George Russell (AE) is the bridge between O’Grady’s vision of a bountiful, feudal Ireland and the poets who stalked through the General Post Office (GPO) with Cuchulain at their side. He mobilizes memory to the cause of that “desired history” outlined in O’Grady’s novels and prose. Too often, he appears in studies of the Irish Revival as a peripheral figure, “generalised into insignificance” by his proximity to Yeats or mocked for his purple poetic style. Russell’s insistence on the authority of a mystic “remembering” and “imagining” of the heroic past has been overshadowed by Yeats’s more influential “invention” of the Ireland that he would help to create. Like his contemporaries, Russell locates the conditions and attributes necessary for a revival of heroism in myth, primitive energy, and a transhistorical framework. He also conflates his desire to return to a more sacred and spiritual Celtic tradition with a rejection of England and its “black centres of boasted prosperity.” Unlike his contemporaries, however, Russell offers a sustained critique of the imperial framework underpinning the political conditions of his own time. In fact, as I demonstrate, Russell’s distinctive anti-imperial, heroic rhetoric is the dominant strain in his early pamphlets and poetry, translating Carlylean principles of authority into a mystic idiom. His attempt to democratize the heroic principle is an unrecognized modality of the more widely promulgated “will to power” in the Irish Revival.

George Russell was a polymath—a poet, novelist, dramatist, editor, critic, and painter. He operated in many arenas—cultural, political, and economic—and had an extraordinary impact on the Dublin of his time. He appears in Joyce’s Ulysses as “the tall figure in bearded homespun,”

In his study of Russell’s editorship of the *Irish Homestead* and *Irish Statesman* from 1905–30, Nicholas Allen returns Russell to the hub of activities in the “new Ireland” that he helped to create. He recovers the pragmatic Russell, the talent-spotter, negotiator, and gifted editor who has been obscured by the visionary mystic. Allen also defines Russell’s Ireland as a “multiple site of conflicting interests, a nation, then state, where anarchism, cooperation, labour, and capital fought for recognition through pamphlets, periodicals, news-sheets, and weeklies.”  

This “place of polemic” is a less stable and legible Ireland than the Ireland read solely through the lens of the monumen-tal Yeats. Indeed, Allen suggests, “The great monument to this Ireland might be the power station on the Shannon river, and not the General Post Office.”  

As I show here, the tendency to read the Irish heroic aesthetic in monolithic terms is similarly misguided. Russell’s intervention in the Revival’s construction of heroism reveals the complexity of its attitudes and the contradictory nature of its achievements. The Revival concerns of authority, tradition, and Celtic renewal remain constant, but Russell’s mystic interpretation opens a line of enquiry that pushes beyond Carlylean principles to find the hero in everyman.

This chapter traces the development of Russell’s heroic aesthetic from his theosophical investigations, through his creation of a pure zone of childhood to his search for a messianic avatar who will restore Ireland to its golden age. In each of these phases, Russell adapts the hierarchi-cal lexicon of “Great Men” and superior leadership to his own system of spiritual equality. Of course, heroes, kings, and avatars are not easily assimilated into the language of democracy, and such rhetorical contradictions undermine the success of Russell’s heroic model. Russell’s most obvious point of departure from the hierarchic activities of his peers is in his work for the Irish Agricultural Organization Society (IAOS). In promoting a model of economic cooperation, Russell converts his democratic theory into a pragmatic social practice. Like all the writers examined here who lived through the First World War, the Easter Rising, the Irish War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War, Russell is profoundly changed by the revolutionary period. His later works (*The Interpreters* and *The Avatars*) betray a disillusioned conservatism as the “pigmy rabble” fails to live up to his expectations. His democratic form of heroism is inflected by the Revival concerns of authority and leadership and is ultimately defeated by the shock of the new Ireland post independence. My focus here is on Russell’s unique democratic version of the heroic aesthetic, one that has been subsumed by the coherence and dominance of the revivalist and nationalist version of heroism familiar in histories of the period.