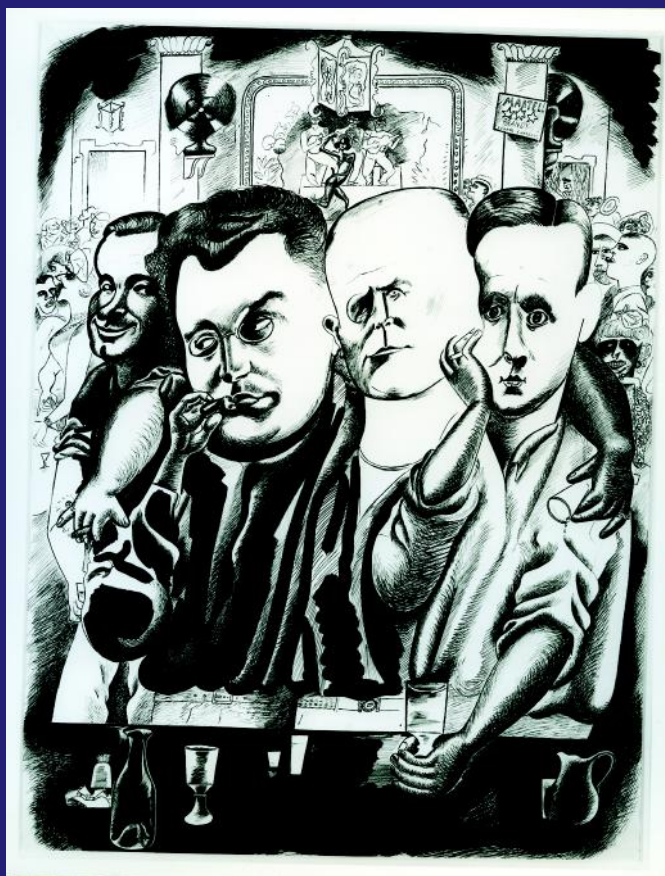


Peter James Harris

# FROM STAGE TO PAGE

CRITICAL RECEPTION OF IRISH PLAYS IN THE  
LONDON THEATRE, 1925–1996



In December 1921 the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, which led to the creation of the Irish Free State and the partition of Ireland the following year. The consequences of that attempt to reconcile the conflicting demands of republicans and unionists alike have dictated the course of Anglo-Irish relations ever since. This book explores how the reception of Irish plays staged in theatres in London's West End serves as a barometer not only of the state of relations between Great Britain and Ireland, but also of the health of the British and Irish theatres respectively.

For each of the eight decades following Irish Independence a representative production is set in the context of Anglo-Irish relations in the period and developments in the theatre of the day. The first-night criticism of each production is analysed in the light of its political and artistic context as well as the editorial policy of the publication for which a given critic is writing.

The author argues that the relationship between context and criticism is not simply one of cause and effect but, rather, the result of the interplay of a number of cultural, historical, political, artistic and personal factors.

'One admires in reading this volume the deft and succinct handling of complex material ... I know of no past or recent publication that comes close to covering the field addressed here.'

— Richard Allen Cave, Royal Holloway, University of London

Peter James Harris is Professor of English Literature at the State University of São Paulo (UNESP), São José do Rio Preto, Brazil, where he is also Head of the Modern Languages Department. He is currently working on a monograph entitled *The End of the World ... Again: Representations of the Apocalypse on the London Stage*.



## From Stage to Page

# Reimagining Ireland

Volume 41

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher  
Institute of Technology, Tallaght



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

Peter James Harris

# From Stage to Page

Critical Reception of Irish Plays in  
the London Theatre, 1925–1996



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Left to right: Ivor Brown (1891–1974), drama critic and writer; St John Greer Ervine (1883–1971), playwright and drama critic; James Evershed Agate (1877–1947), drama critic; Charles Langbridge Morgan (1894–1958), writer and drama critic.

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*For Andrew*

*in gratitude for three and a half  
very happy months together  
in Englefield Green.*





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work for publication the hard graft of indexing has been ably handled by Priscila C. Kido Martins. A contribution towards publishing costs is gratefully acknowledged from FAPERP (The Rio Preto Research and Extension Support Foundation). Finally, I must also express my gratitude to my Mother, whose cheerful good humour in the face of pain and adversity has provided me with the inspiration of an ongoing lesson in the power of positive thinking.

## Preface

I have known about Peter Harris's project since the time of its inception. When he won a São Paulo State Research Foundation award to undertake the basic research in England and Ireland (chiefly in the British Library), he needed as a condition of the award to attach himself as visiting scholar to a British academic institution; and Peter chose to come to Royal Holloway. I was enormously impressed by the scope and originality of the enterprise (that he won a highly competitive scholarship in the first place was proof of its potential excellence), particularly as Peter reported to me regularly on the compilation of a Chronological Table of Plays Produced in London (1920–2006), the fruit of that initial library research. This was a vast undertaking for which scholars will be in his debt for decades to come. It seems on the face of it an obvious venture to undertake, but no one had seen fit actually to do so because, I would suspect, the sheer volume of work involved proved overly daunting. Ben Levitas and I were delighted to publish the finished lists in our co-edited volume for the Irish Theatrical Diaspora Series, *Irish Theatre in England* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007).

It had always been Peter Harris's intention to compile the Chronological Table as a necessary preliminary stage in exploring which Irish plays by which dramatists had proved most popular with London audiences decade by decade over the period he investigated and the reasons why this might be so. He had from his days at Royal Holloway worked out his methodology, seeing the need to situate the productions and their reception within the larger political and social contexts of changing Anglo-Irish relations in each decade. What impresses about the finished work is the width of its potential appeal to readers: it offers a detailed analytical study of eight plays, but does that alongside a political history of Anglo-Irish relations since Ireland's independence, a history of changing modes of theatrical staging in Ireland and England, and (a rarely investigated field of study) a history of changing values and styles in newspaper reviewing and their

relation to changing cultural politics. One admires in reading this volume the deft and succinct handling of complex material, the meticulous lack of bias in treating the material (particularly so with regard to the newspaper critics under review) and the careful framing of conclusions to the chapters and the overall monograph. The lack of bias might have given rise to a style that is rather bland and uninspiring but the sheer diversity of the points of focus and the wit in the writing militate against that effect. Though the cultural history of performances is currently a popular form of study, I know of no past or recent publication that comes close to covering the field addressed in this particular volume.

Richard Allen Cave  
Emeritus Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts  
Royal Holloway, University of London

## Introduction

The Irish temperament is, in the main, indolent, gregarious, ruminative, proud, malicious, eloquent, good-humoured, slovenly, and self-absorbed. I do not think Irish people are, as they would have it themselves, outstandingly brave or pure, or, as the English would have it, violently passionate or quarrelsome.

— MICHEÁL MAC LIAMMÓIR, 'Dramatic Accidents',  
in Sheridan Morley, ed., *Theatre* 72, 1972

On 3 June 1992 Dublin's Rough Magic Theatre Group began a month-long run at the Tricycle Theatre in Northwest London. The play they were presenting was Declan Hughes's adaptation of *Love and a Bottle*, by George Farquhar, which had received its world première the previous year at Dublin's Project Arts Centre. Born in Derry in 1678 Farquhar was, for a time, an actor at the Smock Alley theatre in Dublin, the first theatre to be built in Ireland after the restoration of England's monarchy in 1660. *Love and a Bottle* was the first play that Farquhar wrote, and it was staged in London in 1698, at Sir Christopher Wren's Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, which had been inaugurated twenty-four years previously. Rough Magic were thus, but for six years, commemorating the 300th anniversary of the first Irish play to be seen in London.

Farquhar wrote eight plays altogether, including *The Recruiting Sergeant* (1706) and *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), both of which went on to become staples of the English theatrical repertoire. Thanks to Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* (1987) and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988), it is now widely known that *The Recruiting Sergeant* was also the first play to be staged in Australia, by a group of convicts from the First Fleet, in 1789. This was just fourteen years after another major Irish dramatist, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, had taken the London theatre scene by storm with the première of *The Rivals* (1775), which itself followed hot on the

heels of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). A century later, in 1892, London was to see the staging of new plays by two other Irish-born dramatists, each of whom was also destined for legendary status, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, by Oscar Wilde, and *Widower's Houses*, by George Bernard Shaw. Three years later Wilde provided the English theatre with its most enduring comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). However, despite the fact that all these dramatists are Irish by birth and background, it is not so clear that these are Irish plays. As Christopher Morash puts it, with regard to late-eighteenth-century Irish dramatists: 'All of these writers were born in Ireland; none of them wrote plays set in Ireland or had careers in Ireland, although their plays would be performed in the Dublin theatres.' (2004: 51). This was the point of view defended by Brian Friel in his celebrated survey of Irish drama, published in 1972 in the issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* devoted to 'Irish Writing To-day':

It is high time we dropped from the calendar of Irish dramatic saints all those playwrights from Farquhar to Shaw – and that includes Steele, Sheridan, Goldsmith and Wilde – who no more belong to Irish drama than John Field belongs to Irish music or Francis Bacon to Irish painting. Fine dramatists they were, each assured of at least a generous footnote in the history of English drama. But if we take as our definition of Irish drama plays written in Irish or English on Irish subjects and performed by Irishmen, we must scrap all those men who wrote within the English tradition, for the English stage and for the English people, and we can go back no further than 1899, to the night of May 8, the opening night of the Irish Literary Theatre. (1972: 305)

Friel's point was a deliberately contentious one; could one justifiably exclude plays like *The Shaughran* (1874), by Dion Boucicault (1829–90), from the Irish theatrical canon, simply because its première was at a New York theatre with an American cast?

However, if one accepts Friel's reductive definition of Irish theatre as a premise, then one would have to mark May 1903 as the beginning of the history of the Irish play on the London stage, for it was in that month that the Irish National Theatre Society visited the city, at the invitation of the London Irish Literary Society, and gave two presentations of five short plays. The importance of Irish plays touring outside Ireland had



been stressed at a meeting of the London Irish Literary Society on 23 April 1899, at which W. B. Yeats had delivered a lecture on the 'Ideal Theatre', just two weeks before the first presentation by the Irish Literary Society at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin. After the lecture, one of those present, Clement Shorter,<sup>1</sup> stressed the fundamental importance of writing in English rather than in Irish. The minutes of the meeting record his comments, as well as the support of those present for his contribution:

It was really a matter not so much of being zealous in Ireland to produce a play which should have certain touches of Irish romance in it, but of writing in English to capture the whole English-speaking world upon lines that were strictly Irish. (Hear, hear.) The more popular Mr Yeats's plays were the greater would be the success of the Irish theatre movement, for the plays would be performed not only in Ireland, but in England, in America, and the Colonies. He did not think that mere attempts to appeal to a limited audience was the way in which Mr Yeats could render the largest and most thorough service to the country which he loved so well. (Applause.) (Anonymous, *Irish Literary Society Gazette*, March 1899, in Pierce, 2000: 51)

Although Clement Shorter's comment ran counter to the elitist tenet of Yeats's lecture, its pragmatic truth was amply demonstrated four years later, when the first London performances by the Irish National Theatre Society proved instrumental in convincing Miss Annie Horniman to provide her financial backing for the founding of the Abbey Theatre.

Over the past century, productions mounted by the Abbey Theatre have been regular visitors to theatres in London and other cities throughout the British mainland.<sup>2</sup> However, the Abbey Players' monopoly of the Irish play on the London stage was short-lived. In May 1916 a breakaway group of Abbey actors formed the Irish Players, who went on to organise

- 1 Clement Shorter (1857–1926) was a journalist who had been editor of the *Illustrated London News* since 1891. An ardent believer in the importance of graphic images in effective communication he went on to found three other illustrated magazines: the *Sketch* (1893), the *Sphere* (1900), and the *Tatler* (1901).
- 2 See Richard Cave's essay 'The Abbey Tours in England', in Grene and Morash (2005: 9–34).

their own first tour of England in July of that year.<sup>3</sup> Four years later, on 27 September 1920, the Irish Players' production of Lennox Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* opened at London's Ambassadors Theatre, where it ran for a total of 292 performances, the first Irish blockbuster on the twentieth-century London stage. Since then, Irish plays have rarely been absent from the West End, although tours by Irish companies have made up only a small proportion of the overall number of productions of Irish plays seen in London theatres.

According to my own figures, a total of 1,758 Irish plays were staged in London theatres between January 1920 and the end of 2009, which represents 5 per cent of all productions seen in London in the period.<sup>4</sup> In numerical terms, this represents an average of nineteen Irish plays out of the 377 productions staged in London in an average year. Of course, theatrical activity is directly influenced by economic factors but, taken on a decade-by-decade basis, the proportional participation of Irish plays in the total of London productions has remained remarkably constant. Thus, for example, during the eighty-six years covered by my survey, the year in which the greatest number of productions was staged in London was 1999. In that year 804 plays were put on in London altogether; of that number fifty-one, or 6.3 per cent, were Irish.

Statistically significant though it may be, the Irish play on the London stage does not constitute a segment large enough to have attracted a great deal of critical attention. It has therefore fallen into something of a black hole, largely avoided by histories of the Irish theatre and the British theatre alike. Understandably enough, writers on the Irish theatre have tended to concentrate on plays presented in Ireland, while those writing on British theatre have focused principally on British playwrights. In both cases, the performance of Irish plays in London has been treated as a matter of subsidiary importance, although the Irish Theatrical Diaspora Series, published by

3 See Peter Kuch's essay 'The Irish Players and the Conquest of London', in Cave and Levitas (2007: 53–66).

4 See my own 'Chronological Table of Irish Plays Produced in London (1920–2006)', in Cave and Levitas (2007: 195–285).

the Carysfort Press, is an attempt to fill this editorial lacuna. The first two volumes in the series, *Irish Theatre on Tour* (Greene and Morash 2005) and *Irish Theatre in England* (Cave and Levitas 2007), have focused on productions of Irish plays not only in England but also in America and Australia.

With regard to the Irish theatre itself, the past two decades have seen something of a boom in studies of a more or less panoramic nature, each having its particular focus. To mention just a few of these works, in order of publication, we have: *Modern Irish Drama* (Harrington 1991); *Contemporary Irish Drama – From Beckett to McGuinness* (Roche 1994); *Plays and Playwrights from Ireland in International Perspective* (Kosok 1995); *Twentieth-century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Murray 1997); *Irish Playwrights, 1880–1995: A Research and Production Notebook* (Schrank and Demastes 1997); *A Reader's Guide to Modern Irish Drama* (Sternlicht 1998); *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Greene 1999); *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Jordan 2000); *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* (Pilkington 2001); *A History of Irish Theatre 1601–2000* (Morash, 2002); *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland's National Theatre, the First 100 Years* (Fitz-Simon 2003); *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Richards 2004); and *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (Lonergan 2008). Of all of these publications the one which devotes most attention to performances of Irish plays in London is that by Chris Morash, which chronicles the significance of the metropolitan stage as a market for Irish playwrights and performers since the seventeenth century. In the context of the present study, special mention must be made of John P. Harrington's *The Irish Play on the New York Stage, 1874–1966* (1997), which examines the New York reception of seven key Irish productions, from Boucicault's *The Shaughbran* to Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*. To the best of my knowledge this was the first book-length examination of Irish theatrical diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

5 In fairness to myself I must disclaim any influence of John Harrington's fine publication on the present study, for I only came across it after my own research had been under way for some two or three years.

Recent studies of the British theatre have been similarly coy about attaching undue importance to the presence of work by Irish dramatists on the London stage, for equally justifiable reasons. Some of the important publications, both panoramic and specific, of the past twenty years or so are: *New British Drama in Performance on the London Stage: 1970 to 1985* (Cave 1987); *Modern British Drama, 1890–1990* (Innes 1992); *One Night Stands: A Critic's View of Modern British Theatre* (Billington 1993); *British Theatre Since the War* (Shellard 1999); *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Theatre* (Trussler 2000); *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (Sierz 2001); *Twentieth Century British Drama* (Smart 2001); *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (Billington 2007); and *London Stage in the 20th Century* (Tanitch 2007). Although the names of Irish dramatists are not frequently to be found in the pages of these publications, one must make an exception in the case of Samuel Beckett, for he has been appropriated to an almost equal degree by the British, Irish and, indeed, French theatre – much as writers like Henry James and T. S. Eliot are subjected to a never-ending tug-of-war between the canons of English and American Literature. However, the researcher will seek in vain in all of the above-mentioned books, excellent though each is in its own right, for an account of the Irish play on the London stage.

It has therefore been my objective in my research over the past decade to rescue this particular segment of Anglo-Irish theatrical history from the critical no-man's-land in which it has languished. The first stage of this task was the mapping of the area, the results of which have already been published, as mentioned above. The present study, however, goes beyond that initial panorama to focus on specific, representative episodes in the narrative. The phenomenon of the Irish play on the London stage serves not only as a case study in theatre history but also as an object lesson in the area of cultural studies, for these performances represent an almost laboratorial opportunity to observe the encounter of two national cultures – one on the stage and the other in the audience.

After the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921 the ensuing eight decades of the twentieth century were a period of constant flux and transformation in relations between England and its former colony.

Following the establishment of the Irish Free State early in 1922 there was the Irish Civil War, the tariff war of the 1930s and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1938, the outbreak of the Second World War and the declaration of Ireland's neutral status, the inauguration of the Republic in 1949, the economic problems and the rise in emigration of the 1950s, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement at the end of the 1960s followed by the resurgence of the IRA and militant republicanism during the thirty years of the Troubles, membership of the European Economic Community in 1972, increasingly audacious bombing of mainland targets in the 1970s and 80s, and the emergence of the Celtic Tiger and the success of the Peace Process in the 1990s. All of these events and processes had their impact on Anglo-Irish relations, not only at governmental level, but also on the opinions of ordinary men and women, both on the street and in the theatres.

The aim of the present study, then, is to weave together the separate threads represented by the Irish play on the London stage, the main events in the sphere of Anglo-Irish relations, and the reception of selected plays by the London critics, in order to produce a tapestry which will illustrate not only the development of a particularly rich period in Irish theatrical history but also the ways in which the reactions to certain plays serve as a microcosmic representation of the perception of Ireland itself by the English.

The theoretical underpinning for such an ambitious undertaking has been provided in large measure by Susan Bennett's study, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1997), in which she examines the two-way traffic involved in the production and reception of theatrical performances, arguing that there are fundamental issues of power and responsibility at play. She challenges, above all, the notion that the theatre audience is a passive entity which is merely acted upon by the actors on the stage, stressing that the audience, both individually and collectively, has an active role in shaping the production. A major component in this productive influence results from the expectations that the audience brings to bear upon a particular performance:

Above all, the role of the theatre audience involves the spectator's interaction with performance in both social (audience member) and private (individual) capacities. But these roles do not begin as the curtain rises. Already it is evident that issues such as cultural background and selection play significant parts in constructing these roles and, indeed, in getting audiences into theatres. In the circumstance of the theatre visit, the spectator takes on his/her role(s) before the performance *per se* begins. (1997: 125)

With regard to the present study, this idea can be simply illustrated by the fact that the members of an audience in a Dublin theatre will have a different cultural background to those watching a play in a London theatre. Insofar as the comic elements in a particular play are concerned, it is probable that members of the Irish audience will laugh at certain lines in an Irish play whose humour is impenetrable to an audience in London watching the same production of the play a few weeks later. When this phenomenon is seen to apply to theatre critics as well, whose privileged position has an important bearing on their responsibility in shaping the opinion and forming the expectations of other theatregoers, it becomes clear that the published comments of a reviewer must be interpreted within the context of his or her particular cultural universe.

The above quotation was taken from the second edition of *Theatre Audiences*, distinguished from the previous (1990) edition above all by the addition of an important new chapter on intercultural theatre. Largely unchanged in the second edition is the chapter which surveys the various theories of reading and viewing, and demonstrates the relevance to the analysis of theatrical reception of concepts advanced by Fish, Jauss, Iser and Naumann in connection with reader-response. However, Susan Bennett was not the only advocate of the use of these theoretical tools for such a purpose. In 1989, Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie edited a volume entitled *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*. In his contribution to the volume, 'Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance,' Marvin Carlson describes the particular ways in which the social organisation of the theatre renders the theatre audience a more apparent and identifiable group than the more abstract 'community of readers' postulated by Stanley Fish for the written text (Fish: 1980). Carlson identifies 'four historical means and mechanisms

which have provided audiences with strategies for organizing and interpreting their involvement with the theatre event' (1989: 86). The first of these is the set of genre expectations aroused by the written script itself, most obviously exemplified in the designation of a play as either comedy or tragedy which has characterised Western theatre since the time of the Greeks. By extension these expectations have often been reinforced by the repertorial specialisation of particular theatres. Secondly, in relation to the performance itself, Carlson refers to the 'lines of business' established by particular actors in terms of preferred roles, characterisation and plot structures. With regard to the more socially structured formation of an audience's reading of a particular performance Carlson goes on to refer to the 'phenomenon of publicity and programs' and, finally, the impact of institutional readings provided by dramaturgs and professional critics. Carlson's essay therefore suggests the type of material that might usefully be consulted in the process of researching into 'what an audience brings to the theatre in the way of expectations, assumptions, and strategies which will creatively interact with the stimuli of the theatre event to produce whatever effect the performance has on an audience and what effect the audience has on it' (1989: 97).

The 'historical means and mechanisms' identified by Carlson are certainly very useful points of focus in the analysis of theatre reception. But they were helpfully complemented by the model that Susan Bennett proposed for understanding and analysing the productive reception of a theatrical performance by a given audience. Based on the premise that 'the spectator comes to the theatre as a member of an already constituted interpretive community and also brings a horizon of expectations shaped by the pre-performance elements discussed above,' she proposes a model comprised of two concentric frames:

the outer frame contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the cultural event. The inner frame contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space. The audience's role is carried out within these two frames and, perhaps most importantly, at their points of intersection. It is the interactive relationship between audience and stage, spectator and spectator which constitute production and reception, and which cause the inner and outer frames to converge for the creation of a particular experience. (1997: 139)



What I attempt to do in the present study, with specific reference to the published criticism of the eight productions selected for analysis, is to demonstrate how the external, cultural frame inhabited by the interpretive community of the critics influences their horizon of expectations in such a way as to condition the internal frame of their interaction with the play on the stage before them.

One of the features that distinguishes a theatre audience from the readership of a book is that, at one and the same time, the audience is both a collective entity ('the audience') and a group of individuals ('members of the audience'). In the same way, the critics are both a particular interpretive community within the audience and, simultaneously, individuals, each with their own experiences, prejudices and sympathies. In addition, the horizon of expectations of each critic is to a large extent predetermined by the target readership and the editorial policy of the newspaper or magazine for which he or she is writing. This can best be demonstrated by an example drawn from a particular historical moment within the period of seventy-one years covered by the present study.

In 1938, a British non-governmental organisation known by the acronym PEP (Political and Economic Planning) published a detailed analysis of the extant British print media, including newspapers, periodicals and magazines. The full title of the publication was *Report on the British Press: A survey of its current operations and problems with special reference to national newspapers and their part in public affairs*. PEP itself had been established in 1931 in response to an article entitled 'A National Plan for Britain', published in the *Weekend Review* by Max Nicholson.<sup>6</sup> The report included a detailed description of the eight principal national daily newspapers in Britain at

- 6 Max Nicholson (1905–2003) was born in Ireland of English parents. He was a conservationist and ornithologist of world importance. In 1951 he was chairman of the Festival of Britain committee; from 1952 to 1966 he was director-general of the Nature Conservancy; in 1961, together with Peter Scott, he founded the World Wildlife Fund.

PEP was an independent think-tank, funded by corporations, which included Max Nicholson himself and Julian Huxley, brother of Aldous, amongst its members. During the 1930s it was chaired by Israel Sieff, one of the directors of Marks



that time. Of those papers five still exist, but three: the *Daily Herald*, the *News Chronicle* and the *Daily Sketch* have ceased publication. Amongst the information categories provided about each paper in the report are: Chief Proprietors, Appeal, Politics, Associates, Circulation, Class Coverage, and Income Group Penetration. Given that 1938 was a moment of extreme political sensitivity in Europe, due to the rise of Mussolini and Hitler, one of the most revealing aspects of the PEP's X-ray of each paper refers to its politics. Thus, for example, the *Daily Mail* is described as 'Independent Right-Wing Conservative', and its News coverage is summarised as follows: 'Frequently carries interviews with Continental statesmen, especially dictators; makes a feature of Court and Society news' (1938: 117). A theatre critic writing a review of Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* for such a paper in 1934 would inevitably have felt constrained as to how he discussed the playwright's warnings about the rise of Fascism. This is just one illustration of the kind of detail that must be taken into consideration when seeking to understand the cultural 'external frame' within which a given reviewer is writing.

With regard to the evaluation of Irish plays by English critics, another element in the constitution of their horizon of expectations is the prevailing climate in the West End of the day. What plays are enjoying most success, what is the predominant style of the plays available to theatregoers, what, in other words, does the competition consist of? I have therefore attempted in each chapter to give just a brief sketch not only of the London theatrical scene in the year of each play's production but also of the other Irish plays which were being staged at the time. In the first five chapters I have been able to include a Table which sets out the most commercially successful productions in the West End in the year under consideration. Unfortunately, there are no research sources which enable this to be done for the last three decades covered in this study, so the last three chapters have no such Table.

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and Spencer. In 1978, PEP merged with the Centre for the Study of Social Policy to become the Policy Studies Institute (PSI).

This leads me on to a brief discussion of the methodology employed in this study, which was determined by a number of decisions, as well as limitations imposed by certain external constraints. Having set myself the task of examining the period between Irish Independence and the end of the twentieth century, my first decision was that I would break that period down into decades and select a representative play for each decade. It may very reasonably be argued that the 'decade' is a wholly artificial and arbitrary unit of time, meaningless in itself. This is true, but it is also true that our cultural background gives us a deep, almost instinctive, understanding of the characteristics that make one decade distinct from another. The historian, A. J. P. Taylor expresses this very well with regard to the inter-war years:

September 1931 marked the watershed of English history between the wars. Though any division of time above a year is arbitrary, arising only from our habit of counting with Arabic numerals by ten, decades take on a character of their own. What was at first merely a convenience for historians is accepted as reality by ordinary men when they become more literate and judge the world more from books and newspapers than from their own experience. The 'twenties' and 'thirties' were felt to be distinct periods even at the time, and September 1931 drew the line between them. The break can be defined in many ways. The end of the gold standard was the most obvious and the most immediate. (2000: 261)

In a footnote, Taylor comments on the fact that, in this case, the appropriateness of September 1931 as a starting date 'would be even clearer if men, by an understandable error, did not often count from nought to nine, instead of from one to ten' (2000: 261n). I wish to make it clear that my own definition of a decade in this study is, likewise, what one might describe as the aesthetic rather than the arithmetical one; in other words, the 1920s is here taken to be the decade which begins in 1920 and terminates in 1929.

It is evident that there are alternative ways of structuring a study such as this. In his examination of post-war British theatre, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (2007), in my opinion the most compelling and illuminating analysis of the subject, Michael Billington divides the period into sections according to the terms served by the various governments: 1945–50; 1950–55; 1955–59, and so on. In the context of his book this makes

perfect sense, since his thesis is that 'state-of-the-nation' plays by British playwrights are responses to a political reality defined by the government in power at any given time. A similar structuring device is used by Dermot Keogh in his *Twentieth-Century Ireland* (2005). However, his demarcation of the corresponding period (1948–51 and 1951–9) does not coincide with the dates in Michael Billington's study, for the obvious reason that the political calendars of the UK and Ireland are entirely independent of each other. In the present study, in which the focus is upon the cultural interface between the two countries, a division of time by decades is the only impartial solution to the lack of synchronicity between the two political clocks.

The next decision, or series of decisions, was the selection of the representative Irish play for each decade. This was guided by a mixture of both objective and subjective factors. If I had simply adopted a yardstick such as box-office success, for example, then the representative play for the 1990s would have had to be Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which ran for the best part of a year at the Phoenix Theatre in 1991. However, I already had three other plays by Brian Friel and did not have a single play by a female dramatist. Again, box-office performance would have suggested that Marie Jones's *Women on the Verge of HRT* should have been the play to choose, in recognition of the 60 performances it received in 1997. At that stage of my research, though, I was contemplating extending the period covered up until the present, in which case, Marie Jones's *Stones in his Pockets* would have been the last representative play in the sequence. I also wanted to ensure that Marina Carr's name was included, since she has gone on to establish herself as a major figure in contemporary Irish theatre.

The yardstick of box-office sales would similarly have been of no use in selecting the representative play for the 1970s, since there is no source that offers this information for that decade. With regard to that decade, however, I had no hesitation in determining that Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City* would be the representative play. As a dramatic response to the notorious events of Bloody Sunday there could be no better choice to illustrate the ways in which reception is affected by the external frame of cultural and political events.

With regard to the 1930s, too, I ignored the criterion of commercial success. Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* may seem a particularly questionable choice since its London première in 1934 occurred eight years after its first performance in Dublin. It could reasonably be argued that Denis Johnston's *The Moon in the Yellow River*, which was first staged in 1931, and was considerably more successful than Robinson's play when it was seen in London in 1934, would have been a better option. However, Robinson's play makes an interesting pairing with O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, since both plays examine the impact of the Irish Civil War on individual families and, in addition, Robinson himself attempted to persuade English audiences of his play's contemporary relevance to the political scenario of the 1930s.

I make no apology for the fact that, of the eight plays discussed here, two are by Sean O'Casey and three by Brian Friel. It is a matter of general consensus that O'Casey and Friel are the two major Irish playwrights of the inter-war and post-war periods respectively (Beckett excepted). Few people would dispute the place of *Juno and the Paycock* as the representative play of the 1920s. It would, in my opinion, have diminished the value of my study had I selected as a representative production for the 1940s a play by Paul Vincent Carroll, Donagh MacDonagh, Walter Macken or Michael J. Molloy for no reason other than that of ensuring the name of O'Casey would not have been repeated. Without wishing to underestimate the merit of the work of any of these dramatists it is not one of the purposes of the present study to re-evaluate or extend the canon of twentieth-century Irish theatre. I trust, therefore, that the justification for the selection of the eight plays here analysed will become clear in the course of each chapter; for the nonce, I assure the reader that the complex criteria utilised were rational, albeit largely subjective.

Another area of this study in which I must confess to a subjective interference is in the selection of information for inclusion in that section of each chapter which deals with Anglo-Irish relations. I am not a historian by training; however I have felt emboldened by the perspective of the new historicism, which recognises that no historian can escape from his or her subjectivity, to attempt my own brief history of Anglo-Irish relations. According to Simon Trussler, in his Introduction to his own history of British theatre:

All histories are prejudiced, however hard they claim for objectivity. For if the new historicism has taught us anything, it is that the moment *from* which we write shapes our view of the moment of which we write no less inescapably than our accumulated baggage of personal opinion and experience. (2000: xi–xii)

Let me make it clear, then, that the present study has been conceived and executed in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, signed on 10 April 1998, which has, by and large, not only shaped the development of recent history in Northern Ireland and the wider sphere of Anglo-Irish relations in general, but also provided a frame within which to view the whole post-Independence period. Naturally I have tried to obtain as wide a picture as possible before determining which events might be considered relevant for inclusion by way of context for each of the theatrical productions discussed here. With regard to Irish history I am indebted to the differing approaches in the following studies: *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–1985* (Brown 1985); *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000* (Ferreiter 2005); *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (Foster 1989); *Ireland: A History* (Kee 2003); *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Revolution and State Building* (Keogh 2005); *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Lee 1989); and *A Secret History of the IRA* (Moloney 2003). Ed Moloney's book was especially useful in providing a detailed portrait of the *modus operandi* of the IRA which, as I argue in the present study, was largely responsible for the way in which Anglo-Irish relations were perceived by the English, above all during the period of the Troubles. As far as English history is concerned, the following publications have been very helpful in covering the range of 'histories' – from social and economic to political: *Yesterday's Britain* (Bastable 1998); *England 1945–2000* (Fernández-Armesto, 2001); *Bygone Britain: At Play 1900–1970* (HMSO 1995); *A History of Modern Britain* (Marr 2008);<sup>7</sup> and *England 1914–1945* (Taylor 2000). In order to gain a clear picture of the

7 Andrew Marr's book was the subject of intense publicity early in March 2009, when the publisher, Pan Macmillan, sent a recall letter to UK booksellers requesting the immediate return of all unsold copies after 'writer and women's rights campaigner Erin Pizzey began legal action over incorrect allegations that linked her to the Angry Brigade, a militant group that staged bomb attacks in the 1970s.' (*The Guardian*, 9 March 2009). The allegation, a brief, parenthetical reference on p. 330, only became

precise sequence of events I have made extensive use of the two Dorling Kindersley publications: *Chronicle of the 20th Century* (Mercer 1995) and *20th Century Day by Day* (Mercer 2000). I would venture to suggest that, notwithstanding their emphasis on events of British interest, there is no better register of the most important moments in twentieth-century world history than these two compendia. Like any historian, I have selected from these and other publications in order to create a narrative thread which serves as a coherent context for the discussion of the plays and their reception. Finally, in order not to conceal any aspect of my own subjectivity, I should declare that I myself am English. I was born in London in 1951 but, due to the fact that my Mother is Scottish, my upbringing gave me a profound sympathy with those who live in diaspora, at the interface of two cultures and at home in neither. Since 1985 I myself have lived in Brazil, so a large part of my own adult life has also been lived in exile, with all the cultural privileges and deprivations entailed in expatriate existence.

The last methodological strand that requires some elucidation is that of the texts used as a basis for my representation of the points of view of the London critics. I should perhaps begin by stating that I have the greatest respect for the 'interpretive community' constituted by the London theatre reviewers. Whether viewed as an art or a craft their professional practice has enriched the London theatre world for well over two centuries. As a chronicle or register alone there is no better history of the performances seen on the West End stage than the collected body of their writing. In the first chapter of his practical study, *Theatre Criticism*, Irving Wardle, writing with the benefit of his accumulated experience as theatre reviewer on *The Times* from 1963 to 1989, acknowledges that the role of chronicler is indeed one of the 'uses' of the theatre critic. Having, with wry self-deprecation, outlined the ambiguous utility of the theatre critic's work to theatre managements, artists and theatregoers, he goes on:

There is another reader, though, with whom the critic is on firm ground, even though he buys no newspapers and sends no letters of appreciation. This, of course, is the

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the subject of legal proceedings after approximately 250,000 copies of the book had been sold.

future reader whose knowledge of what it was like on the first night of Brook's *King Lear* or Olivier's *Oedipus* depends almost exclusively on what the reviewers made of it. Hitherto they were his only source, apart from such actors' memoirs and Pepysian gossip as happens to have survived. Now performances can be preserved; and there are examples, like that of the Royal Court, of theatres collecting filmed archives of their most important work. But even if this practice could be systematically extended to the entire profession (a remote possibility even in the trigger-happy video age), it still would not supplant the man with the pen and reporter's notebook. (1992: 12)

In the context of the present study, there is no alternative method of gauging the English audience reaction to each of the Irish West End productions here analysed. For the researcher, however, the problem is that the body of reviews is so vast that it does not exist in any one, handily accessible source: the researcher must literally constitute it for him or herself.<sup>8</sup> My research enabled me to locate approximately twenty reviews for each of the eight plays. I do not claim to have found every single review that was published, but I am confident that the sample is wide enough in each case to provide a good panorama of the spectrum of opinion represented.

Given that, as explained above, each publication – whether newspaper or periodical – has its own political and commercial profile, as well as a target readership defined in socio-economic, as well as in political and educational terms; and each critic also comes to his or her task with a particular cultural and political baggage, I have tried to provide helpful contextual information about both print media and writers, especially those that are no longer with us. Where not incorporated into the text itself this information has been provided in the form of footnotes, rather than as endnotes or an alphabetical appendix, since I personally relish the form of 'dialogue' that can be established between text and footnote. However, I am aware that some readers find footnotes a distraction rather

8 As from 1980 the *London Theatre Record* (later, simply *Theatre Record*) solved this problem by gathering together and republishing, on a fortnightly basis, the text of every review of every professional theatrical production seen in London and the UK's regional theatres, as well as a production photograph of most of the plays thus chronicled – a veritable treasure trove for the theatre historian.



than a stimulating complement, and to these I apologise.<sup>9</sup> With regard to the acknowledgement of sources for each text quoted, I have included, wherever possible, page numbers and titles. I recognise that the division of labour in newspaper production means that critics are almost never responsible for the elaboration of their own titles and sub-titles. However, as far as the reader is concerned, the sub-editor's summary of the content of a review represents the opinion of the critic, and it is understood to be an integral component of the review itself. Where appropriate, therefore, I have discussed the headline of a review as though it were part of the critic's text itself.

This, then, is a study of Irish theatre in a particular period and from a particular perspective. It is based on a personal conviction that an understanding of historical context is fundamental to the satisfactory interpretation of theatre and its reception. I argue here that contextual factors – Anglo-Irish relations, the individual experience of theatre critics, the political leaning of the publication for which they are writing, the state of the West End at the time, the other Irish plays that have been staged in recent memory – all these and more go to conditioning the reception of an Irish play on the London stage, as much as the intrinsic qualities of the text and production themselves. As a result, in examining the reception of these plays by London audiences, we learn much about Irish theatre, but we also have a microcosm of the development of English attitudes to the Irish, from the first steps after Independence to the awakening confidence of the Celtic Tiger.

- 9 For such readers I offer the consolation of P. G. Wodehouse's condemnation of footnotes in the Foreword to his autobiography, *Over Seventy: An Autobiography with Digressions*: 'I am not, I think, an irascible man, but after reading a number of recent biographies and histories I have begun to feel pretty sore about these footnotes and not in the mood to be put upon much longer. It is high time, in my opinion, that this nuisance was abated and biographers and essayists restrained from strewing these unsightly blemishes through their pages as if they were ploughing the fields and scattering the good seed o'er the land.' (2007: 719). Wodehouse underscores his satirical point by attaching five footnotes to this section of text alone!