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Brian Friel, Ireland and Globalisation

Martine Pelletier
Université François-Rabelais, Tours
ICD (EA 6297)

The Celtic Tiger phenomenon has understandably drawn much attention in view of Ireland's extremely rapid transformation from a traditional society with an ailing economy into a winner in the global game, all in the space of a few years during the 1990s. In his aptly named *Luck and the Irish. A Brief history of Change, 1970-2000*, Roy Foster recalls the sense of awe that many people felt as statistics accumulated, demonstrating Ireland's sudden prosperity:

> Output in the decade from 1995 increased 350%, outpacing the per capita averages in the UK and the USA, personal disposable income doubled, exports increased fivefold, trade surpluses accumulated into billions, employment boomed, immigrants poured into the country. As the twentieth century reached its end, Ireland's transformation was an established fact: the country had apparently become vastly rich. (Foster 7)

Ireland could now compare favourably with the former colonial master, the United Kingdom, and with the economic superpower, the United States. Through this newly found prosperity, ghosts of the past were exorcised: "People bought into the idea that this wasn't just an economic boom—it was a national vindication, a healing, the sense that our bad past was gone, and gone forever…" (O'Toole quoted in Nicoll).

Faced with such a seemingly miraculous metamorphosis, commentators could be seen to fall into two categories, the optimists and the pessimists or, as Foster calls them, "Boosters" and "Begrudgers."

Now that the global economic recession has killed the Celtic Tiger—a drop in growth of GDP from 6% in 2007 to -7.6% in 2009 leaving Ireland with a banking system in tatters, thousands of un-saleable housing units, a return to the bad old days of mass emigration[1] and double digit unemployment figures—the warnings of the begrudgers have acquired a prophetic value. One of the most articulate and convincing begrudgers is certainly the journalist and critic Fintan O'Toole. In *After the Ball* (2003), O'Toole evinced much scepticism as to the durability and even desirability of the Celtic Tiger, warning that social inequality, greed and an excessive reliance on multi-national firms would ultimately leave Ireland vulnerable to evolutions outside its control, and impoverished in social and cultural terms. He also analysed Ireland's rapid conversion to the global economy, denying its singularity the better to highlight its exemplarity:

> What makes Ireland interesting is not that it is exceptional but, on the contrary, that it is, in the early 21st century, an extreme case of a phenomenon that touches every part of the world: globalisation. This complex process, in which economic liberalisation, speed of communication and cultural homogenisation are intertwined, affects everyone on earth. It creates losers and winners. (O'Toole, 3)

He went on to identify Ireland as the main winner in the globalisation game—"The Republic of Ireland is the most globalised country on earth" (O'Toole 4)—and pointed out the extent to which this phenomenon had been spurred on by American business :

> Since 1993, 25% of all new US investment in the EU has gone to Ireland, which has only 1 per cent of the EU's population. By 2002, 585 American businesses operated in the Republic of Ireland, employing 94,000 people and representing an investment of $23 billion in the Irish economy. Of the €93 billion worth of goods exported from Ireland in 2001, the

> chemical, pharmaceutical and computer sectors, in which US corporations are utterly dominant, accounted for almost 60 %. (O'Toole 6-7)

Since its accession to the European Economic Community in 1973, Ireland had been hailed as the star pupil of the new Union, reaping benefits and praise, developing its infrastructure and emerging from an insularity that was widely regarded as a negative consequence of its former colonial domination by the British. It is this vision of an increasingly confident Ireland, fully integrated into Europe, that the last three decades have challenged, showing instead how Ireland had remained firmly aligned with Anglophone powers, most importantly the US. In his best-selling 2005 book, *The Pope's Children: Ireland's New Elite*, economist David McWilliams used an arresting metaphor: "Ireland could be regarded as living on the economic and political equivalent of the San Andreas Fault, where the huge continental plates of the US and Europe grind up against each other" (McWilliams 91). He also described Ireland in terms that a writer like Salman Rushdie or a critical theorist like Homi Bhaba would find familiar:

> In the new global economy, which values dexterity and flexibility over hard and fast choices, Ireland is neither Boston nor Berlin but a hybrid, a type of Bostlin… Ireland is the first Ameropean society in the world. We are a 21st century state—we are a hybrid nation, sometimes regarded as the most western outcrop of the most ancient European civilisation while at the same time feeling like a congested New Jersey. We are equally at home in Buffalo or Brussels which allows us to play both off against each other. (McWilliams 90)

Roy Foster raised a similar issue, with an added dimension, identifying an anxiety among the "begrudgers" that the old British empire may have been replaced by a different kind of empire, the United States, with a similar result for Ireland:

> Has the historical shadow of Britain's evil empire, stunting Ireland's growth, draining her resources and imposing degraded cultural

> standards on a dependent population, simply been replaced by an equally enervating cloud from the West? Is the real historical phenomenon of the last generation not the Europeanization of Irish society but the Americanization of the Irish economy, and much else? (Foster 27)

Sociologist Tom Inglis in *Global Ireland* (2008) rightly highlights the importance, both numerically but also symbolically, of the Irish-American diaspora, pointing to another cause and facet of this "globalisation" of Ireland:

> Certainly if one was to measure cultural globalization in terms of the flow of people, then on the basis of the number of Irish people around the world who claim Irish ancestry per head of indigenous population, Ireland would score very high. In 2004, the US Census Bureau reported that 34 million Americans claimed Irish ancestry. (Inglis 111)

Though this may not have been obvious at the time, comments by Irish playwright Brian Friel in 1970 anticipated many of the doubts and criticisms of today's begrudgers regarding Ireland's commerce with the United States: "Ireland is becoming a shabby imitation of a third-rate American state. […] We are no longer even West Britons; we are East Americans" (Murray 49). What Friel perceived in the late 1960s was an early stage of the process that would lead to what Foster calls, with characteristic wit and style, "the mating of the Celtic Tiger with the lean, mean prairie wolf of American international capitalism" (Foster 28). Friel, born in Northern Ireland in 1929, would already have observed, if only from across the border, the first opening of the Irish economy which occurred after 1958 when the de Valera project of a self-sufficient Ireland proved to have reached its limits, its emphasis on agriculture and traditional industries hampering any prospect of economic growth and fuelling mass emigration. A political consensus developed and a new programme for economic expansion was implemented under the guidance of Kenneth Whitaker. In the 1960s, transnational, mostly American, companies and capital flowed into the country thanks to generous tax-incentives, creating jobs and

boosting exports as Ireland joined the global cultural traffic and prepared for entering the Common Market in 1973 at the same time as the United Kingdom. In spite of a global consensus on the need to modernise a backward Irish economy, warnings were sounded at the time that Ireland was at risk of losing its distinctive identity and surrendering its hard-won, still partial political and cultural independence. The superficiality of the new culture developing in Ireland, its disconnection from its traditional roots and values represented a worrying evolution as far as Brian Friel was concerned, which he voiced clearly in a 1970 interview:

> I think, for instance, Ireland is politically sitting in the lap of America […] I think the emphasis is on having at least one car and preferably two. One has only to go into any of the posh Dublin hotels and one can see the new Ireland sprawled around in the lounges. This development is terrifying. (Murray 27)

This article argues that aspects of Brian Friel's career as well as some of his plays—notably his little known *The Mundy Scheme* (1969) and the later *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993) —can be read as indirect comments on Ireland's rise and fall as a global player with America as the major agent in the globalising process. Though artists generally and dramatists in particular have been attacked recently[2] for failing to produce works that challenged and critiqued the social, political and cultural implications of Ireland's new-found wealth and near total dependence on the global game, Patrick Lonergan's ground-breaking *Theatre and Globalization. Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (2009) has paved the way for a new critical paradigm in Irish studies to complement the hitherto dominant postcolonial mode of interpretation.

Brian Friel's career as a dramatist started in 1962 with *The Enemy Within*, a play which looked back to Ireland's golden age as the island of saints and scholars, exploring "global" Ireland *avant la lettre* with the foundation of the monastery of Iona. In 1963, at the invitation of fellow Ulsterman Sir Tyrone Guthrie, Friel spent several months in Minneapolis, an experience he described as his "first parole from inbred claustrophobic Ireland" (Murray 42). Back in Ireland, having served an

apprenticeship of sorts, Friel wrote *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* which achieved instant success in Dublin in 1964. The young protagonist, Gar O'Donnell, is about to leave his small town and taciturn father in Ireland to emigrate to the US where his aunt, his late mother's childless sister, will welcome him with open arms and "all mod cons." The play could not but strike a chord in a country that was losing tens of thousands of young Irish men and women to emigration, mostly to America. Friel's next play, *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, reversed the angle and looked at a returned emigrant, the aging, loud-mouthed Cass, back in the same Ballybeg—meaning small town in Irish, the imaginary backdrop to most Friel plays—after a life spent as a waitress in New-York.

Thus Friel's first two major plays showed an awareness of how Ireland had long been linked to global traffic through America, as a result of emigration patterns established with the Famine in the 1840s, and which had survived after independence and into the 1960s. Though Friel was based in the North, emigration was also a reality for the Catholic community there, confronted as they were by a lack of employment opportunities made worse by the discriminatory practices of the province, in the workplace as well as in other areas. By 1968, Brian Friel started circling around a play that would address the state of contemporary Ireland as he saw it and which developed into *The Mundy Scheme*, analysed below. Through the 1970s and 1980s Friel's stature as a dramatist grew, mostly in the Anglophone world, through the success of *Translations* in 1980 and several other plays which transferred to London and Broadway—as well as further afield—something the Field Day company he had set up with actor Stephen Rea largely contributed to developing. Yet it was in 1990 with the international triumph of *Dancing at Lughnasa* that Friel genuinely became a global figure in a theatre economy that was itself becoming increasingly globalised. Before the end of the decade, the play was performed literally all over the world, from Finland to Israel, Kenya to Uruguay, Iceland to Japan, France to Estonia. Documents in the Friel archive list over thirty locations, not counting UK and US productions. *Dancing at Lughnasa* was turned into a film and Meryl Streep played one of the leading female roles, giving the play a global/Hollywood dimension and distribution network. Patrick Lonergan very

convincingly argues that *Dancing at Lughnasa* "allows audiences to come to terms with the emergence of what could be called 'time-space compression'" (Lonergan 36), which in turn is linked to the globalisation of culture. He further instances the production history of *Dancing at Lughnasa* as "conforming to international audiences' expectations of the Irish play" and "boosting Irish self-confidence," offering a model that "other companies and playwrights would emulate" (Lonergan 54).

In 1993, as the Celtic Tiger was about to spring onto the international scene, Brian Friel produced *Wonderful Tennessee*, a play in which he engaged with another facet of globalisation in Ireland: the decline in religious faith and practice and an attendant loss of purpose and values. Thus it is now food in its new, refined and global guise, that can inspire praise and calls to the divine presence: "Venison and apricot Compote? Honey gateau. […] Marinated quail and quince jelly. God! The delights of the world—you have them all there" (Friel, 1993, 40-44). *Wonderful Tennessee* showed how the material had come to supersede the spiritual, how money—even of the entirely virtual variety, like the money the leading character, a bookmaker on the verge of personal bankruptcy, uses to take an option on an island he will never own—now reigned supreme; though the need to find a sustaining meaning to our lives as we faced failure, marital breakdown or imminent death remained powerful and urgent. Echoing Oscar Wilde, David McWilliams could comment that: "We are now a nation that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing"(McWilliams 76), a claim that is at the heart of *Wonderful Tennessee* and may explain in part the muted reception, critical and popular, that it received.[3] This play was clearly not in tune with the increasingly buoyant mood of a country looking to a future in which *compote* and *gateau* would no longer sound wildly exotic and not yet aware of the dangers which greed and material prosperity held in store. In January 2001, Friel took the momentous decision to donate his archive not to one of the many American high-bidding universities, but to the National Library of Ireland, thus ensuring a sustained flow of academics from the world over for the collection of over 18,000 items now safely located in Kildare Street, Dublin. Since then several of Friel's plays have enjoyed "global productions" especially through his connection with Michael Colgan, the artistic director of the Gate Theatre, Dublin. In

2006, Friel's *Faith Healer*—initially a flop on Broadway in 1980 and since hailed as a masterpiece—enjoyed a much publicized revival at the Gate in 2006 with Ralph Fiennes playing the lead, while correspondence in the archive shows that Friel and Colgan also thought of asking Anthony Hopkins to play the part of Frank Hardy, confirming the appeal of Friel's plays to major figures in the global world of the arts.

Back in the 1960s, before he became such a global figure, Brian Friel was very much aware of the deep and meaningful connection between Ireland and the United States, having himself travelled to America and Minneapolis at the invitation of fellow Northerner Tyrone Guthrie and written two plays that dealt with emigration. Though Patrick Lonergan is right to suggest that "Friel moved from thinking about the relationship between Ireland and America to adopting a global perspective in 1969 when his satire *The Mundy Scheme* appeared" (Lonergan 32), I would contend that *The Mundy Scheme* remains centrally concerned with the connection between Ireland and the United States, and that it is only through that crucial link that a more global picture may emerge; this pattern is very similar to the way many Irish people have experienced globalization in recent years, echoing Foster's "Americanization of Ireland" theory and Inglis's timely reminder of the strength of the Irish-American diaspora. The notes in the Friel archive[4] show the writer spending months toying with ideas and seeking to pin down what he was circling around; thus on one page dated 10 May 1968 he muses:

> How to achieve an intelligible composition with so many themes and with no hold-all form.
> What is the dominant theme?
> The Direction of Ireland?
> The Church/Politics/ New Society?
> The Slow death of Rural Ireland?
> Americanism?

The notes for the play, as well as the interviews given by the playwright around that same time, show Friel challenging the Republic of Ireland's embrace of the American

way of life in the wake of Whitaker's 1958 Programme for Economic Expansion. The play, he notes, is an "exposition in human terms of the theory that: - When America does something for a country it demands in exchange the most exacting conformity," foreshadowing Friel's remark to Desmond Rushe in 1970 that "the turn the Republic has taken over the past nine or ten years has been distressing, very disquieting. We have become a tenth-rate image of America—a disaster for any country" (Murray 27). In his early notes for *The Mundy Scheme*, Friel quotes "After Edward Kennedy: In some way we must all have inherited the residue of violence that is the US way of existence. Where is it manifest in us? Most likely in business." Further on, Friel refers to the phrase newly coined by Marshall McLuhan: "The open society, The just society, The global village." In the finished play, the playwright has his main protagonist, politician F.X. Ryan, use the phrase to express his dismissal of provincial, inward-looking Ireland and his proud and ready embrace of "membership of the global village."

A page of Friel's notes dated 11 October 1968, a few days after the momentous first Civil Rights March in Derry, shows that Friel had pinned down an idea which would be the mainspring of the play: "The sec[retary] general of UNO (or the president of the US) let it be known that it would suit the rich industrial western countries if Ireland were transformed into one huge CEMETERY." The hesitation between "UN Secretary" and "President of the US" demonstrates Friel's suspicion that the two could ultimately prove interchangeable. No fewer than fifteen reasons to adopt the "Ireland as a cemetery scheme" are listed on the same sheet, mixing the outrageous with the barely plausible, as the play ultimately would: "This would satisfy the absorbing Irish necrophilia/ immense tourist trade/ full-time work for the clergy/ ports and airports very busy/ crematoria fuelled by turf." At the bottom of the same page, two thoughts highlight the interactions between obsessions of the time in an amazing mix of the global and the local: "All our emigrants will return—even though its in boxes (sic). Phone call from Gaelic League – Services in Irish." Brian Friel had come to the core of his play which then evolved further as both the American President and the UN Secretary General were discarded as likely instigators of the fantastic suggestion of transforming the barren, unproductive west

of Ireland—and its attendant myth of Gaelic authenticity along with its association with militant nationalism and essential Irishness—into a global graveyard. The man who wishes to allow the expensive and much-in-demand land in and around international capitals to be put to more lucrative use while Irish fields prepare to welcome the wealthy dead, is Irish-American Homer Mundy Jr, "tall, solemn, completely bald, middle-aged. Head of Mundy Real Estate Incorporated. Multimillionaire." Faithful to his conviction that "a major element in the sell-out is America" (sheet dated 13 January 1969), Friel, through the figure of Mundy, establishes a direct connection between US economic power and the potentially exploitative and damaging nature of the emotional connection between Ireland and America, through the diaspora. Through Mundy's family background—"the fellow who had all his ancestors disinterred and reburied in County Sligo where his family came from originally away back in the famine" (Friel, 1970, 197)—Friel is able to link past failure/trauma and present success while hinting at the hidden costs of yielding to the somewhat morbid attraction descendants of famine emigrants felt for Ireland. The plot of *The Mundy Scheme* sounds strangely familiar to the contemporary ear: Ireland is in the throes of a major economic crisis, on the brink of collapse. Money must be found. Ryan, the fictional Taoiseach (equivalent of Prime Minister) and his Cabinet members find they must choose between two rescue packages, both originating in the US. The first rescue package is grounded in the Cold War context, but Ryan immediately dismisses the Pentagon's demand to turn Ireland into a naval base which would put an end to Irish neutrality:

> As long as I am boss of this goddam sinking curragh, there'll be no American nuclear subs, no American communication centers and no American military or naval supply base on our shores. Maybe we're insignificant; but at least we're clean of this dirty nuclear game. (Friel, 1970, 195)

He is echoed, hilariously, by his Minister of Development who conflates nuclear armament and sexual promiscuity:

> We had trouble enough getting rid of the English. And you can take it from me here and now we're going to have no dirty Yankee sailors with nuclear warheads seducing decent Galway girls and decent Cork girls. (Friel, 1970, 215)

No self-respecting politician could possibly expose the decency of Irish girls to such a serious threat… Ryan's foreign affairs minister, the sly Moloney, will soon prove able to sell to the Taoiseach and the whole cabinet his Mundy scheme, designed to save Ireland from complete and imminent bankruptcy without compromising the hallowed principle of Irish neutrality: "France is the recognized home of good food; America is the acknowledged center of art; Switzerland is the center of Europe's banking. Let's make the west of Ireland the acknowledged… eternal resting place. […] We have everything: ideal situation, suitable climate, religious atmosphere—the lot" (Friel, 1970, 204). Ryan is soon convinced of the advantages of the morbid scheme and proceeds to deliver a television interview in which he uses terms that testify to a cynical understanding of the new law of free trade in a globalised economy : "Either you proudly proclaim your membership of the global village—or you die. No country can live in isolation. We are all dependent and interdependent. Commerce, trade and business have made us all brothers" (Friel, 1970, 272). He ends his speech with a reference to Padraic Pearse, the leader of the 1916 Rising and a Republican icon, also mentioned in the prelude as one of "the idealists of 1916" (Friel, 1970, 158). The readiness of corrupt, hypocritical or merely stupid Irish politicians to sacrifice the country for the sake of holding on to office or for personal profit is mercilessly explored and exposed: Ryan hastens to buy tracts of land that are about to become valuable through the Mundy scheme while a minister talks candidly of "selling half the country to America for top prices" (Friel, 1970, 286).

On 10 January 1969, some months before he completed the play, Brian Friel was hoping to broaden the canvas, meaning to introduce into the satire a further global dimension:

> The same situation/story as seen through the eyes of 1 or 2 leaders from an emerging African state. Finbarr Moussa + Garret Litola who were taught Irish dancing, Danny Boy and Gaelic by Irish nuns;
> OR
> Back to an early idea: "We offer this as a cautionary tale to emerging African states."

The specific reference to African states, thus aligning Ireland's experience of colonialism, independence and a form of neo-colonialism with the situation of newly independent African countries, was removed from the final version, the better to focus on home and the betrayal of Republican ideals. This is confirmed by the decision to use the hugely ironic, if to outsiders largely cryptic, subtitle "May we write your epitaph now, Mr Emmett?" Robert Emmett, in a famous speech from the dock after the unsuccessful 1803 rebellion against England concluded: " I am ready to die. […] Let my character and my motives repose in obscurity and peace, till other times and other men can do them justice. *Then* shall my character be vindicated. Then may my epitaph be written" (*FDA*, I, 938). What Republican heroes like Emmett and Pearse would have made of the "Mundy scheme" is easy to guess. Writing on 26 February 1969 to Donal Donnelly, who was to direct the play, Friel explained and warned:

> I'm enclosing a copy of THE MUNDY SCHEME or MAY WE WRITE YOUR EPITAPH NOW, MR. EMMET? It is a satire based on an outrageous premise (as was Swift's A MODEST PROPOSAL) and I think it's funny and savage and relevant to the present condition and the future direction of Ireland. […]
> I see no future for the play outside Ireland. For the first time in my life I've written exclusively for Kathleen; and I have an uneasy feeling she won't welcome my attentions. (Friel archive, MS 37, 062/3)

Friel's forebodings proved correct. Kathleen/Ireland did not respond very favourably to his attention and the play fared even worse across the Atlantic. *The Mundy Scheme* enjoyed a limited and moderately successful run in Dublin's Olympia

Theatre (The Abbey, the national theatre, deemed the play not ready for production, as Friel had predicted) and ended in a dismal failure after a few nights on Broadway. What American, particularly Irish-American audiences, could make of such a play remains a moot point. *The Mundy Scheme* has never been revived since.

Friel's next play, *The Gentle Island*, in 1971, may be read as a companion piece to The *Mundy Scheme*; the west of Ireland is again shown as ready to become a graveyard through the dual pressure of neglect and self-inflicted violence; once again Dublin is shown to be increasingly divorced from its rural hinterland, a theme close to Friel's heart and a major factor, as he saw it, in the decline of the country.[5] Violence was also erupting further north, in Friel's own constituency as "the troubles" escalated and attention once more shifted to the Ireland/Britain axis with the deployment of British troops on the streets of Northern Ireland. Back in 1969, Friel's flawed Swiftian satire angered, shocked or amused; in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, at a time when accusations of stupidity, hypocrisy and institutional corruption are flying, calls for the formation of a new Republic are getting louder,[6] when artists are expected to find ways to engage critically with the current crisis, *The Mundy Scheme* may well have acquired a new, modest relevance

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NOTES

[1] "In the year to April 2010 there was net outward migration of 34,500—the highest level since 1989," writes Fintan O'Toole in *Enough is Enough*, 6.

[2] I am thinking in particular of O'Toole's programme for RTE, "Power Plays," which has drawn much attention.

[3] O'Toole, though an admirer of Friel's work, wrote in his *Irish Times* review, 10 July 1993: "There is, however, no dramatic yeast to make all these heavy ingredients rise, and they remain indigestible… Instead of the ordinary becoming imbued with the mythic, the mythic is reduced to a very ordinary dullness." The Broadway run of *Wonderful Tennessee* was cut short as the producer feared box office losses as a result of equally mixed reviews in the New-York press.

[4] In the Friel archive in the National Library of Ireland (accession number 5612), nine folders concern *The Mundy Scheme*. Unless otherwise stated, all references in the text are to file MS 37, 062/1 which contains material related to the writing of the play.

[5] See for example Friel's interview with Desmond Rushe (1970) in Murray 25-34.

[6] See in particular Fintan O'Toole's bestselling *Enough is Enough* (2010)