

## Introduction

Andrew Patrick “Pat” Wilson [heretofore referred as APW] (1886-1950) was at the forefront of several major movements in Ireland, England and Scotland. He was, for almost forty years (1911-1950), a director and playwright of theatre, film, and radio, and he was also an actor, teacher, producer, critic, political commentator, and visionary. He was the general manager of Ireland’s Abbey Theatre from 1913-1915. He had been an actor with the company since 1911, a member of their second company under the tutelage of Nugent Monck, performing in ten plays, including three he had written (*The Cobbler*, *A Call to Arms*, *The Slough*, all in 1914). He had also directed nineteen plays at the Abbey, including the premier of Lady Gregory’s *Shanwalla* (1915), as well as directing his own three plays. The third of his original plays, *The Slough*, was the first full-length Irish play to deal with the urban tenement-dwelling working-class from their perspective (the first such play to be produced at the Abbey) making it an important and influential forerunner to the urban socialist realism of Sean O’Casey’s celebrated Dublin trilogy ten years later.

During his early years at the Abbey, APW wrote a weekly column for the *Irish Worker*, a syndicalist newspaper and the organ for the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, under the helm of Jim Larkin. With Larkin’s sister Delia, he helped form the Liberty Hall Players in 1912, an amateur company associated with Larkin’s union, directing and acting in his two earliest plays, *Victims* and *Poached*, both of which were originally published in the *Irish Worker* and were performed at union halls to rally the workers. From 1915-1916, he managed the Irish Players, a troupe comprised of

former Abbey Theatre actors (such as Arthur Sinclair) who were fed up with the Abbey's low wages and artistic inertia.

In 1920, he was one of the guiding lights of the Scottish National Players, bringing from 1921-1923 a new commitment to a national drama that had sporadically lain dormant and helping to create opportunities for several new voices in the theatre and in Scottish cultural life (including George Blake, John Brandane, and Gordon Bottomley). That commitment helped result, years later, in the success of several historically important companies, including the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow. As British film was recovering after the First World War, in 1924 he joined Stoll Pictures in London and wrote and directed seven two-reelers for them, most notably six adaptations of P.G. Wodehouse's comical golf stories. By the end of the decade he had become the founder and artistic director of two professional theatre companies: in 1927 a troupe that toured around Scotland (Andrew P. Wilson and his Scottish Players), and in 1931 a theatre venture which focused largely on plays written about and performed by women as well as short one-act plays intended for the burgeoning amateur community theatre movement in Scotland (the Holyrood Players). From 1933-1947 APW contributed radio scripts to the BBC Scotland, original scripts as well as literary adaptations, and he created a popular comedy series, *Sandy and Andy*, the radio philosophers, (1936-1947).

During the Second World War, he founded a left-wing, populist theatre company, the Edinburgh People's Theatre (1943). While ill health forced him to resign from the Edinburgh People's Theatre, he continued his writing and with the Edinburgh Jewish Dramatic Society won the Edinburgh District Scottish Community Drama Festival with his play *The Coat of Many Colours* (1948). He took on an important acting role (as

Spiritualitie, the corrupt bishop) in Tyrone Guthrie's landmark production of Sir David Lyndsay's *Aine Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* at the Edinburgh Festivals of 1948 and 1949. He continued writing, directing and performing plays, right up to his death in 1950. In all, he wrote over 90 scripts, publishing most of them, acting in many of them, and directing and producing all of them.

Yet virtually no one has heard of him.

APW and his plays have fallen into forgetfulness, especially among historians of both Irish and Scottish drama. *Historical Invisibility* intends to interrogate APW's being effectively written out of the official history of the Abbey Theatre and largely out of most historical surveys of the twentieth-century Scottish theatre, and this book will contend that such invisibility distorts the true achievements of both of these theatres and of the man. To understand Irish drama and, especially, the drama of O'Casey without recognizing a man who helped pave the way in two plays through their ground-breaking experiments in form and subject matter, to understand Scottish drama while passing over a tireless and unflagging visionary who pushed, cajoled, argued (sometimes imprudently), and smuggled political and social commentary in many of his plays it is necessary to move away from the "great person" syndrome and begin to exhume and investigate those writers, performers, critics, and teachers who created the opportunities for later, more commercially and artistically successful artists, especially this particular visionary who quintupled as writer/director/performer/dramaturge/producer.

As I began searching out references, I kept coming up with empty spaces, such as when and where he was born, when he died, even what he wrote. One reference<sup>i</sup> listed

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<sup>i</sup> Brady, Anne M. and Cleeve, Brian. *A Biographical Dictionary of Irish Writers*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 250

Wilson's biography as appearing in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, yet a simple check reveals that the encyclopedia's subject was the British socialist novelist, A. N. Wilson. The current website of the Scottish Theatre Archives in the Special Collections at the Library of Glasgow University contains this biographical note of APW:

Andrew Patrick Wilson, born in Dumfries, Scotland. He wrote under the pen-name of Euchan and was the first producer/director of the Scottish National Players. He was also Stage Director for Sir Oswald Stoll's Theatres whom he joined in 1915. Prior to this he was connected with the Abbey Theatre, Dublin as player, dramatist, producer and general manager from 1913-1915.

Incorrect about his birthplace, partially correct about his pen-name, incorrect in date and job title about his employment association with Stoll, and completely without any further mention of plays, films, theatre companies or dates, this is still typical of the information that exists. APW's years in Ireland consist of a multitude of contradictory statements regarding his brief tenure at the Abbey, e.g., whether he was fired or quit, whether he mismanaged funds or whether he attempted to create a new theatre and raid the Abbey of its actors. Yet in each instance his impact is rendered as so minimal as to be reduced at best to a footnote.

Wilson's Scottish years, while better documented, nevertheless contained such gaps that the Scottish Theatre Archives at Glasgow University did not have a date of death for him, in spite of their possessing the archives for the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman* (from both of which I ultimately found that information), while most of the histories of twentieth-century Scottish theatre tend to either downplay or dismiss the significance of the Scottish National Players. And almost no one mentions APW's later

plays or his radio dramas and comedies, in spite of their clear popularity (many of them remained in print and were even re-printed in later editions, well after APW's death).

This book is intended to correct this. Unfortunately there is still much of his private, personal life that is shrouded not in myth but cloaked in invisibility from the lack of documentation. If he left papers, diaries, letters (outside of those letters he wrote to D. Glenn MacKemie during his tenure at the helm of the Scottish National Players and a handful to Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats when APW was general manager for the Abbey Theatre), I have yet to find them. Some areas of potential research were stymied as when I found that much of the Abbey Theatre's archives were destroyed in their great fire of 1951. Much of what I have found has been due primarily to the efforts of the Scottish Theatre Archives in the Library at Glasgow University and their extensive collection on the Scottish National Players. Yet due as much to accident as to persistence I have continued to stumble on to information, such as the revelation that the British Film Institute possesses five of Wilson's seven films which they allowed me to view. Occasionally I uncover new play titles mentioned but not recorded anywhere else (such as an advertisement or a programme for a play by APW, *Puggles Grows Up*, produced at the Theatre Royal in Exeter in 1920), and usually there is neither a script nor a review to read nor any further information as to what has happened to them.

In spite of the information gaps what I have managed to find has been quite exciting and revealing. I will argue in this book that his full-length Dublin labor play, *The Slough* (1914), is his most important and accomplished work. Yet it was never published. The only copy the Abbey possesses in its archives at the National Library in Dublin consists of actors' sides, minus that of the leading two characters, meaning that

approximately 15-20% of this play is missing. I obtained a copy of this in 1999 and have attempted somewhat successfully to piece it together. Very recently a complete copy was found by Dr. Ben Levitas at the British Library in the Lord Chamberlain's papers, deposited when a production in Liverpool in December 1915 was seeking a license to perform it. This is both gratifying and thrilling.<sup>ii</sup>

Most of APW's radio plays can be found in draft form in the Scottish Theatre Archives at the University of Glasgow along with correspondence concerning the Scottish National Players, while his published works are largely found at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh and at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. To these groups I owe deep thanks for their unflinching good will and kind assistance. And it is in the reading of these scripts that I have learned much about APW, his concerns as an artist and as a Scot, and his growth as an artist.

So what I propose to give you in this book is a hybrid critical study-biography of Andrew Patrick Wilson, in the latter to share what is/can be known about his life. But, mostly, my intention is to share with you the works of this largely unknown yet important figure in Irish-Scottish theatre, to examine several of what can be seen as key works from various periods (devoting an entire chapter to his most important play *The Slough*), to chart his development artistically, politically, and personally from them and, hopefully, to render this once popular (and at times slyly subversive) playwright visible. What I will not do is to make assumptions from the plays that lead to specious biographical assertions. It demeans and trivializes any writer to suggest that their creativity is dependent solely on autobiography. The idea, still tossed around occasionally, that

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<sup>ii</sup> Levitas, Ben. *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism, 1890-1916*. (New York. Oxford University Press. 2002). In a footnote, Prof. Levitas writes that the play "whose influence on O'Casey is so palpable, was previously thought lost. Fortunately Wilson submitted a copy to the Lord

Shakespeare was able to create Katherine because Anne Hathaway was a ‘shrew’ in real life, only tries to diminish the accomplishment of the artist, and is silly, insulting, and devoid of any understanding of the creative process. On the other hand, in play after play, Shakespeare sets up scenes of familial betrayals – from children, siblings, spouses, and parents – that do suggest a theme that resonated with Shakespeare. In such manner I will examine connective themes, characters, or styles in APW’s work.

In Chapter One, the shortest, I will reveal what is known from the few records available about APW’s family, his growing up in and around Dumfries, and, from an interview granted when he returned to Dumfries in the 1920s with a touring production of the Scottish National Players, his troubled relationship with his family over his choice of profession, all while providing a brief background to the Scottish theatre of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The second chapter will explore his work with Jim Larkin, syndicalist leader of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union just before and during the ruinous 1913 Lock-out. It was with this union connection that APW began writing a weekly column for the *Irish Worker* commenting on political developments of the day and it was in this paper that he published his first play, *Victims* (1912), a one-act that has been described as the earliest play in Ireland to deal with tenement existence for Dublin’s urban poor and with the immorality of pushing the poor to early deaths in the name of profit. This chapter will examine this play and two others he wrote at this same time, *Profit!* and *Poached*.

Chapter Three will look at the 1913 Lock-out and then critically interrogate APW’s masterwork, *The Slough* (1914), as it fits in with the concept of the historical

drama, as well as APW's background against the urban poverty found in mid to late nineteenth-century Scotland. This chapter, while acknowledging also the critical wrangling still occurring among Irish historians about both the period and the specific event, will draw principally upon the writings of R.F. Foster, Robert Kee, Joseph Lee, and Terence Brown for its contextual overviews of early twentieth-century Irish history, and upon the work of Mary Daly and Joseph O'Brien for specific information about Dublin's living and working conditions during the first two decades of the century. As for the Lock-out, the principal sources are in the reporting and analyses of Arthur Mitchell, J. Beresford Ellis, Emmet O'Connor, C. Desmond Greaves, and Emmet Larkin.

Chapter Four records his years with the Abbey Theatre (1911-1915), first as an actor in their second company, as a director and actor and eventually playwright, and then as the general manager and investigates both his leaving the company, the several Rashomon-like stories as to what ended the relationship, and the concerted effort since then in writing APW out of almost all the histories of the Abbey Theatre, creating the initial event of APW's historical invisibility, and with the lack of any mention by Sean O'Casey who harbored a personal grudge against APW and whose plays, especially *Juno and the Paycock*, feel very much influenced by *The Slough*.

Chapter Five looks at APW's parallel theatre life both during and post-Abbey, as manager for the newly-formed Irish Players (1916), as well as his earliest Scottish drama, *The Herd's Wife* (1913), which premiered in Glasgow during his term at the *Irish Worker*. APW's employment late in the decade with the London impresario Sir Oswald Stoll will also be examined. For much of these two chapters I have relied on the writings of Joseph Holloway's invaluable diaries of his Dublin theatergoing at this time and his



friendship with APW, and from the massive and rewarding archeological work on the Irish theatre at this time by Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham.

Chapter Six examines the efforts to found a national Scottish theatre, one that APW attempted to create in the model of the Abbey Theatre (1920-1924). From APW's speeches and newspaper articles extolling the virtues and necessity of Scotland finding, nurturing and producing their native-born dramatists to his adapting anonymously (as "Euchan") several popular works of fiction crediting their original authors only, to his creating and training a company of young actors and directing all the plays, this chapter will confront the failure of the Board of Directors to sustain the visionary partnership held by APW and D. Glen MacKemie. The chapter also questions an apparent abandonment by APW from his early socialist plays in Ireland in favor of a more commercial mixture of broader, more sentimental, and more quaintly nationalistic plays.

Chapter Seven critically looks at APW's brief but not sustainable film career and assesses his adaptations and direction of a series of P.G. Wodehouse's *Golf Stories* (adapted as *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, 1924) as the British cinema attempted to reinvigorate itself after the devastation of the Great War.

Chapter Eight returns APW to his stage career, founding new companies to perform his new plays, now written without the nom de plume of "Euchan," beginning a four-play cycle of 'Crony' comedies (e.g., *Crony o' Mine*, *Auld Nick*, *Storm in the Manse*, *The Nest Egg*) along with a major pre-feminist comedy *The Provost's Chain*, and the first of his short plays written expressly for amateur community theatres and for all-female casts, allowing APW freer reign to subtly comment on both politics and gender issues.

Chapter Nine examines APW's side career as writer of radio dramas for the BBC Scotland during the 1930s and 40s, creating plays that were patriotic flag of St. Andrew-waivers (especially during WWII) and the slyly satirical and hugely popular *Sandy and Andy*, *Radio Philosophers* (1936-46) which both sent up and embraced the kailyard comedies of the day. During this period APW wrote at least one major drama in which he seems to attempt to reconnect with his earlier, more politically radical background (*Retrospect*, 1935).

Chapter Ten sees APW suffering from ill health but still founding a new theatre company, the Edinburgh People's Theatre, a left-wing, populist company (1943-44), as he starts to retire from acting in his plays. Though APW accepted the important role of Spirituality in Tyrone Guthrie's legendary production of Lyndsay's 15<sup>th</sup> century *Ane Satire of the Thrie Esatites* in the 1948 and 1949 Edinburgh Festivals, his last plays continue to plumb the themes of all-women societies. Finally, through the women in his last play, *Visiting Day* (1950), APW creates a haunting visual farewell.

Throughout this book will examine the various levels of invisibility and the rewriting of both the histories of the Abbey Theatre and the Scottish National Players, downplaying the roles played by APW in their running and development. It will question and re-examine the levels of commentary and rebelliousness in APW's deliberate choice of using the Doric dialect which leads linguistically into an ideological and cultural identification and refusal of cultural absorption by revealing the social diversities of speech. This is seen especially in those moments in his plays (frequently in his all-women one-act plays) as characters do not comprehend the speech patterns even as audiences cannot fail to and require no translation. It is also vital to viewing his plays

that are centered of all-female societies, where female characters are given agency and become the subjects of the drama.

Andrew P. Wilson does not deserve his invisibility and it is the hope of this writer that this book may spark a renewed interest in re-examining and possibly producing some of his plays, and maybe finding that his voice may still be heard and may still have something of importance to offer to us. Tyrone Guthrie recalled the founding of the Scottish National Players as a vital link in the founding of a Scottish drama. I believe Andrew P. Wilson also provides a vital link to two national theatres and it does no disservice to either and their great writers to acknowledge this.