

KITTY O'NEIL AND HER "CHAMPION JIG"

A Forgotten Irish-American Variety Theater Star

by Don Meade

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The names of Irish dance tunes are not usually of much importance. Some musicians find a title 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.

156 **KITTY O'NEIL'S CHAMPION—JIG.**

The musical score is presented in seven systems. Each system begins with a 'SEGUE.' marking. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. Fingerings (1, 2, 3) and breath marks (br) are used throughout. The piece ends with a double bar line and the initials 'D. O.' below it.

Ryan's Mammoth Collection

Kitty O'Neil, the tune's namesake, was a popular New York-based variety stage dancer of the 1870's and '80's. The revival of her "Champion Jig" didn't initially do much to revive her reputation, however, because the tune became widely known as "Kitty O'Shea" after it was recorded under that title by the late County Donegal fiddle great Tommy Peoples, who started

¹ This article was first published in *New Hibernia Review* (Vol. 6, No. 3, Autumn 2002). An expanded and corrected digital version was later posted at <http://www.blarneystar.com>. Revisions have been made on several occasions to include new information from searchable online newspaper archives not available when the original article was written.

playing the tune in concerts during the 1970's and included it on his 1982 LP *The Iron Man*.²

Peoples found the tune in the pages of *1000 Fiddle Tunes*, an often-reprinted collection that was popular in both Ireland and America for decades after it was first published in Chicago by the M.M. Cole company in 1940. Many Irish traditional musicians, including the influential fiddlers Seán McGuire, Paddy Cronin, James "Lad" O'Beirne and Larry Redican, reintroduced tunes they 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 dance tunes issued in Boston in 1882 by music collector and publisher Elias Howe (a relative of the inventor of that name) and his assistant William Bradbury Ryan.³ An eclectic grab bag of Irish, Scottish, English 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* have 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, the celebrated fiddler Kevin Burke called the tune "Kitty O'Shea" when he began playing it in the 1990's, 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 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. She is well worth remembering, however, 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.

² *The Iron Man*, Tommy Peoples: Shanachie Entertainment, reissued as CD No. 79044, 1995.

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, 1883), reformatted facsimile edition published by Mel Bay Publications, Pacific, MO: 1995, ed. Patrick Sky. According to Sky, the book was first published in 1882, a year in advance of the copyright date. Images of pages from an original copy are available online at: <http://violinsheetmusic.org/collections/>.

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" has since been recorded (sometimes as "Kitty O'Shea") by a number of other performers, including the New York fiddle-and-button-accordion duo of Marie and Martin Reilly, fiddler Athena Tergis, harmonica player "Pip" Murphy (with the Tin Sandwich Band), the concertina-and-fiddle duo of Edel Fox and Neill Byrne, and the accordion-and-banjo duo of Dan Brouder and Angelina Carberry. See www.thesession.org and www.irishtune.info for lists of recordings.

Debut

Kitty O’Neil was born in 1855 in Buffalo, New York to William and Elizabeth O’Neil, immigrants from Ireland who kept a waterfront saloon at the foot of Erie Street.⁶ A Buffalo reporter in 1889 recalled the start of her career:

Kitty O’Neill, the greatest jig dancer in the world, first tried her toes on the stage of a Canal-street variety house, and danced later at the Mozart Variety Theater, afterwards St. James Hall, and at Dan Shelby’s theater on the Terrace. At the latter house she fell in with Mary and Harry Cornell, who were the means of starting her on the road.⁷

Her 1893 obituary in the same paper gave this summary:

When but a mite of a child she made her first appearance on a public stage at the Academy of Music in a Fourth-of-July benefit for John H. Meech. She danced at both the afternoon and evening performances, and was so taking that her parents sent her to Prof. Newville of Rochester to learn fancy dancing. She was gifted with a natural ability and learned remarkably fast. After acquiring all the fancy dances she went to Pittsburg [*sic*] and to Chicago and gave public exhibitions there. Her parents say she was about 8 years old at that time.

After a short stay at the cities named, the child was brought back to this city by her mother, who accompanied her in all the travels of her earlier years. She was placed at Frank Wild’s Theater Comique, which was at the corner of the Terrace and Commercial Street. Here it was that she began the straight-jig and laid the foundation for the reputation she afterward attained. She danced at Wild’s for two seasons, and during that period progressed so rapidly that managers in other cities began to seek her. She went to Syracuse and fulfilled an engagement of some weeks.

Meantime Tony Pastor of New-York had heard of the girl and sent for her to play an engagement at his theater. Kittie went to dance at Pastor’s for four weeks, but she made such a hit that he got her to stay with his show two consecutive seasons.⁸

Kitty’s New York City theatrical career was 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. Her performances in Boston can be traced through theatrical ads and notices from that city. Other newspapers, particularly the *New York Herald*, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the *New York Clipper*, a nationally distributed weekly that covered the sporting scene and popular entertainment during Kitty’s heyday, included many ads and brief mentions of her performances.

Attempts to trace Kitty’s career have been complicated by the prominence in the 1860’s of another performer who, though most frequently billed as “Kathleen O’Neil,” was also known as

⁶ Kitty’s Certificate of Death, from Buffalo public records, listed her parents’ names and noted their birth in Ireland. Obituaries reported her birth year as 1855 and her age at death as 38. William O’Neil’s saloon was listed in Buffalo city directories with an address of “Commercial Dock” (1862) or “foot [of] Erie” (1880).

⁷ *Buffalo Express*, October 6, 1889. Shelby, a noted minstrel, managed the Adelphi Theater in Buffalo. The Cornells, presumably variety performers or promoters, are more obscure.

⁸ “Kittie O’Neil Dead,” *Buffalo Morning Express*, April 17, 1893. See also: “Kitty O’Neil Dead,” *Buffalo Evening News*, April 17, 1893.



Kathleen O'Neil (Charles Frederick Studio via Picture History)

vivant, in which groups of scantily clad females struck frozen poses in scenes mimicking classical paintings. After her 1862 New York debut at the Canterbury Music Hall on Broadway, her stage career continued for another fifteen years, overlapping with that of Kitty the dancer, before she retired to Muskegon, Michigan.¹¹ “No Irish Need Apply” (see next page), a song imported from English music halls and published in the U.S. as Kathleen’s own composition, was one of her popular numbers during her years with Pastor.¹²

“Kitty” and who also performed in New York City for showman Tony Pastor. Earlier versions of this article, influenced by what seemed to have been Odell’s own confusion, conflated the career of Kathleen/Kitty the singer with that of the Irish-American dancer for whom the “Champion Jig” would later be named.⁹

Kathleen O’Neil (left) was profiled by New York *Clipper* editor T. Allston Brown in an 1866 column accompanying a front page portrait:

Kitty O’Neil – as she is better known – was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1840 [actually, it was 1833], and at an early age made her *debut* in her native country, meeting with unqualified success. She visited London and appeared at all the principal music halls of the great metropolis. She remained there a number of years, and crossed the Atlantic in 1861, arriving in this city. Since then she has appeared in nearly all the music halls in this country, meeting with success.¹⁰

Kathleen, the wife of variety theater manager Dick O’Neil, was primarily a singer but also danced, acted and appeared in *tableaux*

⁹ George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-49). In volume 8, in the section on Wood’s Minstrel Hall 1865-1866, Odell noted that in July, 1866: “For some time, now, Kathleen O’Neil had been singing here her popular Irish ditties; Kathleen, soon to be taken to the popular heart as Kitty O’Neil.” When he began listing appearances for Kitty the dancer in 1871, Odell did not make any distinction between the two performers.

¹⁰ “Our Dramatic Portrait Gallery,” New York *Clipper*, July 7, 1866, reprinted in T. Allston Brown, *History of the American Stage* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1870).

¹¹ “Vaudeville and Minstrel” notices, New York *Clipper*, May 9, 1903. Known in later life as Mrs. Maria McFarlane, Kathleen O’Neil died October 14, 1905 (Muskegon *Chronicle*, October 14, 1905).

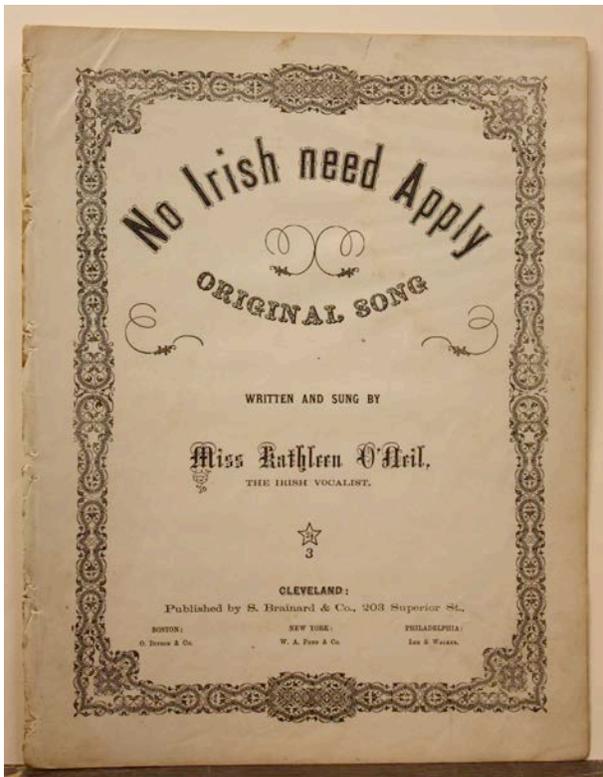
¹² Music hall historian and performer Chris Simmons identified the author of the English original as F.R. Phillips, who penned separate versions for male and female singers (personal communication, January 2019). O’Neil later sold the copyright to Brainard & Co. of Cleveland (*Clipper*, August 1, 1863).

Kitty the dancer launched her New York City stage career the week beginning Monday, January 23, 1871, when she appeared on the bill at Tony Pastor's Opera House, located at 201 Bowery near Spring Street in what was then the heart of New York City's popular entertainment district. Pastor's ad in that week's *Clipper* announced: "First appearance, also, of the Champion Jig Danseuse, MISS KITTIE O'NEIL."¹³ Her New York *Times* obituary reported that she was just ten years old at the time. She was actually at least fifteen, but shaving a few years off a performer's age is a practice hardly unknown among female entertainers then or now, particularly when promoting precocious youngsters.¹⁴

Tony Pastor is remembered today as the father of vaudeville, a more respectable sounding label for variety theater that he first adopted in January 1876.¹⁵ His "Opera House" was a step up from the concert saloons and was modeled on Robert Butler's American Theater at 444 Broadway, where Pastor got his theatrical start after an earlier circus career. Reflecting on the early days of variety in New York, Pastor recalled in 1907:

"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."¹⁶

From the point of view of upper-class reformers and moralists, everything was a bit too "free and easy." In 1861, the New York *Times* led a journalistic assault on the concert saloons, charging that they, "under guise of singing, and selling lager beer, are really the lowest and most infamous houses of prostitution."¹⁷ The saloons targeted by the reformers were of a type described by one contemporary as "a gin-mill on an improved plan."¹⁸ The improvements, designed to entice the nearly exclusively male clientele to spend 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.



"No Irish Need Apply" (Mick Moloney Collection of Irish American Music and Popular Culture, Archives of Irish America, New York University)

¹³ Advertisement, New York *Clipper*, January 21, 1871.

¹⁴ "Kittie O'Neill Dead," New York *Times*, April 17, 1893.

¹⁵ Armond Fields, *Tony Pastor, Father of Vaudeville* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), p. 84.

¹⁶ "The Father of Vaudeville; Tony Pastor 'Reminisces' About Growth of the Business Since War Times," New York *Times*, April 21, 1907. A "free and easy" was also the name used in that era for piano bars in which patrons joined in the singing.

¹⁷ "An Unmitigated and Intollerable [*sic*] Nuisance," New York *Times*, December 12, 1861.

¹⁸ Quoted from a concert saloon owner interviewed by the New York *World*, James Dabney McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (New York: National Publishing Co., 1872), p. 594.

THEATRE COMIQUE!
514 BROADWAY 514.

MR. JOHN HART, Treasurer Richard Doyle, ENGINEER and Gas Man
John B. Topham, Stage Manager H. L. Wood, SCENE ARTIST
David Graham, Orchestral Director Miss Margaret Barry, Costumes
Nelsa Waldron, Machinist and Properties

SPECIAL NOTICE.—In consequence of the very long Programmes given nightly by this Company, we are compelled to say that but TWO courses will be allowed. The great number of Acts and the fatigue of the performers compels the management to enforce this notice. The good sense of our patrons will at once see the necessity of this and will please comply with it. **OUR PATRONS WILL OBLIGE BY REPORTING AT THE BOX OFFICE ANY INATTENTION ON THE PART OF DOORKEEPERS AND USHERS OF THIS THEATRE.**

DOORS OPEN AT 7, TO COMMENCE AT 8 O'CLOCK.

PROGRAMME FOR THE WEEK,
Commencing April 5th, and Wednesday and Saturday Matinees

OVERTURE.....(new).....MR. DAVE BRAHAM AND ORCHESTRA
The Performance will commence with the

SOPHIA'S SUPPER!
MR. JOHN WILD FRINGLE.....MR. CHAS WHITE
Shingle.....Mr. James Bradley Dingle.....Mr. Wm. Carter
Sophia.....Miss Kitty Tiltone

FAVORITE SONGS.....MISS ALICE BENNETT
First Appearance of the Renowned

PEAK FAMILY!
BELL-RINGERS, IN THEIR ARTISTIC PERFORMANCES.
Beautiful Songs.....Mlle. Albertazzi
Harrigan and Hart's Original Irish Sketch, brimful of Laughter, entitled

WHO OWNS THE LINE?
In which Mr. Harrigan will sing for the first time his new and original Irish Song.....**MULDOON'S BROTHER PAT!**
MR. MICHAEL MORAN.....MR. ED. HARRIGAN
MR. PATRICK DORAN.....MR. TONY HART
MR. MARY ANN DORAN.....Miss Adah Richmond

SERIO-COMIC SONGS.....Miss Adah Richmond
MISS KITTY O'NEIL
Will execute, for the first time, the
Lancashire Clog Dance
The Very Loughable Negro Sketch, entitled

Going for the Cup
MR. LEMON HAMM.....MR. JOHN WILD
Mr. Clonson.....Mr. Wm. Carter Mr. Williams.....Mr. G. L. Stout
Jimmy Fresh.....Mr. James Bradley

R. M. CARROLL & LITTLE DICK!
In their Original Specialty,
Holland on a BUST!
HANS.....R. M. CARROLL KATERINA.....LITTLE DICK
Operatic Airs.....Miss Nelly St. John
HARRIGAN AND HART'S Original Sketch, the

Regular Army, Oh!
The Army:—Harrigan, Hart, Wild, Carter, Ryan, and Bradley

FIRST WEEK OF THE RUSSIAN ATHLETES
Dunbar, Antonio, and Johannot!
In their Wonderful Performance.....**La Perche!**
Overture.....D. Braham and Orchestra
Comprising every evening and Matinee with the Irish Drama, by G. L. Stout, entitled

'98; OR, THE MURDER AT THE FARM!
Crotchett, a Hunchback.....MR. E. HARRIGAN Patsy.....Mr. Percy
Anthony Dooling, a well-to-do Farmer.....Mr. J. A. Grover
Florence Shaw.....Mr. J. F. Crossin Micky.....Mr. J. Gibbons
Andy Hunchback, his foster-brother, TONY HART.....Mr. James
First Soldier.....Mr. G. Lewis Jack Doran.....Mr. D. H. Kelly
Aly Dooling.....Miss Marie Gorenflo Ned Shaw.....Mr. W. Carter
Mrs. Dooling.....Mrs. Vivian North.....Miss Kitty Tiltone
Fergie Dermotly.....Mr. J. Bradley Shamus Burke.....Mr. G. L. Stout
Herald.....Miss Nelly Booth Shantons.....Mr. J. Ryan

SYNOPSIS OF SCENERY AND INCIDENTS.
SCENE 1st—Ireland in '98. The Merry-making on Christmas Eve, at Dooley's Feast. Waiting for the Piper. Aly and Percy. Crotchett, the Hunchback, and the Billings. The Irish Reel, Fun and Diversions. Dooling in his cage. The Threat of Crotchett. Dooling's reprieve. A sad ending of the Festival. **MURDER! MURDER! THE BLOODY BELLHOO!** Evening Tables. SCENE 2d—Crotchett and Aly. Andy, Shannon, and Terrence. Jack Doran and old Shaw. "Let 's all join in the Toast for CHRISTMAS, the MILL-DREER!" SCENE 3d—Andy and Herald. The Unfinished Promise. Andy's Oath. Herald's Disgrace. Naming the Wedding-day. SCENE 4th—THE RUINED CASTLE BY MOONLIGHT. Percy and Andy in search of Crotchett. Andy's Fight. The Ghost. The Assassin's Bullets. An Unexpected Discovery. Awful appearance of Crotchett and Aly. Impending Tables. SCENE 5th—Doran and Percy. The Contest with the White Boys. The Trick. Percy trapped at last. The Plan of Shooting. SCENE 6th—THE CAPT OF DUNSMORE, Percy and Herald. Waiting for their Victim. Percy and his friends upon the track. The discovery of ALY, CAPTIVE OF THE HUNCHBACK. Doran's Treachery. Percy denounced as a White Boy. The English Soldiers and Irish Peasants. TABLEAU.

Theatre Comique Playbill for the week starting Monday, April 5, 1875 (New York Public Library)

Prostitution was well established in lower Manhattan in those days but despite the prurient imagination of the *Times*' writer, 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 in the West:

“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.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, in 1862 the reformers got a Concert Saloon Bill through the state legislature outlawing the combination of stage entertainment, liquor sales and “pretty waiter girls.” Enforcement quickly put the Canterbury Music Hall, referred to by the *Times* as “the most prominent of the plague-blotches in our daily life” out of business.²⁰ Other concert saloons did away with performances and/or waitresses to avoid prosecution.²¹ In the end, however, the concert saloons proved hard to suppress. In 1865 police superintendent John A. Kennedy reported that there were still 223 of them in the city employing 1,191 waitresses.²²

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

¹⁹ Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1940), p. 36.

²⁰ New York Times, May 18, 1862.

²¹ The campaign against the concert saloons is detailed in Brooks McNamara. *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²² 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), p. xiv. Periodic police crackdowns would continue to plague concert saloons and variety theaters for many years.

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 in his 1912 memoir as “an offshoot of early minstrelsy.”²³ An anonymous New York *Times* writer in 1874 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.”²⁴

Minstrel shows sandwiched an “olio” of comedians, dancers, singers and other entertainers between the blackface “first part” and “afterpiece.” Elements of minstrelsy survived in variety but the olio became the main event. Leavitt wrote that in the 1860’s, “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]”²⁵

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 American urban audiences in the 1860’s and ‘70’s. It wasn’t just the audience that 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 Emmett, famous as the composer of the southern anthem “Dixie,” and Joel Walker Sweeney, a Virginian who popularized the five-string banjo in the 1830’s. Throughout the 19th century, Irish and Irish-American 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’, ...everybody who aspired to the slightest success was the possessor of a wide range of capabilities.”²⁶ This included Kitty O’Neil, who in addition to dancing served occasionally as a singer and actress in comic sketches and burlesques of “legitimate” theatricals.²⁷

The Idol of the Newsboys

In the months following her New York City debut, Kitty would return to Pastor’s Opera House on several occasions but also danced at John Stetson’s Howard Athenaeum, the leading variety house in Boston, and at Brooklyn’s Globe Theatre, managed during the 1871 season by former minstrel star Charley White. That summer, she joined Pastor’s troupe on a Midwest tour, during which a *Clipper* correspondent noted that in her appearance at the Indianapolis Academy of Music on August 9, “Miss Kitty O’Neil’s superior jig dancing fairly surprised every one, and peculiarly welcome was the weird old-country music with which a member of Tony’s excellent orchestra accompanied her steps.”²⁸

Tony Pastor biographer Parker Zeller noted Kitty's particular celebrity in his troupe, which relocated in 1873 from the Bowery to a new home at 585 Broadway:

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

²³ Leavitt, Michael Bennett, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management, 1859-1909*, New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1912, p. 186.

²⁴ “Variety Shows: Their Origin and History,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1874.

²⁵ Leavitt, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

²⁶ Leavitt, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

²⁷ Performance listings in Odell, *op. cit.*

²⁸ “Variety Halls,” *New York Clipper*, August 19, 1871.



Kitty O'Neil, 1877 (New York Public Library)

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.²⁹

Kitty's visual appeal can clearly be seen in her *carte de visite*, a type of souvenir card collected by 19th-century theater buffs (see left). This photo was taken in 1877, the same year that a *Clipper* reporter wrote of a performance at Pastor's: "Kitty O'Neil, attired in a beautiful costume appropriate to her sex, and of sufficient brevity to allow her nimble and graceful dancing to be freely observed, was the recipient of much applause."³⁰ Seven years later, an anonymous journalist wrote of her days in Pastor's troupe:

"Kitty was one of the strongest of his early attractions. She was a trim little girl, with a pretty face, combining freckled sauciness and a

certain frank good nature, which won the love of the lads; and she had genuine Irish eyes - gray ones, with black lashes. I am no expert judge of jig dancing, but I have no doubt of her superlative nimbleness and grace, and yet I imagine that the same skill in a girl who did not look the ideal colleen would be unappreciated."³¹

Kitty's popularity with the male variety audience certainly owed something to the beauty of her face and figure, but her costume was hardly that of a showgirl. She was, in fact, cross dressing in that photo, wearing hose, trousers and a frilly white shirt virtually identical to the stage costume used by such famed male jig and clog dancers as Dick Carroll, John Queen, Tommy Peel and

²⁹ Parker Zeller, *Tony Pastor: Dean of the Vaudeville Stage* (Ypsilanti: Eastern Michigan University Press, 1971), p. 59. Zeller's source for Kitty as "the idol of the newsboys" was most likely "The Variety Stage," *Harper's Weekly*, March 29, 1902, p. 414.

³⁰ "City Summary," *New York Clipper*, February 10, 1877.

³¹ Rochester, NY *Democrat Chronicle*, November 28 1884.

Thomas Hengler.³² Her choice in costume proclaimed her professional status. As dance historian April F. Masten noted: "...rather than donning the flesh-colored tights of female chorus dancers, which suggested nudity, she sports the white stockings, black pumps, and long-sleeved blouse of her male cohort, which signified skill."³³ Nor did Kitty pander to her admirers. The *Clipper* commented on her demeanor while performing in late 1873:

Miss Kitty O'Neil has a pretty face and well-moulded form, which the audiences have a fine opportunity to study during her graceful movements and in her character dances. From the persistent manner in which she prevents a smile from ever wreathing over her lips, she has gained the soubriquet among the boys of "No-smile Kitty."³⁴

In the fall of 1871, Tony Pastor's domination of New York variety theater was challenged by Josh Hart, an experienced 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."³⁵ Hart evidently outbid Pastor for Kitty's services and after an 1872 summer tour with Tony's company, the Comique became her New York theatrical home base for the next few years. When he couldn't get Kitty O'Neil, Pastor had to make do with Kitty Sharpe, her most prominent rival as a female "champion jig" dancer.³⁶

Starting in 1872, the biggest stars of the Theatre Comique were Ned Harrigan and Tony Hart, who, like Kitty O'Neil, first worked for Pastor and Stetson before seeking greener pastures in Josh Hart's troupe. Harrigan, a New York-born Irish-American, was a tremendously prolific playwright and lyricist remembered today as one of the founding fathers of American musical theater. When he took over management of the Comique in 1876, he continued to include Kitty's dance specialties on the bill and wrote parts for her in his comic sketches.

Harrigan's Irish characterizations often led his fans to take him for a native son of the old sod and the anonymous writer of an 1873 *Clipper* note on a Theatre Comique performance took Kitty for an immigrant as well.

³² For illustrations of cloggers and jiggers in this typical dance costume, see: <http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/itempage.jsp;jsessionid=C4DA200A4F9A25CCA83E85C3E2B8559F?itemid=15500> or Rhet Krause "Step Dancing on the Boston Stage: 1841-1869," *Country Dance and Song*, vol. 22, June, 1992. Available online (as of December, 2018) at: https://www.cdss.org/images/cds_online/country_dance_and_song/v.22.pdf

³³ April F. Masten, "Challenge Dancing in Antebellum America: Sporting Men, Vulgar Women and Blacked-Up Boys," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 48, No. 3, Spring 2015, p. 629. A writer reminiscing in 1902 wrote that the carte de visite photo "does not represent her in the costume in which she was best known to her admirers." "When she had gained reputation," he wrote, "she always appeared in a close fitting dress, falling half way below her knees. Her stockings were green in color and her clogs black" (*Brooklyn Times-Union*, September 17, 1902).

³⁴ *New York Clipper*, November 22, 1873.

³⁵ Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. IX, p. 326. The *New York Times* reported on March 28, 1874 that variety performers were paid \$75 to \$125 a week, three to five times as much as in the early 1860's.

³⁶ Kitty Sharpe or Sharp (both spellings appeared in print throughout her life, 1855-1945) was a variety and circus dancer and singer, and the wife of clown and acrobat Eddie Fritz Smith. In January, 1873, *New York Herald* ads listed Kitty O'Neil dancing for Josh Hart at the Theatre Comique while Kitty Sharpe was doing the same a few blocks away at Tony Pastor's Opera House.

Another broth of a boy, at the same house, is Kitty O'Neil. "Kitty from Cork." She dresses so prettily, and dances so neatly, that it is no wonder she is a favorite with the habitués of the Comique. The other two Irishmen [Harrigan and Hart] will pardon us while we make

RHYMES TO KITTY

When the Comique's band strikes up,
How brisk you make us fellows feel;
Your every footstep draws attention,
Sweet, vivacious Kate O'Neil.

Hear the jubilant 'hi! his!'
To the ceiling born on high,
Words of cheer on every lip,
Brimming with joy in every eye.

Sure, if Cork such spirits breeds,
Truly wonder there is none
That so many pilgrims hasten
Home to kiss the Blarney Stone!³⁷

A December 1877 Theatre Comique program demonstrated the typical hyperbole of theatrical advertising, referring 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," adding (in what may have been a jab at Kitty Sharpe): "All others are mere imitators and their futile efforts when compared with Miss O'Neil's artistic abilities fall below mediocrity."³⁸

Kitty featured in Harrigan's sketch *The Gallant Sixty-Ninth*, for the original sheet music cover depicted Kitty at the head of her pint-sized regiment of boy soldiers.³⁹ Kitty's dancing also inspired Harrigan's song "Sweet Mary Ann."⁴⁰

"My Mary Ann's a dancer in the art of terpsichore, you should see her forward four and a-la-maude [allemande].
She'd break up all the lumber that you 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."⁴¹

³⁷ "Introductory Overture," New York *Clipper*, October 25, 1873. "Kitty From Cork" was a song popularized by the singer Kathleen/Kitty O'Neil, who did not perform for Harrigan in 1873. The *Clipper* reviewer was either recycling a paean to the older Kitty or was genuinely confusing the two performers.

³⁸ Theatre Comique playbills in Townsend Walsh scrapbook of Harrigan ephemera, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³⁹ "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).

⁴⁰ "Kitty O'Neill sang a new character song entitled 'Sweet Mary Ann,' written by Edward Harrigan, which made a hit, and later exhibited her skill in jig-dancing." (New York *Clipper*, February 2, 1878).

⁴¹ "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.

Minstrel jigs (sometimes called “straight jigs” to distinguish them from the Irish variety) used the same meters and eight-bar segments as Irish, Scottish and English reels, hornpipes and flings. The difference was the incorporation of African-inspired syncopation. These tunes are of great significance in the history of American popular culture. Dance historians trace the origin of modern tap and soft-shoe dancing to the amalgamation of African, Irish and English dance styles in the 19th-century musical melting pot, and 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 Emmett that syncopated minstrel banjo tunes “provided elements from which, later on, rags, blues, and finally jazz developed their idiom.”⁴⁴

Jig dancers often competed with each other in “challenge” or “trial” 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 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 early 1860’s, 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.⁴⁵

In 1875, Kitty added the “Lancashire clog” to her Theatre Comique repertoire (see the playbill above), though she had already been noted for her clogging in her youthful days in Buffalo.⁴⁶ This percussive dance form had been imported from England, where it was a folk art among textile mill workers and miners, who wore wooden shoes because they were cheap and lasted longer than leather in wet conditions. A *Clipper* writer made note of her new specialty:

Kitty O’Neil was seen for the first time in a Lancashire clog-dance, in which she surpassed all her former terpsichorean efforts. She was attired in male costume, consisting of a white shirt, knee-breeches of a slate color, silk stockings, a blue sash at the waist, and parti-colored blue and pink and black clogs.⁴⁷

Kitty O’Neil’s most famous specialty, the one for which her “Champion Jig” was composed, was the “sand jig.” It has been written that Kitty O’Neil in 1876 became the first woman to perform this dance, and that it had been introduced that year by the dancer Jimmy Bradley.⁴⁸ In fact, sand jiggling, closely related to later “soft shoe” dancing, was older than that, and Kitty O’Neil was probably doing it before she debuted for Pastor in 1871. Kitty Sharpe, O’Neil’s great rival, told a Saratoga Springs, New York journalist that she herself had picked up the specialty from the Hawley Brothers at George Deagle’s Varieties Theater in St. Louis



Kitty in clogs (Life, August 25, 1941)

⁴⁴ Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 195.

⁴⁵ New York *Clipper*, September 8, 1860, September 5, 1863. Stanton competed in trial dances with Julia Morgan (“the Boston Pet”), Naomi Porter and other female jiggers in New York and Boston.

⁴⁶ Academy of Music review, Buffalo *Evening Courier and Republic*, October 16, 1868.

⁴⁷ New York *Clipper*, April 17, 1875.

⁴⁸ *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 6, p. 316.

before she made her own Pastor debut in 1870. “There were only two women doing sand dancing, or as it is more generally known, jig dancing, at that time, and Kitty rehearsed long and faithfully with the Hawley Brothers.”⁴⁹

Vaudeville historian Douglas Gilbert described the act:

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.⁵⁰

In a 1917 letter to the *New York Sun*, a writer recalled Kitty's performances:

She used to step from the wings of Pastor's Theatre attired in tights and shake a paper bag full of white sand on the stage. She confined her efforts within the limited sand zone, which covered but a few feet.⁵¹

Sand dancing may have evolved from the early jig dancers' habit of scattering sand for traction.⁵² As with minstrel-era “jigging” in general, it likely originated as white performers incorporated African-American rhythms and steps into their own dancing.⁵³ Veteran New York Irish tap dancer Josephine McNamara remembered seeing vaudevillian Charles “Cookie” Cook perform sand dances at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre. “You don't hop around like regular tap dancing,” McNamara recalled, “it's mostly from your knees down.”⁵⁴ As Kitty Sharpe observed: “With that kind of dancing the more immobile you are from your hips up the better you are. I could dance with a glass of water on my head, and have, many times.”⁵⁵ A *New York Post* writer in 1942 described the sand dancing of tap star John Bubbles:

It's a sort of rhythmic, swishing shuffle done on a two-foot-square area lightly sprinkled with sand. Practically all the action is from the ankles down, with the dancer's feet never leaving the ground.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ “Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter VIII,” *The Saratogian*, February 11, 1929.

⁵⁰ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 52-3.

⁵¹ *New York Sun*, November 30, 1917.

⁵² *Clipper* editor Frank Queen, in his account of the April 16, 1862 jig challenge dance between Dick Carroll of the Canterbury Music Hall and Tommy Peel of Bryant's Minstrels, noted that Peel “brought out from the wings a paper of sand, which he scattered on the lower side of the stage where the principal part of the dancing took place” and that Carroll “also scattered the sand around with a free hand.” *New York Clipper*, April 26, 1862, p. 14.

⁵³ “Jig Dancing is peculiarly an American institution and had its origins among the slaves of the southern plantations. No white man taught the original darkies the arts of Jig or Clog Dancing... It was original with them and has been copied by those who, in the early days of minstrelsy, made that a feature of their business...,” Ed. James, *Jig, Clog and Breakdown Dancing Made Easy...*, (New York: Ed. James, 1873).

⁵⁴ Interview with the author, New York, 2000.

⁵⁵ “Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter VIII,” *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ “Bubbles Revives Rarely Seen Sand Dance,” *New York Post*, March 19, 1942.

Gilbert wrote in 1940 that the sand jig hadn't been danced in thirty years, but it may simply have gone underground. As the New York *Post* writer quoted above observed: “Bubbles kept up his sand dance in the act for a while, but dropped it when he found wartime vaudeville audiences too noisy for the subtle sand sounds to get across... for the most part sand dancing has been relegated to after-hours gatherings of professionals who appreciate its technical difficulties.”⁵⁷

Certainly, sand dancing was kept alive after the decline of vaudeville largely by black performers. In addition to John Bubbles (who taught Fred Astaire to sand dance for the 1935 film *Top Hat*), Bill “Bojangles” Robinson was noted for his “sanding.” It was part of Sammy Davis, Jr.’s repertoire into the 1950s and tap star Gregory Hines showed he could do it in a short parody sand dance in the 1981 Mel Brooks film comedy *History of the World, Part 1*. The best known sand dancers of recent decades were New Yorkers Harriet Browne, who mixed sequins into her sand, and Howard “Sandman” Sims, the long-time master of ceremonies at the famous amateur nights at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Both of these celebrated hoofers confined their dancing to a sand box set on stage.

Kitty’s Big Tune

“Kitty O’Neil’s Champion” is the most sophisticated “sand jig” that survives from the 19th century variety tradition. 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.⁵⁸

Kitty’s namesake tune first appeared in a two-part version titled simply “Kitty O’Neil” in *Howe’s 1000 Jigs and Reels*, a forerunner of *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*.⁵⁹ In the earlier book, “Kitty O’Neil” was included in a group of tunes from Jimmy Norton, a Boston minstrel fiddler known as “the Boss Jig Player.” This version predates Kitty the dancer’s first Boston or New York stage performances by several years, which might indicate that the name was tribute to Kathleen/Kitty O’Neil, the singer, who was a celebrated east coast variety performer at the time (c. 1869) that Howe’s *1000* was published.



Howe’s 1000 Jigs and Reels

⁵⁷ “Bubbles Revives Rarely Seen Sand Dance, New York *Post*, March 19, 1942.

⁵⁸ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Elias Howe, *1000 Jigs and Reels, Clog Dances, Contra Dances, Fancy Dances, Hornpipes, Strathspeys, Breakdowns, Irish Dances, Scotch Dances, and More...*, originally published c. 1867 by Howe in Boston; reformatted reprint Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 2001, ed. Patrick Sky.

Versions of the two-part “Kitty O’Neil” straight jig in both G and A major were repeatedly published well into the 20th century.⁶⁰ It has been collected from or recorded by fiddlers from all over North America, including 1950’s Canadian TV performers Don Messer and Ameen “King” Ganam. In Ireland, the Kerry fiddle master Pádraig O’Keeffe interpolated it into a hornpipe called “The Smoky Chimney.”⁶¹

The original “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 1860’s that was printed in both *Howe’s 1000* and *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*. The fifth and sixth parts are quite similar to “Bird on the Wing,” another minstrel jig in *Ryan’s*.

“Kitty O’Neil’s Champion Jig” was published in 1882 when Kitty the sand was performing regularly in New York and Boston, and the earlier Kathleen/Kitty O’Neil had retired from the stage. The title of this tune can therefore without much question be interpreted as a nod to the most celebrated female “sand jig” dancer of the day. While there is no proof that Kitty actually danced to this particular piece, variety stage dancers typically presented the music they wanted played to their accompanists, and it would be strange indeed if such a superior musical tribute had not been adopted and used at least occasionally by the performer to whom it was dedicated.

Ryan’s also includes a five-part straight jig suitable for sand dancing titled “Kitty Sharpe’s Champion” in honor of the other acclaimed female sand jigger of that era.⁶² The other “Kitty” jig is also an expanded version of what had been a two-part tune, and is similar enough in style to “Kitty O’Neil’s Champion” that it may well have come from the same anonymous pen. It is also catchy enough that it too may yet attract the attention of today’s Irish musicians.

Some tunes in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* include a note crediting the composer or the musician from whom the piece was collected. There is no such note for “Kitty O’Neil’s Champion” or “Kitty Sharpe’s Champion.” The credit may belong to editor William Bradbury Ryan himself. Ryan was an accomplished composer who, after his mentor Howe’s death in 1895, continued

⁶⁰ Settings 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 was sourced from the Traditional Tune Archive (www.tunearch.org).

⁶¹ Recordings include a 1912 Edison “blue amberol” cylinder by Charles D’Almeida, a 7-inch disc by King Ganam and his Sons of the West (RCA Victor, 57-5113-A) and a cassette from The New Hampshire Fiddlers Union, *Music of John Taggart* (Front Hall Records FHR-204c, 1992). Pádraig O’Keeffe’s “Smoky Chimney” was performed by the band of the same name on their eponymous 1996 CD (Phaeton Records: Dublin).

⁶² The original two-part tune on which “Kitty Sharpe’s Champion” was based was published in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* as “The Inimitable Reel” and may have been copied from that book by Francis O’Neill, who published it as “Everybody’s Fancy” in his *Music of Ireland*, (Chicago: Lyon & Healy, 1903).

KITTY SARPE'S CHAMPION—JIG.



Ryan's Mammoth Collection

publishing on his own and issued at least twenty original tunes before he retired around 1900.⁶³

The name of the fiddling genius who put together Kitty's "Champion Jig" is lost to history, however, 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 1870's and '80's. Even without the dancing that inspired it, this musical tribute to Kitty O'Neil still has the power to entrance the modern listener.

Bowery Nights

In the late 1870's Ned Harrigan began to produce his own full-length plays and in 1881 moved into a new Theatre Comique located farther 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 the last performance Odell lists for her in one of Harrigan's shows took place in January, 1879, when she was in a variety olio preceding a production of the play *The Mulligan Guard Ball*.

With Harrigan out of the game, Pastor reigned as the undisputed king of New York variety. Kitty resumed performances for Pastor in 1876 and continued to do so after he relocated in 1881 to a theater on 14th Street near Union Square in the same building that then housed Tammany Hall. She 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."⁶⁴ Kitty also joined touring companies led by Hyde, Pastor and Barry, frequently playing venues in her native Buffalo and making several lengthy trips to the West Coast.

Kitty was still popular in Boston during this period and performed on several occasions at the Howard Athenaeum and the 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

⁶³ Patrick Sky, "Elias Howe and William Bradbury Ryan," *Ryan's Mammoth Collection, op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Don Meade, "The Life and Times of 'Muldoon, the Solid Man,'" *New York Irish History*, vol. 11 (1997). Text online at <http://blarneystar.com/Muldoon6.4.11.pdf>.



Kitty O'Neil (José Mora Studio, via Picture History)

headliner leading her own troupe.⁶⁵

In the waning years of her career Kitty was frequently employed in New York 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 after the turn of the century. Kitty was also a regular at Miner's Eighth Avenue Theatre on the western edge of the Tenderloin entertainment and red-light district.⁶⁶

Other popular performers at Miner's included such veterans of Harrigan's company as the comic actress Annie Yeaman 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 up-and-coming vaudeville stars Weber and Fields. Singer Maggie Cline was a favorite at Miner's, where her big number was "Throw Him Down McCloskey," a supremely politically

⁶⁵ Chronology of Boston theatre advertisements for Kitty O'Neil's performances compiled by Rhett Krause (personal communication with the author).

⁶⁶ Kitty's many performances at Miner's theaters are listed in Odell (*op. cit.*).

incorrect ditty about interracial fisticuffs. Another colorful character who played Miner's was Sam Devere, a veteran minstrel 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 1880's because of egg and vegetable bombardment from the gallery but revived in the 1890's. 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."

Finale

Odell lists Kitty O'Neil's last performance in New York at the London Theatre, another Bowery variety house, in April, 1888. She toured later that year with Hyde's Specialty Company, remaining some months in California, and playing in Seattle. The same company returned west in 1890, after which Kitty hung up her clogs and retired to Buffalo.⁶⁷

Kitty was eventually tempted back to the stage in her home town. The Buffalo *Courier* reported on her comeback appearance:

Kitty O'Neil made a great hit at Shea's Music Hall last night when she reappeared on the variety stage after an absence of several years. Kitty danced and jigged with such old-time fervor that the house resounded with acclamations of approval, and she was forced to respond to encore after encore. A floral wreath an elegant bunch of roses rewarded her efforts, and the local favorite's success was very gratifying to the many friends present.⁶⁸

This may have been a generous review. In their obituary notice for Kitty, the Buffalo *Morning Express* said of Kitty's comeback appearances that "although her dancing was good, she was not what she had been," adding: "This was not to be wondered at, since not only had she grown very stout, but she had also been out of practice for a long time." Kitty gave her last public performance at Shea's in the summer of 1892. By that time she had been a variety stage dancer for some thirty years, an extraordinarily long career in such a physically demanding profession.⁶⁹

Personal Life

Not much about Kitty's life offstage can be gleaned from the theatrical listings, playbills and brief newspaper articles that are our main source of information about her. Her name itself is so emblematically Irish that it has served as the title of many unrelated songs, dance tunes and poems, as well as the name of characters in plays, films and television shows. A number of performers over the years have also helped to obscure Kitty the dancer's memory by adopting "Kitty O'Neil" (or "O'Neill") as a stage name. In addition to Kathleen/Kitty O'Neil, the singer

⁶⁷ Advertisements and reports on Hyde's Specialty Company tours, including Kitty, appeared in the San Francisco *Examiner*, San Francisco *Chronicle*, and *The Daily Alta California*.

⁶⁸ "Kitty O'Neil's Return to Vaudeville," Buffalo *Courier*, April 14, 1891.

⁶⁹ "Kittie O'Neil Dead" Buffalo *Morning Express*, April 17, 1893. Kitty's final Shea's performance was mentioned in "Kitty O'Neil Dead," Buffalo *Evening News*, April 17, 1893.

mentioned above, these include a New York stage actress of the early 20th century, a minor Hollywood film actress of the 1940's and a deaf movie stuntwoman and high-speed driver who was the subject of the 1979 television film *Silent Victory*.

The anonymous writer of an 1878 article in the New York *Sun* recalled that in her early days in Pastor's troupe, Kitty was wooed by another member of the company, minstrel song-and-dance man Frank Kerns, as well as by Ed Power, a clog dancer who was Kerns' partner in a saloon catering to the theatrical profession: "It was understood that Kerns and Powers [*sic*] were suitors for the fair and agile Kitty's hand, and there were complications; but Kerns at length died of consumption, and Kitty married Powers [*sic*]." ⁷⁰ Another anonymously bylined article maintained that Kitty in 1884 was still mourning Kerns, who had been known for his rendition of the sentimental Scottish song "Annie Laurie," so that "into the music the orchestra always plays for her nimble steps curiously comes the strain of Annie Laurie, adapted by a slight change of rhythm to the requirements of the jig..." ⁷¹ And, indeed, a slight effort of imagination might find some resemblance between the original "Kitty O'Neil" tune and the first strain of "Annie Laurie."

Kitty married Power in 1873, when she was seventeen or eighteen, but like his old partner, Power contracted tuberculosis. In the summer of 1878, he traveled west with Kitty and the rest of Tony Pastor's troupe in the hope of recovering his health. Kitty wanted to take him from San Francisco to the drier air of southern California, but Power died on the train in the Sierra Nevada foothills on August 31, only 36 years old. ⁷² Power's will left his bar and all other assets to his brothers, who then tried to repossess Kitty's diamonds, her only remaining possessions of any value. No account of the result of that suit has been found, but the *Clipper* noted:

Among those who are familiar with the facts there is a very general impression that all that Edward Power had when he died had been earned by his wife in her profession as a dancer, and she seems to have received nothing from her and her husband's joint estate but the diamonds. There is no question as to with which side sympathy lies in this matter. ⁷³

Only three months after Power's death, Kitty married comedian Harry Kernell, another member of Pastor's troupe. Born Henry Carlin in Philadelphia, Kernell was a major variety star in his own right. His specialty was humorous "sidewalk sayings" in an Ulster accent based on that of his mother Nancy, an immigrant from Plumbridge, County Tyrone. Harry had a double act with his younger brother John that was frequently featured on the same bill as Kitty in Tony Pastor's troupe. An 1876 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." ⁷⁴

⁷⁰ "Kitty O'Neil's Bereavement," New York *Sun*, August 22, 1878, p. 2. Kitty's age when she first married was given in her Buffalo *Evening News* obituary. The opening of Power's and Kern's bar was advertised in the *Clipper* in 1872. "Death of Frank Kerns," New York *Clipper*, September 29, 1877, supplied information on his partnership with Ed Power. The building in which they operated their saloon at 70 Prince Street still exists and a bar/restaurant is still on the first floor. Power's clogging was mentioned in an article covering a benefit for Kerns before he left for Florida in an attempt to recover his health: "City Summary," New York *Clipper*, January 31, 1874.

⁷¹ Rochester, NY *Democrat Chronicle*, November 28 1884.

⁷² New York *Clipper*, August 24 and 31, 1878. New York *Sun*, August 22, 1878.

⁷³ "Fact and Fancy Focused," New York *Clipper*, December 6, 1879

⁷⁴ Playbill, Ford's Opera House, April 10, 1876. In Library of Congress' American Memory collection, online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>

A Buffalo obituary writer noted that “As Mrs. Kernell the young woman was not destined long to be happy.”⁷⁵ Harry’s roving eye was drawn to a paramour identified in Kitty’s divorce suit as “Brooklyn Nelly,” and later to Queenie Vassar (born Cecilia McMahon), an actress imported from Glasgow by Tony Pastor in 1884 who later had a brief but celebrated Hollywood film career.⁷⁶ Kitty and Harry separated and their divorce was finalized in 1887. The *Clipper* had published two brief birth announcements for the couple, but neither child lived long.⁷⁷ Kernell’s career continued into the 1890’s, when his “High Class Vaudevilles” troupe included “Little Harry Kernell,” a son by Queenie Vassar. But in October, 1892, tertiary syphilis resulted in his committal to Manhattan’s Bloomingdale Asylum, where he died on March 14, 1893.⁷⁸

After her retirement from the stage, Kitty returned to Buffalo and her family’s saloon business. She and her sister Annie were arrested in 1891 for selling liquor in a tavern for which the family had been denied a license.⁷⁹ Her parents lived in rooms above the Alhambra Theater on Commercial Street, and Kitty became the theater manager. During a September, 1892 cholera scare in the city, a reporter noted:

Of the three most serious infractions of sanitary laws, the third is in the in the block in which the Alhambra Theater offers its attractions to foolish youth or corrupted manhood. Kittie O’Neil, once a famed jig dancer...is the mistress of the establishment and collects the rents. She is outspoken and is ready to do all in her power, she says, to remedy the evils.⁸⁰

That autumn, Kitty married Alfred Pettie, who ran a saloon and restaurant at 66 Clinton Street.⁸¹ Not long before the wedding, Kitty had an operation for what an obituary delicately described as “some female complaint.” In the spring, “she was attacked again by the same complaint, aggravated by kidney trouble.”⁸² On April 16, she underwent a laparotomy, a perilous abdominal operation in those days, and died soon afterward in the Buffalo General Hospital. The death certificate listed the cause as peritonitis and nephritis. She was buried in Buffalo’s Holy Cross Cemetery.

Only 38 at the time of her death, Kitty was survived by her parents, a sister and three brothers,

⁷⁵ “Kittie O’Neil Dead” Buffalo *Morning Express*, April 17, 1893.

⁷⁶ New York *Herald*, November 3, 1887. Correspondence with Mary Kernell, daughter in law of “Little Harry Kernell,” August 2002. Axel Nissen, *Mothers, Mammies and Old Maids: Twenty-Five Character Actresses of Golden Age Hollywood* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012).

⁷⁷ “KITTY O’NEIL presented her husband, Harry Kernell, with an heir recently.” (New York *Clipper*, March 6, 1880). No more was heard of that child. “Harry Kernell’s wife, professionally known as Kitty O’Neil, recently presented him with a baby boy. Mother and child doing well. – Chicago, Ill., July 18” (New York *Clipper*, July 23, 1881). That child, Charles, died less than a year later (Buffalo *Express*, April 20, 1882). A subsequent miscarriage was also reported (“Kitty O’Neil lost a baby in St. Joseph, Mo., last Tuesday”) in the *Illinois State Register*, Springfield, April 30, 1882. Obituaries of Harry Kernell made no mention of surviving offspring: New York *Clipper*, March 18 and March 25, 1893, *New York Times*, March 14, 1893, Buffalo *Morning Express*, March 14, 1893. News that the O’Neil/Kernell divorce notice had been finalized appeared in the New York *Herald*, November 3, 1887.

⁷⁸ “Harry Kernell Insane,” New York *Times*, October 8, 1892. Queenie Vassar and other performers in the musical *A Trip to Chinatown* performed for the Bloomingdale patients, who included Kernell and his fellow Irish comic W.J. Scanlan: “Actors Entertain Lunatics,” New York *Times*, February 10, 1893.

⁷⁹ Buffalo *Express*, January 14, 1891, p. 5.

⁸⁰ “Everything Ready: The Italians of Buffalo Have Prepared for Cholera,” Buffalo *Illustrated Express*, Sunday, September 4, 1892. “Kittie O’Neil Dead,” Buffalo *Morning Express*, April 17, 1893.

⁸¹ Buffalo City Directory (Courier: Buffalo, 1893) via Google Books.

⁸² “Kittie O’Neil Dead,” Buffalo *Morning Express*, April 17, 1893.

one of whom, Edwin, had taken over management of the Alhambra, renamed the Pavilion Concert Hall. Alfred Pettie sold his saloon only a week or so before Kitty's death and no doubt benefited from her estate. As the Buffalo *Evening News* noted: "She was saving of her earnings on the stage, invested her money wisely and at her death owned considerable property in Buffalo."⁸³

Kitty was long remembered in Buffalo. A local reporter opined in 1888 that she was "the only Buffalonian who was ever first in any field of artistic endeavor."⁸⁴ In the 1940's an old canal boat man told a local historian that that on July 4, 1881, he had witnessed her dancing in the nude atop a 12-inch-wide pedestal for a packed crowd in a Canal Street saloon.⁸⁵ Given that Kitty was at that time in Chicago about to deliver her second child by Harry Kernell, this tale, though it has been repeated in several accounts of Buffalo history, must be regarded as apocryphal.

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 and Manhattan newspapers several times when she was arrested for public intoxication, in one case while dancing a jig on the Brooklyn Bridge.⁸⁶ In 1916, a police court reporter wrote that Connolly, still claiming to be Kitty O'Neil, was pressing assault charges against a fellow rooming house resident for hitting her in the face with a cuspidor.⁸⁷

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 composed to celebrate Kitty's famous sand dance is still very much alive. Thanks to Tommy Peoples, Paddy Keenan, Kevin Burke and other traditional musicians, Irish music lovers the world over are still listening to and enjoying "Kitty O'Neil's Champion Jig," a relic of the days when, long before *Riverdance*, Irish performers dominated popular theater on Broadway.

⁸³ "Kitty O'Neil Dead," Buffalo *Evening News*, April 17, 1893. Tony Pastor told a Boston reporter in 1878 that Kitty was on a salary of \$100 a week (*Otter Creek Valley News*, Bennington, VT, June 7, 1878).

⁸⁴ Buffalo *Express*, April 16, 1888.

⁸⁵ 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).

⁸⁶ "Jig Dancer in Court: Kitty O'Neil, Once Well Known, Fined," Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, August 22, 1900. "What Would King Edward Say," Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, January 28, 1901. Brooklyn *Daily Standard Union*, November 6, 1906.

⁸⁷ "The Theater," Detroit *Free Press*, July 12, 1916.