**The Abbey Theatre and the Irish State**

From the foundation of the modern Irish State, the Abbey Theatre enjoyed a position of privilege. As the self-proclaimed Irish National Theatre, the Abbey was an important cultural signifier of continuity between the ambitions of the Revival and the establishment of the Irish Free State. The value of the theatre – as perceived by the successive Provisional Government, Cumann na nGaedheal, and Fianna Fáil governments – permitted an extraordinary degree of freedom in the theatre’s programme. Despite a growing conservatism that saw the institution of the Censorship of Films (1923) and the Censorship of Publications (1929), there was never legislative censorship of the theatre. That is not to say that the state did not attempt to control the theatre’s programme, or that censorship did not occur. The Abbey was tethered to the state by a subsidy, on which the theatre’s survival of depended; yet, the theatre’s directors used the ostensible freedom of the theatre in Ireland as a point of difference in order to defy attempts at government interference. Privately, the directors compromised the theatre’s programme, censoring plays that they believed were of sound artistic merit in order to ensure good relations with the state. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the theatre’s politics, represented in its programme and in the actions and statements of the directors, were in constant flux.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By 1923, a series of wars, forced closures due to curfews, and a dearth of suitable new plays for production had left the theatre near financial collapse. The directors, W.B. Yeats, Augusta Gregory, and Lennox Robinson, believed that a subsidy from the new Free State government could rescue the Abbey from ruin. A formal relationship with the Abbey was mutually attractive to the Provisional Government and to its successor Cumann na nGadheal.[[2]](#footnote-2) Important politicians believed that support for the National Theatre might reinforce the government’s claim to authority in a state that had emerged from violent dissent over questions of democracy, the nature of independence, and the very idea of Ireland. While the Abbey’s directors sought the state’s endorsement of the theatre as national, the government believed that the theatre could endorse the party as representative of the nation. The theatre and the state were caught in a double bind: mutually reliant but often working from conflicting ideas about what representation meant. This relationship became even more fraught after the change of government in 1932, as the values of the Catholic Church in Ireland were insinuated in the policies of Fianna Fáil, and lay organizations, such as the Catholic Truth Society, established a firm grasp on daily life.

**Education, Representation, and the Campaign for a State Subsidy**

Cumann na nGaedheal had a strong educational ethos. The party pledged ‘To carry on the National Tradition; and To utilize the powers of Government in the hands of the Irish people as well as other forms of public activity for the fullest development of the Nation’s heritage’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Of course, the heritage to which the party’s manifesto referred was very recent: the Irish Revival had been at its height just twenty-five years earlier. The party’s cultural programme attempted to create a sense of continuity and to elide the fracture and dissent that marred the myth of national progress from the Revival to the Free State. The Abbey Theatre, the Gaelic League, and the Gaelic Athletic Association were the most prominent cultural artefacts of the Revival, exemplars of the ‘National Language, Literature, games and Arts’ that Cumann na nGaedheal pledged itself ‘to preserve and foster’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Abbey directors, desperate for financial aid, took advantage of their own history and in a letter to President Cosgrave positioned themselves in accordance with Cumann na nGaedheal’s cultural programme:

By tradition and accomplishment our Theatre has become the National Theatre of Ireland, it should no longer be in the possession of private individuals, it should belong to the State. Having created it and fostered it through twenty years we believe we can now confidently trust it to the Irish Nation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This wholesale offering was a bluff. Yeats knew that neither the Provisional Government nor the Cumann na nGaedheal government that followed had the resources or the expertise to manage a theatre. He had written to Gregory as early as October 1922 to say that he was ‘convinced that the government will not give a penny unless we remain in control [….] Cosgrave does not want to be bothered with control of a theatre’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yeats used his personal connections with Desmond FitzGerald, who served as Minister for Publicity in the Provisional Government and then as Minister for External Affairs in the Free State, to approach Eoin MacNeill, the new Free State’s Minister for Education. Both Fitzgerald and Ernest Blythe, Minister for Finance, urged the Abbey’s directors that ‘a good report from Education would be of great value and might get the matter through Finance where the real opposition would be’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In fact, when the Abbey made an official appeal, Cosgrave forwarded the report to MacNeill in the Department of Education with a note attached saying that he was ‘against giving assistance’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Cosgrave had served as Minister for Finance in the Provisional Government and was keenly aware of the heavy war debt that burdened the new state. By summer 1923, the Free State’s expenditure was far exceeding its revenue, with an estimated deficit for the financial year in ‘excess of a million pounds’.[[9]](#footnote-9) It was probably this financial conservatism rather than any outright philistinism that lay behind Cosgrave’s advice. However, the Abbey had an important ally in Ernest Blythe. Blythe anticipated the intangible benefits to the government’s cultural programme that support for the theatre would bring.[[10]](#footnote-10) It was, as Yeats had foreseen, ‘the psychological moment’; the Abbey could take advantage of ‘the practical men without interference from the literary amateurs who are for the most part hiding their republican heads’.[[11]](#footnote-11) This proved to be true: Cumann na nGaedheal had an unambiguously laissez-faire approach to the Abbey’s programme, and it was not until Fianna Fáil (‘the Republican Party’) came to power in 1932 that the state attempted to directly interfere with the theatre’s productions.

A commitment to the Irish language was important to the state’s support for the theatre, regardless of which government was in office. In the early negotiations for the subsidy, Robinson encouraged Yeats and Gregory to include plays in Irish in the repertoire, or else to show an intention to develop a separate theatre devoted to plays in the Irish language. The directorate responded by letting the Abbey premises to the Gaelic Players, an independent amateur company; in addition to providing a source of revenue for when the theatre was dark, the relationship had the effect of aligning the Abbey with Irish language drama while relieving the directors of the burden to produce it. It was a prescient move. In advance of the grant’s first renewal in 1926, the *Catholic Bulletin* criticized the Abbey for being a burden on the taxpayer and not in any meaningful sense an ‘*Irish* Theatre’, but the Abbey was in a strong position to refute this.[[12]](#footnote-12) Irish language plays would be equally essential to the Abbey’s campaign for a large-scale building project in the 1930s. The directors would include in that proposal a plan to stage six productions in Irish annually; yet, it was common knowledge that these plays were not popular with audiences, so in return for supporting the ‘National language’, the directors were able to leverage a request for an additional grant of £1,000.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Remarkably, the Abbey directors were also able to use the Free State’s educational policy as a way of securing support for some of their most experimental work. In 1919, Robinson and Yeats had founded the Dublin Drama League, an independent experimental company that staged modern European plays in translation and the work of contemporary avant-garde playwrights, such as Eugene O’Neill. Such experimental work could not be staged at the Abbey Theatre because of a confluence of financial pressures and popular expectations of what constituted the artistic remit of the Irish National Theatre. The league’s productions inspired Yeats and Robinson to create a smaller performance space that could accommodate more experimental plays by Irish playwrights. The Abbey building desperately needed renovation, so the directors incorporated the construction of a new performance space into their plans. Although the theatre had ‘between three and four thousand pounds’ to its credit when the subsidy came up for renewal in 1927, Robinson described the theatre as being financially vulnerable. He wrote to Blythe, ‘the Theatre could not be said to be in a safe financial position unless it had laid by a large sum of money - £10,000 say’.[[14]](#footnote-14) Robinson was bold in positing such a preposterous amount, but Blythe seems to have been unflinching, and he endorsed Robinson’s claim that the new experimental space could ‘be looked upon as educational work’. Aesthetically, the experiments at what would become the Peacock Theatre were educational in the best sense, but these plays did not comply with the idea of a ‘national’ education that was essential to either Cumann na nGaedheal or Fianna Fáil’s cultural politics. In fact, this mattered very little. The Peacock was a small space and accommodated small audiences. It was also used principally for productions by the Dublin Drama League and Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir’s new company, the Gate Theatre. Since these productions did not occur under the auspices of the Abbey, they attracted little attention and no government interference.

**The Legacy of Public Investment and Popular Ownership**

The directors’ claim that the Abbey constituted the National Theatre of Ireland was important to creating a sense of public ownership that would sustain the theatre over the long term. However, the state and the people’s ideological investment in the concept of a national theatre was also at the heart of the theatre’s most famous controversies. The reception of Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) exemplified the legacy of public ownership of the Abbey, as the play became an important test of the theatre’s relationship to the Irish State and the state’s response to popular demand for intervention. As a result of the theatre’s first subsidy in 1925, the economist George O’Brien had been appointed to the Abbey directorate. His official role was to oversee the theatre’s finances, but O’Brien was also governed privately by a strong sense of Catholic morality. This was not immediately evident to the Abbey’s directors. When he first read the manuscript of the *Plough*, O’Brien regarded it as ‘excellent’ and believed it would be ‘very successful at the Abbey’. However, when the theatre’s manager, Michael Dolan, expressed reservations about O’Casey’s language – particularly the song ‘sung by the “girl-of-the-streets”’ – O’Brien lost his nerve.[[15]](#footnote-15) He wrote privately to Yeats, objecting to O’Casey’s use of religious language, profanity, explicit sexual phrases, and the character Rosie Redmond. O’Brien argued that ‘The lady’s professional side is unduly emphasised in her actions and conversation [….] The song at the end is an example of what I mean’.[[16]](#footnote-16) He then went so far as to propose that ‘the numerous references to “lowsers” and “lice” should be changed. Yeats refused to compromise. He replied, ‘To eliminate any part of it on grounds that have nothing to do with dramatic literature would be to deny all our traditions’.[[17]](#footnote-17) O’Brien attempted to gain purchase by suggesting that an offence to ‘public opinion’ might ‘make it difficult or impossible for the Government to continue or increase their subsidy’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Although he later disavowed any intention to blackmail the directors, this was certainly the way that his argument was received. Gregory was emphatic: ‘If we have to choose between the subsidy and our freedom, it is our freedom we choose’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Privately, Yeats, Gregory and Robinson agreed that aspects of the play, including Rosie Redmond’s bawdy song, would have to be altered for production, but they kept this secret from O’Brien in order to make it clear to him that the government representative on the board of directors did not have the power to censor plays.

In addition to the government-appointed director over-stepping his bounds, some of the actors were afraid to be associated with roles that challenged religious orthodoxy. In rehearsals for the *Plough*, F.J. McCormick and Eileen Crowe refused to deliver some of their lines. Crowe objected, saying ‘I never had a child that was not born within the border of the ten Commandments’, and McCormick went so far as to refuse to speak the word ‘snotty’.[[20]](#footnote-20) For O’Casey, this was the last straw. He stood by his use of ‘snotty’ as well as ‘Bum, Bastard’, and ‘Lowsey’ and argued that other plays, such as Shaw’s *The Devil’s Disciple* and Shiels’ *Paul Twyning*, had included those words and had not met any objection. O’Casey wrote to Robinson, briskly withdrawing the *Plough* from production: ‘The play itself is (in my opinion) a deadly compromise with the actual; it has been further modified by the Directors but I draw the line at a Vigilance Committee of the Actors’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Catholic vigilance associations were lobbying for legal reforms in the Free State that would institutionalize religious morality. The ‘Associated AEsthetes’ – as the *Catholic Bulletin* referred to George Russell, Yeats, Gregory, Robinson and other prominent Protestant writers and artists – were a prime target. As Dolan, McCormick, and Crowe’s objections illustrate, actors were not free from the pervasive climate of moral policing, but again the directorate refused to bow to conservative pressures. Yeats orchestrated a compromise to save the production, permitting Crowe and May Craig (who played ‘A Woman’) to change parts. However, the short-term solution did not prevent these morally-minded actors from periodically interfering with plays that they believed were injurious to popular religious practices. A decade later, for example, Michael Dolan objected to Cormac O’Daly’s play *The Silver Jubilee* because one of the characters in it, presented as a hypocrite, was a member of the Catholic Young Men’s Society (a thinly veiled reference to the popular Catholic Young Men’s Association). In the case of that play, the theatre was in a less secure position, and the directors believed that it was necessary to compromise the text in order to secure negotiations with the state. Yet in 1926, the directors silenced the moral objections to the *Plough and the Stars*, and the play was staged with few adjustments to the script.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The riots over *The Plough and the Stars* were a response to perceived political rather than moral offences and were not driven by the state but rather by individuals who stood in opposition to the state. Government ministers did have reservations about O’Casey’s play, but these concerns were expressed privately. The consummate playgoer and diarist Joseph Holloway overheard James Montgomery, the first Free State Film Censor, remark caustically on the *Plough*’s opening night, ‘This is a lovely Irish export’. Holloway noted that after the play, he heard Montgomery say that he believed the Free State should not have appointed a director to the theatre’s board at all, since it might lead to the belief that the state endorsed the Abbey’s productions. Montgomery thought ‘They should have given a grant unburdened by any restrictions or not at all!’[[23]](#footnote-23) This perspective would prove prescient in the wake of the riots that erupted on the fourth night of the *Plough*’s run. Members of Cumann na mBan, led by Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, protested that O’Casey’s play degraded the memory of the Easter Rising and that it desecrated the tricolour by having the flag carried into a public house. O’Casey’s defence was that the flag was not ‘symbolical or representative’ of Republicanism but rather symbolised ‘the whole of Ireland’.[[24]](#footnote-24) As Montgomery feared, these arguments created the opportunity for public critiques of the relationship between the theatre and the state. The *Evening Herald*, which had initially published a long favourable review of the *Plough*, went on to attack the play as ‘repulsive’ and argued that ‘such a play would not be permitted by the Government of any other country—certainly not in America, France, Germany, or under Mussolini at the present time’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Another reviewer argued that censorship was the solution to stopping ‘a recurrence of those unfortunate protests’.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Censorship of Films Act (1923) had been designed primarily to protect young audiences and lower-class people, who were believed to be less discriminating and therefore more susceptible to immoral influences.[[27]](#footnote-27) There was growing support for a similar censorship of publications (eventually enacted in 1929), to which Yeats and Robinson were publicly opposed. (Gregory was more cautious and refrained from aligning herself with any cause that might prove injurious to the Abbey.) Importantly, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington attacked the government subsidy, but she did not support the calls for official censorship that came from some quarters. Rather, she thought that the state should not sponsor a theatre that failed to uphold the nation’s values. Ireland was the only country, she argued, where ‘a State-subsidised theatre [could] presume on popular patience to the extent of making a mockery and a byword of a revolutionary movement on which the present structure claims to stand’.[[28]](#footnote-28) In her view, the answer was not institutional control but ‘the free censorship of popular opinion’ that she and her fellow members of Cumann na mBan had attempted to exercise through the riots.[[29]](#footnote-29) Sheehy Skeffington also argued that the Abbey directors had prohibited free expression when they summoned the police to suppress the protest. Yeats had behaved as though the theatre was a ‘kept house’, and – she cautioned – ‘any theatre lost more than the subsidy it received by giving up its freedom’.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Cumann na mBan’s protest laid the foundations for the *Catholic Bulletin*’s campaign against the Abbey’s ‘subsidised attack on Irish Nationality’.[[31]](#footnote-31) The *Bulletin* challenged the subsidy from several angles. One article accused ‘this subsidised system of pouring scorn on the ideals of Easter Week’, while another argued that the government had given the Abbey an £850 annual subsidy but at the same time had refused to support the work of the Dublin Industrial Development Association, thereby implying that the funds supporting O’Casey’s offensive play might have been used instead to alleviate the poverty that was his subject.[[32]](#footnote-32) These challenges to the subsidy arose just a few weeks before the government grant to the Abbey came up for annual review. At first, the protests seemed to have hit their mark. The Cumann na nGadheal TD for Wexford, Osmond Esmonde, interrupted Blythe’s introduction to the vote on the subsidy, which had been increased – without explanation to the Committee on Finance – to £1,000. Esmonde argued that in approving the grant, the government was ‘asked to subsidise the new stage Irishman who is being invented by a modern playwright’; he called for reform of ‘the board selecting plays to be acted in the theatre [which] should be representative of the whole nation, and not any small clique or minority’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Other ministers spoke up in support of Esmonde; Thomas Nolan (Cumann na nGaedheal TD for Limerick), for example, argued that the subsidy should be withdrawn ‘and that education should be given in some other way’. Several TDs complained about the lack of disclosure regarding the theatre’s management and showed a total lack of knowledge that the government had a representative in place on the board. Again, Blythe proved to be essential to defending the theatre’s grant. He summarised the history of the subsidy, discussed O’Brien’s appointment, and concluded by arguing that ‘financial stringency’ should not be exercised by starving cultural institutions that ‘develop the talents of the people in regard to literature and drama’. The grant was not only renewed but increased, and the debates in the Dáil over the nature of the Abbey’s productions served as a platform for campaigns against theatrical censorship. The day after the finance committee’s vote, the *Irish Times* published an editorial arguing, ‘everybody knows that the Abbey would refuse to sell its birthright—its ideals in art, its intellectual standards, its liberty of prophesying—for the *Dail*’s annual mess of pottage [….] the *Dail*, being as now constituted, utterly unfit to discuss questions of art or letters, would make itself and Ireland ridiculous in the eyes of the world’.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The Abbey Theatre’s role as a public face of the nation, abroad and within Ireland, was a central concern of the Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil governments. In fact, during the Irish Civil War, the capital’s theatres had been a space for contesting the identity of the nation. In March 1923, the Minister for Home Affairs in the Republican government (the alternative government established by the anti-treaty opposition), Padraig O’Ruitleis, demanded that all theatres close as an act of mourning for Republicans who had been executed by Free State forces. The Free State Army was dispatched to the Abbey to ensure that the theatre stayed open. This was a symbolic act that endorsed the Abbey as the theatre of the new state, but it was also an act of protection, since Yeats’s role as a Senator had the effect, in Gregory’s words, of making the Abbey ‘a good target’.[[35]](#footnote-35) After the Civil War, the first Cumann na nGaedheal government saw the potential for the theatre to work as a tool for unification, or at least for the presentation of a unified idea of the nation. In the first discussion of a subsidy for the Abbey in the Committee on Finance, Blythe argued, ‘I think we must have this sort of institution, and the sort of activities it stands for, in this country if we are to keep the affection of the citizens of the country for the country in the way we would like it to be kept’.[[36]](#footnote-36) By the time of the *Plough* riots, Cumann na nGaedheal’s position as the majority seemed secure, and it would have been against the government’s political interest to kowtow to the demands of the Republican women of Cumann na mBan.

In addition to the potential for the Abbey to act as a platform to endorse the power of the state, both the government and Irish citizens were keenly aware of the international prestige of the theatre and its capacity to bring tourists to Dublin. Increasing tourism, it was hoped, would boost the blighted post-war economy. This point had also been raised by Blythe in the first vote on the theatre’s subsidy. He had argued that the Abbey above any other agency had made ‘the name of this country so favourably known abroad’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Similarly, at the Abbey’s twenty-first birthday celebration, which was held in advance of the first occasion of the subsidy’s renewal in 1926, Blythe praised the Abbey as ‘a most important national asset’ and commended its role in creating ‘an interest in, and respect for, Ireland in places where, but for the Abbey, there would have been neither’.[[38]](#footnote-38) Since the Abbey’s role in advertising the nation had been a significant argument to justify the government’s subsidy, it is unsurprising that there were objections within and outside of government to *The Plough and the Stars*. After the riots, Blythe successfully emphasised the theatre’s educational role in order to manoeuvre the renewal and increase of the grant, but the *Plough* did not cease to be controversial. In 1930 the play was cause for further objection when the Abbey planned to perform it alongside two other controversial plays, *John Bull’s Other Island* and *The Playboy of the Western World*, at the height of ‘the Tourist season’.[[39]](#footnote-39) *The Nation* argued against the productions:

That State-subsidised playhouse seems to take a perfect delight in caricaturing our people for the amusement of foreigners [….] is it necessary that we be continually portrayed to foreign visitors as peasants feted for killing their ‘das’ or as cravens such as people the ‘Plough and the Stars’? [….] Big audiences for Motor Race week and Horse Show week were already certain. The Directors could have given them the finest plays on the theatre’s magnificent list. Instead it chooses to give them Sean O’Casey’s ‘Plough and the Stars’ lest any of them go away with respect for our War of Independence, and Synge’s ‘Playboy’ to be taken as typical peasant life.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The article went on to suggest that the Abbey directors colluded ‘in cracking a joke against the crude Irish with any Tom Dick or Harry who crosses the Channel to see the motor speeders in Phoenix Park or the military jumpers in Ballsbridge’.

The annual horse show at the Royal Dublin Society was the most important occasion in the Abbey Theatre’s year for reviving profits. In the interim between the critique of the theatre’s programme by *The Nation* and the opening of Horse Show Week a fortnight later, the Abbey directors silently adjusted the theatre’s programme. *The Plough and the Stars* and *John Bull’s Other Island* were withdrawn, and Gregory’s *The Rising of the Moon* and Brinsley MacNamara’s comedy *Look at The Heffernans* were scheduled to play on alternating nights.[[41]](#footnote-41) This drastically changed a programme of plays that were famous for their controversies into a tepid programme of a new play – a proven crowd-pleaser – and two classics. (The *Playboy* was now accepted as an enjoyable part of the Abbey’s repertoire by all but the most conservative audiences.) Although a direct motive is impossible to ascribe, the change seems calculated to keep the Abbey financially afloat: not only in terms of satisfying audiences during Horse Show Week but also in order to secure the continuance of the state subsidy, which had seemed precarious in the most recent financial debate.

In addition to attracting tourists to Dublin, the government subsidy put the theatre under pressure to tour within the country. In the 1927 subsidy debate, Thomas Johnson, Minister for Labour, suggested that state funding could be used to ‘extend the activities of the society to the country’, which would provide a broader benefit beyond a Dublin audience. However, Johnson’s suggestion was problematic given the Abbey’s history of touring within the country. In June 1924, the Abbey players had organized as a private enterprise a tour of *Juno and the Paycock* to Cork. The local manager had opposed the religious and sexual references in the play and demanded the re-writing of a large portion of the script. Gregory recorded the controversy in her journal: ‘Dolan had to arrange (between two performances) that the young man [Bentham] should marry her [Mary] but should desert her later because she had not brought the expected fortune’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Again, in 1927 when the Abbey toured T.C. Murray’s *Autumn Fire* and Lennox Robinson’s *The Big House* to Cork, local Catholic vigilance societies organized a boycott. The protesters were criticized by Dublin’s *Evening Herald* for being uneducated and prudish ‘patriots’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Yet, the conservatism of provincial audiences, which combined religious orthodoxy with political opinion, was a portent of the challenges that the Abbey would face when Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932.

Yeats expected Fianna Fáil to withdraw the annual subsidy to the Abbey.[[44]](#footnote-44) The theatre had lost a valuable ally when Blythe left his post as Minister for Finance, but he still served as Cumann na nGaedheal TD for Monaghan, which Robinson believed offered some hope. However, it was clear that Fianna Fáil was going to demand compliance with the party’s ideology if the subsidy were to continue. Yeats anticipated this and in the spring of 1932, he published the introduction to his play *Fighting the Waves* in which he combined his frustration with the change in government with his concern for the freedom of the theatre.[[45]](#footnote-45) He contrasted the Abbey’s early plays – his own plays in verse and Gregory’s folk drama, plays ‘full of vague suggestion’ – with the recent vogue for a vulgar ‘school of satire that has for its subject the actual life of the village and the slum’. He lamented,

[I]f the Irish Government at the establishment of the Free State had done something no revolution of strong farmers, clerks and lawyers would permit, have founded a school that could have substituted, as only a literature without satirical or realist prepossessions could, positive desire for the negative passion of a national movement beaten down into party politics, compelled for a century to attack everything, to suspect everybody.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Almost three decades earlier, Yeats had written ‘An Irish National Theatre and Three Sorts of Ignorance’ in response to Arthur Griffith’s attack on *The Shadow of the Glen*.[[47]](#footnote-47) This introduction to *Fighting the Waves* was a similar defence of artistic freedom against a blinkered religious nationalism, which demanded a ‘representative’ drama that embodied party ideology rather than artistic vision.

When August Gregory died on 22 May 1932, the government moved quickly to attempt to institute control over the theatre. Just two days after her death, Fianna Fáil’s executive council met to select her successor to the Abbey board.[[48]](#footnote-48) Their first choice, Arthur Clery, had been a vocal opponent of both the *Playboy* and *The Shadow of the Glen* and had encouraged people to protest ‘if they find their *National* theatre tending towards immoral, anti-Christian or anti-human propaganda’.[[49]](#footnote-49) To the government’s disappointment, Clery was unwilling to take up the post of director, and before the executive council could proceed very far in recommending another candidate, the state’s lack of authority came to light. Walter Starkie, George O’Brien’s successor, still held the post of government director, and the state was not entitled to appoint regular members to the theatre’s board of directors. The issue of a new director would not be raised again for another year, when Starkie took Gregory’s place, and the post of government-appointed director became vacant.

In the meantime, Yeats and the Abbey Players embarked for North America. These were separate but complementary enterprises. Yeats was travelling on a lecture tour to fundraise for the Irish Academy of Letters, which had been organised in opposition to the censorship of publications, but the freedom of the theatre was a constant subject of his speeches. In Cleveland, Ohio he argued:

You’ve got to treat the theater as if it were part of an educational system […] A subsidy enables a theater to perform unpopular plays, to keep ahead of public opinion and to shape it. We have had a subsidy for years, a small one, and we have produced plays unpopular at the time which became part of the life of the country. Without a subsidy a theater must produce best sellers only. A play isn’t like a book. When I was a young man I was published by publishers who knew my book would not be popular but who were willing to face a risk for the sake of the future. Theaters cannot do that, and great vitality is sacrificed.[[50]](#footnote-50)

As his lecture tour progressed, Yeats’s references to the Abbey’s relationship with the Irish state increasingly gave voice to the rising antagonism between the theatre and the Fianna Fáil government. In Toronto, he went so far as to declare that the new government would be continuing the grant that began under Cumann na nGaedheal. This was a pre-emptive move that was calculated to make it difficult for Fianna Fáil to withdraw its support.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Just a few months later, the threat of government interference with the Abbey’s productions was finally realized. The spark was the Abbey’s recent tour to the United States, during which they performed Synge’s *Playboy* and *Shadow of the Glen* as well as O’Casey’s *Juno*. The American political party, Fianna Fáil, Incorporated, objected to the Abbey’s representation of ‘the Irish character’ and argued that there were

thousands of good clean wholesome plays which might be presented and which would have a tendency to help us in our efforts to elevate our race and our people and to keep them before the other peoples of the world as decent, worthy and God-fearing people and at least the equals of the people of any other nation.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Fianna Fáil, Inc. proceeded to lobby Fianna Fáil in Ireland to withhold the theatre’s subsidy, which the Americans argued wasted the hard-earned money of Irish taxpayers on these ‘plays, with their filthy language, their drunkness [sic], murder and prostitution’. At first, the government attempted to handle the party’s complaints with diplomacy. The Secretary for the Department of External Affairs, J.P. Walsh, wrote a letter clarifying that the subsidy was to support ‘the National Theatre Society, Ltd.’, not the Abbey Players who had undertaken the American tour. In fact, the Irish consulate had refused to allow the players to include the official seal of the Free State on the publicity circulars for that tour.[[53]](#footnote-53) Fianna Fáil, Inc. would not be so easily appeased, and Walsh forwarded the matter to the Department of the President.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Yeats launched a counter-campaign in an interview with the pro-de Valera *Irish Press*. When he was asked about the American protests, he argued that the Abbey Players had gone ‘to America as ambassadors of Irish taste’, and he echoed the government’s concerns by arguing, ‘We have got to keep the Irish in America linked up with our nation, we must not lose them’. However, Yeats insisted that this link must be a cultural, not a political one. As a further demonstration of the cultural link between the two countries, Yeats produced his *Sophocles’ King Oedipus* in January 1933 as a benefit for the Irish Academy of Letters. He explained that *Oedipus* had recently been produced by the University of Notre Dame, an institution with a strong Catholic and Irish identity. This was proof of the liberality of Irish audiences in the United States and an implicit argument against theatrical censorship: ‘Ireland had no censorship, and a successful performance [of his *Oedipus*] might make her proud of her freedom’.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Yeats’s manipulation of the press was a frequent tactic in shaping the theatre’s relationship to the state. Despite Fianna Fáil, Inc.’s influence, in the face of controversy the Fianna Fáil executive council voted to include the grant in the next budget. Even so, J.J. McElligott, the secretary to the Minister for Finance, wrote a threatening letter to Lennox Robinson:

It will be understood that in considering the advisability of continuing the Grant hitherto made the Minister could hardly disregard representations of this kind. It might even happen that if the representations were of sufficient weight and substance he would be compelled to make the continuance of the grant conditional on an undertaking that, in the event of another American Tour being contemplated in the future, the repertoire of plays should be as not to arouse criticism of the nature indicated.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Without waiting for reply, the government exercised immediately a further measure of control by reducing the grant to £750. However, this reduction was not entirely punitive since it was in keeping with Fianna Fáil’s cuts to the public sector, including reductions to the salaries of civil servants. Yet, the 1933 budget does show how different the policies of Fianna Fáil were to Cumann na nGaedheal, which had increased the theatre’s grant in the same budget that it reduced old-age pensions.

Fianna Fáil was far from finished with dealing with the Abbey directorate’s rebellion. In the same letter that McElligott relayed the state’s threat to the theatre’s funding, he informed Robinson that the executive council had appointed Professor William Magennis as the new government director, replacing Starkie who had now taken Gregory’s post. This was an incredible affront. Magennis was a regular contributor to the *Catholic Bulletin*, a vocal opponent of modern literature, and a public opponent of W.B. Yeats.[[57]](#footnote-57) Yeats replied immediately, bypassing McElligott and writing straight to de Valera. He argued that the government was bowing to the whims of reactionaries. He argued that there had been no protest from ‘the Great Catholic University of Notre Dame’ when he had spoken there on tour, and in New York some Irish-Americans had defended the Abbey against Fianna Fáil, Inc.’s attacks. One of these allies was Patrick Farrell, who had an influential position as the director of the Irish Theatre and the Museum of Irish Art and had issued a public statement proclaiming the aesthetic value of the Abbey’s touring productions.[[58]](#footnote-58) Although Farrell’s influence was artistic and lacked the weight of the lobby of Fianna Fáil’s funders in New York, Yeats threatened to publish Farrell’s correspondence and his own indictment of the government’s policy. As a final flourish, he declared that the Abbey directorate refused Magennis’s appointment and ‘any further financial assistance’ from the government.[[59]](#footnote-59) This was a similar manoeuvre to the directorate’s offer of the entire theatre and its management to Cosgrave during the early campaign for a subsidy. Yeats now drafted a letter to the press in which he shamed Fianna Fáil and recounted support from the Abbey from important, educated audiences in the United States. These were people who appreciated ‘the Irish intellectual movement’ and all it had done to raise ‘the prestige of the Irish Race in America’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Before the letter was printed, Yeats had a last-minute audience with de Valera, during which the two managed to reach a degree of agreement. Magennis was withdrawn as the government’s appointment to the directorate; Yeats would withhold his letter to the press, which would allow de Valera to save face, and the Abbey would keep its subsidy.

The Abbey’s touring programme continued to be the subject of debate. For the next tour to the United States, in the summer of 1934, the directors included Synge and O’Casey in their programme: *Riders to the Sea*, *The Shadow of the Glen*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The Plough and the Stars*. For the first time in the theatre’s history, the directors submitted their touring programme to the government in advance of departure. While this might seem like a display of compliance in the wake of Fianna Fáil, Inc’s protest, it was more of a taunt. Ten days before the government wrote to the Abbey regarding their plans for the tour, the Abbey directors leaked to the press reports of the government’s opposition to their production of the *Playboy* and the *Plough.* Yeats declared that ‘the Abbey Theatre was not to be regarded as a minor branch of the civil service’, and he threatened to give up the subsidy rather than sacrifice the ‘liberty of the Theatre’.[[61]](#footnote-61) De Valera could only reply mildly: ‘the selection of plays for production by the Abbey Company is, of course, a matter for the Directors of the National Theatre Society’ and was beyond the government’s remit. The government asked merely that the directors make it ‘clear that the Government is in no sense responsible for the selection of plays.’[[62]](#footnote-62) As a consequence of his meek response to Yeats’s coup, de Valera was challenged by members of his party in the Dáil, who reminded him of the previous year’s protests. Several Fianna Fáil TDs asked that government’s approval of the theatre’s productions be made a condition of the grant. However, de Valera stood firm, and Yeats published a corrective in the *Sunday Times* that allowed de Valera to preserve his honor.[[63]](#footnote-63)

There were occasions when it was in the Abbey’s interest to comply with the state’s conservatism. The most extreme example of this is the decisions that were made during the Abbey directors’ campaign for a new theatre building. Yeats and his fellow directors foresaw the opportunity to amalgamate the Abbey Theatre with other Dublin theatres, including the Gate, under the auspices of a single National Theatre. This would reduce competition, provide the Abbey with a new building (which was desperately needed), and ensure the future of the Irish National Theatre Society. During the secret negotiations, the directors lost the leverage that they had enjoyed through the public controversies that allowed them to use the power of the press to effectively bully the government into submission. When the government-appointed director Richard Hayes (formerly the Censor of Films, appointed to the Abbey’s board in 1934) objected to a new play by Cormac O’Daly, *The Silver Jubilee*, because he believed its plot was morally offensive, the directors returned the script to O’Daly, recommending censorial changes. In rehearsal, the script was subjected to further censorship, as the same members of the company who had objected to aspects of the *Plough* now opposed O’Daly’s representation of the Catholic clergy. As the plans for reconstruction gained momentum, another play by Carroll, *The White Steed*, was declined for production because, as Holloway recorded, ‘the Abbey Directors voted it too anti-clerical’.[[64]](#footnote-64) Yeats also withheld his play, *The Herne’s Egg*, in order to avoid endangering the theatre’s relationship to the state. Frank O’Connor, who was then serving on the board of directors, recalls in his autobiography *My Father’s Son* a conversation with Yeats during which O’Connor asked, ‘Hasn’t it occurred to you that we have created vested interests?’ Yeats replied, ‘bitterly, “Did you think I wasn’t aware of it?”’[[65]](#footnote-65)

The aesthetic principles of education and representation that Yeats and Gregory set out at the founding of the Abbey Theatre enabled the directorate to cultivate a relationship with the state that ensured the theatre’s place as the Irish National Theatre. Yet, this was a relationship that demanded compromises on both sides. Even so, at least during Yeats’s lifetime, the Abbey directors were able to resist the complete ideological co-option of the theatre, and any compromises to artistic freedom were made willingly in order to ensure the continued alliance of the theatre and the state.

1. For a more detailed discussion of the issues raised in this essay, see Lauren Arrington, *W.B. Yeats, the Abbey Theatre, Censorship, and the Irish State: Adding the Half-Pence to the Pence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Provisional Government was a transitional administration in effect from January – December 1922. The Irish Free State was established in December 1922, after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Cumann na nGaedheal was the first party elected to government, in 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Regan, *op cit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yeats and Gregory to Cosgrave (27 June 1924 [*recte* 1923]), *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, Accession letter #4577, Oxford University Press (InteLex Electronic Edition) 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Yeats to Gregory (22 Oct 1922), CL #4197. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robinson to Gregory (13 July 1923), Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Also see Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, *The Modern Irish Drama Volume 6: The Years of O’Casey, 1921-1926* (Gerrards Cross: Colim Smythe, 1992), 158 and Yeats to Gregory (6 July [1923]), CL #4344. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robinson to Gregory (13 July 1923), Berg. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Regan, *Irish Counter-Revolution*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Robinson to Gregory (13 July 1923), Berg. Also see Hogan and Burnham, *Years of O’Casey*, 158 and Yeats to Gregory (6 July [1923]), CL #4344. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yeats to Gregory (22 Oct 1922), CL #4197. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Editorial, *Catholic Bulletin* vol. xvi, no. 1 (Jan 1926), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. (27 March 1936), Abbey Theatre Minute Book, NLI Acc 3961/NFC 98 (6) and (1 Sept 1937), Abbey Theatre Minute Book, NLI Acc 3961/NFC 98 (7). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Robinson to Blythe (6 July 1927), Earnán de Blaghd Papers, NLI MS 20,706. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dolan to Gregory (1 Sept 1925), NLI MS 22,557. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For the song as it originally appeared, see *A Whirlwind in Dublin*, ed. by Robert Lowery(Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1984), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Yeats to O’Brien (10 Sept 1925), CL #4772. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. O’Brien to Yeats (13 Sept 1925) in (20 Sept 1925), *Lady Gregory’s* *Journals*, ed. by Daniel J. Murphy, 2 vols (Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe), II, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. (20 Sept 1925), *Journals*,39. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. (10 Jan 1926), *Journals*, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. O’Casey to Robinson (10 Jan 1926), *The Letters of Sean O’Casey*, ed. David Krause, 4 vols (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1975-1992) I, 165-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For these and other changes to O’Casey’s script, see Nicholas Grene, ‘The class of the Clitheroes: O’Casey’s revisions to *The Plough and the Stars* promptbook’, *Bullán: an Irish Studies Journal* 4.2 (1999/2000), 57-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. (15 Feb 1926) Holloway, *Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, NLI MS 1,899, p. 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ‘“The Plough and the Stars”, Author Replies to Republican’s Charges, A Piquant Debate’, *Irish Independent* (2 March 1926) in Krause, ed., *Letters*, I, 177-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Evening Herald* (12 Feb 1926), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ‘The Abbey Melee’, *Evening Herald* (12 Feb 1926), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Peter Martin, *Censorship in the two Irelands, 1922-1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington to *Irish Independent* (15 Feb 1926) in Krause, ed., *Letters*, I, 167-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid.* 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. ‘“The Plough and the Stars”, Author Replies to Republican’s Charges, A Piquant Debate’, *Irish Independent* (2 March 1926) in Krause, ed., *Letters*, I, 177-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. ‘Editorial’, *Catholic Bulletin*, vol. xvi, no. 3(March 1926), 242-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ‘Editorial’, *Catholic Bulletin*, vol. xvi, no. 3(March 1926), 244 and Kevin’, ‘Far and Near’, *Catholic Bulletin*, vol. xvi, no. 3(March 1926), 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Vote 21, Miscellaneous Expenses, Dáil Eireann, vol. 16 (22 June 1926). <http://www.oireachtas-debates.gov.ie/D/0016/D.0016.192606220021.html> Accessed 9 March 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ‘Dail and Stage’, *Irish Times* (23 June 1926) in Holloway, *Impressions*, NLI MS 1,902. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. (25 March 1923), *Journals*, i, 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Dáil Éireann, Volume 11 (13 May 1925), ‘Committee on Finance. Miscellaneous Expenses (Vote 21). <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0011/D.0011.192505130012.html> Accessed 24 Oct 2005. Morash writes that ‘the matter [i.e. the subsidy] was not voted on in the Dáil’ and that Yeats ‘announced that the government would be giving the Abbey an annual subsidy of £850’ at the dinner on 8 August. See Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000* (Cambridge, 2002), 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Dáil Éireann, Volume 11 (13 May 1925), ‘Committee on Finance. Miscellaneous Expenses (Vote 21). <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0011/D.0011.192505130012.html> Accessed 24 Oct 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ‘Abbey Theatre: Coming of Age Celebration’, *Irish Times* (28 Dec 1925), 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. ‘Why Those?’, *Nation* (19 July 1930), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Abbey Account Book 1925-1932, Abbey Theatre Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. (3 June 1924), *Journals*, i, 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. D. O’C., ‘The “Kill-Joys”’, *Evening Herald* (9 Feb 1927) in Holloway, *Impressions*, NLI MS 1,907. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Yeats to Olivia Shakespear (9 May 1932), CL #5668. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Yeats, ‘Introduction to *Fighting the Waves*’, *Dublin Magazine*, vol. VII, no. 2 (April-June 1932), 7-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Yeats, ‘The Irish National Theatre and Three Sorts of Ignorance’, *United Irishman* (24 Oct 1903) in W.B. Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*, ed. by John P. Frayne, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1975), II. 306-08. Also see David Krause, ‘Sean O’Casey and the higher nationalism: the desecration of Ireland’s household gods’ in Robert O’Driscoll, ed. *Theatre and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (London, 1971), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Memorandum. Extract from Cabinet Minutes, ‘Abbey Theatre: Appointment of a Director (24 and 27 May 1932), NAI TAOIS/S 6284 A. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Arthur Cleary, *The Idea of a Nation*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002), 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. W.B. Yeats in interview with *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, quoted in Karin Margaret Strand, ‘W.B. Yeats’s American Lecture Tours’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Northwestern University, 1978), 216-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Strand, ‘W.B. Yeats’s American Lecture Tours’, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Memorandum, Fianna Fáil, Inc (21 Dec 1932), NAI TAOIS/ S 6284 A. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. M Murphy (for Consul General) to Secretary, Department of External Affairs (28 Dec 1932), NAI TAOIS/ S 6284 A. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. At this time, the Department of the President referred to the President of the Executive Council, who was Eamonn de Valera. The office of the Taoiseach (Irish for ‘chief’) was established by the 1937 constitution. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Qtd in Strand, *W.B. Yeats’s American Lecture Tours*, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. J.J. McElligott to Robinson (27 Feb 1933), NLI MS 21,957. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: a life*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997-2003), II, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (Orono, Me: National Poetry Foundation, 1984), 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Enclosure, TS (copy) Yeats to McElligott (1 March 1933), NLI MS 21,957. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Yeats to the Irish Newspapers ([1 March 1933]), CL #5827. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. ‘Abbey Theatre Tour Surprise’, *Irish Independent* (7 April 1934), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Department of the President to Robinson (17 April 1934), NLI MS 21,957. See also Foster, *Yeats*, II, 465 and 742. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. ‘A Misunderstanding Corrected’, *Sunday Times* (7 Oct 1934) in *UP*, i, 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *Joseph Holloway’s Irish Theatre*, ed. by Robert Hogan and Michael J. O’Neill, 3 vols (Dixon, Calif: Proscenium Press, 1969-70), III, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Frank O’Connor, *My Father’s Son* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)