Introduction

As long as there has been a distinct Irish drama it has been so closely bound up with national politics that the one has often been considered more or less a reflection of the other: the most recent work on twentieth-century Irish drama is subtitled *Mirror up to Nation*.[1] It is understandable that it should be so. The Irish national theatre movement was an integral part of that broader cultural nationalism of the turn of the century which sought to create for a long-colonised Ireland its own national identity. There were those sharp encounters over *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Plough and the Stars* which gave dramatic expression to the charged relationship of Irish theatre and national politics. Irish drama since the time of the early Abbey has remained self-consciously aware of its relation to the life of the nation and the state. The aim of this book, however, is to suggest that there is more to the politics of Irish drama than merely a theatrical mimesis of the national narrative. A three-way set of relationships between subject, playwright and audience has to be considered in the complex act of negotiation which is the representation of Ireland on the stage. This could be called a poetics of Irish drama in so far as it is concerned with the way the playwright addresses his/her subject; in considering the interaction of dramatic image and audience, it could be identified as a dynamics of Irish drama. But given the political dimensions of both poetics and dynamics in the representation of Ireland, it seems reasonable to call the whole the politics of Irish drama.

The politics of Irish drama, then: *all* the politics? *All* Irish drama? Necessarily not. The book focuses on that Irish drama which is self-consciously concerned with the representation of Ireland as its main subject. It excludes as a result the plays of Farquhar and

Goldsmith, all of Wilde and most of Shaw, with the exception of *John Bull's Other Island*; Beckett is represented only by *All that Fall*. This is not to deny the Irishness of such playwrights: Shaw's Irishness has never been in question, and increasingly critics have demonstrated the significance of Wilde's and Beckett's nationality in reading their work. I am not trying to construct a canon of national drama excluding plays by Irish playwrights that are not directly concerned with Ireland. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for all its English setting, *Waiting for Godot* with its placeless country road, may well be illuminated by an awareness of their authors' Irish background. But the subject of my book is that particular tradition of Irish drama which is constituted around its Irish subject and setting. In taking Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* as the chronological starting-point for that conspectus, I intend to show that this self-conscious stage representation of Ireland antedated the Irish national theatre movement as such. Ireland, from at least as far back as Boucicault, was a marketable phenomenon, a space, a place which *needed* to be represented and represented truly. This book is concerned with the politics of such representation.

A subject so defined marches on the much broader area of cultural self-representation in the expanding field of Irish studies. A number of recent books here have been very influential: Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, which brings postcolonial theory to bear on the full range of Irish writing in the modern period; Luke Gibbons's *Transformations in Irish Culture*, which identifies crucial signs in the visual fields of modernising Ireland; Joep Leerssen's two magisterial volumes, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* and *Remembrance and Imagination*, charting the complementary English and Irish imagological traditions in representations of Ireland down to the end of the nineteenth century.[2] In the context of these wide-ranging studies, to narrow down to just the drama, and a selected number of dramatic texts at that, may seem unduly limited and limiting. However, there are benefits in such a restricted focus. To start with, the Irish dramatic tradition treated in this book has been a notably cohesive one, with its own special intertextual lines of descent, and these forms of filiation will be a part of my subject. More generally, though, concentration on the reading of selected dramatic texts may allow us to come in closer

to the phenomenon of representing Irishness than more theoretically inflected analyses of broader cultural manifestations. A theatrical script, as a set of signs for potential stage realisation, constitutes an extraordinarily rich subject for interpretation. The images created before a live audience are representation in action, the negotiation of meanings through the words of the playwright, the real bodies and voices of the actors, the *mise en scène* of director and designer, all operating within the field of the spectators' preconceptions and prejudices, likes and dislikes. The words of the text bear a specially close scrutiny, not primarily for their authorial authority, but as they reach out towards theatrical embodiment. They are signs in search of an audience, not necessarily or only the audience for which the play is first written. An awareness of the potential, implied audience is the more important for this book because it is a basic tenet of my argument that Irish drama is outward-directed, created as much to be viewed from outside as from inside Ireland. Even where the plays are produced wholly within an Irish theatrical milieu, the otherness of Ireland as subject is so assumed by the playwrights as to create the effect of estranging exteriority.

The Politics of Irish Drama considers in some detail about two dozen Irish plays out of the many thousands which have been produced since the last half of the nineteenth century. It does not attempt to duplicate the historical coverage and chronological order of works such as Christopher Murray's *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, D.E.S. Maxwell's *Modern Irish Drama 1891–1980* or Christopher Fitz-Simon's *The Irish Theatre*.[3] The texts selected have been chosen as they provide key illustrations of the specific issues being addressed in the politics of Irish drama, not because I judge them to be the outstanding achievements of that tradition. I am very conscious of the many major playwrights omitted and the limited sample of the work of those included. So, for instance, only two of Synge's texts are considered, and I have not found room for what I still regard as Brian Friel's greatest play, *Faith Healer*, nor his most successful to date, *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Although most of the plays chosen are indeed among the central works of modern Irish drama, that is not the reason why they are in this book. My object is not evaluation but a critical analysis of the political interplay of dramatic text and context.

Instead of following the line of a single thesis, I have preferred to vary the angle of approach for each chapter, making connections backwards and forwards within the overall argument rather than locking each part into one linear chain. So the long first chapter maps out the subject by considering three plays of Boucicault, Shaw and Friel as they represent different versions of the stage interpretation of Ireland. Chapter 2 examines the themes and variations played upon the motif of strangers in the house by Yeats, Gregory and Synge, where chapter 3 concentrates on just the one text – *The Playboy* – and the one event, its politically explosive reception. Looking at issues of class and space in relation to O'Casey in chapter 4 makes for a different perspective on his first two Abbey plays, while *The Plough* is considered in chapter 5 with the later reactions to revolution of Denis Johnston and Brendan Behan. Two plays of Yeats and Beckett are analysed in chapter 6 as they reveal both their contrasting versions of post-Independence Ireland and the affinity which distinguishes them from other Irish playwrights. Chapter 7 is taken up with the theatrical effects of some early plays of Friel and Tom Murphy and their reception outside Ireland, illustrating their contrasted negotiation with the mode of pastoral. Murphy's Ireland as represented in the rich and resonant *Bailegangaire* is the subject of chapter 8. The last chapter is concerned with the politics of imagining the other in recent plays by Frank McGuinness and Sebastian Barry. The aim of the book as a whole is to extend and alter the sense of what constitutes the politics of Irish drama, and by doing that to reconceive the nature of Irish drama itself.

1 Stage interpreters

Here, for the first time, is the real Ireland on stage:

> Ireland, so rich in scenery, so full of romance and the warm touch of nature, has never until now been opened by the dramatist. Irish dramas have hitherto been exaggerated farces, representing low life or scenes of abject servitude and suffering. Such is not a true picture of Irish society.
>
> (Playbill for the first production of Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, New York, 1860)[1]

> We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation.
>
> (Manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre, 1897).[2]

> the neo-Gaelic movement . . . is bent on creating a new Ireland after its own ideal, whereas my play is a very uncompromising presentment of the real old Ireland.
>
> (Preface to *John Bull's Other Island*, 1907)[3]

> apart from Synge, all our dramatists have pitched their voices for English acceptance and recognition . . . However I think that for the first time this is stopping . . . We are talking to ourselves as we must and if we are overheard in America, or England, so much the better.
>
> (Brian Friel, on the Field Day production of *Translations*, 1980)[4]

Authenticity and authority have been issues in Irish drama as far back as Boucicault, as far forward as Friel. Every dramatist, every dramatic movement, claims that they can deliver the true Ireland which has previously been misrepresented, travestied, rendered in sentimental cliché or political caricature. And they can so produce an unprecedentedly authentic Ireland because they really know what they are talking about: they have the Irish credentials to do so. *The Colleen Bawn* is 'Founded on a true history First told by an Irishman and now Dramatized by an Irishman.'[5] The manifesto writers of the Irish Literary Theatre are confident of the support of the Irish people who are 'weary of misrepresentation', and who will be able to confirm their country as the 'home of an ancient idealism'. Shaw contests this idealism as a Utopian fantasy: *John Bull's Other Island*, by contrast, presents the 'real old Ireland'. Irish playwrights of Brian Friel's generation are no longer going to pitch 'their voices for English acceptance and recognition', 'we are talking to ourselves'.

'We will *show* that Ireland is not . . .' Who is to be shown this? For whose benefit is this theatrical revisionism undertaken? The answer varies from case to case, but it is never unambiguously clear. On the one hand, there is the appeal to those who know, who share the authority of the dramatists and can corroborate their versions of Ireland as truth. On the other hand, the audiences, almost by definition, are those who need to have their images of Ireland revised, who have been so conditioned by false stageland versions that they will find the truth startingly new and unfamiliar. The drama is directed simultaneously at those who know Ireland as the dramatists claim to know Ireland, and at those who do not: it is an act of expression and an act of interpretation. Ireland is at once here, our own, held in common between playwright and audience, and elsewhere, out there to be imagined and, with difficulty, understood.

Three plays may stand as representative examples of this process of the stage interpretation of Ireland and the way it has changed over time: Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* (1874), Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) and Friel's *Translations* (1980). Each of these plays had a specific political context and was written as a more-or-less direct, more-or-less self-conscious, intervention in that context. The playwrights' interpretations of Ireland offered a political

vision of the country to challenge contemporary thinking on the subject. They suggested answers to the 'Irish question' or at least set out to re-formulate the question. But as significant as the plays' national politics is their internal politics of interpretation. In each of the texts there is at least one figure who stands as interpreter, interpreting between characters, between stage and audience, reading and explaining Ireland on behalf of the dramatist creator. The function and nature of these stage interpreters change from play to play, often as part of the process of discrediting past interpretations, reinvesting authority in new and different versions of Irishness. What is one play's authentic spokesman becomes the next play's stage Irishman, acting out the false stereotypes of foreign expectations. How, though, do the various onstage interpreters within the plays relate to the business of intrepretation which the plays themselves transact? *The Shaughraun*, *John Bull* and *Translations* were all performed, for the most part highly successfully, in England and America as well as Ireland, and they are designed to speak to non-Irish as to Irish audiences. The analysis of the stage interpretations of Ireland in the three plays may bring into focus the varying role of the dramatist as interpreter, for whom he interprets and to what end.

The Shaughraun

The Shaughraun was the third of Boucicault's Irish melodramas, but the first to have a contemporary, or near-contemporary, setting. *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) appears to have been set in the 1790s for costume purposes, though 1819 was the date of the actual murder on which Gerald Griffin based his 1829 novel *The Collegians*, Boucicault's acknowledged source. *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) has a 1798 rebellion plot, featuring Boucicault as Shaun the Post singing 'The Wearing of the Green'. The events following the abortive Fenian rising of 1867, the trial of the 'Manchester martyrs' and the explosion at Clerkenwell prison, led to 'The Wearing of the Green' being banned throughout the British Empire. It was in this period of Fenian activity and its aftermath that Boucicault set *The Shaughraun*. Although the playbill for the first New York production at Wallack's Theatre in November 1874 specifies that the time of the action is 'The Present',[6] the references in the text seem to suggest a time back in the winter of

1867–8. The villain Kinchela plans to use the current political situation to justify his murder of the escaped Fenian convict Robert Ffolliott by the police: 'The late attack on the police van at Manchester [September 1867], and the explosion at Clerkenwell prison in London [December 1867], will warrant extreme measures.'[7]

For what sort of audience and towards what kind of political sympathies was *The Shaughraun* directed? In writing a play with a Fenian hero for production in New York, it seems plausible that Boucicault was courting Irish-Americans in the country where the Fenian movement began. And it is true that at the end of its smash-hit four-months' run, the playwright was given an official presentation by the Irish community of New York for his services to Irish drama. Replying to the tribute (and the gift of a statue of Tatters, Conn the Shaughraun's never-seen offstage dog) Boucicault claimed the play's significance was its patriotic exposure of English misrepresentations: 'let me disclaim any pretension as an actor to excel others in the delineation of Irish character. It is the Irish character as misrepresented by the English dramatists that I convict as a libel.'[8] With the profits of the play he bought himself a steam-yacht, and considered sailing it to England and running up the rebel Irish flag,[9] following the example, no doubt, of the belated American brig laden with arms, pathetically misnamed *Erin's Hope*, which arrived in Ireland in 1867 when the Fenian rising had already petered out.[10]

Yet, in spite of such Anglophobic attitudes on Boucicault's part, *The Shaughraun* was every bit as successful in London when it was produced in Drury Lane in the autumn of 1875. This followed the pattern of Boucicault's other Irish plays which had enjoyed equally rapturous receptions in New York, London and Dublin. *The Colleen Bawn*, like *The Shaughraun* a New York hit which transferred to London, had been a special favourite of Queen Victoria, and had made a lionised star out of Boucicault in his native Dublin. The highly successful opening of *Arrah-na-Pogue* in Dublin was a tryout for London where, at the Princess's Theatre, it went on to achieve a run of 164 nights.[11] Although Boucicault was adept at recasting his plays to suit local conditions – as most famously with *The Streets of New York* transformed into *The Streets of Liverpool*, *The Streets of London* etc. etc. – there is no sign that he altered the political complexion of his

Irish plays to suit his several audiences.[12] The romantically pro-Fenian *Shaughraun* which New York applauded was the same *Shaughraun* which London loved.

Boucicault made of that very universality of acclaim of *The Shaughraun* the basis of his public appeal to Disraeli for the release of Fenian prisoners in an open letter to the press in January 1876.[13] By that stage, Boucicault argued, most of the chief Fenian leaders were already at liberty, and it was for the relatively few, relatively rank-and-file prisoners he appealed. He cited the 200,000 people who had seen the play in London and who had all cheered sympathetically the news of a Fenian amnesty as evidence of public opinion on his side. What is more, he imagined an even more dramatic reunion of hearts for twenty million Americans,

> hearts that sincerely respect their mother country, and would love her dearly if she would let them. One crowning act of humanity would be worth a dozen master-strokes of policy; and the great treaty to be established with the United States is neither the Canadian fisheries nor the border-line on the Pacific Ocean – it is the hearty cohesion of the English and the American people.[14]

Disraeli failed to recognise this version of Churchill's Anglo-American 'special relationship' ahead of its time, and ignored Boucicault's appeal. It was treated by the British press with scepticism as one more publicity stunt by the arch-showman: 'One word for the Fenian Prisoners, and how many for the "Shaughraun?" ', runs the caption to a cartoon of Boucicault holding up a placard labelled 'Petition & Advt The Shaughraun' behind a studiously cold-shouldering Dizzy.[15] But the appeal, Utopian and theatrical as it was, rightly represented the Utopian and theatrical politics of the play.

The action opens with a mock passage of arms between the English officer Captain Molineux and the Irish Claire Ffolliott whom he takes, in the style of *She Stoops to Conquer*, for the dairymaid.

> MOLINEUX. Is this place called Swillabeg?
> CLAIRE. No. it is called Shoolabeg.

> MOLINEUX. Beg pardon; your Irish names are so unpronounceable. You see I am an Englishman.
> CLAIRE. I remarked your misfortune; poor crature, you couldn't help it. (Boucicault, 173)

After some flirtatious by-play between them in which Molineux snatches a kiss and they churn the butter together in suggestive intimacy, Claire gets in a parting shot before calling her cousin Arte O'Neal:

> CLAIRE. . . . What's your name again? (*looking at card*) Mulligrubs?
> MOLINEUX. No! Molineux.
> CLAIRE. I ax your pardon! You see I'm Irish, and them English names are so unpronounceable! (Boucicault, 174)

Ireland 2: England nil. The bantering over national difference here sets up the expected trope of a romance to come: the bumbling but honorable Englishman falling in love with the witty and charming Irishwoman, she in spite of her prickly patriotism unable to resist his decency, uprightness and sincerity. By the end of the action Irish and English will join in a marriage of complementary equals not in colonial subordination.[16]

In the imagination of this national romance, class is crucially important. In revenge for his mistaking her for the dairymaid, Claire deliberately distorts the aristocratic Molineux into the ludicrous Mulligrubs. But he is to prove his class affinity with her in the next scene. When the villainous 'squireen' Corry Kinchela appears, Molineux bristles with social antagonism. Two speeches by Kinchela are enough to provoke the aside 'This fellow is awfully offensive to me' (Boucicault, 176) and Kinchela's self-introduction is insultingly rejected. It is this instinctive hostility to the social 'bounder' which seals Claire's alliance with Molineux as he takes his leave, making formal apology for his initial mis-classing of her:

> MOLINEUX. . . . I ask your pardon for the liberty I took with you when I presented myself.
> CLAIRE. (*offering her hand*) The liberty you took with him