

Chapter Nine

“Colleens and Comely Maidens”: Representing and performing Irish femininity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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Idealized women have long played a central role in the Irish cultural imagination. Visual representations of allegorical and mythical female figures such as Queen Maeve, Mother Ireland, the Virgin Mary, and Hibernia have, along with their more anonymous sisters, colleens and comely maidens, been presented as role models of Irish femininity. There have been numerous critical analyses of the political allegorical figures such as Mother Ireland (Loftus 1990; Curtis 1998-9; Steele 2004), but while the lure of the “colleen” has been central in popular Irish iconography since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, she has received much less critical attention than her counterpart figure as emblematic of a gendered ethnicity.

"The Colleen Bawn" as dramatized in Boucicault's Victorian melodrama is possibly the most famous colleen in Irish popular culture and has been well represented both on stage and screen, as well as in critical academic literature. But it is her less tragic sisters who have come to symbolize young Irish womanhood in the visual arts since the mid- nineteenth century. Visual representations of colleens and comely maidens have been determined largely by the historical, political, cultural and artistic contexts in which they emerge and reflect the deep gender cleavages in the society of origin.¹ To understand the role of the colleen in Irish visual iconography therefore, we must look at the ways in which gender was implicated in the construction of national identity in Ireland during the period under review.

Emerging in post-famine Ireland, the fortunes of the colleen have changed over time. Initially she was the subject of paintings, illustrations and folk songs but developments in print

technologies enabled the proliferation of a wider range of visual imagery in the late Victorian era (Curtis 1998-9). Since then, representations of the colleen have been crucial markers of Irish femininity in a diverse range of "high" and popular media alike, from paintings to postcards, photographs, advertising posters, book illustrations, fashion, television advertisements and web-pages. This chapter examines the trajectory of colleen images from the 1860s to the present. In doing so it addresses the ways in which particular political ideologies such as colonialism and nationalism have determined that imagery and how it has maintained a symbolic value into the era of global capitalism. While the images to which I refer are selective, I think they can be instructive in demonstrating how visual representations of Irish femininity reflect the dominant ideologies regarding women in any particular era while at the same time acknowledging that representations are sometimes contested, and the preferred meanings and

pleasures that they elicit are constantly in the process of negotiation and flux².

In setting out to explore the figure of the colleen, three basic questions need to be addressed: What are the distinguishing iconographic features of the colleen? When and why did the colleen emerge as a popular iconographic figure? And, finally, what are the points of similarity and difference between the colleen and Mother Ireland figures? The term colleen is a direct translation from the Irish language word for young girl: *cailín*, with the suffix "ín" denoting the diminutive and connoting both affection and junior status, not just in age terms, but, more crucially, I would suggest, in social standing.³ The colleen figure developed initially as a country/peasant girl and was associated with a rural landscape and way of life. Links with particular places were common and regional versions of the colleen were lauded in both popular song and in painting.⁴ In appearance she was portrayed as either beautiful

or pretty with long dark or red hair, dressed in native attire, the essentials of which are the cloak or shawl draped around the body and generally covering the head. In nineteenth and early twentieth century representations she was usually barefoot. Imputed personal characteristics or personality traits could vary depending on the function of the representation. She could variously be lively, charming, fiery or timid/shy, roguish, funloving, natural, unaffected, hardworking and invariably pretty/beautiful and chaste. She also differed from her counterparts of Mother Ireland and Maid of Erin in terms of the aesthetic and political context of production. The latter figures were produced as personifications of Ireland and functioned within a political context as clearly allegorical figures. They appeared as emblems on banners and badges, as well as in newspapers and political journals. Perhaps we could say, then, that the primary semiotic role of the Maid of Erin is allegorical and that this is a secondary

role for the colleen. The former is of and personifies the country but the latter is embedded in it. Representations of the colleen are also naturalistic. In general, the Maid of Erin is associated with symbols of Ireland such as the round tower (historical monuments), harp (musical instrument) and hound (associated with the mythical hero, Cúchulainn). Whereas the primary association of the colleen is with rurality and chastity, and ultimately the national feminine ideal is negotiated through these discourses.

While the two figures are dissimilar in certain ways, they are alike in several others. They are both popularly perceived to be civilizing influences on the nation. One cannot but be struck by the stark difference between these representations of Irish womanhood and the extremely negative visual iconography of Irish manhood in the nineteenth century (Curtis 1984 and 1997; Loftus 1990). Like Mother Ireland, the colleen too can be regarded as a boundary figure

and therein lies her representational significance and seductiveness. I suggest that it is the colleen who bridges the conflicting or discrepant ideologies and sensibilities; it is she who manages the tensions between the rural and urban, between nature and culture, between sexual repression and desire, and between the domesticated and the wild.

The Colonial Colleen

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely the first mention of the colleen in visual representation since the term, girl, lass or maid was often used interchangeably.⁵ However, the identification of women as specifically Irish has been noted in paintings and illustrations since at least the 1830s⁶ and the firm establishment of the colleen figure in visual iconography can broadly be seen as a post-famine phenomenon developing within the pictorial romanticism of the Victorian era at which time the overlapping discourses of gender and national identity were

becoming increasingly important within an overarching colonial political framework. The issue of Irish femininity and how it should be best represented in relation both to Britain and other British colonies was firmly on the aesthetic agenda by the mid- nineteenth century. The role of colonialism therefore in determining the shape of gender imagery cannot be overestimated. Loftus notes the general colonial view of the Irish as other but that the "otherness" of men and women was configured in significantly different ways (1990). Women, in contrast to men, were represented as beautiful, charming and quaint and as representing a civilizing influence. She illustrates her argument by tracing the allegorical figure of Hibernia through the political press of the nineteenth century. And with reference to nineteenth century Irish painting claims that though it may be regarded in some respects as akin to other European art of the period, it is distinct in crucial ways. However, similarities

cannot be overlooked and I think it is important to refer to possible points of similarity.

Nochlin, for instance, illustrates how representations of peasant women were typically associated with nature and the soil in European painting of the time (eg Millet's The Angelus) and goes on to suggest that this motif functioned to transform rural poverty (1988). It is likely that these kinds of images would have functioned in a similar fashion in Ireland against the backdrop of extreme rural poverty, famine and mass emigration.

The role of the romantic movement in culture and art must also be acknowledged as crucial in valorizing representations of rural life generally, and peasant women in particular. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the growth of nostalgia for a rural way of life that was fast disappearing, particularly in Britain, and which was evidenced in the choice of subject matter in painting where scenes of an idealized rural landscape and characters abounded. Cullen (1997)

attests to the fact that painters of the nineteenth century sought out the peasant as a source of artistic inspiration because national character was believed to be exhibited most strongly and visibly in the rural poor. This belief in the "authenticity" of rural life parallels and, sometimes, overlaps with anthropological discourses concerned with "salvage ethnography" and the "exotic other" as both sought to capture for posterity what was perceived to be a rapidly disappearing ordinary culture.

The representational positioning of the colleen as rural, therefore, is not accidental but plays an important role in colonial and romantic discourses and the intersections between them. It serves a number of purposes. Images of the colleen battling against the elements serve to construct her as hard working and industrious which, again, is in stark contrast to representations of men as lazy and feckless. Following Gibbons (1987) and Nash (1993, 105)

these images might be termed hard pastoral. This version of the colleen may be contrasted with softer pastoral images referred to below and with later and more consumerist imagery discussed in the next section. Indeed, it would be useful to place these representations on a continuum from hard pastoral on one end to total domestication on the other. Hard pastoral imagery places the colleen on the side of nature - as untamed and wild. The most typical background image of rock, bog, with mountain and water/sea included, embeds her firmly in a rural landscape - in nature. A further anchoring is achieved by her frequent portrayal with animals. This anchoring is further consolidated in verbal descriptions where the colleen takes on attributes of the animals themselves - "graceful as a young fawn" (Halls 1838: Vol. 1, 8) or "like a doe fleeing from a pursuer" (Henry 1951: 54). The following description by the Halls is worthy of note as it is one of the earliest travel accounts in which they comment on the unconscious movements and

unaffected manner of a young country girl, signifying both her embeddedness in "wild" nature and her natural beauty (Figure 9.1):

As we were leaving the glen, we encountered... one of the prettiest little girls we had seen in Ireland was crossing a small brook - an offset as it were from the rushing river; but as rapid, and brawling as angrily, as the parent torrent, which it resembled in all sae its width...Her attitude as she stepped cautiously over the mountain cascade, was so striking, that we strove to pencil it down. (Halls, Vol. 2, 252).

Figure 9.1

The description above may be regarded as an example of what Nash (1993, 93), in relation to the discourse of primitivism, sees as her simultaneous portrayal as product of her environment and an exotic outside her community.

In her configuration as "wild" nature she is wholly romanticized as "other,"

A more cultivated or tamed series of representations of the colleen are encapsulated in her portrayal as cultivator/gatherer; saving hay, digging potatoes, bringing turf from the bog, or herding sheep. Such a representation is evident in the celebrated opening scene of the film The Quiet Man, in which the character of Mary Kate Danaher is described as being like a "Dresden maiden, she appears herding a flock of sheep, hair flowing, framed by an idyllic rural background" (Barton 1999, 40). While deeply embedded in the rural, the colleen does have a connection with the town and in standard iconographic composition towards the end of the nineteenth century she is seen transporting farm produce to the town market - a reflection of the growth of the market economy in rural Ireland. The negotiation between the contradictory spaces of the town and country is achieved symbolically through the use of footwear. The colleen's lack

of urban sophistication is signified by her bare feet and is a feature of most colleen images of this era. Her movement to the town is signified by the temporary donning of shoes as illustrated by a postcard, the caption of which reads: "On a market morning this colleen puts on her shoes before entering the town." (Figure 9.2) In this manner the tensions between urban and rural are negotiated and resolved through the figure of the colleen.

Figure 9.2

While the figure of Hibernia is crucial to the political salvation of Ireland within colonial discourse, the colleen's industriousness and capacity for hard work mark her out as the economic and cultural salvation of the Irish nation. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the Franco-British exhibition held in White City, London in 1908 analysed by Coombes (1994) who claims that the exhibition provides

"one of the clearest examples of how inextricably interrelated were the discourses on national identity, gender and imperialism (1994: 207)."

The Irish section of the exhibition was set up as the village of Ballymaclinton the most remarkable feature of which was that it was populated by one hundred and fifty Irish colleens who were employed on site. The village was selected for extensive national and local press coverage, displaying photographs of the colleens, laughing, smiling and working. Indeed, Coombes claims that few representations of the village exist without these women being prominently displayed. The iconographic significance of the colleen is contextualized in terms of the construction of Irishness in other contemporaneous colonial writings. She quotes from one such commentator on the provenance of their striking beauty: "[t]he same flag covers what we believe to be the handsomest people in the world today - English and Irish - who seem to have acquired by some mysterious process of transmission or of

independent development, the physical beauty of the old Greeks" (207). She notes further that the representation of the colleens must be understood in terms of colonist's distinctions between colonies and, in particular, between the portrayal of the Irish and African cultures in the exhibition. Unlike the representations of African women the colleens served to counter the stereotypes of the "dirty Irish by portraying them as hygienic in their food production and cooking practices" (209). Similarly their portrayal as industrious and hardworking women functions to counteract their characterization as a lazy and feckless community. In addition to solidifying ethnic distinctions, Coombes claims that the colleens performed other important ideological functions. One of these was to diffuse the more militant aspects of the Gaelic Revival. She also suggests that they carried an important message for British middle-class women by challenging feminist activism of the period. It was increasingly common for this class of

women to be involved in some form of voluntary public service. Philanthropy, as opposed to the equality and women's rights agenda of the Suffragette Movement, was seen to be the most appropriate form of good work for them since it was the philanthropic approach that appeared to be so effective in the improvement of Irish women and Irish society generally.

Colonial discourse was also effective in terms of negotiating the sexual status of the colleen and here again it is instructive to place her in relation to the contemporary representations of English and African women's sexuality. Power (1996) suggests that English women in the nineteenth century were compared to statues and were represented as being cold [chaste] as marble while, alternatively, African women were represented, in a leap from colour to sexuality, as being polluted by colour and therefore sexually promiscuous. I suggest that Irish women are represented nearer to the English side of the pole, sufficiently similar in terms

of skin colour to be chaste but sufficiently different to be more exotic, "softer" and "warmer."⁷ Indeed, the chastity of young Irish women was vigorously promoted through colonial writings. Cassell, for example in Women of All Nations published in 1908, opined that although Ireland was "stagnating below the line of reason and even sanity," at least the women knew their place, since "no country in Christendom reveals a higher standard of chastity" (Coombes 1994, 208). The strict codes of sexual morality that developed in the post-famine era and the increasing importance of the symbolism of chastity as represented by the Virgin/Mother figure is attested to by MacCurtain (1993) in her analysis of the colleen figure of Molly Macree.⁸ Despite, or perhaps because of, the trope of chastity, the figure of the colleen is simultaneously and decidedly sexualized. This is partially due to the fact that peasant women in European art have generally been represented as both religious and sexualized. Nochlin draws

attention to this duality of representation, arguing that "[a]t the same time as the peasant woman is represented as naturally nurturing and pious, her very naturalness, her proximity to instinct and animality, could make the image of the female peasant serve as the very embodiment of untrammelled, unartificed sexuality" (1988, 19). Nochlin also contends that the peasant woman's role of as signifier of "earthy sensuality" in nineteenth century art is as important as her nurturant or religious role and that this role is influenced by the representation of the young peasant girl as invariably striking in form and posture (1988, 20).⁹

As in European art, the sexualization of the colleen is achieved through drawing attention to bodily form and posture. We can see this clearly in the Hall's descriptions of a young woman's cloak, in which the emphasis on the cloak serves to draw attention to the female form: "[p]erfect in form as a Grecian statue, and graceful as a

young fawn. The hood of her cloak shrouded each side of her face; and the folds draped her slender figure as if the nicest art had been exerted in aid of nature" (8). The reference to the cloak as sheltering but not concealing the face has connotations of modesty and shyness at the same time as it affords the viewer the power of observation. The Halls' later note, "[s]he was completely enveloped in one of the huge cloaks of the country; it had been flung on, carelessly and hastily, but it flowed round her form in a manner peculiarly graceful" (Halls, Vol.2, 252). They also frequently refer to young Irish women's physical beauty and good deportment as in the following: "good nursing gives the women good shapes; there are seldom any "angles" about them; the custom of carrying burthens upon their heads makes them remarkably erect" (Halls, Vol. 3, 470).¹⁰ One particular young woman they encountered on their travels is described thus: "her nose was well formed and straight - quite straight - and her brow was finely arched; the

chin, a feature so seldom seen in perfection, was exquisitely modelled; and as she only knew a few words of English, her gestures, expressive of her wants and wishes, were full of eloquence" (Vol. 3, 471).

Obviously influenced by the Romantic Movement in art and classical allusions to Grecian perfection and simple lines, the Halls saw Irish women as embodying this simple grace in form. In addition to their aesthetic function, the comments on health, strength and beauty above implicitly connote fertility and childbearing capacity. The colleen's childbearing capacity is signalled rather than explicitly stated in the following comment by the Halls on her strength and sturdiness: "[t]ake a portrait of one of them - a fine hale and healthy mountain maid; as buoyant as the breeze and as hardy as the heath that blossoms on its summit" (Vol. 1, 248). In reproductive terms, then, the colleen can be clearly distinguished from Mother Ireland, who is dependent on the next generation for survival.

The colleen not only symbolizes the future generation but, as MacCurtain claims, also "embodied the reproductive capacity of giving birth to that generation" (MacCurtain 1993, 14). "Mother Ireland" is asexual; the colleen is sexualized in the sense that she is the object of romantic longing and desire, the differences between them emphasizing the dichotomy between the maternal and the sexual in Irish culture. One important point to note in relation to the colonial, as indeed other discourses, discussed above is the variability in ideological and aesthetic role of the visual images depending on the production and consumption context.

The Nationalist Colleen

If the colonial discourse on Irish femininity determined visual representations of the colleen from the 1860s, one might ask if, and how, they were altered with the growing strength of cultural nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century and the subsequent

establishment of the Free State in 1922. Critics on the issue (Meaney 1991; Nash 1993b; Loftus 1990; Curtis 2000) seem to agree that cultural nationalists, far from making radical iconographic changes, were very much influenced by the gendered ideas of nation which were in vogue during the colonial period and they generally adopted, and in some cases inverted, the images of Irish womanhood which had been established under colonial rule. According to Loftus (1990) dominant colonial representations were taken up and reproduced by native and nationalist artists. Nash (1993), too, argues convincingly that despite the transition from Celtic to Gaelic within cultural nationalism which "asserted masculinity as the essential characteristic of the Gael" (1993, 99) that women's bodies remained as important signifiers and that nationalism was inscribed onto women's bodies in specific ways. She argues that increasingly in painting and travel photography young women were absent and that this was due

partially to the fact that cultural nationalists denied women "an autonomous sexuality in their idealization of asexual motherhood" (47). This gave rise to a situation in which the "visual representation of the idealized country woman rested uneasily with the history of eroticized images of women in Western art" (47).

Consequently, Nash claims that the image of the young woman was replaced by images of the old peasant woman who could be represented more easily in line with contemporary state ideals of women as mothers and as bearers of language and folk traditions.

While Nash's argument is convincing in relation to painting, I tend towards the view that images of young womanhood retained their importance in visualizations of the national imaginary but were diversified into other aspects of popular visual culture. One banal, but important example of this might be the colleen figure on the paper currency of the new state based on Sir John Lavery's painting of Lady

Lavery as Kathleen Ni Houlihan (1928). References to young women were also common in the rhetoric of political leaders in a post-independence Ireland and were key signifiers, I would suggest, in the construction of a political and cultural national "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983). De Valera's famous radio broadcast on St. Patrick's Day 1943 refers to the "laughter of comely maidens" as an essential element in his vision of a rural idyll. In an earlier but telling passage Michael Collins uses similar utopian imagery in which young women play a central symbolic role:

One may see processions of young women riding down on Island ponies to collect sand from the sea-shore or gathering turf, dressed in their shawls and in their brilliantly coloured skirts made of material spun, woven and dyed by themselves...Their simple cottages are also little changed. They remain simple and picturesque. It is only in such

places that one gets a glimpse of what
Ireland may become again. (McLoone, 55)

Here we note the symbolic importance of red home spun and home-dyed yarns of the colleen's costume and its connotations of indigenous authenticity and sexuality.¹¹ Women are simultaneously linked to the landscape, to local crafts, peasant self-sufficiency - threads which link the past with a utopian vision of the future. I concur with McLoone's reading of this passage as "the displacement of women into symbols of Ireland itself - in Collin's version, young Irish girls, asexual in their beauty and chaste in their deportment" (55). He goes on to suggest that in offering myths of Mother Ireland, or Cathleen Ni Houlihan, this dual concept of chastity and rural utopia is posited against all that England symbolized.

However appealing the colleen image may have been to male political leaders of the day, it did not go unchallenged by some nationalist and feminist women. An editorial in Cumann na mBan's

publication Bean na hEireann denounced references in another publication, The Irish Homestead, as "pernicious nonsense" for "romanticising over the barefoot Irish cailín in her red petticoat and hooded cloak when the reality was that poverty determined what Irish girls wore and not the desire to look picturesque" (Ward 1983, 74). Despite these objections, colleen imagery continued to be consolidated as part of the popular visual imagination and in line with the marginalization of republican and feminist women's voices in Irish public life. Paul Henry's work might be seen as typical of the dominant national pictorial representation of the time. Henry's claim to be witnessing "[the] slow fading out of an era" (108) can be seen as exemplary of the romantic nostalgia and desire to capture a way of life that was perceived to be in rapid decline. In his autobiography he comments on the unearthly beauty of the women of Achill, of their clothes of home spun and dyed red petticoats and of their immersion in the natural landscape. He

recounts "witnessing with sorrow the gradual discarding of the scarlet petticoat by the womenfolk" (108). The association that Henry makes between women and their colourful clothes is echoed in other stories of his time on the island" (53). At one point he is taken to see "a most beautiful girl on the island in the hope that she will assent to sit for the artist. However, on entering the cabin where the girl lives she flees to the next room. In his words, "she was unearthly in her beauty, barelegged and dressed in a faded and tattered frock of dyed red homespun. That one startled look from those beautiful eyes I shall never forget. She was like a doe fleeing from a pursuer" (54). There appears to be a thinly disguised eroticism in Henry's description that is also evident in other accounts of his artistic relationship with the young women of the island. The resistance to being an artist's model displayed in the incident just recounted was typical of the other young girls of the village and Henry, on his own

admission, was forced to resort to drawing from memory or surreptitiously. In these passages, one gets a strong sense of the unattainability and the ephemeral quality of native beauty, of the difficulty of "capturing" the essence of this beauty in his work. The relationship which Henry had with the women of Achill is a good example of what Nochlin identifies as "the notion of the artist as sexually dominant creator: man - the artist - fashioning from inert matter an ideal erotic object for himself, a woman cut to the very pattern of his desires" (1988, 143) much the same as the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

No account of popular representation/performance of the colleen in the twentieth century would be complete without reference to the idealized version of Irish womanhood as represented in Irish step dance. Though unable to detail it fully here, I would like to note in passing a number of pertinent observations about the changing symbolic role of

dance. During the early years of the twentieth century the public performance of step dance changed from being a predominantly male to a female practice (Cullinane 1994) and has arguably become one of the most influential visual markers of Irish feminine identity.¹² In this context we might also note that the colleen figure was no longer embedded in landscape but rather performed in a theatrical space. We might also observe that, despite the antipathy expressed by cultural nationalists towards urbanization, Irish dance became very popular in towns and cities both changes distancing the colleen from the rural. However, dance performance through the establishment of An Coimisiun le Rinnci Gaelacha (The Irish Dancing Commission), and the development of formal rules of movement and presentation, including dress, in dance competitions, continued to encourage young women to perform a distinctly gendered identity. Irish step dance was regarded as graceful and pure as it was given shape in opposition to other

"foreign" types of dance particularly jazz. The visual style of the young dancing girl, that had emerged in the 1930s continued to play an important role as a signifier of idealized ethnicity (O'Connor 2005) at a national level for the next sixty years.

The Commercial Colleen

As advertising became well established and as representations of women were increasingly used to sell products and services, the colleen became a popular icon for marketing Irish goods and the country itself through tourism promotion. Queen Victoria herself, who was "an enthusiastic patron" of the play, The Colleen Bawn, paid a visit to Killarney in 1861, where she visited the Colleen Bawn Rock, the place where, allegedly, the heroine attempted to drown herself. It subsequently became a fashionable spot on the tourist trail (Condon 2003)¹³. The expansion of transport networks helped to develop internal tourism and again we see the clear association

between women and the Irish landscape in the invitation to travel.¹⁴ Tourist representations have continued to utilize images of colleens to attract visitors to Ireland, as there is a continuing need for ethnic demarcation in tourist discourse (Negra 2001).

Figure 9.2

Figure 9.3

Ethnic imagery continued to be utilized to sell products across communication platforms. A television advertisement for Harp lager in the 1980s introduced the figure of Sally O'Brien who is a classic example of the association between male desire and Irish femininity. The advertisement in question revolves around the fantasy of an Irish oil-worker in a desert environment far from home comforts. On his return there is the attractive prospect of a pint of cold Harp to slake his almighty thirst and the

additional voiceover promise of Sally O'Brien and "the way she might look at you." Though the use of colleen imagery is in decline in Irish television advertising (Stevens et al. 2000) or is used in an ironic way (Graham 2000), the current television advertising campaign for Kerrygold butter points to the continuing sexual appeal of the ethnic other. In this advertisement the main protagonists are an Irish woman and French man, though the campaign has reversed the gendering in previous advertisements. The action revolves around a classroom where an attractive teacher with long dark hair, Miss Kennedy, is taking a domestic science class. She is in the process of extolling the health benefits of Kerrygold butter to the class of young women when the entrance of an equally attractive man who appears to be a new teacher interrupts the class. In a seductive French accent he asks Miss Kennedy very politely and formally if he might have some Kerrygold. She assents, proffers him the plate of butter, smiles and lowers her eyes in a coy

manner connoting a sexual tension between them. A stern and disapproving middle-aged headmistress wearing glasses and a bun - her mien signifying sexual primness and repression, witnesses this scene through the open classroom door. At one level we may interpret the colleen figure in this scene as being more sexually aware than her earlier counterpart but one might also interpret the lowering of the gaze as a continuation of a certain sexual coyness.

If the colleen was such a central figure in visual representations of the colonial and nationalist eras from the 1860s onwards, the question arises as to the need for such representations in the contemporary era of a global economy and cultural and ethnic hybridity. And, further, if the colleen has historically been represented in terms of rurality and chastity what is her fate in a world where these concerns and attributes have been superseded and/or devalued? Is there still a need for other idealized versions of Irish ethnic femininity and

how does it function in the global economy of representation?

To answer these questions adequately would require much more investigation of specific visual domains. Preliminary evidence suggests that contemporary versions of the colleen are extremely popular in certain cultural contexts but not in others. The Barbie doll website currently displays two versions of the Irish Barbie, so in its most kitschy commodified form one could say that Irish femininity is alive and well. However, in other domains the colleen is in definite decline. Rains, for instance, points to the relative absence of Irish female stars in contemporary Hollywood cinema (2003). She contends that the kind of sexuality associated with such stars as Maureen O'Hara in the film The Quiet Man no longer has any cultural purchase because of changing ideas about what constitutes physical/sexual attractiveness for female stars:

the rapidly changing ideals of female physicality that have radiated out to

all of the Western world from Hollywood from the late 1980s onwards could also be analysed in tandem with the rising popularity of this "southern femininity" in particular, the uniform equation of bronzed skin and voluptuous body-shape (naturally or otherwise in both cases) with female sexual attractiveness.

(Rains 2003, 194)

The new generation of film actresses are associated with a now positively- represented physical exuberance, eroticism and emotional openness. These qualities are very different from more traditional representations of Irish femininity:

It is this association between Irish female sexuality and traditional ideas of chastity which is perhaps the key to its lack of appeal in contemporary representations of ethnic femininity, and also the nexus around which these cultural

associations are combined with more literal, physical markers of women as objects of desire. (Rains 2003, 195)

The representations cited above fall clearly within the global economy of representations with few links to the local. However, there are other representations such as Riverdance¹⁵ and The Rose of Tralee which are hugely popular but which indicate changing relations between the global and local and, consequently, tensions around the meaning of a quintessential Irish femininity. Though no longer barefoot or becloaked, the representations of the female dancers in Riverdance both embody and draw on many of the markers of ethnic femininity habitually associated with the colleen (Carby, 2001). Riverdance has been an international success for over ten years and I have argued elsewhere that it sought to emphasize stereotypical aspects of Irish femininity by clothing, hair and choreography. Carby, too, claims that the show

valorizes traditional gender roles but that there is a reversal of the moral colour coding in the other successful dance show Lord of the Dance. In the latter, "bad women are sexual temptresses, have black hair and dress in red: the perfect female partner for our hero, the Lord of the Dance, is a blonde, Irish Colleen who signals her virgin state by dressing in white" (2001: 341). She argues that these two recent dance shows have constructed a racialized and gendered Irishness presented in its extreme in Lord of the Dance. In the latter the racial and sexual purity of the Irish colleen is "equally racialized as authentically Celtic" (Carby, 2001: 341). The lesson from this is that within an increasingly globalized culture images of gendered ethnicity may be appropriated in such ways that "particular histories are erased or denied, replaced instead by particular national, or racialized, or ethnic imaginings" (Carby, 2001: 326). This indicates that in the global, as in the colonial era, representations can function in a racially

problematic way. However, there are also contradictions within representations of feminine sexuality in Riverdance or at least contrary interpretations of the meaning of the show. Numerous commentators have emphasized the way in which Riverdance transformed Irish step dancing from a rigid and sexually repressed practice to one that was joyful and "sexy" (O'Toole, 1998).

Figure 9.4

The annual Rose of Tralee competition is perhaps one of the most enduring representations of youthful Irish femininity.¹⁶ The festival is particularly interesting in terms of its mix of migration and tourist discourses, as well as its attempt to define an idealized ethnic hybridity in the face of global and diasporic cultural conditions. It taps into issues of national identity as well as tourist interests. Established in 1959 as a state effort to boost the tourist sector by inviting Irish emigrants

back to visit Ireland, and initially targeted at emigrants mainly from Britain and the US¹⁷, the pageant now has competitors from many other countries including the Middle East and Asia. The festival became very successful in terms of the tourist economy but, more germane to the discussion here, in terms of the televising of the main competition and its hosting for many years by Ireland's premier television personality, Gay Byrne. It may also be regarded as the only public space where diasporic ethnic identity is continually constructed and negotiated in the interchanges between the presenter and competitors in front of both a live and a television audience. The visual highlight of the week's festival is the competition to select the "best" Rose. Though it is not billed as a beauty pageant¹⁸, the competitors are invariably "good-looking." The discourses of the show were influenced not just by the judges but also, crucially by the presenter Gay Byrne. Avuncular in style, he steered the conversation

with competitors between "traditional" images and contemporary realities of ethnic hybridity. Great care was taken to establish their Irish credentials in terms of ancestry. The problems of contradictory discourses and the hyphenated status of the competitors were smoothed over by the presenter.¹⁹ The 2004 show was presented by Ryan Tubridy, one of the younger generation of broadcasters, in a more ironic/tongue-in-cheek style. The show has also been dogged by organizational and funding problems in recent years and perhaps is an indication of the increasing difficulties of constructing and committing to a single idealized ethnic identity in a postmodern and multicultural environment.

The Colleen Looks Back

What I have attempted to do here is explore the image of the colleen in visual representations in/of Ireland over a century and a half. I have argued that she has been constructed in accordance with the dominant

interests of political and cultural elites over that time. In this sense one can say that the representations of the colleen substantiate the claims generally made in relation to dominant representations of Irish womanhood. However, the submissiveness noted by Loftus in terms of allegorical figures and the passivity and wistfulness noted by Cullen in painting are not upheld across time and genres. As we have seen from the discussion above the colleen can in some contexts be regarded as passive and submissive; in others she can be seen as feisty and fun loving. We have also seen how traits that were associated with the colleen such as chastity are no longer valorized in certain performance contexts such as Hollywood cinema but are in others. Visual representations raise the thorny issue of interpretation in specific historical contexts, and periods, by different viewers, a question also raised by Curtis in relation to feminine images of Ireland. In the contemporary context, for instance, while some commentators

see the female dancers in Riverdance as sexual in a positive way, for others, their sexual representation is implicated in racist ideology. Through colonial representations, to nationalist, to transnational/global the image of the colleen has functioned variably to signify sexual and national purity, future prosperity, the exotic, the "wild," modernity, to sell places and products, and to affirm the expectations of emigrants and tourists alike. Whatever the fate of the colleen in the future - and this will depend on her usefulness in a global circuit of imagery - her endurance over the last century and a half has demonstrated the importance of idealized femininity in constructing and negotiating an Irish ethnic imaginary.

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¹ See for example (Loftus, 1990; Coombes, 1994; Curtis , 1998-9).

² While acknowledging that each of the above genres will have its own specificity and effectivity in terms of the form and interpretation of images, this essay will, for the most part, highlight commonalities rather than genre specific differences.

³ The significance of naming is illustrated by Coombes's (1994) account of African women performing dances during the Franco-British Exhibition in White City, London in 1908. In an effort to de-eroticise the naked dancing bodies they were referred to as 'girls' rather than 'women'.

⁴ See for example George Petrie's collection (1967[1855]) of songs and Thomas Alfred Jones series on the Irish Colleen in the National Gallery of Ireland.

⁵ This was also the case for other forms of popular culture at the time. See for example Petrie's collection of folk songs.

⁶ See for example, Ritchie, L. (1838), *Ireland Picturesque and Romantic* London: Longman and Thackeray, W. M. (1879) *The Works*, Vol.18: *The Irish Sketch Book of 1842* London: Smith Elder and Co.

⁷ L.P. Curtis (1998-9) raises the intriguing question of whether allegorical figures such as Hibernia had a sexual meaning for the viewer. He suggests that this was the case and quotes from H.G. Wells' autobiography to support his view. Though impossible to verify, I surmise that the more naturalistic depictions of the colleen allow for a greater sexualisation of the image because they are perceived as more 'flesh and blood' figures.

⁸ Strict codes of sexual propriety were enforced in post-famine Ireland because of the need to keep population growth under control in order to consolidate land holdings. This led to higher rates of celibacy and late marriage.

⁹ J. Berger (1972) too has identified a similar sexualisation of women in art with the rise of the nude in European painting from the sixteenth century onwards.

¹⁰ It is worth noting the contrast with simian discourses of male Irishness which were beginning to develop and which were to become such a common feature of colonial representations from the 1860s.

¹¹ The red colour of women's clothing was a signifier of vitality as far back as the 1830s. Referring to the woman depicted in Wilkie's painting 'The Brigand Asleep', Cullen remarks that 'Wilkie makes the woman's indigenous red skirt the most striking visual component of the painting and that his choice was underlined by a remark in a letter from Limerick that : in Connaught and Cunnemara [sic], the clothes particularly of the women are the work of their own hands and the colour they are most fond of is a red they dye with madder, which as petticoat, jacket or mantle, brightens up the cabin or landscape, like a Titian or Giorgione (Cullen, 1997: 124).

¹² It is interesting to note how Irish step-dance as described by Cullinane (1994) changed from being a predominantly male to a predominantly female practice in the early years of the twentieth century a phenomenon that warrants more investigation in relation to dynamic of gender and national identity construction at this time.

¹³ A postcard from the era entitled 'Bewilderin' the Tourist' contains reference to the tourist being pestered by locals to buy pictures of the 'colleen ban' or the 'colleen das' as souvenirs.

¹⁴ It is also interesting to note the similarity between the style of this poster and Paul Henry's paintings.

¹⁵ With reference to the performance of ethnicity in the form of beauty pageants Wilks (1998) claims that contradictions are not only tolerated in the person of the beauty queen but are indeed demanded. I am suggesting that this is also the case for the colleen.

¹⁶ Molony (2002) comments on the establishment of the colleen figure in popular culture in the US by the turn of the twentieth century. He attributes her role as cultural icon to the upward mobility of second generation Irish women who were by now regarded as pretty and hardworking and thereby making ideal marriage partners.

¹⁷ This is in keeping with the words of the popular song the Rose of Tralee, based on the real life Mary O'Connor whose suitor proclaims that 'it was not her beauty alone that won me. Ah, no 'twas the truth in her eye ever dawning that make me love Mary the Rose of Tralee'.

¹⁸ But even young women with no Irish ancestry could be ethnically converted by marriage to an Irishman as in the case of 'My Yiddisha Colleen', a popular song in Irish-America in the 1920s! (Molony, 2002).

¹⁹ Media and cultural studies scholars have begun to recognise the difficulties of interpreting the meaning through textual analysis of images alone and acknowledge the importance of taking 'interpretive communities' of viewers into account.

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