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THE ADVENT OF MODERN IRISH DRAMA AND THE ABJECTION OF PEASANT POPULAR CULTURE: FOLKLORE, FAIRS AND FACTION FIGHTING

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger project in which the author is interested in recovering popular performative traditions and practices that have been occluded by the modernist project of the Irish Revival. This erasure has been compounded by subsequent historiographical paradigms that have reinforced the revivalist narrative of theatre history and excluded indigenous forms, traditions and practices (mumming, rhymers, strawboys) along with the wider performative culture of patterns, wakes, fairs, faction fights etc. This essay subjects to scrutiny what the author sees as a disjuncture between the riotous reality of peasant popular culture and its representation in Revivalist dramas to argue that Irish Theatre Studies needs to develop alternative historiographies of performance and to methodologically engage with theoretical models extant in Performance Studies.

Keywords

carnavalesque, popular theatre, Revivalist drama

About the author

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An intelligent peasant, who was brought to see the acting at the Dublin theatre, declared on his return: "I have now seen the great English actors, and heard plays in the English tongue, but poor and dull they seemed to me after the acting of our own people at the wakes and fairs." (Wilde 154)

FOLKLORE AND THEATRE

The origins of the Irish Revival and the advent of modern Irish drama can both be traced back to the extraordinary fieldwork of nineteenth century historians and

antiquarians into peasant folklore and traditions, which later became both source and subject for cultural production in the drama of the founders of the national theatre, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J.M. Synge. Letters written when visiting friends and family in Co. Sligo record how Yeats was often “busy gathering fairytales in the cabins” (Yeats, “Letter” 36) of local peasants—fieldtrips that later led to the publication of his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892) which both portray the “Celt” as more noble than savage. However, it was not until the publication of Douglas Hyde’s *Love Songs of Connacht* (1893) that folklore made its most important contribution. With this publication, folklore emerges as a material resource for cultural nationalism and a metaphysical rationale for its political objectives; it was both an indigenous library and ideologically legitimizing. More importantly, it played a critical role in realizing the ambition of cultivating a national drama for Ireland. Hyde’s collection became:

the source of what has come to be regarded as the most notable and distinctive characteristic of modern Irish drama—the quality of the writing which gave dialect and English as it is spoken in Ireland a new status in world drama. (Ó hAodha vii)

In contrast to the critical attention paid to Hyde’s work, the prodigious output of the Irish speaking scholar, William Carleton, especially his phenomenally popular *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830) has been relatively overlooked in discussions of Irish theatre; an omission all the more significant as its world of wakes, weddings, hedge schools, shebeens, secret societies, faction fights, patterns, sporting races and rivalries provided such rich source material for Revivalist authors. Although Yeats championed Carleton, hailing him as the “historian of his class” (Yeats, “Representative” 29), he was also discomfited by Carleton’s depictions of a less than pleasant peasant life, especially in light of the Irish Literary Theatre’s (ILT) artistic and political pledge to “show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery or of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism ... the Irish people ... are weary of misrepresentation” (Gregory 4). Although revivalist figures like Yeats and Gregory were initially attracted by the vitality of peasant popular culture with its vivid, even violent antagonism toward modernity, they were also cautious of the fine line between Carleton and caricature. Yeats, accordingly, downplayed Carleton’s less than idealistic representation of the Irish peasantry in a most patrician manner:

The true peasant had been admitted to the drawing room of the Big House and asked to tell a story, but the lights and the stage faces bewildered him, and he could not quite talk as he would by his own fireside. He at first exaggerated, in deference to his audience, the fighting, and the dancing, and the merriment, and made the life of his class seem more exuberant and buoyant than it was. What did these ladies and gentlemen, he thought, with their foreign tastes, care for the tragic life of the fields. ("Representative" 29)

Yeats himself was hardly renowned for caring about "the tragic life of the fields"; his modernist *mise en scène* was rarely muddied by the boots of the rarified peasants who traversed the stage of his esoteric drama. His caricature of Carleton is feudal and patronizing: the Big House informing the little man that he didn't really know what he was talking about. Whilst Yeats's charge that Carleton exaggerated the exuberance of his community is *partially* true, it reveals the problematic relationship many revivalists had with Carleton—that though he recorded the lived experience of Irish peasants in ways they never could, his representations of Irish peasant culture could help consolidate stage-Irish stereotypes—the "misrepresentations"—that the ILT sought to smash.¹ Though George Bernard Shaw claimed that the Stage Irishman was the meretricious invention of the English music hall, I would contend that there was great more truth to this stage character than either Shaw or the Revivalists cared to concede. Indeed, the extensive travel literature of the nineteenth century, eye witness accounts from myriad literary and legal sources, the utterly invaluable archives of the Irish Folklore Commission, and a rich oral tradition of music and song all confirm that races, markets, matches, fairs, wakes, funerals, saint days, religious festivals and patterns were often occasions of "fighting, dancing and merriment" as Carleton records. This reality was also to cause revivalists real difficulty, as the very saturnalian aspects of Irish society they now sought to idealize had previously furnished with authority imperial representations of the Irish as pre-modern, savage, ungovernable, irrational, brutish. To represent Ireland anew, the rowdy, Rabelaisian nature of folk culture had to be rarefied; if the carnivalesque peasant world of wakes, patterns and fairs was to appear on the national stage, its Dionysian essence had to be disciplined by an Apollonian aesthetic (as too, did its audiences).

FAIR PLAY

A fair, a patron or other public meeting seldom concludes without a pitched battle, and the loss of three or four lives. (Croker 230)

Fairs and markets were important social occasions, not just for trade but for the transmission of cultural histories, memories, music; for courtship and conflict; for recreational relief from the travails of rural life. Many fair days have ancient origins, dating back to pre-Christian times, and many were organized according to special dates in the pastoral year. Some are still observed, albeit in vitiated touristic versions, including the Ould Lamma Fair in Ballycastle or Puck Fair in Killorglin. *Lúnasa*, the harvest festival, is perhaps the most famous, originating in celebratory pagan gatherings on hilltops, by lakes, rivers or holy wells. *Lúnasa* informs Máire MacNeill's magisterial study *The Festival of Lughnasa* (1982) in which she traces the incorporation of this pagan festival in Christian celebrations of Patrons and Feastdays and inspired Brian Friel's masterpiece *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). The fires which smoulder in the backhills of 1930s Donegal in Friel's play are themselves literal and figurative references to the hazy borders between tradition and modernity; Christian pieties and pagan practices, as in such fairs and festivals can be found vestigial traces of an earlier vital culture. *The Memoirs of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland—Ireland's Domesday Book*—sheds fascinating light on the pervasiveness of fairs and their profound impact on local life. One contributor, Lieutenant Lancey—who features in semi-fictional form in Friel's *Translations* (1980)—observes how the local peasantry “have very little amusement or recreation” especially as “cock fighting, hurling and dancing are declining” (Day and McWilliams 50). The blind piper of Padraic Colum's play pleads to be allowed to attend the fair, to “be out in the day and to feel the throng moving about, and to be talking to the men that do be on the roads”—a clear example of those lonely people observed by Synge, to whom “a crowd is as exciting as champagne” (*In Wicklow* 108). Lancey complains about the frequency of rural fairs, with their propensity to violence. He cites fifteen annual fairs in Fintona, Co. Tyrone, in addition to weekly markets, as symptomatic of this excess, declaring that such events:

too frequently offer a temptation to the idler quitting their work, of which he is ever ready to avail himself, and the town overflows on those occasions with persons who have no business whatsoever to transact. The number of fair days could very advantageously be curtailed, as tending only to riot and

disturbance and being profitable only to the spirit dealer and distiller, but what is the positive loss on these occasions? Look at the crowds of idlers who frequent the fairs throughout Ireland with no object but amusement. How much valuable time is lost? (Day and McWilliams 72)

Charles McGlinchy's rich oral history of the local fair at Pollan, one of largest in the North of Ireland which had been held on June 29 and October 10 up until 1812 stands in contradistinction to Lancey's colonial disapproval:

The people gathered from all airts and parts, and the green was black with people and standings and play-actors of all kinds. It was a cattle, horse, and sheep fair, but there was great drinking and dancing and singing carried on too. All the mentioned girls of the three parishes were there, and many a match and wedding was settled at the same fair of Pollan. (McGlinchy 51)

A striking aspect of McGlinchy's history is that his account of the onset of modernity in a rural place is not recounted in terms of the meta-narrative of nationalism (Home Rule; the Land Wars; the rise and fall of Parnell; 1916 Rising; foundation of Free State; World wars etc.). Rather, he observes modernity in relation to the impacts it has on the intimately lived experience of the parish, where a community is "in the process of shedding the last vestiges of a Gaelic past and of an old Christianity that still cohabited with an older paganism" (Friel 2). One aspect of that paganism was the prevalence of recreational violence at patterns, feastdays and fairs, the worst excesses of which were most notoriously played out at the Donnybrook Fair which was often represented as a riotous scene of saturnalian release (see plate 1 below). In all these events (and in their representation), drink and violence are revivifying, restorative, and this is reflected in popular culture (songs, music, music hall, patterns, wakes). During the post-Famine period, these practices come to be regarded as degenerative and debilitating by an increasingly hegemonic alliance of (otherwise incongruous) modernizing institutions and Revivalist organizations, including—eventually—the Abbey Theatre and the state itself. They were reviled as symptomatic of everything that was wrong with Ireland, both internally in terms of its citizens' behaviour, and externally as this became synecdochic for the country as a whole. The internal donnybrook in which a pre-Famine culture of fairs and factions is pitted against the modernizing, monopolizing powers of the state and political nationalism could have only one victor, and the latter's triumph was virtually absolute. Nonetheless,



Plate 1: Scene at Donnybrook Fair
Samuel Watson

a persistent threnody for this vital folk culture runs through the twentieth century, in the dramas of Synge, and later work by M.J. Molly, Bryan McMahon, John B. Keane, Brian Friel and Tom Murphy.

FAIR PLAY

The world of the fairs, races, wakes and weddings infuse all of Synge's drama which especially captures the comic commingling of commerce and carnival that characterized fairs days in Ireland. *The Shadow of the Glen* opens with the tramp travelling from Aughrim fair before his fateful visit to Nora Burke's cottage; *The Playboy of the Western World* opens with Pegeen Mike enumerating a list of products (including plentiful supplies of porter) to be sent to Michael James Flaherty "on the evening of the coming fair" (Synge, *Plays* 109) and the blind couple, Martin and Mary Doul, lament missed opportunities to beg coppers from those "after passing to the fair of Clash" in *The Well of the Saints*. To a lesser degree,

fairs appear in other Revivalist dramas, notably Padraic Colum's *Thomas Muskerry* and *The Fiddler's House*, whilst in Hyde's 1904 play, *An Cleamhnas (The Matchmaking)*, two small farmers negotiate marriage terms for their children, though the son of one is absent, having come home late from the fair: "in the bed he is," "not a twist in him" (173). In Colum's *The Land*, strong farmer Murtagh Cosgar appeals to his son, with whom he is in heated argument, to rein in their anger:

Murtagh Cosgar: Stop. We can have kindness in this. We needn't be beating each other down, like men at a fair.
Matt: We're not men at a fair. May God keep the kindness in our hearts.

Fairs also feature in Lady Gregory's drama; her comedy *Spreading the News* (1904) is set on a fair day and opens with the following fascinating exchange:

Magistrate: So that is the Fair Green. Cattle and sheep and mud.
No system. What a repulsive sight!
Policeman: That is so, indeed.
Magistrate: I suppose there is a good deal of disorder in this place?
Policeman: There is.
Magistrate: Common assault?
Policeman: It's common enough.
Magistrate: Agrarian crime, no doubt?
Policeman: That is so.
Magistrate: Boycotting? Maiming of cattle? Firing into houses?
Policeman: There was one time, and there might be again.
Magistrate: That is bad. Does it go any farther than that?
Policeman: Far enough, indeed.
Magistrate: Homicide, then! This district has been shamefully neglected! I will change all that. (3-4)

This compelling index of the carnivalesque energies, violent excesses and agrarian insurgency associated with fair days is all the more significant when contrasted with their conspicuous absence from Gregory's drama. She depicts an Irish fair shorn of anarchic,

atavistic elements, the better to serve up a harmless comedy about idle gossip. The exchanges between cantankerous paupers in Gregory's *The Poorhouse* (1908), a study of companionship and interdependence which anticipates Beckett, form a sharp contrast:

Paudeen: (*gnashing his teeth at him*) It's finely I'd leather your bones now if I could rise up, but remember, you vagabone, the fine welting I gave you thirty years ago at the fair of Dunmore, that left your stump of a nose crushed and broken from that out. (297-98)

Much in the same way Synge's Mayo villagers celebrate violence (Sara Tansey yokes "an ass-cart and drove ten miles to set your eyes on the man bit the yellow lady's nostril on the northern shore" [*The Playboy* in *Plays* 129]), Paudeen exults in the "fine welting" issued. He exhibits none of Murtagh and Matt Cosgar's reticence about violence, for there is little of their "kindness in our hearts," or in the thousands of other faction fighters like him for that matter.

FACTION FIGHTING

'Twas the 24th of June the day before the fair.
When Ireland's sons and daughters in crowds assembled there.
The young and the old, the brave and the bold, they gathered to sport and kill.
'Twas a curious combination beneath the cross of Spencil Hill.

Nostalgia, homesickness and sentimentality are staples of Irish emigrant songs of which Spencil Hill is one of the most celebrated. Many (mistakenly) find this music mawkish but what is memorialized in this instance is not some idealized "auld sod," but a savage, Syngean culture and community. The date invoked by the author is June 24: fair day, St. John's Eve, where on the same date in 1834, factions called the Coleens and Lawlor-Black Mulvihills "gathered to sport and kill" in the pastoral setting of Ballyeagh Strand, Co. Kerry which was soon transformed into a bloody bucolic battlefield strewn with the bodies of dozens dead and several hundreds injured. Involving more than 3000 armed men this engagement was one of the "the most sanguinary faction fights that ever disgraced this unhappy country," as even the *American Railroad Journal and Advocate of Internal Improvements* reported ("Dreadful Affray" 491). Indeed, more were killed and wounded in this altercation than in all the nationalist rebellions of the century and yet, bar a few fleeting

references and a single article by local historian in local history magazine (Browne), it has been largely ignored by historians and scholars.

Faction fights were stage-managed confrontations, ritualized and highly performative.² When both sides lined up in the set location for battle, they would face off and often dance to their “war music” (O’Donnell 54) sing faction songs and practice strokes to display their prowess whilst hurling insults at their opponents to the delight of watching women and non-involved bystanders. Before the hostilities commenced, captains of each side often advanced across no-man’s land to enemy lines to perform ceremonial challenges and insults. Dozens of eye-witness accounts detail the elaborate choreography of these exchanges as extraordinary wheels and counters were issued by both sides, consisting of ululations, oaths, imprecations, chants, battle cries and ritualized gestures which could last up to a quarter of an hour. Wheels and Counters “could be semi-obscene, sometimes as uninspired as ‘Up the Hickeys’ or ‘Up the Hogans’” (*The Irish Times*), though the following sample collected by O’Donnell seems typical:

WHEEL: Here’s tobacco and who dar’s smoke it?
COUNTER: I’ll cut it. let who likes smoke it.
WHEEL: Hall, Wall, Lane and Moss.
COUNTER: I’ll hang my hat on Wall,
 I’ll piss against Wall,
 I’ll shit on Lane, and
 I’ll wipe my arse with Moss. (51)

Whilst these cries and counter-cries were called the protagonists would “cut” the air with their sticks. Kevin Danaher records another custom whereby one fighter carried two sticks and offered his opponent first choice (Danaher 125), and no less a personage than the Mayor of Limerick explains how “Wheeling ... is an old practice in this county. When a person ‘wheels’ he means a quarrel” (qtd. in Conley 61).³

Contrary to their popular representation, faction fights were not simply some shillelagh-waving-shindig. Fighters were highly skilled and schools were established to give instruction on stick fighting; a role often shared by dancing masters as Carleton records:

in the times of our fathers, it pretty frequently happened that the dancing master professed another accomplishment, which in Ireland at least, where

it is born with us, might appear to be a superfluous one; we mean that of fencing, or to speak more correctly, cudgel-playing. Fencing schools of this class were nearly so common as dancing-schools and it was not at all unusual for one man to teach both. (160-61)⁴

Although O'Donnell suggests faction fighting was not common in north-east Ulster, local newspapers record that a school for fencing existed in Derry to train local men for fair day confrontations. In Greencastle Fair, Co. Antrim, "stick fencing" was also the order of the day; "this was carried on with *baathascors* (or blackthorns in Tyrone) and was a robust, manly, but dangerous art. Older people in the district still recount tales of redoubtable fighters; but excessive *poteen* [moonshine whiskey] and the intrusion of feuds vitiated the custom even before the entire fair was prohibited by the clergy" (Harris 23). Faction fighting in the North, however, was almost invariably political as powerful secret societies and sectarian feeling made clashes altogether more violent with firearms, pitchforks, flails and swords often being deployed alongside sticks and stones. On December 23, 1828, the market town of Augher in Co. Tyrone was almost destroyed entirely after fighting between Catholics and Protestants on fair day; a mock epic setting that likely inspired Carleton's *Battle of the Factions* in which he claims several thousand were involved. Outbursts of violence on such epic scales lend a different valency to Synge's valedictory "Preface" to *Playboy*: "Anyone who has lived with real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed" (107). He was right. Irish-Ireland claims that the Irish were not violent—as they had been *misrepresented* in Synge's play—seems ludicrous in light of Carleton's accounts of faction fights and of a peasantry who exulted in violence.

In the *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland*, Lieutenantancy Lancey describes the peasants of the parish of Clonmany, Co. Donegal as "an industrious people for about six months in the year. The other six they do nothing except a few who occasionally fish" (Day and McWilliams 17). There was not a lot of work available for young men, compounded by local reliance on potato crops which required so little work beyond sowing and harvesting that potato drills were christened "lazy beds." There was little for young men to do and so it is little wonder that faction fighting became a form of recreational release. Indeed, the French Consul to Ireland on a visit to Kilkenny, noted that apart from dancing the only other "pastime" was faction fighting (Ní Chinnéide 35). This culture of recreational violence was practiced and accepted widely, according to Carolyn Conley who cites a statistic that forty-one percent of all Irish homicides between 1866 and 1892 were

“recreational in origin” (59). Faction fighting was largely the cause of such carnage and yet was regarded as a traditional form of sport. Ireland’s ancient martial culture, as reflected in myths which consistently valorize violence and celebrate various champions’ feats of athletic, sporting, military prowess also contributed to this culture in which the faction fights became agonistic recreational contests. Faction fighting also played a critical role in the construction and performance of masculinity in that they also became crucial rites of passage for young men to display their prowess, to prove their honour, and to protect their family and locality’s reputation. Further research into this particular facet of faction fighting, however, might well act on Maria Luddy’s prompt, “it would be interesting to learn of women’s role in faction fights and family disputes” (27). Indeed, dozens of sources confirm that they played active roles, with one author wearily remarking that “women too frequently mingled in it” (Power 426). To aid them in this, women had their own unique weapon: a heavy rock slung in a stocking or an apron: “a dreadful weapon in the hands of those amazons, more dangerous, and often more fatal than the best and quickest oak sapling wielded by the other sex” (“A Wake” 192). Carleton describes encounters with this weapon and another account of such women in action occurs in Tyrone Power’s novel depicting “one of the ‘gentler sex’ striking right and left with a terrific weapon—a huge stone in a stocking foot—and noting several men knocked down by her blows with out either of them aiming at her a single one in return” (Power 246). Such fictional scenes are supported by the eye witness accounts deposited in the Irish Folklore Commission including one dating from the mid-twentieth century:

The women would be fighting also; they would have socks and a rock down in the sock, and if they saw their own men or any other man that they had respect for being cornered, they would go to his help with the socks. (qtd. in Hayes 156)

Several sources state that though a man could parry a woman’s blows, he should “on no account hit her” (Logan 104). It is, of course, impossible to ascertain if such chivalrous conduct was practiced, but it was, however, considered to be a great humiliation for a man to be vanquished by a woman in a faction fight.⁵

In *Ireland Long Ago*, Danaher classifies these violent confrontations as “nothing more than a crude and dangerous form of sport” (123). This ritualized aggression was in some ways later sublimated and surrogated through the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), indeed, as one Galway farmwife explained to a Portuguese anthropologist, “It was a kind

of sport that time; now they have hurling” (Salazar 115). Hurling sticks were frequently used in faction fighting at fairs, patterns, races and wakes, but before the establishment of the GAA and this organization’s efforts to formally organize these activities (and discipline their energies), hurling matches often provided pretexts for faction fighting. *The Freeman’s Journal* in 1825 reported how in Broadford, Co. Clare, a thousand strong “mob ... gathered under the pretence of hurling” and that mounted police opened fire in a vain attempt to disperse the crowd “but were forced to retire amidst a volley of stones.” Evidence of the blurred boundaries between these two recreational sports comes not just in newspaper reports but from folk music, and Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin suggests the tune “The Kinnegad Slashers”⁶ (one of the many colourful faction monikers and marching tunes) dedicated to Kinnegad’s hurling team from Westmeath.⁷ In the heart of hurling country in Co. Tipperary in June 1994 and 1996, “The Cappawhite Fair and Faction Fight Festival” was held to commemorate the town’s infamous fair and its notorious reputation for faction fighting. One local publican, Liam Armshaw, also established the Cappawhite Street Theatre Group to re-enact faction fights whilst the local Cappawhite GAA club publishing a substantial 59-page Souvenir Programme for the festival. Kevin Whelan has written of the “tribal-territorial” qualities underpinning Irish sport (which also fuelled faction fighting), invoking painter Tony O’Malley’s recollection:

If neighbours were playing like New Ross and Tullogher, there would be a real needle in it. When Carrickshock were playing, I once heard an old man shouting ‘come on the men that bate the tithes proctors’ and there was a tremor and real fervour in his voice. It was a battle cry, with hurleys as the swords, but with the same intensity. (30)

Founded in 1884, the GAA’s territorial structuring whereby it used the parish as the fundamental unit of the overall organization, proved tremendously successful in engendering nationalist solidarity during the Revival as helped sublimate localism into nationalism. The GAA transformed the geography of nationalism, turning parishes into county and then provincial collectives within an All-Ireland framework,⁸ building a national organization whilst giving expression to local feeling – something that was crucial in the most localized country in Europe given the extraordinary granularity of the territorial structuration of Irish society (well over 50,000 townlands, averaging just over 300 acres each). The structures introduced by the GAA inculcated a profound sense of loyalty to locality with its attendant rivalries with contiguous parishes, which fuelled faction

fighting just as much as the drink and the delight of taking part in this “sport.” The success of this transformation is reflected the rueful words of one “frustrated faction fighter” as recorded by the *Irish Times* at the packed 1943 All-Ireland final: “What’s coming over the people at all ... two o’clock and not a blow struck” (“Croke Park”).

Eventually disciplined and surrogated through GAA sport and inexorably subordinated by modernity and the state’s monopolization of violence, vestigial traces of faction fighting can still be found today in the vicious feuding of Traveller families, some of whom are now using internet and Youtube to issue traditional wheels or challenges to fight at forthcoming fairs and races. One of the most extraordinary examples of this is the notorious fight between Dan Rooney and Aney McGinley in 1990 for the title “King of the Travellers,” a contest that was videoed and became an underground sensation on the black market. McGinley had challenged Rooney, regarded then as the bare knuckle champion of Ireland, and fought him in his hometown of Crossmaglen in 1990. Although this was perhaps the most militarized area in Western Europe, located in the heart of bandit country on the Irish border, both men fought in the town square in front of a crowd more than a thousand strong. The police and army apparently evacuated the area to allow the men to fight, although their fiercely contested bout was eventually interrupted; but by its own rowdy and unruly crowd as they eventually enveloped the action with the result that in the ensuing scenes of chaos and confusion both men’s camps claimed victory. Eventually, a spokesperson appeared in front of the camera to state that McGinley had challenged Rooney to fight him again “on Ballinasloe Green at the October Fair.”⁹

Some Traveller families continue to uphold a tradition of fighting for honour. The recently deceased Bartley Gorman, “The King of the Gypsies,” proudly traced his fighting ancestry to his great-grandfather Bartley Gorman I, who fought the “King of the Tinkers” Jack Ward in the 1854 Donnybrook Fair (1-3). Gorman’s memoir not only captures this violent, illegal underworld of bareknuckle boxing, but offers a valuable, often moving account of many of those written out of history: Roma, Travellers, gypsies, prizefighters and pugilists from Welsh mining communities, the highlands of Scotland and the estates of London, Manchester and Liverpool, as well as an Irish diasporic underclass of navvies, miners and dockers. It also offers some insight into the Traveller feuding that racked fairs and funerals Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s and records a marginalized, maligned, and often underground culture that is aberrant, even abhorrent to most mainstream, settled society whilst sketching the latter day legacies of Ireland’s faction fighting culture. That this violent world of fighting at fairs and races is so utterly alien and “other” to settled

“civilized” society is a not only a measure of how far cultural attitudes have changed, but a reminder that mainstream society’s reaction today to periodic outbursts of Traveller feuding at fairs, funerals and races shares the same mixture of shock, fascination and horror that shaped the responses of those English travellers—in the very different sense of the word—who toured Ireland in the early nineteenth century.

The first real signs of concern over this pervasive acceptance and practice of recreational violence stemmed not from the enormous number of fatalities and casualties caused by faction fighting, but as Conley observes, from political sensitivity to the image it projected. She points out that *The Munster News* warned readers that faction fighting would be “used by the English to prove that the Irish were savages unfit to govern themselves” (67). Daniel O’Connell’s non-violent campaign for Catholic Emancipation also played a significant role in defeating the factions, with one author claiming this was one of the Liberator’s “best services to his country [for] putting a stop to it by denouncing it as unpatriotic and a shame to Ireland” (Strahan 478). In his *Seventy Years of Irish Life*, William Richard Le Fanu gives the following example of how faction fighting was defeated in Limerick:

O’Connell and the priests, constantly speaking and preaching against England’s hated plan of governing Ireland by *divide et impera*, increasingly from platform and from altar urging the necessity of union, at last succeeded in reconciling the contending factions. Monster meetings and monster marchings, displays of physical forces were organized ... the Reaskawallahs [marched] from their headquarters near Doon to the head-quarters of the Coffeys at Newport ... in military order ... each man carrying, as an emblem of peace, a green bough ... on its arrival at Newport the meeting was celebrated with much joy and whiskey, and, in the presence of the priests, a treaty of perpetual peace was established, and never from that day did those factions meet again for battle. Similar reconciliations took place all over the country, and faction fighting practically ended. (34-35)⁹

Other modernizing nationalist figures and organizations, from the Young Irelanders to the Fenians and the Land League, also contributed to these ritualized reconciliations which helped quell the factions, whilst the emigration of whole communities in the years after the Great Famine exported this culture abroad to contribute to the infamous Gangs of New York (and Glasgow for that matter). Father Mathew’s temperance campaign and

the wider ecclesiastical opposition as part of the “devotional revolution” also played a significant role. Father Mathew’s intervention against the factions is recalled by Samuel and Anna Maria Hall, who provide a fascinating vignette on the localized detail of modernization glimpsed in a room packed with men and women waiting to take the pledge to abstain from alcoholic drink in person from Father Matthew. They meet:

a sturdy mountaineer from Kerry—fine athletic fellow who had led his faction for a quarter of a century, whose head was scarred in at least a dozen places, and who had been renowned throughout the country for his prowess at every fair within twenty miles of his home. He has long been a member of this society and had brought a few of his “friends” to follow his example. He described to us, with natural and forcible eloquence, the effect of temperance in producing peace between man and woman in his own immediate neighbourhood—in terminating the brutal fights between two notorious and numerous factions, the Cooleens and Lalors. (Hall 44; see also Bryan 100-04)

Martin Freeman describes how the Song “Táimse am’ Chodladh” (“I Am Asleep”) was composed on the subject of faction fights by a priest “who sang it from the altar; and the people were so moved by his performance that the rival factions (Twomeys and Lynches) never indulged in a single battle afterwards” (109). Though this tale says more about the peasant susceptibility to the “efficacy of song,” the church played a hugely influential role in breaking up faction fights and in brokering alliances between erstwhile enemies.¹⁰

By end of the nineteenth century Elizabeth Malcolm argues that “the prolonged drinking extending over several days which had once characterized festivals and fairs was very much a thing of the past” (327), chiefly due to the efforts of the Church. The formation of the Irish Constabulary (1836) had also led to greater centralization and removed control of corrupt magistrates and grand juries who had hitherto influenced local policing and encouraged the factions, all of which was part of the process of modernization whereby the state started to monopolize violence through centralized authorities. The new under-secretary, Thomas Drummond, also issued stringent instructions for police to intervene at fair, patterns and races and even prohibited the most notorious gatherings. Emigration and increased urbanization further contributed to this centralization and to the eventual decline of the roles fairs played in Irish life in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. In July 9, 1878, the *Irish Times* reported how “City folk read from time to time with some

bewilderment about how ‘a boy of the Ryans’ (probably aged forty) ‘wheeled’ opposite the house of one of the Walshes” and of the resulting violence. In spite of these changes and of the more aggressive interventionist policing, by the late 1870s, urgent appeals were still being made to “officials, constabulary, and magistrates” to “exercise with more frequency ... firmness to punish the offenders. For its suppression this crying evil demands the iron hand *without* the glove of velvet.”

As a central modernizing influence in nineteenth century Ireland, the Catholic Church had assiduously attacked the pagan practices and violent excesses of popular peasant culture which provided such rich source material for Carleton, Synge and other Revivalist antiquarians and authors. The Church stood firmly “against bad behaviour, secret societies, faction fighting, illicit distilling, and ‘uncontrolled popular gatherings of various kinds including devotions at holy wells on saints days’” whilst patterns and wakes were also disapproved of “because of the “grave evils” that had “arisen among the people from disorderly wakes.”” As the historian George Boyce notes, the Catholic Church sought “to bring the flocks, insofar as they could, into behaving in an orderly, sober and respectable manner” (274): a modernizing, disciplinary mission not unlike the modernist aesthetic the directors of the Abbey Theatre were to demand of their own congregation-audience.

In “By the Roadside” published in *An Claidheamh Soluis* in 1901, Yeats records how in Kiltartan, Co. Galway, he listened to the “mournful songs of separation, of death, and of exile” when someone segued into a love song that had been sung “to his sweetheart under the shadow of a mountain I looked at every day in my childhood.” It evokes an epiphany that moves the poet to rapture: “voices melted into the twilight, and were mixed into the trees, and when I thought of the words they too melted away” transporting Yeats in a reverie “so far that it was as though I came to one of the four rivers, and followed it under the wall of Paradise to the roots of the trees of knowledge and life” (*Writings* 285). Set against this exoticized folk culture with its primal power is a “concert in a Connacht town” where “instead of an ancient tradition, one found the short lived conventions of this age, the insincerity, the shallow cleverness, the reeking vulgarity ... Presently somebody sang about whiskey and shillelaghs and Donnybrook fair, and all those Irish men and women applauded, I waited till my voice could be heard, and hissed loudly” (*Writings* 286). In this short piece Yeats establishes a potent hierarchy between the popular culture of this music hall song and its stage-Irish evocation of fair fighting Irishmen with an indigenous “folk art” that is “the oldest of aristocracies of thought” (*Writings* 286-87). However, as I have tried to elaborate in this essay, this modernist, metropolitan abjection of popular culture

and its cultivation of a folk ideal is at odds with the carnivalesque world of Carleton and even of Yeats's contemporary Synge, whose Mayo villagers embrace "a man did split his father's middle with a single clout" (*Playboy* in *Plays* 160).

Although peasant folklore and traditions were crucial to the cultural discourse of the Revival and to the development of modern Irish drama, the advent of the latter was based on the abjection of the former. I would also argue that this occlusion has been reinforced and reproduced by later generations of theatre scholars as the wider performative culture of the Irish peasantry has been ignored by theatre historians and critics; or worse still, as Lionel Pilkington points out, quarantined into folklore and anthropology, a neglect that is as indictable as it is ironic ("The 'Folk'" 295-305). After all, folklore and anthropology have not only played prominent roles in fuelling and framing modern Irish drama, but, in Richard Schechner's pioneering work, they helped midwife the birth of Performance Studies, to create a dynamic (inter)discipline that examines not only the performing arts but "ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments" (2): subjects this essay seeks to open up. Finally, I would argue that engagement with critical perspectives from Performance Studies could rejuvenate Irish theatre historiography and criticism by addressing its conceptual limitations (in terms of its paradigmatic prepossession with national theatre) and its methodological conservatism. As Pilkington points out, with no little exasperation, to historicize simply isn't enough anymore ("Historicising" 721-31).

NOTES

- 1 A double bind that continues to bedevil Irish politics and culture; consider the controversies associated with the alleged stage Irishry of Brendan Behan, Shane McGowan, and Martin McDonagh.
- 2 Faction fighting was rarely spontaneous in nature, but occurred at predetermined dates and venues, especially fairs and patterns, but also at races, wakes, funerals and sporting occasions. See O'Donnell 22, 77, 99, 185; Harrington 228; Sweeney 19.
- 3 Long after faction fights had demised the practice of wheeling as a challenge or confrontation continued, albeit in different forms, for instance, another pugnacious Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, used this form of wheeling in his famous philosophical debates with C.K. Chesterton: "In the course of his encounter with Mr. Belfort Bax, Mr. Chesterton takes the opportunity to tread on the tail of my coat" (129).
- 4 Patrick Logan also claims that itinerant dancing masters also gave instruction in stick fighting (102).
- 5 See Mrs Hoare, *Shamrock Leaves: or, Tales and Sketches of Ireland*. Dublin: J. McGlashan, 1851. 108-09.
- 6 Coincidentally the same tune is also known in Scotland as "The Irishman in London": the same title as William Macready's play of 1793.
- 7 Indeed, the transmission of skills, training and techniques involved in both hurling and stick fighting would be a fascinating area for further research.
- 8 For an analysis of the importance of the parish system to the organizational and ideological structure of the GAA see Paul Healy's *Gaelic Games and the Gaelic Athletic Association*.
- 9 Another account relays how two other factions, the Moynihans and the O'Donaghues, had their "perpetual feud" settled after "the formation of the Catholic Association, it has become the interest of the priests to establish peace and concord in their flocks." And they successfully "enjoined as penance that the Moynihans should march twelve miles to the north, and the O'Donaghues an equal distance to the south, and both pronounce certain prayers at their journey's end; that all the lookers on should make a pilgrimage of six miles in some other direction; and in case of a repetition of the offence, the penance to be doubled. All this was executed with religious exactness; and ever since the war is at an end" (Hermann Fürst 372).
- 10 In his 1870 Memoir, Gabriel Beranger observes how one priest's actions had a radical effect in pacifying the factions who clashed at the Pattern at Glendalough: "What a change has taken place during the last twenty years! The present worthy parish priest, one Pattern day some twenty years ago, collected the sticks of the combatants, and by his mild but determined influence assuaged the angry feelings aroused simply by the contiguity of the combatants" (Wilde 450).

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