

## Power, Tyrone

by Bridget Hourican

Power, Tyrone (1797–1841), actor and writer, was born William Grattan Tyrone Power on 2 November 1797 near Kilmacthomas, Co. Waterford, only child of an itinerant actor and scion of a once wealthy Waterford family, and Maria, daughter of Col. Maxwell, who died fighting in the war of American independence. Tyrone's father went to seek his fortune in America soon after his marriage and died of a fever there. His widow and child left Waterford early in 1798, and were shipwrecked on the crossing from Dublin but lived to settle in Cardiff. Tyrone early decided on a stage career, and ran away from home at the age of 14, spending a few years touring the country with different companies before settling in Mrs Shatford's company in the Isle of Wight where he remained two years. He married there (1817) Annie Gilbert, ward of Dr Thomas, an eminent Salisbury physician.

That year he returned for the first time since infancy to Ireland, being engaged to appear in the Crow Street theatre in December. On landing he composed a rapturous lyric beginning 'Restor'd to my country', for he was ever full of patriotic feeling. He was five months in Dublin, appearing variously as Romeo, as Lt O'Connor in the farce 'St Patrick's day' by R. B. Sheridan (qv), and in a host of other plays now utterly obscure. He had very limited success and was the butt of caustic comment in the *Freeman's Journal* and *Evening Post*. The next two years were spent touring Britain in provincial companies and becoming increasingly disillusioned. He determined to leave the stage and in June 1820 sailed for the Cape of Good Hope, having entered into speculation with an army officer. After a fruitless year in South Africa he returned home to his family and the stage. From 1822 he began to appear as comic Irish characters and enjoyed his first success. The death in October 1826 of Charles Connor, then the leading Irish comedian, created a vacuum which Power filled. Within a month he was appearing in Covent Garden and his reputation was made. His only roles still remembered are those created by Sheridan; otherwise he played stage Irishmen rejoicing in names like Hoolagan, O'Blarney, or Brulgruddery, but Power seems to have brought a grace and naturalness to these parts which redeemed them from parody. In June 1829 he returned to Dublin and greatly recommended himself, though Dublin audiences were notoriously wary of London actors playing Irishmen. His biographer and fellow actor, John Calcraft, writes that roles that he made his own fell into total obscurity after his death. In July 1833 he brought his fame to America, remaining two years and making double the money he would have made at home. On his return he published his lively *Impressions of America*, marked by the same good humour as his works of fiction. His first novel, *The lost heir*, appeared in 1829. This was followed by a spate of comedies: 'Married lovers' (1831), 'St Patrick's eve' (1832), 'Born to good luck' (1832), 'Paddy Carey' (1833), and his most successful drama, 'O'Flannigan and

the fairies', which opened in Covent Garden in April 1836 with himself in the title role. All are genial farces featuring ebullient Irishmen.

He made further American trips, earning £3,500 there in 1838, to add to the £4,000 already made that year between Dublin and London. In August 1840 he returned to New York, mostly to attend to business affairs – he had brought land in Texas and been swindled, and had invested £3,000 in the United States Bank, which had stopped yielding returns. On 11 March 1841 he left New York on board the *President*, the world's largest steamship. He was announced to open at Haymarket on 12 April 1841 in his own farce 'Born to good luck, or The Irishman's fortune', but by that date the *President* had still not arrived. A rumour that it was coming into Cork brought thousands to congregate in the GPO in Dublin, but the *President* had long since gone down in storms near Nantucket shoals, probably on 14 March 1841. Power left seven children, of whom the eldest, Sir William Tyrone Power, was agent-general for New Zealand and author of travel books. Power's grandson was the American actor Tyrone Power (1869–1931); his great-grandsons were the film actor Tyrone Power (1914–58) and the theatre director Tyrone Guthrie (qv).

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*Dublin University Magazine*, xl (1852); *DNB*; Ernest Watson, *A study of the nineteenth century stage* (1926); Hogan; Arthur Hornblow, *A history of the American theatre* (1965); William Young, *Famous actors and actresses on the American stage*, ii (1975); *ANB*