

# THE *Rogue* THEATRE

## Paddywhackery

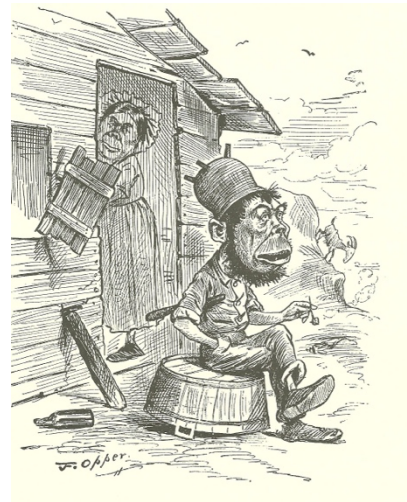
The Irish, the English and “Stage Irish”

By Jerry James

*Much may be made of an Irishman, if he be caught young.* — Samuel Johnson (paraphrased)



*Brittania vs. the Irish, as seen by John Tenniel in “Punch,” (1881)*



*The Irish, as seen by Frederick Burr Opper in “Puck,” (1882)*

For about 800 years, Ireland was under what the singer Liam Clancy sarcastically called “the loving and tender care of the British Empire.” In such situations, it behooves the colonizer to depict the colonized as somewhat less than human. At this, the English excelled. (See above)

*The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* tells us that the Irish were typically depicted in popular entertainments as “garrulous, boastful, unreliable, hard-drinking, belligerent (though cowardly) and chronically impecunious.” They’ve left out “simian.” Not to mention Catholic.

This characterization had a certain affect, even in the works of those dramatists of Irish descent. And why not? These men were Anglo-Irish, descended from the conquerors. They were not above contributing to what was once called “Stage Irish,” a term now subsumed under the term “Paddywhackery.” Although this covers everything from the Paddy Wagon to Riverdance to the Book of Kells, nowadays it usually refers to those rites celebrated every year around St. Patrick’s Day, when Americans sport green wigs, green hats and green glasses, while the streets of New York run a bilious green, with beer coming up almost as fast as it went down. These relatively innocent sports are a long way from where things stood at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was then that William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory set about establishing an Irish theatre that defied Paddywhackery. Getting there had taken a long time, and it would not be easy.

## The Conquest



*Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658)*

In 1189, when the Anglo-Norman English invaded, Ireland was a patchwork of small, clan-oriented Gaelic kingdoms. Although the invaders initially conquered the entire island, they were slowly driven back. By the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the English held only the area around Dublin known as the Pale. The Irish were literally “Beyond the Pale.”

After the Wars of the Roses ended in 1488, England made an almost continual effort to subjugate Gaelic Ireland. The fighting stepped up after Henry VIII broke with Catholicism, making the conflict a religious one. Gaelic Ireland would finally be defeated at the Battle of Kinsale (1601), late in the reign of Elizabeth I.

In 1639, yet another series of wars began. These would not end until 1653, when Oliver Cromwell conquered the entire island. Perhaps a third of the population died. Perhaps 50,000 more were sold into indentured servitude in the West Indies.

Catholics were barred from public office and their lands confiscated, beginning the ascendancy of the Anglo-Irishman, later to be derided by the playwright Brendan Behan as “a Protestant with a horse.”

But this was not quite the end for the Irish. That would be the Battle of the Boyne (1690), when James II, the Catholic King of

England, was defeated by the Protestant William of Orange. William would reign alongside Mary, James’ daughter.

## The Playwrights

The Stage Irishman first appeared in *The Committee* (1665), a play by an Englishman, Sir Robert Howard. Tig was the character’s name, a variant of “Teague,” a derogatory term equivalent to “Paddy.” Tig, in a tradition dating back to Roman Comedy, was smarter than his masters.

The Anglo-Irish playwrights who followed in the 1700’s weren’t always so generous. William Congreve’s only mention of Ireland is to comment that a woman is as hard to understand as an Irish manuscript. George Farquhar provides Foigard, who is really MacShane, an unscrupulous Irish Jesuit, posing as a French priest and speaking in a bizarre dialect. James Evans says that Oliver Goldsmith “allegorizes Irish expatriate experience in *She Stoops to Conquer*,” but one must look very hard to see this.



*Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816)*

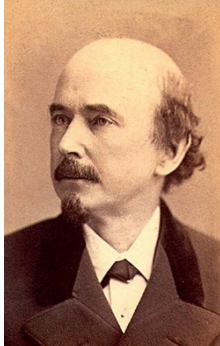
Such is not the case with Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The Rivals* (1775). Sheridan’s Sir Lucius O’Trigger so stretched the limits of 18<sup>th</sup> century Paddywhackery that the play’s original production caused a riot. In *London*.

After being smacked with an apple, the actor playing Sir Lucius stopped the show and

asked the audience, “By the pow'rs, is it *personal*? Is it me, or the matter?”

It seems to have been both. Sheridan did a quick rewrite, replaced the actor, and *The Rivals* has held the stage ever since. After the failed Irish rebellion of 1798, the 19<sup>th</sup> century would not prove as friendly.

### Dion Boucicault



*Dion Boucicault (1820-1890)*

During the 1800s, the Irish kept seeking independence (or at least, home rule), sometimes peacefully, sometimes violently. Therefore, the English found it more important than ever to depict the Irish as subhuman, fortunate to have been lifted from the mire via Britannia's benevolence.

The Irish Potato Famine (1845-1852) gave the English a chance to demonstrate said benevolence. Instead, a million Irish died in the midst of plenty. The descendants of the 2 million who escaped to America would not forget this. Ever.

The English found help in the second half of the 1800s from an unexpected quarter, the Anglo-Irish playwright Dion Boucicault, who is almost completely forgotten today.

Dionysus Boursiquot was born a Dublin bastard; he left there at age 8. When he died, the New York Times called him, “the most conspicuous English dramatist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.” Had the Times used another

adjective, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw might have protested. But Boucicault, who wrote and acted in perhaps 150 plays in 52 years, certainly was *conspicuous*.

He was also clever, the first writer to use an undeveloped camera negative as a key plot point (*The Octoroon*, 1859).

Boucicault's contribution to Paddywhackery is his so-called Irish Trilogy. The 3 plays are connected only by each containing a slam-bang supporting role for the author. The most famous is *The Shaughraun* (1874).

A shaughraun may be defined as a wanderer. But in this play, he's Conn, a roguish poacher. He drinks, as you've probably guessed from the illustration. This provides not only comic relief, but also proof positive (to the English) of the True Irish Character.



*Dion Boucicault as Conn in "The Shaughraun"*

Boucicault made a half-million dollars from the play and may well have asked the English, “Who's laughing now?” But he also did something more, something the English weren't expecting – in the clutch, Conn comes through, alcohol and all.

Of course, the hero and heroine are as pure as the driven shamrock – it's melodrama. But it's Conn who breaks the hero out of prison, stages his own fake death, spies on

the villains at the wake and foils their plans. *Bréan!* (That's Irish for "Bravo!")

Despite the best efforts of the English, Boucicault's Irishman, with its echoes going all the way back to Tig in *The Committee*, would come to dominate the world of the Stage Irish. This was especially true in America, where Boucicault gained citizenship in 1873 – and where the Irish had gained both economic and political power.

### The 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Unfortunately for most of the Irish, they still lived in Ireland, where Stage-Irish Bridget was a good, hard-working woman, but her husband Paddy was an unreliable drunk.



*Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932)*  
*William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)*

William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, both Anglo-Irish, sought to counter this stereotype by sending John Millington Synge out into the west of Ireland to bring back a tale of the Real Irish. But when the Irish saw *The Playboy of the Western World*, they rioted. It would take some time before the theatre and its audience saw eye to eye.

### Modern Paddywhackery

Every year in mid-March, Paddywhackery gleefully pops back up. Here, two examples.



*Darby O'Gill and the Little People (1959)*

In *The Quiet Man*, Sean Thornton comes home to Ireland to live peacefully. No one knows that this former boxer retired after accidentally killing a man in the ring. But Sean doesn't reckon with the local customs. These village folk are so quaint, they're in the Paddywhackery Hall of Fame. (One onlooker says, "Here's a good stick, to beat the lovely lady.") Their mores will force Sean to publicly humiliate his wife, burn her dowry – and *beat her brother bloody in a bare-knuckle brawl*. Very peaceful!

Walt Disney stuffs *Darby O'Gill and the Little People (1959)* with even more fantastic versions of the same – crafty old fathers (who also play the fiddle), leprechauns granting wishes (and tricking you out of them), banshees, pookas, poteen and songs, one of which is sung by the young romantic lead, Sean Connery (above). Yes, the future James Bond, a Scot, plays a singing Irishman. Paddywhackery!

The film was too much for the future President of Ireland, Cearbhall O'Dalaigh, who picketed its release because of what he perceived as insulting stereotypes. And Walt Disney was Irish, descended from a Kilkenny farmer! Yeats and Lady Gregory would have sympathized.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.*