

Darby O’Gill and the Little People

1990

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I saw heretics beheaded, martyrs burned at the stake, Mexicans massacred, gooks machine gunned, Indians annihilated; and strolled home happy. But when the death coach came galloping out of the wild black sky to take Darby O’Gill to hell, it fairly put the fear of God in me; more so than any clergyman before or since, however vivid their threats of eternal damnation.

The Sunday sermon was so predictable, as were the plots and stock characters in every cowboy, pirate or war film. In those early pre-TV Saturday afternoon matinee days at the Ideal cinema in Carrickfergus, only two movies broke the mould for me and lodged themselves forever in the imagination: *The Wizard of Oz* and *Darby O’Gill and the Little People*. Kansas and the land of Oz were sufficiently far away not to keep me awake at night, but Darby O’Gill lived just down the road, somewhere in Ireland; and his world of leprechauns and banshees was outside my window at night.

No matter how corny the characters in the picture postcard parish of Rathcullen, I recognised the fields, I knew the smell of Guinness from drunk men’s breath, and my father wore a cap just like Darby O’Gill’s.

I do not recall much of the plot but all through childhood and beyond I have remained haunted by vivid remembered images: little leprechauns in mad underground celebration dancing round pots of gold, leaping over plundered treasures; Michael and Katy skipping hand in hand through the fields; the jaunty, laughing, Guinness swilling, devil may care Darby with his pub stories, his sideways philosophy and his battles of wit with the wily King Brian of the leprechauns; but mainly, and most frighteningly, the dreaded death coach with its headless coachman come to call Darby’s soul on the one way trip to hell. The thought of it still sends shivers throughout me. Therein is part of the magic of cinema: to implant a visual image so strong that somewhere in the psyche the cinematic illusion becomes as real or as powerful as any actual experience.

Hollywood sends back its version of Irish folklore and legend and we buy it with added Technicolor and schmaltz. Put it in the shop window in New York on St Patrick's Day along with forty shades of green paperweights, the lacquered shillelaghs, and the wonderful world of dee-deelee eedelee eedelee Irishness; skipping dancing jolly little leprechauns in bright buckled shoes and battered hatted bow legged bright red drunken faced gombeen men with little devils in their laughing Irish eyes, mischievous gossipy white haired old women with shawls, pure white skinned colleens skipping carefree through green fields dutifully ready to return in an instant to domestic chores, strapping athletic lads with fine belts and sturdy boots ever willing to put in a fair day's work or hit each other a clout.

I suppose when they string together every possible Celtic cliché, you can only sit back and submit knowing that the stereotype is so overplayed as to be utterly ridiculous, yet at the same time resenting the perpetration of it.

While wanting to dismiss the stereotyping and silly superstition, the snag remains that within all the ballyhoo there are elements of truth. So instead of being outraged, one is left with a resigned smirk. How can *Darby O'Gill* be dismissed as superstitious nonsense when it is part descriptive of a society where even now devotional queues are forming to watch supposedly moving statues. If there is a bit of a want about such people then the good Catholic church surely provides for it. Miracles and dramatic visions, wonderful and fearful, are the stuff on which the faith has survived. The interweave of religion, superstition and legend within Irish history and culture is a living interrelationship which has not died with the coming of any modern age.

Exaggeration is an integral part of the Irish storytelling and myth making tradition and any tale will be followed by the remark 'sure that's nothin'' from an unimpressed listener who will then proceed to recall or invent an even more amazing yarn. The whiskey glass from which King Brian drank is given pride of place as a hallowed relic on the top shelf of The Rathcullen Arms, destined to be the basis of many a tall tale. It is no coincidence that we move from this shot to a view of the holy pictures and medals surrounding Katy's mirror.



And then there was the re-view. If it was like seeing a long lost friend again after twenty-seven years, *Darby O'Gill* was comfortingly predictable with touches of the old sparkle but we had lost a lot of common ground as I had moved from a place of romance and innocence through a world of cynicism and calculated sophistication. Every technical device and dramatic trick was blatantly obvious this time through, and yet there was still a lot of delight, not from smug recognition of prize kitsch, but for a good yarn well told with the perfect characterisation of Albert Sharpe in the title role. If you are talking of definitives you are talking of Olivier as Richard III, Charles Laughton as the Hunchback of Notre Dame, W C Fields as Mr Micawber, Phil Silvers as Ernie Bilko, and Albert Sharpe as Darby O'Gill. His bright eyed, dishevelled, toothless, likeable, harmless old rogue is a cinematic gem, crucial to the enjoyment of the whole film by providing an almost believable character focus in the midst of crudely painted cardboard mountains, fake Irish accents, and stick on red sideburns.

What was once awesome fantasy all seems rather tame now. The magical world of *Darby O'Gill* was shattered long ago when television came into the houses of Carrickfergus. The Ideal had to close down, and a vandal's brick made it the Ideal, which spelled the end of an era.

(JOHN CARSON)