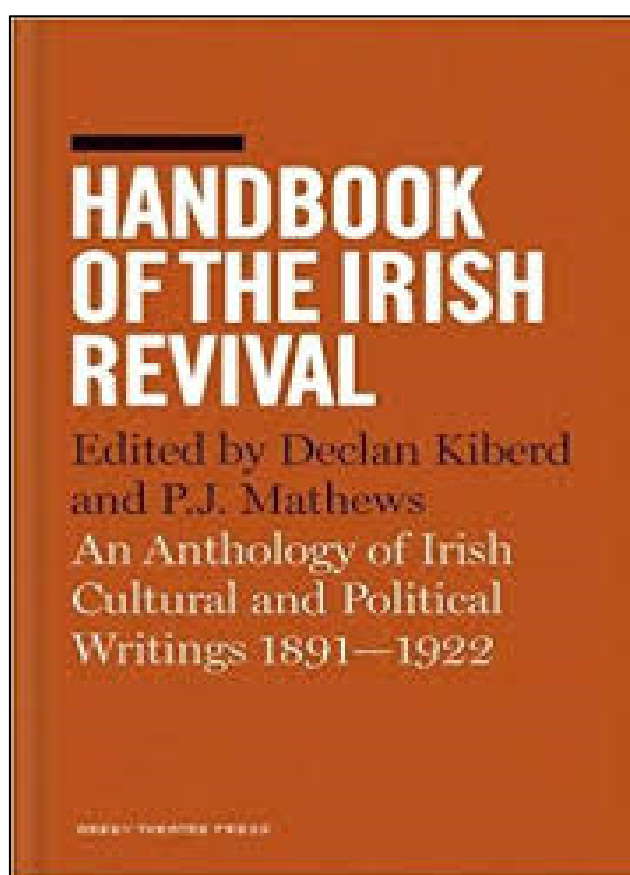


BOOKS

Declan Kiberd and P. J. Matthews (Eds.), Handbook of the Irish Revival. An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings 1891-1922, Dublin: Abbey Theatre Press, 2015, 505 p.



Published as an inaugural volume by Abbey Theatre Press in 2015, *Handbook of the Irish Literary Revival* offers a comprehensive anthology of seminal texts produced in one of the most prolific and meaningful periods in Ireland's history: the Irish Revival. This period spanned three decades, from the late nineteenth century to the early 1920s

(1891 marking the death of Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the Irish National Movement, and 1922 signalling the establishment of the Irish Free State), when a generation of artists and thinkers returned to Ireland's past in an effort to project a future for their nation amidst the other European countries. Sparked by questions about the availability

of these essential documents, raised during *The Theatre of Memory Symposium* held in 2014, the collection of manifestos, poems, pamphlets, newspapers articles, commentaries, letters and fictional extracts that capture the ethos of those decades is co-edited by Declan Kiberd, Professor of Modern Irish and English Literature at the University of Notre Dame, author of groundbreaking studies such as *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995) and, most recently, *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present* (2018), and P. J. Matthews, Associate Professor at University College Dublin, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to John Millington Synge* (2009).

The five-hundred-page *Handbook* is comprised of sixteen chapters, preceded by a short introduction meant to capture the essential arguments brought by the texts included in each section. The first group of texts, under the title “A Country in Paralysis?”, explores the aftermath of the Great Famine and the tremendous depletion of Ireland’s population brought about by starvation and mass emigration. J.M. Synge’s “A Landlord’s Garden in County Wicklow” (1907), Emily Lawless’s “Famine Roads and Famine Memories” (1898) and Douglas Hyde’s “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” (1892) are all accounts which self-reflexively critique the state of inertia Ireland found itself in. While the second section entitled “A Thought Revival” delves into ancient mythology as a reservoir for re-energising modernity, the third, consisting of “Movements and Manifestos” contains a very rich and complex selection of the most prevalent Irish ideologies at the time: “Opening Statement of the Irish Literary Theatre” (1899), “Objects of the Irish National Literary Society” (1892) and “The Democratic Programme of the First Dáil Éireann” (1919), and so on.

Another chapter of particular importance is the one focused on “Language Revival”, presenting opposing voices, such as J.M. Synge and Patrick Pearse, who had very different opinions on whether the Irish Language should be considered indispensable for the production of “a more vibrant industry, agriculture, and sense of community, as well as a radically innovative kind of modern literature” (p. 111). Also worth noting is the chapter devoted to “Women and Citizenship”, which reminds contemporary readers of the difficult path towards securing the objective of equality for Irishwomen, who could either follow the suffragists or, as Constance Markiewicz urged them, join the egalitarian organisations of Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League. The *Handbook* brings into perspective many different other aspects of the Irish Revival. It showcases the richness of subjects tackled by artists of that period including, in the section entitled “The Natural World”, the opinions of writers like Yeats, Synge and Shaw on the regenerative force of Ireland’s pristine beauty.

Michael Higgins, the President of Ireland, writes the Afterword to the *Handbook*, emphasising the importance of the selected excerpts, showing that the editors’ achievement consists in having “saved for us the evidence of some of the most sensitive, idealistic, often combative people of an extraordinary set of decades that ended a century of devastation and began a new century that presented both a promise and a set of conflicts whose consequences would endure into our own times” (499). As a gateway into the past and a very useful tool for researchers and the general public alike, *Handbook of the Irish Literary Revival* represents a successful publishing debut by the Abbey Theatre Press, eloquently unveiling the ideas which became the cornerstone of Ireland’s modern future.

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