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CONNECTING CULTURES ON THE IRISH AND  
CANADIAN STAGE

Canada is a multi-national country that has attracted immigrants since the early seventeenth century. Since then, immigration has been a continuous process. Amongst the numerous ethnicities found in Canada, the Irish form through their large numbers a substantial group of their own to such an extent that they are considered one of the founding nations of Canada besides the English, French and the Scots. This is given further emphasis through the use of traditional Irish symbols, the harp and the shamrock, featuring on the official Canadian Coat of Arms.

Therefore, there has always been an interest in Irish-related cultural, artistic and political issues. With the gradual development of Canadian professional theatre and acting from the early 1940s, Ireland has certainly been an example worth considering and following, especially the international success of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. To promote the success of the Abbey, it was perhaps appropriate that an Irishman, who himself was indirectly involved in the developments and occurrences taking place in the theatrical sphere in Ireland, should eventually help, among others, to disseminate the ideas necessary to lay the foundations of something permanent in the creation of a Canadian national theatre.

John Coulter, an Irishman born in Belfast of Protestant parents, was “somewhat sadly deprived of the total recognition he deserved for penning at least twenty-five plays, the libretti for two operas, a biography of Winston Churchill, a book of poetry, one short novel, two major autobiographical works, nine short stories and innumerable articles, essays and broadcasts for both the BBC in Belfast and London, and the CBC in Canada” (Gardner 1). His first play to be published was a two-act verse drama titled *Conochar* from 1917 (this was broadcast by BBC

Radio Belfast in 1934 as *Conochar's Queen*) (Gardner 1). During the years between the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin and the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, Coulter worked as a teacher of art in Dublin. But the happenings at the Abbey helped to shift his focus of interest towards drama. As a result, he gave up teaching in Dublin and immersed himself in drama and theatrical work, and returned to Belfast "to found a small repertory theatre company, an 'Abbey of the north'" (Gardner 1). This endeavour was most probably without due success, mainly as a result of the tense political situation caused by the religious division, the upheavals of the Civil War and the fact that Belfast did not have the same firm foundation for theatrical development that Dublin already had. The majority of the population in Belfast was Protestant with a minor Catholic percentage, therefore establishing a theatre with the intention of promoting Irish plays by Irish playwrights, since that was the Abbey's original aim, would have been simply adding tension to the already extremely tense situation. But as there is very little information available concerning Coulter's theatrical experiments in Belfast, some biographical sources do not even mention it at all, it is difficult to assess the relevance of his involvement, but his departure from Ireland certainly suggests that he was unable to realize his endeavours in Belfast.

The fact that Coulter eventually left Ireland to seek new possibilities elsewhere is perhaps not surprising, since "emigration became a tradition in Ireland, not just a phenomenon, but actually a way of life" (O'Connor 130). From the early 1920s, he is already working in London, and somewhat later settles in Toronto marrying the Canadian poet, Olive Clare Primrose in 1936 (Benson and Toye 235). His play, entitled *The Drums are Out* (1948) was already written in Canada, therefore from a distance in time and space, based on his memories of a certain historical and political incident in 1935. From 1938 onwards, he becomes involved in the development of Canadian theatre and drama writing numerous articles and essays on the possibilities of creating a modern Canadian theatre. As an Irishman, he compares this progress with that of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the importance of the Irish Renaissance that helped to create an identity and a place to perform exclusively Irish plays by contemporary Irish authors. He considers this example worth following for the Canadians.

Canadian theatre as such was virtually nonexistent during the 1930s and 40s. Music hall's and buildings where theatrical performances could be staged did exist, but they mostly catered for the performances of

international professional acting companies, who were always welcome and lent these towns and cities prestige. Canada did not have any professional acting companies, but rather amateur acting groups spread out over the country. These groups also toured the country, but the majority of their performances were also based on the works of well known international authors. Staging an unknown Canadian dramatist's work would have been highly improbable, because it was mainly the title of the play that helped advertise them rather than the more or less unknown amateur group itself.

Coulter was active in the cultural life of Canada from the time of his arrival, and was among those artists, who were responsible for the formation of the Massey Commission, and ultimately the establishment of the Canada Council. As a friend of Tyrone Guthrie, he managed to persuade him to come to Canada and direct the first production of the well known Stratford Festival (Benson and Toye 237). Although his name is well established within these circles, his works cannot be called altogether popular or successful on a permanent basis. In this sense, his name has clearly been forgotten by the Irish, and his name in Canada has perhaps greater recognition. The areas where he had achieved success were in themes using "non-Canadian subjects" and "Canadian historical subjects with formal dialogue" (Benson and Toye 236), for example his *Riel Trilogy*.<sup>1</sup>

The *Riel Trilogy*, according to the dramatist's note, was "designed for presentation in the Elizabethan manner" (Benson and Toye 235). This suggests a standard educated variation of British English. But one of the problematic points in his plays is the use of language and vernacular. In the *Riel Trilogy*, instead of using the 19th century Métis vernacular variety (which would certainly be rich in its mixture of English, French and Native words and expressions), he uses the "Elizabethan manner," which manages to bring across the historical relevance projected by the author, but fails to convey an overall Métis identity. And in his play *The Drums are Out* the language used is certainly not the Northern Irish dialectal variation, but rather an educated form of the English language. This ultimately has the effect of distancing the characters from an overall Irish audience in Ireland, but placed in a different milieu, like Canada, the audience's concern would be less on the language, but on the political and

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<sup>1</sup> *Riel Trilogy*. 1. *Riel* (1952; rev. 1975); 2. *The Trial of Louis Riel* (1968); 3. *The Crime of Louis Riel* (1976).

religious aspects that the play manages to raise quite well. The *Riel Trilogy* works on a similar basis since the historical momentum and occurrences presenting Riel's tragic fate are what the audience ultimately focuses on rather than the language itself. The language itself, however, is precise and comprehensible for everyone. And the message conveyed by the author is carried through. But I must admit that if Coulter had given greater attention to the use of language his characters could have had greater depth and colouring in providing the audience not only a historical event, but also a part of their culture and identity, as well.

As the aim of this paper is to present a comparative view and analysis of how cultural exchanges bear influence on individuals from various cultural backgrounds a comparison of Coulter's *The Drums are Out* with contemporary playwright, Malachy McKenna and his play *Tillsonburg* (2000) seems adequate in displaying numerous striking differences. McKenna makes use of many very typical and contemporary Irish English exclamations and expressions to sharply distinguish the Irish cultural background from that of the Canadian rural farmer and that of the Canadian Native Indian. Through their manner of speech the characters come to life, each individual culture being clearly distinguishable from the other cultural variant.

The presentation of the Irishman in a Canadian foreign environment emphasizes the notion of cultural exchange. There is a very acute focus on the various layers of cultures meeting and connecting, hence establishing a "global theatre" (Lonergan 216). The ability of theatre to cross cultural and geographical boundaries has become an important marker of success. But the manner in which an identity is established may be seen differently. Globalization has brought multiculturalism to Ireland, but the representation of an Irish identity has had to be narrowed since only those Irish plays can achieve success on a foreign stage, that are sufficiently adaptable to the international expectation and understanding of what the Irish stands for and represents. Coulter's play in this sense may be viewed as an international play, since it focuses on one particular political incident that the audience has perhaps heard or read about in newspapers. One assumes, however, that it is the Irish immigrant population in Canada, who would be mostly targeted with this particular topic, since they are the group who can identify themselves to certain depths with the Northern Irish religious conflicts.

The story of Coulter's play, *The Drums are Out*, is set in the city of Belfast during "one of the worst of its recurring outbreaks of sectarian

rioting” (Coulter 1). As a Protestant Ulsterman, Coulter witnessed the happenings himself, and by adding further information that he heard created the partly fictional and partly factual storyline. In the centre of the political occurrences there is the traditional family unit, which is eventually disrupted by a secret romance. The two main characters of the play are Sergeant Thomas Sheridan and his daughter, Jean. The Sergeant is a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, who through his profession and person represents law and order and the Ulster Protestant side. Jean is an established young school teacher, who was educated in Dublin. Although she is Protestant by birth she has ‘gone Irish’ during her time spent in Dublin and has also fallen in love with a wanted IRA gunman (Denis Patterson), who is presently on the run. To further complicate matters, she has secretly married him and is pregnant with their first child. We also get to meet Denis Patterson, who first turns up in disguise and is presented as a very decent and likeable person, even though he is an IRA man. The sympathetic and agreeable figure of Denis Patterson is actually the reason why the play was never allowed to be performed in Belfast or Northern Ireland. Coulter was told that if he changed the character of the IRA man to that of the typical bad man figure, the play would be produced. But it did have a successful short production (filling the theatre for over five weeks) in the Abbey Theatre in 1948, but was never revived. There have been however numerous amateur productions of the play in both Ireland and Canada in the past decades.

Coulter’s own political views changed, which means that he had ‘gone Irish’, like Jean, during his time spent in Dublin, where he was very much influenced by the occurrences taking place and performances of the Abbey. Within the play both sides are represented: the Protestant side by Thomas Sheridan, his wife, Constable Nixon (an RUC officer) and Matt McCann (a rather foolish gossip and neighbour of the Sheridan’s) and the Catholic, nationalistic side by Dennis Patterson and Jean. But it is Jean, who conveys Coulter’s political views and ideas:

Jean: What’s happening with us in Ireland is what’s happening everywhere else. But Ireland’s small enough to let what’s happening here and everywhere show itself, clear, in focus. And it’s a sorry sight. People on different sides ready to fight and kill each other rather than make an effort to understand or yield an inch. “Not an inch.” They shout it as if it were something to be proud of, instead of what it is—a shameful confession of gross political incompetence and failure. (Coulter 44–45)

During the night of the riot, Jean is forced to tell her father about Dennis, when he is injured and seeks refuge within Jean's and her parents' house. From this moment it is not the family unit that is of importance anymore, but Tom Sheridan's decision and ultimately his ensuing dilemma.

The major theme of the play centres on this perplexity of love and family versus loyalty and duty. As a policeman and Ulsterman (Protestant) Sheridan's loyalty and duty to the force come first and only then his family. This is a dilemma of the mind (reason) and the heart and due to this he becomes indecisive and breaks down. Which should come first? What are its limits? And what are the consequences of one's acts? As a consequence of her act (marriage to Dennis) Jean has shattered her father's world, and all his neatly laid plans of their future after he is pensioned in a year's time.

Sergeant: ...But because this day twelvemonth—I'll be out of the force.

Jean: One more year to go, father.

Mrs. Sheridan: It'll soon wear round.

Sergeant: It will. And I'll be a free man. And not so old. And with my bit of pension coming in, for the rest of my life, ah-ha! You know, I'm beginning to look round already for a nice snug little house in the country. We'll have great times of it there. We'll have a tidy wee bit of a fruit and flower garden, with bees in it, and we'll have lots of white hens, Leghorns, and some laying ducks, and maybe a sprinkling of geese and turkeys. (Coulter 17)

Sheridan's dream of retirement is "his own favourite fairystory" (Coulter 17) as his wife says. The Sergeant longs for the piece and tranquility that he has never had since he put on his uniform. Through the Sergeant's character Coulter displays the individual Irishman torn between love and responsibility for his family and his duty to his profession and religious beliefs. During the night of the riot, Sheridan is forced to choose between the most important things in his life: love and duty. He finally allows Patterson to stay the night (because of his love for his daughter), since his injury does not allow him to move, but the Sergeant is quite adamant when he insists that Denis Patterson must be gone by morning. At this particular moment in time all his carefully harboured dreams crumble and fall to pieces. Future as such ceases to exist. The Sergeant allows his heart to overrule his mind in a moment of

crisis, but he already knows that the consequences for his conduct will be paid for by severe punishment.

Coulter's presentation of Sheridan portrays the Irishman, whose beliefs and devotion to his profession, and ultimately the loyalty to the English Crown, is so deeply coded within him that it must lead to his total breakdown. Similarly, Sebastian Barry, contemporary Irish dramatist, depicts a character, Thomas Dunne, in *The Steward of Christendom*, who is a staunch Catholic chief superintendant in the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Being faithful to the English Crown and his duty to his force come before his family, and this eventually leads to his total mental collapse when he is forced to retire at the time the Republic of Ireland is established. The image of the trustworthy and obedient Irishman is a recurring figure that portrays well the dilemma of the Irish male and "provides a historical basis of the Troubles in a way that international audiences might 'overhear,'" and "audiences internationally can apply to their own lives and localities" (Lonergan 221).

In the Canadian publication of *The Drums are Out* from 1971, Coulter provides two versions of act three in which he shows two possibilities of ending the play. In version A it is already morning and Tom Sheridan's decision has been made: he must make a report at the Barracks about Patterson. No one can dissuade him, because it is his loyalty and duty to the force that must come first. Then IRA men dressed as policemen arrive (they take Sheridan's gun) and help Patterson leave the house. The play ends with Sheridan leaving the house and knowing full well that he will be arrested. No one can stop him. Everyone realizes the consequences of Sheridan's decision.

In version B, the IRA men come dressed as policemen at daybreak (and not in the morning), while Jean is still alone with Dennis, and take him away. Tom Sheridan's decision is the same: decides to report that Patterson had been in his house. Here Mrs. Sheridan also realizes that if her husband is not willing to take responsibility then many innocent people will be arrested and put in jail. She wants to stop him and make him see common sense, but her argument is weaker than in version A.

Within the sphere of his play, Coulter is intent on remembering the past and "found expression and relief in the writing of the play" (Coulter

1). He acutely perceives this distance in time<sup>2</sup>, though in heart he had never really left:

I had long been away from that no-man's-land between the warring Protestant and Catholic sectaries of the Falls and Shankill Roads. Yet I had never completely left it. Thought and imagination had still been coloured by it. Nor do I wish it had been otherwise, since I believe that writing of any merit is a flowering from roots sunk as deeply in the life of a locality as mine were sunk in the life of Ulster, and particularly in the life of that part of Ulster. (Coulter 2)

Tom Sheridan is also forced out of his psychological sphere, which ends with his dislocation. He sacrifices himself for his daughter's deeds, and becomes a martyr. But for whom does Sheridan really sacrifice himself? Certainly not his family, for whom total ruin is now evident. The Sergeant must satisfy his own honour and virtue, which he has broken by bending to his daughter's will. He feels that he has broken his own righteousness and the only way to amend his own consciousness is to give himself up. Due to this no balance is achieved, because there is a feeling of utter hopelessness and despair: a shattered future and dream, a broken home. Only possibility of survival is to leave and seek a new home in another world. This is a suggestion that is hinted at with reference to Jean, who has disrupted her family and a common future with her husband is also rather bleak. Her only comment at the end of version B is: "Oh, we should pray our babies never would be born into a mess like this, except to change it." (Coulter 77)

The distance portrayed through time and space emphasizes that "the country's history and the players provide the romance and stories of heroism". (Fairleigh xii) The past and the political occurrences influenced and helped shape Irish drama in the previous decades. The geographical distance in Coulter's case merely helped to sharpen his focus, but the individual predicament of Sheridan shows that personal involvement colours the dramatist's approach and evaluation.

In contemporary Irish drama this particular political involvement is not as heavily present, but it is interesting to see how an Irishman, Malachy McKenna, depicts his two male protagonists when placed in a foreign cultural environment. The play is set in the present time and all the characters are male. Two young Irishmen, Mac and Digger, in their

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<sup>2</sup> Coulter has been living in Canada for over ten years when the play was actually written in 1948.



twenties go to work on a tobacco farm, in south-western Ontario, Canada, for the summer to earn money. The surroundings which they encounter are not what they had expected:

The walls of the bunkhouse are dressed with the remnants of years of farming activity; old fertilizer posters, rusty implements, torn old oilskin raincoats, rusty horseshoes, old chains, faded pictures of pin-up girls, outdated calendars, cobwebs, nails, hooks, old rope, etc. ...The overall 'feel' of the bunkhouse is hot, dirty and claustrophobic. (McKenna 4)

These bleak and extremely unpleasant surroundings are further enhanced by the title song *Tillsonburg*, which is based on a popular song performed by Stompin Tom Connors, a well known Canadian country rock singer. The song comes up several times during the course of the play when either one or the other characters begin singing its popular refrain, "Tillsonburg? My back still aches when I hear that word", (McKenna 5) this helps to enhance the background atmosphere of the place and the people living there. The characters portrayed all have a 'past' and their individual predicaments shape their perceptions and views. Beside the two Irishmen there is Jon, the Canadian farmer and owner of the tobacco farm, Billy the outcast and drug addict, and Pete the Canadian Native Indian.

McKenna, thereby, collects these very diverse characters from different cultural backgrounds and presents them as the "living wounded" (Fairleigh XIV). Mac and Digger depict the figures of the average Irish college youth, who travel abroad to work and gain experience. But the adventures and experience they had acquired had gone sour the previous year. For some reason, however, they are together again and ready to encounter a new adventure in a different cultural environment.

The basic theme the play relies on is friendship. Mac and Digger are good friends, who trust on each other, they come from a similar Irish background and have already spent time together in a foreign country the previous year. Through their manner of speech, which is loaded with contemporary Irish slang McKenna is able to capture the differences in customs and world views.

Digger: ...Fucken Harlem, and us the only Paddies in the place.

Mac: Give me five, man!

Digger: ...I tell you, I'm giving no one else five as long as I live, my hands were bollixed from it; every time you met someone, Hey, man, what's happenin', and give me five and give me ten, up high and low down and coming back at ya, man,' fucking muck! And if they weren't

giving you five they were threatening to cut your throat or beat the shite out of you. I tell you there were times I honestly wished I was black so I wouldn't be so terrified. Now, I've nothing against blacks, no more than yourself with the Indians, but Jasus, there's a limit. (McKenna 27)

Their experiences in the U.S. are retold within the framework of the play, but the tension is heightened through Digger's nightmares, which is the result of the mystery that encompasses last year's incident. This episode is, however, something that neither can bring themselves to talk about. As the play progresses the mystery is gradually brought into complete focus, but it is only at the very end that the audience learns the truth.

Mac: Next FUCKING thing I know, I wake up to find a crowd of crackheads standing over me. One of them was cutting the pockets from my trousers with a razor blade. One pocket was already gone! ...You never came when they beat me so hard I thought I was going to die, when I tried to scream through my own blood, ... I saw your reflection in the carriage window, when they said they'd kill me if I made a sound. ... I saw you, Digger ... staring through the door from the other carriage, staring at me, you STARING AT ME while ...while they DID THAT to me. ... Digger, ... after all we'd been through together ... you left me in that hell. (McKenna 62–63)

But by the end the puzzle is cleared when Digger is finally able to confess that the gang, who robbed, mugged and raped Mac, also did the same thing to Digger. The hurt that Mac had felt about Digger having left him is resolved:

Digger: I mean, Mac: they came to me first. They ... did me first.

Digger: The nightmares. I call out for you the same way you called out for me. You don't hear. And ...and ... fuckers! I should have put up more of a fight. I should have done something, I should have stopped them ...

Mac: It's OK, Digger, it's OK.

Digger: IT'S NOT OK!!! It's not OK. It's not. Thing is, Mac, you remind me of the whole thing; and ... and ... I can't get beyond it, I can't ... Nothing's the same any more. (McKenna 71)

The psychological impact of their stay in New York had a shocking effect on the two Irish youths from which it is difficult to heal. After having finally spoken about it openly, the burden and strain of responsibility and guilt is lifted. All the characters suffer and wallow in their own personal problems. Jon and Pete had formerly been friends until Jon's

wife left him for Pete. Since then, Jon has had many difficulties with his crops and he is on the verge of ruin. Pete, the Native Indian, is very conscious of his own cultural heritage and considers Jon's land and property his, since the land had for centuries been the ancestral land of his forbears. All the characters exhibit through their manner of speech and behaviour an identity, though somewhat simplified, that is easier to understand and relate to for the audience.

Confronting the different cultures within the given Canadian rural environment enforces the ensuing tension in which all the characters reveal their true and deepest feelings about their friends, the milieu and their utmost desires. McKenna's play is successful in presenting how the various cultures relate and react to each other. He manages to raise numerous questions: How does one behave in a foreign environment? How does one adapt? To what extent can one remain true to one's own identity or should one adapt completely in a foreign setting? What can happen to an Irishman abroad? The play succeeds in handling these questions well without overdramatizing the message projected by the author. But the characters are to a large extent stereotypes, because "globalization is changing the way that audiences see plays and it alters the way that writers compose their works" (Lonergan 185).

To conclude, it is perhaps appropriate to quote John Fairleigh that "the past is not yet another country" (Fairleigh XIV). The plays show in both cases the predicaments of the individual in a moment of crisis, though with a variation in its setting and historical time. Time and distance may help to ease the pain of these "living wounded", but it will not disperse their memories. McKenna's play succeeds since through the effectiveness of global theatre different cultural identities are brought in and given greater focus for an easier accessibility for the audience. Coulter's play, however, is somewhat overdramatized and given colouring through the author's personal and emotional involvement. Where McKenna's play is successful in bringing across its message, this play fails, because it is unable to address a wider public directly only those who are themselves ex-Irish patriots.

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