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Shakespeare and the Irish Writer

Reviewed by Patrick Lonergan Published 12 May

Shakespeare, wrote Ben Jonson, was both the “soul of the age” and “for all time”. His work, that is, encapsulated the life of his society – but it also transcended space and time, acquiring universal importance. That duality is especially important when Shakespeare is considered in an Irish context.

When he’s viewed as the ‘soul of the age’ in Ireland, he’s often seen as exemplifying the anti-Irish strain that existed in Elizabethan and Jacobean society. His characters refer to the Irish as “rug-headed kerns”, for instance – and it’s sometimes assumed that the author must himself have held such views. Similarly, we’re often told that the work of Shakespeare was instrumental in advancing the colonisation of Ireland: many critics complain that Shakespeare invented the Stage Irishman when he gave us Captain Macmorris in *Henry V*, for example – an accusation that is simplistic and, to put it bluntly, completely incorrect.

That said, the proposition that Shakespeare is ‘for all time’ is unlikely to be contradicted by anyone in this country. Most of our great writers have spoken of their indebtedness to Shakespeare, and his plays and poems occupy a central position in our second and third level curricula – even if approaches to teaching his work remain excessively focussed on textual analysis rather than performance. And the recent international fashion for the publication of accessible books on Shakespeare (by writers like **James Shapiro** (<http://www.faber.co.uk/article/2010/3/james-shapiro-contested-will/>), **Stephen Greenblatt** (http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/09/13/040913crat_atlarge), and even **Bill Bryson** (<http://www.harpercollins.com/books/9780060740221/Shakespeare/index.aspx>)) has been as successful here as it is in other countries.

So in Ireland, we have two Shakespeares: an English writer, who is viewed with suspicion by some, and with insecurity by others – and a world writer, whose greatness is uncontested, whose work is part of the fabric of our culture, our languages, and our theatre.

That duality – that contradiction, some might say – is especially evident in our theatre. There have been impressive Irish productions of the plays during the last decade by Classic Stage Ireland, Rough Magic, Corcadorca, Siren Productions and the Abbey. But even at their best, those productions seemed troubled by the notion that staging Shakespeare in Ireland involves resolving problems: the problem of matching the Irish voice to the Shakespearean text, the problem of making the plays ‘relevant’ to Ireland, and so on. It’s curious that these challenges seem only to afflict our professional

Corcadorca's production of Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'.

theatre: amateur productions of Shakespeare are often more confident about their reasons for staging his work (the main one being that the plays are very good). And of course it's also notable that this is a relatively recent phenomenon: Shakespeare was a mainstay of the Edwards and Mac Liammóir Gate, for example, and Anew McMaster brought Shakespeare's plays to every town in Ireland from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Shakespeare and the Irish Writer won't resolve all of those problems but, by opening up the historical context, it might persuade Irish practitioners to stop worrying so much about how and why they stage Shakespeare's plays. Edited by Janet Clare and Stephen O'Neill, the book collects twelve essays that explore how Irish writers have sought to come to terms with Shakespeare's legacy. Most of the writers whose work is discussed come from the Revival period – as is probably appropriate, since it was at that time that his status in Ireland began to change. There are two essays about how Yeats's views on Shakespeare were conditioned by his relationship with the Shakespeare scholar Edward Dowden; two on Wilde; and one each on Joyce, Douglas Hyde, Beckett, Bowen, McGuinness, and Shaw. In most cases, those essays are focussed on texts rather than productions, though Helen Lojek's essay on McGuinness does feature some consideration of Michael Caven's Dublin production of *Mutabilitie*.

Immediately notable is the extent to which Irish cultural nationalism was comfortable with Shakespeare. Hence, Philip Edwards mentions how John Mitchell wrote the words "Thank God for Shakespeare" in his journal during his imprisonment for his activities as a Fenian in the 1850s. And, as Tadhg Ó Dúshláine reveals, Sean Óg Ó Caomhánach would write a remarkable translation into Irish of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy eighty years later ("A bheith, nó gan a bheith – sin í an cheist") – at a time when he was interned in the Curragh for his involvement with the Republicans during the Civil War.

Pauline McLynn, Owen Roe and Rory Nolan in Rough Magic's 'The Taming of the Shrew'.
Photo: Pat Redmond.

Most revealingly, Andrew Murphy writes of how Douglas Hyde was invited to contribute to a *Book of Homage to Shakespeare* – a publication prepared in London to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 1916 (a year that's remembered in Ireland for different reasons, of course). Hyde wrote a poem called 'An Rud Tharla do Ghaedheal ag Stratford ar an Abhainn'. As Murphy informs us, "the point of the poem is, essentially, that a wholly justified hatred of England is assuaged when [an] Irishman undergoes his Shakespearean experience". Irish nationalism is entirely warranted, in Hyde's view – but de-Anglicising Ireland need not involve giving up Shakespeare.

(L-R): Declan Conlon, Frank McCusker, Peter Hanly & Jack Walsh in the 2007 Abbey production of Julius Caesar. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.

The two essays about Yeats and Dowden help us to understand how Shakespeare's plays became politicised in an Irish context. Without wishing to over-simplify the rich and complex arguments made by Philip Edwards and Brian Cosgrove, the over-riding idea here is of a clash between a 'nationalist' or 'Irish' Shakespeare (as represented by the character of Richard II) and a 'unionist' or 'pragmatic' Shakespeare (as represented by the character of Henry V). Both articles reveal how these writers' differing views on Shakespeare's kings were overwhelmingly informed by their political outlook. It is

interesting in this context that Shakespeare's history plays are almost never performed by Irish companies anymore: it's as if we're afraid to look too closely at them for fear of what we might find.

The book will force us to question much of the received wisdom about Shakespeare and Ireland, then. We're often told, for instance, that when Joyce and Shaw sought to trump Shakespeare, they were acting in a postcolonial fashion. Declan Kiberd's essay on *Hamlet* and *Ulysses*, and Cary Di Pietro's essay on Shaw, both show that these writers certainly did attempt to measure themselves against Shakespeare's greatness – but it's not clear how (if at all) their Irishness was a factor in that process. As is often noted, Joyce alludes to Captain Macmorris's "what ish my nation" speech in *Ulysses*, but the book is much more indebted to *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello*, and other plays. And, as di Pietro implies, the major link between Shakespeare and Ireland evident in Shaw's work is that he often pretended to repudiate both of them for rhetorical or aesthetic purposes. The book won't entirely refute those scholars who think that Ireland's attitude to Shakespeare is postcolonial, but it will at least ensure that the discussion is richer and more grounded.

The book's most significant achievement is the introduction by Clare Owen Roe and Olwyn Fouer in Siren Productions' 'Titus Andronicus'. (understandably), they give an impressive survey of the place of Shakespeare in the history of Irish theatre. As they point out, there is a rich tradition of Irish actors performing Shakespeare (though many of them only do so when they leave Ireland). They also remind us that Shakespeare has occupied a central position on the Irish stage since at least 1662. The critical reception of Shakespeare internationally has also been strongly affected by Irish scholars – not just Dowden but, more importantly, Edmond Malone, whose 1790 edition of Shakespeare's plays was highly influential. This section is full of ideas that should stimulate further research (as should O'Neill's last book, *Staging Ireland*, a major study of the presence of Ireland on the Renaissance stage).

Perhaps the greatest problem facing Shakespeare production in this country is that directors seem always to feel as if they need to start from scratch: Shakespeare is in the odd position of being both stupefyingly over-familiar and unnervingly new. One way of addressing that problem might be to pay more attention to developments in Britain – to consider (among other events) the work on voice and accent by **Northern Broadsides** (<http://www.northern-broadsides.co.uk/>), the revitalisation of the **Histories by the RSC** (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phtxjWn59wI>), and the combination of British and American performance styles in the **Old Vic's Bridge Project** (<http://www.oldvictheatre.com/whatson.php?id=47>). And of course there have been other significant developments internationally, the most notable of which recently has been Toneelgroep Amsterdam's **re-imagining of the Roman tragedies** (<http://www.toneelgroepamsterdam.nl/default.asp?path=sqrgjlo3>).

Yet if we need to spend more time looking abroad, we could also do with paying more attention to our own past. As this book shows, we badly need to retrieve the rich, varied and complex history of Shakespearean production in this country: to show that it has always been possible to recite Shakespeare's words in an Irish accent, that he's always been an essential part of our culture and, most importantly, that his work can't be reduced to simplistic political or academic categories. There have been many steps forward in this process in recent years – but *Shakespeare and the Irish Writer* is one of the most important yet.

Patrick Lonergan lectures at NUI Galway where, on 29 May, a one-day seminar on 'Shakespeare, Performance and Ireland' will take place. Full details [here](http://www.mooreinstitute.ie/site/view/733) (<http://www.mooreinstitute.ie/site/view/733>). The event is funded by the IRCHSS and is being held in association with Druid Theatre.

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- Review

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