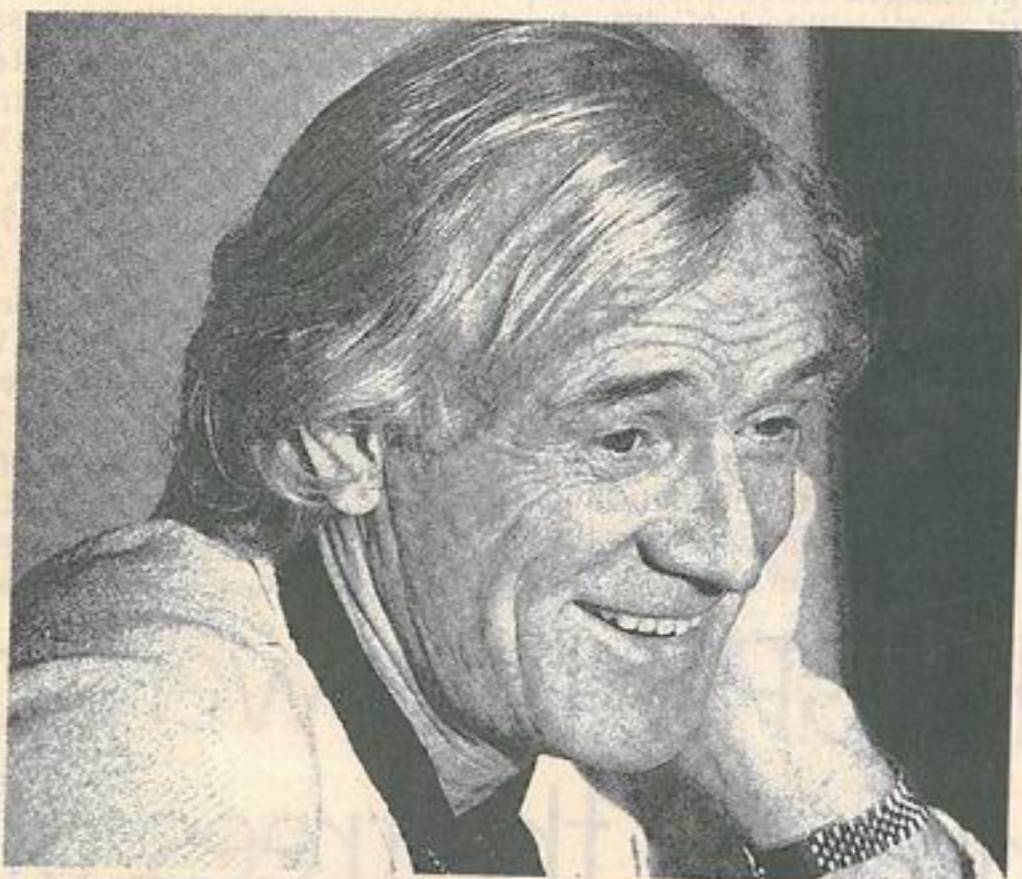


My cousin Richard Harris was a Greek god with dirty-blond hair

RICHARD Harris was a distant cousin. Starting out as a screenwriter, I sent him a script on the Famine. In the covering letter I told him that since I was family, and he was famous, he should help me sell my script for a large sum of money. Alternatively he should send me a tenner himself.

What he did was what every writer wants. He took my script seriously. He called me up and told me it had two major problems: it was too ugly, and wasn't anti-British enough for the British market.

At this last point, we shared a laugh. Harris's ironic insight into how a professional Irish hell-raiser could play on British post-colonial guilt helped him go far. Harris also hit the scene at the right time. Back in the Fifties, as memories of the War of Independence faded, the English were ready for the return of the Tom Moore charmer type, and even more



A STORMING PERFORMER: Richard Harris in 1982

excited if he threw up on the piano. Behan had made a beginning, but Harris was handsome as well.

His storming performance in *This Sporting Life* came straight from the democratic heart of Limerick rugby. After that, he seemed to lose his way. For far too long, he played the professional

Paddy, his stock role in movies like *The Wild Geese*. And then, at the right age, Jim Sheridan showed him the way home through *The Field*, where his performance as Bull McCabe was peerless. And he was brilliant as English Bob in *Unforgiven*.

As a man, his performance showed the same flawed

perfection. Although not a stay-at-home husband, his two wives never said a bad word about him. And during the darkest years of the armed struggle, he never developed the nauseating disease which disfigures most Irish actors abroad — sending simpering signals of support to Sinn Fein.

Back in the early Eighties in Boston, he may have turned in his best performances. Revolted by the violence, I am told, he went into some of the toughest dives and asked them not to send money that might kill fellow Irishmen. That was some performance.

And so I shall always cherish my memory of seeing him on a wet winter's day in Kilkee, some time in 1970, home between pictures, all alone on the hard beach, running up and down in the driving rain, a Greek god with dirty-blond hair, in saturated shirt, jeans and bare feet, playing handball against the cliff, against himself, and against time.

Sunday Indep 27/10/02

DID YOU REMEMBER? The clocks went back an hour at 1am

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