

DION BOUCICAULT: SHOWMAN AND SHAUGHRAUN

Maureen Murphy^{1*}

¹Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, United States of America

Abstract

Dion Boucicault's three Irish plays: *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) and *The Shaughraun* (1874), while not critically significant, owe their perennial popularity to their appeal to Irish romantic nationalism and to their memorable character types. While Boucicault's character Myles Murphy or Myles na gCopaleen (Myles of the Ponies), an example of his native Irish hero, was the first of a series of rogue heroes that John Millington Synge developed in his character of Christy Mahon, Boucicault also owes the character of Myles to American native heroes like Sam Patch, Davy Crockett and Mose the Bowery B'hoy. While the plays are not great drama, they are good theatre and a less self-conscious national theatre has found room for both Boucicault and Synge.

Keywords: Boucicault; Synge; Romantic Nationalism; Rogue Heroes; Native American Heroes

*Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. She is the author of *Compassionate Stranger. Asenath Nicholson and the Great Irish Famine*. She wrote the Great Irish Famine Curriculum for the New York State Education Department and is the historian of the Irish Hunger Memorial in Battery Park City and the co-historian of the Irish Mission at Watson House. She has been the President of the American Conference for Irish Studies and Chair of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures. Her email is maureen.o.murphy@hofstra.edu. ORCID: 0000-0002-3903-8829.



Although Dion Boucicault's plays dominated the popular English-speaking stage for a half century, there are mysteries about his life and unsettled judgements about his work. There are five possible dates for his birth; his father may have been Dr. Dionysius Lardner: professor, encyclopedist and his mother's boarder; he married a wealthy widow and returned from his honeymoon a wealthy widower, and in 1885, while on tour in Australia, he married a young member of his company while maintaining that he never legally married his second wife and leading lady Agnes Robertson (Hogan 21-23, 44-45).

Boucicault's contributions to the stage are more certain. He was a popular actor who appeared first, under the stage name of Lee Moreton, as Teddy Rodent, an Irish rat catcher in *A Legend of Devil Dyke* (1838). Later, he performed under his own name in a London production of *The Vampire* (1852) where he played the part of the monster with a broad Irish brogue (Hogan 34). Despite this rather unprepossessing start, Boucicault became one of the most accomplished actors of his time playing a series of rogue heroes that he himself created.

His acting experience informed the advice he gave young actors in London in 1882 to "always try to select those kinds of characters and lines that is most suited and nearly conforms to your own natural gifts" (Boucicault, 1926, 49). His theory of acting emphasized a natural style, made distinctions between comic and tragic acting and urged actors to master the techniques of voice and movement. Boucicault's approach to acting was like that of Benôit-Constant Coquelin, the French comedian who influenced the Fay brothers to create the Abbey style of acting (Fay, 1970, 18-19).

Boucicault was also an observer of popular taste, so he knew how to turn a play into a commercial success. A master of theatrical effect, his plays featured crowd-pleasers like waterfalls, rising walls, turning towers and burning tenements. He was also a practical stage manager who introduced the matinee, and sent out professional touring companies that replaced the system of touring stars supported by local companies. He demonstrated that scenery could be fireproofed effectively. His most significant legacy was his role in influencing the United States Congress to change the copyright law to compensate playwrights for performances of their work.

Boucicault's plays continue to be revived with success, particularly his Irish plays: *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) and *The Shaughraun* (1874). While they are not critically significant, their perennial popularity owes their success to Boucicault's appeal to Irish romantic nationalism and his ability to create a memorable character type. It was his American experience that was the catalyst for this dramatic development, and his timing was right.

By the time Boucicault wrote the three plays, the Irish immigrant was fulfilling the prophecy of Thomas D'Arcy McGee and others that Irish immigrants would become fully integrated into American life and would take their place among the country's leading citizens. The Irish role in the American Civil War was the crucible for that integration. It also helped fight Protestant nativism that was expressed in signs saying, "No Irish Need Apply." At the same time, American

audiences were prepared to accept a more complicated and sympathetic dramatic figure than the stereotypical stage Irishman. Boucicault could offer a romance between Hardress Cregan and the heroine Eily O'Connor in *The Colleen Bawn*, and could create the rebel heroes Beamish Mac Coul (*Arrah-na-Pogue*) and Robert Ffolliott (*The Shaughraun*). He could even introduce Colonel Bagenal O'Grady (The O'Grady), an aristocrat of the old Gaelic order who enjoys the respect of the English garrison officers in Wicklow (*Arrah-na-Pogue*).

Boucicault's attitude toward Irish nationalism was cautious. Aware that Irish-American plays like *Brian Boreimhe or the Maid of Erin*, *Brian the Brave*, *Ireland Redeemed* and *The Red Branch Knight or Ireland Triumphant* kept the nationalist cause alive to emigrant Irish and Irish-Americans, Boucicault contributed *The Rapparee or the Treaty of Limerick* (1870), his short, dramatic history of Ireland, *The Story of Ireland* (1881) and *Robert Emmet* (1884) to that tradition. Boucicault's nationalist credentials were further strengthened when Queen Victoria banned "The Wearing of the Green" from all English performances of *Arrah-na-Pogue*.

For the most part, Boucicault followed the practice he established when he wrote *The Octoroon* (1859), his play about slavery, based on Thomas Mayne Reid's 1856 novel, that was written just two months after John Brown's raid and which opened days after Brown was hanged. By sympathizing with the injustice of slavery as well as the loss of the traditional way of life that its absence threatened, he offended neither North nor South. For good measure, Boucicault wrote the play with two endings: a tragic ending for New York and a happy ending for London that was designed to reflect British racial politics (Meer, 2009, 81).

There were unsuccessful attempts by the Fenians to invade Canada in 1866, in 1870 and in 1871. When Boucicault wrote *The Shaughraun* in 1874, he handled Fenianism in much the same way so that the play was received with equally success in Ireland, in England and in the United States. While the wider plot of *The Shaughraun* involves landing a Fenian rebel on the Mayo coast and there are references to Manchester and to Clerkenwell, Boucicault anticipated possible political tension by teaming up the British officer Captain Molineux and the romanticized Fenian Robert Ffolliott to oppose the squireen Corry Kinchela and the police informer Harvey Duff who disguises himself and the peasant Keach. To emphasize Kinchela's villainy, Boucicault's character threatens Father Dolan, the parish priest of Suil-a-beg with libel.

Arrah-na-Pogue is set in Wicklow in 1798. The rebel hero Beamish MacCoul shares his name with the Irish traditional champion Fionn MacCoul, and Arrah's defense of Beamish may be based on Anne Devlin's defense of Robert Emmet, a defense that led to her arrest, torture and imprisonment. Boucicault's mother's people, the Darleys, came from The Scalp, the wild ravine near Enniskerry in County Wicklow. They would have known first-hand of the excesses of the military and the local yeomanry during the 1798 Rising. Boucicault's English officer Major Coffin may be rigid and arbitrary, but he is not unjust, and his Sergeant befriends Shaun the Post, the driver of the Mail Car between Hollywood and Rathdrum.

Boucicault uses a melodramatic structure and the dramatic convention of the restoration of order to create the distance between historical facts surrounding the 1798 Rising in Wicklow, the murder of Ellen Hanon in 1819 and the Fenian Rising in 1867, and in his dramatic interpretation of those facts, Boucicault's use of melodrama allowed him to maintain a light hand in dealing with the theme of the Irish peasant and the law, a theme that other nineteenth-century writers addressed as serious social commentary.

Boucicault's Irish romanticism complemented his Irish nationalism. As an Irish immigrant to the United States, he understood the Irishman's longing for home. The pages of the popular Irish-American newspapers romanticized Ireland for the immigrants of the forties and fifties; the images of Ireland, vivid in immigrants' memories, contrasted sharply with the reality of urban poverty. Later generations of Irish Americans, even those who did not feel excluded from American society, shared the same romantic image of Ireland.

Boucicault expressed that romanticism in the speeches of his rebel exiles, Beamish MacCoul and Robert Ffolliott. When he thinks of leaving Ireland for the last time, Robert's speech reflects the emigrant's anguish:

See, the morning is beginning to tip the heights of Mullacor; we must part. In a few hours I shall be on the sea, bound for a foreign land; perhaps never again shall I hear your voices nor see my native hills. Oh, my own land! My own land! Bless every blade of grass upon your green cheeks! The clouds that hang over ye are the sighs of your exiled children, and your face is always wet with their tears. *Eirne meelish, Shlawn loth!* Fare ye well! And you, dear Abbey of St. Kevin, around which the bones of my forefathers are laid. (Krause 115)

In *The Shaughraun*, Conn the Shaughraun says, in a light-hearted way, how it is that he is back in Ireland again, but the message is clear to those who knew the sting of the sign "No Irish Need Apply." When asked to explain how he escaped, Conn clarifies that he didn't escape, that he was "turned out":

As if I wor a stray cat. "Very well," says I, "Bally-mulligan is my parish, I'm a pauper; send me, or gi' me board wages where I am." "No," ses they, we've Irish enough here already." "Then send me back to Sligo, and they did." (Krause 193)

Boucicault developed a successful formula for dramatizing his romantic portrayal of Ireland with blushing colleens, broth of boys, genial parish priests, neat thatched cottages and songs and dances—all laced with a bit of *poitin* and patriotism. It was such a successful approach that Lennox Robinson (1968) felt that the distance between Boucicault's Ireland and John Millington Synge's Ireland created the riots that greeted *The Playboy of the Western World* during the Abbey's 1911-1912 American tour (Robinson 1968, 95-96).

While Boucicault as showman exploited Irish nationalism and romanticism in *The Colleen Bawn*, *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *The Shaughraun*, plays more successful than Boucicault's more polished Regency comedies like *London Assurance* (1841), it was Boucicault as creator of the characters of Myles na gCopaleen, Shaun the Post and Conn the Shaughraun who ensured the continued success of his Irish plays. Boucicault not only created the characters, but he also played the role of Conn the Shaughraun with great success (Walsh, 1967, 126-127).

Critics like David Krause (1964) and Robert Hogan (1969) have identified the origin of Boucicault's Irish characters in the parasite-slave characters in Roman comedy; however, there were more recent antecedents in certain native Irish characters who appear in Irish pre-famine fiction and in the heroes of nineteenth-century American drama who appeared on the stage to dramatize American romantic nationalism (Krause 39-40).

In Irish pre-famine fiction, the native Irish character functions as an agent who interprets Ireland to an outsider or to the reader. Often these figures are servants or family retainers like Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent*, Sheelah Dunshaughlin in *Ormonde* and Lowry Looby in *The Collegians*; however, there is a second group of native Irish characters represented by Myles na gCopaleen in *The Collegians*, Davy Lenigan in *The Rivals*, Peery Conolly in *The Nolans* and Andy Houlihan in *Crohoore of the Bilhook* who anticipate the native Irish hero who comes into his own in literature as he came into his own in Irish history—with land ownership. Neither rogue nor romantic hero, these characters are distinguished by their native kindness and loyalty which make them the protectors, but not the suitors, of the heroines.

Gerald Griffin's Myles Murphy or Myles na gCopaleen, the shrew pony trader in *The Collegians* (1829) which was adapted by Boucicault as *The Colleen Bawn* in 1860, is a particularly good example of the native Irish hero. From his first appearance in the novel, Myles is the most attractive character in *The Collegians*. While Griffin ignored the potential of his finely realized Myles to pursue his moral tale to its classical conclusion, Boucicault allowed Myles to emerge as the natural hero of the play and turned a moralist novel into a melodrama with a proper resolution provided by Father Tom who produces Eily in a *deus ex machine* ending and by Myles who hands Hardress the hand of the Colleen Bawn. Boucicault dismisses any implication that Cregan is responsible for the attempted murder of Eily. In the play, it is Mrs. Cregan not Hardress, who gives the glove token to Danny that sets the attempt on Eily's life into action.

Arguing that Myles is the first of a series of rogue heroes that is fully developed in Synge's *Christy Mahon*, David Krause has described Myles as "a lazy, lying tramp, beyond any hope of reform, a horse-thief and ex-convict, poacher and poitin-maker who thumbs his nose at authority—in short, an irresponsible rogue who is the complete antithesis of Victorian respectability" (Krause 32). True for Conn but not for Myles. Myles is not a loafer. He is a shrewd horse-dealer who abandons his ponies to watch over his beloved Eily while she waits to be recognized as Cregan's wife. He does this not out of laziness but out of loyalty.

Boucicault found the character of Myles in *The Collegians* and borrowed more from Griffin than his admirers admit; he found his model for Myles as hero in the popular American theatre. Familiar with the Myles type in Irish fiction, Boucicault found an American native hero in the Yankee, in Sam Patch, in Davy Crockett and in Mose the Bowery B'hoj, the protagonists of plays full of social idealism. American patriotism and Jacksonian democracy influenced Boucicault's *Andy Blake* (1854), first play for the American stage and later his very successful adaptation of *Les Pauvres de Paris, The Poor of New York* (1857) where the character of Dan the Fireman was based on Mose. (Pure showman Boucicault had a fire engine arrive on stage at the last minute to extinguish the fire from which Dan emerged.)

A clear line can be drawn between the American Yankee hero and Boucicault's Myles, Shaun/Conn characters. After his appearance as a Jonathan, a servant in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), a play that focused on the difference between Americans and Europeans, the figure of the Yankee shifts from a comic bumpkin to a rustic hero. He continues to be wryly humorous, but he provides the contrast to the outsider in the same way that Boucicault promoted his Irish heroes from sub-plot buffoons to the "clever and attractive character in a play set in Ireland where the absurd Englishmen or Anglo-Irishman makes a fool of himself among the Irish" (Krause 13).

To offer one example of the Yankee on the one hand and the Myles/Shawn/Conn character on the other, consider the dialogue between Seth Hope, the captured Yankee, and General Howe in J. G. Burnett's *Blanche of the Brandywine. An American Spectacle* (1858):

Howe: Stand off, fellow! Now, Sir, your name?

Seth: Seth

Howe: Seth what?

Seth: Seth nothing.

Howe: No other name?

Seth: No, major; my dad was an all-fired mean cuss, and he couldn't afford to give me but one name and that was the meanest he could think on (Burnett 37-38).

Seth is finally dismissed by the British officers because his impertinent questions made foils of them, and Shaun does the same at his trial in Boucicault's *Arrah-na-Pogue*:

Major: Will you give the Court your name, fellow?

Shaun: Is it my name, sir? Ah, you're joking! Sure, there's his honor beside ye can answer for me, long life to him!

Major: Will you give the Court your name, fellow?

Shaun: Well, I'm not ashamed of it.

O'Grady: Come, Shaun, my man.

Shaun: There, didn't I tell ye! He knows me well-enough.

Major: Shaun (writing) that is the Irish for John, I suppose.

Shaun: No, sir; John is the English for Shaun. (Krause 150)

Boucicault drew on another Yankee, Rip van Winkle, for Conn the Shaughraun. In 1865, the year after he wrote *Arrah-na-Pogue*, he adapted *Rip*

van Winkle for Joseph Jefferson, the most famous actor of his day. He borrowed a number of details from Rip for his character of Conn the Shaughraun. Rip has Wolf; Conn has Tatters; both like to hunt, to drink and to avoid work. Rip has a nagging wife; Conn has a worrying mother. Boucicault even uses the same comic letter scene in both plays; however, the similarity ends there.

In *Rip van Winkle*, Boucicault realistically creates the American legend; he develops his own creation in *The Shaughraun*, a rogue hero type but one who reflects Boucicault's concern for the restoration of order in his plays. Conn is a rogue, but he arranges Robert's return to Ireland, and he helps Robert escape from prison. At the end of the play, though he claims he doesn't know the word, he promises to reform and calls on the audience to be his bondsmen.

Boucicault's *Shaughraun* has been compared with Synge's rogue tramp (Hogan 108-109). While Synge appreciated the "good acting comedy" of Boucicault's plays, the characters differ in an important way from Synge's tramp. The word *shaughraun* from the Irish *seachran*, meaning wandering in the sense of going astray. The word can also mean an error, a deception or a delusion. In each case departure from order is expressed and the possibility of return is implied.

Synge's meaning of tramp is a wanderer who chooses a nomadic life outside of the narrow, rural work culture. There is no suggestion of a return to order in the coaxing speeches of the tramp wooing Nora to join him on the road in "The Shadow of the Glen," nor is there any suggestion of a temporary straying in Synge's essay "The Vagrants of Wicklow" where Synge celebrates the tramp's wildness and romance and argues that vagrants are the artistic sons of rural families.

Christy is another matter. A would-be parricide who creates his self-esteem in luxurious language, Christy neither contributes to a restoration of order at the end of the play, nor does he mean to live his life outside of his culture. Instead, he creates a new order where he will be master of fights. It is this willingness to shatter all kinds of established order that Synge's rioters found threatening and his defenders found exhilarating. It is precisely that relationship with Synge's Ireland that suggests a judgement of Boucicault.

Synge's Ireland forced his Irish and Irish American audience to abandon Boucicault's romantic Irish nationalism and say with Old Mahon, "Is it me?" To the Abbey directors, the answer was "Yes." Boucicault did not get a single Abbey production between 1899 and 1951, but in recent years the Abbey has produced Boucicault with great success, a success that dismissed the charge that Boucicault merely added to the stage Irishman caricature. Recognizing that Boucicault plays are not great drama but are great theatre, a less self-consciously national theatre has found room for both the *Playboy* and the *Shaughraun*.

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