STANDISH JAMES O'GRADY

This portrait is reproduced from the original pencil-sketch (now in the Colby College Library) by John Butler Yeats, father of the poet William Butler Yeats. It shows O'Grady at the age of sixty-one.
STANDISH JAMES O'GRADY

By Vivian Mercier

If George Bernard Shaw is better known today than Standish James O'Grady, that fact is due less to Shaw's being the better writer of the two than to his having left Ireland young to win an English audience. Shaw and O'Grady had much in common: wit, humor, versatility, an unorthodox outlook, the gift of being indignant without bitterness, an exceptional talent for expounding the ideas of others. Both were receptive to socialism while remaining highly skeptical of democracy. Even on minor points like vegetarianism and an admiration for Shelley, they tended to see eye to eye. But whereas Shaw was for many years a self-proclaimed agnostic, O'Grady remained substantially faithful to the evangelical Protestantism of his father, a Church of Ireland (Episcopal) clergyman, and himself studied divinity at Trinity College, Dublin, for a time.

To attempt to compare O'Grady with Shaw implies a high opinion of the former's abilities. In order to justify that opinion I shall have to consider at least four aspects of his many-sided personality: the historian, the storyteller, the politician, and the journalist. I do so reluctantly, for a severe critic of O'Grady might claim that his versatility was his greatest weakness, and that he failed at everything because he concentrated on nothing. “At
best," such a critic would say, "he never got beyond the
standing of a talented amateur in any of those four fields."
Perhaps; but the whole Irish Literary Revival, like the
Abbey Theatre, the Gaelic League, and the entire politi­
cal and military leadership of the Irish Revolution, was
the work of rank amateurs.

Although O'Grady attempted far too much, he em­
ployed his many means always to the same end—that of
ensuring continuity between Ireland's past and her fu­
ture. As a historian and historical novelist, he sought to
fire the imaginations of his Irish readers by his portrayal
of a bygone Ireland; as a politician and journalist, he
strove to preserve those qualities of truth, courage, and
generosity which he found in aristocratic Anglo-Ireland
and to transmit them intact to the democratic Ireland that
he saw approaching. Moreover, he succeeded. "What­
ever is Irish in me he kindled to life," declared George
Russell ("A.E."). "Here was a man . . . ," wrote William
Butler Yeats, "to whom every Irish imaginative writer
owed a portion of his soul."

Having called O'Grady a historian, I must hasten to
add that he was unlike any other historian who ever lived,
with the possible exception of Herodotus. He wrote his­
tory simply because the professional historians would not
or could not write the kind of epic narrative he wanted to
read. His first (and most important) original work bore the
title *History of Ireland* (2 vols., 1878-1880); it must be re­
garded as the fuse which exploded the long-awaited Lit­
erary Revival. This "history," however, consisted mainly
of a re-telling of the Early Irish sagas—legends which were
then virtually unknown to all but a few specialists.
O'Grady defended his decision to allot so much space
to heroic history, instead of passing on at once to authen­
ticated fact, by calling attention to a profound truth—one
which Yeats also loved to assert: "A nation's history is
made for it by circumstances, and the irresistible progress
of events; but their legends they make for themselves. . . .
The legends represent the imagination of the country; they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess. They betray the ambitions and ideals of the people, and, in this respect, have a value far beyond the tale of actual events."

For a while, unfortunately, O'Grady became convinced of the essential historicity of the legends, but he soon reverted to a soberer view and in 1881 published Volume I of a History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical in which he treated the bardic history of the country with great skepticism. This work was so neglected by the public that no further volumes appeared. I believe, however, that it will one day be shown to contain some very shrewd guesses, the offspring of an original and intuitive mind.

O'Grady's last attempt at a history of Ireland, modestly entitled The Story of Ireland, was an infuriating and unpopular little book. Under Carlyle's influence he praised Oliver Cromwell and maintained that the Irish people had, on the whole, welcomed the overthrow of their feudal lords by Elizabeth. An unpopular opinion need not be erroneous, of course, but his view of Cromwell, unlike his view of Elizabeth, seems to have been based on little or no independent research.

O'Grady the story-teller chose for the subject of his first book an episode from the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. He must have been dissatisfied with Red Hugh's Captivity (1889), for he rehandled the narrative of Hugh Roe O'Donnell's capture and two escapes in The Flight of the Eagle eight years later. The latter is one of O'Grady's most satisfying works. In it he once again proves himself able to strike and sustain the epic note. His "saga" of Red Hugh is worthy of its hero, that Homeric figure from real life.

The Bog of Stars, a series of shorter narratives and sketches from Elizabethan Irish history, has probably had more Irish readers than any other of O'Grady's books. The title
story and the account of the Battle of the Curlew Mountains rank among his best work.

If The Flight of the Eagle and The Bog of Stars read like fiction rather than history, Ulrick the Ready resembles history rather than fiction. In it, O'Grady misses chance after chance as a novelist, dismissing his hero's part in the Battle of Kinsale with a single sentence.

During the 1890's O'Grady wrote several books quite frankly for boys. Two of these, Lost on Du-Corrig and The Chain of Gold, were the only works which ever earned him significant amounts of money. They are rather similar tales of mystery and adventure.

O'Grady the politician was a man whose views were profoundly influenced by his interpretation of history. Like Carlyle, who probably derived his theory from Hegel, Standish O'Grady saw history as an evolutionary process, in which one class or social system would succeed another as the chosen instrument of the Zeitgeist or "Genius of the age." He pointed out that "Rural Ireland was once held under the Clan system. It fell before Feudalism. . . . Feudalism, with its great Lords and Captains, flourished long, and fell before the modern Landlord. . . . And the Landlord has got to go, too, following, in his turn, the Clans and the great Captains."

Yes, the landlord had to go; O'Grady's whole activity as a politician aimed at enabling him to go in peace and, if possible, with dignity. O'Grady felt that the landlords had already abdicated by passing the Act of Union. Let them complete the process by selling their land to the tenant at a fair price and promote the industrialization of Ireland by investing the proceeds of the sale. As investors and employers of labor they could rapidly regain their old influence in Irish public life, defeat the Home Rule Movement, and by the old Parnell tactics at Westminster make Ireland an equal partner in what O'Grady liked to call the "Anglo-Irish Empire."
The Land League agitation catapulted O'Grady into politics. He became the honorary secretary of a landlords' meeting which, in December 1881, passed resolutions demanding the sort of compensation afterwards afforded landlords who sold their estates to their tenants under the Wyndham Land Act of 1903. In 1882 O'Grady published a shilling pamphlet, *The Crisis in Ireland*, calling on the Irish landlords to come to terms, or at any rate to do *something* positive, before it was too late.

Four years later, he published in England a lengthy book entitled *Toryism and the Tory Democracy*, modelled on Carlyle's *Past and Present*. In it, while bitterly critical of Tory rule under the younger Pitt, he prophesied great things for Lord Randolph Churchill's Tory Democracy. There is a good deal of totalitarianism in O'Grady's doctrine, as there was in that of his mentor Carlyle. "The State," says O'Grady, "has a right to control the labor which it employs." In one sentence he thus advocates both state capitalism and the regimentation of labor.

O'Grady's passion for Irish history is said to have ruined a promising career at the Irish bar. Be that as it may, nobody can regret the effect which his more spasmodic love-affair with politics had on his journalistic career. For many years he earned a small but steady income as an editorial writer for the now-defunct Dublin *Daily Express*. When his employment by this paper came to an end because his politics had begun to conflict with its owners', he bought the *Kilkenny Moderator* and embarked on a fresh career as editor, printer and publisher in County Kilkenny. After nearly four years there, he founded (in January 1900) the weekly *All Ireland Review*, which ran until April 1906. All six of its volumes are still worth reading for their humor, their passion and their humanity. In this one-man magazine O'Grady's unique personality found its fullest expression.

I must not end this brief account of Standish O'Grady
without trying to answer the question: What did he do to deserve the title of “Father of the Irish Literary Revival”? I would give a twofold answer. First, in his volumes of legendary history he used the Irish legends for a primarily artistic purpose and so paved the way for W. B. Yeats. Secondly, he differed from that other pioneer of the Revival, Sir Samuel Ferguson, in refusing to regret that the heroes of Irish legend were not Victorian gentlemen. Like Carlyle, Standish O'Grady suspected that the Victorian era might represent a depression rather than a peak in human development; therefore, in spite of all his bowdlerizing and didacticism, he was prepared to glory in certain aspects of ancient Ireland for their own sake.

The men and women who began the Irish Literary Revival possessed too much talent not to create some important artistic movement. What O'Grady did was to ensure that this movement would deserve to be called Irish. The new writers, as Yeats once said, had all read O'Grady in their 'teens. His example encouraged them to write both about Ireland and for Ireland.

Men will doubtless be arguing for a good many years yet about what the Irish Literary Revival did and did not accomplish—and whether, in fact, it should be called Irish at all, since almost all its works were written in English. About one aspect of it, however, there can be no dispute. It did strike a hard blow at Ireland's inferiority complex, and in this achievement O'Grady no doubt rejoiced. “I desire,” he once wrote about legendary Ireland, “to make this heroic period once again a portion of the imagination of the country, and its chief characters as familiar in the minds of our people as they once were.” This ambition, at least, he had seen fulfilled when he died in 1928, at the age of eighty-two.²

² Author's Note: The above article draws on two talks given by me over Radio Eireann, the radio station of the Irish Republic, on June 5 and 12, 1956. Those talks were printed in condensed form in the Dublin Irish Times for July 28 and August 4, 1956.