

THE AURA OF THE IRISH BOOK: THE CUALA AND DOLMEN PRESSES

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Abstract:

Irish printing in the early years of the Celtic Revival had fallen into disarray, and as a response to this circumstance, Elizabeth Yeats and her brother W.B. Yeats inaugurated a new era of Irish printing with the creation of the Cuala Press. This study seeks to situate the production of this distinctively Irish nationalist press in relation to the reified social relations encoded in the materiality of books produced in England. The distinction between the Irish private press movement and the commercially produced books of England emphasizes the forms colonial resistance embedded in the materiality of the Cuala books. Furthermore, the Dolmen Press, an Irish private press founded five years after the closing of the Cuala in 1946, continues the tradition of Irish press production through its material and linguistic dialogue with colonial representation and the formation of an Irish identity in an international context.

## INTRODUCTION

Stephen Gwynn, writing in *The Freeman's Journal*, observed that “Irish people are very odd about books. They are, and every Irish writer knows it to his cost, the least book buying of publics. . . . Yet Ireland is a country of booklovers: the man for whom books are a passion and a treasure is perhaps commoner there than anywhere in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Gwynn’s odd assessment of the Irish relationship to books reveals much about how the book was historically viewed in Ireland, and in the remainder of his article, Gwynn recounts a meeting with one such Irish book-lover:

A blind old man living in the steep street of a Norman-Irish town—in an old borough with memories of Gael and Gall, planter and supplanted, self and master, monk and Cromwellian, ‘Croppy’ and ‘Yeo,’ memories that he had studied, traditions that he had collected, all through a long life; and there besides him in the little sanded kitchen were stacked the volumes of his most cherished possession—all the proceedings of the Irish Parliament. Yet his days were unhappy because a careless generation disrespected his books; because his gathered hoard was scattered by the children; because even the great volumes, richly bound, were—so he feared, and not without reason—torn and abused.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Gwynn, “Irish Book Lovers,” *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century* (Cork, Ireland: Cork UP, 2000) 217.

<sup>2</sup> Gwynn 217.

Gwynn's story is worth recounting because of the way it expresses the complex experiences associated with the Irish book throughout history. The blind man is an antiquarian of sorts, living in a time and place of great political and social division, where the powerful and powerless live side-by-side, yet their differences are omnipresent. The book collector's prize possession is a group of Irish Parliament proceedings, well-bound and printed with great care, befitting the legislative records of a proud state. These particular books are significant for two reasons that Gwynn fails to realize. Where he sees only the eccentricity and nostalgia wrapped up in the man's desire to keep books he cannot read, these treasures are an indication of a lost era in Irish printing and history that is rediscovered in the twentieth century. At the time Gwynn is writing his article in 1913, the Irish Parliament had been suspended for over a century. The Act of Union (1800) effectively abolished any significant Irish legislative bodies by submitting the island to the direct rule of Westminster. In a time of political division, the Parliament records are a signifier of Ireland's loss of control over their own political destiny and a stark reminder of the history of colonialism. In addition, the books would have been printed in Dublin by Irish craftsmen, not imported from British publishing houses. In the seventeenth century, government documents kept many printing houses busy, and while I do not want to oversimplify the consequences of print's entrance into the political sphere of sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland, the books printed to codify political proceedings assisted in the unification and centralization of Irish life.<sup>3</sup> The blind

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Gillespie, *Reading Ireland: Print, Reading and Social Change in Early*

book collector also serves as an excellent metaphor for the ways in which the material book in Ireland had been reified through centuries of colonization and the industrialization that was slowly reaching Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gwynn's book-lover can no longer read the pages, and consequently, only experiences them in a tactile way. However, these material books, aside from the language they contain, have a history and a whole set of social relations that went into their production. In order to see Ireland and its culture, the material book offers one perspective, and the production of books in Ireland in the twentieth century demonstrates the power of books in the struggle for social change.

Amidst the political turmoil of sixteenth-century Ireland, which saw the Tudor conquest of the island and the subjection of thousands of native Irish people to the Protestant crown, the technology of the printing press arrived in Dublin. For centuries Ireland had a flourishing manuscript culture, and their oral epics telling of Irish scribes such as St. Columcille added a sense of wonder and power to books created in Ireland. Yet the Irish fascination with Christian medieval manuscripts did not easily translate to Gutenberg's printing press, which was rapidly spreading across the continent, allowing printed books to slowly supersede manuscripts in scope and availability. About a hundred years after Gutenberg produced his forty-two-line Bible using moveable type, the press finally reached Irish shores, long after most other European countries. In 1551, Humphrey Powell left England to set up his printing enterprise in Dublin under the title of the King's Printer. Shortly after his

arrival, Powell printed and distributed the first printed book in Ireland, *The Book of Common Prayer*. This Protestant prayer book acted as means of further institutionalizing and supporting conversion to Protestantism in a largely Catholic Ireland. To further demonstrate the cultural dominance of England in Ireland at this time, in the 1660s ninety percent of bound books in Ireland were from London.<sup>4</sup> Since its introduction into Ireland, the printing press has been a force of empire and has been instrumental in the reproduction of dominant cultural forms. In Ireland the use of the printing press has been frequently represented as a tool of efficient Protestant culture, one rejected or ignored by the native Irish. In an 1871 article in the Protestant *Dublin University Magazine*, the native Irish are represented as ignorantly rejecting the technological advancements offered by a benevolent master:

While the early printers were bringing their noble art to perfection, Irish princes and chiefs, and Anglo-Irish lords, left no leisure to each other to inquire into the results of the new invention. They now and then listlessly took up an Irish or English MS., jealously guarded as an heirloom, endeavored to get through a page or two of the close-written, contracted writing, and fell asleep. That our scribes were industrious and as numerous as those of any country in Europe—more so, indeed, may be safely said, but the writers of original matter saw no prospect of a large scale for their lucubrations, if put in type, and the mere copiers had no more welcome for the hand-press and

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<sup>4</sup> Gillespie, 88.

composing-stick than my lord's mowers and reapers for the new fangled substitutes for hook and scythe, introduced by his Scottish steward.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these representations, the printing press is not merely a culturally neutral technological advancement. As manuscript culture, which had been active in Ireland since the middle ages and integrated many aspects of Celtic visual culture, yielded to the powerful pull of print culture, the colonizing moves made by the English in its attempted conquests of Ireland become clear.

In the twentieth century, Irish book producers sought a conscious revival of the typography, layout, and labor of a previous era. Influenced by William Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement and the activities of English private presses such as the Kelmscott and Doves, the Cuala Press derived its aesthetic aims from a pre-industrial mode of production that acted as a resistance to the cultural hegemony of the British Empire. The Irish presses of this period looked to the early days of book production in Ireland and revived the centuries-long tradition of illuminated manuscript in medieval Ireland. The Cuala's connections to the Celtic Revival and the widely popular nationalist movements in Ireland during the first decades of the twentieth century can be easily seen; however, after the disintegration of the Cuala in 1946, Ireland again experienced a situation where Irish writers and artists were forced to look abroad to find suitable publishing opportunities for their works. This form of textual emigration and exile was the catalyst for the creation of Liam Miller's

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<sup>5</sup> "Two Centuries of Irish Literature," *Dublin University Magazine* (July 1871): 1.



Dolmen Press, which drew heavily upon the intellectual project and modes of production employed at the Cuala. Once again, the appearance of the private press tradition allowed Irish writers a site of publication that not only supported a new generation of Irish writing, but also gave distinctively Irish texts a material coding conscious of the complexities of colonial representation and the struggle to define Irish experience in post-independence Ireland. Nevertheless, the projects of the Cuala and Dolmen differ significantly in their reactions to their respective sets of historical circumstances in Ireland. The Cuala drew upon fine press printing to buttress to the burgeoning nationalist movement of the Celtic Revival. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Dolmen, drawing upon the influence of the Cuala, attempted to situate an Irish identity, not in a narrow nationalistic sense, but one in which the Irish experience entered into dialogue with the history of colonialism and the rapidly globalized world.

Both Gwynn's book collector and nineteenth-century representations of the Irish book neglect the language contained in books, instead focusing on the aura of these material objects. Walter Benjamin, in his much-celebrated essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," introduces the concept of the aura of a work of art as "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."<sup>6</sup> Through his historical study of the reproducibility of art, Benjamin concludes that the technologies of mechanical reproduction, which gained strength particularly with the nineteenth-century invention of photography, have

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 220.

liberated works of art from the context of their tradition as instruments of the ruling class. “[T]he technique of reproduction,” Benjamin argues, “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.”<sup>7</sup> As the technologies of photography and film break down the aura, works of art no longer reside in only in the context of cathedrals, castles, and museums; the individual lends their own personal context to the work, allowing for a reappropriation by those encountering the work. The private press printing of the Cuala and Dolmen presses attempts to restore the aura to book production in the English language, which had long been controlled by commercial printers who reproduced works on economic models which disallowed for experiment in typography or the inclusion of Irish voices. Yet, these Irish presses also enjoyed the libratory potential that the reproducible art of printing had to offer. As George Bornstein argues:

Although Benjamin himself saw the aura as ‘withering’ in the age of mechanical reproduction, we may revise Benjamin by emphasizing that for literary works original mechanical reproductions can create their own aura, and that it is the earlier auras that wither under

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin 221.

successive reproductions of the work, particularly if the ‘work’ is thought of as identical merely to its words.<sup>8</sup>

This revision of Benjamin’s notion of the aura is key to understanding the significance of book production in Ireland. Strictly speaking, any presswork is mechanical reproduction with a form of type being repeatedly inked and imposed onto paper to create multiple copies in a single edition. Rarely is the press employed to create a singular, original work, but the works of the Cuala and Dolmen retain this aura of the original by consistently drawing the reader back to the time and place of creation through carefully constructed typographical moves. But the books are still paradoxically mechanical reproductions, which destroy the aura of art, removing a work from a specific historical context, according to Benjamin. This destruction of the aura has the potential to dehistoricize a work of art, alienating it from the human conditions of its production; nevertheless, once mechanical reproduction allows for the distribution and appropriation of art by all, art is also liberated from the tyranny of elitist control over the work. Consequently, the private press books of the Cuala and Dolmen straddle this contradiction by creating books that draw attention to the reified labor and historical context while also attempting to create books that are not the sole property of the ruling class. The aura of the Cuala and Dolmen books allow for a break with the commodity production of commercial printing houses and the cultural hegemony of England, while also bringing the politics of cultural representation and appropriation to the forefront of any literary text produced under their imprints.

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<sup>8</sup> George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 6.

THE ARTS AND CRAFTS TRADITION: TWENTIETH-CENTURY BOOK PRODUCTION AND  
THE CUALA PRESS

At the end of the nineteenth century, numerous cultural movements in Ireland began to compete with the hegemonic cultural forces of the British Empire. The Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland, founded in 1895, marked a significant development in Irish artistic production. Its founder, Dermot Robert Wyndham Bourke, Earl of Mayo, had been involved in previous cultural endeavors in Ireland, most notably in the creation of the County Kildare Archeological Society four years earlier, and his archeological interest seems particularly apt considering the ways in which the arts and crafts movement in Ireland sought to uncover the artifacts of a former civilization, reconstructing and fabricating a cultural heritage, and attempting to return to previous modes of social relations. Lord Mayo outlined two main aims of the creation of such a society:

- I. To improve the craftsman and attempt to raise the artistic level of his work.
- II. To make the workman less of a machine producing many objects from one pattern.<sup>9</sup>

Within this formulation, there exists an anxiety concerning the under-industrialized economic conditions of an Ireland still feeling the after-effects of the economic and social disasters of the Great Famine (1845-1852). This concern with the economic

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Larmour, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland* (Belfast: Friar's Bush, 1992) 56.

conditions of an Ireland still largely controlled by England is combined with a fear that industrialization was creating inhumane working conditions for the Irish people while producing commodities of inferior quality and a lack of artistic vision. The Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland strove to reconceptualize the notion of industry by transforming the alienated labor of the factory worker or field hand into the creation of crafts with a distinctively Irish design, based on Celtic manuscript culture and early Irish Christian art, and a careful attention to the quality of handicrafts. Due to the colonial situation and its history of uneven development, while England grew to become a hegemonic power within the nineteenth-century world-system, Ireland experienced pockets of intense industrialization amidst largely agrarian communities governed by English aristocratic systems. In his history of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Irish literature, Joe Cleary explains,

Late nineteenth-century Ireland possessed an unusually modernized state (itself a product of colonial rule), strong basic literacy levels in European terms, and Belfast was then the world's fifth largest industrial city. Nevertheless, on the island as a whole, the economy and workforce were still overwhelmingly rural, artisanal, and preindustrial.<sup>10</sup>

In light of these economic circumstances, the arts and crafts movement cannot be seen as merely an aesthetic movement but can be seen as a larger attempt to redefine Ireland's position within a colonial infrastructure by forming an organized resistance

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<sup>10</sup> Joe Cleary, "Toward a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature," *boundary 2* 31.1(2004): 216.

to the nineteenth-century modes of capitalist production which had begun to take hold in the urban Ireland of Belfast and Dublin. Not surprisingly, it is within these urban centers that the Arts and Crafts Society, as well as their exhibitions, began to take hold in the years in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The Irish arts and crafts movement took much of its intellectual rationale and instruction on handiwork design and execution from William Morris's similar experiments in London. Drawing upon the founding influence of John Ruskin, Morris's artistic movement attempted to combine Guild Socialism with a design aesthetic that looked toward the pre-capitalist, feudal social relations of the Middle Ages, as a model for its various industries, including textile design, stained glass window construction, wood working and, most notably, printing. Of all of the Irish arts and crafts industries that grew out of the nineteenth-interest in handicrafts, fine printing was arguably the most influential craft to support the growing nationalist and feminist movements on the island. The Irish arts and crafts movement in printing, especially the work of the Dun Emer/Cuala Press, sought to transform the book, which had been long commodified by the commercial activities of the London press, into a form of resistance to the machinations of imperial capitalism, and an opportunity to assert a national identity. However, a close investigation of the Dun Emer/Cuala Press reveals a paradoxical complicity in the dominant ideologies of English colonial rule in reasserting aristocratic patronage of the arts and allowing a new form of "Irishness" to be appropriated by the forces of empire.

As Marx famously remarked in the *Grundrisse*, “is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Or is the *Iliad* at all compatible with the printing press and even printing machines?”<sup>11</sup> While Marx is suggesting that mythologies die as people find material ways of mastering a nature that was formerly controlled through the imagination —“Where does Vulcan come in as against Roberts & Co. . . . Hermes, as against the *Crédit Mobilier*?<sup>12</sup>—the reference to printing is an important one in the nineteenth century as the hand-press and the days of setting type manually were giving way to steam-powered presses and the development of mechanical composition. Was the literature being produced in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries possible within the material context of the mechanical printing press and the commercially produced volume? This was a question of great significance to Elizabeth Yeats and her brother, W.B. Yeats, as they decided to found the Dun Emer Press in 1903. The material book for William Butler and Elizabeth Yeats was not a mere vehicle for the transmission of linguistic codes rather the book was a material signifier that interacted with the literary work. They recognized the irony of trying to create an Irish literature of a nationalist tone in the pages of London printers and the bookstores of the English literary marketplace. The Dun Emer Press, which was renamed the Cuala Press in 1908, with its close connections to the activities of Morris’s Arts and Crafts Movement, recognized the revolutionary potential in the return to preindustrial modes of production and an aesthetic that

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, Ed. David McLellan, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 394.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, 394.

consciously resisted the trends of modernization. In writing about W.B. Yeats's consciousness of the materiality of the poem, Jerome McGann presents the crisis that mechanical reproduction introduced to the creation of poetry, using Yeats's notion of an ideal unity of poet and form, the dancer and the dance:

In a social environment dominated by typographical media and publishing institutions, poets no longer stand in the same immediate relation to their work as the dancer might be imagined to stand. A physical gap has opened between the poet and the execution of the poem. From Yeats's perspective at the beginning of the twentieth century, the gap had become an institutional gulf.<sup>13</sup>

To gesture back to Marx's formulation, the question raised by Yeats concerning the possibility for poetry, especially Irish poetry, in the age of mechanical reproduction is an important one. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, books printed and bound in Ireland were of poor quality both in content and construction. In Yeats's autobiographical essay, "Ireland After Parnell" he notes the lack of intellectual engagement with literature and the inability to secure quality editions of Irish authors. To justify the organization of both The Irish Literary Society and The National Literary Society in Dublin, Yeats writes, "The two societies were necessary because their lectures must take the place of an educated popular Press, which we had not, and have not now, and create a standard of criticism."<sup>14</sup> Yeats perceived the lack of an

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<sup>13</sup> Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993) 45.

<sup>14</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999) 170.



Irish press as injurious to the larger nationalist movement that had suffered serious setbacks in the wake of Charles Stewart Parnell's disgraced exit from the political scene. Not surprisingly, most of the literature and critical discourse available in Ireland originated in London. As the capital of the English colonial project, London also acted as a cultural center for Ireland. The Irish arts and crafts movement was part of a broader attack on the cultural and economic influences of England in Ireland. If literature that could be properly called Irish were to appear, it would have to have its own material forms which proclaimed an independence from the publishing houses of London and their literary markets. This was perceived as a necessary early step in the creation of an Irish national identity capable of overthrowing the bonds of colonialism. The recognition of the symbolic power of the colonial book as both a sign of oppression and the possibility it holds for raising consciousness about the politics of colonization is one shared with many postcolonial projects. For example, Homi K. Bhabha explores the signifying power of the English book, pointing out that,

There is a scene in the cultural writings of English colonialism which repeats so insistently after the early nineteenth century—and, through that repetition, so triumphantly inaugurates a literature of empire—that I am bound to repeat it once more. It is the scenario, played out in the wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean, of the sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book. It is, like all myths of origin, memorable for its balance between epiphany and

enunciation. The discovery of the book is, at once, a moment of originality and authority, as well as a process of displacement that, paradoxically, makes the presence of the book wondrous to the extent to which it is repeated, translated, misread, displaced.<sup>15</sup>

Bhabha begins his exploration of this iconic narrative from English literature by viewing the “emblem of the English book—‘signs taken for wonders’—as an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline.”<sup>16</sup> In the context of nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland, the “signs taken for wonders” were the commercially produced novels and poems that issued from large printing factories and appeared on bookstands across the English-speaking world. These books signaled the constant presence of a colonial authority, and the various volumes were a testament to the power of cultural knowledge production at the center of empire. The colonial desire and discipline encoded within these books does not come only through the language and narratives recorded within their pages. Rather the materials of the book itself, the paper, ink, and its very means of production, announce its colonial authority as well as its mode of production. Consequently, any concerted effort to nullify the effects of such a cultural artifact must be taken up at both the linguistic and material levels. The arts and crafts movement in Ireland, with its focus on hand-press printing, attempts to work from the models of the colonial book and translate them into symbols of Irish nationalism, resistance to a history of

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<sup>15</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985) 144.

<sup>16</sup> Bhabha, 144.

English colonization, and a rejection of the industrialization of modern capitalism that allowed for the conquering of Ireland and its subsequent subjugation under English rule.

The aims of Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement and the printing practices of the Dun Emer/Cuala were, in part, to combat the types of social relations that the book as commodity in the nineteenth century concealed. The working conditions of press workers during the age of mechanical reproduction were abysmal, characterized by widespread unemployment and dangerous environmental circumstances. The nineteenth-century English book trade saw the introduction of "large factories in the cities, with shifting workforces, hours often geared to the deadlines of periodicals, and the flow of production dependent upon rows of clattering machines tended by tired children."<sup>17</sup> The introduction of mechanized printing eroded previous systems of apprenticeship which ensured proper training and sufficient wages for press workers and the skilled labor desired by the printing houses. Large printing houses, which rarely had a steady queue of jobs that could support a permanent workforce, took advantage of the large pool of skilled, unemployed press workers, laying off and hiring to meet the immediate demands of the press. For those able to find enough work to support themselves, the air quality of a large printing factory, with the fumes of ink and oiled machinery trapped by the lack of sufficient air circulation, resulted in printers having significantly shorter life-expectancy than workers in other industries; tuberculosis affected twice as many press workers than the average laborer in

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll, 1995) 289.

London.<sup>18</sup> The growing strength of men's unions in the last half of the nineteenth century fought for higher wages and shorter hours for printers, but of course, these union actions did little to stop the exploitation of women and children within the printing industry, other than prohibiting them to work by forcing printers to employ skilled men. In *Capital* Marx observes the ways in which the London printing trade was able to exploit young men with the introduction of mechanical press:

In the English letter-press printing trade, for example, there formerly existed a system, corresponding to that in the old manufactures and handicrafts, of advancing the apprentices from easy to more and more difficult finished printers. . . . All this was changed by the printing machine.<sup>19</sup>

These forms of guild membership and apprenticeship that Marx discusses will become important for the organizational structure of the arts and crafts movement in Ireland, as I will discuss later. But for the workers in large printing factories, the introduction of printing machines transformed the worker into a mere extension of the machine. Even during the hand-press period a printer's job was never a glamorous affair, often consisting of long hours and repetitive motions, the introduction of machinery further isolated workers within an ever-specialized separation of labor, reducing the worker's movement to a single repetitive task in service of the printing mechanisms. Highly skilled workers were no longer necessary to accomplish much of the press work, and as Marx notes:

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<sup>18</sup> Gaskell 291.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I* (New York: Penguin, 1990) 615.

...there are boys mostly from 11 to 17 years of age, whose sole occupation is either to spread the sheets of paper under the machine, or to take from it the printed sheets. They perform this weary task, in London especially, for 14, 15, 16 hours at a stretch, during several days in the week, and frequently for 36 hours, with only 2 hours' rest for meals and sleep. . . . As soon as they get too old for such children's work, that is at about 17 years old, at the latest they are discharged from the printing establishments. They become recruits for crime. Attempts to procure them employment elsewhere come to grief owing to their ignorance and brutality, their mental and bodily degradation.<sup>20</sup>

Marx's observations begin to reveal a small portion of the larger social relations that are reified within the English book, and while the printing industry is only a small slice of industrial production in England at this time, the impetus for Morris's arts and crafts movement can be seen. Presses of this scope did not exist in Ireland during this time period; however, the books published by popular Irish writers such as Yeats and Oscar Wilde were imposed and bound under similar conditions in England. In order to create an Irish book that challenged not only the hierarchies of colonialism but also resisted the forms of industrialization that were leaving many impoverished or subject to inhumane work conditions, the Dun Emer Press founded itself on the premises and

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<sup>20</sup> Marx 615.

aesthetic direction of William Morris's movement in England, which sought to combat these circumstances.

Although Morris only traveled to Ireland on two occasions, with both trips being devoted to the cause of socialism, Morris's work in the arts and crafts industries had attracted much attention in Ireland. In numerous Irish periodicals, the desire for the creation of Irish industries and institutions for educating workers in design and handicraft was publicly voiced.<sup>21</sup> This interest grew, in part, from the popularity of Morris's critiques of capitalism and the role of art within that mode of production. In "Art and Socialism" Morris articulates the position of art under capitalism, and proposes a number of reforms that would bring about great changes for both the artistic products created and the lives of the workers who created them. His primary claim that, "*It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do; and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious,*"<sup>22</sup> is a direct response to the types of working conditions discussed by Marx and others. The degradation of art, according to Morris, is directly related to the degradation of working conditions, the ubiquity of alienated labor, and the religious fanaticism which capitalism had achieved. This situation led to the commodification of art where only the wealthy were able to experience art and have direct access to it, leaving the working classes to their endless toil without any opportunity to experience

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<sup>21</sup> Larmour 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915) 194.

the joy of their work or the beauty of that which is well-crafted. The arts and crafts movement wished to radically alter these social relations by empowering the worker to create handicrafts that benefited from a concern for the beautiful over the necessity of economic markets. In the shops and schools that produced these products, the alienated labor of the factory, where the separation of labor disallows workers to have any knowledge of the value or use of their labor, would give way to a situation where individual craftsmen could practice their art and reap the benefits of such enterprises. The arts and crafts movement attempted to recognize the social relations embedded in commodities. "*'Tis the lives of men you buy,*" Morris remarks.<sup>23</sup> The recognition of these social relations is necessary for understanding the ways in which the material book carries certain knowledge that must be reconstructed by looking at the literary works inked to their pages. Presses such as the Dun Emer/Cuala were certainly conscious of how their own labor and historical and material circumstances were written onto the pages and binding of every one of their books. Near the end of the nineteenth century after the disaster of the Great Famine and relatively little economic stability, many were receptive to the promises of a social movement such as Morris's arts and crafts.

In the case of printing, Elizabeth and Lilly Yeats were particularly well-situated to translate Morris's social message to an Irish context. W.B. Yeats had a longtime friendship with Morris, and in the late 1880s both Elizabeth and Lily took up employment in Morris's arts and crafts industries. Lilly worked with May Morris,

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<sup>23</sup> Morris 197.

the daughter of William, in embroidery and became a distinguished figure within her trade. This was also the time period where Elizabeth first became acquainted with the Albion hand-press and the art of fine printing. It is interesting to note that both sisters took up employment under May and William Morris because of the economic circumstances of the Yeats family. Gifford Lewis in his study of the Yeats sisters takes great pains to note the painful economic circumstances of their once upper-middle class family. With their father John Butler Yeats, the painter, and brothers William Butler and Jack Yeats, both artists in their own right, the family had many financial responsibilities with little steady income to meet the needs of their household and the number of extended family members that they graciously supported. Consequently, Elizabeth and Lilly began their apprenticeships in the arts and crafts movement, despite Elizabeth's successful career as a primary school educator, which neither paid the bills nor gained the respect of her male family members. Lewis presents a number of Elizabeth's diary entries as evidence of this constant financial struggle and theatricality employed in dealing with these crises. One particularly telling entry states that there "is no money *not a fraction* in the house, and no butter or marmalade or sugar or tea, what is to become of us I don't know as we own something at all the shops," and Elizabeth also tells of her excursions to find a store in London where the Yeats did not owe money in order to procure the necessities for their Sunday dinner.<sup>24</sup> While the Yeats family was well-entrenched in their bourgeois life-style, economic and material concerns were the

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<sup>24</sup> Gifford Lewis, *The Yeats Sisters and the Cuala* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994) 27.



genesis of the Yeats sisters' involvement with the production of arts and crafts. Elizabeth and Lilly also experienced the intellectual trends of the movement as they took classes at a school for young socialists at Kelmscott, despite the protests of WBY.<sup>25</sup> These early experiences with Morris's industry would form aesthetic and intellectual tradition of the Dun Emer Press, as the arts and crafts movement migrated to Dublin.

In 1902 Evelyn Gleeson, who was born to an Irish doctor in London and after living in Ireland for most her life returned to London to practice art, returned to Ireland to escape the smog and insalubrious conditions of industrial London.<sup>26</sup> Upon arrival, she founded the Dun Emer Guild to accommodate her expertise in textile design and invited the Yeats sisters to join in her enterprise. This led to the creation of the Dun Emer Press, which was directed by Elizabeth because of her knowledge of the hand-press and book design. Emory Walker, a partner in Morris's famous Kelmscott Press and one of the directors of the Doves Press, assisted in the early workings of the Dun Emer. As Liam Miller, the editor of the Dolmen Press, has noted, "The setting up and equipping of the Dun Emer Press followed the pattern of other Private Presses. An Albion handpress, similar to the type used as the Kelmscott and Doves Presses, was obtained from an Irish provincial printing house through advertisements in the newspaper. . . . On Emory Walker's advice, a fount of Caslon

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis 27.

<sup>26</sup> Larmour 151.

old style type, in fourteen point size, was purchased from London.”<sup>27</sup> The origins of the press demonstrate its distinctively Irish character combined with Morris’s arts and crafts ideologies. The Dun Emer takes its name from the wife of Cuchulainn, one of the most notable figures in Celtic mythology, who was very skilled in needlework, and the name seemed apt for this feminist project in fine book production. The prospectus for the press announced its intention to revive the art of printing in an Irish context: “Though many books are printed in Ireland, book printing as an art has been little practiced here since the eighteenth century. The Dun Emer Press has been founded in the hope of reviving this beautiful craft.”<sup>28</sup> Although this type of artistic production was becoming more prevalent in England, the Dun Emer further distinguished itself by being the first press fully staffed by women. The conditions of women in the printing world were in many cases much more abysmal than those for men because of the exclusion of women from guild associations and the exploitation of women’s labor for low wages and little job security. Women were employed in the printing trade, but as one French printer commented in the 1840, “we pay women only half the rate: that is only fair, because they work much quicker than the men; they would earn too much if we paid them the same rate!”<sup>29</sup> And during the introduction of machinery into large scale printing operation, *The Scottish Typographical Journal* suggested in 1909 that “our trade is going over to machinery

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<sup>27</sup> Liam Miller, *The Dun Emer Press, Later the Cuala Press* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1973) 22-23.

<sup>28</sup> Miller 29.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis 37.

and the machinery is in the hands of underpaid girls.”<sup>30</sup> As a consequence of these social conditions groups such as the Women’s Printing Society, where Elizabeth trained at in London, attempted to educate women in the arts of design and the workings of the printing press. In continuing this tradition, the Dun Emer Industries took on a number of Irish girls, often from impoverished rural backgrounds, to train them in the art of printing and employed them to produce the volumes of the Dun Emer Press.

The arts and crafts movement in England was dominated by a medieval aesthetic professed by the Pre-Raphaelites. This periodization of aesthetic form that privileges the medieval over the classical is linked to historical modes of production in the mind of Morris. He recognizes the classical forms as a return to imperial social relations that stifle beauty and individual livelihood; whereas, the medieval represents a preindustrial, precapitalist mode of production that offers an escape from the injustices of modernity. Morris argues,

Think of a piece of history, and so hope! Time was when the rule of Rome held the whole world of civilization in its poisonous embrace. To all men—even the best, as you may see in the very gospels—that rule seemed doomed to last for ever: nor to those who dwelt under it was there any world worth thinking of beyond it: but the days passed and though none saw a shadow of the coming change, it came none the less, like a thief in the night, and the *Barbarians*, the world which lay

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<sup>30</sup> Lewis 38.

outside the rule of Rome, were upon her; and men blind with terror lamented the change and deemed the world undone by the Fury of the North. But even that fury bore with it things long strange to Rome, which once had been the food its glory fed on: hatred of lies, scorn of riches, contempt of death, faith in the fair fame won by steadfast endurance, honourable love of women—all these things the Northern Fury bore with it, as the mountain torrent bears the gold; and so Rome fell and Europe rose, and the hope of the world was born again.<sup>31</sup>

While Morris's comments on the progression of historical modes of production and their aesthetic forms is less rigorous than the scholarship of Marx, from which Morris is drawing, and exhibits a spiritual teleology that may be considered problematic, Morris presents this as a parable of the proletariat's struggle to overcome the power of the capitalist world system. Consequently, the Europe that arose from the defeat of the classical world became the primary model for the art produced by the arts and crafts movement. Medieval manuscript became the ideal for printed books. In *Arts and Crafts Essays* (1893), Morris and Emory Walker discuss the aims of printing by stating, "it is worth mentioning in passing that, as an example of fine typography, the earliest book printed with movable types, the Gutenberg, or 'forty-two line Bible' of about 1455, has never been surpassed."<sup>32</sup> The Gutenberg Bible has a sort of Edenic existence for Morris and Walker because its creation sits on the very cusp between

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<sup>31</sup> Morris 204.

<sup>32</sup> William Morris and Emory Walker, "Printing," *Arts and Crafts Essays* (London, 1893) 112.

the medieval mode of production and the capitalist one that overtakes it. Early printed books attempted to emulate the manuscripts because of the calligraphy, craftsmanship, and labor time of the manuscript which yielded higher prices at market. Consequently, early printed books shared an aesthetic quality with the manuscripts of the Middle Ages, but were certainly the beginnings of the age of mechanical reproduction and the set of social conditions which accompanied it. There is an anachronistic quality in attempting to return to the aesthetic art forms of a previous mode of production, but the arts and crafts movement saw these actions as revolutionary, capable of transforming social relations.

In creating an aesthetic for the Dun Emer/Cuala Press, there were a number of examples of Irish medieval printing as well as a wealth of Celtic mythology to draw upon in a similar gesture back to a preindustrial, precolonial period in Irish history. However, the Dun Emer/Cuala modified the aims of their aesthetic by not only utilizing Irish manuscripts such as *The Book of Kells* and the visual culture presented in Margaret Stokes's *Early Christian Art in Ireland* (1887), but also incorporating the more modern elements of contemporary book production, especially the Bodley Head editions, to offer contemporary readers access to the poetry written in Ireland at the turn of the century. As McGann has pointed out,

If a Kelmscott approach dominated the graphic conceptions of Dun Emer/Cuala Press books—and it did—the Bodley Head style remains discernable in them. . . That is to say, the books from the Yeats's press are not closely printed in faces that recall medieval manuscripts and

tight fifteenth-century printing styles. The Dun Emer/Cuala typeface is a modern Caslon, and the lines of text are generously leaded to deliver—in contrast to Kelmscott books—an easily read page.<sup>33</sup>

This layout is important for a number of reasons. First of all, while the Kelmscott revived the classics of literature by printing such books as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the Dun Emer/Cuala Press wanted to print contemporary works that would not be encumbered by the difficulty of reading in medieval typefaces and layouts. The works of Yeats, AE, Synge, and others were meant to reach wider audiences and be read, rather than just displayed as the Kelmscott editions called for. The press's involvement in the larger Celtic Revival necessitated both a look back to the past and a consideration of contemporary circumstances in Ireland. The medieval layout of the Kelmscott and the sleeker modern style of the Bodley Head were capable of representing these aims and were in line with the different literary styles accepted by the Celtic Revival.

To return to Benjamin's concept of "aura" of art before the age of mechanical reproduction obscured the historical and material context of a work, the Dun Emer/Cuala editions, while mechanical reproductions in the most strict sense, embraced the cult function of the aura by announcing their involvement in the Celtic Revival and consciously stating the material context of its creation. Some critics have challenged the application of Benjamin's arguments in "Art in the Age of Mechanical

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<sup>33</sup> McGann 16.

Reproduction” to the materiality of printed books;<sup>34</sup> however, in the case of the Cuala the cult function of these editions is explicit. Benjamin writes primarily of film and photography as an art form that utilizes the reproductive capacities of modern technologies, which flatten the opportunities to historicize those works, but in an earlier essay, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting,” Benjamin writes intimately about the relationship of the book collector to his or her books. “The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object,” suggests Benjamin; “...collectors are the physiognomists of the world of objects.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike the cheaply constructed economy book produced for cursory readings and subsequent disposal or the *de luxe* editions created with the wealthy collector in mind, for whom books are merely signs of economic and cultural capital, the book produced for intellectual, artistic, and historic quality has an aura which can be communicated and reconstructed through its material existence. The Dun Emer/Cuala editions certainly carry this aura, marking them as material signifiers capable of representing more than just the contemporary dominant social relations. The colophon for the first Dun Emer book, WBY’s *In the Seven Woods* (1904), does this very work in revealing the identities of the craftswomen, the origins of the materials, and the historical context of the production:

“Here ends In The Seven Woods, written by William / Butler Yeats, printed, upon

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<sup>34</sup> David Ayers, “Materialism and the Book,” *New Poetics* 24.4 (Winter 2003): 759-80.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk on Book Collecting,” *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 60.

paper made in Ireland, / and published by Elizabeth Corbet Yeats at the / Dun Emer Press, / in the house of Evelyn / Gleeson at Dundrum in the county of / Dublin, Ireland, finished the six- / tenth day of July, in the year / of the big wind / 1903.”<sup>36</sup>

In the books produced by large publishers in London these details concerning the production of the book and the labor that went into its creation are completely obscured, but in including the colophon Elizabeth Yeats refuses to allow the reader to approach the Dun Emer volume as merely a commodity where the social relations are obscured. The volumes are created by Irish women, in Ireland, with Irish materials, in a time of great change. The operation of the Dun Emer is indicative of the revolutionary atmosphere building in Dublin in the early twentieth century.

After exploring the historical and cultural context of the operations at the Dun Emer/Cuala press, a complex set of ideologies that support the nationalist movement in Ireland, a socialist revolution concerning the modes of artistic production, and a profound support for the rights of women appear. Nevertheless, the press also produced luxury items for the old aristocracy in Ireland and constructed yet another form of “Irishness” to be consumed by both English and international audiences. Despite the numerous revolutionary ideals embedded in the Dun Emer/Cuala volumes both the press and its books had a certain complicity in the dominant economic and social structures of the time that limit the possibility for viewing the volumes as a purely liberative venture. For example, during the early years of the Dun Emer Industries, Evelyn Gleeson and the Yeats sisters were careful to align themselves with

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<sup>36</sup> W.B. Yeats, *In the Seven Woods* (Dublin: Dun Emer, 1903).



the Unionist factions in Dublin who were wealthy enough to offer patronage to support their endeavor.<sup>37</sup> The books produced by the Cuala Press ended up on the shelves of the old aristocracy in Ireland and art patrons in Europe and the United States, creating a situation similar to the one William Morris had bitterly explained in stating that his artistic creations only appealed to “the swinish luxury of the rich.”<sup>38</sup> In its return to the designs of Irish medieval manuscripts and the stories of Celtic mythology, the books had the danger of being consumed by a colonial power as yet another provincial, primitive artistic product. The reviews of many of the early Cuala volumes suggest this very sense of fascination with the accomplishments of these Irish women, actually referring to Elizabeth’s students as “rustic pupils.”<sup>39</sup>

These observations have great implications for the interpretations of works published by the Dun Emer/Cuala Press. George Bornstein has argued that modernist authors such as Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, and W.B. Yeats utilized the material formats of their sites of publication as a textually significant aspect of their poetic works.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, David Holdeman has argued for a reinterpretation of Yeats’s works to account for the importance of his tripartite publishing approach, which consisted of airing his poems in periodicals, Dun Emer/Cuala volumes, and Macmillian books as a way of reaching a number of audiences, often revising his

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<sup>37</sup> Lewis 68.

<sup>38</sup> McGann 17.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis 79-80.

<sup>40</sup> George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2001).

poetry to meet the demands of each outlet.<sup>41</sup> However, by examining the Dun Emer/Cuala and its complex range of bibliographic codes, I find the simple notion that the Cuala was an extension of the Celtic Revival and the nationalist movement governed by the tastes of W.B. Yeats no longer useful for exploring the complexities of the literature printed by the press. These material codes have great significance for the linguistic content of the works Irish literature in the twentieth century and the further developments of Irish presses such as the Dolmen, which sought to bring a definition of Irish literary identity to the second half of the twentieth century.

#### “FORMS OF IRISHISM”: THE DOLMEN PRESS

Production at the Cuala took place during a number of significant eras in Irish history—the early days of the Celtic Revival, the political turmoil of the Easter Rising and its aftermath, the Anglo-Irish War and subsequent civil war, and the eve of the creation of the Republic of Ireland—and its legacy belongs to an Ireland struggling to create a national identity and taking the first steps in forming a political and cultural life independent of Britain. The twilight of the Cuala coincided with the end of a colonial and provincial Ireland. The rapid transformations of the decades from the 1950s to the 1990s progressively made the work of the Cuala appear as a marker of a time past. The dominance of literary figures such as W.B. Yeats and James Joyce were secured, but their contemporary relevance was giving way to a new generation of writers whose experiences of Ireland were decidedly different from those

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<sup>41</sup> David Holdeman, *Much Labouring: The Texts and Authors of Yeats's First Modernist Books* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1997).

generations who came of age during pre-independence and pre-partition Ireland. Writers such as Patrick Kavanagh, Thomas Kinsella, and John Montague were the new dispensation for Irish literature, and their worldview was shaped by Ireland's entrance onto the global scene. "The overall theme of the 1960's," R.F. Foster writes, "was an exposure to the wider world: through the UN, through international economic initiatives, through the vast expansion in television licenses (and the reception of British stations in the east of Ireland), through the cosmopolitan *lingua franca* of student radicalism, and through the tourist boom."<sup>42</sup> These events were a small part of the larger phenomenon of globalization that accompanied advances of technology capable of shrinking the world. Joe Cleary observes that "[s]ince 1958, when the Irish political elite finally abandoned economic autarchy, the southern Irish state's single major project has been to integrate the country into the European Union and global capitalism."<sup>43</sup> Following the economic and political changes in post-de Valera Ireland, book production sought to move away from the autarchic program of the Cuala; complete self-sufficiency faded away, leaving room for Irish books to enter an international world. Irish printing needed a response to the rapidly changing world, and Irish writers needed a new material format capable of disseminating an Irish identity in a time of rapid globalization.

Liam Miller's Dolmen Press drew upon the precedent set by the Cuala Press to create such bibliographic space for a new generation of Irish writers, thus forming a second Celtic Revival. However, the Dolmen in its bibliographic manifestations

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<sup>42</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988) 581.

<sup>43</sup> Cleary 290.

approaches the question of Irish identity differently than the Yeatses and the Cuala. The construction of Irishness that fuelled the Celtic Revival relied heavily on a constructed notion of Gaelic history and culture. This recourse to a romanticized, privileged era of Ireland was an attempt to form a distinctively national character in opposition to the cultural hegemony of England. However, in the world-system inhabited by the Dolmen and its writers, there was less of an anxiety about dominant cultural forms being imported from London. Consequently, the aims and aesthetic direction of the press supports an increased awareness of the politics of cultural representation, manifesting itself in a willingness to explore colonial representations both past and present, including the nationalist mythologies that arose as a reaction to the circumstances of colonization. Rather than trying to form a new coherent national identity for Ireland, the Dolmen attempts to come to terms with the forms of violence that have accompanied the struggle for independence, and the Troubles of the Northern Ireland. In addition, the Dolmen trades the provincial for the international. While the Cuala editions were largely circulated only in Ireland and England, the Dolmen conceived of Irish literature on an international scale.

In 1951 Liam Miller, the unsure and untrained founder of the Dolmen Press, began his attempt to offer Irish writers a place to publish new works of poetry, fiction, and prose. This enterprise served to fill a void created by the disappearance of literary journals such as *Envoy* and the *Bell* in Ireland.<sup>44</sup> However, Miller's

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<sup>44</sup> Derval Tubridy, "Thomas Kinsella and the Peppercanister Press," *The Irish Book in the Twentieth Century*, Ed. Clare Hutton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004) 102.

Dolmen Press was not merely a vehicle for the transmission of Irish writing; rather, inspired by W. B. Yeats's experiments with the material forms of literary texts, Miller strove to create books whose quality was commensurate with their literary content.

As Maurice Harmon states,

Miller believed in the idea of a sustained, mutually satisfying relationship between the writer and the publisher. The kind of co-operation that had characterized the making of plays in the early years of the Abbey Theatre was replicated in the way that he and the poets worked together. Many who published a book with Dolmen had the rare experience of collaborating with a skilled and imaginative craftsman seeking to match design, materials and literary content.<sup>45</sup>

The results of this artistic approach to publishing were material texts that served as extensions of the literary works inked to their pages, and Harmon's observation concerning the collaborative nature of the Dolmen Press certainly finds precedent in the material realizations of the literary drama of the early Celtic Revival. In fact, critics have also made the claim that the Dolmen Press actually ushers in a second revival that seeks to redefine notions of national and literary identity for Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century. In speaking about *The Yeats Centenary Papers*, a collection of writings published by Dolmen, which demonstrate Miller's fascination with the life and works of W.B. Yeats, Thomas Redshaw Dillon notes that, "[a]t the point of its inception in 1965, Miller's interest in Yeats seems to propose a second

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<sup>45</sup> Maurice Harmon, "Introduction," *The Dolmen Press: A Celebration* (Dublin: Lilliput, 2001) 11.

Revival. By reasserting Yeats's world and the Yeatsian worldview, these and other titles from Miller's Dolmen Press constitute a monument more lasting than bronze."<sup>46</sup>

Likewise, David Gardiner in an earlier article examining the Dolmen edition of John Montague's *Patriotic Suite* argues that Montague's poem "Abbey Theatre 1951," which imagines the banal reaction of a young man gazing over the burnt remains of the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre founded, in part, by Yeats in 1904, is intimately connected to the second revival of the Dolmen: "the burning Abbey Theater seems an appropriate metaphor for the changing of the guard from Yeats to the "new generation" of Irish writers. . ."<sup>47</sup> While the Dolmen Press certainly appears to be a creative force that consciously reaches into the past while formulating a future direction for Irish literature, a closer investigation of the ways that the linguistic and bibliographic codes of these volumes demonstrates how Miller envisioned his press as upholding the aesthetic and nationalistic aims of Yeats's revival while supporting a new view of Irish identity that demonstrates the multiplicity of Irish experience as opposed to the romanticized idealization of Ireland created during the early twentieth century. More important, the Dolmen Press continued the tradition of the Celtic Revival by providing a material realization of literary texts. Much like the Abbey Theatre, which provided a location for staging national drama, the Dolmen's printing of literary works from 1951 to 1987 demonstrates the theoretical and pragmatic

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Dillon Redshaw, "Printing a Second Revival: Liam Miller's Dolmen Editions." *South Carolina Review* 34.2 (2002): 94.

<sup>47</sup> David Gardiner. "Reading the Renaissance: John Derricke's Image of Ireland. . . (c. 1579) and The Dolmen Press (1966-72)," *Nua* 1.2 (1998): 52.

consequences of literature, revealing that texts are not self-contained works but are, rather, intimately intertwined with political and social structures outside of them.

While all of the Dolmen editions suggest various manifestations of a revival in Irish literature, visual art, and bookmaking, *The Dolmen Miscellany of Irish Writing* (1962), edited by John Montague and Thomas Kinsella, is the most explicit dedication to a re-envisioning of Irish national and literary identity. As one of its contributors, James Liddy, suggests, “It can be said that the whole *Miscellany* is a manifesto, more by sample than by direct statement.”<sup>48</sup> The manifesto that the *Miscellany* presents recognizes the importance of material transmission, and its conscious blending of linguistic, bibliographic, and contextual codes that seek to draw upon the strengths and successes of Yeats’s revival. Facing the copyright page of this volume, Montague and Kinsella praise the vitality of the art of their contemporaries and suggest that these writers of the 1960s are bound by their commitment to transcend and assault Irish stereotypes:

In recent years a new generation of writers has begun to emerge in Ireland, probably the most interesting since the realists of the 1930’s. While not forming any sort of movement, they do reflect a general change of sensibility, and this *Miscellany* is an attempt to provide them with a platform. They are, in general, more literary than their predecessors: many of them are poets, and the prose-writers seem to be working towards a more experimental form of story. The main link

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<sup>48</sup> James Liddy, “How We Stood with Liam Miller: The Dolmen Miscellany,” *New Hibernia Review* 2.3(1998): 10.

between them, however, is their obvious desire to avoid the forms of ‘Irishism’ (whether leprechaun or garrulous rebel) which have been so profitably exploited in the past. In such a context, a little solemnity may be a revolutionary gesture.

We have concentrated on work of some length, or of a kind not usually represented in magazines, in the hope that, as well as providing an impetus, the *Dolmen Miscellany* will also be a record of work in progress by a generation. Future issues will, of course, depend upon your support.<sup>49</sup>

Here Montague and Kinsella are drawing upon the tradition of Yeats’s Celtic Revival in identifying noxious representations of the Irish as either leprechaun, which is to be inhuman, avaricious, violent, horrific, childlike and imbecilic, or garrulous rebel, given to senseless violence and idle rabblousing. The early supporters of the Irish National Theatre decried many of the same representations of the Irish and supported the creation of a public space to present representations that challenged those created as a response to colonial associations with and economic dependence on Britain. The manifesto for the Irish National Theatre states, “We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.”<sup>50</sup> Efforts to re-envision the ways that a national and international community view the Irish are commonplace within the twentieth

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<sup>49</sup> John Montague and Thomas Kinsella, eds, *The Dolmen Miscellany of Irish Writing* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1962) n.p.

<sup>50</sup> Lady Augustus Gregory, “Our Irish Theatre,” *Modern Irish Drama*, Ed. John P. Harrington (New York: Norton, 1991) 378.



century; however, a work such as the *Dolmen Miscellany* is especially well situated to comment on these issues because of the way that it marries Irish literature to the materiality of the Irish experience, in much the same way that the Abbey Theatre provided a physical space for the nationalistic sentiments that existed in the abstractions of the literary texts of Yeats, Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge, Sean O'Casey and others.

The *Dolmen Miscellany*'s red cover with light blue and black titling in Calson font foregrounds the authors appearing in the edition. The authors, rather than any common visual cue of Irish identity, are the focal point of the cover. The careful simplicity of this volume, the twelve contributors, a modest title and small press device, and publishing info along the bottom of the cover speak to the "solemnity" that the editors describe as revolutionary. The volume does not announce itself loudly; the simple layout is reminiscent of early twentieth-century little magazines, such as Ezra Pound's *Little Review* or T.S. Eliot's *Egoist*. "Liam Miller designed the brooding of the publication," Liddy recounts, "halfway between a journal and an anthology, heightened the anxiety of its arrival"<sup>51</sup> Liddy's observations on the *Miscellany* are important because of the consequences of bibliographic codes on both the interpretative and social implications of a text. Miller's design seeks to present the *Miscellany* as both journal and anthology as a way of exploiting the certain meanings that are communicated by these forms. The limp, red covers, press device in the lower left-hand corner, large display of both publisher and price, and the

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<sup>51</sup> Liddy 9.

volume number high on the spine declare the *Miscellany* to be a journal. This association comes with the insistence that the writing inside is timely and possibly more experimental than other sites of publication will allow. The ephemeral nature of journals also points to contemporary relevance without recourse to larger historical structures; these are the writings of and for the moment. Journals also suggest an audience that is receptive to and willing to support this type of writing on a subscription basis. To balance these associations, Miller also communicates the authority, historical significance, and author-centered approach of an anthology by centering and foregrounding the contributors to the edition on the cover. Under the editorship of John Montague and Thomas Kinsella, two of the most renowned Irish poets of this time, the *Miscellany* could claim literary authority and seek to define the direction of contemporary Irish literature.

The 1962 issue of the *Dolmen Miscellany* was the first and last of its kind. Miller remarks, “We had hoped to continue the publication, but the *Miscellany* seemed to be a form of publication which would have met with better success in the 1930’s.”<sup>52</sup> The movement toward a second revival of Irish literature and construction of Irish identity in the newly formed Republic certainly continued throughout the history of the Dolmen Press. The most celebrated and noteworthy achievement of the Dolmen Press was Thomas Kinsella’s translation of the *Táin* (1969). This ancient Irish mythological story, translated from Old and Middle Irish, held a prominent position in the Celtic Revival as it provided a truly Irish heritage before the arrival of

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<sup>52</sup> Miller, *Dolmen XXV: An Illustrated Bibliography of the Dolmen Press 1951-1976* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1976) 35.

Anglo-Saxon and Norman conquerors. As Ailbhe Ní Bhriain suggests, Kinsella's *Táin* "is an Irish equivalent of the *livre d'artiste*."<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the translation itself is important because it is a new generation's attempt at re-envisioning a work of literature that played a crucial role in the development of a concerted effort to define Irish literature during the Celtic Revival. Lady Gregory and Standish O'Grady offered translations of the poem in the early twentieth and nineteenth centuries, and Kinsella continues this legacy in his Dolmen Edition translation of the text. While many have commented on the ways that Kinsella's translation differs from earlier versions,<sup>54</sup> the text is indicative of the way the Dolmen Press strove to produce a material realization of literary work which both engaged in a specifically Irish heritage while simultaneously defining contemporary Irish experience through an interaction between bibliographic and linguistic elements.

One of the most striking examples of the Dolmen's commitment to the challenging of colonial stereotypes through its literary works and its bibliographic codes can be found in John Montague's *The Rough Field* (1972). Liam Miller's design combined with Montague's verse demonstrates the close connections between bibliographic and linguistic codes that operate within any poetic situation. The woodcuts that accompany *The Rough Field* are taken from John Derricke's *The Image of Irelande* (1581). Part of a larger orientalist project that sought to retrospectively justify the English conquest of Ireland, especially Ulster, Derricke's

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<sup>53</sup> Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, "Le Livre d'Artiste: Louis le Brocquy and *The Tain* (1969)," *New Hibernia Review* 5.1 (2001): 69.

<sup>54</sup> See Bhriain.

illustrations and narratives reveal the Irish to be barbarous and unnaturally wild. In one section of the text, Derricke states that,

They spoyle, and burne, and beare away, as fitte occasions serve,  
And thinke the greater ill they doe, the greater prayse deserve:<sup>55</sup>

In a 1883 edition of Derricke's *The Image of Irelande*, John Small states that, "There was appended to it a set of twelve *rude* woodcut illustrations of the Irish woodkerne."<sup>56</sup> Unbeknownst to Small, who was merely continuing Derricke's colonial mode of representation, "rude" is an excellent word for describing these cuts. Certainly rough cut, the work of an inferior artist, Derricke's illustrations share in other connotations of "rude"—"inexact, superficial" in their portrait of the Irish, "uncivilized, barbarous", "unmannerly, uncivil, impolite; offensively or deliberately discourteous", and "ungentle, violent, harsh, rugged; marked by unkind or severe treatment of persons."<sup>57</sup> Miller's reproductions of Derricke's woodcuts certainly forces an interpretation of English Renaissance representations of the Irish against a contemporary view of Ireland still struggling to cast off centuries of colonial history. As David Gardiner argues,

The critique which Miller and Montague undertook of the English and Irish Renaissance presented an important defining moment. In Montague's Dolmen chapbook, *Patriotic Suite* (1966), Miller's designs and Montague's poetry begin an investigation which would

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<sup>55</sup> John Derricke, *The Image of Irelande* (London, 1882) 2.

<sup>56</sup> John Small, ed., *The Image of Ireland* (London, 1883) vii. [My italics]

<sup>57</sup> "Rough," *OED* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2007).

ultimately end, in the work of Montague and younger Dolmen writers, in a critique of the Irish Renaissance and the stifling influence of Yeats's circle upon contemporary writers.<sup>58</sup>

*Patriotic Suite*, first published as part of the Dolmen chapbook series, is a part of Montague's larger meditation on the circumstances of Northern Ireland in the years leading up to the Troubles published as *The Rough Field* in 1972. The book first came out in a limited edition of 150 copies with the woodcut illustrations colored by hand and simultaneously in an unlimited edition in limp covers with just one colored illustration.<sup>59</sup> From the perspective of book production, Miller's desire to emulate incunabula in design and distribution while also looking beyond these antiquated methods of book production to provide a wider audience for Montague's work suggests much of the complex relationship that the Dolmen's vision of Irish literature had with the history of early modern Ireland.

Montague's group of poems entitled, "A Severed Head"—Part IV of *The Rough Field*—contains many of the aspects of both a bibliographic and linguistic critique of sixteenth-century representations of Ireland. If Montague intends "to pick up where the last bard of the O'Neills left off,"<sup>60</sup> he must offer an alternative voice to the colonial tendencies of figures such as Derricke. This is accomplished both in the poetry and Miller's designs. The woodcut that opens this section of *The Rough Field* is taken from Derricke's illustration of a group of English soldiers carrying back

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<sup>58</sup> Gardiner 47.

<sup>59</sup> Miller, *Dolmen XXV* 71.

<sup>60</sup> Gardiner 55.

captured woodkernes and the remains of dead Irish soldiers. Montague opens the poem with one of Derricke's captions for the image:

To see a soldier toze a Karne, O Lord it is a wonder!

And eke what care he tak'th to part the head from neck asunder.<sup>61</sup>

Miller's cropping of this larger image, which portrays the English as brutally beheading the Irish and carrying their severed heads on the tips of raised swords as a way of intimidating Irish warriors into deserting their arms, focuses on the 'civilized' English and their inhumane treatment of their Irish foes. The severed head of the woodkerne becomes the central metaphor for Montague's poems. Instead of celebrating the triumphalism of the English as Derricke does, Montague gives the Irish a voice. As he writes in the preface to this group of poems, "And who ever sung / Such a sight unsung / As a severed head / With a grafted tongue."<sup>62</sup> The poet's role, for Montague, is in providing the grafted tongue capable of speaking for those who have suffered at the hands of British injustice. The theme of the poems is the role of a lost culture and tradition for the Irish, and the first poem, like many in *The Rough Field* struggles with the role of pastoral amidst the modern world. As the narrator walks through his farm in County Tyrone, he notes the small cottage where his farmhands live, a father, mother, and two children, and surveys the landscape when a farmhand says,

'I like to look across,' said

Barney Horisk leaning on his *sleán*

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<sup>61</sup> John Montague, *The Rough Field* (Dublin, Dolmen, 1972) 32.

<sup>62</sup> Montague 31.

‘and think of all the people  
Who have bin.’<sup>63</sup>

This meditation pulls the narrator from the simple pastoral imagery that marks the beginning of the poem, and forces him to confront the actual lives of the inhabitants that once lived in this area. The narrator remembers the displaced and deceased: “the Blind Naills, / Big Ellen, who had been a Fair- / Day prostitute.”<sup>64</sup> Much like in Montague’s poem, “Like Dolmens round my Childhood,” the memories of a past generation, not simply idealized as the peasants of the Celtic Revival, haunt the fields and neighborhoods in which they have long been displaced. “Like shards of a lost culture,” Montague writes.

An argument concerning the tendency to represent the rural space as simply pastoral or delve into the more complex politics of colonial representation stretches throughout “A Severed Head.” Montague utilizes a bibliographic metaphor to further contemplate these pastoral and postcolonial views of Tyrone:

The whole landscape a manuscript  
We had lost the skill to read,  
A part of our past disinherited;  
But fumbled, like a blind man,  
Along the fingertips of instinct.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Montague 34.

<sup>64</sup> Montague 34.

<sup>65</sup> Montague 35.

Like the medieval manuscripts constructed by Irish scribes, stolen and destroyed by Ireland's conquerors, the land itself has been rewritten on by centuries of colonization, making the landscape faintly familiar but ultimately illegible. Here Montague uses this metaphor for an extended discussion of the loss of history and language, a cultural inheritance that can only be reconstructed through sifting through the few remaining pieces of a civilization erased. "*Tá an Ghaeilge again arís,*" is the remaining piece of Irish in the poem, "We have the Irish again." This remembered piece of Northern Ireland's culture before the Plantation of the sixteenth century, challenges Montague to assume the role of the Celtic bard, singing the lost histories of figures such as Con Bacach O'Neill, Seán an Diomas, and Hugh O'Neill. Here the Flight of the Earls is not a sign of triumph over a barbarous people and a tribal world; rather, when the last of the O'Neill's yielded to the strength of the English and leave their homeland, bound for the foreign shores of a European exile, a distinctively Irish way of life dies. The remaining poems are a lament for a lost era and way of life, and with the extermination of the political and social structures of Ulster, the bard's song, which codified the history of the area for centuries, gave way to the histories constructed by the Scottish and English planters who took over the area. In the final poem of "A Severed Head," Montague records the slow erosion of Irish associations with the land and the Scottish usurpers:

And what of stone-age Sess Kill Green  
Tullycorker and Tullyglush?  
Names twining braid Scots and Irish,



Like Fall Brae, springing native

As a whitethorn bush?<sup>66</sup>

Montague transforms Derricke's image of a severed head, a triumphalist warning to the Irish civilization in decline, into a symbol for the lost spirit of Northern Ireland, and *The Rough Field* is an attempt, in line with the aims of the Dolmen Press, to restore this Celtic consciousness to the history of Ulster. This historicizing move seems particularly import in the context of the violence surrounding Partition and the denial of civil rights to Catholics during the twentieth century. Montague sees the appropriation of the severed head as one way of explaining the contemporary sources of violence and strife and drawing a connection to a lost cultural heritage.

Miller's page design for *The Rough Field* cooperates with Montague's poetry to further emphasize the revisionist view of the English conquest of Ulster. In terms of its bibliographic construction, Derricke's *The Image of Irelande* is typical of sixteenth-century typographical layout. Some of the features that distinguish these books from their modern counterparts are the use of extensive marginal text and gothic type. Miller reproduces the marginalia of Elizabethan books in Montague's poetry to create a physical page that carries resonance from this time period. One such example comes also in the pages of Montague's "A Severed Head." The first page of this poem strangely contains only marginalia without any body text, leaving a blank space in the middle of the page bordered by notes set in three different types, each in six points. Drawing from the poetic experiments of American writers such as

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<sup>66</sup> Montague 40.

William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Robert Duncan, Montague consciously envisions the field of the page as a meaningful aspect of his poetry, and the title *The Rough Field* does not merely point to the English translation of *garbh acaidh*, which was then Anglicized into Garvaghey, the town in Ulster where Montague was raised, it also suggests the rough field of poetry that appears in Miller's carefully set pages. Much like the title, which has associations with colonial translations and appropriations, Miller's typographical field has similar overlays. The marginalia on the first page of 'A Severed Head,' which is indicative of the rest of the collection, records the histories of English Renaissance that Montague and Miller are resisting. Miller places Montague's first three marginal quotations in increasingly modern typefaces, printing Derricke's caption, followed by a selection from George Hill's *An Historical Account of the Plantation of Ulster*, and finally a quotation from Sir John Davies, the attorney general in Ireland during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The choice of typefaces and their position in the margins of the page communicates the marginal position of historical and colonial representations of Ulster in Montague's poetry. If Montague really wants to challenge these historical accounts, he must push them to the margins as the native Irish had been centuries before; Miller's layout does this work, allowing Montague's poetry to reside in the coveted position in the center of the page. Colonial representations reside only in the footnotes, and the work of the Irish bard takes precedence in Montague and Miller's rewriting.

A similar typographical move is executed in a later section of *The Rough Field* where Miller again returns to incunabula design, restoring the use of gothic typefaces. Part VII—“Hymn to the New Omagh Road”—speaks of the neo-imperial machinations present in the infrastructure projects of 1960s Northern Ireland. Here a poem, “Balance Sheet”, weighs the advantages and disadvantages of a new highway that is proposed to cut through the heart of Tyrone’s rural countryside. Miller cleverly divides the list of pros and cons under the titles **Loss** and **Gain**, in gothic typeface. Again this gesture back to the physical presentation of Derricke’s sixteenth-century text, suggests the pragmatism involved in Enlightenment thinking, and Montague’s poem highlights the problematic nature of attempting to quantify the loss of such a space for inconsequential gains such as:

Item: A man driving from Belfast to Londonderry can  
arrive a quarter of an hour earlier, a lorry load of  
goods ditto, thus making Ulster more competitive  
in the international market.<sup>67</sup>

The danger of slipping into a pastoral image of Northern Ireland is tempered by the threat of environmental devastation, repeatedly symbolized by dying trout in a choked mountain stream. Montague recognizes that much more is at play in the struggle over Northern Ireland than past representations of the Irish. There are plenty of contemporary provisions made by British industrial planners and economists that seek

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<sup>67</sup> Montague 59.

to further fragment the Irish connection to a landscape and a culture. The architects of the sixteenth-century Plantation have found their twentieth-century analogues.

While the *The Rough Field* may seem to have the same narrow inward look at Ireland rather than the outward international stance of Northern Ireland in the 1960's, Montague suggests the international scope of his group of poems in the preface to the collection where he expresses his cosmopolitan stature despite efforts by others to solidly root him in an Ulster context:

This poem begins in the early Sixties, when I went to Belfast to receive a small poetry prize, the first, I think, to exist in that part of the world. (Ironically, the Irish papers hailed it as 'Dublin Poet wins Belfast Prize', so little were they accustomed to a poet of my background.) To deepen the paradox, the award was presented in the Assembly Rooms of the Presbyterian Church in Belfast . . . And as 'Like Dolmens round my Childhood' was being read, I heard the rumble of drums preparing for 'the Twelfth', the annual Orange Festival. . . . And experience of agitations in Paris and Berkeley taught me that the violence of disputing factions is more than a local phenomenon. But one must start from home—so the poem begins where I began myself, with a Catholic family in the townland of Garvaghey, in the county of Tyrone, in the province of Ulster.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Montague vii.

Montague is exactly the type of Irish voice that the Dolmen Press was attempting to cultivate, one that recognizes the events of Ireland's history are neither provincial nor local. While Montague's poems are certainly an investigation of the origins of the Troubles, profound connections are made to the worldwide protests of 1968 and the various demands for civil rights that resounded around the globe. In *The Rough Field*, the Troubles are not seen as a Catholic nationalist struggle against a Protestant loyalist community in decline, but rather, the events are a response to a particular set of historical circumstances, the politics of representation, and a participation in the ideas of an international intellectual climate.

In terms of Irish book production, a similar international character can be found in the work of the Dolmen Press. In addition to the international attention that award winning art books such as Kinsella's *Táin* garnered, Miller conceived of the Dolmen and the tradition of Irish printing as transcending the boundaries of a national context. In a speech entitled "Fresh Images Beget: Art Nouveau & Irish Books," Miller draws connections between the aesthetic values of the Art Nouveau movement, which was popular both on the continent and America, to Celtic artwork and Irish book production. In speaking about the Celtic world of *The Táin*, Miller remarks, "It was a world of artefacts, many of which might have been the product of the new age of skills in gold and silver which accompanied the art of the new book decorators—old skills which in the 1967 Rosc Exhibition in Dublin were re-discovered for us in

all their Art Nouveau richness.”<sup>69</sup> While the Celtic Revival imagined the works of Celtic oral culture to be intimately a part of the Irish birthright and a key to forming a nation, Miller wishes to extend this Celtic tradition to the world by noting similar aims in artistic production. His mention of the 1967 Rosc Exhibition is also significant because of the way it heralded the arrival of Irish art in the international art scene.<sup>70</sup> This type of international involvement in the art world, specifically in bookmaking was unknown to the Cuala. In 1972 Clé, the Irish publishers’ association, hosted a conference in Dublin for UNESCO’s “International Book Year,” which strove to make books available to all people around the globe. Miller addressed the conference, arguing, in part, that nation-states should keep import duties on books low to allow their citizens to have inexpensive access to writers around the world. Miller and the Dolmen sought to promote the spread of Irish writers not just to the Irish, but desired a cosmopolitan atmosphere for literary interaction, one consistent with the globalization of Ireland in the last half of the twentieth century.

Miller also occasionally drew upon Yeats’s tripartite publishing system as a model for keeping Irish works in the hands of a number of different audiences. The early works of the Dolmen were printed in small editions meant for distribution in Dublin and its immediate surroundings. For instance, the first Dolmen book, Siggerson Clifford’s *Travelling Tinkers* (1951) was printed in an edition of 500,

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<sup>69</sup> Miller, “Fresh Images Beget: Art Nouveau & Irish Books,” Dolmen Press Collection ts.127.9, Z. Smith Reynolds Library, Wake Forest University.

<sup>70</sup> W.J. McCormack and Patrick Gillan, *Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 207.

which sold out in a few weeks.<sup>71</sup> This book, hand-printed on a quarto flatbed Adana press, shares much in common with the design and edition size of the Cuala.

However, Miller did not limit his press to the publishing of limited editions at restrictive prices. Rather, as the Dolmen matured, Miller began associations with larger presses such as the Oxford University Press and other international private press like the Swallow Press in Chicago as a means of making his books available to a wider reading public.

The Dolmen is able to recapture the aura lost in the capitalist book industry, yet, retain some of the potential for social change that Benjamin ascribes to art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In Benjamin's estimation the distinction of the aura of artistic production is destroyed with the introduction of mechanical reproduction. The transformation of art is one further step in the dialectical movement toward the negation of capitalism. The destruction of the aura, which the Cuala and Dolmen attempt to combat, is capable of opening a marginalized literature to a large number of readers, and especially in the case of the Dolmen connections with larger printer was successful in raising Irish cultural production to a position of notoriety on an international scale. Nevertheless, the aura that is encoded in the original and limited printing projects of the Cuala and Dolmen allows readers the context needed to reconstruct their conditions of production. Printing, itself a technology of mechanical reproduction, allows for the types of appropriation and reinscription that takes place in volumes such as the Dolmen's *Táin* and *The Rough Field*. No doubt, Miller's

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<sup>71</sup> Miller, *Dolmen* XXV 13.

experiments in these art forms have sparked a drive toward exploiting the potentials and resistances present in the lead of metal type and layout of the press stone. Fine letterpress book-printing in the twentieth century has the advantage of simultaneously gesturing toward the era of the aura while expressing the opportunity for a more democratic art anticipated in the epoch of mechanical reproduction.

A dolmen, a large flat stone supported by smaller vertical stones, a tabletop, a tomb, is a material realization of the Celtic imagination concerning death and the afterlife. More ornate and carefully constructed than a burial in the bog, the dolmen was a memorial to the memory of a person's life and the hope for a life beyond death. Much like these monoliths covered in clay, the Dolmen Press sought to preserve the history of Irish literature while imagining the present state of the Irish literature it entombed. These abstractions need a material realization, and the Dolmen Press sought to provide that space. In doing so, it destabilized the boundaries between text and context. The conscious interaction of bibliographic code and linguistic code demonstrates the significant role of the material situations of reading and writing. The Cuala and Dolmen presses retain an intimate material relationship to the place and social circumstances of their production. Their books carry an aura that allows readers to historicize the reified social relations while also opening up literary works for appropriation by readers across the globe.



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