Commenting on the paucity of children's literature and the shortage of critical literature in modern Ireland on the topic of children's books, Dr Patricia Donlon wrote in 1985:

Ireland has a great tradition of folklore and fairytale, but one cannot grow up on a diet of just one foodstuff – adventure, magic, poetry, fantasy, nonsense, all are necessary to nourish the imagination. Literature is all about making sense of life – and where more than Ireland in the mid-eighties do our young people need such an aid? 1

Where indeed, if not in a country struggling to discover its own national identity? During the period 1880 to 1920, political events determined that Ireland moved rapidly from being a province of the United Kingdom to independent status and self-government. During these crucial years which saw the fall of Parnell, the decline of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy class, the bitter controversies concerning the revival of the Irish language and the trauma of the Easter rebellion of 1916, two main literary movements gathered momentum, and sought, through a study of the past, to find a national and cultural identity. These movements were the Anglo-Irish literary revival and the Gaelic League. Broadly speaking, one of the main differences between the two movements was their chosen language of self-expression, either the English vernacular used in the daily life of the people, or the dying Irish language in which was vested the traditional culture of the island. 2

* I should like to thank Drs David Blamires, Ian Roberts and Jonathan West for their invaluable help and support during the writing of this article. The following people also provided information and encouragement: Dennis Butts, Patricia Donlon, Cherie Gladstone, Clive Hurst and the staff concerned with the Opie collection, Gearóid Mac Eoin, Brian Murdoch, Ruth Potterton, Kimberley Reynolds, Mireia Sagarra, Janet Wallwork and Christine Wilkie. The absence of bibliographical and critical material specifically related to literature for children in Ireland has made investigation of this topic difficult and all suggestions have been gratefully received.

force of these two movements was their growing sense of nationalism which strove to resurrect, out of the dying embers of an Irish tradition, a new Irish identity.³

A great deal has been written about the Anglo-Irish literary renaissance and the conscious attempts by gifted writers such as W.B. Yeats, George Russell (AE), Douglas Hyde, Lady Augusta Gregory and J.M. Synge to explore and define Irish culture and tradition.⁴ However, the literature written at that time in Ireland for children has never been examined to see if it too bears traces of an effort to revive 'the spirit of the nation'. The aim of the present article is to explore the rôle heroic mythology and legend played in the emergence of a national identity in Irish children's literature.⁵

Synonomous with the Anglo-Irish literary renaissance in Ireland, there would appear to have been an equally thriving period of creativity in the production of children's books of a specifically Irish nature, aimed at the British, Irish and American markets. Such a situation seemed to augur well for the future development of a native Irish genre of children's literature written through the medium of English. However, as we shall see, the promise of a literary revival was never fulfilled with regard to children's literature.

But the scene in the early twentieth century was sufficiently healthy for Fr Stephen Brown, writing between 1918 and 1919, to identify some 160 'suitable Irish story books for boys' from the ages of ten to sixteen.⁶ He categorized these books according to their subject matter into school and home stories, tales of adventure, hero tales, historical tales, fairy tales, humorous stories and sketches and miscellaneous stories, which were essentially Irish folktales suitable for children. School stories were scarce, causing Brown to lament that 'If our Irish boys want stories of school life they must read of school life as lived in English Protestant public and private schools', a milieu which was 'wholly alien to that of our Catholic schools at home'. However, he found that stories with an historical backdrop were plentiful, written by both Irish and British children's authors. These tales were set in eras as far apart as that of the Norman Strongbow and Oliver Cromwell,⁷ and included swashbuckling

³ For a study of the period, see A. Norman Jeffares, Anglo-Irish literature (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982).
⁵ This article draws on the work of a joint study on the history of children's books in Ireland from 1700 to 1920 which is now being prepared for publication by my colleague, Dr Ian Roberts, and myself.
⁷ John G. Rowe, With Strongbow at Wexford (1917); Randal McDonnell, When Cromwell came to Drogheda (1906), both works cited by Brown, 'Irish fiction', 470.
adventures which often transported young Irish heroes over the high seas to America and other far-off places.

In his article, Brown referred with some pride to the vast treasury of heroic epic literature, which had become known in Ireland through the upsurge of interest in Old Irish texts and translations during the nineteenth century. He observed that although the Arthurian legends, the folktales of Germany and tales of the Arabian nights were securely established favourites in the nursery and schoolroom, nevertheless ‘to the average European boy or girl Cuchulain and Finn were strangers, and our Irish children were scarcely less ignorant’. Yet, at that time, children were becoming more familiar with the characters of Irish saga literature through tales of kings, heroes and warriors which were being tailored by writers specifically to suit the younger taste. Recommended unreservedly by Brown was Joseph Jacob’s Celtic fairy tales, beautifully illustrated by J.D. Batten. However, singular praise was given by Brown to the stories of Standish James O’Grady. He commented: ‘There is in his style an epic grandeur, a vividness of colour, a something, so to speak, wild and primitive, which gives a unique flavour to his writings about old Irish legends’.

Indeed, Standish O’Grady (1846–1928) was revered in the Anglo-Irish literary circles of the time as the ‘father of the Irish literary revival’. A member of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy class, O’Grady became acutely aware of his Irish heritage through reading Sylvester O’Halloran’s A general history of Ireland from the earliest accounts to the close of the twelfth century. He devoted the remainder of his life to reconstructing the ancient history of Ireland and, in so doing, to reviving the heroic tales and legends for the Irish nation. His twin aims – to be faithful to the original Old Irish texts and also to make these tales both readable and exciting adventure stories –

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8 See Edmund Downey, Captain Lanagan’s log (1891); Mary E. Mannix, Michael O’Donnell, or The fortunes of a little emigrant (1900); James Riley, Christy of Rathglin (1907); all works cited in Brown, ‘Irish fiction’, 668.
9 For a summary of work in these areas at that time, see J.E. Caerwyn Williams and Patrick K. Ford, The Irish literary tradition (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).
11 Joseph Jacobs, Celtic fairy tales (London: David Nutt, 1892).
14 Published in London in 1778.
were quite impossible to achieve, since the sources from which he derived his material were often fragmentary and the culture they portrayed so foreign to his Victorian readers that his manuscripts required extensive revision and explanation to make any sense at all. However, his greatest contribution to Anglo-Irish literature was the fact that he renewed, through his writings, extensive interest in a long-forgotten heritage.

Cú Chulainn,\textsuperscript{16} heroic defender of Ulster in the Old Irish epic tale \textit{Táin bó Cúailnge (The cattle-raid of Cooley)}, was the central figure in a trilogy of adventure stories founded in mythology and entitled by O'Grady: \textit{The coming of Cuculain} (1894), \textit{In the gates of the North} (1901), \textit{The triumph and passing of Cuculain} (1920). The first two books are mentioned in Brown's article as being eminently suitable for Irish boys and it is easy to see the appeal of the story of a lone boyish figure valiantly defending Ulster against the might of the Connaught forces, while the menfolk of his province lie on their beds suffering from a debilitating disease.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, O'Grady's portrait of Cú Chulainn is very stilted when compared with descriptions of that hero in children's literature only a few years later.\textsuperscript{18}

The character of Finn mac Cumail\textsuperscript{19} is more vividly drawn by O'Grady than that of Cú Chulainn. Here he employs his imagination to write an ornate prose which elaborates on the original tales of this mighty warrior and wise leader of a band of \textit{fiana} (warriors/adventurers). The adventures of semi-mythical Finn mac Cumail were related by his son Oisin to St Patrick in early Christian times and thus recorded for posterity.\textsuperscript{20} Doubtless, O'Grady saw in the many tales about that heroic figure untold possibilities to instil in the young mind the morals and values embodied in these tales. His book, \textit{Finn and his companions} was published by T. Fisher Unwin in the Children's Library series,\textsuperscript{21} which also included another gem for children – \textit{Irish fairy tales} by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Literally 'The hound of Culann'. Readers will note that there was no agreed standard orthography for the Irish names of saga-characters at the time, thus Cú Chulainn appeared as Cuchulain/Cuchulainn/Cuculain; likewise Finn mac Cumail/Fionn Mac Cumhaill, Oisin/Ossian and Medb/Medhbh/Maeve/Mave. I have standardized the orthography as far as possible when referring to these characters in general terms. However, the authors' orthography is preserved in any titles or textual excerpts reproduced here.
\item \textsuperscript{17} For a synopsis of the epic saga, see David Greene, 'Táin bó Cúailnge', \textit{Irish sagas}, ed. Myles Dillon (Cork: Mercier Press, 1970), 93–105.
\item \textsuperscript{18} The character of Cú Chulainn as described by Lady Gregory and Eleanor Hull is dealt with below.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Literally 'Finn son of Cumal'.
\item \textsuperscript{20} For further reading on the genre of Fenian / Ossianic literature in early Ireland, see Myles Dillon, \textit{Early Irish literature} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1948, reprinted 1972), 32–50.
\item \textsuperscript{21} See \textit{Finn and his companions} (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892). I am indebted to Dr David Blamires, who kindly lent me his copy of this edition for reference purposes.
\end{itemize}
William Butler Yeats.\(^{22}\) Both books are beautifully, if somewhat traditionally, illustrated by Jack B. Yeats. In the preface to his book about Finn's adventures, O'Grady explained to his young readers that, despite the fact that the Roman world had lost the simple virtues of truth, courage and generosity, these qualities were preserved by the Irish people amongst whom Finn and Oisin lived:

Finn, who was the father of Ossian, Oscur his son, Diarmid his chivalrous cousin, Caelta, MacLewy, and the rest were very brave, upright, true-hearted, and affectionate men, who in their forests and their rude simple homes preserved certain virtues which the Romans and the Romanised Britons had lost in spite of all their wealth.\(^{23}\)

There are strong moralistic tones in these tales of Finn, somewhat reminiscent of the tales of Maria Edgeworth some hundred years earlier.\(^{24}\) Generosity of heart and spirit was a prized quality among the \textit{fiana} and O'Grady places overt emphasis on this theme lest it be lost on his young readers. Finn comes into contact with a curmudgeonly character by the name of Nod, but by dint of his example and the open-heartedness of his men, Nod's meanness is overcome and after some harrowing adventures:

Nod became as famous for hospitality as he had been formerly notorious for the want of it. So greatly was he changed that he was said to be the third most hospitable man of his time in all Ireland . . . the story shows how Finn by force, example and precept, taught the men of Ireland to live in a more generous, kindly, and human manner than they had done. Those who look deeper into these strange stories will find that the numerous serpents which Finn slew were ugly practices and savage unnatural habits.\(^{25}\)

O'Grady also wrote a number of historical novels, eminently suitable for children. In these, characters such as Red Hugh O'Donnell and a supporting historical cast come to life and fight their way through Elizabethan Ireland with great vigour.\(^{26}\) However, it was chiefly through his interpretations of Irish heroic mythology that he became known to, and an acknowledged influence on, the pioneers of the Irish revivalist movement in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many of these writers paid tribute to his influence on their outlook in life: 'Whatever is Irish in me he kindled

\(^{22}\) \textit{Irish fairy tales} (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892). This is a collection of fairy and folktales, selected and edited by Yeats from the collections of Douglas Hyde, Samuel Ferguson, William Allingham, William Carleton and other collectors of folklore.

\(^{23}\) Standish O'Grady, \textit{Finn and his companions}, x-xi.


\(^{25}\) See Standish O'Grady, \textit{Finn and his companions}, 83-4.

\(^{26}\) See \textit{Red Hugh's captivity} (London: Ward and Downey, 1889); \textit{Lost on Du-Corrig}, (London, Paris and Melbourne: Cassell, 1894); \textit{The chain of gold} (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895); \textit{Ulick the ready} (London : Downey, 1896); \textit{The flight of the eagle} (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1897); \textit{Hugh Roe O'Donnell} (Belfast: Nelson and Knox, 1902).
to life’, W.B. Yeats wrote, while George Russell (AE) felt that Tennyson’s Knights of the Round Table paled into insignificance when compared with the heroic figures created by O’Grady: ‘It was the memory of a race which rose up within me as I read, and I felt exalted as one who learns he is among the children of kings’. Small wonder then that O’Grady’s reconstruction of the heroic lives of a host of mythological characters set the scene for the forays of other writers into Irish mythology.

Lady Augusta Gregory (1852–1932) followed O’Grady’s example and adapted and retold stories concerning, for the most part, the mythical heroes and heroines of the Red Branch cycle of tales, of whom the foremost was Cú Chulainn. Her book *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* traces primarily the birth, life and death of Cú Chulainn, but to this she added tales of Emer his wife, Angus Óg, Déirdre and the sons of Usna, and King Conaire of Tara. Her style was direct and she told her tales ‘in plain simple words, in the same way my old nurse Mary Sheridan used to be telling stories from the Irish long ago, and I a child at Roxborough’. Her friend and mentor, W.B. Yeats, was fulsome in his praise of her edition of these tales and quick to recognize the value of these stories for the children of the Irish nation. He urged readers in his prefatory remarks to this book in 1902:

If we will but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea. When I was a child I had only to climb the hill behind the house to see long, blue, ragged hills flowing along the southern horizon. What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me, not even the merchant captains who knew everything, that Cnuachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills!

A more scholarly approach was adopted by Eleanor Hull (1860–1935), historian, Irish scholar and founder of the Irish Texts Society, which had, and still has, as its main aim the publication of early Irish manuscripts. She also contributed to children’s literature in this period, by writing in 1909 a splendid book for children entitled *Cuchulain the hound of Ulster*. The book has sixteen superb illustrations by Stephen Reid, in which much attention has been paid to ‘Celtic’ details. Given Hull’s scholarly background, it is not surprising that her approach to the sources at her disposal was more

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27 Ulick O’Connor, *Celtic dawn*, 25.
29 Lady Augusta Gregory, dedication to the Irish people of Kiltartan, *Cuchulain*, i.
30 Preface by W. B. Yeats, to Lady Augusta Gregory, *Cuchulain*, vi.
methodical than the books we have mentioned thus far. Whereas she
allowed herself some minor pruning of detail, she did not
deliberately alter a tale or add material to it. Neither did she include
tales which did not belong to the Cú Chulainn cycle, a factor which
gave the book a unity and continuity not found in the works of
either O’Grady or Lady Gregory. The book was written ‘for the
pleasure of the young’. Her character portrayal of the valiant
young Cú Chulainn, grasping Queen Medb, acquiescent Ailill her
spouse, wise King Conchobar and a host of other minor
characters, is vibrant, and entirely believable, as is her depiction of
the excitement of battle and the warmth of the evening camp fires.
Her ultimate aim was the same as that of O’Grady, Yeats and the
other writers – to rescue these old tales from oblivion and in so
doing, ‘to recall the minds of men in our own day to some noble
ideals’.

For her, as for other Irish writers of the time, the young Cú
Chulainn represented the embodiment of these noble ideals. The
title-page of the book contained a famous extract in Old Irish from
the stories of the boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn, translated by
Hull. It represented a pertinent philosophy for the children of the
emerging Irish nation.

‘Bec a brig liomsa sin’, ar Cuchulaind, ‘gen go rabar acht aonlá no aonoidchi ar bith
acht go mairit m’airdsgeula dom és’.
‘Though the span of my life were but for a day,’ Cuchulain said, ‘little should I reck
of that, if but my noble deeds might be remembered among men’.

The events in the tale which give rise to this famous saying
were as follows. When he was seven years old, Cú Chulainn
overheard Cathbad the magician tell his pupils that that very day
was a lucky one on which any youth who should assume arms
would attain eternal fame. Cú Chulainn immediately put aside his
hurley-stick and ball and asked King Conchobar to give him the
weapons of a warrior, telling him that Cathbad had instructed him
to ask for them. Some time later Cathbad came on the scene and
expressed sorrow that the lad had assumed arms so soon. Cú
Chulainn explained what he had overheard Cathbad tell his pupils:

‘True is that, indeed,’ said Caffa, ‘noble and famous thou shalt be, but short and
brief thy life’.

32 Hull wrote an interesting and scholarly introduction to Cuchulain, in which she discussed
the manuscript materials from which she derived her tales and her approach to them, see
particularly 12–13.
33 Hull anglicizes this name as ‘Meave’ in the book.
34 Anglicized as ‘Conor’ in the book.
35 See the discussion of P.H. Pearse below, and the manner in which he incorporated this
into his educational philosophy.
36 Anglicized as ‘Caffa’ by Hull in Cuchulain.
'Little care I for that,' replied the lad, 'nor though my life endured but for one day and night, so only that the story of myself and of my deeds shall last'.

The stark image of a small boy putting aside his playthings to assume the trappings of the fighting-man and to adopt the warrior's heroic philosophy as his own appealed strongly to nationalist feelings. Heroic images of this type contributed to the evolution of an educational ideal which saw as its ultimate aim blood-sacrifice in the name of nationhood, as we shall see below.

Another member of this Anglo-Irish revivalist circle who used the tradition of Irish mythology as inspiration was Ella Young (1865–1951). She developed an interest in Irish mythology while still a student in Dublin and was encouraged to collect folktales and learn the Irish language by her friend and mentor, Standish O'Grady. Young's political sympathies lay with an Irish Republic and she played an active rôle in the republican movement, running guns and ammunition for the members of the Irish Republican Army from a farmhouse in county Wicklow. However, through her membership of the movement Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland), one of whose founders was Maud Gonne, and through her voluntary work for their projects, she achieved a unity of philosophy and writing. One of the greatest successes of the Inghinidhe was their provision of free classes in Irish, history, music, dance and drama for the children of Dublin. Ella Young taught history at these classes by retelling the myths and legends of ancient Ireland. Despite the deprivations of their upbringing and the hardship of their surroundings, these children were highly motivated and eager to learn. Young gave a lively account in her memoirs which provides us with an insight into the popularity of these history classes:

In a room perched at the head of a rickety staircase and overlooking a narrow street, I have about eighty denizens of untamed Dublin: newsboys, children who have played in street alleys all their lives, young patriot girls and boys who can scarcely write their own names. Outside there is a continuous din of street cries and rumbling carts. It is almost impossible to shout against it if the windows are open, and more impossible to speak in the smother of dust if the windows are shut. Everyone is standing, closely packed – no room for chairs.

Two books based on Celtic mythology were written by her during this time; The coming of Lugh (1909) and Celtic wonder tales

37 See Hull, Cuchulain, 40–3.
39 For a summary of the work carried out by this early, extraordinarily (for its time) emancipated women's movement, see Margaret Ward, Maud Gonne: a life (London: Pandora, 1990), 65–70.
40 Ella Young, Flowering dusk (New York: Longmans, 1945), 70.
Both books were beautifully illustrated by Maud Gonne, 'with her own re-workings of Celtic designs', and her ethereal depictions of the ancient gods and heroes. Young did not confine herself to the more popular characters in mythology but drew on the whole Celtic pantheon of gods, goddesses, kings, heroes and anti-heroes. *Celtic wonder tales* is a collection of fourteen stories treating of such diverse themes as the fantastic Gobán Saor and the sad and lonely fate of the Children of Lir, metamorphosed into white swans by their wicked, jealous step-mother and condemned to spend hundreds of years flying relentlessly from lake to lake in Ireland.

Three hundred years they flew over Lake Darvra and swam on its waters. Often their father came to the lake and called them to him and caressed them; often their kinsfolk came to talk with them; often harpers and musicians came to listen to the wonder of their singing. When three hundred years were ended the swans rose suddenly and flew far and far away. Their father sought them and their kinsfolk sought them, but the swans never touched earth or rested once till they came to the narrow sea of the Moyle that flows between Ireland and Scotland. A cold stormy sea it was, and lonely. The swans had no one to listen to their singing, and little heart for singing amid the green curling, bitter waves. The storm-wind beat roughly on them, and often they were separated and calling to one another without hope of an answer.

However, the story of the sons of Mil (eponymous ancestors of the Irish race) landing in *Inis Fáil* (the Isle of Destiny, i.e. Ireland) has a lyrical and nationalistic quality all of its own:

They came in ships, and it is said by some that they came from a land beyond the utmost blueness of the sky and that their ships left the track among the stars that can still be seen on winter nights.

Their chief poet and druid Amairgen was the first to set foot on the land and after various encounters with the original inhabitants, the Túatha Dé Danann, the sons of Mil are victorious and lift their heads to get their first glimpse of the land of Ireland:

They saw the sunlight on the grass like emerald fire; they saw the blueness of the sky and the solemn darkness of the pine trees; they heard the myriad sound of shaken branches and running water and behind it echoed the laughter of Brigit.

In these early tales, Young adhered rigidly to the traditional material. It was only in later years, when she used this same material

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41 Ella Young, *The coming of Lugh* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1909); *Celtic wonder tales* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1910). The latter has been re-issued by Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1988, reprinted in 1991.
42 On Maud Gonne's art, of which far less is known than of her political activities, see Ward, *Maud Gonne*, 90.
43 Ella Young, *Celtic wonder tales*, 148–9.
44 Ibid., 117.
45 Ibid., 125.
to launch her imagination, that she was at her most creative. For example, in *The unicorn with silver shoes* (1932) she took figures out of Irish mythology or otherwise and transposed them out of their milieu into unusual situations – a unicorn who is calmed by listening to the recitation of epic poetry, a djinn who ends up in a Dublin zoo, a Pooka who has mischievous adventures.46

If Ella Young's books for children were at their best when she imprinted her own character on traditional themes, the same could also be said of the writings of James Stephens (1880 or 1882-1950). Stephens lived in Dublin during the Easter Insurrection of 1916 and his reaction to this period cultivated intense patriotic feelings within him, which were sublimated in a re-discovery of his interest in Old Irish literature.47 The three books which he listed as his best among his novels were *Irish fairy tales* (1920), *Deirdre* (1923) and *In the land of youth* (1924).48 Of these, *Irish fairy tales* has to be the epitome of pure Irish mythological literature for children, beautifully recounted tales and magically illustrated plates by Arthur Rackham. In the ten tales recounted here, Stephens achieves the perfect blend of fantasy and reality. O'Grady's Finn is a cardboard character when compared to the exuberant lad in Stephens's tale 'The boyhood of Fionn'.49 There are wonderful flights of imagination such as that which describes how Finn first learns to jump:

He learned to jump by chasing hares in a bumpy field. Up went the hare and up went Fionn and away went the two of them, hopping and popping across the field. If the hare turned while Fionn was after her it was switch for Fionn, so that in a while it did not matter to Fionn which way the hare jumped, for he could jump that way too. Longways, sideways or baw-ways, Fionn hopped where the hare hopped, and at last he was the owner of a hop that any hare would give an ear for.50

His understanding of children is well illustrated in a paragraph about Finn's son Oisin, who leaves his mother in another land, comes to live with Finn and his band of *fiana* and at last learns their speech so that he can tell his story to his father:

There were many blanks in the tale, for a young child does not remember very well. Deeds grow old in a day and are buried in a night. New memories come crowding

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47 He was friendly with Irish scholars such as Osborn Bergin, Richard Best and Stephen MacKenna and these encouraged him to read editions of Old Irish texts which gave him a background for subsequent poetry and prose.


50 Ibid., 46-7.
on old ones, and one must learn to forget as well as to remember. A whole new life had come to this boy, a life that was instant and memorable, so that his present memories blended into and obscured the past and he could not be quite sure if that which he told of had happened in this world or the world he had left.\textsuperscript{51}

Stephens's own philosophy of life blended effortlessly with the adventures he narrated to give a barely perceptible moralistic tone, such as in the tale called 'The birth of Bran':

When Iollan and Tuiren were married, they went to Ulster and they lived together very happily. But the law of life is change; nothing continues in the same way for any length of time; happiness must become unhappiness, and will be succeeded again by the joy it has displaced. The past also must be reckoned with; it is seldom as far behind us as we could wish: it is more often in front, blocking the way and the future trips over it just when we think that the road is clear and joy our own.\textsuperscript{52}

It should be noted that the books written for children by the writers mentioned thus far all subscribe to the same aims in varying degrees, in that the mythological heritage of the past was unveiled in its own traditional context both to inform and to inspire its readers. Curiously enough, none of these writers, apart from Ella Young, as we have already mentioned, used the traditional material as a stepping-stone for their own creativity. But this development in Young's writing was almost certainly precipitated by the fact that in 1925, disillusioned with the government of the new Irish Free State, she left to make her home permanently in America,\textsuperscript{53} as did a number of other Irish writers at that time.

However, there was one Irish writer, namely Edmund Leamy (1848–1904), who began in the late nineteenth century to mould traditional Irish legends and folklore in his own inimitable way, to create magical adventure stories for children. Leamy's books for children were aimed primarily to entertain and can therefore be said to represent children's fiction in the purest sense.\textsuperscript{54} His books were peopled with ordinary boys and girls who were transported into fairy realms to meet mythical heroes and heroines, who were tested by supernatural challenges and returned to the mortal world to be enfolded in the secure embrace of their 'mammy', none the worse for wear. But the milieu of that mortal world was unmistakably Irish and the fairy realms which he created were also the legendary realms of the \textit{aos si} (the fairy folk reputed to populate the Irish otherworld).

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{53} See Ward, \textit{Maud Gonne}, 67.
\textsuperscript{54} See F. J. Harvey Darton, \textit{Children's books in England} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 1, where he gives his interpretation of children's literature: 'By "children's books" I mean printed works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure, and not primarily to teach them, nor solely to make them good, nor to keep them profitably quiet'.
In the foreword to a collection of his posthumously published stories and anecdotes, Leamy was described by his friend, Katharine Tynan, as ‘the beau-ideal of a chivalrous Irish gentleman, patriot and Christian’; he was ‘Ireland’s man; all he did was for Ireland.’

Leamy was an active politician, a Member of Parliament and an ardent supporter of Charles Stewart Parnell. When Parnell seized the newspaper *United Ireland* back from his opponents in 1890, Leamy was entrusted with editorial control of this important Parnellite mouthpiece. Notwithstanding his intense political involvement and poor health, his literary interests impelled him to write poetry and prose which displayed a wealth of colour and imagination. His two most popular books for children – *Irish fairy tales*, first published in 1890 and *The fairy minstrel of Glenmalure and other stories for children*, published in 1899 – were re-issued many times in the course of subsequent years. *Irish fairy tales* was also issued many times in an abridged version, entitled *The golden spears and other fairy tales*.

Leamy used as his sources a mixture of legends and folklore gleaned from Eugene O’Curry’s seminal volumes, *Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history* (1861) and *On the manners and customs of the ancient Irish* (1873), and P.W. Joyce’s *Old Celtic romances*. However, his interest in archaeology led him to recreate pictures for his young readers of the Ireland of ancient times, as depicted in the second story in *Irish fairy tales*, which is entitled ‘The house in the lake’, and describes quite accurately a *crannóg* or dwelling-place on an island in a lake:

> The hut was built on stakes driven into the bed of the lake, and was so high above the waters that even when they were stirred into waves by the wind coming down from the mountains they did not reach the threshold of the door. Around, outside the hut, on a level with the floor, was a little wicker-work platform, and under the platform, close to the steps leading up to it from the water, the fisherman’s curragh, made of willows, covered with skins, was moored, and it was only by means of the curragh that he and his son, Enda, could leave their lake dwelling.

This is the setting to launch young Enda, the humble fisherman’s son, on the adventure of a lifetime, in which he rescues ‘the Princess

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56 For background information, see Margaret Leamy (his wife), *Parnell’s faithful few* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), and F.S.L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (London: Fontana/ Collins, 1978).
58 Leamy cites his sources in *Fairy tales*, 159–65.
59 Ibid., 160.
60 Ibid., 20. For a verification of this description from an archaeologist’s viewpoint, see more recently, Eamon P. Kelly, ‘*Crannog*’, in *The illustrated archaeology of Ireland*, ed. Michael Ryan (Dublin: Country House, 1991), 120–4.
Mave', held in thrall in the shape of a swan by her wicked step-mother, by pouring on her plumage 'the perfumed water that fills the golden bowl that is in the inmost room of the palace of the fairy queen, beneath the lake'. But first he must fetch the perfumed water, slay the dragon of the deep, defeat a thousand poisonous hissing serpents and kill with his spear the hideous monster guarding the fairy palace. Thrilling stuff indeed, and worthy of a modern day Indiana Jones!

The world which Leamy painted for children was devoid of any mention of the political turmoil which was the reality of late nineteenth-century Ireland. He used his pen to re-create a legendary Ireland of make-believe, where the rightful king was restored to Tara and the usurper banished, where warriors were lured to fairyland never to know old age or pain or sorrow or sickness, where warriors passed tests of strength and endurance before claiming the fairest princess in the land, where 'the sweetest music that was ever heard in all the world' was played by the nine little pipers of fairy land. The legend of the 'Fairy tree of Dooros' is used by Leamy in a story in which an ugly princess has her former beauty restored by eating a berry from the famous fairy tree growing in Dooros Wood. His description of how the magic tree came to grow there is quite enchanting:

Once upon a time the fairies of the west, going home from a hurling-match with the fairies of the lakes, rested in Dooros Wood for three days and three nights. They spent the days feasting and the nights dancing in the light of the moon, and they danced so hard that they wore the shoes off their feet, and for a whole week after the leprechauns, the fairies' shoemakers, were working night and day making new ones, and the rip! rap! tap! tap! of their little hammers were heard in all the hedgerows.

The food on which the fairies feasted were little red berries, and were so like those that grow on the rowan tree that if you only looked at them you might mistake one for the other; but the fairy berries grow only in fairyland, and are sweeter than any fruit that grows here in this world, and if an old man, bent and grey, ate one of them, he became young and active and strong again; and if an old woman, withered and wrinkled, ate one of them, she became young and bright and fair; and if a little maiden who was not handsome ate of them, she became lovelier than the flower of beauty.

These berries were guarded jealously by the fairies but, because of their euphoria at winning the hurling-match, 'a little weeny fairy' called Pinkeen lost his head and, while travelling through the wood,
dropped a berry from which grew the magic tree. This conjunction of fairy and mortal worlds, caused by the presence of a fairy tree on mortal soil, enables both worlds to mix in a magical adventure.

Such a conjunction invariably occurs in Leamy’s book *The fairy minstrel of Glenmalure and other stories for children* (1899), which contains three stories, each having as its theme the entry by human children into the fairy world, their encounter with its inhabitants and their conviction that they will eventually return to the arms of their mother. Emun answers the giant’s third riddle correctly and the children escape from the giant’s evil clutches in the story ‘The fairy minstrel of Glenmalure’:

The club fell of itself, and groaned as if it were alive. The roar of the disappointed giant made the woods tremble. But Emun, dragging Kathleen along with him, rushed like the wind. They had scarcely got outside the enchanted wood, when they heard –

‘Kathleen! Kathleen! Emun! Emun! where are you?’

‘Emun! Emun! that is mothereen!’ cried Kathleen.

‘Hurrah, hurrah!’ shouted Emun, and at the sound of the dear, sweet voice, their fears and terrors left them as the nightmare leaves the sleeper, awakening to the songs of the birds and the light of the rosy morning.

The fascination of Leamy’s stories is undoubtedly proven by the fact that each book was reprinted many times during the course of the subsequent forty years. Not only were Leamy’s books appreciated by the general public, but also by Irish language enthusiasts such as Father Eugene O’Grownney (1863–99), one of the founders of the Gaelic League, who wrote to Leamy on 15 December 1889:

Allow me to say how much I have enjoyed reading your beautiful little ‘Irish Fairy Stories’. I trust you will soon give us more of them. My present object in writing is to ask permission to translate some of them into our own language – Irish-Gaelic – for publication.

Although O’Grownney’s letter was prompted by his recognition of the dearth of such literature for children written in the medium of the Irish language, his wish for the translation of Leamy’s books was not, in fact, realised until 1932, with the publication of *Sidhe-séalta. i. Irish fairy tales*, translated by Brighid Ní Loingsigh. This was followed in 1933 by *Piobaire sidhe Ghleann Maoiliughra. i. The fairy minstrel of Glenmalure*, translated by Proinsias Ó Bróghain.

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66 For example, *Irish fairy tales* was reprinted in 1894, 1906, 1907, 1911, 1930, 1938.

67 This letter from Father O’Grownney is printed, together with a letter from Laurence A. Waldron, dated 25 September 1906, at the back of the book *The fairy minstrel of Glenmalure* (Dublin: H. M. Gill, n.d.).

68 *Sidhe-séalta. i. Irish fairy tales*, Brighid Ní Loingsigh d’aistriúigh go Gaedhilg (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifige Díolta Foilseacháin Rialtais, 1932); *Piobaire sidhe Ghleann Maoiliughra. i. The fairy minstrel of Glenmalure*, Proinsiais Ó Bróghain d’aístrigh (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifige Díolta Foilseacháin Rialtais, 1933).
O’Growney’s request highlights the fact that the present article’s exploration of children’s literature in Ireland at the turn of the century would not be complete without a consideration of what was being provided through the medium of the native Irish tongue. To appreciate fully the status of the Irish language at that time, it should be understood that before 1876 the Irish educational system made no provision for that section of the population for which Irish was the vernacular and only language, nor for that section which was bi-lingual. 69 Irish-speaking parents proscribed the use of Irish among their children and policed them to prevent them uttering a single word of Irish. Parents cooperated with school-masters to eradicate the language, because it was generally recognized that, if their children did not become proficient in English, they had not the slightest chance of economic advancement in the world. As David Greene commented:

That world was one of increasing literacy and books and newspapers were becoming part of everyday life, literacy was available only through the national school system, for the hedge schools and the Irish manuscript tradition were dying out everywhere and the national school system offered only English. 70

However, with the foundation of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language in 1876, pressure was brought to bear on the National Education Board which, in 1879, resulted in Irish being granted recognition in schools as a voluntary subject to be taught outside school hours. In 1893, the foundation of the Gaelic League marked the beginning of an important reaction against anglicization, in that the League’s two main aims were, first, the revival of Irish as the vernacular of all Irish people and, second, the creation of a new literature in the Irish tongue. Thus, side by side with the Anglo-Irish literary movement at the end of the nineteenth century, there existed a Gaelic revivalist movement which regarded the Irish language as a crucial factor in the realization of the Irish identity. An ongoing controversy between these two movements centred about the possibility of having a genuine Irish literature written in the English vernacular. The use of traditional elements in literary form by W.B. Yeats, George Russell (AE), Lady Gregory and others provoked a great deal of criticism among Gaelic revivalists who felt that there could not be a genuine

Irish literature unless it was written in the Irish language. Needless to say, this Irish literature would have to be written anew, as the Anglo-Irish revivalists writing as they did in the English vernacular, represented the true language situation in Ireland.

In order to provide a literature in the Irish medium, the Gaelic League inaugurated a publishing scheme at the turn of the century, which, during the next twenty years, provided plays, short stories, novels, folktales and translations of literary material from English and other languages. O’Growney’s contribution was a series of lessons on the Irish language first published in 1894 under the title *Simple lessons in Irish*, which sold thousands of copies. The Gaelic League’s weekly newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light) played a leading rôle in the campaign to encourage use of the Irish language in the schools and homes of Ireland. The editor of that newspaper, Patrick Pearse (1879–1916), was also an innovator in the field of education and a prolific writer of prose and poetry in the Irish language. His plays and short stories were written mainly for children. His contribution, in the twin rôles of writer and educationalist, is important for our understanding of the fostering of a political awareness of national identity in the children’s literature of the time.

As a writer, Pearse contributed to the establishment of a simple, fresh prose style based on spoken Irish, rather than on the archaic, literary tongue of previous centuries. His innovative style tended more towards the modern short story form, as opposed to the folktales. His themes were drawn from the everyday lives of the Connemara people, native Irish speakers in the west of Ireland, whom he idealized and sentimentalized in his first collection of short stories: *Iosagán agus sgéalta eile* (1907). Critics have sometimes faulted these stories for their simplicity and lack of polish, yet their simplicity was a true reflection of the daily poverty and hardship of the people in Irish-speaking districts. Few children could fail to be moved when reading the story ‘Eoghanin na n-éan’ (Eoineen of the birds), which tells the story of a delicate boy, whose sole interest was in nature and who watched and waited until the swallows came each summer. Eoineen’s frail hold on life was measured by the swallows’ migrations from Ireland and their return every summer, until one summer he followed them forever:

The little flock of birds rose in the air and faced the southern world . . .

‘Mother’, Eoineen said, ‘they’re calling me. “Come to the country where the sun is always shining – come, Eoineen over the wild seas to the country of light, come, Eoineen of the Birds!” I can’t refuse them. A blessing with you, little

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72 Published in Dublin in 1907 by the Gaelic League. The book was translated into English by Joseph Campbell, *Iosagán and other stories by Patrick Pearse* (Dublin and London: Maunsel, 1918).
mother. My thousand, thousand blessings to you, little mother of my heart. I’m going from you . . . over the wild seas . . . to the country where the sun is always shining’.73

But it was in Pearse the educationalist and playwright that the differing views of national identity promulgated by the Anglo-Irish revivalists and the members of the Gaelic League were united at last. Through him and through his educational theories the national heritage unlocked by writers such as Standish O’Grady came alive once more. Pearse’s educational vision formed the bridge between the present and the past, inspired as it was by the early Irish system of education, and Cú Chulainn, the youthful warrior-hero of early Ireland, seemed to him the ideal embodiment of its virtues. He saw in his pupils at St Enda’s, the school which he founded in 1908,74 a re-creation of the boy corps entrusted in fosterage to the legendary King Conchobar at Eamhain Macha. He wrote:

It is a long time since I was attracted to the Gaelic plan of educating children. One of my oldest recollections is of a kindly grey-haired seanchaidhe, a woman of my mother’s people, telling tales by a kitchen fireplace . . . one of her tales was of a king, the most famous king of his time in Ireland, who had gathered about him a number of boys, the children of his friends and kinsmen, whom he had organised into a little society, giving them a constitution and allowing them to make their own laws and elect their own leaders. The most renowned of the king’s heroes were appointed to teach them chivalry, the most skilled of his men of art to teach them arts, the wisest of his druids to teach them philosophy . . .75

He sought constantly to inspire his pupils with the heroic example set by Cú Chulainn and with the moral values of Finn mac Cumail, warrior-leader of the fíanna. The mottoes attributed to Cú Chulainn, prominently displayed in the school, were ‘Better is short life with honour than long life with dishonour’, and ‘I care not though I were to live one day and one night, if only my fame and my deeds live after me’. This latter was the motto on the title-page of Eleanor Hull’s book, Cúchulain the hound of Ulster, to which we have already referred. The school crest of a helmeted warrior with a sword, bore the motto of Finn and his fíanna, ‘Strength in our hands, Truth in our tongues, and Purity in our hearts’. He exhorted each of his pupils to live up to his finest self in the following way:

We must be worthy of the tradition we seek to recreate and perpetuate in Éire, the knightly tradition of the macradh of Eamhain Macha, dead at the Ford, ‘in the beauty of their boyhood’, the high tradition of Cúchulainn, ‘better is short life with

74 See Pat Cooke, Sceil Scoil Éanna, the story of an educational adventure (Dublin: Office of Public Works, 1986).
75 On Pearse’s educational philosophy, see Séamas Ó Buachalla, A significant Irish educationalist (Dublin and Cork: Mercier Press, 1980), 360.
honour than long life with dishonour', 'I care not though I were to live but one day and one night, if only my fame and my deeds live after me;' the noble tradition of the Fianna, 'we, the Fianna, never told a lie, falsehood was never imputed to us', 'strength in our hands, truth on our lips, and cleanness in our hearts'; the Christ-like tradition of Colm Cille, 'if I die, it shall be from the excess of the love I bear the Gael'. It seems to me that with this appeal it will be an easy thing to teach Irish boys to be brave and unselfish, truthful and pure; I am certain that no other appeal will so stir their hearts or kindle their imaginations to heroic things.  

An intense interest in his life was drama. Pearse used his knowledge of the early Irish heroic age to provide a springboard for the writing and production of plays for children. Between 1909 and 1916 he wrote eight dramatic works, six of them in the Irish language, specifically for production at St Enda's. These included two outdoor pageants based on the 'Boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn', a passion play and four one-act plays. Anglo-Irish writers such as W.B. Yeats were extremely interested in Pearse's educational experiment at St Enda's. Yeats himself attended plays produced at the school at Pearse's invitation, gave a half-term lecture to the boys, and offered to produce Pearse's play _An ri_ (The king) to help the school overcome its financial difficulties. Although Pearse was not a good dramatist, he did produce dramatically intense pieces and his young pupils thoroughly enjoyed the heroic rôles in which they were cast. With such important patrons as the Anglo-Irish revivalists, it was small wonder that he believed his plays for children to be a vital contribution to the resurgence of drama that had been spearheaded by Yeats and Synge.

The plays Pearse wrote for children proclaimed a messianic message of heroic self-sacrifice for a noble ideal. They are interesting as part of the Irish literary revival and as revelations of the motivating force in their author which spurred him ever onwards to the blood-sacrifice of the Easter Rebellion of 1916. He wrote in 1913:

... one must be generous in service and withal joyous, accounting even supreme sacrifices slight. Mr J.M. Barrie makes his Peter Pan say (and it is finely said) 'To die will be a very big adventure', but I think, that in making my little boy in _An Ri_ offer himself with the words 'Let me do this little thing', I am nearer to the spirit of the heroes.

The blood-sacrifice became a reality. Some of Pearse's child-warriors did fight to the death for the ideal of nationhood.

In the political upheaval, some three years after the 1916 Rebellion in Ireland and the execution of Pearse and others, it was

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76 Ó Buachalla, _Irish educationalist_, 324. The _macradh_ mentioned was the boy corps of the King.

77 Ibid., 344-5.

78 Ibid., 343.
evident to Fr Stephen Brown that the idealism which had provided the impetus to create a literature for children had become extinct. In his 1919 article he commented: ‘Publishing in Ireland is almost at a standstill’, and predicted that there would be a long interval of transition before the situation could be remedied. 79 A number of writers such as Ella Young, James Stephens and Padraic Colum had already emigrated to America, where they continued to write for children on Irish themes. 80 But the political chaos and stagnant economic climate of Ireland in the 1920s precluded the promotion of any literary activity. 81

Nor was this lack of creativity confined only to the 1920s. As late as 1946, Kenneth Reddin was decrying the stage-Irishness portrayed in whatever children’s books were being produced:

Pigs in the kitchen and little red hens and tinkers splitting skulls down bohereens, and ass carts and clamps of turf and heaps of muck, cabins, sleans, Seáns, illiteracy, bad whiskey and general ‘divilment’ 82

He bitterly criticized the scant attention being paid to the literary needs of an Irish middle class child rooted in an emerging urban environment and wondered about the origins of ‘this phoney peasant stuff’, only to come to the conclusion that since the Irish book market was non-existent, Irish writers continued to perpetrate the ‘stage-Irish bogey’ because there was a market for this type of literature in England and America.

Plus ça change, and the situation did not greatly change until the 1970s, when the production and publication of children’s books in Ireland underwent something of a revival. 83 Books in the Irish language are now being produced by the Irish publications branch of the Department of Education – An Gum. The publication of books for children in English is also assured by the establishment by the larger publishing houses of separate children’s imprints – notably Brogeen Books (Dolmen Press) and Lucky Three Books (O’Brien Press). Needless to say, this revival includes the publication of many modern re-tellings of Old Irish legends, such as Edmund Lenihan’s *Stories of old Ireland for children,* 84 Michael

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Scott's *Irish hero tales*,\(^{85}\) and Patricia Lynch's *Tales of Irish enchantment*.\(^{86}\) Recent years have also seen the re-issue by Mercier Press of 'golden oldies', such as those stories taken from Lady Gregory's book, *Gods and fighting men* (1904) and re-titled: *Irish legends for children*,\(^{87}\) and Edmund Leamy's *Irish fairy tales*.\(^{88}\) It is heartening to realize that the tradition of kings, heroes and warriors, so earnestly preserved and fought for in the period of emergent nationalism, will be preserved for present and future generations of children everywhere.


\(^{88}\) A synopsis and commentary on popular books for children, which have either been re-issued or newly published may be found in Patricia Donlon, 'Children's literature in Ireland', *Iris na Roinne Gnóthait Eachtracha, Bulletin of the Department of Foreign Affairs*, no. 1037 (1987), 7–11. I am indebted to Dr Donlon for having provided me with a copy of this article.