

SPIRIT OF IRISH WIT

Introduction

Spirit of Irish Wit, or to give its full title, *Spirit of Irish Wit or Post-Chaise Companion: being an Eccentric Miscellany of Hibernian Wit, Fun, and Humour much the greater part never before in print, with a selection of such that may have appeared; calculated for the Meridian of the United Kingdoms; and consisting of Bon-Mots, Repartees, Smart Puns, High Jokes, Queer Hoakes, Humorous Anecdotes, Laughable Bulls, Devlish Good Things, and various other articles of Intellectual Confectionary, adapted to the risible Muscles, and designed to dispel Care, Purge Melancholy, Cure the Spleen, and Raise the Drooping Spirits in these Gloomy Times.*

The title page says ‘Printed for Thomas Tegg, 111, Cheapside, and R. Griffin & Co. Glasgow’. In the editor’s edition a hand written note has ‘(1811)’. The printer was Plummer and Brewis, Love Lane, Eastcheap. There was at least one further edition in 1812 the only difference being the deletion of Griffin and the correction of a pagination error at the end of the book.

Tegg was a well known prolific, but controversial, London publisher (see Dictionary of National Biography) who spent an unknown length of time in Ireland around 1790 (Between 1785 and 1796 he travelled and worked extensively around the kingdom as a kind of self-organised apprentice) prior to going into business in London at the end of the decade; he began publishing in c. 1805. In Dublin there was a Tegg and Co. office. The book’s editor was one Momus Broadgrin, an obvious alias, possibly of Tegg. He was also author of *Treasury of Wit and Anecdote* in 1842 but is not the same author/editor of a similar book on Scottish wit of 1786.

The proclamation prefacing the book expands on the title/advertisement and is worth given in full.

“Whereas it has been credibly represented to us, and we have, moreover, strong reasons to believe, that during the rancour, spleen, party dullness, and mutual distrust, which for some time prevailed in this once good-humoured and convivial realm, very considerable quantities of current and sterling wit and pleasantry of the land had been withdrawn from circulation; and that humorous anecdotes, bon mots, good jokes, epigrams, bulls, and divers other devlish things, to the amount of some millions, were concealed or hoarded in memories, brain-boxes, pocket-diaries, common-place-books, and other repositories of once chearful, but since dull, splenetic and gloomy persons, who have passed over to this realm, and have for some time withdrawn themselves from social intercourse, and do now obstinately withhold from conversation the said wit, humour and pleasantry, both in *coin* and *bullion*, to the great injury and detriment of colloquial pleasure and *national* humour, and in the propagation of dullness, the spleen and the blue devils.

Now in order that such invaluable treasures of wit, pleasantry and good-humour, may no longer remain locked up in the said brain-boxes, memories, pocket-books, and other repositories of such glumpish, churlish, and refractory persons aforesaid, and thereby run the risk of being lost to all cheerful society, or of dying with their avaricious and monopolizing possessors. We do hereby charge, command, invite, and implore all wits, humourists, social fellows, droll dogs, comical fellows, fun-lovers, curiosos, odd fishes, pickled dogs, queer devils, and all other votaries of wit, humour and pleasantry, as they tender the common interests of laughter and cheerfulness, that they do, with all possible expedition, after this issue of this our proclamation, bring forward or transmit, to the Editor of this our Book, all such bon-mots, pleasant anecdotes, epigrams, characters, witticisms, and all other such good things as they have been so hoarded and concealed, whether they be in *coin* or *rough bullion*, as aforesaid, to the end that the same may be forthwith stampt with our *imprimature* into general circulation, for the advantage of public pleasantry, and the promotion of social harmony and good-humour within our dominions.”

Given at our Council Chamber, No. 111, Cheapside, this 1st of May, 1811

By order of the Lord Chief Joker, Momus Broadgrin, Controller of the Comicals

Commentary

Obviously he thought that the people of Ireland were a gloomy lot in the first decade of the 18th century. This is hardly surprising, as the bloody and violent events of the 1798 rebellion, particularly in its suppression, had badly disrupted their way of life. The whole process of social harmony had received a major battering and had to be rebuilt though it would take several generations for the emotive shock to be dissipated. Trust within the community had to be re-learned but some suspicions never left.

In the broader context Ireland by 1810 was in the first ten years of an economic decline that lasted till the latter part of the 20th century. Ireland had been economically on par with the rest of the kingdom in terms of land wealth, the then main source of capital and income. The explosive growth of the industrial revolution and colonial empire shifted new wealth towards London and resource-rich areas in the English midlands and elsewhere.

Ireland's economic position, relatively speaking, fell considerably. Dublin, which had been a wealthy city, now also declined; particularly after the Union of 1800 when it lost its powers, prestige and patronage. Furthermore the Union had not lived up to Catholic (many had supported the act) political, economic and religious expectations, as had been promised.

Much of this was, of course, in the future and the first decade of the 18th century saw major conflicts with the French and people seemed to very pessimistic about this as well judging by poetry written at the time, imbued with melancholy and pathos. Late 18th century wars against other European powers and the nascent United States of America were also of recent memory.

The book is sympathetic to Irish complaints about the Union and, by and large, there are little anti-Irish feelings or prejudices. While of course there are jokes where the Irishman or woman is the butt, there are as many where the Irish top the English trying to pull a fast one. Others are ambiguous and have no obvious target.

There were several favourite motifs, the Irish bull, much lauded and appear to have been produced in much the same way as comedy writers compose jokes today; there were Irish letters, 18th century equivalents of urban legends, and the standard fare of Irish servant jokes. These last are not surprising given that when young men are taken from a completely rural environment there was much to learn as to how cities operated; mistakes and misunderstandings were bound to occur. Similar sort of stories can be found in today's developing world of young people hired direct from the countryside.

The main targets of scurrilous satire were politicians, particularly if they were aristocratic, an attitude that is refreshingly modern, though not, perhaps, if one is a politician. Lawyers and doctors were another favourite target; teachers and clerics are also represented.

The editor has used material that harks back to excellent relations and social intercourse of the pre-rebellion period with some nostalgia but it therefore should not be seen as some kind of golden age as any brief look at poverty, life expectancy, infant mortality, disease and famine would show.

Some of the pieces are older; Guymond and Jeremy White were chaplains to Henry III (13th C), and Oliver Cromwell, respectively. Others date from the reign of Queen Ann, spanning the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries. The first Lord Lieutenant to figure prominently in the book is Lord Townsend, 1767-72, and most of the pieces date from then to 1810.

The pieces question some modern Irish stereotypes about English attitudes to the Irish. Cultural historians commonly hold by that the general view of the Irish was one of negative condemnation, as exemplified by Punch. While this may be true in the later 19th century Victorian England there is little evidence of this in this book, which can be taken to be representative of attitudes several generations earlier. What we, perhaps, see is cultural shifts in how people defined themselves as Irish at the turn of the 18th century but was buried and obscured by later shifts particularly after the Famine (1845-7), the 1916 rebellion, accession to the European Union in 1972, and Globalization since.

England, too, went through its own cultural shifts so the relationship between the two islands has varied in time and was never static. It did not conform to any one stereotype as implied by many modern cultural historians. The academic habit of chopping time into discreet bits as specific disciplines within history can often obscure long-term trends and changes in how the island population perceived itself, with all its variety, and how they related to neighbouring communities. Certainly there was no angst about what it meant to be Irish. However Irishness varied among the different strata of society, in the

worldviews of the actor, alderman, chancer, cleric, coxcomb, craftsman, docker, doctor, farmer, innkeeper, gentleman, labourer, lawyer, lover, noble, prostitute, seaman, servant, shoeshine, soldier, teacher, tailor, washerwoman, weaver, etc. The Dubliner probably had more in common with urban classes in England than with rural classes in the West.

On a more general level a common cliché is that ‘victors write history’, however it can be seen that this is not necessarily the case for 1798 where from contemporary and modern perspectives there are alternative opinions and the freedom to express them. The easy availability of mass printing allowed the survival of a plethora of pamphlets and opinions from all classes of literate society. To misquote a medieval phrase general literacy resulted in a ‘Victor’s History with Opposition’.

In any human disaster it is human nature to try and see the funny side of things for a whole complex of individual and community psychological reasons; the 1798 period was no exception; in fact the Rebellion needs a good psychological history.

Tegg, evidently thought Ireland needed cheering up and that he could make some money from publishing what is probably the first Irish joke book. It is possible that the inspiration for this book came from his time in Ireland. Whether this was a Good Thing is doubtful given his legacy of the plethora of joke books dedicated to the Irish and other stereotypes published today.

The quality is probably very similar. This book is very much a cut and paste job with pieces being culled by various collectors, from Dublin and the Irish community in London, and typeset in batches. Others may have been collected by Tegg, when in Ireland. Editorial control is mixed. The formatting is inconsistent, there is duplication of pieces, there is no sense of order (at least in a modern sense); However it is obvious that there was editorial input based on the introductions of some that indicate that the editors were politically aware as well as knowledgeable and sympathetic to the country and its people; these sometimes assume that linked pieces will be read consecutively.

The book was aimed at the tourist, mostly gentry and new rich, and as the title suggests with the use of the phrase ‘Post-Chaise Companion’. It was, no doubt, a useful companion while travelling from Ballygobackwards to Ballymecrazy in a storm of driving sleet, rain and snow while bouncing around the many water-filled potholes.

Many pieces were later recycled and are found in traveller’s books particularly in the first half of the 19th century when plagiarism was common. A few have since found their way into serious historical studies whose authors, no doubt, would be miffed and mortified to find out that their primary source is a mere joke book.

The transcription of the contents, between November 2012 and January 2013, was an interesting exercise. On one level it was tedious, dreary and grim but was also a fascinating glimpse in to life and language of the period. Some days it took all my self-discipline, on others I flowed with 18th century spoken and written rhythms, very different from today.

I spent some time exploring various words and found many examples of changed meanings, defunct words, slang and dialect. The phrases 'to be sure' and 'at all, at all' are found but words such as dilacerate, fussock, coxcomb, macaroni, fugitated, mundification, lutterel and the evocatively named glister pipe, an essential apothecary's instrument, have disappeared.

The word 'feck' appears once, as in "does the fellow make a feck of me?" regarding an insolent London coachman. Most other Dublin slang words have since disappeared from modern usage; the Blind Peter stories have some of the best: chir, louse traps, music, mazzards, snotty, blanch de bacon and dub with his daddle on his snotter-box are but a few. Crature and bowsy, however, has survived. London Irish slang is also well represented.

On a general level, there are similarities between perceptions regarding the economic recessions then and now, indicating that human economic behaviour has changed little in the meantime; see 'A Collection of Prudential Maxims'.

My copy has a library sticker of Francis James Helston. Above in a nineteenth century hand is three lines: Penberthy, Nov^r 1/52, Bought at Sale. On the next page, in a 20th C hand, is 35/-. The book was purchased by my father, Brian J. Cantwell, from a book barrow on the Dublin quays sometime in the 1930s.