Russell, George William (‘Æ’)

by Nicholas Allen

Russell, George William (‘Æ’) (1867–1935), journalist, writer, artist, and cooperator, was born 10 April 1867 in William Street, Lurgan, Co. Armagh, son of Thomas Elias Russell (d. 1900), a bookkeeper, and Marianne Russell (née Armstrong; d. 1897).

**Early life and marriage** The youngest of three children, Russell attended the model school at Lurgan before the family moved to Dublin in 1878; they lived at 33 Emorville Avenue and then at 67 Grosvenor Square, both in Rathmines. Russell attended Dr Power’s school in Harrington Street and night classes at the Metropolitan School of Art, before entering Rathmines school, which he left in 1884. Russell met William Butler Yeats (qv) that year at the Metropolitan School, and the two became firm friends. Russell spent the next six years in various jobs, then in 1890 entered Pim’s drapery store as a clerk.

Russell later reported trances and visions throughout his adolescence, experiences encouraged by his friendship with Charles Johnston, whom he met in Dublin in 1885. Johnston, son of the northern unionist MP William Johnston (qv), founded the Dublin lodge of the Theosophical Society in 1886. Theosophy was the synthetic doctrine of Madame Blavatsky, a Russian émigré whose book *The secret doctrine* was an attempt to reconcile the various faith systems of the world in one spiritual revival. Russell, an other-worldly youth, was known to the Yeats sisters as ‘the Strayed Angel’. He entered the Theosophical Society in 1890, moving into its lodge in Upper Ely Place, which was also the home of a Scottish engineer, Frederick Dick. Russell contributed occasional writings to mystical journals such as *Lucifer* and the *Irish Theosophist* which constitute the beginning of his literary career; they also brought about the genesis of the pen name by which he is best known, ‘Æ’ (or A.E.), derived from ‘Aeon’ (the first sound in the universe). Russell began to publish as Æ regularly after 1893. He continued to paint, and the murals with which he decorated the halls of the lodge survive in the National Gallery of Ireland.

Russell’s occult self-expression found register in his first collection of poetry, *Homeward: songs by the way* (1894). There followed a period of rapture in the imagined presence of the ancient Irish gods: influenced by the two-volume *History of Ireland* of Standish O’Grady (qv), Russell began to find a form for his occult beliefs in the magical character of Cú-Chulainn (qv) (Cuchulain). Russell's excitement rose in 1896 when, with many of his theosophist colleagues, he developed a belief, expounded in early pamphlets such as *Ideals in Ireland: priest or hero?* (1897), that a Celtic saviour was due to return to the world. Russell's prose retains some of the evangelical fire he had experienced in his Ulster childhood. (John Butler Yeats (qv) derided Russell to his son, calling him a ‘Portadown boy’). His next poetry collection was *The earth breath* (1897).
Russell's life now took two important new turns. In 1897 he left Pim's for employment with the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) of Horace Plunkett (qv); and on 9 June 1898 he married his fellow spiritualist Violet North (1869–1932). Plunkett, a son of the 16th Baron Dunsany and a unionist MP, founded the IAOS in 1894 to develop cooperative societies in dairy farming and credit banking, on a model already successful elsewhere in Europe. His intentions were political in their practicality. By working together he felt that Irish people of all creeds and beliefs might develop a new understanding. Russell left for Co. Mayo in December 1897 to speak to local communities about the potential of the IAOS. He reported his work in the society's journal, the *Irish Homestead*, and found a subject for his social and spiritual conscience in the figure of the local moneylender, or ‘gombeen man’, whose influence on rural life Russell spent much of his career fighting. Plunkett recognised Russell's abilities and appointed him Dublin-based assistant secretary to the IAOS in June 1898.

At this time Russell and his wife lived at 28 Upper Mount Pleasant Avenue. Their first child, a son, born in March 1899, died soon after birth. Russell continued his literary activity, writing reviews and poetry, while travelling to rural areas to promote cooperation. His second son, Brian, was born in 1900, and the family moved to 25 Coulson Avenue, Rathgar; a daughter was born there in July 1901 but she died a month later. The Russells’ third son, and last child, Diarmuid, was born in November 1902. Russell's public profile had begun to rise. His play *Deirdre* was produced alongside Yeats’s *Kathleen ni Houlihan* in April 1902, Maud Gonne (qv), Russell's neighbour in Coulson Avenue, playing Yeats's lead character. Russell never wrote another play for production, but he accepted the role, with Gonne and Douglas Hyde (qv), of joint vice-president of the Irish National Theatre Society in February 1903; Yeats was president, an arrangement that lasted until 1904. Russell drew up a constitution for the society in August 1905.

Russell's house soon became known for his Sunday evening salon, which attracted the literati; George Moore (qv) became a close friend and James Joyce (qv), who first attended the salon in August 1902, an associate. The stories that would be published as *Dubliners* first appeared in the *Irish Homestead*, thanks to Russell's influence (then as a collection, edited by H. F. Norman, in 1904), and Russell later appeared in *Ulysses* as the yogi-bogey box. Joyce's mockery of Russell should not obscure the importance of his support at a time before Joyce was widely known or respected. At this time two more collections by Russell were published: *The divine vision and other poems* (1904) and *The mask of Apollo and other stories* (1905).

**The *Irish Homestead* and nationalism** Russell entered a crucial phase of his life when he assumed the editorship of the *Irish Homestead* in the summer of 1905. This weekly journal, published every Saturday, was designed to promote the ideal of cooperation between rural communities and agricultural societies and found its way all round the country. Russell's genius was to use this organ as a means to promote ideals of citizenship and self-help crucial to the formation of an independently
functioning Ireland. The cooperative movement was publicly non-political, but its economic programme coincided with a cultural revival that reinvested Irish identity with a confidence nearly destroyed by the famine. Using his weekly columns as editor to attack dishonest traders and inefficient producers, Russell bridged the gap between material and intellectual reform. He translated the epic language of the heroic revival, of Cuchulain and the ancient heroes, into a practical discourse of reform, neatly sidestepping the established controversies of constitutional politics by appealing to agricultural improvement, so avoiding the dilemma of land reform. Week in week out, first from offices in Lincoln Place, then (starting in 1908) from an office at the top of 84 Merrion Square, the walls of which he had painted himself, Russell wrote on everything from butter preservation to poetry, encouraging his readers to exercise careful stewardship of their resources. His assistant editor was Susan Mitchell (qv). In the wake of his appointment as editor of the *Irish Homestead* Russell and his family moved to 17 Rathgar Avenue in early 1906.

Russell met George Bernard Shaw (qv) at the NGI in late September 1908; both men afterwards claimed that they had held a long conversation with an unknown stranger. In November Russell published in *Sinn Féin* his polemical poem 'On behalf of some Irishmen not followers of tradition', an idealistic expression of separatist nationalism that suggests the radicalism submerged in Russell's weekly editorials. From 1908 the IAOS was under severe pressure from T. W. Russell (qv), vice-president of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, and nationalist MPs led by John Dillon (qv), partly because of the cooperative movement's success in modifying relations between small traders and farmers. Owing to Plunkett's aristocratic background, claims persisted that the IAOS was a covertly anti-national project, that an amelioration of rural conditions cloaked the basic structural inequalities of land ownership. Advanced nationalists nevertheless recognised Russell's potential. In 1911 he wrote a series of essays entitled 'The problem of rural life' for the *Irish Review*, a journal edited by Padraic Colum (qv) and supported by a coterie that included Patrick Pearse (qv), Thomas MacDonagh (qv), and Joseph Mary Plunkett (qv). Russell continued with his advocacy for mutual aid in *Co-operation and nationality: a guide for rural reformers from this to the next generation* (1912). Uneven and energetic, *Co-operation and nationality*, which the *Irish Review* compared to an indistinct impressionist painting, is part Fabian social report, part polemic, and part mystic rapture.

Russell's increasing social militancy found focus in 1913 in the lock-out by William Martin Murphy (qv) of tram workers trying to organise as part of the ITGWU. James Larkin (qv), the workers' leader, was imprisoned, and Russell shared a platform with James Connolly (qv), who Russell felt was ‘a really intellectual leader’, at a demonstration at the Royal Albert Hall in London on 1 November. Larkin was released twelve days later. Russell's speech, which was highly critical of state and church authorities, particularly the police and William Walsh (qv), archbishop of Dublin, caused fury in the constitutional nationalist press, the *Freeman's Journal* accusing him of hiding anti-Irish sympathies in his socialism. *Sinn Féin* and *Irish
Freedom remained sympathetic. Russell was saved and his position on the Irish Homestead preserved by Plunkett's silence during the controversy. There followed an exchange of views in print between Russell and Connolly, each reading and responding to the other's theories of social and political organisation through the columns of the Irish Homestead and Connolly's books on labour in Ireland. Each offered the other a constituency difficult to reach – in Russell's case the urban worker, in Connolly's the farm labourer and smallholder.

For all this flirtation with republicanism, Russell, like Yeats, was surprised by the outbreak of the Easter rising; he travelled to the home of Edward MacLysaght (qv) in Co. Clare on Good Friday and did not arrive back in Dublin until the following Wednesday, 26 April 1916. His first report of events was published on 13 May in the Irish Homestead, in which he argued that the rising was the logical outcome of the oppression of Dublin's working class, and perhaps portended a larger change to come. He was distraught at Connolly's execution. Connolly himself asked his wife to contact Russell to arrange for his family's emigration to America; having raised £101, Russell secured permission from General John Maxwell (qv) for them to leave, but the licence was revoked when the British authorities awoke to the propaganda use to which the Connollys' departure might be put. Russell was enraged.

Some of this anger is manifest in Russell's The national being published in September 1916. Composed from March 1914, the text is Russell's prediction of apocalypse and recovery, Ireland's surviving the displacements of world war and national convulsion by a commitment to the spiritual economy of cooperation. Russell found practical focus for his thinking in the last major attempt to reconfigure constitutional relations between Britain and Ireland, the Irish Convention, held at Regent House, TCD, from 25 July 1917 to 5 April 1918. With the election of Éamon de Valera (qv) for Sinn Féin to the constituency of East Clare in June 1917, there was pressure for a new settlement to replace an increasingly outmoded Irish Home Rule Act, which had been languishing on the statute books since 1914. Russell secured his government nomination to the Irish Convention as a representative of advanced nationalism by means of a media campaign that culminated in the publication of his 'Thoughts on Irish settlement' in the London Times of 31 May 1917; this was followed by a declaration of support for Russell's ideas from a group that included Alice Stopford Green (qv), Douglas Hyde, and, most surprisingly, Russell's former adversary William Walsh. Russell took his seat at the first meeting of the convention on 25 July 1917, accompanied by MacLysaght, who kept Sinn Féin informed of the convention's progress through the intermediary of Eoin MacNeill (qv). Russell remained a member until 1 February 1918. The experience disheartened him, especially the encounter with the intransigence of Ulster unionism, which was at odds with his own vision of a single island nation. In his last speech to the delegates Russell warned of a revolution to come of the kind that had happened in Russia.

Russell turned his energies back to the Irish Homestead and the writing of The candle of vision (1918). An obscure book even by Russell's standards, The candle
of vision surprised its author by quickly going into a third edition. A precursor to Yeats's *A vision* (1925), Russell's work argues for art, from Shakespeare to Shelley, as a means by which to divine the future, the medium through which to see the trembling behind the veil. With the ending of the first world war in November 1918, a speech that Russell had written for the first anniversary of the Easter rising but never delivered was published in the *Voice of Labour*, a journal edited by Cathal O'Shannon (qv). A former contributor to Connolly's *Worker's Republic*, O'Shannon saw the cooperatives as a useful tool in the creation of a socialist state, as was proved at Ballina, Co. Mayo, in 1919, when a Dublin cooperative society opened a store in the town to supply workers locked out by local employers. As the war of independence began, O'Shannon went on the run to avoid arrest by the RIC.

Russell, meanwhile, was identified publicly with the cause of revolutionary nationalism by Sir Hamar Greenwood (qv), chief secretary for Ireland, in a speech to the British house of commons in 1920. Official censure soon became physical threat as cooperative societies in disturbed areas were attacked by British forces in retaliation for IRA attacks. Russell condemned the attacks in the *Irish Homestead*, but soon realised that the British media had to be involved if his message was to have any impact. The editor of the London *Times*, Wickham Steed, disliked the policy of reprisals. Accordingly, Russell published a letter in *The Times* on 23 August 1920 to protest against the destruction of creameries at Castleiney, Loughmore, and Killea. The consequences of denying Ireland justice were thrown into clear relief in the weeks following. As Terence MacSwiney (qv), lord mayor of Cork, died slowly on hunger strike in prison, Russell again wrote to *The Times*, publishing his poem ‘Brixton prison: August 31, 1920’ on 2 September 1920. MacSwiney read the sonnet in his cell before he died on 25 October, which is shocking considering Russell's final direction: ‘Farewell, Lightbringer, fly to thy heaven again.’

The violence finally resulted in the Anglo–Irish treaty that passed the dál on 7 January 1922. Russell had spent much of 1921 defending the cooperative movement in the *Irish Homestead*, and examining, in pamphlets such as *Ireland and the empire at the court of conscience* and *The inner and the outer island*, what practical and psychological adjustments would be needed to make independence work. Russell excelled in this pragmatism, having the foresight to widen the public debate beyond the rights and wrongs of the independence struggle in an attempt to focus minds on the means by which to secure finance, employment, and security. This determination led to Russell's support for the Free State government during the civil war, by which he signalled his distance from the radical elements whose support he had courted in previous years. (Mary MacSwiney (qv), sister of the dead lord mayor, afterwards railed against Russell for deserting the cause.) Russell tried to resolve his position in *The interpreters* (1922), a prose work which is nearly unreadable as fiction. As a commentary on his own sympathies after independence it has some interest: its central character, Heyt, is a capitalist, educated to a form of sympathy for others during his conversation with the other characters, an architect, an anarchist, a labour leader, and a poet.
The *Irish Statesman* The interpreters sets the frame of reference for Russell's late career, when his project became the amelioration of present conditions rather than changing them entirely. Plunkett, his sponsor, encouraged this transition, in the belief that the new Ireland needed new influence. Accordingly, Plunkett raised funds in Ireland and the United States to fold the *Irish Homestead* into the *Irish Statesman* under Russell's editorship; the first issue appeared on 15 September 1923. Russell's assistant editors were Susan Mitchell and James Good (qv), who had worked previously for the *Freeman's Journal*. Each issue of the new journal comprised a leading article, pages of ‘Notes and comments’ on contemporary events, original writing from emerging and established authors, book and theatre reviews, letters, and advertisements. As subscriber lists show, the journal was read throughout Ireland, in Britain, and in America.

Culture had played a fundamental part in the conception and realisation of the Irish Free State. In this context, the *Irish Statesman* acted as an international bulletin with semi-official status, and Russell, like Yeats, was recognised internationally as an authoritative voice. The *Irish Statesman*'s correspondence columns contained plenty of criticism of this perception, including mockery by Maud Gonne of Russell's anti-republican remarks. The fact remained that Russell's journal, at this particular moment of national transition, exerted an influence that no cultural journal has matched since. Ironically the situations where this influence became most visible were those in which Russell's power began to slip. The Free State government began to legislate for Ireland's cultural difference from its neighbour, with censorship of films, bans on contraception and divorce, and then legislation to protect against what was termed ‘evil literature’. These repressions were partly motivated by the growing influence on the state of religiously affiliated bodies. Russell revolted at this alliance, defending Irish writers' right (within reason) to represent their perception of place and people according to their choice. Russell was never against censorship per se, but he felt that the mechanism of censorship as proposed by the government party would lead to manipulation and ill feeling, which it did. In the early skirmishes Russell published Yeats's opinions, interviews with key ministers under the title ‘As others see us’ in a register of international scrutiny, and scathing editorials, sharpened by decades of practice in support of cooperation, maintaining that censorship, if it had to be passed at all, must operate under the authority of writers alone. His campaign had some success, as elements of the Censorship Act were changed in ways responsive to his arguments.

This episode used much of his energy, and was followed in quick succession by the successful defence of a libel case against the *Irish Statesman* for one of its reviews, which nevertheless cost the journal a crippling £2,500 by November 1928. Russell wondered at this time if he might leave Ireland to teach in an American university; he had received an honorary doctorate of letters from Yale in June 1927, and TCD had honoured him with the same degree in June 1929. The *Irish Statesman* struggled on financially, saved by public subscriptions until the Wall Street crash caused its key donors to withdraw their support. This signalled the end for a journal that
had been crucial to the construction of Ireland's self-imagination after the civil war. This construction was, at times, partisan in favour of the ruling party and unfairly dismissive of a temporarily defeated republicanism. Russell made connections with some of the generation of writers who had fought and lost in the civil war, notably Frank O'Connor (qv) and Sean O'Faolain (qv), whose later joint project, *The Bell*, bore the imprint of their *Irish Statesman* experience.

Russell's final editorial in the *Irish Statesman* summarised his intentions for the journal as an open space of debate over Ireland's present reality and possible future. There is no doubt that his view of the present was eccentric, and at times reactionary, but there was no other public intellectual figure in the first decade of independence who had such broad influence. That influence worked, more often than not, for the common good, advocating a mutually supportive society, civic commitment, and – still – cooperative economics, all designed to give each citizen a stake in the community. In the eight years of the *Irish Statesman*'s publication, Russell had published articles on the river Shannon electrification scheme, on James Joyce's experimental *Work in progress*, on banking, on Jack Yeats's (qv) painting, on republicanism, on Italian fascism, on farming. If the variety of his interests was a weakness when it came to his art, it was the current of his journalism, his hyperactive imagination engaging his audience in a world beyond the Free State's narrowing borders.

**Last years** On the demise of the *Irish Statesman*, Russell suffered further shocks. His son, Diarmuid, who had worked at the journal for three years in the late 1920s, emigrated to America in May 1929. Violet Russell was diagnosed as suffering from cancer, and Russell was forced to give an American lecture tour to raise money for her treatment. Before he left on 13 September 1930, Horace Plunkett, R. A. Anderson (qv), and Father Thomas Finlay (qv) organised a reception at Plunkett House, the cooperative headquarters, and presented Russell with a gift of £800. The lecture tour, which moved from east coast to west, then south and north, lasted eight months. Returning through London, Russell met George Moore for the first time since 1916; he spent a brief time in Dublin, and then moved on to Sheep Haven in Donegal, a favourite retreat since 1904. Back in Dublin his wife's illness grew worse, a strain that emerges in the account by Patrick Kavanagh (qv) in *The green fool* (1938) of meeting a distracted Russell about this time. Violet Russell died on 3 February 1932. *Song and its fountains* was published two weeks later. This was a brief achievement before bitterness crept into Russell's public writings, prompted partly by attacks made on Yeats's Irish Academy of Letters, for which Russell wrote the rules and worked as honorary secretary. His association with Yeats remained emotionally fraught. Russell's book *The avatars* (1933) was originally dedicated to Yeats, 'my oldest friend and enemy', but that line was deleted before publication.

Russell now began preparation to leave Ireland, selling his house in July 1933, resigning from the academy in July, and arriving in London in August, where he first lived in lodgings at 41 Sussex Gardens. Unsettled, he left for America in December
1934, sailing from Southampton, to lecture on cooperative societies and rural life, subjects close to Franklin Roosevelt's hopes for the New Deal. Russell met M. L. Wilson, under-secretary of agriculture, before meeting the president himself on 5 January 1935. Russell received an invitation to speak to native American communities in Arizona and New Mexico, but he felt ill and tired, and his stomach was giving him such pain as to cause him to return to London in March. In new lodgings at 14 Tavistock Place, London, Russell was diagnosed with colitis. He travelled to Havenhurst, a Bournemouth nursing home, on 21 June, in the company of two friends, Charles Weekes and Hector Munro. He was wretchedly ill, and the diagnosis of colitis was changed to cancer in early July. After an abdominal operation at another nursing home, Stagsden, Russell died 17 July 1935, having spent his last evening with Constantine Curran (qv), Oliver St John Gogarty (qv), and Pamela Travers, later famous as the author of Mary Poppins. Seán O'Sullivan (qv) arrived the morning after to sketch his face.

Russell's body was returned to Ireland on 19 July, resting at Plunkett House as people paid their respects before the burial on the 20th at Mount Jerome cemetery; the funeral procession was more than a mile long, and the mourners included de Valera, W. T. Cosgrave (qv), Yeats, and Frank O'Connor, who gave the oration. ‘He might’, O'Connor said, ‘if he had devoted himself to one art only, have been amongst the very greatest figures in the world; but if he had done so, he would not have been Æ, and Ireland, and we, would have been poorer for that’ (Ir. Times, 22 July 1935). Russell was, for four decades and more, a radical intellectual engaged with the cultural, economic, social and political changes that transformed twentieth-century Ireland. A connection point between his readers and the world, Russell was a poet, painter, prose writer, and journalist, an administrator, visionary, and polemicist, whose commitment to the ideal reality of Irish independence was the signature of all his thinking.

L. P. Byrne, Twenty-one years of the Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society, 1897–1918 (1919); William Clyde, Æ (1935); John Eglinton, A memoir of Æ: George William Russell (1937); Patrick Kavanagh, The green fool (1938); C. Coates, Some less-known chapters in the life of Æ (George Russell): being the substance of a lecture delivered at Belfast, November, 1936 (1939); H. Wallace, ‘Æ: a prophet out of an ancient age’, Colby Quarterly, iv, no. 2 (May 1955), 28–31; Alan Denson (ed.), Letters from Æ (1961); Darrell Figgis, Æ (George W. Russell): a study of a man and a nation (1970); Henry Summerfield, That myriad-minded man: a biography of George William Russell ‘Æ’, 1867–1935 (1975); Patrick Bolger, The Irish co-operative movement: its history and development (1977); R. B. Davis, George William Russell (Æ) (1977); Peter Kuch, Yeats and ‘Æ’: the antagonism that unites dear friends (1986); Trevor West, Horace Plunkett: co-operation and politics, an Irish
biography (1986); Nicholas Allen, *George Russell (Æ) and the new Ireland, 1905–30* (2003)