FORUM KRITIKA: RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND

“HE CALLS HIS DADA STILL”: NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH RADICALISM AND THE DRAMA OF PÁDRAIC PEARSE

James Moran
University of Nottingham
James.Moran@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract
This essay explores the extent to which some of the political upheavals of twentieth-century Ireland, and their related theatrical manifestations, might reveal a series of affinities with the organised political radicalism of nineteenth-century England. Specifically, the playhouse dramas written by the executed leader of the Easter Rising of 1916, Pádraic Pearse (also known as Pádraig or Patrick) point back to the earlier Liberal reform meetings that took place in the English Midlands. The key connecting figure is the revolutionary leader’s father, James Pearse, who spent his life between Birmingham and Dublin, but who has tended to be overlooked by historians in the years since 1916.

This paper will explore the way that throughout the twentieth-century a focus on Pádraic Pearse’s mother has tended to obscure the influence of James Pearse. Yet I suggest that James—influenced by Liberal thinkers such as the MP John Bright—helped to link one kind of waning English radicalism with the developing nationalism of twentieth-century Ireland. It is in this context that my paper explores the political implications of Patrick Pearse’s theatrical writings, The King, The Master and The Singer, tracing connections between these plays and the Birmingham radicalism of James Pearse, with a particular focus on James’s nonconformist reformism and day-to-day involvement with the Catholic pomp of the Hardman church-furnishing company.

Keywords
Ireland, nationalism, Pearse biography, radical theatre

About the author
Jim Moran is head of drama at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of Staging the Easter Rising (Cork UP, 2005), which was labelled “a brave, confident book” by the Times Literary Supplement and “timely and provocative” by the Irish Times. He has also edited Four Irish Rebel Plays for Irish Academic Press and his Irish Birmingham: A History will be published by Liverpool UP in March 2010.

Philip Larkin famously observed:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you. (Larkin 180)
In almost a century since the Easter Rising, the reputation of the leading rebel Pádraic Pearse has vacillated between the saintly and the risible. At times, iconoclasts have followed Larkin’s formulation, and portrayed Pearse’s personal life as one that was “fucked up” during childhood or because of an abiding sense of childishness. For example, in an influential study published shortly after the fiftieth anniversary of the Dublin insurrection, William Irwin Thompson writes: “Accused of being foolish, Pearse made a metaphysic out of foolishness. Throughout his plays, poems, and stories, he celebrates children and fools, for in them he is steadfastly resisting maturity” (118). According to this line of thinking, Pearse was a kind of early twentieth-century Michael Jackson, inhabiting a Peter-Pan realm of bizarre behaviour and suspected pederasty in the years leading up to an untimely and self-inflicted death.

Just as Martin Bashir revealed Michael Jackson’s psychological problems to be the consequence of the child-star’s relationship with a bullying father, so Pádraic Pearse’s family life has been subjected to similar analysis by “revisionist” historians (Bashir 2003). At the start of Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure, Ruth Dudley Edwards writes of Pádraic’s neglectful father James and clinging mother Margaret:

James became increasingly involved in his self-education, and left his children for most purposes to his wife’s care. Patrick’s devoted mother cosseted his body and his ego, but offered no mental stimulation. The only one to bring news of a broader, more exciting world was his mother’s octogenarian Aunt … who would tell him stories and sing him songs. (8)

Ruth Dudley Edwards then includes some fascinating details about the Pearse’s family life in her book, and is one of the few commentators to have found James Pearse himself worthy of serious enquiry. But she concludes that the home environment would have been “suffocatingly dull” for the young Pádraic, and states that:

Besides providing a good material existence for his family, James confined his attention to his family to occasional expensive presents, and in their reminiscences he is a shadowy figure. Dominant though he was intellectually he was too distant from Patrick to counter-balance the narrow and often maudlin nationalism with which the boy was being fed through maternal influence. (11)
Thus Dudley Edwards’ influential book, which remains in print three decades after its original publication, presents a Pádraic Pearse whose personality was forged by a “maudlin” maternal influence, and whose father remained on the sidelines, unable to exert any particular influence over the young revolutionary. As Anthony Cronin asserts, such a focus on the maternal influence meant that Pádraic Pearse was “turned into an utterly unreal and boring figure, a mother-lover” (qtd. in Holohan 184-85).

However, such assertions about James Pearse’s distant relationship with his children appear at odds with the surviving correspondence that exists between James and his wife, in which he repeatedly asks her to “Kiss the children dearest for me,” and exhorts his wife to give the children “nourishing food” and to “be extremely careful with the kiddies.” Indeed, when James travelled from Dublin to England, his youngest son William (who would be killed alongside Pádraic for taking part in the Easter Rising) missed James so much that Margaret recorded, “he calls his dada still” (James Pearse “Correspondence”).

In this paper, then, I would like to question whether the “fucking up” of Pádraic Pearse is as uncomplicated as writers such as Thompson and Dudley Edwards have assumed. Perhaps James Pearse necessarily appears “shadowy” in those pieces of writing penned by his family in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, as these relatives strove to commemorate their sacrifice in a way that gave the Pearses a central role in the narrative of the Irish state. James Pearse’s disconcerting atheism and Englishness scarcely dovetailed with the ideas of Catholicism and Irish self-sufficiency that his son was increasingly understood to have died for, and which were persuasively articulated by the new state’s leaders after 1921. So James has tended to remain overlooked and marginal during historical debates about Easter week.¹ Yet if we look again at the writings of Pádraic Pearse, we may well find a number of connections with the ideas and affiliations of his father.

This paper will begin, then, by charting the way that Pádraic Pearse and his mother themselves began the process of sidelining James Pearse by respectively writing and endorsing jail-cell poems about maternal love. Yet I will argue that these poems owe a debt not only to Margaret Pearse, but to James Pearse as well, just as Pádraic’s earlier plays about rebellion repeatedly revolve around the relationship between boys and father figures. I will then explore the kind of radicalism endorsed by James Pearse, who encountered a particular brand of political thinking in Birmingham that was articulated by the local MP John Bright. In later years, James himself drew upon his memories of this radical rhetoric when writing polemically about Ireland. And in turn this brand of Birmingham thinking—at once politically transformative and socially conservative—coloured Pádraic’s last plays, which similarly endorse political change but eschew a wider
reassessment of societal values and hierarchies. Finally, this paper will consider the way that the aesthetics and the violence of Pádraic’s plays also point to a series of affinities with the staging of particular forms of piety and political radicalism in nineteenth-century England, the enthusiasm for which had been carried to Dublin from Birmingham by James Pearse in the 1860s.

THE MOTHER LOVER?

James Pearse grew up in Birmingham when the town was a centre of English “radicalism,” that is, a home for many on the extreme wing of the Liberal Party who called for a reform of the social and parliamentary system. James had in fact been born in London to a poor, nonconformist family in 1839, but the family moved to Birmingham when he was still young, and at the age of eight he started working in a local chain factory (Dudley Edwards 1). He married his first wife in the town, and they had four children here, although sadly only two survived infancy. He later found employment in Birmingham as a stone carver with one of Britain’s leading church furnishing firms (Chinn 92). But Catholic emancipation meant that Ireland was experiencing a church-building boom, and James Pearse, whose Birmingham boss grew increasingly infirm and would die three years later, decided to seize the opportunity and relocate to Dublin in about 1864, where in spite of his personal beliefs he prudently converted to Catholicism along with his wife (Gillow 128-29). However, she died in 1876, and James then met the nineteen-year-old shop-worker, Margaret Brady, with whom he set up home in Great Brunswick Street in 1877. Their first daughter Mary was born in 1878, followed by Pádraic in 1879. James continued to live and work in Dublin until the end of the century, but maintained business interests in Birmingham and was attempting to set up a headquarters there in Bristol Street at the time of his death in September 1900, when his son Pádraic was twenty years old (Crowley 72, 75-76).

James’s second wife, Margaret, was the daughter of a native Irish speaker from Meath, and she exerted a powerful influence on her son Pádraic, who as an adult showed real sensitivity towards Irish language, story, and culture. Indeed, after her son’s death Margaret herself described the way that she had affected her son’s thinking:

He always called me “Little Wommie,” and “Little Mother.” In that beautiful play, The Singer, when Mac Dara [sic] rushes into his mother’s arms, it was of me, his own mother, that Pádraic was thinking. I knew that, instinctively;
and Willie afterwards confirmed my belief when he told me that I was the prototype of Mac Dara’s mother, Máire. His own “Little Mother” was in my boy’s brave heart when he wrote that play. (qtd. in Pádraic Pearse The Home Life, 47)

Elsewhere, Margaret said:

In the play of the Singer I am the supposed mother. Don’t I feel proud of this, that dear Pádraic favoured me so and gave me the credit even before I deserved it, and am I, not, [sic] the proud mother to have given my two loving sons so willingly for the freedom of their beloved country, poor dear suffering Ireland. (qtd. in Walsh 12)

Pádraic Pearse himself also steered readers towards seeing the maternal influence behind his plays The Master and The King. He explained that:

One of my oldest recollections is of a kindly grey-haired seanchaidhe [storyteller], a woman of my mother’s people, telling tales by a kitchen fireplace. She spoke more wisely and nobly of ancient heroic things than anyone else I have ever known. Her only object was to amuse me, yet she was the truest of all my teachers. 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 leader. (Pádraic Pearse “By Way of Comment” 13)

This story formed the basis for the text of both the Master and The King, two plays that revolve around young boys and their priestly teachers in monastic schools. Indeed, Pádraic structured his entire teaching methodology at St. Enda’s along similar lines, believing that such ideas derived from a seanachie of “his mother’s people.”

After 1916, Margaret Pearse was also elevated to the position of symbolic mother to the nation by the Fianna Fáil party, by the Irish Press, by her interventions in the Dáil treaty debates, and by her appearance at the Abbey Theatre to protest against O’Casey’s The Plough and the Stars (Ward 179, Deputies of Dáil Éireann 221-22, Belchem 285, Morash 163-71). But perhaps the poems that Pádraic wrote in his jail cell before his execution were
most important in terms of catapulting Margaret to national prominence. In these verses he imagines himself into his mother’s mind, and in a strange act of ventriloquism, addresses the Virgin Mary:

Dear Mary, that didst see thy first-born Son
Go forth to die amid the scorn of men
For whom He died,
Receive my first-born son into thy arms,
Who also hath gone out to die for men,
And keep him by thee till I come to him.
Dear Mary, I have shared thy sorrow,
And soon shall share thy joy.
(Pádraic Pearse “A Mother Speaks” 22)

After Easter week, Pádraic Pearse’s mother-centred poems became widely known, undoubtedly owing much of their popularity to their engagement with Marian devotion. By late 1916 the Dundalgan press had published a picture of Margaret Pearse as the first page of its edition of Pádraic’s The Mother and Other Tales; and Small, Maynard and Company produced a revised edition of Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood, which included Pádraic’s poetry about his mother (O’Brien 40).

Yet these poems also owe a debt to the example of Pádraic’s father. After all, the poems had been inspired by Margaret’s request “to write something for me—as your father used to. He wrote such beautiful things when your Auntie Kate and Grandfather died” (qtd. in Pádraic Pearse The Home Life 51). Furthermore, one of the recent acquisitions at the National Library of Ireland is James Pearse’s diary, in which, during an anguished passage debating the merits of religious belief and atheism, James Pearse wrote the following poem:

1
Good bye dear mother
A long and agonised
Good bye

2
Good bye to your dear
Face your tender
Patient heart
Moran

“He Calls His Dada Still”

3
I feel my own will burst
If this I do not cry

4
O God! How have with
Sweet hallowed[?] need[?]
Mother to part!

5
Yet I will not spare[?]
As me of all hope herein.

6 [verse crossed through]
God may in justice
Take, what he in bounty gave
(James Pearse “Diary”)

Such a poem puts quite a different slant on Pádraic Pearse’s famous jail-cell poems. Rather than simply using his mother to inspire him, Pádraic had self-consciously replicated the example of his father, who used similar verse to commemorate Pádraic’s English grandmother, and who elsewhere had written of “dear mother gone to rest” (James Pearse “Correspondence”). Pádraic’s father had made a habit of writing elegies about dead members of the family, celebrating the deaths of those close to him in a way that might perhaps be expected from a man who earned his living from carving tombstones and memorials. Yet this example showed Pádraic Pearse how the memory of the dead might live on and be celebrated by the living. One of the distinctive things about Pádraic Pearse’s brand of revolutionary nationalism is his awareness that far-reaching political reform could be achieved through the verdict of posterity, in the face of the indifference or hostility of the present. If Pádraic Pearse wanted to show the potential rebels of 1916 what exactly they were engaged in, a struggle to the death that—although involving despair and pain at the time—would be commemorated in years to come, he needed to look no further than the literary example set by his father. James Pearse had celebrated the dead both through poetry and grave-stone carvings, and Pádraic Pearse similarly sought to encourage the potential rebels of 1916 with those
Moran  
"He Calls His Dada Still"

final plays that culminate in the victorious demise of the title characters, *The Singer*, *The Master*, and *The King*.

Of course, the assertion that we might glimpse James Pearse in his son’s plays is somewhat counter-intuitive. *The Singer*, for example, is dominated by a mother figure, and set in a household where the father is entirely absent. But if, as Margaret Pearse suggests, this work was in some way an autobiographical portrayal of the Pearse household, we might note that the onstage family is haunted by a lost member, and by a grief so intense that the mother of the household hallucinates about her loss when she is about to receive Holy Communion. As the mother-figure of the play explains, “We have both been lonely for him. The house has been lonely for him” (Pádraic Pearse *The Singer* 9). In the play of course, the mother is pining for her exiled son MacDara, who does reappear before being killed, but if Pádraic was basing this idea of a house of grief upon his own experiences, then it may be that he was thinking not of a son but of James Pearse. After all, there is something paternal and not necessarily brotherly about the fictional MacDara’s relationship with those around him: he holds the child Sighle in his “strong” arms, for instance, and recalls teaching a young boy who was “a winsome child, and he grew into my heart” (Pádraic Pearse *The Singer* 30).

Pádraic’s two other late plays are more obviously set in a paternal rather than a maternal environment. In the all-male setting of *The King*, a group of children and monks live under the care of an abbot, whom they address as “father” and who responds to them as “my children.” Indeed, when one of the boys describes having seen the king by saying “I saw him once in my father’s house,” we perhaps hear an echo of that moment in the New Testament when the child Christ, having been separated from Mary and Joseph, is found teaching in the temple (Luke 2:48-49). If that biblical incident revolves around questions of fatherly attachment, then Pádraic Pearse’s play also goes on to emphasise the importance of the paternal bond: indeed, much of the dramatic tension of the end of the play is dissipated if we do not see that the abbot has a parental care for the child whose life is sacrificed for the community. The child’s death can easily be justified in utilitarian terms, but the audience relies on the abbot to articulate the terrible individual cost of the child’s loss, to point out that “I have given you the noblest jewel that was in my house. I loved yonder child.” And the abbot then goes on to state, with biblical echoes of Abraham and Isaac, “Thou hast been answered, O terrible voice! Old herald, my foster child has answered!” (Pádraic Pearse *The Singer* 63, 66).

The same kind of all-male environment is found in *The Master*, where a group of young boys are again schooled by an attentive teacher. As in *The King*, Pádraic Pearse may
have wanted us to see this master as having a paternal relationship with his charges; whom he calls “My boy,” whom he spends time “caressing,” and whom he calls “my good little lad” (Pádraic Pearse The Master 87, 92). At one point, one of the boys draws particular attention to the master’s quasi-parental role, remembering that:

I served his Mass yesterday, and he stayed praying so long after it that I fell asleep. I did not stir till he laid his hand upon my shoulder. Then I started up and said I, “Is that you, little mother?” He laughed and said he, “No, Breasal, it’s no-one so good as your mother.” (Pádraic Pearse The Master 84)

Perhaps these close relationships in Pádraic’s plays between older male teachers and their pupils, then, if read through the lens of James Pearse, start to look less like versions of Michael Jackson and the boys of the Neverland ranch, and more like the relationship that exists between a father and a son.

**JOHN BRIGHT AND BIRMINGHAM RADICALISM**

There is a danger, of course, that emphasising the significance of James Pearse in his son’s writings opens the door to the claim that the key ideas of Irish politics originated in England to begin with, somewhat akin to that classic imperial move of reinforcing the importance of the administrative centre at the expense of the “periphery.” But in this case a number of the influential political views and radical sentiments that James Pearse encountered in Birmingham, and which went on to affect Pádraic Pearse, actually originated in Ireland in the first place.

In the early 1800s, Daniel O’Connell had transformed the way that mass meetings could be used to push for political reform, and his emancipation campaign inspired reformers in Birmingham. Indeed, the Birmingham reform organisation, the Birmingham Political Union, consciously modelled its activities on what O’Connell had done, and he became the group’s most high-profile member, making regular visits to Birmingham in the 1830s and 1840s to show his support for, and approval of, Birmingham’s radicalism (see, for example, “Birmingham, Jan. 23, 1832” and “Daniel O’Connell”). The Birmingham radicals emulated O’Connell’s emancipation meetings by hosting a series of monster meetings on Newhall Hill, and these were probably the largest political gatherings ever seen in Britain, long remembered in Birmingham as forcing through the great reform act of 1832. Indeed, after the reform act was passed, there was also a remarkable meeting of
hundreds of thousands during the following June when those in Birmingham campaigned not for themselves, but to “confer upon Irishmen those constitutional rights which Englishmen now enjoy” (“Irish Reform Bill” 2).

James Pearse, of course, had no personal experience of these O’Connellite monster meetings, which occurred before he was born. But his family came to live in Birmingham shortly afterwards, and when growing up in the town, James Pearse could scarcely have avoided learning about the town’s radical history. In particular, when he gained employment he worked for a church furnishing company that was based on Newhall Hill, proudly remembered by residents as the site where hundreds of thousands had gathered to persuade the government to pass the great reform act (St. Chads, par. 3). Furthermore, James Pearse’s employer in Birmingham was the Hardman company, whose founder had an intriguing and well-known confrontation with Daniel O’Connell’s main supporters in Birmingham over the building of St. Chad’s cathedral (Gillow 375).

In addition, whilst James Pearse lived and worked in Birmingham, the area experienced something of a revival in radical sentiment, with James being particularly influenced by the Quaker politician, John Bright. Bright became Birmingham’s MP in 1857, and, every year afterwards, spoke before large and enthusiastic crowds in the town about the main issues that faced radicals in the year ahead (Ward 57).

John Bright had previously been MP for Manchester, where he campaigned for greater expansion of the franchise and for assistance for Ireland. He had seen first-hand the appalling conditions suffered by the Irish immigrants to Lancashire, and felt that something needed to be done to help such people to enjoy good living and working conditions in their home country (Sturgis 136). In Bright’s opinion, the real problem in Ireland revolved around land ownership, and he felt that tenant farmers ought to be given a stake in the soil. Bright also recognised that the existence of an established Anglican Church in Ireland served as a lingering cause of discontent. Indeed, Bright became the first English politician of note to recommend tenant rights and long-term reform measures, by contrast with the majority of MPs who wanted to deal with the Irish famine by providing temporary relief (Ausbubel 27-28).

In the summer of 1849, when parliament went into recess, Bright travelled to Ireland, where he found that his campaign for Irish justice had won him a great deal of support and admiration. Indeed, he ended up staying for more than a month, and only eventually returned to England because his wife was due to give birth. He returned to Ireland again in 1849, and then in 1852, 1866, and 1868, and made a number of pro-Irish speeches in England, pointing out that “Ireland has had no rulers who ruled for Ireland” and asking
“Can the cats wisely and judiciously legislate for the mice?” (qtd. in Sturgis 118, Trevelyan 166-67).

Bright also felt concerned to continue the legacy of the 1832 reform act, and these twin concerns about enfranchisement and about Ireland made him well suited to Birmingham. When Bright’s high-profile stand against the Crimean war resulted in his being defeated as Manchester’s MP in 1857, the Liberals of the English midlands decided to offer him one of Birmingham’s seats and pay all of his election expenses. When his candidature was announced the Conservative candidate withdrew, leaving Bright to be elected unopposed (Trevelyan 262). He was greeted with great excitement in Birmingham, and here, in 1858, quickly set about pointing out the need for justice to Ireland and reminding the town of its radical history. He declared that the condition of Ireland gave Birmingham’s reformers “no reason to be self-satisfied and contented with our position,” and discussed reform in terms of the town’s earlier agitation: “I esteem it a great honour to be permitted to act with the inhabitants of Birmingham on that question which a quarter of a century ago they did so much to advance, and on which their potent voice is once more about to be heard” (“The Birmingham Banquet to Mr Bright” 9, “Mr Bright upon Reform” 11).

In the years before James Pearse travelled to Dublin, he saw the excitement caused in Birmingham by Bright’s election. And when James and his family arrived in Dublin in the 1860s, they would have found that, because Bright had expressed his strong feelings about Ireland for so many years, the Birmingham representative was the most admired English MP in the Irish capital. James Pearse had—either in Birmingham or Ireland—attended Bright’s meetings, and for many years remained greatly impressed by Bright’s oratory. Indeed, in the mid-1880s, James Pearse remembered hearing Bright speak in 1868 and making a “large and most touching appeal for justice to this country [Ireland]” (James Pearse “England’s Duty to Ireland” 16). If James remembered the year correctly, then he may have seen John Bright in Ireland in 1868, when the politician visited the country and addressed a public breakfast given in his honour in Limerick. It may be that James Pearse knew of this event, at which Bright declared “Ireland, like every other country in Europe, had a right to desire national independence” (“Mr John Bright MP at Limerick” 6). However, it seems likely that James Pearse, in referring to Bright’s heartfelt appeal for “justice” to Ireland may in fact be remembering a speech that Bright gave when visiting Dublin two years before the Limerick address. James Pearse may well have attended this meeting on 2 November 1866 at Dublin’s Mechanics Institute, where Bright repeated the refrain of “justice” for Ireland: reminding the audience that he supported
“complete and equal justice” and “substantial justice” for Ireland, he looked forward to the time when “justice may come,” and pledged he would continue to “stand as a friend to the most complete justice to the population of this island” (“Mr Bright in Ireland” 5).

Such a striking oratory may have been on James Pearse’s mind when he returned home and taught his young son Pádraic how to deliver speeches. At an early age, Pádraic was schooled in the skill of public oratory by his father, assisted by a magic lantern that James had purchased from a Dublin optician (James Pearse “Pearse Papers”). As Pádraic’s sister later wrote:

At least eighty slides—generally more than that!—would be shown, all dealing with many different subjects; yet for every one of them the clever boy lecturer found something worth saying. It was quite remarkable that so young a lad could have gathered such a fund of useful and reliable knowledge. The style of his compositions and the delivery of them were admirable. Father, a keen and honest critic, was always thoroughly pleased with his son’s efforts. (qtd. in Pádraic Pearse The Home Life 108)

Something of Pádraic Pearse’s initial attraction towards drama and public oratory might therefore be attributed to these sessions of coaching from his father. And Pádraic Pearse’s awareness of how speaking before a public audience might have a real political efficacy—something that we find both in his own speeches and in his playwriting—may also have been derived, albeit indirectly, from that Birmingham radical tradition.

It is clear that James Pearse had listened to John Bright on more than one occasion, as James also recalled listening to another example of Bright’s oratory:

I remember a speech made by John Bright—although I cannot call to mind the occasion, and perhaps not the exact words—he said: If it were possible to unloade [sic] Ireland from her moorings, and let her float some thousand miles away from England, the then—to us—humiliating state of that country [Ireland] could not be maintained for twenty-four hours. (James Pearse “England’s Duty to Ireland” 19)

Again, it is difficult to know exactly which speech James is referring to here, but Bright had addressed another meeting in Dublin on 30 October 1866, and on this occasion had dwelt on Ireland’s geographical position in the sea next to England. Bright had talked
about how the Irish might be “looking more to America than they are looking to England,” and described how, for an Irishman, “the aspiration of his heart reaches beyond the wide Atlantic” (“Mr Bright in Ireland” 12).

James Pearse’s admiration for Bright may also have been increased in later years by Bright’s support for the atheist MP, Charles Bradlaugh, a figure who championed a number of advanced causes such as birth control, female suffrage, and Home Rule for Ireland. In 1880 the Liberal Party split over whether Bradlaugh, who had been newly elected for Northampton, should be allowed to take his seat in parliament, as Bradlaugh led the Freethought movement, which questioned whether MPs ought to be compelled to swear allegiance to God. John Bright felt that it was ridiculous to try to exclude the elected representative—whether an atheist or not—from the House of Commons, and addressed the House to support “the freedom of the elected to sit in Parliament” (Ausubel 210). In Dublin, James Pearse admired Charles Bradlaugh, owned the MP’s biography, and seems to have maintained some degree of personal contact. In fact, James sent a letter to Bradlaugh’s daughter to enquire about her father’s health on the day of Bradlaugh’s death (Crowley 74). James might therefore have continued to approve of Bright, even if in the 1880s, Bright’s own language had started to change in relation to Ireland, denouncing Parnell’s obstructionist tactics and lambasting Gladstonian Home Rule. Bright’s language in fact started to sound more like that of his fellow Birmingham Liberal MP, Joseph Chamberlain, who was now bending Bright’s ear and redefining what “radicalism” meant in the town, ensuring that Birmingham would be “the rock upon which Home Rule was wrecked” and would elect Unionists MPs until the middle of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, in the 1880s, James Pearse in Dublin continued to remember John Bright’s earlier rhetoric, and in 1886 strove to echo Bright’s language in a pamphlet called “England’s Duty to Ireland.” James printed this 20,000-word essay in angry response to a pamphlet written by a Trinity College fellow, Thomas Maguire, who had asserted that the intelligence and wealth of Ireland resided mainly in the Protestant community, and that strong law-enforcement was needed to deal with the rest of the population (Dudley Edwards 9). In reply, James Pearse expressed Ireland’s “unalienable right to be free and self governed, which the very constitution of England sanctions, which the lives of Reformers and Patriots of all times sanctify” (Pádraic Pearse “O’Donovan Rossa” 137, James Pearse “England’s Duty to Ireland” 54). James Pearse continued:
This intense and unquenchable desire to be free, is—coupled with Catholicism—the one great trait of the Irish character. It asserts itself at all points, and at all times. The history of Ireland since its connection with England, is the history of one long struggle for “Faith and fatherland.” That struggle is not yet finished. (“England’s Duty to Ireland” 23)

Perhaps the ultimate expression of Ireland’s twin desire for freedom and Catholicism would come in the sections that Pádraic Pearse drafted of the proclamation of the Irish republic, and the assertion that Ireland strikes for her freedom “In the name of God and of the dead generations.” Yet twenty years before the Rising, James Pearse had been relying on the Birmingham radical tradition, as expressed most recently in the words of John Bright, to describe the desire for freedom as an intrinsic part of the Irish character and to assert that “the struggle is not yet finished.” If the then seventeen-year old Pádraic Pearse had heard such rhetoric at home it may well have influenced his own thinking, perhaps guiding him towards drafting his own statements about the relationship between England and Ireland.

PÁDRAIC’S THEATRICAL WORK

Of course, we know that the playhouse was one of the places where Pádraic articulated a particular nationalist vision in the lead-up to 1916. In the decade before the rebellion, he composed a number of scripts to be performed by the boys who attended the school he ran in Rathfarnham. These works tend to depict rebellion against unjust authority, conclude with the sacrificial death of the main character, and seem to connect—albeit allusively—with Pádraic Pearse’s wider preparations for the real-life Rising. Watching and acting in plays might be an unorthodox way to train for revolution, but these works formed part of a broader insurrectionary strategy, that, if looked at in the long term, did prove successful in ridding most of Ireland of British rule and providing a foundational moment for the inhabitants of the new state to remember and to celebrate.

Pádraic Pearse’s work was certainly designed to appeal to the more advanced wing of nationalist opinion when acted out in venues such as his St. Enda’s school or the Irish Theatre in Hardwicke Street, a playhouse that had been set up by his fellow rebels, Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Plunkett. Those who came to watch Pádraic Pearse’s version of The King performed in Irish in 1912 at St. Enda’s included men and
women who shared his view of education reform, and of the centrality of restoring the Irish language, whilst those who saw *The Master* at the Irish Theatre in 1915 included members of the Irish Volunteers. But Pádraic Pearse of course had little intention of initiating a more widespread reordering of society. His revolutionary colleague, James Connolly, may have seen national liberation as a necessary first step towards reconstituting Ireland along more equitable lines, but Pádraic’s reforms focussed in the main around anti-imperialism, and showed no interest in redistributing property, promoting feminism, or curtailing the power of the clergy. As Charles Townshend has written of the IRB, “It focused almost entirely on winning Irish independence and establishing a republic, which it conceived as a one-step process; it showed little attraction to the wider social reshaping that had marked the great French Revolution” (Townshend 4).

Accordingly, Pádraic Pearse’s play *The King* emphasises the importance of casting off an unjust and bloodthirsty monarch, and of valiantly fighting in a self-sacrificing way in order to achieve victory. However, the play does not advocate the abolition of the idea of kingship itself, or a reassessment of this particular monarchy, only a change in the person of the king. And the monks and their pupils at the end of the play look as though they will be carrying on with their religious duties much as they did before, declaring, “Let shouts of exultation be raised and let a canticle be sung in praise of God” (Pádraic Pearse *The King* 67). Their religious faith has not been shaken or reformed by the fact that God ordained that an innocent boy has had to die in order to win the battle. Indeed, the author evidently thought that such a storyline might even bolster Christian belief, with the play’s sacrifice evidently providing a stark reminder of the torment of Calvary.

Similarly, at the end of *The Master*, an evil monarch has been shown the error of his ways by a militaristic archangel, whilst the teacher whose Christian faith has previously been questioned and mocked by this king is now vindicated. Such a message had a parallel with the unpopular position that the advanced nationalists occupied at the start of the First World War. And Pádraic Pearse highlighted the play’s links with real life by taking members of the cast to parade with the Irish Volunteers in Limerick on the day after the performance, where they were attacked by a hostile crowd and feared being ambushed by Crown forces (Sweeney 98). However, again the conclusion of the play is socially conservative, showing that those who question Christian faith are misguided, and it idealises a monastic and patriarchal kind of society from which women are notably excluded.

The final play that Pádraic Pearse wrote before he died was never staged during his lifetime. He scripted *The Singer* in the autumn of 1915, and intended this last play to be
acted in the week before the real-life Rising by the same schoolboy cast that had previously performed in *The Master*. For the men who might be about to lose their lives in a real-life rebellion, Pádraic’s play might help to prime them for action, showing them the nobility of taking radical action against imperialism. However, any move towards articulating a radical new societal vision is once more stymied in the play, particularly when the play reinforces a very traditional Irish mother’s role, with MacDara’s mother coming to prominence through her ability to run a home, care for her sons, encourage nationalist sentiment, and mourn the death of her offspring. The mother scarcely thinks about taking action herself, or envisaging a role for herself outside of the domestic sphere. As with the two previous plays, then, Pádraic Pearse’s radicalism may not have extended to any desire for widespread societal reform, but he did articulate a radical political position, encouraging revolution in such a forthright way that both Thomas MacDonagh and William Pearse, Pádraic’s younger brother, eventually persuaded the writer that describing anti-British rebellion in such terms might well let the cat out of the bag if performed immediately before the Easter Rising, and so the first performance did not take place until after Pádraic Pearse’s death (Walsh 12).

Despite the politically revolutionary subject matter of Pádraic’s plays, then, they seem largely content with the social status quo, perhaps recalling an earlier kind of English radicalism. After all, the Liberal-radicals of the English midlands were quite clear that, although they wanted parliamentary change, they objected to any wider revolutionary sympathies becoming associated with their cause. Although the rise of the factory system in northern English regions brought conflict between employer and worker, Birmingham remained a town of small workshops where there was regular contact between small-scale employers and skilled employees, and an established pattern of inclusive agitation which drew together people of different backgrounds (Briggs 208-9). Unlike in Liverpool, this relative conservatism of Birmingham’s workers meant that reformers were not fearful of inspiring revolutionary excesses. As Richard Cobden commented, “the industry of the hardware district is carried on by small manufacturers, employing a few men and boys each, sometimes only an apprentice or two; whilst the great capitalists in Manchester form an aristocracy, individual members of which wield an influence over sometimes two thousand persons” (qtd. in Trevelyan 263). Perhaps James Pearse, one of these small Birmingham manufacturers, passed on something of this attitude of political radicalism edged with social conservatism to his son Pádraic during the final years of the nineteenth century.
JAMES’S SCULPTURAL WORK

However, it may not only have been the political message of Pádraic Pearse’s plays that was affected by his father’s thinking, but also the aesthetic way in which those ideas were expressed. After James’s death, his two Irish sons agreed to run their father’s sculpting business together under the name of “Pearse and sons,” and Pádraic took to describing himself officially as “Pádraic H. Pearse, Sculptor” (Dudley Edwards 46). However the two brothers had little business sense, and with the church-building boom having run out of steam, the brothers wound up the company in 1910 (Dudley Edwards 112).

Yet Pádraic Pearse had learned from his father the way that certain imagery could be used to inspire feelings of religious passion and devotion, and filled St Enda’s school with inspirational artworks. For example, one of Edwin Morrow’s works at the school was a panel showing Cuchulainn taking arms, framed by the hero’s famous words: “I care not though I were to live but one day and one night provided my fame and my deeds live after me” (Dudley Edwards 117). Another painter, Beatrice Elvery, described the effect that such art had upon the pupils, noting that when she met one of the schoolboys he told her that such imagery inspired him “to die for Ireland!” (Dudley Edwards 117).

In the same way, at moments in Pádraic’s playwriting, he summons up the kind of familiar ecclesiastical images fashioned by his father in stone so many times. The Singer and The King, for instance, call to mind the image of Christ hung upon the cross, whilst The Master ends with the vision of an angel “winged, and clothed in light” (Pádraic Pearse The Master 100). Indeed, the settings of Pádraic’s plays may have seemed familiar to anyone who had seen the church architecture that had been designed by his father. Pádraic’s play The King begins on “A green before the monastery,” and his play The Master demands the setting of “A little cloister in a woodland. The subdued sunlight of a forest place comes through the arches … In the centre of the cloister two or three steps lead to an inner place, as it were a little chapel or cell” (Pádraic Pearse The King 47, Pádraic Pearse The Master 83). With this latter setting, we might remember James Pearse’s familiarity with Pugin’s gothic style from Birmingham St Chad’s cathedral, where James saw the ideas that Pugin had originally learnt as a stage designer at Covent Garden. As Pugin’s biographer Rosemary Hill puts it, one of his recurring architectural themes was “The space within a space, the Picturesque ideal of revelation by partial concealment” (Hill 83). When Pádraic Pearse chose to fight at the Dublin GPO in 1916, the classical architecture was hardly reminiscent of this gothic style with
which James Pearse had been most familiar, but by directing the rebels to occupy the main building that dominated Dublin’s central thoroughway, Pádraic Pearse showed that he still maintained his father’s aesthetic sense of where onlookers might focus their attention. If Pádraic’s father had carved iconic images such as “Erin Go Breagh” and “The Marriage of the Virgin and St. Joseph” into local churches and public buildings, Pádraic knew that the stonework of the GPO’s portico would bear the memory of the Easter rebellion for many years to come (Crowley 79-80).

EASTER 1916

Finally, we should perhaps acknowledge that, although there is some debate about Pádraic Pearse’s personal capacity for violence, he did lead an armed rebellion in Dublin and his plays do repeatedly refer to violent ideas and imagery. At the end of The Master the archangel Michael appears as a “mighty warrior” and announces himself as “I am he that turneth and smiteth” (Pádraic Pearse The Master 100). In The King, Pádraic Pearse’s most bloodthirsty play-script, the boys at the start of the work shout to the army “Take victory in battle and slaying,” and the abbot praises the notion of wanting to “smite foes” or to fight “with flaming swords” (Pádraic Pearse The King 62-63). Although the hero of The Singer decides not to use his pike, even he still decides to “go into the battle with bare hands” at the conclusion of the drama (Pádraic Pearse The Singer 43).

James Pearse himself opposed political violence, and so at this point Pádraic seems to diverge from his father’s views. However, James did remain close to his brother, William Pearse, who lived at Great Russell Street in Birmingham and worked as a gun-maker, a profession that had attracted controversy in the 1860s, when police seized large quantities of ammunition and arms en route from Birmingham to the Fenians (James Pearse “Pearse Papers,” “Fenianism in Birmingham” 629). Despite James Pearse’s professed opposition to violent revolution, he held that Irishmen working in Birmingham had the right to send guns back to Ireland (“Fenianism in Birmingham” 629). He wrote “I maintain that a working man in England who sends a rifle home, to help in the work of establishing self-government; is by that much remedying the evils caused by Absenteeism” (James Pearse “England’s Duty to Ireland” 104). Such an assertion chimes quite strikingly with his son’s latter words, notoriously and unflatteringly recycled by Seán O’Casey, that “it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands” (Pádraic Pearse “The Coming Revolution” 98).
Pádraic Pearse himself wrote little about his father, perhaps worried that an admission of English ancestry might diminish the rebel’s own claim to speak for the Irish nation. James Pearse, like the fathers of Eamon de Valera and Christy Mahon, has therefore been escaped and evaded, or discussed in brief and disparaging terms. Yet to incorporate only Pádraic Pearse’s mother into the story of his life and work is to end up with a historical blind-spot, ignoring the particular kind of radical thinking that came from Pádraic’s father. After all, long before Pádraic had written any speeches, newspaper articles, or plays about Irish sovereignty, his father James Pearse had condemned the kind of peace in Ireland that was “begot of inferiority and Slavery” and looked forward instead to hearing “the free voice of a willing, and therefore a self-governed people” (James Pearse “England’s Duty to Ireland” 12). Little surprise then, that James’s son should come to advocate Ireland’s “sovereign nationhood,” and should write plays that sought to prepare the way for that independent Ireland (Pádraic Pearse “The Spiritual Nation” 320).
ENDNOTES

1 A notable exception is in the work of Brian Crowley, the curator of the Pearse Museum, who has recently written an excellent article on the way that James Pearse may have influenced Pádraic, based on detailed knowledge of James Pearse’s possessions and remarkable library, which are still held at the museum (Crowley 71-88).

2 When Pádraic later established St. Enda’s school, the printed prospectuses almost obsessively emphasised the use of this technology, repeatedly describing how lectures are “illustrated, where possible, by the Magic Lantern” (Pádraic Pearse “St Enda’s School Prospectus”).
Works Cited


“Mr Bright in Ireland.” *The Times* 3 Nov. 1866: 5.

“Mr Bright Upon Reform.” *The Times* 4 Feb. 1858: 11.


“He Calls His Dada Still”


Pearse, James, and Margaret Brady. “Correspondence between James Pearse and Margaret Brady.” MS 21082. National Library of Ireland, Dublin.


—. “St Enda’s School Prospectus.” P43. University College Dublin Archives, Dublin.


