OLD MOTHER RILEY GOES TO THE PICTURES: SCREENING THE IRISH IN BRITAIN

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This chapter offers an exploration of the place of Irish popular entertainment in British working-class culture, using film as the medium for my argument. As I suggest, this has some equivalence with the positioning of the immigrant Irish in popular American culture, although the differences between both sets of representations may be more revealing. My argument will focus in particular on films of the 1930s featuring Irish ballads and Irish Music Hall performers, concluding with a discussion of the re-emergence and re-articulation of this form of cultural expression in the work of the Liverpool-Irish director Terence Davies in the 1980s.

While some considerable work has been carried out on the Irish in Britain, this has traditionally been the preserve of historians and sociologists, with much of the research focused on the immediate post-Famine decades. Whereas scholars of Irish-America have increasingly become interested in discussing how representations of the Irish in popular culture – in film, music, literature – shed light on the positioning of Irish-Americans within dominant WASP culture and as part of ethnic culture, very little comparable or comparative research has been undertaken on the Irish in Britain. The only sustained debate on representation has been the series of responses to L.P. Curtis' *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (1971); these, including Sheridan Gilley's "English attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780-1900" (Gilley 81-110), have continued to focus on the Irish in Victorian Britain and earlier.

The essays in the special edition of *Irish Studies Review* (Barton 2011) entitled "Screening the Irish in Britain" provided the first dedicated analysis of how the Irish have been represented by British film and television makers since the beginnings of cinema. Although not by any means definitive (or intended to be), the collection found common ground in arguing for the willed invisibility of the Irish in Britain, particularly in the case of women. By further narrowing the topic of representation to the Irish in Britain (rather than in Ireland), the silence became even louder. As so many writers have noted, Irishness often had to be identified through a name or a visual clue, rather than through specific markers of ethnic identity. This contrasts sharply with the equivalent situation in the United States, where Irish characters have occupied highly visible positions from the early days of cinema through to the present. There are obvious historical reasons for the divergence between the two diasporas, most specifically in terms of the relationship between the home country (Ireland) and the host country (the United States, Great Britain), so that while the Irish in America became viewed as exemplary immigrants and earned themselves favoured immigrant status, the Irish in Britain suffered from suspicions of allegiance to the IRA throughout the

decades when Anglo-Irish relations were poor. Similarly, official American ideology has always subscribed to the expectation that immigrants would make America their home; whereas in British culture immigrants have more commonly been constructed as aliens whose home was elsewhere.

What the two cultures have in common is an understanding that Irish characters are most likely to be identified as entertainers or insurgents. That is, they may appear as singers, dancers and comedians, or as boxers and brawlers. In American cinema and television, the Irish could also be policemen or priests – such authority positions were less often on offer in British screen narratives. In the United States, the 'fighting Irish' have become part of the national narrative and have been celebrated for an often unreconstructed version of masculinity, a situation that was quite unthinkable in British culture.

The two cultures converge in their acceptance, even celebration, of the Irish as entertainers. In both cultures, Irish ballad singing, Irish dancing and the performance of Irish comic stereotypes have long been imbricated in popular, working-class entertainment. In American turn-of-the century vaudeville and British Music Hall alike, the Irish were welcomed as part of the show; as William H.A. Williams writes (in a piece that evidently predates *Riverdance*):

> In vaudeville, to be Irish was to dance. Irish immigrants brought traditional step dancing to America, where it became a part of theatrical dancing. Solo Irish step dances, such as the double jig and the hornpipe, are still performed with the upper body stiff and the arms held at the sides. All action is in the feet that beat out the rhythm. The contrast between the immobility of the upper body and the movement of the feet could be accentuated by balancing a glass of water on the head of the dancer or an egg on each shoulder. (Williams 120)

Even before this, the influential Irish playwright Dion Boucicault (1820?-1890) had moved between Ireland, Britain and the United States, doing much during his career to improve the image of the Irish in popular entertainment, particularly through his reformulation of the stage Irishman from the butt of low-class humour to a much-loved and subversive trickster. Although issues around copyright prevented substantial cross-fertilisation between British Music Hall and American vaudeville, there was certainly some crossover between the two. In particular, audiences in Britain were quick to embrace minstrelsy or blackface entertainment (where white artists impersonated Afro-American stereotypes). The Liverpool Irish, as John Belchem has illustrated, greatly appreciated minstrelsy and, as in America, themselves regularly made careers as blackface performers (Belchem 220-236; Williams 65-66). Blackface was not, however, just a living, it was a statement of difference:

> Where the stage Irishman was a parody figure with redeemable features (hence the refrain, 'Pat's not so black as he's painted'), the 'nigger' minstrel was beyond civilized reform, purportedly portrayed at his 'semi-barbarian' best in blackface minstrelsy […] With the 'negro' irredeemably below, the Liverpool-Irish acquired a new self-confidence on the stage, as in politics. Irishness was not homogenized into a generic whiteness but accentuated and romanticized in the variety section, the ideal platform for melliflu-

> ous rendition of the beauties and delights of the old country, suitably sentimental and nostalgic fare for an expatriate audience 'across the water'. The Liverpool-Irish were able to become white and green simultaneously. (Belchem 235)

In the late Victorian period, Irish singers, dancers and stand-ups (who regularly combined song, dance and joke-telling) also moved freely between Ireland and Britain, playing to equal acclaim on both sides of the Irish Sea. Outside of Dublin, few Music Halls were built, but performers were as likely to perform in parish halls and at fairs around the country. In Dublin, Dan Lowrey's Star of Erin Music Hall on Dame Street would eventually become today's Olympia Theatre; from its foundation in 1879 it was to play host to generations of Music Hall entertainers. Dan Lowrey himself began his career as a stage-Irish performer in Liverpool's taverns. Similarly popular was Belfast's Alhambra Music Hall.

American vaudeville and British Music Hall both hosted and provided the material for early cinema; in Ireland the first films were projected at the Star of Erin Music Hall on 15 February 1895, reflecting a pattern across Britain of interspersing the exhibition of moving pictures with live performances. Those live performers were in turn captured on film in short comedy sketches and projected back to their audiences as part of the popular entertainment of the late Victorian era. Both early American and early British moving pictures regularly featured comic acts by vaudeville and Music Hall performers. The "Happy Hooligan" and "Bridget" sketches in turn-of-the-century American cinema perpetuated the stereotype of the luckless Irish labourer and domestic help; while in Britain numerous "Mike Murphy" films appeared in the early 1900s, reflecting similar comic situations.

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If the early films are straightforward knockabout comedies in the main part, the coming of sound introduced a new dimension to filmmaking that in turn gave rise to a cycle of films made by British production companies that were structured around Irish ballads and Irish comic acts.[1] It is this cycle that I find particularly interesting for the light it sheds on the place of Irish working-class entertainment in British popular culture. These films were made in the 1930s and were B movies, many of them quota quickies; that is, following the 1927 Cinematographic Films Act they were made to satisfy the regulations on the quota of British films that must be released and exhibited in Britain. They were part of a larger cycle of such productions – Stephen Guy concludes that "out of a total of just over 1,500 full-length feature films made in that decade [1930s], at least 220 can be described as musical films" (Guy 99). They are essentially musicals, though not of a type recognisable to fans of the Hollywood musical, in so far as they are low-budget productions with numbers drawn from, in the case of the films discussed below, Irish ballads. These films include: *Danny Boy* (Oswald Mitchell, Challis Sanderson, 1934; remade 1941), *Kathleen Mavourneen*

1 For an initial exploration of these films, see Barton, *Irish National Cinema* 56-60.

(Norman Lee, 1937), *The Minstrel Boy* (Sydney Morgan, 1937), *Rose of Tralee* (Oswald Mitchell, 1937), *The Londonderry Air* (Alex Bryce, 1938), *My Irish Molly* (Alex Bryce, 1938), *Father O'Flynn* (Wilfred Noy, Walter Tennyson, 1938), and *Mountains O'Mourne* (Harry Hughes, 1938).

Reviews and viewings of these films reveal that they played mainly to working-class, and therefore partially immigrant, audiences. Thus, the British trade paper the *Kinematograph Weekly* wrote of *Mountains O'Mourne* that it was "obviously designed to appeal to the masses," and further: "Tuneful numbers […] are neatly and logically presented, and sentiment is of the sure-fire variety for the unsophisticated" ("Reviews for Showmen"). The film was also a success in Ireland where it was enthusiastically reviewed in the Irish papers and broke box office records when it played at the Grand Central Dublin ("Mountains O'Mourne Retained" 24). The storyline was simple – a tale of hardship and unfortunate coincidences redeemed by the singing talents of Paddy Kelly (Niall MacGinnis). Other films revolved around Music Hall plots; *Rose of Tralee* concerns an Irish ballad singer, Patrick O'Brien (Fred Conyngham), who has created for himself a successful radio career in the United States under the name of Paddy O'Malley. Back in London, his wife Mary (Kathleen O'Regan) is struggling to make ends meet and to bring up their four-year-old daughter Rose (played by British child star Binkie Stuart). When Patrick returns to London, he fails to find his wife and child and numerous complications ensue. At a St Patrick's Night dance at the Royal Hotel in London, all are reunited to the strains of "Rose of Tralee." Binkie Stuart reappears in *My Irish Molly*, a film that again moves between Ireland, Britain and the United States. This time Stuart plays the orphaned Molly who is unaware that she is, in fact, an heiress, something that her conscienceless aunt, Hannah (Maureen Moore), is determined to hide from her. The film includes a subplot that sees Molly appear singing Irish ballads on "The Shamrock Baby Food Hour."

In common with the American backstage musical, then, the films did not just feature numbers familiar from Music Hall, they also incorporated Music Hall themes into their narratives. Any number of these and other films from the 1930s include narratives of Irish immigrant life and tell stories of escape from working-class English environments, usually Liverpool, to an idealised rural Ireland or to the United States. Often they dramatise the immigrant's arrival in Liverpool and are set in Liverpool or London. Irishness is denoted as rural and familial and associated with themes of disempowerment, emigration and loss. The singing of ballads both articulates this loss and facilitates the overcoming of it – through the singer's professional recognition and incorporation into mainstream entertainment. They are marked by a high degree of sentimentality, which, in turn, reinforces their Irishness, an identity that then and now sanctions the expression of sentiment where it otherwise might not acceptably be articulated.

Although these films were not made by Irish directors or production companies, they drew on what were evidently popular aspects of Irish culture amongst the British

working-class audience, whether of Irish descent or not. Many featured Irish actors and singers. We may assume that they pre-sold themselves on the familiarity of their characters, situations and particularly their songs. That they played successfully in Ireland indicates that this model of representation was enjoyed by Irish audiences, too. Indeed, the Irish at home and the emigrant Irish had every reason to take pleasure in such entertainment, it being at once a celebration of Irishness and the validation of Irish entertainment in popular culture.

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The most durable of these Irish-themed films, and the best known, however, was the *Old Mother Riley* series, a total of seventeen feature films, which pulled together both comedy and sentimentality. These are derived from a popular Music Hall act performed by Englishman and regular pantomime dame Arthur Lucan (1885-1954).[2] Lucan was born Arthur Towle but changed his name to honour the Irish village in which he had his first date with his wife and performance partner, Kitty McShane (1897-1964), who was just fifteen at the time of their marriage. He made his initial appearance as an Irish washerwoman in Dublin, stepping in to replace a pantomime dame when he became unwell. He soon teamed up with Kitty McShane and they took their act to London, appearing at the Alhambra in 1925. Subsequently he and McShane joined the revue "Irish Follies," which toured Britain between 1926 and 1928; by March 1927, Lucan was the principal comedian in the Follies, headlining at the Wood Green Empire. The twosome continued to appear on stage, notably in the Royal Variety Performance of 1934.[3] Their act was as mother and daughter, with Lucan appearing in drag and never hiding his English accent. They debuted on film in *Stars on Parade* (1936) followed by a small performance in *Kathleen Mavourneen*. Soon they moved from side show to the main act, appearing thereafter in: *Old Mother Riley* (Oswald Mitchell, 1937), *Old Mother Riley in Paris* (Oswald Mitchell, 1938), *Old Mother Riley MP* (Oswald Mitchell, 1939), *Old Mother Riley Joins Up* (Maclean Rogers, 1939), *Old Mother Riley in Society* (John Baxter, 1940), *Old Mother Riley in Business* (John Baxter, 1940), *Old Mother Riley's Ghosts* (John Baxter, 1941), *Old Mother Riley's Circus* (Thomas Bentley, 1941), *Old Mother Riley Detective* (Lance Comfort, 1943), *Old Mother Riley Overseas* (Oswald Mitchell, 1943), *Old Mother Riley at Home* (Oswald Mitchell, 1945), *Old Mother Riley's New Venture* (John Harlow, 1949), *Old Mother Riley, Headmistress* (John Harlow, 1950), *Old Mother Riley's Jungle Treasure* (Maclean Rogers, 1951), and *Mother Riley Meets the Vampire* (John Gilling, 1952).

2 After Lucan's death the series migrated to television where Roy Rolland played the part, often accompanied by Danny LaRue.

3 Background information taken from Fisher (77-85) as well as King & Cavendar.

In addition to noting the sheer popularity of the series, which resulted in the flow of new films, we need to appreciate that many of these titles were re-released on several occasions to cater for a pre-VCR market. The releases were inevitably greeted with derision by upmarket critics, a response that did nothing to diminish their popularity with audiences. The trade press reported regularly on their box office success in the provinces, where the films time and again broke existing exhibition records. The films also played across Ireland and in Dublin where reviews indicate that they were much-loved fixtures in the schedules. In fact, the series is "one of the longest lasting movie series in British film history" (Shafer 5). Stephen Shafer also reminds us that "because the movies of these transplanted music hall stars like Arthur Lucan rarely played the influential West End, critics rarely wrote about them, except in terms of ridicule. Consequently, they have been largely ignored by social historians and forgotten by students of film" (5). In similar vein, John Fisher has written that

> Lucan was born in Lincolnshire, his readiest audience was spread throughout Lancashire and Yorkshire, the content of his act with its quaint illogicality and endearing blarney was unmistakeably Irish, and yet its essence was the Irish of the Liverpool dockside and neighbouring industrial towns. (Fisher 83)

In the tradition of this kind of comedy, the films revel in the anarchic possibilities of the comic central character before reconciling him/her to mainstream values by the end of the film. As Old Mother Riley, Lucan is visually marked (by costume) as working-class as well as by performance, by profession and by environment. His accent is a performative interpretation of a brogue, thus indicating simultaneously Irishness and not-Irishness. In the same vein, the comedy is frequently derived from issues of mistaken identity. Some of the comic plots explicitly draw on Old Mother Riley's Irish identity (as when in *Mother Riley Meets the Vampire* she receives a telegram informing her that her Uncle Jeremiah in Ireland has died and left her a fortune).

Lucan was by far the more talented performer of the two; Kitty McShane tended to be wooden. Her main attraction was the singing of sentimental Irish ballads; thus, for instance in *Old Mother Riley's New Venture*, Kitty appears onstage at a cabaret organised by her 'mother' in the hotel they have inadvertently agreed to run. The occasion is a St Patrick's dinner, and both Kitty and an (unidentified) Irish tenor entertain the guests with numbers such as "Galway Bay." As Stephen Guy notes, it was common for these Music Hall-derived films to "film the stories and invent a covering story to explain the linkage, however flimsy" (Guy 101). *Old Mother Riley* was based on Lucan and McShane's enormously popular number, "The Matchseller," and *Old Mother Riley in Paris* was a reworking of another sketch, "The Stepwasher." The set-up favours a straightforward proscenium-arch framing and the performers act to camera, with Lucan regularly infringing filmmaking practice by looking directly at the camera and in doing so acknowledging both the presence of the audience and their complicity with his act.

The series is a reminder of the familiarity and popularity of Irish Music Hall entertainment in working-class Britain. Pleasure in the Old Mother Riley films could not have

been confined to Irish emigrants – they did not constitute a large enough audience –, but was much more widespread in the provinces, where the films helped to express a general sense of exclusion from dominant society, of lack of opportunity, and the sheer physical graft of labour as reified in the bony, angular body of Arthur Lucan as Old Mother Riley. Old Mother Riley's act was both familiar and yet 'other', he/she was a member of the working class but Irish. Indeed, her Irishness allowed for a dual set of associations: on the one hand, rebellion against dominant British culture – much of the humour is aimed at puncturing middle-class aspirations and snobbery in a fairly conventional appeal to a working-class audience that in the 1930s was feeling particularly alienated from its own bourgeoisie – and, on the other, the pleasures of sentimentality and nostalgia associated with the singing of ballads (usually by Kitty McShane). Such entertainment allowed for moments of audience communality, of putting the hard work of the day behind you and joining in a singsong. Ballad singing was commonly taken up by the 'audience' in the Music Hall or was part of a shared experience in the pub or in the parlour, as Lucan's direct, inclusionary look to camera confirms. The lyrics of ballads allow for an expression of loss and for a dream of a better life often associated with immigrant culture but equally shared by the non-immigrant working class. In the United States, by contrast, the films found no success, being too regional, too unsophisticated, and too class-based for an American audience.

Certain of the films allude, in turn, to a sense of nostalgia for such acts, presenting them in the narrative as events in the past, as Music Hall was superseded by radio and cinema – as in the opening sequence from *Old Mother Riley's Circus*. The film opens with a shot of a hand holding a sheet of music, with the title "Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland" clearly in shot. "I'm sure this is just the number for your BBC Old Time programme," the man holding the sheet remarks, passing it to another man as a piano plays in the foreground. "Sung by Maggie O'Hara," the second man comments. "Yes, I knew her well in those days," the original speaker reminisces. They discuss her sudden departure from the stage, wondering what happened to Maggie since. The film then cuts to Arthur Lucan, in costume, singing 'Meet me tonight in Dreamland' in his creaking voice, outside the steps of the Pavilion Theatre, before a policeman attempts to move her on. "Only a few years ago, my voice was the toast of the town," she remonstrates with the policeman. Struck by a comment he makes, she takes a cleaning job in the auditorium. "I wonder what my old-time public, who sat and cheered me night after night, would think if they only could see me now," she laments as she scrubs the boards.

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The scene was prescient; in common with other revue and Variety acts, Lucan and McShane's popularity waned in the post-war era, with tastes becoming increasingly sophisticated. In the end, the marriage broke up and both sides of the partnership

were to die penniless. For a long time after the last Old Mother Riley film had faded from the screen, the representation of the Irish as at home in working-class British culture vanished. Instead, Irish characters, when they did appear, were most commonly stereotyped as insurgents and unwelcome aliens. However, during the 1980s, particularly from the Thatcher era onwards, the Irish began to reappear on screen, most consistently as representatives of an old strain of working-class culture marked both by hard labour and sentimental entertainment. Whereas the films of the 1930s spoke to the British working classes, these films speak equally if not more to the sympathies of the liberal left, for whom they function as a tool for articulating a post-imperial critique of British history and society. They draw on many of the same signifiers of Irish working-class culture – anarchic resistance to dominant society and a rich cultural heritage constructed around communality and sentimentality. Thus, the Irish make frequent appearances as sympathetic ethnics in the cinema of Ken Loach, notably in his return-to-favour film, *Hidden Agenda* (1990), but more generally in his English- and Scottish-set films, such as *The Golden Vision* (1968), *The Big Flame* (1969), and *Raining Stones* (1993). As John Hill argues:

> this primarily involves appealing to Irish-Catholic elements of working-class experience as a means of reinforcing the sense of working-class disadvantage and oppression highlighted in Loach's work. At the same time, however, it also involves invoking a sense of the working-class camaraderie and, in some cases, political resistance which the films show arising in response to these same social and economic circumstances. (Hill 102-103)

Hill goes on to argue that the Irish in Loach's cinema underwrite the films' authenticity while recuperating poverty and Irishness as a positive rather than a negative attribute.

This portrayal of the Irish as symptomatic of British working-class authenticity can be found in numerous other British films from the 1980s onwards. In many of them, too, it is tempered by its associations with an inarticulate and brutal masculinity. It is with one of these releases, Terence Davies's *Distant Voices, Still Lives* that I conclude this essay. *Distant Voices, Still Lives* is essentially two films of 45 minutes' duration that were released back-to-back in 1988 and funded by the British Film Institute Production Fund, which had been set up to support experimental low-budget feature films. Davies was born in Liverpool in 1945, the youngest of ten children, of whom seven survived childhood. His background was working-class Irish-Catholic, and his films are infused with both nostalgia for family life and the horror of a childhood dominated by his brutal father, a rag-and-bone man who routinely physically and mentally abused his wife and children. Davies's father died after a two-year-long battle with cancer when Davies was six-and-a-half. Davies's mother, on the other hand, was a source of boundless maternal love and affection. *Distant Voices* is focused on the violent family patriarch, played by Pete Postlethwaite. In *Still Lives* the family achieves tranquility in the wake of the death of their father. Although the film is autobiographical, the family does not exactly correspond to Davies's own. Nor is he directly represented. Although it is framed by his memories, it is as much a film about how memory

is constructed as a film of memories. Many of the sequences are set up as *tableaux vivants* or photographs, while many more are set in pubs and living rooms where the women find solace, community and celebration in the popular songs of the period, including “Roll out the Barrel,” “Buttons and Bows,” “If You Knew Suzie.”

Irishness in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* is almost invisible, a reflection of the willed invisibility of the immigrant Irish in contemporary British working-class culture and an unmistakeable point of departure from the equivalent American-made films. Where Terence Davies often and publicly discusses his childhood and Liverpool Catholic culture, he too does not seem to connect it to his identity as the descendent of immigrants. Few of the many critical articles and books on the film reference its Irish content; only Geoff Eley, in his essay on the diptych, poses the question as to what “fugitive knowledge” (Eley 40) needs to be applied in order to tease out its references. “One such context,” he answers himself, “would be the field of religious affiliation; for although Catholicism is key to the biographical framing of Davies’s earlier trilogy, it is notably understated in *Distant Voices, Still Lives,* and yet the negative coding of Irishness and Catholicism remains no less vital to the national fantasy of the present than to the discursive working class of history” (41).

Following Eley’s comment, I would like to suggest that Irishness in the film reflects two competing discourses around Irish immigrant identities. Liverpool Catholicism, which has come to stand in for Irishness generally, is discursively understood to be both communal and authoritarian, a throwback to an older period where the family unit was at once a safe place and also a place of patriarchal abuse. The integrity of this unit was guaranteed by the patriarchally constructed Catholic Church that in its turn provided solace to the Irish immigrant working-class mother. All this is there in Davies’s film. At the same time, the brutal father is offered two moments of subjectivity, one in which he creeps into the children’s room and places Christmas stockings on their beds, and the other where he is grooming his horse. In this second sequence, the children creep onto the roof of the stable and watch their father at work. Not noticing them, he softly sings the ballad “When Irish Eyes are Smiling.” In the commentary to the DVD, Terence Davies says of this memory of his father currying the horse: “It was the only time I saw him actually happy” (Davies 2007).

If Davies consciously historicises his film by its covert referencing of the history of Liverpool-Irish working-class Catholicism, I believe that he unconsciously provides another reference point for his father’s identity in this very brief moment that stands out in the film for its singularity. It is not just singular because of its privileging of the father’s subjectivity, it is singular because it is the only moment when we hear him, and not the womenfolk, sing. Where they sing popular songs of the period (1940 to the late 1950s), he, of course, is singing an Irish tune. The occupation of grooming his horse reconnects him to the Irish culture of his Liverpool childhood, as does the singing of the ballad. It may be an extrapolation too far but we may also read into this sequence a suggestion that this man’s brutality has arisen from his alienation and

loss of culture. He can only recover himself through recourse to the sentimentality that sustained an earlier immigrant working-class generation. I think this is the kind of fugitive knowledge to which Eley refers and to which, as Irish Studies scholars, we have access. It is this fugitive knowledge that allows us to read into contemporary British cinema, and other cultural forms, a rich history of Irishness that has on the surface been obliterated but which allows for an articulation, on the one hand, in say the films of Ken Loach, of post-colonial expiation and, on the other, in films such as *Distant Voices, Still Lives* of both dissent and consolation, and without which British culture would be much the poorer.

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