

# **The politics of Irish drama**

Plays in context from Boucicault to Friel

Nicholas Grene



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# Contents

*Acknowledgements* x

*Chronology* xi

*List of abbreviations* xvi

Introduction i

- 1 Stage interpreters 5
  - 2 Strangers in the house 51
  - 3 Shifts in perspective 77
  - 4 Class and space in O'Casey 110
  - 5 Reactions to revolution 136
  - 6 Living on 170
  - 7 Versions of pastoral 194
  - 8 Murphy's Ireland 219
  - 9 Imagining the other 242
- Conclusion: a world elsewhere 261

*Notes* 269

*Bibliography* 290

*Index* 301

# 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)<sup>1</sup>

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).<sup>2</sup>

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)<sup>3</sup>

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)<sup>4</sup>

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.'<sup>5</sup> 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 startlingly 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 interpretation 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',<sup>6</sup> 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.’<sup>7</sup>

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.’<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

[Kinchela] when he presented himself clears the account.  
(Boucicault, 176)

Class solidarity, the identification of a Molineux with a two-f Ffolliott against a Kinchela, is here established as a decisive bond beyond national difference.

The upper-class Arte O'Neal and Claire Ffolliott are cousins, and their kinship is made to stand for a pre-Cromwellian alliance of Old Irish and Old English gentry. Father Dolan reminds the would-be dispossessing Kinchela of the curse upon the usurpers of Suil-a-more:

When these lands were torn from Owen Roe O'Neal in the old times, he laid his curse on the spoilers, for Suil-a-more was the dowry of his bride, Grace Ffolliott. Since then many a strange family have tried to hold possession of the place; but every year one of that family would die; the land seemed to swallow them one by one – till the O'Neals and Ffolliotts returned, none other thrived upon it. (Boucicault, 178)

Colonial expropriation is here figured as the standard Gothic family melodrama; the details of history are blurred or elided. Owen Roe O'Neill, Gaelic leader for the Confederation of Kilkenny at the Battle of Benburb in 1646, is a rebel figure sufficiently removed historically to make a respectable ancestor 'in the old times'. The role of the English in the confiscation of Irish lands is tactfully omitted (not to mention the fact that the real-life Ffolliotts seem only to have come to Ireland in the seventeenth century as Ulster plantation settlers in Fermanagh<sup>17</sup>) so that it may appear that the original 'despoilers', as well as the 'strange families' who tried to seize Suil-a-more since, were all hated Irish 'middle-men' like Corry Kinchela.

The middleman is a great man to blame in these matters. The agent who stands between the landlord and tenant, unscrupulously exploiting both, the rackrenter who sublets at extortionate rates the lands he himself leases rather than owns, the half-educated 'half-sir' who rises through the middle-class professions to ape or oust the Ascendancy family, these are all the favoured villains of nineteenth-century Irish fiction. The unsettled state of Ireland and its chronic land problems need not be attributed to the colonial connection or the

inequities of land tenure when there are the middlemen to blame. And hand-in-glove with the middleman in this rogues' gallery is the informer: in the case of *The Shaughraun*, Harvey Duff.

Harvey Duff is not only an informer but an *agent provocateur*, employed not by the police but by Corry Kinchela for his own nefarious ends. He protests when Kinchela tries to fob off his demands for more money for his evidence against the Fenians:

KINCHELA. Were you not handsomely paid at the time for doing your duty?

DUFF. My jooty! was it my jooty to come down here amongst the people disguised as a Fenian delegate, and pass meself aff for a head centre so that I could swear them in and then denounce them? Who gave me the offis how to trap young Ffolliott? (Boucicault, 190)

Robert Ffolliott has been transported to Australia on the strength of Duff's evidence, but it remains doubtful in just what, if any, Fenian activity he engaged. He is first mentioned by Captain Molineux who (with wild implausibility for an English officer) refers to him as 'a distinguished Fenian hero' (Boucicault, 174). An air of the disguised rebel on the run is as much Fenianism as Robert needs. The Fenian movement itself is made to seem a fabrication of the Harvey Duffs and the Corry Kinchelas, a wicked chimera devised to further their own heinous ends. The middlemen, the squireens and informers, stand between and *misinterpret* relations which would otherwise be amicable and co-operative, the relationship of landlord and tenant, of English and Irish. Land wars and Fenian liberation movement alike are products of such wilfully contrived misunderstanding.

It is significant in this emollient picture of Irish politics that the priest Father Dolan is emphatically on the side of the angels. When Arte O'Neal explains the impoverished position of herself and her cousin Claire, Molineux attributes it to *Castle Rackrent*-ish high living in the family: 'You have to suffer bitterly, indeed, for ages of family imprudence, and the Irish extravagance of your ancestors.' Arte retorts with pride: 'Yes, sir; the extravagance of their love for their country, and the imprudence of their fidelity to their faith' (Boucicault, 175). The O'Neals and the Ffolliotts are, it seems, allied not

only by class and political allegiance but by their common Catholicism. However, no further inconvenient signs of their faith are forthcoming in the play, and their priest is a most reassuring figure. In the wake of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869 and with the growing power of an increasingly modernised and well-organised Catholic Church in Ireland, he might well not have been so reassuring for English (or Irish) Protestant audiences. Boucicault took care not only to stress Father Dolan's personal loyalty, and his exemplary standards of honour – he is unable to give the assurance Molineux demands that Robert is not hiding in his house, whereupon Robert gives himself up to spare his priest the sin of perjury – but also his class subordination.

Father Dolan's speech varies through the play. He can rise to the high register of melodrama rhetoric as in his account of the curse on Suil-a-more quoted earlier. But he is also given the telltale dialect vowels which place him in the brogue-speaking classes. He recoils in horror at Kinchela's proposal that he should marry Arte: 'T'd rather rade the service over her grave and hear the sods falling on her coffin than spake the holy words to make her your wife' (Boucicault, 178). While the recruitment of priests from the peasant class, their close involvement in grassroots local politics, were to make them a formidable part of the Land League organisation in the 1880s for all the disapproval of the hierarchy, Boucicault reads Father Dolan's relatively humble status as a guarantee of political loyalty. As the uncle of Moya, the peasant heroine who will eventually marry Conn the Shaughraun, as somewhere between priest and faithful retainer to the upper-class O'Neals and Ffolliots, he is no threat to the dream of Utopian political harmony towards which the action tends.

Conn the Shaughraun himself has the key role in the engineering of this politically happy-ever-after denouement. In plot terms, the Shaughraun is the exemplary opposite of the middleman. Corry Kinchela and Harvey Duff, as magistrate and police spy, are the ostensible agents of law and order who are in fact deeply subversive; Conn the lawless vagabond is the incarnation of true loyalty. The middlemen deceive, misrepresent, misinterpret. They suppress letters (Corry Kinchela has intercepted Robert's prison letters home to Arte O'Neal), they bear false witness, they wrongfully imprison the

innocent and the good. Conn is the communicator, using his songs outside Robert's prison walls for coded messages, the liberator who frees his master not once but repeatedly.<sup>18</sup> (And if Conn's story of how he hitched shiprides to Australia and enabled Robert to escape sounds fantastic, it is hardly less so than the real-life rescue of Fenian prisoners from their Australian penal settlement by the Catalpa expedition later in the year that *The Shaughraun* closed in London.)<sup>19</sup> While Kinchela has the traditional villain's combination of financial and sexual predatoriness, Conn facilitates the two politically and socially correct marriages of Arte with Robert, Molineux with Claire, and is to be rewarded with his own union with Moya – provided the audience 'go bail for' him. In an artful version of the traditional *plaudite*, Conn appeals to his public:

You are the only friend I have. Long life t'ye! Many a time you  
have looked over my faults. Will you be blind to them now,  
and hould out your hands once more to a poor Shaughraun?

(Boucicault, 219)

The *Shaughraun*/Boucicault here invites applause and approval not only for his starring performance, but for the reconciliatory happy ending which he has brought about and the Irish drama which he has presented and epitomised.

*The Shaughraun* was offered as 'an entirely New and Original Play ... illustrative of Irish Life and Character'<sup>20</sup>, and the *Shaughraun* himself was cast as the greatest illustration and illustrator. In the *Dramatis Personae* he is listed as 'CONN (the shaughraun, the soul of every fair, the life of every funeral, the first fiddle at all weddings and patterns)' (Boucicault, 171). Conn is here associated with the Irish genre scenes which it is the design of the play to display as it displays the much-featured Irish scenery. He is the essence of Irishness as it is manifested in fairs and funerals, wakes and weddings, but he is also the showman who produces and stars in them. In this regard Boucicault's special position as actor/author/producer is significant. There was nothing unusual about having the lead actor in the comic part rather than the role of the nominal hero/juvenile lead: the phenomenon was familiar back to the time of Molière and before. Equally traditional is the key role as contriver and controller given in

comedy to normally subordinated figures; Boucicault's comic Irish servants are legitimate descendants of the tricky slaves of Plautus and Terence. But there is a particular piquancy in having the illiterate Conn played by the man who wrote the whole play, and an added dimension as a result to the *faux naïveté* of the clever/foolish dialect-speaking clown who presides over the action.

Boucicault apparently insisted on the play's title, in spite of the protests by the theatre manager Lester Wallack that the New York public would not be able to pronounce, much less understand, it.<sup>21</sup> It seems to have been his policy in the titles of all his Irish plays (including the later unsuccessful *The Amadan*) to use the estranging novelty of an Irish-derived word or phrase. It was a part of what he had to purvey, the otherness of Ireland, like the romantic scenes and place-names which he marketed in such abundance, at times regardless of geography. (*The Shaughraun* appears to move the Blaskets from the Dingle peninsula to the coast of Sligo, while *The Colleen Bawn* combines the Limerick setting implied by its subtitle *The Brides of Garryowen* with the full benefit of the Kerry lakes of Killarney.<sup>22</sup>) It is a composite idea of Ireland which Boucicault offers to his audience, its picturesque scenery, its dialect, its traditional music, all of them equally strange and yet thoroughly familiar in their strangeness. The *Shaughraun* is there as audience sponsor to inhabit and comfortably interpret the Irish scene.

The wake is one of the great set-pieces of the play, as it was one of the most distinctive and commented-on customs of the Irish. Molineux acts as English straight man to be baffled by the practices of what he constantly calls 'you Irish'. 'In the name of Bedlam,' he exclaims at Conn's mother's plans for the wake, 'does she propose to give a dance and supper-party in honour of the melancholy occasion?' (Boucicault, 208). An audience may be supposed to smile at the Englishman's ignorance of the practice of the wake, to side with Claire in her impatient refusal to be stereotyped as 'you Irish'. Yet it is very important to the wake-scene that we know *in advance* that Conn is not really dead. The strong curtain of Act II closes on the fallen figure of the *Shaughraun* who has given his life for his master, with all the added pathos of dying in front of the moonlit broken shrine of St Bridget. But in the very next scene the incorrigible, unmurderable

Conn is back, disclosing himself to his allies, furthering the next stage of the plot, yet refusing to undecieve his mother, bent instead on returning to play his part as the corpse: 'Would you have me spile a wake? Afther invitin' all the neighbours!' (Boucicault, 209). The audience goes into the wake-scene thus prepared to enjoy the spectacle as pure comedy.

The wake and the keen were potentially frightening, awe-inspiring, as the customs of an archaic, even a barbaric culture. The abandoned uninhibitedness of the keen was striking to as late and sympathetic an observer as Synge. Boucicault opens his scene with the picturesqueness of a formal genre painting, 'TABLEAU OF AN IRISH WAKE', and domesticates the keen into a recognisable ballad format with alternating male and female choruses. Conn exploits the comedy of the undead corpse for all its worth, with the stage business of stealing the head keener's whiskey and amused wonderment at his miraculously improved reputation: 'It's a mighty pleasant thing to die like this, once in a way, and hear all the good things said about you afther you are dead and gone' (Boucicault, 212). As a result, what is strange and potentially disturbing about the spectacle of the wake is neutralised by having it turned into a comic version of itself. With Conn the conman, the audience can enjoy the wake as pure grotesque.

The scene acts similarly to mime and defuse other threatening images as well. With Molineux's revelations of the iniquities of Kinchela and Harvey Duff, the keeners are suddenly transformed into a lynch-mob, as they bay for the blood of the informer:

BIDDY seizes axe. MRS. O'KELLY crosses to fire for poker.  
DONOVAN gets scythe and file. PEASANTS rush for various  
implements that are about the stage. MOLINEUX comes on  
BIDDY with axe, backs to MRS. O'KELLY with poker, turns to  
DONOVAN with scythe, whom he eyes with his glass.

(Boucicault, 213)

In the iconography of terror there is a special place for the crowd released into anarchic violence by the peasants' revolt, armed with the agricultural implements of their labour. Here, though, Molineux the English officer, who might be expected to be the victim of Irish peasant rage, is actually on their side. The momentary discomfort of

being surrounded by angry people brandishing axe, poker and scythe is made ludicrous by Molineux's monocle and the confident knowledge that he is not their intended scapegoat. The men they are really out to get are – of course – the offstage middlemen, Kinchela and Duff. And though the fury of the mob is used to drive Duff to a suicidal leap from the cliff, Kinchela is rescued from lynching by a single command from Father Dolan: 'Stand back! D'ye hear me? Must I speak twice?' at which 'The crowd retire, and lower their weapons' (Boucicault, 218). Violence in *The Shaughraun* is localised, controllable by the authority of the priest, directed not against the colonising British or the true landowning classes of O'Neals and Ffolliotts but only at the limited and eradicable class of the villainous middlemen.

Boucicault's Irish plays were produced in fashionable theatres to largely middle-class audiences, though they could be popular with the working classes also.<sup>23</sup> For such audiences, the social conservatism of the plays' politics, the reassuring picture of a pseudo-feudal bond of gentry and loyal peasants allied against greedy and unscrupulous bourgeois ambition offered 'an optimistic myth of reconciliation'<sup>24</sup> in the colonial context of Ireland. In the magic space of melodrama the realities of Fenian politics, of power struggles at agrarian and national level, are susceptible of domestic solution. The Utopian idyll represented by the line-up at curtain close of *The Shaughraun*, Conn and Moya flanked by Mrs O'Kelly and Father Dolan, with the two couples, Robert/Arte, Molineux/Claire at either end, and not a Kinchela or a Duff to be seen, could be appreciated equally by American, English or Irish audiences. It could appeal to the inherited sentimental patriotism of Irish-Americans, allay the fears of the English and satisfy the national self-esteem of the Irish. This flexibility of appeal, the winning charm of the version of Ireland produced by *The Shaughraun*, were made possible by its simultaneous inside/outside perspective. Boucicault as Conn the Shaughraun interpreted Ireland as an actor interprets his role, embodying, impersonating the part he plays, but always with the consciousness of an outer, other audience with its preconceptions and prejudices. That stance came to be despised as stage-Irishry, castigated for its inauthenticity, condemned for its ingratiating 'blarney' and 'bootlicking'.<sup>25</sup> Political disapproval apart, the Shaughraun is indeed a stage Irishman,



designed to live in the theatre as a representative type 'illustrative of Irish life and character'. The concern of the rest of this chapter is with how later dramatists developed the political business of interpreting and reinterpreting Ireland for audiences at home and abroad, and how the figures of stage interpreter, Irish genre scene and English/Irish marriage initiated by Boucicault are redeployed by Shaw and Friel.

***John Bull's Other Island***

The politics of *John Bull*, its genesis, production and performance history, is a more complicated story than that of *The Shaughraun*, partly because it extended over a longer period of time. Shaw's ideas about Irish and English national character were simmering as far back as 1897 when he let off a volley at a meeting of the London Irish Literary Society in response to a fatuous paper on 'Irish Actors of the Nineteenth Century'.

It is a mistake to think an Irishman has not common sense. It is the Englishman who is devoid of common sense . . . It is a mistake to think the Irishman has feeling; he has not; but the Englishman is full of feeling. What the Irishman has is imagination; he can imagine himself in the situation of others.<sup>26</sup>

Shaw's target here is the Arnoldian polarity of the emotional Celt and the practical Saxon, and the design of his 'play on the contrast of Irish and English character'<sup>27</sup> which (at Yeats's prompting) he undertook to write for the Irish Literary Theatre was to reverse these stereotypes.

In its resistance to stereotyping, Shaw's play accorded with the aims of the Irish Literary Theatre to escape from the misrepresentations of Ireland on the English stage, and Yeats was no doubt pleased to get the promise of a play from a playwright of Shaw's standing for what by 1904 was about to become the Abbey Theatre. However, from the beginning the play was written from within an English rather than an Irish theatrical context. All through the summer of 1904 while at work on the play, Shaw fired off a series of all but daily letters to Harley Granville Barker about the casting and staging of the projected production at the Court Theatre, while one equivalent letter to Yeats enquiring whether the Dublin theatre had a hydraulic bridge – 'It

seems to me that as you will deal in fairy plays you may have indulged yourself with hydraulic bridges' – indicates an unfamiliarity both with the modesty of the Abbey Theatre then being fitted up, and the nature of Yeats's 'fairy plays'.<sup>28</sup> The Dublin production seems to have been very much secondary to the London one in his mind, and he cannot have been too much concerned when, in October 1904, Yeats came to the conclusion that the play was beyond what the Abbey could manage or afford. *John Bull*, on the other hand, was integral to the pioneering work of the Vedrenne–Barker management at the Court: 'we shall have to play off the piece as a very advanced and earnest card in the noble game of elevating the British theatre'.<sup>29</sup>

Shaw had in mind also a British political context for the reception of his play. In August he wrote to Granville Barker proposing a delay in the production of what was then still called *Rule Britannia*:

It has only just occurred to me that it would be very bad business to produce *Rule Britt.* before parliament meets again. In fact, it mustn't be done. You will sell a lot of stalls to the political people; and the Irish M.P.s will fill the pit.<sup>30</sup>

(It is interesting to note the differentiation of the Irish MPs from the 'political people', and the assessment of their different means in terms of the price of the tickets they would buy.) In the event, Shaw was proved exactly right and the play drew enormous political interest, with Prime Minister Balfour, who had previously been Irish Secretary, attending five performances in all, bringing (on separate occasions) two future Liberal leaders, Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, as his guests.<sup>31</sup>

Shaw's reputation as a leading Fabian – it was Beatrice Webb who brought Balfour to *John Bull* initially – ensured him the attention from the British political establishment which Boucicault with his appeal to Disraeli so signally failed to achieve. But *John Bull* had in any case a much more specific, much more seriously topical political argument to advance than *The Shaughraun*. The year 1903 had seen the passing of Wyndham's Land Act, one of the most important in the series of legislation that allowed Irish tenant farmers to buy their land and that resulted ultimately in the wholesale expropriation of the

Irish landlord class. Though the first of these Land Acts had been the doing of Gladstone's Liberal administration in 1870, Wyndham's Act had been brought in by the Tory government as part of their policy of 'killing Home Rule with kindness'. For many people it represented some sort of ultimate triumph of that policy: by solving the land question, it effectively solved the 'Irish question'. The design of Shaw's play was specifically to challenge that assumption, to argue that an Ireland of small-farm owner-occupiers was no nearer the end of its problems than the Ireland of persecuted and summarily evicted tenants. 'I have taken,' said Shaw in the wake of the play's production, 'that panacea for all the misery and unrest of Ireland – your Land Purchase Bill – as to the perfect blessedness of which all your political parties and newspapers were for once unanimous; and I have shown at one stroke its idiocy, its shallowness, its cowardice, its utter and foredoomed futility.'<sup>32</sup> It is not clear how far the play may have influenced the Irish policies of Balfour (who was to be defeated in the next General Election) or of the incoming Liberals, but certainly they sat up and took notice.

*John Bull* got a lukewarm critical press on its first production in London, but it attracted great political interest and was a real popular success, culminating in the Royal Command Performance in March 1905 where, famously, Edward VII broke the outsize royal chair laughing. The play folded after just two weeks in New York where the critics castigated its preachiness: 'a thick, glutinous and impenetrable four-act tract'.<sup>33</sup> To the surprise of many, however, it was given a very warm reception in Dublin when it was staged there in November 1907 in a touring version of the Vedrenne-Barker production, and it was to prove an enduring favourite at the Abbey for many years after it was (belatedly) staged there in 1916.<sup>34</sup> In 1907, the year of *The Playboy*, there was apparently a great deal of nervousness about the reception *John Bull* would get, so much so that the Theatre Royal had police on duty to deal with potential disturbances. In the event, they were not needed and the play was as successful in Dublin as it had been in London. Joseph Holloway, the Abbey Theatre architect and obsessive theatre-goer, whose sympathies were always on the nationalist side and who was still sore with the Abbey over the *Playboy*, commented triumphantly in his journal: 'I have been hearing

since the play saw light at the Court that a Dublin audience would wreck the theatre if produced here and yet the event has taken place and the Royal stands unruffled where it stood.' He gleefully imagined the Abbey directors' chagrin at the success of the play they had turned down: 'I wonder how Yeats felt as he sat in the box with Lady Gregory and witnessed the play being thoroughly appreciated by a £300-0-0 house at least!'<sup>35</sup>

A part of the reason why *John Bull* was so appreciated in Dublin was its even distribution of political satire. Irish nationalists could enjoy the exposure of Tim Haffigan, the fake stage-Irishman, and revel in the absurdity of Tom Broadbent, one of the greatest comic stage-Englishmen ever created. And yet the play also gave a caustically satiric picture of Rosscullen, the Irish small town. In fact, the debate between Hodson the English valet and Matt Haffigan the Irish small farmer on their relative sufferings was apparently turned into an Ireland versus England political contest, with alternating rounds of applause from the dress-circle and the gallery.<sup>36</sup> It is extraordinary to imagine Unionists (presumably) in the fashionable dress-circle seats applauding Hodson's socialist attack on the Irish tenant-farmers as less disadvantaged than the English working classes, but equally bizarre that nationalists should have rallied to the cause of the politically myopic Mat Haffigan. Where Synge had incensed the specifically nationalist audiences of the Abbey with a grotesque vision of the sacrosanct West of Ireland peasantry in their own supposedly national theatre, Shaw provided a mixed Dublin audience at the more fashionable Theatre Royal with something for everyone. If the universality of Boucicault's appeal was based on a policy of general conciliation, *John Bull* made its way with the English and the Irish, nationalists and Unionists, by a strategy of even-handed provocativeness and iconoclasm.

The play was directed at both English and Irish audiences and its theatrical design was to move the audience from England to Ireland. Granville Barker, in despair at a play which ran for more than three and a half hours and could only be played in an extended matinée, suggested to Shaw that the first act should be cut and a first scene substituted 'in Cork, with Broadbent already in tweeds on Irish soil'; Shaw insisted that it 'would be about ten minutes longer than

the existing first act, and would do its work worse'.<sup>37</sup> The work of the first act was to show Broadbent on home English territory, thoroughly taken in by the stage Irishman Tim Haffigan. Broadbent, preparing for his visit to Ireland, proposes to take Haffigan as his 'Irish Secretary' to 'come with me and help to break the ice between me and your warmhearted, impulsive countrymen'.<sup>38</sup> Haffigan is to play the part of Irish interpreter for Broadbent, the part of Boucicault's Shaughraun, and he plays it to the life: roguish, deferential, whiskey-drinking, brogue-spouting, giving the gullible Englishman top of the morning with an air. Shaw no doubt intended his English audience to be as taken in by this performance as Broadbent, and to be equally taken aback when it is revealed that Haffigan is 'not an Irishman at all' (Shaw, *CPP*, II, 905).

Shaw had a first go at the Boucicaultian stage Irishman in a review of *The Colleen Bawn* in 1896. 'I have lived to see *The Colleen Bawn* with real water in it; and perhaps I shall live to see it some day with real Irishmen.' Shaw's argument there, elaborated in *John Bull*, is that the stage Irishman was not a misrepresentation of the Irish by the English, but a meretricious invention of the Irish to suit English tastes. 'Of all the tricks which the Irish nation have played on the slow-witted Saxon, the most outrageous is the palming off on him of the imaginary Irishman of romance.'<sup>39</sup> And so in *John Bull* he produces Larry Doyle as the real Irishman to expose the unreality of Haffigan and to take over from him the job of stage interpreter of the Irish. Larry is described in the stage directions in terms which no English audience, reared on images of rollicking shaughrauns, would associate with Ireland:

Mr Lawrence Doyle is a man of 36, with cold grey eyes, strained nose, fine fastidious lips, critical brows, clever head, rather refined and goodlooking on the whole, but with a suggestion of thinskinness and dissatisfaction that contrasts strongly with Broadbent's eupeptic jollity.

(Shaw, *CPP*, II, 901-2)

It is Larry who provides the full-scale denunciation of the stage Irishman. When the flabbergasted Broadbent protests that Tim Haffigan spoke and 'behaved just like an Irishman', Larry explodes:

Like an Irishman!! Man alive, dont you know that all this top-o-the-morning and broth-of-a-boy and more-power-to-your-elbow business is got up in England to fool you, like the Albert Hall concerts of Irish music? No Irishman ever talks like that in Ireland, or ever did, or ever will. But when a thoroughly worthless Irishman comes to England, and finds the whole place full of romantic duffers like you, who will let him loaf and drink and sponge and brag as long as he flatters your sense of moral superiority by playing the fool and degrading himself and his country, he soon learns the antics that take you in.

(Shaw, *CPP*, 11, 905–6)

Larry's de-authentication of the Boucicault-like stage Irishman helps to establish his authority as real Irishman, as true interpreter of Ireland. In the first act he functions as Shavian spokesman for his creator's own theories of national character, voiced already in the 1897 speech at the Irish Literary Society. The notion of national character was problematic for Shaw. He was utterly opposed to any racial or ethnic concept of Celticism: once again Larry voices his views (expounded at length in the 'Preface for Politicians'):

When people talk of the Celtic race, I feel as if I could burn down London. That sort of rot does more harm than ten Coercion Acts. Do you suppose a man need be a Celt to feel melancholy in Rosscullen? Why, man, Ireland was peopled just as England was; and its breed was crossed by just the same invaders. (Shaw, *CPP*, 11, 908)

Shaw was enough of a cultural materialist, sufficiently formed by his reading of Marx, to distrust any essentialist explanation of human behaviour. And yet he was committed to the idea that there *was* a fundamental difference between English and Irish character. His own persona as GBS, quizzical, sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued Irish commentator on the ways of the thick-witted English, depended on a bold antithesis of national difference. His solution was to adopt the environmental/climatic theory of nationality which Larry airs in the great 'dreaming' speech of *John Bull*.

When Broadbent maintains that the ennui of life in the country

is much the same in England as in Ireland, Larry earnestly contradicts him:

No, no: the climate is different. Here, if the life is dull, you can be dull too, and no great harm done. (*Going off into a passionate dream*) But your wits cant thicken in that soft moist air, on those white springy roads, in those misty rushes and brown bogs, on those hillsides of granite rocks and magenta heather. Youve no such colors in the sky, no such lure in the distances, no such sadness in the evenings. Oh, the dreaming! the dreaming! the torturing, heart-scalding, never satisfying dreaming, dreaming, dreaming, dreaming!

(Shaw, *CPP*, 11, 909)

Though the idea of climate as cultural determinant starts as some sort of paradoxical challenge to racial/ethnic essentialism, it soon transmutes into the romantic cult of landscape which even those Irish writers most allergic to national nostalgia find hard to escape. And Larry's analysis of the Irish imagination is actually a version of Arnoldian Celticism, with a fierce twist of self-hatred rather than a patronising or self-congratulatory admiration. 'An Irishman's imagination never lets him alone, never convinces him, never satisfies him, but it makes him that he cant face reality nor deal with it not handle it nor conquer it' (Shaw, *CPP*, 11, 909). This is the Celtic resistance to the 'despotism of fact' seen as a miserable disability not a spiritual and creative asset. Doyle's speech stresses all the things an Irishman's imagination unfits him for:

He cant be religious. The inspired Churchman that teaches him the sanctity of life and the importance of conduct is sent away empty; while the poor village priest that gives him a miracle or a sentimental story of a saint, has cathedrals built for him out of the pennies of the poor. He cant be intelligently political: he dreams of what the Shan Van Vocht said in ninety-eight. If you want to interest him in Ireland youve got to call the unfortunate island Kathleen ni Hoolihan and pretend she's a little old woman. (Shaw, *CPP*, 11, 910)

The Irishman's imagination leaves him fantasy-fed, permanently