

## **‘Playing the Rebel’: Propaganda and Amateur Dramatics in County Louth, 1902–1916.**

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The Cultural Revival and the development of a new kind of Irish drama has rightly been the focus of much research over the last century. However, the focus has been almost entirely on how this has manifested itself in the large cities, Dublin in particular, but occasionally Belfast, Cork or Galway. What is less clearly articulated is how the struggle for a nationalist cultural and political identity was played out in the towns and villages of Ireland, away from the major metropolis. This paper will explore the cultural life of Dundalk in the years approaching the 1916 Rising, as the various cultural and political organisations sought to ignite visions of a future independent Ireland, based on popular representations of Ireland’s rebellious past. Dundalk between 1901 and 1911 had a population of just over 13,000 people, making it among the largest towns in Ireland during the era. By comparison, Galway city had a population of 13,255 in 1911 and Kilkenny city had 10,514 people.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, Dundalk’s location on the eastern seaboard almost equidistant between Dublin and Belfast, at the centre of both rail and shipping networks and therefore a hub of industry and commerce, as well as a military base, had a great deal to do with its population size. This location also meant that touring theatre and musical companies that typically played on an axis between Belfast, Dublin and Cork would regularly stop off in Dundalk.<sup>3</sup> After the refurbishment of the Town Hall Theatre in 1901 to accommodate a proper stage and audience seating, not only did the number of local amateur performances increase, but a regular diet of London comedies, farces and musicals were served to the discerning population of Dundalk.<sup>4</sup>

That population were not content to just be audience, and it becomes clear, looking at the local papers from the early twentieth century, that there was a vibrant amateur theatre community at the time, which was beginning to see the potential for performance in bringing together young men and women to discuss and enact ideas of nationalism. Between 1900 and 1916, the Catholic Young Men’s Society (CYMS), the Young Ireland Society (YIS) and Sinn Féin in Dundalk performed both popular melodramas and revival dramas, which despite their possible lack of artistic merit, supported a growing nationalist culture in the town of Dundalk. There were also productions in Irish, new plays written by local playwrights, and visits from Cumann na nGaedheal and Patrick Pearse’s boy performers from St Enda’s school. In playing the rebel, they imagined and embodied the performance of a revolution that was to come. Dundalk, as a garrison town, had a significant military presence. Alongside the patriotic melodramas and Cultural Revival nationalistic performances you also had members of the British Army stationed in Dundalk producing their own plays and entertainment. In 1904 alone, there were amateur performances of *The Colleen Bawn*, Boucicault’s melodrama, by the CYMS, a new version of *Robert Emmett* by Cumann na nGaedheal under the auspices of the YIS, and a charity performance of *The Manoeuvres of Jane* by a company of officers and

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was published in D. Hall and M. Maguire (eds), *County Louth and the Irish Revolution 1912-1923* (Newbridge, 2017), pp 109-130.

<sup>2</sup> W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Historical Statistics: Population 1821-1971*, (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), p. 29–31.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre: 1601-2000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 104–5.

<sup>4</sup> About Town, ‘Mr Payne Seddon’s Benefit’, *Dundalk Democrat*, 2 May 1908; *Dundalk Democrat* 16 Apr. 1904, 27 Aug. 1904, 3 Sept. 1904, 1 Oct. 1904, 29 Oct. 1904, 29 Oct. 1904, 26 Nov. 1904. See also Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, *Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 104.

their wives organised by Lady Louth.<sup>5</sup> It seems clear that playing and performing were important to both sides in the future production that would be the Rising of 1916. Although Yeats' and Lady Gregory's play, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, definitely made an appearance in Dundalk, it was more likely that the soldiers of the Rising and War of Independence had their imaginations fuelled by melodramas like *The Shaughraun*, *Lord Edward or '98* and *Robert Emmet*.

Christopher Morash describes the theatrical context of Ireland in the late nineteenth century as 'a crowded room'.<sup>6</sup> Where early historians and propagandists for the Irish National Theatre Society conceived of themselves as bringing light to the ignorant darkness of Irish theatre, the reality was much more complex. Any survey of Dublin in 1900 would see a city saturated with multiple theatres and music halls, some of them seating up to 3,000 people. These were commercial theatres providing popular entertainment for working class Dubliners, as well as the middle-classes, and their fare was not without a strong element of nationalist sentiment.<sup>7</sup> Irish-born playwright, Dion Boucicault, created a number of popular nationalistic melodramas, *The Colleen Bawn*, *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *The Shaughraun*, which skilfully balanced a sentimental patriotic feeling with successful entertainment. As Mary Trotter explains, 'heroes were nationalists, villains were traitors, heroines loved heroes while being stalked by villains', and through it all strode a comic character actor with a thick brogue who would 'laugh and fight and endure for Ireland'.<sup>8</sup>

By the 1890s, Boucicault's plays were revived on an almost annual basis in Dublin at either the Theatre Royal or the Queen's Royal Theatre Dublin.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Queen's, under the management of the English entrepreneur, J.W. Whitbread, became known from 1883 as 'The House of Irish Drama'.<sup>10</sup> As the centenary of the 1798 rebellion approached there was a surge of interest in patriotic dramas with a strong helping of sentiment. Whitbread produced Boucicault plays, as well as works like Hubert O' Grady's *The Famine*, *The Insurgents* and *For the Land She Loved*, and his own creations *Robert Emmet* and *Wolfe Tone*.<sup>11</sup> At the Queen's Royal audiences were encouraged to sing along with popular nationalist songs, as well as enjoy the spectacle of Irish landscapes like Kerry and Mayo that many of the urban working class Dublin audience might never have seen. Plays like *Robert Emmet*, *Wolf Tone*, *Lord Edward Fitzgerald or '98* and *Sarsfield* not only combined clever peasant comic characters in the mode of Conn the Shaughraun, but presented the great orators and heroes of nineteenth-century nationalist Ireland. There was an element of 'preaching' to audiences in Dublin, London and New York, on the conditions in Ireland but also a depiction of the 'nationalist project as one that united social classes, one that in fact required the cooperation of brave peasant and Anglo-Irish gentry alike'.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it was this combination of nationalism and social reform that appealed so much to popular audiences, and made these plays the most frequent choices for amateur productions in Dundalk in the era before the Rising.

Although popular with the general Irish audience at home and abroad, the standard fare of The Queen's was the target of much criticism from the nationalist and Celtic Revival

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<sup>5</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 23 Jan. 1904, 12 Mar. 1904, 30 Apr. 1904.

<sup>6</sup> Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre*, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> See Paige Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama, and The Audience for Irish Spectacle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Trotter, *Ireland's Nationalist Theatres*, (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Watt, 'Late nineteenth-century Irish theatre before the Abbey – and beyond', Shaun Richards (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre*, p. 109; Trotter, *Ireland's Nationalist Theatres*, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; Watt, 'Irish Theatre before the Abbey', pp. 21–30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

intelligentsia. Lady Gregory and Yeats rejected the easy sentimentality and comic buffoonery of the “Stage Irishman” in their Manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre in 1898, as they sought to establish ownership of the right to define Irish national identity.<sup>13</sup> The Fay brothers, William and Frank, criticised the shallowness of this popular form both in their frequent editorials in the *United Irishman* as well as in their own attempts to create a new style of indigenous theatre with the Irish National Dramatic Society.<sup>14</sup> The political and ideological battle to define Irishness through drama was not just the preserve of artists and writers, but could be seen in the activities of many nationalist organisations. There is evidence that the Gaelic League, Inghinidhe na hÉireann and the St Enda’s School boys, all engaged in the performance of dramas and tableaux on folk and mythic themes as national identity was imagined and re-imagined before the Rising.<sup>15</sup>

Away from the salons and theatres of Dublin, Alice Milligan’s were perhaps the most popular of these amateur entertainments. Milligan was appointed travelling lecturer for the Gaelic League in 1904, and her dramatic presentations ‘part tableau, part magic-lantern show, part didactic narration’<sup>16</sup> were important in drawing audiences and participants into the world of politics as well as the dynamic world of performance in early twentieth-century Ireland. Her productions were associated not only with the Gaelic League but with Maud Gonne’s Inghinidhe na hÉireann. Although Lady Gregory dismissed her efforts as ‘tawdry’, she successfully disseminated her populist nationalistic message to a wide audience. More importantly she also provided a model for ‘do-it-yourself Irish drama in undemanding but widely read journals such as *Ireland’s Own* and the *Irish Weekly Freeman*’.<sup>17</sup> It is not clear whether Milligan ever visited Dundalk, but certainly the Dundalk YIS were inspired by the visit of the Cumann na nGaedheal Dramatic Company in 1904, a company she may have had contact with through her many associations within the nationalist amateur drama movements in Dublin. The drama class of the Dundalk YIS premiered their own productions of Abbey plays, *The Eloquent Dempsey* and *Kathleen ni Houlihan* in 1908, but were soon followed by amateur companies producing similar plays in Reaghstown, Dunleer and Carrickmacross. These productions required an immense commitment from both performers and producers, as they took on learning lines, making costumes and building sets outside their normal working lives. Amateur performances in the early twentieth century had all the same drawbacks and advantages of amateur theatre today, but what seems clear is that whatever the quality of the productions, there were both performers and an audience willing to support these amateur exploits. As Foster says, ‘they found each other’.<sup>18</sup>

The pattern of populist melodrama appreciated by the many and artistic mythic or modernist nationalist drama appreciated by the few is largely repeated in the amateur and professional performances in Dundalk between 1900 and 1916. The CYMS regularly ran into criticism from the local Redmonite paper, the *Dundalk Democrat*, for presenting popular melodramas while the YIS and other amateur groups who performed Revival inspired productions were generally celebrated. The *Dundalk Democrat* promoted both the Irish language and Irish culture in all its forms, but also records the ‘crowded room’ of popular entertainment in Dundalk, from visiting melodramas, farces and musical comedies, to day trips to pantomimes in Dublin and even the first experiences of modern technology, moving

<sup>13</sup> Morash, ‘*A History of Irish Theatre*’, p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> See Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), p. 83; Trotter, *Ireland’s Nationalist Theatres*, pp. 57–8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Foster, *Vivid Faces*, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

images, phonographs and the first cinema.<sup>19</sup> Dundalk was not an isolated cultural wasteland, but a microcosm of the capital in miniature. It is interesting that the cultural activities of Sinn Féin in 1909 did not focus on nationalist mythic drama or even Irish language drama, but on a contemporary adaptation of those patriotic sentimental melodramas so hated by the nationalist elites.

Performance venues in Dundalk varied from church halls, club rooms and gymnasium to the newly refurbished Town Hall theatre. The Town Hall was constructed as a corn exchange in the early 1860s, and was used for many years as a fairly multi-purpose space with a temporary stage for performances constructed with 'planks and barrels'.<sup>20</sup> After it reopened in January 1902, it had a fixed extended stage, a proscenium arch, fire proof curtain with an image of Narrow Water, Carlingford Loch and Flagstaff on it, as well as 160 leather armchairs closest to the stage, scarlet plush seats in the balcony and wooden benches at the back of the stalls for the cheap seats.<sup>21</sup> There was another venue for performances in the Assembly Rooms above the Market House, demolished in 1968, where Baden Powell, founder of the Scouting Movement, took part in an amateur performance of a one act farce, *Box and Cox*, by and for the officers based in Dundalk.<sup>22</sup> Other venues included the gymnasium at the back of the CYMS club rooms where the first performances of their drama group were held in 1901, and the hall of the newly finished St Malachy's Dominican Priory National School, referred to locally as 'the Friary', completed in 1900. Concerts and entertainments of both classical music and Irish traditional songs took place not only in the Town Hall but in various churches and schools around the area. Within the first few months of 1900 both the Dundalk YIS and the CYMS advertised meetings and dances in their club rooms or halls, which included songs and recitations, as well as 'phonograph selections'.<sup>23</sup> In the same few months at the start of 1900 there were concerts advertised in St Vincent's School and St Mary's College, Dundalk; Kilcurry New Church; Mullabawn [*sic*]; Castleblaney National Forrester's Dramatic Club; and the Boy's School, Ardee.<sup>24</sup> There was a strong nationalist element to many of these presentations, apart from the obvious Annual St Patrick's Concert held in the Town Hall.<sup>25</sup> A review of a concert at Grange, Carlingford, in May 1900, which included songs like *The Irish Emigrant* and 'other ballads of patriotic feeling or of the pure and simple sentiment of the Irish heart', provoked the *Democrat* columnist to criticise other non-Irish style entertainments, 'and why should the organisers of other entertainments of the kind seek their material amongst the inane and maudlin and tuneless rubbish that some of us over here affect to like because it is "English – quite English you know"'.<sup>26</sup>

The opening of the refurbished Town Hall in 1902 with the increase of both visiting professional productions and more frequent and ambitious amateur productions, prompted the *Democrat* to run two columns in October under the title 'The Modern Stage'. Principle among their concerns were that 'some of the very modern forms of entertainment that are promised to us are not as clean-minded people on this side of the water will care to attend'. The columnist complained that although these things might be acceptable in London, 'whence morals have long since departed', and are tolerated in Dublin, 'the provincial mind is, thank Heaven, cleaner, and its critical faculties acuter than are those of the Dublin

<sup>19</sup> Padraic Ua Dubhthaigh, *The Book of Dundalk*, (Dundalk, 1946), p. 120. See also Advert for 'Edison's Animated Picture – Life and Scenes in Dundalk', *Dundalk Democrat*, 15 Feb. 1902.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Curran, 'Drama in Dundalk', *Tempest Annual*, 1959, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> About Town, *Dundalk Democrat*, 11 Jan. 1902.

<sup>22</sup> Curran, 'Drama in Dundalk', p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> About Town, *Dundalk Democrat*, 10 Feb. 1900; see also About Town, *Dundalk Democrat*, 24 Feb. 1900.

<sup>24</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 6 Jan. 1900, 17 Feb. 1900, 24 Feb. 1900, 10 Mar. 1900, 21 Apr. 1900, 28 Apr. 1900.

<sup>25</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 10 Mar. 1900.

<sup>26</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 26 May 1900.



public'.<sup>27</sup> The particular object of the *Democrat's* ire was the professional visit of a musical comedy called *The Belle of New York*, which played to packed houses in the Town Hall despite the protestation of not only the local paper, but D.P. Moran's *The Leader*. The play had been a huge success in New York and London in 1897–98, running for nearly 700 performances in London, but was clearly exactly the type of modern drama at odds with a pure vision of Catholic Ireland, favoured by a certain type of nationalist.<sup>28</sup> The *Democrat* was resigned to the fact that much of the audience were 'soldiers and their friends', but was disgusted that many were the curious 'respectable people of the town', 'some of the Catholic elite' and 'country people in their evening dress'. He is entirely scathing of the play, a melodrama based on a reprobate American youth who decided to have an adventure with a 16-year-old French maid in the Chinese quarter of New York the night before his wedding to a 'high-kicker from the music halls'. He then falls in love with the 'Belle', a Salvation Army missionary in this den of vice, who is miraculously found to be a lost heiress at the conclusion of the play. The *Democrat* columnist is particularly upset by the effect such a production might have on the 'giggling empty-headed Miss who thinks the Gaelic Movement "such rot"', and fears the effect of both 'the Gay Parisienne' maid and the Belle herself, who are both 'poor specimens of womanhood for our daughters to copy'.<sup>29</sup>

There were many such professional productions that visited Dundalk in the pre-Rising years and although there were some Queen's type melodramas, the majority of productions were West End farces and comedies, with the occasional Shakespearean play to provide an element of culture. In 1902 two Irish-based impresarios, Lena Lewis and Kennedy Miller, both brought Irish melodramas to Dundalk with titles like *The Rebel's Wife – A Tale of the Rebellion of '98*, *The Insurgent Chief*, *Michael Dwyer* and *Lord Edward or '98*.<sup>30</sup> However, more typical fare was brought by the British theatre producer, W. Payne Seddon, who in 1904 alone, brought six productions to the Town Hall from April to November, including comedies like *Are you a Mason?*, *A Message from Mars* and *A Chinese Honeymoon*.<sup>31</sup> The choice of play seemed to be entirely dependent on availability and viability of the touring companies who were engaged on a circuitous route from Belfast to Cork or Wexford, via Dublin.<sup>32</sup> *A Message from Mars* was advertised as having been performed 700 times at The Avenue Theatre, London, while *The New Clown* also performed in 1904, was advertised as having been recently performed at the Gaiety, Dublin, and the Theatre Royal, Belfast.<sup>33</sup> These advertisements suggest that Payne Seddon was aware that his audience in Dundalk were interested in successful productions from both Dublin and London. Although a small town, Dundalk was close enough to Dublin, that regular special trains would be organised in January each year to bring Dundalk residents to the pantomimes in the Gaiety and the Theatre Royal.<sup>34</sup> It is also clear from the 'About Town' sections, and editorials like the 'Modern Stage' discussion of 1902, and reprinted excerpts from *The Leader* and other nationalistic journals, that the *Democrat* saw the Dundalk audience as cosmopolitan, educated and discerning. In 1907, there were four visiting productions of Shakespeare plays, and in

<sup>27</sup> About Town page, 'The Modern Stage', *Dundalk Democrat*, 4 Oct. 1900, see also advert for the Ben Greet Company, 'The Great American Play', *Dundalk Democrat* 24/25 Sept. 1900.

<sup>28</sup> *The Belle of New York* was advertised at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, 12 Dec. 1899, advertised at Theatre Royal, Dublin, 24 Aug.–3 Sept. 1898, from 12 Aug. 1900–16 Aug. 1900: see *Irish Times* for those dates.

<sup>29</sup> About Town page, 'The Modern Stage II: The Belle of New York', *Dundalk Democrat*, 11 Oct. 1900.

<sup>30</sup> Advertisements in *Dundalk Democrat*, 19 Apr., 26 Apr. 1902.

<sup>31</sup> *Dundalk Democrat* 16 Apr., 1 Oct., 26 Nov. 1904.

<sup>32</sup> About Town, 'Mr Payne Seddon's Benefit', *Dundalk Democrat*, 2 May 1908. See also Fitzpatrick Dean, *Riot and Great Anger*, p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> Advertisements in *Dundalk Democrat*, 3 Sept. 1904 and 1 Oct. 1904.

<sup>34</sup> Advertisements for special trains on the front page of the *Dundalk Democrat*, 6 Jan. 1900, 5 Jan. 1901.

February 1908, Payne Seddon brought productions of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>35</sup> At a benefit performance in May 1908 to celebrate fifteen years of visiting Dundalk, Payne Seddon complemented his audience: 'In Dundalk he found the people could laugh at a farce and occasionally enjoy the jingle of musical comedy; but even the man in the street, who occupies the back seats, commonly known as the region of the gods, can appreciate in its turn a really good play'.<sup>36</sup>

That Payne Seddon could keep returning to Dundalk and run touring versions of West End productions for two or three nights four to six times a year, suggests that there was a significant proportion of the population who were happy to pay to see these plays. Audiences also flocked to see amateur performances in the Town Hall, perhaps because they knew the performers, but also because productions were entertaining or even controversial. The most successful productions in terms of achieving audience capacity in the Town Hall seem to have been the run of melodramas performed by the drama class of the Dundalk CYMS, which premiered its first full scale production in 1901. Their premiere production was *The Shaughraun* by Dion Boucicault, first performed at their 200-seat gymnasium at the end of March 1901. On the 9 April, Easter Tuesday that year, they reproduced their performance in the Town Hall with 'beautifully illuminated tableaux and mechanical effects'.<sup>37</sup> The columnist for the *Democrat* was supportive, if not enthusiastic: 'The piece was very well presented, the acting being very good in some parts, and the staging was first rate'.<sup>38</sup> The lack of success of some of the acting may have been because the CYMS did not consider it appropriate for young women to spend their evenings 'in an exclusively male club, especially when they would be called upon, without even a chaperon, to rehearse a loving embrace, or even a kiss'. This prudishness meant that all the female romantic leads were played by 'beardless youth' until 1904.<sup>39</sup>

The company was more successful in the casting of its comic lead, Conn, the *Shaughraun*, played by Hugh McDermott, who became a leading member of the company. Boucicault's play premiered in New York in 1874, and although set during the Fenian insurrection of 1866, contains 'young lovers, a priest, an English gentleman' and the archetypal 'Stage Irishman' in Conn, 'the soul of every fair, the life of every funeral, the first fiddle at all weddings and patterns'.<sup>40</sup> The production was so popular that it was revived the following year as a benefit production for the 'Christian Schools, Dundalk'.<sup>41</sup> Many came to see the production again, however the *Democrat* considered the choice of play lacked merit. The antagonist of the play is Kinchela, an evil double-crossing squireen who is aided by the police agent, Harvey Duff. In addition, one of the two heroes is a sympathetic portrayal of an English character, Captain Molineux, who falls in love with an Irish heiress who has fallen on hard times.

The problem for the columnist of the *Democrat* was that although he saw the value in the dramatic class as a 'very pleasant and useful recreation', he objected to the poor quality of the play choices by the CYMS. He described Irish drama as in a 'transitional stage', with no good quality plays as yet produced by the Gaelic movement and the old melodramas seeming not only unfashionable but too British and in poor taste.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> About Town, *Dundalk Democrat* 29 Feb. 1908, 2 May 1908.

<sup>36</sup> W. Payne Seddon quoted by the *Dundalk Democrat*, 2 May 1908.

<sup>37</sup> Advert from *Dundalk Democrat*, 6 Apr. 1901.

<sup>38</sup> About Town, *Dundalk Democrat*, 30 Mar. 1901.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Curran, 'Drama in Dundalk', *The Tempest Annual*, (Tempest, Dundalk, 1959), p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Fawkes, *Dion Boucicault: A Biography*, (London: Quartet Books, 1979), p. 194. See also Dion Boucicault character list in Andrew Parkin (intro) *Dion Boucicault Selected Plays* (Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 258.

<sup>41</sup> Advertisement in *Dundalk Democrat*, 5 Apr. 1902.

<sup>42</sup> 'A True Son of Erin', Review, *Dundalk Democrat*, 8 Feb. 1902.

Their 1902 production of Whitbread's melodrama, *A True Son of Erin*, provoked the *Democrat* columnist to vigorously criticise the author for his 'strong melodrama' and an unnecessary amount of 'slewsthering' or love making, as well as taking the heroes from the Irish landlord class and the British Navy. Considering that all the female parts were played by boys, the columnist's anxiety about the how 'Irish girls love without loss of modesty' seems misplaced. He accepted that Whitbread's work was 'a laudable attempt' but felt it was unrealistic, and bemoaned the lack of a true Irish drama that looked at the 'deep tragedy of Irish life':

It is saying much for him that he has contrived to make his plays much less offensive than many; but when – oh when? – will an Irishman worthy of the part arise to give us, after centuries of Mickey Frees, plays showing us Irish life as it is, bringing out the nobilities that underlie our national character, not the idiosyncrasies that be on the surface.<sup>43</sup>

By 1908 the CYMS had to accept their melodramas were beginning to seem outdated. Not only had they produced all of Boucicault's major Irish plays, *The Shaughraun*, *Colleen Bawn* and *Arrah-na-Pogue*, they had also produced many by Whitbread and Hubert O'Grady. The most notorious was probably O'Grady's *The Fenian* produced in 1903, which did not even merit a review from the *Democrat*, but instead prompted a reprint of comment made in the *United Irishman*. The production was criticised for having 'all the worst faults of this class of drama'. Although from the title you would expect a nationalist theme to emerge, the *United Irishman* describes it as a 'common place love story' the hero of which is a young lieutenant in the British Army. Worst of all the 'Irish characters are made to appear stupid, low and vulgar, while the English personages are well-nigh perfect'.<sup>44</sup> The poor choice of play was seen as symptomatic of a lack of patriotism and nationalistic fervour in the CYMS in which the Irish class and hurling club had both seemed to die out through lack of interest. This attack was followed up the next week by a reprint from *The Leader* in which not only was the play described as 'a glorification of a British military officer' but the members of the CYMS were described as 'West British', and accused of tearing up copies of *The Leader* in their reading room.<sup>45</sup> The *Democrat* pointed out that this information must have come from a member and there is the suggestion that internally the CYMS was undergoing a breakdown in the group between those who saw it as a social club and those who saw it as a proto-political organisation.<sup>46</sup>

By 1908, many of those dissenting voices may have taken up membership of other social and political organisations, as the *Democrat* has a number of pages in each weekly edition devoted to notices and reports from meetings of local branches of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the United Irish League, the Irish National Foresters and Sinn Féin. Perhaps because of this and a shift in the temperament of the time, the CYMS drama class, which still included many of the original members like Hugh McDermott, P.J. Murphy and P.J. Watters, decided to produce *O'Donnell's Cross* by Lottie MacManus in 1908. MacManus's play seems to have been first produced at the Rotunda, Dublin, in 1907, and is associated with the National Players Society, a nationalist organisation that combined Edward Martyn, members of the Gaelic League, and Cumann na nGaedheal.<sup>47</sup> The *Democrat* was pleased with the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Review of *The Fenian*, *United Irishman*, reprinted in About Town section, *Dundalk Democrat*, 7 Mar. 1903.

<sup>45</sup> Quote from *The Leader*, reprinted in About Town section, *Dundalk Democrat*, 14 Mar. 1903.

<sup>46</sup> See About Town section, *Dundalk Democrat*, 14 Mar. 1903.

<sup>47</sup> Trotter, *Ireland's Nationalist Theatres* p. 129; Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel, *Productions of the Irish Theatre Movement, 1899–1916: A Checklist* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 37; Eileen Kearney and Charlotte J. Headrick, *Irish Women Dramatists 1908–2001*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), p. 5.

choice of play by the CYMS, describing it as a 'play of a different character' that represented 'a higher aim than its predecessors'.<sup>48</sup>

*O'Donnell's Cross* is a reworking of the popular melodrama *Sarsfield* by Whitbread, although from the *Democrat's* description it is difficult to tell the difference. The O'Donnell's Cross of the title is a diamond crucifix that is entrusted to Lady Sarsfield by a young officer during the Siege of Limerick. The cross is lost and then rescued by a young Irish woman, Eithne Ni Brien, and returned in time to save the reputation of Iveagh, the hero of the piece. The *Democrat* concludes that the play ends in the usual way 'with the preliminaries for a marriage'. Peace had obviously been restored between the columnist of the *Democrat* and the CYMS as he complemented each member of the company individually and concluded, 'Altogether the production reflected the greatest credit upon the members of this Club, who with each succeeding production prove themselves more and more entitled to commendation and support'.<sup>49</sup>

*O'Donnell's Cross* may have been associated with many of the organisations of the Cultural Revival, but it was still essentially a melodrama that ended with marriage after intrigue and comedy. The CYMS would continue with its populist dramas until the 1920s when it became more noted for 'Savoy operas'.<sup>50</sup> However, it failed to engage in serious intellectually or politically motivated drama. The criticisms of the organisation in 1903 seemed to be symptomatic of a strong conservative element. For a more radical engagement with the artistic exploits of the Revival, Dundalk needed to turn to the YIS.

The YIS may have engaged in drama classes for some time before their premiere productions in 1908, but they were a much more politically and artistically minded group than the CYMS. In 1904, they invited Cumann na nGaedheal to perform two plays as part of their St Patrick's Day celebrations. Cumann na nGaedheal brought a new version of *Robert Emmet* by Henry Connell Mangan that had only premiered in 1903 at the Samhain Festival to celebrate Emmet's centenary. This was quite a different play than the 'burlesque under the same name written by a certain English comedian'.<sup>51</sup> Both Whitbread and Boucicault had produced versions of the life story of Robert Emmet, which were highly wrought, melodramatic and inaccurate.<sup>52</sup> The Mangan version had none of this artifice, and the columnist of the *Democrat* could not speak highly enough of this version of Emmet's life story:

One sees faithfully reflected the high and noble aims of the young patriot, the really well-matured wisdom of plans that a rash world has called foolhardy; the steadfast loyalty and self-sacrifice of Anne Devlin, Dwyer, and a very few conspirators; the cowardice and falseness of too many, the hideous web of treachery woven by England's watchdogs in the Castle.<sup>53</sup>

The production itself was aided by a fine performance from Abbey actors, Dudley Digges and Maire Quinn in the lead roles of Robert Emmet and Sarah Curran, and was altogether described as a fine amateur production, 'vastly superior in artistic comprehension to many professionals we have known'. The evening was completed by a short bilingual comedy by Douglas Hyde called *Bursting the Bubble* in which a group of university professors who mock the Irish language are cursed to speak only Irish when the Lord

<sup>48</sup> About Town, *Dundalk Democrat*, 15 Feb. 1908.

<sup>49</sup> 'Catholic Young Men's Society Dramatic Entertainment', 22 Feb. 1908.

<sup>50</sup> Arthur Curran, 'Drama in Dundalk', *The Tempest Annual*, (Tempest, Dundalk, 1959), p. 32.

<sup>51</sup> About Town, *Dundalk Democrat*, 12 Mar. 1904.

<sup>52</sup> See for example Act Four, Last Tableau, *Robert Emmet*, in *Dion Boucicault Selected Plays*, p397, in which Emmet is shot in the Yard at Kilmainham Gaol, and then a figure of Ireland appears like Mary, Mother of Jesus, to create a Pieta like tableau.

<sup>53</sup> 'Irish Plays in The Town Hall', *Dundalk Democrat*, 19 Mar. 1904.



Lieutenant visits their college in Dublin. After the drama of *Robert Emmet* this seems to have been a very welcome relief, provoking ‘roars of laughter’.<sup>54</sup> This visit, organised by the YIS, was obviously inspirational as four years later they produced their own productions of similar Revival plays. The *Democrat* not only ran advertisements for the YIS premiere production in the two weeks running up to their opening night on St Patrick’s night, 17 March 1908, but devoted a full page-length column to a review of their two offerings, *Kathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Eloquent Dempsey*. The Town Hall was full and they were not disappointed, ‘even experienced actors could hardly have done better’ according to the *Democrat*. *Kathleen ni Houlihan* was considered an ‘ambitious effort’ and ‘one which might try the capacities of seasoned actors’. In fact, the *Democrat* columnist was very impressed with this first public effort from the YIS, particularly the performance of Miss Matthews in the role of Kathleen. The lead role in William Boyle’s *The Eloquent Dempsey* was taken by P. O’Connell who ‘astonished even his intimate friends by the fervour and enthusiasm with which he threw himself into the part’. The second play was a comedy, but equally challenging theatrically in that Dempsey is required to give ‘half a dozen lengthy and ornate speeches’ in his attempt to avoid committing to either side in his manoeuvres between the Home Rulers and Unionists in small town Ireland. The ‘audience dispersed in a state of high good humour’ and it seemed that the *Democrat* felt they had found a new popular theatre group who produced true Irish drama.<sup>55</sup> There is little suggestion that there was any political motivation in this presentation, either from the performers or the audience. Although Boyle’s play was relatively modern, only having premiered at the Abbey in 1906, *Kathleen ni Houlihan* had been in circulation both as a performance and in print since 1902. Boyle’s play is essentially a representation, in comic form, of problems of modern contemporaneous Irish life, whereas Yeats and Lady Gregory’s play has a good deal in common with the patriotic associations of a Queen’s melodrama as a young man is called to join the rebellion of 1798. Unlike a Queen’s melodrama, however, there is no comedy, no happy ending with marriage, and the only solution to the hero’s problem on offer is self-sacrifice and death in the service of Ireland. Although the reaction of the audience to this was not really described as the *Democrat* focussed on the positive feeling left by the second comedy, the columnist’s concentration on the skill of the performance suggests that the play was at least impressive from a theatrical perspective.

As with the CYMS, the YIS drama class only made one presentation a year, and chose to perform on St Patrick’s Day in a deliberate attempt to provide an Irish themed celebration for the evening. Over the following years, plays from both the Abbey catalogue and that of the Ulster Literary Theatre were presented, and represented by the YIS. In March 1909, Rutherford Mayne’s interesting play analysing the response of the Northern Protestant community to the arts was the opening play. It had premiered in 1906 at the Examination Hall of Queen’s University Belfast, performed by the Ulster Literary Theatre, and was then published in 1907 in Dublin. The play’s central problem was whether the Co. Down based protagonist, Robbie John, should give up his gift for music to settle down to work and marriage. Having destroyed his own violin at the behest of his father, he is offered temptation when he inherits a violin from a tramp he befriended. His fiancé supports him in following his dream but his father disowns him and drives him from the home. This drama was contrasted with Lady Gregory’s comedy, *Hyacinth Halvey*, originally produced at the Abbey in 1906.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “‘The Eloquent Dempsey’, Dramatic Performance by Dundalk Young Ireland Society’, *Dundalk Democrat*, 21 Mar. 1908.

<sup>56</sup> ‘The Turn of the Road’, *Dundalk Democrat*, 20 Mar. 1909, p. 4. See also <http://www.irishplayography.com/play.aspx?playid=1353> (accessed 24/6/16).

The following year, 1910, the YIS presented four one-act plays over a matinee and evening performance, two previous presentations and two new plays. *The Eloquent Dempsey* was the matinee performance, and the evening performance ended with a representation of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. The evening performance opened with Synge's tragedy, *Riders to the Sea*, followed by another Lady Gregory comedy, *The Jackdaw*. Again, the *Democrat* refers to how the Town Hall was 'packed to the doors' and goes into considerable detail naming each cast member and their qualities of performance. However, the columnist did not seem to be greatly impressed by either tragedy, and reserved his briefest comments for these two plays. He only listed the cast of *Kathleen ni Houlihan* saying their parts were 'well taken', but since it had already been reviewed in 1908, he did not feel the need to repeat himself. He might have said more about *Riders to the Sea*, as it was a new production for the company, but all the columnist could say was that 'while it gives scope for very good acting, is not a piece which appeals in any sense to an audience'. By comparison, both comedies got up to half a column of description, suggesting that although the *Democrat* could write extensively on the value of the Irish language and the cultural Revival, it still preferred its Irish culture to be comic rather than tragic.<sup>57</sup> As an amateur group who were largely involved in drama for enjoyment, it is hardly surprising that in the following years they focussed on similar comedies from the Abbey school of playwrights like William Boyle's *The Mineral Workers*. The group's drama activities seemed to fade away by the 1920s, probably choosing to focus on the strength of their Gaelic football club.<sup>58</sup>

Prior to 1916, however, the YIS Dramatic Class quickly became one of many associated with the villages and towns of north Louth. In January 1909, Reaghstown Temperance Solidarity Dramatic Class performed *The Eloquent Dempsey* and another comedy by Lady Gregory, *Spreading the News*.<sup>59</sup> In April 1910, the Dunleer Dramatic Class were more ambitious, performing a patriotic melodrama by Ira Allen called *Father Murphy, or the Hero of Tullow*.<sup>60</sup> In January 1911, the Farney Players in Carrickmacross were more inclined towards Revival plays, producing a comedy by Lady Gregory called *The Workhouse Ward* and a four-act drama by Count Markievicz called *The Memory of the Dead*. This play again recounted the story of 1798, as it dealt with 'Ireland after the French invasion, and presented in vivid colour the story of failure, ruin and gloom, with tragedy surmounting all'. The *Democrat* was impressed that this Polish Count had captured the tragedy of the situation and had not resorted to the humour of most Irish playwrights: 'It was a triumph for our amateurs that with such material in hand they not only made the piece interesting, but succeeded in giving that lump in the throat arising from a sympathetic feeling between the auditorium and the stage'.<sup>61</sup>

The wide variety of groups performing in Dundalk and the surrounding areas shows that there was clearly a great excitement and feeling of engagement with the process of creating plays. Paige Reynolds describes the 'craze for drama supported by the volume and variety of theatrical activity in Dublin and across the country', and there is certainly wide evidence of this in Dundalk.<sup>62</sup> And nowhere can the symbiotic relationship between performance and politics be seen more clearly than in the plays presented by the Sinn Féin drama class in 1909. Sinn Féin struggled as a political force in Dundalk in the early years of

<sup>57</sup> 'Young Ireland Dramatic Class Production of Four Plays', *Dundalk Democrat*, 19 Mar. 1910, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur Curran, 'Drama in Dundalk', *Tempest Annual*, (1959), p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 6 Feb. 1909.

<sup>60</sup> *Dundalk Democrat*, 2 Apr. 1910.

<sup>61</sup> 'The Farney Players, Production of "The Memory of The Dead" and "The Work House Ward"', *Dundalk Democrat*, 21 Jan. 1911, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama, and The Audience for Irish Spectacle*, p. 21.

the century, as it competed with the strong Redmonite feelings in the town, and the numerous diverse political and social organisations.<sup>63</sup>

Apart from the dramatic attempts to defend the Catholic community of Rostrevor from attacks by the Orange Order during the July marching seasons from 1903 on, the president of Sinn Féin in Dundalk, Paddy Hughes, was most noted by his followers for his enthusiasm for lectures and plays.<sup>64</sup> Hugh Kearney explained that Hughes's idea was for Sinn Féin to organise 'plenty of lectures, plays and concerts in which the policy of physical force was stressed as a means of obtaining our freedom from English rule'.

According to Hughes, such entertainment attracted large audiences even though most of those present 'had no use for Sinn Féin as a serious political weapon'. Kearney complained that their performances were not rewarded with the increase in recruits they felt their efforts deserved, but he argued that the performances did 'create an interest among the people in a general way' that later helped to swell the ranks of the Irish Volunteers.<sup>65</sup> Although the witness statements refer to productions of two plays, *Lord Edward Fitzgerald* and *Robert Emmet*, the only production that seemed to be reviewed by the *Democrat* was Mangan's version of the Emmet story performed by the dramatic class of the Sinn Féin Society in the Town Hall on 20 April 1909. However, this was not the first public performance of this production, as the *Democrat* recorded that 'the class had already produced the latter piece in their own hall'. The Sinn Féin Dramatic Class were hugely ambitious, performing two three-act dramas on the same night, *Robert Emmet* and *The Patriot Priest*. There is no author listed for this second play, and very little detail given of the production, except to complain that one of the actors overdid his part 'as to more faintly resemble that almost extinct monstrosity, the stage Irishman'. Dundalk had already seen Mangan's version of *Robert Emmet* performed by the semi-professional players of Cumann na nGaedheal in 1904, so the *Democrat* was conscious that this was 'an ambitious piece for any company to tackle, doubly so for amateurs'. However, the Sinn Féin actors seem to have produced a creditable performance, with Joseph Berrill being described as particularly good in the role of Emmet. The major criticism of the presentation was that the evening was too long and that the class had made a 'major error of judgement' in doing two full-length plays on the one evening. This did not seem to deter the 'very large audience' in attendance, so perhaps Hughes was not boasting in his suggestions that these entertainments were popular.<sup>66</sup> He was also incorrect in suggesting that there were no recruits for the organisation through these productions, as at least two members of the cast for these plays in 1909 appear on a list of those involved with the Irish Volunteers in 1916. Joseph Berrill, who played Emmet, James Jennings who appeared as Billy Byrne in *The Patriot Priest*, and possibly Pat McHugh, who may be the 'Mr MacHugh' who played a minor role in *Robert Emmett*, all appear on the list. There is also a Maria Jennings on the cast list, who might have been a relative of James Jennings, as well as Michael and Gilbert Coburn who could have been related to Frank Coburn who is listed as one of the Volunteers.<sup>67</sup> The lack of secondary reports of these Sinn Féin productions beyond this appearance in 1909 may be because the Dramatic Class chose to keep their performances for the internal audience at their own hall, or that the class declined very soon after this performance as the Sinn Féin members became more involved in political activity. James McGuill's witness statement is the only one to refer to both *Robert Emmet* and *Lord Edward*

<sup>63</sup> Bureau of Military History (BMH), Witness Statements WS.494, 'Peter Kieran'; WS.353, 'James McGuill'; WS.677, 'Hugh Kearney'; WS.644, 'Patrick McHugh'.

<sup>64</sup> See for example, *Dundalk Democrat* 4 Jul. 1903, 18 Jul. 1903; BMH WS.494, 'Peter Kieran' WS.353, 'James McGuill'.

<sup>65</sup> BMH, WS.677, 'Hugh Kearney'.

<sup>66</sup> 'Robert Emmet', *Dundalk Democrat*, 24 Apr. 1909, p4.

<sup>67</sup> List of Volunteers, Victor Whitmarsh, *Old Dundalk*, (Dundalk: Whitmarsh, 1988), pp. 80–2.

*Fitzgerald*, although there is no other evidence that Sinn Féin produced the second play. It is interesting to note, however, that less than two months before the Sinn Féin production of *Robert Emmet*, the CYMS produced Whitbread's version of *Lord Edward, or '98*. Perhaps McGuill had confused the groups who produced these plays in his memory, and if not as performers, then certainly as audience, there was probably considerable crossover between the amateur groups performing in Dundalk.

There is one final group of performers in Dundalk who were perhaps growing in awareness of nationalism during this time, and this was the children of the Friary schools. Below the controversial review of *A True Son of Erin* in 1902, the *Democrat* took note of a new play by Shemus O'Toole called *The King of West Britain* to be produced by the Oriel Amateur Dramatic Company. The columnist was obviously familiar with this upcoming production in writing his review of *A True Son of Erin* as this new production seemed to attempt to fulfil his desires for a new Irish drama. Although the children of the Friary schools presented the production, it merited a full column on the 'About Town' page both on opening in February and when it was revived in May 1902. It seems that the true author of this allegorical piece was Father Ambrose Coleman, a priest from the Friary who was clearly a convert to the Celtic Revival. In the programme distributed at the second performance of the play in May he complained that the conventional fare of popular Irish drama, 'highly-wrought and blood-curdling melodramatic productions, with comic parts well-seasoned with vulgarity' were 'unsuited to the aspirations of our people'. He suggested that audiences were now looking for 'something that will elevate and refine the mind, rather than for what evokes storms of shallow laughter while it reduces us all to one common level of vulgarity'.<sup>68</sup> However, he tried to suggest the aspirations of the play were not political, 'The play is an attempt to put into dramatic form the National ideals, and is in no sense political. The burthen of it all is the cultivation of the National language, National music and customs – the formation in a word of a self-conscious and self-respecting Irish-Ireland'.<sup>69</sup>

The play seems to have been a poetic musical mythic fantasy with large sections in Irish, performed by forty school girls. The play had three acts. In the first, 'The Coming of the Stranger', the King and Queen of Oriel are shown falling under the influence of English 'ways and manners'. In the second act, 'The Great Enchantment', the King and Queen are enchanted and fall asleep allowing their places to be taken by John Bull and Eliza Jane Hopkins, a 'denationalized person'. The King's son, Donagh, is forced to change his name to Alfred, and the country falls under the spell of worshipping all things English. Maura, the Irish nurse, is the only dissident voice who deplores the 'terrible abasement of her country'. In the third act, 'The Great Awakening', the true king's second son, Colm, who was stolen by the fairies as a baby, is returned as an adult who can only speak Irish. The fairies represent authentic Irishness, they speak only Irish and perform traditional Irish songs and dances. They have given Colm a charm to wake his parents, and when he does so the country also awakes to see what they have been sleepwalking through. They banish John Bull and his partner, and the play concludes with 'a magnificent chorus of "Awake, ye men of Erin," led by the faithful Maura'.<sup>70</sup>

When first performed in February, the house was a little disappointing, and the *Democrat* felt it necessary to go into a detailed explanation of the plot. However, when the play was represented in May the matinee and evening performances were both crowded and the audience were 'sympathetic and at times quite wildly enthusiastic'.<sup>71</sup> The *Democrat*

<sup>68</sup> Father Coleman, quoted by Arthur Curran, 'Drama in Dundalk', *Tempest Annual* (1959), p29. See 'The King of West Britain', *Dundalk Democrat*, 17 May 1902.

<sup>69</sup> 'The King of West Britain', *Dundalk Democrat*, 17 May 1902.

<sup>70</sup> 'The King of West Britain', *Dundalk Democrat*, 15 February 1902.

<sup>71</sup> 'The King of West Britain', *Dundalk Democrat*, 17 May 1902.



columnist was obviously a supporter, and he described the ovation Coleman received at the end of the play when he stepped in front of the curtain, so his audience at least appreciated his efforts. One must be mindful though that any audience for a children's performance is liable to be partial as it will contain family, so it would have been interesting to see reactions to an adult performance of the same play. However, Coleman's troupe of child performers were not unique at the time, as can be seen by Pearse's plays for St Enda's School in Dublin. In fact, the boys from St Enda's visited Castlebellingham in June 1911 to perform *The Pageant of the Boy Deeds of Cuchulainn*, and were anticipated with such excitement that the *Democrat* printed two articles with detailed descriptions of the pageant in the weeks before the performance.<sup>72</sup>

Coleman's play does not seem to have been revived after 1902, and the Oriel Amateur Dramatic Company may have continued to do performances in their own hall in the Friary school, but the *Democrat* does not seem to have reported on these efforts. However, the little girls who performed in this nationalist allegory in 1902 would have been between 19 and 25 at the time of the Rising, as would the audience of school children brought in to watch the drama for the matinee in May 1902. The concluding lines of Coleman's play spoken by Maura, might well have had some significance for them:

Learn that the country is not dead; the seeds  
Scattered by hands like mine, will germinate  
And sprout in barren soil, on naked rocks,  
Spreading an emerald carpet o'er the land.  
What seemeth dead is not dead but asleep,  
And though the nation in deep slumber lie,  
'Twill wake again.<sup>73</sup>

Coleman may not have been a poet in the same class as Yeats, but he certainly created a play that might stand with the efforts of Pearse and Markievicz to create an authentic nationalist or national drama.

Dundalk was perhaps an unusual small town at the beginning of the twentieth century in having such a significant number and diversity of theatrical performances. This research has not been able to cover all the efforts of the different groups, both professional and amateur, who performed in the Town Hall, never mind the smaller venues around the town that were not even covered in the local papers. That so much of the work produced by the amateur groups should focus on ideas of playing the rebel is quite striking. Robert Emmett and the history of 1798 seems to be a recurring motif, whether in melodramas or Revival plays. The intense scrutiny and discussion of the need for a national drama as well as language, music and culture, which is frequently a topic of the *Dundalk Democrat* is also an important theme to emerge from this analysis. The regular voice of the *Democrat* is concerned that the people of the town should learn Irish, practice Irish sports and cultural activities, and that their minds should not be corrupted by immoral English or American imports, as well as stale anti-nationalist representations of 'Stage Irishmen'. That the plays most closely associated with the 'Stage Irishmen' should be the standard fare for both amateur and many professional groups performing in Dundalk shows another interesting theme to emerge, the battle between the popular and the artistic vision of Ireland. Yeats and Lady Gregory, among others, would have the same arguments about whether new Irish drama should be mythic, poetic and esoteric, or popular and realistic as well as national. What does seem clear from the frequent mention of the significant audiences for these productions, is

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<sup>72</sup> See 'The Cuchulainn Pageant', *Dundalk Democrat*, 28 May 1910, p4 and 'The Boy Deeds of Cuchulainn', *Dundalk Democrat*, 11 Jun. 1910, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> 'The King of West Britain', *Dundalk Democrat*, 17 May 1902.

that the people in Dundalk were regular theatre goers. It may have been only the select few who engaged in performing in these plays, but there must have been a wide variety of classes represented in the audience of all these plays. Whether it was soldiers and town's people at *The Belle of New York* or children at *The King of West Britain*, audiences seemed to represent all classes and all political allegiances.

The dominance of plays celebrating and commemorating nationalist heroes and condemning the impoverishment of Irish life lived under colonisation may not have directly prompted anyone to join the Rising in 1916. But, as Yeats famous poem *The Man and the Echo* suggested, it is not difficult to see how Joseph Berrill playing Robert Emmet might have felt his role in the National Volunteers in 1916 was legitimated. There is also a correlation to be made between Fr Coleman's play, and Yeats' own thoughts. When Coleman suggested that 'the seeds scattered by hands like mine, will germinate and sprout in barren soil', he could not know that fourteen years later 'The Great Awakening' would finally come. We have no record of whether Coleman was in Dundalk at the time of the Rising, but many of his audience certainly were, and maybe they had been inspired to take part by watching his play, just as Yeats reflected on the effects of his own play *Kathleen ni Houlihan*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> I wish to acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Lorraine McCann at the Louth County Archive, Alan Hand and the staff of the reference section of the Louth County Library, Dundalk, and my colleague in the Department of Humanities, Dundalk IT, Dr Martin Maguire, for setting me off on the trail of drama in Dundalk at the time of the Rising.

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