

*Eve Patten*

## Trinity Professors *versus* Men of Letters: Ferguson, Dowden and De Vere

In 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson', published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1886, W. B. Yeats wrote that '[T]he most critical of Irish readers are only anxious to be academic, and to be servile to English notions. If Sir Samuel Ferguson had written of Arthur and Guinevere, they would have received him gladly; that he chose rather to tell of Congal and of desolate and queenly Deirdre, we give him full-hearted thanks; he has restored to our hills and rivers their epic interest'.<sup>1</sup> This article – which appeared shortly after its subject's death – is often cited for its accusations of anti-Gaelic prejudice in literary matters, and almost as often for its charge against the then Professor of English Literature and Oratory at Trinity College, Dublin, Edward Dowden, whose irresponsibility towards his friend, Yeats claimed, had left Ferguson exposed to the taunts of English reviewers. Undoubtedly, Yeats had a point: the Professor was no friend to Gaelic revivalism. In the same month as the *Dublin University Review* piece appeared, Dowden's forthright views on the subject were quoted at some length by the speaker to the Trinity College Philosophical Society, in the Inaugural Address of its thirty-third session: 'Surely an Irish man of letters may be engaged in genuinely patriotic work if he strive to bring the best ideas from France, from Spain, from England, from America, although the word "Ireland" may not for ever be thrilling on his lips. We should be far truer patriots if, instead of singing paeans about Irish genius, we were to set ourselves to correct some of the defects of the Irish intellect'.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of Dowden's divergence from the interests of Ferguson's cultural nationalist school has been well rehearsed elsewhere. But Yeats's specific terminology, framed by his assertion in the article of a modern-day division between the creative and the critical classes, raises contingent issues about the relationship between the two men. What, exactly, did he mean by 'the most critical' of Irish readers, and in what

sense 'academic'? The question should lead beyond dictionary definitions towards the context in which Ferguson's later works – from the 1872 epic *Congal*, the 1880 *Poems* and *Deirdre* – were received. That context was characterized by lively public debates in the period about the nature of critical reading and by the advancement of English Literature as a university discipline. In both developments, Edward Dowden was closely engaged. And in the light of this connection, we can interrogate Yeats's vocabulary to comprehend the schism between Dowden and Ferguson not only in terms of their differing responses to Gaelic antiquarian and revivalist incentives, but also as an effect of their respective positioning inside and outside academic concepts of the discipline of literature. To what extent was their friendship affected by a growing breach in the later Victorian period between the increasingly fragile function of the amateur 'man of letters' and the growing authority of the professional academic and critic?

This essay attempts to chart the tensions surrounding this development, partly through the correspondence which circulated between Edward Dowden, Ferguson, and the third comrade in this triumvirate, Aubrey de Vere, in the second half of the century. Dowden's letters to his brother John include a description of a dissipated evening the three men spent together, trying deliberately to put each other to sleep with tedious sonnet recitations, a report which suggests an easy camaraderie between them.<sup>3</sup> Behind the scenes however, their roles and relations were shifting, with Dowden's institutional function further distancing him from the Irish cultural heritage which Ferguson, assisted by de Vere, had laboured so hard to sustain.

After the publication of *Congal* and into the 1880s, the elderly Ferguson became closely identified with a formative Irish literary canon, his name proffered frequently as required reading in discussions of the subject. He was included for example, in the fourth volume of Charles Anderson Read's compendium, *The Cabinet of Irish Literature* (completed in 1879 after the editor's death by T. P. O'Connor), with a modest selection – 'The Forging of the Anchor', 'The Fairy Thorn' and 'Pastheen Finn' – though nothing of the longer works. Two lengthy articles written about him by his life-long friend John O'Hagan, the first on *Congal*, the second on Ferguson's earlier poetry, appeared in the Jesuit journal the *Irish Monthly* in 1884. Insistent reference to him was made by several contributors (albeit mostly his close peers and associates) in the correspondence provoked by the *Freeman's Journal* feature on the 'Best Hundred Irish Books', which ran in the spring of 1886, shortly before Ferguson's death. And in a significant endorsement of his position in the cultural mechanics of the late century his *Lays of the Red Branch*, re-issued by Unwin with a new introduction by

Lady Ferguson, appeared as the twelfth volume of Charles Gavan Duffy's *New Irish Library* series in 1897.

Together with the many obituaries which appeared during the later 1880s in the Irish, Scottish and English press, these allusions suggest that Ferguson, though long finished with the *Dublin University Magazine*, maintained a visibility in the world of Irish letters outside the rarefied committee rooms of the Royal Irish Academy. But it was a strange kind of visibility, repeatedly tagged by the author himself to a sense of future promise rather than present impact; a cultural utopianism shared by his friend Aubrey de Vere. Letters of the 1870s onwards show Ferguson and de Vere colluding in a process of consolatory prophecy: in time, the world of Irish arts and letters would realign itself; in time, a national feeling for literature would displace less attractive questions of relevance, worth or critical merit. Thus, after lukewarm reviews of *Congal*, de Vere wrote from his Adare home, Curragh Chase, to reassure his friend that at some point in the future, the poem would successfully find its audience: 'it will do much towards creating a more elevated and manlier taste for poetry, corrupted as public taste has been for some time by what is trivial and occasionally by what is scandalous'.<sup>4</sup> Two months later he reverted to the same theme. 'I grieve to hear of the neglect which *Congal* has hitherto met, but am hardly surprised at it, for the book is too good for rapid appreciation', he stated. 'But it is only a question of time ... Ireland will one day profit by what she does not now understand'.<sup>5</sup> To his credit (and related perhaps to his own spiritual investments) de Vere stayed true to his faith in Ferguson's literary afterlife following his friend's death, reassuring Ferguson's widow (who had sent him a volume of Ferguson's *St Patrick's Confession*) that 'Ireland will one day know how great a debt her literature owes to him!'<sup>6</sup> To this same end he was hard at work, he added, on a forthcoming volume of essays which would include an account of her husband's poetry, based on his own reviews of the major works from 'Conary' to *Congal*. But the publication of this appreciation, in *Essays, Chiefly Literary and Ethical* (1889), secured little, and de Vere's optimism waned. A full decade later, having read Roden Noel's *Irish Literary Society* lecture on Ferguson in the *Irish Times*, he wrote again to Lady Ferguson with regret that his prophecy of how the poet would add 'another string to the great English harp – the Gaelic string' – had not yet been fulfilled.<sup>7</sup>

Ferguson's perception of an increasing literary isolation in the final two decades of his career requires careful reading. It was commonplace after all, for writers of the period to insist that a muted critical response was the result of their being somehow ahead of their time; to take comfort in their friends' reassurances about low standards of public taste and literary discrimination. For Ferguson and de Vere, as Yeats complains, there was added consolation in the fact that their chosen

topics, Gaelic, mythological and antiquarian, were minority interests for the late Victorian reading public at large, even in Ireland where concepts of a national culture had yet to capture the popular imagination. De Vere wrote to John O'Hagan of how he had striven to make Ferguson's 1880 *Poems* better known, urging it on many of his literary friends including Alfred Tennyson and Sir Henry Taylor, but lamenting that 'commonly the most accomplished Englishmen have a great difficulty in understanding, and still more in appreciating, poetry with real Gaelic character, and feel a sort of unconscious dis-sympathy, if not antagonism to it'.<sup>8</sup> The point was over-stated: English poets such as Tennyson (as de Vere well knew) had frequently turned to Celtic and indeed specifically Irish Gaelic sources for their subject matter, without losing sight of their readership.<sup>9</sup> But the sense of constriction persisted. On the same issue but from a different perspective, Edward Dowden had written to de Vere some years earlier, and with reference to Ferguson's recent epic, specifically to advise his associate against the 'solicitations' of Irish legendary or historical material in his work. 'As a fact, whether it ought to be so or not', he observed, 'the choice of an Irish mythical or historical subject confines the full enjoyment of the poem to a little circle. I admire *Congal* very truly; nevertheless I feel that I shall never more than half enter into it. I do not believe the most admirable poem would be able quite to conquer the difficulty.'<sup>10</sup>

Many later commentators have observed that it was Ferguson's lot, in this respect, to be admired rather than actually read. But Dowden's comment here also hints at a second and related issue: the perception that Ferguson's material had limited appeal not just because of its subject matter, but because it was difficult to read. Constrained by the very obscurity which gave it authenticity, it alienated readers with its narrative complexity or unfamiliar place and character names. At one level this suggests nothing more than Dowden's West Britonism showing through at its most obstinate, but then Dowden was not the only reader to find Ferguson's writing difficult to penetrate. On first reading *Congal*, which Ferguson had sent him in manuscript, Aubrey de Vere himself wrote at length to his friend with a series of suggestions made (ostensibly) on behalf of the poet's 'ignorant' potential readers, but all directed towards clarifying and simplifying the poem. Ferguson's epic would greatly benefit, he argued gently, from an explanatory preface, outlining the historical context and offering a narrative summary modelled on Macaulay's arrangement in his *Lays of Ancient Rome*. Indeed, the work might be more accessible, he continued, if it exposed more prominently a 'moral', on the theme of poetic justice perhaps, again to draw in the reader and give the narrative some familiarity.<sup>11</sup> John O'Hagan too, in his

extensive adulation of the poem in the *Irish Monthly* some twelve years later, was to voice – politely but pointedly – similar uncertainties with regard to the poem’s likely reception. Of *Congal* O’Hagan wrote:

It is not, perhaps, easy at a first reading, unless the reader be singularly attentive, to take in all the features of the story, and all the relations of the personages. We think it a pity that Sir Samuel, instead of prefixing a condensed statement in two lines, brief as the single lines at the head of each book of Homer, did not give us a comprehensive epitome of the whole poem, and then a prose argument of the contents of each book which would make the story plain to everyone. We hope to see this done by him in a future edition.<sup>12</sup>

O’Hagan put his brilliant mind to good use in the ensuing twelve pages, offering a succinct plot summary of the entire poem and laying the groundwork, in effect, for the future edition which did exactly what he had requested here: the 1887 Sealy, Bryers and Walker issue of *Congal* was furnished with a lucid ‘Editor’s Preface’ by Lady Ferguson, and each book of the poem provided with a prefatory prose summary. Ferguson’s own notes were not used.<sup>13</sup>

In looking backwards, from the perspective of a Revival-led cultural cohort which frequently lamented the neglect of the country’s nineteenth-century literary greats, Ferguson’s peripheralization from an Anglo-centric literary mainstream on the grounds of his dedication to Gaelic versions and translations is indeed regrettable, first, and second, a marked failing of national cultural consciousness which the generation of Hyde, Yeats, and Lady Gregory would in turn rectify. But his predicament appears rather different when set in a contemporaneous literary landscape, inhabited not only by a sympathetic de Vere but also by a more pragmatic Edward Dowden. Dowden was a fellow poet, certainly, but at the same time, a professional academic and pedagogue, immersed during the 1880s and early 1890s in debates over the fast-changing conditions for literary production and popular dissemination. Following his appointment to the first Chair of English Literature and Oratory at Trinity College in 1867 (where he stepped into the shoes of his own former tutor, John Kells Ingrams), he joined the vanguard of a movement to professionalize critical writing and reading practices with reference to the new centres of authority on the subject, the universities. While he may indeed have enjoyed his evenings with Ferguson and de Vere, reciting poetry or participating in the Shakespeare readings hosted by the former at his North Great George’s Street home, Dowden’s professional life illustrates a deviation from the

world of the gentleman *littérateur* which his two friends inhabited. In letters between them from 1872 onwards, tensions emerge that hint at the divergence between amateur and professional, poet and critic, layman and academic. These tensions help further explain the isolation experienced by Ferguson as his late writings faded into the cultural margin, the 'difficult' *Congal* representing a category of material not only unpopular in its choice of subject matter, but unassimilable to a formative canon for late Victorian readers (as one senses de Vere, and certainly O'Hagan, recognized), and certainly inimical to the kind of pedagogical and critical incentives generated by Dowden and his disciplinary community.

Judging by his correspondence, Aubrey de Vere was always open to advice from his friends on his writing, but doggedly resistant to the interference of the independent critic. He sought reassurance from Ferguson that they shared this distaste in a somewhat pompous letter on the subject in 1873. 'It has long been my belief that Poets alone are qualified to criticise Poetry', he claimed, 'and that infinite mischief has been done even by such able and well meant attempts as those by Dr Johnson. Compare his odd mixture of sense and lack of real insight with such criticism as you find in a single sentence of Coleridge's scribble in the margins of a book, or granted from his table talk! ....It is only poets, I think, who really understand the Philosophy of Poetry'.<sup>14</sup> With his customary deference De Vere upheld Wordsworth as the doyen, the visionary who most fully understood the esoteric, resistant nature of true poetic art, but he also name-checked Tennyson and Charles Taylor as writers whose imagination soared above the critical grasp. 'If we have ever a really valuable philosophy of the Art, it will be one built up of fragments from the Poets themselves' he continued, exhorting Ferguson to keep this in mind in the future. If poets themselves would give to the public more of their thoughts, then '[C]riticism would eventually be taken out of the hands of the Pretender and given into the only hand that does not blunder'.<sup>15</sup>

Sent to Ferguson shortly after the publication of *Congal*, these sentiments perhaps contain an element of protectionism in the light of the poem's uncertain reception. Nor did de Vere's views amount to anything more than a reflex championing of poet against critic in a tradition long predating the Victorians. De Vere harps on a theme, nonetheless, closely related to anxieties about the place of literature in the re-organization of the disciplines and the changing nature of a public reading culture. In an Irish context, this uncertainty was manifest in the role played – or increasingly, *not* played – by the Royal Irish Academy, which, having established shortly after its founding three distinct categories of intellectual enquiry, Science, Antiquities and Belles Lettres, began after the mid-century to peripheralize the last of these,

and increasingly to leave fiction, poetry *and* criticism to the periodical and journal press.<sup>16</sup> While many of its literary members, including Ferguson, were regular *reviewers* in the journals with which they were associated, no recognizable school of literary criticism emerged from the institution itself in its *soi-disant* 'golden age' and the processes of modern literary reception therefore remained segregated from the Academy's core concepts of intellectual engagement. In this context Ferguson's 'Address' on taking up the Presidency of the Royal Irish Academy in 1881 hints at strains surrounding what he referred to as the desirable 'influences of independent taste' generated by distinguished individuals: 'genius cannot be taught', he states emphatically here, and 'rare learning, if we would profit by it, must be allowed its own leisure'.<sup>17</sup> Art – and literature – required freedom rather than discipline, and by implication, an educated but independent public viewer or reader, rather than programmatic scrutiny within the confines of academic and critical disciplines.

The defensive note of the 'Address', in this respect, can be set against the accelerating institutionalization of criticism in the late Victorian period. From about 1870 onwards (in tandem, inevitably, with the expansion of publishing houses and changes in copyright law) the subject of literary knowledge as an object of structured critical enquiry began to feature as a topic in the major journals of the period, with the *Athenaeum*, the *Quarterly Review*, *Macmillans*, *Temple Bar Magazine* and others running hundreds of articles devoted to questions such as 'Books and Reading', or 'The Vice of Reading', or indeed, in *Nineteenth Century*, J. Pope Hennessy's highly sentimental 'What do the Irish read?'<sup>18</sup> The spate of interest was dominated by the 'Best Hundred Books' feature article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885, which provoked a vast and controversial response from correspondents (and almost certainly inspired the *Freeman's Journal* 'Best Hundred Irish Books' series in the following year). Among the many contributors to the debate on this topic Edward Dowden's voice was clear, not in favour of reading as such but in favour – effectively – of the *professionalizing* of criticism. With reference to the selection he suggested that 'It would have been more profitable for us had we been advised now to read any one of the hundred; for what, indeed, does it matter whether we read the best books or the worst, if we lack the power or the instinct or the skill by which to reach the heart of any one of them?' He pursued the topic in 'The Interpretation of Literature', published in the *Contemporary Review* article in 1886. Here, his argument, metaphor-heavy at times, is driven by the urge to define and defend the critic; to produce an anatomy of criticism grounded securely in Coleridgean precepts. For Dowden, the critic's role is elevated to that of travelling companion at one juncture, moral and psychological interrogator at another. Above all, the critical

function is sacerdotal, with responsibility for clarification and revelation:

The happiest moment in the hours of study of a critic of literature is when seemingly by some divination, but really as the result of patient observation and thought, he lights upon the central motive of a great work. Then, of a sudden, order begins to form itself from the crowd and chaos of his impressions and ideas. There is a moving hither and thither, a grouping or co-ordinating of all his recent experiences, which goes on of its own accord, and every instant his vision becomes clearer, and new meanings disclose themselves in what had been lifeless and unilluminated. It seems as if he could even stand by the artist's side and co-operate with him in the process of creating. With such a sense of joy upon him, the critic will think it no hard task to follow the artist to the sources from whence he drew his material – it may be some dull chapter in an ancient chronicle, or some gross tale of passion by an Italian novelist – and he will stand by and watch with exquisite pleasure the artist handling that crude material, and refashioning and refining it, and breathing into it the breath of a higher life. Even the minutest difference of text between an author's earlier and later draft, or a first and second edition, has now become a point not for dull commentatorship, but a point of life, at which he may touch with his finger the pulse of the creator in his fervour of creation.<sup>19</sup>

Terence Brown complains that Dowden's critical writing can be 'tiresomely speculative and flaccid': in fact, even his early *Studies in Literature 1789–1877*, published in 1878, show a clarity and vivacity which distinguish them from the more turgid contributions of some of his contemporaries.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, his writing began to jostle seriously for critical authority, as evidenced by his singular promotion of George Eliot in his 1877 essay, 'The Scientific Movement in Literature'. The same push for jurisdiction fuels the *Contemporary Review* piece. Dowden elevates but also validates the critic, integrating a legacy of Romantic transcendentalism with contemporary guidelines for critical practice, from Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold (the latter's education reports, together with the 1873 *Literature and Dogma* were closely tracked by both Dowden and de Vere in their correspondence). Dowden – who once joked about de Vere being 'arrested and bid to come forward by a member of the critical constabulary in plain clothes' – was complicit with a new critical hierarchy and process, and the publication of *New Studies in Literature* in 1895 confirmed this role.<sup>21</sup> 'Dowden's essays', observes Kelly Mays, 'make visible the historical emergence of

interpretation as the definitive process and product of professional reading'.<sup>22</sup>

In turn, Dowden's moves towards refining critical practice were consolidated by the advancement of the teaching of literature at university level in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Much like the question of appropriate reading practices, the issue of whether literature could in fact be 'taught' was a recurrent topic for discussion in the leading journals (including the *Dublin University Magazine*), particularly after 1870 when Schools of English Literature were founded at the universities of London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and by the end of the century, at Oxford and Cambridge. Again the *Pall Mall Gazette* led the debate, canvassing numerous literary and academic luminaries, including Walter Pater, Grant Allen, William Morris and Dowden himself, on a list of speculative questions concerning the rationale of the new discipline of English.<sup>23</sup> The development of Schools of English throughout the leading universities was neither straightforward nor uniform, and Dowden was not alone in expressing doubts, at times, as to the justification of a literary pedagogy.<sup>24</sup> As the pioneering holder of the Trinity Chair he was exemplary, nonetheless, in his professional dedication to the architecture of the new subject. His archived papers include not only the source material for his books and essays but also the detailed notes he prepared for lectures, together with extensive drafts of the examination questions he set over several years. These reveal at a fundamental level the evolution of a syllabus which would be seen as essential training for a post-Victorian, secular generation in need of systematic interpretative skills, as the 1921 Newbolt Report on the teaching of English would subsequently confirm.

In Ireland Dowden's extraordinarily productive career tends to be obscured by his retrospective casting (by Yeats and others) as a worthy but dull Victorian don locked into the narrow-minded Dublin circles of Protestant unionism. But his output as a critic was prolific *and* provocative. Notoriously, and sometimes controversially, he championed several contemporary writers including Whitman and Ibsen, and made frequent, acute interventions in ongoing British cultural debates of the period on the nature of literary education, reading, and criticism. What cemented his position beyond Ireland were his successful ventures into academic and scholarly publishing. Dowden's *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, published in 1875, was a bestseller and a long-term authority on the bard; his follow-up Shakespeare primer immediately sold 10,000 copies for Macmillan and was translated into Russian. His monumental seven-volume edition of Wordsworth's poetry (1892/3) was a major publishing event. Correspondence related to his long-term relationship with the British

publishing house Kegan Paul also illustrates his influential role in the 'packaging' of an English literary heritage for a new undergraduate readership, chiefly through his collaboration with Edmund Gosse on the production of a handbook for the study of English Literature. The preparation of this volume, which involved some terse exchanges between the two editors on suggested exclusions and inclusions, offers a rare insight into the process of canon formation in the context of late Victorian pedagogy. For all the difficulty of the production, Dowden was keen to follow it up with a 'Dublin University Series', together with a new handbook on Poetry, and while such plans were not always fulfilled they show his grasp on the practicalities of a new, commercially expanded literary age, which he defended vigorously for its democratic ethos. 'Talents and energy are indeed well employed in making knowledge easily accessible to a great population', he wrote in his 1889 essay 'Hopes and Fears for Literature'. 'When an eminent scholar produces his handbook or primer, which circulates by tens of thousands, we can have no feeling but one of gratitude and gladness.'<sup>25</sup>

Dowden's archive also reveals, suggestively, that the formation of a new English literary discipline was geared less to enshrining a 'national' culture or soliciting an Arnoldian 'best self', than it was towards defining professional critical procedures, grounded in somewhat bureaucratic training routines of reading, recognition and the exercise of a specialist vocabulary. Making this point in a broader British context, Ian Hunter suggests that the foundation of English Literature in the universities at the end of the nineteenth century was not the triumphant manifestation of any liberal humanist or cultural imperialist ideology, but rather the product of disciplinary and corrective exercises within the institutions themselves as they reformed their subject parameters and praxis in line with governmental initiatives. In allowing for the emergence of the professional literary academic, the rise of English Studies marked, at the same time, 'a terminal mutation of the nineteenth-century man of letters'.<sup>26</sup> Reading from a broad span of university archives, John R. Gibbins similarly argues that the new academics in the late nineteenth-century were generated less by social and cultural milieux than by the regimes of the new pedagogical structures and syllabi they tendered. A closer look at the scholar dons of the period, he suggests, confirms that 'as organisers of knowledge, curriculum impacted on more lives than did its competitors for transmission of knowledge in the nineteenth century, namely the churches, novelists, sages, journalists and even the popular cultural forms of cartoon and music hall'.<sup>27</sup> During the *fin de siècle* the professionalizing of the dons, the broadening of their sphere of expertise and specialization (in English and other subjects), their networks of scholarship and – crucially – their influential publishing ventures in a

commercial marketplace, gave them prestige over and above their extra-mural literary associates. By the end of the century, claims Gibbins, there was 'a growing division in authority and power between literary gentlemen and the university specialised dons', with the curriculum itself a key route to consolidating that pre-eminence.<sup>28</sup>

If this is the case, then Ferguson and Dowden represent two stages of evolution, briefly co-existing, but becoming increasingly estranged from one other. Buoyed up by the authority of the new literary curriculum, Dowden challenged rather than supported the fading world of *belles lettres* represented by Ferguson: Ferguson in turn, with his resistance to professional criticism and obscurity of narrative presentation (if one agrees with the responses to *Congal* noted above), was inevitably distanced, at this level, from the university-based scholar and pedagogue. As to visibility, there can be little doubt that the younger academic attracted a good deal more attention than the senior poet, who, in the same year as the Trinity Chair appointment, moved to the quieter environs of the new Irish Public Records Office. If we bypass Yeats's Casaubon-ish portrait and look instead to Dublin's intellectual circles during the 1880s, it would appear that Dowden had genuine impact both in and outside the university walls. Though again rather begrudgingly, Terence Brown admits to the scholar's wide sphere of influence, identifying him as an archetype of the Victorian popular lecturer who brought consolation to an audience bereft of religious faith and seeking sustenance in an 'easily digestible' literary canon: 'in the polite circles of the university, Alexandra College and the Protestant Dublin middle-class', Brown explains, Dowden 'did achieve something of the status of literary sage, interpreting the great for lesser morals, assimilating them to an acceptably ethical sense of an orderly world'.<sup>29</sup> To those who actually attended his many public lectures on 'The Revolutionary Movement', in the Alexandra College-sponsored Saturday series held in Trinity's Museum Building, or the Royal Dublin society 'Afternoon Lectures' in Kildare Street, or the sessions on 'Shakespeare's Heroines' at the Harold's Cross Christian Young Men's Association, or on 'Victorian Literature' to the Presbyterian Association, that function was real enough, giving Dowden a significant role in the city's intellectual life.

Dowden's public presence was certainly noted by Ferguson and his immediate circle. De Vere, for all the doubts he expressed to Ferguson over the value of secondary criticism, was convinced by the scholarly interventions of the Trinity professor. Following Dowden's public lectures on Tennyson and Browning in 1869, he wrote to him to enthuse over them as 'a specimen of what poetic Criticism ought to be, and so seldom is...'.<sup>30</sup> In November of 1874 De Vere wrote again on the subject to Mary Ferguson, relating how he had met Dowden in Dublin

and praising him for his ability to bring literature out of the classroom and into the public domain: 'What an able and interesting man he seems. His lectures on Shakespeare ought to have done real good'.<sup>31</sup> By 1880, as Dowden's star in the academic firmament continued to rise, he again signalled his confidence to Lady Ferguson: 'Have you been attending Dowden's lectures on Goethe? I hope he will follow them up by lectures on a healthier and wholesome poet, Wordsworth'.<sup>32</sup> Ferguson too was attuned to the nature of Dowden's impact. In furnishing a testimonial for Dowden in support of his application to the Chair of English Literature at Trinity College Cambridge in 1883, he identified specifically the hierarchy of functions served by his friend as he moved into the mainstream of the new discipline, noting with care Dowden's eminence as 'lecturer, critic and man of letters' as grounds for his suitability to the academic position.<sup>33</sup>

What emerges therefore is a division of roles, a schism in the nature of literary activity which compounded and exacerbated a more visible resistance to Ferguson's work on the grounds of its Gaelic or antiquarian obscurities. To his credit, Ferguson didn't stop fighting, nagging Dowden at every opportunity with less than subtle reminders of his responsibility to a national literature. Writing to congratulate him on the success of his Shakespeare lectures, in 1874, Ferguson added as a plaintive and somewhat non-sequential rider: 'You know my sentiments about what we owe to ourselves in the way of making our own city a centre of literary influence and publishing activity. My *Congal* has not been a success but it has broken the ice. If that pool is to freeze over again I should be disappointed but not discouraged'.<sup>34</sup> And perhaps it was Dowden's failure to respond to his exhortations that inspired Ferguson's complaint to his director at the Public Records Office, Thomas Larcom, just four months later that same year, about the neglect of an Irish heritage. 'I am grieved to see that the men of Trinity College look on this material as if it were to be cultivated or not merely on its own merits, and not in what I conceive to be the truer view, as the roots or seeds of a literature which we might properly create out of it', Ferguson lamented. 'I have done what I could in this way and am convinced that if the men of higher genius whom we have produced and may hope to produce hereafter, took it in hand in the same way, there is matter enough for the creation of a wholly new fresh and ennobling school of epic and dramatic literature in these despised sources'.<sup>35</sup>

Academic divisions aside, was Dowden really so distanced from Ferguson's aims? In public, his scepticism towards a strident cultural nationalism was long-established. 'You have always thrown cold water on anything like a 'patriotic' movement in College – partly no doubt because your instincts told you that the hour was not yet come – but also I believe from a feeling that you could not work well with men

whom you feel to be your inferior and yet could not adequately control', wrote his life-long friend John Todhunter in 1869.<sup>36</sup> His reticence was affirmed once again in his 'Hopes and Fears for Literature', published in 1889 in the *Fortnightly Review*: here, his plea for recognition of both democracy and science with regard to literary development also defined the kind of national ethos that *should* be pursued by the cultured classes, an ethos more likely to have been drawn from his beloved Schiller and Goethe than from the battle-cries of the new movement in his own country. Finally, the much rehearsed terms of the debate in the *Daily Express* in 1895, when W. B. Yeats, John Eglinton and William Laramie feuded with the Professor (and each other) over the legitimacy and advisability of promoting a 'national' literature, consolidated Dowden's unpopular position and unfortunate profile as West Briton stick-in-the-mud.<sup>37</sup>

But in private Dowden was more than sympathetic to the literary endeavours of his colleagues. De Vere was particularly grateful for Dowden's warm assessment of his Irish legends: the response pleased him more than any other, he wrote, 'with the single exception of a letter from Ferguson who has himself done more than anyone to illustrate old Irish lore, and whose *Congal* and 'Conary' you are doubtless well acquainted with'.<sup>38</sup> The gratitude was in response to a touching and rather intimate letter Dowden had sent de Vere in relation to the latter's dramatic poem, 'The Forging of Queen Maeve'. De Vere had urged him to read the work aloud to himself, if possible, and having done so, Dowden was overcome by its effect. He wrote:

I come to Irish subjects neither as an Englishman nor as an Irishman but as a halfbreed. Until comparatively recently I did not even know of the existence of Maeve and Deirdre and Cuchullain. Perhaps I even suspected that King Brian the Unspellable was a mystic hero who never fought the Danes (in whom English history had taught me to believe) at Clontarf. At first discovering my loss, I was angry. Now on third thoughts, I'm inclined to believe my father's errors are on the right side. I am infinitely glad that I spent my early enthusiasm on Wordsworth, Spenser, Shakespeare, and not on anything that Ireland ever produced. But now I come to these stories, not in the John Ball spirit – having breathed Irish air so long, they seem to melt into me very readily... You have made me feel things either in the story or else you have written into it that I did not feel before.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, one might well argue that Dowden's sudden warmth pertains more to his recognition that Irish subjects had potential to serve as illustrations of 'dramatic art', the topic on which he was writing at the

time, rather than any genuine emotions aroused by this exposure to Gaelic antiquity. Be that as it may, this is still at the very least, an alternative view of the Professor. But such gestures would necessarily remain discreet, among friends: publicly, Dowden's commitment was to the mainstream development of English Literature, with all the bureaucratic and academic systemisation now associated with it, together with the high profile it afforded him as a critic. While Ferguson slipped into the margins and waited for the fulfilment of his cultural vision, Dowden's *Life of Shelley* was lauded by the *Irish Times* and featured on the paper's 'Christmas Books' recommendations list. Their relationship was underwritten by such discrepancies, characterized increasingly by the distance between their respective roles, and by the cautious manoeuvring of their mutual friend and correspondent, Aubrey de Vere, in the middle-ground between them.

## NOTES

1. 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson' (II), in *Dublin University Review* (November 1886), reprinted as 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson' in *Uncollected Prose*, by W. B. Yeats, ed. by John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), I, pp.87-104. The article responded to the comments of the *Academy* review of the theological contributions to Ferguson's *Poems*: 'Sir Samuel Ferguson's volume of verse may possibly give pleasure to a few intimate friends, but it would have been much better to have printed it privately, and issue copies as presents only.' *Academy* 13.429 (24 July 1880), pp.60-1.
2. *Irish Times*, 5 November, 1886, p.5.
3. Edward Dowden to John Dowden, 27 May, 1879, *Letters of Edward Dowden and His Correspondents* (London: Dent, 1914), p.137.
4. Aubrey de Vere to M. C. Ferguson, 9 December, 1872 (TCD Ms 11300).
5. De Vere to Samuel Ferguson, 2 February, 1873 (TCD Ms 11300).
6. De Vere to M. C. Ferguson, 27 November, 1888 (TCD Ms 11300).
7. De Vere to M. C. Ferguson, 19 January, 1898 (TCD Ms 11300).
8. Cited by Matthew Russell, 'Aubrey de Vere on Sir Samuel Ferguson', *Irish Monthly* 15.5 (April, 1887), 224-6 (p.225).
9. For a valuable reading of Tennyson in terms of a resultant united kingdom 'hybridity' see Matthew Campbell, 'Letting the Past be Past: The English Poet and the Irish Poem', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.1 (March, 2004), 63-83.
10. Dowden to de Vere, 20 August, 1874 (TCD Ms 5055).
11. De Vere to Samuel Ferguson, 9 December, 1872 (TCD Ms 11300).
12. 'On the Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson: First Article. The Epic of "Congal"', *Irish Monthly* 12.134 (May, 1884), 217-234 (p.218).
13. See Peter Denman, *Samuel Ferguson: The Literary Achievement* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), p.201. Like all Ferguson readers, I am indebted to Peter Denman for this useful checklist of Ferguson's published writings. Coincidentally, in the same year and with reference to de Vere's anxieties (voiced in his *Spectator* review of 'Conary') that 'its greatest merit, its originality, may rather discourage than attract those indolent readers who shrink from all themes but such as they are used to', the *Irish Monthly* pushed for the same initiative to be taken with Irish manuscripts in general; that they be translated first into prose, with an indication of line divisions and stanzas, as a basis for subsequent metrical translation. 'Aubrey de Vere on Sir Samuel Ferguson', *Irish Monthly* 15 (April 1887), 224-6.

14. De Vere to Samuel Ferguson, 4 April, 1873 (TCD Ms 11300).
15. De Vere to Samuel Ferguson, 4 April, 1873.
16. See R. B. McDowell, 'The Main Narrative', in *The Royal Irish Academy: A Bicentennial History 1785–1985*, ed. by T. ÓRaifeartaigh (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1985), pp.34–5.
17. 'Address Delivered Before the Academy', by Sir Samuel Ferguson, LL.D., Q.C., President, 30 November, 1882, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Polite Literature and Antiquities, 1879–1888*, 16.33, 185–201 (p.188–9). On a similar note Ferguson wrote to Dowden – in relation a complaint about John Ruskin – of his 'disbelief (perhaps ill-grounded) in the utility of Art-lectures', Samuel Ferguson to Dowden, 30 November, 1871 (TCD Ms 3147; item 57).
18. See Kelly J. Mays, 'The disease of reading and Victorian periodicals', in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practice*, ed. by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 165–94; and Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (London and Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p.51. J. Pope Hennessy's article, 'What do the Irish Read', appears in *Nineteenth Century*, 15.88 (June, 1884), 920–32.
19. Dowden, 'The Interpretation of Literature', *Contemporary Review*, 49 (May, 1886), 701–19 (p.717).
20. See Brown's 'Edward Dowden: Irish Victorian', in *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays*, ed. by Terence Brown (Mullingar: Lilliput, 1988), p.39.
21. Dowden to de Vere, 20 August, 1874 (TCD Ms 5055).
22. 'The disease of reading and Victorian periodicals', p.194, fn 105.
23. A useful summary, with extracts from the debate, is provided by Alan Bacon, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century History of English Studies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), Chapter 17. Oxford Extension lecturer John Churton Collins' controversial article 'Can Literature be Taught' appeared in *Nineteenth Century* in November 1887: on his contribution to the subject and related context see also Ian Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), Chapter 4.
24. Brown considers Dowden's misgivings in 'Edward Dowden: Irish Victorian', p.40.
25. 'Hopes and Fears for Literature', *Fortnightly Review*, 45.266 (February, 1889), 166–83 (p.169). The issue of the literary primer was a sensitive one in the wake of Edmund Gosse's *From Shakespeare to Pope* (1885) and the subsequent row with John Churton Collins, whose caustic review of this book raised many concerns about 'amateurish' literary-critical practice, see Bacon, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century History*, Chapter 16.
26. *Culture and Government*, p.112; p.111. The point echoes T. W. Heyck's description, in *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), of the Victorian sage being 'professionalized' out of existence at the end of the century. See also Stefan Collini's relevant discussion of the shift in scholarly activity from amateur to professional, *English Past: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.308.
27. John Gibbins, "'Old Studies and New": The Organisation of Knowledge in University Curriculum', in *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Martin Daunton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.235–63 (p.237).
28. Gibbins, p.237. The designation 'man of letters' remained insecure for some time, nonetheless. In 1910, on accepting Edmund Gosse's invitation to join Edward Dowden on an Academic Committee of English Letters (founded under the aegis of the Royal Society of Literature) W. B. Yeats responded that 'An English Academy would save us, perhaps, from the journalists, who wish to be men of letters, and the men of letters who have become journalists...' (Yeats to Edmund Gosse, 12 April, 1910): see the full

- account of this exchange by Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.460–1.
29. 'Edward Dowden: Irish Victorian', pp.39–40. The *Irish Times* archive lists details of Dowden's many public lecture series in this period.
  30. De Vere to Dowden, 12 November, 1869 (TCD Ms 5055).
  31. De Vere to M. C. Ferguson, 13 November, 1874 (TCD Ms 11300).
  32. De Vere to M. C. Ferguson, 28 April, 1880 (TCD Ms 11300).
  33. Dowden papers (TCD Ms 3149; item 396). Ferguson also wrote privately to Dowden of his concern that the Professor might be tempted away by such a post, 'which we poor Irish could ill afford', Samuel Ferguson to Dowden, 29 March, 1883 (TCD Ms 3149; item 404).
  34. Samuel Ferguson to Dowden, 28 March, 1874 (TCD Ms 3147; item 80).
  35. Samuel Ferguson to Larcom, 8 July 1874 PROI PRO 2/3: cited Gréagóir Ó Dúill, 'Sir Samuel Ferguson, Administrator and Archivist', *Irish University Review*, 16.1 (Spring 1986), 117–40 (p.127).
  36. John Todhunter to Dowden, 12 December, 1869 (TCD Ms 3147; item 57).
  37. 'Hopes and Fears for Literature', *Fortnightly Review*, 45.266 (February 1889), 166–83 (p.182). For further discussion of this episode see my 'A "general crowd of small singers": Yeats and Dowden Reassessed', in *Yeats Annual 12. That Accusing Eye: Yeats and his Irish Readers*, ed. by Warwick Gould and Edna Longley (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp.29–45.
  38. De Vere to Dowden, 20 September, 1882 (TCD Ms 3148; item 361).
  39. Dowden to de Vere, 13 September, 1882 (TCD Ms 5055).