

Limerick acting out on Hollywood stage

by Rose Rushe

CINEASTES, movie goers, fans of celebrity, archivists and academia alike will be interested in a new book, *Acting Irish in Hollywood*.

It's the work of Dr Ruth Barton, research fellow at the Centre for Film Studies in UCD, and is the first academic study of Irish film stars in Hollywood.

It proves a cracking read for Limerick, given the connections four of the 10 actors profiled have with the Treaty City: Richard Harris, Constance Smith, Gabriel Byrne and Colin Farrell. Colin Farrell, your raised eyebrow begs?

Readers of the Limerick Post might remember an endearing exclusive we ran in 2003. Editor Billy Ryan's brother Paul had run Doc's nightclub for years - and employed the young Colin as, gulp, a line-dancing teacher.

He was a big hit in his big Stetson with the girls, and way back then, linedancing was king. For a year. And thus, this notorious actor's early platform for entertaining was established in a local club. Enough.

Storytelling

Acting Irish in Hollywood is a wealth of untold stories, analyses, ruthless critique and the placing of the Irish contribution to American film-making on an international stage. Neither is the author gobsmacked by the stellar quantities involved, and her turn of phrase is as pithy as the insights. Every chapter is footnoted; quotes are faithfully attributed and the span of research and interviews is eye-popping.

Probing the insecurity of the emigrant as a driving theme, Ruth Barton plundered studio and press archives as well as garnering help from stalwarts such as Declan McLoughlin of Limerick Film Archive.

The influence of colonialism on the Irish psyche and the layering of masks being innate self-protection are other drivers to acting success argued by this academic.

Harris -

"the greatest light"

Harris' early work and subsequent rise and rise through films such as *This Sporting Life* and *A Man Called Horse* trilogy, is documented. More

interestingly, she tells how the man was received and perceived as an Irish man abroad. One British press comment in 1967 read:

"He is a Limerick Irishman, so two thirds of his energy is vocal, but the physical side of him alone is exhausting enough... The wild colonial boy, the tinderbox of emotions, the troublemaker with flailing fists is busy throwing kisses at the world...[Harris], with his gift of laughter and his madness, could become the greatest light that Irish theatrics has ever tossed on the screen".

Byrne

- Gothic traveller

Actor/ producer / writer Gabriel Byrne, who has family in Raheen (first cousin to my family - RR) is signalled for "reinflection of the screen Irishman". Citing how he retains his accent and native associations, Barton interprets this as "an assertion of the validity of the exilic persona and a refusal to be marginalised because of it".

Sure, he's had no truck with clichéd villainy or servility, the well-trodden route of the outsider in film. This is an Irish man who has purposely eschewed roles of IRA men in his career on stage and in theatre, yet championed our writers and film-makers, from Eugene O'Neill to Jim Sheridan.

In *The Usual Suspects*, Byrne's character Keaton, as with Reagan in *Millers Crossing* and journalist Nick Mullen in *Defence of the Realm*, she emphasises his espousal of an Irish identity/ outsider, underlining "a filmic structure different in character, narrative and style to dominant culture".

Ruth Barton writes of his Byronic good-looks, Byrne epitomising "the romantic/ Gothic Irish hero, a figure that has defined Byrne's screen career to date".

Smith

- fallen star

Constance Smith (1928-2003) is the forgotten, fallen Irish star of Hollywood. Limerick Film Archive's Declan McLoughlin has a quiverful of stories on this Limerick born beauty who rose to present at the Oscar awards in 1952, and died an alcoholic vagrant on London streets.

"Constance's mother was from Limerick as well and she was born in Wolfe Tone Street. Her father

was working in the Ardnacrusha Power Station, although a birth certificate has never been found. They moved to Dublin," Declan says. "She was from this very poor family and was thrust into

stardom when she won an Irish cinema magazine's look-a-like competition in 1946 - Constance looked like Hedy Lemarr".

A screen test took her to Rank studios in England and she later got a contract with 20th Century-Fox.

"She made films in England, Italy and in American," Declan says, "and she made quite a lot of films. Constance was married to the director Bryan Forbes for a while, and later to the eminent British documentary maker, Paul Rotha".

There was even a triumphant visit back to Wolfe Tone Street in 1960 to promote her latest film, *Cradle of Genius*, and Rotha spoke to neighbours of writing a book on her life, called *A Weed in the Ground*. That was one of many things that did not come to pass for her or for him.

Regretfully, insufficient talent to win better roles and a decline into drugs and drink undermined Constance's meteoric rise and three marriages. Ruth Barton includes her story in this academic discourse on film, "partly because it is another version of the emigration narrative, and unlike the others.. one that ended neither in assimilation nor the triumph of fame".

The child who grew up in a one-room Ranelagh slum was frail goods against the gods that lit Los Angeles' screens. Fox forced an abortion on her, and her first faltering marriage failed. Forbes seems to have been a thoroughly decent man, and later, when Constance was jailed (episodically) for knifing her lover Rotha, offered her help in prison.

Reading Barton's clear-eyed account of her career, Constance Smith seems to have churned through B-movie success, despite herself.

"Undoubtedly, she was also temperamental and assertive; later she insisted that she was a victim of casting couch politics".

Decades of heavy drinking with Rotha, bombed projects and discarded friendships took their toll. Constance Smith checked out of her last marriage, out of hospitals and is thought to have died a forlorn death a couple of years ago in Islington. Occasionally, she got work as a cleaner and got herself together. Until the next drink.

But you can read her story more fully, and those of nine others in *Acting Irish in Hollywood*, From Fitzgerald to Farrell. It's published in paperback by Irish Academic Press and widely distributed.



Limerick-born film actress Constance Smith pictured at the pinnacle of her career