

James Christopher O'Flynn and The Cork Shakespearean Company

Annetta Kavanagh

In Ireland, the period between 1891-1922 known as the Revival, was a curious mix of political agitation and frenetic literary, linguistic, and musical activity which shaped modern Irish culture. It was a time when new synergies were manifested linking artistic ventures with nationalist sentiment. Cork was at the centre of this febrile revolutionary activity. The Rev James Christopher O'Flynn (hereafter referred to as O'Flynn), moved in circles close to key political, intellectual, and artistic figures who helped forge the new state. He is, however, largely unknown. Despite his huge contribution to the movement, he turned his back on the spirit of the Revival and turned instead to producing the works of Shakespeare. His theatre company, The Cork Shakespearean Company, remains the longest running amateur Shakespearean company in the world. What is perhaps even more extraordinary is that for its first decade, the Cork Shakespearean Company was comprised almost entirely of working-class players.

O'Flynn was born on 12 December 1881. His father, Con O'Flynn, worked as a butter inspector in the Cork Butter Market. His mother, Kate, née Uppington, was the product of a mixed marriage; her father and her brothers attended St Ann's Protestant church while she and her sisters attended Mass at the North Chapel (O'Donoghue 29). His mother had a fine singing voice and a love of music and poetry. She would reportedly expose her children to opera, particularly Bellini (Smith 26). By all accounts they were a talented musical and theatrical family who enjoyed music, poetry, drama, and opera. Richard O'Donoghue gives an account of a typical Sunday evening in the O'Flynn home where the entire family would have a musical evening, their repertoire was extensive; collectively they sang in church choirs, the Cork Operatic Society and the Cork Union Choir. In his *Notebooks* O'Flynn describes his home life: "There was Grand Opera talk at home. The mother ironed the clothes and sang 'Hear Me Normas' as she worked. We were poor. The singer on the phonograph was rough, almost offensive." O'Flynn attended Blackpool National School and the North Monastery Christian Brothers School. In 1899, O'Flynn began his religious life when he joined the junior seminary in Farranferris, Cork. In September 1902 he entered the Pontifical University, Maynooth. O'Flynn's academic prowess was evident from his early days in Maynooth where he was awarded a first in English and was appointed Class Monitor (Smith 34).

In 1895 Abraham McHardy-Flint was appointed lecturer in English, and performances by Shakespeare, Goldsmith and Sheridan soon became *de rigueur* in the Aula Maxima, Maynooth. It was during his seven years in Maynooth that O'Flynn became better acquainted with Shakespeare and came to the attention of McHardy-

Flint, who had been a pupil of Sir Henry Irving, the great Shakespearean actor and “apotheosis of the Victorian actor-manager” (Hughes 242). Sir Henry Irving was one of the most celebrated Shakespearean actors of his age and dominated the London stage between 1878-1902. In 1903 O’Flynn played King Lear with such intensity that McHardy-Flint fainted: “That is more than Irving, or all the other great Shakespearean actors ever did” (Smith 34). Given the stature of Irving, this observation is astonishing. There is no question that O’Flynn was a very fine actor. Raymond Smith opines that O’Flynn was so taken up with performing and directing Shakespeare that he abandoned all other activities. Holidays from College were spent reading Shakespeare and staging plays in an outbuilding at his home in Cork.

O’Flynn established his theatrical credentials with the Great Pageant of 1911. Theatrical pageants down through the ages have had a powerful potency; the combined elements of theatre and spectacle create a display of communal identity and unity. One of the central tropes of nationalism was reconnecting with heroic figures from the past such as Cúchulainn. In 1911 O’Flynn curated a pageant to celebrate the Centenary of the Christian Brothers North Monastery School. The pageant was a celebration of Irish Ireland, using a model adopted by Pearse to re-enact the Cúchulainn cycle. It was a huge undertaking involving the young adults of Shandon, an area on the north side of the city with considerable social problems. Staged over five nights it had a cast of five hundred. Astonishingly, *The Cork Examiner*, 4 September 1911¹ reported upon the entire proceedings of the pageant which began with a High Mass in the Cathedral. The sermon was reported word for word and ran to thirty column inches. Significantly, and of its time, there was a strong nationalist resonance throughout. The pageant was hailed by *The Cork Examiner* as “leaving an ineffaceable impression” (ibid). It is within this context that O’Flynn made his debut into the theatrical world of Cork City that was neither highbrow in the manner of the Cork Shakespearean Society, nor avant-garde as in the Cork Dramatic Society.

In addition to the highly successful Pageant of 1911, another vehicle through which O’Flynn asserted his magnetism in the lead-up to his establishing the Cork Shakespearean Company, was his commitment to traditional Irish music. He befriended Professor Richard Henebry, Professor of Irish at University College, Cork, and an expert in traditional Irish music. Later, and controversially, he would actively support Carl Hardebeck’s appointment as Professor of Irish Music at University College Cork. Indeed, locally he was praised for bringing Hardebeck to Cork (*The Skibbereen Eagle*, 23 December 1919). O’Flynn’s talent for teaching and his keen interest in traditional music endeared him to his community. Traditional singing classes at the Cork School of Music under O’Flynn increased in popularity. *The Cork Examiner* commenting on O’Flynn’s address on the subject of traditional Irish music reports: “Many of the records he has taken in Ballingearry from the traditional singers and others have been lent him by enthusiastic collectors” (30 October 1915).

The task of reviving Irish scholarship and the Irish language at the beginning of the twentieth century was formidable. Earlier it was indicated that O’Flynn aligned

¹ Newspaper articles referred to in this essay were retrieved by microfiche. Author names and page numbers are not available.

himself with several key figures in the Gaelic Revival movement; Kuno Meyer (1858-1919) was one such. O'Flynn campaigned vigorously for a school of Celtic Studies to which Meyer would subsequently be appointed. In July 1911, the Corporation of Dublin decided to confer the freedom of the City on Kuno Meyer in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to Irish scholarship. The following May he was elected Honourable Burgess of the City of Cork in recognition of his services to the Irish language and to the Irish literary movement (O'Luing 43). O'Flynn oversaw the reception committee with the students from the North Monastery dressed in the costumes of the 1911 pageant. Concomitant with the restoration of Irish scholarship there was growing concern that if the hegemony of Irish values were to be restored then the Irish language must be spoken. In 1851 fifty percent of the population spoke monolingual Irish; by 1861 this had fallen to five percent (Rees 78). The vehicle for learning and disseminating the language was the Gaelic League, it was: "the hub of the revival, maintaining a not inconsiderable professional staff of editors, writers, teachers and organisers to sustain its publishing and industrial activities; Irish summer schools and several hundred branches" (Hutchinson 291).

Membership of the Gaelic League was a broad church and comprised an entire cross section of social class. In August 1904, the first Irish College, Coláistena Mumhar opened its doors in the West Cork Gaeltacht of Ballingeary. This college would prove critical in developing the League's policy of expansion, most especially in Munster. In 1910, O'Flynn spent time in Ballingeary, and subsequent summers were spent in the Irish speaking districts of Ring in County Waterford and Ballinskelligs in County Kerry. O'Flynn mingled with fishermen and assisted farmers making hay. He was charmed by the hospitality, lack of sophistication and colorful speech patterns of the people and realized that: "[t]here rummaging among the ruins of a nation, I discovered the remnants of a supremely beautiful culture of emotions in language, story, song and dance, still living in the hearts of these people that completely captivated me (qtd. in O'Donoghue 42). Upon his return to Cork in the summer of 1910, O'Flynn joined a Gaelic League class and committed to immersing himself fully in his native language.

In the summer of 1912, he visited the Gaeltacht again with Dr Osborn Bergin. He recorded his experience listening to a laborer:

I sat there looking, listening, admiring the lovely picture. His conversation I could not fully understand for he spoke fluently, and my humble knowledge of Irish was imperfect. But I know the Shakespearean drama, and the need the human spirit has, when deeply moved to express itself in the iambic and in adequate emotional form. I was an ardent student of natural expression. There before me was the thing itself. That labourer's voice was delightful to my ear (O'Flynn, *Notebooks*).

O'Flynn's "imperfect Irish" of 1912 was clearly perfected, so much so that by 1915 he was addressing large audiences fluently in Irish. Indeed 1915 would prove an eventful year for O'Flynn, both in terms of his position within the Gaelic League and his burgeoning friendships with other key figures within the Revival. The importance of

Ballingeary cannot be underestimated. It was becoming apparent that there was a movement within the Gaelic League that was advancing a more militant stance. Liam De Róiste writes in his diary that “armed conflict might be necessary” (March 20, 1906). There was also a feeling, especially in the cities, that the social ills called for political action. The 1913 lockout brought into sharp focus the poverty and rebellion of the working class. Pádraig Pearse argued that the League had been a stage in the education of those who wanted to serve Ireland: it had been “the prophet not the Messiah” (91). There is no doubt that the League’s battle lines were divided between the conservative right wing and the revolutionary left wing.

On St Patrick’s Day, 1915 O’Flynn delivered an address at a public meeting at the National Monument on the Grand Parade. The entire speech was carried in *The Cork Examiner*; transcribed it runs to eleven A4 pages and would have taken over an hour to deliver. In this speech he seeks to “expose the National crime of base, ignoble apathy towards our national language.” O’Flynn excoriates the neglect of the Irish language and reminds his audience of its antiquity, citing that it is older than Sanskrit: “As old almost as Basque, an ancient language when Demosthenes and Cicero spoke classics in the streets and forum ... it is our native tongue, our bond of Nationhood, part of our National mind, our soul expressed, we ought as patriots, dear countrymen to love every syllable and sound, with all the tenderness of love of child” (*The Cork Examiner*, 18 March, 1915).

By the end of July 1915, a group of advanced nationalists were increasingly dissatisfied with the non-political character of the Gaelic League. The frustration of the more politicized nationalists came to a head in the Dundalk Ard-Fheis. The second principle of the League was “Conradh na Gaeilge shall be strictly non-political and non-sectarian,” the Sinn Féin delegation wanted to change this by adding: “and shall devote itself to realising the ideal of a free Gaelic speaking Ireland” (qtd. in Murphy 275). The change was voted upon by delegates; the advanced Nationalists took centre stage which resulted in the resignation of Douglas Hyde as President. They carried an action which resulted in the League coming under the control of the more political activists and Douglas Hyde was succeeded by Eoin Mac Neill, which marked a distinct turning point in the fabric of the Gaelic League. Hyde was firmly of the belief that the Gaelic League was established as a non-political organization and refused to accept that an independent Ireland was or should be at the core of its agenda.

A little over a year later, the Easter Rising took place in April 1916. Pearse’s involvement in armed rebellion came as a great source of surprise and sorrow to O’Flynn. In his notebooks, O’Flynn records: “Pearse, ar dheis Dé go raibh an anam, (May his soul be on God’s right hand) visited me at Farranferris about 1911. We talked culture. I knew his mind.” Donoghue adds that Pearse was very interested in what O’Flynn was doing with Shakespeare at Farranferris, their talk was of “poetry and Shakespeare” (54). In his notebooks O’Flynn also says:

Pádraig Pearse one Sunday evening a few years before the Rising sat with me at Farranferris where I was wont to put planks on barrels and carpet with a few appurtenances on the planks to play a full Shakespearean play. “This” said he “is Shakespeare in full life in a simple workshop with his pupils about him — the

advanced and the latest apprentice — here is the greatest artist the world has ever known in vital contact with those who would learn of him.”

In hindsight O’Flynn clearly did not know his mind, entirely. He was plainly ignorant of the events leading to the 1916 Rising. Following the Easter Rising there was a great deal of confusion in Cork. In some instances, priests negotiated delicate situations. Aan de Wiel gives an account of the auxiliary Bishop of Cork, Daniel Cohalan; the rebel leaders Terence MacSwiney, Thomas MacCurtain and Seán O’Sullivan had orders to reinforce a group of Volunteers in Kerry. O’Neill’s counter-order advised Volunteers not to take part in the Rising, thus the Cork Volunteers remained in Cork. Pearse sent a message that the Rising will begin. The timing was unfortunate, the British forces arrived in Cork Tuesday 25 April 1916. The forces of the Crown and the insurgents were in a stand-off. Bishop Cohalan and the Lord Mayor tried to persuade the leaders to surrender. Cohalan persuaded the Volunteers not to fight and a somewhat bizarre deal was brokered in which the volunteers would surrender their arms to the bishop, on condition that he would take custody of them. Ultimately the insurgents rendered their weapons in return for “vague guarantees” against arrest; guarantees that the British authorities failed to honour (Canning 253).

A century later the above negotiations seem naïve; what they do reveal however is the power and influence of senior clerics at that time. Aan de Wiel adds that Bishop Cohalan of Cork was an early convert to the possibility of Sinn Féin as a “credible political party” (96). Cohalan, described by *The Cork Examiner* (11 September 1916) as “widely recognized as a brilliant and profound scholar” would become a significant figure in O’Flynn’s ministry. He realized early on the brilliance of O’Flynn; he understood that if he were sent to a parish in England, as was the plan, it was unlikely that he would return (O’Donoghue 40). There were however difficulties to be surmounted. Bishop Cohalan was aware that O’Flynn, though opposed to revolutionary politics, was providing a haven to rebels on the run in the Eglington Asylum. The British military and the Royal Irish Constabulary were taking citizens, known to be Sinn Féin sympathizers, from their homes and keeping them in custody. In collaboration with one of the nurses at the Eglington Asylum, O’Flynn provided food and board for such activists. Bishop Cohalan accused O’Flynn of being “very active” in the Revival movement (qtd. in O’Donoghue 79). O’Flynn argued that his involvement in the Revival movement was motivated by his desire to revive noble traditions. As a precautionary measure, Bishop Cohalan removed O’Flynn from his Chaplaincy at the Eglington Asylum in 1920. He became curate at the North Cathedral where, no doubt, the Bishop could keep a closer eye on him.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Revival within Cork post-1916, was the emergence of the Aerialheacht, or taking the air, orchestrated by O’Flynn. The Aerialheachtaí were events in which music, poetry, drama, and storytelling were celebrated en plein air through the medium of Irish. *The Cork Examiner* commented that O’Flynn’s personal contributions always ensured success. However, the Westminster Defence of the Realm Act outlawed the holding of such events where large groups could gather unsupervised. On the 13 July 1918, the local Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was instructed to prohibit the Gaelic League’s Aerialheacht in

Cork the following day. Great bodies of police, fully armed, arrived to patrol the field. *The Cork Examiner* reported that undeterred, O'Flynn re-arranged the location to a secluded field in another part of the city. He addressed the crowd in Irish and English. He emphasized the need to speak Irish and to remain calm:

We have been warned that they should not hold their Aeridheacht today... In attempting to suppress our language or the Gaelic league Mr Lloyd George had overstepped himself. It was very important that Irishmen should know how to act. Nothing rash must be done. First of all, they should take up the study of their language. In batches in the streets let them talk it, in the trains, in the homes — let them in batches take their books along the Lee Fields and there study it ... Do not allow their tempers to rise through provocation. Let the young men learn their native language. Young men who did foolish things to policeman were only harming their county's cause, were throwing it backwards (*The Cork Examiner*, 13 July 1918).

The Aeridheacht ended peacefully and the crowds dispersed without incident. It is almost certain that O'Flynn knew that his speech would be carried in all the Cork newspapers, hence the control and restraint. Throughout the summer of 1918, despite the RIC ban, Aeridheachtaí clandestinely took place throughout Cork city and county. O'Flynn found himself, with utter conviction, drawn to the Gaelic literature of the past, whilst at the same time drawn in equal measure to Shakespeare. He eschewed the politicizing of the League; for him, the Irish language had the beauty of Shakespeare. There is a tendency within nationalism to focus on sentiment: certainly, the identification of the patriot looms large within the concept of nation state. For many, their commitment to the Revival was an attempt to recreate a past which was overly sentimental. The period of rebellion however was harrowingly brutal: “[t]he whole country runs with blood. Unless it is stopped and stopped soon every prospect of political settlement and material prosperity will perish and our children will inherit a wilderness (*The Irish Times*, 14 March 1921). In addition to the escalating violence and bloodshed, there was a widespread sense of ambiguity. Many of the rebels had close relations fighting in the trenches of World War 1. In a diary entry, 23 May 1916, Liam De Róiste articulates this complexity when writing of his brothers who were British soldiers “they have always been cut off from me.”

Revolution and Revival were not clear cut; there were layers of ambiguity. Amid the ambiguities, confusion, and violence, O'Flynn took his opportunity in 1924 and created a theatre company. One might imagine that his theatre would be exclusively Irish and would be a celebration of Irish traditions and Irish plays. Indeed, as Russel Rees suggests theatre has a contribution to make in shaping a nation and projecting how we see ourselves (13). O'Flynn's theatre was and is devoted entirely to that old Imperialist, Shakespeare. It hardly seems credible that, having immersed himself entirely in the Revival movement, his focus should turn not alone to Shakespeare, but Shakespeare for the working class.

The revolutionary years did little to change the grinding poverty that was a feature of working-class life at this time. Towards the end of the First World War, food supplies

within the British Isles were deteriorating. In late 1915, the Cork Poor Law Guardians asked the Local Government Board for assistance in controlling the price of bread (Borgonovo 168). Fearing a repeat of another famine reminiscent of Black '47, the Guardians condemned the disproportionate export of oats from Ireland. Poor Law Guardian, Marie Lynch, “demanded action to prevent the urban poor from starving to death” (Borgonovo 169). There were fears that the famine might revisit the land. Throughout 1917 Cork Corporation attempted to avert food shortages. By May 1917, it was reported by T. A. Finlay, that children were dying from malnutrition: “Very large numbers of the children perish absolutely from want of food” (*The Freeman's Journal*, 7 May 1917). Later in the year, at a public meeting, attended by 15,000 on Grand Parade, O'Flynn did not mince his words. He addressed the food crisis among the poor and demanded that the Irish County Council take a census of food in the country, to ensure sufficient provisions for the Irish people: “If food supplies were found wanting farmers should stop selling to the British markets and the Cork Harbour Board should prohibit food exports. He [O'Flynn] called on farmers to keep their crops until the investigation into food supplies has been completed” (*The Cork Constitution* 24 September 1917). A month later it was reported that the poor, particularly in urban areas were “feeling acutely the privations that the war imposed” (*The Cork Examiner*, 23 November 1917). A twelve-man committee was formed to monitor food shortages and to negate profiteering. It is against this backdrop of poverty and lack of opportunity and propelled by a strong desire to elevate the young people of the poor, that the Cork Shakespearean Company (CSC) was established.

Of the one thousand seven hundred and sixty-nine people recorded as living in the Parish of St Mary's, seven hundred and two were classified as laborers. The streets surrounding the Butter Exchange were subjected to violence because of food shortages among the poor. This area was located beside the Cathedral where O'Flynn lived and worked. Aloys Fleischmann records in his schoolboy diary a visit to O'Flynn's North side locale which shocked the middle-class schoolboy, and reveals a certain arrogance and condescension: “I went through the slums of northern Cork, where I had never been before. It is extraordinary what squalor and misery those poor people endure in their tiny hovels, yet they seem quite cheerful. Of course, being born in it, it is their standard of living” (30 November 1926). These were the “poor people” to whom O'Flynn reached out. The working-class roots of the Cork Shakespearean Company are articulated in a letter to *The Cork Examiner*: “The society was founded in Cork, November 1920, in connection with the North Cathedral to educate, through knowledge and use of drama, a membership drawn exclusively from people of the less-well-to-do classes” (May 2 1927). O'Flynn therefore found himself in a position where he could advance the plight of the poor by affording them “the highest possible educational and social value” by offering them “educational work of outstanding value and efficiency” (ibid). Perhaps the seeds for the company were planted some four years earlier when O'Flynn realized that he had a talent for teaching. *The Cork Examiner* reports on a *King Lear* lecture he gave in which “... the Chairman complimented him on the ability with which he interpreted the great tragedy for them” (*The Cork Examiner*, 19 January 1916).

Shakespeare has been performed in alternative venues down through the ages, from large theatres in London, to smaller theatres in provincial towns, in the homes

of the gentry and en plein air. It is quite possible that this was O'Flynn's plan: to lure his audience into a space where it appeared very little was required of them. In the summer of 1926, O'Flynn produced Shakespeare in several locations throughout County Cork. He knew his audience and he knew that for many, theatre was an alien concept. He had learned from the Centenary Pageant of 1911 and the various Aeridheachtaí that he had staged, that outdoor performances were less formal and allowed for a more communal experience. Thus, he proposed to stage *The Merchant of Venice* in the shadow of the Knockmealdown mountains near Youghal, County Cork. The first performance at Knockadoon was reported in *The Cork Examiner*, under the title "Great Drama in Nature's Setting – Shakespeare at Knockadoon. The second performance was *Richard III*, which was performed in a disused shed in Newcestown, Bandon, County Cork.

The first temporary rehearsal space for the company was a room in the Presbytery. In 1926 the company moved to John Redmond Street and rehearsed in a loft over a toffee factory; locally the Cork Shakespearean Company became known as The Loft. This would be O'Flynn's theatrical base until he died in 1962. Throughout the mid to late 1920s the players of the Cork Shakespearean Company performed *Richard II*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* in the grounds of University College, Cork (O'Donoghue 137). O'Flynn's energy and resourcefulness appeared indefatigable. Another alternative venue was the roof of the North Infirmary Hospital, Shandon. Carol Dundon writes: They (CSC) used to put on plays regularly on the flat roof of the North Infirmary, and that roof is still here. It wouldn't be every month; it would only be maybe once or twice a year... It's a natural theatre in many ways, it's dead flat overlooking the city, and they just put chairs there and it was a concept way before its time (*The Archive*, issue 14).

In 1927, the Cork Shakespearean Company made itself legendary within the city of Cork for staging a weeklong season of eight Shakespearean plays at the Cork Opera House. In the programme notes O'Flynn sets out his *raison d'être*. At the core of his work is the search for justice and equality: "Class-distinction breeds vulgarity. For class-distinction and true culture are opposed as true culture and vulgarity. Class-distinction is as false as hell: it carries with it ruin. it goes the opposite way that lovers of humanity go..." (cited in Programme notes for 70th Anniversary of the Cork Shakespearean Company, 1927). Later, in the same year, *The Irish Times* reported that *Othello* "had been playing with great success to large audiences" at the Cork Opera House (*The Irish Times*, May 17, 1927). Indeed, the *Othello* "was broadcast from the stage which connected with the Cork Broadcasting Service" (*The Cork Examiner*, May 17, 1927). The proceeds of *As You Like It* were donated to the families of the thirty-one fishermen from the village of Cleggan in Connemara and Lacken Bay in Mayo who tragically drowned in a storm.

In the spring of 1928, *The Irish Times* reviewed the Cork Shakespearean Company's performances at the Opera House commenting on the players drawn from every walk of life. The following year *The Cork Examiner* responded effusively to Cork Shakespearean Company's productions:

The past works of these very enthusiastic and whole-hearted local players have always been shaped with remarkable artistry, and every production has reached a level which it would be difficult, even for a professional company, to equal, let alone excel. It is a well-known failing of Irish people- or, at any rate, of Cork people- that they are hypercritical of local endeavor and slow to accord praise to their fellow citizens who venture on to the public stage. Despite this tendency, however, the public have been forced to admit the exceptional character of the work of the Cork Shakespearean Company and are beginning to take pride in the society which is rendering such noble service to the cause of the drama. (*The Cork Examiner* November 10, 1928)

The company continued to flourish. In 1929 *The Irish Independent* reported on five Shakespearean plays at the Opera House: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As you Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*. The article informs that the performances were “patronised by excellent and approving audiences” with the cast displaying “a mastery of their parts and a rare talent met with in amateur organizations” (*The Irish Independent*, April 17, 1929).

By early 1930s the Company was respected within theatrical circles, “The Cork Shakespearean Company is so well-established as an institution which the citizens take for granted” (*The Cork Examiner*, 4 January 1930). The sheer output of plays is impressive for an amateur company. The following January, 1931, the company produced *King Lear* with an almost complete cast of understudies. Such was O’Flynn’s conviction and vehemence that it is easy to understand how impressionable young men and women might wish to be a part of this company. Pat Gunne, a former member of the CSC opined:

He had the ability to get people to believe that they could do anything. Whenever Frank Benson would come to the Opera House, the crowd from the CSC believed they were better than Benson’s actors. Fr O’Flynn was very ambitious and would get costumes from London for his plays. His family helped him out financially (Programme for 70th Anniversary of Cork Shakespearean Company).

Throughout the 1930s the Cork Shakespearean Company continued to produce Shakespearean plays. In November 1931, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was performed at the Cork Opera House. *The Cork Examiner* reported that the company was still holding its own, even though they were competing with “modern types of entertainment.”

In November 1932, the company returned to the Opera House for yet another week in which they performed seven full length Shakespearean plays over eight performances. *The Cork Examiner* once again remarks on the educational and intellectual values of the plays. The following March, the company performed *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. O’Flynn reminded the audience that the Cork Shakespearean Company remained true to its philosophy of maintaining the beautiful whilst eschewing the crass commercialism and sensationalism of the theatre of the day:

At the fall of the curtain Athair U aFloinn (Fr O'Flynn) addressed the audience... he was forced by the company to thank the audience for their excellent appreciation; appreciation he said, was worth more to them than the making of money, because the aim of the company, their motto was *Anailneacht in leachtar*, (seek the beautiful). He referred to a time in the world when man found life and happiness seeking and contemplating the beautiful. But for centuries now the world looked for happiness in making money. (*The Cork Examiner*, March 1933)

What emerges here is not alone O'Flynn's intolerance for profit-making, but also his intolerance, perhaps misguided, for second rate drama. He believed in hard work and endeavor. In his pursuit of the beautiful, Shakespeare was its essence. By 1935 the Company had moved to the Palace Theatre, Cork. For O'Flynn, education was the great leveller. Free secondary education in Ireland was not introduced until 1966. It was his ambition that through Shakespeare the actors in his care would be nurtured. In O'Flynn's vision for Ireland Shakespeare would save the poor from ignorance. He firmly believed that the autodidact could succeed by exposure to great literature. By employing Shakespeare, he wished to awaken not only the dramatic potential of the piece but to fully expose the students to the range of emotions. He argued that to neglect the cultivation of human emotions leads to "vulgarity and depravity in private and in public life" (ibid). In effect, Shakespeare was the conduit to empathy and understanding.

The search for authenticity is a recurring trope within O'Flynn's writing. He believed that through understanding the heart of an emotion the individual attains empathy; being touched by the language of Shakespeare has a transformative effect:

Teaching of the heart is done through creative things called emotions, mother's love, affection, direction is done through emotions, fathers' emotion. The emotions of the home are the language of the home. Emotions are the same in all humans, they can become degraded from being noble and noble from being degraded. But Shakespearean English is the language of human emotions, passions, creations. Teach emotions and the expression proper to it is in the purified form an unchanging thing... With these powerful things art is concerned. Art is the most universal and unchanging of all language. Emotions written in moulds on stage by a child, by the actor felt and expressed as it seems written. (O'Flynn, *Notebooks*)

O'Flynn believed that through Shakespeare an individual could connect to the core of his emotional self: "In human emotions and their proper expressions all mankind is one. In emotions and expressions proper to them man has a common language... art is the expression that tells the emotion. An actor must know all the emotions, be able to be alive with the life in them, and when sincerely felt and adequately expressed the audience will be as the actor" (ibid). As early as November 1915, when O'Flynn addressed the Past Pupils of the North Monastery, Cork, he realized, not alone the importance of Shakespeare to connect with the emotions, but also the educational benefits to be derived from a classical education: "The Rev. lecturer on being introduced by the Chairman said after much thinking what would be most suitable

for this lecture, he decided to give them some idea of the speeches of Shakespeare, they being for the most part public men who required a certain knowledge of rhetoric” (*The Cork Examiner* 27 November 1915).

For one glorious decade, O’Flynn filled the lives of the poor in the north side of Cork city. As Harry Weldon articulates he enabled the poor and elevated their expectations and enriched them culturally: “I often reflect on how empty our lives would have been, we children of working-class parents” (O’Donoghue 262). There are several reasons why O’Flynn successfully managed to engage the working class of Cork to join a Shakespearean Company. The first was his position within the Church itself. As Chaplain to the North Monastery he lived near the lanes in which the laborers lived. At the beginning of the twentieth century the church yielded considerable power. Malcolm Brown comments on the elevated position of the priest in the early days of the state. The learned enjoyed great gravitas: “For the peasant masses the printed word was the symbol of social success: school masters, the rich, civil servants and priests were all people who read” (22). The respect for Shakespeare within the new state and among the proponents of the Revival movement remains incongruous. Philip Edwards posits the view that Ireland was steeped in Shakespeare and that “his works were in the parlour of everyone who could afford to have a parlour” (30). It is inconceivable that the two roomed cottages that populated the lanes where O’Flynn’s actors emerged had a parlor, much less a volume of Shakespeare. And yet the Cork Shakespearean Company provided social mobility, the perfect fusion of religion and cultural respectability.

O’Donoghue outlines O’Flynn’s considerable ability to influence and cajole his parishioners. Time and again his great generosity to the poor is emphasized. The “90 Years of Shakespeare at The Loft” pamphlet emphasizes his philosophy of bringing culture to the poor and underprivileged (2). Smith opines that he had a “wonderful way” of gaining the confidence of ordinary people, “one minute he would be talking in his native tongue... the next discoursing on the merits of Gregorian chant” (88). It was perhaps his profound erudition, coupled with his down-to-earth disposition, which endeared him to his people, and which in turn gave them the confidence to perform Shakespeare. The Fleischmann diaries also give an indication of O’Flynn’s powerful personality. The 1926 diary reveals a young boy of sixteen in the Diocesan seminary school at Farranferris. It was here that O’Flynn was a teacher of English and elocution. The diary entries provide a snapshot into O’Flynn’s formidable acting talent: “He is really extraordinary at imitation.” His passion for Shakespeare: “Went over *Macbeth* again today. It reminded me when we acted it for the Bishop... I think that day was one of the happiest of my life” and his unfettered nationalism: “Had some traditional singing from Father O’Flynn... These traditional airs give a real insight into Irish life as it was before it was spoiled by the coming of the English” (Fleischmann). The London *Guardian* newspaper, a year before O’Flynn’s demise, chronicles his extraordinary career:

A priest who works against the wind... A rock of his church with an exuberant rhythmic drive, his message was the doctrine of beauty which comes from the infinite love of the Supreme Being in transcendental rays of truth and beauty.

Amid all the angry lashing of decadence, the whipping of pseudo-art, the songs and laughter, truth was the recurring theme. Through the medium of Shakespeare could be found a deeper understanding of the Christian approach to life, Father O'Flynn wants everybody to know Shakespeare. (January 18, 1961)

R. F. Foster argues that a “peasant nation seldom finds its representatives within itself” (12). This is, however, disproven by O'Flynn's activities who had the necessary knowledge, influence, and intellectual rigor to give coherence to a social movement. His concern ever was to address the inequalities which afflicted the poor. Unquestionably, not alone did O'Flynn leave an indelible mark on his working-class players but he also shaped a unique chapter in the annals of Irish theatrical history.

Works Cited

- Borgonovo, John. *The Dynamics of War and Revolution: Cork City, 1916-1918*. Cork: Cork UP, 2013. Print.
- Brown, Malcolm. *The Politics of Irish Literature from Thomas Davis to W. B. Yeats*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1972. Print.
- Canning, Bernard J. *Bishops of Ireland 1870-1987*. Donegal: Donegal Democrat, 1987. Print.
- De Róiste, Liam. *De Róiste Papers*. Cork City Archives, IE CCCA/U271, 1901-1947. Print.
- De Wiel, Jerome Aan. *The Catholic Church in Ireland 1914-1918 War and Politics*. Dublin: Irish Academic P, 2003. Print.
- Edwards, Philip. “Shakespeare & Politics of The Irish Revival” *Shakespeare and The Irish Writer*. Ed. Janet Clare & Stephen O'Neill. Dublin: University College Dublin P, 2010. 24-39. Print.
- Fleischmann, Aloys. *Diaries 1926-1927*. Cork: University College, Cork, 1014. Web. fleischmannndiaries.ucc.ie/date1926/ Accessed 15 March 2021.
- Foster, R. F. *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989. Print.
- Hughes, Alan. *Henry Irving, Shakespearean*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981. Print.
- Hutchinson, John. *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1987. Print.
- Murphy, Gerard. “Douglas Hyde 1860-1949.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science* 38 (1949): 275-81. Print.

O'Donoghue, Richard. *Like A Tree Planted*. Dublin: Gill & Son, 1967. Print.

O'Flynn, James, Christopher. *Notebooks* 1957. Unpublished.

O'Lúing, Seán. *Kuno Meyer 1858-1919 A Biography*. Dublin: Geography Publications, 1991. Print.

Pearse, P. H. *Political Writings and Speeches*. Dublin: Talbot, 1952. Print.

Rees, Russell. *Ireland 1905-25: Vol 1. Text & Historiography*. Newtownards: Colourprint, 1998. Print.

Smith, Raymond. *The Well of Love*. Dublin: Little & McLean, 1964. Print.

Newspapers and Periodicals

from which microfiche materials were retrieved

90 Year of Shakespeare at The Loft. Anniversary Pamphlet of the Cork Shakespearean Company, 2014.

The Archive: Journal of the Cork Folklore Project

The Cork Constitution

The Cork Examiner

The Guardian

The Irish Times

The Skibbereen Eagle