

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Defoe Abbot Stoker Wilde Carroll Christie Maupassant Byron Molière Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Goethe Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Hall
Cotton Henry Flaubert Turgenev Balzac Willis
Baum Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Thoreau Twain Scott
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Voltaire Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Bunner Shakespeare Cooke
Hale James Hastings Richter Chambers Irving
Doré Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
Swift Dante Pushkin Alcott
Newton



tredition was established in 2006 by Sandra Latusseck and Soenke Schulz. Based in Hamburg, Germany, tredition offers publishing solutions to authors and publishing houses, combined with worldwide distribution of printed and digital book content. tredition is uniquely positioned to enable authors and publishing houses to create books on their own terms and without conventional manufacturing risks.

For more information please visit: www.tredition.com

TREDITION CLASSICS

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series. The creators of this series are united by passion for literature and driven by the intention of making all public domain books available in printed format again - worldwide. Most TREDITION CLASSICS titles have been out of print and off the bookstore shelves for decades. At tredition we believe that a great book never goes out of style and that its value is eternal. Several mostly non-profit literature projects provide content to tredition. To support their good work, tredition donates a portion of the proceeds from each sold copy. As a reader of a TREDITION CLASSICS book, you support our mission to save many of the amazing works of world literature from oblivion. See all available books at www.tredition.com.



The content for this book has been graciously provided by Project Gutenberg. Project Gutenberg is a non-profit organization founded by Michael Hart in 1971 at the University of Illinois. The mission of Project Gutenberg is simple: To encourage the creation and distribution of eBooks. Project Gutenberg is the first and largest collection of public domain eBooks.

The National Being Some Thoughts on an Irish Polity

George William Russell

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: George William Russell
Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany
ISBN: 978-3-8424-3280-2

www.tredition.com
www.tredition.de

Copyright:
The content of this book is sourced from the public domain.

The intention of the TREDITION CLASSICS series is to make world literature in the public domain available in printed format. Literary enthusiasts and organizations, such as Project Gutenberg, worldwide have scanned and digitally edited the original texts. tredition has subsequently formatted and redesigned the content into a modern reading layout. Therefore, we cannot guarantee the exact reproduction of the original format of a particular historic edition. Please also note that no modifications have been made to the spelling, therefore it may differ from the orthography used today.

THE NATIONAL BEING

Some Thoughts on an Irish Polity

By "A.E." [George William Russell]

To The Right Hon. Sir Horace Plunkett

A good many years ago you grafted a slip of poetry on your economic tree. I do not know if you expected a hybrid. This essay may not be economics in your sense of the word. It certainly is not poetry in my sense. The Marriage of Heaven and Earth was foretold by the ancient prophets. I have seen no signs of that union taking place, but I have been led to speculate how they might be brought within hailing distance of each other. In my philosophy of life, we are all responsible for the results of our actions and their effects on others. This book is a consequence of your grafting operation, and so I dedicate it to you. — A.E.

I.

In the year nineteen hundred and fourteen Anno Domini, amid a world conflict, the birth of the infant State of Ireland was announced. Almost unnoticed this birth, which in other times had been cried over the earth with rejoicings or anger. Mars, the red planet of war, was in the ascendant when it was born. Like other births famous in history, the child had to be hidden away for a time, and could not with pride be shown to the people as royal children were wont to be shown. Its enemies were unforgiving, and its friends were distracted with mighty happenings in the world. Hardly did they know whether it would not be deformed if it survived: whether this was the Promised, or another child yet to be conceived in the womb of the Mother of Parliaments. Battles were threatened between two hosts, secular champions of two spiritual traditions, to decide its fate. That such a conflict threatened showed indeed that there was something of iron fibre in the infant, without which in their make-up individuals or nations do nothing worthy of remembrance. Hercules wrestled with twin serpents in his cradle, and there were twin serpents of sectarianism ready to strangle this infant State of ours if its guardians were not watchful, or if the infant was not itself strong enough to destroy them.

It is about the State of Ireland, its character and future, I have here written some kind of imaginative meditation. The State is a physical body prepared for the incarnation of the soul of a race. The body of the national soul may be spiritual or secular, aristocratic or democratic, civil or militarist predominantly. One or other will be most powerful, and the body of the race will by reflex action affect its soul, even as through heredity the inherited tendencies and passions of the flesh affect the indwelling spirit. Our brooding over the infant State must be dual, concerned not only with the body but the soul. When we essay self-government in Ireland our first ideas will, in all probability, be borrowed from the Mother of Parliaments, just as children before they grow to have a character of their own repeat the sentiments of their parents. After a time, if there is anything in the theory of Irish nationality, we will apply original principles as

they are from time to time discovered to be fundamental in Irish character. A child in the same way makes discoveries about itself. The mood evoked by picture or poem reveals a love of beauty; the harsh treatment of an animal provokes an outburst of pity; some curiosity of nature draws forth the spirit of scientific inquiry, and so, as the incidents of life reveal the innate affinities of a child to itself, do the adventures of a nation gradually reveal to it its own character and the will which is in it.

For all our passionate discussions over self-government we have had little speculation over our own character or the nature of the civilization we wished to create for ourselves. Nations rarely, if ever, start with a complete ideal. Certainly we have no national ideals, no principles of progress peculiar to ourselves in Ireland, which are a common possession of our people. National ideals are the possession of a few people only. Yet we must spread them in wide commonalty over Ireland if we are to create a civilization worthy of our hopes and our ages of struggle and sacrifice to attain the power to build. We must spread them in wide commonalty because it is certain that democracy will prevail in Ireland. The aristocratic classes with traditions of government, the manufacturing classes with economic experience, will alike be secondary in Ireland to the small farmers and the wage-earners in the towns. We must rely on the ideas common among our people, and on their power to discern among their countrymen the aristocracy of character and intellect.

Civilizations are externalizations of the soul and character of races. They are majestic or mean according to the treasure of beauty, imagination, will, and thought laid up in the soul of the people. That great mid-European State, which while I write is at bay surrounded by enemies, did not arrive at that pitch of power which made it dominant in Europe simply by militarism. That military power depended on and was fed by a vigorous intellectual life, and the most generally diffused education and science existing perhaps in the world. The national being had been enriched by a long succession of mighty thinkers. A great subjective life and centuries of dream preceded a great objective manifestation of power and wealth. The stir in the German Empire which has agitated Europe was, at its root, the necessity laid on a powerful soul to surround itself with equal external circumstance. That necessity is laid on all

nations, on all individuals, to make their external life correspond in some measure to their internal dream. A lover of beauty will never contentedly live in a house where all things are devoid of taste. An intellectual man will loathe a disordered society.

We may say with certainty that the external circumstances of people are a measure of their inner life. Our mean and disordered little country towns in Ireland, with their drink-shops, their disregard of cleanliness or beauty, accord with the character of the civilians who inhabit them. Whenever we develop an intellectual life these things will be altered, but not in priority to the spiritual mood. House by house, village by village, the character of a civilization changes as the character of the individuals change. When we begin to build up a lofty world within the national soul, soon the country becomes beautiful and worthy of respect in its externals. That building up of the inner world we have neglected. Our excited political controversies, our playing at militarism, have tended to bring men's thoughts from central depths to surfaces. Life is drawn to its frontiers away from its spiritual base, and behind the surfaces we have little to fall back on. Few of our notorieties could be trusted to think out any economic or social problem thoroughly and efficiently. They have been engaged in passionate attempts at the readjustment of the superficialities of things. What we require more than men of action at present are scholars, economists, scientists, thinkers, educationalists, and litterateurs, who will populate the desert depths of national consciousness with real thought and turn the void into a fullness. We have few reserves of intellectual life to draw upon when we come to the mighty labor of nation-building. It will be indignantly denied, but I think it is true to say that the vast majority of people in Ireland do not know the difference between good and bad thinking, between the essential depths and the shallows in humanity. How could people, who never read anything but the newspapers, have any genuine knowledge of any subject on earth or much imagination of anything beautiful in the heavens?

What too many people in Ireland mistake for thoughts are feelings. It is enough to them to vent like or dislike, inherited prejudices or passions, and they think when they have expressed feeling they have given utterance to thought. The nature of our political controversies provoked passion, and passion has become dominant in our

politics. Passion truly is a power in humanity, but it should never enter into national policy. It is a dangerous element in human life, though it is an essential part of our strangely compounded nature. But in national life it is the most dangerous of all guides. There are springs of power in ourselves which in passion we draw on and are amazed at their depth and intensity, yet we do not make these the master light of our being, but rather those divine laws which we have apprehended and brooded upon, and which shine with clear and steady light in our souls. As creatures rise in the scale of being the dominant factor in life changes. In vegetation it may be appetite; instinct in bird and beast for man a life at once passionate and intellectual; but the greater beings, the stars and planets, must wheel in the heavens under the guidance of inexorable and inflexible law. Now the State is higher in the scale of being than the individual, and it should be dominated solely by moral and intellectual principles. These are not the outcome of passion or prejudice, but of arduous thought. National ideals must be built up with the same conscious deliberation of purpose as the architect of the Parthenon conceived its lofty harmony of shining marble lines, or as the architect of Rheims Cathedral designed its intricate magnificence and mystery. Nations which form their ideals and marry them in the hurry of passion are likely to repent without leisure, and they will not be able to divorce those ideals without prolonged domestic squabbles and public cleansing of dirty linen. If we are to build a body for the soul of Ireland it ought not to be a matter of reckless estimates or jerry-building. We have been told, during my lifetime at least, not to criticize leaders, to trust leaders, and so intellectual discussion ceased and the high principles on which national action should be based became less and less understood, less and less common possessions. The nation was not conceived of as a democracy freely discussing its laws but as a secret society with political chiefs meeting in the dark and issuing orders. No doubt our political chieftains loved their country, but love has many degrees of expression from the basest to the highest. The basest love will wreck everything, even the life of the beloved, to gratify ignoble desires. The highest love conspires with the imaginative reason to bring about every beautiful circumstance around the beloved which will permit of the highest development of its life. There is no real love apart from this intellectual brooding. Men who love Ireland ignobly

brawl about her in their cups, quarrel about her with their neighbor, allow no freedom of thought of her or service of her other than their own, take to the cudgel and the rifle, and join sectarian orders or lodges to ensure that Ireland will be made in their own ignoble image. Those who love Ireland nobly desire for her the highest of human destinies. They would ransack the ages and accumulate wisdom to make Irish life seem as noble in men's eyes as any the world has known. The better minds in every race, eliminating passion and prejudice, by the exercise of the imaginative reason have revealed to their countrymen ideals which they recognized were implicit in national character. It is such discoveries we have yet to make about ourselves to unite us to fulfill our destiny. We have to discover what is fundamental in Irish character, the affections, leanings, tendencies towards one or more of the eternal principles which have governed and inspired all great human effort, all great civilizations from the dawn of history. A nation is but a host of men united by some God-begotten mood, some hope of liberty or dream of power or beauty or justice or brotherhood, and until that master idea is manifested to us there is no shining star to guide the ship of our destinies.

Our civilization must depend on the quality of thought engendered in the national being. We have to do for Ireland—though we hope with less arrogance—what the long and illustrious line of German thinkers, scientists, poets, philosophers, and historians did for Germany, or what the poets and artists of Greece did for the Athenians: and that is, to create national ideals, which will dominate the policy of statesmen, the actions of citizens, the universities, the social organizations, the administration of State departments, and unite in one spirit urban and rural life. Unless this is done Ireland will be like Portugal, or any of the corrupt little penny-dreadful nationalities which so continually disturb the peace of the world with internal revolutions and external brawlings, and we shall only have achieved the mechanism of nationality, but the spirit will have eluded us.

What I have written hereafter on the national being, my thoughts on an Irish polity, are not to be taken as an attempt to deal with more than a few essentials. I offer it to my countrymen, to start thought and discussion upon the principles which should prevail in

an Irish civilization. If to readers in other countries the thought appears primitive or elementary, I would like them to remember that we are at the beginning of our activity as a nation, and we have yet to settle fundamentals. Races hoary with political wisdom may look with disdain on the attempts at political thinking by a new self-governing nationality, or the theories of civilization discussed about the cradle of an infant State. To childhood may be forgiven the elemental character of its thought and its idealistic imaginations. They may not persist in developed manhood; but if youth has never drawn heaven and earth together in its imaginations, manhood will ever be undistinguished. This book only begins a meditation in which, I hope, nobler imaginations and finer intellects than mine will join hereafter, and help to raise the soul of Ireland nigher to the ideal and its body nigher to its soul.

II.

The building up of a civilization is at once the noblest and the most practical of all enterprises, in which human faculties are exalted to their highest, and beauties and majesties are manifested in multitude as they are never by solitary man or by disunited peoples. In the highest civilizations the individual citizen is raised above himself and made part of a greater life, which we may call the National Being. He enters into it, and it becomes in oversoul to him, and gives to all his works a character and grandeur and a relation to the works of his fellow-citizens, so that all he does conspires with the labors of others for unity and magnificence of effect. So ancient Egypt, with its temples, sphinxes, pyramids, and symbolic decorations, seems to us as if it had been created by one grandiose imagination; for even the lesser craftsmen, working on the mummy case for the tomb, had much of the mystery and solemnity in their work which is manifest in temple and pyramid. So the city States in ancient Greece in their day were united by ideals to a harmony of art and architecture and literature. Among the Athenians at their highest the ideal of the State so wrought upon the individual that its service became the overmastering passion of life, and in that great oration of Pericles, where he told how the Athenian ideal inspired the citizens so that they gave their bodies for the commonwealth, it seems to have been conceived of as a kind of oversoul, a being made up of immortal deeds and heroic spirits, influencing the living, a life within their life, molding their spirits to its likeness. It appears almost as if in some of these ancient famous communities the national ideal became a kind of tribal deity, that began first with some great hero who died and was immortalized by the poets, and whose character, continually glorified by them, grew at last so great in song that he could not be regarded as less than a demi-god. We can see in ancient Ireland that Cuchulain, the dark sad man of the earlier tales, was rapidly becoming a divinity, a being who summed up in himself all that the bards thought noblest in the spirit of their race; and if Ireland had a happier history no doubt one generation of bardic chroniclers after another would have molded that half-mythical figure into the Irish ideal of all that was chivalrous, tender, heroic, and magnanimous, and it would have been a star to youth,

and the thought of it a staff to the very noblest. Even as Cuchulain alone at the ford held it against a host, so the ideal would have upheld the national soul in its darkest hours, and stood in many a lonely place in the heart. The national soul in a theocratic State is a god; in an aristocratic age it assumes the character of a hero; and in a democracy it becomes a multitudinous being, definite in character if the democracy is a real social organism. But where the democracy is only loosely held together by the social order, the national being is vague in character, is a mood too feeble to inspire large masses of men to high policies in times of peace, and in times of war it communicates frenzy, panic, and delirium.

None of our modern States create in us such an impression of being spiritually oversouled by an ideal as the great States of the ancient world. The leaders of nations too have lost that divine air that many leaders of men wore in the past, and which made the populace regard them as divine incarnations. It is difficult to know to what to attribute this degeneration. Perhaps the artists who create ideals are to blame. In ancient Ireland, in Greece, and in India, the poets wrote about great kings and heroes, enlarging on their fortitude of spirit, their chivalry and generosity, creating in the popular mind an ideal of what a great man was like; and men were influenced by the ideal created, and strove to win the praise of the bards and to be recrowned by them a second time in great poetry. So we had Cuchulain and Oscar in Ireland; Hector of Troy, Theseus in Greece; Yudisthira, Rama, and Arjuna in India, all bard-created heroes molding the minds of men to their image. It is the great defect of our modern literature that it creates few such types. How hardly could one of our modern public men be made the hero of an epic. It would be difficult to find one who could be the subject of a genuine lyric. Whitman, himself the most democratic poet of the modern world, felt this deficiency in the literature of the later democracies, and lamented the absence of great heroic figures. The poets have dropped out of the divine procession, and sing a solitary song. They inspire nobody to be great, and failing any finger-post in literature pointing to true greatness our democracies too often take the huckster from his stall, the drunkard from his pot, the lawyer from his court, and the company promoter from the director's chair, and elect them as representative men. We certainly do this in Ire-

land. It is—how many hundred years since greatness guided us? In Ireland our history begins with the most ancient of any in a mythical era when earth mingled with heaven. The gods departed, the half-gods also, hero and saint after that, and we have dwindled down to a petty peasant nationality, rural and urban life alike mean in their externals. Yet the cavalcade, for all its tattered habiliments, has not lost spiritual dignity. There is still some incorruptible spiritual atom in our people. We are still in some relation to the divine order; and while that uncorrupted spiritual atom still remains all things are possible if by some inspiration there could be revealed to us a way back or forward to greatness, an Irish polity in accord with national character.

III.

In formulating an Irish polity we have to take into account the change in world conditions. A theocratic State we shall have no more. Every nation, and our own along with them, is now made up of varied sects, and the practical dominance of one religious idea would let loose illimitable passions, the most intense the human spirit can feel. The way out of the theocratic State was by the drawn sword and was lit by the martyr's fires. The way back is unthinkable for all Protestant fears or Catholic aspirations. Aristocracies, too, become impossible as rulers. The aristocracy of character and intellect we may hope shall finally lead us, but no aristocracy so by birth will renew its authority over us. The character of great historic personages is gradually reflected in the mass. The divine right of kings is followed by the idea of the divine right of the people, and democracies finally become ungovernable save by themselves. They have seen and heard too much of pride and greatness not to have become, in some measure, proud and defiant of all authority except their own. It may be said the history of democracies is not one to fill us with confidence, but the truth is the world has yet to see the democratic State, and of the yet untried we may think with hope. Beneath the Athenian and other ancient democratic States lay a substratum of humanity in slavery, and the culture, beauty, and bravery of these extraordinary peoples were made possible by the workers in an underworld who had no part in the bright civic life.

We have no more a real democracy in the world today. Democracy in politics has in no country led to democracy in its economic life. We still have autocracy in industry as firmly seated on its throne as theocratic king ruling in the name of a god, or aristocracy ruling by military power; and the forces represented by these twain, superseded by the autocrats of industry, have become the allies of the power which took their place of pride. Religion and rank, whether content or not with the subsidiary place they now occupy, are most often courtiers of Mammon and support him on his throne. For all the talk about democracy our social order is truly little more democratic than Rome was under the Caesars, and our new rulers have not, with all their wealth, created a beauty which we could imagine after-generations brooding over with uplifted heart.

The people in theocratic States like Egypt or Chaldea, ruled in the name of gods, saw rising out of the plains in which they lived an architecture so mysterious and awe-inspiring that they might well believe the master-minds who designed the temples were inspired from the Oversoul. The aristocratic States reflected the love of beauty which is associated with aristocracies. The oligarchies of wealth in our time, who have no divine sanction to give dignity to their rule nor traditions of lordly life like the aristocracies, have not in our day created beauty in the world. But whatever of worth the ancient systems produced was not good enough to make permanent their social order. Their civilizations, like ours, were built on the unstable basis of a vast working-class with no real share in the wealth and grandeur it helped to create. The character of his kingdom was revealed in dream to Nebuchadnezzar by an image with a golden head and feet of clay, and that image might stand as symbol of the empires the world has known. There is in all a vast population living in an underworld of labor whose freedom to vote confers on them no real power, and who are most often scorned and neglected by those who profit by their labors. Indifference turns to fear and hatred if labor organizes and gathers power, or makes one motion of its myriad hands towards the sceptre held by the autocrats of industry. When this class is maddened and revolts, civilization shakes and totters like cities when the earthquake stirs beneath their foundations. Can we master these arcane human forces? Can we, by any device, draw this submerged humanity into the light and make them real partners in the social order, not partners merely in the political life of the nation, but, what is of more importance, in its economic life? If we build our civilization without integrating labor into its economic structure, it will wreck that civilization, and it will do that more swiftly today than two thousand years ago, because there is no longer the disparity of culture between high and low which existed in past centuries. The son of the artisan, if he cares to read, may become almost as fully master of the wisdom of Plato or Aristotle as if he had been at a university. Emerson will speak to him of his divinity; Whitman, drunken with the sun, will chant to him of his inheritance of the earth. He is elevated by the poets and instructed by the economists. But there are not thrones enough for all who are made wise in our social order, and failing even to serve in the social heaven these men will spread revolt and

reign in the social hell. They are becoming too many for higher places to be found for them in the national economy. They are increasing to a multitude which must be considered, and the framers of a national polity must devise a life for them where their new-found dignity of spirit will not be abased. Men no more will be content under rulers of industry they do not elect themselves than they were under political rulers claiming their obedience in the name of God. They will not for long labor in industries where they have no power to fix the conditions of their employment, as they were not content with a political system which allowed them no power to control legislation. Ireland must begin its imaginative reconstruction of a civilization by first considering that type which, in the earlier civilizations of the world, has been slave, serf, or servile, working either on land or at industry, and must construct with reference to it. These workers must be the central figures, and how their material, intellectual, and spiritual needs are met must be the test of value of the social order we evolve.

