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Colleen Anne Hynes

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# "Strangers in the House": Twentieth Century Revisions of Irish Literary and Cultural Identity

**Committee:**

______________________________
Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Supervisor

______________________________
Barbara Harlow, Co-Supervisor

______________________________
Kamran Ali

______________________________
Ann Cvetkovich

______________________________
Ian Hancock

# “Strangers in the House”: Twentieth Century Revisions of Irish Literary and Cultural Identity

**by**

**Colleen Anne Hynes, B.S.; M.A.**

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**“Strangers in the House”: Twentieth Century Revisions of Irish Literary and Cultural Identity**

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Colleen Anne Hynes, Ph.D.
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Co-Supervisors: Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Barbara Harlow

This thesis, *Strangers in the House*, illuminates how “strangers in the house”—unconventional women, Travellers, emigrants and immigrants—have made significant contributions to the evolving traditions of Irish literature and culture. I trace the literary and creative contributions of groups that were silenced during the early twentieth-century nation-building project to review the impact of the Irish Revival, from the politics of Arthur Griffith and Eamon de Valera to the writings of Yeats, Gregory and Synge, on the establishment of an “authentic” Irish identity. I draw on scholarship that establishes Ireland as a postcolonial nation, suggesting that contemporary identity is closely linked to the national, religious and gender expectations reinforced during the periods of colonialism and decolonization. My scholarship considers individuals who continue to be peripheral in the “reimagining” of what it means to be Irish in a post-Celtic Tiger, E.U. Ireland.

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# Introduction

## Where in the World is Ireland?

*Strangers in the House*: *Twentieth Century Revisions of Irish Literary and Cultural Identity,* examines how unconventional women, Travellers, emigrants and immigrants contributed to the evolving traditions of Irish literature and culture during the late twentieth century. The title comes from Yeats and Lady Gregory's Revival play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan.* Near the end of the play, which is set just before the 1798 rebellion, Cathleen asks Michael Gillane to expel the "strangers in the house" who have stolen her "four beautiful green fields." I retrieve the famous phrase, which has appeared in texts including James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Northern Irish folk songs, and apply it to individuals who have been strangers in their own house for the better part of the twentieth century. Those individuals did not fit the narrow, homogenous version of Irish identity created during the early twentieth century Revival, a cultural renaissance of poetry, drama, sport and language that complemented the simultaneous nationalist political agenda. The project, as well as each chapter, is rooted in the Irish Revival, which, from the politics of Arthur Griffith and Eamon de Valera to the writings of Yeats, Gregory and Synge, established an "authentic" Irish identity. In the following chapters I trace the late twentieth and early twenty-first century creative contributions of some of the groups that were silenced as a result of national rhetoric that grew increasingly repressive during the Free State and postcolonial periods. In order to demonstrate how writers, directors and artists have responded to that version of Irish identity, I draw on scholarship that

establishes Ireland as a postcolonial nation, suggesting that contemporary identity is closely linked to the national, religious and gender expectations reinforced during the periods of colonialism and decolonization.

I bring together the voices that helped expand the concept of Irish identity: writers and filmmakers who discuss infertility and the Magdalen asylums as a means to challenge the construction of women's identities as maternal and heterosexual,[1] individuals and organizations who represent Travellers and immigrants on the page and screen, and artists who have attempted to reconceive Irish identity for export through the channels of international media. These texts, like those that preceded them, react to their colonial and postcolonial legacy as Ireland becomes increasingly secular and multicultural in the decade following the legalization of divorce, the tentative optimism of the Northern peace process, and the public criticism of the Catholic Church.

These new forms of Irishness raise questions about the evolution of Irish identity in the early twenty-first century. At the same time that women poets are challenging constructions of femininity and maternity in a postcolonial society, representations of Travellers and immigrants, with only a few exceptions, continue to be regressive and stereotypical even as anti-discrimination movements grow. Similarly, despite efforts to export a sexier and more confident Irish identity through Irish step dance, familiar tropes

[1] In chapters two and three I discuss recent challenges to the narrowly conceived idea of Irish women's sexual identities, which, in a conservative, Catholic and postcolonial society, was tied to maternity and the institution of marriage. The texts included in these chapters reveal the realities faced by women who could not reproduce, or who did not conform to the sexual mores of traditional Irish society. This project is currently limited to heterosexual representations of femininity, with the exception of my brief analysis of *The Crying Game,* in which I focus primarily on issues of race and ethnicity. I would like to add a chapter on homosexuality in contemporary Ireland; I discuss this chapter and its relationship to my argument in more detail in my conclusion.

of violence and mystical Celticism continue to inflect such productions, reinforcing the nostalgic and predictable Irish "types" expected by a diasporic audience.

In bringing together these particular marginalized voices, *Strangers in the House* constructs a pluralistic image of Irish gender and ethnicity. This work contributes to recent moves in Irish Studies to consider broader categories of gender, race and ethnicity. Before I turn to those central concerns, however, I will examine some of the background information that frames my overall argument, beginning with the Revival construction of Irish identity.

**"MISE EIRE"**

Padraig Pearse, a leader of the Easter Rising of 1916, wrote his poem, "Mise Eire," during the Revival. Pearse's poem, whose title translates as "I am Ireland," describes the nationalist struggle through familiar tropes. In the poem, Ireland is an old woman, "older than the Old Woman of Beare,"[2] who once experienced glory through her son Cuchulainn, a mythical warrior. She was shamed, however, by her "children that sold their mother" (Pearse). Pearse draws on Celtic mythology and the concept of Ireland as a woman to rouse nationalist feeling; in doing so he reinforces the patriarchal, Gaelic version of Ireland.

Some seventy years later, Eavan Boland revised Pearse's poem in her collection *The Journey* (1987). In her version of "Mise Eire," she challenges the personification of Ireland as an old hag, invoking several different female perspectives to attempt a more three dimensional portrayal not only of Irish women, but of the image of Ireland often

[2] The "Old Woman of Beare" is a hag figure that stands in for Mother Ireland in a number of literary and mythological texts. Yeats included her in his poetry as the Cailleac Beare.

projected in poetry. She undercuts the romantic vision of a feminine Ireland embraced by Pearse and his followers. She says twice in the first stanzas, "I won't go back," refusing the "small farm" and the "scalded memory" that she identifies with Ireland's past. In the fifth and seventh stanzas she begins with "I am the woman," emphasizing Pearse's appropriation of the feminine voice in order to build a national identity on the back of Mother Ireland. The two women she speaks for are a prostitute and an emigrant, neither of whom figure in the nationalist construction of an independent Ireland. They are, however, important to the creation of a more complete and realistic portrait of Irish identity.

The decade following the publication of Boland's poem was marked by social and cultural change that prompted a reconsideration of who and what was representative of Ireland. In 1990 Mary Robinson was elected president of the Republic; although a relatively symbolic position, the election of a woman as president, especially a feminist, socialist president, foreshadowed the changes to come in the 1990s. The 1990s brought an economic boom that continued for a decade, prompting international observers to name the phenomenon the 'Celtic Tiger.' Male homosexuality was decriminalized in June of 1993 and divorce legislation was finally passed in 1996, the year after the "worst year in the modern history of the Irish Catholic Church" (O'Toole 17). Scandals—from clerical sexual abuse to a bishop's illegitimate child—accelerated the process of secularization in Ireland. Changes made life in Ireland more appealing not only to the native population and emigrants who began to return to Ireland from abroad, but also to immigrants from Europe, Asia and Africa. In 2005, as a result of immigration, Ireland's population has surpassed 4 million for the first time since 1871. Despite Ireland's history

of mass emigration, new immigration patterns, and the arrival of a small number of refugees and asylum seekers, have caused disproportionate panic in some parts of Irish society.

**REVIVAL LEGACIES**

As a result of such changes in postcolonial Ireland, the definition of "Mise Eire" continues to shift and evolve. The legacy of the Revival still impacts Irish society, however; as Mathews argues, "the imprint of revivalist thought and initiative is everywhere traceable in the cultural and social make-up of contemporary Ireland" (148). The Revival period, from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, was marked by the interrelated cultural and political nationalist movements, including the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association (1884), the Irish Literary Society (1892), the Gaelic League (1893), the Abbey Theatre (1904), Sinn Fein (1905), the Irish Volunteers (1913), and the Irish Citizen Army (1913).[3] The period is associated with a number of major Irish literary and political figures, many of whom had different political, creative or apolitical objectives for their work: W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Maud Gonne, John Millington Synge, Michael Collins, Eamon de Valera and George Russell (AE).[4]

Although the Revival is now often connected to the conservative political and cultural nationalism of Gaelic and Catholic Free State, it was, in its inception, a relatively inclusive movement. For example, Douglas Hyde, an important Revivalist and Irish

[3] I would agree with critics like Luke Gibbons, who believes that "culture in Ireland became ineluctably bound up with politics" and would argue that culture and politics continue to be inseparable (Gibbons 8). Revisionist critics like Roy Foster often see the two spheres as separate.

language activist, does not “provide an unequivocal endorsement of singular Gaelic identity” in his famous pamphlet “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” (Mathews 21-22). Rather, he contrasts a number of groups, including “Irish,” “Gaelic,” “Celtic” and “Anglo-Irish” with the singular category of “English.” Hyde, the son of a Protestant clergyman, and professor of Irish at Trinity College, could not be easily categorized.[5] P.J. Mathews observes that

> One of the lesser-recognized features of the revival is the extent to which it witnessed the emergence of a loose cadre of intellectuals who subscribed to a broad civic nationalism and who drew, in turn on the ideas of co-operation, republicanism, socialism and anti-imperialism…All subscribed to a pluralistic conception of Irish culture, in so far as they encouraged the development of a national literature in both Irish and English languages. This belies a generally held view of the period as an ethnic contest or ‘battle of two civilizations’…it may be more useful, therefore, to configure this period as one of conflict between a broad civic republican cultural politics and a more chauvinistic nationalism than as a battle between two clear-cut ethnic categories. (147)

Mathews complicates the common argument that the Revival was a “Battle of Two Civilisations,” or “The Pale versus the Gael,” as described by another central Revivalist, D.P. Moran (Lyons 228; 225).[6] I argue that the initial pluralism of the Revival movement described by Hyde and Mathews was suspended with the victory of conservative national rhetoric. That political and social era, embodied by the traditional, isolationist government of Eamon de Valera, lasted for the better part of the twentieth century: that “economic stagnation, nationalist insularity, state censorship an clerical

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[4] For a discussion of the political and cultural differences of some of these individuals, see Roy Foster’s “The ‘New’ Nationalism” in *Modern Ireland.*

[5] Hyde was appointed to the Free State Oireachtas as a senator, but lost his seat after a smear campaign by a far-right Catholic organization. In 1938 Taoiseach Eamon de Valera appointed Hyde, then retired, to be the first president of the Irish Republic.

conservatism combined to stunt Irish cultural development for decades after independence" (Cleary). Irish identity politics have only recently emerged from that period of exclusivity to include alternatives to traditional perceptions of gender and ethnicity.

Physical force nationalism also changed the shape of the Revival. Hyde, for example, abandoned the Gaelic League as it became increasingly political and it was taken over by Padraig Pearse, a central figure in the Easter Rising. Pearse was executed after the Rising, along with the founder of the Irish socialist movement, James Connolly. As Pearse and his followers were elevated to the status of martyrdom, a chauvinistic physical and political nationalism displaced the socialist, feminist, anti-imperial and co-operative movements in favor of the Gaelic and Catholic Ireland imagined by those who established the Free State.

Because of the homogenous Gaelic, Catholic and patriarchal version of Irish identity that was reified politically and culturally throughout the twentieth century, the pluralistic impulses of the early Revival were suspended. One hundred years later, however, writers and directors began to challenge those narrow perceptions of Irishness in a new cultural revival that would reconceive Ireland for a new century. Those individuals, however, continue to reconcile with the legacy of the Revival, which "may have much to teach us about the cultural dynamics of Ireland in the twenty first century" (Mathews 148).

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[6] F.S.L. Lyons borrowed the title for chapter five of his book *Ireland Since the Famine,* "The Battle of Two Civilisations," from D.P. Moran's pamphlet of the same name. In the chapter he records the rift between the literary, linguistic and political worlds of the Revival.

## CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS

Fintan O'Toole argues that Ireland has stopped defining itself against Britain and its "lost Empire" (13) and has started to see itself, and its identity, emerge from the colonial binaries of British vs. Irish. International conferences like "Re-imagining Ireland" and op-ed pieces such as "The Great Irish Identity Crisis" speak to the need to create a sense of self that goes beyond Pearse's vision of "Eire." If, as O'Toole posits, the Irish have ceased to define themselves against the British, then it seems that they search for new identities in a number of ways. The contradictions inherent in these different ways of reconfiguring the meaning of "mise Eire" reinforce Luke Gibbons's idea that "Ireland is a First World country, but with a Third World memory," a country that still negotiates its colonial past (3). Because I assume that Ireland is, in many ways, a postcolonial space, I will briefly revisit the scholarship that has established Ireland's position in postcolonial studies.

Gibbons's description of Ireland attempts to bring together two sides of the debate on its status as "postcolonial" or "third world." He acknowledges that present day Ireland enjoys the privileges of a first world nation, but its identity continues to be shaped by its relationship to its colonial past. Ireland was brought into the academic area of postcolonial studies by the 1990 collection of Field Day pamphlets titled *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, written by Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, whose "Yeats and Decolonization" controversially claimed Yeats as a "national poet" in an anti-colonial tradition. Seamus Deane, in his introduction, locates Ireland as the "only Western European country that has both an early and late colonial experience" (3). He writes that the essays, as well as the Field Day project as a whole, work to

recognize the importance of literature and culture in the effort to "overcome and replace the colonial experience" (3). Deane's philosophy draws on that of Frantz Fanon**,** who posited that after attempts at assimilation with the colonizer, subsequent rebellion and, finally, return to traditional native culture, colonized writers will "feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people, and to become the mouthpiece of the new reality in action" (*Wretched* 223). While Deane draws from anti-colonial and postcolonial thinking in the conceptualization of the Field Day project, he, like Subaltern Studies critics, is wary of nationalism and the nation, which can become "repressive, ideological reproductions of the colonial regime" (Graham 87). Field Day, as a result, attempted to create a "fifth province" for cultural and intellectual discussion outside of national politics.

Colin Graham writes that "postcolonialism makes the crucial identification of who is the colonizer and who the colonized—it also morally evaluates this colonial relationship as one of fundamental inequality" (82). This definition explains my use of the term to describe the relationships between not only the Irish and their British colonizers, but between groups within the hierarchy of Irish society. Graham's discussion of postcolonialism in the Irish context also highlights the Subaltern Studies critique of postcolonial nationalism. He writes that

> As the Gramscian term "subaltern" suggests, it [Subaltern Studies]aligns itself with social groups which it sees as excluded, dominated, elided and oppressed by the state (effectively peasants, the working classes and latterly women and other minority marginalized ethnic and social groups). (83)

Graham highlights the potential of the postcolonial "nation" to reproduce systems of oppression: since I am interested the groups excluded as a result of anti-colonial nation-building, my use of the term "postcolonial" is informed by Subaltern Studies.

Because Ireland is also white, (now) English speaking and western European, it is not always viewed as a country with a colonial or postcolonial experience. Most Irish Studies scholars acknowledge the atypical aspects of the Irish colonial experience. Declan Kiberd, who refers to both Fanon and Said in his criticism, recognizes the Irish population's "unique position vis-à-vis their occupier and…the forced intimacies of Anglo-Irish relations..." (254-55).[7] In several articles for *Race and Class* and in his short book, *Encounters: How Racism Came to Ireland*, Bill Rolston traces the history of Irish participation in colonial and racist projects in India, the western United States and even in contemporary New York City, where the majority of the officers charged in the Amadou Diallo case had Irish-American surnames. He also notes the positive contributions made by the Irish and the Irish diaspora in anti-slavery and anti-colonial movements around the world. Rolston reads these conflicting positions, which will be relevant to my examination of Irish reactions to immigrants, as a result of colonialism, writing "that Ireland should show up such extremes of attitudes and behaviour should come as no surprise to those who have read Frantz Fanon or Albert Memmi…" ("Are the Irish Black?" 98). Revisionist scholars, however, cite Irish participation in the British Empire to argue against its postcoloniality. They also refer to the relatively long period since

[7] For example, he offers a Fanonian reading of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and draws on Said's concept of Orientalism to argue that the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland resulted in Ireland's "invention" by England.

Irish decolonization, Irish membership in the European Union and recent economic success as further evidence against its position as "postcolonial."

Some contemporary critics have moved away from this semantic debate, as will I in the following chapters. Several of those scholars have provided a framework for my own project: According to Elizabeth Cullingford, although the parallel between Ireland and, for example, India, "is not exact in all particulars, nor relevant at all times, it has considerable explanatory powers" (2). This argument is also made by Graham, who states that

> Whether Ireland has a story to tell which is "like" that of Algeria or a history which precedes (and is a model for) India's becomes less immediately the burden on which the "proof" of the validity of the colonial rests. The conditions of a series of cultural "moments," in which one culture seeks its own coalescence of definition "against" another which it dominates, are in themselves the reasons why the figurations of postcolonial criticism can be effective in the context of Irish cultural production. (85)

Similarly, David Lloyd is ultimately most interested not in the "empirical claims and counter-claims" that have characterized the debate on Ireland's postcoloniality, but in asking how Ireland can resist participating in the "capitalist colonialism," which is central to the contemporary narrative of Irish modernization (5). I, like Cullingford, Graham and Lloyd, am interested in how the Irish colonial experience has informed the production of twentieth century literature and culture. Edna Longley writes, "Our impulse should be not only to decolonize, to criticize English canons and English ideologies of Ireland, but to subvert indigenous canons and ideologies" (cited in Graham 93). My concern here is to look at how emergent voices are challenging those "indigenous canons and ideologies." I examine both how Irishness was historically defined in opposition to Englishness, as well

as how Irish identity is currently determined by its relationship to marginalized ethnic and social groups.

**INTERVENTIONS**

Contemporary Irish society provides a unique and complex cultural situation in which writers, directors and performers revise Irishness as they confront familiar stereotypes. Some of those stereotypes have been so internalized that they cannot be entirely erased; others are displaced and used to describe new populations that have come to provide the "Other" in a situation of internal colonization. It is also a moment when literature, while of continued importance, is no longer the primary means of expressing Ireland: film has become an important medium for storytelling and allows a much larger audience to consume not only Irish stories but in some ways Irishness itself. The varied media included in this study—written work, movies, and performance—are part of what Kiberd sees as a second creative Irish renaissance (613). Film and performance, particularly dance, have had an increasingly large influence on the construction and representation of Irish identities both in Ireland and abroad.

The new global and bourgeois Irish society has resulted in what *Irish Independent* columnist Pat Stacey refers to as the "great Irish identity crisis":

> The more you examine it, the less clear Irishness becomes. According to the outdated perceptions of others, ours is a land of saints and scholars, fighters and drinkers (although there can be little argument with that last one). It's an image popularised by our disproportionately impressive literary heritage but also, and perhaps more validly, by cinema, the most powerful of all media.

Stacey summarizes the current struggle between the "outdated perceptions" of stereotypical Irishness and a contemporary affluence and multiculturalism that challenge

the idea of Ireland as a rural, homogeneous society. Although Irishness may be more difficult to define, it has also become more interesting and inclusive as tradition and modernity complicate and contradict what it means to be Irish in contemporary Ireland.

In chapter one*, "Dancing at the Crossroads": Gender, Ethnicity and Identity in Irish Dance,* I use dance to examine the representation of gender and of Irishness in ways that simultaneously reinvent and stereotype a globalized concept of Irish identity. Although the resurgence of Irish dance can be connected to the Revival, Irishness and step dance have become synonymous since *Riverdance* appeared in 1994. Through an analysis of the use of dance as a means to mark Irish identity on stage and film, I introduce a number of themes that run through the entire project: the construction of gendered Irishness, the transformation and marketing of Irish identity in the late twentieth century, and the continued influence of colonial stereotypes in representations of Irishness. I draw upon scholarship by David Lloyd, Colin Graham and Diane Negra to frame my analysis of the nationalist renaissance of Irish dance and the impact of *Riverdance* on the globalized vision of Ireland and the Irish. I then investigate the use of Irish dance to signify Irish identity and define Irish communities in films that depict rural Ireland, northern Ireland and Irish America.

In Chapter Two, *"A Song for Every Child I Might Have Had:" Infertility and Maternal Loss in Irish Women's Poetry,* I establish the historical and cultural significance of maternity in Ireland and discuss the poetry about infertility and maternal loss that challenges the ideal version of Irish femininity highlighted during the Revival. Irish women have traditionally been depicted as long-suffering mothers, symbols of land and church. Over the past twenty years Irish poets such as Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan,

Kerry Hardie and Mary O'Malley, have dismantled part of that maternal mythology by writing about infertility, an unspoken reality in a Catholic and postcolonial country. I provide a comprehensive analysis of how these poets respond to their literary and cultural legacy that has impacted the evolution of feminine identity in Irish literature.

My work in Chapter Three**,** *"Bad Girls Do the Best Sheets:" Magdalen Asylums in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* challenges the popular conception that the Magdalen asylums, which committed unmarried mothers (amongst others) to indentured servitude in convent laundries for most of the twentieth century, were a cruel but necessary social service. I argue that the asylums were a complex system that required the complicity of the Church, the family and the community to keep not only unwed mothers and "morally questionable" women imprisoned, but also to remove orphans, rape and incest victims, and mentally challenged women from Irish society. I complicate the assumed culpability of the Church by looking at the relationships between all sectors of Irish society, reading commentary on the Magdalen scandal in the context of the rise of women's rights and the decline of the Church in Ireland in the 1990s. The revelations about the Magdalen system reflect a shift in attitudes towards maternity and femininity in contemporary Ireland. I analyze drama by Patricia Burke Brogan (*Eclipsed, Stained Glass at Samhain*), a series of documentaries produced in England, Scotland and France in the 1990s, two films (*The Magdalene Sisters, Sinners*) and two contemporary popular novels to trace the creative and social reactions to the exposure of the Magdalen system over the past ten years.

I return to questions of ethnicity in Chapter Four**,** *"Beyond Respectability's Pale": Irish Travellers in Literature and Film,* as I document the evolution of the

portrayal of Travellers from the Revival to the Celtic Tiger to analyze how they, like the women in chapters two and three, have been depicted as "other" than Irish since the early twentieth century. I begin by examining the work of J.M. Synge, most specifically *The Tinker's Wedding,* to establish themes of domestication, romanticization and denigration. I use Synge to examine how Travellers function not only as a link to the past but also as representatives of sexual and literal freedom and a challenge to the patriarchal order. Giving particular weight to gendered representations of Irish Travellers, I consider films, poetry and fiction that comment on issues of identity and stereotype raised in Synge's plays, including work by Liam O'Flaherty, Vona Groarke, Marita Conlon-McKenna, Traveller writer Peter Brady and the films *The Field, Into the West* and *Trojan Eddie.*

In my final chapter, *From Mise Eire to Metro Eireann: Immigration and Irish Identity,* I analyze the current debate about race, immigration and asylum seekers in contemporary Ireland. I examine scholarly writings by Steve Garner, Bill Rolston and Luke Gibbons, media accounts from major Irish newspapers and Ireland's only multicultural newspaper, *Metro Eireann,* and several literary and cinematic texts. The academic and journalistic examples provide a framework with which to read two recent films, *Black Day at Blackrock* and *Yu Ming is ainm dom,* and Charlie O'Neill's play *Hurl,* which raises questions of race, immigration and Irish identity through its exploration of a multi-ethnic hurling team in the West of Ireland.

Writers, filmmakers and artists are revising what it means to be an Irish man or woman while continuing to struggle with historically prescribed identities in order to reimagine what we recognize as Irishness. This dissertation project examines the influence of the literary, cultural and political revival of the early twentieth century on the

reconception of Irish identity in the late twentieth century. My analysis works to insert the "strangers in the house," the voices that were removed from the national narrative as a result of political and nationalist ideology, into scholarly conversation with their literary and political forbearers.

# Chapter One

## Dancing at the Crossroads: Gender, Ethnicity and Identity in Irish Dance

"When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement…as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary…"
Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*

When my students see *Riverdance* on the syllabus of my Irish American Literature and Culture course they typically have two reactions: half of the class groans and the other half, many of whom have seen the show on stage with their Irish-American families, are intrigued to find such an icon of popular culture on an academic syllabus. Most of them grew up with *Riverdance* as a part of their cultural lexicon since the show debuted in 1994, when the majority of them were in elementary school. For most of them, *Riverdance is* Irish dance. In order to explain its importance as a reflection of the shift in contemporary Irish and Irish-American cultural identity, I show students a clip of traditional Irish step dancers in full costume: heavily embroidered dresses, shawls, Tara brooches, bouncing curls, poodle socks and shamrock-buckled hard shoes. The adolescent dancers perform a traditional heavy jig to the music of the famous Gallowglass ceili band, which is made up of aging Northern Irish musicians with accordions and electronic keyboards. Neither the dancers nor the musicians smile during the performance. The clip provides a striking contrast with the scene that I play from *Riverdance,* which features dancers with short, simple dresses and broad smiles moving around a large stage with light, quick movements. The music, which echoes both

traditional Irish folk tunes and contemporary film scores, is performed by young musicians, including the famous Irish American fiddle player Eileen Ivers, whose blue Doc Martens match her blue electric fiddle.

I was an Irish dancer before *Riverdance.* To me the show meant that people finally understood what I did when I said "Irish step dance." It also meant that dancers, many of whom, myself included, were trained by Irish immigrant instructors, started to incorporate some of the *Riverdance* embellishments into their own traditional performances. I traded in a heavy green velvet vest, knee-length black polyester skirt and embroidered long-sleeved blouse for a short, fitted black velvet dress with sheer sleeves. My two costumes, like the two clips I show my students, visually illustrate Irish dancing before and after *Riverdance* –a juxtaposition which reflects the tradition/modernity binary in contemporary Irish Studies scholarship.

Irish dancing has its roots in the Gaelic revival and a contemporary incarnation that reflects Celtic and nationalist identity as well as a globalized and commodified version of Irishness. It thus offers a unique means of investigating the tension between tradition—what David Lloyd terms the "non-modern" — and modernity. Declan Kiberd argues that the revival was not, as it is often depicted, a struggle between tradition and modernity. He defines the debate instead as one concerned with the best way to modernize by combining culture and industry (134). He writes that "the cultural movements to which the League [Gaelic League] gave rise also refused to succumb to simplistic notions of tradition and innovation as opposed entities" (134). Similarly, P.J. Mathews points out that "the process of reviving 'ancient' cultural practices was always already complicit in a process of modernization…" Although Irish dance cannot be traced

back to pre-colonial or Celtic times, Mathews encourages us to see dance, like the other oxymoronic "new traditional practices" of the revival, as "examples of an alternative modernization process that was informed by a belief in the dormant potential within pre-colonial Irish cultural forms" (27-8). One hundred years after the revival, contemporary Irish step dance illustrates the continued innovation of a "new traditional practice."

In this chapter I will explore how dance functions as a means of constructing Irish identity in a globalized society, since it is intimately intertwined with nationalism, cultural production, politics and the global economy. Moving from *Riverdance* to a selection of dance scenes from Irish and Irish American films, I will investigate how Irish dancing has become synonymous with a version of Irishness that is at once traditional and modern. I will show how these examples from stage, screen and in the global economy provides the means to construct--and challenge the construction of-- gender, community and perceptions of the Irish both at home and abroad.

## IRISH DANCE: CULTURAL NATIONALISM ON STAGE

In his essay "The Recovery of Kitsch," David Lloyd posits that cultural nationalism functions to "retrieve for the people an authentic tradition that, in its primordiality and continuity, differentiates the nation culturally if not racially from those that surround or occupy it" (89). Irish cultural nationalism was rejuvenated in the late nineteenth century. The Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde to revive traditional language and literature, declared Irish dance to be an "authentic tradition" that identified Irish culture as separate from English culture. At the same time the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) promoted Gaelic football and hurling as Irish alternatives to

soccer, hockey and rugby. The Gaelic League outlawed set dancing, which was considered to be influenced by "foreign" dances like French quadrilles, while it encouraged ceili dancing, which was considered more Irish. In 1897 the first ceili, or informal dance gathering, was held in London. In the same year, the Gaelic League began to promote feisanna, competitions in singing, dancing, music and Irish speaking, throughout Ireland. The popularity of feisanna and the "Irish Ireland" activities that they promoted grew during the beginning of the twentieth century and coincided with the Irish literary revival and the nationalist political movement, which culminated in the 1916 Easter Rising and subsequent War for Independence.

An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, or commission for Irish dancing, was formed in 1927, the same year that the Free State national anthem was changed from "God Save the King" to "Amhrán na bhFiann" ("A Soldier's Song"). Today An Coimisiún continues to establish guidelines for the teaching and judging of Irish dance. It also standardizes the steps of ceili dances to ensure international continuity in what were considered the most traditional and communal of Irish dances. An Coimisiún is, in many ways, a reflection of the Free State and mid-century Republic in its adherence to strict and sometimes arbitrary rules, many of them based on modesty and acceptable physical presentation, including appearance, comportment and neatness. Contemporary rules issued by An Comisiún require a skirt that is no more than four inches above the knee, a bodice without any cutaways that comes up to the collarbone or above, and sleeves from the shoulder to the cuff (although chiffon or lace are acceptable for sleeves). In addition, "appropriate underwear must be worn. Where tights are worn they must be of a denier not less than 70." As Irish dance fashion becomes more and more like that of a beauty pageant, An

Coimisiún has issued a new rule forbidding "the use of make-up and false tan" for dancers under the age of ten in an effort to maintain the putative purity of Irish dancing and its competitors (http://members.tripod.com/EMFriend/costume.html). No such stringent regulations exist for men and boys' costumes, which are usually either kilts or black slacks with button down shirts and ties.

In the 1990s, Irish dance had become a signifier of Irishness as recognizable as the Northern gunman.[1] The uniformity of Irish dancing was challenged through the work of the Trinity Irish Dance Company and *Riverdance,* breaking away from some of the traditional rigidity maintained by its governing body. The economy in the Republic was on the upswing and, at the same time, Northern political violence was in decline as the various parties in the North negotiated the most successful and long-lasting peace agreement of the conflict.

Irish identity reflected through dance performances, especially by men, often reflects the stereotype of the Irish as inherently violent. Dance performances on stage, in films and in advertising directed towards a diasporic[2] audience frequently provide what Diane Negra, in her work on advertising and popular culture, defines as a return to a nostalgic historical moment. Artists and producers strategically return to some classic representations of Irishness while occasionally and subtly revising others to 'sell' to

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[1] Roy Houghton, a Glaswegian of Irish extraction who played football for Ireland from 1986-1997 appeared on the program *Fantasy Football Euro 2004* in June of 2004dressed as a potato, a leprechaun, and Jean Butler, the original female lead of *Riverdance.* At the end of the sketch he appeared next to an army-jacketed, balaclava clad character.

[2] Although some scholars take issue with the use of the term "diaspora" in an Irish context, I find it useful for describing the community that has emerged from several generations of steady emigration from Ireland to (primarily) North America, Australia/New Zealand and the UK.

primarily diasporic consumers. This version of identity reflects internalized colonial and gendered stereotypes.

Lloyd notes that in order to circulate “cultural commodities,” “cultural nationalists must deploy, in the name of tradition itself, the most modern techniques of reproduction and dissemination” (89-90). This type of identity marketing is problematic in and of itself, since, as Negra points out, “practices of consumption maintain and reinforce colonial relations of power” (“Consuming” 78). In the case of Irish dancing, capitalism and cultural nationalism fuse in advertising campaigns and sold-out auditoriums as the Irish provide the song-and-dance routine that enables corporations to sell products and audiences to consume, for a few minutes or a few hours, a particular version of Irish identity.

Depictions of Irish identity in dance tend to reify stereotypes put in place by the colonizer (that of the wild Irish) or constructed during the nation-building period. Gerald of Wales was one of the first outsiders to explicitly link the now common stereotypes of fighting and dancing to Irish identity when he visited Ireland in the twelfth century on behalf of Britain’s Henry II. He described the Irish as a primitive and violent race, illustrating his *Topographia Hibernia* with drawings of Irishmen wielding axes; in his opinion, one of the few redeeming qualities of the Irish was their ability to play fine music and to dance. Although dancing was a part of Irish culture when Gerald of Wales visited Ireland, the first accounts of dances that would eventually become identified as “Irish” dances, jigs, rince fada (long dance) and the hey, precursor to the reel, were recorded in the mid-1500s. Solo or step dancing most likely began at the end of the 18$^{th}$ century and was taught by traveling dancing masters (Flynn).

Dancing masters were responsible for teaching the recognizable carriage of Irish dancers, who cross their legs and turn their feet out from the hips as they keep their upper bodies immobile and their arms at their sides. The origins of this posture are highly mythologized in oral histories that continue to circulate through Irish dancing schools. While there is no established explanation for this stylized positioning of the body, legends suggest that Irish dancers held their arms in and at their sides in order to disguise the fact that they were dancing during the colonial period, when explicit demonstrations of traditional Irish culture were outlawed. An even more far-fetched explanation is that Irish prisoners insisted on dancing even with their hands tied, and their fellow dancers maintained the posture in a gesture of solidarity. More likely is the suggestion that Irish dancers were encouraged to keep their hips and torso still and their arms rigid by the clergy, who only encouraged dance that was "an exercise in anti-eroticism" (Smyth 33).[3] Either way, the continued perpetuation of such myths in Irish dancing schools around the world emphasizes the centrality of Catholicism and colonial history to the folklore of Irish dance.

Luke Gibbons has connected Irish dancing with literature and oral culture; he notes that bodies in such texts have often been represented as "paralyzed," an apt description of the upper bodies of traditional Irish dancers. Gibbons believes that the emphasis on "skill, technique and discipline" in Irish dance resulted in a "full metal

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[3] This explanation is supported by the 1935 Dance Hall Acts, which ended "house parties" and dancing at the crossroads. The Acts were strongly supported by the clergy, who believed that all sorts of immoral activity were transpiring outside of official public space. The Acts were passed and required all dances (traditional ceilis as well as popular ballroom dancing) to be held in licensed public spaces where clergy could attend. On a related note, a colloquial nickname for the rock step in Irish dancing is "the nun's step." The step requires the dancer to be as high as possible on the balls of her feet (this step is only performed by

jacket" that eliminated room for expressivity or personality. Words, in an oral culture, "took up all the energies," leaving very little room for physical artistic expression like dance. Dance critics Moe Myer and Helen Brennan, on the other hand, see Irish dance as an extension of oral culture. Myer argues that "the beats created by Irish dancers' feet actually derive from the sounds of Gaelic oral poetry" (ctd in Morrison 174). J'aime Morrison, in an essay on Irish dance in the film versions of *The Field* and "The Dead," responds that Myers's interpretation "highlight[s] the fact that Irish dance complicates the notion of "orality" by embodying an intersection between sound (speech) and movement…to dance is to story the body" (174). Thus step dance, with its highly nationalist history, is a weighted symbol that is often used by directors to allude to a moment of social or historical violence, and to cement gender roles as they were conceived during the late colonial and early postcolonial periods.

## *RIVERDANCE*

### History, Context and Reception

*Riverdance* has become, for better or for worse, one of the primary signifiers of Irishness for international audiences over the past ten years. *Riverdance's* position as a definitive cultural artifact should not be overlooked: it revises Irish identity for the late twentieth and early twenty-first century but also subtly reinforces certain cultural and gendered stereotypes. The original show, performed for the 1994 Eurovision song contest, was only seven minutes long. Ireland was hosting this annual song contest, a "televisual celebration of Euro kitsch" and was thus responsible for the interval act before

women) in order to rock back and forth, rolling her ankles towards the ground. The other important aspect

results were announced (Smyth 18).  Moya Doherty, the producer, envisioned the interval piece as a "vibrant, sexy, contemporary Irish tap dance routine…this would not be a 'back to our roots' routine, rather the opposite" (Smyth 23).

*Riverdance* was conceived in 1994, when Doherty's husband, John McColgan, head of entertainment at the Irish national broadcast company, Radio Teilifis Eireann (RTE), produced a show called Mayo 5000 that celebrated County Mayo in the West of Ireland. Irish musician Bill Whelan was the composer, and two Irish-Americans, Jean Butler and Michael Flatley, and one Irish Briton, Colin Dunne, were the dancers. Flatley, who was the first American to win the World Irish Dancing Championships, had been working on a hybrid of Irish dance and (primarily) tap that incorporated a more relaxed upper body posture than that approved by An Comisiún and Irish dance competitions.[4] Jean Butler collaborated with Dunne on a piece that was initially very traditional but evolved into a dramatic a cappella hard shoe piece that showed off the percussive power of Irish dancing. Although Butler admits that they tightened up the dance because "the establishment was watching" they had captured the attention of McColgan and Doherty (Butler).

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of this step is that the legs need to be locked together at the ankle, knee and thigh, hence the nickname.

[4] Although *Riverdance* was the first Irish show to use this updated form of Irish dancing, Mark Howard, the British-born founder of the Trinity Irish Dance Company (1979) in Chicago had been working on what he termed "progressive" Irish dance during the 1980s.  Howard's form of Irish dance, which debuted to U.S. audiences on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, combined "dramatic choreography, expressive upper body articulation and lightning fast footwork," all descriptions that could later be applied to *Riverdance.* The similarities between the two productions were not lost on Howard. In 1989 he choreographed an a cappella hard shoe chorus line piece called "Celtic Thunder." Then, in 1995 Michael Flatley, also originally based in Chicago, included a similar a cappella piece called "Distant Thunder" in *Riverdance.* The name was changed to "Thunderstorm" when Howard informed *Riverdance* producers of the "glaring similarities" between the shows. Trinity operates several Irish dance academies in the Chicago-Wisconsin area, and his company continues to tour internationally. In 1994 Howard produced a piece called "Turf," which paired Irish-American step dancers with African American tap dancers, choreography that would be echoed in the later *Riverdance* piece "Trading Taps" (www.trinitydancers.com).

The reaction to the original April 30, 1994 Eurovision performance was overwhelmingly positive; director John McColgan recounted that “it wasn’t a cheer, but a roar, a primeval roar…people were crying” (Smyth 35). The seven minute video of the performance and Bill Whelan’s single sold so well that Moya Doherty began work on a full-length stage show. The program primarily consists of Irish dance but also incorporates Flamenco, tap, Russian folk dance, traditional Irish music and a gospel choir.

The show had immediate success in Ireland and was attended by everyone who was anyone in Irish cultural, social and political life. Maureen O’Hara, the redheaded colleen from *The Quiet Man,* gave it her approval, perhaps because a contemporary Mary Kate Danaher, Jean Butler, finished the show in a white lace dress reminiscent of the Irish lace wedding gown that was one of the most famous costumes from film. Neil Jordan, one of Ireland’s most acclaimed directors and writers, took the cast of *Michael Collins*, his biopic about revolutionary Ireland, to see the show. Producers and financial backers worried, however, that it wouldn’t translate to English or American audiences. The show was an overwhelming success despite, or perhaps because of, its “uncompromising Irishness” and was even performed for Prince Charles, Queen Elizabeth and Princess Margaret when it went to London in 1995 (Smyth 55; 60). In 1996 *Riverdance* strategically made its U.S. debut during St. Patrick’s week at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Many in the audience wore clusters of shamrock, including Senator Ted Kennedy and his sister Jean Kennedy Smith, the US Ambassador to Ireland, who blocked sixty seats at the theater.

As Negra observes, “Images of the historically burdened, static Irish terrorist largely receded in late 1990s US and transnational media in favour of a more sanguine version of Irishness, increasingly available through heritage and/or tourism…” Marketing a contemporary and positive Irish identity was a possibility. When *Riverdance* went abroad in the mid-nineties, there was an IRA ceasefire in effect, the Irish economy had taken off and bed and breakfasts around Ireland were brimming with heritage tourists. Dear, dirty Dublin, with the addition of trendy upscale shops, coffee bars and restaurants, became a destination for weekend getaways and stag parties: “Ireland and all things Irish were fashionable” (Smyth 54). Author Helena Mulkerns suggests that *Riverdance* updated “the last skeleton in our cultural closet,” the nationalist, petit bourgeois art form ruled with an iron fist by An Comisiún (Wall 60-61). *Riverdance* emerged from “a place of ectasy…a newfound national confidence” (Butler) and embodied a “change in the Irish collective self-esteem” (Wall 60-61). *Riverdance* was a major factor in this fresh conception of Irishness that appealed to people not only in Ireland but to audiences around the world.

**Use and Challenge of Gendered and Ethnic Stereotype**

Despite the fact that *Riverdance* has been lauded for updating Irish dancing and identity, and even tapping into “the genre’s sublimated sexuality,” the show also provides ample opportunity for audiences to indulge in a pre-modern Celtic or pastoral revery (Smyth). The dancing Celts support Negra’s idea of the “myth of ethnic enchantment” in which “Irishness often stands for the erasure of the effects of modernity…it acts to freeze individuals and families in a pre-1960s moment of harmony.” Indeed, the negotiation of

tradition and modernity was, at least in part, what made *Riverdance* so successful. The show embraced a traditional dance form that was closely tied to colonial resistance and postcolonial identity to revise Irish cultural identity for a current, international stage. The skirts were short, the costumes were contemporary, and the choreography incorporated international dance and music. The show took Irish artistic traditions to a global audience and made a new vision of Irish identity available through a subtle adhesion to traditional ideas of Irish heritage, returning, like the artists and writers of the revival, to the pre-colonial Celtic period for the first half of the show. Composer Bill Whelan says that "Act One is…purely Celtic in form and content," which suggests a primitive version of Ireland. The show relied on celticized Irish motifs, with a dolmen and Celtic swirls taken from the tombs at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth as backdrops;[5] bodhrans, fiddles and Irish language songs; and pieces whose titles draw on Irish literature and folklore, from "The Countess Cathleen" to "The Women of the Sidhe." In addition the description of the final scene of Act I, from which the show takes its name, utilizes the trope of Ireland as a female body: "Our story begins in the evocation of the Riverwoman…as the power of the river grows, as the barren earth becomes fertile…our story rises until it floods the world in a vital, joyous riot of celebration." The comparison of Ireland to the body of a renewed and fertile woman can be traced back to Celtic mythology, when sex with a

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[5] The sets were designed by renowned Irish artist Robert Ballagh. Although Ballagh has said that the original seven minute piece "touched a nerve in the area of Irish identity in a modern way" he dismisses academic readings of the show. He believes that, though the production marked the significant moment in which an Irish show achieved international acclaim for its slick packaging, razzle-dazzle and professionalism, it should not be taken too seriously as a commentary on contemporary Irish society, culture or identity. Ballagh thinks that *Riverdance* is essentially a "piece of light entertainment" that has been burdened with too much expectation, too much representation of the 'new Ireland.' He says that "if people think this is the apex of Irish culture, they're wrong. It was a specific response to a specific situation."

young man would restore the fertility and beauty of the old hag that represented the nation. The myth was borrowed by the nationalist tradition, from the aisling poetry of the wandering poets to Yeats's *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, which shifted the requirement for renewal from sexual union to death. The descriptive lines from the program notes also echo the explicit sexual allegory of the impregnated female body in Seamus Heaney's anti-colonial poem "Act of Union": "To-night, a first movement, a pulse, / As if the rain in bogland / gathered head / To slip and flood: a bog-burst, / A gash breaking open the ferny bed." It also echoes the opening lines of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*: "Riverrun past Adam and Eve's…" The river is a reference to the character Anna Livia Plurabelle (ALP), representative the River Liffey. A statue nicknamed the "Floozy in the Jacuzzi" immortalizes ALP on O'Connell Street in Dublin.

The dances are broken down along gender lines that reinforce conventional depictions of Irish men and women. Despite the contention of *Riverdance* historian Sam Smyth that the show reworks the "stage Irishism that had cast its men as amiable or pugilistic drunks, and its women as retiring or fiery redheads in a shawl," the show reifies those very stereotypes even as it revises others. For example, the tenth anniversary program employs predictable male/female vocabulary to portray the initial dance, a hard shoe reel performed by men and women called "Reel around the Sun," which is described as a celebration of the "benevolent masculine power" of the sun. In a later scene, "Shivna," the dancer, a version of Mad Sweeney, "dance[s] desperately in the power of the moon…the powers are cruel and arbitrary, female and savage." Helen Davis, whose writing focuses primarily on traditional Irish music, briefly discusses

*Riverdance* in her chapter on "Irish Music, British Culture and the Transatlantic Experience." She notes that the women who perform the chorus of "Reel around the Sun" dance in a "traditional" style, while the lead male dancer, a role immortalized by Michael Flatley, who left the show but still receives credit as the principal choreographer, "burst[s] onto the stage in running leaps with open arms…throughout the performance his dancing is characterized by novelty" (257). Davis argues that the choreography of *Riverdance* presents "tradition as female and modernity as male" (257).

Although certain aspects of gender roles are reinforced in the show, the tradition/modernity binary is more complex than Davis acknowledges. Flatley's choreography seems as much part of his own personal style as it is a commentary on traditional women and modern men. The "novel" changes he introduced, which included relaxed upper body posture and the occasional use of the arms, were always central to the show's goal of updating Irish dancing. A better characterization of the masculine/ feminine divide in the show would describe the men in the show as hyper-masculine rather than hyper-modern. Men who dance have always faced questions about their gendered and sexual identities; since the Irish have often been characterized as a fey and feminine race, male Irish dancers have faced a double feminization. Although male Irish dancers compete and perform in soft and hard shoes, the men in *Riverdance* dance exclusively in hard shoes. The choreographers emphasize aggressive footwork and percussive rhythm, often performed a cappella. The men's costumes accentuate masculinity through the use of dark colors, leather and clinging shirts that show off pectoral muscles. Similarly, the background slides for the dances performed exclusively by men feature masculinized symbols of power: thunder, lightening and standing stones.

In these ways, the men in *Riverdance* resist feminization and reinforce a masculine version of Irish identity.[6]

The first solo piece for the lead female dancer and several other women dancers, however, challenges the simplistic idea that men are masculine and modern and women feminine and traditional. The piece was called "The Countess Cathleen," in both the original show recorded at the Point and in the tenth anniversary performance at the Gaiety, both in Dublin.[7] The piece was called "Women of Ireland" when it was performed in New York City. "The Countess Cathleen" begins with a soft shoe slip jig, a traditional dance performed only by women. Several women dance together and then leave the stage for the female lead to perform a solo. The lead is then seemingly "chased" from the stage by three male dancers from the Moscow Folk Ballet. The chorus of women dances back onstage, this time in hard shoes, to challenge the all-male Russian dancers. The lead returns to perform a series of steps that force the men off the stage, allowing her to finish her solo hard shoe piece on an empty stage. Women were traditionally limited to soft shoes dances, although the women of Cork were rumored to have dance in hard shoes before the mid-twentieth century, when it became acceptable for women to perform hard shoe dances. Slip jigs, a soft-shoe dance in 9/8 time, are still only danced by women.

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[6] Matthew Arnold in particular argued that the Irish were part of a Celtic race which he characterized as feminine, lazy, superstitious and creative. He posited that the Irish needed the structured guidance of the British in order to contribute to the United Kingdom.

[7] *The Countess Cathleen's* title comes from Yeats's play, which was the controversial first production of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899. The drama features an aristocrat, the Countess Cathleen, who sells her soul to the devil to save her tenants who are starving during an unnamed famine. When she dies the bargain is nullified and she is taken to heaven because God "looks always on the motive, not the deed" (105). In the play Yeats emphasizes Celticism, rather than Catholicism, as central to an "authentic" Irish identity.

According to the program notes, the choreography is meant to reveal the "empowerment" of the female dancers as well as their "sensual, nurturing, independent and fierce" sides. These five adjectives reflect the tensions in the representation of gender in *Riverdance* through a blending of classic and contemporary perspectives on Irish femininity. The "independent" and "fierce" qualities can be read politically: if the audience sees the lead female dancer as a representative of Ireland, then this woman, constructed as a passive figure in nationalist rhetoric, claims agency and, as a result, her independence. "Nurturing" recalls the common nationalist and Catholic emphasis on maternity, though there is nothing nurturing about this particular dance, while "sensual" challenges the idea that the female body is solely maternal.

The celticism of Act I disappears in Act II, which focuses on the diasporic experience. Two of the most compelling scenes of Act II did not appear in the original show. The first, "American Wake," [8] appeals to an Irish-American audience. The piece, in which young dancers whirl through set dances and folk songs in full, colorful peasant skirts and homespun vests during a ceilí, "touched a melancholy chord in the native folk memory and brought lumps to the throats of many of the children's children of those Irish forced to leave their homeland generations before" (Smyth 63).

The second new scene, "Trading Taps," is the only one to address racial tensions in Irish America, a theme treated in many twentieth century Irish-American texts, from Mary Doyle Curran's novel *The Parish and the Hill* (1948) to Alice McDermott's

[8] The American wake is an Irish tradition that celebrates and mourns the departure of one or more members of the community before they emigrate to America which, before transatlantic flights became affordable, was often tantamount to a death in the family. American wakes were extremely important events in the social structure of the Irish community. See J'aime Morrison, "Dancing between the Decks:

*Charming Billy* (1997) and the Ted Demme film *Monument Ave* (1998). "Trading Taps," which is part of the larger scene called "Harbour of the New World," was added to the show for the Radio City Music Hall performance and was choreographed by Colin Dunne. In the piece the male lead and three other Irish men challenge the show's two African American tap dancers to a competitive show of dancing skills, at times mocking the stylized elements of each others' genres. The scene, a popular favorite, alludes both to the influence of Irish dance on tap dancing, clogging and Louisiana style "hoofing," and to the tension between Irish Americans and African Americans, particularly in the nineteenth century, as they competed for the same jobs and fought to escape the lowest position on the social ladder.[9] Though the dance ends amicably, with good-natured back slapping all around, the scene's aggression demonstrates how dance, as in *The Field* and Northern Irish films, serves as ritualized confrontation.

As the popularity of *Riverdance* surged internationally, Irish dancing became increasingly commodifed as an Irish cultural symbol. As Whelan comments in Sam Smyth's *Riverdance: The Story*:

> There is cultural identification. People recognize something of themselves in the show. How else would African Americans, Australians, people from the north of England identify with the show? Sure, the Irish feel proud to be Irish, but it is international too—and it's not just because of the Spanish or Russian dancers. In Belfast, both Protestants and Catholics identified with it; it transcends nationalism. You have to suspend your preconditioning of what to expect and just let *Riverdance* flow over you. Every generation has to find a new way to express an old idea. *Riverdance* is explaining people to themselves. It is part of a new confidence for us to express our music and culture in a new way. (90)

[9] For the classic discussion of the racialization of the Irish, see L. Perry Curtis's *Apes and Angels* and Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White.* Also of interest is *Racism in the Irish Experience.*

Whelan's comments summarize some of the contradictions inherent in the recent use of Irish dance. Whelan, as one of the creators, wants audiences to "suspend . . . preconditioning," and sees the project as one that will reacquaint Irish people, as well as an international audience, with an Irish culture that has been reconceived as modern and sexy. The idea of this performance as a means of "explaining people to themselves" underscores the shifting perceptions of Irish identity. Although *Riverdance* itself succeeds in updating Irish dance and other cultural signifiers while acknowledging their importance to Irishness, its ripple effect has been, in many ways, regressive. Irish dance has subsequently been used to reinforce a primitive and stereotypical Irishness, particularly in film.

Such stereotypes appear most often in diasporic communities which, no matter how tenuous their genetic link to their Irish roots, seek ethnic identification. Enrollment in Irish dance classes in North America, Great Britain and Australia skyrocketed after the debut of *Riverdance,* whose two American-born principal dancers, Michael Flatley and Jean Butler, illustrated the importance of the diaspora. The tenth anniversary production also stars two diasporic dancers: Sinéad McCafferty, Belfast-born but raised in Toronto, and Conor Hayes, born in Dublin but raised in Melbourne. A practice which was once relegated to first and second generation immigrant enclaves, Mulkerns's "skeleton in the cultural closet," suddenly had mass appeal.

As things Irish and Irish-American became economically successful and culturally desirable, step dance moved from a relatively obscure traditional art form to an internationally recognized and marketed phenomenon. Negra suggests that "a commodity reveals the underlying sociopolitical fabric out of which it is produced…" ("Consuming,"

78). The middle class position of Irish Americans and the same factors that helped make *Riverdance* so successful—the Northern peace process, Irish tourism and the success of the Irish economy, made Irish and Irish-American identity appealing and lucrative enough to supportive Irish interest magazines and catalogues directed at the second and third generations of the diaspora. Advertising agencies started to embrace dance as a vehicle to sell everything from coffee to high speed internet access.[10]

As a result, Irish dance, which in diasporic contexts represents an "economically rejuvenated (yet somehow still undeveloped and rural) Ireland," has been used to sell both products and perceptions of Irishness (Negra, "The New Primitives"). Although *Riverdance,* for the most part, avoided overt kitchiness, subsequent uses of Irish dance have embraced the kitschiest aspects of Irish culture to allow audiences to consume Irishness, both on stage and through associated products. This evolution proves Lloyd's thesis that commodification contributes to the devolution of a national cultural symbol into kitsch. Lloyd, however, does not see this as exclusively negative; in its most ideal form, Lloyd argues, it is a means of resistance for the subaltern, through which traumatic memories can be "congealed and privatized" (94). According to Colin Graham, Lloyd's reading of Gerry Kelly's Belfast murals, which rely heavily on Celtic imagery, demonstrate how "the subaltern agent as kitsch artist recovers the 'wasted' emblems of culture" (169). *Riverdance* reclaims 'emblems of culture': Celtic imagery, the traumatic memory of generations of sustained emigration and the tradition of step dancing itself.

[10] Irish dancing has been used to sell, amongst other things, Folger's Coffee, Dr. Pepper, Crest Whitestrips, and RoadRunner high speed internet access.

By updating those potentially kitschy elements of Irish culture, the performers use them as a means of resistance to showcase the cultural confidence of Ireland.

**Where are they now?**

The trajectories of the two original stars of the show after they left *Riverdance* in some ways reveals the fine line between a confident, creative and "economically rejuvenated" Irishness and the cultural imperialism of slickly marketed plastic Celticism (Negra; O'Toole). Flatley left the show in the fall of 1995, turning the lead over to Colin Dunne less than 24 hours before curtain. In order to achieve total creative control he started his own show, *Lord of the Dance*, which debuted at the Point in Dublin just weeks after he left *Riverdance*.[11] While *Riverdance* took up residence for their ten year anniversary show at the Gaiety Theatre just off St. Stephen's Green in Dublin, *Lord of the Dance* has a five year contract at the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas, and the contrast between the venues mirrors the differing appeals of the two shows.

While *Riverdance* "liberated locked-up elements of Irish tradition" it was also a self-conscious "parable of the modernization of Irish culture" (O'Toole 153). *Riverdance,* with its "underlying respect for Irish traditional music and dance…its implicit acknowledgement that folk culture has a life, and a truth of its own" is successful and respected in Ireland and abroad (O'Toole 152). *Lord of the Dance,* despite commercial success, moves away from cultural sensitivity and self awareness, coming dangerously close to self-parody. Although Fintan O'Toole, in "Unsuitables from a Distance: The Politics of *Riverdance*," recognizes Flatley's "mesmerizing physical power," he points out that *Lord of the Dance* also exemplifies the

> crass egomania and cultural idiocy that can result when a knowing post-modern Irishness tips over into the packaged, de-politicised, de-contextualised Celticism that has become such an attractive way of selling Ireland- without-tears . . . *Lord of the Dance* showed how easy it is for Irish culture, in its adaptation to a global, commodified entertainment business, to teeter over the edge of boldness and into an abyss of banality, to mistake liberation from a repressive past for crass ignorance of the collective memory locked up in traditional forms, to lose the core of awkwardness and resistance without which any piece of art must be either insipid or destructive. (*Ex-Isle* 153; 155)

*Lord of the Dance* challenges David Lloyd's belief that kitsch functions as a means of resistance.

Flatley went on to choreograph the show *Feet of Flames,* which added even more glitz and special effects than *Lord of the Dance* had done. He emerged from retirement in July of 2005, and his latest production, *Celtic Tiger,* premiered late that year in Budapest, Hungary, where, as in Russia, there has been an increase in Irish dance schools and performances. The show, which debuts in the United States at Madison Square Garden in September 2005 is reportedly organized around "the survival of invasion and triumph in the face of oppression" (Owen). Flatley says that "this show really chronicles the journey of the Celts… it will take [the audience] on a journey like none other they've experienced" (Owen). He insists that "this is not about ego—despite what people may say." He also, however, compares the creative process through which *Celtic Tiger* was conceived with that of his "literary idol," James Joyce, and the creation of *Finnegan's Wake* (Owen). As Flatley himself modestly proclaims, "We *are* Ireland in the eyes of those audiences. From Beijing to Berlin to Moscow to Melbourne, we are the only Ireland that many of them may ever see or experience" (Owen). Such comparisons, combined with the name of the show, its themes and its premiere in Eastern Europe,

termed by one author "a thriving centre of the Irish cultural renaissance," all indicate the global branding of Irish dance and Irish identity.

Jean Butler, on the other hand, has avoided what O'Toole terms the "smash-and-grab" relationship to Irish culture post-*Riverdance*. Butler did some acting[12] and performing following her departure from the show and, in 1999, began collaborating on a large stage production with her other *Riverdance* partner, Colin Dunne. She and Dunne conceived a show called *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* (1999), which was loosely based on the myth of Diarmuid and Grainne. The two stars wanted to investigate the form of Irish dance to create something "organic and expressive" (Butler) while "studiously avoid[ing] the trite, shamrocks-and-shillelaghs approach often taken with this legend" (Hitchener). After filling out the cast (which, according to Butler, was difficult to do because of competition from shows like *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance)*[13] Butler and Dunne started work on choreography, asking for contributions from all of the dancers in

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[12] Butler starred in the film *The Brylcreem Boys* (1996) which takes place during the Emergency, or World War II. The film depicts a prisoner of war camp in Co.Kildare that held Allied soldiers on one side of a barbed wire fence and Axis soldiers on the other. The plot of the movie revolves around the competition between Bill, a Canadian flier, and Rudy, a German officer, for Maddie, who is a direct descendant of Mary Kate Danaher, Maureen O'Hara's character in *The Quiet Man*. As the only significant woman, she simultaneously conveys the image of a feisty colleen, with her wavy auburn hair, independent streak and endless wardrobe of elegant tweeds and Aran sweaters, and a modern, independent woman, with her financial and sexual freedom, her Katherine Hepburnesque trousers and her refusal to marry one of the two men and leave Ireland. The same contradictions appear in her dancing; while she showcases her considerable talent in the local pub by performing traditional solo dancing after a group of set dancers have cleared the floor, she dances in hard shoes, which were traditionally used only by men. Her two suitors end up having a fistfight outside the pub. Intercut with this scene is an a capella hard shoe reel sequence performed by several male dancers; as the speed of the music and dancing increase so does the intensity of the fight, until the two juxtaposed moments end in a frenzy of homosocial bonding. Once again dancing is a test of masculinity, although in this film the female character also raises questions about the construction of femininity through dance. In the end Maddie, who has been constructed as a Mother Ireland of sorts, refuses both of her foreign suitors, maintaining her independence but also her Irishness.

[13] *Riverdance* spawned not only the Flatley and Butler/Dunne shows but also a relatively large number of similar Irish dance shows, including *Celtic Legends, Fire of Dance, Dance of Desire, Magic of the Dance, Ragus: The Show, The Rhythm of the Dance,Spirit of the Dance, Spirit of Ireland* and *To Dance on the Moon*.

order to create a style that was less vertical than traditional competitive dancing. Butler says that she wanted "individuality, characterization…a thinking dancer" for *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*. As a result they eliminated the hard shoe chorus lines associated with *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* and used music that was more like a film score than a traditional Irish music showcase. At one point in the show, when the Fianna wake from the drug-induced sleep that has allowed Grainne to run away from her wedding to Finn McCool with his second-in-command and her lover, Diarmuid, the dancers perform a parody of just such a chorus line. They form a tentative and drunken line and dance a hard shoe treble reel with their arms tied to their sides, bound literally by rope and metaphorically by the constraints of traditional Irish dancing. The show received mixed reviews, in part because it was not the "de-politicized, de-contextualized bit of Celticism" that audiences had come to expect. Even though the reviewer for the *New York Times* observed that it channeled "Irish dancing into genuine expression" in a way that other shows did not, Butler admits her frustration in fighting a "commercial machine…a brand image" that she herself had helped to create (Butler).

As the "brand image" of *Riverdance* and subsequent Irish dance shows became globally synonymous with Irish identity in the mid-late 1990s, the peace process in Northern Ireland was in full swing and Gerry Adams took his place on an international stage, visiting the United States and the Clinton White House on a special visa negotiated in part by Ted Kennedy. The presence of Adams and Flatley in popular imagination is evident in the 2002 *Times* of London op-ed piece by Michael Gove titled "Riverdance of Death as Gerry Calls the Tune." Gove writes that in both *Riverdance* and the current peace process, which he regards as equally performative, the "choreography is superb,

the discipline impressive, the applause thunderous." In addition he puns about both parties' reluctance to use their 'arms.' Gove's story uses two signifiers of Irish identity that became particularly potent for an international audience in the 1990s: IRA men (or, like Adams, former-republican-prisoners-turned-politicians) [14] and Irish step dancers, to link step dancing and violence in a manner that has appeared repeatedly in Irish film and stage productions over the past fifteen years. Adams and Michael Flatley became the public faces of Ireland for people around the world, explicitly reinforcing the connection between dancing and nationalist politics.[15]

The nationalist origins of dance are reflected in organization of *Riverdance*: in addition to a number of touring companies named after Irish rivers (the Boyne, the Avoca, the Liffey), the producers established a group of dancers that made up "flying columns" that could substitute on any show that might be missing performers. "Flying

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[14] Adams has always denied membership in the IRA. He was held on the prison ship the *Maidstone* in 1972 under the internment act of 1971. He was released in 1972 to take part in peace talks and interned again in Long Kesh from 1973-1977 and again briefly in 1978. The release of documents under the "thirty year rule" names Adams as a prominent figure in the IRA and in 2005 Irish Justice Minister Michael McDowell and *Irish Times* journalist Kevin Myers publicly named Adams as a member of the current IRA army council. Adams, as well as other senior political figures like Martin McGuinness and Martin Ferris, denied the charges in the British and Irish press.

[15] Talks have continued since the Good Friday agreement of 1998, when the most lasting ceasefire of the Northern Irish conflict began. A power-sharing government based in Northern Ireland was short-lived, however, and disagreements focused mainly on the decommissioning of arms by the IRA. Decommissioning did begin, although splinter groups of paramilitary organizations on both sides threatened the agreement. Recent elections reinforced the tenuous nature of the peace process and the government remained in London. One of the greatest blows to the credibility of the contemporary incarnation of the IRA occurred on January 30, 2005, two IRA members were accused of murdering a Catholic man named Robert McCartney after an altercation in a republican bar in Belfast's Short Strand. When witnesses (there were up to 50) failed to come forward, McCartney's sisters, who grew up in the nationalist enclave and have voted Sinn Fein all their lives, began a campaign to draw attention to the corruption of the IRA. The IRA expelled both volunteers involved in the murder and offered to shoot them. The sisters refused and continued to draw international attention to their cause. They were invited to the White House and met with Ted Kennedy on St. Patrick's Day, 2005, while Gerry Adams was left out of both events for the first time since the Good Friday Agreement. Protests marked the anniversary of the Easter 1916 Rising as Sinn Fein reacted to its ostracization by the international community; leaders emphasize that the political party recognizes no ties to the IRA and has long been the representative party

columns" is a term originally used to describe groups of IRA soldiers during the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921) who would conduct guerilla attacks on police and army barracks throughout Ireland, and this overtly connects Irish dancing with nationalist violence. The name "flying columns" directly refers to a critical moment in nationalist history and ideology. As these dancers move around the world, they promote both the traditional aspects of the show—Celticism and nationalism—and the updated versions of Irish dancing and Irish identity for consumption by an international audience.

## FLYING COLUMNS: THE ARTICULATION OF CONFLICT THROUGH IRISH DANCE IN FILM

### *The Field*

*The Field*, Jim Sheridan's critically acclaimed 1990 cinematic adaptation of John B. Keane's 1965 play of the same title, is one of the first films to enlist dance as a metaphorical tool. The film is also the only one in this study that preceded the influence of *Riverdance. The Field* uses ceili[16]dancing rather than solo dancing, the flamboyant steps of which became internationally synonymous with Irishness after the 1994 debut of *Riverdance*. Ceili dancing traditionally requires four couples to comprise a "set," or grouping, but can, depending on the dance, involve anywhere from four to ten dancers. It has not undergone the same metamorphosis as solo dancing, which has been influenced by the hybrids seen in popular stage shows; the dances remain relatively unchanged and

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of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. On July 28, 2005, the IRA formally announced an end to their armed campaign and began significant decommissioning of weapons.

[16] A *ceilí* is literally translated as a "party," which is the most common venue for ceili and set dancing. As a result, the terms 'set dancing' and 'ceilí dancing' are often used interchangeably, though since the Gaelic League tried to limit set dancing, which they saw as influenced by "foreign" dancers like the British Lancers and the French quadrille. The first ceili was organized by the Irish community in London in 1897. Later in this chapter I will discuss the use of ceili dancing in Irish American films.

are danced the same way by ceili dancers around the world. Ceili dancing is a communal dance form: like the square dancing in America that it influenced, it does not involve a high level of expertise or fitness but does require a large group of people who, over the course of the evening, will all dance with each other. Some of the most famous ceili dances are The Walls of Limerick, The Siege of Ennis, the Haymaker's Jig and the Harvesttime Jig, the names of which reflect the importance of land and place in the rural Irish communities where ceilis often flourished, particularly during the early twentieth century.

*The Field's* protagonist, Bull McCabe, is the patriarch of a family that has struggled to maintain a small plot of land ("the field") over generations. He has brought his son Tadgh to an American wake, a community gathering to celebrate and mourn the departure of young people who, with no better option in Ireland, have decided to emigrate. Bull, who has struggled his whole life to maintain one small piece of land, sacrificing his relationships with his family and community, strategizes that his son might make a match with the landed daughter of the farmer McRoarty. When the Yank, an Irish American who has returned to Ireland to buy the piece of land that Bull believes is rightfully his, appears at the ceili, he upends the precarious social structure that, as an outsider in rural Ireland, he does not understand.

J'aime Morrison argues that dance is a "cultural and social construct that impacts life beyond the dance floor: the choreography of the dance hall, kitchen or parlor highlights the unspoken codes of behavior that guide all social interactions" (183). In *The Field*, Jim Sheridan uses traditional set dancing as a means to frame a community conflict. The concern with the land is reflected in the setting of the American wake,

Sheridan chooses to open with the set dance called the Harvesttime Jig to allude to the historical realities colonization and the appropriation of land that produced emigration. During the ceili dancing, the main characters of the movie, Bull, Tadgh and the Yank, challenge each other in a test of masculinity that emphasizes "codes of behavior." The ceili provides a means of ritualized confrontation: this confrontation is repeated in nearly every Irish film that uses Irish dancing.

During the American wake a Traveller woman named Katie challenges the men in the hall to dance with her. As a Traveller she is marked as an outsider and no man wants to acknowledge her by including her in a set. She stands in the middle of the silent floor and shouts

> You're afraid if you touch me you'll lose the soil under your feet and end up sleeping under the stars. Well you could do worse… you could do worse than lie with the tinker's daughter under the stars. Is there any one of ye man enough to dance with me? Who's the biggest man among ye?

In a move that foreshadows his sexual affair with Katie, Tadgh steps up to dance; but his father, who tells him that "the tinkers lost their footing on the land during the Famine," cuts in and whirls Katie across the floor. The music resumes, and the Yank further disrupts the social code of the community by cutting in to dance with Katie. Tadgh and the Yank then face off in a set of four for a four-hand reel. They begin the dance with the common "advance retire" pattern which requires the partners to dance in two steps to each other and then retreat two steps; in this film, where "the contest over land is ritualized and expressed through dance, as both women and land are figured as contested social terrain that must be claimed," the advance and retire seems particularly confrontational (Morrison 182). As the dancers move through the figures, their

competition for the land to which they have both laid claim and the partners with whom they dance—the never-named but landed daughter of the farmer McRoarty and Katie—crescendos along with the music. They end the dance with a common final step called a ceili spin, in which the partners hold each other at the waist or with clasped hands and spin rapidly in a circle until they reach their original place. Tadgh loses control during the ceili spin, which mirrors his loss of control over the larger situation. The faces of the community blur as they watch him dance faster and faster until he loses his hold on his partner and she falls to the ground. The ceili dance provides a metaphor for ownership and control: the dance hinges not only on the domination of land but of the women who do or do not possess it.

The Yank, like the diasporic dancers who have re-imagined Irish step dancing, masters the dance more easily than Tadgh. The scene foreshadows the collapse of the McCabe family and their resistance to modernizing forces represented by the Yank. Bull's obsession with land and tradition eventually devastates them all, suggesting that a static adherence to constrictive values can only lead to destruction.

### Northern Film: *Some Mother's Son* and *Dance Lexie Dance*

An investigation of the relationship between the dancer, the camera and the editing process in the films *Some Mother's Son* (1997) and *Dance Lexie Dance* (1996) reveals the political valence of dance in the Northern Irish context, which remains a contested (post)colonial space. The first film begins in 1979 and takes place during the hunger strikes and the dirty protests in the early 1980s; the latter, a short film, has a

contemporary setting. Because of the northern location, the use of dance in these two films is more politically significant than it is in stage shows or in *The Field*.[17] The dance scenes reinforce powerful and aggressive masculinity, which echoes the "coeval stereotypes of the terrorist and the Irishman…[whose] violence becomes a racially rather than socially or historically conditioned characteristic" (Lloyd 66).

As in the 1996 Jean Butler film, *The Brylcreem Boys*, the dance scene in *Some Mother's Son* is intercut with violent action: IRA members Gerry and Frankie blow up a bridge used by British army convoys. The film, which was directed by Terry George, is the second in the Jim Sheridan produced trilogy on Northern Ireland that includes *In the Name of the Father* and *The Boxer.* The scene begins with Gerry and Frankie, dressed in khaki, carrying bundled weapons from their safe house and loading them into Gerry's mother's car (she is a music teacher at a local Catholic school). George then switches the perspective to show Gerry's mother making performance notes while some of her students sing and the dancers, all young women in dark green skirts, white shirts and hard shoes, walk on in the background. As the music, written by *Riverdance* composer Bill Whelan, begins, the dancers use sevens, a sidestep of seven small steps, to fall into a formation highlighted by the marching beat of their feet. At the same time the men are jumping a fence on their way to their target. When the dancers leap into front clicks, a scissor kick in which the heels intersect and click in midair to mark a beat, the men run towards their target. They reach their position as the women perform rally stamps, a rhythmic step that lends this dance, the treble reel, an even, militaristic beat. When the rocket hits the bridge, the windows of the classroom implode, shattering glass in slow

motion over the dancers. The use of slow motion was meant to highlight what George calls the "repercussions of that explosion": George makes a pointed condemnation of the violence as the attack directly threatens the very community it purports to defend (Crowdus 2).[18]

In an interview with *Cineaste* George says that "the pace we set was very important…Our film goes basically at the speed of the step-dance sequence the whole way through" (2). The use of step dance in the early scene underscores the politics and social codes of dance, which embodies what Martin refers to as the dual meaning of "movement" and "mobilization" in the context of dancing. Both the men and women are mobilizing in choreographed movements, one political and one artistic. The women dancers demonstrate their nationalism through dance, an acceptable and controlled form of protest, while masculine nationalism manifests itself in actual violence. The editing of the two scenes reinforces the cultural connection between the two nationalisms while underscoring the gendered nature of nationalist expression. Only in the very last moments of the scene do the masculine and feminine worlds intersect, as the glass covers the women in the classroom. As the students evacuate the building Frankie's sister steps out of her gendered role for a brief instant when she refuses to move out of the way for a British tank. A nun from the school hurries to bring her across the street and George creates a pointed tableau with the woman in the habit, the girl in hard shoes and the British military vehicle. The two women iconically represent the female nationalist community through the black nun's habit and the Irish dance shoes; their interior space

[18] George, an IRA prisoner in the 1970s, often focuses on social justice and internecine politics in his films. In 2004 he directed the critically acclaimed movie about the Rwandan genocide, *Hotel Rwanda.*

(the school) has been comprised by the IRA explosion and, when they run to the street, they are equally threatened by the armored car, a symbol of the British occupation of the larger geographical space of the North.

The violence in *Dance Lexie Dance* (1996) remains part of historical memory since the short film is set in an ostensibly apolitical household in the North during the relatively peaceful late 1990s. The short film, which shows a young Protestant girl named Laura learning to "riverdance,'" was produced by Raw Nerve, part of Derry's Nerve Centre multimedia project in cooperation with BBC Northern Ireland. Lexie Hamilton is factory worker and a widowed father who reluctantly supports his daughter's desire to learn to dance. While he is at work one day, Laura sees *Riverdance* in a news clip about the Eurovision contest. Jazz music, the soundtrack for the film's urban setting, gives way to Whelan's Celtic songs until Lexie comes in the door, saying "turn that thing down, willlya?" Laura becomes entranced by the show and tells her father that when she grows up she wants to be "a Riverdancer." He replies curtly, "Wise up Laura, we don't dance." As an Irish Protestant, Lexie views step dancing as inherently Catholic and nationalist. Laura's response, "Mum would have let me," goes beyond parental manipulation and genders the issue further, making step dancing, already feminized in the Arnoldian sense through its association with Catholicism, doubly female.

Lexie eventually humors his daughter and goes into a Catholic neighborhood to buy an Olive Hurley instructional tape.[19] Before he enters the shop he looks around furtively and, once inside, is overwhelmed by the selection of dance paraphernalia, most

[19] Olive Hurley is an internationally known Irish dance teacher and adjudicator based in Dublin. Her popular teaching tapes are marketed worldwide and have just been released on DVD.

of it embroidered with Celtic crosses and elaborate knots borrowed from the Book of Kells. He emerges with the tape and Laura begins to diligently teach herself basic soft shoe steps. She organizes the students in her presumably Protestant primary school to do one-two-threes in a Riverdance style line up. In the meantime, Lexie acquires a solo dress for Laura from a co-worker; the men pass the "gear" between their lockers in a brown bag, an ironic exchange that echoes countless cinematic handoffs of explosives or guns by IRA men.

Lexie takes the dress home to Laura and tells her that she will wear it to her first feis, or competition, in the Gaelic Hall at the end of the month. The Gaelic Revival produced the blueprint for contemporary competitive Irish dancing by establishing feisanna (the first was in 1897, the same year that the first ceili was organized by members of the Irish community in London) throughout Ireland to encourage participation in "Irish" pastimes: feisanna could include dancing, music, singing and Irish speaking competitions (contemporary Irish American feisanna also include a soda bread competition). In order to participate in her local feis, Laura will have to go into the social center of the nationalist community: the Gaelic Hall. On the day of the feis Lexie plays the traditional maternal role as he helps Laura into the dress that he has altered himself and fixes her hair in the traditional ringlets; when they sign in the woman automatically asks Laura for her mother's name and Lexie replies with his Protestant name, "Lexie Hamilton." Her bright green dress is outdated compared with the shorter skirts and shiny pastels and sequins of her competitors. The shamrock color contrasts with the boat they will take across the lough, which Lexie has decorated with blue, red and white Unionist flags. When they arrive at the Gaelic Hall Laura is immediately out of place. As she

climbs the stairs to the stage where she will perform for the adjudicators, she is surrounded by other girls in the accoutrements of contemporary Irish competitive dancing: expensive, glittery costumes, make-up, curly wigs and tiaras. Despite her poodle socks, curly hair and solo dress (which resembles a dress from her father's generation) she does not possess any understanding of the social codes of the Irish dance world, which she has never experienced beyond *Riverdance*.

Laura dances a soft shoe jig, a dance that contrasts significantly with the majority of the other dances featured in film. For dramatic and aesthetic reasons directors choose hard shoe dances over soft shoe (in fact, *Lexie* is the only one of the films I have included in this study to feature solo soft shoe dancing); in addition hard shoe pieces project an aggressive and masculine Irish identity much more effectively than the athletic but balletic soft shoe, which are danced primarily by women. Laura performs a basic light jig, which is commonly one of the first two dances a beginning Irish dancer learns. The jig, in 6/8 time, differs from the dances in other films, which are almost always hard shoe reels performed in 4/4 time. Laura's shoes, as well as her jig, are lighter and more whimsical.

In *Dance Lexie Dance* the conflict seen in almost every film that features Irish dance has become a competition: a form of ritualized confrontation. In this way the film parallels Jim Sheridan's *The Boxer*, which was released a year after *Lexie* but also reflects the political climate of the ceasefire and approaching Good Friday Agreement. In both films conflict becomes controlled and formulaic; individuals with cultural and religious differences meet under the watchful eye of a judge or referee who is guided by a strict set of rules that allows the lines of identity to be blurred. Danny, the boxer of the

title, is a Catholic man; in *Lexie* the boxer becomes a young, female, Protestant dancer and the fistfight becomes a feis. Although Laura does not experience explicit hostility, the other competitors can tell she is an outsider, especially after she finishes her dance and her father's whoop of pride echoes through the quiet hall filled with women and children.

*An Phoblacht,* the republican newspaper in the North, liked the film. O Donaile, the reviewer, applauds the moment of father-daughter bonding at the end of the film as Laura teaches Lexie one-two-threes on the beach, a "double jig on the shores of Lough Foyle." Lexie's acceptance of Laura's desire to embrace an element of Catholic culture has been read as the "triumph over the communal expectations of behavior that doomed generations to see the other side's culture as threatening…[suggesting] there is hope" (Cullen). The short film, which emerged from a relatively positive moment in the Northern Irish conflict, tries to avoid reinforcing cultural or religious stereotypes and suggests that a cross-cultural exchange could reconfigure what it means to be Irish in the North. At the same time, *Dance Lexie Dance* controls and feminizes the dance by translating it to a Protestant context, thus subconsciously reinforcing the visual connection of Irish dance with a violent, masculine, and Catholic nationalism made in a movie like *Some Mother's Son. Dance Lexie Dance* is one of the few films set in Northern Ireland to take a Protestant perspective. The movie was not accepted, however, by the Unionist community in the North, who pointed out that not only did it suggest that Protestant and Unionist culture needed to borrow from Catholic and Republican culture, but also accused the film of feminizing Lexie. The reaction to the film shows that the

contextualizing violence, though not explicitly mentioned, is in the not-so-distant past and that dance, and its treatment of gender, continues to raise political hackles.

### Ceilis, Community and Commodification: Irish Dance in American Film: *Monument Ave, Road to Perdition* and *The Luck of the Irish*

Nowhere do we see the commodification of Irish identity more clearly than in the United States, with its substantial Irish-American population. Dance has served to reinforce the link between the 'old sod' and the new, as a more diverse and multi-cultural generation puts on traditional dance costumes emblazoned with Celtic knots and Claddagh rings. Two of the three films I will discuss, *Road to Perdition* (2002) and *Monument Ave* (1998), however, reveal a darker side of the Irish-American community. The directors, Sam Mendes and Ted Demme, use ceili dancing (the same type of group dancing seen in *The Field)* to establish the ethnicity of their characters and to expose the violent underpinnings of a society organized around loyalty to literal and figurative families. Each movie depicts a community influenced by organized crime, the former in the Midwest during the mob's heyday in the 1930s and the latter in working class Charlestown, Massachusetts in the 1980s. The films focus almost entirely on Irish-American masculine identity: both male protagonists struggle to reconcile with their own criminal activities and relationships with the mob boss, who represents a surrogate father. Both denouements lend themselves to Oedipal and Fanonian interpretations: the protagonists have to kill the father figures in order to assume their own identities.

Violence in both films is either intercut with or presaged by ceili dancing, but, unlike *The Field,* the violence is outside the dance. Early in *Road to Perdition* the main character, Michael Sullivan, takes his family to a wake at the sprawling home of John

Rooney, the Irish mafia head. The wake is for McGovern, one of Rooney's henchmen, and through the speeches at the wake it becomes apparent that McGovern died suspiciously, probably at the hands of Rooney's son Connor. Music and dancing break the tension in the room when McGovern's brother Finn confronts the Rooneys. Those in attendance at the wake fall into sets for ceili dancing, which was common at wakes, both for the dead and for departing emigrants, and the camera focuses primarily on women and children, who will be largely absent from the remainder of the film. As in *Some Mother's Son,* the dancing is female and communal while the men, who will carry out another assassination later that evening, stay at the periphery of the room. As Michael Sullivan watches his wife dancing, the glances exchanged between the men in the room foreshadow the impact that their profession will have on their community. The dance scene in *Monument Ave* is strikingly similar, despite the fact that it takes place fifty years later in Charlestown, an urban, working class, Irish-American enclave of Boston, where crime and racism were rampant during the 1980s. At the end of the film Bobby O'Grady, the protagonist, murders his surrogate father, the organized crime boss Jackie O'Hara, in order to avenge the death of his immigrant cousin Seamus. He kills Jackie in the boiler room of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians hall, where the wake of another executed gang member was held earlier in the film. In the final scene the hall is festooned with green streamers and a live ceili band performs for the dancers. Bobby meets Jackie in the boiler room and, with the music drowning out the sound, shoots him and his bodyguards. The scene cuts back and forth from the conversation between Jackie and Bobby and the dancing members of the community in the hall just beyond the door. As in *Some Mother's Son,* this juxtaposition accentuates two sides of the community. Jackie's murder

also parallels an earlier wake scene for another of his victims: the violent, masculine world threatens the feminized communal space, which is populated primarily with mothers, widows and children.

In contrast with these two films, the 2001 Disney film *The Luck of the Irish* returns to the St. Patrick's Day version of Irish America, what Negra calls the "myth of ethnic enchantment," which, according to her work on portrayals of the Irish on television after September 11th, "uses Irishness as an access route into a purified vision of family and community life that specifically compensates for the exigencies of contemporary US culture." She posits that such racialization offers not negative stereotypes and expectations but rather the perfect "identity credential" in multi-cultural America. Being Irish means being ethnic while still being white ("The New Primitives"). The writers of *The Luck of the Irish* use solo dancing to allow Kyle Johnson, the quintessential upper-middle-class, white, suburban adolescent, to join a multi-ethnic American community by discovering his own ethnicity: Irishness. The movie tells Kyle's story: he is an American middle school student with no apparent ethnic heritage until he loses the lucky coin his mother gave to him at a traveling Irish fun fair. After the coin is lost, Kyle experiences a rash of bad luck and his mother starts to become a leprechaun. First her sleek French twist becomes long, red curls. Then she starts wearing shawls, tweed caps and tara brooches and speaking with a brogue. Before long she is wearing complete peasant garb, cooking traditional Irish breakfasts over a peat fire and packing pails of crubeens for Kyle's lunch. She ultimately shrinks down to six inches and dances a jig on the kitchen counter in green knee breeches. During this appalling transformation, Disney capitalizes on nearly every Irish stereotype, culminating with Kyle enlisting the

help of his grandfather, who owns the Emerald potato chip factory, to retrieve "the necklace from the one who took it -- an evil step-dancing leprechaun named Seamus McTiernan" (Disney). Until Kyle can retrieve his "lucky charm," he and his grandfather will also slowly become leprechauns: Kyle's hair turns red, he begins to shrink and his ears become pointy. His grandfather starts to play sad songs on the flute (he explains, "I'm Irish…this is how we manifest our despair") as he becomes smaller and grows a long, grey beard.

Kyle is helped along the way by two friends: an African-American boy whose father measures him each night to see if he has grown for the basketball team, and a Latina girl, both of whom lecture Kyle on the importance of their heritage and the achievements of their respective cultures in the United States. His mother tells him, anachronistically, that she kept their Irish heritage a secret because she didn't want him to suffer the discrimination experienced by early immigrants. Although there a few moments in the movie that reference "real" Irish history, the majority of the Irish references epitomize what Mulkerns calls "leprechaun syndrome." *The Luck of the Irish* embraces nearly every stereotype of contemporary, commercialized identity possible: the Celtic fun fair (replete with green plastic hats and shamrock mardi gras beads), the low-budget dance performance by the villainous leprechaun Seamus McTiernan, "the saint of the step" (a dark-haired version of Michael Flatley in black leather pants and green satin pirate shirt accompanied by an entourage of IRA-like henchmen in black knit caps, jeans and army jackets), the excursion to the Emerald Potato Chip factory and Kyle's innate ability to step dance, Although some of the commodification of Irish identity might be attributed to the target audience (ages 8-13), the fact that the movie takes itself seriously

as a teaching tool—teaching materials targeted to elementary school classrooms are available from Disney, who encourages school libraries to purchase the video—makes it problematic. All of the ethnic representations are tainted by stereotype, from the African American father who threatens to adopt the white basketball star if his own son doesn't improve on the court to the lucky, step-dancing Irish American leprechaun. The use of step dance in this film proves that Irish dancing can be as meaningless a symbol as the "Kiss me, I'm Irish" shirts for sale at the fun fair.

The representation of Irish culture in this film devolves, like *Lord of the Dance* and countless other step-dance spectacles post-*Riverdance,* into outright kitsch. The stereotyping of the Irish confirms Colin Graham's analysis of a leprechaun snow globe as capitalist symbol. Like that plastic icon, *The Luck of the Irish* "imitates its own colonially coercive image for commercial ends…everything it signifies is 'instantly and effortlessly identifiable,' and as an object it accepts this fate, playing on its own emptiness as all it has left, and equally accepting its degradation as non-'enriching' (171). The problem with *The Luck of the Irish* is that it enlists the "instantly and effortlessly identifiable" Irish dancing as the "hook" to get its audience's attention. The movie does not, however, present itself as "non-'enriching.'" On the contrary, the writers use a stereotypical version of Irishness to "enrich" its audience's purported understanding of Ireland and the Irish.

The film ends on multi-cultural day at Kyle's school, where he proudly displays his Irish heritage by step dancing on stage before the entire audience spontaneously joins in with a student rendition of "This Land Is Your Land." As Negra points out when analyzing Irish characters on television:

> [That] such constructions would not necessarily be taken as representative by an Irish viewer is a point worth bearing in mind, for [they] illuminate a more general level of "disconnect" between those traits/behaviours deemed "Irish" in US popular culture and a contemporary Ireland which seldom fulfils the expectations that such depictions produce. ("The New Primitives")

The "disconnect" between the reality of a changing Irish identity and the impulse, in both diasporic communities and in Ireland, to retain some of the internalized stereotypes from the past complicate any simple notion of Irish identity.

## CONCLUSION

The contemporary use of Irish dance demonstrates the difficulties inherent in any analysis of Irish identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Irish dancing, that last "skeleton in the cultural closet," has emerged from the confines of mid-century Ireland to be reinvented and reclaimed at the same time that it has been reified and commodified. In its role as a traditional cultural marker, step dance continues to reflect the cultural nationalism from which it emerged in the early twentieth century, which often results in the reproduction of common stereotypes when dance is used as a metaphor on stage and screen. At the same time, performances like *Riverdance* made Irish dance into a "new traditional practice" at the end of the twentieth century as much as the revival did at the beginning of the twentieth century.

*Riverdance* negotiates the tension between tradition and modernity in contemporary Irish identity. Many subsequent forms of Irish dance, however, rely on more traditional versions of Ireland and Irishness. While this return to tradition, or the "non-modern," might seem positive to those scholars who see modernity as a form of neo-colonialism, it marks a return to indigenous religion and patriarchal family and

community structures that keeps those who do not fit the dominant perception of Irishness either in the background or backstage. The subsequent chapters in this project will investigate the ways in which marginalized voices—women, immigrants and Travellers—have surfaced in contemporary Ireland, asking that they be included in the construction of twenty-first century Irish identity.

# Chapter Two

## "A Song for Every Child I Might Have Had": Infertility and Maternal Loss in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry

In her sequence of poems "Domestic Interior," from the 1975 volume *Night Feed*, Eavan Boland describes a maternal, suburban scene that has become ubiquitous in her poetry:

> I tiptoe in.
> I lift you up
> Wriggling
> In your rosy, zipped sleeper.
> Yes, this is the hour
> For the early bird and me
> When finder is keeper.
>
> I crook the bottle.
> How you suckle!
> This is the best I can be
> Housewife
> To this nursery
> Where you hold on,
> Dear life. (*An Origin*…135)

Boland's poetry often focuses on the individual, intimate relationships between mothers and daughters as she reappropriates the themes of maternity and womanhood that have been so often used (and abused) in Irish literature. She writes in her essay "A Kind of Scar" that

> [t]he majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry…Irish poems simplified women most at the point of intersection between womanhood and Irishness…the nation as woman; the woman as national muse…long after they [male poets] had rejected the politics of Irish nationalism,

they continued to deploy the emblems and enchantments of its culture. (80-81)

In response to the simplification of women in male Irish poetry, Boland works to create a more complicated and nuanced representation of Irish women (particularly mothers), carving out moments like that in "Domestic Interior" to reveal a more personal definition of Irish womanhood.

Although the recognition of such instances of "real" maternity and women's experience is a significant contribution to the body of Irish poetry, it does not challenge the undisputable centrality of maternity to the definition of Irish womanhood in the cultural and literary imagination. Different maternal experiences, including infertility, maternal loss and incarceration in the Magdalen Asylums[1] are now being depicted in Irish creative work, exploring the complex position of women who do not fit the prescribed definitions of Irish womanhood, to which maternity is central. A new generation of poets, dramatists and filmmakers, creating work from the 1980s through the early twenty-first century, has built on the foundations established by Boland and her peers to renegotiate the role of motherhood in Irish writing. Much scholarly attention has been directed towards these reclamations of motherhood by women writers, but there is little commentary on the substantial amount of work from the past two decades (and the last ten years in particular) that revises the experience of maternity itself. These contemporary poets acknowledge and sometimes struggle with the importance of maternity to Irish history and culture as they recognize the stories of women who do not

[1] The Magdalen Asylums, also known as the Magdalen Laundries, were homes for "wayward women." Unwed mothers, women suspected of "loose" behavior and even orphans, rape victims and girls who were simply "too pretty" could be committed to service in these institutions, the last of which closed in 1996. The history of the Laundries will be explored in greater detail later in chapter two.

fit the traditional mold. In their texts they struggle to reconcile cultural heritage with subject matter becomes evident.

## ESTABLISHING MATERNITY

Maternity and fertility have long occupied a central space in both Irish nationalist and Catholic rhetoric, from the veneration of Mother Mary and Mother Ireland to de Valera's infamous constitution that encourages women to make their contribution to the nation by staying home and raising babies. Beginning during the nineteenth century, when Ireland was still a colonial society, and moving into the early twentieth century, "the fluid relationship between the seemingly private, domestic space of the home and the public symbol of the nation as family (Mother Ireland) has indeed worked to locate women within a particular social and cultural space…" (Nash 54). A good deal of the rhetoric behind the construction of the Irish nation as the family was produced by both Church and State in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period of nation-building in Ireland during which "political, religious, social and economic modernization, resulted in ideological and material exclusion [of those who did not fit into the "imagined community" of nationalist Ireland]…as dominant understandings of 'Irishness' narrowed…" and despite efforts to 'modernize,' conservative values were reified (Fanning 3). Irish nationalists constructed Ireland as Gaelic, Catholic and nationalist, a homogeneous society in which the pious, rural family came to represent the nation filled with children who gained political awareness at their mothers' knees.

The nineteenth century also saw the post-Famine rise of Mariolatry, which reinforced the role of Irish women as maternal caregivers at the center of the nationalist

hearth and home. Mariolatry was part of a ‘devotional revolution’ that lasted from 1850-1950 (Whelan). The religious and cultural attitudes that emerged as part of the devotional revolution would have a profound impact on the treatment and representation of Irish women throughout the twentieth century. Before the Famine, the Irish Catholic Church was characterized by a horizontal distribution of power and was rooted in spirituality rather than piety. There was still a strong connection between Celtic religions and the newer Catholicism, which was manifested in a loyalty to local lore and local saints (who were often Celtic gods or goddesses renamed as Christian saints), worship at holy wells and mountains and a celebration of seasonality seen most evidently in the retention of Celtic festivals as saint’s days (for example, the Celtic festival of Imbolc, in February, became St.Brigid’s Day). This older church was a “pobail De,” a church of “God’s people” (Whelan). When the Famine occurred in the 1840s it took its toll mostly on the lower classes, thus virtually wiping out the large population that practiced this type of vernacular religion. When the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and the landowners also left Ireland only a small middle class remained and with them began a new type of Catholicism.

The first formal meeting of Irish bishops since 1642, the Synod of Thurles, occurred in 1850 (Bourke 5). This Synod, following quickly on the heels of the Famine that destroyed many of the practitioners of popular Catholicism, reinforced “the Church’s control of its members’ daily lives” (Bourke 5). Emphasis was placed on a centralized religion that would be located in “big chapels” that were constructed at the heart of so many Irish towns and villages after Catholic Emancipation; on ending the practice of celebrating mass in private homes; on the celibacy of clergy, who began to wear clerical

garb and Roman collars more consistently; and on a middle-class, continental Catholicism, which included “Marian devotions favoured increasingly by the papacy” (Bourke 5-8). The latter was part of a rapprochement between the Irish Church and the European Church, which brought about a new focus on devotion, novenas and other ritual prayers as well as strong support for teaching orders like the Christian Brothers. The Church became dominated by bishops, with priests and other clergy in positions of power. Perhaps most central to this change was the profound involvement of the Church in the establishment of the state, what Angela Bourke terms the “control of…daily lives,” especially on issues of morality.

Elizabeth Cullingford notes that the end of the century, halfway through the devotional revolution, marked an increased fear of women’s sexuality. Sexualized mothers were dangerous to Catholicism and nationalism; only the pious model of motherhood offered by Mary was acceptable to a religious and political agenda according to which women were representative of Catholic Ireland. The control of female sexual autonomy, and as a result maternity, became increasingly important to both the Church and the State. The power of the Catholic Church continued to increase during the revolutionary movements of the early twentieth century and through subsequent decolonization; this return to conservative religion, seen particularly in de Valera’s Fianna Fail government, is a reaction predicted by foundational colonial writers like Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon. The Church’s power over society contributed to the collaboration of the community and the Church in the support of institutions like the Magdalen Laundries.

Literature from the post-Famine period through independence (1922) underscores the importance of women and their representation in nationalist ideology. Women were seen as symbolic of Ireland by writers, artists, politicians and revolutionaries, in texts as diverse as political cartoons depicting Erin and Hibernia,[2] the female representations of Ireland by English cartoonists, to the title character of Yeats's famous play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Cathleen, one of the quintessential embodiments of Mother Ireland, requests the sacrifice of her symbolic sons (Michael Gillane in the play) for her renewal. Cullingford points out that Yeats, however, complicates his use of the female figure as nationalist symbol since he ultimately "associates himself with the humanly bereft rather than the triumphantly sacrificial maternal figure" as he questions, "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" as he ponders the impact of Cathleen on the nationalist movement ("Thinking"13). One of his peers and a leader of the 1916 Easter Rising, Padraig Pearse, blindly worships the maternal figure as political metaphor in his own writing. Pearse's work presents the "implications of male valorization of the mother: the role of women is to stay at home, reproduce, and suffer" (Cullingford 14).

Pearse's position on women's place within Irish society, rather than Yeats's, lived on in the establishment of the Free State and the Republic. The rhetoric of the Church and the State emphasized reproduction, which was necessary to populate both parishes and political parties, as well as a woman's obligation to stay within the home. Motherhood was identified as one of the essential characteristics of Irish womanhood, as seen in the equation of the terms "woman" and "mother" in article 41 of the 1938 Irish constitution:

[2] As seen in L.P.Curtis's *Apes and Angels: The Irish in Victorian Caricature*

> In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to assure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (*Constitution* 56)

The women poets like Boland and her peers, who began writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, were reacting to those masculine and patriarchal constructions of womanhood and maternity reified in official document like the 1938 constitution. The 1960s and 70s, which were crucial to the feminist movement on both sides of the Atlantic, have been described as "emotional and intellectual Purdah" for Irish women. The choice of the word 'Purdah' connects Irish women's issues to those of some "third world" women (Levine, cited in Siggins 60).[3] Influenced by the feminist movement in the United States and Europe, the women's movement began, slowly but surely, in Ireland. In 1971 the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) published a manifesto called *Chains or Change*: "some of its details 'shocked even some of those who had contributed to its research…things were even worse for Irish women than we had thought" (Levine, cited in Siggins 62). Included in the manifesto was a piece by Mary Maher titled "Five Good Reasons Why it is Better to Live in Sin," which highlighted discrimination against women. Laws were implemented to keep mothers at home with their children. Married women did not have access to birth control, had no rights to divorce, were taxed more than their single counterparts and were forced to leave work in public service, trade unions or banks upon their marriage: "marriage obliterated women's

[3] The choice of the word "Purdah" must be interpreted in a broader context. As Ireland's position as "third world" or even postcolonial has been the subject of debate (see *Is Ireland a Third World Country*), authors and activists like Levine were aligning themselves with women in countries that are more widely considered to be "third world" by referencing Purdah, the traditional covering adopted by some women in

commercial identity…a married woman had about the same rights as an infant in Irish law" (Siggins 62). In making a strong argument against marriage, Maher ignores some of the very grave repercussions of "living in sin," namely the possibility of illegitimate children who could be taken from their mothers or exile to a Magdalen Asylum, still a possibility in the 1970s.

At the same time that the IWLM was working to bring gender inequity to public consciousness, a 25-year-old barrister named Mary Bourke was one of only five women elected to the Seanad (the Irish equivalent of the Senate). She did not shy away from civil rights issues in the volatile North and also in the Republic, where she advocated "removing the issue of divorce from the Constitution, and repealing the ban on birth control in the 1935 Criminal Law Amendment Act" (Siggins 59). In 1970, despite Maher's persuasive arguments against matrimony, Bourke married Nicholas Robinson. In 1990 she would become Ireland's first female president, focusing a great deal of attention on women's rights.

**WOMEN'S ISSUES IN IRELAND: 1983-PRESENT**

As poets like Boland continued writing in the 1980s and 90s they witnessed improvements in reproductive rights, in terms of both law and culture. Married couples received the legal right to contraception in 1979, and the right was "extended to all adults in further measures passed in 1985 and 1993" (Barry, Wills 1409). In 1983, however, an abortion referendum had inserted the "right to life of the unborn" into the Irish constitution (Barry, Wills 1411). Despite the referendum some 3,700 Irish women had

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Muslim societies. Interestingly, it is usually affluent women who follow the tradition of Purdah, just as it is often women of a higher socioeconomic class who become feminist activists.

gone to Britain for abortions in 1983 (*Irish Times*, 4 January 1984). Three quarters of these women stated that they had not used contraception, revealing a deeply-rooted cultural and religious attitude towards birth control.

On January 30, 1984, fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett and her newborn died in a grotto in Co. Longford. She had given birth outdoors and alone, having brought her pregnancy to term without any intervention by her family or by authorities in the school, church or community[4]. In the same year, a murdered baby washed up on a beach in Co.Kerry. Joanne Hayes, a woman who, like Lovett, had delivered a baby in secret, was accused of the crime despite the fact that her stillborn child was found on the family farm where she had buried it.

The events of 1984-1985 expose a series of unpleasant realities and profound changes in Ireland in the late twentieth century. Just after the Ann Lovett tragedy a live baby was found abandoned in a shopping cart in the urban area of Ballymun and an eight day old infant was found dead in a cattle trough on a family farm in rural Ireland; neither of these incidents was as widely reported as the cases of Lovett or Hayes. In 1985, perhaps as a result of these events, minister for education Gemma Hussey insisted that schools had the responsibility to provide sex education. However, sex education would not become a part of the curriculum until 1994, after another dead baby was found on the banks of the River Feale, ten years after Ann Lovett and her child died in Co.Longford (Inglis 122-123). In 1984, at the time that Lovett died a family planning amendment that

[4] The Ann Lovett incident has been described in a poem by Paula Meehan, "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks." Seamus Heaney's poem "Limbo" comments on the infanticides of the 1980s. Margo Harkin's film *Hush-a-bye Baby* was also in part inspired by the Lovett and Hayes cases.

would have provided condoms to any individual over the age of 16 with a prescription had been rejected amidst a moral outcry.

The rejection of the condom amendment was front page news at the same time as Joanna Hayes's trial, called the Kerry Babies Tribunal (*Kerryman*, 15 February 1985). Tom Inglis, author of the only academic investigation of the Tribunal, argues convincingly that the witch hunt that followed the discovery of the murdered baby off the coast of Kerry, called the Cahircaveen baby after the beach on which it was discovered, and the subsequent case brought against Hayes and her family, was the result of a number of primarily cultural changes occurring within Irish society. Despite the fact that the Church still yielded a great deal of power over Irish society (the Hayes family said the rosary every night, attended mass regularly and took religious medals and statues into the witness box with them), Irish Catholics were moving towards more of an 'a la carte' Catholicism. Inglis writes that

> Young women like Joanne Hayes might have had a high level of adherence to the beliefs and practices of the Church, but they were no longer afraid of his [the priest's] power to shame, demean and demoralise those who failed to adhere to the Church's laws regarding sex and birth outside marriage. (129)

In fact, Hayes already had a daughter with the married man who fathered the stillborn of the Kerry Babies Tribunal. She was not alone; Fintan O'Toole wrote that births out of wedlock had increased 44% between 1981 and 1984 and more and more of the mothers, like Hayes, were keeping their babies. In 1984, when Hayes delivered the stillborn, 103 other illegitimate children were born in Co.Kerry (*The Lie of the Land*, 126).

Although more women were having babies outside marriage without being committed to institutions like Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalen Asylums, attitudes towards women's sexuality were still negative and even absurd. For instance, at one point it was suggested by a witness for the prosecution that Hayes might have been carrying twins fathered by two different men; she supposedly delivered one baby, murdered it in her home as her family looked on, buried it in a field, delivered another child, murdered it and drove to the coast to throw it into the sea. Before the gardaí (Irish police) took Hayes into custody they compiled a list of 'suspects' in the county, including single mothers, women known to be having extra-marital affairs, lesbians and 'hippies' (Inglis 22). Hayes was both a single mother and having an affair; after delivering the child she went to the hospital and claimed to have miscarried her child, a story that was originally accepted by hospital staff. According to John Creedon, an obstetrician/ gynecologist in Tralee, it was not entirely unusual for a woman to come to the hospital appearing to have given birth, as Hayes did. Although the Infanticide Act of 1949 specifically forbids infanticide (obviously), Inglis says that

> the gardai in Kerry had encountered cases of infanticide and abandoned babies many times before. However, the custom and practice in Co.Kerry was for women who were admitted to hospital and seemed to have given birth, but denied having done so, to be treated sympathetically, quietly and discreetly. (21)

Creedon testified that he had attended to five cases of self-delivery in which the babies were found dead. Although Hayes's case was arguably so sensational because it coincided with the discovery of the Cahircaveen baby, the fact that none of the cases referenced by Creedon received any media or police attention supports Inglis's argument

that societal and cultural changes in the mid-1980s caused the Kerry Babies case to receive so much of the nation's attention.

So it is not surprising that Hayes was made an example of given the sociocultural context: the Church was losing its hold on the supposed morality of the nation, as evidenced in the shifting attitudes towards Catholicism and the rise in births outside marriage. There were no longer convenient ways to hide and simultaneously punish women who moved beyond the parameters of acceptable Irish womanhood, as there had been in the heyday of the Magdalen Laundries, from the 1930s to the 1970s. Although Hayes is an extreme example, women who were Hayes's contemporaries were discriminated against in additional ways. Single mothers in Athlone and Dun Laoghaire were evicted from their homes and Eileen Flynn, a teacher, was fired when she became pregnant out of wedlock. Her dismissal for "flaunting" her immoral behavior was upheld in a local court. The judge, Noel Ryan, said that "In other places women are condemned to death for this sort of offence. They are not Christians in the Far East. I do not agree with this, of course. Here people take a very serious view of this, and it is idle to shut one's eyes to it" (O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land* 126). As recently as 1999 such public condemnation continued: Olympic runner Sonia O'Sullivan, one of Ireland's most famous athletes, "was denounced from the pulpit of the Catholic Church as being a 'common slut' for the unashamed public manner in which she undermined Catholic values by having a child outside marriage and allowing herself to become the focus of media attention" (*Irish Times* 4 September 1999). Even the women who protested against such treatment were seen as beyond the pale. The judge in the Kerry Babies Tribunal publicly reprimanded groups protesting Hayes's trial. It was reported that he

> condemned both Wednesday's protest by the people of Abbeydorney [5]and Thursday's picket which was comprised mostly of women and was organized by the Tralee Womens Group. He added that in fairness to the people of Abbeydorney, Wednesday's protest was dignified and silent but he referred to Thursday's as "raucous and ill-mannered.' (*Kerryman* 1 February 1985)

Hostile attitudes towards outspoken women are incredibly clear in this telling statement from the *Kerryman* newspaper, which depicts the general, male and female population of Abbeydorney as "dignified and silent" while the exclusively female group was "raucous and ill-mannered."

In the middle of the Kerry Babies Tribunal, people claimed that statues started to move in the tiny Kerry town of Asdee. On Valentine's Day of 1985 seven-year-old Elizabeth Flynn went into the chapel next to her school to "give two or three minutes to Jesus," a daily practice advocated by the elderly principal, Eileen Moriarty (O'Toole, *A Mass for Jesse James* 17). The child reported that after she said her prayers she looked up and "the Sacred Heart crooked his finger and beckoned her over to him…When she looked again, Our Lady's mouth was open" (17). A photograph of the three children who first claimed to have seen the statues move (36 children claimed to have seen them move after the initial report) in front of a statue of the Virgin holding a baby Jesus bumped the Kerry Babies Tribunal from the front page of the *Kerryman* for the first time since the beginning of the trial. Some 2000 faithful made the pilgrimage to Asdee the following Sunday, where the statues' movement included: "hands lifting, eyes moving, small spots appearing on the Blessed Virgin's neck…[and]a heavenly perfume" (O'Toole 20). Father Michael O'Sullivan of Asdee supported the children's testimony, saying that

[5] Abbeydorney is the townland where the Hayes family lived.

"many of them had never heard of the word apparition." The headmaster of the school, on the other hand, told the *Kerryman* that he did not believe that there was much to what the children claimed to have seen (*Kerryman* 22 February 1985). One of the fathers of an Asdee child voiced what many believed was the true cause behind the apparitions:

> There was all that Kerry babies business and there have been other things too. There've been two murders in the Listowel area and over in Tarbert there was a case of a man who was having sex with his two nieces and got one of them pregnant. That's why some of the people here think that what's happened is a sign. There's a message there and it's to do with all the bad things that have been happening. (O'Toole 16)

The message seemed to be that Mary, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, were appalled by the scandals that rocked Kerry, and, in a broader sense, the moral state of Ireland. In addition to the local Kerry scandals cited by the Asdee father, between 1970 and 1983, eleven gardaí were murdered in Ireland whereas prior to 1970 no garda had been killed since 1942. A rash of robberies in rural areas targeted the elderly living alone. The rising crime rate evidenced by the attacks on the police and the elderly disturbed the larger population. There was no end in sight to the conflict in the North and the economy in the Republic was struggling (Inglis 122). The Kerry Babies case, so soon after the death of Ann Lovett, symbolized for many the downward spiral of modern Ireland.

The next major reproduction case occurred in 1992, when a fourteen-year-old rape victim was initially prohibited from traveling to England for an abortion. Called the 'X' case, this case resulted in a constitutional amendment to "safeguard the rights of travel and information" (Barry, Wills 1411). Despite discrete moments of progress in

access to information and birth control, "the images and practices of an earlier era still overshadowed the lives of contemporary Irish women…traditional images of womanhood recur[red]…suggesting a continuing imaginative hold…" (Barry, Wills 1411).

1992 was also the year that debates raged around the Irish referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, which would make Ireland a part of unified Europe. One of the central issues was that of abortion: the inclusion of a clause called Protocol 17 protected Ireland's anti-abortion amendment from the European constitution, which allowed abortion. Both pro-life and pro-choice activists campaigned against the treaty. Pro-life activists felt that it aligned Ireland too closely with the morally corrupt European Union; pro-choice activists argued that by including Protocol 17 Irish women's reproductive rights were limited in comparison with their European counterparts. All of this debate reinforced "women's responsibility to the Irish nation.... echoing the calls of the leaders of the Irish independence movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries… a pro-EC narrative developed in which 'women's issues' were to be subordinated to the interests of the nation" (Oaks, cited in Conrad). Women continued to be the "landscape" of Ireland, mothers and future mothers whose many Church and State encouraged babies would populate a Republic of Ireland that would uphold the nationalist values established in the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, the Church was suffering its own scandals, and the combination of criticism of the Church and slowly changing attitudes towards reproductive rights would allow for a discussion of maternity that challenged the ways in which it had been previously represented. In May of 1992, the month before the Maastricht Treaty was

voted on in the Republic of Ireland, Bishop Eamonn Casey of Galway resigned in disgrace. He had fathered a son seventeen years earlier with his Connecticut-born housekeeper, Annie Murphy, and had been paying child support with diocesan funds. In the same year, Patricia Burke Brogan published her play *Eclipsed*, which follows the stories of several inmates of a Magdalen Laundry. Though the true repercussions of the Magdalen system would not be brought to public view for another ten years, Brogan's play was the first to criticize and raise awareness of the church-sponsored system of indentured servitude.

The Casey scandal would seem innocuous when, in the years following the publication of Brogan's play, a series of scandals involving the widespread physical, sexual and psychological abuse of children in the Church's care surfaced. The systematic abuse, which was brought to national attention through a series of books[6] and the groundbreaking documentary *States of Fear*, was blamed primarily on the Catholic Church, which now seemed riddled with corruption. The Church sought legal counsel and denied responsibility for any abuse in an effort to avoid financial responsibility; such action was seen as particularly cold and callous by Irish society. Although certain religious orders (as well as state officials, who should have been equally implicated in the scandals) have issued apologies in recent years, the damage had been done. The scandals, combined with the increasingly secular attitudes of young, globalized generations of Irish

[6] Numerous memoirs and films were released during the time period on which this chapter focuses, including *The God Squad* (Paddy Doyle), *Fear of the Collar: My Terrifying Childhood in Artane* (Patrick Tuoher), *Freedom of the Angels: Surviving Goldenbridge Orphanage* (Bernadette Fahy), *The Stolen Child: A Memoir* (Joe Dunne), *Evelyn: A True Story* (Evelyn Doyle); *Song for a Raggy Boy* (Patrick Galvin); *Suffer the Little Children* (Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Neill). *Evelyn* and *Song for a Raggy Boy* became feature films in 2003 and *Suffer the Little Children* accompanied the release of *States of Fear*. Patrick

people, resulted in the lowest mass participation in memory. Attendance at mass dropped from 91% in 1974 to 60% in 1998. Membership in the Christian Brothers has decreased by 70% and only 7,000 individuals remain a part of religious communities. The "pay, pray and obey" version of middle class Catholicism has been thoroughly rejected by a new generation in Ireland (Whelan).

### "MY CHILDREN WERE BORN": POETIC RECONCEPTIONS OF MATERNITY

Despite the political and secular changes of the last few decades, the importance of maternity remains deeply ingrained in Irish culture. Boland, arguably the "matriarch" of Irish women's poetry, responded to the traditional representations of women as both mothers and personifications of the earth in her poem "Anna Liffey,"[7] from her 1997 collection *The Lost Land (*published 22 years after "Night Feed"). She says that as a woman poet she is still, even in the late 1990s, "usurping a name and a theme" by adopting the female perspective as she describes the geography of Ireland so often feminized in the work of male poets. By describing herself as a "usurper" as she writes in the voice of a geographical and feminized symbol of Ireland, the Liffey river that runs through the center of Dublin, Boland emphasizes the power of male literary propriety over this type of metaphorical symbolism. Although she gives voice to Anna Liffey she reinforces the centrality of motherhood to the definition of her subject[8]:

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McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* and Brendan Behan's *The Borstal Boy* are examples of novels and drama which treat the same subject.

[7] "Anna Liffey" is the female personification of the Liffey River, which runs through the city of Dublin. This feminized version of the river first appeared as Anna Livia Plurabelle in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. A statue of Anna Livia now stands in the center of O'Connell Street and has been nicknamed "The floozy in the jacuzzi" by Dubliners.

[8] I do not wish to undercut the importance of maternity to either Boland's poetry or to female identity. My goal is to challenge the damaging and one-dimensional versions of maternity and women's representation that have reduced Irish women to political metaphors and reproductive vessels.

> I came here in cold winter.
>
> I had no children. No country.
> I did not know the name for my own life.
> My country took hold of me.
> My children were born. (32)

The birth of children marks not only the birth of the nation but of female identity; before she had children she "did not know the name for [her] own life." Although this mother, the Norse goddess Life, exercises authority over her fertility, she is still ultimately defined by the fact of her motherhood.

Boland's work signals an important moment in Irish poetic tradition. Her efforts to retrieve women's stories from historical silence and record them, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the present, established a new type of poetics in what had previously been a male-dominated field. The generation of poets who followed her, undeniably influenced by her work, has reconsidered the representation of Irish women through the varied voices of working class, urban, rural, and childless women. These contemporary writers—among them Paula Meehan, Mary O'Malley, Kerry Hardie and Mary O'Donnell— complicate perceptions of maternity by confronting the reality of infertility in a way that exposes the multiple dimensions of that condition in a society that has historically measured women by the production of their wombs. At the same time that they engage with the patriarchal, postcolonial depiction of the maternal figure in Irish literature and culture they recognize that women are constructed as "essentially close to nature through the reproductive functions of their bodies [which] can be enlisted to constrain women's opportunities and define womanhood" (Nash 120). They employ the familiar themes used by writers who preceded them, often returning to natural and

religious imagery ironically to describe infertile bodies. These women initiate a conversation about the personal and emotional significance of infertility as well as the broader, cultural implications of childlessness in a Catholic and postcolonial society.

The poets, writers, filmmakers and actors who have started to tell the stories and break the "unbreachable silence" surrounding the painful realities of women's lives are important voices in the project started by a previous generation of Irishwomen. In a country that is growing rapidly more multicultural and secular, women are expanding perceptions of themselves and accepting historical and contemporary realities that previously were culturally, religiously and even politically impossible to confront.

### "IS A CHILD SO HARD TO MAKE?": INFERTILITY IN WOMEN'S POETRY

Despite Eavan Boland's connection to positive experiences of maternity, her poem, "The Famine Road," which appeared in her 1975 collection *The War Horse,* is one of the earliest contemporary Irish poems to discuss infertility. In it she interweaves a conversation between two British officials about the construction of famine roads with that of a woman receiving a diagnosis of infertility from her doctor. The poem ends with the infertile woman being told that she is

> *Barren, never to know the load*
> *of his child in you, what is your body*
> *now if not a famine road?*

The woman's body has not only predictably become the earth, but as it is infertile it has become a symbol of colonial oppression: a road that leads nowhere built by a dying population.

Paula Meehan deepens the discussion of infertility by removing the direct political metaphor seen in Boland's poem and placing it in a personal context; the infertility no longer speaks to the state of the nation but to a woman's personal experience. Women are no longer exclusively metaphors, but individuals. Meehan, who was born on Dublin's north side in 1955, contributes a powerful urban, working class voice to the canon of Irish writing. She writes about her childhood and the "northside streets / that whelped me; not a brick remains / of the tenement I reached the age of reason in" (*Pillow Talk* 14). Like Boland, she underscores the importance of female generations, though the mother/daughter relationships in Meehan's poetry reveal a tension in the negotiation of identities. There is a schism in Meehan's relationship to maternity—one perception of maternity is idealized, the other born of real experience. Meehan says that she was "very conscious of the world of my mother, her sisters, my grandmother." She also saw her mother "fall victim to those roles [models assigned to a woman of her class] and while I mightn't have known what I wanted, I sure as hell knew what I didn't want" (Dorgan 265-66). In "The Pattern," one of her most powerful poems about mothers and daughters, she writes:

> Little has come down to me of hers,
> a sewing machine, a wedding band,
> a clutch of photos, the sting of her hand
> across my face in one of our wars
>
> when we had grown bitter and apart.
> Some say that's the fate of the eldest daughter.
> I wish now she'd lasted till after
> I'd grown up. We might have made a new start
>
> as women without tags like *mother, wife*
> *sister, daughter*, taken our chances from there… (*Man* 17)

She goes on to describe the difficulty of the mother's life, saying that "history has brought her to her knees" (18). Despite the speaker's desire to know her mother without the label of "mother" or "wife," she realizes that her mother was defined by those roles. One of the last images of her mother is in Phoenix Park, where she is "wrapped / entirely in her own shadow, the world beyond her / already a dream, already lost. She's / eight months pregnant. Her last child" (19).

Meehan also negotiates the tensions between Catholicism, earth/female imagery and women's identities. Although she challenges Catholic ritual and belief (often in favor of Celtic mysticism) in her poetry, she instinctually returns to the religion and culture of her childhood. That instinct speaks to her struggle to question such ingrained doctrines while simultaneously reclaiming and revising their vocabulary. The same tension between acknowledging the cultural importance of Catholicism and its often negative impact on women's lives appears in the work of other poets, namely Mary O'Malley, as well as the play and films investigating the Magdalen asylums.

In "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," in which Meehan gives voice and agency to Mary, who becomes a pre-Christian earth goddess, the poet criticizes the complicity of the Church and community in the death of Ann Lovett (*Man*…41). The poem, like many of Meehan's fertility poems, is organized cyclically around a natural and religious calendar. At the beginning of the poem, in November, the statue of Mary laments being "stuck up her in this grotto, without so much as / star or planet to ease my vigil." She is unhappy in her position, "fit…to a myth of a man crucified" and named "Mother of all this grief / though mated to no mortal man." She describes her grotto in springtime with the eruption of new life—"hedgerows / of cow parsley and haw

blossom"—that coincides with first communion celebrations. In midsummer, so important in the Celtic calendar, Mary departs entirely from her traditional role.

> …the grace of a midsummer wedding
> when the earth herself calls out for coupling
> and I would break loose of my stony robes,
> pure blue, pure white, as if they had robbed
> child's sky for their colour. My being
> cries out to be incarnate, incarnate,
> maculate and tousled in a honeyed bed. (41)

As couples are married, Mary wishes for a love of her own; this declaration, combined with the Marian vocabulary of "pure white" and "pure blue" as well as the choice of slightly altered words like "incarnate" and "maculate," reinforces the contrast between Meehan's Mary (and real women) and the sexless Catholic Mary. The poem continues into autumn, with the sacrament of burial and a reference to All Soul's Night, the Christianized replacement of the Celtic festival of Samhain. It is All Souls that reminds the Virgin of the issue at the heart of the poem: the death of fifteen-year-old Anne Lovett and her newborn child in the grotto in 1984. Mary blames the "town tucked up in little scandals / bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises." At the same time Mary cannot free herself from her own Catholic guilt as she remembers that the girl "cried out to me in extremis / I did not move / I didn't lift a finger to help her / I didn't intercede with heaven / nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear." Mary, who wants so much to be freed from her stony robes and her windswept grotto, also wants to be freed from any responsibility of intercession, from "being the conscience of the town": she wants both herself and the community to be freed from the confines of Mariolatry and hypocritical religion.

In “Handmaid” Meehan continues to play on the vocabulary of Catholicism, addressing the poem to an ambiguous “Lord” in a poem ripe with sexual and religious language.

> Lord, when I walked with you under the stars
>
> and we were overcome by desire
> and we lay down in the desert night,
> I fell into your eyes, tasted your salt.
>
> And, Lord, when I was impaled on you,
> gazed on your face with devotion,
> you spoke of the hard day’s ride
> and the distances you had crossed to couple with me.
>
> I have opened wide as a rivermouth to you
> and would have you invade my cells,
> my womb, my heart, my head, O Lordy
> do with me what you will. (*Pillow Talk* 13)

The poem, which is a reference to the Magnificat, tears down the idea of “immaculate conception” and confronts its sexual oppression of Catholic women. The Magnificat, taken from Luke 1:46-55, refers to the account of the Visitation of Mary to her sister Elizabeth. Elizabeth, herself pregnant with John the Baptist, greets her sister with the lines of the Hail Mary, “Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” Mary replies:

> My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior for He hath regarded the humility of His handmaiden. For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed for He that is mighty hath done great things to me and holy in His name.

The title of the poem is taken from the prayer itself, and Meehan adds a subtext that sexualizes the Immaculate Conception. The reference to Mary’s pregnancy and the Magnificat is clear, and Meehan’s poem also uses the idea of devotion and of complete

surrender of the body, "do with me what you will," to offer further religious connections. She is perhaps also commenting on the acceptance of church doctrine by women like her mother, who were forced to allow the invasion of their "cells…womb…heart…head." The use of "Lord" and the more familiar "O Lordy" could be read as either exclamations or direct addresses: their significance lies in their ambiguity. The familiarity of "O Lordy" suggests a relationship between a man and a woman that transcends the patriarchal hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The level of intimacy increases with the sexualized body of the possibly divine male. The speaker challenges pious expectations for her Catholic self as she simultaneously recognizes her cultural and religious heritage in her use of the Magnificat. In both this poem and "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," Meehan feels compelled to "escape the traps of history and construct a positive tradition…I would drown in the kind of fascist Catholicism that suppressed the female in our culture if I didn't have a way of constructing a tradition that makes sense" (Praga 74). In her process of reconstruction she revisits the history and traditions that she wishes to escape, recognizing their inevitable influence.

Meehan's criticisms add dimension to the experiences of her speakers, though her poetic voice, especially in her earlier work, occasionally returns to familiar tropes like the woman/earth parallel. In her work on infertility, that trope sometimes implies that childlessness is the most definitive aspect of her speakers' lives; women are still defined by maternity, albeit by its absence. Her speakers are frank about their desire to have a child and the pain of their inability to do so. The honest portrayal of infertility and the

evolution of the infertile subject in Meehan's work reflect the changes in Irish society[9] that allows the poet to open a dialogue with a surprising number of Irish women who approach the same topic.[10] Although her voice is initially very close to that in Boland's "The Famine Road," her subjects end up challenging the nationalist obsession with maternity that continued well into highly religious and conservative postcolonial Ireland .

In Meehan's first poem about infertility, "Childless," which comes from her first collection, 1984's *Return and No Blame*, she writes,

> In the face of all creation
> seeding, sporing, taking root,
> things go wild to get in flower,
> mad to rush towards death.
>
> Is a child so hard to make?
> I would trade all of my poems,
> my stores of words, my hoarded tunes,
> to have a child suck on my breast.
>
> Cruel fate, you must despise me
> to give me two good eyes to see with
> all around me young blood pulsing
> while in cap and gown I am sterile.
>
> Cold as the white page, cold as the grave,
> colder still the winding sheets at night
> when the shoots of my passion
> are seeking the sun.
>
> The moon will grow full again.
> I will count the days
> and follow it from crescent

[9] Infertility was previously undiscussed or only discussed in coded references, as seen in Angela Bourke's *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*. Cleary and her husband, despite seven years of marriage, were childless. According to Bourke, a common euphemism and explanation for infertility was the suggestion that the woman had been taken "by the fairies" and, upon her return, was unable to have children.

[10] Infertility is a taboo subject in most, if not all, Anglophone literature. Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds and Sharon Thesen each have poems about infertility and/or miscarriage. There tends to be very little creative expression of the subject, which makes the relatively large body of Irish women's writing on infertility even more surprising, given the religious and cultural context in which it has been produced.

to round in its range.

A curse on the rich songs,
the cyphers that dance on the page.
The language that others have made
do I remake, robbed of my child's eyes?

The planet is slowly dying,
all things are bound to their end.
A shadow lies on my heart
and little relief can I seek in sound. (*Return and No Blame* 55)

The traditional earth/female body comparison parallels the infertility of the speaker with the burgeoning fertility of the earth, undermining the implicit argument that both women and the earth will continue to reproduce. This woman acknowledges her connection to the moon's cycles as she marks another month without conception. Meehan's poetic voice evolves in a "seasonal" pattern, reflecting life cycles that underline the link between female and earth in an ironic commentary: the woman's infertility mirrors the "seeding, sporing, taking root" of nature. As for all of Meehan's subjects, this speaker's childlessness is not a choice but a biological fact; even though the poet uses the earth metaphor ironically here, she does not deny the importance of reproduction to herself or to the earth.[11] Since these women do not always challenge what might be considered the essentialism of the maternal role, such poems could be read as a continued deference to the centrality of motherhood which, according to this speaker, is more important than "all of my poems / my stores of words, my hoarded tunes." By examining how Meehan's voice evolves, however, we can see how she reconciles the deeply embedded values of a Catholic and nationalist culture with the reality of infertility. The changes in her poetic

[11] I have not found literature that deals with the implication of choosing not to reproduce. It seems that infertility remains more acceptable than choosing not to reproduce.

voice follow the cycles of a maturing woman as well as changing cultural attitudes in Irish society from her first volume in 1984 to her most recent in 2000.

Meehan's poems of maternal loss from her next collection *The Man Who Was Marked By Winter*, published in 1990, continue to challenge the earth/female metaphor by juxtaposing nature's rebirth with the death of an infant. In "Elegy for a Child," a ritualized listing of signs of spring contrast with the speaker's loss. She writes that "petals drifted in the orchard…clouds move over the river / under the sun…birds riotous about / the house, fledglings learning to fly." The lost child is described as "a small bird balanced / within me / ready for flight." Meehan returns to natural imagery in "Child Burial," in which the speaker imagines turning back time in order to preempt conception and the ensuing bereavement: "I would travel alone / to a quiet mossy place / you would spill from me into the earth / drop by bright red drop" (30). The menstrual blood, symbol of fertility and, at the same time, a sign that conception has not occurred, returns to the earth just as the child returns to the earth through burial. The speaker's body is linked to Mother Earth, though the blood, in nationalist rhetoric a familiar symbol of regeneration, as in Pearse's blood sacrifice for "Mother Ireland," here symbolizes the opposite. The traditional lament form appears when the mother refers to her child as "my lamb, my calf, my eaglet / my cub, my kid, my nestling / my suckling, my colt…" (29). This listing of endearments echoes the formulaic construction of the caoineadhs composed by women to honor the dead and evokes the powerful role of women in the grieving community, giving the poet's words and subject a particular historiocultural weight.

In her most recent poems, from 2000's *Dharmakaya,* Meehan uses lament to move towards resignation. The speaker in the poem "Ectopic" is in the hospital, thinking

of “the weight / of my little creature’s soul and why its fate / has been to leave before I had a chance to save / her…I am a woman with a sieve carrying sand / from the beach” (32). The sand running from the sieve not only suggest a Sisyphian task but also the realization of an older woman who cannot change her situation. That shift in tone is further reinforced in “That Night There Was Full Moon, Little Cloud,” as the speaker seems to have come to terms with her childlessness. The poem describes a conversation between a grandmother and granddaughter. The grandmother reads the younger woman’s tea leaves and the granddaughter says:

> She sees. She tells me I am beautiful.
>
> That I’ll never have children, but a song
> for every child I might have had and none
> got easy but writ in the blood of men
> who’ve displeased me. She swears it’s true. No room
> of my own till the grave. The moon’s strong pull
> will claim me as a daughter. No blame. No wrong. (14)

While there will be no physical offspring from this particular body, the poet procreates through her “songs” and realizes that there is “no blame, no wrong” in her situation and she should feel no guilt. In writing about the loss or impossibility of children, language becomes a comfort. Poetry acts a both a vocalization of grief and as a sort of surrogate child for the speaker, marking a significant shift from the tone of “Childless.” From the perspective of a mature poet in a more recent Ireland, poetry is as much a contribution to the creation of a nation as a child.

The lament, seen in Meehan’s “Child Burial,” is not available to the mothers of stillborn children in Mary O’Malley’s “Cealtrach,” from her collection *Where the Rocks Float*. O’Malley, a native of Connemara, was born in 1954 and lives in the Moycullen

Gaeltacht. Her poem describes mothers on the harsh western coast who are forced to bury their children in the cealtrach, a piece of unconsecrated ground designated for the burial of stillborns and unbaptized babies. In the poem O'Malley writes,

> The children were never told
> about those places. The unbreachable
> silence of women protected us
> from terrible things.
> We heard the dread whisperings
> and peopled the swarming spaces with ghosts.
>
> Yet we never knew. They buried
> unnamed innocents by the sea's edge
> and in the unchurched graveyards
> that straddled boundary walls. Those infants
> half-human, half-soul were left
> to make their own way on the night shore.
>
> Forbidden funerals, where did mothers
> do their crying in the two-roomed cottages
> so beloved of those Irish times?
> Never in front of the living children.
> Where then? In the haggard, the cowshed,
> the shadowed alcoves of their church?
>
> That Christian religion was hard.
> It mortified the flesh
> and left mothers lying empty,
> their full breasts aching, forever afraid
> of what the winter storms might yield,
> their own dreams turning on them like dogs. (249-250)

The mothers of these children do not, or cannot, speak, testifying to the long history of silence surrounding such culturally unacceptable but common realities. The silence, which "protects" the surviving children, damages their mothers, who are unable to mourn except like animals in the haggard or the cowshed. O'Malley's final indictment of the church, which left mothers with a grief they could not acknowledge, echoes Meehan's desire to escape the sometimes impossible expectations of patriarchal institutions that

leave no room or outlet for mothers who, through no fault of their own, cannot fulfill their "duty" to procreate (though again the question of choosing not to have children in not addressed). The mothers are left "lying empty" by a religion that orders them to be mothers first and foremost and then offers them no comfort if they are physically unable to fulfill that assignment. O'Malley's poem takes the grieving process out of the shadows and exposes an alternative reality to the idyllic "two-roomed cottages" of rural, nationalist Ireland.

Kerry Hardie was born in County Down in 1951 and, like O'Malley, recently published her second collection of poetry. She approaches the issue of infertility in "A Childless Woman." The poem begins with an epigraph that captures the emotional toll of the speaker's inability to bear children: "With young women I am motherly / With older women, daughterly / With women of my own age, lonely." Her first stanza shifts to the ironic natural imagery seen in Meehan's "Child Burial" and "Childless." Hardie describes an early spring landscape:

> Where the swollen river has loosed its brown waters
> into marsh places
> and the shine of the cold sky shows in flatness of flood—
> there the frogs grunt,
>
> heave, flop about in watery eruption,
> stilling when they hear us,
> but for an old bull, quivering, out of his head with sex,
> who regards us balefully from his station
> on a female, submerged
> in the spawny glub and not protesting. (269)

The earth and the animals represent a living, breathing life cycle, full of sound and imagery easily read and fertile and sexual. The speaker, like so many in these poems, remains outside, only able to observe a process of reproduction that she will never share.

Although she yearns to be a mother, her choice of vocabulary critiques the lack of agency experienced by the female of the species. The cow is "submerged" and "not protesting," which implies that she is nearly simultaneously ambivalent and nearly drowned. The bull, who is described as "old", perhaps as a reference to the large numbers of marriages between old bachelors and young women in twentieth century Ireland, is "out of his head with sex." There is nothing noble or beautiful about the act of procreation. The first stanza of this poem evokes Seamus Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist," in which the bullfrog and the female, like the bull and the cow in "A Childless Woman," react with biological instinct, achieving a fulfillment that escapes Hardie's speaker. Like Meehan, Hardie returns to the earth/female parallel to undermine its most basic assumption.

Hardie changes her tone in the second part of the poem, as she describes her "part-time, not-mine son / loaned from a woman I never meet." She has found an alternative to bearing her own children. In the following section she expresses resigned emotions reminiscent of Meehan's speaker in "That Night There Was Full Moon, Little Cloud":

> It's no big deal, happens over and over.
> Just haunted, in spring, by the slow file
> and of the grey women who have made me.
> And I am them, and I am breaking the line.
> This is what it means: the year spring didn't come.
> Spilled water, seeping underground.

The poem recalls work by Meehan as Hardie comments on her break with nature's cycles and her inability to continue the long line of mothers; the "grey women" whose color has either been leached by memory or, perhaps, by the generations of children they have

produced. Unlike Meehan, however, she finds no reconciliation at the end of the poem; rather the speaker sees herself trapped in an eternal winter.

Winter landscapes pervade Mary O'Donnell's poem "Antarctica," from her 1990 collection *Reading the Sunflowers in September*. As in Hardie and Meehan's poetry, her speaker wishes for a child, saying "I covet their children; wardrobes / stocked with blue or pink…" (1380). The Antarctica of the title is a metaphor for her body, with "waters petrified by spittled winds: / little fish will not swim here." She feels betrayed by her own womb, "maddened by / lunar crumblings, the false prophecy / of tingling breasts, the turgid abdomen…blood seeps, again." She, like several of Meehan's voices, sees the moon and its control over her reproduction as an endless circle of disappointment. The lunar cycle brings on her menstrual cycle and when she bleeds she is metaphorically wounded by her infertility.

O'Donnell complicates her speaker's perceptions of maternity, however, by suggesting that those coveted children of her peers bleed their mothers, repeatedly referring to them as "animal-children": motherhood, although desirable, takes its toll on women. She tells us that the mothers of whom she is jealous say, "But you are free…you have no child!" She recognizes that they are "women grafted like young willows, / forced before time," trapped in the endless cycle of maternity that mirrors her own struggle with infertility. Her poem offers a version of infertility that recognizes not only the overwhelming biological and cultural desire felt by the speaker to conceive, but also the burdens placed on those who do bear children.

O'Donnell's poem, like the work of all the poets writing on infertility, presents a complex picture of contemporary maternal bodies. Overall, the painful and rhetorically

unacceptable realities that these women reveal imply that the "road" no longer completely ends since, as Meehan's speaker realizes in "That Night," she will have a "song for every child I might have had" and that although there is pain, there is "no blame / no wrong" in her childlessness. The poetic expression of infertility signals the recognition of another element of contemporary feminine identity. These women's subjects can no longer be portrayed as silent "famine roads" since the complexity of their work recognizes the cultural weight of Catholic and nationalist culture on Irish women and the personal struggle with childlessness. Their poetry represents not only an end to the silence surrounding infertility and maternal loss but also provides an alternative means of production for these women; the poetry that they contribute to the canon of Irish literature means that they cannot be seen as "famine roads." By reclaiming familiar tropes and challenging the expectations of religion, culture and nation, their poetry acknowledges what was previously unacknowledgeable in a society that relies, for powerful reasons of national identity, on the fertility of its women.

## Chapter Three

## "Bad Girls Do the Best Sheets": Magdalen Aslyums in Literature and Popular Culture

Poets are not the only artists to challenge perceptions of Irish maternity and femininity and their control by Catholicism and nationalism. The twentieth century Magdalen Asylums[1] present one of the most shocking examples of controlled maternity in Irish culture; the stories of their inmates have been memorialized in the last decade (particularly in the last four years) in plays, songs, novels, and, perhaps most notably, multiple documentaries and two feature films. Catherine Nash notes that "questions of gender, sexual and national identity emerge…in the production of popular media histories, literature… in temporary and more lasting forms of memorialization" (119). These genres reach a much larger audience than poetry, in part because of the public broadcasting of documentaries and exposés on standard television channels in Ireland, the UK and North America and the media attention given to film, and in part because they dramatize and expose a potentially sensational topic. Film and documentary have brought some of the issues raised by the poets—particularly that of the constricting and judgmental role of Catholicism in women's reproductive lives—to the attention of international consumers.

[1] The Magdalen Asylums were established in the eighteenth century as church sponsored homes to reform prostitutes. By the twentieth century they had shifted their focus to unwed mothers, women suspected of "loose" moral character and even rape victims. These women were committed to the asylums by their family or the church and were forced to labor in laundries. They were separated from their children and could only leave the asylum through the intervention of a male relative. The brutality of the Magdalene

The pure, chaste examples of Mary and of Mother Ireland leave little room for "wayward women" like Mary Magdalene in the newly formed Republic of Ireland populated by "comely maidens" who would only reproduce within the state and church-sanctioned confines of Catholic marriage. Like women who could not reproduce, these "Magdalens" were removed from the "imagined community" of devout, rural, Gaelic Ireland. Some had actually had illegitimate children while others were victims of rape or incest or suspected of "questionable" sexual behavior and were committed to the asylums by their family, clergy or the police. A series of accounts that emerged during the 1990s recount the circumstances of various women placed in the laundries, vividly exposing the precarious position of women in Irish society: Patricia Burke Brogan's 1992 play *Eclipsed* and 2003 play *Stained Glass at Samhain*, a series of documentaries made in the 1990s and 2000, including *Les Blanchisseuses de Magdalen* (France 1993), *Washing Away the Stain* (Scotland 1993), *States of Fear* (Ireland 1999) and *Sex in a Cold Climate* (Britain 2000), the 2002 BBC Northern Ireland film *Sinners* and 2002 Peter Mullan film *The Magdalene Sisters*. The Vatican criticized the most commercial of the films, *The Magdalene Sisters*, for being excessively harsh in its indictment of the Catholic Church. The film won the principal prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2002 and went on to be distributed worldwide.

Director Peter Mullan claims that he was so affected by Steve Humphries's documentary, *Sex in a Cold Climate*, which aired on Britain's Channel Four "Witness[2]"

asylums was exposed beginning in the 1990s as a number of church related scandals were made public. The last laundry closed in 1996 (Luddy 736).

[2] The "Witness" series, according to the Cinema Guild, which now distributes the documentary (though it has been made a part of the DVD of *The Magdalene Sisters*, increasing its availability to a large audience) was a "religious strand" on Channel Four. *Sex in a Cold Climate* had around 3 million viewers, one of the

series in 1998, that he wrote the majority of his own film script the same night. The film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, was described as "angry and rancorous provocation" by the Vatican, while according to *Slate*'s David Edelstein, who reviewed the film for the National Public Radio program "Fresh Air," the movie was a "masterpiece" depicting a "holy hell." The documentary and subsequent film told the stories of inmates of Ireland's Magdalen Asylums, also called the Magdalen Laundries. By the 1950s and 60s, the Asylums were taking in "fallen" women committed by their families, churches, police or some combination thereof and subjecting them to forced labor for indefinite periods of time. The sudden flood of texts exposing the Magdalen system and the increasingly vitriolic indictment of the Irish Church and its influence on mid-twentieth century society demonstrate a new willingness to discuss the existence and abuse of women who did not fit the prescribed ideals of Irish womanhood: unwed mothers, sexually active, attractive or flirtatious unmarried women, orphaned girls (especially those born to unmarried mothers), mentally retarded women and victims of rape and incest. The Church has been the primary target of blame for the Magdalen Aslyums, but when all of the texts treating the subject are considered (rather than just the highly visible films) they underscore the role of society—the State, the community, the family—in maintaining their existence. The body of texts about the Magdalens contradicts the widely accepted idea that the Magdalen Aslyums were homes exclusively for unwed mothers. The testimonies and depiction of inmates demonstrate how many women were punished for deviating from society's idea of acceptable femininity or, often through no fault of their own, threatening

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largest audiences ever for the series. Any Irish viewers would have had to pick it up through satellite television. RTE, the Irish national television station, has twice refused to air it.

the structure of the community. Although the Magdalen texts comment implicitly on the impact of nationalist doctrine in the creation of the Church-dominated society that labeled these women unacceptable, they focus more directly on the role of Catholicism and community in the erasure of these women from mid-twentieth century Irish history. The exposure of the Magdalen system through film and literature makes the situation of these excluded women public, in contrast with the private, poetic revelations of infertility and maternal loss seen in the previous chapter. When taken as a whole, the literature and film provide a nuanced depiction of the complicity of Church and State and the precarious position of the women, both those incarcerated in the Asylums and the nuns who responsible for their care and 'rehabilitation,' all of whom were until very recently silenced.

**THE MAGDALEN ASYLUMS: A BRIEF HISTORY**

Although all of the literature, documentary and popular culture surrounding the Magdalen Asylums in the last dozen years has focused on the mid-twentieth century, the Magdalen Asylums have existed for much longer. The first was opened in Lower Leeson Street, Dublin, in 1767, modeled on the Magdalen Hospital in Whitechapel, England, which opened in 1758. In the eighteenth century the Magdalen Hospitals and Asylums accepted primarily prostitutes who wished to reform, although the Dublin Magdalen Asylum accepted "first fall Protestant cases only" (Finnegan 8). The first Catholic Aslyum was opened in Cork in 1809 and numerous homes had opened in England over the same period of time. In 1848 the Good Shepherd Sisters (the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd of Angers) gained control of a home and laundry that had

been opened in 1826 in Limerick. The Good Shepherd Sisters would dominate the operation of Magdalen Asylums from that point on, running houses in Wexford, Belfast and, most significantly, in Cork, where an Asylum was established in 1870 in response to the Contagious Diseases legislation, which focused in part on prostitutes and the diseases that affected them (Finnegan 10). By the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, however, prostitutes were no longer the primary 'penitents' in the Asylums. The women who did end up in the Asylums were punished for their sexuality even more harshly than prostitutes, who rarely remained there. Frances Finnegan, a lecturer in Social History at the Waterford Institute of Technology (which, ironically, is housed in a former Magdalen Laundry) has written extensively on nineteenth century poverty and prostitution. She struggled to find a publisher for her book *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* when it was first published in 2001, though in 2004 it was picked up by Oxford University Press and can now be found on the shelves of popular Irish bookstores like Eason's and Hodges Figgis. Finnegan's book is one of the only historical books about the Magdalen Asylums, and she focuses primarily on the nineteenth century Laundries. She writes that

> the Female Penitentiary System betrayed a continuing fear of women's sexuality, a fear particularly evident in Ireland in the 1930s, when, according to one concerned observer, outcast women were "never so numerous or so sinful…" to counter such vice, the ideal of womanhood became more than ever fixed in the celibate nun—and of all the religious vocations open to women, none more closely resembled the work of Christ himself, than that of the Good Shepherd Sisters. Significantly at this stage of the new State's existence, these nuns' work—"never more needful"—was seen as patriotic. And since even motherhood in its "purest" form (without the taint of sex or childbirth) was attributed to them, these women were elevated to heights no normal female, however virtuous, could ever aspire to attain. (18-19)

Finnegan's observations about the position of the nuns who ran the Good Shepherds is especially intriguing given the mother/child relationship that was written into *The Practical Rules for the Use of the Religious of the Good Shepherd for the Direction of Classes.* This rule book refers to the penitent women as 'classes' and 'children' and the nuns as 'mothers.' For example, the rules state that "You [the nuns] must serve both as guides and mothers to the children of the classes…We recommend you once for all, to be charitable to the children…thus the children may render testimony that we are, as we ought to be, true Mothers" (*Rules for the Direction of the Classes*, cited in Finnegan, 23). The women have been described by one commentator as "almost like the daughters they [nuns] didn't have" (*Washing Away the Stain*). Women who had given birth outside of wedlock were ostracized, punished and separated from their children, forced into an unnatural relationship with religious women who acted as their metaphorical "mothers."

In the Asylums women worked ceaselessly in the laundries and ironing rooms. The Asylum took in the laundry of the church, seminary and the orphanage as well as washing from hotels, restaurants, and private homes in the community. Although the religious orders that ran the Laundries claimed that the money they took in from the community was only enough to provide for the women who did the work (the women themselves never received any wages), they were in reality quite profitable. The Good Shepherd Convent in Cork, the largest of the Laundries, made the contemporary equivalent of 100,000 pounds profit annually. The women rose to prayers at 6 a.m., attended mass, had breakfast and were at work by 8 a.m. They had two meals during the day and finished work between 6.30 and 8.30 p.m. A rule of silence was imposed on the

women and friendships and interactions with fellow penitents were strongly discouraged. While their work was a form of "penance," the women were also expected to recite prayers during working hours; Mary Norris, one of the few vocal survivors, bitterly recalls the irony of a decade of the rosary being dedicated to the "oppressed in Hungary and Russia where they didn't have civil rights" (*States of Fear*).

Survivors of the system have different recollections of recreational time. Some former penitents recall that "[s]ometimes they'd play music, show films, sing songs" and Sr.Noel Duggan of the Mercy Convent in Galway (the convent in *Eclipsed*), remembers that "we danced, and they enjoyed that" (*Washing Away the Stain*). On the other hand, Norris says that

> It wasn't a life, it was an existence. It was not a life. There was nothing to enjoy. There was nothing to look forward to…everything revolved around work and prayer. There was no individual contact. There was no newspaper, no radio, no books…bed, up, work, pray, bed, seven days a week. (*Les Blanchisseuses de Magdalen*)

Some of the most powerful views of the twentieth century Magdalen Asylums come from former penitents like Mary Norris, who now works to memorialize the Magdalens by speaking out about her experience and establishing a memorial with the names and birthdates of penitents who died in the Laundries and were buried in mass graves. The majority of first person accounts have emerged in a series of documentary films that followed the production of the play *Eclipsed* in 1992.

### *ECLIPSED* AND *STAINED GLASS AT SAMHAIN* : THE PLAY'S THE THING…

In the 1960s Patricia Burke Brogan was a 21-year-old novice who was sent to a Galway Magdalen Asylum for "holiday relief" during her religious training. Brogan was horrified by what she witnessed in the Laundry; she eventually left her order and married, settling in Galway where she became an artist and a writer. *Eclipsed* was first performed as a reading in Galway in 1988. Four years later it was produced on stage by the Punchbag Theatre. That summer the play went to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it won a Scotsman Fringe First. The play was the first creative depiction of the Magdalen Laundries and its production, along with widespread criticism of the Catholic Church during the 1990s, has encouraged survivors to speak about their experiences.

Most of the play is set in 1963 in the interior of a fictional convent-laundry called Killmacha. The Laundry was based on the one run by the Mercy Sisters in Galway City. Inside the Laundry are five penitents: Brigit, a bitter young woman focused on escaping and finding her daughter; Cathy, an asthmatic mother of twins; Nellie-Nora, who gave birth to a stillborn son conceived when she was raped by her employer, who subsequently signed her into the Laundry; Mandy, who is obsessed with Elvis and is also the mother of a stillborn son; and Juliet, an orphan from the orphanage attached to the convent. The women are overseen by the Mother Superior, Mother Victoria, and a novice named Sister Virginia. Through the women's conversations the audience gleans information about their pasts, the society that put them in the Laundry and their possibilities for the future. The nuns represent two different perspectives on the Magdalen penitents: Mother Victoria sees them as cunning and dangerous 'fallen' women while Sister Virginia struggles with her conscience as she interacts on a more personal level with the penitents.

In the BBC2 documentary *Washing Away the Stain*, which appeared in 1993 and was obviously inspired in part by Brogan's play, scenes from which appear in the documentary footage, Brogan says that

> I saw Christ crucified in the women, in their suffering. I felt that the violence was the violence of keeping them in there and having taken their children away. And that violence came out of society…the whole atmosphere was as if you were in a trap and you couldn't get out…became brainwashed in a sense from the hum of the machinery and the steam and the prayers.

The prayers and religious music are interrupted by popular songs of the 1960s in almost every scene: the women begin Act I, Scene 3 by singing "Heartbreak Hotel" and nearly all of the scenes between the Mother Superior and Sister Virginia contain Latin prayers that are either sung or spoken. The Magnificat appears most frequently; as the prayer that narrates Mary's announcement of her pregnancy to her sister Elizabeth, it is especially significant in a play that takes place in a convent full of unwed mothers. Its cultural weight in Irish society is evident in its use not only by Brogan but also by Paula Meehan, as was seen in chapter two. The combination of popular music and the constant litany of prayers also figure prominently in the documentaries, one of the two feature films (*Sinners* 2002) and in Marita Conlon-McKenna's novel *The Magdalen* (1999). The two types of music—popular and sacred—contrast the rapidly changing outside world, influenced by American music and culture and the gyrations of Elvis's hips, with the atrophied interior world controlled by a rigid and repressive Catholicism. As Finnegan writes, the women were "kept ignorant of changing attitudes, demoralized and controlled, they were excluded from the sexual revolution which, far from freeing them, made

mockery of their wasted lives" (5). The juxtaposition of the two types of music emphasizes the contradictions of 1960s Ireland.

One of the most compelling elements of the play is the crise de conscience experienced by Sister Virginia, a character who seems to be inspired by the playwright's experiences in the Mercy Convent. Sister Virginia struggles with her emotions towards the penitents from the beginning of the play, and her lines are often prefaced in the stage directions with "sadly" and "gently." When she delivers Juliet, a 17-year-old orphan from the convent orphanage, to the laundry, she tries to convince the young woman that the world outside, and the men in it, are not all bad. Juliet is convinced that her place is in the Laundry, saying "My Mammy lived here until she died. I want to stay in here! I'd hate to live out there! All those men! Look what happened to Mammy!" (22). It is revealed later in the scene that Juliet was attacked by the vegetable man and although Mother Benedict was "just in time" and "hit him a wollop with her big rosary beads," her superior, Mother Joachim, refused to believe that Juliet was not responsible for "leading him on," which suggests that her placement in the Magdalen Laundry was not as voluntary as she implies to Sister Virginia. Such a story was a common one; several women who have shared their stories with researchers were 'orphaned' when their disgraced mothers were placed in the Laundry. When they reached adolescence they were shifted from orphanage to convent, from one institution to another in order to protect them from their genetic fallibility. In Act Two Mother Victoria echoes this attitude towards the children of the penitents when she orders Sister Virginia to distance herself from the women. She tells the novice

> When I was nineteen, I had the same thoughts! I wanted to free the penitents—mothers of some of the women in the laundries now. You see, this weakness to sins of the flesh stays in the blood for seven generations! (45)

Not only were the penitents punished but their female children, who were often committed to life in orphanages and industrial schools, were automatically suspect because of the supposed "sins" of their mothers. Here the generational connection seen in so much women's poetry becomes a bond of guilt that assumes that the daughters will carry on the mother's 'sinfulness.' Mother Victoria employs a vocabulary of miscegenation as only one drop of 'weak' blood may be left after seven generations but it will, nonetheless, be the defining element of the woman's character.

Sister Virginia questions not only the Mother Superior but some of the foundations of Catholicism as she tries to understand her position within the Laundry. She challenges Mother Victoria's reference to St.Paul's condemnation of people who sin, saying "But St.Paul hated women!—Christ had many women friends!" (45). Mother Victoria, in a particularly didactic moment, tells the younger woman that "blind obedience" will carry her through (47). In a short scene called "Credo," Sister Virginia struggles with the Nicene Creed. As she recites the lines of the creed she is haunted by the voices of the penitents and, finally, the voice of Mother Victoria. She worries that she will ultimately become as desensitized as her superior. At the end of the scene she abandons the rote memorization of the creed and demands

> Was early Christian history rewritten too? Woman's witness submerged? –Christ Crucified! Help them! For a woman bore you, carried you for nine months! Mother of Jesus, do something about Cathy, Mandy, Nellie-Nora and the others! When you arose from that tomb, women were your first witnesses! Your first miracle was performed at your mother's request! –Help us!—Help me! (32)

By the end of the play Sister Virginia takes matters into her own hands. She first attempts to bring the plight of the penitents to the attention of one of the men whose laundry they do—the Bishop. The letter she writes asking the Bishop to visit the Laundry is intercepted by Mother Victoria, who orders the novice into her office where she forces Sister Virginia to kneel as she berates her for her actions. Mother Victoria is shocked and horrified at the prospect of such a "holy man" visiting "those—sinful women!" (64-65). Throughout the play she has insisted that the nuns of the Laundry are doing necessary work, providing food, clothing and shelter for the penitents as well as attending to their spiritual needs. After all, as she emphasizes repeatedly, "No one else wants them" (31). Such an argument was common and continues to be used by those who seek to defend the Magdalen system and their role in it. Finnegan points out that the convents did "shelter the abandoned," though she also underscores that the

> [O]bsession with repentance, this unwholesome preoccupation with the sexuality of others is an aspect of the system curiously ignored by its apologists, who recommend that Magdalen Asylums be judged not from the present viewpoint, but "in the context of their time." (243)

The question of historical context is consistently raised by religious professionals who, in the face of recent criticisms of the Catholic Church in Ireland and elsewhere, seek explanation or absolution. As will be seen in the testimony of nuns who worked in the Laundries, many people continue to argue that the Asylums were symptomatic of an historical period in which it was acceptable to commit women to indentured servitude if any aspect of their behavior was unacceptable to their family, Church or community. Sister Virginia, however, shows that not all of those directly involved in the laundries

were comfortable with their role; Brogan's characterization of Sister Virginia offers a far more complex representation of the nuns than appears in the films.

In the final scene one penitent suffocates in a laundry basket trying to escape to see her twins and Sister Virginia is attacked by Brigit, who was considered the most dangerous penitent by Mother Victoria. She hands over the keys as she prays the Hail Mary for the dead penitent and Brigit curses her, shouting "Ye're the ones who are dead, Virginia! Dead inside yer Laundry Basket Hearts!" (72). Brigit escapes and disappears completely. When her daughter, Rosa, attempts to find her some twenty years later she is unable to do so. The only woman left at the Laundry when Brigit's daughter arrives is an old and bitter Nellie-Nora. She has become institutionalized[3] during her decades in the Laundry and we learn that after Cathy's death Mandy was sent to a mental asylum. When Rosa arrives from America in search of her mother, we discover that Brigit never found her lost child after her escape. More than twenty years later the daughter is equally incapable of locating her mother. Nearly all of the women have been erased entirely.

Just after *Eclipsed* debuted Brogan said "I'm trying to understand why this would happen…as a nun I was silent for a long time" (*Washing Away the Stain*). She has continued to question the system, and in the fall of 2003 her most recent play, *Stained Glass at Samhain*, was produced in Galway. The new play revisits the Killmacha laundry, this time primarily from the perspective of Sister Luke, former Mother Superior of the convent. As the convent is being demolished Sister Luke remembers the laundry as past and present intersect in her muddled memory. In the play Brogan continues the

work she began by creating Sister Virginia's introspective character. As she does so she also observes the changing role of the Church in Irish society in the eleven years since she wrote *Eclipsed*.

The catalyst for the play's action—the destruction of the convent and Magdalen Laundry in Killmacha, a fictionalized version of the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Galway--seems inspired by actual events at the High Park Convent in Dublin. Early in Act I Sister Luke, who is housed in the novitiate and has a tenuous grip on reality, remembers the graves of two penitents, Rosemary and Mary Ann, who lived at the Laundry during her tenure as Mother Superior. She says that "last week the builders exhumed and cremated them—and all the others" (7). The exhumation and cremation of penitents echoes the High Park scandal, which was exposed in an August 21, 2003 column by *Irish Times* writer Mary Raftery. Raftery had discovered that, in 1993, the convent arranged to have 133 bodies exhumed, cremated and relocated to Glasnevin cemetery so that they could sell their land to recuperate financial losses on the stock market. During the exhumation process, 22 additional bodies were found in the mass grave. At least 58 of the women buried in the grave had not been issued death certificates and, since the nuns had real names for only 34 of those women (the other 24 were listed under "quasi-religious names" like Magdalen of Lourdes or Magdalen of St.Theresa) they could not account for who was buried in the mass grave nor the date or cause of death. Because the women were cremated (a cheaper option, though one frowned upon by the Catholic Church, which 'earnestly recommends' traditional burial) any chance of identifying the

[3] I will use the term "institutionalized" both as the verb to commit a woman to the institution of the Magdalen and as an adjective describing the mental state of some of the women who spent long periods of

remains was eliminated. Besides revealing a complete disrespect for the women in their care, the failure to report over 80 deaths is illegal. When Raftery compared the names on the gravestone of the mass grave in Glasnevin she found that only 27 of the names and dates match, meaning that the majority of the women buried in the grave at Glasnevin have not been properly identified and most likely never will be. Raftery asks at the end of her piece,

> Who will care enough to restore to these women the dignity of their real names - something the nuns stripped ruthlessly from them in life? It is surely the duty of the State to return some respect to these, its citizens, whom it deserted so comprehensively both in life and in death.

Brogan attempts to right some of these wrongs in *Stained Glass at Samhain* while also removing some of the blame from the religious orders. Sister Luke remembers and names Rosemary and Mary Ann. She also takes Maura Ber, a former penitent who was committed to the laundry at the age of thirteen for "giving cheek in school" to see the graves of the penitents. Maura escaped the Laundry and was eventually taken to America by an aunt. She enters the play as a Harvard graduate student writing a thesis on the Magdalen Laundry. Sister Luke leads her to a corner of the Laundry property, insisting that

> …there must be body-parts still here after the bulldozers. How could the bull-dozers take all? Every scrap of bone? Sinew? –Heart? Everything? –And I know for certain that their souls come back at Samhain. I'm certain! (42-43)

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time in the Magdalens.

Like the women buried in the unmarked graves, Sister Luke exists in a liminal space. A former Mother Superior, she now lives with the novices and, when Sister Benedict, who cares for her, leaves the order she is sent to a rest home. She constantly references Samhain, the Celtic cross-quarter festival that became All Hallow's Eve in the Christian calendar. The Celts believed that during the cross-quarter festivals (Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine and Lughnasa) the human and spirit worlds were closest to each other, increasing the likelihood of an exchange between them, whether physical or spiritual. Sister Luke is not unlike some of the speakers in the work of Meehan and O'Malley, who see the boundaries between worlds as fluid. She says in Act I, Scene I, "I had to come back to tell my story.—It's Halloween! Oiche Samhna! Here in the West there's no boundary between the living and the dead at Samhain!" (3). Sister Luke also sings songs in Irish, in contrast to the Benedictus from Mozart's *Requiem*, the piece of classical music that runs through the play in the same way that the Magnificat and popular music of the 1960s run through *Eclipsed*. Maura Ber joins her in singing the Irish lullaby "Seothín, seo hó" as they remember her escape from the Laundry and it becomes apparent that she too moves between worlds. The night she escaped Sister Luke watched her progress, saying "I could have stopped her…I kept on praying along with her Guardian Angel. Sent my own Angel to help her through the dark" (18-19). Maura ran across the countryside, finding shelter with a farmer and his wife for the night. When she returns to Ireland she searches for the house that gave her shelter only to find that no one remembers a house existing on that spot since the famine. Sister Luke tells her to go back on Samhain, the anniversary of the night that she escaped, when the two worlds are closest. She seems to suggest that Maura's escape was not only aided by her own willingness to turn a blind

eye, but also by an otherwordly presence that contrasts sharply with the Church she ostensibly serves.

Sister Luke is writing a book that will tell the story of the Laundry and her efforts to ameliorate the lives of the penitents in any way she could. She wonders, as she writes her memoirs on her old starched guimpes,[4] if her book will be censored. Sister Luke's concerns about the possible censorship of her book seem valid given the refusal to air documentaries about the Laundries on Irish television. As she recalls the work that she did to help the penitents, she does not ignore the cruelty and desperation recorded by survivors of the Asylums. She remembers a penitent who died trying to escape, one who attempted to abort her own child with a coat hanger and another who committed suicide by drinking bleach. She does not hesitate to indict the upper echelons of the Church, asking "who has bolted the doors and windows on these women?" (5). The concern for other babies, especially those in the third world, seems especially hypocritical to her, as is evidenced in her description of the penitents as "puppets" holding rag dolls (1). She says that those responsible would have been better off taking the women out of the Laundry and giving them their "babies from the orphanage, their páistí gréine, instead of popping pennies into black-baby-boxes" (5). She was removed from her position as Mother Superior when she was caught using the money generated for the laundry for "fresh vegetables… a milch cow… flowery aprons and tennis shoes" for the penitents (6). We discover that part of her motivation was personal; her family was visited by her father's illegitimate son when she was a child. The mother of that child had died and Sister Luke

[4] A guimpe is the high necked undergarment meant to be worn under a low-necked blouse. It is the white garment that covers the throat and chest of a nun.

says that she “could see the ghost of that woman from the North in every fair-haired penitent in the Laundry” (55).

Like Sister Virginia in the first play she questions the religious motivation behind the Laundry she runs. Her favorite stained glass window in the convent depicts the “penitential purples and crimsons of the Mother of God, of Mary Magdalene and the women lamenting the dead Christ” and is symbolically “half in shadow” (4). She wonders “what Christ wrote in the sand about the Pharisees, who wanted to stone that poor woman to death” (55). When “Central Powers” discover that she has been putting money back into the Laundry she is demoted. At that moment she “made a decision….there and then I decided to escape” (14). She jumps from the window of what had been her office, her first but not last attempt at flight, breaking her ankle. Sister Luke had become just as institutionalized and trapped as the penitents she guarded; her fate suggests that the some of the nuns who worked in the Laundries and other religious endeavors were also prisoners of a system that controlled women’s sexuality in more ways than one.

The pressure placed on the sisters is made apparent in the character of Sister Benedict. She is the only novitiate who cares for Sister Luke, who in turn encourages Sister Benedict to question her vocation. As Sister Benedict struggles with her decision whether or not to leave the convent, she is pressured by Mother Victoire, who schemes with the Bishop to coerce her into staying in the order because they need her to teach. They go so far as to write a document in which Sister Benedict must promise to give all of her salary to the Church if she leaves the convent. Mother Victoire then places her “under obedience,” forbidding her under pain of mortal sin to speak to anyone about her

intention to leave the convent. Both she and the Bishop, who enjoys travel, dinners and fine wine on the expense account of the Church, are concerned about the drop in enrollment in both convents and seminaries. They represent those who cling desperately to the days of "pay, pray and obey," when they occupied a powerful position in Irish society. Despite their efforts, Sister Benedict leaves the convent after she is denied permission to visit her dying mother. She returns at the end of the play as Bridget O'Brien, the head of an international publishing company that published Sister Luke's memoirs as well as Maura Ber's research on the Magdalen Laundries and the work of a priest, Father James, who has written a book about the women who ministered to Christ. In the last scene of the play she inscribes Sister Luke's name on the front of the simple cross that marks her grave, insisting on the importance of naming in a system where so many women went unnamed. Her symbolic gesture contrasts with the end of *Eclipsed*, where the audience discovers that all of the women have been erased from the society that hid them from view. These women, in a play published eleven years later, escape the system. Unlike Sister Virginia or the penitents from *Eclipsed*, Bridget O'Brien and Maura Ber have become a part of the world, contributing to their societies as scholars and businesswomen while Sister Luke has contributed her memoirs to the body of literature on the Church.

**"A DISGRACE TO THE NATION": MAGDALEN DOCUMENTARIES, 1993-2000**

After Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* was performed in 1992 (although it was read in 1988), first in Galway and then at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it won a Fringe First award, the silence surrounding the system of the Magdalen Laundries

was broken. The documentaries and the films they inspired reached audiences that Brogan's play could not, joining in a large body of literature and film criticizing the Church in the 1990s. *Washing Away the Stain,* produced by BBC2 in 1993, looked at both Irish and Scottish Laundries. It included interviews with Brogan and clips from the production of her play, even incorporating some of her dramatic devices by including a shot of a record player in an empty room playing the Joni Mitchell recording of the song "The Magdalen Laundry." The filmmakers also obtained interviews with sisters from the Mercy convent in Galway, the setting for Brogan's play. For the first time the nuns responded to the criticisms they had received since the play's performance in Edinburgh brought the Magdalen system to the attention of the general public. The testimony of both nuns and former penitents illustrates the complicity of the Church, the family and the community in keeping certain women out of view in de Valera's Ireland.

The documentary begins with a brief history before interviewing women who spent time in the Magdalen Asylums. One woman, Phyllis Valentine, was sent to the Galway Laundry from the orphanage when she was just a young teenager. She also appears in Steve Humphries's documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*—very few women who were committed to the Laundries have been willing to speak publicly about their experience because of the continued stigma attached to being a "Maggie," and several of the women appear in more than one documentary. The shame of having been in a Laundry, whether as an unwed mother or not, is evidenced in the testimony of Aileen, a woman from Cork who was sent to an orphanage at the age of two weeks because her mother was put into the Magdalen Asylum. She tells her story under a false name, with her face disguised by a shadow. At sixteen she, like Juliet in *Eclipsed*, was moved to the

Magdalen since it was suspected that she would fall like her mother. She says, “I had to suffer for what my mother did.” She remembers that a priest told her: “your mother had you outside marriage. We aren’t going to give you that opportunity.”

Brogan points out that the women in the Laundries were “cleansing themselves but also cleansing the society that sent them there.” These were women who, for being unwed mothers, children of unwed mothers, were removed from view. Many of the nuns who were essentially their captors refuse to be held responsible for the system. Sr. Noel Duggan says

> We worked with them…I did the same as they did…we went to the same church, we had the same confessor…they were rejected by their families for the most part…I suppose now that if I look back on it… with thirty years experience and a lot of human development for myself…we colluded with the system that was there…but at the time these girls had no place else to go…A lot of the blame… would be left on our shoulders whereas society in general, who had those girls in there in the first place, has got off lightly. And some of those families I’m sure and I know, they don’t live too far away from here, they haven’t come forward and owned up to their responsibility. And we’ve had to carry it. I have quite a lot of hurt and anger at that. (*Washing Away the Stain*)

The Mother Superior of the convent, Sr. Marcella O’Brien, supports Sr.Duggan’s reaction. She too feels that the Church has been unfairly singled out, and that the families and communities of the women should also acknowledge their role in maintaining such practices. She says

> There was a stigma attached to being an unmarried mother and they were not well received in their own areas. The family felt that in some way or another they were disgraced for having an unmarried sister or an unmarried daughter so a place was needed, a place of refuge. These women were homeless and penniless. (*Washing Away the Stain*)

Her memories of the roles of the Magdalen Aslyums, like those of Sr.Duggan, are more innocuous than the memories of the women who were actually inmates of the Laundries.

Just after *Washing Away the Stain* appeared on British (but not Irish) television, two documentary filmmakers from France 3, Nicolas Glimois and Christophe Weber, also produced a film on the Magdalens called *Les Blanchisseuses de Magdalen* (The Magdalen Laundresses, though the word *blanchisseuses* in French more literally symbolizes a whitening or bleaching, which carries more weight in the double context of laundry and sin than the translation "laundress"). They were more successful at obtaining interviews than their Anglophone counterparts, perhaps, suggests IFI film archivist Sunniva O'Flynn, because the women interviewed knew that their testimony would not be broadcast in the English-speaking world. Their first extensive interview is with a woman named Angela, who was sent to the Sacred Heart Convent in Castlepollard in 1949 after she became pregnant. It was her mother who told her about her own condition: "I didn't know I was pregnant because I didn't know about the birds and the bees." It seems likely that Angela was initially in a sort of mother and baby home; according to Frances Finnegan, pregnant women did not actually work in the Laundry. They gave birth to their children and, once the children were taken away to the orphanage or put up for adoption, they began their penance.[5] The filmmakers show a photograph of Angela's stern looking parents as she explains that her mother told her that "We'll have to find a place for you to go…it was so much of a disgrace, you wouldn't be able to live with

[5] There seems to be some confusion about this fact since at least one film and one novel imply that the women worked up until their children were delivered and then immediately returned to the Laundry.

that." The next photographs show smiling young mothers in old-fashioned dresses, bouncing their babies. The absence of fathers in the pictures is conspicuous. Although many women in the Magdalen Asylums remember relatively few unwed mothers as fellow penitents,[6] Angela recalls that

> …there must have been a couple of hundred mothers there—the place was full. I couldn't believe all the lovely young women that was in there, and all those lovely children.

The gravity of her 'sin' was reinforced by the nuns:

> It was a terrible shame you brought on your family and the nuns over and over again said that we were there to do penance for our sin. It was lovely when I had my baby. I didn't realize I suppose that I had to go through so much pain. It was a lovely child. I was really sure that my parents would relent and they would come to see us and they would take us home. But no.

Like many of the children born to Magdalens, Angela's baby was given up for adoption to a "good Catholic family." Very often those Catholic families were American, and Irish Americans with a certain amount of disposable income were able to obtain a newborn on a transatlantic black market. The documentary shows a black and white film clip of a happy, stylish couple, the woman with a bouffant hair-do and knee-length shift of the 1960s, taking custody of their infant from a smiling nun. Former Magdalens who were forced to give up their babies have continued to demand that freedom of information legislation be passed that would allow them to locate their children in either Ireland or the United States.

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[6] As discussed earlier in this chapter, many of the women committed to the Asylums were not unwed mothers. Personal interaction, however, was discouraged and much of the time women were forced to take new names and keep their personal history a secret, which could have played a role in the number of women who were believed to have had a child.

The other women interviewed—all of whom immigrated to England, most for the rest of their lives—recall the horrors of the Magdalen Laundry. None, besides Angela, had had a child. Several of the women were sent to the Magdalen from orphanages and many, once they were released, suffered for the rest of their lives from the trauma of being incarcerated in the Laundries. One woman remembers that there was

> No spark, no hope. It was just like a living hell. But you never knew if you were ever going to survive it. And to this day I still think how many people have survived and how many eventually committed suicide to get out of that trap.

The nuns interviewed in this documentary have similar perspectives to those of the Mercy Sisters in *Washing Away the Stain*. In one of the most bizarre and surreal sequences in any of the documentaries or films, the French filmmakers captured a scene in the recreation room of the Our Lady of Charity Convent, the last Magdalen Laundry. Although much is made of the fact that the last Laundry did not close until 1996, it was at that point more of a rest home than anything: the penitents, institutionalized from decades behind the convent walls, were being cared for by the same nuns who had once held them as virtual prisoners. In the recreation room old women are singing an old Irish folk tune, several propped up in wheelchairs or beds. One or two old women dance aimlessly around the room with a woman who is identified as the Mother Superior of the convent. Sister Teresa Coughlan stops dancing long enough to reprimand the filmmaker, who poses barely audible question in French. She replies sharply:

> *Nous ne disons pas Madeleine ici*…. We don't use that word. These aren't Magdalens, we don't use that word…they are ladies, residents. It was from the past. All of these ladies have been with us for many years. We're all old friends and we're growing old together. I came here over fifty years ago. Life was hard at

> the time but we worked hard together as a team…and we've always had good food. Haven't we?

She doesn't get a reply from the women in the room, but from her tone one could imagine that very few of the women would attempt to disagree with her. About forty of the women remained with the nuns when the Convent closed in 1996. A woman named Kathleen tells the filmmakers that she would be scared to death to live in a flat on her own, preferring to live in a white walled room in the convent with a single bed covered in stuffed animals. She was sent to the Magdalen after talking to soldier 60 years earlier, when she was 17 years old. It is difficult to determine whether six decades of institutionalization have affected her mental capacities or whether she was one of the women who was sent to the Magdalen as much because she was 'simple' as because of any suspected sexual transgression.

A rather jolly looking nun, Sr. Lucy Burton, discusses that type of institutionalization:

> I don't think that we actually drove anyone to madness…we institutionalized them…we didn't free them as much as we could. We didn't give enough respect or opportunities…we didn't support them as women in better ways. We didn't fight for the respect of their families for them.

Like Sr. Lucy and Sr. Noel of the Mercy Convent, even the sharp-edged Sr. Teresa recognizes that perhaps the church failed the women that they purported to save.

> I have a much better understanding of what their initial rejection was. Some of them had been rejected from birth and were in orphanages. Some had been rejected by their families…all were rejected by their families. That was a terrible thing. But we didn't understand the depth of their hurt. But one thing we always said…they were more sinned against than sinning. They were the people who

> were the victims of other people's sins. I regret, maybe, we hadn't got the knowledge that we have today, nor the psychology. I would always regret if we were lacking in compassion because if you go back to the gospels and you see that Jesus was very compassionate…and I was often lacking in compassion, I'm sure, in all areas of my life. The Lord knows what we did and didn't do, and that's it. That was the truth. It doesn't matter what the media say. We're not going to defend ourselves. Because God knows.

Sr. Teresa returns to the responsibility of the community and the family, although, as Finnegan points out, the two were so connected to each other and the Church in mid-twentieth century Ireland that it would be impossible to examine them as separate entities. In another familiar pattern she refuses to total culpability, saying that "The Lord knows what we did and didn't do, and that's it." She does accept some blame, however, and the acknowledgment by a Mother Superior of a Magdalen Laundry that the penitents were "more sinned against than sinning…victims of other people's sins" marks an important moment for the women who were committed to these institutions. Not only are their stories now being recorded but those at least partially responsible for their experiences are now apologizing and admitting that the women in their care were victims of a terrible system. There has not been enough recognition, however, since Magdalen women and their experiences are often overshadowed by children who survived industrial schools and orphanages. The children have been the focus of campaigns for counseling, formal apologies and financial restitution, while very little progress has been made in assisting Magdalen women in efforts to locate their children, in placing names on graves or in paying them for the work they did in the Church Laundries. Children remain easier to perceive as innocent victims.

Neither *Washing Away the Stain* nor *Les Blanchisseuses de Magdalen* were seen on Irish television. The first documentary to expose the horrors of institutional life in Ireland was *States of Fear*, which was produced for RTE, the Irish state television channel, and broadcast in April and May of 1999. *States of Fear* focused on the industrial schools (a combination of an orphanage and institutional boarding school) in Ireland, though a few of the women interviewed were moved from orphanages to Magdalen Asylums as young women and speak about their experiences. From their testimony it becomes obvious that the children adopted by Irish and Irish American couples were the lucky ones.

Over 1000 children a year were sent to industrial schools by judges. Most were not orphans; rather, judges determined that their parent or parents were unfit and some families were forced to send children away because of extreme poverty. Mary Norris, who appears in two of the documentaries, was separated from her seven siblings and sent to an orphanage after her father died and the parish priest determined that her mother was a poor parent. She was told over and over that her mother was a tramp, saying that "by the time I was eleven I hated my mother…I was told that if I was bad I'd end up like my mother" (*States of Fear*). Philomena Byrne remembers that she was told

> Your mother's dead, you'll end up in the gutter just like her. She was no good, you're no good. We were never spoken to as if we came from mothers. It was if we had been scooped up from some back alley and sent to these places and we were nothing…We reminded the church and people from the church of the terrible sin of illegitimacy…we were constant reminders of original sin. I've thought we were being punished for that sin. (*States of Fear*)

The fear of illegitimate daughters following in their mothers' footsteps appears over and over in writing about the Magdalens, reinforcing the importance of maternity to

the mythology of overlapping Irish religion and politics. Single mothers, who were poor representatives of de Valera's pious and conservative Ireland, were sometimes even blackmailed—if they were unable to pay, their children were taken away from them.

More girls than boys were sent to industrial schools[7] and the schools and orphanages were often run by the same orders that ran the Magdalen Laundries, namely the Good Shepherds and, ironically, the Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers have issued an apology and set up a counseling service that has been used by 4,500 people. Bertie Ahern, the Irish Taoiseach, issued a public apology to victims of child abuse on April 11, 1999, though no such apology has been made to the women of the Magdalen Asylums. Padraig O'Morain, Social Affairs correspondent for the *Irish Times,* says in part two of *States of Fear* that he believes that "it is important for the state to acknowledge that it placed all of those thousands of children in care. They weren't brought in there by the religious orders. The state failed to provide support for families in the home." His critique can be applied to the Magdalen System as well: as the nuns responsible for running the Magdalens have pointed out, the families and the state were just as responsible for the abuses that took place in such institutions as the Church. Although an apology may not be immediately forthcoming, the recognition of these women's lives, which were stolen and erased for decades, is a significant step towards reconciling with the past.

[7] Boys' experiences in the industrial schools have been more widely documented despite the fact that more girls were sent to the institutions. The Artane school, home of the famous Artane Boys Band, which plays before GAA matches in Croke Park, has been studied and fictional accounts of experiences in such schools, including *The Borstal Boy* and Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, which became a Neil Jordan film, detail boys' lives in the industrial school system.

The documentary strictly about the Magdalen system that received the most attention was Steve Humphries's *Sex in a Cold Climate*, which was made in 1998 and aired on Britain's Channel Four. It was narrated by popular Irish actress Dervla Kirwan (perhaps best known for her role as barkeep Assumpta Fitzgerald on the RTE/BBC soap opera *Ballykissangel*) but despite repeated offers to RTE, it was never aired on Irish television. The documentary focuses on four women: Phyllis Valentine, an orphan sent to the Magdalen for being "too pretty" (she also appeared in *Washing Away the Stain*); Bridget Young, another orphan whose harrowing stories of physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of the priest and nuns provide some of the most horrific and shocking testimony; Christina Mulcahy, an elderly woman whose infant son was taken away from her after she was sent to the Laundry; and Martha, who was sent to the Laundry after she was raped by a family friend. Both Young and Mulcahy were dying of cancer as the documentary was being shot; some believe that being faced with mortality allowed them to speak about their experiences for the first time. Mulcahy's family did not know that she had been in the Magdalen, nor that she had another child, for decades. The documentary was seen by director Peter Mullan, who then wrote the screenplay for the film *The Magdalene Sisters*. He was greatly influenced by these women's stories, which he has acknowledged in interviews, and includes the documentary on the DVD of the film.

According to Sunniva O'Flynn of the Irish Film Institute, the documentaries, especially *States of Fear*, which was the only one accessible to the majority of the Irish viewing audience because it was aired on RTE, generated a strong response. Individuals came to the director of the Film Institute, which provided substantial footage for the

documentaries as well as the feature films, to offer their own testimony. Because their experiences were being addressed for the first time, people felt compelled to share their own memories and had no venue through which to do so. The documentation of the lives of these "lost" women and children (although in the documentaries the plight of children is highlighted much more than that of women, despite the overlap in their situations, particularly those of mothers and daughters) forces us to reconsider recent Irish history. The women who were erased from Irish society for the majority of the twentieth century add not only another dimension to perceptions of Irishness and Irish womanhood, their stories also demonstrate how profoundly Ireland continued to be affected by the interconnected attitudes of the Church and government towards Irish women.

**"A HOLY HELL": THE MAGDALENS ON FILM**

Only *States of Fear* was broadcast on Irish television, so the documentaries strictly about the Magdalen asylums had a limited audience outside the countries in which they were produced: England, Scotland and France. The feature films made about the Laundries in 2002, The *Magdalene Sisters* and *Sinners*, draw directly on the documentaries. Scottish actor/director/writer Peter Mullan was inspired by *Sex in a Cold Climate* to write *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and according to lead actress Bronagh Gallagher, the cast and crew of *Sinners* (also 2002) all viewed *States of Fear* repeatedly while preparing the films. The testimony of survivors found in the documentaries, along with unreleased silent film reel footage also held in the Irish Film Institute,[8] play a

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[8] The Irish Film Institute received a camera with a film reel still attached from a family in Cork as a donation to their project to archive footage of mid-century Irish life. When they looked at the reel they were uncertain what they were seeing until Steve Humphries, who made *Sex in a Cold Climate* saw the reel and identified the location as the Good Shepherd Convent and Laundry in Cork. They contacted the donors,

significant role in the development of both character and plot in the two films. As a result, previously unseen documentaries and film reels are animated for both television and cinema screens with dramatic intensity, and, some would argue, dramatic license.

Peter Mullan, who is best known for his work as an actor in Ken Loach's cinematic studies[9] of the Scottish working class, was accused of exaggerating the reality of the Magdalen system in his film, *The Magdalene Sisters*. He has vehemently denied taking excessive dramatic license in the film, which through international distribution and wide publicity has reached the widest audience of any work about the Magdalen Laundries. He stayed faithful to testimony of former penitents while writing the script; initially inspired by Humphries's *Sex in a Cold Climate*, Mullan thought he would locate more survivors by placing an advertisement in the *Irish Independent*. He told Brian Pendreigh of the *Times* (London) that after attempting to publish the advertisement,

> This nice wee lassie phoned me back and said, 'I'm sorry, we can't take your advert.' She said: 'We've had to consult with the lawyers…We have a list and if you mention these words we then have to go through the lawyers. And you used the words survivor and Magdalene asylums." (5 January 2003)

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who agreed to leave the footage in the hands of the IFI under the condition that none of it could be reproduced in documentaries or films. It is accessible to researchers no matter what genre of text they are producing. The footage, which is in Technicolor but is silent, shows a surreal series of images captured by a priest (priests often documented life in their parishes because they were some of the only members of the community with the means to obtain a camera) on what seem to be recreational and religious days for the penitents. They are captured walking on the beach and playing in the surf, along with nuns in traditional habits, playing games on the lawn of the convent, also with the nuns, and taking part in a several religious processions along with children celebrating their first communion. Some of those images appear almost exactly in Mullan's film, which shows a similar religious procession and a day of recreation for the benefit of visiting state officials. The family of the priest who took the footage was reportedly offended by the ways in which the film and the priest himself, who is shown shooting similar silent footage in the movie, were treated by Mullan, who pointedly vilifies all of the religious professionals in his *The Magdalene Sisters*, using those film scenes to highlight the hypocrisy of the situation.

[9] Mullan's most famous performance was in *My Name is Joe*, although he has acted in a long list of films, including *Trainspotting*, *Braveheart* and *Shallow Grave*.

Mullan abandoned his search for additional survivors, relying primarily on the documentaries and film reels at the Irish Film Institute. After he completed the screenplay he met with several women, claiming that “If they told me it was absolute crap, it bore no relation to anything that happened, then I wasn’t going to make the film” (Pendreigh). The women were overwhelmingly supportive, however, which has reinforced Mullan’s stance against critics (primarily those connected to the Catholic Church) who accuse him of what *L’Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, called “an inept caricature” and “an angry and rancorous provocation” (Dolbee).

Mullan has never pretended that his film was motivated by anything but anger; the testimony on the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*, included with the DVD, provides evidence for his plotlines and reassures audiences that although he combines a number of survivor biographies into four characters, their stories are true. That it took a documentary made by an Englishman and a film made by a Scotsman to expose the extent to which Irish women were being controlled and essentially enslaved by the dictates of society reveals the profound and continued indigenous inability to acknowledge the stolen lives of women. It is estimated that at least one third of the adult population of Ireland saw the film and the resulting reaction and commentary effectively shattered the silence surrounding the Magdalen Asylums. Fintan O’Toole believes that the film was so successful at reaching a broad audience, in Ireland and abroad, because it “drew attention to a story that most Irish people had either deliberately forgotten or never known…*The Magdalene Sisters* was the culmination of a long awakening to a reality that many of us would like to forget” (16 February 2003). According to O’Toole it didn’t

hurt that the film also brought down the wrath of the Vatican at a time when the Catholic Church continued to be criticized by the Irish public.

The admittedly one-dimensional portrayal of the priests and nuns, all psychologically, physically or sexually abusive to the women in their care, provide Mullan with some of his most striking tableaux in the film. He starts the film with brief explanations of why his three central characters have been sent to the Magdalen. Bernadette, the dark haired beauty, is transferred from the ironically named St. Attracta's orphanage to the Laundry for attracting the attention of the boys on the other side of the institution's fence, a pattern common to the experiences of many penitents who never left the orphanages but were still believed to be in moral danger. Rose has had a baby out of wedlock and her emotionless parents force her to sign adoption papers for the infant before they send her into the Magdalen. Margaret's story is presented with the most poetic irony. At a wedding in rural Ireland a priest loosens his collar and takes up a bodhrán, playing a traditional tune that increases in speed and intensity. As he plays Margaret follows her cousin to an upstairs room where he attacks and rapes her. When she returns to the reception she tells a female family member and the news travels as the scene is intercut with a tight shot of the priest playing the bodhrán, his sweating face bent towards the drum, a whiskey glass and a rosary at his feet. As the men at the gathering assess the situation, their decision to "see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil" is expressed in a shot of a young child pressing his hands over his ears to shut out the pounding of the drum.[10] In order to assure the family and community that the rape will

[10] See James Smith's "*The Magdalene Sisters:* Evidence, Testimony, Action?" and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's "Our Nuns Are Not a Nation: Politicizing the Convent in Irish Literature and Film."

remain a secret, Margaret is bundled into the priest's car first thing the next morning and sent to the Magdalen Asylum. Her circumstances mirror those of Martha Cooney, of *Sex in a Cold Climate*, just as the other two characters share backgrounds with Phyllis Valentine, the pretty orphan, and Christina Mulcahy, the unwed mother. All of the women were committed to the Laundry with the support of their family and community.

When the girls arrive at the Laundry they are greeted by Sister Bridget, who is initially shown faceless in the shadow against the light of the church windows. She is in her office counting the piles of money that have come to the Laundry through the hard work of the penitents, bundling it in tight rolls and squirreling it away in a biscuit tins locked in the desk graced by a photograph of President John F. Kennedy. Sister Bridget is one of the most sadistic characters in the film; she tells the girls that they will have to "work beyond human endurance" in order to cleanse themselves of sin. When Bernadette objects, claiming there must have been a mistake because she is a "good girl," the nun begins the psychological abuse that will break the majority of the women committed to the Laundry. She takes their names and assigns them new ones after they've been disinfected, and tells them that they won't be leaving until she believes they've been cleansed. In one of the most macabre scenes Sister Bridget beats Bernadette mercilessly after she tries to escape, shearing her hair violently, leaving her scalp and face gouged with the scissors. She forces Bernadette to look at herself in the mirror and the audience sees the reflection of the nun in the blood caked eye of the penitent. What is perhaps most horrific is that the graphic scene was inspired by the testimony of Brigid Young in *Sex in a Cold Climate*; while in the orphanage she helped a Magdalen mother see her child, who was in the orphanage as well, by taking the child to a low roof that could be seen from the

attached Laundry. When the two "orphans" were caught by the Mother Superior they were beaten and shorn in the same way as Bernadette, and then forced to look at themselves as a part of their punishment.

Bernadette's escape was foiled when the laundry delivery boy she had attempted to seduce panicked and ran away from the Laundry door, to which he had the key. Bernadette, like many of the women in the Magdalen, was a "good girl" before she arrived. It was only after she was committed to the Laundry that she used her "suspect" sexuality to attempt escape. She tells one of the other girls that she'd "commit all the sins in the world, mortal or otherwise, to get out of this place." She is not the only one who tries to escape; when the penitents have a day of recreation for the benefit of the visiting hierarchy, Margaret finds an open door that leads out to the road. She flags down a passing car but is incapable of seizing her opportunity for freedom. In the relatively short amount of time spent in the Magdalen she has already started to become institutionalized.

Margaret eventually leaves the Magdalen after her brother, who had always questioned her abrupt disappearance, comes to claim her (male relatives were the only people who could take a woman out of the Magdalen). The other two main characters, Bernadette and Rose, escape together at the end of the film in what is one of the most satisfying jail-breaks on film. They are only successful because Bernadette has a cousin in the town who owns a hairdresser's shop. She takes the women in and gives them a change of clothes, setting them up to eventually leave the country, one for England and the other for Scotland. Another penitent in the film who escapes is brought back by her father, who beats her and then leaves her behind, telling her that she has "killed" her family with her behavior. Christina Mulcahy, also of *Sex in a Cold Climate*, remembers

being turned away from her home when she left the Laundry. With no where to go, wearing the drab clothes of the penitents and often with shorn hair, it was difficult for women who escaped to reintegrate into the world they had left.

The nearly impossible situation faced by some escapees supports the arguments of critics who claim that the Magdalen Asylums "were often the only refuge for young women who had been abandoned and rejected by their own families" (Donohoe). The majority of those critics are only considering the unwed mothers, who, according to survivors, did not make up the majority of the inmates of the Laundries. The other recurring criticism of the film concerned its villainous priests and nuns. Mullan refuses to apologize, emphasizing that he made the film from the perspective and with the support of the Magdalen women. He also emphasizes that although the majority of his film focuses on the sins of the Church, the entire society was to blame. In an interview with National Public Radio on the film's U.S. release, Mullan says that the Church has blamed the State and the State has blamed the Church. He posits that the "secular differential is absurd…[there was] a theocracy at the time…the Church was the State."

Miriam Donohoe, in a letter to the *Irish Times*, prefers to see the Laundries as unfortunate relics of the past. She seeks to redeem Irish clergy by pointing out that

> There were social pressures on girls to enter (religious orders) and many took the calling for the wrong reasons. What an unnatural existence it was for dozens of young women to be closeted together in big old Victorian convent buildings, "married to God." It is little wonder there were some bad and cruel nuns who took out their frustrations and unhappiness on the children in their charge.

Donohoe, like Brogan, sees some of the nuns as prisoners themselves. She emphasizes that many nuns were motivated to do good and that their lives were often very grim. She

seems very quick to forgive the convents and to conflate the situations of children in industrial schools and women in Magdalen Asylums, which are ostensibly her subject in this piece. Mullan also faced the reality of the nuns' lives when a former nun in a Magdalen Laundry auditioned to play a nun in his movie. The nun, Phyllis MacMahon, had since left her order but her experience helped Mullan to see what went on from the perspective of the nuns. He said, "I asked her, 'What went wrong? What the fuck happened that nuns could do these things?' and she said, 'Absence of doubt. We had no doubts about what we did' (Pendreigh). The character of Sister Bridget was inspired by a nun for whom Mullan worked when he was seventeen; he says that the woman had "absolutely no doubts that she [was] doing the right thing." The testimony of the nuns in the documentaries, along with Mother Victoria's adherence to "blind obedience" in *Eclipsed*, supports the notion that during a time of sexual hysteria, many of the religious professionals involved in the Laundries were not one dimensional sadists. They were convinced of the importance and validity of their work by the same prayers, doctrines and religious hierarchies that kept the penitents in the Laundries. Like the nuns who spoke to filmmakers in *Washing Away the Stain* and *Les Blanchisseuses de Magdalen*, some may have felt that they were providing the only salvation available to women who were abandoned by their families and communities. There are no nuanced representations of nuns in the cinematic representations of the Magdalen Asylums, though Mullan defends his directorial decision by emphasizing that he was portraying the Laundry from the perspective of the penitents and all of the women who read the script and saw the film supported his work.

The same year that *The Magdalene Sisters* debuted, a smaller made-for–television film was broadcast on BBC Northern Ireland. The channel has a reputation for making quality dramas from socially informed topics like the Holy Name school controversy in the North to adaptations of novels like John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Robert MacLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street*. In 2002 one of the showcase films was *Sinners*, written by Lizzie Mickery and directed by Aisling Walsh, who was a writer for *Song for a Raggy Boy*, a film about the industrial schools. While Mullan's film draws almost exclusively on the documentaries, Walsh's movie shares characteristics not only with the documentaries, but also with *Eclipsed* and popular fiction like *The Magdalen*[11] (which will be discussed later in this chapter). Like those two texts, *Sinners* allows the women to interact far more than the characters in *The Magdalene Sisters*. The movie begins with the main character, Anne Marie (actress Anne Marie Duff, who plays Margaret in *The Magdalene Sisters*), being taken away from her rural home by an aunt. Her departure is overlaid with popular music of the 1960s, echoing the similar device used in Brogan's play and in the novel *The Magdalen*. Anne Marie and her only living brother reside with their aunt because their parents and younger siblings have died from influenza. Anne Marie is pregnant and as the film continues it becomes clear that the child is her brother Eamon's. She needs to be hidden not only because she an unwed mother, but also

[11] The stars of the film refer to *States of Fear* as an inspiration for their work on the film. There are no specific references made to Brogan's first play or the novel *The Magdalen*, though the credits of the film acknowledge a book called *A Light in the Window* by June Goulding. Goulding was a midwife who worked in the Bessboro home for unmarried mothers, which is apparently still open. Bessboro was not officially a Magdalen Aslyum and a revised edition of the book has just been published. On the publisher's website the book is referred to as an inspiration for both *Sinners* and the Mullan film (though Mullan never mentions it).

because her child is the product of incest, a reality that landed many girls and young women in the Magdalen Asylums.

When Anne Marie gets to the Magdalen[12], she and her aunt sign papers with Sister Bernadette, played by Tina Kelleher, who had the role of an unwed mother herself in the adaptation of Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* (she also played Niamh on *Ballykissangel*, which makes her the second *Ballykissangel* star to participate in work on the Magdalen Laundries). Sister Bernadette, like Sister Bridget in *The Magdalene Sisters*, perpetuates the sadistic portrayal of Magdalen nuns. After cutting her hair, binding her breast and changing her name to Theresa she tells Anne Marie that "you may be a sinner, you may have contravened in laws of God and society…but here you can do penance…" She is particularly cruel to Kitty, played by Bronagh Gallagher, because the two women are engaged in a power struggle. Kitty was a teacher before she became pregnant (perhaps a reference to Eileen Flynn, who lost her job for the same reason) and her presence challenges the teacher/child structure of the Magdalen Laundry, with its emphasis on the penitents forming straight lines, keeping a strict schedule and performing rote memorization and repetition of prayers, which, along with the popular music of the wireless in the recreation room, provides a murmur of background noise throughout the film. When Kitty goes into labor, Sister Bernadette tells her that if she dies it'll be no better than she deserves, saying "you should have thought of that before you indulged

[12] As mentioned before, there seems to be some confusion about whether this is a mother-and-baby home or a Magdalen Aslyum. The women work in the laundry and are dressed as and treated as Magdalens. Many are pregnant during the film and give birth, nurse and wean their children in the building. According to Frances Finnegan, most women gave birth elsewhere (in a home like Bessboro, in June Goulding's book) and were then sent to the Magdalen to do penance.

your evil lusts…what you saw tonight were the wages of sin." She refuses to let the nurse stitch Kitty up and sends the afterbirth out to the pigs.

Like Bernadette in *The Magdalene Sisters*, Kitty hatches a plot to escape the Magdalen. She begins a secret 'courtship' (sex in the room where the sheets are dried) with Patrick, one of the gardaí who patrol the Magdalen. She convinces him not only to marry her and take her away with her daughter, but to also sign out Anne Marie. In the end Patrick is unable to go through with the plan; like the laundry boy in *The Magdalene Sisters*, he realizes that the societal repercussions for him are too great. He tells Kitty that his father warned him: "never trust a woman who can add up faster than you." With that one sentence he summarizes not only the sexual hysteria that put women in the Magdalen Asylums but an intellectual hysteria as well: some of the Maggies might be smarter than the men who put them there. After Patrick's betrayal Kitty receives a brutal beating from Sister Bernadette and her daughter is taken from her immediately. She throws herself from an upstairs window into the cobblestone courtyard and her suicide is declared a "tragic accident. God have mercy on her."

One of the only other characters to leave the Magdalen is an orphan named Angela. She represents the typical pattern of institutionalization, sent from the orphanage to the Laundry without having an opportunity to commit any sins. The priest at the Laundry, Father Flannery, molests Angela, all the while blaming "those lascivious eyes…that pretty face…you're just like your mother…filthy little slut." The supposed sins of the mother are transposed onto the daughter, who tells Anne Marie/ Theresa, "I didn't ask to be pretty…I hate being pretty…It's my fault, I'm a filthy little slut." Anne Marie/Theresa takes matters into her own hands, going to Sister Bernadette to complain

about Father Flannery. In order to sweep the issue under the rug, Angela is sent to a mental hospital, the only institution to which she has not yet been committed, and Father Flannery is sent to the "heathens in Africa." As she is being dragged away, Anne Marie/Theresa realizes what she has done and says that she has "made a terrible, terrible mistake." Some of the other penitents blame her for Angela's fate, saying "you stupid bitch…do you think she's the only one he's waved his prick at?"

After Kitty's death and Angela's commitment, Anne Marie/Theresa focuses her energy on leaving the Laundry. Her son, named Eamon after her brother, is born. When she asks if she can go with her child Sister Bernadette asks her "Go? Go where? It's your family who put you here…you're a Magdalen, no one wants you in their home…you'd end up selling your body to feed your mouth…pray your family forgive you enough to come and claim you." Even though she is almost a cardboard villain, Sister Bernadette reinforces the reality that the Church was working hand-in-hand with the larger community, providing a social service for the Irish government and Irish families. Anne Marie/Theresa realizes that there is no hope of leaving the Laundry and when a minister comes to visit she plans her escape. As the minister gives a speech in which he says to the nuns, "I'd like to thank you on behalf of the state…for taking in these unfortunate ladies…" Anne Marie/Theresa goes to the nursery, takes baby Eamon and escapes through an unlocked kitchen door. When her flight is discovered, the guardaí are called out to search for her. She hides in the home of a widower named Frank who turns her over to the authorities. When she returns to the Laundry she is beaten and her hair is shorn. Sister Bernadette, echoing Sister Bridget, tells Anne Marie/Theresa that she sees "ugliness, wantoness, corrupt and defiant flesh. An abomination of God's holy will." She

then arranges for little Eamon to be sent away as soon as possible. Another nun comes to tell Anne Marie/Theresa about the plans for Eamon; he will be adopted by a Catholic couple in America. She comforts Anne Marie/Theresa, reassuring her that they are "A loving couple in America…she has unfortunately not been blessed with motherhood…He sails on Monday…money, love, everything you must want for the boy." The irony, of course, is that the nun sees motherhood as a blessing even as she takes children from their mothers every day in the Magdalen.[13] The scene illustrates the collaboration of the Church (Laundry), the State (visiting minister) and community (police and Frank) in keeping women in the Magdalen.

In the end it is Frank, the widower in whose house Anne Marie/Theresa hides, who takes her out of the Magdalen. He insists upon seeing her in the Laundry, despite Sister Bernadette's efforts to dissuade him. When he sees her, with her hair cropped and a black eye, he asks "what have they done to you?" Even though he claims to know about "you Maggies," he visits with Anne Marie/Theresa, who is initially suspicious of him. As her only link to the outside, however, she asks him to go to her brother Eamon and tell him that their son has been taken away. Despite the fact that he doesn't want to "meddle" in other people's business he goes to Eamon and finds that Eamon is planning to marry. When Eamon refuses to do anything about his sister and child, Frank punches him and shouts

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[13] Not all of the women are upset about their children's fates. One penitent is pleased that her child will be going to America. She reveals her dreamy impressions of America, saying "imagine that, one minute you're a bastard, the next minute you're a film star."

> Have you any idea what she's going through? She's dragged back like a common criminal. It's just as well, you don't want her on your doorstep with little Eamon, you selfish shit. What do you care if she festers away for the rest of her life?

When Frank returns to the Laundry to tell Anne Marie/Theresa about his visit to Eamon, he has a proposition for her. He says: "I know people think I'm mad taking on a Maggie…" to which Anne Marie replies, "Are you asking me to work for you?" Frank says, "I'm asking you to marry me. You're hardly spoiled in choice. I kind of see that as my trump card. At least you'd be out of here." He leaves her to think about what has become her only option. Only a man can take her out of the Magdalen and although Frank seems relatively kind, she would still essentially be agreeing to a life of indentured servitude with a man probably thirty years her senior. When he returns the next week she tells him that she will marry him only if they do not have children. He replies: "You mean no…" and then claims that the church insists that they reproduce and that he's not interested in a housekeeper. Apparently the arrangement is to involve not only cooking and cleaning but sexual servitude as well. She tells him, "Sorry, I'm grateful for the offer…you're a nice man, Frank, but sure I'm not going to pretend for you." He replies by asking "will you be as bossy when we're married?" and then presents her with a necklace that he admits belonged to his dead wife, saying "I hope you have no objection to wearing a dead woman's things."

Before the "happy couple" can leave the Laundry Anne Marie/Theresa must be signed out by her brother, since Frank is not yet a male relative. Frank makes another trip to the country, telling Eamon, "She'd be out of that place and off your hands, a respectable married woman…come and sign for her, that's all you have to do." After

initial hesitation Eamon is persuaded and goes to sign out his sister. When he sees her again she cannot hide her anger and bitterness at the fate he allowed her. In a didactic but effective speech she says,

> I'm only young and I've varicose veins…six days a week I've been washing other people's filthy laundry…I've been beat, I've been shouted out, I've been told I'm filth…they took my life away. What we did was wrong, I accept that, but it was both of us. Why was your life worth protecting more than mine?

Eamon's only reply is that he was "scared." His sister tells him that "the only power they have over you is keeping you afraid." When she leaves the Laundry with Frank one kindly nun smiles at her and says, "God go with you." Anne Marie can only leave the Laundry by the grace of two men: her brother and a relative stranger. Her means of escape require her to agree to what is essentially society sanctioned prostitution; no matter how kind Frank might be she is exchanging one kind of prison sentence for another. *Sinners* does not quite have the visceral impact of *The Magdalene Sisters*. Despite the horrors of the Laundry, and the writer and director include many, the tone of *Sinners* is not as angry as that of *The Magdalene Sisters*, which might have made it more accessible to its television viewing audience. The release of the two films during the same year, and their refusal to back away from ugly and critical depictions of a shocking Church and State run system, suggest a new willingness to acknowledge the mistreatment of women during the most conservative decades of the Irish twentieth century.

**“BAD GIRLS DO THE BEST SHEETS”: MAGDALEN LAUNDRIES IN POPULAR CULTURE**

In August of 2003, as Peter Mullan’s film was opening in the United States, acclaimed Irish American author Mary Gordon (*Final Payments, The Company of Women*) contributed a column to the *New York Times* about the Magdalen Laundries. In her column she makes astute observations about the obsessions with shame and respectability that allowed a system like the Laundries to be an unspoken reality in Irish society. To her, some of the most chilling proof that the laundries were part of the vernacular appears in the “nicknames, proverbs, cautionary tales: the domestic architecture of demotic speech” (3 August 2003). She cites the commonly used nickname for the penitents, the “Maggies” and notes that children who misbehaved were told they’d be sent “to the laundries with the sisters” (3 August 2003). The most macabre example, perhaps, is the catchy double entendre, “bad girls do the best sheets.” Some members of the community deny knowing about the Magdalens, and many claim that they had no idea what went on behind the high walls of the Laundry. Given the photographs and film reel footage of Magdalen penitents, guarded by police, marching through Irish towns during Marian processions, and the vernacular references to the Magdalens, it seems unlikely that the majority of the community had no idea what was going on. The Magdalens had long been a part of the popular lexicon; following the plays and documentaries of the nineties, and after the two films in 2002, they also entered into popular fiction.[14]

[14] Emma Donoghue’s novel *Slammerkin* makes a brief stop in a Magdalen Asylum. Donoghue, an Irish author, sets the novel in 18th century London, where her protagonist, Mary, is a teenage prostitute. She goes to the Magdalen on the advice of one of her colleagues, who is dying of consumption. The Magdalen will offer food, shelter and warmth for the winter months to women and girls who are ‘salvageable.’ This Magdalen is an example of the earlier incarnations of the Asylums, when prostitutes were the only penitents and when entering and leaving the Magdalen were voluntary. The presence of the Magdalen in

In 1999 popular children's and young adult novelist Marita Conlon-McKenna, most famous for her series about the famine that begins with *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, a children's novel read in primary schools in Ireland, published her first work of adult fiction. The novel, *The Magdalen*, tells the story of Esther Doyle, a Connemara girl who finds herself in the "Sister of the Holy Saints Magdalen Home for Wayward Girls and Fallen Women" in Dublin in 1952 (1). Conlon-McKenna acknowledges Patricia Burke Brogan first in her list of thanks at the beginning of the book, along with the Magdalen Commemoration Committee and "all those who shared their story with me."

The Laundry of Conlon-McKenna's work shares more characteristics with that of *Eclipsed* and *Sinners* than with the Mullan film. The women are friendly with each other and offer support, sharing their stories and wisdom on childbirth with those who are still pregnant.[15] Esther is at the Laundry because she is pregnant with the child of a Cork man who worked on the farm up the road. When her family discovers her pregnancy they are horrified—the shame of her 'condition' is too much following the tragic death of her only sister, and when it becomes apparent that the father will not marry her, she is sent away. The priest in this novel is a kind man who encourages Esther's mother to support her, although her mother cannot bring herself to do so, calling her daughter a "tramp." With the exception of one brother, Tom, her siblings are equally unsupportive. Her eldest brother Gerard's greatest concern is that word of Esther's pregnancy will travel around their small village and threaten his chances at marriage to the daughter of the publican: he

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*Slammerkin* also underscores the historical fact that the Magdalens were initially an English invention—many critics, particularly after the release of The Magdalene Sisters, were quick to point out to English audiences that Magdalen Aslyums, though not run by the Catholic Church, continued to exist in England and Scotland in the 20th century.

initially tells Esther "you must get rid of it" (161). Before telling her family, Esther did try to "get rid of it," drinking the better part of a bottle of poitín and then walking into the icy Atlantic. Tom pulls her out before she drowns and forces her to tell her family. It is Esther's aunt who takes charge of the situation, telling Esther that she's not the "first to get caught and…won't be the last." She agrees when Esther insists on the Dublin Magdalen rather than the closer Galway Magdalen and accompanies her niece on her first train trip to the capital. Before delivering her to the Laundry her aunt takes her to lunch and buys a layette for the baby at Clery's. When the taxi-driver drops them off, Esther sees "pity in his eyes, and knew he realized her reason for coming here." He agrees to wait to take her aunt back to the train station, telling them that he'll "have a read of the paper and see what De Valera is telling us all to do now" (182). Like the doctor who confirmed Esther's pregnancy, he knows that "she'd a long hard road ahead of her as an unwed mother in holy bloody Ireland" (154).

Conlon-McKenna's novel is an accessible version of the Magdalens, where the women are supportive of each other and the nuns, although strict, are well-meaning. Every Saturday night the penitents listen to a dance on the radio and socialize in the recreation room. Their work is hard and they are separated from their children once they are born, but Conlon-McKenna emphasizes the temporary nature of most of their situations. The only women who stay in the Laundry their whole lives seem to do so voluntarily. Some of the nuns encourage the women to leave and start over but some prefer to stay, either because they have become institutionalized or because they are

[15] As in *Sinners* the women work in the Laundry until their children are born and then return to work quickly after the birth, nursing the babies until they are moved to the orphanage or adopted.

escaping a worse fate on the outside, as evidenced by a domestic violence victim who prefers doing the washing of the Church to that of her abusive husband.

The book raises some of the uncomfortable reasons why women were sent to the Magdalen: Tina, one of the youngest penitents, comes from a large family in the Dublin inner city. Her father comes to take her out of the Magdalen after she delivers a stillborn child. The nuns try to keep her from leaving but are unable to challenge the authority of the father figure. It is only after they've departed that one of the more worldly penitents tells Esther that "'twas Tina's daddy put her in the family way" (217). Esther is sickened by the idea of incest, which she had never known about, and thinks to herself that "no matter how hellish they all thought it [the Magdalen], at least it was safe" (217). Although Tina may have been safe from her father in the Magdalen, her situation reveals the flaws in a social system whose only means of dealing with incest was to lock away the victim.

*The Magdalen* also introduces the question of class into the discussion of illegitimacy. As the women are sorting laundry one day they come across the body of a dead infant wrapped in some sheets. They call the nuns, who come and bless the child, saying "Could have been a stillborn, or suffocated. God between us and all harm, what poor girl was driven to do this? (239). The question seems ironic given that it is posed while standing in a Magdalen Laundry. When the gardaí come to investigate, they blame the "sly bitches" in the Magdalen. The nuns defend the penitents, saying "Our mothers are supported. We already know they are pregnant. That poor child was from the outside!" (243). It becomes clear that the child came from one the homes that sent laundry to be done at the Magdalen. A family that was affluent enough to have their

laundry done for them was possibly too affluent to have their daughter sent to a Magdalen Asylum, which suggests that the Magdalen was meant to keep the poor and the middle class in line.

After her daughter Roisín is born and weaned Esther is collected by her aunt. Rather than return to her small village, where the father of her child has married a woman with a farm, she decides to stay in Dublin to find work in a restaurant or hotel. She has the address of a woman who rents rooms in Rathmines whose sister is in the Magdalen. Like Anne Marie in *Sinners*, she has also caught the attention of a widower who brings in the laundry. He has offered her a job minding his children while he is at work; she decides to look for other jobs but to reserve the option since she sees him as "kind and dependable" (347). Although her aunt is surprised by her decision she is supportive, and leaves Esther with a twenty pound note. In the end the Magdalen actually liberates Esther. She no longer sees life in terms of her Connemara village and, because of her time with fellow penitents and her brief glimpse of Dublin, is inspired to take charge of her own life. In the last pages Conlon-McKenna writes that Esther

> …would find a job, one that paid her decent wages and didn't make her feel like a slave. She was determined to earn money of her own and have the fun spending it…Roisin would grow up strong and free. Esther had to learn to accept that she could never play any part in her child's life. No life is ever wasted…Esther Doyle was not prepared to turn her back on life, stay hidden away like some of the Maggies. She was a Connemara woman, a survivor, a Magdalen ready to put the past behind her and begin again. (347-348)

Despite the fact that she has given up her daughter and been forced to do manual labor, Esther's experience in the Magdalen is one of the most positive to be portrayed in literature or on film. Conlon-McKenna leaves her readers with an optimistic vision of

what the Magdalen has offered to Esther. Perhaps more women have stories such as this one, though the majority of women who have spoken out about their experiences in the Laundries had little positive to relay about the time they spent there.

In 2003, Ken Bruen's *The Magdalen Martyrs* was published by the Brandon Press. The crime novel, one in a series about ex-guard Jack Taylor, reveals the seedy side of Galway. *The Magdalen Martyrs* was published after the two films were released in Ireland and although Bruen claims that the novel was finished before the films came out, some of his harsh depictions echo the scenes in the Mullan film (Siggins). Bruen interweaves a series of investigations in the novel, which takes its title from just one of them. Taylor must return a favor to hardened criminal Bill Cassell, who is dying of cancer. Cassell wants Taylor to find a woman named Rita Monroe who he claimed helped his mother escape from the Galway Magdalen Asylum.[16] When Taylor goes to investigate he discovers that people are still haunted by the Magdalen Asylums. He enlists his good friend, another ex-guard named Brendan Flood, to help him track down Rita Monroe and look into the Galway Laundry, which has since been razed and replaced with "luxury apartments," a sign of the changing economic and cultural landscape of the west of Ireland (31). Brendan, a recovering alcoholic who has found Jesus, falls off the wagon and loses his religion after spending time talking to a former inmate. When Taylor asks him what happened, Brendan replies, "The Magdalen happened" (92). In a rather

[16] There was a Galway family named McEntee that did help women escape—the mother worked in the linen room and with her husband she'd help the women get out. Their son remembers that "The girls were petrified…they didn't know where they were running to…we were their only guideline." They'd run out and get into a van and were taken to the McEntee house until they were settled (*Washing Away the Stain*).

unbelievable plot development, Brendan kills himself because of the trauma of learning about the Magdalen, which haunts his dreams and destroys his faith in God.

What is most interesting about Bruen's novel is that the villain in the Magdalen investigation and brief flashback chapters is not a nun but a lay person who turns out to be Rita Monroe. Monroe is painted more one-dimensionally than any of the characters in the films about Magdalen Asylums. When Taylor goes to her house under false pretenses to see if she is the woman he is looking for she corrects him when he addresses her as "Mrs. Monroe," saying that "the correct form of address for a lady of unknown marital status is Ms." Taylor observes that "as she said this, she appeared totally demented, and I nearly shouted, 'Spinster'" (111). Her apparent hatred of men, women and other human beings supports Brendan's pop psychology thesis that the women in the Laundry were "martyrs, the real thing, dying in agony for love." He believes that this is why the nuns "hated the girls so much…because those girls had experienced the one thing they'd never know, sex…or if you wanted to push it, love" (94). Rather than make a representative of the Church the worst perpetrator in his story, Bruen chooses to make the cruelest employee of the Laundry a member of the community. By leaving the religious orders relatively untouched in his narrative he assigns the bulk of the blame to society; although a number of the texts about the Magdalens pay lip service to the responsibility of families, State and general population, Bruen focuses almost entirely on the character of Rita Monroe to describe the Laundries.

Bruen's depiction of the Laundry is far more sensational than any other in literature or film. Brief flashbacks and memories from the community reveal that Rita Monroe was nicknamed "Lucifer" (she is referred to only as Lucifer throughout the

flashback sections). She tortures the girls with a blind hatred, forcing them to wash in boiling water, soaking them in carbolic acid, refusing them basic hygiene, making them eat soap and stand all night wrapped in wet sheets in a cold courtyard. She is particularly cruel to those she suspects of lesbianism, another salacious detail only included in the hard-boiled crime genre version of the Magdalen Laundries. The lack of nuance in Bruen's depiction is troubling in the context of the majority of the other texts, which at least attempt to comment on the multiple layers of religious and societal hypocrisy which condemned 'unfit' women to the Asylums. Nevertheless, Bruen's use of Rita Monroe rather than Sister Rita as Lucifer suggests that he has more of an understanding than perhaps his genre or audience will allow.

## CONCLUSION

The average individual's exposure to the Magdalen Asylums is limited to one of the films and perhaps *Sex in a Cold Climate*, *The Magdalen* or *The Magdalen Martyrs*. Taken together, the works of film and literature that treat the subject of the Magdalen Asylums reveal a more complex situation than the one seen in cinematic representation alone. The depictions of the penitents of the Magdalen Laundries and the religious professionals who ran them offer more than a simplistic critique of the repressive Catholicism that could commit sexually suspect women to indentured servitude. The diversity of the women sent to the Magdalen suggests that rather than simply controlling maternity outside marriage, the Magdalens were meant to remove women who were seen as 'others' from the community: rape and incest victims, developmentally or mentally disabled women, victims of domestic abuse or post-partum depression and orphans. The

consistent commitment of orphans from one institution to another, especially those whose mothers were seen as 'fallen' women, reveals a communal rather than solely religious impulse to contain those who challenged the establishment of an Irish national identity. That national identity continues to be negotiated in contemporary society; the tension over reproductive and women's rights discussed in chapter one, and the evolution of the Magdalen system and its representation over the past decade underscore the continued revision of women's identities in Irish literature, film and culture.

Work remains to be done, however, since the Catholic Church and the nuns who ran the Laundries continue to take most of the blame for the situation, as is reflected in villainous portrayals of nuns in the two films. Although the Church is certainly not without responsibility, society as a whole must recognize its culpability in the maintenance of these institutions. The women who spent time in the Magdalens are often still silenced by the shame of their experience. A small plaque in St.Stephen's Green now memorializes their experiences, but there has been no freedom of information act that would allow the women or their families to locate lost children or find the graves of relatives who may have died in the Magdalen Asylums. The stories of the Magdalen Asylums ultimately ask audiences to consider who belongs to Irish society and who does not, both in the mid-century era of the Magdalen Laundries and in contemporary Ireland.

## Chapter Four

## “Beyond Respectability’s Pale”: Representations of Irish Travellers from Synge to *Paveewhack*

When John Millington Synge’s play, *The Tinker’s Wedding*, was published in January of 1908, it caused “considerable outcry” in Ireland for slightly different reasons than the protests directed towards *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Playboy of the Western World*. The main characters of *The Tinker’s Wedding* were Irish Travellers, an indigenous nomadic people who continue to suffer discrimination in contemporary Ireland. The cultural nationalists who were opposed to Synge’s “unIrish” representation of the County Mayo peasants and Irish women in *Playboy* and *Shadow* were not troubled by the slur upon Irish identity suggested by Traveller characters, despite the similarities in their renderings. The Travellers, like some of the characters in Synge’s other plays, are prone to violence and alcoholism; moreover they challenge conventional gender roles. Critics ignored these negative representations of Irish Travellers but were enraged by Synge’s unflattering portrayal of a priest: the play was described as “a vulgar atrocity, gross libel on the priesthood of Ireland” (Hogan and Kilroy 243). *The Tinker’s Wedding* was then refused by the Abbey Directors. As conversations in Irish Studies turn towards questions of ethnicity, however, the priest seems less important than the Travellers, through whom Synge challenges the nationalist construction of Irishness.

Most scholarly work about Travellers has focused on film, primarily on the “prevailing tendency in Irish cinema to align Travellers with the past” (Connolly 275). I will consider both literature and cinema, from Synge and O’Flaherty to contemporary

poetry, fiction, and the films *The Field, Into the West* and *Trojan Eddie*. I begin with an examination of the function of violence in Synge's plays, his construction of female protagonists and his use of the "wanderer." I argue that Sarah of *The Tinker's Wedding,* like Nora and Pegeen Mike, continues Synge's critique of the Victorian ideal of the domesticated woman promoted during the Revival. His use of Irish Travellers also illustrates his concerns about the reification of a narrow, nationalist version of idealized Irishness: the lack of reaction to the stereotypes of Traveller characters in *The Tinker's Wedding* reflects the assumption that Travellers were not "Irish." *The Tinker's Wedding* offers a lens through which to investigate how Travellers function as an internally colonized group that is simultaneously romanticized and denigrated. I will start with Synge's Sarah, who demonstrates how Travelling women have offered not only a "figurative or literal link to the past" but also, as representatives of sexual and literal freedom, an alternative modernity that challenges the patriarchal order. I will analyze the evolving portrayal of Travellers as it reflects the social, cultural and economic changes affecting the settled community, from the Revival to the Celtic Tiger.

**"*The Wandering Tribe*": Culture, Discrimination and Mythology**

In the Revival writing of the early twentieth century, Travellers were sometimes romanticized as a survival from pre-colonial Gaelic Ireland. As wanderers they evoked the early Irish bards and displaced Irish language poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were celebrated for their "cultural features of mobility, freedom from wage labour and uninhibited sexuality" (Helleiner 42). But while Yeats described Travellers as the "true heirs of the Ireland of the kings and the bards" (Raine 21), Lady

Gregory claimed in *The Wandering Tribe* (1903) that “country people—who are so kind to one another, and to tramps and beggars…speak of a visit of the tinkers as of frost in spring or blight in harvest” (Gregory 94). Furthermore, according to Gregory, the “rural peasantry linked the mobility and outcast status of the ‘tinkers’ to alleged moral and religious transgressions” (Helleiner 44).[1] Customs such as early marriages by Travellers, without land or dowry, and rumors of informal sexual unions, wife-swapping and adultery, scandalized the settled population who had grown more repressively Catholic and invested in the land, material possessions and property.

Much debate surrounds the origins of the approximately 24,000 Travellers (0.6% of the overall population) who live in Ireland (Irish census) and scholars and activists question whether they constitute a cultural, ethnic or racial group. No evidence suggests that they are actually a different race from the settled Irish population, and they are not usually constructed as such despite the common use of the term “racism” to refer to anti-Traveller discrimination. In his essay “Ethnicity and Culture,’ which was published in the book *Travellers: Citizens of Ireland (2000)*, Michael McDonagh, a Traveller, makes an argument for his people as an ethnic group. That term can have both positive and negative implications: Brendan Halligan, of the *Limerick Leader,* observes that “ethnic group carries with it the danger of Travellers, already largely marginalized, being increasingly treated like a race apart” (10 March 2001).

[1] Yeats, Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory collaborated on a play called *Where There Is Nothing*, which presented Travellers as “a vibrant and uncouth people…[who] were thought to provide welcome assistance to all who had grown weary of modern bourgeois existence” (Delaney “Representations” 57). Yeats decided against including the play in his *Collected Works* in 1908. Two Irish language plays emerged around the same time, one by Douglas Hyde and the other by P.T. McGinley. Both featured Travellers as “the other people of the earth” (Delaney “Representations” 57).

McDonagh traces the origins of Travellers back to at least the twelfth century by referring to Traveller-like characters in Irish mythology and emphasizing connections between Traveller language, referred to as Shelta, Gammon, Cant or Minceirtoiree, which literally means "Traveller Talk," and Old Irish. By locating Travellers in the distant past he challenges the widely accepted idea that Travellers were Irish people who were dispossessed during the famine. He claims that he is not "trying to prove the exact origins…but disprove any theories that suggest that we only came about as a result of some disaster in Irish history. The perception that we are drop-outs or misfits is wrong" (23). Dispelling the connection to the famine is crucial for legislation concerning Travellers' rights to a nomadic lifestyle. Jane Helleiner, an anthropologist who lived in a Galway Traveller camp for nine months and who has written extensively on Travellers, connects the origins debate to the implementation of law by suggesting that the impulse to 'settle' them was sometimes seen as the "action of a benevolent state motivated by a national duty to 're-settle' victims of colonialism" (*Racism* 30).

The same factors—colonial racism, xenophobia and ethnic misrepresentation—that contributed to outsiders' fictional depiction of the Irish have also influenced the literary representation of Travelling communities by settled Irish authors and directors (Fanning 13). As Bairbre Ní Fhloinn notes in her introduction to oral literature in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume IV*,

> In post-colonial Ireland, settled attitudes to Travellers are often indistinguishable from English attitudes to Irish people in the past. So the oppressed lean all the more heavily on the next ones down. In post-colonial Ireland, Travellers may be an uncomfortable reminder of an uncomfortable past, which we would prefer to forget, or at least to site where we would not have to see it. (1267)

Peter Brady confirms this analysis in his novel *Paveewhack*, which is written in Travellers' cant. Brady, of Traveller heritage himself, describes the relationship between Irish Travellers and settled Irish people in a conversation between two recently settled Travellers in 1960s Ireland:

> Me granny ushta say they [settled Irish] don't like to get too close tiv hus cause we keep remindin them where they come from theirselfs. The sigh of hus makes them fidgety. Like we cut too close to the bone for their likin, is the very words she use. (18)

Travellers are often characterized by the settled Irish as lazy, drunken, superstitious, excessively reproductive, dirty, irresponsible and stupid: all characteristics once attributed to the Irish by the British. [2]

As evidenced by the parallelism of anti-Irish and anti-Traveller descriptions, the defensive hostility of the settled population against Travellers is motivated by more profound concerns than unemployment, petty crime or the poor aesthetics of Traveller encampments and their impact on real estate value. Jim McLaughlin, author of *Irish Travellers: Whose Country, Whose History?* (1995), notes that they have been seen as "social outcasts from 'respectable society' …an ugly blemish on the face of Mother Ireland…disparaged as a backward people who were to 'settle down' and become wards of the state if they were not to become a threat to the settled social order" (29). McLaughlin's comments highlight the importance of domestication to contemporary attitudes towards Travellers as a cultural group. Maeve Connolly suggests that this

[2] Ni Fhloinn and Brady's observations recall Albert Memmi, who wrote that colonial racism is "neither biological nor metaphysical, but social and historical…it is not aggressive but defensive racism" (Memmi 131).

emphasis on domestication and property-holding has increased in recent years. She claims that "within the current economic context, Irish settled society has perhaps begun to develop a new relationship with property, as *capital.* The fear of immobility has (paradoxically) given rise to new forms of territorialism." Connolly's argument offers a new perspective on the domestication debate by considering the impacts of a global economy on two segments of Irish society.

Traveller culture is often seen as a blemish upon Irish identity. In recent years, Irish economic dependence on England has been reduced; in a moment of postcolonial irony, workers on Dublin construction sites are now likely to be from Manchester, Birmingham and London (Whelan). Ireland, along with Luxembourg, is now the wealthiest country in Western Europe, thanks to the relocation of the technology industry, research and development corporations and pharmaceutical companies to Ireland during the Celtic Tiger economy (1994-2001). Although the economic strength of the Tiger has weakened somewhat in recent years, its profound impact on Irish identity is still manifested in the globalization and industrialization of Irish society. Irish national identity, in many ways, has moved beyond its history of colonization. Nevertheless, an indigenous population reminds the settled population of their formerly colonized identities.[3]

**CONTEMPORARY ISSUES**

Traveller caravans were not acceptable versions of the Irish hearth and home: the settled majority valorized domesticity and land ownership and, as a result, legislation has

[3] For a thorough reading of Travellers in a subaltern context, see Paul Delaney's "A Marginal Footnote: O'Faoláin, the Subaltern and the Travellers" in *Irish Studies Review*, vol.11, no.2, 2003.

consistently attempted to "settle" Travellers. The first of such laws was a Prohibition Order passed in 1948 that refused to allow Travellers to maintain a nomadic lifestyle once accommodation existed (M.McDonagh 43). By the 1960s, the traditional Traveller lifestyle of mending tin and peddling products from door to door has more or less disappeared and Travellers, like much of the rural Irish population, "moved off the land and relocated in cities…[which led] to a high degree of structural discrimination" (McLaughlin 1). Such discrimination is evident in the 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy. Michael McDonagh quotes the report in his essay on nomadism:

> All efforts directed at improving the lot of itinerants and at dealing with the problems created by them, and all schemes drawn up for these purposes, must always have as their aim the eventual absorption of the itinerants into the general community. (43)

In the 1980s, The Travelling People Review Body issued a policy statement emphasizing the need to accommodate those who wished to live in a house while disregarding those who chose to maintain a nomadic lifestyle. Currently, 55% of Travellers are settled, living in either standard local authority or group housing. Approximately 38% remain nomadic, living in caravans parked on halting sides and roadsides (Pavee Point).

By the 1990s, attitudes towards Travellers began to shift. Taoiseach Charles Haughey, who worked on the 1963 Report, stated that "we should respect the culture of our Travelling community and develop a better public understanding of their time honoured way of life" (Presidential Address, 1991, qtd in M.McDonagh 44). More recently, presidents Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese have also spoken about the

importance of recognizing and supporting Traveller culture and community. In 1999 several Travellers' resources and rights centers, including The Parish of Travelling People, The National Traveller Women's Forum, The Irish Traveller Movement and Pavee Point, combined forces to create the Citizen Traveller campaign, which sought to emphasize the status of Irish Travellers as Irish citizens. Their goals included increased access to hardstands (permanent hook-ups for electricity and water) for caravans and mobiles and improvement in environment, education and healthcare.[4]

Despite such campaigns, few changes have been successfully implemented. In November 2002 Citizen Traveller lost its funding a year early when the government decided that it had not sufficiently incorporated the perspective of the settled community into its work. There was a particular concern over their awareness campaign comprised of a series of billboards emphasizing the many different roles that Travellers play in their own community and in Irish society. The majority of these billboards featured large black and white photos (with more billboards featuring women and children than men) detailing different elements of the individual's identity, for example "mother, comedian, sister, friend, teacher, traveller." The most controversial billboard featured the tricolor and criticized anti-trespass laws, specifically directed towards Travellers, as "racist and unworkable." TD Minister for justice, equality and law reform, Michael McDowell, stopped the funding, claiming that Citizen Traveller should not have used the Irish flag in a campaign that labeled the government and its policies as racist (Dooley).

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[4] Another significant moment for Travellers in the 1990s was the 1996 Olympic Games. Traveller Francie Barrett, a boxer, carried the Irish flag during the Opening Ceremonies. His story became the documentary *Southpaw*, which documents his training and career as well as his life as a Traveller in Galway and in England and his relationship with his settled trainer.

Citizen Traveller was reacting to a series of April 2002 laws that criminalized camping on private and public property, gave gardaí (police) new power to arrest people without warrant, allowed property to be confiscated and disposed of and trespassers to be jailed for a month or fined 3,000 euros. According to Pavee Point, this legislation "targeted…Irish Travellers and is no less than an attack on Traveller culture" ("Latest News").[5] In 2003 Travellers' rights organizations protested in Galway against "attempts by the Vintners' Association of Ireland to impose a blanket ban on Travellers in licensed premises" (Siggins). Most recently, Tuam county councilman Martin Ward, who became the first Traveller mayor of an Irish town in 2003, has attempted to save several government-funded training and education centers that are currently threatened with closure.[6]

**GENDER**

In literature and cinema, Travellers have been constructed as romanticized and denigrated 'others' in Irish society. The portion of the population most effected by this romanticization and exoticization is, not surprisingly, women. Helleiner observes that

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[5] Less dramatic discrimination is also common. Cathleen McDonagh cites a survey by the Irish Traveller Movement that found:

> 8 out of 10 Travellers refused in a pub
> 5 out of 10 Travellers asked to leave a shop
> 3 out of 10 Travellers asked to leave a hairdressers
> 2 out of 10 Travellers asked to leave a laundry (115)

[6] Violent anti-Traveller discrimination was demonstrated vividly in Sussex, England, in October 2003 when the effigy of a Traveller caravan (Irish Travellers often emigrate to England and intermarriage with English Travellers, or Romanichals, is not uncommon), painted with the image of a Traveller family and bearing the license plate "P1KEY" was burned in a public bonfire.[6] The town had recently experienced conflict over encampment areas for English and Irish Travellers (MacKenzie).

there are three “types” of Traveller women in popular representation: romanticized and sexualized, masculinized and aggressive, and victimized by husbands and fathers (162-3) As Gayatri Spivak argues in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the colonial situation is fought over women’s bodies, where “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (294). In a Traveller context, then, settled men (and women) are saving Traveller women from Traveller men. Settlement scheme often refer to the plight of women and children. In addition, popular representations of Traveller women are often eroticized in a way that contradicts Travellers’ own accounts of conservative cultural and social codes for women. Female sexuality, unacceptable in Irish women, is displaced onto the figure of the eroticized Traveller woman.[7]

In the 1960s, settlement movements in Galway City were run by the Irish Countrywomen’s Association and the Galway Young Wives. According to Helleiner, these associations focused on women (especially mothers) and children “shivering in the wet and the cold” (167). Life expectancy, for instance, is 12 years less for Traveller women and 10 years less for Traveller men than for their settled counterparts. The infant mortality rate is three times the national average, which, according to Pavee Point Women, is due to “[poor] accommodation, discrimination and lack of awareness of services and the barriers of access of services” (128). Although the Pavee Point Women attempt to raise awareness about the necessity of well woman care, the 2002 National

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[7] Some scholars, including Helleiner, do not read the representation of women Travellers as eroticized. While there is not an overwhelming and consistent move to eroticize Traveller women as there has been with Romani women (“gypsies”), I will show how eroticization appears consistently in depictions of Traveller women until the production of very recent literature. Paul Delaney makes similar arguments in his analysis of late nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction.

Traveller Health Strategy focused exclusively on maternity issues in women's health, implicitly connecting the value of women with reproduction.

Outside observers have tended to overlook the roles of women in the Traveller community in order to represent them as victims. Helleiner observes that outsiders have downplayed the contributions of women to the economic survival of the family: the belief that the Traveller economy was based solely on tinsmithing and horse trading elides the women's financial contributions. As men were increasingly constructed as a hyper-masculinized threat to the settled population, the women were still able to interact with the settled community. The depiction of women as beggars in media and popular culture "obscured how interactions initiated by Traveller women with the settled population combined requests for assistance with the sale and barter of a variety of goods and services" ("Gender and Racism" 279). Women and children were much more successful at going "door-to-door" than men. The obfuscation of the active role of women in this aspect of Traveller culture allowed the settled population to insert Travelling women into a Victorian gender paradigm. As early as the start of the twentieth century, however, writers like J.M. Synge started to exoticize these women as a means to critique bourgeois values.

## "Any Speckled Female": Gender, Domesticity and Travellers in Synge's Drama

*The Tinker's Wedding* shares elements with two of Synge's better-known and controversial plays, *Shadow of the Glen* and *Playboy of the Western World.* All three works feature pervasive violence, a significant wanderer (or wanderers) and a female character who exposes the hypocrisy of bourgeois society. The main characters in *The*

*Tinker's Wedding,* however, are Irish Travellers. Synge wrote about Travellers in his essays "The Vagrants of County Wicklow" and "At a Wicklow Fair," which includes the tale that inspired *The Tinker's Wedding.* Paul Delaney notes, however, that "according to Stephens [Synge's biographer and nephew]…Synge's knowledge of the 'tinkers' was gained by means of indirect inference…informed by hearsay and lore" ("Representations" 56-7). Delaney argues that Synge, like Hyde, Yeats and Gregory, based most of his writing on limited interaction, observation and rumor. The position of Travellers over the past one hundred years has changed only marginally: they continue to inhabit the fringes of Irish society, posing a perceived threat to the new version of Irish identity as much as Synge's dramas posed a threat to Revival ideas of Irishness. Synge's portrayal of Travellers, while ostensibly stereotypical, actually criticizes the settled community. But although Synge uses stereotype ironically, his audience accepted those stereotypes as truth, in large part because they were applied to the Travelling community and not to themselves.

In *The Shadow of the Glen* (1904), the protagonist, Nora, married to a man many years her senior, runs away with a character described only as "tramp," not specifically as a Traveller. In fact, in *The Shadow of the Glen, The Well of the Saints* and *The Playboy of the Western World,* Travellers are an "absent presence" that allows Synge to differentiate between his protagonists, who are wanderers, and the "tinkers" who exist offstage. The Tramp extols the virtues of nomadism, however, and his rhetoric persuades Nora to run away with him by the end of the play. She is lured away from her settled lifestyle in what can be read as Synge's critique of both the post-famine reality of marriages between

young women and older men and of the increasing emphasis on domesticity for Irish women.

The play scandalized nationalist audiences and critics, who saw Nora as an affront to Irish womanhood. Despite the well-documented fact that Synge drew from Gaelic literary and folk traditions for the drama, nationalists like Arthur Griffith accused Synge of translating a "foul echo of degenerate Greece" into a rural Irish context (Hogan and Kilroy 12). In correspondence with W.B. Yeats, Griffith dismissed the play as "unIrish" and its unconventional heroine as "a woman devoid of all conception of morality, decency and religion" (Mathews 140; Hogan and Kilroy 12).[8] From the patronizing perspective of the Dublin middle-class, which was "anxious to been seen to measure up to Victorian moral standards," Nora was not the "paragon of virtue" that the Irish peasant woman ought to be (Mathews 140).

Mathews points out that many of those "Victorian moral standards" were central to the modernization of peasant society. He observes that

> Week in, week out, the *Irish Homestead* urged a program of social reform which constantly pitted a desirable middle-class propriety against the perceived uncouthness of traditional practices…a great number of these new practices had the effect of restricting women to the domestic space, and cutting them off from activities outside the home, as well as curtailing expressions of female desire. (143)

As a result, Nora's desire to abandon domestic confinement acknowledges a real and unpleasant side effect of the modernizing process of the Revival. When she leaves her husband and her lonely life in a remote cottage for the company of the tramp and the

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[8] For excerpts from the exchange, which took place in the *United Irishman*, see Hogan and Kilroy, *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge 1905-1909*, pages 10-15.

open road, Nora chooses a type of freedom associated with Travellers, who would provide Synge with the cultural backdrop for his next play. In creating Nora, as well as later characters, Synge drew on a "typical revivalist manouevre, [using] the fragmentary resonances of the 'imperiousness and freedom of women' in Gaelic society to critique a stifling Victorian female identity" (Mathews 143).

Negative popular reaction to Pegeen Mike, the protagonist of *Playboy*, was stronger than the outcry about Nora and *The Shadow of the Glen.* Like *Shadow, Playboy* did not offer the audience noble peasants. Pegeen Mike, as well as the Widow Quin and the chorus of other female characters in the play, continued Synge's challenge to the embourgeoisement of Irish identity, and Irish women. Synge again drew upon Gaelic legend and the historically and culturally liberal attitudes towards women in earlier times. Declan Kiberd notes that "Synge was well aware of the loss of these liberal traditions, but he delighted in pointing to those areas, such as the Aran islands, still largely unaffected by changes…the women of Inishmaan were, he noted, 'before conventionality' in their frank, easy manners, which left them untainted by the false Victorian gentility of the women in Dublin, Cork or Galway" (178-9).[9] As a result of this influence, the women in the play are seen as masculinized and the men, for the most part, as feminized. Christy Mahon, the hero, begins the play terrified and emasculated; only when his supposed patricide causes Pegeen Mike and the other women to pursue him does he gain self-confidence.

[9] This interpretation seems somewhat romanticized. In *The Aran Islands*, for example, Synge writes in "The Women," that "the women of this island…share some of the liberal features that are thought peculiar to the women of Paris or New York," he also says that "it appeared that the greatest merit they [the men of Aran] see in a woman is that she should be fruitful and bring them many children." He goes on to note that "life here is still at an almost patriarchal stage" (190).

Synge emphasizes the violence of rural life in *Playboy.* The community believes that Christy has killed his father; rather than turning him in to the colonial authorities, they make him into a celebrity. Kiberd writes that Synge was interested in "how the colonized cope with the violence in themselves, in their situation and in their daily life" (171). He argues that in *Playboy*, the characters have no allegiance to English law and very little to the Catholic Church, which figures only peripherally in the play. The communal fascination with violence culminates in the appearance of Christy, an alleged murderer who is regarded as a hero. Christy provides a location in which the community can "bring their instincts to violence into a single clear focus: a hero, moreover, whom they can then convert into a scapegoat…this figure must come from outside the settled community" (Kiberd 166).

Synge's unconventional female characters also challenged the Revival's romantic view of Irish hearth and home. Idealized marriage, central to domesticity, fails in all three plays: Nora, believing herself the widow of a loveless marriage, refuses a proposal that will only perpetuate her lonely life; Pegeen Mike becomes enamored with Christy as substitute for Shawn Keough, her spineless suitor and only alternative to spinsterhood. In *The Tinker's Wedding,* Sarah is a Traveller woman with no social status; she sees marriage to fellow Traveller Michael Byrne as her only means of earning respect. She believes that she has "as good a right to a decent marriage as any speckled female," and tells Mary, Michael's mother, that once she is married "no one will have the right to call me a dirty name, and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself" (164-5). Like Pegeen Mike, Sarah pursues Michael, pressuring him to marry, though unlike Pegeen or Nora, Sarah does not worry about domestic imprisonment. She already

possesses some of the freedom that Synge admired, and as a married woman will continue to travel up and down the eastern coast. If Michael will not marry her, she says that she'd "have a right to be going off to the rich tinkers that do be traveling from Tibradden to the Tara hill; for it'd be a fine life to be driving with Jaunting Jim" (139). Sarah, like Nora and Pegeen Mike, considers all of her limited options. Her willingness to run off with "one man or another man," however, was not an insult to Irish women (as was Nora with her supposed "power of men"), since Sarah was not considered truly Irish. Her "loose" sexual morality is a characteristic frequently attributed to Traveller women, although it contradicts the strict sexual mores of traditional Traveller culture.

Sarah, Michael and Mary's lifestyle offers freedom from an oppressive domestic life, but all of the characters act out violently. Mary suggests that Sarah might stray, and Michael warns her to be quiet, "or she'll [Sarah] knock the head of you" (152). When Mary trades the group's only item of value, a tin can, for "a good drop," she decides to stay "near the peelers…for the first bit of the fair [so that] herself won't strike me at all…" (157). Michael is also aggressive, repeatedly threatening to beat Sarah. Like Dan Burke of *Shadow*, who keeps a stick in the cupboard for his "bad wife," Michael tells Sarah that he will "hit [her] a great clout" (8;140). Michael remembers the violent beginning of their relationship:

> I'm thinking of the day I got you above at Rathvanna…and I'm thinking on the way I came behind you that time, and hit you a great clout in the lug, and how quiet and easy it was you came along with me from that hour to this present day. (140)

Michael met Sarah at the Rathvanna horse fair; he subsequently treats Sarah as chattel. Sarah says that Jaunting Jim, who always admired her, had a "grand eye for a fine

horse, and a grand eye for a woman," this comparison between a female Traveller and an animal is drawn in several texts.

Sarah and Michael's brutality can be attributed to the same origins as that of the Mayoites in *Playboy.* If the colonized Irish peasants are unable to "cope with the violence in themselves, their situation and their daily life," then the Traveller characters, as a marginalized group within the colonized population, will be even less able to do so (Kiberd 166). Michael, who has no means to achieve status in Irish society, proves his strength by threatening Sarah; Sarah, in turn, threatens the elderly Mary. The Traveller characters, like Christy Mahon, are the outsiders whom audiences can scapegoat for their own cruelties.

Much of the violence in the play is triggered by interactions with the priest, in which the Travellers play the stereotypical roles of beggar and thief commonly associated with their community. When the priest has finally agreed to marry Michael and Sarah, he discovers that the tin can he was promised has been replaced with Mary's empty porter bottles. The audience knows that Sarah and Michael are innocent, but the priest accuses them of being a "wicked, thieving, lying scheming lot" who are guilty of "burning, stealing, robbing and raping" and orders them to gather their "every stinking rag" they have and leave his parish (173-4). Synge uses the priest's anger at being duped out of his tin can—Michael and Sarah's one possession besides Sarah's wedding ring—to highlight the materialism of the Church. When the priest orders them out of his church, Sarah says

> …you'll be getting all the tinkers from Wicklow to Wexford and the county Meath, to put up blocks in the place of glass to shield your windows where you do

> be looking out and blinking at the girls. It's hard set you'll be that time, I'm telling you, to fill the depth of your belly the long days of Lent; for we wouldn't leave a laying pullet in your yard at all. (173)

Through her threat she highlights his hypocritical attitude towards his vows of chastity and poverty.

The final scene culminates violently, as Michael threatens the priest with the ass's reins. When the priest tries to escape the three Travellers bind and gag him and cover his head with a sack. Michael and Sarah want to kill the priest and "run him in a boghole" to keep him from going to the police. Mary intervenes, however, and the three run away with the priest's "Latin malediction" following them (179). As they leave Sarah exclaims that it will be "a long day till I go making talk of marriage or the like of that" (179). Her experience with the Church has shown her that marriage will not get her the respect she craves and taught her the value of her personal freedom. Since the Travellers in the play are drunken and violent thieves, it might seem that Synge was reinforcing negative stereotypes about the community. The play should not be read in isolation, however: when *The Tinker's Wedding* is considered alongside Synge's other work, we see that he ascribed similar characteristics to both Travellers and settled characters.

The last stage directions of the play read: "they rush out, leaving the Priest master of the situation." Those directions imply that even though Sarah has escaped, the priest and all that he represents—middle class propriety and hypocrisy, the restriction of women's freedoms—have ultimately won.

Contemporary reaction to the play, which was not performed at the Abbey until a 1971 Synge centenary production, confirms this interpretations, since the Travellers are overlooked in outraged concern for the priesthood (Delaney "Representations" 61): "Not

content with his achievement in the direction of *The Playboy of the Western World,* Mr. J.M. Synge has perpetrated a still greater atrocity in the new play *The Tinker's Wedding.* The thing is an abominable libel upon the Irish priesthood. No such travesty has ever been penned before" (Hogan and Kilroy 243). Synge, in a late revision, classified *The Tinker's Wedding* as a comedy, saying in his preface that "of the things which nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it…where a country loses its humour, as some towns in Ireland are doing, there will be morbidity of mind…" (33). Audiences found very little humor in Synge's play, despite his hope that "the country people…from the tinkers to the clergy…will [not] mind being laughed at without malice" (33). In a country struggling with self-definition, very few were ready to laugh at themselves.

The few critics who have examined the play believe that the drama serves primarily to "mock the values of the post-famine peasantry" (Helleiner 41). Jim McLaughlin enumerates Synge's reasons for using Travellers as his protagonists:

> J.M.Synge sympathized with 'tramps,' 'vagrants' and 'tinkers' both because they represented the marginalised 'other' in an increasingly petty bourgeois society…Synge idealized these sectors of Irish society because they were the social antidotes to a stultifying, puritanical and late-Victorian nationalism that was in danger of suffocating cultural life in early 20th c. Ireland. (31)

Despite similarities with Synge's other characters, some of whom have become accepted as part of nationalist history, Travellers remain outsiders in Irish history and contemporary society. The priest's generalizations, though, remain present in the discourse of literature, journalism, legislation and film. Synge's depiction of Travellers has been recognized as "complex and contradictory," but few efforts have been made to

investigate how he might be using such generalizations to challenge stereotypical portrayals of the community ("Representations" 64). In *The Tinker's Wedding,* Synge reveals similarities between the two cultures as he uses the autonomous aspects of Traveller culture to critique a increasingly oppressive settled society.

The use of such stereotype remains problematic, in part because audiences accepted its veracity and thus failed to recognize its commentary on their own community. In addition, as Delaney claims,

> However liberating this [Traveller] lifestyle may be, it is nonetheless partially dependent upon a reaffirmation of certain indices of dominant stereotype. For their irreverent spirit of license can also be interpreted as proof that all Travellers are drunkards and thieves, foul-mouthed and promiscuous, superstitious and comic, and all at once casually violent. ("Representations" 64)

These characteristics are common in later representations of Travellers on page and screen, which demonstrates the pervasive and persistent presence of such assumptions. The remainder of this chapter will examine how similar issues of gender, class, and identity are raised in subsequent portrayals of Travellers.

**O'FLAHERTY**

Traveller women, like Sarah, represent freedom from domestic confinement; as a result they are frequently eroticized. In Liam O'Flaherty's sensational short story "The Tent" (1926), the central character, Carney, encounters a Traveller, Byrne, and his two nameless wives: the depiction of one of the wives as sexually predatory and of Byrne as a violent, Calibanesque figure illustrates the postcolonial impulse that transfers desire onto an "other" against whom a definition can be created. O'Flaherty represents Travellers as

"sexually and humanly Other…licentious, secretive, immoral and crudely violent people" (Delaney "Representations" 55).

Delaney notes in his analysis of the 1887 "pseudo-anthropological" essay "Irish Tinkers," that Travellers embodied "many of the fears and fantasies of their thoroughly reputable audience" ("Representations" 55). Victorian audiences were titillated by rumors of wife-swapping and bartering, promiscuity and informal marriage arrangements like "jumping the budget," or bag of tools. At the same time, Travelling women pose an erotic threat to the settled community. The fair-haired wife's attempt to seduce Carney, for example, leads him away from the safety of the respectable, domestic life to which the reader assumes he will eventually return.

The two women are immediately exotic as a result of their polygamous marriage.[10] They are

> …just like him [their husband Joe] in texture, both of them slatterns, dirty and unkempt, but with the same proud, arrogant, contemptuous look in their beautiful brown faces. One was dark-haired and black-eyed. She had a rather hard expression in her face and seemed very alert. The other woman was golden-haired, with a very small head and finely developed jaw, that stuck out level with her forehead. She was surpassingly beautiful, in spite of her ragged clothes and the foul condition of her hair, which was piled on her tiny skull in knotted heaps, uncombed. The perfect symmetry and delicacy of her limbs, her bust and her long throat that had tiny freckles in the white skin, made the stranger [Carney] feel afraid of her, of her beauty and her presence in the tent. (81)

Disgusted by his simultaneous attraction to and fear of the women, Carney says to himself, "Tinkers. Awful bloody people" (81). Carney justifies his attraction to the fair-haired Traveller woman by claiming that she "must be a gentleman's daughter. Lots o'

these shots out of a gun in the country Wicklow. Half the population is illegitimate" (84). She flirts with Carney, drinking provocatively from the bottle and then looking at him "with her lips open" (84). O'Flaherty's portrayal of the woman becomes increasingly animal: he writes that she "bared her teeth in a savage grin and pinioned his [Carney's] arms with a single movement" (86). She acts as a sexual catalyst to allow her husband to confront Carney, who then narrowly escapes the Traveller encampment.

O'Flaherty initially feminizes Byrne, describing him as a

> …slim, tall, graceful man, with a beautiful head poised gracefully on a brown neck, and great black lashes falling down over his half-closed eyes, just like a woman. A womanish-looking fellow, with that sensuous grace in the languid pose of his body which is found only among aristocrats and people who belong to a very small workless class, cut off from the mass of society yet living at their expense. (81)

O'Flaherty's depiction of Byrne distinguishes him from the respectable masculinity of Carney, who has "firm jaws…a fighter's face" and "was fairly well dressed, his face was clean and well shaved and his hands were clean" (80). Carney observes that Byrne is "more like a woman than a man. Suppose he never did a stroke of work in his life" (84) and when he produces an unopened bottle of whiskey Byrne "immediately opened his eyes wide." Carney's physical appearance reflects his character; he claims to be a teetotaler while the Travellers, like Synge's Michael and Mary, are lazy drunkards.

Byrne leaves Carney alone with his fair-haired wife, but before they can consummate their "relationship," they are interrupted by a "hissing noise" from Byrne, who returns to the tent "stooping low, his mouth wide open and his jaw twisted to the

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[10] Although polygamy was not unheard of amongst Travellers, it is unlikely that it would have occurred

right, his two hands hanging loosely by his sides, with the fingers twitching" (87). He has transitioned from sensuous and effeminate to brutal and simian, and, in his new persona, calls Carney out of the tent. Byrne punches Carney, knocking him down and jumping on him "like a cat, striking him with his hands and feet all together" (87). Carney shouts, "Let me up, let me up. Fair play"(87). As Carney staggers onto the road, the blonde wife calls out "good-bye dearie" before Byrne picks her up and carries her, screaming, into the tent. As Carney turns into the storm and towards town he cries out, every two yards, "God Almighty!" as he crosses himself (87).

Byrne's wives are eroticized as their settled counterparts could never have been. O'Flaherty's transposition of erotic desire onto the women directly contradicts strict cultural codes of the Traveller community but their depiction accords the postcolonial project that must transfer desire onto an 'other' against whom a definition can be created. Significantly, the women in O'Flaherty's story are silent: the fair-haired woman speaks only towards the end of the story while the dark-haired wife has a few monosyllabic lines throughout. Neither of them is given a name.[11]

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during the twentieth century (Hancock).

[11] Seán O'Faoláin uses two Traveller women as principal characters in his collection of short stories set during the Anglo-Irish War, *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories* (1932). In the first story, "The Small Lady," he depicts the Travellers as "the embodiment of resistance and freedom" (Delaney "Marginal Footnote" 160). The title story features a character who parallels O'Flaherty's Traveller women in several ways: "Gypsy Gammle," has a "palpable sexual presence is deemed to be transgressive…she is…depicted acting like a "wild animal"" and, by the end of the story, becomes symbolically silent (Delaney "Marginal Footnote" 161). For a reading of these stories, see Paul Delaney's "A Marginal Footnote: O'Faoláin, the Subaltern and the Travellers," *Irish Studies Review*, vol.11, no.2, 2003.

**"TINKERS' DAUGHTERS": TRAVELLERS ON FILM**

The earlier literary characters are related to three late-twentieth century women in the films *The Field, Into the West* and *Trojan Eddie.* [12] All of the women, ironically, are called Kathleen, a name which, as a result of Yeats's revival play *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, has became synonymous with Ireland itself. Each character thus bears the name of the iconic embodiment of a society that excludes her.

The first Kathleen is Katie, "the tinker's daughter," in Jim Sheridan's *The Field* (1990), the story of Bull McCabe, a land-obsessed small farmer and patriarch of a crumbling family in the West of Ireland. The film was based on the John B. Keane play of the same title, which has limited but negative references to Travellers. Sheridan adds a substantial plot involving Katie which underscores the importance of land and dispossession: Bull tells his son that "they [the Travellers] lost their footing on the land during the Famine and they'll never get it back again." Because she has no claim to the land, Katie represents freedom to Bull's son Tadgh. To Bull, however, she represents a threat to the land he has worked so hard to maintain for his disintegrating family.

Like Byrne's wives, Katie presents an erotic threat to the settled community. She flirts openly with settled men, most notably with Tadgh, who is under pressure to help his father scare away the Yank, an Irish-American who intends to buy and develop the piece of land that the McCabes have been cultivating for decades. Tadgh is dominated by his father, who delivers a soliloquy about the importance of the land that he and his father

[12] See also Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1982), one of the only films to feature an actor from the Travelling community, as well as Maeve Connolly and Ruth Barton's analyses of the film ("'A bit of Traveler in everybody:' Traveler Identities in Irish and American Culture" and *Irish National Cinema*) and the documentaries *Traveller* (RTE, 2000) and *Southpaw* (Ireland/GB 1999). In addition, the experimental filmmaker Vivienne Dick, famous for the short films that emerged during the New York punk movement of the 1980s, is currently working on a documentary about Traveller women and girls.

and his father's father struggled to maintain during a century of colonization, famine and conflict. Katie serves to juxtapose Bull's destructive fixation on the field with the Travellers' "freedom" from the cultural and historical memory that informs his obsession.

Katie appears as colorful and wanton in comparison with the earth-toned members of the settled community. Her wavy red hair is always loose and she wears layers of skirts and brightly striped blouses. She appears more often within the settled community than in her own; the Traveller encampment is pictured only peripherally, although its inhabitants are "represented as drunken, quarrelsome and abusive to their children" (Cullingford 182). Katie initially appears hauling her drunken father down the street on a flatbed wagon, gripping the front of the wagon where a horse or donkey would normally be found. Bull notices her interest in his son and tells him, "never trust a woman who has no contact with the earth, boy." Traveller women, rather than Traveller men, are the greatest danger to the values of the settled community.

During an American Wake, a mournful celebration in which the community gathers to send a generation of young people off to America because they have no way of carving a livelihood out of the inhospitable terrain, Katie underscores the idea that emigration represents another loss of ties to the land. She challenges the men to dance with her:

> What're you laughin' at? Think I'm not good enough for you? Will you dance with me… You're all afraid of me…the tinker's daughter. You're afraid if you touch me you'll lose the soil under your feet and end up sleeping under the stars. Well you could do worse…you could do worse than lie with the tinker's daughter under the stars. Is there any one of ye man enough to dance with me? Who's the biggest man among ye?

The Yank accepts the challenge; as an outsider he does not understand the taboo against dancing with a Traveller. Bull steps in at the last second: the situation has become a test of masculinity between Tadgh and the Yank, so Bull, who may lose his field to the Yank, must protect both his son and the McCabe reputation. Katie becomes the classic colonized woman: eroticized and then claimed, just like the land from which she is ostensibly disconnected.

Tadgh eventually seeks solace in Katie's arms, going to her caravan after running away from his father's home following the murder of the Yank. Like Christy Mahon in *Playboy,* he impresses Katie with the tale of the murder. Katie, who like Synge's Sarah and O'Flaherty's fair-haired wife, is the victim of domestic abuse, asks Tadgh to run away with her in the caravan. Soon Tadgh is in the driver's seat, reins in hand. He tells Katie that they can't "run away like tinkers," to which she replies, "we are tinkers." He cannot escape his responsibility to the land and his family as she cannot escape her marginalized position as a Traveller woman.

When they return to his father's house, Bull shouts, "…get that tinker's whore out of my house" and when Tadgh says that he wants to marry Katie, a culturally implausible plan, Bull says, "What, her? A tinker…Travelling people, Tadgh, they're outcasts. They don't care about the land…what kind of heir can she give you?" It seems briefly that the kind of life Katie offers—one free from oppressive ties to land and history—might overcome Tadgh's obligation to his family and culture. But Bull goes mad over the possibility of his son taking to the road, and Tadgh and Katie's relationship is prevented by Tadgh's death: he is forced over a cliff by a herd of stampeding cattle driven by his father. Maeve Connolly notes that, "through the death of Tadgh, and the destruction of

the male line of inheritance, *The Field* portrays *settled* society (or at least its overtly patriarchal dimensions) as doomed" (376). Sheridan, like Synge and Yeats, draws on Celtic legend to create a final tableau that emphasizes that reading: Bull, an aging, destroyed Cuchulainn, realizes that he has killed his son and wades into the sea, fighting the waves with his blackthorn stick.

As McLaughlin writes, Katie encourages Tadgh to

> …reject the mores of the landed tenantry and the petty bourgeoisie and to spend his life on the road rather than submitting to patriarchal authority on the farm. Her success would represent a triumph of love and sexuality over love of the land…the 'tinker woman' was an affront to all patriarchal values because she was literally causing the seed of the patriarch to fall by the wayside… (33-34).

Tadgh's death represents not only the defeat of Katie and the feminized Traveller community, but the decline of the masculinized settled community. Sheridan suggests that Bull, and all he represents, is more destructive than any threat posed by Katie: like Synge, Sheridan sees Travellers as representative of freedom from the stultifying expectations of history and culture. In the film *Into the West*, which he wrote and produced, Travellers also represent independence from an oppressive urban existence. The Travellers in the movie, and the women in particular, represent "a recurrent romantic investment in the spiritual, familial and communal values that these white 'others' are thought to possess—values no longer securely located in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland" (Connolly 406). Although the women in the film are supporting characters, they are cultural repositories, guardians of the "true" Traveller way of life. Travellers, ironically, represent both freedom from the oppressively domestic lifestyle of the settled community and a nostalgic reinvestment in the family values it believes lost to globalized culture.

The film focuses on two young Traveller boys who live with their father, Papa Reilly, a widower and former "King of the Travellers" in a grim Dublin housing project. Their grandfather, who still travels in a brightly painted wooden caravan, extols the virtues of "life on the road" and tells his grandsons romantic stories of Tir na nOg, the land beyond the sea. His stories, in an echo of revival literature, romanticize the West of Ireland and the nomadic Traveller lifestyle.[13] When a mysterious white horse, who turns out to be the embodiment of their mother's spirit, comes into their lives they head west, playing cowboys and Indians as they escape from the confines of settled city life.[14]

Maeve Connolly argues that the film depicts "the loss and recovery of cultural identity and familial stability through recourse to a rural, pre-industrial past" which is "coded in terms of return to maternal origins (370; 392). As the boys leave the Dublin towers behind, they recover their identity as Travellers and renew their relationship with their father. When the boys disappear, Papa Reilly seeks help from his former community, including a Traveller named Kathleen who, according to Connolly, "appears to be an independent, strong-willed figure" but who might actually only be a "surrogate for the spirit mother" (392). Kathleen, like Mary Reilly, functions as a link to the "old ways," but also embodies an exotic and primitive lifestyle: she is a tracker, who, like Reilly's father-in-law, is committed to life on the road. Reilly initially dismisses her

[13] For an analysis of the film's use of the supernatural and the West of Ireland, see Joe Cleary's "Into Which West?: Irish Modernity and the Maternal Supernatural" in *Literature and the Supernatural,* ed. Brian Cosgrave.

[14] For a reading of the "cowboys and Indians" element of the narrative, see Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's chapter "John Wayne Fan or *Dance with Wolves* Revisionist" in *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2001.

offers to help, ironically telling her that "the road's no place for you," but she proves to be an excellent tracker and horsewoman.[15]

During their time on the road, Kathleen, who is a stereotypical red-head dressed in a motley assortment of clothing, reveals that she has left her husband, a rare phenomenon in Traveller culture (as well as for settled people in 1992 Ireland, when divorce was not yet legal). She says that her husband "wanted to settle…central heating and all," and explains her decision to stay on the road by saying that traveling is "in our blood…out there you're alone, part of nothing, what we are all in the end anyway." Mary's father tells Reilly that the boys should leave Dublin, that "this isn't the way Mary would have raised them…[let's go back] to the West, back to the old life." As Connolly argues, the Travellers, and the women in particular, represent "a recurrent romantic investment in the spiritual, familial and communal values that these white 'others' are thought to posess—values no longer securely located in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland" (406). Kathleen and Mary Reilly are guardians of the "true" Traveller way of life. The women in the film are supporting characters and cultural repositories. Travellers, ironically, represent both freedom from the oppressively domestic lifestyle of the settled community and a commitment the nostalgic values it believes lost to globalized culture.

The film *Trojan Eddie* (1997) alters this representation of Traveller women: although the character Kathleen shares some traits with her traveling foremothers, the evolution of her character evidences a social impulse to domesticate the Traveller woman. The main plot of the film involves an "aging kingpin [choosing] to take a child

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[15] Elizabeth Cullingford likens Kathleen's tracking skills to those of an Indian scout in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which is referenced in the film.

bride." [16] John Power, the "aging kingpin," chooses the teenaged Kathleen because she reminds him of his first wife, also named Kathleen. The name is an ironic reference to the nationalist icon, but also suggests that these women are as interchangeable and essentially nameless as the wives in "The Tent."

Just as Byrne's wives are eroticized through their polygamous marriage, Kathleen's eroticization begins with her representation as a "child bride." With her heart-shaped face, curly black hair and leather pants, she is a sexual young woman who asserts her autonomy by flirting with two young men, including her chaperone Dermot, in addition to Power. While being courted by Power, she skinnydips in a stream in view of both Power and the two young male chaperones and Dermot accuses her of being a "Mary Magdalene" for stripping down "in front of that old man." He tells her that she will not be respected and that Power is only interested in her because she resembles the dead Kitty but she insists, like Synge's heroines, that she will only be taken for herself. When Dermot tries to kiss her she raises her hand like a claw and hisses: he approaches her cautiously, murmuring repeatedly "take it easy now…". Like many Traveller women in literature and film, Kathleen becomes an animal to be broken.

Unlike the majority of her predecessors, Kathleen does not embrace life on the road. She tells Power: "I want a house…with an orchard at the back and a swing for the children…I want beautiful things. People think Travellers don't like beautiful things, but it's not true." Her desire to leave the road, and the squalid encampment, with its

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[16] "Child brides" are rare in Traveller culture. Although both Romanis (gypsies) and Travellers are accused of widespread arranged marriages between young women and older men, numbers show that though Travellers often marry young, Traveller women do not marry as children. According to statistics from

rundown trailers and muddy common ground, sets her apart from the Katie and Kathleen of the earlier films. After the wedding she abandons Power, running off with Dermot and a suitcase full of wedding cash but eventually Dermot deserts her and she returns to Power; the film has a "happy ending" with the pregnant young wife at the movies with her elderly husband. Despite her efforts to claim her independence by taking to the road and staying, not in a caravan but in a series of bed and breakfasts, she falls into a domesticity more common to the settled culture than her own. Although she gets the house and the "beautiful things" she wanted, she trades her independence and freedom in order to obtain them. Through her domestication, Kathleen contradicts the patterns of freedom and resistance of settled culture and values established by the characters of Sarah, Katie and Kathleen in *Into the West*. The narrative exchanges romanticism for realism to reveal that, despite the work of organizations like Pavee Point and the recognition of Traveller culture by politicians from Charles Haughey to Mary Robinson, there remains a desire to domesticate the community, particularly its women. While Kathleen's character perpetuates many misconceptions about female Travellers, she also communicates the harsh reality of nomadic life and the cultural and historical pressure to settle.

**"IT'S HARD TO LAY GHOSTS": CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND FICTION**

Contemporary literature, despite occasional returns to romanticization, provides a more nuanced vision of the Traveller community than contemporary film. Women poets in particular have created new depictions of Traveller women. Two poems, Moya

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1983, 97.3% of sixteen year old girls were single. By the age of 24, however, 80.5% of Traveller women were married (Pavee Point).

Cannon's "After the Burial," and Vona Groarke's "House Fire," published in 1999 and 2000, depict the death of a Traveller and the subsequent burning of her caravan. Through their use of a rare and sensational aspect of Traveller culture, these poets give dimension to their subjects while reinforcing the supposedly civilizing role of women within the community.

Cannon and Groarke, who both write from a settled perspective, describe the destruction of a Traveller woman's possessions in the ritual caravan burning that follows her death.[17] Both poems humanize their subjects more than most contemporary films; a closer reading suggests however, that the impulse to "save" Traveller women is also at work within these poems. Moya Cannon, a poet who works at a school for adolescent Travellers in Galway City, describes a caravan burning similar in her poem "After the Burial," from her 2000 collection *Oar*. She writes:

> They straightened the blankets,
> Piled her clothes onto the bed,
> Soaked them with petrol,
> Then emptied the gallon can
> Over the video and the tape recorder,
> Stepped outside their trailer,
> Lit it, watched until only the burnt chassis was left,
> Gathered themselves
> And pulled out of Galway.

[17] Caravan burning is a custom most likely borrowed from the Romani people. Both cultures believe that the possessions and dwelling of the deceased are contaminated after their death and must be destroyed in order to prevent the person from haunting the living. For a discussion of the Romani tradition see Hancock, Ian. *We are the Romani People: Ame sam e Rromane dzene*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002, and "Romani Customs and Traditions." *Patrin Web Journal of Romani Culture and History*. http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/tradition.htm.

After the funeral, the family moves on to London where the father grieves while the children run wild; the family unit is threatened by the loss of the mother, whose physical presence has been entirely erased from their lives.

> Camped for a week in Shepherd's Bush,
> Then behind a glass building in Brixton,
> He went into drunken mourning for his dead wife,
> While their children hung around the vans,
> Or foraged in the long North London streets
> Among other children, some of whom also perhaps
> Understood,
> That beyond respectability's pale,
> Where reason and civility show their second face,
> It's hard to lay ghosts. (48)

The second stanza uses language that emphasizes discrimination against Travellers: they camp behind a "glass building," which implies that those who judge them live in glass houses. While the husband drinks, the children join others who are "beyond respectability's pale," a reference to early phases of British colonization in Ireland, when all that was outside the immediate region of Dublin, the English Pale, was considered savage. Through the word "pale" the poet underscores the shared ethnicity and experience of the settled Irish and Irish Travellers.

The reference to ghosts, like the father's drinking binge, reinforces stereotypes of Travellers that were once common to the Irish in general: they are drunken and superstitious. The last lines suggest that Travellers, like the London poor with whom they share the streets, exist just beyond "reason and civility." Although these words imply that there is nothing reasonable or civil about the behavior of this collective underclass, the poet also indicts those who live in the glass buildings and fail to acknowledge the cultural and economic factors that make it "hard to lay ghosts."

Vona Groarke's "House Fire," from the 1999 collection *Other People's Houses*, depicts a similar scenario. The Travellers of her poem have abandoned their halting site, leaving a "shattered hull" that mirrors Cannon's "burnt chassis." Groarke writes:

> After her death, they had burned her caravan, fittings, furniture,
> the lot.
> The fire took care of her wordly remains: a place at the table,
> a side of the bed, a way of resting her hands beside the sink.
> The fire was supposed to silence whatever might call her
> back. The fire was supposed to set her free.

The vivid details of her life, the table, the bed, the sink, are all domestic. As in Cannon's poem there is a need to "lay ghosts" and appease the superstitions of the Travelling community and the settled population, who she tells us are afraid of "a strange whistling sound, a blue light in the dead of night." She ends the poem with:

> They won't come back this way. What's done is done. And if the sagging
> Roof and shattered glass mean anything, it is not to do with her, who kept
> Her windows netted and intact.

In "House Fire," as in the Cannon poem and *Into the West*, which ends with the main character burning his dead wife's caravan, the surviving Travellers have moved on. Groarke emphasizes, however, that "they" are the ones who have destroyed the car park and left the shell of the caravan and broken glass. This woman was tidy and domestic, none of that "is to do with her." Groarke, in imagining the funeral ritual, rescues her from association with the rest of the Traveller population. The women hold together the family unit, which is central to nationalist rhetoric; when they die, those they leave behind fall into "negative" patterns of Traveller existence. The depiction of their lives,

however, their “side of the bed / way of resting [their] hands beside the sink” rescues them from the domestic chaos that follows their deaths.[18]

**NOVELS**

I will conclude by looking briefly at how the ideas of freedom and domesticity function in two contemporary novels, Marita Conlon-McKenna’s young adult novel *The Blue Horse* (1992), and Peter Joyce’s *Paveewhack.* Both books are bildungsomans about settling; *The Blue Horse* tells the story of a young Traveller named Katie (another Kathleen) and the trials she faces when her family settles after an accidental fire destroys their caravan, while *Paveewhack* details the experiences of the author’s uncle as a Traveller in the 1960s.

Conlon-McKenna focuses her narrative on the women’s community: Katie is the eldest daughter in the Connors family and before they lose their caravan, she and her mother, sisters, aunts and cousins form a close-knit community around their halting site. After the fire destroys their caravan, Miss O’Gorman, a social worker, convinces Mrs. Connors to settle. Like the women of the Galway Young Wives who worked to settle Travellers in the 1960s, she tells Mrs. Connors to “think of [her] children, their education, a chance of a job. Autumn and winter will soon be here. A roof over your heads is vital” (58-59). Even though Mrs. Connors argues that “there’s more to life than schools and houses,” she eventually gives in, which puts her in opposition to her husband (59). He says “I’ll not live in any house! If you government people want to help, give us a new caravan, that’s all the help we need” (59-60). The exchange with Miss O’Gorman

[18] For a Traveller depiction of the ritual of caravan burning, see Julia Gentle’s “The End of Love,” in *Black Stones around a Green Shamrock: A Poetry Anthology By and About Travellers,* ed. Michael O’Reilly and

encapsulates the debate that has impacted legislation for Travellers over the last fifty years: should the government support a nomadic lifestyle?

The discrimination experienced by the Connors family allows Conlon-McKenna, like Synge, to expose the hypocrisy of a supposedly civilized settled society. In order to move into their council house the rest of the family has to cross a line of protesters bearing signs that read "No more tinkers" (71). The hostile environment makes the family question their decision to leave the support of the Travelling community: Mrs. Connors asks, "My God, are they the kind of neighbours we're going to have?" (65). Katie and her siblings are refused water by a settled household on a hot day and are tormented by local bullies. Despite her strong academic performance, Katie nearly quits school because of antagonism from several of the other girls, and towards the end of the novel she has to have a friend cut her hair when she is turned away from every beauty parlor in town.[19]

Katie, like Kathleen in *Trojan Eddie*, is scripted to assume a traditional role within the home, which she does when her mother miscarries and she is left in charge of the household. While Conlon-McKenna portrays the cultural difficulties of Traveller life in a primarily settled society, she also implicitly argues for settlement schemes. This is evidenced in the "happy ending": when her mother returns home Katie is able to balance school and household duties and her father comes back to stay with the family. He

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Mairin Kenny for the Blackrock Teacher's Centre.

[19] Education is difficult for Travellers for obvious logistical reasons, and parents sometimes fear that their children will be discriminated against in schools, remembering "their own hurtful or discomforting experience" (W.McDonagh 151). For practical reasons, Travellers are often placed in special schools like the one to which Katie's younger siblings are sent, though the majority of Travellers who have attended such schools agree that it's "all English and Maths and they're not bothered" ("Young Travellers" 157). A settled class offers more subjects, but the young Travellers also stress their isolation in a settled class: "The rest of the girls [in the class] just left you there on your own" ("Young Travellers" 160).

remains uneasy in settled life, but he avoids stereotypes of male Travellers by sacrificing life on the road for his family. Although the cruelty of the settled community is present throughout the novel, the narrative ultimately privileges their lifestyle over that of the Connors family.

Peter Brady's novel, which reveals Traveller life from a rare first-person perspective,[20] differs from the majority of texts about Travellers by exposing the disturbing marriage practices of the *settled* community. Using his uncle's memories of settling in the Irish midlands in the 1960s, Brady, like Conlon-McKenna, constructs a narrative that exposes the institutional discrimination faced by Travellers while explaining Traveller culture and community, from family relationships, religion, and wedding and funeral traditions to alcoholism, employment, fortune-telling and relationships with the police and the settled community. The narrative revolves primarily around Whack, his group of friends and his father, an endearing alcoholic who struggles with settled life but, like Ned Connors, remains loyal to his family.

Traveller marriage traditions are consistently denigrated in literature and film, from *The Tinker's Wedding* and "The Tent" to the supposed "child bride" marriage of Kathleen to John Power in *Trojan Eddie*. *Paveewhack* turns the tables, questioning the sexual and marital mores of the settled community.[21] On the property of Birdy O'Brien, a settled farmer for whom his father sometimes works, Whack discovers a badly beaten teenager locked in her bedroom. Cora tells Whack that her father

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[20] Another first person Traveller narrative is *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman*, told by Nan Joyce to Sharon Gmelch.

> …done a deal with this rotten auld cur down the road whose land's mearnin ours. Two hundred acres of other, an he promising me auld man a brand new car and over two thousand pound if I marry him. But I'm only sixteen, an he's sixty-six! That's fifty years older than me…he's hopin the auld fella will shortly kick the bucket, leavin us with all that land. I'm in fierce trouble. (98)

The girl has gone to the police or the priest, but neither will do anything to help her. The police sergeant, who declares that Travellers are "vermin…the farmer shoots foxes for kicks, while tinkers are my bloodsport," tells her that if she was beaten she deserved it (107). The priest, whom the Travellers nickname "Father Money," tells her that her father is "very shrewd and highly regarded, an can only have [her] welfare in mind" (98). The attitudes of the authority figures show what lies just below the surface of respectable, middle class society. The priest and the sergeant support Cora's father, a "highly regarded" man who tells his daughter that

> …this is the chance of a lifetime…I've broken wilder fillies in me time! In this neck of the woods it's the man who makes the decisions. In your peculiar case, it's your own lovin father. (101-102)

Birdy O'Brien is exactly what Traveller patriarchs are supposed to be: abusive, conniving and willing to sell his daughter to the highest bidder. Brady reverses the situation by having two Travellers rescue the settled woman from a "barbaric" cultural custom. The "respectable" town is not a "dacent God-fearin land" and its hypocrisy is revealed, as in *The Tinker's Wedding,* through the experiences of Travellers.

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[21] Ken Bruen's 2002 novel *The Killing of the Tinkers* also challenges assumptions about Travellers. The protagonist, alcoholic ex-guard and private investigator Jack Taylor, is hired by Sweeper, the leader of the Galway City Travellers, to investigate the murders of several young Travellers.

## CONCLUSION

Although the work of J.M. Synge and Peter Brady is separated by nearly a century, both authors offer similar observations about the settled and Travelling communities in Ireland. From Synge's Revival perspective, Travellers represent freedom and the courage to challenge an increasingly narrow version of Irish identity. Unfortunately, this vision allows Travellers, especially Traveller women, to exist solely as symbols who often become sexual or ethnic "others" against which the settled community can define itself. Even when the representation of Travellers is relatively positive, it is frequently because they offer a romantic means to achieve the "therapeutic…recovery of the past" (Connolly 405).

In his novel, Brady, a Traveller himself, records his family's past, not for the benefit of settled society, but as a way to preserve his culture and acknowledge the process of domestication that has impacted the Travelling community over the course of the twentieth century. He compares his uncle's story to the Irish Folklore Commission's collection of Travellers' narratives in the 1930s, and stresses the importance of recording the first person experiences of Travellers to counter their exploitation as stereotypically romanticized and/or maligned symbols within the national narrative. As the most contemporary author in this study, Brady writes from the multicultural vantage point of the early twenty-first century, where, due to the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, Travellers no longer occupy the lowest position in Irish society. As a result of his historical and cultural position, Brady provides a challenging framework with which to read new texts by and about Irish Travellers. His contribution to the textual representation of his community opens the field for new voices to build on

and revise the creative and scholarly work that focus on the Travelling community and its relationship with settled Ireland.

# Chapter Five

## From Mise Eire to Metro Eireann: Immigration and Ethnicity in Contemporary Ireland

In 2002 the organization Irish International received a multi-million euro grant from the Irish government to start an anti-racism campaign titled "Know Racism." Their initial poster and public service announcement featured the famous Gaelic footballer Jason Sherlock, the son of an Irish father and Korean mother. The poster jokes, is a "minority" as a Dubliner with All-Ireland medals in a sport traditionally dominated by provincial counties. Bernice Harrison, in an article for the *Irish Times*, criticizes the campaign for suggesting that Sherlock "is fine once he assimilates totally by, for example, excelling at the national game. Read that way, it's the opposite of the campaign's stated objective of interculturalism." Harrison's critique underscores both the ease with which the sporting metaphor is translated to situations of discrimination and conflict and the potential problems inherent to the use of such a metaphor. In this chapter I will trace the relationship between sport and nationalism in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* and Charlie O'Neill's *Hurl* as a means of analyzing ethnic and racial identities in contemporary Ireland. I argue that the evolving metaphors of cricket and hurling have been adapted in order to challenge essentialized versions of British and Irish national identity and allow for a discussion of contemporary ethnic and racial tensions in Irish society. I will finish the chapter with a brief analysis of other emerging texts that address issues of immigration and Irish identity.

The “Know Racism” campaign is not the first to use sport as a metaphorical device: sports often represent of their countries of origin, with all of the historical and cultural baggage that might imply. Public schools established in India were modeled on the British system and included a rigorous sporting program.  Tensions were played out on the cricket pitch between the “westernized oriental gentlemen” of the Indian public schools as well as between local villagers and the imperial government, a situation dramatized in the Bollywood film *Lagaan* (Mangan). The contemporary film *Bend it Like Beckham* features a moment of postcolonial bonding between the Sikh football star and her Irish coach, both of whom have experienced discrimination on English soccer fields. Academics have also examined the role of sport in national identity, focusing especially on football (soccer), for example *Racism and Anti-Racism in Football* and *Fear and Loathing in World Football.*

Cricket in particular has signified England and Empire, along with virtues like “promptitude, resource, honour, cooperation and unselfishness…the soul of English games” (Mangan 41).  In J.A. Mangan’s book *The Games Ethic and Imperialism,* Mangan traces the values transmitted through English games, cricket in particular, throughout the Empire. As the public schoolboys who would become the agents of Empire took to the cricket fields they were reminded that in “doing your duty whether it be to the Captain of your team, to your masters, or to your Queen—remember that at the same time you are carrying out a higher work because you are doing your duty to God” (48).  The language used to describe Irish games echoed this rhetoric: an 1884 editorial in *United Ireland* stated that

> The strength and the energy of a race are largely dependent on national pastimes for the development of a spirit of courage and endurance. A warlike race is ever fond of games requiring skills, strength and staying power. The best games of such a race are never free from danger. (Garner 154)

Despite significant differences in the class structure of Ireland and England at that time, the Victorian British values muscular Christianity and masculinity celebrated in imperial writing was translated into an Irish nationalist context through Gaelic games.

Hurling became representative of a self-confident and independent Irish identity when it was revived as an alternative to sports of the colonizer: cricket, soccer and rugby. Irish sports, along with literature and language, were a central element of the Revival: sport provided a vehicle for nationalist ideology for a rural population not impacted by the scholarly and political debates centered primarily in Dublin. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which continues to oversee Gaelic sports, was formed by native Irish speaker Michael Cusack. Cusack, who was fired after his first attempt at forming a hurling club for being too "dictatorial," is described by F.S.L. Lyons as

> A large, bearded, tweedy and altogether formidable man. He appears as "the Citizen" in Joyce's *Ulysses* and no doubt many experienced the same sort of treatment he meted out to Leopold Bloom. (221)

He then founded the GAA on November 1, 1884 in Thurles, County Tipperary (Lyons 221). After that meeting, P.D. Mengin wrote, romantically, that

> …like the martial spirit of the race, Hurling was at its lowest ebb when Michael Cusack brought together that pioneer band of seven in a Thurles Hotel one dark November day in 1884. Famine, oppression, ruin, almost despair had possessed the anguished land. Like the fiery cross of the highland dams, a blazing camán reappeared on every hill. The Irish nation was reborn. (Cronin 89)

Mengin's quote provides an example of the nationalist construction of hurling as a cultural phoenix rising, like Ireland itself, from the ashes of centuries of colonial domination.

Lyons and Mike Cronin, author of *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland,* note that the organization was political from its inception: at least four of the seven men present at the initial meeting were Fenians and "this connection between the GAA and the extreme wing of the nationalist movement was never lost" (Lyons 221). The GAA was eventually classified as a "secret society" by the colonial police, who recognized its potential to be revolutionary association. In fact, in the early twentieth century the executive positions of the GAA were held predominantly by members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, though no direct connection can be drawn between the GAA as an organization and physical-force nationalists. The events of Bloody Sunday, in Croke Park in November of 1920 reified the nationalist mythology of hurling: after Michael Collins's men destroyed the British spy network in the early morning hours, British soldiers went to the Dublin-Kildare challenge game in Croke Park and fired on the crowd, who were presumed to be nationalist sympathizers. Thirteen people were killed, including Tipperary captain Michael Hogan, for whom the Hogan Stand at the park is named (Cronin 87).

During this time, the GAA grew in popularity in rural areas. Its three principal roles were: to encourage patriotism on the county level; "[inculcate] among its members an uncompromising hostility to foreign games," an attitude reinforced by Archbishop

Croke,[1] the first patron of the GAA; and, most significantly, to awaken "national feeling in rural Ireland" (Lyons 222). In addition, the GAA, like the rest of the cultural movement, celebrated Irish nationalist identity. As Cronin observes, Gaelic games have been constructed as "a privileged depository of racialised Irishness" (Garner 153). Irish games were to be played by Irish men and "the grip of the native ash fortifies [the players] against national submission and racial perversion" (Devlin, qtd in Cronin 89). In fact, members of the security forces in Ireland were (and) banned from playing Gaelic games, which "reinforced the purity not only of the actual games, but also of the Irish race" (McLua, qtd in Garner 155). That ban continues in Northern Ireland, where members of the GAA are often treated with suspicion by Ulster Protestants, the RUC and the security forces because of the organization's political recognition of a thirty-two county republic.

The earliest reference to hurling, a description of the 13th century Battle of Moytura during which the Tuatha de Danaan defeated the Firbolgs in a hurling match that foreshadowed their victory in battle, is rooted in conflict. Ireland's most famous mythological hero, Cuchulainn, was famous for his skill at hurling. Cronin posits, however, that the nationalist connection of Gaelic games with medieval ball games in an "unbroken genealogy" was ideological rather than historical, and "ignored the paradox that the…codification of rules and regulations under a governing body were actually an embodiment of (Anglo-Saxon) late Victorian culture" (Cronin, qtd in Garner 155). Like

[1] According to Lyons, Croke saw English sport as "part and parcel of a general betrayal of national heritage" (222). Croke emphasized both the economics of British imperialism and its threat to Irish masculinity when he wrote: [if we condemn]…the sports that were practiced by our forefathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them, and putting on, with England's stuffs and

An Comisiun and Irish dancing, the GAA oversaw a “native” Irish cultural artifact with all the efficiency associated with the colonizer.

Parallels between the hurling pitch and battlefield are easily drawn. Hurling functioned historically as warrior training: in continuing that tradition, inmates of internment camps in Ireland and Wales after the 1916 Rising kept physically fit by organizing hurling teams. The battle metaphor is evident in the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, which describes hurling as

> …a mad kind of aerial hockey invented to make the English feel embarrassed about tiggy-touchwood soccer, a hurling match is perhaps the fastest spectator sport in the world (with only ice hockey matching it for up-close frenzy). From a distance it resembles a roaming pack-fight between men with thin pale legs and names like Liam and Sean. At ground level it's much more frightening, a kind of 15-a-side escape from the asylum.

The depiction itself plays into stereotypes of both the Irish and the British as violent and effeminate (respectively), but also, through its inclusion in a popular international tourist guidebook, demonstrates the cultural currency that hurling has in Ireland and abroad.

The games were supported by a strong rural network. In keeping with the origins of the sport during the early days of the GAA, the strongest contemporary teams are from rural counties (traditional powerhouses are Kilkenny, Wexford, Cork and Tipperary, though Galway, Offaly, Limerick and Clare came into their own in the 1990s), playing into the stereotype of the noble and sturdy peasant. Players usually start young and work their way through the provincial system, where teams are organized around towns and

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broadcloths her masher habits, and such other effeminate follies as she may recommend, we had better and once, and publicly, abjure our nationality…” (qtd in Lyons 222).

parishes. The combination of Church and GAA ensured that the games would remain emblematic of Gaelic and Catholic Ireland while providing a vision of the "nation as family, a set of parishes united in commitment to the appreciation of an overarching 'imaginative possession'" (Garner 155). In keeping with the idea of the nation—and the teams—as family, there is no professional national hurling team. The best players represent their counties on provincial pitches, ultimately playing weekend matches in Dublin's legendary Croke Park. To preserve the "purity" of the sport, the GAA has maintained its players' amateur status. In 1995, however, Guinness signed on as the sponsor of the annual hurling championship. The merger, which resulted in a series of clever advertising campaigns, increased attendance at hurling matches. It was also widely criticized for encouraging alcohol consumption and for commercializing the sport. The negative reactions to the Guinness campaign reveal a continued impulse to protect the national game.

**FAIR PLAY: SPORT IN *THE CRYING GAME***

One of the most famous cinematic representations of sport, empire and identity occurs in Neil Jordan's 1992 film *The Crying Game*. In Jordan's film, Jody, a member of the British military held hostage by the IRA, appears in his cricket whites both in the photograph treasured by his lover, Dil, and in his sympathetic captor Fergus's dream sequences. As a West Indian, Jody is an ironic representative of England: although in some ways he embodies the image of the cricket-playing English soldier he is a colonized black man maintaining the Empire in the north of Ireland.

*The Crying Game,* which was based in part on Frank O'Connor's short story "Guests of the Nation" and Brendan Behan's drama *An Giall/The Hostage*, was the first of several important films about the IRA in the 1990s, most notably Jim Sheridan's films *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and *The Boxer* (1997) and Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996). Although *The Crying Game* and *The Boxer* use historical background to propel the plot,[2] they do not focus as exclusively on a particular moment, as do *In the Name of the Father,* which follows the trials and false imprisonment of the Guilford Four and Maguire Seven, *Some Mother's Son,* which dramatizes the 1981 Hunger Strikes, and recent films depicting Bloody Sunday (*Bloody Sunday,* Paul Greengrass and *Sunday,* Charles McDougall, both 2002). In addition, *The Crying Game* and *The Boxer* both offer a critique of IRA through the portrayal of hardline characters like Peter and Jude[3] in the former and Harry in the latter, and the difficulty faced by the protagonists, Fergus in *The Crying Game* and Danny in *The Boxer,* when they attempt to leave the organization. I would argue that *The Crying Game* and *The Boxer* are the critical bookends of a decade of film about the IRA, although here I focus exclusively on *The Crying Game* and its use of sport to comment on transnational imperial identity politics.[4]

[2] 1992, the year *The Crying Game* was released, was the year of the Brooke Mayhew talks in Northern Ireland. It was a violent year, with a several fatal sectarian attacks, a number of large bombs and significant property damage through the North, especially in Belfast, as well as bombings on the British mainland. There were a series of bombings in London in October of 1992 in addition to bombs throughout the year, including the Baltic Exchange bomb in London that resulted in three fatalities. Downing Street was twice a target of small IRA bombs. Sheridan uses the 1996 IRA ceasefire as the backdrop to *The Boxer.*

[3] A number of critics have pointed out Jordan's poisonous portrayal of Jude. See Katrina Irving, "EU-Phoria? Irish National Identity, European Union and *The Crying Game*" and Elizabeth Cullingford, "There's Many a Good Heart Beats Under a Khaki Tunic" in *Ireland's Others.*

[4] *The Boxer* also uses sport as metaphor, though Sheridan primarily uses boxing to comment on sectarian relationships and internecine strife in 1996 Belfast.

Many scholars have examined the racial and sexual politics of the film and the film's famous "secret," which, as Kathleen Lyons notes, has prompted numerous "psychoanalytic interpretations of the phallic economy of the film" (91). I am most interested in the visual metaphors of cricket and hurling, and how those metaphors address issues of ethnic identity. The first lines of the film are about cricket: Jody, who is at a carnival with Jude, wins a ring toss game and says, "And that…is cricket, hon." After Jody is taken hostage the audience, along with Fergus, sees a photograph of Jody in his cricket whites. The photo, which he keeps in his wallet in the inside breast pocket of his jacket, is on top of the picture he wants to show Fergus: that of his lover, Dil. Fergus says

> F: You like cricket?
> J: Best game in the world.
> F: You ever seen hurling?
> J: That game where a bunch of Paddies whack sticks at each other?
> F: Best game in the world.
> J: Never.
> F: The fastest.
> J: Not in Antigua…cricket's the black man's game. Kids play from the age of two…then we moved to Tottenham and it was all different.
> F: How was it different?
> J: Toff's game there. Not at home. So when you come to shoot me, Paddy, remember that you're getting rid of a shit-hot bowler.
> F: I'll bear it in mind. And by the way, it's not Paddy.

In this scene the two men discuss the sports that define them: Fergus's allegiance to hurling, whose governing body has always supported a 32 county Irish republic, is natural given his nationalist identity. Furthermore, hurling was the Irish response to sports like cricket, which were limited primarily to play at Trinity College and in Ulster (Cronin 114). In fact, Cronin argues that the GAA caused "the failure of British

colonialism in the sporting arena, a failure that other nationalist groups around the globe were unable to duplicate" (114).

While there is no Caribbean equivalent to the GAA, Jody, a black man in cricket whites, remembers not the type of cricket that he found in Tottenham, but "the black man's game" that he knew in Antigua. In the Caribbean, unlike England, cricket was a game of the people: As Cullingford observes,

> In England, cricket still belongs to the "toffs", but in Antigua it belongs to the people. Like the Irish mastery of the English language, cricket has become a way of beating the colonizer at his own game. (62)

C.L.R. James, in *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), uses cricket to comment on class, colonialism, race and nationalism in his native Trinidad. He celebrates the skill of West Indian cricket players like premiere batsman Larry Constantine, who, in the 1930s, mastered the game to the extent that he migrated to London to play in the imperial metropolis. James calls for the reappropriation and subversion of the British sport as a means of anti-colonial resistance.[5] The 1930s marked the beginning of the decline of the British Empire and the growth of West Indian nationalism that, in 1962, just before James's book was published, would lead to independence for Trinidad and Jamaica. The story of West Indian cricket functions historically as a national narrative and an allegory for the end of Empire. This background further complicates Jody's position within the

[5] Critics have observed that although James calls for the subversive use of cricket, he might be overlooking the value of indigenous cultural practices to accomplish the same goals. He has also been criticized for his celebration of Caribbean cricket players' ability to "play by the rules" of the colonizer. James and the GAA share an impulse to return to a Victorian orderliness, either in the game they play or the organization they create.

imperial project by connecting him to an independence movement not unlike that of his captor.

Although their sport talk seems superficial, Jody's description of hurling racializes the Irish as violent "Paddies."[6] Although hurling is undeniably violent, the GAA was committed to the fair-play ethic since, "by playing the games cleanly and with good temper, despite the inherently violent nature of the hurling and Gaelic football, the GAA could dismiss the British caricature [of the Irish as violent and uncontrollable]" (Cronin 110). Even as Jody complains about the racial epithets directed towards him since he arrived in Northern Ireland, where he is an obvious racial other, he assumes certain information about Fergus's ethnicity, referring to "your people" when he tells Fergus that he knows the IRA will not let him go because it is not in their "nature." When Fergus responds, "what the fuck do you know about my people?" Jody replies, "only that they're tough, undeluded motherfuckers and it's not in your nature to let me go…" Lyons, in her interpretation of the scene, argues that "Jody enacts an essentializing rhetoric as a way of belittling and ideologically containing Fergus, his captor. This scene is the best example of the inversions of racial and ethnic discourses and identities in the film that prohibit clear-cut readings of identity and power" (94). Many critics have commented on the colonial identities of both characters. Katrina Irving posits that

> The film intimates that the bond that grows between the two men is premised on their positions as, respectively, subject and former subject of a colonized or formerly colonized state, as well as on their mutual marginalization within their own cultures. They are both economically disadvantaged (they are working class)

[6] Jody's description echoes that in the *Lonely Planet,* which substitutes "Liam and Sean" for "Paddy" but also refers to the violence of the game.

> and members of minority communities (Fergus as a Catholic in Northern Ireland and Jody as a black in Britain). (300)

Other critics challenge the imperial parallelism: bell hooks sees Fergus as a colonizer in his pursuit of Dil. To her, Fergus is not a member of an 'emergent' ethnic group but a white man whose race privileges him (Cullingford 133).

When Fergus takes Jody into the woods to execute him, Jody revisits their conversation about sport:

> J: Hurling's a fast game, isn't it Fergus?
> F: The fastest.
> J: Faster than cricket…So if I ran there's no way I could beat you, is there?
> F: You won't run.
> J: But if I did, you wouldn't shoot a brother in the back…

Jody breaks free and runs, but Fergus, in a gesture of "fair play" and brotherhood, refuses to shoot Jody in the back. Jody then runs into the street and is hit by a British Army Saracen; he is killed by his own "side," to which he is essentially invisible. In the end, Jordan suggests, he and Fergus are playing for the same anti-colonial team.

Fergus immigrates to London after Jody's death, in part to escape his commitment to the IRA, in part to escape his guilt over Jody's death and seek out Dil, Jody's lover. Like Jody in Ireland, he experiences direct racism. Although he assumes the name Jimmy, a less obviously Irish name than Fergus, the wealthy manager of the London building site where he is employed refers to him as "Pat" and "Mick."

The building site on which Fergus works overlooks a cricket pitch: what he sees from his vantage point on the scaffolding, as well as the discrimination he experiences

from his boss, remind him of Jody.[7] Fergus continues to have visions of him in his cricket uniform, including during moments of intimacy with Dil, the centerpiece of whose shrine to Jody is the cricket photograph. When Fergus realizes that he must disguise Dil to keep her safe from Jude, he does so by cutting her hair and dressing her in Jody's outfit from the photo. Dil, in reverse drag, completes the triangle by "becoming" Jody. Thus Jody, Fergus and Dil all claim the "whiteness" of cricket to challenge the Irish/British, black/white, male/female and hetero/homosexual binaries that the film addresses.

### "GUESTS OF THE NATION": IMMIGRANTS, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES IN CONTEMPORARY IRELAND

In a reversal of Fergus's experience as an Irish emigrant, Ireland has, despite its "legacy of anti-colonial struggle and anti-Irish racism throughout its diaspora," a "destination for members of other diasporas, many with their own legacy of colonialism and racism" (White 104). Immigration into Ireland increased as the Irish economy boomed: between April of 2004 and April of 2005, an estimated 70,000 people immigrated to Ireland. Many, however, were Irish citizens returning as a result of the weak dollar and poor economy in the United States. This influx of immigrants, a new experience in a country whose greatest export has been people, has caused disproportionate panic in some parts of Irish society even though only 6% of the population is "non-Irish." Although the *Irish Times* estimates that Ireland needs to continue to attract around 50,000 immigrants a year in order to maintain economic growth, attitudes towards migrant works are overwhelmingly negative.

[7] Katrina Irving argues that Jody, as a British soldier, would have had a higher class standing in England

Despite particular concern about the “flood” of asylum seekers and refugees into Ireland, Ireland receives only about 2.7% of the EU’s refugee population (amnesty.ie). The term “asylum seeker,” however, has come to be a racialized epithet, what Elisa Joy White describes as “a kind of code for people of colour…a way of vilifying and a method of noting that a person has a precarious position in society” (107). The terms “immigrant,” “asylum seeker” and “refugee” are often conflated in public discourse despite the fact that they are three distinct groups. An immigrant is typically an economic migrant, most often from within the European Union. A refugee, according to Amnesty International, is a person who is “outside her country of origin and genuinely risks serious human rights abuses because of who she is or what she believes. She cannot or will not return because her government cannot or will not protect her.” Asylum seekers are individuals who are seeking refugee status. While they wait for the government of their asylum country to determine whether or not to award them refugee status, they should be protected by international refugee law (www.amnesty.org).

Drawing from theories of subaltern studies, I argue that the presence of immigrants “others” in Irish society “haunts” the Irish, reminding them of their own traumatic history of colonization and emigration, from which they have only recently emerged. Many commentators have noted the irony of a formerly colonized country with a history of mass emigration becoming an inhospitable port for other postcolonial populations. Some ask, in the words of Lear, whether the Irish are “more sinned against than sinning” when it comes to racism?

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than Fergus, a Northern Irish day laborer (99).

Ireland's colonial past and postcolonial present provide what many scholars read as the origins of racism in Ireland. In the debate on racist attitudes, Ireland's presumed monoculturalism and homogeneity are often cited as reasons why racism from within Irish society has only recently become a significant issue. In 1995 Luke Gibbons observed that "…there may well be some truth in the observation that the only reason the Irish are not racist at home is that there are not enough racial minorities or non-Europeans in the country to make immigration a social problem…" (208). Following the influx of immigrants in recent years, however, both he and other contemporary scholars note that Ireland's ostensible lack of racism conceals the historical presence of endogamous racism, most notably towards Irish Travellers, but also towards a small Jewish population.

Such anti-Semitism is evidenced by the treatment of Leopold Bloom in the "Cyclops" chapter of *Ulysses.* Bloom's Irishness is questioned by the hyper-nationalist Citizen who was inspired by GAA founder Michael Cusack. The Citizen, drinking in Kiernan's pub, asks Bloom: "What is your nation…" and Bloom replies, "Ireland…I was born here. Ireland" (272). His response prompts the Citizen to spit on the floor; he grows more contemptuous when Bloom says, "I belong to a race too…that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant" (273). The Citizen does not relate his own colonial experience to that of Bloom. Instead he attacks Bloom, that "bloody jewman" for pointing out that "Your God was a jew. Christ was a jew like me" (280). Bloom, then, is one of the most famous literary examples of an individual racialized and excluded by nationalist discourse.

The nationalist rhetoric that informed the historical construction of Irish identity reified the twentieth-century, postcolonial version of Irishness as a "Catholic, Gaelic, idealized rural west of Ireland ideal-type…consolidated by the state and Church in the early years of the Republic" (Garner 23). That monocultural identity, in part created by the British in a process of cultural othering, and in part adapted by Irish nationalists as a reaction to that colonial construction, speaks to Ireland's sometimes contested status as a former colony. Several scholars have connected Ireland's colonial past to instances of racism in its present: Gibbons argues that origins of Irish racism stem from the British imperial model to which Ireland was exposed. He does not deny that the Irish participated in "hegemonic forms of racism in the United States and Australia" but believes that such behavior was "a process of identifying with existing supremacist ideologies, derived mainly from the same legacy of British colonialism from which they were trying to escape" (174-5).[8]

Garner notes, however, that "the racist ideologies used to justify and sustain inequalities (in Ireland also) were engaged with and often absorbed by the Irish abroad" (130). Bill Rolston also describes the transatlantic transmission of racism: he contends that the Irish learned racism as immigrants and such attitudes, particularly against African-Americans in nineteenth century America, returned to communities in Ireland. This scholarship, as well as work that complicates the debate about Ireland's postcoloniality, points out the complicity of some Irish citizens in the imperial project. These arguments translate to some attitudes towards immigrant populations in

[8] See also Bill Rolston: "Irish emigration and racism," in *Race and Class,* vol.45, #2, for a discussion of how the Irish emigrant experience influenced racist attitudes within Ireland.

contemporary Ireland: the shared colonial and postcolonial experiences of the Irish and, for example, Nigerians, has done little to smooth the social and legislative relationship between the two groups.

### PLAY BALL: CHARLIE O'NEILL'S *HURL*

Charlie O'Neill's as yet unpublished play *Hurl*, which was performed at the Galway Arts Festival and the Dublin Theatre Festival in the summer and fall of 2003, uses hurling to address the situation of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The play is one of the first dramatic productions to focus on Ireland's new minority population, though the multicultural newspaper *Metro Eireann*, founded by two Nigerian journalists, has provided an important venue for immigrant voices and issues. The paper has published Roddy Doyle's serial fiction "I Understand" and "New Boy" as well as writing by immigrants and anti-racism activists. *Hurl* is an ambitious play that does the important work of placing immigrants and asylum seekers and their stories on the Irish stage. O'Neill situates a controversial topic within the mythic framework of hurling: his play reveals implicit and explicit tensions that exist in the troubled and troubling use of sport as metaphor and in the contemporary immigrant situation dramatized in the play. O'Neill, like Jordan, challenges audience expectation by claiming a "national" sport for a new kind of national character. Just as Jordan's choice of Jody the gentle West Indian cricket player as a symbol of imperial Britain forces viewers to reconsider their ideas of Englishness, O'Neill's characters push a contemporary Irish audience to reassess what it means to be Irish.

The play, which chronicles the efforts of a group of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants to organize a hurling team in their rural West of Ireland community, was produced by the Barabbas theatre company, whose trademark is the intense physicality of their plays. *Hurl* is staged on a hurling pitch and involves complicated choreography to represent the series of hurling matches. The 32 roles in the play are played by only eight actors. The team, which comes to be known as the Freetown Slashers after the village in Africa where the team organizer learned the sport, is made up primarily of refugees and asylum seekers who want to join the local club to bring some of the immigrant groups together and, more practically, to pass the time. Musa, an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone, points out that they have very little to do since they aren't allowed to work or take classes.

The numbers of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees has been in flux over the past decade. The *Irish Times* reports that in 1992, only 39 people sought asylum in Ireland: between 2000-2002, the annual average was 11,000. Numbers have dropped considerably since 2002—only 5000 applications were made in 2004. The shift may reflect changes in Ireland's immigration legislation, although the number of refugee and asylum seekers throughout Europe has decreased, in part because of the addition of Eastern European countries to the EU. The reported number of asylum seekers currently in Ireland is inconsistent but seems to be between 6,500 and 7,280 individuals living in direct provision centers.[9] Direct provision began in 2000 under then Minister of Justice

[9] Because of the de crease in the number of asylum seekers entering Ireland, nine direct provision centers are being closed, including the Quiet Man Hostel in Cong, Co.Galway. The closings have caused some controversy, both because they provide income for the communities in which they operate and because those housed in the provision centers have to readjust to another part of the country (O'Brien).

John O'Donoghue, who feared that Britain's shift from cash to food vouchers would result in Ireland being "overwhelmed" by "non-genuine asylum seekers." Asylum seekers, like those of O'Neill's play, are relocated from Dublin to rural provision centers within two weeks of their arrival in Ireland. The largest direct provision center is outside of Athlone, which has recently opened its first African shop. These centers provide basic housing (usually in a hostel or mobile home), three meals a day (one loaf of bread, 2 liters of milk, one piece of fruit, pasta or rice with tomato sauce and either fish or chicken) and 19.10 euro a week per adult, 9.60 euro per child. Those living under direct provision are not allowed to pursue employment or education (with the exception of children) and families are often separated and placed in single-sex housing.[10]

Musa, the team captain, creates the hurling team in large part to keep those at the relocation center active, as well as to try to build a community in difficult circumstances. He learned hurling from Lofty, a former missionary priest in Africa who has returned to rural Ireland, which he refers to as "the third world with more clothes on." Musa and his potential teammates, including Fatmata, a Sierra Leonean woman, Santos, an economic refugee from Argentina with Irish roots, two Bosnians, Istlav and Miroslav, a Nigerian and a Vietnamese man, persuade Lofty to take on coaching duties, much to the displeasure of Rusty, the local GAA chairman. Rusty tries to dissuade the team from playing, first by telling them that the town already has a club hurling team, then by having the Slashers compete against a team handpicked for their size and tendency towards brutality.

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[10] For reading on the impact of the direct provision system on the lives of asylum seekers, see the following stories: "Asylum Families Kept Apart," *Irish Times,* June 24, 2005; "Faces show true picture of refugees,"

Lofty and the team inspire persevere, despite the discrimination they experience in their daily lives and the attempts made to discourage them from playing hurling. In a locker room pep talk, Lofty blends romanticized Irish mysticism with social commentary as he tells his team that they have to win the match with "poetry…we don't have the physical force to play hard hurling…the hurling skills to play tight hurling…the history to play patriotic hurling…" The Freetown Slashers win enough matches to become the provincial champions and the darlings of a pseudo-RTE reportage. Rusty, enraged, pursues their paperwork and immigration status, saying that "they'll rue the day they ever upset this lovely little country we've built for ourselves." His actions build on his previous xenophobic rhetoric, when he complains to Lofty that "…they're representing the club at our own, native game and not a Paddy among them…haven't they enough without taking our game as well?" Rusty, in his red wig and tartan tam o'shanter, symbolizes a return to the hyper-nationalism, previously depicted by Michael Cusack and the Citizen and currently represented by Michael McDowell, the current Minister for Justice.

In May 2005 McDowell, referred to "the nonsense that lies behind a huge amount of these bogus claims" while speaking to the Oireachtas Justice Committee. He went on to say

> I'm making it very clear that you will be going home within 10 weeks of making a claim in Ireland, and I would much prefer to have a system where I could have an interview at the airport, find out the cock and bull stories that are going on and put them on the next flight. But unfortunately the UN Convention requires me to go through due process in respect of all these claims. (Coulter)

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*Irish Times,* June 20, 2005.

McDowell and his supporters reference asylum requests that cite "fears of persecution from a secret cult . . . fear of local tribal customs as the first-born son of a royal family . . . heir to father's throne . . . sacrifice of first-born child . . . fear that a former employer may kill her and place body parts around the house . . . male members of tribe carry out ritual sacrifices of children . . ." as evidence of "bogus claims," stating that only 1% of Nigerian asylum claims, one of the largest national groups of asylum seekers, are approved across Europe (*Financial Times).*[11] About 95% of asylum appeals are rejected by the refugee appeals tribunal which, unlike its counterparts in England, Australia or Canada, refuses to publish its decisions. This secrecy, combined with the fact that those who sit on the tribunal are paid a fee per case, has caused many people to question the system.

McDowell's attitude is reflected in contemporary legislation directed towards asylum seekers and refugees: on June 11, 2004 the "citizenship" referendum revoking the right to citizenship by birth passed with an 80% approval vote. It became the 27th referendum to the Irish constitution and was signed into law on June 24, 2004, stating that

[11] McDowell defended his statement on the Department of Justice website. He stated: A small but well placed minority of commentators have sought to create the impression that Ireland's treatment of asylum seekers is harsh and unfair. They have consistently concealed the real facts from the Irish people. Moreover, they have sought to create the impression that anyone who points out the true situation is engaging in political racism. They hint at international comparisons which do not exist.
They refuse to address the very large abuse of asylum protection in Ireland. They claim to believe that it is wrong to point out what is happening lest it create prejudice against genuine asylum seekers. They are engaging in a form of verbal intimidation of those who would tell the truth." He goes on to claim that meeting the international requirements of the Geneva Convention is central to the Irish government's treatment of asylum seekers. He also says that the "recognition rate for refugee status at first instance compares favourably to other European countries."
(http://www.justice.ie/80256E01003A02CF/vWeb/pcJUSQ6D6ER3-en/)

> A person born on the island of Ireland, which includes its island and seas, who does not have a the time of the birth of that person, at least one parent who is an Irish citizen or entitled to be an Irish citizen is not entitled to Irish citizenship or nationality. (Bunracht)

The law was introduced by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fáil party in coalition with the Progressive Democrats. It was supported "in principle" by Fine Gael and opposed by Sinn Féin, Labour, the SDLP and Green parties, as well as by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties. The referendum followed a January 2003 decision that made it constitutional for the government to deport the parents of children who were Irish citizens and reversed the citizenship by birth law that had existed in the state in law since 1922 and in the constitution since 1999.[12] Before the referendum Ireland was the only member of the EU to legislate citizenship by birth.[13]

In O'Neill's play, the audience gradually learns about the diverse circumstances that have brought the Freetown Slashers to McDowell and Rusty's "lovely little country." Their stories are interwoven with the narration of the hurling matches, a device which prevents them from becoming too didactic. Musa is recently arrived from Sierra Leone, where he was a child soldier. Ndingi blew up oil pipelines in his native Nigeria because, he explains to an Irish opponent, "I don't like people taking over my place." Miroslav, a Bosnian, arrived in 1994, well before Musa and Ndingi. He says that he immediately went to the west, where, in an ironic echo of Irish emigrants to the US and the UK, he worked for cash on a "very dangerous" building site. He was introduced to hurling by

[12] The law entered the constitution in 1999 to protect the Irish citizenship of Northern Irish citizens following the Good Friday Agreement.

[13] Ireland maintains a policy of "birthright citizenship" by which any person born to an Irish parent, in Ireland or abroad, is automatically an Irish citizen. The children of those individuals, the grandchildren of

fellow workers, who took him to the All-Ireland finals in Croke Park. To celebrate their team's victory, the men celebrate by heading to a lap dancing club where Miroslav encounters a former schoolmate named Katerina; the chance meeting references the fact that a good deal of the sex trade in Ireland employs women from eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. The first lap dancing club in Ireland opened on the quays in Dublin in 1999. Three years later the number had expanded to 12. O'Neill uses the characters' brief biographies to expose problems in both their native countries and in their new home.

Journalists and activists have recorded the experiences of those seeking asylum from repressive governments, political violence and gender-specific violence such as rape and clitoridectomy.[14] Three Nigerian asylum seekers staying in Athlone list poverty, corruption and threats of violence as their motivation for leaving their country: one woman fears that her daughter would have to undergo genital mutilation, another fled after threats to her unborn child when she refused scarification rituals following her marriage ("Asylum families kept apart"). British photographer Howard Davies, who has photographed refugee populations around the world and whose exhibit on Irish asylum seekers, "Asyland," was on display in Temple Bar, suggests that those who question the validity of some asylum claims, including McDowell "go out and see some of the situations that people are fleeing from. Or…at least read a few Amnesty reports" ("Face show true pictures of refugees").

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an Irish citizen, are entitled to "birthright citizenship" through the documentation of their parent and grandparent's citizenship.

[14] See the following stories for personal narratives: "Asylum Families Kept Apart," *Irish Times,* June 24, 2005;

As Fintan O'Toole wrote in his review for the *Irish Times*, O'Neill "wants to show us…the real world in which people end up in Ireland because they are fleeing unspeakable horrors and in which, when they get here, they face an often cruel asylum system." But even as O'Neill challenges audiences to reconsider their perceptions of asylum seekers and their definitions of Irishness within the context of the most quintessentially Irish of sports, the problems with the play reflect the tensions that exist within Irish society.

Despite his best intentions, O'Neill slips into stereotype, writing that "Ndingi from Nigeria comes flying out to the ball like a gazelle in zero gravity…" Benito, the Argentinian player, feels like a "tiger cat" when he's on the pitch. The entire team is described as "exotic," and the crowd for one of their early matches is described as "having an extra bit of colour…a slight sense of madness." The players are encouraged to play like madmen, and in the stage production they practice using martial arts and prepare for matches by painting their faces and howling at their opponents. Lofty, the coach, sees their race as an advantage. He tells them: "they'll never have met a team like ye…when they're running in on goal and facing a huge pair of white eyes jumpin the fuck out of a mad black face, that'll throw them. And when that black face won't go away, when it sticks to them like cattle brand on a heifer's ass, that'll throw them more…" He draws particularly on African stereotypes to describe the team as wild, animalistic "others" who cannot be escaped.

O'Neill also employs the literary shortcut of one dimensional stereotype for the Irish characters. Lofty, the former missionary priest, is an alcoholic who can't escape his memories of Africa; his character strongly echoes that of Father Jack in Friel's *Dancing*

*at Lughnasa.* Musa tells Lofty that the priest has saved him and, eventually, Lofty realizes that he has been "saved" by the African and his teammates, who have provided the means of his redemption. Rusty the GAA chairman, with his overt racism and strong country accent, falls into the category described by the characters as "muck savage bogman."

In the end Rusty turns Musa in to immigration authorities and he is sent back to Sierra Leone because his paperwork is not in order, which he reads as a certain death sentence. His team wins the provincial championship without him after Lofty uses his deportation to motivate the players, saying "Do it for Musa. He broke his heart to make something amazing happen here. And by Christ, yeer going to break years to help him finish it! Go to war lads. Yeer guerilla hurlers." The description reinforces the position of the Freetown Slashers as warriors, either in their own countries, like Musa the child soldier, or as they fight to remain in Ireland, where they exist precariously in a sometimes hostile society. It also brings 80 years of hurling full circle by drawing a parallel between these "guerilla fighters" emerging from asylum centers and rural relocation venues and the Irishmen held in prisoner of war camps following the 1916 Rising, when hurling was a physical expression of cultural nationalism. The last scene of the play features Musa reading the victory headlines in Irish from his jail cell; as Christie Fox writes, "The end of the play presents a stark reminder of this tenuous situation, as one of the former members of the team sits in a prison cell in his home country. His future remains uncertain, and the decision to end on this note, rather than the triumphalism of the match, brings *gravitas* to the performance." O'Neill chooses the realism over a completely happy ending.

This play will probably not enter the Irish dramatic canon anytime soon; as Fintan O'Toole wrote in his review, "like the team it depicts, Hurl may not be quite at ease with the subtler skills of the form, but its heart, its funny-bone and its brain are in the right place and it swings its hurley in the right direction." The problems with the representations reflect the lack of vocabulary to discuss the situation of immigrants and asylum seekers in Ireland under even in the best circumstances; the means of resolving the issues presented by immigrant communities do not yet exist, even on the stage. The implicit tension revealed in the play speaks as loudly as the explicit agenda of the playwright. *Hurl*, for all its flaws, is an ambitious and important gesture; for the first time on Irish stages, Irish immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees appear as the central characters. As O'Toole notes, "if Hurl has an uncertain array of modes and moods, it is probably because, as things stand, the story of Ireland's encounter with immigration is a narrative with a confused beginning, a murky middle and an unknown end."

The complexity of *The Crying Game* and *Hurl* is that the ethnic "other" plays, and wins, the national game: the audience's sympathy lies with the appropriator, either Jody the Caribbean immigrant or the multi-ethnic hurlers. The success of colonial populations at games like cricket in many cases signaled the decline of the British Empire (C.L.R. James): in the example of hurling, O'Neill's challenge to the monolithic model of Irish identity might denote that the necessity for strategic essentialism of nationalist rhetoric is over. His play also suggests, however, that Irish society must embrace this turning point and find a way to incorporate new identities into the definition of Irish identity.

**EMERGING VOICES: IMMIGRATION ON FILM**

In March of 2002, Desmond Bell's documentary *The Last Storyteller* debuted on TG4, the Irish language television station. The film chronicles the life of Sean O hEochaidh, who began collecting stories in his native Donegal during the 1930s for the Irish Folklore Commission. Bell retells a number of O hEochaidh's stories, ending with "The Pig-headed Child." "The Pig-headed Child," the only story in the documentary to be depicted in the present, is the cautionary tale of wealthy farmer, a "half-gentleman," who refuses to help a poor woman and her child. He orders his staff to "tell that sow and her litter to get off my land." He brings a curse upon his house, since "you should never liken a Christian to a beast," or turn away a person in need. The story evokes the folk song "The Lass of Aughrim," which Bell plays in the background as his contemporary "poor woman," a Romanian immigrant, walks the streets of Dublin with her children.[15] In Bell's interpretation, the "big farmer" is a filmmaker who lives in a comfortable home in a suburban neighborhood with his pregnant wife. He is consumed by his documentary about the "anti-colonial narratives" found in Irish folk and fairy tales. He and his crew pay the Romanian woman and her children to be the subjects of their video. When the woman, cold and desperate, comes to his doorstep as they are finishing the video, however, he refuses her help. He tells her "this is my home," and threatens to call the guards if she stays on his doorstep. His wife goes into labor soon after, and she delivers a baby girl with the head of a pig. By retelling O hEochaid's tale in present-day Dublin, Bell indicts Irish society for its blindness to the plight of the new "lasses of Aughrim":

[15] "The Lass of Aughrim" tells the story of a young woman who bears Lord Gregory's illegitimate child. Desperate, she goes to him for aid but he refuses to help her and she and the child die on his doorstep.

the poor Irish mother who was condemned by the Anglo-Irish Lord Gregory for reasons of class and ethnicity has become the Romanian immigrant in Temple Bar.

Two other recent films comment on the vexed relationship between the Irish and contemporary immigrants: Daniel O'Hara's *Yu Ming is ainm dom* and Gerry Stembridge's *Black Day at Blackrock.* The former was a short film broadcast on Ireland's Irish language television channel, TG4. O'Hara uses the story of Yu Ming, a young Chinese man who decides to immigrate to Ireland, to expose a loss of language and culture in contemporary Ireland. Yu Ming reads that the official language of Ireland is Irish, so he dedicates himself to learning Gaelic. His arrival in Dublin is complicated by his lack of English: when he sits down in a pub and orders in Irish, the barman asks if he is speaking Chinese. Only a very old man at the bar recognizes the language and tells Yu Ming that to find Irish speakers, he'll have to go to the Gaeltacht. As he and Yu Ming speak Irish the other patrons are amazed that their Irish friend can "speak Chinese." Yu Ming ends up in the west of Ireland, pulling pints and speaking Irish to tourists. The film demonstrates the deracination of Irish culture: the barman is unable to recognize his native language and the old man at the bar has never had the opportunity to speak Irish in his own local.  Through Yu Ming, O'Hara comments on fact that it takes an immigrant not only to point out the loss of language, but to fill the stereotypical role of Irish-speaking barkeep in the west of Ireland.

The movie *Black Day at Blackrock,* which plays on the name of a famous western, takes place in the coastal town of Blackrock, just outside of Dublin. The film was commissioned by the Irish national television channel, RTE, and directed by Gerry

Stembridge. Stembridge, who directed the Temple Bar film *About Adam*, has also directed films about abortion (*The Truth about Claire)* and domestic violence.

The film satirizes Blackrock's residents and their reaction to the impending arrival of 30 asylum seekers and refugees to stay at the local hostel, Ard na Rí, which, ironically, means "high ground of the king." One of the main characters, Eugene, like the Citizen and Rusty, is a version of the hyper-nationalist, hyper-conservative character. He lives in a trailer park and drives a big red American car with a cowboy hat hanging from the rearview mirror and a statue of Jesus on the dashboard. He says that once the refugees arrive the residents of Blackrock will constantly "be bumping into a big pair of lips…we won't be able to buy a sweet in a shop without a translator." Eugene is convinced that the asylum seekers are arriving because "we're a soft touch here with the Live Aid and the black babies…"[16] The "black babies" were a perpetual charitable cause in twentieth century Ireland and, along with missionary work in Africa, influenced the perception of Africans in Ireland as examples of "passivity and weakness" (130). Elisa Joy White, in her work on African communities in Dublin, notes the disconnect between reactions to the "Black Babies" of charity work and the "Black Babies" on the streets of Dublin.

At the other end of the spectrum are characters like Grace and Tom, a mother and son who run an organic farm, and Brian, who teaches at the local school, the patron saint

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[16] Live Aid and the Black Babies are two of the most famous charities in 20th century Ireland. Live Aid was an enormous charity concert organized by Bob Geldof in 1985 to raise money for famine in Africa. Twenty years later he organized Live 8, a series of charity concerts around the world, to draw attention to poverty in Africa as the governments of G8 countries met in Scotland. "Black Babies" was common shorthand for charities like Trocáire, Catholic organizations that encouraged children to donate money, especially during Lent, to save the "black babies" in Africa.

of which is St. Martin de Porres, the first black saint of the Americas.[17] Brian makes repeated efforts at community outreach, leading a town meeting during which he uses a "primary text," a letter written by a Famine emigrant in New York to his wife in Ireland, to parallel the situations of current immigrants into Ireland with those who left Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Stembridge to points out the hypocrisy of many attitudes towards asylums seekers and refugees through the actions of Blackrock's resident: Eugene's store, with a prominently displayed "Be Irish, Buy Irish" sticker on the front door, stocks Old El Paso nachos, Italian breadsticks, Aunt Jemima pancake mix and Uncle Ben's rice. The women who work at the local beauty shop say that "black people are beautiful…Muhammed Ali, Denzel Washington…but they aren't using our town as a dumping ground." Conversely, Kate, who runs the Ard na Rí hostel, is happy to host the refugees and asylum seekers, though she won't take "busloads of American blue rinses." Even the government officials are targets of Stembridge's criticism: Aodhann and Grainne, civil servants in dark suits with excellent Irish language credentials, are "just fulfilling the obligations of the minister [of justice] to the EU."

Although the characters are meant to be caricatures, the racism exhibited by Eugene and his supporters reflects American xenophobia, one associated with southern masculinity. As a result, Eugene is not represented as entirely Irish, thus shifting the responsibility for racist attitudes onto another culture, one that is presented as one-

[17] St. Martin de Porres was born in Peru in 1579, the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman and a freed slave. He was a servant in a Dominican order and because of his commitment to the teachings of the order and his work, especially in healing, the order dropped the stipulation that no black person could be admitted to the order. Martin de Porres took vows as a Domincan brother and ran a hospital and animal shelter until his death in 1639.

dimensionally as Eugene himself. Furthermore, Eugene's character is constructed as rural, which often figures as a signifier of xenophobic behavior: on June 4, 2004, the day of the citizenship referendum, the *Irish Times* featured a front page photograph of a guard and presiding election officer of the remote Inisfree island off the Donegal coast carrying the ballot box down a gravel road. Just below the article on the same page, however, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern undercuts the supposition of racism is a purely rural phenomenon by urging Irish citizens to vote for the citizenship referendum since "They [asylum seekers] are prepared to travel here to give birth even though they have no relationship with our country." Despite the visual cue to relate racism to "backwoods" attitudes, the text on the same page reveals that racism is not limited to outposts like Inisfree.

At the very end of the film Eugene burns down Ard na Rí in an attempt to stop the relocation scheme, killing a local indigent man in the process. The asylum seekers and refugees are never actually shown; instead the audience sees a "Celtic Coach" bus full of the refugees who no longer have a destination. Two other residents leave Blackrock and their unhappy marriages and, as they pass the bus, they reminds themselves that with an Irish passport they "can live anywhere [they] like." That didacticism, coupled with a lack of nuance, undercuts *Black Day at Blackrock*'s satirical edge. Like *Hurl*, this film suggests that even the best-intentioned texts dealing with Ireland's immigration situation reflect the difficulty inherent in representing a "new" Ireland.

**CONCLUSION**

For the first time since 1871, more than four million people reside in Ireland. These numbers, the largest since the Famine reduced the population from 8 million to 4

million in the mid-nineteenth century, are the result of increased immigration (including returning Irish nationals), decreased emigration and the side-effects of a healthy economy: better health care, lower infant mortality rates and longer life expectancies. The emerging texts that I have examined in this chapter expose the conflicting attitudes towards immigrant populations in Irish society, whether they are economic migrants, asylum seekers or refugees. Each of these texts does the vital work of placing marginalized populations on the stage, screen or page; equally valuable are the moments through which they indicate the tensions in creating a pluralistic version of Irish society. The negative portrayal of the nationalist rhetoric that has been central to Irish identity for the past century also indicates a significant shift in the construction of Irishness that implies that the monolithic version of Irish identity may no longer be necessary. At the same time, attitudes closely related to the dream of a Gaelic, Catholic and nationalist (as well as white) Ireland remain a part of public and political discourse, from anti-immigrant activists like Aine Ní Chonaill to the Minister of Justice, Michael McDowell. The inclusion of ethnic "others" in sport, drama, satire and film, some of Ireland's greatest cultural signifiers, point to the continued revolutionary potential of the stage/screen/page in Ireland.

# Conclusion

In my introduction I looked to Pearse and Boland's poems "Mise Eire." In this conclusion I return to that famous phrase as I consider who might rewrite "I am Ireland" in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As voices continue to emerge in Irish society, I anticipate that more "strangers in the house" will reclaim and revise the idea of "Ireland" for a new century.

In *Strangers in the House: Twentieth Century Revisions of Irish Literary and Cultural Identity*, I have examined contemporary expressions of Irish identity in literature, film and popular culture, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity. By examining the early twentieth century cultural and literary revival in Ireland, I argue that the legacy of that movement continues to impact certain concepts of Irishness, especially in moments when writers and filmmakers struggle with regressive representations of women and ethnic minorities. The texts I examine challenge the nationalist rhetoric that resonates through debates about contemporary Irish identity, revealing alternative versions of Ireland that have always existed but have only recently emerged in literary and cultural studies.

While my scholarship considers individuals who continue to be peripheral in the "reimagining" of what it means to be Irish in a post-Celtic Tiger, E.U. Ireland, I have focused primarily on gender, specifically heterosexual women, and ethnicity. As I think about future directions for this project, I would like to expand to include a chapter on representations of homosexuality in contemporary Ireland. Homosexuality remains largely invisible in the national narrative, although figures like Oscar Wilde, Roger

Casement and Padraig Pearse "haunt Irish history and culture" (Rose 9).[1] Discussions of homosexuality in Ireland, as seen with Wilde, Casement and Pearse, are often rooted in imperial and anti-imperial rhetoric: Wilde was tried for "gross indecency" in British courts and his homosexuality and effeminacy were linked to his Irishness (Conrad 25); Casement was hanged for treason for his support of the Easter Rising after being defamed in court as a homosexual; Pearse manifested his homosexuality through his writing, which often had nationalist overtones. Both British colonial powers and Irish nationalists accused each other of homosexuality and "degeneracy" in newspapers directed towards British soldiers serving in Ireland during the Anglo-Irish War and the Volunteers they fought.

The eventual decriminalization of homosexuality in the Republic, in 1993, was linked both to imperialism and postcolonialism. Before 1993, Ireland's laws on homosexuality were actually nineteenth century British laws, which were maintained in the Irish constitution. When David Norris, a gay rights activist, Trinity College lecturer and member of the Seanad, began his campaign to reform those laws, the Irish Supreme Court returned to the constitution to support their refusal to amend. Chief Justice C.J. O'Higgins stated that

> on the ground of the Christian nature of our State and on the grounds that the deliberate practice of homosexuality is morally wrong, that it is damaging to the health both of individuals and the public and, finally, that it is potentially harmful to the institution of marriage, I can find no inconsistency with the Constitution in the laws which make such conduct criminal. (qtd. in Conrad 49)

[1] See Susan Cannon Harris's *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* for a discussion of Pearse. For readings of homosexuality in Frank McGuinness's Northern Irish drama, see Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's *Ireland's Others.*

The fear of homosexuality, like the fear of infertile and Magdalen women, was closely tied to concern about the preservation of the family and, metaphorically, the nation. Norris ultimately won his case by arguing that the Irish law "was in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights," which protected the right to privacy (Conrad 52). By aligning Ireland with Europe rather than Britain (Ireland's decriminalization laws went further than British ones), Norris also highlighted Ireland's position as part of the European Union rather than simply a former British colony.

Norris's victory meant that one could be Irish *and* gay or lesbian, rather than Irish *or* gay or lesbian. Despite vocal protests about divorce, contraception and abortion in the 1980s and early 1990s, there was surprisingly little reaction to the Norris Bill from the conservative sectors of Irish society: Kieran Rose argues that this lack of objection is connected to the "positive traditional Irish values arising from the anti-colonial struggle" (3). I would suggest that it is also related to the fact that homosexuality is not as ostensibly related to the "undermining" of the postcolonial family as issues surrounding reproductive rights and marriage laws. Regardless of the cause, Norris's success marked another change in late twentieth century Irish society.

I will foreground this new chapter with a more detailed look at revival constructions of homosexuality, particularly in terms of the colonial and anti-colonial construction of gender and sexuality, and an examination of Irish legislation and the gay rights movement from the 1970s to the present.[2] As in my previous chapters, I will then

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[2] There are relatively few sources about the gay and lesbian experience in contemporary Ireland. I will use Kieran Rose's *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics in Ireland*, Eibhear Walshe's *Sex, Dissent and Nation,* Kathryn Conrad's *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse* and *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards the Twenty-*

turn to literary and cultural artifacts as a way to read the evolution of Irish identity through the representation of gays and lesbians. I plan to include poetry by Mary Dorcey, Ailbhe Smyth and Rita Ann Higgins, fiction and nonfiction by Nell McCafferty, Emma Donoghue and Nuala O Faolain and two recent "Temple Bar" films, *Goldfish Memory* and *Cowboys and Angels*, which explore alternatives to traditional heterosexuality in cosmopolitan Dublin and Limerick.[3]

*first Century,* eds. Ide O'Carroll and Eoin Collins. At the moment I do not plan to examine work by Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien or Somerville and Ross.

[3] "Temple Bar" films are usually glossy romantic comedies shot in contemporary, cosmopolitan Dublin. They tend to focus on young, attractive characters with plenty of disposable income.

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# Vita

Colleen Anne Hynes was born in Cincinnati, Ohio on April 7, 1978. She is the daughter of Charles Peter Hynes and Lenore Dee Hynes, the sister of Gregory Thomas Hynes and the wife of Christopher Trent Caselli. She received a Bachelor of Sciences degree in Education with majors in English, French and Spanish from Indiana University-Bloomington in May 2000. After teaching secondary school in Indiana and County Roscommon, Ireland, she entered the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin in August of 2000.

Permanent Address: 3206 Cherry Lane, Austin, Texas 78703

This dissertation was typed by the author.