

## **‘WEAR SOMETHING GREEN’: THE RE-INVENTION OF THE ST. PATRICK’S DAY PARADE**

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This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Rupert Murray, who lost his long battle with cancer in 2006, and to Monica Frawley, who lost her shorter battle in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

The celebration of St. Patrick’s Day has always been inextricably linked with the Irish Diaspora. In many ways, historically the celebration of Ireland’s National Saint’s Day has had less to do with ‘the Irish’ and far more to do with ‘the Irish-American.’ My own personal history with St. Patrick’s Day began as the child of Irish immigrants in America, and so my earliest memories of St. Patrick’s Day are of the package posted out by my grandmother in Ireland containing cards, badges for us kids, and carefully boxed living shamrock for my parents to wear. In their book *The Wearing of the Green, History of St. Patrick’s Day*, Mike Cronin and Daryl Adair note:

One of the most common traditions and customs associated with St. Patrick’s Day has been the annual dispatch of shamrock to Irish family members abroad [...] the packaging and sending of Shamrock has been a commercial enterprise since the 1950’s. (238)

When my parents later made the return ‘home’ to Tipperary, my participation in the celebrations went from passive to active, marching (wet and frozen) in my school’s tin whistle band in the Nenagh Parade from 1977-1983. Fast forward to 1996. As a fledgling theatre stage manager, I was drafted in to work on my first Dublin Parade, and I have been involved, on and off, ever since.

With this research paper I wanted to look at the celebration of St. Patrick’s Day as a ‘material marker’ designed to project specific ideas of Irishness, both on a national and on an international level. I also wanted to interview and acknowledge some of those ‘backstage’ individuals who are behind so many of our biggest celebrations. From St. Patrick’s Festival to Grand Slam winning team receptions, and from the Ryder Cup opening ceremony to the 1916 Commemorations: these are the people called upon to make it all happen. In 1996, I first met them as the distant figures directing everything, either from the tops of cherry pickers, or as voices over the headset system. Over the years, as I became established in the industry, they became col-

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leagues and friends. I particularly wanted to record formally some of the anecdotal stories of that 1996 parade because, although I did not realise it at the time, 1996 was a significant year in the history of the Dublin Parade. In his essay, "Funereal Black Trucks Advertising Guinness: The St. Patrick's Day Industrial Pageant," Mike Cronin writes that the event offers "a series of visual images through which the Ireland of the time can be understood" (162). Viewed in this context, the re-invention of the St. Patrick's Day Parade in 1996 can be seen as a reflection of an emerging cosmopolitan and increasingly confident Ireland in the beginnings of the 'Celtic Tiger' era.

In their history of the celebration, Cronin and Adair find that although "[t]he wearing of the green on St. Patrick's Day has ecumenical origins and was evident as early as the seventeenth century [...] the custom of staging street parades for St. Patrick's Day seems to have been a North American invention" (xxiii). While in Ireland 'the wearing of the green' may have referred to something as subtle as a bunch of shamrock, or perhaps a dark green overcoat, Cronin and Adair note that in America, the commodification of St. Patrick's Day began as early as 1898, when fancy dress costumes, souvenirs, and other special goods were produced: "it seemed that any product, if emerald coloured for the day, could be sold [...] irrespective of its 'authentic' relationship to Ireland" (166). By 1960, concerns were being expressed about the levels of commercialisation, and the parades, particularly those in New York and Boston, were seen as the root cause. In 1962, the Irish Ambassador to Canada wrote to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin: "Many Irish people would find offensive the green top hats, the shillelaghs, the green carnations, green beer, green whiskey [...], not to mention the festooning of everything with shamrock" (qtd. in Cronin and Adair 168). All of this was worlds away from the manner in which the National Day was marked in Ireland. As a Holy Day of Obligation on the church calendar, the emphasis was placed on attendance at sombre religious ceremonies. Up until the 1970's, pubs in Ireland were closed on St. Patrick's Day – the chief form of entertainment was to attend the local version of the parade.

In his book *National Identity, Popular Culture, and Everyday Life*, Tim Edensor notes that parades and other "national(ist) ceremonies" are:

Still the most obvious and recognisable ways in which national identity is performed [...] through] grand, often stately occasions when the nation and its symbolic attributes are elevated in public display [...]. Such ceremonies are played out to legitimate the power, historical grandeur, military might, legal process, and institutional apparatus of the nation-state. (72)

As the state capital, the parade in Dublin has always attracted the most international media coverage, and as such has been the focus of a series of state-sponsored re-interpretations, designed to project specific notions of Ireland's status: the 'shop window' for the nation.

In the 1930's and into the 1940's, the New Irish State celebrated its independence with military pomp on its National Day. The triumphant shine of these parades gradu-

ally fading as the 1940's became the 1950's, and the memory of the War of Independence receded. Kathy Sheridan, writing humorously on those early parades, recalls:

Soldiers with fixed bayonets and polished leggings tramped down one side of the street and up the other, reverently overseen by politicians with hats clamped to their bosoms [...]. There was radio commentary on the parade from Radio Athlone. The commentator, poor creature, was doubtless mightily relieved the year the IRA broke into the box and the tedium. 'You have been listening to a commentary on a fine display of British Militarism' intoned the IRA voice to the masses. (Sheridan, "Doing What We Do Best")

From these military-style parades of the 1930's and 1940's to the involvement in the 1950's of the National Agricultural and Industrial Development Association (NAIDA), there has always been a "link between Irish Government policy and the staging of the pageant" (Cronin and Adair 168). Run by NAIDA throughout the 1950's and 1960's, the Dublin Parade, was a largely commercially sponsored display of machinery and plant, dominated by government agencies such as Bord na Móna, Aer Lingus, and the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) alongside businesses such as Guinness. In an era of mass-unemployment it was, as Cronin puts it, "not a St. Patrick's Day parade that sought to tie the people to an idea of identity, rather (it was) [...] designed to convince people that Ireland was not a country of mass emigration but one of thrusting capitalism" (154).



Fig. 1. Float from the 1962 NAIDA Parade urging the public to 'Buy Irish,' a precursor to the government's 'Guaranteed Irish' campaign of the 1970's. (Image courtesy of the Irish Photographic Archive)

By the late 1960's, the industrial pageant had become passé, and attendance had dropped off considerably (see Cronin and Adair 168). Ireland had had its own national television station since 1961, and under its influence the entertainment value of trucks and tractors had undoubtedly diminished. The shadow of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland had begun to take a toll on tourism, and in 1970 the parade was handed over to Dublin Tourism by a government keenly aware of the need for a boost to that sector. Americans in general, and Irish Americans in particular, were the target of this campaign. Dublin Tourism believed that the best way to attract American buying power was not to *provide* an entertaining parade, but rather to invite Irish Americans to *be* the parade. As Cronin and Adair put it:

While there was undoubtedly a desire to import American performers to make the parade a more attractive spectacle, the overarching reason behind the propagation of such links was financial. A marching band of perhaps fifty American teenagers would be accompanied by a large number of adult relatives and supporters; they would spend money flying to Ireland, staying in hotels [...], eating and drinking (185).

They go on to add that “[t]he Dublin Tourism parade, relying so heavily on American involvement, became an event that appeared to be trying to be more American than Irish” (Cronin and Adair 185). Highlights of the 1979 parade can be seen in the online RTÉ Archives;<sup>2</sup> among the American marching bands and the waving groups of ‘walkers’ (the nickname given to the visiting Irish American groups) are the numbers of Irish groups presenting entries based on American popular culture, music, television, and film. Dublin-based company Abel Alarms (perpetual winners of the float competition) that year presented a depiction of the popular American television series *The Muppet Show*. The footage also shows several new Dublin groups such as the Glenview Majorettes, Tallaght, and the Balbriggan Musical Society: groups of pre-teen Dublin girls dressed in American cheerleader-style costumes, carrying batons and pom-poms, influenced, perhaps, by nine years of seeing real American Majorettes on Dublin streets. As Cronin puts it, “the parade from the 1970's through to the 1990's was not specifically or exclusively Irish; rather it was a parade that became a poor-quality copy of what was perceived as American razzmatazz’ (162). Notably too, in that same year (1979), the RTÉ News shows a snippet of something far more reflective of the reality of the Ireland of the time. The parade was gate-crashed by a group who somehow smuggled their float (a cage full of prisoners wearing blankets) past organisers and onto the parade route in protest against the treatment of IRA prisoners in the H Blocks of the Maze Prison.<sup>3</sup> Cronin and Adair note that while the parade remained relatively well attended, the media coverage of the event was reducing each year. The enthusiasm of the crowd, too, seemed to be waning, as evidenced by the manager of Dublin Tourism, Matt McNulty who, in 1975, complained

2 <<https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/923-st-patricks-day-as-seen-on-tv/287770-st-patricks-day-parade-dublin-1979/>>.

3 See the RTÉ Archives online exhibition “Lá Fhéile Pádraig: St Patrick's Day On TV and Radio”: <<https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/923-st-patricks-day-as-seen-on-tv/>>.

about the lack of response from the crowd, saying: "I'd love to see more cheering and waving [...], more enthusiasm generally" (qtd. in Cronin and Adair 186).

Nuala O'Faolain, writing in *The Irish Times*, gives a tongue-in-cheek description of the experience:

We counted our possessions in it, so to speak. We didn't have just one Downes's Bakery bread van [...]. We had tens of bread vans [...]. Any old body can enjoy colourful, imaginative entertainment. It took a real Dubliner to enjoy 25 bread vans followed by a flatbed truck with a frozen swing band on it. (n.p.)

Almost everyone I interviewed for this project spoke of the memory of having been 'dragged' to the Dublin Parades in their childhood, and how the American 'walking groups,' marching bands, Guinness and other commercial entries were the same year after year. There was a decidedly amateur feel about many of these entries, as companies dressed their workers in *ad hoc* costumes or even work uniforms as walking advertisements for the brand. Confectionary companies such as Cadbury's and McIntosh's threw chocolates out to literally 'sweeten' the waiting crowds, and Superquinn workers handed out hot sausages (Health & Safety Regulations had yet to be invented). In a 1996 *Irish Times* article, Kathy Sheridan quotes Dublin Tourism Chief Executive Frank Magee, who responds to criticism of the parade by insisting: "Our function is to promote Dublin as a tourism destination, not necessarily to entertain the people of Dublin [...]. Having an artistic director for the parade is a pie in the sky idea" (11).



Fig. 2. Superquinn workers win over the crowd at the 1982 Parade by handing out the famous Superquinn sausages (Image courtesy of the Irish Photo Archive)

In the introduction to his book (co-edited with Terence Ranger) *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm notes that the reinventing of traditions occurs “more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions have been designed” (4). And, as the 1990’s began, things in Ireland began to change rapidly. Much has been written about an emerging sense of national confidence and pride which began to establish in the 1990’s. The decade began with the World Cup Italia ’90, which saw impromptu post-match explosions of joy at each advancement of ‘Jackies Army,’ with crowds spilling outdoors, bringing songs, chanting, and colourful celebrations onto the streets. Later that year, Ireland made history by electing its first female President, Mary Robinson, and the Northern Irish Peace process reached a significant milestone with the IRA ceasefire of 1994. After the gloom of the 1980’s, the national mood began to lift. Significantly, too, in the early 1990’s the entertainment industry was achieving prolific success overseas. Irish musicians such as U2 and Sinead O’Connor had broken America, while Irish theatre was recognised with Tony Awards for Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1991. Roddy Doyle’s *The Commitments* and Jim Sheridan’s *My Left Foot* achieved worldwide popularity, and Oscar nods in the case of the latter. Even the Eurovision Song Contest contributed to this success, through a remarkable run of Irish wins (in 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1996) and RTÉ’s technically accomplished host broadcasts (the interval act of the 1994 production became the internationally acclaimed *Riverdance, the Show*). After decades of being the butt of jokes and the subject of negative news stories, Ireland and the Irish seemed suddenly to be becoming cool and capable of shaking off old insecurities. Declan Kiberd, in his 1996 book *Inventing Ireland; the Literature of the Modern Nation* describes this era as “something very like a second renaissance” of Irish writing (613) and singles out Joseph O’Connor and Roddy Doyle, “who took a more relaxed, even humorous, approach to Irish pieties, [and] often seemed to achieve more as artists and as social analysts” (611).

Others have noted that this globalised and confident Ireland was fast becoming a marketable brand. In their book *Cosmopolitan Ireland: Globalisation and Quality of Life*, Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane note that the appearance of cultural and popular Irish successes like *Riverdance* actually precedes the first ever use of the term ‘Celtic Tiger’ in a 1994 Morgan Stanley report (Kuhling and Keohane 1). In the chapter “Guinness, Ballygowan, and Riverdance: The Globalisation of Irish Identity,” Kuhling and Keohane describe *Riverdance* as “a commercially successful, mass produced global product” (77). They compare *Riverdance* to Guinness’s “[k]nowing what matters” ad campaign to explore the ways in which “artistic creativity is brought into the service of commerce and merchandising under conditions of global consumer capitalism” (Kuhling and Keohane 76).

With the focus increasingly on Dublin as the centre of modern Irish life, the old-fashioned St. Patrick’s Day Parade came under scrutiny, and once again the Government sought its re-invention. In a radical departure, this time the reins were handed not to government bodies or commercial interests, but to the artistic community. It is

possible that this decision was partly influenced by a series of street carnivals and professional events held in the city, beginning with the Dublin Millennium in 1988, and continuing with celebrations surrounding Dublin's tenure as European City of Culture in 1991. These events identified under-used public spaces in the city centre (such as the plaza in front of the Central Bank on Dame Street, the area at College Green, and the wide Georgian streets around Merion Square) and utilised them to great effect as concert and festival sites (Flood n.p.). Unfavourable comparisons began to be made between these professionally run events and the Parade itself. Writing in *The Irish Times*, Hugh Linehan notes:

The whole point of parades and street festivals is that they're an urban phenomenon, celebrating urban life. In Ireland, since the foundation of the State, the urban experience was ignored in favour of a national narrative which privileged the rural and pastoral [...]. The first sustained critique of the old-style parade came in 1992 from the UCD Architectural Graduates' Association, who described it as 'a collection of separate elements strung together along the streets [...] sadly lacking in entertainment value, in imagination and in design.' (n.p.)

Michael Colgan, then Artistic Director of the Gate Theatre, recalls the phone call from then Taoiseach John Bruton, the moment his involvement with the Parade began:

He said, 'This country finally seems to be getting its act together, but we are not getting St. Patrick's Day right. The biggest St. Patrick's Day Parade in the world is still in New York. I want to change that.' I had run the Dublin Theatre Festival and had just done the Beckett Festival, so he asked me if I would take over the running of the parade and turn it into 'something new, something spectacular.' (Interview, n.p.)

Colgan is adamant that the tone of these initial conversations centred around national pride, and not commercial gain: "Absolutely not. It was all about making it the best St. Patrick's Parade in the world, showcasing our people and our talent. Creating something so spectacular that it would make people forget about New York; making Dublin the place to be on St Patrick's Day" (Interview, n.p.).

Colgan was installed as the Chairman of the new Board of Directors in November 1995, a mere four months out from the event. The sum of £500,000 was allocated; considering that the overall budget the previous year had been £98,000, this represented a considerable level of investment on behalf of the Government. The first duties were to "wrest the power" from those who had organised the Dublin Tourism parade for decades. "There are people upset. We're making omelettes and we are doing it in a hurry, but overall change will be good" (Sheridan, "Don't Hail, St. Patrick" 11). There were many long-term decisions made on the artistic content of the parade, which due to the short lead in time, could not be implemented immediately. One of the first to be 'phased out' were the groups of American 'walkers.' Colgan went head-to-head with tour operators who were bringing these groups over and to whom the Parade was a big source of income:

There was a lot of resistance, naturally. I wasn't against them taking part, but I was against them running the gig. They (Dublin Tourism) came at me with so many statistics; the number of hotel beds sold, the number of meals eaten [...]. I said, 'what does it matter if hotel beds are filled with people from Galway or America as long as they are

filled?’ and I was told: ‘Americans are our core business, they bring the dollars.’ (Interview n.p.)

With such ideas so deeply entrenched it is remarkable how much change the committee did manage to implement in that first year, a testament to the strength of their vision for the festival. A large part of that vision came from Rupert Murray. A legend in theatrical circles, Murray was a multi-*Irish Times Theatre Award* winner for best lighting design, the original lighting designer of *Riverdance, the Show*, who also lit the Gate Theatre production of *Juno and the Paycock* which premiered on Broadway in 1988. Murray had worked with Colgan as coordinator of the 1991 Beckett Festival: “Rupert had a flair for organising large events, I knew he was the man for the job” (Colgan, Interview n.p.). Murray, as Festival Director, was teamed with Marie Claire Sweeney as Executive Director (see Murphy Fig. 1 in Colour Supplement). Sweeney had been Chief Executive of the Dublin Millennium celebrations in 1988, and on the City of Culture celebrations in 1991 (Flood n.p.). Gary Flood, a former street performer, had worked with Sweeney on Millennium ’88 and City of Culture ’91:

When I heard that they were going to re-invent the parade I thought, I want in. I had seen almost every parade since 1969; I was that kid who watched Abel Alarms trucks going by, all that stuff. My love for street performance had been fed by seeing the Teragona Carnival: a massive spectacle festival in Spain. And having been around Macnas a couple of times throughout the 80’s, these were my influences in terms of what I wanted to do. (Flood n.p.)

In press releases for the new-look parade, the organisers highlighted its celebratory feel and the importance of the audience: “We are trying to change it into a highly visual, theatrical and musical parade. This is a day for celebrating Ireland and the Irish; it’s a people’s event. The most important element is the audience” (Murray qtd. in Carey 3).

The day of the drab parade  
is given its marching orders

The Irish Times - Saturday, March 16, 1996 - Page 11  
**Don't hail, St Patrick, on our  
glorious £500,000 parade**  
Dublin organisers promise 'new route, new theme and new concept'

The Irish Times - Friday, January 19, 1996 - Page 2  
**St Patrick to get  
Revamped parade all festive facelift**  
set to beat the band

**A capital  
spectacular**

This year it's all change for Dublin's St Patrick's Day parade — so  
look out for some truly exciting and imaginative action along  
the way. Justin Comiskey reports

**Making the most of  
a very special day** **Putting  
green on  
the spot**

A 20th Anniversary  
celebration, from 1976  
to 1996, the parade has  
grown from a small  
group of people to a  
major event.

Fig. 3. Press coverage surrounding the announcement of the re-invented St. Patrick's Day Parade



Speaking in the *Irish Independent*, Marie Claire Sweeney set out the long-term plan:

This year's parade is not a one off event, but the first stage in the development of a major international festival. Unusually we've been given enough time to develop something, a sort of ongoing full dress-rehearsal, if you like, for the Millennium. (qtd. in Mac Reamoinn 12)

One of the innovations was to invite established European street performers to participate in that first parade. These professionals would work with Irish community groups and theatre practitioners, teaching street performance and clown techniques to create original pageants and performance pieces for the festival, but with an Irish flavour. Irish groups had unprecedented access to high calibre professionals such as Alex Pascall, one of the people behind the Notting Hill carnival, and Spanish super group Els Commediants, who had provided the closing night's spectacular of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games. This access was key to the artistic vision of the Festival; rather than a poor copy of an American parade format, the organisers wanted to create a highly professional, uniquely Irish parade.

I spoke with Marie Tierney, a theatre Production Manager who, along with designer Barbara Bradshaw, was enlisted to create one of the decorative elements of the 1996 parade: the fabric snakes along the parade route. Tierney and others spoke about Murray's passion for street theatre, and the importance of his legacy:

Rupert saw the Festival as a big opportunity for the theatrical community. He insisted that people use some of their budget to travel to see European street carnivals, meet with groups like Els Commediants, and see them perform. You would never get the chance to do that otherwise. As far as Rupert was concerned, it was an investment; we were bringing back new ideas and skills, training the Irish theatre practitioners of the future.<sup>4</sup>

Murray gave the task of creating the overall design to Monica Frawley, a multi-award-winning set and costume designer. Frawley had worked with both Colgan and Murray, designing for the Abbey and Gate Theatres, and her film work included the costume design for *Michael Collins*. Frawley recalls:

Rupert called in everyone he knew, and we called in everyone we knew – real 'trickle-down economics.' It was a huge deal for the theatre community to have access to Government money. I remember being thrilled with my budget at first, until I realised what an enormous amount of work there was, and how little time there was to do it.<sup>5</sup>

The design brief for the first year was "to transform the city centre, to make it look as different and exciting as possible," according to Frawley:

The easiest way to make an impact on a streetscape is with blocks of colour, and since green is the simplest and most universal association to make with St. Patrick's Day it was the obvious choice in terms of the design. 'Green' in all of its significance: growth, energy, vitality, as well as in the Irish national sense, became the overall theme for the Parade. (n.p.)

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4 Marie Tierney, in interview with the author, 29 March 2014.

5 Monica Frawley, in interview with the author, 10 March 2015.

Frawley tried to avoid stereotypes associated with St. Patrick's Day; she chose instead to highlight buildings of architectural and historical importance to Dublin. She wanted to 'wrap' buildings in green fabric "[l]ike the work of artists Christo and Jeanne Claude," and give each its own identity: "The GPO (General Post Office) was to be wrapped like a giant parcel, with a big bow, stamps, and a gift tag which read 'To the People of Ireland'" (Frawley n.p.). Giant fish were to leap out of the Liffey at O'Connell Bridge (see Murphy Fig. 2 in Colour Supplement), and the fabric snakes made by Tierney and Bradshaw were to adorn statues and buildings along the parade route. To add to the pressure, this magical transformation was planned as a "surprise wake-up call" for Dubliners (Sweeney qtd. in Mac Reamoinn 12), which meant that all of the elements had to be installed overnight on 16 March, a massive logistical undertaking.

One of her simplest ideas on paper proved hardest to implement. Frawley wanted to replace all of the bulbs in the street lighting along the route with green ones "and all of the Christmas lights in the trees on O'Connell Street. But Dublin Corporation wouldn't allow it. It was so frustrating. But apart from that there was a terrific level of co-operation. There was a huge sense of good will surrounding it; people generally got on board and helped us with whatever we wanted to do" (n.p.). Although some of her ideas had to be shelved due to budgetary and time constraints, one of Frawley's innovations, the miles and miles of green bunting, made of fabric and sewn by volunteers and community groups, was adopted and is still being used today. "In some ways it was the triumph of mediocrity over aspiration in terms of what I wanted to do originally, but compromises had to be made" (Frawley n.p.).

Gary Flood was made the Street Festival Manager: "I was responsible for any content which wasn't the actual parade. I had dancers, jugglers, speciality acts of all kinds, comedians, barber shop quartets, around 200 people, working in groups" (n.p.). Flood's performers were to be deployed to keep the waiting crowds entertained in the long pre-parade build up. Originally to be dressed as traffic wardens walking the route, the surprise would come when they "would suddenly turn and start to juggle, or to sing, or whatever" (n.p.). Again, the idea had to be compromised, and Flood settled for bright green chemsplash overalls (see Murphy Fig. 4 in Colour Supplement):

At the time green was the obvious thing to wear, because in the crowds there wasn't that much green around, it was only recently that people started to wear something green and all of those hats and costumes came in. At the time it stood out; you could spot your dancers quarter of a mile down O'Connell Street. (n.p.)

This observation by Flood articulates a theory that, as had happened in the US in the 1960's, the Festival Parade is partly responsible for the creation of a market for novelty parade costumes here. World Cup Italia '90 had kick-started a trend for Irish people wearing the type of leprechaun hats, tricolour face paint etc. that previously had been dismissed as 'paddywhackery' or 'only for tourists.' Attempting to re-capture some of the spirit of Italia '90, Irish soccer hero Paul McGrath was made Parade

Marshall, and people were encouraged to become part of the spectacle. "Organisers are also calling for a sea of green to add dramatic colour to the occasion. Director Rupert Murray wants everyone, including the crowd, to turn up in green or to use green paint and make-up liberally" (Khan 3). This call was repeated again in 2000, when the then Festival Chairman, Fergal Quinn, promoting the Millennium Patrick's Festival, asked people "not to be shy about putting on green and silly clothes. Do it just for the craic. We will have all the excitement of last year, plus a little bit more" (qtd. in Cronin and Adair 245). I spoke with Dara de Buitlear, Sales and Marketing Executive with Carrolls Irish Gifts, about sales trends of novelty items, the omnipresent green velour hats in particular. De Buitlear admits that the market for such items has grown since the 1990's: "Tourists generally buy their items from the 14<sup>th</sup> onwards. Irish people tend to buy exclusively on the 17<sup>th</sup> itself. But both demographics seem to dress up. On parade day it is primarily all novelty clothing/costume accessories etc."<sup>6</sup> Certainly, photographs of the early Festivals show few mass-produced green costumes in the crowd. When compared with today's scenes of seas of green leprechaun hats, it seems obvious that the Festival organisers did get their wish, as Irish people began to shed sensitivity around historical associations with negative Irish stereotyping and began to 'own' Paddywhackery in a way that would have been unthinkable even 10 years prior.

The first Festival Parade (as it was known from then out) reversed the traditional Northside to Southside route, and started at St. Patrick's Cathedral. This route re-established the connection to St. Patrick and made a distinct break from the old format. Frawley's design associated the cathedral with its literary history: in reference to its former Dean, Jonathan Swift, the building was dressed with painted cut outs and small puppet figures depicting a giant Gulliver trapped inside and swarms of Lilliputians scaling the outside. The cathedral bells rang out to start the 1996 parade. "The only surprise about changing the route to a starting point at Patrick's Cathedral was why nobody had thought of it before" (Colgan, qtd. in Mac Reamoinn 12).

Much of the responsibility for carrying off the 1996 Parade was given to the Galway-based Macnas, Ireland's leading street performance group. Founder members, influenced by Els Commediants, had created the company in 1985, but Macnas had quickly found their own visual style and uniquely Irish sense of artistry and wit. With lead-in time so short, Macnas raided their back catalogue to use as many existing puppets, props, and costumes as possible: elements from *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, had debuted in 1988 as a Dublin Millennium project, and the giant U2 heads were originally made for the 1993 Zooropa Tour (see Murphy Fig. 5 and Murphy Fig. 6 in Colour Supplement). There was scarcely a festival or event in the 90's which didn't feature these Macnas' 'U2 Heads.' They even appeared alongside the real band in the 1998 music video for their single "The Sweetest Thing." Macnas formed the backbone of the '96 Parade, their pageant, woven through the entire parade, in-

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6 Dara de Buitlear, in an email exchange with the author, 12 March 2015.

volved a giant St. Patrick puppet, which 'banished' hundreds of snake puppets all along the parade route with a wave of its arm. Theatre of Fire, Ireland's first professional pyrotechnics company, added drama with smoke, flares, and explosions (see Murphy Fig. 3 in Colour Supplement).

In visual terms, the parade was vastly different from anything that had gone before. The loose performance style of the pageant elements was the polar opposite of the stiff regimented rows of marching bands and 'Ceremonials,' such as the formal elements of the parade provided by An Garda Síochána (Irish Police Force) and the Irish Army. This parade had a narrative, a cohesive design, and plenty of character. It was edgy, witty, and displayed an artistic and creative vision that set the standard on which to build the festival in the following years.

The initial press response, however, was lukewarm at best, with Miriam Lord in *The Irish Independent* writing scathingly:

Mr. [Enda] Kenny [then Minister for Tourism and Trade] was so confident that the parade was going to be different that he did something very dangerous when he arrived at the O'Connell Street reviewing stand yesterday. He took the credit for dreaming up the new, super-doooper march past before it even started. 'It's my baby,' said Enda proudly. Perhaps this reporter was standing in the wrong place [...] but there wasn't that much to write home about despite the £500,000, Colgan's involvement and the Minister's blessing. (6)

This slightly disingenuous assessment was based on the fact that this first 'new look' parade did not seem to look that different. Due to the four-month lead-in time there was only so much that could be done, and there were still marching bands and commercial groups involved. By 1997, however, when the Festival became a three-day event, and with a year to plan, the vision was closer to being realised.

The official program for 1997 shows a confident, ambitious line-up, with a substantial decrease in commercial and American groups and a fair percentage of professional Irish performers. By 1998, an *Irish Times* Culture piece titled "How Paddy's Day Became a Humdinger" was praising the organisers for achieving a level of excellence that "has people voting with their feet," adding that "the spectacular combination of street theatre and public entertainment makes the festival a model for Ireland's Millennium events." The Festival has built on its reputation ever since; it is now attracting over 120,000 overseas visitors, with the top visiting countries being the USA, Germany, France, and Spain. 500,000 people attend the parade, and the festival contributes an estimated €122 million to the Irish economy (2015 statistics). The Parade itself gives work to hundreds of prop makers, float builders, dancers, costume makers, choreographers, directors, performers, designers, technicians, and stage managers, and the standards rise year upon year as practitioners receive invaluable experience and training in these highly specialised areas. The parade is also the chief source of funding for a number of newer Irish street theatre companies, such as Spraoi (Waterford), Downtcha Puppets (Cork), and Inishowen Carnival (Donegal), who provide innovative pageantry each year aligning to the Parade's theme. The St.

Patrick's Festival also funded two community outreach groups: Brighter Futures (which worked with children's groups) and City Fusion (which worked with adults). Both groups celebrate diversity and inclusiveness. Working with immigrant groups and people of various physical capabilities, they have been the heart of the parade since 2005.

It seems fair to conclude that the first St. Patrick's Festival Parade in 1996 was made possible by the dedication and good will of the people involved on all levels. Colgan, who gave four years as Festival Committee Chairman, managed to pull in substantial corporate and commercial sponsorship for events such as the Aer Lingus Skyfest, while he himself worked on an entirely voluntary basis. Rupert Murray and Marie Claire Sweeney were paid a salary by the Festival; most others, like Frawley or Tierney, were paid a fee. As Frawley puts it: "Rupert would often say 'I don't know *how* you're going to do it, just do it.' It was that usual thing of getting it done by working twelve-hour days, seven days a week, for weeks on end. Afterwards you realise that you've worked for about 2 pounds an hour" (n.p.). This willingness to work long hours in difficult conditions for little financial gain is often ruefully called 'the hidden subsidy of the Arts' by those who work in that sector. Philip McMahon, from the theatre and events production company Thisispopbaby, articulates the difficulties of working in the Arts sector through straightened economic times in an *Irish Times* piece entitled "Culture Shock: Killing Art Won't Create Hospital Beds. It Will Just Make Society Duller": "Things are less creative than they used to be. We expect culture to flourish in Ireland but no longer want to support it. We denounce artists as spongers leeching off of the public purse, until there is a new bridge to be named" (n.p.). Rapid development in Dublin has also had an impact on the availability of workshop, storage, and rehearsal spaces, with far reaching implications. Spaces are rare and those that exist are costly, which inflates already stretched budgets.

Keen to update this piece (I originally wrote it in 2015), I spoke to Karen Walshe, current St. Patrick's Festival Artistic director, in April of 2021, after she and her team had pulled off the first Virtual St. Patrick's Festival. Walshe surprised me by commenting that she is the first full-time Artistic Director who has been employed, to the best of her knowledge "since around 2000." The AD role had been reduced to a part time appointment, with previous AD's coming on board "in October/November of the year before, so of course there's no time to turn anything around" (n.p.). It seems that, once the big 2000 Millennium celebrations were over, the Government funding began to dry up again. It was at this point that Murray and Colgan stepped aside, with Sweeney following suit some time later. Around this time, the Festival was handed over to Failte Ireland, with the perhaps unsurprising result that American involvement has again increased.

Speaking to Walshe, a sense of *déjà vu* crept over me, as she spoke of tighter budgets, arguing for artistic content over yet more marching bands, and the struggle to adequately fund Irish artists and pageant companies:

We are very tied to Failte, still, in terms of funding. Every year the funding from Government to Failte is reduced, and so every year the money that comes down to us would be reduced and the budgets would be tighter, so we can't grow the festival in the way that we feel we should. And Failte of course are always very tourist-focused and want us to spend the money on developing entertainment for visitors. (n.p.)

Walshe confirmed that Brighter Futures/City Fusion, due to funding cuts, had to be amalgamated into one group: The Community Arts Project. Cuts in funding have made it unsustainable for many of the pageant companies to provide original content each year, with the result that fewer pageants now participate, and those that do often have to recycle pieces from previous years.

Somewhat unexpectedly, however, the Covid restrictions this year may actually turn the fortunes of the Festival around once again. Walshe and her team, left in the dark in early 2021 with the government scrambling to contain the third wave of Covid-19, were told they were to be funded, not by Failte, but by the Department of the Arts. Almost immediately, recalls Walshe:

We really felt for the first time like we were in the right place, like we were talking to people who understood us. We were given the overall funding money from the Department of Arts and Culture to go off and just spend it as we wanted to, and we were just allowed to breathe. I was able to create this programme that has never been so big, and really just go out and touch all areas of culture and arts and society and create this full spectrum of what Ireland is. (n.p.)

Of necessity, the 2021 program of events was to be streamed online, but far from being restricted, Walshe was able to give the funding directly to the artists, which in turn gave them the freedom to create their content. Artists submitted innovative short films, music, spoken word, poetry, and puppetry performances from all corners of Ireland. The resulting festival engaged with a staggering 99 million people worldwide over the 5 days.

Walshe ended our interview talking about the possibilities for the 2022 festival, and their plans once again to deconstruct and re-invent the format:

I think we all feel that we are coming into a new era because Covid has blown it all open, wide open. People are now willing to look at doing things differently. We've just been told that the Department of the Arts is going to fund us again next year, and they are talking about giving us more funding and, crucially, getting the money to us earlier so that we can get it to the artists earlier. The other side of it is that we will never be just a Dublin-based festival anymore. What was discovered, accidentally almost this year, was that we can be an Irish-based Festival taking place all over the country now, through technology, and that's the way we will have to go forward. (n.p.)

But I return to 1996 to leave the last word to Monica Frawley, who described the push and the all-night session pulled by her team to dress the parade route:

We barely stopped to eat: it was freezing cold, and so stressful: we had no idea if it was even possible. But we did it, and we arrived up to O'Connell Street, cold, hungry, and exhausted, but pleased with ourselves, to take our places on the viewing stand, only to find that no one had thought to book us tickets. So we went for breakfast together, and then all went home to bed. I never even saw the parade. (n.p.)

## Afterword

Rupert Murray worked on the St. Patrick's Festival until the Millennium Festival in 2000, after which he, and many of the team behind that first re-invented the Parade in 1996 (including Monica Frawley), went on to create the spectacular opening ceremony of the 2003 Special Olympics in Dublin.

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## COLOUR SUPPLEMENT



Connerty Fig. 1. *The Wee Men* (Bill Tytla, 1947)



Connerty Fig. 2. *Spooking with a Brogue* (Seymour Kneitel, 1955)



Connerty Fig. 3. *Finnegan's Flea* (Izzy Sparber, 1958)



Murphy Fig. 1. Rupert Murray and Marie Claire Sweeney, from the 1997 Festival Brochure  
(Image courtesy of the St. Patrick's Festival Parade)



Murphy. Fig. 2 Giant fish designed by Monica Frawley and built by then Abbey Theatre prop makers, Paula and Ian Conroy, 1996 Parade (Image courtesy of the St. Patrick's Festival Parade)



Murphy Fig. 3. Part of the Macnas pageant, with smoke bombs by Theatre of Fire (Image courtesy of the St. Patrick's Festival Parade)



Murphy Fig. 4. Street performers, entertaining the pre-parade crowd, 1996. Note the snakes and bunting in the background (Image courtesy of the St. Patrick's Festival Parade)



Murphy Fig. 5. Macnas's 'U2 Heads' travelling in a vintage car in the 1996 parade. Snakes installed by Tierney's team can be seen on the statues in the background (Image courtesy of the St. Patrick's Festival Parade)



Murphy Fig. 6. Macnas snakes pageant at St. Patrick's Cathedral, 1996 parade. Gulliver's giant green hand and face can just be seen on the side of the cathedral (Image courtesy of the St. Patrick's Festival Parade)