

## The Land of Saints and How to Get Out of It Irish Diaspora on the Irish Stage (1904 to 1939)

Fabio Luppi

(Università telematica “Guglielmo Marconi”, Italia)

**Abstract** Leaving aside historical and mythological dramas, a considerable number of plays written for the Abbey Theatre between 1904 and the outbreak of the Second World War represent emigration. They enjoyed varying degrees of success. In 1904 G.B. Shaw portrayed an Irish émigré as one of the two protagonists in *John Bull's Other Island*; in the following two years Padraic Colum's *The Land* and William Boyle's *The Mineral Workers* were enthusiastically received by Abbey Theatre audience, the former with its depiction of young Irish men and women emigrating to America, the latter, an engineer returning to Ireland from overseas; 1907 saw three plays presenting emigration as one of the great Irish issues, both politically and economically: J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, George Fitzmaurice's *The Country Dressmaker* and Lady Augusta Gregory's *The Jackdaw*. They were followed by T.C. Murray's *Birthright*, Lennox Robinson's *Harvest* and Colum's *Thomas Muskerry*. Indeed, it is almost impossible to provide an exhaustive list of all the plays dealing with emigration. The present paper aims to discuss a selection of significant plays intended for or staged at the Abbey Theatre in the first decades of the twentieth century, analysing what emigration stood for, and how it was exploited dramatically. The historical boundaries of this research (1904-1939) provide a provisional limit to an otherwise too vast study for the present paper.

**Keywords** Theatre. Irish. Diaspora. Emigration. Abbey.

The end of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th witnessed the success of a melodrama entitled *Emigration*, written by the Irish melodramatist and actor Hubert O'Grady. It represented the dramatic situation of the many Irish people who were forced to emigrate to escape from disastrous social and economic conditions. In the first decades of the new century something had changed: while many left the island as a form of resistance to British Rule, and for some it was still a matter of economic necessity, many other emigrants did so of their own volition. Remaining did not entail death, starvation or poverty, but it did involve renouncing a better life, or sacrificing intellectual freedom. Indeed, British and American life offered social and intellectual outlets that Ireland did not have. As Padraic Colum explained in a prefatory note to his plays: “In *The Land* I tried to show that it was not altogether an economic necessity that was driving young men and women out of the Irish rural districts; the lack of life and the lack of freedom there had much to do with emigration” (Colum 1916, 2).

Moreover, emigration could be seen as a temporary, rather than permanent, condition; mobility had radically changed over the years, and travelling outside the country was becoming progressively easier. Leaving Ireland did not necessarily mean emigrating for good, especially for the educated or those belonging to certain social classes. Foster (2014) makes a significant point when he says that “many of the revolutionary generation followed well-established Irish routes to Continental Europe, for purposes of education, work or leisure, as well as travelling regularly across the Atlantic. Mobility, and access to faster and cheaper transport in the Edwardian age, created new opportunities for evading the world of their parents” (16). This observation applies not only to the characters of several plays produced at the Abbey Theatre, but also to several Irish playwrights of the time; escaping the world of their parents meant escaping an old society in order to create a new one.

Many Irish playwrights saw emigration as the only way to attain artistic independence, international recognition, a chance for self-expression or simply a better life. In 1914 Padraic Colum – who had split with the Abbey Theatre and joined The Theatre of Ireland<sup>1</sup> – left for America. Paul Vincent Carroll, a schoolteacher “disheartened by the limitations of the Irish educational system, which the Free State placed in the hand of the Catholic Church” (as George Cusack says in Carroll 2014, 9), emigrated to Scotland in 1921. William Boyle, often in disagreement with Yeats, especially after the riots accompanying Synge’s *Playboy*, spent the last years of his life in England where he died in 1923. Meanwhile James Joyce travelled to Italy, Switzerland and France, claiming that exile was the only way to be a free artist. In the Thirties, following the rejection of *The Silver Tassie*, Sean O’Casey sailed for the UK. The Ulsterman, St. John Ervine, settled in London when he was seventeen, although he eventually spent the first part of his adult life in Belfast and Dublin, where he was appointed manager of the Abbey Theatre for a short time. He then moved back to England and died in London in 1971. Shaw – like Larry Doyle, the Irish protagonist of *John Bull’s Other Island* – sailed for England at twenty and settled there. He did not return to Ireland for more than twenty years. He also stated explicitly that, in order to acquire an objective perspective on Ireland, an Irish artist had to leave the country. Shaw did not actually refer to emigration, but he did raise his voice against the danger of Irish provincialism. Referring to Joyce, Moore and Synge, he added that “it was only when they went to Paris Irishmen could write” and sardonically recommended that “the Irish should be conscripted out of their own country so that they would learn to know what Ireland was really like” (reported in Holloway 1967, 19).

1 Interestingly, Murray (1996, 11) describes Colum’s withdrawal from the National theatre and joining the new organization as a form of emigration akin to that mourned in *The Land*.

Between 1904 and 1939 Irish society had ‘utterly’ changed, politically, economically and socially. These two dates are not arbitrary: in 1904 the Abbey Theatre opened and 1939, with the outbreak of the Second World War – and Ireland consequent decision to remain neutral – marks a neat breach in the political history of the country.<sup>2</sup> Within these two dates the Irish diaspora started to assume different forms characterised by a shift from economically driven emigration to an emigration motivated by new individual needs. It could be seen as an escape from punishment (*The Playboy of the Western World*, Paul Twining) or from responsibilities (*Juno and the Paycock*), as an act of personal emancipation from authority (*The Land*, *Things That Are Caesar’s*) or as an attempt to find new opportunities and have a better life (*Birthright*, *The White-headed Boy*). In all of these cases emigration was seen as the extreme consequence of a new attitude towards family and social structure in Ireland rather than the only alternative to a life of extreme poverty and starvation.

The most obvious way to introduce the topic is through Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*. In this play, emigration is mentioned as a possible way of escaping the law; the punishment Christy deserves for the crime of parricide can be avoided if he leaves for America. This is, in fact, his intention. Widow Quin argues against this option: “You’d be too proud to speak to us at all, and it’d be a pity surely to have your like sailing from Mayo to the Western World” (Synge 2008, 97). The widow continues, talking about her own experiences: “You’ll be doing like myself, I’m thinking, when I did destroy my man, for I’m above many’s the day, odd times in great spirits, abroad in the sunshine, darning a stocking or sticking a shift; and odd times again looking out on the schooners, hookers, trawlers is sailing the sea, and I thinking on the gallant hairy fellows are drifting beyond, and myself long years living alone” (101). Thus, when Christy’s father eventually arrives in County Mayo and meets Widow Quin, the latter hides Christy and tells the old man that he has to find out whether his son has already left for America. Old Mahon, she says, has to follow those hundreds of trampers going to the Sligo boat. She says she has seen a fellow “gone over the hills to catch a coasting steamer to the north or south”(100).

The idea of emigration as an escape from punishment or responsibility became a common trope in several plays – Lady Gregory alludes to this solution in *The Gaol Gate*, where the wife of a condemned man says: “It is only among strangers, I am thinking, he could be hiding his story at all. It is best for him to go to America, where the people are as thick as grass” (Gregory 1911, 20). A series of other fictional criminals – or people who

2 It must also be acknowledged that the issue of emigration continued to play an important role in the country and continued to be represented both in masterpieces and minor plays of the Irish stage – suffice it to mention James McKenna’s *The Scatterin’* (1959) and Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964).

were guilty of various moral and religious sins, or who just had something to hide – find a definitive solution to their problems in emigration. In Lennox Robinson's *Thomas Muskerry*, a fraudster who has stolen the protagonist's money, thus causing his financial and existential ruin, escapes to America. In O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, Charles Bentham – a school-teacher who studies law and brings news of a supposed important legacy for the Boyle family – is responsible not only for the financial problems of the Boyles due to an error made drafting the will, but also for Mary Boyle's pregnancy. When everything is lost, he escapes his responsibilities and disappears from the play. There is no clear indication of his destination.

A possible sequel<sup>3</sup> to this play is St. John Ervine's *The Magnanimous Lover*, where the protagonist, Henry Hinde, comes back to his village from Liverpool ten years after having left his pregnant fiancée. Henry comes back to propose marriage, but in the end she refuses what is ironically defined as a magnanimous offer.

If Synge's play suggests that emigration is the best 'exit strategy' for criminals, there is a much more interesting and important reason why *The Playboy of the Western World* should be cited in relation to a problem that was both politically and personally sensitive. Indeed, Synge called emigration into question to justify his controversial plot. He declared that the purpose of his *Playboy* – and the main issue that it was intended to raise – did not concern escaping the law or the violence of rural Ireland; its purpose was to condemn emigration, seen as a plague for the whole nation. In an essay, he wrote:

It should not be forgotten that emigrants are going out at the present time for quite opposite reasons. In the poorest districts of all they go reluctantly, because they are unable to keep themselves at home; but in places where there has been much improvement the younger and the brighter men and girls get ambitions which they cannot satisfy in this country, and so they go also. Again, where there is no local life or amusements they go because they are dull, and when amusements and races are introduced they get the taste for amusements and go because they cannot get enough of them. They go as much from districts where the political life has been allowed to stagnate as from districts where there has been an excess of agitation that had ended only in disappointment. (Synge 2008, 232)

Synge had already recounted a story of parricide and escape in part 1 of *The Aran Islands*:

<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is O'Casey's play that would be a prequel, as Ervine's play dates from 1914 while *Juno and the Paycock* dates from 1924.

The oldest [man] on the island... is fond of telling me anecdotes - not folk tales - of things that have happened here in his lifetime. He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to the island and threw himself on the mercy of... the natives (350).

Yeats also wrote that "An old man on the Aran Islands told [him] the very tale on which the *Playboy* is founded, beginning with the words: 'If any gentleman has done a crime we'll hide him. There was a gentleman that killed his father, and I had him in my own house six months till he got away to America'" (Yeats 2007, 244). Synge intended this story as a criticism of the Irish diaspora, which put Ireland in the hands of the coward Shawn Keogh and the criminal Christy Mahon, the rascal who allegedly kills his father. Youngsters are no match for the older generation who fought the land war, as Pegeen Mike scornfully tells Shawn: "Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler; or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet" (Synge 2008, 70).

Synge's justification for this negative representation of Irish society can be seen as an illustration of what Padraic Colum had already described in *The Land* - a play set, significantly, after the harsh battles for the redistribution and ownership of the land, fought in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. After various laws, the conflict culminated in the Wyndham Land Purchase Act of 1903. In Colum's play, Murtagh Cosgar and Martin Douras are two old landowners, Murtagh's son Matt being the perfect match for Martin's daughter, Ellen. Matt Cosgar and Ellen Douras are smart, and they aspire to a different, freer life, while their respective brother and sister, Sally Cosgar and Cornelius Douras - described as much less resourceful and intelligent - lack any sense of initiative and simply do what their parents want them to do. Murtagh Cosgar has twelve children and all of them but two have opposed their father's authoritarian management of the family businesses and have left for America. "Ten of your own children went" (Colum 1986, 14). Martin reminds his friend. Matt would love to stay and run the farm with Ellen, the girl he loves, but his father, patronizing and controlling, wants to dictate the rules and impose on his son a loveless marriage to a richer girl. This behavior leads Matt to follow his brothers' example and make the difficult decision to leave for America.

In *The Playboy of the Western World* Pegeen Mike says she has often thought of emigrating ("And myself, a girl, was tempted often to go sailing the seas till I'd marry a Jew-man, with ten kegs of gold"), but has never followed up the idea. Pegeen considers herself lucky not to have left because she eventually finds Christy ("and I not knowing at all there was the like of you drawing nearer, like the stars of God"). Similarly, Ellen in *The Land* is

fascinated by the chance of going away: "I was thinking of the girls that are going to America in the morning, and that made me restless" (Colum 1986, 8). When Matt tells her, "My brothers and sisters took their freedom. They went from this house and away to the ends of the world", Ellen replies: "Do you ever think of America?" The difference between her and Pegeen is that Ellen really wants to leave; she seeks true emancipation, even if she has already found a husband. Ellen adds this description of how America appears to the eyes of all young emigrants: "The streets, the shops, the throngs". When a group of boys and girls leaving for America arrives to say goodbye, Sally - Matt's sister - says: "The land never troubles them in America, and they can wear fine clothes, and be as free as the larks over the bogs" (19). Almost the same words are later used by the young emigrants. The dreams of these boys and girls who have decided to leave and are all "dressed for going away" (21) are expressed in their whispering and chattering when they talk to Ellen:

- FIRST GIRL Every night I'm dreaming of the sea and the great towns.  
Streets and streets of houses, and every street as crowded as the road  
outside the chapel when the people do be coming from Mass.
- FIRST BOY I could watch the crowd in the street; I would think it better  
than any sight I ever knew.
- SECOND GIRL And the shops, and the great houses.
- SECOND BOY There's no stir here. There's no fine clothes, nor fine man-  
ners, nor fine things to be seen.
- THIRD BOY There's no money. One could never get a shilling together  
here. In America there's money to have and to spend and to send  
home.
- THIRD GIRL Every girl gets married in America. (21)

Ellen's friends come not only to say goodbye, they also want to convince her to join them. One says that for a girl like her (that is, smart and well educated) it is "foolish to be staying here", and another adds that in America they could all have the different life "they have been longing for", with a different job, different people, and "streets and crowds and theatres" instead of "bare roads and market-towns" (22). It is an idealised picture, and Ellen warns her friends saying: "O what do you know about streets and theatres? You have only heard of them. They are finer than anything you could say. They are finer than anything you could think of, after a story, when you'd be young".<sup>4</sup> However, we know that Ellen herself is not as self-assured and as self-confident as she wants to show when she

4 A few years later, in 1909 Lady Gregory mocked this over optimistic and idyllic image of a possible life in America in her play *The Image*.

expresses these objections. Even if her words are sensible – because sailing to America does not mean an easy life – she knows that she deserves better prospects than those she can expect in Ireland. Moreover, the image her friends have of emigrating is not completely idealised. They recognise that they will “be lonesome for a long time [...] thinking of [their] brothers and sisters” (22) they had been nursing and minding; but even without friends in America they are convinced they will get on.

At the end of the play Ellen and Matt make the decision to leave the country. On the other hand, the young couple formed by Sally Cosgar and Cornelius Douras (Matt’s sister and Ellen’s brother) intends to stay. With little initiative, they simply rely on the traditional life their fathers have always had living on the land. Cornelius Douras, Ellen’s less intelligent brother, mocks young people leaving Ireland, as the situation might change. He tells his father: “Aren’t they foolish to be going away like that, father, and we at the mouth of the good times?” (37). He therefore urges his father to convince them not to leave using words that sound bitter to Martin’s ear, as he has just lost his brightest daughter: “‘Men of Ballykill-duff’, you might say, ‘stay on the land, and you’ll be saved body and soul; you’ll be saved in the man and in the nation. The nation, men of Ballykill-duff, do you ever think of it all? Do you ever think of the Irish nation that is waiting all this time to be born?’”. Cornelius Douras’ blind faith in – and probably unjustified optimistic expectations of – what is going to happen in Ireland matches the description provided by the stage directions of the patriotic and religious pictures hanging on the walls of Martin Douras’ house. This contributes to illustrating how traditional national values are represented: as static as pictures hanging on a wall, while the best part of Irish future generations escapes from what Joyce would later describe as a paralysed society. This is not precisely what Yeats would say a few years later – though in a completely different context – that is, that “the best lack all convictions while the worst are full of passionate intensity”, yet the play does exemplify the premises of *The Playboy of the Western World* – the fact that Synge intended his play as a denunciation of the diaspora of the most promising young generations that left Ireland at the mercy of rogues, scoundrels and even murderers. In *The Land*, the best realise that it is not possible to fulfil ambitions in a rural Ireland. “Matt and Ellen, the fit and the strong, go to America. Cornelius and Sally, the hare-brained and the drudge, remain. Symbolic this is, of course, of the situation in Ireland to-day, or at least yesterday” (Weigandt 1913, 207-8). The epilogue to the play was probably inevitable from the very beginning.

The comic equivalent to Colum’s play is George Shiels’ comedy, *Paul Twynning*. The two plays share several well-established characters and set pieces. Like Murtagh Cosgar in *The Land*, James Deegan, a stubborn rich farmer and magistrate, drives his children away from home: “he had to banish four other sons and two daughters for disobedience” (Shiels

1954, 125). He also wants his shy son, Dan, to marry Daisy Mullen, who has just come back from America (apparently rich).<sup>5</sup> Like Murtagh Cosgar, he wants to impose a loveless marriage on his son, but Dan is in love with Rose McGothigan, a small farmer's daughter. Deegan considers her inferior to his own family and so Dan, like Ellen Douras, is seriously thinking of leaving for America. This again is the extreme consequence of a father's interference in his children's life choices. At the end of the play Paul Twining (a tramp plasterer from Dublin who works for Deegan) convinces Deegan after a series of vicissitudes to consent to the marriage between Rose and his son, and craftily manages to get money for himself and Julia so that they can head off to America together. Dan tells his father: "I believe you'll never see them again..." (Shiels 1954, 173). Interestingly, the two smart scoundrels, Paul and Julia, represent yet further examples of the best people leaving, although they are also fraudsters who have to leave in order to avoid possible prosecution. The paradox - and the bitter irony of the play - resides in that the best do not lack all convictions, but coincides with the worst: their wit and good intentions show up as dishonest expedients.

T.C. Murray's *Birthright* (1910) also portrays emigration on stage. Batt Morrissey, a farmer, has two sons, the youngest of whom, Shane, who is the most suited to farm life, decides to leave for America, because the law dictates that only the eldest son can inherit land. Shane's sudden decision to emigrate upsets his father, who soon realises "the terrible loss that boy will be on [the whole family]" (Murray 1998, 38). The play opens with the family receiving a visit from a neighbor, bringing them the new trunk they have bought for Shane's departure. Shane says that since his elder brother will inherit the land and will probably soon get married and have children, his staying in Ireland would mean having a life that would not befit a smart, active young man. He provocatively asks his mother: "Rocking the cradle for Hugh [his elder brother], ye'd want me to be" (32). Even though his help is needed on the family farm, he feels he can aspire to something better. As Synge had pointed out, "in places where there has been much improvement the younger and the brighter men and girls get ambitions which they cannot satisfy in this country, and so they go also." At the end of the play, the single-minded father decides to go against the law and leaves the farm to his youngest son, but this decision sparks a furious discussion between the two brothers, which tragically degenerates into a violent fight and the death of the elder son. The fact is that Ireland could not guarantee a decent life to more than one son in small agrarian families; the family business, that is the farm, was a resource

5 Daisy tells Deegan: "If you've met me even ten years ago, you'd have met a comparatively poor gel, for I've made all my money in the last decade", that is to say, in America (Shiels, 1954, 125).



for just one person. The other sons and daughters had to find a different path in life; in order to have a chance of improving their situation, the best option was emigration. Further proof that cooperation between brothers was not feasible was the habit old farmers had of deliberately postponing their own retirement as:

Once entitled [the farmers] were reluctant to relinquish their farms to their sons. Giving over the farm created a thorny nexus of problems. According to peasant custom, once a farmer did so, he and his wife were obliged to move to a small rear room of the farmhouse so that the son might become master and his wife, the new 'woman of the house'. As a result, father often delayed surrendering his farm until advanced age required him to do so. [...] Furthermore, the small size of these farms meant that they could only support one son's family. If the other son wished to marry and raise a family, they were forced to emigrate in order to find work; otherwise they remained single. (De Giacomo 2003, 37)

The same paradigm applies in Lennox Robinson's *Harvest*. Here the playwright does not only refer to emigration, but more generally to the younger generation abandoning rural life and its traditions. In the play, the family farm is run by the old father, Timothy Hurley, assisted by his youngest son, the only one who has not left rural life. All but one of Timothy's children have transformed their lives and left home: "One of them, a priest [...] over in America now using his eloquence to win money for the Church; and one a solicitor that's unravelling the law in the west in the County of Galway [...] and one in England [...] and Jack here, that's giving medicines to the sick and bringing happiness to countless families in the City of Dublin and its suburbs" (Robinson 1982, 17). They have become a priest, a lawyer, a secretary and a chemist, moving either from the countryside to the city or to America or England. Another play by the same author depicts emigration as the only alternative for the youngest son of a family. In this case, the setting is not rural, but 'provincial' - though the very word 'provincial,' in a country as Ireland, was problematic. Leaving aside the fact that the whole country was sometimes seen as 'provincial' due to its colonial status, here the adjective is used to refer to life in small towns, and to exclude the few real cities Ireland counted at the time, Dublin, Belfast, Galway and Cork. In Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* (1916) emigration is seen as the last resource for Denis Geoghegan, the youngest son of the family, who had originally been given the chance to study to become a doctor. Failing his final exam for the second time, his eldest brother, who is now the head of the family (the father is dead), decides to send him to Canada. The problem at the heart of the conflict between the two brothers is found in Denis' resolute: "I want to be inde-

pendent" (Robinson 1982, 112), and, later: "I only want to be able to do what I like with my own life" (114).<sup>6</sup>

What is evident in all these plays is that emigration is caused by a superior authority: it is the consequence of a choice made by the main characters' parents or the reaction of sons and daughters to decisions made by their patronizing fathers. This aspect is of great importance if we consider the Irish political situation and read the texts as political metaphor. Thus, the political significance of emigration – either to England or to America – that might have been only partly touched on in plays about rural life, becomes strikingly evident once the social setting involves Protestant landlords or provincial urban life. A refusal to come to terms with the never-ending internal political struggles led many young Irish people to leave their native land. The civil engineer Laurence Doyle, the protagonist of Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) is a perfect example of this bitter disillusionment. He considers it futile to remain in Ireland, and is reluctant to go back there even if only for commercial purposes. When his English colleague, Broadbent, asks him, "But don't you want to see your country again, after eighteen years absence? to see your people? to be in the old home again?", Doyle answers: "I have an instinct against going back to Ireland: an instinct so strong that I'd rather go with you to the South Pole than to Roscullen" (Shaw 2004, 33). Such ideas might well have sounded more than irritating to the nationalists.<sup>7</sup>

One major concern for both Yeats and Robinson was the decline of the Protestant Ascendancy in the new Free State. In particular, Robinson shows this unease with regard to emigration in two different plays. At the end of *The Big House* (1926) one possibility for the families of the Ascendancy who have had their houses burnt down after Irish independence, is to emigrate to England. St. Leger Alcock and his wife make this decision, but their daughter Kate – the protagonist of the play – decides to stay in Ireland and fight for a place in the new Republic as she recognises that Ireland is her home. Kate speaks against the old "Irish dissipation" represented by the "old generation of Irish high spirits", ironically referring to the mistaken conservative attitude of many Protestant landowners: "Just what has tumbled the big houses into ruins or into the hands of the big graziers or into the hands of the Roman Catholic Church" (Robinson, 1982, 154). The prototype of this breed of Ascendancy landowner is Vandaleur O'Neill: "a quarter of him is Irish – the best old Irish, the other three-quarters are successive English invasions" (148); he is a product of his

6 His brother Duffy interprets this metaphorically: "Free? ... Bedad, isn't he like old Ireland asking for freedom, and we're like the fools of Englishmen offering him every bloody thing except the one thing?" (Robinson 1982, 114).

7 *Twenty-Five*, Lady Gregory's first play (written and performed before 1904), was harshly criticised: Maud Gonne objected that the playwright showed the returning emigrant as the hero at the expense of the Irish at home (Welch 1999, 23).

“wicked old father and his foolish mother” (148). The same disappointment with the conduct of Protestant landowners is bitterly expressed in *The Lost Leader* (1918), in a stage direction describing the Major, John White, an old unionist: “He and his two maiden sisters occupy the one big ‘place’ in the neighbourhood [a Big House], when they die the heir, an Australian cousin, will sell the place, and Cooney or his son will probably buy it. The Whites will pass away, and the demesne of Castle White will become a grazing ranch. And with them will pass a tradition of hospitality and [...] a tradition of culture” (Robinson 1918, 67). In this case, the emigration of a Protestant landlord to Australia extinguishes the last possible dream of the many descendants of the Ascendancy.

St. John Ervine’s *The Island of Saints and How to Get out of It* (1920)<sup>8</sup> recounts a different kind of disillusionment. The comic title conceals a bitter irony, but its subtitle is much more pointed in providing the context for the criticism expressed in the play: “A Small Piece for the Times.” Two opposing views of Irish society emerge here: while the old Ulster cobbler John Cairns interprets the physical suffering of an old rival in love – who has returned from America incredibly rich, but seriously ill – as a warning against American materialism, his son sees emigration as the sole means of escaping an asphyxiating society. Ulster is described as trapped inevitably in the exhausting fight between Unionists and Republicans<sup>9</sup> and the only chance of avoiding this paralysis is emigration.

A returning émigré is protagonist in various plays.<sup>10</sup> After experiencing a new kind of life, however, homecoming can be a trap. In Fitzmaurice’s *The Country Dressmaker* (1914), Pats Connor, Julia Shea’s suitor, comes home after ten years in America, widowed and in good health. Julia, who has waited for him for many years, does not know of his return, and finally capitulates and accepts a match with Edmund Normyle, an admirer insistently pushed upon her by her mother. After a series of deceptions orchestrated by rival characters, and several turnabouts, the two protagonists – Pats and Julia – finally get married, but this finale turns out to be a bitter one. In the vicissitudes that have led to the conclusion, Julia and Pats disappoint each other. Nothing can be as it was before Pats’ emigration: Julia is disheartened by the fact that Pats married another woman in America, while Pats cannot accept that Julia consented to marry another man.<sup>11</sup>

8 The text of this play has never been printed.

9 URL <http://www.irishplayography.com> (2017-12-14).

10 See, among others, the aforementioned *Twenty-Five*, or R.J. Ray’s *The Casting-out of Martin Whelan*.

11 Another play portraying a returning émigré is Joyce’s *Exiles*. It was initially rejected and was not staged in Ireland.

Those who return expecting to change Irish society, bolstered by the experiences they have had abroad, have to fight hard and face the differences between life in a static rural country and life in the recently visited land of opportunity, open to new and enterprising experiences. In William Boyle's *The Mineral Workers* (1906) the protagonist, a returning Irish-American mining engineer, wants to dismantle the fixed, traditional local life by introducing modern methods to exploit the land, but finds the strong opposition of rural conservatism. In the end he succeeds, notwithstanding the outright hostility of his fellow countrymen. The situation is different with another returning émigré. The protagonist of the aforementioned Murray's *Birthright* has bought his land thirty years earlier than the time of the action in the play, "with the bit o' money [...] made in the States" (Murray 1998, 34). The situation is different from that in *The Mineral Workers* because here the protagonist's return is set in the past (in respect of what happens in the play) that is, before the Wyndham Land Purchase Act of 1903. The play thus acquires a different historical significance given that it refers to the Land War fought by the previous generation.

Destiny is less benevolent to the central character of T.C. Murray's *The Blind Wolf* (1928),<sup>12</sup> who is sent to America by his father to seek his fortune. When he comes back disguised as a stranger, his father, not recognizing him, decides to kill him to steal the gold he has earned abroad. Possibly this play was a rewriting of an extremely similar story narrated in the lesser known play *The Home-Coming*, written by Gertrude Robins and staged at the Abbey in 1913 (although the story of a father who does not recognise his son and kills him to steal his money has a long 'tradition'; the German Zacharias Werner wrote and published a Gothic one act play, *Der vierundzwanzigste Februar* (1808), where this is what happens; the play was translated in French, and became popular; J.C. Mangan knew and translated it from the original German, publishing it in 1837).<sup>13</sup> While Murray's play is set in Hungary, Robins' is set in Russia. Probably expedients to avoid troubles similar to those caused by *The Playboy of the Western World*, which was accused of berating Ireland. The plot is almost the same: an émigré comes back home in disguise and asks his parents for hospitality. Not recognizing him, his old mother convinces her husband to kill his own son in order to steal his money. Only when it is too late is the identity of the young man revealed to his desperate father. In both cases emigration is set in a context of extreme poverty, where resorting to violence is an almost acceptable solution for characters who are desperate to find some respite to their miserable lives.

12 The text of this play has never been printed. Cf. Allen Cave in Murray 1998, XIX.

13 For more details see Paci, Francesca Romana (2015). *Il mio cuore è un monaco*. Torino: Trauben; Paci, Francesca Romana (forthcoming). "James Clarence Mangan's 'Necromantic Scroll'". This article is forthcoming in a volume collecting essays from the conference on Irish Gothic held in Perugia in 2013.

Another device used in at least two plays is that of a letter arriving from America. The letter, sent by an émigré, announces the economic success of the emigrant, a relative who has found a stable and prosperous job in the new world, wanting to share his fortune with those who have remained in Ireland. In St. John Ervine's *John Ferguson* (Ervine 1988), the title character is a farmer living in harsh economic conditions, who has had to mortgage his estate. He has a son, Andrew, and a daughter, Hannah. The latter is being courted both by Henry Witherow, the village miller, and by James Caesar, the local grocer. In neither case would this be a marriage based on love, but the match is probably the only chance of finding a solution to the family's financial misfortunes. When Andrew kills Caesar for raping Hannah, everybody thinks that the murderer is Witherow, although everything finally falls apart and Andrew confesses to his crime. The whole tragedy could have been avoided if only the letter the characters receive in one of the final scenes, had arrived a few days earlier. John's brother, an émigré, had sent money from America in order to prevent the foreclosure of the estate.

Similarly, in Paul Vincent Carroll's *Things That Are Caesar's* (Carroll 2014), a letter from America has the potential to change the life of the protagonist, Eilish Hardy. Eilish is deceived by her greedy mother and by the local priest, Father Duffy, who manage to convince her to put love aside and marry the son of a crude farmer. Only at the end, in the third act, and after a baby has been born of this odious marriage, does Eilish receive a letter from her brother who has made his fortune in America. In a revised version of the play Carroll substituted a different finale: the protagonist bravely - and unrealistically - decides to leave her family and join her brother in America in order to live her own life, free from the impositions of a society that is all too ready to bargain individual freedom and happiness for financial stability.

To conclude, the issues raised by emigration in almost all of the plays considered - all of which selected among the many staged at the Abbey Theatre - are more closely linked to a sustained attempt to change the family and the social structure in Ireland than to the extreme poverty of the protagonists (as in *The Blind Wolf* and *The Home-Coming* where poverty actually plays a determining role). The plays here included, representing a cluster of works insisting on the recurrent issue of the diaspora, express a common concern with a vast social phenomenon, the impact of which was felt as decisive for the potential development of the country. Thus, what is of central importance in the plays staging emigration after 1904 is the different economic and social condition of the new emigrants. And what is contested through the issue of emigration is traditional authority, and the imposition of fundamental life choices in a society regulated by parental control. The diaspora of these years can be seen as a response to a societal structure governed by the old generation - extensively rep-

resented in the plays here at stake. The depiction of this constant social phenomenon challenged not only the old patriarchal Ireland ruled by the British, but also the new Free State and must be read as an indirect accusation of the course of Irish history: the replacing of an old authority with a new one did not change these playwrights' bitter condemnation of what was perceived as a paralysed society.

## Bibliography

- Boyle, William (1916). *The Mineral Workers*. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Sons.
- Bowen, Zack (1970). *Padraic Colum. A Biographical-Critical Introduction*. Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Carroll, Paul Vincent (2014). *Selected Plays of Paul Vincent Carroll. Chosen and Introduced by George Cusak*. Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe.
- Colum, Padraic (1916). *Three Plays. The Fiddler's House. The Land. Thomas Muskerry*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Colum, Padraic (1986). *Selected Plays of Padraic Colum*. Edited by Sanford Sternlicht. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- De Giacomo, Albert J. (2003). *T.C. Murray, Dramatist. Voice of Rural Ireland*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Ervine, John (1988). *Selected Plays*. Chosen and introduced by John Cronin. Colin Smythe: Gerrards Cross, Bucks.
- Fitzmaurice, George (1914). *The Country Dressmaker*. Dublin; London: Maunsel & Company.
- Foster, Robert F. (2014). *Vivid Faces. The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland. 1890-1923*. London: Penguin.
- Gregory, Augusta (1911). *Seven Short Plays*. Dublin: Maunsel & Co.
- Grene, Nicholas (1975). *Synge. A Critical Study of the Plays*. London: Macmillan.
- Grene, Nicholas (1999). *The Politics of Irish Drama. Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herr, Cheryl (1987). "Subworlds, Props, and Settings in Joyce's 'Exiles'" [online]. *Theatre Journal*, 39(2), 185-203. DOI 10.2307/3207688.
- Holloway, Joseph (1967). *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre. A Selection from his Unpublished Journal. Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*. Edited by Robert Hogan, Michael O'Neill. Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Kiberd, Declan (1996). *Inventing Ireland*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Levitas, Ben (2002). *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism, 1890-1916*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morash, Christopher (2002). *A History of Irish Theatre. 1601-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Moran, James (2013). *The Theatre of Sean O'Casey*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Murphy, Paul (2008). *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama, 1899-1949*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murray, Christopher (1996). "Padraic Colum's *The Land* and Cultural Nationalism" [online]. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 2(2), 5-15. URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41273935> (2017-12-01).
- Murray, Christopher [1997] (2000). *Twentieth Century Irish Drama. Mirror up to Nation*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Murray, Thomas Cornelius (1998). *Selected Plays of T.C. Murray. Chosen and Introduced by Richard Allen Cave*. Gerrards Cross (UK): Colin Smythe.
- O'Casey, Sean (1980). *Three Plays. Juno and the Paycock. The Shadow of a Gunman. The Plough and the Stars*. Reading: Pan Books.
- Robinson, Lennox (1911). *Two Plays. Harvest. The Clancy Name*. Dublin: Maunsel & Co Ltd.
- Robinson, Lennox (1918). *The Lost Leader*. Dublin: Eigeas Press.
- Robinson, Lennox (1982). *Selected Plays of Lennox Robinson. Chosen and Introduced by Christopher Murray*. Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe.
- Roche, Anthony (1994). *Contemporary Irish Drama, from Beckett to McGuinness*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Roche, Anthony (2015). *The Irish Dramatic Revival. 1899-1939*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Shaw, George Bernard (2004). *John Bull's Other Island*. Fairfield: 1st World Library.
- Shiels, George (1954). *Three Plays. Professor Tim. Paul Twynning. The New Gossoon*. Toronto: Macmillan.
- Sternlicht, Sanford (2010). *Modern Irish Drama. W.B. Yeats to Marina Carr*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Synge, John Millington (2008). *The Complete Works of J.M. Synge*. London: Wordsworth Editions.
- Watson, George J. (1994). *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival. Synge, Yeats, Joyce and O'Casey*. Pittsboro: Catholic University of America Press.
- Weigandt, Cornelius (1913). *Irish Plays and Playwrights*. London: Constable and Co.
- Welch, Robert (2003). *The Abbey Theatre, 1899-1999. Form and Pressure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yeats, William Butler (2007). *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats. Volume 4. Early Essays*. Edited by Richard J. Finneran, George Bornstein. New York: Scribner.

