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**Gallous Stories or Dirty Deeds?**  
**Representing Parricide in *The Playboy of the Western World***

**Piers Beirne and Ian O'Donnell**

*Largely ignored in sociology and criminology, *The Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge is the most famous and the most controversial play in the history of Irish theatre. This article examines the meaning of the apparent parricide at the centre of Synge's play. Though Synge's authorial intentions in respect of the play's parricide are not open to complete reclamation, we examine, first, his self-stated reliance on the violent actions of William Maley and James Lynchehaun and second, with the aid of police records and newspaper reportage, we delve into the situation of intergenerational homicide when *Playboy* was being imagined and first performed. The culture wars and associated media frenzy around the play provide an instructive backcloth against which to interpret the meanings of violence in a colonial society on a path to national self-determination.*

**Introduction: Murder and Mayhem in *The Playboy of the Western World***

I'll say a strange man is a marvel with his mighty  
talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard and  
the blow of a loy have taught me that there's a  
great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed.

*The Playboy of the Western World* (Act 3, lines 570-573)

*Gallows*, 1. n., alt. *gallows*; 2. adj., deserving to be hanged;  
3. daring, wicked, mischievous; 4. type of humour.

Its narrative never quite finished to the satisfaction of its author, the playwright John Millington Synge (1871-1909), *The Playboy of the Western World* (Synge, 1907a; henceforth, “*Playboy*”) was first performed in public by the Irish National Theatre Society on 26 January 1907. The performance, at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, was jointly directed by Synge himself and by his friends the poet WB Yeats and the English playwright and theatre patron Lady Augusta Gregory. *Playboy* was in the vanguard of the Irish literary renaissance at the beginning of the twentieth century. Probably the most famous play in Irish history, it is surely the most controversial.

*Playboy* is a story in three Acts. It is set in a shebeen (a small pub), in remote County Mayo on Ireland’s western coast. At the beginning of *Act One* the shebeen’s dramatis personae include Michael James Flaherty (the publican), his daughter Margaret Flaherty (known as Pegeen Mike), her second cousin Shawn Keogh, the Widow Quin and several small farmers. Simmering away in the background, though offstage for the entire play, are the authoritarian threats posed respectively by the parish priest Father Reilly, by the police (the ‘peelers’) and by other elements of English rule in Ireland.

*Act One* begins on a dark autumn night when a young, landless peasant, Christy Mahon, stumbles frightened, tired and dirty into the shebeen. There is considerable speculation among the assembled customers that this young man might be on the run from the law. All are stunned when Christy claims, at first with reticence but soon thereafter with increasing boldness, that eleven days earlier he killed his father. Among the reactions to Christy’s Oedipal claim are ‘There’s a daring fellow’, ‘Oh, glory be to God!’ and ‘[with great respect] that was a hanging crime, mister honey. You should have had a good reason for doing the like of that’ (1:262-265). Additionally, Pegeen asks ‘Did you shoot him dead?’ ‘Did you do it with a hilted knife, perhaps?’ inquires Michael. Christy, adamant that he is a law-fearing man, blurts out by way of an explanation:

I just riz the loy [a long shovel] and let fall

the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he  
 went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never  
 let a grunt or groan from him at all. (1:279-281)

*Figure 1*

*Representing Parricide*

Source: Abbey Theatre Programme, March 1988.

Christy implies that he committed this deed because his father had treated him very roughly. He rues, moreover, that his father was ‘a dirty man, God forgive him, and he getting old and crusty, the way I couldn’t put up with him at all’ (1:266-268). Not long after, Christy embellishes his motive by stating that just before the murder, while they were digging potatoes together, his father was demanding that Christy marry the Widow Casey (so that the father would ‘have her hut to live in and her gold to drink’ (2:126-127)). But Christy bluntly refused his father’s request, complaining that Widow Casey was much older than he and, moreover, that she was mean and unattractive and that, anyway, for six weeks had been his wet nurse. Then, said Christy, somewhat redescribing the murder:

‘She’s too good for the like of you,’ says he, ‘and go  
 on now or I’ll flatten you out like a crawling beast  
 has passed under a dray.’ ‘You will not if I can help  
 it,’ says I. ‘Go on,’ says he, ‘or I’ll have the  
 divil making garters of your limbs tonight.’ ‘You will  
 not if I can help it,’ says I ... ‘God have mercy on your  
 soul,’ says he, lifting a scythe; ‘or on your own,’  
 says I, raising the loy ...

He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a  
 lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back  
 to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his

skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet. (2:137-154)

After his announcement of the murderous deed, Christy at once commands the fear and the grudging admiration of the local men for his bravery and also the amorous attentions of young and middle-aged women alike. Pegeen, who is informally betrothed to the fawning Shawn Keogh, quickly falls in love with Christy, eagerly offering him a job as a pot boy and a bed for the night with board. After some tussling and squabbling for Christy's affection between Pegeen and the widow Quin, *Act One* ends with:

CHRISTY ([*who*] *settles his bed slowly, feeling the quilt with immense satisfaction*) remarking "it's great luck and company I've won me in the end of time – two fine women fighting for the likes of me - till I'm thinking this night wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by". (1:593-597)

*Act Two* gets underway with the appearance of three village girls who enter the shebeen in search of the celebrated man who had killed his father. Anxious that Christy might already have gone, one of the girls, Susan Brady, worries to another 'you'd have a right so to follow after him, Sara Tansey, and you the one yoked the ass cart and drove ten miles to set your eyes on the man bit the yellow lady's nostril on the northern shore' (2:44-47). On seeing Christy, the girls, Magi-like, present him with ducks' eggs, cake and a chicken and then make him breakfast. Christy and the Widow Quin, who buried her children and killed her husband, are referred to by Sara as 'heroes' (2:163).

The love-match between Christy and Pegeen developing rapidly, she confides to him that 'you a fine lad with the great savagery to destroy your da' (2:277). However, later in the same day – after the local sports competitions (at which Christy won prizes in the horse race and at

jumping) and after Pegeen agrees to marry Christy – a man with bloodied head bandages bursts through the door of the shebeen.

*Figure 2*

*Pegeen, forlorn*

Source: *Playboy* album cover, Dublin, 1962, Gael Linn.

Like an old-fashioned patriarch full of fire and brimstone, he announces that he is Old Mahon and that eleven days ago his lazy son Christy ('a dirty stuttering lout', 2:434) tried to kill him with a shovel. The son had then set off on foot from Kerry, where the blow was struck, and traipsed across several counties and over many miles to arrive in Mayo, with his battered father, unbeknownst to him, in dogged pursuit. Protective of Christy, the Widow Quin informed Old Mahon that his son had already left for the coast to catch a steamer and escape capture. Off goes Old Mahon and, for a few hours at least, Christy is spared his father's wrath.

But Old Mahon suddenly reappears: [*Hubbub outside. Old Mahon rushes in, followed by all the crowd and Widow Quin. He makes a rush at Christy, knocks him down and begins to beat him*]. The fickle crowd now turns against Christy, believing that with his gallous story he had lied and fooled them into thinking that he had committed the brave act of killing his father. Christy then delivers his father a savage blow on the head with a shovel. In the ensuing quiet it seems that, this time, Christy has finally done the deed; now, doubtless, a double murder for him to be telling the girls. However, with plot and counterplot changing at a dizzying rate, circumstances once again take an unexpected turn. Instead of adulating his murderous act, and wishing not to be seen as accomplices to murder, members of the crowd, including his new love, Pegeen, try to truss Christy up with a rope in order to deliver him to the police to answer for his dirty deed.

In the final scene, the still un-murdered Old Mahon reappears in order to rescue his son from the mob. Christy and Old Mahon manage to exit together, the arm of one firmly around the other. Off they go into the sunset, the son now the master in charge of future fights, and the father

willingly subservient. All the villagers are now left to the solace and to the peace and quiet of their solitary porter, while a distraught Pegeen wails:

*[Putting her shawl over her head and breaking out into wild lamentations]*. “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only playboy of the western world” (3:652—654)

### **A Riotous Response**

*Playboy*’s run in Dublin was short-lived. Following noisy protests by the audience and, subsequently, the deployment of the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) in the Abbey’s auditorium, less than a week after opening night future performances of *Playboy* were abruptly cancelled. Similar disturbances four years later, first in Philadelphia, then in New York City, accompanied the Abbey Theatre’s inaugural touring production of *Playboy* in the United States. In Philadelphia most of the cast were arrested under the MacNichol law, aimed at preventing ‘lascivious, sacrilegious, obscene or indecent plays’ (Bourgeois, 1913: 194; and see Dallett, 1996; Trotter, 1998).

At the time, by the media, by Irish nationalists and by Unionists, then afterwards chiefly by literary scholars, numerous explanations have been given for why the first production of *Playboy* was greeted with such hostility in Dublin. Foremost among these is that to Irish nationalists *Playboy* was a great insult in that Synge’s characters, his depiction of their way of life and their language seemed so primitive, fickle and backward. *The Freeman’s Journal* (28 January 1907: 10), for example, objected that:

*[Playboy* is an] unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood. The blood boils with indignation as one recalls the incidents, expressions, ideas of this squalid, offensive production, incongruously styled a comedy in three acts. ... No adequate idea can be given of the barbarous jargon, the elaborate and incessant cursings of these repulsive creatures.

Intergenerational conflict and parricide did not comprise the desired presentation of some pure, Irish way of life which progressive and independent-minded nationalists wished to see projected in, of all places, what had become Ireland's new national theatre, with its founding manifesto setting out a determination to show Ireland as 'the home of an ancient idealism'. Moreover, to that great majority of nationalists who were also Catholics, it was unforgivable that Synge, a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, dared to vaunt his anti-familism, his anti-clericalism and, in particular, his anti-papism on the national stage. To the protesters, moreover, the image of Irish womanhood conjured up by Synge in *Playboy* – symbolised by the loose morals and the flagrant flaunting of the females, both adult and juvenile, all of whom fussed and fawned over the young stranger Christy Mahon, and he portrayed somewhat as a Christ-like figure – was an untruthful affront to the natural modesty and chaste manners of the gentler sex. (Bretherton (1991: 323) writes of Christy's characterization: 'there can be little doubt that he is meant to represent and remind us of some aspects of Christ, that his entry into a community, apotheoses, and rejection by that community followed by his own leave taking, an ascendancy of sorts, echoes the progress of Christ on earth.') Perhaps, too, for most patriarchal tastes *Playboy's* female leads were portrayed as too strong in character, too independent of men and not committed enough to familism. For its critics, the blatant reference to female undergarments in the use of the term 'shift' encapsulated all that was wrong with the play. (We return in the final sections of this paper to the relationship between Synge's dialogue, cultural sensibilities and the background circumstances of lethal violence.)

Such contemporary interpretations of *Playboy* no doubt stemmed largely from the tendency of Irish nationalism to situate every nook and cranny of all social practices and institutions, including the scripts and stages of playwrights, as sites of warfare for Irish independence, for national identity and against English imperialism. This all-consuming tendency might have had its political advantages, of course, though it tended to belie the difficulty that, like all the best stories, *Playboy* was and is open to multiple and competing interpretations. Over the years productions sometimes emphasized its imagination and its poetic language, at others the numerous comic moments, and at yet others they brought out the violence

in the story, especially the fight between Old Mahon and Christy in Act Three. (For an outline of the various productions of *Playboy* on screen and stage see Frazier, 2004).

Synge's characters in *Playboy* are neither the drunken Irish sloths so lampooned on the English stage nor the embodiment of Irish pre-conquest virtues. They are characters, instead, who include assertive and independent women, flirting girls, heavy drinkers, a murderous widow and a wimpish, priest-terrified coward. Catholicism is repeatedly mocked and vilified, as are other authoritarian tendencies such as patriarchy and English colonialism. During the tumult about the play, in an interview with A.F. (1907) in *The Mail*, Synge was asked:

[T]he main idea of your play is not a pretty one. You take the worst form of murderer, a parricide, and set him up on a pedestal to be worshipped by the simple, honest people of the West. Is this probable?

To which he responded, 'No, it is not; and it does not matter. Was Don Quixote probable? And still it is art'. Synge was then asked by A.F., 'What was it that at all suggested the main idea of the play?' To this he replied:

'Tis a thing that really happened. I knew a young fellow in the Arran Islands who had killed his father, and the people befriended him and sent him off to America.

The exchange continued:

But did the girls make love to him because he had killed his father, and for that only, the sorry-looking, bedraggled, and altogether repelling figure though he was personally?

No, those girls did not, but mine do ... It is to bring out the humour of the situation. It is a comedy, an extravaganza, made to amuse ... I don't care a rap how the people take it. I never bother whether my plots are typical Irish or not, but my methods are typical.

Two days later, in a letter published in *The Irish Times*, Synge (1907b), complained that his views ‘had been rather misunderstood in an interview which appeared in one of the evening papers’ and, moreover:

“The Playboy of the Western World” is not a play with “a purpose” in the modern sense of the word, but although parts of it are, or are meant to be, extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it, and a great deal more that is behind it, is perfectly serious, when looked at in a certain light ... There are, it may be hinted, several sides to “The Playboy.”

A few months after the Abbey riots, in a letter about various interpretations of *Playboy*, including whether its events and characters were possible or not, Synge (1907c) harrumphed that:

It isn’t quite accurate to say, I think, that the thing is a generalization from a single case. *If* the idea had occurred to me I could and would just as readily [have] written the thing, as it stands, without the Lynchehaun case or the Aran case. The story – in its ESSENCE – is probable, given the psychic state of the locality. I used the cases afterwards to controvert critics who said it was *impossible*. Amen.

### **In Search of the Original *Playboy***

The notion of ‘playboy’ at work in *Playboy* has a distinctively Janus-faced character to it. On the one hand, it represents heroic qualities that are firmly embedded in the past. Thus, as Christy’s autobiography is dragged out from him, he takes on a new lease of life, gains more confidence and begins to speak in rhythms not altogether unlike the warrior-poet heroes of ancient Gaelic myth. Indeed, Christy’s language and tenor variously reflect rival Irish poetic traditions. For example, when voicing his love for Pegeen, especially in tender passages, he embodies the rejected lover ubiquitous in Irish poetry; and his vicious speeches against his father reflect Gaelic cursing rituals (Kiberd, 1979:20-21).

It should be noted that the central action in *Playboy* – Christy’s violent blow to his father’s head – in part displays Synge’s deployment of the elemental myths associated with the

ancient Gaelic beheading game in ‘The Championship of Ulster’ (Bessai, 1968). Foremost amongst these myths are the feats of the heroic Cúchullain, a champion game player who was especially skilled at hurling. Christy’s actions, therefore, hint at continuity with legends past. At the same time, Christy’s self-proclaimed brutal slaying of his father suggests a violent rupture with the past. Old Mahon is an ‘Old Testament God’ (Bretherton, 1991: 332; and see Doggett, 1997), all fire and brimstone and recrimination, a spoiled child grown into a savage patriarch. Christy, the youth, dares to slay this dragon, not once but twice, and in so doing liberates himself from the yoke of childhood, captures his own manhood, and is able spontaneously to enter a love match. As Kiberd (1995: 171) described it, ‘By recreating some of the traits of the ancient hero in a puny peasant playboy, Synge offered his own caustic comment on the similarities and dissimilarities between the Irish past and present.’

In an attempt to shed light on the play’s antecedents, it is worth returning to Synge’s comment that he could just as easily have written *Playboy* ‘as it stands, without the Lynchehaun case or the Aran case’. We consider the latter affair first, in light of the more obvious contribution it made to Synge’s dramatic efforts. **What is novel about this paper is the diversity of intellectual influences and data sources that inform it. We attempt to infuse literary criticism with the fruits of our labours in the archives, and to provide a criminological perspective on what inspired an author and evoked such mixed emotions in his audience.**

### *The ‘Aran Case’ - William Maley’s Parricide*

In the 1880s and the 1890s the Aran Islands became the site of a provocative Darwinian-driven discourse about race. Struggles over the question of whether the racial and cultural purity of the islanders was similar to that of pre-conquest Aran appeared in anthropology and ethnography and was manifest in investigative visits by Gaelic Leaguers and by J.M. Synge. Crucial questions concerned the degree to which the islanders had intermarried with the somewhat less pure stock on the mainland and how much their bloodlines had been diluted by Oliver Cromwell’s installation on Inis Mór in 1652 of an English garrison (many of whose members chose to stay on after the cessation of hostilities). (About Irish anthropological investigations on Aran and on

the influence of the opening of an anthropometric laboratory in Dublin in 1891, see Jones, 1998; and Ashley, 2001). The linguistic and cultural purity of the Aran islands would be part of the cultural resurrection of an independent, Gaelic and Catholic Ireland.

At the suggestion of his friend W.B. Yeats, Synge visited the islands each summer from 1898 to 1902. In his book *The Aran Islands*, Synge recounted that on Inishmaan an old man, the oldest on the island, who was ‘fond of telling me anecdotes - not folk tales’ (1907d: 62), often spoke of:

a Connaught man who in a fit of passion had killed his father with the blow of a spade and who then fled to the Aran Islands, where he placed himself at the mercy of some of the islanders with whom it was said he was related. They hid him in a hole – which the old man has shown me – and kept him safe for weeks, though the police came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America.

On the old man’s story Synge commented that ‘[t]his impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west [of Ireland]’ and, he said, it is partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but even more directly:

to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. If a man has killed his father, and is already sick and broken with remorse, they can see no reason why he should be dragged away and killed by the law. Such a man, they say, will be quiet [i.e. depressed] all the rest of his life, and if you suggest that punishment is needed as an example, they ask, “Would anyone kill his father if he was able to help it?” (*ibid.*:62)

In Kiberd's words (2000: 426), 'The ethic here is existential: one is punished less *for* one's sins than *by* one's sins.'

We believe that Synge's development of the character and actions of Christy Mahon was inspired by the slaying of Patrick Maley by his son William on 28 January 1873, at Calla, a remote part of County Galway. About this several layers of detail can be uncovered from contemporaneous police records and newspaper reportage. While these are brief, amounting in total to little more than a few paragraphs, they contain many of the ingredients essential to making sense of this particular parricide and some of its consequences. They give us a sense of who William was and why he cracked a spade over his father's head after years of supporting him with wages earned in the U.S. Navy. While there was for a time an ocean between them, and even if relations between the two men were less than harmonious, it seems perfectly natural that when William returned to *terra firma* he would think nothing of wanting to scratch a living from the soil beside his father.

The case was categorized as manslaughter in the *Outrage* report filed by the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), where the following narrative was provided:

Patrick Maley, farmer and provision dealer, at about 9 o'clock, A.M., went to work in a potato garden next his house. His married son, William Maley, who lives next door, went into the garden and asked his father what he was doing; on receiving answer that he was sowing the ground, as it was his, the son denied it was his father's, and a struggle ensued, and William Maley struck his father on the head with a spade, from the effects of which he died about three hours after. The assailant absconded, and was arrested in Arran [sic] Island, but escaped. William Maley had been some years at sea, and had sent some money to his father, with which the latter traded. Having married on his return home, a division of the property was made, and dissatisfaction on the part of the son at the portion allotted to him, led to this outrage.

Further particulars can be gleaned from an account of the event that was published in the *Galway Express: Mayo, Roscommon, Clare and Limerick Advertiser* (1 February 1873: 3) under the headline ‘Awful Murder of a Father by His Own Son’. No reference is made in the newspaper report to the arrest of the perpetrator.

On Tuesday morning, the 28<sup>th</sup> ult., a quiet and elderly farmer, named Pat Maley, residing in Calla, seven miles from Clifden, was informed that his married son, William, was preparing a little paddock (not larger than an ordinary room in size) for early potatoes; he went out to prevent him, when a scuffle ensued; the son lifted his spade and struck the father with it; he fell insensible. The son rushed into the house, returned soon again to behold the prostrate parent. He seized him, helped him up, carried him insensible to his bed, and laid him on it, bleeding, but still living, though unable to speak. The son then changed his clothes, provided himself with what money he could find, and when informed the police were coming to arrest him, he walked slowly lest he police should notice him, and for the last two days no trace can be found. Some believe he drowned himself, as the sea was quite near his father’s house, and he was seen last going in that direction; another report is, that he lay concealed in a relative’s house until nightfall, and was seen leaving it when it was dark.

The fact that William carried his father indoors while he drew his final breaths does not suggest a remorseless killer who exulted in the destruction of a foe. This is quite a point of contrast with the braggart Christy Mahon who hit the father and ran, not waiting to see whether he was alive or dead. One wonders what words, if any, were exchanged between father and son and whether the former advised the latter to flee. The newspaper report states that the father did not speak, but who knows what escaped his lips as he lay on the small patch of land where he had scabbled a living, or as he met his end indoors. It is possible that, having drawn his father’s blood, William left with his blessing. That he was informed the police were coming to arrest him and managed to walk slowly – and surreptitiously – away suggests that other persons present felt no compunction to hold him until the authorities arrived or to alert the police to his direction of travel. That the possibility of suicide by drowning was raised further supports the notion of a

killer whose actions were not universally condemned and whose grief and regret may have been all too evident.

Whatever the nature of community sentiment, the RIC put its members on alert and spared no effort trying to track down the fugitive. The first issue of the biweekly *Police Gazette, or Hue-and-Cry* to appear after the killing (31 January 1873: 1) carried the following ‘Wanted’ notice:

Description of William Malley, a seafaring man, who stands charged with having, on the 28<sup>th</sup> instant, at Calla, in Clifden district, murdered his father, - Malley: - Fresh cut on nose; gray eyes, medium make, 5 feet high, about 40 years of age, dark hair, red shirt; will endeavour to emigrate; may be dressed in Connemara frieze. The Constabulary at seaports are directed to use endeavours to arrest him.

The subsequent issue of the *Gazette* (4 February 1873: 1) carried a slightly different version with what was presumably a more accurate description. Here, the culprit was described as being seven inches taller, he had lost one ‘l’ from his surname and had acquired whiskers, a more complicated nose and a strange accent.

Description of William Maley, native of Calla, near Errismore, district of Clifden, stands charged with having, on the 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1873, in the barony of Ballinahinch, parish of Ballindoon, killed his father, Patrick Maley, by striking him on the head with a spade: - Fresh cut on nose, large feet, sailor-like appearance; gray eyes, hooked and drooped nose, pale fair complexion, long face, medium make, 5 feet 7 inches high, about 38 or 40 years of age, brown hair, red beard and whiskers, no hair on lip; wore an old black hat, gray Connemara frieze coat, old pilot trousers, gray Connemara frieze vest, red shirt; was 9 years a sailor, and will endeavour to reach a seaport and re-engage as a sailor; mixture of Scotch and English accent grafted on Irish accent.

The ‘fresh cut’ on the suspect’s nose is a curiosity. Does it imply an exchange of blows with his father and a more reciprocal engagement than has previously been thought? (In Synge’s version blows are not exchanged, the father being dispatched with a single, sudden, swipe.) Or did Patrick strike first with William reacting in self-defence? Or did a keening mother claw at her son, the killer’s, face? Or had William somehow injured himself immediately prior to the encounter with his father, thereby worsening his mood and increasing his irascibility?

William lived as a fugitive for some time and was reported to be hiding in the mountains or in fishing boats or on islands off the Connemara coast. A reward of £20 was offered for his arrest but to no avail. Before he swung his loy in the paddock, the sea had been a source of employment and a way of keeping the homestead intact through remittances. Now it became a route of escape from domestic circumstances that William had obliterated through his own actions; he is forced to take to the water again, however reluctantly. Allen (1997) discovered a record in the National Archives of Ireland, giving a clue to extradition proceedings begun in 1877, but there is nothing to indicate that they were executed. Allen also found that an application to increase the size of the reward was refused; indicative perhaps of the level of priority associated with the case after the trail went cold. We know that Maley was recently married when he took his father’s life. What happened to his wife, and whether he ever had a son of his own (and if they came to blows), cannot be ascertained.

### ***The Case of James Lynchehaun***

Besides the ‘Aran case’, Synge also referred to the ‘Lynchehaun case.’ What is the bearing of the Lynchehaun case on *Playboy*? Not a great deal is known about James Lynchehaun, though some basic details can be pieced together from the records of his trial, from newspaper accounts and from James Carney’s (1986) biography *The Playboy & the Yellow Lady*. Carney’s book is based largely on the accidental discovery of a hand-written manuscript by Franciscan Brother Paul Carney, who had lived in Achill. This narrative, entitled *A Short Sketch of the Life and Actions of the Far-Famed James Lynchehaun, the Achill Troglodyte*, we have been unable to find.

James Lynchehaun (c.1860-c.1937) was born in Pulrannay, one mile from Achill Sound, County Mayo. After work as a school teacher and in England as a member of Manchester’s

Metropolitan Police, he was employed in 1888 as a bailiff or land agent at her Valley estate on Achill Island by Mrs. Agnes MacDonnell, a wealthy English landowner. After six years and he and she having developed, for whichever of several reasons, a bitter hatred for each other, MacDonnell dismissed Lynchehaun from his position. In addition, she served him with notices of eviction from the small house that came with his job. On 6 October 1894, Lynchehaun, probably acting alone, set fire to her stables, a shed and her mansion and, with the use of horrific violence, savaged her to within an inch of her life. The next morning Lynchehaun was arrested for attempted murder.

On 20 October, while being transported for a deposition from Castlebar jail to Pulranny and onwards to the remains of Mrs. MacDonnell's residence, Lynchehaun slipped away from police custody and into the night. A £300 reward was offered for his capture. (Compared with the £20 bounty for William Maley, this shows that, as always, the bodily integrity of the rich is valued most highly.) *The Times* [of London] reported (7 January 1895: 10):

Lyncheham [*sic*], the Achill islander who is charged with the murderous attack upon Mrs. Agnes M'Donnell ... was rearrested at 2 o'clock this morning in the house of a man named Gallagher. It will be remembered that after he was arrested on the charge immediately after the outrage he effected his escape from the police, who have since been untiring in their efforts to recapture him. They watched the island so closely that it seemed all but impossible for him to get clear away, but it was generally believed that he was concealed in a cave waiting for the chance of a hooker taking him off at night. Gallagher's house was frequently searched in vain, but the police recently got information that he was concealed in a hole under Gallagher's bedroom, and he was there found. The police arrested Gallagher and a girl named Mary Masterson, a cousin of Lyncheham, on the charge of harbouring a criminal and assisting him in his efforts to escape from justice.

Clearly, the 'impulse to protect the criminal' about which Synge had written, could be trumped by hard cash, the prospect of a large reward loosening an informant's tongue. Several months later, Lynchehaun was tried for attempted murder at the Castlebar Assizes. The jury found him

guilty and he was sentenced to penal servitude for life. During the three-day trial evidence was presented by Mrs. MacDonnell and others about what *The Times* (18 July 1895: 9) described as ‘an amount of barbarity on the part of the prisoner which was almost incredible.’ The same newspaper report continued:

On the night of October 6 she [Mrs MacDonnell] was alone and in bed in the house, when she was aroused, and looking out, saw that her stables were on fire. The prisoner came to the house and asked for the keys to let out the horses. She gave them to him and was returning to the house when he caught her and dragged her into the burning building and made a determined effort to throw her into the flames. In her struggle she fell and he tried to strangle her, and struck her a tremendous blow on the head. She became insensible and remained unconscious for several days. The frontal bone of her head was fractured. Her nose was bitten off, and also a portion of her lip by human teeth. One of her eyes was destroyed and the other permanently injured.

Having served seven years of his life sentence, Lynchehaun once again escaped, this time finding sanctuary in America. After the failure of the British government’s arduous attempts to have him extradited (the U.S. Supreme Court even ruling in his favour), Lynchehaun apparently returned to Achill in disguise around 1917. He likely died in 1937 in Girvan, Scotland, aged about 77. On these details see Carney (1986: 219-24).

In trying to uncover the influence of the Lynchehaun case on Synge’s orchestration of characters and events in *Playboy*, one can begin by noting that Synge first visited County Mayo in 1904, the year before he began to write *Playboy*. (According to Bourgeois (1913: 193) *Playboy* was ‘laboriously written in 1905-6’). The stage Synge sets is actually near a village on a wild coast of Mayo, far enough away from his treasured Aran Islands so as to do them neither a cultural nor literary disservice nor to create an influx of gawkers there. It is otherwise hard to fathom, textually, why Synge relocated the parricide that he had heard about in Galway to Kerry (it would undoubtedly have made more sense to think of a Galway killer escaping to Mayo, than a Kerryman trekking half way across the country). Indeed, Synge provides several textual clues

about where in coastal Mayo the action of *Playboy* takes place and what events might have nurtured aspects of his play. These references, singly and collectively, lead us directly to James Lynchehaun, to his gruesome violence, and to his flight from English justice.

Thus, first, Christy refers to ‘the heaths of Keel’ (3:480-481) and, curiously, to ‘the madmen of Keel, eating muck and green weeds on the faces of the cliffs’ (3:580-581), implying that the action of *Playboy* occurs near the village of Keel on Achill island. Moreover, there is a two-mile sandy beach nearby on which Christy Mahon became the Playboy with his triumphs in the carnival races and athletic competitions. Second, there is Susan Brady’s comment to Sara Tansey about ‘the man [who] bit the yellow lady’s nostril on the northern shore’ (2:46-47). This is a direct description of Lynchehaun’s facial mutilation of Agnes MacDonnell and, in addition, at that time ‘yellow lady’ was a derogatory Irish term for English females, especially those women who were members of the hated forces of occupation or allied with them. The third is contained in Widow Quin’s promise, while trying to help Christy flee the crowd’s murderous intent, ‘I’ll take him in the ferry to the Achill boat’ (3:537-538). The Achill boat was doubtless a ferry which plied the western coast and by which Christy and Lynchehaun might eventually have found safe passage from northern Mayo to escape justice on a trans-Atlantic steamer.

To what extent is it fair to say that Synge modelled the situation of Christy Mahon on that of James Lynchehaun? The similarities noted above between the Lynchehaun case and Christy’s situation in *Playboy* notwithstanding, there are crucial differences between them. For example, Lynchehaun tried to kill a propertied Englishwoman – an oppressor – and afterwards sought shelter with relatives and friends. Christy, however, was on the run for the self-proclaimed killing of his father and sought shelter in a community of strangers (we will have more to say on this later). The level of viciousness associated with Lynchehaun’s assault on MacDonnell was widely condemned, though he himself – his willingness to poke his thumb in the eye of British justice, to escape from the police and from prison and to find sanctuary in America – was doubtless viewed, if not altogether with rapture, then with a degree of sympathy by the Irish. Perhaps however unusual and shocking, it was simply a form of agrarian outrage committed against the Anglo-Irish landlord class. Yet, for his self-proclaimed patricide, Christy was received, initially

at least, with great respect and hero worship.

### **Lethal Violence in *Fin-de-Siècle* Ireland**

*Playboy* was written when Ireland was pacifying. The social reorganization of post-Famine society meant the virtual elimination of young rural men with few attachments, and fewer prospects, who found diversion in fighting. The decimation of the country's population through starvation, disease, emigration and celibacy made society safer for those who remained. However, this was also a time when there was little respect for those who were enfeebled by age; infanticide occurred with troubling regularity and when it came to lethal brawling the elderly were not spared (for an exploration of trends in lethal violence see O'Donnell, 2005). In this sense, the killing of an older man would not have been such a remote prospect that to suggest it would cause shock and consternation. It could be argued that that the response to *Playboy* reflected a metropolitan view of a rural idyll held by people who were trying to reinterpret an agricultural past from which they would hardly have been more than one generation removed.

It is amusing to think of sons and daughters of farmers standing outside the Abbey Theatre, or interrupting the performance within, to vent their displeasure at the offence caused to their sensibilities, given what they must have known about the quotidian hardships and brutality of rural life. Adding a delicious twist to this irony is the fact that the protests took place a short walk from one of the most notorious red light areas in Europe, known as 'the Monto', where prostitution and all of the associated vices were rampant. The area features as 'Nighttown' in James Joyce's *Ulysses*; Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus visited a brothel in the Monto during their perambulation on 16 June 1904.

Pimps, prostitutes and their clients must have wondered what all the fuss was about as they strolled past the Abbey Theatre in January 1907, en route to the brothels of Tyrone Street and the adjoining thoroughfares. While theatregoers expressed horror at the utterance of the word 'shift' and what they believed to be a scurrilous depiction of country life, all around them was evidence of carnality and its consequences. The appetite for criminal sex and violence was well-established and clearly evident at the time that some Dubliners raised their voices against

*Playboy*. The sexual hypocrisy of some of the protesters is captured in Synge's observation to Yeats that a young doctor had declared, 'I wish medical etiquette permitted me to ... point out among the protesters in the name of Irish virtue the patients I am treating for venereal disease' (Yeats, 1907).

By examining the *Outrage* reports held in the National Archives of Ireland for the period 1905 to 1907 we get a sense of the sort of homicide problem that affected Ireland when Synge was finalising the text of *Playboy* and during its ill-fated first performances. During the triennium in question, RIC narratives were available for 106 incidents.<sup>1</sup> This yields an incomplete perspective on the national homicide problem; the capital city is omitted as it was not policed by the RIC. However, the level of detail is better than from other sources and allows an examination of the characteristics of perpetrators and victims, the relationships between them, the causes of death and the sentences imposed. So what do we learn about the social circumstances of homicide at this time?

Turning first to the key demographic variables of gender and age, we find that male victims predominated, accounting for three quarters of incidents (75.5 per cent; 80/106). The average age of victims was 45.8, ranging from 3 years to 90 years. The perpetrators were considerably younger, averaging 35.6, with a narrower range from 16 years to 78 years. Looking at the geographical pattern, lethal violence was widely spread. Most counties experienced at least one killing over the period in question but few were the location for as many as half a dozen. The Connaught counties of Galway and Mayo, where the Maley and Lynchehaun attacks took place averaged two killings each year. There were noticeable clusters around the major cities of Belfast and Cork and, of course, Dublin where, according to the judicial statistics for Ireland, the DMP dealt with 54 incidents of lethal violence between 1905 and 1907.

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<sup>1</sup>. The reports included details of 108 killings, two of which have been omitted because they relate to deaths inflicted in 1904 (one each in Fermanagh and Londonderry). In addition there were 34 infanticides, for which no narratives were available.

Around two-thirds of deaths resulted from beatings. These involved bare fists and booted feet, sticks and stones, household items that happened to be at hand during the encounter such as a poker, sweeping brush or porter bottle, and tools such as a spade, fork, hammer or flail. Around one in four victims were stabbed or shot and the remainder died under a variety of circumstances, some being criminally injured by drunk drivers and one each being strangled and drowned. Christy Mahon's use of a spade to resolve a squabble with his father had the hallmark of a typical dispute where the harm caused was heavily dependent on whatever happened to be seized upon as a potential weapon. During spontaneous outbursts of violence the outcome was unpredictable and the opportunities afforded by the immediate environmental context were sometimes more important than the perpetrator's intent. James Lynchehaun's *modus operandi* was quite different and statistically unusual; only one per cent of victims were strangled. So too was his persistence unusual; when throttling failed, he struck, bit and tried to burn Agnes MacDonnell. Her survival seems to have resulted from a peculiar resilience rather than a lack of intent on the part of her assailant. This was a woman of remarkable fortitude. In Carney's account (1986: 222) she defied expectation to 'live on vigorously for another twenty-eight years, wearing a false nose, an eye-patch and a veil, constantly guarded by the police.'

Almost one in four killings was followed by the perpetrator's suicide or committal to an asylum. In another one in five cases the prosecution failed. Where sentences were imposed they tended to be relatively short, with the great majority under five years. In five cases a sentence of death was passed but each was commuted to penal servitude for life. If the courts tended to be lenient, why should we be surprised that the citizenry sometimes took a similar view? Conley (1999) has shown in her work on 'melancholy accidents' that where a man felled another in the heat of the moment, and there was no evidence of planning or the use of a knife or gun, the Irish courts were often merciful. Given the embedded nature of this perspective, the population of Dublin who found the plot of *Playboy* so at odds with their preferred portrayal of Irish life should not have been all that surprised that there was a certain measure of ambiguity when it came to judging those who had killed in temper (or in their cups). However, on occasion, as when confronted with an expression of violence as grotesque as James Lychehaun's, the courts were prepared to award severe sentences, in his case penal servitude for life.

Christy was well aware of the qualitative differences between killings. When asked if he had shot his father, he replied, shaking his head: ‘I never used weapons. I’ve no licence and I’m a law-fearing man’ (1:270-271). When asked then if the murder weapon was perhaps a knife, he was scandalized, exclaiming: ‘Do you take me for a slaughter boy?’ (1:274). His account of the circumstances was that he was digging potatoes when he ‘just’ raised the spade – almost as if it was a natural extension of his arm – and brought it down on his father’s head. In his view, and one that was commonly shared at the time, this was a world away from a cold-blooded killing. Often fights took place to establish who was the ‘better man.’ By tackling his father, who by all accounts was made of stern stuff (given his double resurrection), it is not surprising that Christy won bragging rights to some extent. Had the age difference been greater, or the father more obviously weak, his ‘achievement’ in this regard would have earned him fewer plaudits. Also the reason for his assault – namely the desire to avoid a forced marriage – would probably also have evoked some sympathy in the public at large.

Lethal disputes between intimates (whether parents and children, other relatives or lovers) accounted for more than a quarter of deaths in the sample. The single greatest category was where the parties came together in a haze of alcohol, with intoxication being assigned the status of a causal factor by the police investigators; inebriation, it seems, made the search for a motive somewhat redundant. Workplace disputes were sometimes lethal (the Lynchehaun case is an extreme example of where such conflicts could lead), as too were arguments over rights of way and access to land for grazing and planting. In a small number of cases death resulted from the commission of a crime such as robbery or rape.

### *The Particulars of Parricide*

How rare was parricide? Did it imply such an aberrant state of family affairs that Synge would have had to resort to a case that had taken place three decades earlier to justify his plot? Could he have credibly written his play without reference to the violence of William Maley and James Lynchehaun? Did he capture what he described in his own words (see above) as ‘the psychic state of the locality’? The RIC records show that lethal squabbles between parents and children

were regular enough occurrences during the years when Synge was writing *Playboy* and at the time that elements of the Dublin public were reacting so strongly against it. Of the 106 homicides studied, nine were intra-familial and inter-generational. Four of these involved children who were killed by their parents. In another, a father died of heart failure in the course of forcibly ejecting his son from the house in the aftermath of the latter using ‘some offensive words towards his mother.’ The remaining deaths comprised three of matricide and one of patricide, the particulars of which are briefly set out next.

On 17 June 1905 Patrick Hasson beat his mother (aged 70) with a stick and smashed in her head with a large stone. He was found guilty but insane. The report of the case in *The Irish Times* (19 June 1905: 9) noted that Patrick was ‘a man of violent temper’ who had been known to drink ether. At the inquest into his mother’s death the coroner condemned the use of ether in the area and called for ‘legislative repression’ (ibid.). On 20 January 1907, Lavinia Forsythe (52) was found dead in her home. Her son Francis stated that she had fallen out of bed thereby bruising her face and head. But a neighbour testified hearing the deceased scream ‘murder, murder’ and the son reply that he ‘would hang for the old cat’. This exchange was followed by the sound of a body falling to the floor. Another witness reported seeing Francis knock his mother down ‘with his clenched fist’ on the night she died and then threaten to take her life if she did not light the fire and make his supper. The first jury was unable to reach a verdict and the second, whilst convicting, made a strong recommendation to mercy (*The Irish Times*, 26 March 1907: 5 and 27 July 1907: 4). Francis received three years’ penal servitude. On 30 March 1907 William Bell (62) was assaulted in bed by his son, David. David seems to have been somewhat indiscriminate in his violence, having originally been arrested on a warrant for an assault on his mother (*The Irish Times*, 18 April 1907: 5). Finally, Rose Johnston (65) was attacked by her son Edward on 8 September 1907. According to the *Outrage* report, ‘Edward who was anxious to get married wanted to get his mother out of the house, and had been quarrelling with her and treating her badly for some time previously’. He was sentenced to five years’ penal servitude.

Clearly, then, parricide was not unknown in Ireland during the early years of the twentieth century. Indeed, the week before the curtain was first raised on *Playboy* Lavinia Forsythe died at

the hands of her son, followed not long after the show had completed its initial run by William Bell. Given the relative ease with which we have pieced together the particulars of these cases from police records and newspaper reports, it seems reasonable to assume that they would have excited significant interest at the time.

### **Defending the Indefensible**

Returning directly to the riotous reaction to the performance of *Playboy* in Dublin in 1907, Synge felt he had to justify the plot when he came under attack for traducing the character of rural Ireland. This criticism of the play seems to have assumed that the events described were unimaginable or, at least, so highly improbable as to be unbelievable. While the enthusiastic response Christy got as a killer might have been an exaggeration, the likelihood is that there would have been sympathy for a man who raised his hand to his father to protest against an attempt to match him in marriage to a woman for whom he could feel no affection, and who then ran for cover for fear of what he might have done.

In an insightful review of the play, 'Pat' (1907) complained that Synge's central message had been obscured by the language he chose to express it in, which had caused genuine shock to theatregoers. The core of the drama, which Pat describes as the 'inner' play shines 'a dreadful searchlight into our cherished accumulation of social skeletons ... It is as if we looked in a mirror for the first time, and found ourselves hideous. We fear to face the thing. We shrink at the word for it. We scream.' It is Pat's contention that neither Pegeen's infatuation with a killer nor the expressions attributed to the peasantry are at odds with reality.

As for Pegeen, a lively young woman facing the inevitability of married life with the spineless and insipid Shawn Keogh, the attractions of Christy should be obvious. Here stood a man who had resisted his father's domination and who had struck out to assert his independence, rather than marrying a woman he found repellent. A man capable of demonstrating his resolve in such a way might also be capable of wooing and loving sincerely. Furthermore, as Pat (*ibid.*) reminds us:

The difference between a hero and a murderer is sometimes, in the comparative numbers they have killed, morally in favour of the murderer; and we all know how the “pale young curate” loses his drawingroom popularity when the unmarried subaltern returns from his professional blood-spilling.

Controversy has raged about whether Synge misunderstood, romanticized or mocked the Irish peasantry who blunder around the pages of *Playboy*. Nowhere are these rival interpretations so evident as in Synge’s use of the word ‘shifts’ (3:532). While the Gaelic Leaguers complained that such ‘vulgar’ words misrepresented the western Irish peasantry, in an interview with *The Freeman’s Journal* (30 January 1907: 7) Synge stressed that a shift was ‘an everyday word in the West of Ireland, which would not be taken offence at there, and might be taken differently by people in Dublin. It was used without any objection in Douglas Hyde’s “Songs of Connaught,” in the Irish, but what could be published in Irish perhaps could not be published in English!’

Pat’s view that the language of the play was true to the region in which it was set is captured by his remark that:

As to the discussions on feminine underclothing, I have often heard discussions more familiar among the peasantry themselves, without the remotest suggestion of immorality, and if Dublin is shocked in this connection, it is because its mind is less clean than that of the Connacht peasant woman.

However, this acknowledgment of the accuracy of the idiom is tempered by a feeling that the use of terms that could be considered objectionable is overdone to the extent that it becomes irritating and deflects attention from the ‘dramatic essentials’. Pat was not alone in adopting this position. Another review published in *The Irish Times* (28 January 1907: 8) elaborated on this theme:

While there is not a word or a turn of expression in the play that is not in common use among peasants, it is quite another matter to reproduce some of the expressions on a

public stage in a large city. People here will not publicly approve of the indiscriminate use of the Holy Name on every possible occasion, nor will they quietly submit to the reproduction of expressions which, to say the least, are offensive to good taste, however true they may be to actual life.

The review went on to note that the audience resented these ‘indiscretions’ on the part of the author and as a result what could have been a ‘brilliant success’ was brought to an ‘inglorious conclusion.’ The sentiment here is quite clear, namely, that what might be acknowledged should not be named; that tacit acceptance and shared secrets should trump public avowals; that the avoidance of scandal is more important than the expression of truth. Even the most puritanical and austere members of the audience must have been aware that women wore undergarments and that these were known as ‘shifts’. But to identify such a garment by name and by association to draw the public mind to the body that it covered and the temptations of the flesh that it barely concealed was a step too far. Such brazenness was held to pose a threat to the purity of the emerging Irish nation. This was to confirm the worst fears of those who opposed the move to national self-determination by highlighting in three acts an appetite for sex, violence and community perfidy. As *The Irish Times* reluctantly concluded, ‘Mr. Synge, we are afraid, must to some extent sacrifice the ‘remorseless truth’ if his play is to be made acceptable to healthy public opinion.’

In this regard, one wonders if the production would have excited the same level of scandal if it had retained its original title. This would have at least had the virtue of transparency and only the most obtuse could have felt misled by the play’s content. That title: ‘Murder Will Out’.

*Figure 3*  
*Representing Parricide (Again)*

Source: Irish postage stamp released in March 2009 to mark centenary of Synge’s death.

### **Finale**

We have revisited *Playboy* exactly one hundred years after its author’s death and have interpreted it more from a sociological perspective than from the standpoint of literary criticism. In so doing,

what have we learned? First and foremost, we have demonstrated that *Playboy*'s central events were not as far beyond the pale as convention has it. Clearly, as Synge himself attested, *Playboy* could have been written without reliance on the Aran or Lynchehaun cases. To repeat Synge's own insistence, *Playboy*'s story – in its *essence* – is quite plausible.

However, this raises two pertinent questions. First, why did Synge trawl so far back in time for parricidal inspiration? Second, why was the public response to the play so intensely negative on the grounds of the flimsiness of its evidence base (when violent killings, including parricides, were regularly reported in the press) and of the impropriety of its language (when the words used reflected peasant idiom and the first staging in the Abbey took place in the vicinity of a busy red-light district)?

*Playboy* contains other puzzles, too. Why, for example, did the apparent parricide of Old Mahon take place in Kerry, with Christy walking for eleven days before his arrival in Mayo? By introducing the idea of a sustained pursuit, was Synge providing another faint echo of the past (e.g. harkening back to the famous tragic myth *An Toraíocht Dhiarmada agus Gráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne))? What image is Synge trying to conjure here? Is it another example of the eternal truth of his portrayal or, at least, of its distinguished literary lineage? Moreover, is it only a matter of convenience for Synge's orchestration of the play that Christy has neither a mother nor siblings further to complicate the generational conflict with his father? Does his father own any land or is he, more likely, a landless squatter?

Questions are also raised about the nature of the reception Christy received in other places that he must have passed by or rested in during his epic walk. It is not at all probable that his arrival at the shebeen was the first time that anyone had questioned him about his circumstances. Similarly, it is likely that his father must have been previously alerted to or somehow been made aware of his son's direction of travel because it was very soon after Christy entered the shebeen that Old Mahon arrived there too. What transpired in the interlude between quitting Kerry and finding safety and comfort in Mayo? What are we to make of this silent period? Where did Christy go for food and shelter? How could an old and injured man keep pace with a younger,

healthier son? Are we led to conclude that at no stage along the way did anyone feel the need either to bring Christy to justice or to join his father in the chase; further emphasizing Synge's view about popular antipathy towards the justice system?

The parricide in *Playboy* is not as well known in criminology as Michel Foucault's (1975) account of the 1835 trial of the French peasant Pierre Rivière for having slaughtered his mother, sister and brother with a pruning hook. Yet, unraveling the identity of Christy Mahon to a certain extent involves the same set of questions. Who was he? Why did he do what he did? Within what power structures was he entrapped and identified? Which elements of his behaviour were lauded and which derided? The dizzying plot and counterplot in *Playboy* – progress and failure, triumph and despair – offer fertile ground for further inquiry as a case study in cultural criminology.

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