Introduction

Jack B. Yeats's 1937 painting *In Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi* bears testament to the crucial significance of the plays of Dion Boucicault in the Irish cultural imagination during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Describing this work, which he had just sold at exhibition, to a friend, Yeats wrote:

> It was a large picture, and showed a long car on a kind of fairy road in the moonlight with a waterfall at the side, meeting a group of characters of Boucicault's plays. You remember about *The Colleen Bawn Arragh na pogue* [*sic*] and *The Shaughraun*. Bianconi was an Italian who came to Ireland as a boy and became rich with the ownership of the Bianconi Longcars. *The Shaughraun* was the second play I ever saw and a Bianconi the first vehicle in the nature of a coach I ever rode on.[1]

Yeats, brother of poet William B., had travelled as a child from his grandparents' home in Sligo to Rosses Point to see that production of *The Shaughraun*. Set against the spectacular backdrop of Glencar waterfall, prominent in much of the artist's work, the painting captures the romance of the small travelling theatre companies that journeyed the length and breadth of Ireland, while also creating a palpable sense of excitement that evokes Boucicault's melodramatic plots.

Boucicault's cultural influence, however, extended well beyond his native land as he was the most prominent playwright on the international stage for almost forty years, spanning the period 1840 to 1880, becoming best known for that triptych of Irish plays referred to by Yeats – *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) and *The Shaughraun* (1874). Yet, it was not until ninety years after the first success of *The Shaughraun* that these three plays became readily available when they were published together in *The Dolmen Boucicault* in 1964. In his introduction to the volume, David Krause observed that Boucicault was by then 'a forgotten and much maligned figure', and he noted that none of his works had survived in the modern repertoire.[2] *The Dolmen Boucicault* undoubtedly played a part in a

revival of interest in Boucicault: two years after its publication the National Gallery of Ireland purchased a statuette of Boucicault in the role of Conn, which had been presented to the playwright by the Irish-American citizens of New York in 1875, during the run of *The Shaughraun* in that city. Later in 1966 *The Shaughraun* was produced in Belfast, and another production of that play enjoyed a successful run in Dublin's Abbey Theatre in early 1967. A Boucicault exhibition at the City Library in Pearse Street followed the Abbey production. Whether this revival of interest in Boucicault and his most popular play was in any way a reflection of nationalist sentiment during the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 revolution is certainly worth consideration.

Early Boucicault criticism treated the plays as spectacular melodrama, emphasising that the success of the Irish plays was largely due to the playwright's improved portrayal of the stage Irishman. Subsequent criticism has treated Boucicault's work in a more nuanced light, focusing on the evident political subtexts of the plays. Most recent analysis has focused on very particular political readings of the plays within the colonial context of Ireland, often as the opening chapter in books which subsequently move on to consider later Irish dramatists and culture. Overall, the body of existing Boucicault criticism with regard to all of his Irish work is problematic in that it generally brings a very specific reading to one, sometimes more, of the Irish plays, and often as part of a larger cultural project. So, while a re-evaluation of the melodramas has certainly taken place over recent decades, the last works to deal with all three Irish plays together remain David Krause's 1964 essay and Robert Hogan's book, *Dion Boucicault*, published in 1969.[3]

The national and international significance of Boucicault's work is well recognised, yet the reception of his work in the three cities where his Irish plays premiered has been a neglected area of research. This work addresses some of the many lacunae in Boucicault research by undertaking a detailed examination of the reception of all of his Irish plays in the New York–London–Dublin theatre triangle which Boucicault inhabited. Interpreting theatre history as 'a socio-cultural phenomenon' that closely approximates social history, the book examines the different social and political worlds in which the plays were produced.[4] It will show that the complex politics of reception of the plays, spanning the twenty-year period from the start of the 1860s right through to the early 1880s, cannot be separated from the social and political implications of colonialism at that time.

Boucicault criticism has become strongly politicised in recent years, and has mainly favoured a nationalist reading of the plays. It is generally

accepted that the Irish plays demonstrate a trajectory of increasing nationalism culminating in *The Shaughraun*, but this claim is based mainly on textual analysis of the play with some reference to biographical details of the playwright. The approach taken in this book provides a more broadly informed basis for assessing such political interpretations. In light of the nationalist subject matter of the plays, a question posed is how such nationalist content was received by contemporary audiences, and how, if at all, the politics impacted on critical reception. This raises the further issue of whether a play can be considered political if it is not received by audiences as such. While the politics of the plays are central to this study, its main focus is on how those politics were received in the auditorium and in the periodical press.

In defining what constitutes a Boucicault 'Irish play', Robert Hogan's list of the Irish plays is a good starting point. Hogan's loose classification of 'major' and 'minor' Irish plays draws on his definition of an Irish play as one being 'peopled mainly by Irish characters and set in Ireland'.[5] *The Colleen Bawn*, *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *The Shaughraun* form the major Irish plays, while the minor category consists of six works: *Andy Blake* (1854); *The Rapparee* (1870); *Daddy O'Dowd* (1873); *The Amadan* (1883); *Robert Emmet* (1884); and *The Spae Wife* (1888). Hogan employs a further category that consists of non-Irish plays in which an Irish character features prominently: they include *The Knight of Arva* (1848); *Night and Morning* (1871); *The Jilt* (1885). The six 'major' and 'minor' plays considered in this book were selected on the basis that their representation of Ireland, or what could be called their Irishness, was intrinsic to their reception. This was not the case with the other plays such as *Andy Blake*, which, while set in Dublin, has no particular Irish aspect to it.[6] The plays are *The Colleen Bawn*; *Arrah-na-Pogue*; *The Rapparee*; *Daddy O'Dowd* (and its rewritten version, *The O'Dowd*); *The Shaughraun*; and *Robert Emmet*, with reference also being made to *Night and Morning*. Because it is argued that *Robert Emmet* is not substantially a play by Boucicault, the issue of its authorship is central and therefore its reception is not considered. The reception in the cities in which the plays were first premiered, and in which other significant productions took place, is covered.

While the Irish plays are the main focus, this book positions them in light of Boucicault's career as a whole. Thus the opening chapter offers a biographical sketch of the playwright up until 1860 when *The Colleen Bawn* premiered, and provides an introduction to his most popular plays of that period. Chapter 2 considers *The Colleen Bawn* in light of Boucicault's earlier work, including *The Octoroon* (1859). Although written and

first performed in New York, *The Colleen Bawn* is shown to have been claimed by Dubliners as a long-awaited, national drama of Ireland. Chapter 3 examines the detailed genesis of *Arrah-na-Pogue*, and its reception. The question of censorship, and the supposed banning of 'The Wearing of the Green', is investigated in full. Of the thirty-two plays that Boucicault wrote in the ten-year period between *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *The Shaughraun*, only two were Irish: *The Rapparee* and *Daddy O'Dowd*. Chapter 4 considers the question of how to account for these two Irish plays, and their relatively low level of success.What many consider to be Boucicault's finest Irish play, *The Shaughraun*, premiered in New York in September 1874. Chapter 5 examines its reception by its American audience, and questions whether the Fenian and nationalist subject matter of the play was an important issue for any element of that audience. The fact that Boucicault wrote a letter of appeal to the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, on behalf of the Fenian prisoners during the London run of *The Shaughraun* in 1876, is well documented, but little is known of its precise nature and content. When examining the London reception of *The Shaughraun*, chapter 6 focuses on whether the political aspects of the play provoked a response, and it also carries out a detailed analysis of the reception granted to the letter, highlighting Boucicault's treatment at the hands of the British press.

The final chapter demonstrates that Boucicault's 1880 play, *The O'Dowd*, was undertaken as a direct response to the immediate Irish politics of the day. In contrast, a coda to the chapter will reveal that *Robert Emmet*, a play that has been positioned as a highpoint in the playwright's political commitment to Irish nationalism, is first and foremost the work of Frank Marshall, an English playwright, and not Boucicault. The aim of the book as a whole is to offer a new way of viewing all of Boucicault's Irish melodramas in light of their social, cultural and political complexity. It argues for a shift in focus from the politics of the plays, and their author, to the politics of the auditorium and the press, or what can be described as the politics of reception. It is within that complex and shifting field of stage, theatre and public media, that Boucicault's performance as playwright, actor and publicist is best understood.

CHAPTER 1

Becoming Boucicault

Dion Boucicault was born Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot at 28 Middle Gardiner Street, Dublin, the fifth child of Samuel Smith Boursiquot and Anne Darley. Samuel, a Dublin wine merchant of Huguenot extraction, was forty-four when he married the eighteen-year-old Anne in 1813. Her Irish Protestant family was distantly related to the wealthy Guinness brewing family, and her brothers, George Darley, a poet, and the Reverend Charles Darley, the first Professor of English Literature at Queen's College, Cork, were both minor playwrights from whom Boucicault claimed to have inherited his literary talent. Samuel Boursiquot was under severe financial and personal strain by the time of his son's birth in December 1820. As the marriage deteriorated, Anne had embarked on an affair with an old childhood friend, Dionysius Lardner, at some point in early 1820. It is generally held that Boucicault was the illegitimate son of Lardner, and Lardner's actions, including paying for Boucicault's education, certainly suggest that he was the natural father, or at least that he believed this to be the case. Boucicault's childhood in Dublin was unconventional in that Lardner, having left his own family, took lodgings with the Boursiquots, now at 47 Lower Gardiner Street, in 1821. When Lardner moved to London in 1828 to take up the first chair of Natural Philosophy and Astronomy at the newly formed University College London, the Boursiquot family moved with him. Samuel Boursiquot returned to Ireland the following year and lived apart from Anne for the rest of his life.

In England, the young Boucicault went to several schools, and although an unenthusiastic scholar, he read widely and learned easily. While at the University College School in London he made friends with Charles Lamb Kenney, whose father, James, was a playwright, and the two became regular theatregoers, Boucicault becoming enthralled with the theatrical world. His next school was in Middlesex, and Boucicault gained his first acting experience there in 1836 in an end-of-term production of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Pizarro* in which he played the part of Rolla. While there, he also

composed his first dramatic piece, *Napoleon's Old Guard*, and the success he enjoyed set his determination on becoming an actor. After a brief period in Dublin with his mother, whose relationship with Lardner had ended, Boucicault was back in London as a civil-engineer apprentice to Lardner, whom he eventually persuaded to give him a quarterly allowance to enable him to pursue an acting career.

Boucicault made his provincial acting debut in Cheltenham under the pseudonym of Lee Moreton, which was followed by work in Brighton and Bristol, where the first professional performance of his work took place in February 1839. The three performances of the one-act farce, *Lodgings to Let*, gave Boucicault his first real taste of success. His first full-length work to be produced, *Jack Sheppard*, opened in Hull later that year, and while it was generally well received, the theatre's manager decided to cut the play from four acts to three and to offer it only as an afterpiece. Boucicault argued with the manager and his engagement at Hull was terminated, thus establishing the behaviour that he would display for his entire career.

Boucicault's biographer, Richard Fawkes, records how in early 1841 the playwright's first stage success came about more by accident than by design. Boucicault, still using the name Moreton, was only granted a meeting with Charles Mathews, the actor/manager of Covent Garden, when he was mistaken for another playwright, Maddison Morton. When instructed by Mathews that he needed 'a good five-act comedy of modern life', Boucicault duly produced such a work thirty days later.[1] While *London Assurance* was billed as a modern comedy, it is essentially written in the style of a Restoration comedy, and is suggestive of the work of such authors as Sheridan, Congreve and Goldsmith. In its initial draft, Boucicault had called the play *Country Matters*, pointing to his humorous contrasting of the manners of fashionable London with those of rustic Gloucestershire.

The play was substantially rewritten during rehearsal, opening at Covent Garden on 4 March with Mathews playing Dazzle alongside his wife, Madame Vestris, in the role of Grace Harkaway. The initial advertisements did not carry the young playwright's name as it was then unknown, but this did not remain the case for long. *London Assurance* was a great success, *The Times* reporting that the author had displayed 'a fearless humour to strike out a path for himself, an enjoyment of fun, a rapidity in loading his speeches with jokes, a power of keeping up his spirits to the last, which distinguishes this piece from every other work of the day'.[2] Overnight, the twenty-year-old Boucicault became the sensation of the London stage, a position he would hold on and off over the next forty years.

LONDON AND PARIS

Establishing a pattern he would subsequently repeat several times, Boucicault, who had by now dropped his pseudonym and changed the spelling of his surname, was heavily in debt by the end of the year. Mainly due to youth and arrogance, he had succeeded in alienating theatrical colleagues and critics alike, and he would continue to maintain an antagonistic relationship with the London press throughout his career. *The Irish Heiress* (1842), his next play for Covent Garden, failed and, blaming Charles Mathews, Boucicault moved to the Haymarket, under the management of Benjamin Webster. It was difficult for any dramatist of the day to survive by playwriting alone as only a single payment was received for each work regardless of the play's success, so while composing original works, Boucicault, at Webster's suggestion, started adapting French dramas, for which he was paid £50 each. As long as another big hit proved elusive, adapting from the French at least provided Boucicault with a regular income. When, in November 1844, his new comedy, *Old Heads and Young Hearts*, did not enjoy the reception he felt it deserved, Boucicault made his first trip to Paris in order to select plays for Webster to produce on the London stage.

During the next four years, Boucicault moved between London and Paris, and married a French widow, Anne Guiot, in July 1845 in London. Very little is known of Anne other than that she was considerably older than Boucicault and that she was affluent, which is generally held to be the reason he married her. By the summer of 1848, Anne was dead, the cause of her death unknown, and Boucicault was back in London, where, two years later, he became house dramatist to Charles Kean, son of the great Shakespearean actor Edmund Kean, at the Princess's Theatre in Oxford Street. *The Corsican Brothers* (1852) was the third major play Boucicault wrote for Kean and it proved to be one of the most successful to result from the partnership, and the hit of the season. Fawkes notes that Queen Victoria saw the play five times that season, and made a sketch of the duel scene in her journal. *The Corsican Brothers* was an excellent vehicle for Kean, who played the twin brothers, and it remained popular among star actors, including Henry Irving, for the next fifty years. Boucicault's specially designed stage trap for the production became known as the Corsican Trap and was copied by most theatres, and serves as an early example of his technical innovation and mastery of stagecraft that included the development of fire-proof scenery. The two men soon argued when Kean discovered that Boucicault was having an affair with his ward, a young actress called Agnes Robertson. Since he could in consequence no

longer work for Kean, Boucicault decided to travel to the United States; his plays were just as popular there as in London, and at the age of thirty-two he craved new experiences. The couple left London in late summer 1853 for New York, where Boucicault had arranged for Agnes to play a season at Burton's Theatre.

AMERICA: SENSATIONALISING THE CONTEMPORARY

In America, Boucicault's efforts were mainly concentrated on vehicles to promote the acting talents of Agnes, who proved to be phenomenally successful. Her claim later in life that 'Except Jenny Lind, no woman was ever received in America as I was', can certainly be held to be true.[3] Boucicault himself returned to the stage as an actor in 1854, and the couple spent the next two years touring extensively, finally settling in New Orleans following the birth of their first child. Boucicault's attempt at theatre management there failed, and late 1857 saw him back in New York practically penniless and in desperate need of a substantial dramatic success. According to Richard Fawkes, he hit on an idea for a new play while in conversation with the editor of the *Daily Times*, Charles Seymour, and two other journalists. They suggested he write something based on the financial panic that had recently hit New York, and Boucicault knew a French play upon which he might base such a story, *Les Pauvres de Paris* by Eugène Nus and Edouard Brisebarre.[4] *The Poor of New York* opened at Wallack's Theatre on 8 December 1857, and proved to be the New York hit that Boucicault so badly needed.

The opening act is set during the commercial panic of 1837, which had followed a period of unparalleled speculation, the financial consequences of which were felt until 1843. The following four acts take place during the recently experienced 1857 financial crash, which had been sparked off by the failure of the Ohio Life Insurance Company. The issue of social class is at the core of the play as the poor of the title are not newly arrived immigrants but the financially reduced middle classes who are shamefully forced to hide their poverty in order to maintain their social respectability. The play contains all the requisite ingredients of melodrama, including the obligatory happy resolution, but it was the sensation scene towards the end of the drama that caught the public imagination. The repentant villain, Badger, is seen frantically trying to save an important document while the burning walls of a house collapse all around him. A real fire engine roars on to the stage and extinguishes the fire, while a badly burnt Badger emerges triumphantly with the document that will convict the guilty.

In drawing on contemporary events, Boucicault had, according to John McCormick, given his audiences exactly what they wanted, 'Topicality and realism were two of the essential elements.'[5] Audiences felt they were watching a 'real' American play due to Boucicault's use of local place names such as Union Square, Fifth Avenue and Brooklyn Heights. It was one of the first full plays to do so and 'For its original audiences it was a play of the here-and-now.'[6] Despite the play's New York locale, Boucicault had in fact created a generic play, and such was its broad appeal that he produced it in various cities in America and England, changing the title and place names to tailor it for local audiences.

Boucicault now looked to other contemporary events for inspiration, and the source for his next hit, *Jessie Brown*, which opened at Wallack's on 22 February 1858, was the Sepoy rebellion that had occurred in India only months before in September 1857. According to Peter Thomson, the play is based on a single press report about the letters of an English lady who was rescued when Lucknow was relieved by the forces under Sir Colin Campbell.[7] The events in India had been widely reported, and according to McCormick, 'The Indian Mutiny was so fresh in people's minds that the play had something of the value of a dramatized newspaper.'[8] The heroine is Jessie Brown, a young Scottish girl who inspires and rallies the besieged garrison at Lucknow to hold out under extreme conditions. In the dramatic final moments of the play when all hope seems lost, it is only Jessie who hears the bagpipes that signal their salvation.

In his introduction to the play, Thomson notes that the instigator of the Cawnpore massacre, Nana Sahib, received the sort of press coverage in America and England 'that Hitler might expect in modern Israel'.[9] This would explain why Boucicault was forced to take on the role himself when he was unable to find an actor willing to play it. Unlike *The Poor of New York*, where class is an invisible trait, determined only by outward signs of prosperity or lack thereof, the issue of race in *Jessie Brown* is highly visible and is central to the play. Boucicault positioned the besieged white ruling class as the deserved victors who had God on their side, and used symbols of British and Christian culture to represent the order that will be restored once the native non-Christians have been suppressed.

The Octoroon: the most contemporary of all

Prior to the opening of *The Octoroon* on 6 December 1859 at the Winter Garden in New York, some confusion existed as to what exactly an octoroon was. The *Albion* professed 'an arithmetical suspicion that it may

be something like a double quadroon'.[10] The term is now defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'a person having one-eighth Negro blood, the offspring of a quadroon and a white', crediting Boucicault with first using the word. He had drawn on Mayne Reid's 1856 novel *The Quadroon* when writing the play, but it is, nonetheless, generally regarded as an original work.[11] As a play about slavery, *The Octoroon* was politically in tune with its own time, as the United States in the 1850s had witnessed prolonged struggles over that issue. It opened just four days after the execution by hanging of the abolitionist leader John Brown for his attack on the US arsenal at Harper's Ferry on 16 October. Additionally, the opening night coincided with the election, as mayor of New York, of Fernando Wood, a pro-Southern candidate. The Civil War would erupt in less than sixteen months. In anticipation of the play's opening, the pro-slavery *New York Herald* concerned itself with the impact the new drama might have on its audience:

> The effect of the new play upon the public mind, just now in such an excited state, must be irritating, and it is certainly disgraceful that the people of this metropolis – and they are conservative and sound in their hearts – cannot even go to the theatre without having the almighty nigger thrust under their noses . . . The play will carry with it the abolition aroma, and must be classed with the sermons of Beecher and Cheever and the novels of Mrs. Stowe. It will tend still further to excite the feeling which now threatens to destroy the Union of the States and ruin the republic.[12]

In its first-night review, the *New York Times*, attempting no doubt to downplay any potential the play might have to cause debate or further unrest, put such concerns to rest and declared that, 'Nothing in the world can be more harmless and non-committal than Mr. Boucicault's play.'[13] Yet, just a week later, in a further review, the paper was forced to concede that: 'Everybody talks about the "Octoroon," wonders about the "Octoroon," goes to see the "Octoroon"; and the "Octoroon" thus becomes the work of the public mind.'[14] *The Octoroon* was clearly a product of a precise time in American social affairs: Boucicault succeeded in capturing the imagination of the people in his portrayal of slavery. This is not surprising as stage adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's powerful indictment of slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had been even more popular than the novel and had run for many years following its first publication in 1852. Additionally, Beecher Stowe's next major novel of plantation life, *Dred* (1856), while not as acclaimed as her earlier work, was also extremely popular when adapted for the stage.