

# The Kilkenny Theatre

## 1802-1819

By HUBERT BUTLER

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IN the middle of the 18th century there was a vogue for country-house theatricals in Ireland. Henry Flood, the statesman, was the first to introduce them to the County Kilkenny. His house, Farmley, was the rural retreat, "his Tusculum" he called it, to which he withdrew when the strain of office was too great. His theatricals were simply to entertain his guests. No gentleman would, in those days, have appeared on the stage for any other purpose. Flood was an 18th century humanist, who accepted uncritically his position as a hereditary leader of the Irish people; in his own way he considered himself the defender of their interests of their culture. When he died in 1791, it was found that he had left over £5,000 for the study of Celtic languages and the purchase of Irish MSS. He must be considered not only a patron of the arts but also of Irish archaeology and scholarship. He was buried at Burnchurch, near Callan.

A generation after him a more famous theatrical company was formed at a neighbouring house, Kilfane. The intervening years had been momentous ones. The Union had followed the '98 Rebellion and it was no longer easy for an Irish landowner to be a leader of the Irish nation. A gulf had formed which the well-disposed could only bridge by philanthropy and good will. The humanitarian had taken the place of the humanist and the Irish gentleman, in his diversions as in his duties, had to play a different and more difficult role. The Kilkenny Players acted on the public stage and for charity.

They were oddly successful. For about twenty years after the Union, there was unexpectedly a revival of provincial life and culture. With the decay of Dublin and the abandonment of the great town houses, the country house became, for a time, not a rural retreat, but the Irish headquarters of the family. The Napoleonic war was being waged, but it was a war of professionals chiefly and the remote country squire was not deeply involved. They were more isolated than previously from England and the Continent and they flung themselves with an unprecedented zeal into the life of their country.

Captain Power of Kilfane had served in the local yeomanry in '98; his brother was a rich and cultivated bachelor, who lived in Kildare Street and paid constant visits to Kilfane. They were an extremely sociable pair and it is difficult to say whether it was John Power, who first started the Kilkenny Hounds, or Richard Power, who started the Kilkenny Theatricals. Both were the results of an united endeavour. John acted inconspicuously in the plays, and Richard rode without distinction to the hounds. For twenty years this collaboration, not in those days as odd as now, continued. There was nothing to show that John Power's venture would outlast his brother's by more than a century.

The Kilkenny Club was later to be associated principally with the hounds, but, in fact, it was started by the Kilkenny players, to whom membership was restricted, and I expect it arose from their need to have somewhere to go and discuss their plans. Rehearsals were, at the beginning, in Kilfane.

The first season opened in 1802 and lasted four days only. Every alternate evening there was a ball at the Tholsel and every day there was a meet of John Power's hounds, which were kept in Kilkenny for the week. They started with two plays by a forgotten dramatist, Otway, but next year they were doing Shakespeare and Sheridan, and after that an average season had fifteen or sixteen different plays, including three of Shakespeare's and lasted two or three weeks. Congreve and Goldsmith were also acted. Every season had a prologue and epilogue composed and spoken by one of the players. They were not, at first, very sure of their talents, and so they emphasised in a rather lordly way that they were amateurs and acting for charity.

If you be pleased, we shall not be forgotten,  
If not it's Otway's fault, who's dead and rotten.

No vulgar motives stimulate our muse,  
But such as feeling hearts can ne'er refuse,  
To smoothe the bed of care, to wipe the tear  
From silent suffering, mercy brings us here

Who were the Kilkenny players? Robert Langrishe, speaking the first prologue, gives the answer.

Who are we? That's all stuff!  
You know us every one and that's enough

Even to-day the names are not unfamiliar. Apart from the Powers, there were near neighbours, Cramptons and Bushes.

kinsmen of Charles Bushe of Kilmurry, the Incorruptible, who made the famous speech against the Union, and who was frequently in the audience. There was Robert Langrishe, the son of Sir Hercules, the author of a witty satire on Lord Townsend's administration and an eloquent supporter of Catholic Emancipation in the Irish House of Commons. There was William Tighe of Woodstock, author of a still valuable survey of the County Kilkenny, and son of Mary Tighe, the poetess. There were other well-known names, Rothe, Becher, Croker, Corry.

Many of these families had been represented in the Irish Parliament, some as supporters of the Union, others like the Bushes were passionate opponents. None of them could ignore the blow that the Union had dealt to the prestige and culture of their class in Ireland, and in each succeeding season the note of regret can be heard more audibly. The Union had made them provincials and shifted the focus of every social activity to London. There was a slow drain upon enthusiasm and talent, which was bound ultimately to dissolve their class, as soon it was to dissolve their company of players.

The prologues and epilogues are written in verse that is smooth and lively, even when it is doggerel, and often it is witty and caustic. At their worst they were written by educated men, it is clear, to please a critical audience.

In their first season the players roused the fury of an Evangelical body calling themselves "The New Light," and the war was carried on for several years between the pulpit and the stage. The swaddlers, as they were also called, seem to have been Methodists who studied the Irish language for the purpose of proselytism. An imaginary Dr. Cantwell is satired by Langrishe:

When alms are given, let me dispense the boon!  
Heaven smiles upon my works and mine alone.  
As if the chanting hypocrite would say  
There's but one gate to heaven and I've the key.  
But we with mirth put by the weak attack,  
Retort in rhyme and laugh their follies back.  
'Tis yours, grave sirs, to preach, 'tis ours to play.  
'Tis yours' (he indicates the audience,) to succour  
wretchedness . . . and pay.  
And heedless what a meddling priest may say.  
Make charity the order of the day.

In two years the Kilkenny players had started a fashion that was to last for nearly twenty. The Viceregal party and suite arrived, the lodging houses filled to overflowing. In the words of

a Kilkenny paper, "In every row of the Box Circle appeared lovely women of the first rank and family, in all the brilliance of full dress, the pride and ornament of our country, and our country at large." It was said that mothers with marriageable daughters found Kilkenny next best after Bath for finding suitors. The players were not shy of blowing their own trumpets.

The capital, once elegant and gay,  
 Now own our revels of superior sway.  
 Each vapid man of fashion in her streets,  
 Thus coldly greets the brother fop he meets.  
 What? Still in town? They tell me nowadays  
 That we must go to those Kilkenny plays.  
 The Colonel's gone. To-morrow I leave town.  
 Come and I'll draw you in the dog-cart down.  
 There will be room enough for you, you'll find,  
 For I shall leave the pointers all behind.

The Apostles of the New Light were eventually routed—

Abandoned both by dupe and proselyte,  
 They vanished like the gloomy clouds of night,  
 Dispersed by sovereign sense and Ancient Light.

but the players were obviously sensitive to the charge that they were merely fashionable dilettanti—

Invidious rumour whispers it about  
 That this our consecrated dome must shut,  
 That charity is but a stale pretence  
 To veil our vanities and scanty sense,

and in several prologues by Langrishe and Bushe, the high ideals of the company were proclaimed. They spoke in the accents of their time, a generation that had been terrified by the French Revolution. But they were a curiously liberal body of men, very much more liberal probably than the fashionable audience to which they were obliged to defer. The constant theme of Bushe and Langrishe was that, since the Union, everyone of ambition was going across the sea to make his fortune and to amuse himself. Everyone was despising Ireland, yet their place was here in their own island, and their plays showed that they could produce at home the talent to divert themselves and to support the less fortunate. They need not be dependent on what comes from abroad.

How grateful in this half-forsaken isle.  
 To call forth talents and bid Genius smile.



Tho' half our sons desert their native shore,  
Such cumbrous cargoes let us ne'er deplore,  
For in this trade you prove it who remain,  
'Tis bodies we export and souls retain.

Here is how Bushe chastised some of those who went abroad  
to better themselves :

The worthy Esquire sells his old estate,  
Possessed with proud ambition to be great.  
And what's his view of greatness? to be sent  
An independent man to Parliament.  
And, truly independent, forth he goes,  
Of all the comforts his old home bestows.  
See him in London to a Chop-House sneak,  
To famish on a solitary steak,  
Yet on each meal more substance wasting,  
Than here would furnish hospitable feasting.  
Or see him round St. James purlieus straying,  
With wondering eyes that wealthy world surveying.  
And half his income for a garret paying.  
Or at St. Stephen's on a top bench waiting  
In fretful doze while statesmen are debating.  
Unknown, unnoticed save by some pert peer  
Who thus accosts his neighbour with a sneer,  
"Who's that, my Lord? His face I don't remember.  
How could you? 'Tis a Scotch or Irish member.  
They come and go in droves but we don't know 'em.  
They should have keepers like wild beasts to show 'em.  
But wait a moment till he gives his vote,  
And then you'll know his nation by his note."

And the following year there was a cut at the snobs who found  
Ireland unfashionable.

But some I miss who say that little worth  
Attend these sports, for they're of Irish birth.  
Can Mrs. Coolan in these ranks be found,  
Once known by Coghlan's more Hibernian sound?  
For twice ten years in Clonakilty known,  
She spent last season full six weeks in town.  
Returned to Admiring friends I heard her say,  
Readin' the peepers while she teests her tay.  
"Kilkinny plays, O what a name I hear !  
How harsh, how barbared a travelled ear.  
Things low like these with me are ne'er in vogue,  
Who can't unfortunatedly endue the brogue !  
And then with conscious simper wonders tells,  
O' th' Lord Mayor's Ball, Vauxhall and Sadler's Wells."

Their motives were understood. Here, for example, is an appreciation from a contemporary paper, "The Kilkenny Chronicle."

In the present degraded state of this poor province of Ireland, what can be more patriotic than to establish a point of attraction, where the influence of wealth and rank may unite in the encouragement of humble industry and the people can be occasionally reminded that all the gentry have not taken flight from the country along with her independence and prosperity. Gentlemen of the first rank and attainments are here associated by one common sympathy in the cause of elegant literature, distaining the allurements of which folly satisfies the fools of fortune and miraculously preferring books, thinking and conversation to dice, dogs and jockeys. Such men may well exult in the appropriate motto they have chosen for their stage, "While we smile we soothe affliction," and every good Irishman must pray that they may long continue their meritorious exertions.

Yet it was uphill work. It depended almost entirely on the enthusiasm of Richard Power of Kilfane, who had held his company together for so many years. After ten seasons, whether the strain was too great or they wished to test their popularity, they decided to close the theatre. Langrishe made the last farewell. It took the form of a eulogy of Kilkenny, which had always been a nursery of talent and enthusiasm.

What fortune's revolutionary sport  
 In time may bring to this her loved resort  
 We can't foresee but if a Poet's fire  
 May somewhat to prophetic glance aspire  
 This town may still remain our island's boast,  
 Nor mourn one glory set, one laurel lost.  
 This is no augury you may mistrust,  
 Though second sight, 'tis founded on a first;  
 This soil for genius has creative power  
 And dreads not a degenerating hour;  
 Here Berkeley, Congreve, Swift in days of yore,  
 Lisp'd the first accents of their classic lore  
 Here Bushe, here Flood were born, here Grattan planned  
 In early youth the welfare of the land.  
 One, though my sire let me record beside  
 With equal praise and fame, with greater pride,  
 These you can boast the splendour of the age!  
 These we can boast our brothers of the stage.

Nor shall you want as circling time rolls on  
Minds meet to fill our abdicated throne.  
But time must toil our vanity foresees  
Ere any group be found more formed to please  
More pure in motive with intent more kind  
In wit more chaste, in friendship more combined  
More prompt to feel and to inspire delight  
Than that sad group that takes its leave to-night.

There was a year's pause and then so great was the demand that they opened again for a couple of years. Then again they closed. Waterloo was fought. Europe was free again to the traveller. Richard Power went off to Italy and was gravely ill in Rome.

The news of his recovery was celebrated by a banquet in Dublin with all Power's friends and the great Lord Charlemont in the chair. There were small pictures of Richard Power up and down the table and the newspapers described unctuously the jellies and blancmanges, which were stamped with the emblems of the Powers and the Kilkenny Theatre.

By 1817 he was home again and the theatre was opened for the third and last time. It had been enlarged and done up by public subscription. These last two years were almost the most festive. The crowds were unprecedented. In these years and those immediately preceding many famous visitors arrived. Maria Edgeworth and her father were there and so was Henry Grattan. William Lamb, the future Lord Melbourne. Queen Victoria's first Prime Minister, came with his wife, Lady Caroline, in a last attempt to cure her, by a trip to Ireland, of her infatuation for Lord Byron. Then, of course. Tom Moore came and acted several times. He composed a prologue. recited his verses and found himself a wife among the players. Perhaps their chief triumph was that the great Miss O'Neill, the leading actress on the English stage, consented to come and play for them without remuneration. A few years later she married one of the players, Mr. Becher.

Every evening the band played in the parade and the visitors promenaded up and down the quiet lime-shaded avenue, which then, as now, was something unique in Irish towns. There was a succession of balls in the Tholsel and Kilkenny Castle and in the theatre itself. To give an idea of the lavish scale on which these festivities were conducted, when Mr. Becher gave a ball at the Club House, a breach was made in the wall that divided it from the adjoining house so that for one night all his guests could be accommodated.

Perhaps it is time to ask: "Did they act well?" The "Kilkenny Chronicle" says they did, and, naturally, we don't

believe it. All the same the dramatic criticism that is recorded is exceptionally thorough and painstaking and is given much more space than modern criticism receives. Sometimes the plays were condemned, sometimes the players were gently reproved. Not often, we admit, but it is clear that the drama was in those days taken seriously and the plays followed with attention.

Less cordial criticism comes from Charles Bushe, the father of one of the players. He confessed that he admired the prompter most. "Because," he said, "I declare to you I heard the most and saw the least of him." But Bushe was the father of one of the players and was likely to be disrespectful. There is reason for supposing that four at least of the players were of outstanding capacity and would have made their mark upon the public stage.

The charitable purposes of the players were certainly abundantly fulfilled. In a single season more than a thousand pounds was handed over to Kilkenny charities.

In 1819 the plays at last came to an end. A prophetic spirit might have seen that it was not only the plays but a brilliant phase of social life which was on the road to extinction.

What was to blame? Bushe would have blamed the Union, Langrishe the fashionable snobbery, which made men look for their pleasures abroad. Perhaps the steam boat and swift communications had something to do with it.

Shorn of their canvas wings now vessels sail  
through pathless seas nor longer woo the gale.

Probably many causes combined to bring the plays to an end. The immediate pretext is given in the prologue spoken by Power and composed by Bushe:

Know then my actors are grown restless all,  
Nor longer hearken to my sovereign call,  
Some to strange lands a wandering spirit drives,  
Some take to business, some have taken wives.  
My Thanes fly from me and too soon Macbeth  
Must stand alone upon the blasted heath.  
But late my plaguey rogues, as if combined,  
They had together a round robin signed  
Wrote word "This season their engagement ends,"  
Shall I expose them? Tho' they are my friends,  
By Jove I will—

(takes a packet of letters from his pocket).—

Let's see! . . . Aye, here in truth  
Comes a sweet sentimental line from Rothe,  
Dear Power. You know my heart . . . aye, still the pathos.  
But this Excise Board . . . Heavens! What bathos!  
And thus he quits . . . Oh, unambitious fool! . . .  
The tragic sceptre for the dipping-rule.



What next? A note in folio signed J. Corry,  
Who says, "Indeed he is extremely sorry  
But that the linen trade now comes so full in."  
Pshaw! Hang his linen, haven't we got the Woollen?  
If to my orders thus he prove refractory  
Let him improve his system at the factory.  
There sports and toil the alternate hours beguile  
And man, poor labouring man, is taught to smile.

He adds excuses from Crampton, Becher and others. The woollen factory to which he is referring is the Merino factory at Annamult, whose impressive ruins still stand upon the King's river. During the play season the proprietors invited a party of distinguished visitors to see it and gave them a handsome dinner. This very idealistic enterprise, for which Merino sheep were imported from Spain and bred in Kilkenny, and by which it was hoped to raise the condition of the working man, was then starting on its short career, soon to be ended by the fall in prices after the peace.

Richard Power died in 1824 and was buried at daybreak on a winter morning in Kilfane Church. I do not know what happened to the theatre immediately afterwards, but in 1838 the biographer of Henry Flood wrote of it, "The Theatre is now a mart of miscellaneous furniture without a vestige to remind the observer of the famed amateurs of sock and buskin." To-day, of course, it is the Inland Revenue Office and some of the original fabric is still preserved. A plan of the theatre was recently sold at an auction in Kilkenny and every now and then some reminder of that vanished time comes to light: a programme, a prompt copy of the plays, or, more recently, a portrait of the fair O'Neill, then Lady Becher. In the list of acquisitions by the old Kilkenny Museum other relics of the Kilkenny Theatre are mentioned, but when the museum was moved to Dublin all track of them was lost.

Kilfane House still stands, untouched by time. The peacocks strut upon the lawns and screech in the lime walk and among the ruins of Sir John Power's kennels, while, across the fields, Kilmurry, the home of the Bushes, is enjoying a new lease of life under different owners. The generations, which succeeded Richard Power, made little impression on the beautiful library, which he built at Kilfane and where the rehearsals were held. His portrait as Hamlet hangs in the dining room and beside him his bluff brother, John, as Master of the Kilkenny Hounds. Opposite is Charles Kendal Bushe of Kilmurry in the robes of an Attorney General. They appear to have little relation to the Ireland of to-day and yet in their own way they loved it and worked for it. They do not deserve to be forgotten.