

John Hewitt: Creating a Canon of Ulster Art

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In 1943 Northern Ireland was at war. For four years the population had weathered the hardships of rationing and evacuation. Yet war also brought a degree of prosperity to the Province's industrial economy and with the involvement in a global conflict and influx of foreign servicemen, came a glimpse of the world beyond Ulster's shores.¹ By the end of 1943, the air-raids had ceased and a new spirit of optimism was palpable. This spirit was particularly prevalent in the arts where there was a growing pride in local culture. Reflecting on the period the poet, critic and curator, John Hewitt (1907 – 87) concluded 'never before in my lifetime had the Arts seemed so lively and exciting. The war was far away and, since travel was severely restricted, we were left to cultivate our own gardens'.² This essay explores the Hewitt's role in attempting to articulate a distinctive artistic and cultural identity for Ulster from the middle of the twentieth century. Focusing on Hewitt's interpretation of the visual arts, it examines the ways in which he acted as a curator and advocate for particular artists who he felt embodied his sense of a regional style of art for Ulster.

During the period of the war, artists and writers in Belfast were gathering to promote their own work and the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), the first public body dedicated to the arts on the island of Ireland, was established.³ Central to CEMA's visual arts committee and taking an active role in many of the artist led initiatives, Hewitt became the spokesman for a generation of progressive artists whom he believed could create a distinctive modern art for Ulster. Over the next two decades, Hewitt's critical and curatorial efforts both introduced public across the north of Ireland to modern art and promoted the idea of a distinct Ulster regional culture. This culture, he believed, could unite the divided communities of Northern Ireland through what he understood as a collective sense of identity, rooted in the landscape and nourished by a distinctive Ulster identity.

¹ War brought prosperity to Ulster's shipyards and aircraft industry. J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 256. American and British servicemen were stationed in Ulster.

² John Hewitt, contribution to 'The War Years in Ulster 1939-45', ed, Frank Ormsby, *The Honest Ulsterman*, 64, September 1979 – January 1980, 24-27, p.27. Hewitt was appointed as an art assistant at the Belfast Museum in 1930, rising to deputy director by 1957.

³ Modelled on CEMA in Britain, which was set up during the war and absorbed into the newly formed Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946, CEMA NI, became the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1962. The Arts Council of Ireland was not established until 1953. See 'The State as Patron', in Margaret Garlake's, *New Art, New World: British Art in Post-war Society*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998, 17.

Suggesting that Hewitt's championing of regionalism shaped his approach to art, this paper argues that his celebration of the Ulster artist, Colin Middleton, was informed by the belief that Middleton's combination of local and international references could provide a blueprint for regional modernism. Hewitt's support for Middleton is particularly illuminating in this regard when contrasted with his treatment of other contemporary figures, such as Daniel O'Neill, Gerard Dillon and others.

The idea of the 'invented tradition', as explored by Eric Hobsbawm, provides a useful frame of reference for Hewitt's focus on regionalism within his art criticism. In Hobsbawm's interpretation, the nation, and its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation state, national symbols and histories are all based on 'exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative'.⁴ Hewitt's attempt to construct a canon of Ulster art can be considered within these terms, and interpreted as an effort to invent traditions that could provide legitimacy for his political and cultural claims.

Some of Hewitt's first comments on Ulster regionalism were expressed in the essay, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists' published in *Now in Ulster*, 1944. This anthology of articles, short stories, poetry, paintings and photographs, compiled by the artist brothers George and Arthur Campbell, provided an impressive picture of the arts in the Province. In 1943, the Campbells had published the booklet *Ulster in Black and White*, which included their work along with Maurice Wilks and Patricia Webb and intended to provide 'a means for four Ulster artists of widely varying styles to express themselves'.⁵ *Now in Ulster* was a more ambitious project which reproduced the Campbells' work alongside paintings by five other Ulster artists: Gerard Dillon, Colin Middleton, John Luke, and John Turner.

In his essay, Hewitt initially stressed that a comprehensive survey of progressive art in Northern Ireland would include several other artists of merit, but then conceded that 'those who are here comprise the majority seriously at work, and contain names that will outlive our epoch'.⁶ Remarking that, 'the freshness, liveliness, and awareness of contemporary trends', among the 'more experimental of our younger Ulster painters gives me reason to make claims which I should not have ventured on five years ago', Hewitt focused on Luke and Middleton and suggested that 'each by his own individual approach achieves status in the front rank of painters in this island and I believe beyond'.⁷

⁴ See Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 13–14.

⁵ Arthur Campbell and George Campbell, *Ulster in Black and White*, Belfast: W and G Baird, 1943.

⁶ Hewitt, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', in George and Arthur Campbell, eds, *Now in Ulster*, Belfast: Campbell Bros. and W and G Baird, 1944, 13.

Emphasizing that he had not selected the artists, Hewitt suggested that a comprehensive survey would include other artists such as Tom Carr, Nevill Johnson, Maurice Wilks and Markey Robinson.

⁷ Hewitt, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', 13, 34. Hewitt recalled that this was the first time that he had written about the work of 'the younger quartette', Dillon, O'Neill and the Campbell brothers. John Hewitt and Theo Snoddy, eds, *Art in Ulster I*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1977, 120.

Contemporary with the emergence of literary regionalism, both *Ulster in Black and White* and *Now in Ulster* can be seen as manifestations of a growing sense of regional cultural identity in Ulster. Declaring himself the spokesman for this nascent regional identity, Hewitt worked tirelessly over the next two decades to encourage and promote local art and culture in Ulster in the hope that it would contribute to the formation of an authentic Ulster regional culture.

An early manifestation of Hewitt's growing sense of regional identity was his involvement with the short-lived literary journal *Lagan* founded in 1943.⁸ Contemporary with the Campbells' efforts to promote local art, *Lagan* united Ulster writers and poets including Hewitt, and Sam Hanna Bell, with the editor John Boyd, in the belief that 'the struggle for a way of writing is also the struggle for a way of life'.⁹ As Hewitt was later to explain 'although the others were not avowedly regionalists, that was the slant of the thing'.¹⁰

Wartime isolation and restriction on travel certainly encouraged this turn inward, but as Martin Mooney has pointed out, 'regionalism was also evidence, perhaps paradoxically, of an outward-looking attitude on the part of its few adherents, a search for an ideology with which to supplement socialism in its challenge to home-grown philistinism and complacency'.¹¹ In fact, Hewitt's regionalism can be seen as part of a wider movement. As John Wilson Foster has suggested, 'in the 1940s regionalism was very much in the air that British writers were breathing and was a near-synonym for the Celticism (Welsh, Scottish, Irish) that was a geographic strain of the dominant Romanticism of the period'.¹² Yet, as Foster emphasises, while Hewitt may have inherited the idea of the region, his dream of cultural synthesis in Ulster, meant that he 'accorded it more urgent significance than did his fellow regionalists in Britain'.¹³

Reflecting during the 1980s on the impetus of his regionalist project, Hewitt wrote 'I thought that if we could establish a regional consciousness for the North of Ireland it would give us something to cling to, a kind of key to our identity'.¹⁴ As Mooney has suggested, Hewitt believed that the 'differences within a community and its language could be transformed from zones of conflict into valuable resources'.¹⁵ Reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's idea of 'hybridity' conceived within a post-colonial context as a 'cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an

⁸ John Hewitt, *A North Light: Twenty-five years in a municipal art gallery*, edited by Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013, 148–155.

⁹ John Boyd, *Lagan*, 2, Belfast: Lagan Publications, 1943.

¹⁰ Hewitt, quoted by Martin Mooney in 'A native mode': Language and Regionalism in the Poetry of John Hewitt', *Irish Review*, 3, Cork: Cork University Press, 1988, 67–74, 68.

¹¹ Mooney, 1988, 68. Hewitt was a life-long socialist who worked with the Labour Party in the 1920s and with the National Council for Civil Liberties and the Peace League. Paul Arthur, 'John Hewitt's Hierarchy of Values', in Gerard Dawe and John Wilson Foster (eds.) *The Poets Place: Ulster literature and society: Essays in honour of John Hewitt*, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1991, 276.

¹² John Wilson Foster, 'Radical Regionalism', *Colonial Consequences: essays in Irish literature and culture*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991, 278.

¹³ Foster, 'Radical Regionalism', 278.

¹⁴ Hewitt quoted in Mooney, 'A native mode', 1988, 68.

¹⁵ Mooney, 'A native mode', 1988, 68.

assumed or imposed hierarchy', Hewitt envisioned a regional culture incorporating Ulster's opposed traditions.¹⁶ What he sought was effectively the creation of a hybrid regional culture with the potential to unite the Unionist and Nationalist communities of Northern Ireland, through a synthesis of the linguistic and artistic traditions.

Through his poetry, writing and criticism, Hewitt saw himself as both a recorder and contributor to this regional culture. However, he was also acutely aware that, given the state of the arts in Ulster, a mammoth effort was required. Discussing the arts in Ulster in 1951, he wrote,

Until this decade, no one would have been rash enough to claim that there was, or ever had been, an easily identifiable school of Irish painting even worth numbering among the lesser schools of European art. So with Ulster ... for here the same factors ... plus a few others with a different emphasis from the rest of the country must be considered.¹⁷

Although his regionalism was consolidated in the 1940s, Hewitt's efforts to encourage modern art in Ulster had begun two decades earlier when, after joining the staff of the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, he became involved with the local art world. Distressed by the conservatism and general ignorance of continental modernism, he became Ulster's most outspoken art critic.¹⁸

Reviewing the first major exhibition of the Ulster Academy in 1931, Hewitt criticised the institution for its conservatism and judged that 'the total effect is depressing'.¹⁹ Writing that as 'we in Ulster have now, as a further mark of our separation from the South, an Academy of Arts of our very own', he concluded,

chiefly it emphasises what we long have suspected, that Ulster artists are mostly ignorant and uncritical, out of touch with contemporary tendencies, and absolutely without knowledge of the best work of the past forty years. With one or two exceptions there is no evidence that they have ever heard of Post-Impressionism.²⁰

¹⁶ Homi, K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 4.

¹⁷ Hewitt, 'Painting and Sculpture in Ulster', in S.H. Bell, ed, *The Arts in Ulster: A Symposium*, Belfast, 1951, reprinted in Tom Clyde (ed.), *Ancestral Voices: The selected Prose of John Hewitt*, Belfast: Blackstaff, 1987, 87. Hewitt doesn't extrapolate as to the nature of these 'other factors' but he is probably referring to sectarian conflict.

¹⁸ Initially publishing much of his criticism in literary journals, from 1955–1957, Hewitt wrote a weekly column for the *Belfast Telegraph* under the pseudonym 'MacArt'.

¹⁹ The institution that became the Ulster Academy in 1930 grew out of the Belfast Ramblers' Sketching Club, 1879–1890, and the Belfast Art Society, 1890–1930. In 1950 it was renamed the Royal Ulster Academy. See Martyn Angelsea, *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts*, Belfast: The Academy, 1981.

²⁰ Hewitt, 'The Exhibition of the Ulster Academy of Arts', *The Northman*, winter, 1931, 53–54. Hewitt excluded from this criticism Middleton's work *Woman* of which he wrote, 'the only valid criticisms are firstly that the pattern of recurring curves is rather too simple, secondly that the artist should have let paint finish the face instead of pencil. Any other comment must spring from venerable prejudice'.

By emphasising the Academy's independence from the Free State, it could be argued that perhaps Hewitt was hoping to appeal to a sense of regional pride that could spur Ulster artists to explore modernism. Yet, three years later he was forced to repeat his diagnosis. In a review of an Academy exhibition of 1934, he condemned the quality of both local art and criticism. Lamenting that, 'the inaccurate and pseudo-literary accounts which have already appeared in our leading journals, demonstrate ... the deplorable state of popular aesthetics in Belfast', Hewitt concluded, 'this exhibition ... contains above two hundred and forty works, not more than fifteen of which should have been allowed to leave the studio'.²¹ Among those fifteen were works by Luke whose *Dead Tree* was judged 'immeasurably the best painted picture here', and Middleton, whom Hewitt wrote, 'gives us something individual in the contemporary spate of reclining figures'.²² Both artists exhibited in the Ulster Unit, an exhibition that Hewitt helped to organise a few months later.

In the catalogue of the Ulster Unit's only exhibition, held in December 1934, Hewitt identified the future of the arts in Ulster:

At the beginning of the last century Belfast was in full contact with the flow of European events. ... But in the intervening period mainly for political-economic reasons, the scope of wit and culture suffered a time-lag of increasing proportions. Our province became provincial. However, since the Great War and partly consequent upon it, the acceleration of social change has narrowed the gap between Ulster and Europe. Once again our best aesthetic thought is coloured by contemporary tendencies.²³

The Ulster Unit consisted of sixteen local artists, many of whom had won scholarships to the Slade or Royal College of Art and had returned to the Province determined to improve art teaching and educate a public that had little awareness of modern art.²⁴ Asserting the importance of the exhibition Hewitt concluded,

²¹ Hewitt, 'The Ulster Academy of Arts Exhibition, October 24 – December 1: With a few remarks on local art criticism by John Hewitt', *The New Northman*, Autumn, 1934, 8.

²² Hewitt, 'The Ulster Academy of Arts Exhibition, October 24 – December 1', 1934, 8.

²³ Hewitt, 'Preface', *Ulster Unit*, exhibition catalogue, Belfast, 1934. S.B. Kennedy notes that the Unit was founded out of the short lived Northern Ireland Guild of Artists which was formed by John Hunter the previous year as a forum in which young and progressive artists, who were usually excluded by the Ulster Academy could meet and exhibit their work. S.B. Kennedy, *Irish art and modernism 1880 – 1950*, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1991, 73.

²⁴ The exhibition was held in the Locksley Hall, Belfast, and financed by the members' subscriptions. It just broke even, and dissolved shortly afterwards. Hewitt recalls that Middleton showed three abstract paintings and several prints. John Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976, 9. S.B. Kennedy notes that Luke's *Connswater Bridge*, 1934 and *Lustre Jug*, 1934, were exhibited alongside works by R.C. Toogood, Kathleen Bridle, W.R. Gordon, Edward L. Mansfield, Edward Marr, Margaret Yeames, Crawford Mitchell, George McCann, Jean McGregor, Elizabeth Clements and the architect Denis O'D Hanna. Kennedy, *Irish art and modernism 1880 – 1950*, 74.

In this Unit, Ulster has for the first time a body of artists alert to continental influence while that influence is still real and vital. It is no vain hope that with a consistent group bound by more ties than those of mere geographical proximity, working on experimental lines and no longer in an archaic dialectic, Belfast will move step by step not only with Great Britain but with France and Scandinavia.²⁵

Not surprisingly the press response to the exhibition was tentative. The critic of the *Belfast Newsletter* suggested that 'a certain amount must be dismissed as hocus-pocus', but admitted that, 'even the most unreal things ... represent honest and worthy experiment'.²⁶ The *Northern Whig* concentrated on the more representational works including Luke's *Connswater Bridge* which he recognised as 'a fine picture' in contrast to Middleton's 'abstracted' works.²⁷ While also praising Luke, the *Belfast Telegraph* recognised that although the Ulster Unit symbolised a 'new departure in artistic adventure', the inclusion of more 'orthodox' artists such as Luke, meant that 'altogether the exhibits lead from the academic stage through many aspects of the modern school'.²⁸

Despite this pluralistic aspect of the exhibition, as S.B. Kennedy has suggested the Ulster Unit were 'the first group of artists in Ireland to share, in effect if not by intent, a common aspiration of the role and purpose of art. For them modernism symbolised the spirit of the age'.²⁹ Although this common purpose failed to keep the Unit together, their example inspired later artist-led initiatives and their stress on the potentially vital role of art in society was carried on through Hewitt's promotion of a modernism (referring here to modern painting which reflected developments and innovations in painting from the cultural centres of Paris and London) in Ulster. While Hewitt contributed to artist-led initiatives, as a member of CEMA's visual arts committee, he also had the opportunity to pursue his cause through official channels.

Established in February 1943 with the aim of providing 'the Province as a whole, ... exhibitions of first-class work and dramatic and musical performance of the highest standard by professional and semi-professional artists', CEMA became the focus for state sponsored artistic activity in Ulster for the next two decades.³⁰ Upon its foundation the Council set up an art committee that included Hewitt and the artist John Hunter who, in his role as Art Inspector for the Ministry of Education, was keenly aware of the need to improve art education in the Province

²⁵ Hewitt, 'The Ulster Academy of Arts Exhibition, October 24 – December 1: With a few remarks on local art criticism by John Hewitt', 1934.

²⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, 19/12/34.

²⁷ 'Present-day art: Opening of Ulster Unit's Exhibition: Striking Display: Fortnights occupation of Locksley Hall', *Northern Whig*, 18/12/34 by a special correspondent.

²⁸ 'New Spirit in Art: Exhibition by the Ulster Unit', *Belfast Telegraph*, 19/12/34.

²⁹ S.B. Kennedy, *Irish art and modernism 1880 – 1950*, 73.

³⁰ CEMA, Annual Report for 01/02/43–31/03/44, Arts Council Archives, Public Records Office Northern Ireland (PRONI.)

and introduce the public to modern art.³¹ Although the council ultimately hoped to bring exhibitions of foreign art to Northern Ireland, war-time restrictions on travel meant that in the beginning, they had to 'rely on Irish artists alone to maintain high standards'.³²

Armed with an official mandate and a small amount of public funding, the art committee organised the first CEMA loan exhibition, *Living Irish Artists (Series I)*. Consisting of forty pictures by nineteen living Irish artists, eight of whom were from the North, this exhibition toured to six towns outside Belfast and was also shown in factories in the capital.³³ Ranging from the comparative academicism of Seán Keating via Jack B. Yeats, to the more explicitly modernist Louis le Brocquy, the southern work mirrored the pluralism of the first Irish Exhibition of Living Art held the same year. While the North was also represented by a range of artists from William Conor and Paul Henry to the more innovative work of Luke and Middleton, there was a noted absence of work by the younger progressive painters, Dillon, O'Neill and George Campbell.

The decision to leave out the work of these young artists and concentrate on more established northern artists, the majority of whom produced representational images, may have been a cautionary measure to prevent complaints from both the public and official sources.³⁴ *Living Irish Artists (Series II)*, 1944, continued this trend and consisted of watercolours by fourteen resident artists, most of whom painted subjects that were, as Hewitt described 'all figurative and readily comprehensible to the viewer'.³⁵

³¹ CEMA Northern Ireland, originated in Queen's University's Joint Committee for Adult education and the Pilgrim Trust. The Art Advisory Sub-committee established in 1943 consisted of O. de Selincourt, H.E. Broderick, R.T. Hewitt, Mrs E. Montgomery, Miss S. Rosamund Praeger, Mrs H.C. Richardson, Mr Denis Winston and John Hewitt with Lieut. Col. John F. Hunter in the chair. Hewitt took over from Hunter in 1949 and was also a member of the standing committee and CEMA board until 1957. CEMA, Annual Report for 01/02/43–31/03/44, Arts Council Archives, Public Records Office Northern Ireland (PRONI.)

³² CEMA's Annual Report of 1944–45 stated that the travel ban imposed in March 1943 was 'for security reasons in connection with the preparations for D Day'.

³³ The exhibition travelled to Derry, Armagh, Dungannon, Enniskillen and Omagh with a selection also travelling to Larne. The annual report also notes that the pictures were shown in the canteen of 'an important linen concern and selections were shown in other Belfast factories. CEMA Annual Report, 1943–44. S.B. Kennedy lists the artists involved as Kathleen Bridle, J.H. Craig, William Conor, Lady Glenavy, Paul Henry, Seán Keating, Frances Kelly, Harry Kernoff, Charles Lamb, Louis le Brocquy, John Luke, J. Langtry Lynas, Violet McAdoo, Maurice MacGonigal, Norah McGuinness, Colin Middleton, Seán O'Sullivan, Hilda Roberts and Jack B. Yeats. S.B. Kennedy, 1991, 153–155.

³⁴ I have not located a copy of the catalogue. However, with the exception of Middleton, all the Northern artists are likely to have exhibited representational images of familiar subjects.

³⁵ The CEMA Annual Report 1943–44 notes that forty-two works were shown in Belfast Art Gallery, then in 'a large foundry' and the Group theatre and that the exhibition would then to be sent to various RAF and military establishments. Hewitt lists the contributors as Kathleen Bridle, William Conor, Gordon, Hull, Violet McAdoo, Romeo Toogood, Richard Faulkner, J.D. McCord, Theo J. Gracey, H. Echlin Neill, David Allen, George Waters, David Gould, and Marjorie and Olive Henry. Hewitt, *Art in Ulster 1, 1977*, 110.

In 'Watercolour in Ulster', his catalogue essay for the exhibition, Hewitt made a concerted effort to locate the medium of watercolour, as not only authentically Irish, but specifically connected to Ulster.³⁶ Invoking a meteorological argument typical of nationalist discourse, he claimed that the medium of watercolour,

is certainly well adapted to outdoor work in our climate. The magnificently unstable weather, with swiftly altering skies and the coiling protean clouds, determined by our nearness to the Atlantic here made it necessary for the landscape artist to have at his fingertips a lively and responsive implement for recording the restless panorama of hour and season.³⁷

Having established the technique as native, Hewitt went on to guide his audience towards recognition of the familiar.

Here is an Ulster anthology ... the brilliant leafiness of summer in the park; the quiet lapping of the calm tide; the sound and rush of swirling bog-brown water; the laughter of children at play; the breathtaking surprise of a ghostly gable caught in the headlights of a car; the absurd incongruity of the thatched cottage mobbed by encroaching villas; the chatter and chair-scraping of tourists; the friendly whiteness of walls in strong sunlight.³⁸

Hewitt's efforts to naturalise these works and his emphasis on the local, should be considered within the context of his wider mission to construct a canon of Ulster art.

Although CEMA did not proclaim regional aspirations, as an institution supported by the Northern Irish Ministry of Education and independent of the Arts Council of Great Britain, its remit was effectively regional.³⁹ Appointed chairman of the Art committee in 1949, Hewitt also served on the Standing committee and the Board of CEMA and had a considerable influence on the Council's art programme.

In 1943, Hewitt also saw the opportunity to promote Colin Middleton and simultaneously introduce the Northern Irish public to modern art. With the outbreak of war in 1939, all the contents of the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery had been evacuated to the countryside. By 1943 the threat had subsided to the degree

³⁶ I have not located a copy of this catalogue.

³⁷ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster 1*, 1977, 110. Hewitt's attempt to portray watercolour as native to Ulster's climate can also be seen in terms of Hobsbawn's idea of 'invented traditions' where discourses including those of landscape, natural phenomena and even meteorology can be tailored to support the idea of the nation. Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983.

³⁸ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster 1*, 1977, 110.

³⁹ Between partition in 1921 and the reintroduction of direct rule in 1972, Ulster had its own bicameral devolved legislature. This Parliament at Stormont could legislate for a wide range of areas, with only issues such as taxation, foreign affairs and the armed forces outside its remit and remaining under Westminster.

that the gallery space was made available for exhibitions.⁴⁰ Seizing the chance, Hewitt invited Middleton to stage his first one-man show.

The exhibition held in August, was the first solo exhibition by a local artist ever held in the Gallery and consisted of 115 works.⁴¹ Stylistically they ranged from impressionistic landscapes to surreal figurative work, a range that the artist Tom Carr labelled 'an amazing anthology of modern art'.⁴² Although the public reaction to Middleton's show was generally positive both the diversity of his work and the complexity of his symbolist canvases caused confusion. While declaring Middleton, 'without doubt the most brilliant of our younger group' the critic of the *Northern Whig* admitted that he was a 'problem' artist whose 'symbolism, despite certain obvious affinities to modern psychoanalytical formulae is over-laden with historical literary and geographical significance which are not commonly intelligible'.⁴³ Skirting around Middleton's symbolism, the *Belfast Telegraph* instead stressed that all the paintings were done in Northern Ireland and that as the first solo show by a local artist the exhibition was 'a milestone in the history of the gallery'.⁴⁴ Reflecting on the reaction to the exhibition in a letter to his friend Patrick Maybin, Hewitt wrote, 'most people over forty can't make head or tail of the symbolist stuff – anymore than Colin can himself'.⁴⁵ Made partly in jest, this remark also refers to Middleton's attribution of much of his symbolism to unconscious sources.

Criticism of the exhibition was directed at both role of the unconscious in Middleton's work and his tendency to work in diverse styles. However, while admitting that, 'the bulk of visitors were baffled by the remarkable variety of style and idiom,' Hewitt interpreted Middleton's diversity as a strength that made him the ideal artist to introduce the public to recent art history.⁴⁶ Claiming that this was, 'the public's first opportunity to see our first artist move among contemporary conceptions like a scholar, in a library, choosing the volumes he needed ... to yield the helpful reference, the illuminating quotation', Hewitt identified Middleton as the Ulster artist 'most alert to continental influence'.⁴⁷ Believing that he had found a foil to provincialism, he celebrated Middleton as one of the few Irish artists who had avoided both exile and ignorance, or as he later described him,

⁴⁰ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster 1*, 1977, 105.

⁴¹ 'Museums Special Exhibitions taking on International Character', *Northern Whig and Belfast Post*, 10/08/43.

⁴² No catalogue was printed for the 1943 exhibition, however Hewitt records that a list of works 'plus a copy of an explanatory note prepared by the artist was made available for enquiring visitors'. A copy of this text is in Middleton's archive in the Ulster Museum. Tom Carr quoted in Hewitt, *Art in Ulster 1*, 1977, 105.

⁴³ 'Variety Keynote at One-man Art Show', *Northern Whig and Belfast Post*, 8/09/43.

⁴⁴ 'One man exhibition at Belfast Art Gallery', *Belfast Telegraph*, 8/09/43.

⁴⁵ Hewitt letter to Patrick Maybin, 10/1943, Hewitt Archive, PRONI, quoted from 'Sources on John Hewitt', unpublished paper by Grace McGrath, PRONI, delivered at the John Hewitt Summer School July 2003.

⁴⁶ Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, 1976, 18.

⁴⁷ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster 1*, 1977, 105, Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*.

an artist born, and living still on the westernmost edge of Europe who might well ... have remained content with one piece of driftwood which struck the Irish shore and settled down to its sole exploitation, he has informed himself, or left himself open to be alerted to the swiftly succeeding waves of influence.⁴⁸

Perhaps at Hewitt's suggestion, the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery purchased a work from Middleton's exhibition. However, while Hewitt praised Middleton's innovations, the Gallery chose the impressionistic *Lagan, Annadale, October 1941*.⁴⁹ The first Middleton to enter a public collection, this was a conservative choice within the context of the exhibition. The loose brush strokes, glimpses of exposed canvas, simplified figures, and conscious naivety of the work, however, meant that it was among the more radical works in the collection.⁵⁰ Significantly, as a representational image of everyday life, set in a familiar area of Belfast, *Lagan, Annadale* could be clearly identified as a local picture. While Middleton's surrealist and symbolist canvases displayed the 'continental influence', that Hewitt celebrated, his impressionistic images of civilian life touched a chord in wartime Belfast. Yet, despite his praise of Middleton's modernism and exploration of the forms of the European avant-garde, Hewitt's desire to encourage art in Ulster meant that he was becoming increasingly focused on art that could be identified as local. Simultaneous with his celebration of Middleton's internationalism, Hewitt was promoting regionalism as a viable cultural and political alternative to the conflicts between Irish nationalism and pro-British Unionism in Northern Ireland.

In 1947 Hewitt published an essay in the *Northman* entitled 'Regionalism: the Last Chance'. Suggesting that western man was 'threatened by over-centralisation' and 'rapidly losing his individual responses in the hurricane of propaganda', Hewitt identified a crisis that he believed could only be solved through regionalism.⁵¹ Turning to his own situation, he argued that 'Ulster considered as a region and not as the symbol of any particular creed can ... command the loyalty of every one of its inhabitants'.⁵² Defining a region as 'an area which possesses geographical and economic coherence, which has had some sort of traditional and historical identity and which still, in some measure, demonstrates cultural and linguistic individuality', Hewitt explained that 'regionalism is based upon the conviction that as man is a social being, he must, now that the nation has become an enormously

⁴⁸ Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, 30.

⁴⁹ Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, 18. This is the title used in recent Ulster Museum Publication. Hewitt refers to this work as *Annadale Embankment*. Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, 18.

⁵⁰ Belfast Museum included some recent British art in the Lloyd Patterson Collection amassed between 1919–1933. S.B. Kennedy notes that by 1933 the collection included works by Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Mark Gertler, Duncan Grant, Paul Nash, Sickert, and Wadsworth. S.B. Kennedy, *Irish art and modernism 1880 – 1950*, chapter 4, fn.16.

⁵¹ Hewitt, 'Regionalism: The Last Chance', *Northman*, 1947, reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 122.

⁵² Hewitt, 'Regionalism: The Last Chance', *Northman*, 1947, reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 125

complicated organisation, find some smaller unit to which to give his loyalty'.⁵³ Finally, identifying a growing sense of cultural regionalism in Ulster, Hewitt presented 'the substantial improvements in and diffusion of painterly skill here, shown in exhibitions in city and country, and in the success elsewhere of Ulster born artists' as evidence.⁵⁴

Two years earlier in 'The Bitter Gourd: Some Problems of the Ulster Writer', published in *Lagan*, Hewitt had claimed that, 'undoubtedly regionalism is in the air', but warned that the regional writer must be 'a *rooted* man, must carry the native tang of his idiom like the native dust on his sleeve; otherwise he is an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream'.⁵⁵ Hewitt then proceeded to make a telling comparison with painting:

To draw an illustration from another art, Irish painters (...) when not in exile, usually specialise as either pure portraitists or pure landscapists. A man may spend a lifetime copying the features of company directors or prelates. Another man will link his name with a known area, to a bundle of mountains or a stretch of coast and continually repeat his own convention for rendering these in terms of pigment. Never in our history have we had a painter who lived in a country place and made not merely the scenery of it, but the whole tangled bird's nest of its life, its people their business and behaviour, their garments gestures and architecture, the stuff and substance of his work. The cosmopolitan school of Paris has naturally wiped such an ideal from our minds. But I hazard a guess that we will once again become heartily aware of it all over the new shabby battered scrabbling Europe.⁵⁶

Having found Ulster artists wanting, Hewitt went on to offer the example of the American Regionalists, Grant Wood, Thomas H. Benton, Doris Lee and William Sidney Mount, artists who he believed re-presented and re-created, 'the genuine social values' of their environments 'on canvases that not only give delight, but remain a valid record of one facet of human behaviour in one place at one time ... the kind of painter Ulster should have thrown up'.⁵⁷

Central to Hewitt's interpretation of the work of Middleton and others was the extent to which he wished to communicate their value to a broad audience, framing ways for them to read and engage with this sometimes challenging themes

⁵³ Hewitt, 'Regionalism: The Last Chance', *Northman*, 1947, reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 122.

⁵⁴ Hewitt, 'Regionalism: The Last Chance', *Northman*, 1947, reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 123.

⁵⁵ Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd: Some Problems of the Ulster Writer', *Lagan*, 1945, reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 108, 115. Some critics have argued that the *Lagan* shared a characteristic common to the American born genre of the 'Little Magazines' in that it displayed 'an almost instinctive regionalism'. Clyde, 1995, 151.

⁵⁶ Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', 1945, 115. While Hewitt does not name individual artists, it is hard to resist looking behind his generalizations to artists such as Paul Henry.

⁵⁷ Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', 1945, 116.

and imagery. In *Now in Ulster*, Hewitt had identified Middleton and Luke, as the 'biggest men we have ever had in the North'.⁵⁸ Aware that Luke's polished style and recognisable subject matter made him much more palatable than Middleton, Hewitt attempted to justify the diversity of Middleton's work and in particular the surrealist influenced works of the 40s.⁵⁹ Taking an illustrated work, *The Dark Tower*, as an example, he asked his audience to first focus on the technical skill and then consider the symbolic content, and finally invoked comparison with established British artists proclaiming, 'or if you will, take the tower simply as a structure of sheer abstraction – the lozenges, the rectangles, the perforating circles – these in colour have all the delight of a John Piper or a Ben Nicholson'.⁶⁰ Further guiding the reader, and potential viewer, Hewitt concluded his argument by returning to technique and asserting that 'Luke all the time and Middleton in the type of work illustrated, defy the customary criticism of the inexpert, that modern artists cannot paint and do not know how to draw'.⁶¹

A year later in 'The Bitter Gourd', Hewitt dismissed the social commentary of William Conor claiming that, 'his concentration in his genre pictures on proletarian life unclarified by a sharp political philosophy has resulted in a narrowing of his interest to the pathetic and at times sentimental', and instead suggested Middleton as the brightest artistic light in Ulster.⁶² In Hewitt's view, Middleton's series of street scenes, such as *If I were a Blackbird*, suggested that, 'a fuller sense of social responsibility allied to his magnificent technical variety and skill may yet give us the complete commentator we need for Ulster urban life'.⁶³ These comparisons can be viewed as further attempts to create an appreciative audience for Middleton's work by allying his work to the 'true' or 'real' life of the place, rather than a sentimental vision.

The work of Lewis Mumford can provide a useful frame of reference in exploring Hewitt's dual sense of the artist both living in a 'country place', and his celebration of Middleton's urban scenes. Like Mumford, Hewitt believed that regionalism required attention to both the rural and the urban.⁶⁴ In *The Culture of Cities* of 1938, Mumford wrote 'no region can be defined as a geographic, economic and cultural complex without respect to the essential relationships between city and country'.⁶⁵ While Middleton's impressionistic images of Belfast along with his Ulster landscapes, such as *September Evening, Ballymote*, 1951, could be easily comprehended in regional terms, Hewitt anticipated complaints about Middleton's surrealist work and suggested that his talent was, 'all the more subtle and

⁵⁸ Hewitt, 'Under forty: some Ulster artists', 1944, 35.

⁵⁹ Hewitt, 'Under forty: some Ulster artists', 1944, 15.

⁶⁰ Hewitt, 'Under forty: some Ulster artists', 1944, 15.

⁶¹ Hewitt, 'Under forty: some Ulster artists', 1944, 15. Ibid.

⁶² Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', 1945, 116.

⁶³ Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', 1945, 116.

⁶⁴ Hewitt references Mumford in 'Regionalism the Last Chance', 122–123.

⁶⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938, 1970, 308.

responsive for the strenuous discipline of his sojourn with the upper reality of symbols and dreams'.⁶⁶

Despite Hewitt's defence, Middleton's references to symbols and dreams continued to present an awkward challenge to the interpretation of him as the ideal Ulster artist. If the regional artist's role, according to Hewitt, was to create, 'a valid record of one facet of human behaviour in one place at one time', how could Middleton's surrealism be appropriated to the cause? As has been outlined above, Middleton's stylistic diversity identified him as the local artist, 'most alert to continental influence'. While Hewitt's concept of Ulster regionalism required the identification of a vibrant regional culture, it was essential that it also avoided provincialism. This dialectic reveals Hewitt's need to represent Middleton as an artist whose work participated in the avant-garde developments of contemporary cultural centres, while simultaneously remaining distinctively local. This need reveals the uncomfortable position of Hewitt's regionalism, as something that continually required the authentication of the cultural centre. Recognising that Middleton's versatility, 'has surely mitigated against his achieving a reputation outside his native country commensurate with his astounding ability', Hewitt admitted that, 'diversification has clearly had an effect upon how we assess his work'.⁶⁷ However, such concerns were outweighed by his fear of provincialism and belief that an authentic Ulster art could only come about if the best aspects of international art were brought to bear on the particular character and landscape of Ulster.

Hewitt's fear of provincialism is also evident in the work of the English critic and poet, Herbert Read. Initially attempting to define an authentic tradition of English modernism, in the early 1940s Read began to consider a form of regional modernism, rooted in his native Yorkshire and exemplified by the work of Henry Moore. Read's regionalism can be seen as a parallel to Hewitt's vision of a modern Ulster art where both critics aimed to appropriate modern art to a political and cultural ideal that was simultaneously regional and international.⁶⁸

Hewitt's mission to champion a distinctive cultural identity in Ulster was analogous to Read's, 'struggle to modernize and renew Englishness', albeit on a regional scale.⁶⁹ For Hewitt regionalism was both a way of preserving what he saw as the, 'individuality and personality' of his 'energetic, stubborn, and proud province', 'in the face of the world tendency to standardization and anonymity', and a concept with the potential to transcend both political and religious divisions in Northern Ireland; or as Barry Sloan has suggested a way of 'grafting the two

⁶⁶ Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', 1945, 116.

⁶⁷ Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, 1976, 29, 32.

⁶⁸ For more on the affinities between Read and Hewitt see Riann Coulter, 'Herbert Read and Irish Art', Michael Parakos, ed, *Rereading Read: New Views on Herbert Read*, London: Freedom Press, 2007, 102–111.

⁶⁹ Kevin Davey, 'Herbert Read and Englishness', in D. Goodway, ed, *Herbert Read Reassessed*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998, 270

communities in the province on to one another and of giving Hewitt himself an uncompromised sense of belonging'.⁷⁰

John Luke, the second of the two Ulster artists whom Hewitt believed had 'greatness in them' initially seems an unusual choice for a critic who identified with the mid-century painterly avant-garde as represented by the experiments of Middleton, yet Hewitt's advocacy of Luke alongside Middleton is a revealing clue to his conception of the regional artist. In 1951 Hewitt described Luke as 'our only classical painter', and revelled in the fact that he was, 'a complete foil, a tremendous opposite to Middleton'.⁷¹ An artist preoccupied by technique who created idealised images rendered with painstaking precision, Luke followed an individual path with little concern for contemporary fashion. Hewitt admired Luke's skill and individualism, and described him in the poem *Freehold* of 1950 as, 'the tall dark painter who / no careless line or lazy contour drew'.⁷²

While he praised Luke's technical skill, the crucial factor that ensured Hewitt's admiration was Luke's dedication to the Ulster landscape. Despite his highly finished images, Luke began his artistic career painting Loyalist political murals on gable walls in Belfast. As an apprentice in the Belfast shipyards of Harland and Wolff, Luke attended night classes at Belfast College of Art before winning a scholarship to the Slade where he shared a studio with the sculptor F.E. McWilliam.⁷³ Luke's working class origins and elevation via education undoubtedly appealed to Hewitt's socialist principals. However, it was Luke's picturesque visions of Ulster's industrialised landscape, such as *Connswater Bridge* where nature and industry appear to exist in harmony, along with his idealised visions of the Ulster countryside including *Old Callan Bridge* that commanded Hewitt's respect. Although Hewitt was eventually to chastise Luke for 'allowing his insistent rhythms to become over-elaborate' and creating work that, 'said nothing to my emotions, offered me no extension of imaginative experience, somehow had no relevance to life', his admiration for his technique and depictions of the Ulster remained.⁷⁴

What then of the remaining 'four or five very good painters' that Hewitt wrote about in 'The Bitter Gourd'?⁷⁵ In an essay of 1951 Hewitt stated, 'with or near Luke and Middleton, I should place Dan O'Neill, an out and out Romantic, who in the last year or so has asserted his right to that position by virtue of his magnificent *Mother and Child* and similar nudes', further on he adds, 'with O'Neill one must

⁷⁰ Hewitt, John, 'The Nation's Treasures: Belfast Art Gallery', *The Studio*, January, 1947, 133: 646, 15–24, 24. Barry Sloan, *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland: Heirs to Adammation?*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000, 161.

⁷¹ Hewitt, 'Painting and Sculpture in Ulster', 1951, reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 103.

⁷² Hewitt, John, 'Freehold', in Hewitt, *John Luke, 1906–1975*, Belfast: Arts Councils of Ireland, 1978, 48.

⁷³ In his monograph on Luke, Hewitt notes that he won a scholarship to the Slade in 1927 where he studied under Henry Tonks. McWilliam arrived at the Slade in 1928 and the two men shared a studio from 1929 until Luke's return to Belfast in 1930. Hewitt, *John Luke, 1906–1975*, 1978, 5.

⁷⁴ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster I*, 1977, 120. Hewitt letter to Luke talking about his work the *Circus Performers* 10/12/49, Hewitt Archive, PRONI.

⁷⁵ Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', 1945, 115.

associate George Campbell and Gerard Dillon'.⁷⁶ When reflecting on the period in 1977, Hewitt once again considered this triumvirate as a group claiming that,

while each was highly individual, they had this in common, besides being close friends, that they were romantics.⁷⁷

Later in the same essay, Hewitt explains that, 'the drawing by life-class standards was usually inaccurate, but the distortions demanded by the mood of the theme, for theirs was an art of feeling, of emotion symbolised not of designed structure of thought'.⁷⁸ While Hewitt always emphasised the local significance of O'Neill, Dillon and Campbell, and made attempts to justify their art, it seems that he could never fully endorse their expressionistic style and temperament.

In 1944, Hewitt wrote,

I prefer the defined, the disciplined, I require the artist to organise his emotions before I can digest them. But in England, if the recent CEMA exhibition of British painting was any gauge and in Ireland as the large reputation of Jack B. Yeats evinces, the blurred, the heavy handed, or the seemingly fortuitous are the conventions most admired and apparently most consistent with some widespread emotional need of our time to which I do not as yet respond whole heartedly. So it is not surprising that most of the remaining artists should be of this kind, should even if they were capable of it, avoid the precision and smoothness of these two (Luke and Middleton) and indulge in the emphatic and the more directly emotional statement.⁷⁹

Part of the explanation for Hewitt's suspicion of the expressionistic 'art of feeling' produced by Campbell, Dillon and O'Neill, may lie with his concept of the ideal regional artist. As explored above, he believed that the Ulster artist had to be rooted in the local landscape. Yet as he explained in 1977,

Campbell, who was sometimes tempted to emotive abstraction, had to travel far to find himself, to Spain, to *A Blind Flamenco Guitarist*, to *Gypsies Moving Camp*, to the Holy Procession in the narrow street. Dillon found himself in Connemara where so many had gone for inspiration ... the country bar room ... the lads on their ponies, proved it an inhabited country ... O'Neill found himself equally, in the memory of a small boy, his back to the woman in child-bed ... and in the cracked jam-jar with flowers, tiled on the mysterious sea-shore, which could be any shore'.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Hewitt, 'Painting and Sculpture in Ulster', 1951, 104. The painting Hewitt is referring to may be O'Neill's *First Born*, now in the collection of the Ulster Museum.

⁷⁷ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster I*, 1977, 122–123.

⁷⁸ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster I*, 1977, 123.

⁷⁹ Hewitt, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', 1944, 16. The exhibition Hewitt refers to was the 'CEMA Collection' from the Council for Education, Music and the Arts, Great Britain.

⁸⁰ Hewitt, *Art in Ulster I*, 1977, 123–124.

Clearly, Hewitt felt that these three artists had looked beyond Ulster's borders for inspiration; Campbell to Spain, Dillon to the western seaboard of the Free State and O'Neill towards memory and mysticism. Furthermore, unlike Middleton who had spent almost his whole working life in Ulster, Dillon, Campbell and O'Neill all spent considerable periods living outside the province in London and in Dublin, and thus, in Hewitt's opinion, 'continuing the outflow of talent from which the arts here have always suffered'.⁸¹ Hewitt's regionalist dream could only be realised if local artists remained in Ulster and in 1951 he lamented that

We have many contemporary artists who have been compelled to live beyond our borders for an extended period ... the absence of these naturally impoverishes the home ground and makes it impossible to assert claims for our achievement in terms of any precision. Who knows but it has impoverished the exiles also. But with the Spaniard Picasso in Paris, and the American Epstein in London, this condition of exile seems, dare I say, a symptom of the world's plight.⁸²

Hewitt was convinced that authentic Ulster art could not be created in exile and was, in a way, to prove himself correct from 1957. He did not succeed in getting the position of director at the Ulster Museum, and left Ulster to become the director of the Herbert Gallery, Coventry.⁸³ For the fifteen years of his exile Hewitt wrote little, but from his return in 1972 to his death in 1987 he experienced a great period of creativity that produced seven books of poetry, monographs on both Luke and Middleton and a number of prose pieces advocating the case of Ulster regionalism.⁸⁴

Yet, failure to attend to their locality cannot fully explain Hewitt's hesitancy towards Dillon, Campbell and O'Neill, for in 1944 he had admitted that in their early work all three chosen 'subject matter drawn largely from the life of men in towns, the life at hand, seeking no escape into the psychological world of

⁸¹ Luke had trained in London but returned to Ulster in 1931 where he remained until his death in 1975 and Middleton, spent less than a year in England when he and his family briefly joined Middleton Murry's community in East Anglia. Hewitt, *Art in Ulster I*, 1977, 124.

⁸² Hewitt, 'Painting and Sculpture in Ulster', 1951, reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 101.

⁸³ Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, viii. Hewitt applied for the job of director in 1953. Hewitt attributed his failure to achieve promotion to his left wing politics and friendship with Catholics, factors which some members of the Libraries, Museum, and Art Gallery Committee of Belfast's Ulster Unionist city council could not tolerate. His primary complaint was that the new director, Bill Seaby, was an English man who unlike Hewitt did not hold a university degree. See Hewitt's 'From Chairmen and Committee Men, Good Lord Deliver Us', *Honest Ulsterman*, 1968 reprinted in Clyde, *Ancestral Voices*, 1987, 48–55. Hewitt's accounts of these experiences have been explored by Sarah Ferris, *Poet John Hewitt, 1907 – 1987 and criticism of Northern Irish Protestant writing*, Lewiston, N.Y; Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.

⁸⁴ Hewitt also wrote a survey of eighteenth and nineteenth century Weaver Poets in the Counties of Down and Antrim. His exploration of the Ulster weaver poets could, perhaps, be interpreted within the context of Hewitt's desire to explore the idea of an essentialised identity, an equivalent to Read's search for a form of the 'primitive', located within a regional context.

Middleton'.⁸⁵ Rather, it appears that Hewitt objected to what he saw as their 'strongly emotional' style, their 'response to pity and pathos' and the distortions that 'in Campbell are frequently the result of chance' and in Dillon, are 'romantic rather than organic'.⁸⁶ This expressive, painterly Romanticism and the associated characteristics of emotion, expression, pathos and chance, were the values that Hewitt found hard to endorse. Revelling in what he saw as Middleton's 'magnificent technical variety and skill', Hewitt admitted not only that he preferred 'the defined, the disciplined', but also that he required the artist to 'organise his emotions' before he could digest them'.⁸⁷ The romantic tendencies of Dillon, Campbell and O'Neill were antithetical to this desire for restraint and balance. He felt that they lacked restraint and subsequently were incapable of achieving a sense of balance or synthesis necessary for great art.

In contrast, Hewitt saw Middleton's oeuvre as embodying the synthesis of both romanticism and classicism and regional and international forces that Herbert Read celebrated in Henry Moore. Claiming that Moore's work resolved the conflict between abstraction and surrealism, Read believed that it not only achieved the perfect balance between classicism and romanticism but also, the ideal fusion of international and English influences.⁸⁸ While Read's celebration of Moore implied that English modernism was rooted in Yorkshire, Hewitt saw Middleton's art as a model for a regional culture that could unite the segregated communities of Ulster and result in an authentic regional identity.

In her study of British art in the post-war society, Margaret Garlake has identified a 'sense of transition' in post-war Britain characterised by, 'aspiration rather than achievement and the search for identity rather than confidence'.⁸⁹ Through his attempts to forge a regional identity for Ulster, Hewitt positioned himself on the fault-line between this British post-war quest and Ireland's post-colonial struggle to construct an authentic national culture. It was in the liminal zone between Britishness and Irishness, colonised and coloniser – Bhabha's 'Third Space' where 'negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences' – that Hewitt hoped Ulster regionalism would flourish.⁹⁰ Ultimately, while he was championing a regional identity for Ulster, Hewitt was also seeking to define his personal identity as an Ulster man. In his poem *Conacre* of 1943, he wrote,

This is my home and country. Later on

⁸⁵ Hewitt, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', 1944, 33. Campbell's series of paintings recording the 'Holiday's at Home Movement' and both his and Dillon's records of the Blitz are good examples of these socially minded subjects.

⁸⁶ Hewitt, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', 1944, 34.

⁸⁷ Hewitt, 'The Bitter Gourd', 1945, 116, Hewitt, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', 1944, 16.

⁸⁸ In the mid-1940s Hewitt referred to what are now considered Middleton's surrealist works as symbolist.

⁸⁹ Margaret Garlake, *New art, new world: British art in postwar society*, 4.

⁹⁰ Bhabha, 'How newness enters the world', *The Location of Culture*, 218.

Perhaps I'll find this nation is my own⁹¹

As Tom Clyde has suggested, throughout his life Hewitt was, 'driven by a need to define himself in terms of the past both of his family and of his province, to dig out long buried artists and rebels, to trace lines of descent, to forge his own personal mythology'.⁹²

In his 1972 essay 'No Rootless Colonialist' he wrote that 'people of planter stock often suffer from a crisis of identity, of not knowing where they belong'.⁹³ Caught between Britain and Ireland – coloniser and colonised – and unable to identify wholly with either, Hewitt embarked on a mission to construct a regional identity for both Ulster and himself. He adapted and appropriated material to suit his cause, and harboured prejudices and preferences.

Although Hewitt was later to recognise the limitations of his idea of Ulster Regionalism and admit that, 'the trouble was that I didn't realize that there were several regions in the North of Ireland and that the one region I thought it was, was heavily conditioned by Protestant planter background', in 1976 he still maintained that 'our best hope will be to 'invent the myth', ... for Ulster, which will give our peoples, at whatever stage in history they came here, identity with the region'.⁹⁴ Ultimately, in his championing of Middleton and his contemporaries, Hewitt succeeded in drawing attention to art in Ulster, and recognised Middleton as an artist, who by being simultaneously alert to continental influence and rooted in his native place, created art that could be interpreted within a regional context, distinct from the national spheres of both Britain and Ireland.

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⁹¹ Hewitt, 'Conacre' 1943, *Collected Poems, 1932-1967, The Selected John Hewitt*, ed. Alan Warner, Belfast: Blackstaff, 1981, 15.

⁹² Clyde, *Ancestral Voices: The selected Prose of John Hewitt*, vii.

⁹³ Hewitt, 'No Rootless Colonialist', in Clyde, 1987, 146.

⁹⁴ Hewitt, Address to a Corrymeela Conference 1976, cited by Paul Arthur, 1991, 282.