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“The Breath of Hope and Tomorrow”: An Examination of John Stephens’s *Farewell the Fair Country*

Charlotte J. Headrick

“Miss Coyle, come quick, can you smell it? Can you? It’s land, surely. In the wind now...it’s the breath of hope and tomorrow. It’s America, Miss Coyle.”

—John Stephen’s *Farewell the Fair Country*

As many have noted, those who left Ireland following the Potato Famine embarked on a series of perilous travels. For many, their journeys to North America and elsewhere could certainly be considered odysseys.¹ In recreating these journeys in the world of drama, a cluster of plays has been written that could be termed the “immigration/emigration” genre of Irish drama. John Stephens’s *Farewell the Fair Country* is one of these immigration plays; numerous plays fall into a variation of this category—Brian Friel’s 1965 *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, Charabanc Theatre Company’s 1986 *Gold in the Streets*, and Janet Noble’s 1989 *Away Alone*, an excellent piece on the displaced Irish in contemporary New York. Christopher Murray cites the theme of immigration and emigration as one of the major concerns of Irish drama. This paper will not only examine John Stephen’s immigration play *Farewell the Fair Country*, but it will also place the play in the context of the dramatist and the theatre he founded in Atlanta, Georgia: Theatre Gael.

Several plays in the Irish canon contain characters “back from Boston/back from New York/back from London,” such as in Declan Hughes’s 1991 *Digging for Fire*. Dermot Bolger’s 1999 *In High Germany* has a central character, a construction worker, who is homesick and lonely in Germany. Theresa who has fled Belfast for London in Christina Reid’s 1983 *Tea in a China Cup* could be considered such a displaced character. Tom Murphy’s 1985 *Conversations on a Homecoming* has Michael returned from America. Set in Donegal during World War II, Frank McGuinness’s 1999 *Dolly West’s Kitchen* has two characters, American soldiers, one of whom Jamie O’Brien speaks of his ancestors who came from Donegal. His presence leads to upheaval in the West family. John B. Keane’s 1965 *The Field* has a returned Irishman whose actions lead to a violent end. The same is true of Ronan Noone’s 2005 *The Blowin of Baile Gall*, in which Samuel Carson has returned to Ireland with his American wife to start a construction company. An immigrant himself, Noone’s characters often struggle with immigration issues. In his 2007 *Brendan*, the title character, living in Boston, is haunted by the ghost of his dead Irish mother. Noone’s 2014 *The Second Girl* deals with the Irish servant characters in O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. While O’Neill’s play happens upstairs, the Irish characters’ lives are revealed downstairs. In Kabosh Theatre Company’s *Two Roads West* by Lawrence McKeown (2009 and 2013), Rosie returns to Belfast having been away for forty years.

Eamonn Wall comments on the condition of being an emigrant in contemporary times: “We still carry the same heavy emotional baggage which Irish exiles have always carried with them...For us Irish, emigration is both a welcome safety net and a curse. What is a fact is that everyone emerges changed from the experience.² For those who left Ireland during the Potato Famine, their lives were not only changed, but they were also drastically transformed. John Stephens’s 1995 play *Farewell the Fair Country* traces an immigrant family’s journey from Ireland to Savannah, Georgia, one of the most “Irish” of American cities—a city whose St. Patrick’s Day festivities rival those of New York and Chicago. Savannah has a long history with immigration from Ireland. The first Irish to come to Georgia were from Ulster, many coming from Antrim. A friend in tracing her genealogy tracked her family journey from Larne, on the Antrim coast of Ulster, in the eighteenth century. In her case, the family landed a bit north of Savannah in Charleston, South Carolina. Irish came to Savannah in the 1830s to build the Central of Georgia Railway.³ As the case in much of North America, the largest wave of Irish came to Savannah during the Famine.

Like the family in his play, Stephens’s ancestors emigrated to North America in the nineteenth century, and his play is a love letter from Stephens to his forebears, extolling their courage and fortitude, particularly as manifest in the strong women of his family. It is a play about the endurance and durability of the human spirit.

Although *Farewell the Fair Country* had a successful run at Theatre Gael, Atlanta’s highly acclaimed Celtic theatre, this play has never been published and is not known outside of Atlanta. Founded by John Stephens in 1984, Theatre Gael was known for the excellence of its work and was one of a handful of theatres in the United States dedicated to producing Irish drama.⁴ It was a well-established company in a thriving Atlanta theatre scene, having produced everything from Christina Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup* to Friel’s *Translations* to O’Casey’s *Shadow of a Gunman*. It also staged or prepared a number of original works, including the world premiere of *Dark Irish* (2002) by Shirlene Holmes, which examines African-American women and their search for their Irish roots; it was a conversation between two real people in the Atlanta area. One news story stated,

Atlanta’s Theatre Gael Premieres Two-Woman Drama *Dark Irish* Jan. 25-28 (Dec. 14, 2001) [Editor’s Note: The production was cancelled on January 24, 2002.] Dr. Shirlene Holmes and Kathleen Ferguson became friends 20 years ago. Holmes is an African-American, the other an Irish American, but they have been drawn together by more than their Celtic surnames. In *Dark Irish*, Holmes explores her friendship with Ferguson as well as the cultural identities and life choices that have affected their art and their affection for each other. Theatre Gael in Atlanta premieres the play in its Crossroads Series, Jan. 25-28 at the Fourteenth Street Playhouse. Holmes and Ferguson play themselves. Holmes is an associate professor of communications at Georgia State University and a playwright (*A Lady and a Woman*).⁵

As noted, there is a note on one web site stating that this play was cancelled. Theatre Gael hosted the now legendary Charabanc Theatre Company on one of its tours to the United States. Along with being a producing theatre, Theatre Gael also had a thriving educational program. In 1994, Theatre Gael celebrated its twentieth season, and the web site had this statement:

Theatre Gael is celebrating its 20th season of bringing high quality, professional theatre to Atlanta. Their mission is to produce and preserve the plays, poetry, music, dance and storytelling of the Celtic countries of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Theatre Gael is the only inter-Celtic theatre in the region and one of only a few in North America that actively celebrates the rich and diverse cultural traditions of Celtic people.

Theatre Gael is dedicated to serving as a resource for Celtic Americans wishing to use the scope of the theatre to explore their own heritage. They emphasize the universal themes that prevail in Celtic literature so that they may share these enduring values with their entire community.

In addition, Theatre Gael is committed to providing quality arts education to children throughout Georgia by creating programs and workshops that help young people and their families express and exchange ideas about diverse subjects such as human rights, conflict resolution, cultural literacy and values formation, the very themes that typically define Celtic and Celtic American literature. Founded in 1984 by Artistic Director John Stephens and now with over seventy-five productions mounted, Theatre Gael continues to preserve and celebrate one of the world's richest literary traditions.

One in five Georgia citizens traces their ancestry to Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As a "former minority, Celtic Americans have achieved tremendous economic and social success in their adopted country. They believe that it is critical to nurture the creative spirit that contributed to their American success story and sustain that spirit for future generations.

A production list exists on the web for the plays produced by Theatre Gael from 1997 through 2006. The theatre was producing not only some of the great works of Irish drama from the twentieth century but also some of the most important dramatists of the twenty-first century. There are numerous works by Friel, O'Casey, and Synge. A sampling of productions (with the year of production noted) include: Hugh Leonard's *Da* (2002), Martin McDonagh's *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (both 2003), Ron Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skull* (2003), and Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (2004). Theatre Gael also produced two musicals during this period: Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* in 2000 and Terrence McNally, Lynn Ahrens, and Stephen Flaherty's *A Man of No Importance* in 2004—a musical based on the Irish film of the same name.

Sadly, the theatre is no longer active. Kathleen McManus, an Atlanta actress, who was in the 1985 Theatre Gael *Shadow of a Gunman* and several other productions, wrote, "The reason you can find no information about TG closing is because it was never officially declared." She

believes that the theatre “seems to have remained active until around 2008.” McManus is the co-founder of Arís, a new Celtic theatre company in Atlanta. According to McManus, Theatre Gael initially used the second space in Atlanta’s Academy Theatre and then transferred to the 14th Street location, where it operated through the 1990s.⁶ Concerning Arís, which is Irish for “encore,” McManus says,

We very much wish to revive the notion of Celtic-based theater in Atlanta, not only for the general theater-going public, but also for the high percentage of Atlantans of Celtic origin. Also, many of us are alums of Theatre Gael, which is currently not producing plays, so this is a task the nine founding members, with several decades of theatrical experience between us, have willingly have taken up.⁷

Scholar Marilynn Richtarik writes,

Theatre Gael was, of course, going strong when I first arrived in Atlanta. I remember John Stephens as a particularly good director of Brian Friel’s work. I saw a fine production of *Translations*, starring our friend John C. (as Hugh)⁸ and Molly Sweeney and a terrific one of *Translations* (with John Stephens playing Teddy, to very good effect). I didn’t see their production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* (I was in North Carolina that fall), but one of the students in my Irish drama class this semester remembers it well and fondly.

Another highlight, for me, was the Theatre Gael production of Sebastian Barry’s *The Stewart of Christendom*, which moved me to tears. I saw this with Meg Harper, and it had a similar effect on her.⁹

Stephens is an only child; born into a “US military family,” he “grew up everywhere.” He was an “integral company member of the Academy Theatre, from the mid-1970s until their departure from the 14th Street Playhouse in December 1990.”

In 2010 at Theatre in the Square (in the Atlanta suburb of Marietta), Stephens played Sam in a production of Leonard Gross’s *Conversations With My Wife*. His biography for that production gives a glimpse of his contributions as a dramatist within and beyond Atlanta’s theatre scene:

John is very happy to be working Theatre in the Square once again. John has directed a number of plays on this stage, including: *Death of a Salesman*, *Stones in His Pockets*, *The Caretaker*, *A Life in the Theatre* and *The Boy Who Would Be King*. He is the Artistic Director of Atlanta’s Theatre Gael, the oldest professional Irish-American theatre in the country, and WORLDSONG, their arts-in-education program. He is also a playwright whose work has been produced at Theatre in the Square, Alliance Children’s Theatre, Center for Puppetry Arts and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. This fall, look for the premiere of *Brief Candle: Remembering Anne Frank*. Many thanks to all my friends at T-Square.¹⁰

Within the context of Theatre Gael's production history, this paper examines Stephens's play and how it functions in the larger world of immigration plays. Like Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, *Farewell the Fair Country* is a memory play. Like Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come* and Noble's *Away Alone*, it explores what it means to be an immigrant—and also what it means to be the inheritor of that legacy. In the play, Clare Burns, the leading character, sorts through the boxes and bits of her Great Aunt Kate as the latter's Savannah house goes on the market. Although only vaguely aware of her Irish ancestry, Clare comes to understand and appreciate her ancestors, their struggle, and the legacy she has inherited. Filled with music, the play works on several levels, shifting back and forth from the present day to the nineteenth century, with outside commentators—the Historian, the Biologist, Rev. Osbourne, Lord Bennett, the Businessman—framing the historical and political situation of the time of the famine, the time of “Black '47.”

Although *Farewell the Fair Country* is not known to a wide audience, with its loving look at one immigrant family, the play introduces us to a family whose journey and whose greater story could be those of so many within the Irish diaspora. The drama opens in the present, in an empty room filled with packing crates. The crates become the various locations in the play. (Since Stephens is familiar with Charabanc's work, I would argue that their well-known minimalist staging is an influence on this play. Many small theatre companies are financially strapped, and the legacy of Peter Brook and empty-space theatre can be seen in those packing crates.) Simultaneously, we see three characters—Brid Coyle and two of her daughters, Nan and Rose—standing in the shadows of the house. As Rose begins dancing, the Historian steps up to deliver a lecture on the success of the Irish as emigrants to the United States.

With a light shift we are in mid-nineteenth-century County Antrim, Ireland, and from there we shift again to the present day and Clare Burns, a professional career woman. One of the first items Clare finds is a framed bit of lace, which, we discover, is part of a wedding veil. As Clare chats with the realtor, we are reminded of the final moment in Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* between Beth and the Estate Agent. (Theatre Gael also has produced Reid's play, and I would additionally argue that Reid's influence is seen in the structure and form of *Farewell the Fair Country*.) As the realtor examines the house, the action moves to Ireland and 1845, and we meet the Coyle sisters and their mother preparing Clare, our present-day Clare's ancestor, for her wedding. Like Beth in Reid's play, Clare speaks directly to the audience, sharing her story. As the nineteenth-century story progresses, we discover that the men are absent, the father and the son, because they have gone to England to harvest “Saxon wheat.”

The Coyle sisters call to Clare to hurry up or she will be late to her own wedding. In a wonderful theatrical moment, modern Clare pulls a bonnet and shawl from a packing box and becomes her ancestor, stepping into the nineteenth century. What John Stephens has done so cleverly in this scene is illustrate how for those of us with immigrant forebears, the past is always in the present.

Dylan Thomas wrote: “Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea.” Stephens captures in the next sequence of this play the womb/tomb motif of Thomas’s “Fern Hill.” As Clare and her mother and sisters chatter about Clare’s wedding, the Biologist appears on stage elucidating the history of the potato. The scene ends with the Biologist describing the deadly fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, as Brid discovers the rotting potatoes in their garden and Jimmy Jack Cassidy, Clare’s betrothed, runs on stage to report that the whole crop is ruined, that he can’t marry her, and that he is heading for Canada and will send for her.

Like so many Irish plays, *Farewell the Fair Country* is filled with music, particularly traditional music of the famine period. One of the first songs comes from present-day Clare: “So, it’s off and away to Americay / Across the wild Western Sea / ...Still, it’s long I’ll remember the best of my heart / Was left behind with thee.”¹¹ The song evokes American wakes, families torn apart, uncertain futures. In the nineteenth-century sequence, Rose sings first: “Bright, scarlet ribbons to remember me by / Bonny blue ribbons to remind you of home / Oh ribbons-o-ribbons of scarlet and blue / To remind you forever that my love was true...” (2). Clare repeats a section of this song, and she tells the realtor that she was “remembering a song my aunt used to sing. She was Irish. My aunt. You know Irish-American. Irish, they sing for no apparent reason” (3). The stage direction reads, “The man looks at her curiously” (3). Of course, Clare is the Irish-American, the one now singing for no apparent reason. Kate tells the realtor that the house belonged to her aunt, Kate Burns. After Jimmy tells Clare he cannot marry her, is bound for Canada, but will send for her, the women sing, “Some Yankee girls you’ll see. / They’ll all look very handsome / And you’ll think no more of me / You’ll forget the vows and promises / That you to me have made / You’ll forget them all you left behind / And your lovely Irish maid” (20). Another verse of this song is repeated after Rose’s death. The music both comments on the action and propels it forward to the next scene.

In quick succession in the play, we meet Rev. Osbourne and Lord Bennett. The former explains that although he has a “Christian compulsion to offer aid” to Irish famine victims, he cannot because “[t]here are simply too many of them” (11). For his part, Bennet, a member of the British parliament, on hearing the reports of the starving in Ireland, although perhaps exaggerated because of the “hysteria of the overheated Irish imagination,” says that “some action must be taken. I suggest that we form a committee to elect a commission to investigate the entire affair” (25). In a visual history lesson, we see the Coyles lose their home, Bridget die, her wedding ring sold to build her coffin, and a triumphant British businessman gloating that the “Irish are going with a vengeance!” (30). A ship’s agent strikes a deal with the sisters to take them to an unidentified port if the girls will agree to five years work as servants in exchange for their passage. Clare signs the manifest and is quickly separated from Rose, who dies when troops open fire, trying to keep control of the crowd in Belfast. The narrator’s role at this point in the play has been taken over by the actress playing Brid, who comments on the riot:

None of the casualties were actually attributed to the gunfire but were found to be a result of the panic that spread among the crowds after the first shots. While the newspapers failed to tally the number of dead, they did mention that the riot had interrupted the normal flow of commerce. (35)

Nan dies during the crossing, leaving Clare with John O'Beirne whom she has met on the journey. The narrator, a role that rotates among the various actresses in the play, tells the audience, "The Captain's log of the *Southern Star* which docked in Savannah, Georgia on March 14, 1848, registered 210 of the 600 passengers 'buried at sea'" (42). What Stephens has done in a few theatrical strokes is depict the journey of the coffin ships. As many as a third of the emigrants from Ireland who boarded often derelict ships headed to North America died in the crossing, hence the term "coffin" ships. Legend has it that so many dead were tossed overboard that sharks followed the ships. It is Clare alone who arrives in the United States, having lost her mother and her sisters Rose and Nan, and, following a common pattern, she meets, on the crossing, the man she will marry, John O'Beirne. Stephens concludes the play by having all the characters complete the story of Clare Coyle and John O'Beirne, bringing it back to present-day Clare holding the framed bit of lace.

Clare's wedding veil becomes a symbol of the journey from Ireland to America. Part of the veil becomes first, her mother's shroud; then, a cover for her sister Rose's body; and finally, a cloth used to catch rain which cools the brow of the dying Nan. As the play ends, Kate is holding the last of the wedding veil, a fragment of the original, a framed bit of lace. Like Beth, who carries the china teacup off with her in the last scene of Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, Kate holds the lace, which, like Beth's teacup, is a talisman of the past, a reminder of the long immigrant journey, the odyssey to a new life. Early on when we first meet the sisters, they are weaving flowers into Clare's wedding veil. There is heather "for a long and happy life. Martyrs blood and blessed thistle" (6) and "Wild roses to remind us there's joy and sorrow all times wound together" (7).

We learn that the family has changed their name from O'Beirne (traditional spelling) to Burns

in order to get a loan to build this house. They did that back then. The Irish. They changed their names to get jobs, to marry up, to get elected, especially in the South. They took those beautiful names and changed them in order to sound, and seem, somehow more American. Proud O'Beirne was to become plain old Burns. Safe and respectable. A name you would lend money to. (7)

Knowing that John Stephens based some of this play on his own family history, the voice of the playwright and his own bitterness at how his ancestors were treated occasionally peek through. And since the play was written and produced in Atlanta, Georgia, there are some insider jokes. Clare tells the audience:

As the Burnses scattered about America, and the yearly visits dwindled to Christmas

cards, and then to nothing, Kate held on to Savannah house with a fierceness that surprised us all. This dilapidated, old house. And my father would tease. “It’s the land, Katie Scarlett. It’s the land.” And we’d hoot and hug and Kate would join our laughter.
(8)

Atlantans would have also ‘hooted’ at this reference to *Gone With the Wind*, the film, based on the book by Atlanta native Margaret Mitchell.

In the last moment of the play, Clare’s words, as she holds the lace, recall the story of the wild roses and the wedding veil. As she ‘hears’ the voices of her ancestors, whose stories will not go away, she recognizes that she and they are “bound together in our joy and in our sorrow” (42).

In New York State, high school students must be educated about the Holocaust and the Irish famine. Copies of John Stephens’s play should be shipped to New York State, for it is an ideal teaching tool. *Farewell the Fair Country* is written to be produced without an intermission, thereby increasing the intensity of the drama. In an actual production, the audience members would experience a wave of Irish and Irish-American history wash over them. In theatrical terms, the running time for this play should be just over an hour, suitable for educational purposes. Unfortunately, like so many first plays, this drama has only had two productions. Although the play is a dramatic fiction, it is based not only in Stephens’s own family history, his love letter to his ancestors, but it also grounded in solid immigration history. Clare Coyle’s journey to Savannah, Georgia, could be the story of so many of our own ancestors who out of necessity started odysseys not of their own making, reaching for “the breath of hope and tomorrow.”

Notes

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at the 2001 International Association for the Study of Irish Literature’s annual meeting at Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland. The theme of the conference was “Odysseys.”

² Eamonn Wall, *From the Sin-é Café to the Black Hills: Notes on the New Irish* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000) 5.

³ Jim Morekis, “Irish History in Savannah, Georgia,” <http://moon.com/2014/03/irish-history-in-savannah-georgia>, accessed November 3, 2015.

⁴ There are several companies scattered across the United States dedicated to producing Irish theatre. Among those are Solas Nua in Washington, D.C.; Corrib in Portland, Oregon; the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York; and Theatre Banshee in Los Angeles. Sugin in Boston has closed, but Fat Violet in Boston has filled some of the void. There are several companies in Chicago that concentrate on Irish drama. Irish theatre is being produced worldwide and all over the United States by professional theatre companies, university theatre companies, and community theatres.

⁵ <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/atlantas-theatre-gael-premieres-two-woman-drama>

[dark-irishjan.-25-28-100298#sthash.5p34TE8x.dpuf](#), accessed Dec. 2, 2015.

⁶ Kathleen McManus, Email to C. Headrick, October 20, 2015.

⁷ Lisa Nanette Allender, "Celtic Theatre Company Arís Launches Debut Season," <http://www.atlantaintownpaper.com/2014/05/celtic-theatre-company-aris-launches-debut-season>, accessed Dec. 2, 2015.

⁸ John Countryman: scholar of Irish drama, actor, and director (Berry College, Mount Berry, Georgia).

⁹ Marilyn Richtarick, Email to C. Headrick, October 16, 2015.

¹⁰ marietta.com, "Theatre in the Square's Conversations with My Wife," <http://www.marietta.com/theatre-in-the-squares-conversations-with-my-wife>, accessed December 2, 2015.

¹¹ John Stephens, *Farewell the Fair Country*, Unpublished Manuscript (1995) 2. In the body of the essay, all subsequent parenthetical page numbers given for the play refer to this manuscript.

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