‘There are compensations in the congested districts for their poverty’: Æ and the idealized peasant of the agricultural co-operative movement

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The mentality of the Anglo-Irish involved in the cultural revival at the turn of the century has, for the most part, been culled from an analysis of the literary works produced. This essay proposes to widen the context by examining aspects of the mentality of Æ in the *Irish Homestead*, the organ of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, which he edited from 1905 to 1923 and from 1923 to 1930, when it was subsumed into the *Irish Statesman*. The *Irish Homestead* is very much a paper of the cultural revival. All the major concerns of the revival, notably the antagonism between Irish spirituality and English materialism, the use of ancient Ireland as a cultural tool, and the creation of a peasantry, are present in its volumes. The Anglo-Irish concern to regain leadership in a changing social, economic and political environment is also evident as a continuous sub-text of the paper. An analysis of the *Irish Homestead* as a cultural revival text, a context hitherto ignored, is vital. Such an analysis provides insight into the links between the revival and the journalism produced during the period and the connections between the revival and contemporary social and economic movements such as that of agricultural co-operation. This essay will focus on the idealized nature of the peasantry to be found in the writings of Æ in the *Irish Homestead*. A close reading of these writings reveals that Æ ‘created’ a peasantry that favoured the small farmer whom he saw as more amenable to leadership from a newly regenerated Anglo-Irish ‘aristocracy’ of intellect and character. Æ’s idealization of the lifestyle of the small farmer in his co-operative writings placed him firmly within the context of the cultural revival and indicates that the historian of the revival must look further than the purely literary texts if the movement is to be understood in all its facets.

The contrast between the depictions of the Irish peasantry in the works of George Moore and J.M. Synge offers a reminder that there was not one image

1 See ‘Thinking in a vacuum’, *Irish Homestead*, 21 Apr. 1917, p. 286, where Æ defined that section of rural society which the IAOS was most concerned to aid: ‘we mean that most numerous class whose holdings are twenty acres or thereabouts, going as low as five or seven acres, or rising to thirty or thirty-five acres …’
of the peasant created by the revival. There were several; however, each of these images reflects different social and political concerns of the creator rather than any reality. F.S.L. Lyons claims that Synge did not idealize the Irish peasant but rather, ‘they were earthy men and women, differing from their kind elsewhere only in the beauty of the language Synge put into their mouths’. Many of Synge’s descriptions of the Irish peasantry, however, did attribute a dignity to their lifestyle. In the words of Seamus Deane, it is a peasantry ‘blessed by refinement’, which was a characteristic feature of romantic Anglo-Irish writing since Samuel Ferguson. According to Declan Kiberd, in The Aran Islands, Synge locates among the poor the values and attributes of a lost Gaelic aristocracy. One can, however, contrast Synge’s dignified description of the Irish peasantry with depictions of the peasantry in the work of George Moore. As a Catholic landlord, Moore’s concern was to maintain a barrier between himself and the Catholic peasant by stressing what divided them, that is, the peasant’s poverty, lack of education, backwardness, and inhumanity. This is exemplified in Moore’s The Untilled Field:

And when he caught sight of the priest he stuck his spade in the ground and came to meet him, almost as naked as an animal, bare feet protruding from ragged trousers; there was a shirt, but it was buttonless, and the breast-hair trembled in the wind – a likely creature to come out of the hovel behind him.

This essay will add Æ’s ‘created’ peasant to the revival list. What is interesting about Æ in this context is that his peasant was ‘created’ in the context of journalistic as much as in fictional writing. An analysis of Æ’s ‘created’ peasant in the Irish Homestead necessitates in turn a reassessment of the canon of cultural revival texts.

The Irish Homestead was a paper that went out weekly for over twenty years to the farming community throughout Ireland. As such, it had a wider audience for its revival ideologies than the fictional work of other revivalists, such as Synge or Yeats. Furthermore, Æ’s attempts to disperse the dogmas of the revival in a self-help paper for farmers was a much more subversive project than the literary designs of Yeats and the other revival leaders. Poetry and drama inhabited

the realm of fiction after all and could be dismissed by those who desired to repudiate the revival leaders. From this perspective, the *Irish Homestead* was a much more subversive revival text and needs to be recognised as such.

The *Irish Homestead* did include literary contributions, such as Joyce's first short story, 'The Sisters', which was published in 1904; however, this sort of contribution was usually included in the end sections. A cursory reading may indicate that the paper expressed a disinterested concern to extricate the farmer from unscrupulous moneylenders and to guide the rural small holder towards better business and marketing methods. That the journal was perceived as a farmer's journal is reflected in the fact that Joyce employed the name 'Stephen Daedalus' to cope with his shame at appearing in the 'pig's paper'.

A closer reading of the *Irish Homestead*, however, shows an implicit connection between the programme of the Irish cultural revival and the sentiments expressed, often as a subtext. Although precise circulation figures for the paper are irretrievable, the subscriptions taken by the co-operative societies throughout the country indicates a wide scale circulation of *Æ*’s views and among an audience who arguably might not have been immediately attracted to the literary productions of the revival. The impression of the paper as one concerned with explaining the merits of agricultural co-operation allowed *Æ* to transmit values of the cultural revival to an audience who might not have engaged otherwise in the cultural debates of an urban intellectual minority. The *Irish Homestead* thus had a potentially diverse appeal. For example, it appealed both to those who were interested in co-operative farming and who embraced the ethos of the cultural revival. Concurrently, it also appealed to whose who were attracted to the political and economic philosophies advocated by individuals such as *Æ* and Horace Plunkett who sought to transcend what they viewed as the narrow commitment to parliamentary-style politics.

The opinions *Æ* enunciated and the attitudes he expressed in his role of editor of the *Irish Homestead* have to be viewed in the context of social, economic and political change in Ireland at the time. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a new rural elite had emerged in Irish society. Made up of large farmers, shopkeepers, merchants, and professional men, this elite was the result of the post-Famine social, economic and political transformation of Ireland. Despite *Æ*’s theosophical concern to promote the brotherhood of man, he was primarily concerned to better the life of the small farmer. An examination of his editorials and weekly notes in the *Irish Homestead* shows him to be opposed to the larger farmer whom he viewed negatively as a member of the rising middle-class in early twentieth-century Ireland.

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8 *Æ* attended meetings of the Dublin lodge of the Theosophical Society from
of the *Irish Homestead*, the large farmer was described negatively and abusively. Along with the gombeenman, he was presented as the source of ill in the Irish countryside. AE’s focus on the small farmer, his obvious dislike of the large farmer, and his furious and sustained attacks on the gombeenman indicated his discomfort with, and dislike of, the new configuration of social, economic and political power in early twentieth-century Ireland. Throughout his writings, AE stressed the uncultured aspects of the Irish middle-class, often contrasting their lack of cultural achievement with the glory of the Anglo-Irish contribution to Irish literature and the arts in general.

The co-operative values preached by AE in the *Irish Homestead* were, therefore, an attempt to grapple with social change. Far from a utilitarian self-aid paper for farmers concerned with tillage farming and pig rearing, the sub-text of the *Irish Homestead* was an idealistic attempt to halt the full effects of mass democracy in Irish society and retain a leadership role for the Anglo-Irish. AE believed that it was possible to diminish the impact of what he saw as the vulgar Catholic bourgeois class in Irish society. From his perspective, it was a class that preferred ‘the decorations in a gaudy public house to a poem in stone by Lutyens’. This statement was made in reference to the failure of the Dublin municipality to finance the building of an art gallery to house Hugh Lane’s proposed gift of impressionist paintings to the city. AE desired to create an affiliation between the early 1888, perhaps joining the society in late 1888 or early 1889. However, as his letters to his childhood friend Carrie Rea indicate he was well verse in the tenets of the Society at least as early as 1887. Although AE broke formally with the Society in 1898, its tenets were the fundamental beliefs that informed his actions in the IAOS; although the Theosophist had an other-world focus; his commitment to social reform and the improvement of the present life was central to preparation for his next reincarnation.

9 See ‘Large and small farmers’, *Irish Homestead*, 29 Dec. 1905; ‘Templecrome a record of co-operative activity’, *Irish Homestead*, 11 Nov. 1916; ‘The membership of agricultural banks’, *Irish Homestead*, 14 Oct. 1905. In the latter AE wrote: ‘If the Book of Life, out of which they will be judged hereafter, turns out to be the hearts of their neighbours whom they have helped or neglected there will be pretty barren records for some big farmers in Ireland.’ 10 For AE’s opposition to the gombeenman, see: ‘The case for agricultural co-operation’, *Irish Homestead*, 27 Apr. 1912; G.W. Russell, *Co-operation and nationality: a guide for rural reformers from this to the next generation*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1982), p. 13. In the latter work, AE wrote of ‘swollen gombeenmen straddling right across whole parishes, sucking up like a sponge all the wealth in the district’. 11 See ‘Old traditions and the new era’, *Irish Statesman*, 3 Jan. 1925, pp 522–3, where AE wrote: ‘if the Anglo-Irish tradition is repudiated, Ireland becomes a country populated by nonentities’. Certainly, coming from a middle-class, even lower-middle class family, AE cannot be fitted into the classic Protestant Ascendancy mould. However, for AE, as indeed for the middle-class Yeats, ‘Anglo-Irish’ was a state of mind as much as a description of class. Throughout his life, AE saw no contradiction between his scathing attacks on middle-class lack of culture, the result, as he saw it, of their commercial and materialistic values, and his own position as a member of that middle-class. 12 ‘The practical business man in Ireland,’ *Irish Homestead*, 6 Sept. 1913 in Henry Summerfield (ed.), *Selections from the contributions to the Irish Homestead by G.W. Russell – AE*, vol. 1 (Gerrards Cross, Bucks.: Smythe, 1978), p. 371.
Anglo-Irish and the smaller farmers. From his point of view, the small farmers would be released by agricultural co-operation from debt bondage to the Irish gombeenman, who represented the rise of the new materialistic middle-class in Irish society. Recreated as an aristocracy of intellect and character, the Anglo-Irish would establish themselves as the leaders of rural Ireland that would be newly reconstructed through agricultural co-operation.

In 1908, Plunkett published ‘Noblesse Oblige, an Irish Rendering’, which appealed to the landlords of Ireland to use their superior education and character to work for the future social and economic betterment of Irish society and thereby would ensure their place in that future society. In the editorial of the 1 February 1908 issue of the *Irish Homestead*, Æ ringingly endorsed the sentiments expressed in the pamphlet, sentiments he himself expressed and enlarged on repeatedly in his co-operative writings. In the past, Æ argued for Irish farmers to follow whoever helped them in the land struggle. In future, he declared that support would be granted to whoever helped in solving the problems of the small proprietor.

One finds in the *Irish Homestead* a focus on agricultural occupations suited to the small farmer and agricultural labourer, for example, horticultural, bee keeping and poultry societies. In July 1908, Æ waxed eloquently on the ‘variety of vegetables that can be got out of a very small plot’ and went on to declare that with ‘an acre to cultivate, no one should be able to complain of want of proper variety at their meals’.

In April 1906, discussing the Munster–Connaught Agricultural Exhibition, which was to take place in July, he focused on the Home Life and Home Industries Section. Here, he declared, ‘will be model labourers’ cottages, with demonstrations in household management; a small farmer’s house, with model furniture and demonstrations of domestic economy in keeping with the small farmer’s means’. The ‘Household Hints’ section of the paper similarly had a bias towards providing information for the less well off members of rural society. The 18 March 1905 edition included a piece entitled ‘Plain Fare Made Palatable’ that was intended to help the country housewife or cottager to provide for her family ‘a variety of palatable dishes composed from the ordinary materials to be found in the majority of even modest households’.

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13 Many contemporaries, of course, would have characterized the small farmer as part of the lower middle-class elite created by peasant proprietorship; Æ’s refusal to accord the small farmer this middle class status was itself part of his ideology. 14 ‘The future of the Irish aristocracy,’ *Irish Homestead*, 1 Feb. 1908, pp 81–2. Also, see: ‘The resignation of Lord Monteagle,’ *Irish Homestead*, 28 Oct. 1905, p. 782. In this article, Æ praised Monteagle’s performance as president of the IAOS and lauded him as one who brought to his public and philanthropic work ‘the motto of his class, “Noblesse oblige”’. 15 See ‘Poultry societies,’ *Irish Homestead*, 16 Apr. 1910, p. 310. In this instance, Æ lauded poultry and eggs as ‘the great industries of the small farmer and cottagers.’ 16 ‘Labourers plots,’ *Irish Homestead*, 18 July 1908, in Summerfield (ed.), *Selections*, vol. i, p. 154. 17 ‘At the roots of nationality,’ *Irish Homestead*, 14 Apr. 1906, p. 282. 18 M.T.W., ‘Plain fare made palatable,’ *Irish Homestead*, 18 Mar. 1905, p. 218.
Clearly, one would expect to find the above sentiments reiterating the benefits of agricultural co-operation for the small farmer in a paper such as the Irish Homestead; large farmers stood to gain no advantage from such co-operation.\(^9\) While this has to be recognized, AE’s concern to promote the well-being of the small farmer over his larger neighbour goes further than simply a rational understanding of how co-operation benefited the small rather than the larger farmer.

AE’s call to the Irish landlord class to work to better the future of Irish society drew on his belief in the merits of a hierarchical past. This past was underpinned by notions of reciprocal duties and rights between classes, where social relations were mediated through patronage and were premised on the concept of a moral economy.\(^{20}\) Co-operation ensured a leadership role for the Anglo-Irish in the new Ireland. As early as 1899, AE wrote that co-operation brought to the ‘assistance of the simplest and poorest the intelligence and wealth of the rich and better educated, and yet without weakening the poorest members’ feeling of self-respect’.\(^{21}\)

Agricultural co-operation, as AE promoted it, was designed at one level to create an alliance between the small farmer and the Anglo-Irish to ensure that the new rising class of shopkeepers and publicans were unable to gain an ascendancy in Irish life. By promoting an organized rural life through agricultural co-operation where the small farmer was led by a newly renovated Anglo-Irish ascendancy of culture and intellect, the nefarious influence of the gombeenman could be contained. The small farmer, less implicated in the commercial, modernizing world than his larger neighbour, was according to AE’s scheme, more amenable to Anglo-Irish leadership.\(^{22}\) In 1906, he wrote that the rural district:

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\(^{20}\) The United Irishwomen, affiliated with the IAOS in 1910, would, he believed, foster a return to the social harmony of a bygone age, ‘just as the aristocrat of three hundred years ago dined with all his retainers ... the chief at the top of the hall and the swineherd at the bottom, but all happy and social ...’ ‘The pleasures of eating’, Irish Homestead, 15 Jan. 1910, p. 43.  
\(^{22}\) See Liam Kennedy, ‘Traders and agricultural politics in pre-independent Ireland’, in S. Clark and J. Donnelly (eds), Irish peasants: violence and political unrest, 1780–1914 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), p. 347. Kennedy discusses how shopkeeper-graziers and other graziers improved their position in society at the expense of the rural smallholder and restricted the latter’s attempts to achieve economic viability. David Jones also discusses how shopkeeper-graziers often improved their position at the expense of smaller farmers in the district by taking advantage of landlord facilitated free sale to increase their pasture acreage. See David Jones, ‘The cleavage between graziers and peasants in the land struggle, 1890–1910’, in Clark and Donnelly (eds), Irish peasants, pp 404–5. Frank Callanan contends that during the split in the Irish Parliamentary Party, 1890–1891, ‘the ascendancy of anti-Parnellism in rural Ireland was a function of the political and social transformations wrought in the previous decade’. The barony of Tírínche in the west of Co. Sligo, a region ‘deemed socially backward and politically undeveloped’, produced a high Parnellite vote by contrast with the rest of the constituency during the 1891 Sligo bye-elections.
affords the greatest opportunity to the man who wishes to make his mark. It is here that the people are the most backward and most teachable. We can imagine no more splendid ideal for a man to have than when he says to himself, ‘there are six hundred families in this parish were Providence has placed me. They are poor, badly housed, badly fed, badly educated. They are centuries behind other countries. I will read and study what has been done elsewhere that I may know how to help them.’

Æ’s concern to promote the well-being of the small farmer through agricultural co-operation had its literary manifestation in his creation of an Irish peasant, a creation which can be seen not just in his poetry and fictional work but also in the Irish Homestead. These ‘created’ peasants were small holders, primitive and backward in the material needs of the life. Concurrently, they possessed an innate dignity and willingness to be lead into the joys of an idealized rural way of life that bore little resemblance to the realities of commercial farming in Ireland.

Certainly, Æ’s concern to distinguish between the small and the large farmer mirrored the reality of the divisions within the farming community. A cleavage between small farmers and the growing class of graziers existed as a continual point of tension within the United Irish League in the early twentieth century and came to the surface in the ranch war of 1906–1908. On that basis, Æ’s isolation of the small farming class as a specific interest group in Irish society was rooted in a certain reality, but his vision of the Irish peasant was also highly ideological. His descriptions of the rural life that the small farmer ought to strive for were, in many cases, literary constructs designed to act as a counter to what he saw as the materialism of Catholic bourgeois Ireland. ‘There is no more ideal life than the farmer’s,’ he wrote in 1899:

no life which contains more elements of joy, mystery and beauty. He has always the scent of the earth in his nostrils, pure air and the perpetual election. See Frank Callanan, The Parnell split, 1890–1891 (Cork: Cork UP, 1992), pp 113–14.

Æ’s focus on the smaller farmer and the inhabitants of the backward rural districts of the western seaboard was consistent with his desire to circumvent and contain the full scale consequence of social and political change in late nineteenth-century Ireland. 23 ‘Local Organisation,’ Irish Homestead, 7 Apr. 1906, p. 262. 24 David Jones contends that by 1900, ‘commercial production and a monetized economy were clearly evident even in the remote and infertile areas of the west.’ Jones, ‘The cleavage between graziers and peasants,’ p. 374. 25 Paul Bew, Conflict and conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 8. 26 In 1897, Æ issued two pamphlet invectives against the despotism of Irish Catholicism: ‘The awakening of the fires’ and ‘Ideals in Ireland: Priest or hero,’ both first published in the Irish Theosophist, Jan.–Feb. 1897 and Apr.–May 1897 respectively. Æ’s attitudes towards the religions of the ‘grocer and the counting house’ grew more strident as he got older. Talking the side of the workers in the 1913 strike and lockout he saw himself in opposition to the Catholic church. See Russell to Charles Weckes, [4 Nov. 1913], P 8389, NLI.
wonder of growing things. And it is so easy to make an earthy paradise around every cabin. A few lilac bushes, roses, creepers, a little paint on fences and on door and window and a pot of creamy whitewash over the walls, will make a home to allure the might ones of the earth from the palaces.\footnote{27}

This idealized rural life was always throughout the co-operative writings of \(\text{Æ}\) the alternative to the social and economic climate produced by gombeenism. Country towns, dominated by the activities of the gombeenman, he argued in *The National Being*, 'produce nothing and are mere social parasites;' creating no productive wealth, generating no civic virtues or intellectual life, such country towns were 'excrences on the face of nature.'\footnote{28}

In 1912, \(\text{Æ}\) announced his belief after a holiday in the west of Ireland that:

the west Irish country folk are on the whole the happiest and most contented he has ever met or heard of. None of the political storms which are convulsing Ireland elsewhere had come near that quiet mountainy land. Even on the great question of the day he heard no more pronounced opinion than the oracular statement: 'If Home Rule be a good thing let it come. If it be not a good thing let it not come.'\footnote{29}

Indeed, \(\text{Æ}\) described himself, on holidays in Donegal, as staying at a small farmhouse using the quote 'a high windy place among distant hills,' which Summerfield suggests is misquoted from Synge's, *The Playboy of the Western World.*\footnote{30}

This attempt to quote Synge suggests that \(\text{Æ}\) saw himself belonging with those within the Irish literary revival who idealized the Irish peasant class. Such idealization refused to credit the peasantry with material desires such as those evidenced by the growing Irish bourgeois classes. This attitude is highlighted strongly in \(\text{Æ}'s\) *Irish Homestead* editorial of 14 May 1910, where he wrote:

the most interesting part of Ireland is the congested districts. There are compensations in the congested districts for their poverty. They are rich in human nature. We are reminded too, that the small farmer in the West of Ireland has the most imaginative, picturesque and literary speech in the world ... But the congested districts have out of their poverty developed something better than rich speech. They have developed, as all poor communities do, a rich humanity. The organisers of the IAOS find the best material for true co-operation in these poverty-stricken communi-

ties ... In other parts of Ireland we organise industries more than men. In the West we organise the kindly, loyal, human feelings of the people.  

The editorial continued by arguing that a great responsibility rested with the members of the new Congested Districts Board because they had the power 'to fix the new social order.'  

AE's concern was to ensure that the Congested Districts Board in its attempts to better the material situation of the people did not in the process destroy what he considered their finer human qualities. In this context, he believed that people in these areas had to be weaned away from reliance on state aid and had to be educated towards self-help.

AE's concern for preserving the finer human qualities of the people of the west of Ireland bordered on patronizing. In the west of the country, the reality of life for many farmers was emigration. Donald Jordan's discussion of the ultimate failure to provide relief for the small farmers of Co. Mayo highlights the dismal realities of life on the land in one area on the western seaboard. Although following the Famine, small farmers broadened their economic activities to enter the cash market, Jordan contends that they still subsisted for the most part on the potato. The threat of famine was therefore always a reality for the small farmers of Co. Mayo, especially in the peripheral areas where the land was unsuitable for crops other than the potato.

Arguably for AE to talk about the finer qualities of humanity in the face of such poverty and economically forced emigration was condescending and cavalier. His remarks must be seen in the context of his literary image of rural simplicity. Discussing the 'Back to the Land' movement in England, Alun Howkins writes that the:

notion of returning to a purer, better and more natural life, was, of course not new. 'Agrarianism,' the idea of small producer units supported by some form of co-operation or communal production was a powerful part of English radical thought throughout the nineteenth century.'

Howkins contends that those who moved back to the countryside were 'not simply leaving a crowded or unsanitary urban area they were going to a rural

myth which they were creating. Central to that myth were ideas of a ‘natural’ or ‘organic’ social order and society.Æ’s vision of a small peasantry whose finer human qualities count for more than mere material concerns clearly has to be seen in this context of a created rural myth.

Æ’s engagement in the late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century pastoral versus tillage debate was on a cultural as well as an economic level. In very literary terms, he asserted that tillage farming produced a more noble human being than did pastoral farming:

A man ought to know how to dig as well as write. He ought to be able to read the seasons as well as to read books. In short he ought to be able to drag from the earth her produce as well as cram his mind with the thoughts of others. Those of us who have engaged in digging know how well it stimulates our thinking power and nothing is better calculated to enable a man to concentrate his thoughts than ploughing ...

... But, of course, it is the hard work which is entailed by agriculture that the most valuable education lies. The man who tills is, in my opinion, much more superior in moral qualities to the man who is content with grazing ...

Æ presented an image of rural life based on tillage farming which was arduous in its workload, modest, if adequate, in its material returns, but rich for its participants in nobility of life and inner strength of character.

This idyllic view of rural life was, of course, not unique to Æ or even to Irish rural commentators. Parallels can be made between his rural discourse and a tradition of English observers who created an idealized image of English rural life that was disconnected from the actual transforming fact of the historical moment. Such parallels reinforce the argument that Æ’s vision was highly ideological. William Morris wrote that there are ‘few men ... who would not wish to spend part of their lives in the most necessary and pleasantest of all work – cultivating the earth.’ Similarly, Æ presented in the volumes of the Irish Homestead a liter-

36 Alun Howkins, Reshaping rural England: a social history, 1850–1925 (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 225 and p. 231. 37 During the first decade of the twentieth century, Æ was writing in the context of the sustained tension between ranchers or graziers and the small farmer. This conflict erupted in the 1880s during the land war and reached a height following the 1903 Land Act. Between 1906 and 1909, the conflict was so extreme that it was known as the ranch war. The rancher was able to acquire large areas of pasture at the expense of the smaller farmers, particularly among the impoverished small holders of the west of Ireland. Jones, ‘The cleavage between graziers and peasants’, pp 381–2; Jordan, Land and popular politics in Ireland, p. 7. 38 ‘Agriculture in education.’ Irish Homestead, 29 Dec. 1905, p. 934. 39 See Raymond Williams, The country and the city (London: Paladin, 1975). 40 William Morris, ‘Useful work versus useless toil,’ Asa Briggs (ed.), William Morris: Selected writings and designs (London: Penguin, 1977), pp 129–30.
ary image of Irish rural life where his concern was to foster a cultural dimension to rural life. ‘We hope,’ he wrote in 1908:

in the next generation the then editor of the Homestead will find it possible, to print along with instructions of what seeds should be sown in the earth, the songs which the farmer might sing at his work. We have been in every country in Ireland and we never heard a song in the fields, or any suggestion of cheerfulness or lightheartedness in labour … Song and labour, the soul and the body, are far apart in Ireland; but they may be brought closer, and a more lighthearted life be possible, if we can get our rural population educated to work more together, to be more social and to realise what they came to earth for, to live together and work together … 41

Of course, Æ himself never engaged in manual labour, and here he exemplifies what Newby and other writes on the English rural tradition have identified as the ‘refusal to recognize the problem of rural poverty in the midst of this splendidly bucolic existence [the rural idyll].’ 42 With a similar lack of true knowledge as to the hardships of rural labour, Æ praised the United Irishwomen’s advocacy of gymnasiums for girls as well as boys and wrote:

Little girls who have learned in the gymnasium how to use their limbs properly will not let themselves grow into despairing drudges bound down under a yoke that is too heavy. If they have to carry weights or do field work or, what may also be very laborious, heavy housecleaning and arranging, they will bring to it a science that will make it a delight at times and never a drudgery … 43

41 ‘Watertight compartments for ideals and actualities’, Irish Homestead, 2 May 1908, in Summerfield (ed.), Selections, vol. 1, p. 145. Also, see: ‘Singing and working,’ Irish Homestead, 25 Nov. 1905, p. 865. In this article, Æ similarly argued for the necessity for song at work: ‘We should have milking songs and a list for the carts bringing the milk, and a song when the milk is being separated, and a song for the dairymaid and one for the engine man.’ 42 Howard Newby, The deferential worker: a study of farm workers in East Anglia (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 12. Brian Short writes of the belief that to be truly English at the start of the twentieth century was to be rural. ‘But … “rural” did not mean rural people, and especially not poor rural people, who might not fit the stereotypes of poverty by living in picturesque cottages. The countryside was made by working people, but the rural idyll of pastoral from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, itself an urban product, has largely banished them from the scene. The image was that of an outsider, often looking with a “tourist gaze” and seeking the landscape from a distance, not in detail, and not encompassing all its occupants.’ Brian Short, ‘Images and realities in the English rural community: an introduction,’ in his The English rural community: image and analysis, pp 2–3. 43 ‘Bessie Bobtail’, Irish Homestead, 15 Apr. 1911, pp 288–9.
Æ’s portrayal of the farmer who sings at his work or the girl who transforms her heavy field work into a delight exemplified those rural workers for whom, in the words of Howard Newby, ‘metaphysical rewards have been deemed to be adequate compensation for ... [their] labour’.44 The picture of a rural organic community presented by Æ is an example of the idealized portrayal of rural life that Newby identifies in the English rural tradition.45 Roy Foster contends that when Yeats stressed the need for Ireland ‘to become a country where, if there are few rich there shall be few very poor,’ he anticipated the anti-materialistic image of Ireland that prevailed under de Valera in the 1930s and 1940s.46 In the Irish Homestead, Æ himself referenced with approval this remark by Yeats, indicating clearly that his held the same ideal of rural adequacy and simplicity:

We believe that we are going, perhaps first of all races in Europe, to have a real democracy, that is, a co-operative union of the inhabitants of the country with the ideal once stated by Mr Yeats, of a country where if nobody will be very rich nobody will be very poor, and our collective efforts will conduce to the happiness and well-being of the average man, and we will not be mere intellectual hewers of wood and drawers of water to enrich the holders of shares in great companies.47

Indeed, de Valera’s often quoted and by now clichéd speech envisioning a countryside populated by athletic youths and comely women was pre-empted some three decades earlier by Æ. Again, one is looking at a literary image of rural simplicity:

A fine life is possible for humanity working on the land, bronzed by the sun and wind, living close to nature, which bring about essential depth and a noble simplicity of character ... We will move a hundred times more rapidly to national prosperity and happiness if we try to make our civilisation more predominately rural. There will be a better race in Ireland, stronger men and comlier women, and we will be less subject to the shock by the tidal ebb and flow of the industrial world, with its slumps in trade, its feverish and transient prosperities ...48

Similarly, in Co-operation and Nationality, Æ wrote that the aspiration of a great nationality should be to ‘beget youths, beautiful, gigantic, and sweet-blooded,

and their counterpart in comely and robust women.'49 With this in mind, the image AE placed in front of the Irish Homestead reader was that of the artist Millet’s peasant. In short, the image was an artistic construct. Discussing ‘The Woolcarder’, AE remarked how Millet captured in this painting the dignity of ‘a life well spent in honourable labour.’ Crucially, he believed that the appreciation of such fine art would develop a sense of aesthetic judgement in the Irish. Such judgement would enable them to express a preference for ‘Millet over the cheap lithographs of a chubby child with two puppies sent round as an advertisement by the tea merchant.’50 Such a statement indicates the manner in which commercial values were synonymous in AE’s thinking with vulgarity and lack of aesthetic taste.

AE’s created peasant was one who eschewed bourgeois tastes, was content with his modest lot and station in life, and did not seek to rise above it. In 1906, he declared that it was more important for the peasant to manifest an inner nobility of life ‘than to change their social position or employment.’ National Education system’s role was to teach children ‘to be fine men and women’ rather than teaching them to aspire to move up the social scale.51 The elemental hardness of the peasant and his closeness to nature were the defining characteristics of AE’s ideal peasant, as exemplified in his the poem ‘Survival’ with its image of the digger:

What pent-up fury in those arms,
Red gilded by the sun’s last breath!
The spade along the ridges runs
As if it had a race with death.

The clods fly right: the clods fly left:
The ridges rise on either side,
The tireless fury is not spent,
Though the fierce sunset long has died.

The strength which tossed the hills on high,
And rent the stormy seas apart,
Is still within those mighty limbs,
Still stirs the dreams of that wild heart.52

AE’s peasant was a stock figure, to use Raymond Williams’ phrase, ‘reduced ... from human to “natural” status’.53 The peasant’s link with nature enabled him to establish a connection with the hidden world, the world of vision, which as

a theosophistÆE considered so essential to an Ireland lacking sufficient spirituality. This lack was manifested in the materialistically orientated mentality of the Irish who had no cultural or intellectual depth beyond that dictated by, in William Morris's phrase, 'the counting house'. To counter the deficit of discerning intellectual inspiration in contemporary Ireland, ÆE argued that Irish poets needed to return to writing of heroes and great men. The lack of such inspiration, he declared, created a situation where the huckster or gombeenman is taken as the representative type for all society to follow. Indeed, for Morris, as for ÆE, what was essential in life was linked with nature and divorced from vulgar materialism. What Morris referred to as 'wealth' was in many respects what ÆE meant when he talked of spirituality. Castigating the production of 'articles of folly and luxury,' Morris declared that wealth was that given to man by 'Nature':

The sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment, and housing necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds, and the power of disseminating it; means of free communication between man and man; works of art, the beauty which man creates when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful — things which serve the pleasure of people, free, manly and uncorrupted.

Many of ÆE's poems highlight what for him was the essential unity between the peasant and nature. The poem 'In Connemara' presents an image of an 'untroubled' peasant woman, carrying a creel of seaweed by day, but by night:

Then she will wander, her heart all a laughter,
Tracking the dream star that lights the purple gloom
She follows the proud and golden races after
As high as theirs her spirit, as high will be her doom.

By night the peasant woman, therefore, seeks a mystical communication and the worlds of the spiritual planes of theosophical belief. Similarly, in 'An Artist of Gaelic Ireland,' discussing the works of Jack Yeats, ÆE wrote of the peasant's link by night with the other worlds of his theosophist outlook:

... it is only occasionally that the younger Yeats becomes the interpreter of the spirituality of the peasant. He is more often the recorder of the extravagant energies of the race-course and the market place, where he finds herded together all the grotesque humours of West Irish life. Yet in all these there is an ever present suggestion of poetry; and these people

who laugh in the fairs will have after hours as solemn as the star gazer in
the 'Midsummer Eve'.

Of course, the notion of the spiritual peasant with the ability to transcend mate-
rial concerns and make a link with the spiritual world of Æ’s theosophical beliefs
in real terms meant little. In essence, what Æ’s construct did was to remove the
peasant from any connection with the realities of the small farmer’s existence
on the western Irish seaboard, where poverty, unemployment, emigration and
potential famine were the harsh facts of life. Æ’s removal of the peasant from the
reality of his existence had similarities to the treatment of the poorer classes by
English rural commentators. In such commentaries, real knowledge of the work-
ing countryman is missing; there is no sense in such accounts of the various
degrees of skill and status, which existed in rural areas. Instead, the reader is
presented with an archetypal rural dweller. As Brian Short states: ‘Lob the coun-
tryman, with all the virtues of countrymen in general, is nothing more than a
caricature.’ Similarly, Raymond Williams, discussing Edward Thomas’s ‘Lob’
writes that:

all countrymen, of all conditions and periods, are merged into a single
legendary figure. The various idioms of specific country communities –
the flowers, for example, have many local names – are reduced not only
to one “country” idiom but to a legendary, timeless inventor, who is more
readily seen than any actual people.

If Æ’s ploughman, in the poem ‘The Earth Breath’ looks ‘Deep beneath his rustic
habit and finds himself a king’, it was because Æ considered contemporary
Ireland squalid and lacking sufficiently in the noble and heroic values. In his
poem ‘Exiles’, Æ stressed the continuity of a noble tradition in the person of the
Irish peasant:

The gods have taken alien shapes upon them,
Wild peasant driving swine
In a strange country. Through the swarthy faces
The starry faces shine.

Declan Kiberd contends that the revival writers used the hero ‘not as an exam-
plar for the Anglo-Irish overlords but as a model for those who were about to

1901, p. 2. 59 Short, ‘Images and realities in the English rural community’, p. 4. 60 Williams,
The country and the city, p. 308. 61 Æ, ‘The Earth Breath’, in Æ, The nuts of knowledge, lyrical
poems old and new by Æ (Dublin: Dun Emer, 1903), p. 11. 62 Æ, ‘Exiles’, in Æ, Voices of the
stones, p. 2.
replace them'. The English had dismissed the Celts as feminine and childlike and thus, necessitous of the ruling hand of their masculine conquerors. Using the heroes of the ancient Irish legends, in particular Cuchulain, the revival writers, Kiberd argues, 'provided a symbol of masculinity for Celts...'.\(^{63}\) This is a positive reading of the role of the hero in the writings of the revival. AE's use of the hero as a model for contemporary Ireland to follow has to be seen, however, in a more negative light. He held up the hero of ancient literature and the persona of the noble peasant for a new middle-class generation, which had no further aspirations than to share in the fruits of, as AE saw it, base and soul-destroying commercial activity. This being said, however, AE's statement when reviewing the paintings of Jack Yeats in 1901 suggests a lack of any true knowledge of the hardship of the life of the 'folk', as he called them. Lauding Jack Yeats's lack of intellectual patronage towards the peasants whom he painted, AE wrote: 'I suggest Jack Yeats thinks the life of a Sligo fisherman is as good a method of life as any, and that he could share it for a long time without being in the least desirous of a return to the comfortable life of convention.'\(^{64}\) Crucially, AE created this exemplary peasant, closely linked to the natural world and dismissive of materialistic values, in his journalistic writings as well as in his literary work. The *Irish Homestead* was, consequently, a paper highly charged with the ideologies of the cultural revival. An understanding of the paper as a production of the cultural renaissance makes clear the manner in which the revival ethos was introduced into and permeated a wider contemporary social and economic discourse. Furthermore, the manner in which the *Irish Homestead* was presented as a farmer weekly allowed the spread of that ethos. The paper created possibilities for the reception the revival discourse amongst a wider society and allowed it to transcend the intellectual debates of a hermetically sealed Dublin-centred, intellectual clique.