'Oh, Oh Rodeo!!': American Cowboys and Post-Independence Ireland

Heffernan, C. (2022). 'Oh, Oh Rodeo!!': American Cowboys and Post-Independence Ireland: American Cowboys and Post-Independence Ireland'. *Irish Economic and Social History*, 49(1), 60-79.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/03324893211070241>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Irish Economic and Social History

Publication Status:
Published online: 10/01/2022

DOI:
[10.1177/03324893211070241](https://doi.org/10.1177/03324893211070241)

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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‘Oh, Oh Rodeo!!’: American Cowboys and Post-Independence Ireland.¹

What excitement down at Croke Park where the Rodeo was staged,
It came to us in Ireland as a boon,
For all the champion riders in the world were engaged,
We had thrills and spills throughout the afternoon ...

P.C., *Kerryman*, September 6, 1924.²

Writing for *Kerryman* in 1924, P.C. highlighted the fun and spectacle engendered by Tex Austin’s Croke Park rodeo. Playing in Ireland during a wider tour of the British Isles, Austin’s rodeo came at a pivotal moment in Irish history. In 1922, the Irish Free State formally gained political independence from Great Britain. While any celebrations of Irish sovereignty were curtailed by an Irish Civil War from 1922-1923, the early 1920s were marked by sustained public efforts to establish a new state that was simultaneously Irish and global in outlook. Examples of this included sporting displays, investment in new technologies and a welcoming of public or private entertainments.³ While a great deal of historical attention has focused on the forms of entertainment that were censored or critiqued in the interwar period, relatively little work has examined those forms of entertainment which were embraced wholeheartedly.⁴ Tex Austin’s rodeo, and the new wave of interest in cowboys which it encouraged, is one such example. How

¹ ‘Oh, Oh Rodeo!!’, *Sunday Independent*, 24 August 1924, p. 7

² ‘The Rodeo in Dublin,’ *Kerryman*, 6 September 1924, p. 7.

³ Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, *All Dressed Up: Modern Irish Historical Pageantry* (Syracuse, 2014), pp. 1-30.

⁴ Kevin Rockett, ‘Protecting the Family and The Nation: The Official Censorship of American Cinema In Ireland, 1923-1954,’ *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio And Television*, 20:3 (2000), 283-300; Senia Pašeta, ‘Censorship And Its Critics In The Irish Free State 1922-1932,’ *Past & Present*, 181, (2003), 193-218.

and why the Irish public embraced this rodeo, and the implications of their enthusiasm, are the focus of the present article.

Originally envisioned as a component of the Tailteann Games, Austin's rodeo came to Ireland one week after the Tailteann's end. At a time when civic pride in Ireland was high, Austin's rodeo events, featuring circus clowns, 'bronking' cowboys and open challenges to the public, quickly ingratiated itself with the Irish public and marked an intensification of Irish interest in American culture. Interest in cowboys in Ireland existed prior to Austin's rodeo but the rodeo, and its successors, marked a new, visual, intensification in this interest. While the role of cowboy culture, the myth of the frontier and rodeos in Irish culture has been alluded to in passing, the importance of visual cowboy spectacles and their symbolism in Ireland has yet to be fully discussed.⁵

Austin's two-week rodeo in Ireland and its aftermath spoke to masculine and nativist identities valued in the 'new Ireland.' Rodeos offered a participatory role to Irish men that appealed to new masculine identities and a rugged Irishness defined by its mastery of animals and the land. This facilitated the later growth of cowboy culture in Ireland. Sporting and leisure tours had existed prior to this time, but few encouraged the reactions that Austin's rodeo did.⁶ Arriving immediately after the Tailteann Game's closure, Austin's rodeo benefited from, and shaped, new conceptions of Irish popular culture. Specifically, it was part of a new wave of visual and public spectacles connected to masculinity in Ireland. The article opens with a brief discussion of masculinity and

⁵ Bernadette Whelan, 'American Influences on Irish Advertising and Consumerism 1900-1960: Fashioning Irishwomen,' *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 6: 1 (2014), 159-182; Elizabeth Russell, 'Holy Crosses, Guns and Roses: Themes In Popular Reading Material,' in Joost Augusteyn (Ed.), *Ireland In The 1930s: New Perspectives* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 11-28. One exception is Patrick Mahoney, 'Buffalo Bill Cody or Bufló Bill Códai? Irish Nationalist Invocations of An American Icon,' *New Hibernia Review*, 23:2 (2019), 31-51.

⁶ Neal Garnham, 'Rugby and Empire in Ireland: Irish Reactions to Colonial Rugby Tours Before 1914,' *Sport In History*, 23:1 (2003), 107-114; Mike Cronin, 'The Gaelic Athletic Association's Invasion Of America, 1888: Travel Narratives, Microhistory And The Irish American Other,' *Sport In History* 27:2 (2007), 190-216.

spectacle in independent Ireland with reference to hierarchies over women, land and animals. Following this, the article provides a brief biography of Austin and the growth of cowboy culture in a global setting before examining the rodeo in Ireland and its aftermath. Austin's short rodeo highlighted the importance of leisure in defining masculinity as well as the global, particularly Americanized, form of leisure popular in Ireland. Here attention is drawn to a new wave of messages surrounding masculinity in Ireland and the variety of mediums they took.

Leisure, Spectacle and Gender in 1920s Ireland

Writing in 2019, as part of a much broader collection of essays on masculinity in Irish history, Sonya Rose made clear the need to study the multiplicity of masculinities which took form in Ireland.⁷ Led, in particular, by Aidan Beatty and Mary Hatfield, historians have turned towards alternative means of studying gender, away from the traditional area of politics or sport, be it religion, adolescence or labour.⁸ While Beatty and others have done a great deal in examining efforts to conserve 'traditional' Irish identities through the censoring of dance halls, the media or tougher legislation regarding sex work, little work has examined recreation outside of the Gaelic Athletic Association or children's games.⁹

Austin's rodeo, and cowboy culture in general, highlights the need to address this area in greater detail. The popularity of American cowboys and the rodeo has long been acknowledged in

⁷ Sonya O. Rose, 'Afterword: Irish Masculinities and Gender History', in Rebecca Anne Barr, Sean Brady and Jane McGaughey (Eds), *Ireland and Masculinities in History* (London, 2019), pp. 292-302.

⁸ Aidan Beatty, *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism, 1884-1938* (New York, 2016); Mary Hatfield, *Growing Up in Nineteenth Century Ireland: A Cultural History of Middle-Class Childhood and Gender* (Oxford, 2019).

⁹ Aidan Beatty, 'Fianna Fáil's Agrarian Man and The Economics Of National Salvation,' in Rebecca Anne Barr, Sean Brady And Jane McGaughey (Eds), *Ireland And Masculinities In History* (London, 2019), pp. 155-177; Ed Madden, 'Bachelor Trouble, Troubled Bachelors: The Cultural Figure Of The Bachelor In Ballybunion And Mullingar,' in Rebecca Anne Barr, Sean Brady And Jane McGaughey (Eds), *Ireland and Masculinities In History* (London, 2019), pp. 177-202.

Irish literature and Irish history.¹⁰ Neglected from such discussions is an in-depth examination of the masculine identities attached to this world. In a different context, Ben Griffin has stressed the value of studying masculine communities which often operate alongside, or subservient to, broader masculine identities.¹¹ Aidan Beatty's work on Irish masculinity in the 1920s and 1930s has made clear the strength of political and nationalist identities during this time.¹² Likewise, Bryce Evans has explained the pressures brought to bear on Irish teenagers in the interwar period who were expected to be more like the 'revolutionary' generation.¹³ What is currently lacking from the study of masculinity in Ireland is greater engagement with those identities, values and communities unconnected to the revolutionary period. Cowboy and rodeo culture provide one potential pathway for a study of leisure masculinities within Ireland.

It is at this point that Griffin's recent work on masculinities in history must be explored. In an overarching critique of R.W. Connell's influential work on hegemonic masculinities, Griffin suggested a study of masculine communities. Such communities are not all encompassing – exhibiting those nationalist masculine norms studied by Aidan Beatty did not disbar someone from exhibiting a cowboy masculinity – nor are they isolated from other communities.¹⁴ During the course of a day individuals passed through multiple gender communities in the home, workplace, classroom, on public transportation or during sport and/or leisure. Values from one community were often taken into another but space existed for cowboy values, ideas and images to influence and support masculine identities in Ireland.¹⁵

¹⁰ Mahoney, 'Buffalo Bill Cody.'

¹¹ Ben Griffin, 'Hegemonic Masculinity as A Historical Problem,' *Gender & History*, 30:2 (2018), 377-400.

¹² Beatty, *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism*.

¹³ Bryce Evans, 'How Will We Kill The Evening? 'Degeneracy' And 'Second Generation' Male Adolescence in Independent Ireland', in Susannah Riordan and Catherine Cox (Eds.), *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (London, 2015), pp. 151-175.

¹⁴ Griffin, 'Hegemonic Masculinity as A Historical Problem'; Beatty, *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism*.

¹⁵ Griffin, 'Hegemonic Masculinity as A Historical Problem.'

What then, did a cowboy masculinity look like? More specifically, what did it look like in the interwar period? Cowboy and cowboy literature existed in Ireland prior to the Great War, as evidenced by Irish readers' familiarity with Buffalo Bill Cody.¹⁶ What differed in the interwar period was inclusion of visual spectacles. Buffalo Bill never toured Ireland, Tex Austin did. When those following Austin in Ireland did not perform in person, they could be found in the multitude of cowboy movies which came to Ireland. Moving towards the kinds of masculine identities that were exported to Ireland, a number of areas were at play. Speaking on the popularization of the cowboy figure in the United States, Jeremy Agnew cited the characteristics of self-sufficiency, of mastery over the land and also a chivalric nature. Coupled with this was the often-simplistic dichotomy made between the 'good' cowboy and the 'evil' or 'bad' opponent be they native Americans, corrupt politicians or blood thirsty villains.¹⁷

The self-sufficient nature of the cowboy, the man who relied not on new technology or luxury but rather relied on his own toil, was itself a reincarnation of the Horatio Alger books of the nineteenth century which fetishized self-improvement for American men.¹⁸ This idea of the self-sufficient cowboy also fed into the rural and farming masculinities related to mastery over the American frontier, both the land and the livestock. This latter point was demonstrated visually through the rodeo. As literature and film progressed in the 1920s and 1930s, the cowboy figure continued to be represented in simplistic 'good versus evil' narratives that saw the often aloof and self-sufficient cowboy forced to act to save his town, protect the innocent and/or protect a young woman. What was remarkable about such messages was the regularity with which they were used.

¹⁶ Mahoney, 'Buffalo Bill Cody or Bufló Bill Códai?'

¹⁷ Jeremy Agnew, *The Creation of The Cowboy Hero: Fiction, Film And Fact* (North Carolina, 2014), Pp. 12-45.

¹⁸ Tom Pendergast, 'Horatio Alger Doesn't Work Here Any More: Masculinity and American Magazines, 1919-1940,' *American Studies*, 38:1 (1997), 55-80.

Roderick McGillis' study of 'B movie' cowboy films during the 1930s explained the simplicity and regularity with which these messages were found in dozens of movies sold around the world.¹⁹

A clear 'cowboy aesthetic' existed. Such ideas were not uncritically embraced in Ireland, but meshed well with existing identities. As explored previously by Aidan Beatty, Bryce Evans and, more recently, Tim Ellis, a great deal of importance was given during the inter-war period to those who exhibited strong masculine attributes which were oftentimes thought to have existed during the revolutionary period.²⁰ The self-sufficiency of the revolutionary generation, who eschewed modern luxuries in favour of difficult work, was routinely seen as a standard against which Irishmen and, more often than not, Irish male teenagers, were measured. There was a distinct overlap between these ideals and those found in the cowboy figure. Similarly, the cowboy's relationship with the land, and with animals, fit well with the longer running masculine tropes found outside Irish cities. Much more work needs to be done on the masculine identities found in the Irish countryside, but recent work by Aidan Beatty and others has made clear the different norms found in the countryside. According to Beatty, the 'rural man' was often taken to be the purest expression of true Irish identity.²¹ In American literature and film, the cowboy was seen as the last bastion of American ruggedness and frontier spirit.²² All of this helps explain, in part, why the cowboy became such a popular figure for Irishmen, especially children and teenagers who had the time to consume cowboy ephemera. Equally important was the medium through which the new wave of visual cowboy media entered Ireland: the rodeo.

¹⁹ Roderick McGillis, *He Was Some Kind of A Man: Masculinities in The B Western* (Waterloo, 2009), pp. 1-28.

²⁰ Beatty, *Masculinity And Power In Irish Nationalism*; Bryce Evans, 'How Will We Kill The Evening? 'Degeneracy'; Timothy Ellis, 'De Valera's Gains: The Masculine Body in Irish Political Cartoons, 1922-39,' *Éire-Ireland*, 54:3 (2019), 61-93.

²¹ Beatty, 'Fianna Fáil's Agrarian Man.'

²² Jacqueline Moore, *Cowboys And Cattle Men: Class And Masculinities On The Texas Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York, 2011), pp. 33-54.

Led by Tex Austin, the first Irish rodeo came immediately after the 1924 Tailteann Games in Croke Park. Originally planned for 1922 and delayed owing to warfare and threats of boycotts, the Games were, a multi-faceted sporting and cultural event aimed at the rebirth of Irish nationhood. Seen by Mike Cronin as ‘an attempt to move beyond the hostilities of the revolutionary period and create Ireland anew,’ the Games tenuously traced their origins from 1896BC to 1169AD, the last period of Irish sovereignty before British rule.²³ Open to athletes of Irish birth and Irish descent, the Tailteann included an art exhibition, chess matches, a pageant to celebrate Irish businesses and, of course, sporting events. Early on a decision was made by the Game’s organizing committee to exclude sports perceived as British. This meant that, despite the popularity of games like soccer or rugby, they were excluded. In the case of the latter, Paul Rouse found that rugby was excluded on the grounds that it was ‘undemocratic and almost un-Irish.’²⁴ Such feelings were not extended to other foreign sports as motor boating, motor cycling, golf and tennis were included. It was also scheduled to feature Austin’s rodeo, which perhaps explains why Austin, and his promoters, made a strong push to highlight the Irish-American athletes competing in his shows. Owing to travel delays and logistics, Austin’s rodeo only arrived at Croke Park a week after the Tailteann. This did little to dampen its reception.

‘Rodeo Thrills’: Tex Austin’s Rodeo and American Masculinity

Born in Missouri in the late nineteenth-century, Tex Austin was, for a brief moment, one of the most popular and successful rodeo promoters of his time. Initially unremarkable, if reports are to

²³ Mike Cronin, ‘Projecting The Nation Through Sport And Culture: Ireland, Aonach Tailteann And The Irish Free State, 1924-32,’ *Journal Of Contemporary History* 38:3 (2003), 396.

²⁴ Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: A History* (Oxford, 2015), p.270.

be believed, Austin's later success stemmed from his creativity.²⁵ In 1917, Austin, whose real name was Clarence Van Nostrand, began hosting indoor rodeo performances across the United States.²⁶ Prior to this time, rodeos had largely been an outdoor enterprise, conducted away from modern stadiums or, indeed, cities.²⁷ Part of Austin's success stemmed from his decision to host rodeos in stadiums and indoor venues. This meant that Austin brought the rodeo directly into American cities, as opposed to peripheral locations. The public's enthusiasm for this new approach should not be underestimated. In 1922, Austin's rodeo toured New York, playing at the recently opened Yankee stadium before finishing the tour at Madison Square Garden.²⁸ Throughout this period and, using a public script which would be repeated in England and Ireland, Austin stressed the authenticity of his rodeo. In public, Austin deemed the 'Buffalo Bill' shows, which emerged in popularity in the late nineteenth century, to be a pastiche of Western culture. By contrast, Austin's shows were defined by their dangerous and 'real' events.²⁹ Austin's 'commitment' to authenticity helped propel the success of his shows but also ensured the ire of animal cruelty groups. In New York in 1923, for example, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals protested Austin's shows to little avail.³⁰

How Austin came to England is not entirely clear but the answers appears to lie with Sir Charles Blake Cochran. An English theatrical manager, Cochran became aware of Tex Austin during the planning of the 1924 British Empire Exhibition.³¹ The Empire Exhibition was a several month event, welcoming a series of oddities and colonial displays.³² Included in this was Austin's

²⁵ Joel H. Bernstein, *Wild Ride: The History and Lore of Rodeo* (Layton, 2007), pp. 52-53.

²⁶ Mary Lou Lecompte, *Cowgirls of The Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Illinois, 2000), p. 86.

²⁷ Gail Hughbanks Woerner, *Cowboy Up! The History Of Bull Riding* (Austin, 2001), p. 5.

²⁸ 'Cowboy Explains Rodeo to Women at Mrs. Hamilton's', *New York Herald*, 20 October, 1922, 14.

²⁹ 'Tex Austin', *The Colorado Museum*, 56 (1979), pp. 211-216.

³⁰ 'The Rodeo', *Animal World*, 5 (1924), 51-54.

³¹ Charles Blake Cochran, *I Had Almost Forgotten ...* (London, 1931), pp. 50-70.

³² Daniel Stephen, *The Empire of Progress: West Africans, Indians, And Britons at The British Empire Exhibition, 1924-25* (London, 2013), pp. 1-22.

rodeo. According to Cochran's biographer, Charles Greaves, Cochran asked Austin to perform in London when they met during Austin's tour of New York.³³ At first glance, Austin's inclusion in the Empire Exhibition was an odd choice. Organized in part by Prince Edward, the Wembley Exhibition was envisioned as a representation of Britain's new progressive nature. Austin's participation was supposed to be a side note to the main festivities which celebrated British modernity and monarchy in equal measure. Austin's inclusion was criticized by many for this very reason. Speaking on the rodeo in the House of Lords, Lord Charnwood of Leicester labelled the rodeo as 'one of the least desirable of the cultures of the United States.'³⁴ Despite Charnwood's protestations, the rodeo was a success. Ted Powell later argued that the British public expressed far more interest in Austin's show than many of the British exhibitions on sight.³⁵

³³ Charles Graves, *The Cochran Story: A Biography Of Sir Charles Blake Cochran* (London, 1951), pp. 113-116.

³⁴ Lord Charnwood, *House of Lords*, Vol. 57 Cols. 903-911 (4 June 1924).

³⁵ Ted Powell, *King Edward VIII: An American Life* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 87-94.

Fig. 1. Tex Austin's Rodeo, 1924 Wembley Programme. From Author's Collection.

In London, where Austin's group played for a week, the reception was largely positive but not immune from criticism. Reporting on proceedings, one unnamed journalist wrote of the 'procession of cowboys and cowgirls' who rode 'their variegated horses' to great acclaim.³⁶ At the intervals between performances 'an admirable clown mounted on a still more admirable ass, gave amusement.'³⁷ Noting the distinctly American ethos underpinning the show, which included loud amplifiers, the journalist devoted a great deal of attention to the steer running, which sadly ended when a horse broke its leg. Visibly distressed, the horse was destroyed in the stadium which turned

³⁶ Henry Nevinston, 'The Crowd and The Spectacle,' *Guardian*, 16 July, 1924, p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

the crowd against Austin's show. Calls of 'shame', 'rotten' and 'stop it' were said to have reverberated throughout the stadium.³⁸ Such was the anger exhibited by British audiences, soon substantiated by animal rights groups, that Austin's group were forced to change subsequent performances to lessen claims of animal cruelty. At a time when British fascination with American frontier culture was itself beginning to grow, Austin's rodeo came to be viewed by some as grotesque.³⁹ In a report for *The Guardian*, one journalist claimed that

after the demonstration the steer was applauded that managed to escape being roped. The crowd in its British way was cheering the underdog ... What may be perfectly natural and inevitable in the wild surroundings of a Wild West cattle ranch seemed too deliberate here in a place lit like a theatre under the eyes of a civilized crowd.⁴⁰

Austin's rodeo finished its London run in late July 1924. From reports, it appears that the first 'international rodeo' had been a financial success.⁴¹ Far from the exciting Wild West show Austin sought to advertise, the tour was marred, at least somewhat, by claims of animal cruelty. As evidenced by Lord Charnwood's comments in the House of Lords, the issue of animal cruelty was used by some to distinguish between the 'civilized' Englishman and his 'uncivilized' American counterpart. While such criticisms were not ubiquitous, they did exist. Furthermore, reports on the rodeos, and even the crowds' reactions, suggested a distinct distancing between British and American cultures. The contrast made between the 'wild surroundings' of America and the

³⁸ Ibid., 'Rodeo Set Back,' Nottingham Evening Post, 16 June, 1924, p. 1; 'Rodeo Casualties', *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 19 June, 1924, p. 6.

³⁹ Alannah Birch, 'Roy Campbell and The Cowboy-Dandies,' *English In Africa*, 43:1 (2016), 31-56; 'A Defence Of Rodeo,' *Yorkshire Post And Leeds Intelligencer*, 28 November, 1924, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Nevinson, 'The Crowd and The Spectacle.'

⁴¹ Cochran, *I Had Almost Forgotten ...*, pp. 50-70

‘civilised eyes’ in Britain was testament to this point. It was only when Austin’s group travelled to Dublin that they met with a near wholly positive reception.

Tex Austin and Irish Cowboys

Fig 2. Tex Austin’s Rodeo in Croke Park Dublin. Courtesy of the Croke Park Museum and Archives, Dublin.

Austin’s rodeo was not solely responsible for the intense Irish interest in cowboy culture in the interwar period, but it was one of the earliest iterations of the new visual turn in cowboy ephemera. While cowboy books and short-stories circulated in Ireland prior to the Great War, it was during the interwar period that films and live displays intensified this interest. The success of the initial rodeo was critical and linked to its appeal to Irish diasporic identities, Irish manhood and mastery over animals. This was a deliberate act on the part of Austin and his managers to sell the rodeo. Immediately on the finishing the London tour Austin’s manager, Mr. Heaslip, wrote to Irish

newspapers in a bid to raise awareness of the upcoming Irish exhibitions. Among his first batch of letters, those to *Freeman's Journal* proved the most illustrative

Paris, Berlin, Glasgow and other cities were anxious to get the show, but the most of the winners of the Wembley contest being of Irish origin – Vera McGivern, Tony Kernan, Rabe Roberts and half a dozen others – expressed a strong desire to see Ireland with the result that Dublin was voted the rodeo ...⁴²

Arriving in Ireland immediately after the Tailteann Games, Austin's group profited from a renewed sense of pride in the Irish diaspora. Similarly, claims that Irish organizers had bested those in Paris, Berlin and Glasgow served to substantiate ideas that Ireland was a recognized cultural state in its own right. Throughout their time in Ireland, Austin's organizers stressed the achievements of American-Irish riders, the country's unusual beauty and the toughness of the Irish people.

This blatant pandering to Irishness, and Irish masculinity in particular, was commercially effective. Performing twice a day in Dublin's Croke Park from August 18 to 24, Austin's rodeo enjoyed a warm reception despite the fact that Irish audiences were, at least initially, completely unaware of what a rodeo actually was. Called by some journalists 'the greatest living example of the American institution', the rodeo was explained to Irish audiences in a series of newspaper articles prior to the event. Articles reassured the audience that the rodeo be entertaining and that rodeos would quickly become the latest craze in Ireland.⁴³ The *Weekly Irish Times*, for example, claimed that

⁴² 'The Dublin Rodeo', *Freeman's Journal*, 26 July, 1924, p. 7.

⁴³ 'The Rodeo', *Derry Journal*, 30 July, 1924, p. 5.

A month ago very people in this country had even heard of the word 'Rodeo'. Before another month passes, it will often be heard in the land, and its meaning will have become familiar to the people. Rodeo is the Mexican word for 'round up' ...⁴⁴

The same article continued by distinguishing Austin's performance from 'Buffalo Bill stunts', which substantiated Austin's own claims that his rodeo was authentic whereas previous iterations were not.⁴⁵ The confusion surrounding the rodeo, including its pronunciation, even prompted the sale of a 'Cowboy Dictionary' outside Croke Park prior to proceedings.⁴⁶

Fig. 3. Souvenir Programme from Tex Austin's Rodeo. From Author's Collection.

⁴⁴ 'Rodeo,' *Weekly Irish Times*, 31 May, 1924, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ 'Rodeo In Dublin: 35,000 Spectators at Croke Park,' *Irish Times*, 19 August, 1924, p. 5.

At the event itself, emphasis was placed on the strength and virility of the Irish nation, specifically, its men. In the weeks prior to the rodeo's debut, Great Northern Railway struck an arrangement with Mr. Heaslip to run special trains from Belfast in Northern Ireland to Dublin in the Irish Free State.⁴⁷ Despite this all-Ireland customer base, it was Free State participants, emblems and emigrants who received the plaudits. In the first instance, Austin's rodeo donated the profits of two of its shows to the Jubilee Nurses Fund.⁴⁸ As explained in Elizabeth Prendergast and Helen Sheridan's work, the Jubilee Nurses often worked in the poorest parts of Ireland and were well regarded by local communities.⁴⁹ Several dozen Jubilee Nurses, took part in the opening ceremonies of Austin's rodeo. This spectacle served two purposes. First it rehabilitated Austin's image following the animal cruelty allegations in Britain. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it helped showcase the charitable spirit of Irishwomen, and by proxy, the Irish nation. In a different context, Maryann Gialanella Valiulis cited the importance of Irish women and their perceived virtues as emblems of the state's purity.⁵⁰ Playing with this ideal, Austin ensured a warm reception for his rodeo. Furthermore, Austin's decision to showcase the nurse's leading organizer Mrs. Barry and have Mrs. Barry pretend to direct proceedings comically but effectively captured the crowd's imagination.⁵¹

Far more important and indeed, popular, were Austin's Irish-American riders. Prior to the rodeo, *The Irish Times* wrote that

⁴⁷ 'Bands At the Rodeo,' *The Irish Times*, 15 August, 1924, p. 7.

⁴⁸ 'Rodeo Performances in Dublin: Special Displays For Nurses,' *Irish Times*, 1 August, 1924, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Prendergast And Helen Sheridan, *Jubilee Nurse: Voluntary District Nursing in Ireland, 1890-1974* (Dublin, 2013), pp. 2-28.

⁵⁰ Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, 'Power, Gender, And Identity in The Irish Free State,' *Journal of Women's History* 7:1 (1995), pp. 117-136.

⁵¹ 'The Dublin Rodeo', *Freeman's Journal*.

For us Irish this Rodeo had a special interest if for the names alone. Ruth Roach, Vera McGinnis, Florence Fenton, Bonnie McCarroll, Tommy Kirnan, Mike Hastings, despite spelling, are surely of Irish stock ...⁵²

Once in Ireland, Vera McGinnis and Tommy Kirnan became almost the sole focus of the media's attention. On the first day of the rodeo, Tommy Kirnan gave an impromptu exhibition for gathered journalists.⁵³ Later reflecting on her Irish welcome, Vera McGinnis remembered social outings where champagne glasses never emptied and crowds who happily stood in the rain to watch the rodeo. The warm Irish welcome was contrasted with English crowds deemed hostile by McGinnis. It was only in Ireland, McGinnis claimed, that she and the rodeo were 'really appreciated.'⁵⁴ Much like the 1924 Tailteann Games, which celebrated athletes of Irish descent, Austin's performers were depicted not as foreigners or outsiders but as Irish in their own right.

Far more important in furthering the popularity of Austin's show was the inclusion of Irish riders, specifically Irishmen, in the form of amateur bronc riding competitions which saw Irishmen attempt to remain atop a bucking horse for the longest time possible. Open each night to Irishmen in the audience, the amateur contests were well received despite the dangers involved.⁵⁵ The advertising of this exhibition centred primarily on a challenge to Irish masculinity. Using the prowess of Irish-American riders as an example, Austin and Irish newspapers questioned if Irishmen could measure up to their American counterparts. Many Irishmen competed in a bid to demonstrate their strength and highlight, even momentarily, their cowboy credentials. Predictably

⁵² 'The Rodeo', *Irish Times*, 2 January, 1925, p. 2

⁵³ Vera McGinnis, *Rodeo Road: My Life as A Pioneer Cowgirl* (New York, 1974), pp. 189-193.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ 'Rodeo Competitions', *Irish Times*, August 12, 1924, 7; 'Last Performance: End of Rodeo In Dublin', *Irish Times*, 25 August, 1924, p. 5.

many were injured in the process. One such rider, Mr. H. Hayes from Kildare, fractured his right leg after being thrown from his horse into the stadium walls of Croke Park.⁵⁶ This was done for a £5 prize and the status associated with being a champion rider in a sport depicted as entirely foreign and exotic to Irish eyes.⁵⁷ In their evaluation of the amateur contest, the *Sunday Independent* asked

What would we have done without the amateur riders? Their daring was sufficient proof that hope springs eternal in the human chest – for most of them did their riding with chest on the horse’s neck. But pains usually sprang in other parts of the human anatomy ...⁵⁸

Likewise, P.C., whose poem is found at the start of the article, wrote

Before the amateurs got up, they look at every girth,
Some wondering how long on top they’d stay,
But Johnny Wall of Dublin when consigned to mother earth
Said he thought he was above for half a day ...⁵⁹

Reports of the amateur riders were notable for their admissions that while the Irishmen ultimately failed to best their professional counterparts, they demonstrated the kind of grit, determination and hardiness which had long defined the cowboy spirit. Over the course of a week, over thirty-one Irishmen took part in the amateur competition, with several incurring injuries ranging from broken

⁵⁶ ‘Last Performance: End of Rodeo In Dublin’, *Irish Times*.

⁵⁷ ‘Rodeo In Dublin: Weather Stops Evening Performance’, *Irish Times*, 23 August, 1924, p. 7.

⁵⁸ ‘Oh, Oh Rodeo!!’, *Sunday Independent*.

⁵⁹ ‘The Rodeo in Dublin,’ *Kerryman*.

bones to bruised egos.⁶⁰ It appears that the majority of Irish entrants came from two categories, the Free State Army and Irish jockeys.⁶¹ While the military equestrian school did not open until 1926, mastery over horses was a point of military identity even then.⁶² What was clear was that this was a deeply masculine test. Prior to the event, one unnamed Irish woman from Louth was said to have entered the contest but was refused on the grounds that it was ‘too dangerous for a woman.’⁶³ Whether this claim was hearsay or not, the story re-iterated the fact that it was seen as an entirely male affair despite the celebrated exploits of Vera McGinnis. This suggests that, much like the music hall, the rodeo afforded female performers, like McGinnis, a relative degree of freedom from social constraints which were evident when it came to Irishwomen.

The Free State Army served an important ideological function. Like other parts of Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, the military was presented by some as an indicator of the nation’s strength and health.⁶⁴ For Irish politicians, like Colonel Richard Mulcahy, soldiers represented the livestock of the nation. In a debate in *Seanad Éireann*, Mulcahy claimed that only Irish soldiers were fit to teach physical education in Irish schools as only the strongest and fittest men were permitted entrance to the military.⁶⁵ That soldiers and officers entered the amateur rodeo gave Irish audiences the opportunity of comparing Irish and American tests of strength and manhood. In the buildup to the rodeo, Irish newspapers regularly spoke of the rugged masculinity needed to survive

⁶⁰ ‘Rodeo Competitions’, *Irish Times*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Michael Slavin And Louise Parkes, *Ambassadors on Horseback: The Irish Army Equitation School* (Dublin, 2010), pp. 12-33.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Conor Heffernan, ‘Soldiers, Sokol, And Symbolism: Forging A National Identity In 1930s Ireland,’ *Éire-Ireland*, 54:3 & 4 (2019), pp. 37-60

⁶⁵ General Mulcahy, *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 8, Ccl. 6 (07 July 1924).

on the American frontier, one it was assumed Austin's rodeo riders had.⁶⁶ In this way, Irish entrants could compare themselves with Americans.

Alongside Irish newspapers, which reported on the daily events of the rodeo, *British Pathé* released brief coverage of the rodeo. Specifically, *Pathé* compared the Irish amateur riders and their professional counterparts in a series of feats. *Pathé* viewers were thus treated to footage of Austin's performers riding two horses simultaneously with a foot on each followed by an Irish amateur. At other times, Irish amateurs were shown riding horses beside American handlers. What was important about the footage was the respect given to the Irish riders.⁶⁷ In other footage of the Irish Free State and its military during the 1920s and 1930s, *Pathé*'s coverage satirized exhibitions in the Free State.⁶⁸ This was not the case with Austin's rodeo in which *Pathé* viewers were repeatedly told that the amateurs could 'creditably emulate professional cow-boy's feats.'⁶⁹

The praise given to Irishmen was also, somewhat tongue in cheek, extended to the Irish cows and horses used during the rodeo. It nevertheless spoke to the comparisons between the 'strong' Irish and the 'Wembley weaklins.' Reporting on a conversation supposedly overheard in the audience, the *Sunday Independent* endorsed one man's claim that

Ye can't cod the Irish calves like the Wembley weaklins. One bull, obviously a descendant of the cow that jumped over the moon, had a bell on his neck ...⁷⁰

⁶⁶ 'Rodeo,' *Weekly Irish Times*; 'The Dublin Rodeo: What the Contests Comprise', *Weekly Irish Times*, 16 April, 1924, 5; 'The Rodeo In Dublin,' *Kerryman*.

⁶⁷ 'Rodeo In Dublin,' *British Pathé*, 28 August, 1924.

⁶⁸ Heffernan, 'Soldiers, Sokol, And Symbolism,' pp. 50-51.

⁶⁹ 'Rodeo In Dublin,' *British Pathé*, 2-8 Seconds.

⁷⁰ 'Oh, Oh Rodeo!!,' *Sunday Independent*.

The unnamed spectator was not alone in his appreciation of the Irish cows as the same newspaper emphasized the fact that ‘the crowd was always with the calves. Always. They were Irish calves.’⁷¹ Such praise could be contrasted with newspaper reports found in Great Britain, which oftentimes focused on the animal’s safety and wellbeing. While this was undoubtedly prompted by the injury suffered by a horse on the opening day, it further distinguished the Irish and British experience of the rodeo. In Ireland, attention was given to the strong Irish cows, distinct from the ‘Wembley weaklins’, in much the same way that cultural nationalists distinguished Irish athletes from ‘effeminate’ Englishmen a decade before.⁷² Likewise, some Irish spectators seemed to take great pride in the strength and vitality of the Irish animals used. The spectacle, celebrity, and participation opportunities given by Austin’s rodeo proved a successful combination. On leaving the Free State in 1924, many anxiously awaited Austin’s promised appearance at the 1928 Tailteann Games.⁷³ While this did not happen, the Irish fascination and enjoyment of American culture grew.

Cowboy Culture in Ireland

Short-lived but nonetheless enjoyable, Austin’s rodeo marked an intensification of Irish interest in American popular culture, specifically cowboys, rodeos and frontier life. Previous studies have tended to focus primarily on American jazz and film, both of which incurred the ire of Irish censors during the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁷⁴ Far more benign, but nevertheless significant, was an Irish

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Patrick Mcdevitt, ‘Muscular Catholicism: Nationalism, Masculinity and Gaelic Team Sports, 1884–1916,’ *Gender & History*, 9:2 (1997), pp. 262-284.

⁷³ ‘Oh, Oh Rodeo!!,’ *Sunday Independent*.

⁷⁴ See Footnote Seven.

infatuation with the American frontier that often-circumvented censure. This interest was found primarily among Irishmen and children. Immediately after the conclusion of Austin's rodeo, newspapers reported that

The newsboys and their smaller brethren have raided Fairview Park for brown paper to make sombreros; old sacks with side whiskers are converted into 'chappies' (cowboy language for trousers) and cast-off socks into moccasins ...⁷⁵

Such comments were illustrative of trends to come. In Irish theatres and circuses, more and more advertisements began to speak of 'rodeo thrill' on a regular basis. Visual cowboy culture had arrived. One year after Austin's summer sojourn, Duffy's circus promised a 'wild west rodeo & bill circus' that would fill everybody 'full of wonder.' Touring the west and southwest of Ireland, the circus included 'Indians, cowboys, cowgirls, Zulus' and even a cowboy band.⁷⁶ Furthering the show's attraction was the promise of fully lit spectacles at night owing to the electrification of the west of Ireland.⁷⁷ Duffy's circus was somewhat unique in trying to directly mimic Austin's rodeo. Far more common in Irish theatres was simply the inclusion of the word rodeo somewhere in the title and some allusion to the 'Wild West' and cowboy culture.⁷⁸ One such example was the 'Rodeo Frolics' show which played at the Tivoli Theatre in Dublin in 1927. Including bantamweight

⁷⁵ 'Oh, Oh Rodeo!!,' *Sunday Independent*.

⁷⁶ 'Wild West Rodeo & Big Circus,' *Connacht Tribune*, 22 August, 1925, p. 16.

⁷⁷ Mike Cronin, 'Selling Irish Bacon: The Empire Marketing Board and Artists of The Free State,' *Éire-Ireland* 39: 3 (2004), pp. 132-143.

⁷⁸ 'Rodeo Stevens,' *Kerry News*, 14 September, 1925, p. 4; 'Big Circus Rodeo And Wild West Show,' *Donegal Democrat*, 07 August, 1925, p. 4; 'Rodeo Frolics,' *Evening Herald*, 26 July, 1927, p. 6; 'Rodeo Frolics At The Tivoli,' *Irish Independent*, 26 July 1927, p. 8.

wrestlers, comedians and practitioners of jiu-jitsu, there was little to suggest a distinctly American theme to the night save, of course, the 'Rodeo Girls' who sang 'The Wrestling Horse.'⁷⁹

Admittedly a tenuous connection to the rodeo, such shows highlighted the significant social cache now attached to the rodeo in Ireland and, more importantly, cowboy culture. Weeks prior to Austin's arrival in Ireland, newspapers felt the need to define the term rodeo and provide examples of what it meant in action. In a short space of time, Irish audiences not only became aware of the rodeo, they seemed to have become cowboy connoisseurs. Writing in the *Irish Independent*, Walter Starkie, a man better known for his vagabond memoirs, noted the ubiquity of the cowboy in the European consciousness, especially among men, in an article entitled 'Characteristic American Figure.'⁸⁰ By 1929, Starkie claimed to have been inundated with cowboy regalia in Ireland and England. Such was his immersion in the topic that when he finally travelled to the United States, he convinced himself that the stories of 'one star' rangers and tough cowboys were more fact than fiction. He was left sorely disappointed when he realized how little such stories and spectacles corresponded with reality.⁸¹ Starkie's recollections pointed to a second important trend in the Irish interest in American culture, the publication of cowboy literature and film.

Elizabeth Russell's study of pulp fiction in Ireland during the 1920s and 1930s spoke to the fact that Irish authors were simply unable to sustain a growing demand for cheap, easily digestible fiction.⁸² Filling this gap, at least somewhat, were tales of American cowboys, shooting duels between foes and frontier living. Such works reinforced the idea of the cowboy as a masculine persona worth emulating. What was remarkable about such books was not their volume, but rather their widespread appeal. Declan Kiberd found that such books found a ready audience

⁷⁹ 'Rodeo Frolics,' *Evening Herald*.

⁸⁰ Walter Starkie, 'Characteristic American Figure,' *Irish Independent*, 12 December, 1929, p. 12.

⁸¹ *Ibid*.

⁸² Russell, 'Holy Crosses, Guns and Roses: Themes In Popular Reading Material,' pp. 11-15.

among rural and urban Irishmen, stating that ‘for those men who now had family cares and financial woes, cowboy tales offered the fantasy of escape.’⁸³ Such escapism was predicated on stories of rugged masculinities, defeating evil-doers and protecting one’s family. Likewise, Susan Motherway found that members of the travelling community resonated with the cowboy’s individualism as well as the racial prejudices exhibited against Native Americans in such books.⁸⁴ This meant that Irish readers, across classes, in the interwar period were regularly updated on, and interested in, the latest Will James novel and those of other cowboy authors. James’ popularity extended across North America and Europe during this period, but his fame was shared in the Irish context by several once off or lesser known cowboy authors who, as Russell argued, supplied a growing Irish demand for escapist tomes of masculine valour.⁸⁵

The increase of cowboy novels and shows in Ireland appears to have been a relatively unproblematic affair. Somewhat more cumbersome, at least at times, was the influx of cowboy and western films during the 1930s. Previous work on Irish censorship has highlighted the suspicion many felt toward foreign films and popular culture during this period.⁸⁶ Much of this ire was directed primarily at foreign music, such as jazz, and its perceived corrosive influence over young generations.⁸⁷ There was, however, still criticism levelled at foreign films despite the Free State’s reliance on outside production. Kevin Rockett cited the Free State’s peculiar media situation of the 1920s and 1930s when, Rockett claims, domestic film production was effectively nil.⁸⁸ This meant an overreliance on British and American film, which largely distinguished Ireland

⁸³ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge Ma, 1996), pp. 580-581.

⁸⁴ Susan Motherway, *The Globalization of Irish Traditional Song Performance* (London, 2016), pp. 90-91.

⁸⁵ ‘Cowboy Story,’ *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 December 1933, 11; Russell, ‘Holy Crosses, Guns and Roses: Themes In Popular Reading Material,’ pp. 11-15.

⁸⁶ Rockett, ‘Protecting the Family And The Nation.’

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* See Also Kevin Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema To Internet Pornography* (Dublin, 2004).

in the European context. Despite this reliance, strict standards were still put in the place by the Irish Censorship Board to retain the state's morality. For producers of Cowboy films, this necessitated relatively banal stories in which violence was permissible but little else. *Sackcloth and Scarlet*, a 1925 cowboy film, was rejected by censors owing to its sexual undertones and pseudo-religious imagery.⁸⁹ James Montgomery, the censor, cited a poor effort made by the studio to appease Irish standards in the decision

A Society Woman seduces a cowboy & becomes a mother as a result, a lot of Adam & Eve with the apple symbols worked in to make the opening scene as plain as possible, but in order to pass the Irish Censor a couple of unconvincing titles have been inserted which, if anything make the story worse. The story is unhealthy ...⁹⁰

This pattern continued into the 1930s where other cowboy films, like the 1930 *Trailing Trouble*, were rejected for the inclusion of prostitutes in the film.⁹¹ Far more common were mandatory cuts, as was the case with *Ride 'Em Cowboy*, which lost its jitterbug dance scene or *Lady Takes a Chance*, which featured unsavory words like 'jeeppers.'⁹²

From 1925 to 1943 only eight cowboy films were stopped by censors, with just two rejected entirely.⁹³ This suggests an acceptance of the wholesomeness, real or otherwise, of the cowboy film in Ireland. Certainly, cowboy films were some of the most popular attractions of the 1930s with Irish viewers treated to an influx of films ranging from Samuel Goldwyn's *The Cowboy and*

⁸⁹ Trinity College Dublin (Hereafter TCD), Irish Film Censor Records, 'Sackcloth and Scarlet,' James Montgomery 11 November, 1925, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ TCD, Irish Film Censor Records 'Trailing Trouble,' James Montgomery 11 July, 1930, p. 1.

⁹² TCD, Irish Film Censor Records 'Ride 'Em Cowboy,' James Montgomery 26 January, 1942, p. 1.; TCD, Irish Film Censor Records, 'Lady Takes a Chance,' James Montgomery 3 November, 1943, p. 1.

⁹³ TCD, Irish Film Censor Records.

the Lady or one of Tom Mix's three hundred cowboy films.⁹⁴ Interestingly, Tom Mix briefly toured Irish theatres in the late 1930s with his horse, 'Tony' which again highlights the variety of ways in which visual cowboy materials could be consumed. Part of Mix's appeal to Irish audiences, at least that advertised in the *Irish Press*, was his uniqueness in never being 'portrayed as smoking, drinking or gambling' in any of his many films.⁹⁵ Such praise was indicative of the numerous ways in which cowboys came to be seen as standard bearers for Irishmen. The purpose of such praise was not just to compliment Mix, but also to critique those Irishmen who indulged in such behaviours. The wholesomeness of Mix was echoed in other Irish engagements with the travelling cowboy, such as Gene Autry, the 'Singing Cowboy.' Capitalizing on his celebrity from films such as *Git Along Little Dogies*, Autry toured Ireland and Great Britain to great acclaim.⁹⁶ On Autry's visit to Dublin in 1939, thousands lined the streets of O'Connell Street in Dublin to greet him. Included were *Ceád Mile Failte* banners and a full marching band.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ 'The Savoy,' *Irish Examiner*, 15 September, 1939, p. 9; 'Cowboy Film Star Comes To Dublin,' *Irish Press*, 30 December, 1938, p. 7.

⁹⁵ 'Cowboy Film Star Comes to Dublin,' *Irish Press*.

⁹⁶ Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (Oxford, 2007).

⁹⁷ 'Great Excitement in Dublin', *The Irish Press*, 8 August, 1939.

Fig. 4. Gene Autry in Dublin, 1939. *The Irish Press*, 8 August, 1939.

Elizabeth Russell's previous work on cowboy literature in the interwar period made clear the enthusiasm shown by children, in particular, for the cowboy lifestyle.⁹⁸ It is clear that such enthusiasm was also found among Irishmen and women. For Irishmen, cowboy films, rodeos and theatre shows offered a visual medium through which to consume escapist stories of rugged masculinities, the triumph over evil and adventure. Such messages could often have a significant impact. Steven O'Connor has previously explained the importance of British and American film in prompting Irishmen to fight in the Second World War as part of the British Empire. In O'Connor's study, British films proved pivotal in shaping ideas of what war entailed, and how men should act.⁹⁹ Cowboys provided a similar role for Irishmen and children. For some, this

⁹⁸ Russell, 'Holy Crosses, Guns and Roses: Themes in Popular Reading Material,' pp. 11-28.

⁹⁹ Steven O'Connor, 'The Pleasure Culture of War in Independent Ireland, 1922-1945,' *War in History*, 22:1 (2015), pp. 66-86.

interest ended with childhood games or pretending to roam around the prairies on the streets of Dublin.¹⁰⁰ For others, like the famed Dublin police officer, Lugs Brannigan, cowboy films provided a masculine script for the tough approach taken towards criminals.¹⁰¹ In either case, cowboy media – be it rodeos, films or books - influenced behaviour, thoughts and identities.

Conclusion

Patrick Mahoney's work on 'Buffalo' Bill Cody, the turn of the century frontier showman, has stressed the enduring image of the cowboy in the Irish consciousness, especially in nationalist discourses.¹⁰² Mahoney focused on Cody, but it is clear that the Irish fascination with cowboys was not isolated to Buffalo Bill's famous shows. One such indication of a broader interest was Tux Austin's 1924 rodeo, which explicitly defined itself as overtly different from Bill Cody's. Coming at a time of significant social and political upheaval in Ireland, Austin's rodeo promised an entirely new kind of spectacle which would simultaneously entertain and inform. Equally important was the challenge it presented to Irishmen. Part of Austin's appeal, and genius, lay in the open invitation for Irishmen to test themselves against their American or Irish-American counterparts in feats of skill and strength. Although many failed, their participation spoke to the overlap in masculine ideals between Irish and cowboy cultures. First in the United States, and then in the global context, cowboys were primarily depicted as rugged, hard-working and even chivalric men, whose behaviours were laudable.

¹⁰⁰ Elaine Crowley, *A Dublin Girl: Growing Up in the 1930s* (New York, 1999), P. 54.

¹⁰¹ Kevin C. Kearns, *The Legendary 'Lugs Branigan' – Ireland's Most Famed Garda How One Man Became Dublin's Tough Justice Legend* (Dublin, 2014), p. 44.

¹⁰² Mahoney, 'Buffalo Bill Cody Or Bufló Bill Códai?', pp. 31-51.

In Ireland, such ideas meshed well with a public consciousness that largely celebrated these qualities for men, especially when comparing new generations to the men of the revolutionary period. Tex Austin, and the arrival of cowboy films into Ireland, provided a new visual medium for Irish boys and men to engage with and negotiate these identities. For some, their interest was confined to one off events within the rodeo, or to childhood games. For others, the cowboy became a means of escaping the trappings of modernity or work by immersing one's self in the excitement of the Wild West. Others modelled themselves on the tough but fair cowboy who enforced the law while some saw encouragement in the cowboy's rugged individualism and relationship with nature. For Irish historians, the rise of cowboy culture provides a much-needed addition to the study of Irish masculinities. This was a kind of identity forged through entertainment and leisure which provided a frame of reference for man and boy alike. Its existence spoke to the multiplicity of influences brought to bear on Irish men and children during this time.