

# From High Hopes of the Celtic Twilight to Last Hurrahs in Inter-war Warsaw: The Plays of Casimir Dunin-Markievicz

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*Abstract:*

Recent reassessments have done much to show that Casimir Markievicz's cultural activism in Ireland made unique contributions to its renascent cultural nationalism: his portraiture recorded key moments and personages of the age; whereas his role as a dramatist and theatrical impresario in thrall to Shaw, theatrical naturalism and social engagement represented a supplementation of the Celtic Literary Revival. As a further contribution to what is a growing awareness of the importance of Markievicz as a historical, artistic and literary figure, this article will seek to show that, following the breakdown of his marriage and his return to Poland in 1913, Markievicz would also play a meaningful if short-lived role in the emerging modernity of Warsaw's post-war theatrical world. It will also look to assess why his career foundered, with consequences for his own literary legacy here in Poland.

*Keywords:* Irish Theatre, Celtic Literary Revival, Markievicz, Polish Theatre, Reception

## *1. Introduction*

Popular acquaintance with the life of Casimir (Kazimierz) Dunin-Markievicz is largely limited to knowledge of his having been the dilettante appendage of the Irish firebrand revolutionary and activist Constance Markievicz, *née* Gore-Booth. However, recent reassessments have done much to show that his cultural activism in Ireland made unique contributions to its renascent cultural nationalism: his portraiture recorded key moments and personages of the age; whereas his role as a dramatist and theatrical impresario in thrall

to Shaw, dramatic naturalism and social engagement represented a supplementation of the Celtic Literary Revival (see Quigley 2012; Arrington 2014; Keane 2016). As a further contribution to what is a growing awareness of the importance of Markievicz as a historical, artistic and literary figure, this article will seek to show that, following the breakdown of his marriage and his return to Poland in 1913, Markievicz would also play a meaningful if short-lived role in the emerging modernity of Warsaw's post-war theatrical world. It will also look to assess why his career foundered, with consequences for his own literary legacy here in Poland.

## 2. *Cutting a Dashing Figure in Dublin*

Casimir Markievicz and Constance Gore-Booth first met as art students in Paris in 1900, and their chance meeting was the beginning of a whirlwind romance and courtship, which was soon followed by marriage, where whiskey and champagne flowed in their comfortable Parisian apartment. The couple was coaxed back to Ireland by the prospect of receiving portraiture commissions, and soon Casimir and Constance, socially trading on the bogus titles of Count and Countess, established a position in Dublin's bohemia, moving easily between the Dublin Castle set and the city's literary and artistic circles (Fijałkowski 1962, 263-264; Arrington 2012, 38-40). As representatives of Ireland's School of Young Artists, both placed their works in various exhibitions and collections with the likes of George William Russell (AE), and became involved in the campaign to retain Hugh Lane's art collection in Dublin (Arrington, 2012, 40). It was in 1908 that Markievicz began to write plays, inspired in no small part by his involvement as one of the founders of the Independent Dramatic Company and the Theatre of Ireland. The plays Markievicz produced at that time were regarded more as society events than socially relevant theatre, and in terms of their plot and general tone, skirting as they did the borders of acceptable morality, G.B. Shaw's *The Philanderer* (1893) was very much a prototype piece. Whilst critics would point to their need for polishing, Markievicz's plays would be regarded in some quarters as giving the Irish theatre-going public a respite from the Abbey's peasant plays (Cox 1908, 7). W.B. Yeats, who though resentful of distractions from the Abbey project, agreed to hire the Abbey out to the Independent Dramatic Company and the Theatre of Ireland for a production of Markievicz's commemorative play of the 1798 rebellion, *The Memory of the Dead*, which premiered on 8 March 1908. Constance played the lead role of Nora, who declares over the corpse of her husband Dermot, shot by the English militia, that their children will be brought up with the ideal of laying down their lives for Irish freedom. Indeed, although it is a play that is today a largely forgotten piece, it has been accredited with having idealized the idea of blood sacrifice, which saw its dénouement with the events of Easter 1916, and with

the executions that followed (Morash 2002, 152). Indeed, if Constance had been hitherto swept up by the cause, it was her playing the role of Nora that caused her to embark on an Irish nationalist and revolutionary path.

### 3. *New Horizons*

However, the call to arms that *The Memory of the Dead* represented was the high watermark of Casimir's involvement in the cause of Ireland's freedom. Whilst he was prepared to tolerate Constance's firebrand views, he had no interest in accompanying her to conspiratorial meetings and political rallies. Indeed, in every respect, Constance's activities had for some time begun to run contrary to her husband's expectations of a congenial life in Ireland spent painting landscapes, dabbling in drama, and impressing all and sundry with his fencing prowess and fondness for scotch and soda (Makuszyński 1935, 7). Casimir would soon leave Ireland, rejecting out of hand a potential Irish conflict, and throw himself into an unfolding conflict in far-off Albania, where he ended up becoming a close advisor to Austria's Prince William of Wied, and played a central role in placing him upon what was a contested throne. But whatever the intended outcome, the Albanian adventure came abruptly to its end at the start of 1914, when Casimir had to leave the country at a moment's notice (*ibidem*, 7). He turned up in Warsaw in early April, and took a room in the plush Bristol Hotel, which was the shortest of walks to the newly opened Polish Theatre.

Markiewicz soon made the acquaintance of the theatre's manager, Arnold Szyfman, who was at the time basking in the crowd-pleasing successes of an ad-hoc Irish season with his productions of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) and J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1906), having profited handsomely from the considerable talents of an English-to-Polish translator, Florian Sobieniowski, who, having met personally with Shaw in London, had been authorized by Shaw to be his man in Poland, in terms of translating and overseeing the production of his plays, including his collection of royalties (Keane 2016, 45-48).

Szyfman was charmed to meet someone of almost mythical status who could claim an intimacy with the world of the Celtic Literary Revival. The director knew of Markiewicz's celebrated marriage, his reputation as an artist, and almost certainly had read of his theatrical successes in Ireland. In turn, the playwright had a number of items to show Szyfman, such as newspaper cuttings, reviews, perhaps manuscripts of his Irish staged plays, and a published copy of *The Memory of the Dead* (1910) (Fijałkowski 1962, 266). Szyfman was extremely impressed by Markiewicz, as not only did he commission a play but settled on having it staged by the end of May that same year. An obvious choice of plays would have been *The Memory of the Dead*, but Markiewicz was a good way along with a Polish reworking of his English-language play, *The Dilettante* (1908), which entailed the creation of a new title *Dzikie Pola* (*Wild Fields*), and

the introduction of minor alterations to the plot, including the relocation of the play from rural Scotland to a rustic Ukraine. In keeping with a fascination for regional dialects, exemplified in recent years by the work of Polish playwrights Stanisław Wyspiański and Jan Kasprowicz, *Wild Fields* featured a strong local dialect spoken by the servants and the local villagers who would relay back and forth the minutiae of local happenings.

In *Wild Fields* the protagonist is a bounder called Count Józef Przedmilski, the son of a widow who owns a gentry lodge mansion near Humań and Zaporozże, which was an area historically known as Dzikie Pola. His mother is blind, having lost her sight in an accident that also claimed the life of her husband. The first love interest is Roma Splawa Podlipska, a young woman, recently married, who has brought a large dowry to the union. However, she has fallen deeply in love with Józef and the intensity of her passion makes her incapable of hiding it from her husband, who remains unperturbed by the infatuation and assures Roma that it will soon pass telling her that she can love as much as she wants, provided she goes to bed early and gets her beauty sleep. Another of Józef's paramours is Hela Rzepkiewicz, the young daughter of the estate steward, whose family have served the Przedmilskis for generations. Józef's third love interest is Ciupa Topnicka, a widow who makes no claim on him and like a Marquise de Merteuil is interested in the salacious details of his other dalliances. Józef's comfortably manageable love life begins to unravel when Roma divorces her husband. Being the guilty party, she ends up surrendering much of her money to her cuckolded husband. And since she has sacrificed so much, she presses Józef to marry her. But Józef has no wish to get married, and cruelly reveals his involvement with Hela, who may be expecting his child. Playing out a romantic fantasy where she takes on the role of the selfless lover, Roma eventually decides that Hela should marry Józef. However, when Józef visits the house of Hela's father, he sees a bucolic painting on the wall and is convinced that it is the work of Jean-Antoine Watteau. He offers to buy the painting for 500 rubles, all the while hoping to sell it for 10,000 rubles. Taking his fraudulence beyond the pale, Józef settles matters with a promissory note. In the third and final act, Hela and Roma meet and "swap notes". When they realize what Józef is plotting, they come to despise him. But Józef is not slightly concerned about either his tarnished reputation or his standing with his lovers. He takes the painting and sets off to Warsaw with the intention of selling it.

Markiewicz completed his manuscript of *Wild Fields* on 21 April, signing it K-Ma, although in typed letters below he wrote "Bristol Hotel / Copyright by Casimir Dunin-Markiewicz"<sup>1</sup>. *Wild Fields* had its premiere on 30 May 1914. Although much was made of Markiewicz's Polish debut, with Warsaw's press

<sup>1</sup> This manuscript is to be found in the archive of the Theatre Museum of Warsaw, call no. 711.

only too happy to welcome him into the theatrical fold, the play had a short run. Reviews universally praised the production, the performances and the play's unconventional setting (Baliński 1914, 449; Krzywoszewski 1914). Although surely pleased with the moderate success of *Wild Fields*, Markiewicz did not remain in Warsaw until the end of the play's theatrical run. Inspired by Tsar Nicholas' manifesto to the Polish nation that promised liberation, he joined the ranks of the Imperial Huzar regiment<sup>2</sup>. Badly wounded in the Carpathian campaign, Markiewicz was duly decorated for bravery and then discharged. Later that year, with his estate and the surrounding areas fast becoming a battleground for the White and Red armies, Markiewicz was forced to move to Kiev, and at the end of 1918, like many of his neighbours and friends, he fled to Warsaw as a war-refugee, carrying all that was left to him in a suitcase.

#### 4. *Out in the Cold*

Markiewicz soon became part of a literary salon centred around the cultural newspaper *Świat* (World), and he also attended a weekly Thursday morning open-house hosted by the theatre critic and crack marksman and hunter Władysław Rabski, who had a spacious apartment in the Krasiński Palace on Krakowskie Przedmieście. Loud and rambunctious, this was the kind of society Markiewicz found easy entry into (Fijałkowski 1962, 265), and he was just about as impoverished as every other writer and journalist trying to eke out a living in the city. His first earnings would come from royalties for the play *Marta wychodzi za mąż* (Marta is Getting Married), first performed in Warsaw's Teatr Rozmaitości (Variety Theatre), and then shortly after in Kraków's Teatr Bagatela (Bagatelle Theatre) as a support feature for Fijałkowski's satirical *Pan Poset* (The Parliamentarian) (1919). For quite some time Markiewicz had lived solely on the paltry proceeds of this play. Once again, Markiewicz had chosen Ukraine as the backdrop for his play, with its mix of opulent landowners and peasantry, sharing both living space and customs (Fijałkowski 1962, 266). Even though the manuscript has been lost to posterity, a summary was provided by one of the foremost theatre critics of the day, Emil Breiter, writing for *Gazeta Polska* (1919, 3). The play tells the story of a father who rents out his daughter, Marta, to his brother once a year; a practice which continues for nine years. Marta manages to extract herself from this arrangement only when she meets a young suitor, to whom she confesses all. She then chooses to confront her mother with the truth in the third act, which serves principally to explore the protracted nature of the outrage itself. In his review, Breiter was less appalled at the weightiness

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Tsar's manifesto, see Davis 2005, 282-283.

of the subject than concerned with the artistic qualities of the play. He understood that Markiewicz was attempting to achieve a naturalism which presented a deeply shocking issue from an objective perspective. However, the critic also reminded the dramatist that an intended construct should not take a story beyond the bounds of plausibility. For Breiter, it was the believability of the plot and not the heinous misdeed that stretched credulity. Indeed, he marvelled at the idea of Markiewicz banking on the fact that his play would “épater le bourgeois”, when in fact it had been clear on the night of the premiere that those of his class in attendance had felt sullied by the insinuation that this sort of abuse was commonplace. Markiewicz, Breiter so suggested, could claim a prize for having conceived the nadir of unpleasant situations.

When Szyfman reopened the Polish Theatre, following its enforced closure in the years 1916-1918, he looked to Shaw to re-launch the enterprise in what was now a newly independent Poland (Szyfman 1964, 218). He chose to stage *Fanny's First Play* (1911) followed by a production of *Major Barbara* (1905). However, the production of *Fanny's First Play* proved to be only a qualified success: the technical challenge of “a theatre within a theatre” had flummoxed the play's fledgling director Aleksander Zelwerowicz. The directorial reins for *Major Barbara* were handed to Markiewicz, who could claim some first-hand knowledge of the industrialised landscape of Britain's cities (Pieńkowski 1919, 5). Though Markiewicz acquitted himself admirably with this production, he was not part of the core group of directors whom Szyfman called upon regularly, and thus he failed to secure another commission. It was then that Markiewicz's theatrical career began to founder irretrievably, and a staging of *The Memory of the Dead* in a small and marginal Warsaw theatre only confirmed his flagging fortunes (Krzywoszewski 1919, 12-13). The final nail in the coffin of his theatrical career came with Rabski's review of his *Nawrócenie totora* (The Conversion of the Rogue), which had premiered in Warsaw's Teatr Komedia (Comedy Theatre) on 15 November 1922. Rabski, who was something of a mentor to Markiewicz, stated that some months previously he had unequivocally told Markiewicz, who had presented him with the completed manuscript, that the play could in no way be considered as a work of literature. Having seen the play on stage, the critic could not hide his displeasure at the fact that Markiewicz had disregarded all of his corrections and suggestions (Rabski 1925, 162-164). Rabski proved not to be the sole critic of the play, as an unsigned review featured the following remark: “dowcip jest banalny, a intryga komediowa irytująco niezręczna [...] Publiczność [...] kazała”<sup>3</sup> (Unsigned 1922, 7). It appears that for Rabski and his fellow theatre aficionados, the time for hailing Markiewicz as a promising

<sup>3</sup> “the humour is banal and the comedic intrigue exceptionally irritating. [...] The audience [...] was coughing”.

playwright had passed. In spite of the continuing strength of his literary and theatrical friendships, Markiewicz found himself outside the loop.

### 5. *The Final Bow*

To fill the yawning gaps in his daily routines, and to plug an ever-widening hole in his finances, Markiewicz took an office job as a legal counsel in the American Consulate in Warsaw, a position he retained until his death in 1932 (see Quigley 2012, 215-216). Despite securing notable portraiture commissions during the 1920s and writing a novel on the recent Irish conflict, Markiewicz remained a marginalized figure in Warsaw's vibrant literary and artistic scenes. However, an opportunity for a theatrical swansong arose when he chose to co-write a play with Fijałkowski, the fruits of their collaboration being the three-act *Miłość czy pięść?* (*Love or Fisticuffs?*), a light comedic and matinee-esque romance set in the Eastern borderlands. The play brought Markiewicz back to the stage of the Polish Theatre in that it was staged in the adjoining Little Theatre, opened in the early 1920's to cater for the public's more levitous tastes. The production followed a celebrated staging of Shaw's breezy comedy *Misalliance* (1910), to which *Love or Fisticuffs?* was destined to be compared, sharing as it did several tropes, such as an indolent aristocratic set, and audience-pleasing romantic resolutions.

Given Markiewicz's propensity for writing naturalistic plays, the absence of a shocking theme can be attributed to Fijałkowski's more clementine choices. In the play an elderly aristocrat, shortly before his death, draws up two wills, leaving his expansive but encumbered estate to two distant young relatives in such a way that both have an equal claim to the entire property. One of the relatives is a humdrum university lecturer in philosophy, Dr Butrym, who harbours misogynist views. The assignee of the parallel will, Ms. Rozpędowska, is a bright and vivacious female athlete, handy with her fists, who likes to walk about in revealing sports attire. The actual sparring, however, occurs between their respective lawyers, who try to outmanoeuvre one another with their use of legalese. But as an improbable flame of romance fans between Butrym and Rozpędowska, the lawyers join forces in an attempt to fend off the bailiff, who in former times had been a baron and a dramatic poet – clearly this was a character who represented Markiewicz's own reduced circumstances. In the end, an ingenious plan is concocted to sell the forested part of the estate to an Englishman, who happens to be looking for a good business investment in the area. Romance blossoms between the competing benefactors of the will, marriage is planned, and ownership rights are shared. Markiewicz must have surely wished that his own life had panned out in a similar fashion.

The premiere took place on 15 July 1930, and following generous applause at the end of the performance, Markiewicz was called to the stage to receive an ovation. He also fielded questions from the audience, many of

whom, it was reported, were left speechless at the sight of the playwright's gigantic frame (Grubiński 1930, 3).

Several critics saw in the play a deconstruction of Markiewicz's own previous playwrighting failings, representing as it did a departure from his traditional aphoristic resolutions of unsavoury topics. Having said that, the critic Tadeusz Kończyc sensed that beyond the play's light-heartedness was a yearning for home: "[...] Jak to na kresach: 'Poznawszy się i pokochawszy' [...] a z miłości do ziemi, z której wyszli – połączyła dwoje młodych węzłem serdecznym"<sup>4</sup> (1930, 3). That said, Kończyc wondered whether Markiewicz's reputation as a writer of insalubrious material would leave some disappointed by the play's rather middle-of-the-road romance: "Nie wiem, czy publiczności szerokiej przypadła do gustu atmosfera wczorajszej sztuki. Nie była na scenie trójkąta [...]"<sup>5</sup> (*ibidem*, 3).

*Love or Fisticuffs?*, like the majority of Markiewicz's plays, has been lost to posterity, but its reviews and the recorded accounts indicate that the production presented Warsaw's theatre-going public with an opportunity to turn out and pay tribute to a beloved though misunderstood figure, whose theatrical status had become associated with being out of sync with the literary tastes and mores of the age. Critics, whilst less than effusive about the play's artistic noteworthiness, expressed their relief that the playwright had chosen to abandon the kind of tropes seen in *Marta is Getting Married*, which had scarred the collective memory of all those who had braved to sit through its performance (Grubiński 1930, 3). The writing of the play and the production itself crowned what had been a theatrical career of mixed fortunes, with critics ultimately adjudging the play to have relied too much on the willingness of actress Maria Modzelewska, playing Ms. Rozpędowska, to be in a state a relative undress for long periods of the play. As Henryk Liński noted, her performance had been both visually and aesthetically pleasing (14).

## 6. Conclusion

Markiewicz died two years later at the end of 1932. A close friend, Kornel Makuszyński would write some years later that his "polonus vagabundus" had not left to posterity a single mature literary work, but he took consolation from the fact that Markiewicz's collaboration with Fijałkowski had returned him to a theatre which should always have been the rightful venue for the performance of his plays. So some redress in the end had been made. Although Markiewicz's theatrical career in inter-war Warsaw was one of

<sup>4</sup> "[...] like in the borderlands, having met and fallen in love [...] and from their love of the land from which they came - they are joined by a sincere bond".

<sup>5</sup> "I don't know if the public liked what they saw yesterday. Maybe they did, maybe they didn't. After all, there was no *ménage a trois* on the stage".



thwarted expectations, it represents an important link between Poland and Ireland's theatrical traditions. Sadly, Markiewicz would always remain betwixt and between, destined to never be fully embraced by either.

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