The Shaughraun by Dion Boucicault

Nancy Cole

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/artstud_pub

Scholar Commons Citation
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/artstud_pub/6
The Shaughraun by Dion Boucicault

Article by Nancy Cole

To begin...

The title, The Shaughraun, has been a puzzle since the play opened at Wallack’s Theatre in New York November 14, 1874. The author and man-of-the-theatre Dion Boucicault was at midcareer and perhaps past that when he appeared as Conn, the Shaughraun, in a play very much of his own devising. Experienced theatre practitioners including Lester Wallack advised him to change the title. But Boucicault, born Irish in Dublin, persisted. The term shaughraun means wanderer in Gaelic: he who lives as he will.

Synopsis of The Shaughraun

The scene is the wild coast of County Sligo in the west of Ireland and three of the characters, not including Conn, are suffering declined fortunes—Claire and Robert Ffolliott and Miss Arte O’Neal, a local belle. She is engaged to Robert, a key point in the play, and she is a descendant of the ancient O’Neal clan—the old blood. Among the many distinguished forebears were Owen O’Neal, the famous chieftain of the Irish pre-English dynasty in Eire, and Owen Roe O’Neal who fought for Ireland against the English parliamentary forces in the 17th century. In fact, the forthcoming marriage of the O’Neal lady to the Ffolliott gentleman is seen as manifest destiny. As the priest, Father Dolan, says:

When these lands were torn from Owen Roe O’Neal in the old times, he laid his curse on the spoilers, for Suil-a-more was the dowry of his bride, Grace Ffolliott. Since then many a strange family have tried to hold possession of the place; but every year one of them would die—the land seemed to swallow them up one by one. Till the O’Neals and Ffolliotts returned none other thrived upon it.

Act I, scene i

In this passage we hear grim echoes of recent famine in Ireland (1845-50) and the centuries of English domination.

The Ffolliott family are landholding gentry; the priest Father Dolan and Corry Kinchela, the former estate agent, were appointed guardians of the two Ffolliotts, Claire and her brother Robert. Robert has been convicted of conspiring as a Fenian against British rule on the false evidence of Harvey Duff, a police spy, and condemned to transportation to prison camp in Australia. We soon understand that Kinchela, the villain, has three priorities: 1. ruin the Ffolliotts by getting them to mortgage their land to him so that he can procure a judgment against them for nonpayment; 2. incriminate Robert as a Fenian so that he is deported; and-- yet to be done--3. replace Robert as Arte’s prospective
husband. Kinchela’s motive is clear: he wants Arte to have no alternative but to marry him.

Now that Robert has been convicted and sent far away, Kinchela seems to have a clear field. Together with Arte, the fiancée, Robert’s sister Claire has moved out of the estate house, Suil-a-beg, into a cottage at the edge of the Ffolliott property. The whereabouts of Arte’s family is not mentioned.

The initial action of the play turns on Robert’s escape from Australian imprisonment back to Sligo aboard a ship that smuggles him into the bay. His presence must be concealed from the authorities but Harvey Duff detects the truth and alerts Kinchela, who moves to have Robert arrested by the British soldiers.

The plot is propelled by the interaction of three groups: the Sligo county police cum militia who are under the control of Kinchela, the justice of the peace; the English soldiers commanded by the conscientious Captain Molineux, compelled by his duty to the Crown to detain Robert once his presence is discovered in the neighborhood; and the country people who support Robert and who have likewise been exploited by the quondam justice Kinchela and his gang--Harvey Duff, the spy, and various thugs. Kinchela very effectively and villainously manipulates judicial and extralegal means to achieve his ends.

In melodrama form, there must be a hero, a villain, and a prime young maiden. Here there are three maidens, Arte O’Neal, Claire Ffolliott, and Moya, the priest’s niece and housekeeper; all of their fates are dominated by Kinchela.

There is also the benevolent presence of the local priest--Father Dolan, who paternally presides over the characters’ personal dilemmas and is partly to blame for the mess because he has not paid attention to the machinations of Kinchela, his fellow guardian over the Ffolliotts’ inheritance.

If the principal villain is Kinchela, the hero figure is Robert Ffolliott, who succeeds in escaping back to his home county and frustrating the schemes of Kinchela. Smitten with Claire Ffolliott’s beauty and quick wit, Captain Harry Molineux falls in love with her and assists Robert to escape his true nemesis, Kinchela.

But it is clear that the leading character in the play is Conn, the shaughraun, a devil-may-care Irishman, who has no firm commitment to earning a living. He dances over the fine line of the law—he has served time for poaching, in fact, in the very cell that Robert comes to be confined in. He drinks, even though he has pledged to Father Dolan he will not; he can’t read despite his mother’s sacrifices to send him to school. But he truly loves Moya. Above all, he is heart and soul Robert Ffolliott’s good buddy from boyhood, despite the considerable class difference. In the play Conn relates that he has gone to seek Robert in Australia after transportation there and poach him back to Sligo and his loved ones. Conn
stands in the surf to carry Robert ashore when he returns. The shaughraun is clearly the most powerful and charming personality in the play.

Meanwhile the new authority figure in town, the British Captain Harry Molineux, is charged with maintaining Her Majesty’s civil order, as Ireland is under the British flag at this time. The British soldiery and the local police have parallel powers and Robert Ffolliott, when detected, is arrested and detained first by the soldiers, commanded by Molineux, preparatory to turning him over to the county police.

Kinchela has advance word that the Queen has pardoned the Fenian prisoners. The amnesty however does not extend to escaped prisoners, which Robert now is. But once Robert turns himself in to the authorities (rather than forcing Father Dolan to lie about his presence in the parsonage), he becomes eligible for the pardon, although Robert himself is unaware of all this.

Kinchela cunningly arranges for Robert to escape from the police cell so that Robert can be legally apprehended and killed as an escapee. However, Kinchela has reckoned without Conn. In the jailbreak Conn spirits Robert away and they adopt disguises. Kinchela, Harvey Duff and their posse of bad men chase Robert and wound a figure they take for him. In fact, the victim is Conn, not Robert, and it appears they have killed him.

This is the occasion for a peasant wake for the dead man, one of the most effective scenes in Boucicault’s works. Conn has survived the attack, unbeknownst to the mourners, so the scene is imbued with pathos and hilarity as well as scenic appeal.

Meanwhile Robert flees to a schooner where he learns of the pardon and he immediately returns. Captain Molineux and he join together to get a warrant for the discredited magistrate Kinchela, who has now kidnapped both Arte, Robert’s fiancée, and Moya, Conn’s girl.

At the play’s end Molineux unites with Claire, Robert’s sister; Arte and Robert are together, Kinchela disgraced, Harvey Duff dead, and Conn the Shaughraun with Moya on his arm is forgiven his shortcomings by all, including the audience.

The Boucicault Innovations

One of Boucicault’s unique qualities as a dramatist is that he revitalizes the 18th century comedy of wit form—parallel lovers, witty dialogue and interplay of social classes. He had used this form in his earlier plays, London Assurance and Old Heads and Young Hearts. He weds the comedy of wit form to melodrama—the prevailing taste of the mid19th century audiences. In addition The Shaughraun has elements of Shakespearean heights like the opening courtship scene and the last act death of Harvey Duff, and Claire and Molineux’s farewell in Act II
reminds one of Beatrice and Benedict’s “Kill Claudio” scene (IV, i) in Shakespeare’s Much Ado about Nothing.

The play has the fine elements of the melodrama—exotic setting on the wild Irish coast; sensation melodrama scenes (escapes to the boat in the distance, the assault on Rathgannon Head near St. Bridget’s Chapel; the wake; the jailbreak); suspense; stock characters including a character who suffers compunctions about his moral path (Harvey Duff). The action of the plot takes place seemingly within a week.

The moral values of faith, hope, Christian and romantic love, honour and love of country set against greed, betrayal, deception, abuse of power are not as simple as they sound, for they are the fuel of the necessary involvement of the audience that occurs in good melodrama and are here complicated by the fact that they cut across the national and class boundaries, as Boucicault deployed them, to give depth and colour to his picture of humanity.

Parkin, Introduction, Selected Plays, p.21

Boucicault adds his special touch to the end: Conn directly appeals to the audience—a device perhaps borrowed from Shakespeare’s Puck and Prospero and the many epilogue speakers in Restoration comedies. The epilogues delivered by Rosalind in As You Like It and Margery Pinchwife in Wycherley’s The Country Wife are two more instances of this direct address by the character to the audience after watching the play.

A Role for Himself

Boucicault began writing roles for himself, beginning significantly with the role of Alan Raby in The Vampire in 1852, and he continued the practice of acting exclusively in his own plays until 1888 when he retired from the stage. For his farewell performance, he chose his greatest acting vehicle and most profitable role, the 18-year-old Conn in The Shaughraun. He was a playwright-actor-manager in the tradition of Moliere, the 17th century French theatre master.

So prolific was he that he wrote and adapted over 250 plays, many of which he did not appear in and which other managers as well as he produced. He famously did the final 1865 adaptation of Rip Van Winkle that Joseph Jefferson, the admired American actor, made his signature role. Likewise his 1852 dramatization of The Corsican Brothers, Alexandre Dumas pere’s famous novel, held the English stage for nearly a century. He himself never performed in either.

DB hit a mother lode when he decided to adapt for the stage The Collegians, a novel by Gerald Griffin set in Ireland. In the resulting melodrama, The Colleen Bawn or the Brides of Garryowen, Boucicault featured himself as Myles-na-
Coppaleen--this was the beginning of the scamp Irish characters he excelled in acting. Agnes Robertson, his wife, was Eily, the colleen bawn herself. The play opened at Laura Keene’s Theatre in New York in 1860. He imported it to London where it ran at the Adelphi Theatre for 230 performances. The play continued to be produced under Boucicault’s standard and those of other managements into the 1880’s.

In 1864 he devised the second of his three prominent Irish melodramas, *Arrah-na-Pogue*, featuring himself as the earnest Shaun the Post. It premiered in Dublin for he had left American shores when the Civil War was imminent and then stayed abroad until well after the end of the war. Finally he returned to New York and theatrical activities there in 1872. He continued to cross the oceans to the British Isles and Australia, to wherever there was an English-speaking population with a large admixture of people of Irish descent. Intrepidly he even toured by rail to San Francisco and the West in 1874.

In 1873 Boucicault was granted American citizenship along with Agnes. But the couple had finally separated and later in 1873 Agnes returned to her five children in London. They were never to reconcile. In fact, the final announcement of the divorce was in 1889, the year before Boucicault’s death, after a showcase divorce trial in London in the course of which Boucicault claimed he had never married Agnes officially. The British court found for Agnes and granted the divorce. Boucicault and Louise Thorndyke, an American actress who was 43 years his junior, had a second, this time legitimate, ceremony.

Immediately before writing *The Shaughraun*, Boucicault had worked on *Led Astray*, which opened Dec 6, 1873, at the Union Square Theatre under the management of Augustin Daly, one of the preeminent New York producers in those years in New York. (Boucicault, the author, was not in the cast.)

On November 14, 1874, *The Shaughraun* opened to tremendous applause and revenues at Wallack’s Theatre in New York; Agnes was not in the cast. Ada Dyas, who had made her New York debut in Boucicault’s *Led Astray*, went on ten months later to star as Claire in the premiere of *The Shaughraun*. It is important to note that DB was 54 years of age when he opened as the 18-year-old Conn in *The Shaughraun*.

Tough and good-hearted, craftier than the villains who surround him, he is totally different from the blustering buffoon of a stage Irishman rightly despised by the best Irish artists and audiences. For his acting of Conn Boucicault was rightly praised by contemporaries for mastery of detail in characterization, the timing and adroitness of his comedy, and his charming air of spontaneity.

Parkin, Introduction, *Selected Plays*, p.21
Led Astray, a drama, is listed in its first production as having 5 acts. By contrast The Shaughraun, which opened in November, 1874, 11 months later, originally had 3 acts, the traditional act number for melodrama.

Within two years after opening, The Shaughraun took on a 5 act form. One of the handwritten promptbooks USF is presenting has evidence of this conversion to the increasingly popular five act form being adopted for all melodrama. Please note the Shaughraun program glued in the back of promptbook 2--the Boston Theatre performance in Boston on October 21, 1876, lists the play as being in 3 acts. Pencilled into the Boston Theatre printed program, replicated here, are notes restructuring the play into a 5-act form.

On January 22, 1876, closing night of The Shaughraun in London at the Adelphi Theatre, both Agnes and DB were in the cast when news arrived of the death of the Boucicaults' beloved eldest son Willie in a tragic train wreck in Huntingdon, England. He and Agnes were never onstage together again; she remained in England while he toured to California and Australia and relocated to New York.

Boucicault continued to play the role of Conn until 1888 when he retired from the stage as a performer. As an actor and producer DB toured the English speaking world indefatigably. He made and lost theatrical fortunes. He was active in lobbying for the first copyright law in the US (1856). He introduced chemical fireproofing for theatrical scenery in 1876. After his retirement from touring and when there was no more call for his playwrighting, he became the preceptor of the first acting school in the US at the Madison Square Theatre in New York City.

Indisputably, Dion Boucicault was a 19th century dynamo of theatrical activity and creation and one of the theatre’s great talents.

His interest in Ireland--How Irish was he?

Boucicault was born in Dublin in 1820 into an established Protestant family; the original spelling of his name was Boursiquot, derived from Huguenot ancestors. He left Ireland early to be educated in England, partly under the tutelage of his guardian, the notable popular science writer, Dionysius Lardner, his namesake. Seemingly the young man did not become very sensitized to Ireland and its possibilities onstage until his fortieth year when he undertook to adapt Griffin’s novel, The Collegians, into his play, The Colleen Bawn. When he began writing about Ireland, he took modest political points-of-view; it is in the plays that we find his abiding affection for his homeland.

Boucicault had not been active as a proponent of Irish policy until the notable successes of his Irish plays, including The Colleen Bawn (1860), Arrah-na-Pogue (1864), and The Shaughraun (1874)--the latter had specific references to the activities of the Fenian movement. Boucicault sympathized instead with the Home Rule Movement, established by Isaac Butt in 1870. Unlike the Fenians,
the Home Rulers advocated a constitutional remedy for Ireland’s troubles: an Irish subordinate parliament with control over Irish domestic affairs. The appeal of this viewpoint extended even to the Fenians who were in political disarray after the failed uprising in 1867. Despite this connection, Home Rule was essentially a moderate and conservative movement whose main support came from the Catholic middle class as opposed to the Fenians who drew major support from working and rural classes.

On January 1, 1876, Boucicault wrote an open letter to B. Disraeli, the British Prime Minister, demanding the release of Irish political prisoners in the name of the audiences who had paid admission to see The Shaughraun, which was then continuing its first London run at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Boucicault’s appeal was given short shrift by Disraeli, who accused him of being a mere Thespian or conjuror, aiming to thrust himself into the national debate about Ireland’s fate.

Later, in 1881, Boucicault wrote a pamphlet titled “The Fireside Story of Ireland” which sold for a penny in Northern England at the same time he was touring his Irish plays. It had a ready audience with the North Country’s large settlement of displaced Irish and those sympathetic to the Irish cause. That same year it was printed in House and Home, the New York magazine edited by John De Morgan, and it was subsequently reprinted and sold separately for 10 cents under the title, “Ireland’s Story”. Essentially it is a 15 page tract describing the enormous disadvantages and hardships Ireland endured under British rule.

**Who were the Fenians?**

In The Shaughraun Robert has been convicted as a Fenian on the false evidence of Harvey Duff, the police spy deployed by Kinchela. The events in The Shaughraun take place shortly after 1867, the year of the ill-starred Fenian uprising in Ireland and the execution of the Manchester martyrs Fenian patriots) and the Clerkenwell Massacre in England. Both of these latter events are referred to as recent in the play. The last convict ship to Australia was sent in January, 1868, when the practice of penal transportation was suspended.

The Fenians, named for an early Irish warrior band, the *fianna*, were a mid-19th century revolutionary group, an outgrowth of the 1848 Irish uprising which had failed because of population weakness (the Great Famine was in full course) and inept leadership. The Fenians were a secret military organization pledged to achieve independence for all Ireland. Adherents in America, England and Australia were willing and able to bankroll their activities. James Stephens, one of the most determined of the 1848 Young Ireland group, a forerunner of the Fenians, temporarily exiled himself after the 1848 failure and set about organizing abroad.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood (the IRB), referred to as the Fenians, was founded simultaneously in Dublin by Stephens and in New York by John
O’Mahony in 1858. The organization grew quickly; unlike previous revolutionary
groups, their membership was largely drawn from working men and women—
“small farmers and labourers, clerks, shop assistants and artisans…. Nearly all
members were Catholic but they firmly withstood the disapproval of the Church
and believed in complete separation of church and state”, as T. W. Moody writes
in his essay, “Fenianism, Home Rule and the Land War 1850-91” (quoted in The
Course of Irish History, 231).

The Fenians were feared as dangerous and violent by the English and Irish
authorities and the general public. Many Irishmen, now trained in arms in the US
Civil War, returned to help achieve their homeland’s independence. In England,
the Fenian-engineered Clerkenwell Massacre and the Manchester jailbreak, both
in 1867, confirmed the danger. Fenian activity was outlawed and many activists
were tried and transported to Australia, which is where the character Robert
Ffolliott has been sent.

Like the fictional Ffolliott, the very real John Boyle O’Reilly, a writer and editor,
made a famous escape from the last convict ship to reach Australia. The ship he
escaped to had been chartered by fellow Irishmen in America. This event lends
verisimilitude to Conn’s story of going to Australia to retrieve Robert and stopping
by America on the way back. The newly arrived Robert offers the Captain a slug
of American whiskey, presumably brought from there. Captain Molineux has no
idea that Robert is the escaped convict he seeks. All these would have been
well-known references to The Shaughraun’s contemporary audiences.

While the Fenian flames were banked after the failures of 1867, the objective of
total independence from Britain did not die. It figured prominently in Irish politics
in such later organizations as the Sinn Fein, founded in 1902, and the Irish
Revolutionary Army (the IRA), founded in 1919. It certainly influenced the rebels
of The Rising of 1916. Many of the best known Fenians from the 1860’s came to
the US and Canada to make new lives while continuing their active support for
the cause of Irish independence.

The name “fenian”, derived from the early Irish warrior band-- the fianna, was
headed by Fiann MacCuill (Finn MacCumhaill or Finn MacCool). The hero of
Boucicault’s play, Belle Lamarr, written earlier than The Shaughraun in 1874
and set in the American Civil War, is a Conn-like Irishman who is a Confederate
soldier. He is the namesake of the legendary Fin MacCoul (yet another variant).
He comes from Skibereen, the reference a nod of respect to Fenian J. Donovan-
Rossa and the dissident Phoenix Society of Skibereen, which he founded.
Historical Notes: the Home Rule Movement, the O’Neals, the Catholic Church:

In April 1870 the foundation of the Home Government Association or the Home Rule Movement brought together Protestant Conservatives and Liberals, Catholicconstitutionalists and Fenians. The attorney and Member of Parliament Isaac Butt, the chief defense counsel for the Fenians in the 1860’s, was its founder. Butt was an Irish Protestant and fundamentally conservative; there is some speculation he may have acted in part because he feared what would happen if the Fenians were successful. He was determined that Ireland not suffer as she had previously during the chaos of the Great Famine years.

The Home Rule Movement essentially set its goal as change through constitutional means. It did not seek total independence for Ireland, as did the Fenians. Rather, the Home Rule movement proposed an Irish subparliament with hegemony over Irish domestic affairs. Later it was to form a platform for the renowned Irish politician, Charles Stewart Parnell.

+++++++++++++++++++++++

The evoking of the name of Owen Roe O'Neill (O'Neal) in Arte O'Neal's heritage harks back to the dominant military commander who supported the Catholic cause and the English king, Charles I, against the forces of Parliament during the period of the English Civil War (1642-1650). O'Neill was arguably the best officer Ireland had and his men defeated the English/Scots contingent at Benburb on the Blackwater in 1646. As the war dragged on, the Irish were defeated. The English offered amnesty to the Irish men-at-arms, provided they emigrate, and the upshot was the Irish landowners who supported the Irish cause were stripped of their land. O'Neill did not face the Parliamentary army when Oliver Cromwell came to Ireland, for O'Neill had died in November, 1649. Under the Commonwealth rule (1649-1660) titles to land were widely redistributed to Commonwealth supporters; for several centuries Catholics were deprived of not only their land but voting privileges and entitlements of many kinds.

The original Owen (Eoghan) O'Neill was the son of Niall, king of Ireland in the 5th century. All the O'Neills are said to have descended from him.


+++++++++++++++++++++++

The Fenians with their declared purpose of complete independence for Ireland, upheaval by any means, and secret membership oaths could not fail to arouse the suspicion and hostility of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Because of political agitations throughout Europe as well as Ireland, in 1870 Pope Pius IX and church authorities issued a Decree of Condemnation outlawing membership in the Fenians. (Rafferty, The Church, the State and the Fenian Threat, 131)
In The Shaughraun the character of Father Dolan does not manifest political convictions, although historically the Irish Catholic hierarchy and many clerics were key players in debates about various Irish issues, especially whether the Fenians as a secret society should be tolerated. When the Pope issued a Decree of Condemnation for participation and membership in the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the American Catholic bishops, squarely in the corner of the Fenians, protested the action and placed the blame for promoting the decree on the shoulders of the Irish bishops. Indeed the American IRB pointed out they were not specifically named and therefore unlike the Irish Catholics should not be banned from Church sacraments.

The Fenian Amnesty

In The Shaughraun Queen Victoria is reported to extend amnesty by proclamation to Fenian prisoners, including Robert. This upsets the plans of Kinchela who has everything riding on Robert’s permanent removal. On January 5, 1871, in part due to the influence of William Gladstone, the prime minister, and the Liberal Party, forty-nine Fenians were granted amnesty, provided they remove themselves from Ireland and emigrate. The majority of amnestied Fenians went to America and Canada, some to Australia. But since Robert Ffolliott was wrongfully accused of being a Fenian, under the terms of the amnesty he would presumably gain full pardon and be restored to his land and rights.

Notes by Nancy Cole

NB  The author has used boldface font for headings and when the titles of Boucicault play occurring for the first time; I have eschewed underlining of titles and using boldface every time a title appears. Also, titles by other authors such as As You Like It by William Shakespeare are not in boldface. Hopefully this establishes a convention which makes the reading easier on the website.