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Volume 3

Article 80

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2022

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## Recommended Citation

Mortell, Abigail (2022). "Canonization of Irish Authors: Nationalism and The Popularization of 1920s Irish Literature." *The Macksey Journal*: Volume 3, Article 80.

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# Canonization of Irish Authors: Nationalism and The Popularization of 1920s Irish Literature

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## Abstract

While early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish authors such as James Joyce and William Butler Yeats are revered in the canon of Irish literature, another writer, Liam O'Flaherty, remains relatively obscure despite enjoying critical acclaim and seeing his work debut at the historic Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland. What factors led to his nonrecognition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a country that celebrates its writing tradition? The original manuscripts of O'Flaherty's three-act Irish language play, *Dorchadas: A Tragedy in Three Acts*, at the University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Research Center provide a unique opportunity to compare it to other works published during the same time. Qualitative analysis will uncover literary themes, subject matter, and critical reception to trace trends in the popularization of Irish authors. Political turmoil in Ireland coincided with the height of the literary boom of the 1920s, known as the Irish Literary Revival, and certain works were promoted over others as Irish censorship boards attempted to support the new republican government. When comparing O'Flaherty's works to contemporaries like W. B. Yeats and Sean O'Casey, the effects of Irish nationalism on their respective careers is of particular interest. Research will explore how and why Irish authors' works published at the same time enjoyed substantial success while O'Flaherty and *Dorchadas* are widely unmentioned by scholars when discussing influential Irish literature.

**Keywords:** *Dorchadas*, Irish Free State, censorship, Irish Literary Revival, nationalism

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The creative arts present intimate insights into the lives and environments of their creators. The original manuscripts of Liam O’Flaherty’s Irish language play, *Dorchadas: A Tragedy in Three Acts*, offer a unique starting point to consider how the political instability within the Irish Free State affected the dissemination and success of certain literary works over others. This question comes after recognizing O’Flaherty’s nonrecognition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century despite enjoying critical acclaim and seeing his work debut at historic Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland. While other Irish authors from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century such as James Joyce and William Butler Yeats are revered in the canon of Irish literature, O’Flaherty remains relatively obscure. An examination of O’Flaherty’s biographical background, character as a writer, and the Irish government’s involvement in literary publication at the time will show the other factors, beyond mere literary merit, that determined the success of Irish authors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Works that discuss O’Flaherty’s play *Dorchadas* are relatively few and far between. Brian Ó Conchubhair provides background information in his introduction to the English translation of the three-act play.<sup>1</sup> He calls for more scholarship to be produced on the significance of *Dorchadas*, the revival of Irish language literature, and O’Flaherty’s and his colleague Padraic Ó Conaire’s scheme to create a traveling, Irish-speaking theatre.<sup>2</sup> While there is not extensive literature on O’Flaherty’s contribution to drama, analyses of his novels and short stories focus on themes that can be applied to *Dorchadas*. In *The Literary Vision of Liam O’Flaherty*, John Zneimer argues that those who characterize him as an “Irish manque” only do so because no one, prior to Zneimer, had considered him outside the expectations placed upon Irish authors.<sup>3</sup> Zneimer considers O’Flaherty outside the strict mold of an Irishman, examining him independent of his Irish identity, in order to refute some of the critiques O’Flaherty faced. However, despite *Dorchadas* being one of O’Flaherty’s works that suffered the most, Zneimer only mentions it once in his analysis of the societal forces acting against O’Flaherty.

*Dorchadas*, meaning “darkness” in Irish, is a play about two Irish-speaking families who live on a rural island off the coast of Ireland. Two brothers, literally named “Merry Brian” and “Dark Daniel,” are in love with the same woman, “Proud Margaret,” who has been promised to the eldest brother Daniel. Margaret is conflicted because she has feelings for both Brian and Daniel, and struggles with what to do given her engagement to the latter. After Brian passionately expresses his feelings for Margaret, they run off together and attempt to get off the island to escape Daniel’s wrath. When Daniel hears of this, he tracks Brian down, and, to Margaret’s horror, murders Brian in a fit of rage. This tragedy is fast-paced, and some go so far as to call it underdeveloped in places.<sup>4</sup> The play is the product of O’Flaherty and his colleague Padraic Ó Conaire’s endeavor to create a traveling Gaelic theatre, for which O’Flaherty

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<sup>1</sup> Liam O’Flaherty, *Darkness*, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair (Dublin: Arlen House, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> John Zneimer, *The Literary Vision of Liam O’Flaherty* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), vii.

<sup>4</sup> In a review published after the debut of *Dorchadas* at the Abbey Theatre, the author writes, “The play has two faults: firstly, there is a feeling that too much has been done in a short space—it needs and could bear elaboration—and, secondly, it lacks dignity, especially in the third act.” See Oscar Óg, “The Gaelic Players,” *Irish Statesman*, March 6, 1926, 802.

promised to write ten plays.<sup>5</sup> The project never materialized due to a lack of funding,<sup>6</sup> but the play was performed once—produced by Géaroid Ó Lochlainn and debuted at the Abbey Theatre in 1926.<sup>7</sup> *Dorchadas* has received little recognition since, and its author remains fairly unknown in Ireland and abroad. The main points to note about the contents of the play are that it is set in a Gaeltacht, that being a predominantly Irish-speaking part of Ireland,<sup>8</sup> disloyalty on the part of Brian and Margaret, and Margaret’s ability to make choices in her relationships. Though this paper does not address the role of women in the Irish republic at length, Margaret’s character certainly did not fit the prescribed roles for women in the Free State. This contributed to the play’s problematic nature.

The degree of censorship employed during the Irish Free State era meant that as an author, who you were was as important as what you wrote. Liam O’Flaherty, himself a native of the Gaeltacht on the island of Inis Mór and fluent Irish-speaker, was born in 1896 to parents Margaret Ganly and Michael Ó Flaithearta.<sup>9</sup> A contemporary of W. B. Yeats,<sup>10</sup> O’Flaherty became prominent in the mid-to-late stages of the Irish Literary Revival. Before he was recognized for his writing talent, however, O’Flaherty attended Rockwell College in county Tipperary for seminary training.<sup>11</sup> Eventually becoming disillusioned with the church, he transferred to Black Rock College in Dublin in 1913.<sup>12</sup> His divergence from the path to become a clergyman at times affected O’Flaherty’s image, particularly in the eyes of those who believed he only committed to the seminary for free education and joined the ranks of “spoiled priests.”<sup>13</sup> Other biographical details to note are his service in the British military during World

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<sup>5</sup> Liam O’Flaherty, in a letter to the Editor of the *Irish Statesman*, wrote “I consulted Pádraig Ó Conaire and we decided that drama was the best means of starting a new literature in Irish. I became fearfully enthusiastic. The two of us went to Dublin and entered a hall where some fellows were holding a Gaeltacht Commission. We put our scheme before them for a travelling theatre and so on. I guaranteed to write ten plays. They thought we were mad and, indeed, took very little interest in us. In fact, I could see by their looks and their conversation that they considered us immoral persons.” *The Letters of Liam O’Flaherty*, ed. Angeline A. Kelly (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996), 206.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> In a letter written on November 21, 1925, O’Flaherty wrote to his mentor and patron Edward Garnett and mentioned Géaroid Ó Lochlainn agreed to produce *Dorchadas* and was “exceptionally enthusiastic.” O’Flaherty, ed. Angeline A. Kelly, 136.

<sup>8</sup> *Concise English-Irish Dictionary*, ed. Pádraig Ó Mianáin (Dublin: Foras na Gaeilge, 2020), 772.

<sup>9</sup> O’Flaherty, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair, 22.

<sup>10</sup> O’Flaherty mentioned Yeats in various letters to his friend and mentor Edward Garnett. See O’Flaherty, ed. Angeline A. Kelly, 80, 129, 152, 222.

<sup>11</sup> O’Flaherty, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair, 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> O’Flaherty’s time at Rockwell College and his lay education at Blackrock College, Holy Cross College, and University College Dublin offered “the best that Irish Catholic education had to offer... Had O’Flaherty been the son of wealthy parents, he could not have hoped for better in the way of schooling... Four different college in as many years is not exactly a recommendation, but the unsettling factor was, as so often in such case, the problem of a religious vocation.... O’Flaherty was now, on Aran, and points east and north, a ‘spoiled priest’.” This term is used to refer to an Irish person who was studying to become a priest but has since stopped or been removed from the seminary. See Patrick F. Sheeran, *The Novels of Liam O’Flaherty: A Study in Romantic Realism* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1976), 63.

War I and his interest in communism and Bolshevism,<sup>14</sup> all of which made him suspect in the eyes of the Irish government.

O’Flaherty’s background influenced the way he lived and worked in a society experiencing major political turmoil. In many ways, O’Flaherty had the potential to be the perfect Irish Free State writer—he was born there, spoke Irish fluently, and wrote about the Irish experience—but his tendency towards extremism instead made him the target of censorship by the Irish government particularly following the adoption of the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929.<sup>15</sup> In fact, his book *House of Gold* was the first book ever banned by the censorship board in 1930.<sup>16</sup> Set in a post-civil war town—that is, the Irish Civil War—*House of Gold* incorporates lustful priests, greed, murder, and alcoholism in a story about native Irish elites’ ascension to power.<sup>17</sup> O’Flaherty’s book *The Martyr*, banned in the 1930s, was a fictionalized account of the Civil War fighting.<sup>18</sup> Three more of his books would be censored throughout the years,<sup>19</sup> and sensitive topics being the subject-matter is a common theme among them. An institution founded in 1926, An Gúm, was, according to Professor Brian Ó Conchubhair, a “nation-building project established for promoting Irish-language publishing and included textbooks, original Irish writing—fiction and non-fiction—and translations.”<sup>20</sup> The Irish-language theatre group An Comhar Drámaíochta, who performed *Dorchadas* at the Abbey Theatre back in 1926, submitted the play for publication with An Gúm in 1929.<sup>21</sup> After some deliberation, Seán Mac Lelland, An Gúm’s chief publications’ officer, wrote “I don’t know what right or authority the Sec[retary] of Comhar had to offer the work for publication, but I can hazard a guess as to what the author would say and do if we published it. I recommend no further action.”<sup>22</sup> *Dorchadas* had been published in English as *Darkness* in *The New Coterie—A Quarterly Magazine of Art and Literature* back in 1926,<sup>23</sup> but An Gúm’s rejection prevented the dissemination of O’Flaherty’s work in its original Irish form.

It could be argued that *Dorchadas* was not published and did not catch the public’s attention like other plays due to a lack of literary merit rather than a conspiracy to block controversial works or quiet problematic authors. However, the reviews of *Dorchadas* and O’Flaherty’s background show it is unlikely the quality of the play was the main contributing factor to its obscurity. *Dorchadas* debuted to a packed theatre in Dublin and received a mixed critical response.<sup>24</sup> A review published in the *Irish Times* read, “[*Dorchadas*] proved to be exceedingly interesting and it was somewhat surprising to find a novelist proving himself so

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>15</sup> Zneimer, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Prendeville, “Banned treasure sees the light,” *Independent.ie*, September 22, 2013, <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/banned-treasure-sees-the-light-29596478.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Liam O’Flaherty, *House of Gold* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929).

<sup>18</sup> Liam O’Flaherty, *The Martyr* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1933).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1968), 242.

<sup>20</sup> O’Flaherty, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair, 60.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>23</sup> The manager of *The New Coterie*, Charles Lahr, was an acquaintance of O’Flaherty’s and wrote to him requesting material to be published in the magazine. Lahr frequented anarchist club meetings, and his political affiliations reflects the range of people with whom O’Flaherty associated. O’Flaherty, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair, 36-42.

<sup>24</sup> O’Flaherty, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair, 54.

well skilled in stagecraft..."<sup>25</sup> Another, by a pseudonymous reviewer in the *Irish Statesman*, said, "Though the play may be faulty in many ways, yet it is encouraging to find original work of such promise being done."<sup>26</sup> There was a desire to bring original Irish literature, rather than just English writing translated into Irish, beyond the rural outskirts of the island. Clearly, there were positive feelings towards what could have been the beginning of a new era of Irish-language drama. However, O'Flaherty's rocky history with the church, involvement with Margaret Barrington, the wife of Professor Edmund Curtis of Trinity College,<sup>27</sup> and his divisive portrayal of Irish people hindered the popularization of his work in the precarious state of Irish society.

Political instability often tightens the fist of government, but that begs the question of what the Irish Free State was trying to protect by controlling the dissemination of literature, particularly that written in the Irish language. O'Flaherty's personal letters do well to show the image Free State supporters avoided promoting. In a letter to the editor of the *Irish Statesman*, O'Flaherty argues that building up national culture must start at home, saying:

In art, in literature, in architecture, in general culture, we are submerged beneath the rotting mound of British traditions... The younger generation alone can decide whether we will be still a nation of bigoted and intolerant people or whether we are going to build up a civilisation distinctly our own, a civilisation and culture that will make us a force in Europe.<sup>28</sup>

Though in a way these sentiments convey a willingness to contribute to the nationalist movement of bolstering Irish identity, later O'Flaherty's enthusiasm tires, giving way to a lasting critical view of his fellow countrymen. He writes, "I became less interested in politics and in the regeneration of the Irish people, intellectually; having come to the conclusion that my people were too hopelessly sunk in intellectual barbarism to be capable of being saved by a single man."<sup>29</sup> After O'Flaherty was not paid for the performance of *Dorchadas* at the Abbey Theatre, he "swore that [he] would never write another word in Irish. If [he did he would] take good care not to publish it and place it at the mercy of these sows."<sup>30</sup> Irish politicians' were preoccupied with building a strong national identity in spite of internal division, and this rhetoric shows why O'Flaherty had his fair share of works removed from production.

The ethnographic characteristics of Ireland and the political events of the time molded the country's budding new identity. The religious homogeneity achieved by the Catholic Church and its consequent influence over Ireland's development is unparalleled in the history of the United States, for example. In the 1926 Irish census, 93% of the population of the Irish Free State was Catholic.<sup>31</sup> The Catholic character of Irish audiences and government agencies influenced their reactions to O'Flaherty's work in theatre. The new republic was a mere five years in existence when O'Flaherty and other playwrights like Sean O'Casey, author of *The*

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<sup>25</sup> "Gaelic Plays at the Abbey Theatre," *Irish Times*, March 2, 1926, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Oscar Óg, 802.

<sup>27</sup> O'Flaherty, ed. Brian Ó Conchubhair, 29.

<sup>28</sup> O'Flaherty, ed. Angeline A. Kelly, 206.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Anne Dolan, "Politics, Economy and Society in the Irish Free State, 1922-1939," in *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Volume IV, 1880 to the Present*, ed. Thomas Bartlett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 338.

*Plough and the Stars*,<sup>32</sup> produced plays with themes considered problematic by the public and state. The state's determination to separate Ireland from the stereotypes perpetuated during British occupation limited the ways artists could depict Irish people. The barbaric image of Irish people can be traced back as far as 1171 with Gerald of Wales' depiction of bestiality in his work *Topography of Ireland*.<sup>33</sup> This work was published shortly after King Henry II led the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland, and Gerald intended for it to be a multipart justification for Britain's actions.<sup>34</sup> From O'Flaherty's own rhetoric quoted previously, the perception of Irishmen as uncivilized and lacking culture still existed in the minds of Irish people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like any new nation, the Irish Free State was determined to put forth a unified image of stability and civility, so *Dorchadas*, a play depicting fratricide among Irish-speakers in the rural countryside, did not serve that mission.

The censorship of Irish written and creative works shows a degree of continuity between Britain's administration in Ireland and the Irish Free State. After spending centuries under British subjugation, the expectation was not that authors would be censored in a way so reminiscent of their colonial occupiers. Though the Irish government may have employed similar means of control, they did so to different ends. O'Flaherty was a writer too uncontrollable with works too controversial to be promoted by the Irish Free State, and *Dorchadas* suffocated under the weight of the era into which it was born. However, this drama remains one of the few examples of original Irish literature produced among the first generation of independent Irish people, and for this fact alone it deserves to be brought into the light.

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<sup>32</sup> O'Casey's play depicts the 1916 Easter Rising, an armed insurrection that occurred in Ireland during the week of Easter. See C. Austin Hill, "The Plough and the Stars," *Theatre Journal* 69, no. 4 (2017): 590-591.

<sup>33</sup> Gerald of Wales, or Giraldus Cambrensis, tells a story of a woman who had intercourse with a goat owned by Rothericus, king of the Irish province of Connacht. Another story tells of a ritual used to confirm the power of kings in Kenelcunill in northern Ulster. The candidate for kingship has intercourse with a white mare. The mare is then cut up to make a soup, which the king subsequently bathes in before consuming the horse meat. See Giraldus Cambrensis, *The History and Topography of Ireland* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1951), 75, 109-10.

<sup>34</sup> Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 34-35.

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