

**KITTY O'NEIL AND HER "CHAMPION JIG"**  
**A Forgotten Irish-American Variety Theater Star**  
by Don Meade

The names of Irish dance tunes are not usually of much importance. Some musicians find a name such as "The Mouse in the Cupboard" or "The Little Pig Lamenting the Empty Trough" to be a useful device for recalling a tune from memory. Others are more casual about names, often transferring them accidentally from one tune to another or simply forgetting them entirely. Occasionally, however, the name of a tune can serve as the key that opens up a hidden history behind the melody.

One such melody is "Kitty O'Neil's Champion Jig," an elaborate, seven-part fiddler's showpiece that has been revived in recent years by Irish traditional musicians on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite the tune's Irish-sounding name and its adoption into the contemporary Irish repertoire, "Kitty O'Neil's Champion" is actually a hardy survivor from 19th-century American minstrelsy and variety theater.

Kitty O'Neil, the tune's namesake, was a popular New York-based dancer and singer of the 1870s and '80s. The revival of Kitty's "Champion Jig" hasn't done much to revive her reputation, however, because the tune has become widely known as "Kitty O'Shea," the title under which it mistakenly appeared on a recording by Donegal fiddle great Tommy Peoples, who started playing the tune in concerts during the 1970s and included it on his 1982 LP *The Iron Man*. **1**

Peoples found the tune in the pages of *1000 Fiddle Tunes*, an often-reprinted collection that has been popular in both Ireland and America since it was first published in Chicago in 1940. **2** Many Irish traditional musicians of the past half-century, including the influential fiddlers Seán McGuire, Paddy Cronin, James "Lad" O'Beirne and Larry Redican, reintroduced tunes found in *1000 Fiddle Tunes* into the living tradition.

The contents of *1000 Fiddle Tunes* were actually lifted wholesale from *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*, a compilation of 1,050 reels, jigs, hornpipes and other dance tunes published in Boston in 1882 by Elias Howe (a relative of the inventor of the sewing machine) and his assistant William Bradbury Ryan.**3** An eclectic grab bag of Irish, British and American dance music, *Ryan's* stands out from other well-known collections for its wealth of tunes from the 19th-century stage. The names attached to many of these tunes honor now-forgotten fiddlers, banjo players and dancers who, like Kitty O'Neil, were once famous variety or minstrel performers.

Irish musicians who have learned tunes from *Ryan's* or *1000 Fiddle Tunes* have largely concentrated on the reels, hornpipes and Irish-style jigs, avoiding the unfamiliar minstrel show "essences," "walkarounds" and "straight jigs." "Kitty O'Neil's Champion" was, however, too good a tune to be ignored forever.

Following Tommy Peoples' example, celebrated fiddler Kevin Burke called the tune "Kitty O'Shea" when he began performing it in the 1990s and on his 1999 recording *In Concert*. **4** Uilleann piper Paddy Keenan, who also picked the tune up from Peoples, included an abbreviated version on his 2001 CD *The Long Grazing Acre*, on which it is more correctly titled "Kitty O'Neil's." **5** Through the influence of these three alumni of the famous Bothy Band, Kitty's tune can now be heard in Irish music sessions from Belfast to Brisbane.

Kitty O'Shea was the mistress of 19th-century Irish Home Rule champion Charles Stewart Parnell. The exposure of their adulterous affair brought the political career of "the uncrowned king of Ireland" to a scandalous end and made O'Shea an enduringly notorious

character in Irish history. Kitty O'Neil, on the other hand, has been almost entirely forgotten, though she is well worth remembering, if only because the tune that bears her name is an intriguing relic of a time when a fusion of Irish and African-American elements was helping to create a truly American style of popular music and dance.

### **Broadway Debut**

Biographical details on Kitty O'Neil are hard to come by, but her New York theatrical career is extensively chronicled in George C. Odell's encyclopedic *Annals of the New York Stage*, a multi-volume listing of performances culled from newspaper advertisements, playbills and other records. **6**

According to her 1893 death certificate, O'Neil was born in the U.S. to Irish-born parents. The year was probably 1852. Like many variety entertainers, she may well have belonged to a showbiz family. Her New York *Times* obituary noted that she was survived by three brothers and a sister, all unnamed.<sup>7</sup> It may not be a coincidence that a Billy O'Neil was a well-known clog dancer and comedian in her youth or that Kitty was once on the same variety program as the otherwise obscure Hattie O'Neil.

Her first appearance in Odell's annals came in 1862 when "Kathleen O'Neil" sang on St. Patrick's Day at the Canterbury Music Hall. The Canterbury, run by Robert Fox and named for a then-famous London music hall, was located at 583 Broadway in what is now called SoHo but was then the heart of the New York theater district. The Canterbury's orchestra was led by Dave Braham, a London-born violinist who a few years later would achieve fame as Ned Harrigan's songwriting partner and musical director. **8**

Shortly after her Broadway debut, Kitty's stage career, and that of many other New York variety entertainers, was interrupted by the Concert Saloon Bill, a state law designed to suppress what various reformers and blue-nosed puritans regarded as flagrant displays of public immorality in the Broadway music halls. **9** The New York *Times*, which led the journalistic assault, went so far as to charge that concert saloons "under guise of singing, and selling lager beer, are really the lowest and most infamous houses of prostitution."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Concert Saloon Bill**

The concert saloons targeted by the bill were of a type described by one contemporary as "a gin mill on an improved plan."<sup>11</sup> The improvements, designed to entice the mostly male clientele to spend their money on drink, consisted of free or cheap variety entertainment and "pretty waiter girls" (some of whom doubled as performers) in short, low-necked dresses.

Prostitution was well established in lower Manhattan in those days, but despite the prurient imagination of the *Times*' writer, the concert saloons were in the business of selling liquor, not sex. As vaudeville historian Douglas Gilbert noted when writing about the female employees of variety halls:

Although the nature of their work made for looseness, few of the actresses and wine-room maidens were promiscuous. Ladies of the evening had their own racket, picking up where the wine-room girls left off.<sup>12</sup>

Most New York concert saloons of the 1860s were not nearly as grand as the Canterbury Music Hall, which presented lengthy variety bills in a theatrical setting with a small orchestra rather than a mere piano player. As variety producer Tony Pastor recalled in a 1907 interview:

The variety show had its origin in the days of the civil war.... Not much was required in those days in the way of scenery and other stage accessories. Small halls and even

stores were used as variety theatres. Drinks were served. Smoking was allowed, and everything was free and easy.<sup>13</sup>

Annoyed by this cut-rate competition, owners of “legitimate” theaters made common cause with puritanical temperance advocates and Republican Party reformers to lobby for the 1862 law, which forbade the combination of stage entertainment, liquor sales and “pretty waiter girls.”

Enforcement quickly put the Canterbury (referred to by the *Times* as “the most prominent of the plague-blotches in our daily life”) out of business.<sup>14</sup> Other concert saloons did away with performances and/or waitresses to avoid prosecution. In the end, however, the concert saloons proved hard to suppress. In 1865 police superintendant John A. Kennedy reported that there were still 223 of them in the city employing 1,191 waitresses.<sup>15</sup>

The campaign against the concert saloons did, however, help speed the establishment of true variety theaters in which owners made their money from the box office rather than the bar. The shift from concert saloon to variety theater also encouraged producers to try to broaden their audience by attracting female customers. Tony Pastor took the lead on this front with “Ladies nights,” as well as promotional give-aways of flour, coal, sewing machines and silk dresses.

### **Origins of Variety**

Michael Bennett Leavitt, a veteran burlesque and variety producer who claimed to have been the first to use the word “vaudeville,” described variety theater in his 1912 memoir as “an offshoot of early minstrelsy.”<sup>16</sup> In an 1874 article on the history of variety, an anonymous New York *Times* writer credited R.W. Williams with opening the first real variety theater, “The Santa Claus,” in 1857 when he “struck out into a new line, and added white performances to his burnt-cork celebrities.”<sup>17</sup>

The original minstrel show format sandwiched an “olio” of comedians, dancers, singers and other entertainers between the main blackface segments known as the “first part” and “afterpiece.” Elements of minstrelsy survived in variety, but the olio became the main event. In the 1860s, Leavitt wrote, “the main features in what was then called a good variety programme” were “Ballads, minstrel acts, comic songs, gymnastics, jugglery, fancy dancing and short sketches in black[face]”<sup>18</sup>

The short turns of a variety theater bill were usually followed by a lengthier theatrical afterpiece, often a melodrama with an Irish theme calculated to appeal to the largest ethnic segment of urban audiences in the 1860s and ‘70s. More than audience was Irish. The most prominent performers of early minstrelsy were Irish or Irish-American. These included Ohio-born fiddler, banjo player, singer and dancer Dan Emmet (most famous as the alleged composer of the southern anthem “Dixie”) and Joel Walker Sweeney, a Virginian who popularized the five-string banjo in the 1830s. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Irish singers, comedians, pipers, fiddlers, banjo players and dancers continued to fill the programs of the variety theaters.

Variety performers had to master a variety of skills. As Leavitt put it, “There were no ‘one act people’,” as “everybody who aspired to the slightest success was the possessor of a wide range of capabilities.”<sup>19</sup> That included Kitty O’Neil, whose range of talents included singing, dancing and acting in early burlesque theatricals such as *Black-Eyed Susan* and *Ixion*, shows in which the chief attraction was the spectacle of pretty young women in tights.

### **A Pastor Protégée**

O'Neil's second performance listing in Odell's chronicles came nearly a year after her Canterbury debut, when she appeared at the American Theatre, also known as the American Music Hall, Butler's Varieties (after proprietor Robert Butler) or simply "444" after its Broadway address.

Butler and six of his "waiter girls" suffered the ignominy of arrest and overnight incarceration soon after the enactment of the Concert Saloon Bill.<sup>20</sup> Together with Robert Fox of the Canterbury, Butler then vainly attempted to challenge the bill in court. He also dismissed his waitresses, however, and made alterations that forced customers to go next door to Butler's Saloon to get a drink, thus converting "444" into a conventional theater and allowing the show to go on.<sup>21</sup>

The star performer at "444" was singer Tony Pastor, a native New Yorker now regarded as the father of vaudeville, though he himself always preferred the older term "variety." In her early years in New York, O'Neil also performed at P.T. Barnum's Museum, the New Bowery Theatre and Wood's Minstrel Hall. It was Pastor, however, who did the most to foster her career, supplying her with songs and continuing to employ her in her later career as a dancer.

The type of material O'Neil performed in her early stage career can be seen in "No Irish Need Apply," a song that survives in both sheet music and broadside form.<sup>22</sup> The lyrics of this song – which shares its name with a better-known 19th-century number by John F. Poole that is still performed today – are prefaced by a line from an advertisement for a female servant allegedly placed in the *London Times* in February 1862, with the warning that "No Irish need apply."

"Kathleen O'Neil, The Irish Vocalist," is credited as both writer and singer, but references in the lyrics to Irish bravery in the British Army in the Crimean War and to the Irishness of Napoleon's nemesis Wellington mark the song as an import from the English music halls. It is quite likely that Pastor picked up "No Irish Need Apply" from an English source, presented it to his young protégée and had it published in her name.

In February 1866, "444" suffered the frequent fate of wooden theaters in the gaslight era and burned to the ground. Butler tried again at Mechanic's Hall at 472 Broadway, but that theater too burned less than a year later. Tony Pastor had already left the building, however, having opened his own "Opera House" in 1865 on the nearby Bowery. O'Neil continued to work with him in this period, both in New York and on tour. An example of her repertoire with Pastor's troupe in this period is "The Nerves, New Comic Song Sung with great applause by Tony Pastor and Kathleen O'Neil."<sup>23</sup>

### **"The Idol of the Newsboys"**

From the fall of 1866 until the end of 1870, O'Neil's name appears only once in Odell's New York stage annals. According to her obituary, she worked for Pastor in New York for two years, then for John Stetson at the Howard Athenaeum, the leading variety theater in Boston, splitting her time between the two companies for "several seasons."<sup>24</sup>

O'Neil actually seems to have gone on an extensive road trip before returning to New York. Stetson didn't take over management of the Howard Athenaeum from Josh Hart until 1870.<sup>25</sup> In April 1869, Kathleen O'Neil was performing at San Francisco's Bella Union music hall, indicating that she had joined a touring company of the sort organized by Butler, Pastor, Stetson and other early variety producers.<sup>26</sup> She may have spent a considerable period of time in California. M.B. Leavitt, who led his own troupe on a western tour in the 1860's, wrote that the effort it took to bring performers to the west coast before the completion of the transcontinental railroad guaranteed that travelling performers would stay

in San Francisco for a lengthy period.<sup>27</sup>

O'Neil began working again regularly for Pastor in New York in January, 1871. During her absence she must have been working on her dance steps, because she was now advertised as a dancer rather than a singer, a shift marked by a change in her billing from Kathleen to "Kitty" O'Neil.<sup>28</sup>

Kitty soon became one of Pastor's most popular performers and followed him to the new theater at 585 Broadway that he took over from M.B. Leavitt after the financial panic of 1873. Pastor's biographer Parker Zeller noted Kitty's celebrity:

Pastor's Broadway theatre was a virtual bargain basement for any variety buff with at least 25 cents in his pocket. The shows were whopping affairs lasting nearly three hours and stuffed full of the best specialty and comedy acts the field had to offer... Special mention must be made of the petite and trim Kitty O'Neil, one of the best jig and Irish clog dancers of the day. She was a dependable crowd-pleaser and the idol of the newsboys in the gallery. <sup>29</sup>

The only photo of Kitty O'Neil found to date is a *carte de visite*, a type of souvenir card collected in albums by 19<sup>th</sup>-century theater buffs. This 1877 photo of Kitty in stage dress does give some clue to her appeal. A pale-eyed beauty with a mass of curly black hair piled high on her head, Kitty struck a casual pose in a lacy, long-sleeved shirt, short fringed trousers and skin-tight white stockings – not a revealing costume by today's standards but certainly risqué in her day. In this photo she gazes at the photographer with cool, unsmiling detachment, hands folded at her waist and a cross hanging demurely at her throat.

### **Harrigan and Hart and Kitty O'Neil**

In the fall of 1871, Tony Pastor's domination of New York variety theater was challenged by Josh Hart, the former Howard Athenaeum manager, who took over the Theatre Comique, the former Wood's Minstrel Hall at 514 Broadway. Odell described Hart's Comique as Pastor's "great competitor for popular favour." It was, he noted, a good time to be a variety performer, as "cut-throat rivalry set salaries booming and gave New York more 'Variety' than the spice of daily life demanded."<sup>30</sup> Hart evidently outbid Pastor for Kitty's services and the Comique became her New York theatrical home for the next six years.

Between Manhattan engagements, Kitty performed across the East River in Brooklyn, where she joined other Comique troupers at the Olympic or members of Pastor's company at Hooley's, a theater run by Richard M. Hooley, a Mayo native who had made his name as a minstrel fiddler and band leader. During the summer months, when New York's heat and humidity closed many of the city's theaters, Kitty also joined road companies that toured smaller towns. In May, 1877, for example, the theatrical weekly *The Clipper* noted that Kitty's "song, clog dance and jig dancing" were to be featured in a touring company headed by blackface comic Billy Barry.

From 1872 on, the biggest stars of the Theatre Comique were Ned Harrigan and Tony Hart, who were in the process of becoming the most popular comic song-and-dance act of the 19th century. Harrigan, a New York-born Irish-American, was a tremendously prolific playwright and lyricist who is remembered today as one of the founding fathers of American musical theater. He had shared a stage with Kitty at San Francisco's Bella Union, and renewed his acquaintance with her in the early '70s, when they worked together for John Stetson in Boston and Tony Pastor in New York. When Harrigan himself took over management of the Comique in 1876, he continued to include Kitty's dance specialties on the program and also wrote parts for her in some of his comic sketches.

Harrigan's business manager and publicist Martin Hanley outdid himself in describing Kitty's act. A December 1877 Theatre Comique program referred to Kitty as "Everybody's favorite ... whose Artistic Terpsichorean Powers, Beauty, Grace and Costuming have gained for her the Plaudits of the Numberless Admirers who have nightly witnessed her Nonpareil specialty." Another Comique playbill raved that she was "Acknowledged by the Press and Public to be the only Female Jig Dancer extant, all others are mere imitators and their futile efforts when compared with Miss O'Neil's artistic abilities fall below mediocrity."<sup>31</sup>

One of Kitty's more prominent roles on Harrigan's stage was in *The Gallant Sixty-Ninth*, an 1870s sketch in which she headed a marching corps of boy soldiers. The original sheet music for the song "The Gallant Sixty-Ninth" includes an engraving showing Kitty at the head of her pint-sized regiment, a role later taken over by Harrigan's partner Tony Hart.<sup>32</sup>

Kitty's dancing prowess also inspired the song "Sweet Mary Ann" (also known as "Such an Education Has My Mary Ann") written by Harrigan for his comic sketch *Malone's Night Off or The German Turnverein*. The third verse reads:

My Mary Ann's a dancer in the art of terpsichore,  
You should see her forward four and al-la-maude [sic].  
She'd break up all the lumber that you'd lay down on the floor,  
Such a heavy stepper is my Mary Ann.  
Oh she'd dance you the Mazurka, a Polka or Quadrille,  
A Reel and Jig or shuffle in the sand.  
The Schottisch or the German you could not keep her still,  
Such an education has my Mary Ann <sup>33</sup>

### **A Shuffle in the Sand**

Kitty's repertoire may have been as varied as that of Harrigan's Mary Ann, but in stage performances her specialties were the "rae ould Irish reel," the "Lancashire clog" (danced in wooden shoes) and what was then known as "jig dancing." In 19th-century America, the word "jig" was used not only to describe tunes with the the 6/8 or 9/8 meters of the Irish dance tradition, but also a peculiarly American dance form developed by minstrel-show entertainers who incorporated African-inspired syncopation into tunes with the same basic 4/4 rhythm and eight-bar segments of Irish or Scottish hornpipes, reels and flings.

These "jigs" (sometimes called "straight jigs" to distinguish them from the Irish variety) are of great significance in the history of American popular culture. Dance historians trace the origin of tap and soft-shoe dancing to the amalgamation of African, Irish and English dance styles in the 19th-century musical melting pot. Some historians go so far as to view minstrel jigs as the first truly American popular music. Musicologist and historian Hans Nathan, for example, wrote in his biography of pioneer minstrel Dan Emmet that syncopated minstrel banjo tunes "provided elements from which, later on, rags, blues, and finally jazz developed their idiom."<sup>34</sup>

Jig dancers often competed with each other in "challenge dances," which were sometimes adjudicated by auditors stationed underneath the stage, the better to hear the accuracy of the steps. While no account has been found to prove that Kitty O'Neil entered such contests, she was frequently described as "the champion jig and clog dancer of the world." This sort of billing was quite common, however. Kate Stanton, a prominent jig dancer of the 1850s, traded on her reputation as a hooper to set up the Champion Music Hall, a concert saloon in the basement of 654 Broadway that flourished during the Civil War years. <sup>35</sup>

In 1876 Kitty became the first woman to perform the "sand jig," a specialty introduced

earlier that year by dancer Jimmy Bradley. **36** Douglas Gilbert described the sand jig in 1940:

During the introduction by the orchestra the performer entered, right or left, carrying a metal or cardboard cornucopia holding about a pint of fine sand. After the sand was sprinkled about the front of the stage the container was thrown off in the entrance. The music was in 4-4 time, accented like a ballroom schottische. The dancing, all on the balls of the feet, was done in shuffles and slides instead of taps. The soles of the shoes were thin and hard, and the dancer, shifting and digging in the sand, produced a sharp, staccato sound which could be doubled and tripled at will. Like all seemingly effortless presentations, it was difficult. Probably the greatest sand jigger of vaudeville was Kitty O'Neill (sic), who flourished in the beer halls during the seventies and eighties. **37**

The sand jig is nearly forgotten now. Gilbert wrote that it hadn't been danced in thirty years. Veteran New York Irish tap dancer Josephine McNamara remembers seeing it in her youth, however, when it was danced by vaudevillean Charles "Cookie" Cook at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre. "You don't hop around like regular tap dancing," McNamara recalled, "it's mostly from your knees down."**38** Film buffs may recall Fred Astaire's sand dance sequence in the 1935 film *Top Hat*. The famous black dancer John Bubbles was noted for his rendition of the specialty, which was danced by Sammy Davis, Jr. into the '50s. The sand dance was kept alive in more recent years by New York tapper Harriet Brown, who mixed sequins into her sand, and by the late Howard "Sandman" Sims, the long-time master of ceremonies for the famous amateur nights at Harlem's Apollo Theater. Tap dance star Gregory Hines included a sand dance routine into the Mel Brooks film comedy *History of the World, Part 1*.

### **Kitty's Big Tune**

"Kitty O'Neil's Champion Jig" is the most sophisticated minstrel-style "jig" that survives from the 19th century. It is not an easy piece to play, but as Gilbert noted:

The orchestras in the best theaters were extraordinarily good... Your typical variety-hall musician could play from memory a vast repertoire of clogs, reels, hornpipes, sand jigs, and walkarounds, and could fake a song in any given key. All of them had to be good readers and improvisers. Many of them were not only fine soloists, but well grounded in harmony, counterpoint, and form. **39**

Kitty's namesake tune first appeared in print in a two-part tune version titled simply "Kitty O'Neil" in *Howe's 1000 Jigs and Reels*, an 1867 forerunner of *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*. **40** In the earlier collection, "Kitty O'Neil" was included in a group of tunes from Jimmy Norton, a Boston fiddler and bandleader who had grown up in a minstrel show family and was known as "the Boss Jig Player."

The expanded, seven-part "Kitty O'Neil's Champion Jig" dates from the years of Kitty's greatest celebrity and the period in which she was performing her "sand dance" specialty. It is not clear, however, whether the earlier two-part version played by Jimmy Norton was named for Kitty or if singer "Kathleen" O'Neil became the dancer "Kitty" O'Neil by association with the tune. At the time it was first published, Kitty was working in Boston, where she undoubtedly encountered Jimmy Norton.

Versions of the two-part "Kitty O'Neil" were printed in various tunebooks well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**41** It has been collected from or recorded by fiddlers from all over North America, including 1950s Canadian TV performers Don Messer and Ameen "King" Ganam. In Ireland, the Kerry fiddle master Pádraig O'Keefe interpolated it into a hornpipe called "The

Smoky Chimney.”**42**

The original two-part “Kitty O’Neil” was expanded into the seven-part “Champion Jig” at least in part by incorporating sections from other minstrel-style “straight jigs.” The second part is very similar to that of “Phil Isaack’s Jig,” a tune named for a prominent stage fiddler of the 1860s and which was also printed in both *Howe’s* and *Ryan’s* collections. The fifth and sixth parts are quite similar to “Bird on the Wing,” another minstrel jig in *Ryan’s*. *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* also includes a five-part minstrel-style jig titled “Kitty Sharpe’s Champion” in honor of another New York variety theater dancer of the 1880s. The tune is similar enough in style to “Kitty O’Neil’s Champion” that it could easily have come from the same anonymous pen, and is catchy enough that it too may attract the attention of today’s Irish musicians.**43**

The name of the fiddling genius who put together Kitty's “Champion Jig” is lost to history, as are the details of Kitty's dance steps. All we have are the syncopated rhythmic accents, long upward-sliding notes and cascading triplet runs in the written music – fossil remains of a now-extinct dance that delighted variety audiences in the 1870s and '80s. Even without the dance that inspired it, Kitty's tune still has the power to entrance the modern listener.

### **Bowery Nights**

In the late 1870s Ned Harrigan began to produce his own full-scale, three-act plays and in 1881 moved into a new Theatre Comique located further up Broadway. This was a step up in theatrical class for Harrigan and Hart, but it also left behind the old variety olio of jugglers, animal acts and specialty dancers. The demand for Kitty's services slacked off at the Comique and she began to work again in companies led by Tony Pastor, Josh Hart and other variety producers. The last performance Odell lists for her in one of Harrigan's shows took place in January, 1879, when Kitty was in the variety olio preceding a production of the play *The Mulligan Guard Ball*. **44**

With Harrigan out of the game, Pastor reigned as the undisputed king of variety. Until the end of her career, Kitty continued to work for Pastor, who, in 1881, relocated to a theater on 14th Street near Union Square in the same building that then housed Tammany Hall. Kitty also danced frequently at Hyde and Behman's theater on Adams Street in downtown Brooklyn in a company that featured Billy Barry and Hugh Fay, a pair of Harrigan alumni famous for “Muldoon's Picnic,” an often-revived comic sketch based on the boozy politician character created by Harrigan in his song “Muldoon, the Solid Man.”**45**

Kitty was still popular in Boston during this period and performed on several occasions at the Howard Athenaeum and Boylston Museum. In February 1887 “Miss Kitty O’Neil’s Best Double Company” performed at Boston’s Windsor Theatre in her only known booking as a headliner leading her own troupe.**46**

For the last ten years of her career Kitty was most frequently employed in the New York theaters operated by Henry Clay “Harry” Miner, a native of the Lower East Side who opened his Bowery theater in 1878. Serious theater was moving up Broadway toward Herald Square, but down on the Bowery the old variety format of olio and afterpiece survived until the turn of the century. Kitty was also a regular at Miner's Eighth Avenue Theatre in what is now called Chelsea but was then the seedy Tenderloin district.**47**

Other popular performers at Miner's included such veterans of Harrigan's company as the comic actress Annie Yeamans and the blackface duo of John Wild and Billy Gray. The original Pat Rooney, the first of a dynasty of Irish comedians by that name, strutted his stuff at Miner's, as did the up-and-coming vaudeville duo of Weber and Fields. Singer Maggie

Cline was a favorite at Miner's, where her big number was "Throw Him Down McCloskey," a supremely politically incorrect ditty about interracial fisticuffs. Another colorful character who played Miner's was Sam Devere, who was reputed to have killed two cowboys with his banjo during a circus fight out west.

Box seats at Miner's went for 75 cents, but the most enthusiastic customers were the boys in gallery, who gained admission for a dime. The Bowery boys would rush upstairs and immediately start agitating for the curtain to rise with comments such as "Aw, gwan! H'ist the rag! You got our money; give us de show!" Waiters served beer from a bar in the northeast corner while house cops stationed on every tier kept order with braided rattan canes and frequent admonitions to "cheese it."

Miner's was famous for its Friday Amateur Night, which was suspended in the 1880s because of egg and vegetable bombardment from the gallery, but revived in the 1890s. An impromptu decision by a Miner's stage manager to remove a floundering amateur with a prop shepherd's crook gave rise to the infamous call to "give 'em the hook." Miner's also provided a stage for the amateur theatrics of future governor and presidential candidate Al Smith and New York City mayor-to-be Jimmy Walker, who appeared in a benefit production of Boucicault's *The Shaughran* in 1907.

Odell's annals list Kitty O'Neil's last performance in New York at the London Theatre, another Bowery variety house, in April 1888. At that time she was probably 36 or 37 years old and had been a professional variety entertainer for over two decades.

### **Finale**

Very little about Kitty's life offstage can be gleaned from the theatrical listings and playbills that are our main source of information about her. Her name itself is so emblematically Irish that it has served as the title of several songs, dance tunes and poems. A number of performers over the years have also helped to obscure her memory by adopting "Kitty O'Neil" (or "O'Neill") as a stage name. These include a New York stage actress of the early 20th century, a minor Hollywood film actress of the 1940s and a deaf movie stuntwoman and high-speed driver who was the subject of the 1979 television film *Silent Victory*.

When she died in 1893, the New York *Times* described Kitty as "the best female jig dancer in the world" and gave her age as "about 38." The *Times* also noted, however, that she debuted for Tony Pastor at the age of ten, which would make her birth year 1852 and her age at death 40. **48**

According to the *Times* writer, when she was about eighteen (i.e., circa 1870), Kitty married Harry Kernell, a Philadelphia-born comic who, with his younger brother John, was a frequent performer with Tony Pastor's company.<sup>49</sup> A Pastor playbill described Harry as a "North of Ireland Comedian, Vocalist, and Dancer" and "the leading representative of this peculiar, pleasing, and popular style of Celtic Comedy."<sup>50</sup>

In the late 1870s, Kitty often appeared at Pastor's and Miner's theaters on the same bill as the Kernell brothers, but according to Kernell's *Times* obituary, she and Harry divorced in 1880.<sup>51</sup> Kernell's career continued into the late 1890s, when his "High Class Vaudevilles" troupe included "Little Harry Kernell," a son by his second wife, Queenie Vassar (born Cecilia McMahan), an actress who had been imported from Glasgow by Tony Pastor and who went on to a Hollywood film career.<sup>52</sup>

The unfortunate Harry was committed to Manhattan's Bloomingdale Asylum suffering from syphilitic paresis, from which he died in March, 1893.<sup>53</sup> Kitty did not long survive him. After her stage career ended, she moved to Buffalo, New York, where in 1892 she married

saloon and restaurant owner Alfred Pettie. According to her death certificate, she died in Buffalo General Hospital on the night of April 16, 1893 from peritonitis and nephritis following an operation to remove kidney stones.<sup>54</sup>

Kitty's fame inspired many imitators, one of whom tried to pass herself off as the original years after the real Kitty's death. This "Kitty O'Neil," otherwise known as Mrs. Catherine Connelly or Connolly made the Brooklyn newspapers three times when she was arrested for public intoxication, in one case while dancing a jig on the Brooklyn Bridge.<sup>55</sup> An earlier version of this article quoted a report in the July 12, 1916 *Detroit Free Press* that Connolly, still claiming to be Kitty O'Neil, had been spotted in a New York police court, where she was pressing assault charges against a fellow rooming house resident for hitting her in the face with a cuspidor.<sup>56</sup>

The last echoes of Kitty O'Neil's footsteps on the 19th-century variety stage have long since died away. No one now alive can recall the days when she was the darling of the newsboys in Pastor's gallery or the dancing star of Harrigan's Theatre Comique. Improbably enough, however, the infectiously cheerful, slyly syncopated music to which Kitty once danced her famous sand jig is again very much alive. Thanks to Tommy Peoples, Paddy Keenan, Kevin Burke and other traditional musicians, "Kitty O'Neil's Champion Jig" is once again being played and enjoyed by Irish music lovers the world over, a relic of the days when, long before *Riverdance*, Irish performers dominated popular theater on Broadway.

#### Endnotes

1. *The Iron Man*, Tommy Peoples: Shanachie Entertainment, reissued as CD No. 79044, 1995.
2. *1000 Fiddle Tunes* (Chicago: M.M. Cole, 1940).
3. Elias Howe and William Bradbury Ryan, *Ryan's Mammoth Collection: 1050 Reels and Jigs, Hornpipes, Clogs, Walk-arounds, Essences, Strathspeys, Highland Flings and Contra Dances, with Figures, and How to Play Them; Bowing and Fingering Marked, Together with Forty Introductory Studies for the Violin, with Explanations of Bowing, etc.* (Boston: Elias Howe, copyright 1883, actually issued 1882), reprinted by Mel Bay Publications, Pacific, MO: 1995, ed. Patrick Sky.
4. Kevin Burke, *In Concert*: Green Linnet Records CD No. 1196, 1999.
5. Paddy Keenan and Tommy O'Sullivan, *The Long Grazing Acre*: Hot Conya CD, 2001. "Kitty O'Neil's Champion Jig" was also recorded (and correctly named) on *Marie and Martin Reilly*, a self-produced 2002 recording from the New York fiddle and button accordion duo).
6. George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-49).
7. Death certificate from Buffalo, New York public records. The obituary (New York *Times*, April 17, 1893) stated that she was ten years old when she made her debut.
8. John Franceschina, *David Braham: The American Offenbach* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
9. Brooks McNamara. *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
10. New York *Times*, December 12, 1861.
11. Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days: The Chronicles of a Famous Street* (New York: D. Appleton, 1931).
12. Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Whittlesey House [McGraw-Hill], 1940).

13. *New York Times*, April 21, 1907. No-cover piano bars in which patrons joined in the singing were then known as “Free and Easies.”
14. *New York Times*, May 18, 1862. Robert Fox relocated to Philadelphia, where he continued in theatrical management.
15. William L. Slout (ed.), *Broadway Below the Sidewalk: Concert Saloons of Old New York*, Clipper Studies in the Theatre, 0748-237X, no. 4 (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1994). Periodic crackdowns on the sale of beer and liquor would continue to plague concert saloons and variety theaters for many years.
16. Leavitt, Michael Bennett, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management, 1859-1909*, New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1912.
17. “Variety Shows: Their Origin and History,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1874.
18. Leavitt, op cit.
19. Leavitt, op cit.
20. *New York Times*, May 6, 1862
21. Leavitt, op. cit. and Franceschina, op cit.
22. “No Irish Need Apply,” Cleveland: S. Brainard & Co. (also Boston, O. Ditson, and New York, W.A. Pond & Co.), 1863. The sheet music can be viewed online at <http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>. A broadside version published in Philadelphia by J.H. Johnson can be viewed online at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/amsshtml/amsshhome.html>.
23. “The Nerves, New Comic Song Sung with great applause by Tony Pastor and Kathleen O’Neil” (Philadelphia: Lee & Walker, 1865). View online at <http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>.
24. *New York Times*, April 17, 1893.
25. Leavitt, op cit.
26. The Bella Union program was reproduced in Richard Moody, *Ned Harrigan: From Corlear's Hook to Herald Square* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1980).
27. Leavitt, op cit.
28. Odell himself assures us that “Kathleen” and “Kitty” were the same person.
29. Parker Zellers, *Tony Pastor: Dean of the Vaudeville Stage* (Ypsilanti: Eastern Michigan University Press, 1971).
30. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. IX, p. 326. The *Times* reported on March 28, 1874 that popular variety performers in New York were being paid \$75 to \$125 a week, three to five times as much as they had in the early 1860s.
31. Theatre Comique playbills in Townsend Walsh scrapbook of Harrigan ephemera, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
32. “The Gallant Sixty-Ninth, Sung by Miss Kitty O’Neil and Cadet Corps, Words by Ed. Harrigan, Music by Dave Braham” (New York: William A. Pond & Co., 1875. View online at <http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>.
33. “Sweet Mary Ann,” words by Ed. Harrigan, music by David Braham (New York: William A. Pond & Co., 1878); reissued as “Such an Education Has My Mary Ann” by Pond in 1879. View online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mussmhtml/mussmhome.html>.
34. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962).
35. Slout (op cit).
36. *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 6, p. 316.

37. Gilbert, op cit.
38. interview with the author, New York, 2000.
39. Gilbert (op cit.)
40. Elias Howe, *1000 Jigs and Reels, Clog Dances, Contra Dances, Fancy Dances, Hornpipes, Strathspeys, Breakdowns, Irish Dances, Scotch Dances, and More...*, reprint Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 2001, ed. Patrick Sky.
41. Settings of the two-part "Kitty O'Neil" in G or A major appear in *White's Excelsior Method for the Guitar* (Boston: White-Smith, 1894); *Jack Snyder's Collection of 200 Favorite Jigs, Reels, Country and Folk Dances* (New York: Jack Snyder Publications, 1900); *Harding's All-Round Collection of Jigs, Reels and Country Dances for Piano, Violin, Flute or Mandolin* (as "Old Time Straight Jig," New York: Harding's Music House, 1905); Ira W. Ford, *Traditional Music of America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940); Samuel P. Bayard, *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife: Instrumental Folk Tunes in Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982); R.P. Christeson, *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory, Vol. 1: 245 Traditional Tunes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973); and *The Don Messer Anthology of Favorite Fiddle Tunes* (as "Away Back," Toronto: G.V. Thompson, 1981). Much of this publication history comes from Andrew Kuntz's "Fiddler's Companion," a tune index available on-line at [www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers](http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers).
42. Recordings include a 7-inch disc by King Ganam and his Sons of the West (RCA Victor, 57-5113-A) and The New Hampshire Fiddlers Union, *Music of John Taggart* (Front Hall Records cassette FHR-204c, 1992). Pádraig O'Keeffe's "Smoky Chimney" was included on *Pádraig O'Keeffe: The Sliabh Luachra Fiddle Master*, Radio Teilifis Éireann CD, 1994.
43. "Kitty Sharpe's" would seem to be an expanded version of "The Inimitable Reel," which also appears in *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*, and as "Everybody's Fancy" in Francis O'Neill (ed.), *Music of Ireland*, (Chicago: Lyon & Healy, 1903).
44. Odell, op cit.
45. Don Meade, "The Life and Times of 'Muldoon, the Solid Man,'" *New York Irish History*, vol. 11 (1997).
46. Chronology of Boston theatre advertising compiled by Rhett Krause.
47. For this and other references to Miner's theaters, see Harlow (op cit), Leavitt (op cit.) and "Miner's Bowery was a Landmark," *New York Times*, August 11, 1929.
48. *New York Times*, April 17, 1893. .
49. A search of New York City archives yielded no marriage license for the couple.
50. Playbill, Ford's Opera House, April 10, 1876. In Library of Congress' American Memory collection, on-line at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>
51. Harry Kernell obituary, *New York Times*, March 14, 1893.
52. Correspondence with Mary Kernell, daughter in law of "Little Harry Kernell," August 2002.
53. Queenie Vassar and other performers in the musical *A Trip to Chinatown* performed for the Bloomingdale patients, who included Kernell and fellow Irish comic W.J. Scanlan, "Actors Entertain Lunatics," *New York Times*, February 10, 1893.
54. Kitty was long remembered in Buffalo. An old canal boat man told a local historian in the 1940s the somewhat unlikely tale that she had performed a nude dance atop a 12-inch-wide pedestal in July 1881 for a packed crowd in a Canal Street saloon. See Michael N. Vogel, Ed Patton, and Paul Redding: *America's Crossroads, Buffalo's Canal*

*Street/Dante Place: the Making of a City* (New York: Western New York Heritage Institute, Canisius College, 1993).

55. Brooklyn *Eagle*, August 22, 1900 and January 28, 1901, Brooklyn *Daily Standard Union*, November 6, 1906.

56. *New Hibernia Review* (Vol. 6, No. 3, Autumn 2002).