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## Storytelling as a Cultural Context for London-Irish Writing in Donall

MacAmhlaigh's *Schnitzer O'Shea*, Jimmy Murphy's *Kings of the Kilburn High*

*Road* and Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce*

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### *Abstract:*

The oral tradition of storytelling is culturally significant to Irish literature and important for immigrant communities as a way to connect with their home culture and share stories without the necessity of literacy. This essay considers the motif of storytelling and the importance of voicing the community in much London-Irish literature. In Walsh's *The Walworth Farce*, a play within a play, the main character obsesses over retelling the story of their emigration from Ireland but corrupts its purity as he pushes his narrative of innocence too far, and the cycle of storytelling begins again. Similarly, in Murphy's *Kings of the Kilburn High Road*, workers create narratives of success to convince their families at home that they are doing well in London. However, again the narrative is unsustainable and the audience quickly sees that the men are not as happy and successful as they would like to be perceived. In MacAmhlaigh's work, his eponymous character's role as a voice and storyteller for his community is emphasized as Schnitzer O'Shea is encouraged by both the "literati" of Dublin and his fellow migrant workers to be a representative of Irish Navvies in Britain, but he rails against this enforced position. An important part of Irish culture and tradition, storytelling, when placed into the migrant context of the Irish in London, often becomes corrupted, whether it is used to hide the reality of life in London or to expose it.

*Keywords:* migrant literature, Irish Studies, metatheatre, oral tradition, storytelling, globalism, working class literature, postcolonial, unreliable narration

The cultural tradition of storytelling in Ireland can be traced back centuries into the pre-literate traditions of the original Celtic populations. There is an ongoing continuation of titles associated with the form, such as *Seanchai* (holder of old lore) and *Saoi* (wise one) bestowed upon those who contribute creatively through oral traditions to Irish society. The form has continued to be relevant throughout time for a variety of reasons not least the strong continuation of a Celtic culture in spite of the colonial influence of British rule in Ireland. Much of the folklore and literature from Catholic Irish communities existed and continues to exist in the form of storytelling rather than written narratives, unlike the work of the Anglo-

Irish ascendancy writers who dominated the published literary output of Ireland for centuries. Education was largely accessible only to the English land-owning classes as the Irish language and a Catholic Education were suppressed under the Penal laws of 1695 through to the early nineteenth century, although “hedge schools” providing an illegal primary education to Presbyterian and Catholic children persisted. Those who had the education, wealth, and means to publish literature, therefore, most often belonged to this Anglo-Irish, English speaking, ascendancy class. Even the Celtic Revival of the late nineteenth century, when many of Ireland’s folkloric stories were republished in English and consequently brought back into the public consciousness, was spearheaded by Anglo-Irish gentry figures like W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. With the exception of writing from Dublin, where Catholic and non-Anglo-Irish figures such as James Joyce saw significant success, prior to the creation of the Free State in Ireland in 1922 and the subsequent and continuing dismantling of British colonial influence, there is little celebrated Irish literature that is not tied to this particular social group. The consequent expansion of Irish literature to include more rural, Catholic, and working-class voices in the hundred years since 1922 has allowed for Irish immigrant writing such as London-Irish literature to exist and be published, offering those who previously would have relied on the oral tradition the space to share their own written stories, and in turn providing storytelling a more symbolic cultural role.

Storytelling in Ireland continues to be celebrated and revered, having seen various revivals and moments of popularity through time. It is clear how central and significant storytelling remains within Irish culture by how commonly it features as a motif in works of London-Irish writing, including in the three works subsequently examined: Enda Walsh’s *The Walworth Farce* (2006), Jimmy Murphy’s *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2000) and Donall Mac Amhlaigh’s novel *Schnitzer O’Shea* (1985). These works, although each vastly different in their approach to representing the London-Irish community, all rely greatly on

storytelling traditions in their narratives as both a way to represent their community and its challenges, but also as a way to hide them.

Storytelling is perhaps most explicitly presented in Enda Walsh's highly metatheatrical play. *The Walworth Farce*, being a performance within a performance, is obsessed with storytelling and, indeed, the shaky reliability of the oral narrative. This sense of the unreliable is emphasised by the play's title. By naming it a "farce," Walsh encourages ideas of the nonsensical and improbable. The audience know before they are even seated that this is not realism and expect the complicated narration and ridiculous proceedings that follow. As the protagonists relive their last day in Ireland, the facts of the matter become increasingly fraught as the father, Dinny, alters reality over and over in order to absolve himself from the crime that led them to flee Cork City.

Dinny is the chief storyteller of the internal play. The importance of the oral tradition to Irish culture as a method of relaying stories and ancient lore, becomes corrupted by his usage. While myths and legends are not to be taken as truth, many oral narratives have moral codes at their centre or act as cautionary tales. Dinny, by using this mode to pass down an untruth and present a fictionalised version of history that selfishly covers his own wholly immoral deeds, contaminates and corrupts the intended purpose of storytelling. He does not wish to caution his sons but instead to blame them for his own sins. He assumes the directorial role, ensuring that each day's performance runs smoothly.

Dinny becomes fraught, however, when the retelling does not follow his vision, lamenting when Sean brings home the wrong shopping, "It's not working with the sausage. It's not right" but refusing to admit that actually very little of the story they are telling is "right" when Blake questions the truth of his narrative (29). At various points in the play the audiences see Dinny struggle to remember his own invented story. Towards the end of Act 1, he forgets a grand speech about his position as an Irish immigrant, ending it instead with

“Fuck. (*A pause.*) And then what happened, Blake? What then, tell me?” (31). Clearly, the longer the retelling goes on, the more difficult it becomes to follow. This particular lapse of memory for Dinny is significant. In his monologue, Walsh portrays the patriarchal figure alluding to a host of stereotypical feelings associated with those who have migrated to London, admitting, “I run the same race a million Irishmen.” He refers to the expectations of London as being a “Sure thing, a happy Ever After,” saying a “final farewell to the green” and commenting on the suffocation of the grey buildings upon his arrival in the city (30). These are lived experiences for Dinny, he is indeed an Irish migrant in London, and yet his faltering at the end emphasises that ultimately this is simply a story, ingenuine and performed.

Dinny’s reliance on his son Blake to take over, to inherit his tale of migration, speaks to the ways in which many second-generation immigrants inherit the tragedies and tales of those who came before them. In her essay on narrative dysfunction in *The Walworth Farce*, Hannah Greenstreet argues that “Dinny utilises storytelling as a means of propagating and confirming communal identity, but this narrative world is premised on the exclusion of the outside world and of dissenting views” (81). Bringing in Blake at this point shows this confirming of communal identity in action. The retelling of Dinny’s narrative can only succeed if he retains complete creative control, but he has to rely on Sean and Blake’s support. Dinny’s reliance on Sean to do the daily shopping, allowing him access to the outside world, proves to be Dinny’s downfall when we see the family’s descent into chaos and eventual collapse upon the entrance of Hayley, Sean’s dissenting disruption, to Dinny’s “narrative world.”

Jimmy Murphy’s *Kings of the Kilburn High Road* also plays with ideas of metatheatre and storytelling through the scrutiny placed on how many immigrants, including the characters of the play, return to Ireland with falsified stories of enormous success. In one of

the most quoted lines from the play, Jap Kavanagh states “‘Per-fuckin’-formance! That’s the word Git, performance... I plan it out, like I was goin’ into battle” (35). Jap occupies a similar role to Dinny in Murphy’s play, that of chief storyteller, constantly attempting to push forward with the created story rather than admit the realities of their lives. The audience witness his performance of triumph later in the play when the most successful member of the group, Joe Mullen, appears and Jap lies about his successes, telling him, “Sure would I be over here if I wasn’t? rakin’ it in boy, rakin’ it in... Oh yea, foreman on a big site at Marble Arch, me. Have Git workin’ with me too” (44). Here, even in London and among friends, he feels the need to compete to show himself as being worthy of Mullen, who has achieved successes the other men have not. As Jason King puts it, “their inability to achieve a modicum of success leaves them feeling emasculated and embittered in England. Their frustration is channelled into delusions of grandeur or more sullen feelings of acceptance and resignation” (29). The audience is well aware that Jap’s claims of his job at Marble Arch are a fabrication conjured up to avoid admitting that he has not been able to keep up with his friend. The delusions of grandeur King notes are almost entirely spearheaded by Kavanaugh and the tale grows into himself and Gitna setting up their construction firm together in Dublin until Shay steps in, swiftly bring them back to reality, issuing the harsh reminder, “Would yis ever stop all that shite talk about home an’ cop on to yourselves?... This is our home. Here.... We’ve been livin’ here longer than we did in Ireland” (47). Greenstreet’s assessment of Dinny’s narrative can be applied equally to Jap’s, and Shay, in reminding them of this, adopts a similar role to Walsh’s Hayley, disrupting the narrative, forcing the other characters to be confronted with the truth, and attempting to disrupt the greatest story the men tell themselves, that it is Ireland and not England that is their home.

Similar to *The Walworth Farce*, as the action of the play unfolds and the drink flows, the performance of happiness and success held by each of the men begins to fall apart and the

reality of the unhappiness of their lives is unveiled. The truth of Jackie's death is revealed against Jap's wishes and Maurteen succumbs to the pressure of drink, leaving with violent threats towards his English wife whom he sees as holding him ransom. This in itself is a story fabricated by the unhappy man to explain away his inability to return home. Jap, being caught crying by Gitna towards the play's end when all has fallen apart, tries in vain to retain something of the mask he had been wearing before, but gives in and laments, "Twenty-five years, twenty-five years an' what have I got to show for it, hah? I'd be a laughing stock" (65). Here the audience, seeing behind Jap's bravado, begins to understand how strong his fears of being marked a failure truly are – the thought of being a "laughing stock" at home keeps him in London as much as his economic situation does. To witness Jap break down and admit defeat, when it is he who has been consistently the most adamant about maintaining the positive spin on the story, feels like a moment of anagnorisis for the play. Yet quickly Gitna revives him, and they leave in a lightened mood, ready to live the day all over again, "Start again in the mornin' Jap, what? We'll start off from scratch an' have one more go" (66). There is a pervasive feeling that Gitna's words, although they should be hopeful, actually instil a hopeless sense of dramatic irony. No member of the audience can leave without feeling as though, even if they do start again in the morning, the characters will simply find themselves back in the same place once again.

Gitna and Jap's decision to simply start again mirrors Sean's in *The Walworth Farce*. Even when Dinny's narrative falls apart, the play ends with Sean taking up the mantle "as we watch him calmly lose himself in a new story" (85). Eadoin Ni Mhuirheartaigh's association of *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* with *Waiting for Godot* and the Sisyphus myth in her essay on the film adaptation of the play, "*Kings*," rings true (90). Neither Sean in Walsh's play nor Jap and Gitna in Murphy's play can break the cyclical nature of their lives; they must continue reliving the same stories over and over, stuck in the same stagnant narratives.

For Murphy's workers the answer to breaking the stagnation seems clear, if dark; the only way to truly break the narrative is to do as Jackie did, and return to Ireland in a coffin. In Walsh's work, the deaths of Dinny, Blake, and Hayley are left uncomfortably open; Sean returns to the play and the audience is left with the deeply disconcerting question of what will happen with the bodies next – will he simply use them as props and continue the story? Their cyclical story continues even in death.

Many of the immigrants moving to Britain in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were doing so as economic migrants, unskilled and unable to find work to support their families at home. Naturally, those with wealth and status had better access to education and the limited jobs that were available, and thus a sizeable portion of those leaving Ireland had little to no education or knowledge of a trade. The physical ability of first-generation immigrants to write London-Irish stories was hindered by this limited literacy. Catherine Dunne has used this to her advantage in the creation of her non-fiction work, *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London*. Rather than attempting to write a comprehensive historical account of the lives of Irish immigrants, or, indeed, writing a fictional account, she chose to interview several first-generation members of the mid-century London-Irish community and instead shares their own stories, as told by them. Consequently, Dunne continues the tradition of storytelling as an inherent part of Irish culture in the diaspora by way of negating the need for literacy to document stories. She takes on the role of the folklorist and ensures that the stories of the London-Irish community are enshrined.

This idea that Dunne employs in her biographical work – providing a voice to those who cannot document their experiences easily themselves – can also be found in London-Irish fiction. Donall Mac Amhlaigh, himself being a member of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century migrant group about whom Dunne centres her work, took great care to document and share his experiences of being an Irish worker in Britain. In his satirical novel, *Schnitzer O'Shea*, the



eponymous character is distinct from his peers for his literary interest and capabilities. Even his premier foil, Pacelli Ignatius O'Mahoney, although also a writer, favours journalistic pursuits and Marxist ideology rather than stories and poetry, and he regards O'Shea's literary pursuits with some disdain. The arrival of a great migrant population in London in the post-war period coincided with the election of the Labour party in Britain in 1945, and there was a significant rise in union membership by 1950 with charismatic politicians such as Clement Attlee and Aneurin Bevan implementing socialist reform such as the welfare state. The influence of Marxism on labour movements across Europe was notable and topical as globally, countries such as China and Russia began to develop as communist states. For O'Mahoney, Schnitzer O'Shea's association with the "literati" is a betrayal of his class. Upon encountering the uninspired poet in Dublin, he tells him, "Oh it's happened before... You're not the first poor slob of a worker to be ditched by the bourgeoisie and the trendies" (120). O'Mahoney's position on literature and art can be traced back to the historical context of the domination of published literature by the upper classes in Ireland. He sees O'Shea as a puppet of the elite and poetry as a waste of time as it removes him from his perceived role as "the worker." For O'Mahoney, literature that exists purely for pleasure and entertainment is of no use to his cause. There is a sense throughout the novel that, more than being simply a waste of time, as O'Mahoney would posit it, creativity simply is not something that can be afforded to the working immigrant population, so O'Shea must give it up to become a true Irish migrant writer.

O'Mahoney is but one of many of O'Shea's colleagues who see him as an outcast for his literary persuasions. His love of language and writing, and his particular opinions on the matter, are baffling to peers both in Ireland and in Britain. He repeatedly refuses to be boxed into a particular identity, and looks down, for example, upon Mac Amhlaigh's own satirical character, Awley MacDonall, whom he dismisses as a lesser writer for choosing the medium

of diaries for his writing. O'Shea insists upon existing as a worker with bourgeois notions and refuses to adapt or change for anybody, whether that be for O'Mahoney or those with greater status and power. Despite his resistance to other's opinions of him, there are expectations placed on O'Shea from all corners. A man O'Shea meets at the *Oireachtas* award celebrations tells him, "You must write a novel now... The Irish emigrant working-class experience has never been fully articulated, not even by Patrick MacGill. You must be the voice of the voiceless now!" (99). For the "literati," as O' Mahoney terms them, O'Shea is a representative of the immigrant community to which he belongs, and thus inherits a responsibility to share their stories, much in the way Catherine Dunne has done in reality. The man has not taken into consideration O'Shea's favouring of the medium of poetry or creative and philosophical endeavours, but instead takes him at face value. He is a writer who is Irish in Britain and therefore he must be "a voice for the voiceless" and make sure the working-class immigrants in Britain are heard. The man evidently does not view O'Shea's predecessor (and indeed Mac Amhlaigh's real life predecessor) Patrick MacGill to have done enough in this regard. Given the satirical nature of the text, there is a feeling of irony in his mild dismissal of MacGill, a highly successful and radical voice for the Irish in Britain. There is perhaps a hint that the *Oireachtas* man undermines his achievements because of the navy's willingness to be critical of the Ireland of his youth, as well as the Scotland of his adulthood, which has made him hostile to the nationalist Irishman. If this is so, there is humour to be found in his decision to name O'Shea the "Voice for the voiceless," speaking on behalf of the men he works with, when he has already refused to criticise Britain while being interviewed on television. O'Shea's endowment with the responsibility of being a voice for the "Irish emigrant working-class" is also highly ironic given the personal difficulty he finds fitting into his community. The reader is aware that, in reality, O'Shea would be a terrible person to choose as the voice of the London-Irish community, much in the same way

he is a terrible representative of Irish poetry in the story, because his own literary ambition and opinions set him at odds with the generally accepted views of both communities.

By being pressured to assume this role as the storyteller for a voiceless community, the character Schnitzer O'Shea in Mac Amhlaigh's work in 1985 suffers a similar expectation to that which is placed on the shoulders of Enda Walsh in the present moment. There is a sense that as someone who has migrated from Ireland to Britain he must represent that community and write immigrant narratives along expected lines. In a 2008 interview during a run of *The Walworth Farce*, shortly after Walsh had moved to London, the very first question asked is, "Did you feel that you wanted to write yourself into that tradition of the immigrant experience?" To which Walsh responds, insisting, "I think *The Walworth Farce* is very quickly not about that at all, you know, the immigrant experience, it's actually got nothing to do with that at all" (O'Callaghan np). There is still, in the twenty-first century, an assumption that as an immigrant writer he must want to "write yourself into that tradition" as Mac Amhlaigh has before. Although Walsh denies that the play is engaged with the immigrant experience, he is seen to engage simultaneously with both ideas of the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain and the perceived moral corruption of London as a city. While performing their farce, Dinny, Sean as Paddy, and Blake as Vera, discuss the city and its flaws and Dinny states, "You do often read stories that they do eat their young over there, Paddy and Vera. So criminal and violent they are that Londoners like nothing more than skinning an Irishman halfway through his drink" (16). This reference to the barbarity of the Londoner harkens back to notions of the "wild Irishman" that have been portrayed in British stereotypes of the Irish for centuries. As David Hayton states, "Early characterisation of the 'wild Irishman' as a barbarian and near-beast, a Caliban close to home, helped to legitimise Elizabethan rapacity" (5-31). Here, however, Walsh subverts the long-told story and instead it is the Londoners who become the barbaric child-eaters that pose a threat to the gentle

Irishman. This in turn recalls the consistent representation in Mac Amhlaigh's diaries, of the Irish nationalist notion that the modernity of the city represents something morally corrupt and degrading, compared to the purity and morality of a rural lifestyle, and that those who emigrate from Ireland to London are electing to join the "criminal and violent" world Dinny describes to "Paddy and Vera." The city does, therefore, seem the perfect place for the criminal and violent Dinny to then make his home. Since these allusions are well-pronounced, it is clear that Walsh is knowledgeable of these tropes, alongside other moments in the text such as Dinny's earlier monologue of his journey to London explicitly discussing his migration. Consequently, Walsh is engaging with the immigrant experience and the history between Ireland and Britain despite claiming that the play is in fact not engaged with it at all. This contradiction between Walsh's intentions and the reality of his work shows that it is near impossible to write a narrative regarding London-Irish characters without being influenced by the immigrant experience, although each writer may bring his or her unique vision to the common experience.

While his character is less willing to take up the mantle, Mac Amhlaigh's social realist work alongside *Schnitzer O'Shea* presents a thoughtful and well-represented view of the life of working men in Britain in the 1950s. Mac Amhlaigh, although based in Northampton, worked extensively in, and clearly had a great fondness for, London. Jean Philippe Hentz, in his essay on Gaelic London in Mac Amhlaigh's diary, *Dialann Deorai*, considers the role the city plays in the writer's life, stating, "What strikes Mac Amhlaigh most about London is the opportunity that it gives to meet fellow Irish people, many of them from the same areas in Ireland, and to have the possibility to live among his own people in a kind of transposition of his native home town of Renmore, near Galway" (9). It is clear that Mac Amhlaigh was able to find a community among the Irish immigrants in the city, particularly feeling at home in the Irish speaking population. Yet despite this forged

community and comfort that he finds in London, Mac Amhlaigh, like many immigrants in the city, evidently still views himself in the role of the exile and struggles to see the UK as his true home. This is immediately obvious from the choice of title of his two best regarded literary works, his diary, titled *Dialann Deorai* (Diary of an Exile), and his later novel *Deoraithe* (Exiles). This repeated decision to position both himself and his characters as people in exile speaks volumes to the way not only Mac Amhlaigh but also many in the immigrant community of the period felt about their journey and consequent lives as Irish people living in Britain.

While his relationship to his migrant identity in London is as complicated as that seen in much of the examined immigrant literature, Mac Amhlaigh, who left as part of this mid-century migrant group, was still willing to tell the stories of these voiceless and forgotten “exiles.” He tried both in his journalistic and creative pursuits to give the “voice to the voiceless” to which O’Shea is so unwilling to commit. This is one aspect of immigrant writing that has indeed shifted to some degree in the time since. The expectation to engage with his migrant identity is still placed upon Enda Walsh as a contemporary writer to an extent. However, now in a more globalized world where the colonial influences on migration from Ireland to Britain are much less pronounced and fraught as they were in Mac Amhlaigh’s time, he is provided with a greater space to separate himself and his work from his immigrant identity. Although he does continue to engage with and present immigrant stories in his work, he can also choose not to, and is free to claim so in an interview without seeing it negatively impact his career in the way it does to O’Shea in Mac Amhlaigh’s story. O’Shea, refusing to comply with the prescribed views of how he should choose to write eventually finds himself in London, imprisoned and destitute, having lost the support of the “literati” much as O’Mahoney predicted he would. Walsh can continue with success and is

celebrated as an Irish writer in London without the same need to prove himself, whereas O'Shea's refusal to fit the mold leads to his ostracism from the literary community in Ireland.

Many works of London-Irish literature engage with storytelling as part of an important tradition within Irish culture, although it frequently becomes corrupted or part of something bigger than itself when placed in an immigrant context. The role of the storyteller is key to both the characters within the texts and to their authors, particularly for writers such as Mac Amhlaigh and Walsh who are themselves Irish migrants in Britain. They are bequeathed with the role of storyteller simply due to their status as London-Irish writers. Although both do choose to engage with immigrant experiences to some extent, perhaps the pressure to tell the stories of the forgotten and voiceless working-class community in Britain was greater for Donall Mac Amhlaigh than the pressure to represent the London-Irish community is in the more globalized and connected present for Enda Walsh. This may distinguish the London-Irish writers of the mid-century from contemporary writers. Walsh's work, however, remains attached to tropes and narratives associated with the experiences of migrants in the post-war period and presents an immigrant experience that is much different to his own. Where Dinny and the characters in *The Walworth Farce* and Jap and his friends in *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* use storytelling to hide the reality of their lives in London, escaping criminal misdeeds left behind them and disguising failure behind narratives of success respectively, Mac Amhlaigh's Schnitzer O'Shea is consistently encouraged to use his position as a teller of stories to represent and share the reality of his life and those of his fellow workers. This reflects the real-life pressures placed on London-Irish writers such as Dunne, Mac Amhlaigh and indeed, Enda Walsh. Although used differently by the various characters and writers present amongst these three works of London-Irish literature, storytelling is common to their works, highlighting how key it is to Irish culture and tradition

and its importance as a mode through which to experience and express the difficulties of life as an Irish person in London.

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