

The Case for the 1940s–50s Irish Theatre: M. J. Molloy’s Folk History Play

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Abstract

The mid-20th century Irish theatre, by which I mean the 1940s and 50s after the instability and experimentation of the 30s, made a number of notable contributions to the history of drama, one of which is the folk history play of M. J. Molloy. The celebration of the rural community reflected the ethos of de Valera’s Ireland, if not the more rambunctious and carnal aspects of his plays. Molloy wished to preserve the past through the theatre and thereby pass on the universal lessons of how ordinary people survived through the ages. And he tried to do this by reproducing on the stage the customs, artefacts, and lifestyles of the past as well as by showing how political and social events affected their everyday life. To illustrate, I used Molloy’s *The Wooing of Duvesa*, in comparison with other plays by Christine Longford, Teresa Deevy, Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory set in the same period, highlighting Molloy’s efforts to be true to the spirit and culture of the past. Though the result may not have been entirely successful, I conclude that the type of folk history play he created has the potential of continuing significance for the future.

The 1940s and 50s are remembered by many in Ireland as a time of oppressive gloom. Lack of employment forced the young to emigrate and the Church kept a firm grip on those who stayed. The theatre at the time is remembered, though it might be truer to say forgotten, for its peasant or 'kitchen' plays, a lackluster succession of comedies performed by actors soliciting vulgar laughter.¹⁾ Insularity and sclerosis were said to characterize the theatre as they did the politics and economy of this period. However, this impression of stagnancy—often substantiated by comments of the theatre-goers at the time—may have been exaggerated, for one thing, by the long-runs the Abbey introduced from the 40s. In between the extended runs of light comedies such system favored, we encounter a number of distinctive voices that are just as much the outgrowths of the time. One clear instance is that of M. J. Molloy (1914-1994).

In their discussion of the mid-20th century, Irish theatre historians often consider the 1930s together with the two decades that followed, citing the departure of O'Casey or the death of Lady Gregory as a turning point.²⁾ In the 30s, however, experimentation was very much in the air. With the newcomer Gate leading the way in avant-garde production, Yeats recruited new directors from abroad as part of the Abbey's 'New Policy' in 1935. In fact, according to Michael Ó hAodha, there was a moment at the beginning of the 30s that left "little space" for plays "without a measure of international significance" (1961, p. 23; 1974, p. 118). In 1933 Brinsley Macnamara complained:

Surely there must have been some reason for the notion which arose that the peasant play was to be considered a thing of the past. It seemed to be expected of the Irish dramatist, if he hoped to have his play produced, that he should write about far countries, or upon certain supposedly cosmopolitan aspects of Dublin, or about any other kind of life than that he knew best. (p. 61)

Yet, the strand of innovation that in 1936 Curtis Canfield, for example, spotted in a group of plays he selected for *Plays of Changing Ireland* becomes submerged under the "full stream of national life", as Christopher Fitz-Simon (2003) styles the 40s' theatre in his centenary chronicle of the Abbey.

The playwrights of the 40s and 50s are "the nation's ballad-makers" Christopher Murray (1997) quotes Gabriel Fallon as saying,³⁾ adding that those writers "maintained the idiom and form of the peasant drama to narrate and give voice to primary feelings and communal anxieties" (p. 138). 'Community' was de Valera's favorite word (ibid., p. 139). Following the end of the civil war, a militant brand of nationalism gave way to one of an economic and cultural nature, and the village, with its image of "cosy homesteads, joyous fields...and fireside forums for the wisdom of serene old age" (Ó Cruaíoch, 1986, p. 47),

provided a convenient model of frugal self-sufficiency, which de Valera actively exploited to pursue his other agenda.⁴⁾ The pastoral ideal, furthermore, became a matter of practical exigency during the Emergency. Gearóid Ó Cruaí (1986) uses the word 'folk ideology' to characterize de Valera government's policy (p. 47), calling attention to the fact that the founding of the Folklore of Ireland Society took place at the same time as that of Fianna Fáil, and that the Irish Folklore Commission was given a £3000 annual grant upon its establishment in 1935.

Folk drama, therefore, would have been an ideal embodiment of the government's political philosophy, but it was Ernest Blythe, whose long reign began nearly a decade after de Valera took office, who presided over this conservative and populist tendency at the Abbey. It was as if the theatre was retracing the path that politics had taken a decade earlier. After the commotion of the 30s—with changing managements, tentative attempts at experimentation, and the two rival companies venturing on tours abroad—the theatre settles down to the long and, some would say, uneventful reign of Blythe in 1941, as the nation did in 1932 after the strife and uncertainty of the 20s.

Christopher Morash (2005) argues that because Ireland lacked a native theatrical tradition, the founders of the Abbey resorted to myths and folklore to give it "an authenticating past" (p. 327). However, as mythical plays had a limited popular appeal and proved to be a theatrical "cul-de-sac" (Morash, 2002, p.120), they were superseded by peasant plays, the countryside being, as he put it, "where markers of temporality could be blurred" (Morash, 2005, p. 328). As for the frequent use of kitchen sets in particular, Morash (2000) sees this as part of Blythe's political aim, which was to undermine the idealism of militant republicans by using a "deliberately limiting setting" (p. 74).⁵⁾ It must be noted here, however, that kitchen plays were not necessarily 'peasant' plays.⁶⁾ More often than not, the plays were set in towns, with merchants and professionals, though the same kitchen set could well have been recycled endlessly—with a dash of new wall paint, as Denis Johnston wryly observed. And among the peasant plays, those with a genuine feel for the folk tradition were relatively rare. So one can understand the sense of relief and even jubilation traditionalists (or defenders of old-fashioned plays) felt as young M. J. Molloy breathed new life into folk drama. "The coming of Molloy seemed to be an event designed to prove that the peasant play had still great life in it" (Robinson, 1949, p. 20), wrote Macnamara at the time, while Ó hAodha (1974) singles out Molloy's "lyrical note" as placing him alongside the "folk-dramatists of the earlier period" (p. 136).⁷⁾

In more recent years, however, some of the Irish theatre's principal critics have lined up against him. D. E. S. Maxwell (1984) writes that Molloy's play "is so close to it [the past] in sympathy that when the curtain falls the characters behind it remain fixed in their own time" (p. 147). Murray (1997), as the rather dispiriting title of the chapter on the 40s-50s,

"Shades of the Prison-House" in his book suggests, does not see much value in the plays of this period except as echoes we hear of what they had attempted more successfully done in contemporary plays. Most of them, in his assessment, 'reflected' instead of 'critiqued' de Valera's pastoralism. And such critiques as existed were hampered by the realistic well-made form the playwrights stuck to (Murray, 2004, p. 61), and the happy ending with which they catered to popular demand (Murray, 1997, p. 138). He is especially harsh on Molloy, whose "museum pieces", he says, are "beautiful curiosities eloquent of a culture and a people so remote from us that we cannot find a response beyond puzzlement and a shameful kind of laughter. They have no discernible impact on late 20c Irish drama" (Murray, 2004, p. 67). In other words, both Maxwell and Murray dismiss Molloy because of his unswerving attachment to the past. Similarly, Robert Hogan (1968), while expressing deep appreciation of Molloy's work, has warned that "His biggest problem as a writer is that his material is dying out" (p. 87), in "Michael Molloy's Dying Ireland", yet another example of a lugubriously titled chapter. A singular voice of dissent comes from Michael Etherton, who, writing in 1989, discerned in the resilience of Molloy's peasants—and the interaction with the local audience at the production of his plays—a beacon for class struggle and political engagement in today's world:

In the 1990s, the insights of Molloy...may strike a more contemporary note than the quaint debauchery of the 1960s. This will be likely as Western sensibilities become increasingly aware of the scale and complexities of peasant suffering in the Third World.... Molloy's plays show, on one level an historical class analysis of Irish society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ...What is much more radical in his plays is his depiction of the Irish peasant sensibilities vis-à-vis their class oppression." (pp. 87-88)

Etherton may have read too much of his own political agenda into Molloy's plays, but he does point us towards the possibility of widening our perspective on the neglected playwright.

Molloy belongs to a generation of playwrights closely associated with their regions, who had their plays first produced at the Abbey in the 40s: Walter Macken (1915-67) of Galway (*Mungo's Mansion* 1946), Brian MacMahon (1909-98) of Listowel (*The Bugle in the Blood* 1949), Joseph Tomelty (1911-95) of Belfast (*The End House* 1944).⁸⁾ They came on the scene just about at the time when the dominance of George Shiels (1886-1949) was to end (with *Tenants at Will* 1945) after an amazing three decades of consistent productions. This took place also amidst the more sporadic final productions at the Abbey of other long-lasting grandees born in the 1870s and 80s, Lennox Robinson (1886-1958), St. John

Ervine (1883-1971), and T. C. Murray (1873-1959),⁹⁾ whose realistic peasant plays had succeeded the mythic folk plays of the early Abbey. By this count, Molloy's generation would fall under the third generation of peasant play writers, corresponding to those active in the 50s-60s that Hans Georg Stadler (1978) identified by their melodramatic and nostalgic traits (pp. 39-41). Citing Molloy and John B. Keane (1928-2002), Stadler says these writers have learned that drama must entertain through their experience with amateur productions thriving at the time. At the same time, they were keenly aware that the local materials which best pleased their audience were fast disappearing under the onslaught of industrialization in the 30s. Molloy was situated at a time poised to look back. And this, coupled with a "strange craving" for history he had since he was a boy,¹⁰⁾ and a sense of allegiance he must have felt toward the region where he assiduously collected the folklore, propelled him to create his own brand of folk history play.

Roger McHugh (1908-87), who had two history plays of his staged at the Abbey (*Trial at Green Street Court House* 1941 and *Rossa* 1945), claims that for a period of time after Frank O'Connor and Hugh Hunt had shown the way with *The Invincibles* (1937) and *Moses' Rock* (1938), writers like him turned to history plays. He attributes the trend to Ireland's wartime isolation. Since "we were cast upon ourselves", he writes, "there was a chance to assess our past", while others "wished to provide some touchstones for whatever new Ireland might emerge from the wreckage" (McHugh, 1967, p. 60). Though the trend was not general enough to characterize the 40s' theatre in itself, it was around this time that Christine Longford wrote her series of heroic histories (*Lord Edward* 1941, *The United Brothers* 1942, *Patrick Sarsfield* 1943, *The Earl of Straw* 1944), and that one finds famine plays (Gerard Healy's *The Black Stranger* 1945 and George Shiels's *Tenants at Will* 1945), an Ulster rapparee play (Malachy A. Conlon's *Dunreavy No More* 1945), and plays which, though contemporary, deal with the commemoration or the latter days of a hero in the war of independence (Bernard McGinn's *Remembered for Ever* 1941, Louis D'Alton's *This Other Eden* 1953, Macken's *Twilight of a Warrior* 1955).

History plays had been on the Irish stage long before this.¹¹⁾ Nineteenth century melodramas used historical materials for their picturesque effects as much as for patriotic spirit. The events were fitted into a romantic-heroic formula with all the glamour that could be mustered. If the playwright took an interest in particular historical figures as human beings, the result would be more biographical—Swift tops the bill in such character studies. Or, he/she might be more concerned with the way those figures occupied people's imaginations, irrespective of, or in contrast to, what they really were (Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* 1929, Lady Gregory's *The Deliverer* 1911, Lennox Robinson's *The Lost Leader* 1918), in which case the object would more likely be to depict society at large, or possibly the idea of a leader in the abstract. If the aim is to bring into

relief the significance of a certain historical event or time, the playwright may focus on pivotal decisions people had to make at the time, using only non-historical and representative characters (Lady Gregory/W. B. Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* 1902, A. P. Fanning's *Vigil* 1932). The time period addressed can be extensive: the play may chronicle changes that took place over generations (Bill Morrison's *A Love Song for Ulster* 1993) or fathom the repercussions of a critical event in people's subconscious over the years (Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* 1985). Drama is resourceful, and can represent history in ways that historians cannot or dare not: in three dimensions, in jumbled order, in fragmentary juxtapositions, and even as a joke. As playwrights became more analytical, they began to reconstruct events in ways that reveal connections and causes which remain hidden in realistic configurations. It might be a satirical spoof (Arthur Riordan and Bell Helicopter's *Impossible Frequency* 2004), a multi-layered analysis (Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City* 1973) or an epic (Tom Murphy's *Famine* 1968). More recently, playwrights' concerns have become more involved with the question of the writing of history, resulting in what may be called metahistory plays (Friel's *Making History* 1988).

Molloy employs no such devices. He does not use the past as an allegory for the present or offer his own interpretation of the historical process. Rather than to analyze or interpret, his aim is to preserve, because he feels it is worth preserving and because it is important for posterity to know how people felt and thought in the past. His lectures and prefaces, like some of his plays, are cluttered with facts and sayings he gathered—and meticulously recorded in his thirty-one notebooks (Donoghue, 2001, p. 18). In a lecture he gave on "The Making of Folk Plays," for instance, he spends his entire time relating pieces of local histories and personages he knew or had heard or read about that went into his plays.¹²⁾ But through this jumble of facts, two things that he considered vital in the folk play come across: first that it should be written from the point of view ordinary people;¹³⁾ second that it should be based on a solid knowledge of local traditions. The heritage Molloy tries to transmit is not only verbal but physical. Molloy puts as many objects and customs of the period as he can on stage—like the tricks performed in the visiting house (*The Visiting House* 1946), an amateur drama production (*The Will and the Way* 1955), a poltergeist (*Bachelor's Daughter* 1985), a faery doctor's charms and an "oath on the skull" (*Petticoat Loose* 1979)—so that the audience can partake of the experience, and be entertained at the same time.

To illustrate the way Molloy recreates the past, let us look at *The Wooing of Duvesa* (1964), for though it is not from the 40s-50s—nor one of his more successful plays—the play deals with the period, the Williamite War and its aftermath, that invites comparisons with other plays on the same subject. The first Irish play to deal with recent history,

according to Christopher J. Wheatley (1999), was Robert Ashton's *The Battle of Aughrim* (1728), a heroic tragedy in rhyme—also called “Ulster Folk Play” (p. 63)—which was popular with both Catholics and Protestants throughout the 18th century. In the 20th century the Jacobite topic was treated in Douglas Hyde's *King James* (*Rí Séamus* 1903),¹⁴⁾ Lady Gregory's *The White Cockade* (1905), Teresa Deevy's *The Wild Goose* (1936), and Christine Longford's *Patrick Sarsfield* (1943).

Longford's *Patrick Sarsfield* is a typical example of the popular history play. Many historical incidents are used in the plot, such as Sarsfield's surprise attack on a supply train at Ballyneety, Tyrconnel's return to France, and Luttrell's overtures to Sarsfield¹⁵⁾ and subsequent betrayal. Likewise, good use is made of folk history or hearsay, like that of Lady Tyrconnel saying to James, “But your Majesty won the race!” on seeing him so quickly back from the Boyne. And the characterization of Sarsfield, who R. F. Foster (1989) says was “notoriously not very bright” (p. 148)—and in the play Luttrell insinuates such—is based on historical testimonies. But the main interest of the play is in the imagined human relationships surrounding Sarsfield rather than history itself. The series of battles and sieges are seen from the point of view of the women waiting at home. In fact most of what the audience see on the stage are the women talking to their husbands or fathers before they leave for the battlefield or after their return.¹⁶⁾ This is a biographical history of a domestic kind. The historical past is humanized, made familiar and contemporary by showing the backstage of its key players at home.

Deevy, like Molloy, deals with the persecution of Catholics in general rather than any historical leaders fighting the war, though Sarsfield's name is mentioned by farmers variously touched by the urge to join the Wild Geese. Set in the spring of 1692, only a few months after the Treaty of Limerick (3 October, 1691), *The Wild Goose* follows the vacillations of young Martin Shea, who decides to join a seminary after the parish priest is killed, then, having realized his lack of vocation, marries his sweetheart, before he finally leaves with the other men to get on the boat for France. Although care seems to have been taken to reproduce the atmosphere of the age by the newly recruited stage designer Moiseiwitsch—a reviewer commented “the settings, costumes, and lighting being all finely suited to the play and the period” (Kearney, 1986, p. 180),¹⁷⁾ Deevy's interest is more psychological than historical. The dilemma between a potentially self-fulfilling but dangerous life and an unexciting but secure life is a source of frustration for Deevy's more famous heroines in *Katie Roche* (1936) and *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935). The women in those plays actually have little choice, but the historical setting of *The Wild Goose* provided Deevy with an ideal dramatic situation to explore such a dilemma with an additional national dimension.

Hyde's *King James* is a dramatized folktale in its purest form, with its clear, bold

outline and pithy image. It centers on a trick, challenged in a series of repeated patterns, and ends with a comic surprise and a compromised resolution—the characters exiting rhythmically in good humour. The play opens with an old man and a boy rolling a barrel with King James inside it to carry him on board the ship bound for France. A group of Jacobite soldiers retreating from the Boyne, talking of how they would be revenged on Dirty James, meets them and demands the wine that they think the barrel contains. After a bantering exchange during which the old man desperately protests that the barrel contains, by turns, fish, beef, meal, bran, shoes and clothes, with the soldiers responding each time that those are exactly what they need, the boy asks them to swear they will not take anything that cannot be drunk, and if such a thing is found in the barrel they will help carry it to the boat. They of course find the detested King, but having sworn the oath, they leave, rolling the barrel to the port. In a version recorded in the School Folklore collection project, the story goes like this: “a distraught King James retreated to Drogheda and beseeched a local wine merchant to help him escape. The dealer promptly immersed him in a barrel labeled ‘pickled pork’ and got local sailors to carry him overseas” (Stout, 2004, p. 201). The play crystallizes the tale into a compact performance of perhaps less than 15 minutes’ duration, easy to remember and hand down to posterity.

While Hyde aims no more than to capture James’s cowardice in a single image, Lady Gregory uses the same material to juxtapose different layers of images in *The White Cockade*. In her essay on Jacobite Ballads, Gregory (1974) says that what caught her attention first was a line in a poem that referred to “my bright Stuart”, and the fact that the few songs of King James that survived were only found in Munster. She felt James’s image was always “faint and unreal”, while that of Sarsfield “the brave, handsome fighter” (p. 59) was personal, and had “more of Connaught simplicity than of Munster luxuriance” (p. 60). So in *The White Cockade* Lady Gregory’s first aim is to highlight the discrepancy between the “comely” (Gregory, 1979, p. 221) James of songs, adored by the half-crazed “Lady”, and the supercilious coward the play unveils him to be. Gregory does this within the comic framework of a folktale, while in pursuing her second objective to reveal Sarsfield as a person of genuine royal caliber, a non-comic style and language is adopted, culminating in a magical transformation scene.

Her play is set at an inn near Duncannon, a port in Co. Wexford, from which James, historically, left for France. Just as the white cockade is but a feathery ornament worn by the Jacobites, there is a lighthearted playfulness in the play’s treatment of its typecast characters and events, which opens with the innkeeper’s son playing jackstones. The boy sets out on his little journey looking for news of King James’s forces at the end of Act I. He meets the King in the wood in Act II, without knowing who he really is, just like a folktale hero who encounters a stranger on his way. But this comes after a tug-of-war

between his mother and Lady Dereen—again, not unlike two guardian fairies vying with each other for the boy.¹⁸⁾ The pragmatic mother, who wants her son to stay at home and manage the inn, speaks a language almost entirely made up of proverbs,¹⁹⁾ while the Lady, who has lost all her property for the Stuarts and now urges the boy to fight for James, uses romantic images and mannered parallelisms of patriotic ballads.²⁰⁾

When Matt the innkeeper brings a false report of James' victory, the Lady's reaction is nothing less than a fairy-tale/nursery-rhyme dream: "I will put on my silks and my velvets. I will have jewels about my neck"; "The coach will stop—the young lords will hand me out of it—my own young kinsmen will be there"; "A curtsy to the right to the Queen—a curtsy to the left to the princesses" (p. 227), while her lamentation at learning the truth of his defeat is just as ludicrous in its rhetorical hyperbole.²¹⁾ The Lady, in other words, exemplifies the unreality of the representations of James found in the Jacobite songs. James himself is made to follow a comic routine with his secretary Carter, who like a sounding board, bounces back each of James' remarks in concord. Sarsfield, alone in the play, maintains a flowing rhythm of his courtly speech.

The magical transformation that Lady Gregory is expert at bringing about, as seen in *The Rising of the Moon* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, typically involves the emotional appeal of songs and rhymes in a neat step-by-step process. But here, Jacobite songs are used to represent the illusory misconception, and it is through the sheer power of his speech and demeanour that Sarsfield sways the soldiers' hearts. The scene begins with James, Carter and Sarsfield entering the inn, where unbeknownst to them, the Williamite soldiers have dropped in. No sooner does Sarsfield see the soldiers holding up muskets against them than he assumes the part of the King, chiding the soldiers for their manners and nonchalantly calling for food to eat before he is taken away. Sarsfield mesmerises the soldiers with repeated use of the words "ups and downs" as he balances a knife on his finger. What he is doing is to persuade them that as the fortunes of war are unpredictable, the best course is to be on the side of your own people.²²⁾ The rhetorical heights to which Sarsfield soars as he talks of the royal blood and the sweetheart he serves (i.e. Ireland), gives a final shove that persuades the soldiers to switch sides.

Pathos rather than laughter concludes the play, with Sarsfield picking up the white cockade which he had thrown away after seeing James safely off. By providing multiple dimensions, Lady Gregory has turned what could have been no more than a farce featuring James' cowardice into a folk play of missed opportunity, the intimation of a possibly alternative course of history under a true leader.

Molloy avoids setting his plays in instantly recognizable years, as if he would prefer to treat history from the periphery. The peasant world is "where little things are all important, a band plays and a horse takes flight" (Ó hAodha, 1961, p. 26). So, he chose

not the Great Famine itself but an earlier and lesser famine of 1822 to set *Petticoat Loose* in, when there still were farmers affluent enough to make generous payments for a clandestine service, while we also hear of men starving on the road.²³⁾ *The King of Friday's Men* is set, not in 1798, but 1787 to cast an eye on an anonymous faction fighter known only locally. Likewise, *The Wooing of Duvesa* is set in 1715-16, twenty-five years after the Battle of Aughrim. Thadeus O'Kelly of Castlekelly is said to have sustained wounds in the fight from which he died, according to his wife Honora in the play. The O'Kellys are a historical clan, but the characters must have been fictional, because the owner of Castlekelly was a Colonel Charles O'Kelly (1621-1695) known for an account he wrote of the Williamite War under the guise of the invasion of Cyprus. He wrote this in 1692 at a residence in Aughrane given him under the terms of the Treaty of Limerick.

Molloy may have chosen this time because of the Stuart rebellion in 1715, which is mentioned in the play as having taken place the previous harvest (p. 10). It is a period filled with a lingering sense of anticipation as well as bitter disappointment, suspended between two possibilities.²⁴⁾ In the play, people are still waiting for the return of King James with the French troops. A Catholic landlord toasts to "our true King in France; that he may soon come back to his own" (p. 10). A hunted friar says "the next east wind might blow our Irish Brigade heroes back across the sea" (p. 37). Yet on the whole, hopes for the Jacobites were getting slimmer. A returned Wild Goose, Captain Ulick Burke sees no hope after having witnessed his fellow Brigadiers unpaid, starving and reduced to robbery and murder (p. 30). In 1714, George I succeeded to the throne and within two years an alliance was established between England and France, leading to a long peace between the two countries. Since whenever there was a rumour of a Jacobite comeback, the government issued a proclamation ordering the existing penal laws to be stringently enforced, the situation at the time of the play would have been quite dangerous for Catholic clerics. People were lying low, as it were, with bated breath under increasing pressures. This was also, in cultural terms, a critical period marking the beginning of an end to the Gaelic culture, which was Molloy's major concern. R. F. Foster (1989) writes, "By the early eighteenth century, Irish society and politics had undergone a seismic shocks. Indigenous elites had been wiped out, along with the culture they represented" (p. 160). Molloy told Hogan that his theme was "more the eternal one of the problems of the poet and artist in the world than just the Penal Days" (Hogan, 1968, p. 98). Yet his self-professed love of history may have tipped the balance to make this play more interesting in terms of its being, as Hogan (1968) says, "a full re-creation of the times, fuller even than Lady Longford's history play" (p. 98). Molloy's history is a cultural history; it concerns changes that take place gradually and invisibly among people rather than events set in motion by political leaders.

The story is as the title says. Like in many a fairy tale, there are a mother, three sisters—the two older ones much less pretty than the youngest and favoured Duvesa—with as many as 4 suitors.²⁵⁾ Two of the suitors are traditional artists, poet Donogh and harper Cahal, whom Duvesa loves. The other pair are a Catholic landlord and his son: 60-year-old Sir Walter, a veteran of Aughrim, and rascally Captain Ulick Burke back from the continent. In the first two Acts Ulick looms as the biggest threat, expected to attack with his abduction gang and take Duvesa by force. So the two rivals, Donogh and Cahal, stay at the O'Kellys' overnight to defend them. However, in Act 3, with the abduction attempt successfully averted, the most pressing issue is shifted to the arrest of the friar by the magistrate, involving the two new characters summoned by Ulick in revenge. After the final twists and turns, the play ends with Sir Walter married off to Honora and taking her three daughters to his castle, Ulick vowing to lead the rescue of the friar, and the two artists left behind to share a drink and a quiet talk on art and Ireland's future.

A reviewer of the 1964 production thought that Molloy did not "seem to have made up his mind just what to aim at—romantic comedy, riproaring melodrama or a farcical romp in the French fashion. As a peepshow on the past the play succeeds only intermittently in breathing life into the cold facts of history" (O'Connor, 1964, p. 783). As is often the case with Molloy, the play does try to do too much, so that the theme of cultural demise tends to get lost in the plethora of historical facts and romantic plots until we are reminded of it at the close of the play. And the language may lack the distinctive vibrancy and colour of his other published plays. Despite such weaknesses, however, there is plenty of action to entertain, if cleverly directed and energetically acted. And Molloy does especially well what is vital in a cultural history, to evoke the atmosphere of the society at the time.²⁶⁾

Early 18th century society as described by Maureen Wall (1989) was a disquieting one: "infested with highwaymen", "a general spirit of lawlessness prevailed"; "there were constant references [in the newspaper] to the escape of prisoners" (p. 21). The O'Kellys' "smoky den" is on a hill, surrounded by a bog named Eamoon, where one may see "bog lights" or "will-of-the-wisps" (p. 17). Along it is a lake with "a great fleet of wild duck and fifteen swans" (p. 3). The only escape route, the other areas being too soft to pass, is made treacherous with "swallow-holes" (p. 21), and visitors are known from a distance by the torchlights they carry in the dark. It is also so cold that the wind "would skin a statue" (p. 13). Snowflakes (p. 3) are expected, and the characters warm their hands at the turf-fire when they come in. The chimney, as one daughter says, "is pulling down the birds of the air" instead of letting the smoke out, so that their skin is "smoke-dried" and may soon be coloured like hams (p. 3). The window, as so often happened then, is filled with a furze bush,²⁷⁾ providing a means to draw the audience's attention to some of the artefacts of

the day, as each visitor is examined through the window before he is allowed in. For example, what looked like a “blunderbass” or a “musket” turns out to be a “poet’s satchet” (p. 4); and a box, a “sedan chair”. The women are engaged in hardy men’s work, hammering out a battered spade-edge and roping a cracked spade handle, not to speak of occasional shooting of highwaymen. The rushes and heather for the bed have to be renewed, potatoes dug, all in keeping with the stark natural landscape and grim living conditions.

The Penal Laws are used to motivate and drive the romantic plot forward, with the characters’ dialogue providing whatever historical annotations are necessary. Ulick needs to convert to inherit the estate, and to marry Duvesa quickly before that because a Protestant is not allowed to marry a Catholic (p. 35). Sir Walter, in consequence, is prompted to wed her to prevent his land from falling into a Protestant son’s hands. Donogh wants to marry her because with his patrons outlawed, and both teaching and the writing of rebel songs punishable by imprisonment, he has had to waste his talent in farm labour (p. 44), which he hopes to escape with the help of the O’Kellys’ patron saint—poor but proud, the family had let the locals believe that St. Grellan visited nightly to farm for them, though it was actually the women themselves who secretly worked.²⁸⁾ The priest Ulick brings to wed Duvesa by force is discovered to be a friar returned from abroad and therefore in danger of his life on a charge of high treason.²⁹⁾ In this way, the audience have a chance along the way to learn about the laws’ stipulations and conditions under which people lived, right down to such details as the 50-pound fine exacted for harbouring unregistered priests (p. 38) and the address “from out of my hiding place” invariably used by bishops in the letters of ordination (p. 36).³⁰⁾ Only Cahal the harper, who is hired by both Catholics and Protestants, is relatively exempt from the constraints of the Penal Laws. And it may be that his ecumenical hope to establish understanding between the two religions, an idea supported by the cynical Ulick, is being suggested as the best way forward.

While the play is dense with historical references and even argumentative in parts, as if the characters were engaged in historical exposition for its own sake, it is never pretentiously academic. Molloy’s history is more like bric-a-brac collected by people, which could be anything that affects their daily life or leaves some impression on them. And lest the action becomes swamped by such commentaries, Molloy inserts several highly physical scenes, including such stagy climaxes as the cruel magistrate pricking the hapless heroin with his “hat-pin” (p. 43), or two “peasants” pointing their borrowed pistols at a brash captain, who has his sword drawn (p. 32); though it must be added that for Molloy the action was likely meant in all seriousness as part of the rough and hardy ways of the time and not intended for melodramatic exaggeration.³¹⁾ Another device Molloy

uses is playacting, or impersonation of a kind. There are two instances in Act 2, both plans hatched by Nuala the wise second sister. The first is Duvesa testing Cahal, the well-known playboy, by talking to him while he is still half asleep, letting him believe that she is Kitty, a maid at one of the castles he works at. The second is Donogh dressing up as St. Grellan to persuade Ulick into marrying the ugly eldest sister instead of Duvesa. The stunt goes awry when Ulick brightens the turf fire to see better.

After all this hustling and bustling, however, the ending is not altogether a happy one. Pieces do not fall perfectly into place for most of the characters. The friar is under arrest; Duvesa is not married—yet. The patched-up alliance of all Catholic characters to save the friar at the denouement does not look as all-mighty as would be hoped, just as St. Grellan, who could have been a symbol of people's faith and a rallying point for their deliverance, is exposed as a tattered fake wrapped in shawls. But it may be significant that it was the poet who played the saint. In Donogh, unsuccessful a suitor that he was and his potential role not fully realized, Molloy has clearly invested all his personal anxieties, frustrations and aspirations. The problem is, he seems to remain undecided as to who should bear the weight of the play's theme until the very end, so that when Donogh looks back on Ireland's long history and the poet's place in it, we are not quite as ready as we are with Bartley or Sanbatch's final speeches in Molloy's other plays.

In his overview of history plays staged at the Abbey, Christopher Murray (1988) named Molloy as the sole successor to Lady Gregory in the "inspirational or educational" category, or as he later referred to it, "folk type history play" (pp. 272-274).³²⁾ The terms 'folk' and 'history' require a full length discussion in themselves, but here we simply take 'folk' to signify the traditional rural community, as commonly understood in reference to de Valera's ideology; and 'folk history', the past as it was handed down and envisioned by the people. Some plays have a strong shading of 'folk' and others of 'history'. The plays by Longford, Deevy, Hyde, Gregory and Molloy are coloured by both in varying degrees. Longford's play of titled men and women can be said to have the least element of folk among those plays, but it, too, reflects people's image of the dashing hero. Deevy, whose background resembles Molloy's in that she is a convent school graduate and suffered a serious disease that left her disabled, may be closest in spirit to him. Her play deals with ordinary people, reflecting the kind of faith that is native to the land, broad-minded and at one with nature, even though the style of her presentation is quite different from his. In her play, individual characters at a particular time in history undergo inner conflicts and make their choice, rather than, as Molloy's play does, have typecast characters broadly act out roles that embody what was happening in society at that cultural and political juncture in time.

Lady Gregory and Hyde's plays seem almost tailor-made to fit the label of folk history.

The difference from Molloy is that they treat folkloric material at one remove, chiselling it out into the shape of a play by playing with its iconic images and styles. Molloy, on the other hand, gives the impression of standing on the same ground with his characters in the past, intermixing his own thoughts in their mouths. He would ram in anything that he thought would help to recreate the past, with entertaining action to boot. The result may be rough-hewn, especially in his later plays like *The Wooing of Duvesa*—with their weaknesses in organization, characterization and even his much-praised language sometimes—but there is an undeniable sympathy that ties the playwright to his past.

Henry Glassie (1982), who spent years recording stories in a village called Ballymenone in Co. Fermanagh, observed that history originates in the ‘place’. Something happened at the same place where something else may be standing today, but through the place, time, events and people are connected. And the folk historian’s task, he repeats again and again, is to tell the truth. By truth Glassie does not just mean facts but the truth about human nature and relationships. In the case of Ballymenone he thinks it can be expressed as the balance between patience and rebellion in the way people reacted to upheavals in their history. Standing on the brink of his native culture’s demise, Donogh says:

“My duty is to compose poems that will enlighten the people and brace them up with anger and courage and hope and determination” (pp. 13-14).

“First the Danes, then the Normans, then the English, and after the English some other invaders will come in. Nations as small as this don’t be long free. So I’m thinking—and I fear—the people will need as much as ever we can leave them of glory in art—and courage.” (p. 48)

Molloy’s characters and their actions may feel alien today and his artefact-crammed plays are dismissed by some as “antiquarian” and not “history” (Murray, 1988, p. 274). But what Molloy is doing is to reach out to the spirit of the past society by recreating it as truthfully as he can. And he does this in the hope that his audience may learn from the way their forefathers survived through tribulations—with the selfsame conviction of his mission as the folk historian of Ballymenone.

Notes

- 1) Recently, however, there seems to be a resurgence of scholarly interest in the mid-century, as evidenced by a number of books published on the subject: Paul Murphy’s *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama, 1899-1949* (2008) and Ciara O’Farrell’s *Louis D’Alton and the Abbey Theatre* (2004), as well as an edition of George Shiels’ plays by Christopher

Murray (2008). Christopher Morash and Lionel Pilkington also include fulsome reviews of the period in their theatrical histories.

- 2) Brian Fallon in *An Age of Innocence* defends the whole spectrum of Irish culture in the three decades 1930-60. Hugh Hunt treats the 30s and 40s together, or more precisely, between 1932 (Gregory's death and de Valera's inauguration) and 1951 (the Abbey's fire), in the chapter "The New Directorate". Robert Welch starts the period slightly earlier in 1926 (O'Casey's departure and the creation of the Peacock), but likewise ending it with the fire. Christopher Morash discusses the 20s together with the 30s and 40s, characterizing the period by the aftereffects of independence. D. E. S. Maxwell includes the first half of the 50s in the chapter "The plays, the players and the scenes: 1930-1955", its pluralistic title maybe indicative of the lack of centralizing vision in the period. Robert Hogan divides his history in two halves before and after the end of WWII (1926-1945 and 1945-1966). Christopher Murray alone among those mentioned has a separate chapter for the 30s apart from the 40s and 50s.
- 3) *Standard* 12 June 1953 (quoted again in Murray, 2004, p. 71)
- 4) Ó Cruaíoch suggests that folk ideology had its strategic purpose: "the conception of a folk or peasant-type society that seems to me to lie at the heart of de Valera's and Fianna Fail's political philosophy from 1932 to 1959 made it easier ... to get on with the 'real' job of manifesting and reinforcing Irish sovereignty while leaving Irish society relatively unaltered" (p. 54). Ó Cruaíoch (2003) is also critical of the fact that too much emphasis on folkloric tradition has led to the neglect of creative urban popular culture (pp. 155-65).
- 5) The former Fine Gael minister's stance was that physical violence only impedes solution of the problem of Partition, which he believed can only be achieved by developing a sense of common national identity through cultural means, of which drama was one (Morash, 2000, p. 75).
- 6) Definitions of peasant plays can vary. For instance, saying that the best Abbey plays of 1935-60 were all peasant plays, Ó hAodha (1961) includes plays like *Margaret Gillan*, *Shadow and Substance*, *Design for a Headstone* in them (p. 24). He explains that some are peasants in prison or 'countryman townified' but 'peasants in aspic' nonetheless (Ó hAodha, 1974, p. 118).
- 7) The value of the peasant play, Ó hAodha (1961) believes, lies in the quality of writing and dialect (p. 23), in other words, language. He says they were "written within a naturalistic framework but make use of somewhat non-naturalistic dialogue, very often with poetic overtones", variously described as "racy" "colorful" "salty" and "quaint" (Ó hAodha, 1969, p. 39).
- 8) Gerard Healy (1918-63) with his *Thy Dear Father* (1943) and Mervyn Wall (1908-97) with *The Lady in the Twilight* (1941) may be included as his contemporaries though not strongly noted for their association with particular localities.
- 9) Robinson with *The Lucky Finger* (1948), Ervine with *Friends and Relations* (1941), T. C. Murray with *The Briery Gap* (1948; written in 1914). The playwriting careers of Rutherford Mayne

(1878-1967) and Brinsley Macnamara (1890-1963) ended a little earlier with *Bridgehead* (1934) and *The Grand House in the City* (1936), the latter because of his row with the other Abbey directors. Molloy's generation follows also a group of writers born around the turn of the century and who were mostly active in the 1930s. They include Lord Longford (1902-61), Christine Longford (1900-80), Paul Vincent Carroll (1900-68), Teresa Deevy (1903-63), Denis Johnston (1901-84), Mary Manning (1906-99) and Louis D'Alton (1900-51). D'Alton, whose work stretched from *The Man in the Cloak* (1937) to posthumous *Cafflin' Johnny* (1958) succeeded Shiels as the reigning Abbey playwright of the 40s and 50s, more or less at the same time as Molloy's generation. Besides them were socially conscious playwrights, Robert Collis (1900-75) with *Marrowbone Lane*, Seamus Byrne (1904-68) with *Design for a Headstone*, and *Little City* (foreword by Molloy).

- 10) "I was born with, and will die with a strange craving for every kind of history" (The Program for the Druid production of *The Wood of the Whispering*, 1984)
- 11) Although an ideal definition of the history play would involve factors such a concern with the state/the public, and a historical perspective, here I take it simply as a play that uses the past as its subject.
- 12) Eithne Tynan (1989) saw "books everywhere—books about everything, but mostly history" in his house.
- 13) Molloy (1977) compares his *Daughter from Over the Water* to Friel's *The Loves of Cass McGuire* claiming that his is "seen through the eyes of the country-based parents and neighbours, so mine is a folk-play", whereas in Friel's play "the problems are viewed through the eyes of the urbanized emigrant woman, so his is a city play" (p. 60).
- 14) It is thought that the play was never performed, only published in the *Weekly Freeman*, Christmas 1903 (Dunleavy, 1991, p. 225). The translation is published in Lady Gregory's *Collected Works*.
- 15) Henry Luttrell was said to be Sarsfield's evil genius, always at hand to flatter in the hope of rising by his means.
- 16) Other types of scenes that move the plot forward include an intrigue involving Luttrell, tribulations under the siege, Tyrconnel's death after a toast.
- 17) Sean O Meadhra, "Wild Geese—and Tame", *Ireland Today*, December, 1939, p.66.
- 18) e.g. "Lady: Our hero in danger!/ Mrs. K: Our bacon in danger!/ Lady: Our prince under mists!/ Mrs. K: Our meat under mildew!" (Gregory, 1979, p. 224)
- 19) e.g. "You are too hard now, Lady, upon the boy. Leave him alone. There is no man knows which is best, hurry or delay. It's often it's not better to be first than last. Many a tattered cold makes a handsome horse. The first thread is not of the piece. It's not the big men cut all the harvest. When the times comes, the child comes. Every good comes by waiting." (p. 224)
- 20) e.g. "I lost all through Charles; I will get all back through James. My eyes are tired watching for the sun to rise in the east. The sun of our success is rising at last!" (p. 221); "O my heart leaps up with my pleasant Stuart!" (p. 223)

- 21) e.g. "The King beaten, and the moon in the skies not darkened!" "The King beaten, and the fish not dead in the rivers!" "Why did not the hills fall upon the traitors? Why did not the rivers rise against them?" (p. 234)
- 22) At this point, a brief exchange between James and Mrs. Kelleher the innkeeper's wife is inserted to show the frigidity of James's attitude in contrast to Sarsfield, who purposefully calls the men "fellow-soldier". The soldiers in their turn have grown polite and diffident by that stage, so that they treat Sarsfield as "your Majesty".
- 23) Though *The Paddy Pedlar's* 1840 is closer to the height of the calamity, its treatment of the Famine is more iconic than realistic.
- 24) Comerford (2003) says Prince Charles Edward's final defeat at Culloden in 1746 "marked the end of any credible possibility of a Stuart restoration" (p. 102).
- 25) The mother Honora and the oldest sister Eithne are a hardened sort, relentless in their pursuit to regain a castle and estate for the family, but not unreasonably cruel or malevolent, considering the austere conditions they live in. The second sister Nuala plays the part of the kind and wise fairy, aiding Duvesa to wed her true love. She herself admires the poet, one of the luckless suitors, for the love she harbours of learning and art.
- 26) His stage directions even explain the type of clothes the characters are wearing, such as the long hair tied with a ribbon or a three-cornered hat and knee breeches, matters usually left to the costume designer, but maybe helpful to amateur companies, whose needs Molloy never forgets.
- 27) Estyn Evans (1989) explains that glass being so expensive, a "wattle frame, a handful of straw or a dried sheep-skin served as a substitute" and that in "one Donegal parish in 1837 ... not more than ten square feet of glass was in windows in the whole (some 1500 houses)" (p. 49).
- 28) St. Grellan lived in the 5th century and is a patron saint not only of the Kelly clan but others in the parish of Ballinasloe, where he had built a church at Kilclooney. Cahal also wishes to preserve manuscripts still left in the ruins of the castles and recover the prestige of poets by winning the beautiful princess the landed gentry long for.
- 29) The legislation of 1697 forbade bishops and clergy to "return under penalty of incurring death for high treason" though there were about 1000 diocesan priests who were permitted to stay (Wall, 1994, p. 222). In 1704 it was legislated that those who were registered have to take an Oath of Allegiance and Abjuration (Foster, 1989, p. 152).
- 30) Other references include masses conducted in the landlord's barn (p. 25), Ulick having to hide his sword before the arrival of the magistrate (p. 41), just as the O'Kellys do with their rosaries.
- 31) Though Molloy is said to have idolized Gerry Hynes for having produced *The Wood of the Whispering* to great acclaim, he was privately quite dissatisfied with the way the Druid turned his characters into caricatures, as he had felt earlier with the American production of *The King of Friday's Men*. (Michael Leydon, Molloy's friend, an interview by the author,

1986).

- 32) His other two categories are "biographical" and "myth". The folk history play as Lady Gregory envisioned it, according to Murray (1988), was that of "history held by the people and embedded in tradition...emanating from the racial memory like dramatized ballads" (p. 272).

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