

The Life and Times of “Muldoon, the Solid Man”
by Don Meade

Go with me and I'll treat you dacent
I'll set you down and I'll fill the can
As I walk the street, each friend I meet
Says: "There goes Muldoon. He's a solid man"¹

"Muldoon, the Solid Man," a comic song first performed in 1874, has proved to be one of the most enduringly popular compositions of the New York Irish playwright, director, actor, lyricist and singer Edward Harrigan.

The multi-talented Harrigan, most famous as half of the theatrical team of Harrigan and Hart, is a towering figure in the history of the American stage and one of the founding fathers of modern musical comedy. Harrigan was an amazingly prolific writer who cranked out scores of successful plays and sketches, as well as the lyrics for over 300 songs. Many of those songs were at least as popular in their day as "Muldoon, the Solid Man." Yet this comic ditty about a boastful New York Irish politician has outlived most of the rest of Harrigan's works and is still being performed and recorded today.²

Tracing the story of "Muldoon, the Solid Man" and its survival to the present day illuminates many aspects of the history of the Irish in New York. The explanation for the song's surprising longevity also throws light on the important links between the 19th-century American variety stage and the Irish folk song tradition.

Harrigan and Hart

If the name Harrigan rings a bell today, it is usually because of George M. Cohan's song ("H, A, double-R, I, G, A N spells Harrigan..."), a 1908 musical tribute that, thanks to Jimmy Cagney and Hollywood, has long outlived the reputation of its subject. A century ago, however, "Ned" Harrigan was one of the best-known theatrical personalities in the English-speaking world.

Harrigan was born in 1844 on the lower east side of Manhattan but got his start in show business in San Francisco while working there as a ship caulker after the Civil War. He took his first turns on stage as a banjo-strumming blackface minstrel but soon expanded his repertoire to include the Irish and "Dutch" (i.e., German) dialect comedy that was a staple feature of the variety stage in those years.

In 1871 Harrigan found himself in Chicago and in need of a new partner when he met the teenaged actor Anthony Cannon, who was similarly unattached, and the two decided to team up. Young Tony took a new stage name – "Harrigan and Hart" sounded better than "Harrigan and Cannon" – and the most celebrated American theatrical partnership of the 19th century was born.

Hart may not have had Harrigan's all-around theatrical genius but he was a better singer and a natural comic actor. With his short stature and baby-faced features, he was also perfectly suited for female "wench" roles opposite the taller Harrigan. The duo achieved their first taste of success in Boston in 1871 and soon took their act to Broadway.

Harrigan and Hart became regulars at the Theatre Comique, a variety theater located at 514 Broadway between Spring and Broome Streets in a building that had previously housed a synagogue and a blackface minstrel hall. In their early years at the Comique, Harrigan and Hart performed short sketches and shared crowded three-hour variety programs with comedians, singers, minstrels, jig and clog dancers, acrobats and animal acts. They also took roles in the lengthier dramatic "afterpieces" that usually concluded the evening's entertainment.

Harrigan and Hart were an immediate hit and soon won an audience that ran the gamut from newsboys on the 25¢ gallery benches to Tammany Hall politicians in the box seats downstairs. Their big breakthrough came in 1873 with *The Mulligan Guards*, a wildly popular and often revived musical sketch that lampooned the pseudo-military target-shooting societies popular in New York in the years after the Civil War.

As their popularity grew, Harrigan and Hart's sketches got longer and often appeared in the prime spot at the end of the program. In 1876 Harrigan and Hart took over the Comique themselves and made it the premiere variety theater in New York. Five years later they moved into a new Theatre Comique further up Broadway near Astor Place. There Harrigan broke away from the variety show format to produce full-scale, three-act musical plays that set box office records and won the praise of literary and dramatic critics, who compared him to Shakespeare, Dickens and Molière.

Then disaster struck. A fire destroyed Harrigan and Hart's uninsured theater, exacerbating differences between the two principals and their families. In 1885, much to the sorrow of their fans, the duo parted ways. The unfortunate Hart died of syphilis not long after the breakup but Harrigan, who died in 1911, maintained a successful theatrical career until after the turn of the century.

Harrigan's Comedy

“Muldoon, the Solid Man” dates from Harrigan's early years in variety theater. His sketches of that period were full of catchy songs and the kind of physical comedy he called “knockdown and slabang.” They were also full of ethnic characters drawn from life on the streets of his native New York. Harrigan's admirers praised his naturalism and considered his Irish, German and Black characters a vast improvement on the stereotypes employed by his theatrical predecessors. Modern audiences, however, would find Harrigan's brand of ethnic humor a bit raw, if not downright racist.

Rivalry between Irish and German New Yorkers was a long-running theme of Harrigan's comedy, but as drama scholar Alicia Kae Koger noted, “Harrigan consistently favored the Irish in his plays and sketches and his German types usually suffered from lack of depth and humanity.”³

Harrigan's Black characters may have been more fully realized than their minstrel show forerunners, but they were still buffoonish caricatures. In a generally favorable 1886 article on Harrigan's comedy, the renowned literary critic William Dean Howells criticized Harrigan on this score:

Not all the Irish are good, but all the colored people are bad colored people. They are of the gloomy, razor bearing variety, amusing always but truculent and tricky...⁴

Harrigan may not have favored his German characters, but he at least allowed German actors to play them on stage. All of his Black characters, both male and female, were played by white men in blackface. A reporter once asked Harrigan whether he ever had his “darkies played by negroes.” Harrigan replied:

Hardly, and there's good reason. A negro cannot be natural on the stage. He exaggerates the white man's impersonation of himself and thus becomes ridiculous.⁵

However harshly one must judge his racial attitudes, Harrigan did, at least, advocate peaceful coexistence. “As a champion of the common man and woman,” Koger wrote, “he addressed the concerns that most affected the Blacks and the Irish and German immigrants and gently encouraged racial tolerance and cooperation.”⁶

A Typical Harrigan Irishman

In Harrigan's heyday in the 1870's and '80's, the immigrant Irish and their offspring constituted the largest single ethnic group in New York. The Irish predominated in Harrigan's audience as well, and the Irish characters, not surprisingly, came off best in his comedy.

"Muldoon, the Solid Man," was a typical Harrigan Irishman. He was, of course, a comic caricature, but the lyrics of his song (which accompany this article) concisely and accurately describe a very real type of Irish New Yorker of the 1870's.

Muldoon sings that he "came when small from Donegal, in the *Daniel Webster* across the sea." With this reference, Harrigan identified Muldoon as an immigrant of the immediate post-famine years. Launched in 1850, the *Daniel Webster* was perhaps the most famous packet ship on the heavily traveled Liverpool-to-Boston route. In the six years before she was sold to a British concern and renamed, the *Daniel Webster* carried thousands of Irish men and women to the New World. The ship's very name conjured up images of hazardous Atlantic crossings as the *Webster* was famous for a mid-ocean rescue of 200 Irish immigrants from the sinking *Unicorn* in 1851.⁷

The oldest extant version of "Muldoon, the Solid Man" was jotted down by Harrigan in a notebook that is now part of the Harrigan Papers bequeathed to the New York Public Library. In that version, titled simply "Solid Man," Muldoon sings that he "situated" in the Sixth Ward, the site of the notorious Five Points slum and a district often referred to as "the bloody ould sixth." Harrigan subsequently changed Muldoon's address to the Fourteenth Ward. This was the district in which the Theatre Comique, where "Muldoon" was first performed, was located. It would later become the site of Manhattan's "Little Italy," but in Harrigan's day the Fourteenth was a crowded tenement ward with a mixed but heavily Irish population.⁸

The destitute immigrants who fled a famine-ravaged Ireland in the early 1850's had by the 1870's become a factor to be reckoned with in the political life of New York City. Like Muldoon, quite a few of them were able to "elevate" by pursuing a career in politics. It might just as well have been Michael Muldoon, rather than the real-life politician George Washington Plunkitt, who said of his path to success: "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."⁹

With his somewhat fractured English, Muldoon doesn't really sound "educated to a high degree." And perhaps he exaggerates his "great influence" – the "control" of which he boasts extends principally to the population of the city's jails. Muldoon's rise from tenement poverty to political prominence was, however, a true-to-life immigrant success story and one with which Harrigan's audience could readily identify.

Harrigan's Muldoon and his stage brethren may have been ethnic stereotypes. But as William H. A. Williams observed in his recent book *'Twas Only An Irishman's Dream: The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800-1920*, they were far more positive stereotypes than the crude anti-Irish caricatures commonly seen on the pre-Civil War American stage.

Harrigan's Irish-born contemporary Dion Boucicault was also creating a new type of stage Irishman in those years with *The Colleen Bawn*, *Arrah na Pogue* and other popular dramas that featured heroic sons of Erin in leading roles. Harrigan broke new ground, however, by making Irish-American men and women the main figures of his theater. The New York Irish politicians, policemen, tenement landlords and saloonkeepers who populated Harrigan's

sketches and plays were thoroughly Americanized characters whose stage capers allowed a more self-confident and assimilated generation of Irish-Americans to laugh at themselves.

Some people, of course, have no sense of humor. A few Boston Irish in 1884 tried to organize a boycott of a Harrigan and Hart tour to protest alleged slanders on the Irish. The local Catholic paper, the *Pilot*, dismissed these over-sensitive souls with the remark that “the Irishman who could be offended at *The Mulligans* or *Cordelia's Aspirations* is not sure of himself or his people.”¹⁰

Harrigan and Hart were, after all, Irish themselves. Hart was the Massachusetts-born son of Irish immigrants. Harrigan may not have been the purebred Celt many of his fans believed him to be, but his paternal grandparents were Irish and he himself grew up near Corlear's Hook on the Lower East Side in a neighborhood so thoroughly Hibernian it was known as “Cork Row.”

The rising New York Irish were delighted to see themselves positively portrayed on stage and eagerly embraced Harrigan and Hart as their own. They couldn't get enough of Harrigan in his recurring role as Dan Mulligan, leader of the Mulligan Guard. And they laughed for years at Harrigan's musical jabs at New York Irish politicians, especially “Muldoon, the Solid Man.”

Solid Men

Muldoon boasts that he “went to the front like a solid man.” To Harrigan's contemporaries “solid” connoted wealth and respectability. In his popular 1879 song “The Babies on Our Block,” Harrigan used the word in that sense to describe “Patrick Murphy, Esquire,” a prosperous Irish tenement owner:

With his shiny silken beaver,
He's as solid as a rock,
The envy of the neighbors' boys
A-living off our Block.¹¹

When Harrigan had Muldoon sing that he “went to the front like a solid man,” he was also invoking a political cliché dear to the hearts of Tammany Hall leaders. The phrase recalled the title of “Solid Men to the Front,” a quickstep composed in 1870 by Seventh Regiment band leader Claudio S. Grafulla and dedicated to Tammany boss William M. Tweed, whose heroic portrait dominated the cover of the sheet music.¹² The Seventh Regiment was a heavily Irish state militia that later made Harrigan and Hart honorary members. Grafulla's regimental band often played at Tammany functions and for the private affairs of Tweed's Americus club.

Tweed, though not himself Irish, led a Democratic Party organization that relied in large measure on the Irish vote. Like Harrigan, he was a product of the Seventh Ward on Manhattan's lower East side. In the years before the Civil War, volunteer fire companies loomed large in the social and political life of the downtown wards and Tweed's role as a foreman of the Americus (“Big Six”) engine company was his springboard to a political career. As a boy, young Harrigan would run after “Big Six” as it sped to the site of a fire and help carry water to fill the hand-pumped engine.¹³

By 1873 the once untouchable Tweed was standing trial on charges stemming from courthouse construction graft. Other “solid men” in city government, including Mayor Oakey Hall, Parks Commissioner Peter Sweeny and city Comptroller Richard (“Slippery Dick”) Connolly, were either on the lam or under investigation.

It was at this time that Harrigan and Hart launched their famous *Mulligan Guards* sketch, in which they sang that “the solid min would all fall in and march in the Mulligan Guards.” “Muldoon, the Solid Man” was first performed only a few months after Tweed (like Muldoon’s constituents in the song) went to the Blackwell’s Island prison to “take the refreshing East River air.” In this context, musical tributes to “solid man” politicians had obviously acquired an ironic character.

Tweed’s downfall meant opportunities for others. With the old boss out of the way, “Honest John” Kelly went to the front. Kelly is often referred to as the first Irish head of Tammany Hall. This is not quite true. The society’s first “Grand Sachem” was an upholsterer named William Mooney.¹⁴ And while Mooney may have been a figurehead, the Irish Catholic William D. Kennedy was a genuine power in Tammany before he became a Civil War casualty in 1861.¹⁵ It was John Kelly, however, who transformed Tammany into the political machine of legend and his elevation was emblematic of the rising status of the New York Irish.

The city’s Irish politicians also cast hungry eyes on upstate political plums, as Harrigan noted in his 1875 song “Duffy to the Front”:

Cornelius Duffy, the people’s choice
A substantial, solid man
Will represent our government
And surely lead the van
His head is full of learning,
His constituents agree
He’ll hold the chair and rule it there
Far up in Albany

Then rise your voices every one
The enemy we will hunt
We’ll rule New York, ah that’s the talk
When Duffy’s to the front¹⁶

One might think that Harrigan’s “solid men” would have been considered slanderous caricatures by real New York Irish politicians. In fact, Tammany sachems, aldermen and ward heelers were among Harrigan’s biggest fans and consistent first-nighters at his plays. Harrigan long remembered the support that “Honest John” Kelly offered in 1881 when the showman was renovating a new theater in which to present full-length plays. Many of his friends were predicting that the switch from a variety format would prove disastrous. Kelly, Harrigan recalled, “was the only one who gave me encouragement.” He described how the Tammany boss sought him out at the building site, took a seat in a wheelbarrow and, when told of Harrigan’s plans, remarked: “splendid! You’ve struck the right idea.”¹⁷

Richard Croker, Kelly’s successor as Tammany chief, was also a friend of Harrigan. So was Tammany loyalist Hugh Grant, who served terms as Sheriff and Mayor and was known as “Honest Hugh” because he once declined to join his fellow aldermen in splitting a \$500,000 cash bribe from the Broadway Surface Railroad Company.¹⁸

Muldoon in Song and Sketch

The song “Muldoon, the Solid Man” was probably first performed on Monday, March 2, 1874. The Theatre Comique playbill that week advertised “Harrigan and Hart’s Laughable Irish Sketch entitled WHO OWNS THE LINE” and listed Harrigan in the dual roles of Michael Moran and his wife Bridget, with Hart doubling as Patrick and Mary Ann Dolan. “During this sketch,” the playbill indicated, “Mr. Harrigan will sing his New Song,

MULDOON, THE SOLID MAN.”19

No script survives for *Who Owns the Line?* (also known as *Who Owns the Clothes Line?*). It can be deduced from the *dramatis personae* and from the illustration on the cover of the “Muldoon” sheet music, however, that the sketch involved a dispute between two Irish women and their husbands over a backyard clothes line. It's not clear how Muldoon fit into the storyline, but as Alicia Kae Koger observed, Harrigan in his early sketches frequently “inserted songs into the action for no logical purpose besides offering a diversion from the plot or an opportunity for a performer to display his talents.”²⁰

The song “Muldoon, the Solid Man” belonged more naturally in a sketch of the same name, one that survives as a handwritten script in the Harrigan Papers. The central character in that farcical melodrama was one Michael Muldoon, a thick-brogued Irishman ready to drink, sing, dance or fight at the drop of a hat. Muldoon was a saloonkeeper and small-time politician who tried to prove that he was “educated to a high degree” by larding his conversation with polysyllabic malapropisms.²¹

A letter that plays a key role in the plot of *Muldoon, the Solid Man* was dated March 29, 1874, i.e., only a few weeks after the Muldoon song was first performed in *Who Owns the Line?* The Muldoon script may date from 1874, but it is far more sophisticated than most of Harrigan's variety sketches of that period and perhaps represents one of his early essays at writing multi-act plays. Some of the characters and scenes in the sketch were recycled in later Harrigan productions, but there is no evidence that the Muldoon sketch as written was ever actually performed.²²

Who Owns the Line? was popular enough, however, that Harrigan revived it three times for week-long runs at the Comique in 1874 and '75. The song “Muldoon, the Solid Man” proved so popular that one Muldoon was not enough. For the April, 1875 revival of *Who Owns the Line?*, the Theatre Comique playbill advertised that “Mr. Harrigan will sing for the first time his New and original Irish song MULDOON'S BROTHER PAT.” In the new song, Pat Muldoon boasted of his influence in “society” and of his accomplishments as a lawyer, dancer, journalist and politician:

Around New York in style I walked,
I dare any man to shoot my hat
Ye'll understand I'm a solid man,
I'm Michael Muldoon's brother Pat

I'm a leading man in politics,
I'm known throughout the state
In every bar both near and far
My name is found upon the slate²³

In other words, Pat was such a “solid man” that he owed money to every saloonkeeper in New York!

Harrigan and Hart went on the road in the fall of 1875, touring the country with a version of a play called *The Doyle Brothers* that, according to Harrigan and Hart biographer E.J. Kahn, incorporated the sketch *Muldoon the Solid Man*.²⁴ The duo returned to New York in the fall of 1876 and took the lease on the Theatre Comique themselves. In the week before Christmas that year, they revived *Who Owns the Line?* one more time.

For that revival, Harrigan and Hart appeared in the roles of Michael and Ellen Muldoon rather than the original Michael and Bridget Moran.²⁵ As this couple were the main

characters in the script of *Muldoon, the Solid Man*, it is possible that the final version of *Who Owns the Line?* incorporated some of the comic routines from that unproduced sketch. Harrigan brought Michael and Ellen Muldoon back one last time as minor characters in his 1882 play *Squatter Sovereignty*.

Muldoons Go Leor

In a 1904 article on Harrigan's career, the New York *Daily News* noted that in *Who Owns the Line* "Harrigan was 'Muldoon, the Solid Man,' and many a man has since sung after him: 'Go with me and I'll trate ye decent...'"²⁶ Many a man indeed – the song could not have achieved the fame that it did had Harrigan been the only one singing it. For more than a century "Muldoon, the Solid Man" was "covered" by other entertainers, reprinted in songbooks and published on newsprint broadsides.²⁷

The phrase "Muldoon, the solid man" had other echoes in popular culture. The Irish-American wrestling champion William Muldoon was known throughout his career as "The Solid Man." The wrestling Muldoon was so well-known, in fact, that many people assumed the song had been named for him rather than the reverse. He launched his career in the 1870's by winning bouts held in Harry Hill's concert saloon on Manhattan's Houston Street. He later joined the police force, became a friend of Harrigan's, played cameo roles on Broadway, trained boxing champion John L. Sullivan, served on the New York State Athletic Commission and founded the "Muldoon Institute," where celebrity actors and politicians went to get in shape.²⁸

In 1877, George W. Hull, the same con artist who had earlier cooked up the "Cardiff Giant" hoax in upstate New York, "discovered" another phony fossil in Colorado with a little public relations help from P.T. Barnum. Some frontier Harrigan fan dubbed the 500-pound cement giant "The Solid Muldoon," a name that subsequently served as the title of a Durango, Colorado weekly newspaper until 1892.

Harrigan's famous character was also appropriated by other variety entertainers. The banjo-playing comedian William F. Carroll (whose real name actually was Muldoon) performed for years in a sketch called *Muldoon's Picnic*, which featured versions of Harrigan's characters Michael and Ellen Muldoon. Carroll, however, had stiff competition in the Muldoon business from other performers, particularly the comedy team of Billy Barry and Hugh Fay.²⁹

Both Barry and Fay had worked alongside Harrigan at the Theatre Comique in the mid-1870's. After a stint with variety theater king Tony Pastor, Barry teamed up with Fay in 1879 at Hyde and Behman's Brooklyn theater, where the pair began a career based on the sincerest form of flattery of Harrigan and Hart. Harrigan had capitalized on the huge success of *The Mulligan Guards* with a series of sequels that included *The Mulligan Guard Picnic*, *The Mulligan Guard Ball* and *The Mulligans' Silver Wedding*. Barry and Fay in turn churned out *Muldoon's Trip to Coney Island*, *Muldoon's Flats*, *Muldoon's Christening*, *Muldoon's Wedding*, etc.

The competing Muldoons went head-to-head in January, 1882 when Tony Pastor produced a version of *Muldoon's Picnic* starring Carroll at the same time that Barry and Fay were putting on their own *Picnic* at Niblo's Garden. Niblo's indignantly advertised that its version featured "the authors and creators in their original characters."³⁰ Harrigan must have had quite a laugh.

Muldoon Goes to Ireland

The fame of Michael Muldoon was not confined to this shore of the Atlantic. According to E.J. Kahn, several of Harrigan's early sketches were exported to British music halls.

Harrigan's influence in Britain can be seen in the works of Rudyard Kipling. In his 1901 novel *Kim*, for example, Kipling had a column of British soldiers in India march along singing "The Mulligan Guard." And in 1888 he gave the title "The Solid Muldoon" to one of his "Soldiers Three" tales. As there is no Muldoon in that Indian barracks ghost story, the title was presumably a reference to a character with which Kipling assumed his readers would be familiar.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that "Muldoon, the Solid Man" is among the myriad references in *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce's great compendium of the Irish collective unconscious:

...from Pat Mullen, Tom Mallon, Dan Meldon, Don Maldon a slickstick picnic made in Moate by Muldoons. The solid man saved by his sillied woman. Crackajolking away like a hearse on fire.³¹

The performer chiefly responsible for the popularity of "Muldoon, the Solid Man" in Britain and Ireland was William J. Ashcroft. Ashcroft was born in 1840 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, the son of immigrant parents from Belfast. He ran away from home to join a minstrel troupe and regularly performed on New York variety stages in the decade after the Civil War.

Ashcroft was a versatile performer. Good enough as a hooper to partner the famous clog dancer Dick Sands, he was also adept at blackface and Irish comedy and songs. During 1874 and '75, Ashcroft was booked as an Irish singer and comedian in New York theaters that included Tony Pastor's, the Olympic and the Theatre Comique, where he no doubt heard Harrigan sing "Muldoon, the Solid Man."

Ashcroft was never a headliner in New York. After marrying the English actress Kitty Brooks, however, he relocated to England and achieved greater fame and fortune. The image of the Irish in popular entertainment was in greater need of revision in Britain than it was in America. Music hall audiences were evidently fascinated by Ashcroft's self-confident, "elevated" Irish Yank, so different from the typical English stage Irishman or the ape-like Paddies in the cartoons in *Punch*. According to Irish music hall historians Eugene Watters and Matthew Murtagh, Ashcroft's "Irish Song-and-Dance Characterisations from the raw New World went well in London, and he played leading Halls to crowded Houses." "In 1876," they continue, "he had a huge success with 'Muldoon the Solid Man'."³²

With money earned in England, Ashcroft bought the Alhambra Theatre in his parents' native Belfast from fellow stage comic Dan Lowrey. From 1880 on, he was also a frequent performer at Lowrey's Star of Erin music hall in Dublin. Ashcroft was no one-hit wonder. He had another big success with "McNamara's Band," a song written especially for him by John J. Stamford and Shamus O'Connor. "Yet," as Watters and Murtagh relate, "the character that clung most to Ashcroft was 'The Solid Muldoon'."

He played it in frock-coat, muttonchops and tall hat - the self-made man of the Successful Generation, bluff, honest, generous and proud of it - and it made such an impression both in Europe and in America that he was always referred to as the Solid Man.³³

Ashcroft's music hall career lasted until 1900 when, broke and suffering from mental fatigue, he was forced to sell the Alhambra. Benefit performances for "the Solid Man" were held that year in Dublin and Glasgow but Ashcroft never recovered and he ended his days in 1918 in Belfast's Purdysburn Asylum.

The Melody Lingers On

The survival of "Muldoon" is a tribute to Harrigan's comic powers of invention and to the lasting impact of stage performances by Harrigan, Ashcroft and other variety entertainers. It

is also, however, a tribute to the vitality of the Irish folk song tradition. Even the most popular songs of the late 19th-century stage eventually faded from folk memory in North America. What gave “Muldoon” such longevity was its traditional Irish melody. That melody made for an easy transition from the music hall stage to the Irish oral tradition.

The bulk of Harrigan's lyrics were set to music written by Dave Braham, an English-born violinist who led the Theatre Comique orchestra and became Harrigan's father-in-law and lifelong collaborator. Braham's scores for Harrigan's shows often incorporated Irish traditional airs, but his own compositions were more in the mold of the Victorian music hall. “Muldoon,” however, dates from Harrigan's early years on the New York stage, before he had begun to rely exclusively on Braham's melodic imagination.

The sheet music for “Muldoon, the Solid Man” and “The Old Hat,” both of which were published in 1874 and performed in *Who Owns the Line?*, gave Harrigan credit for both words and music. The melody of “The Old Hat,” a St. Patrick's Day parade song, is actually a traditional air that has been used for many Irish songs, including “Going to Mass Last Sunday,” “My Love Nell” and Cathal McGarvey's still popular “The Star of the County Down.” The air for “Muldoon” is likewise traditional.

Most of Harrigan's fans couldn't read music, but they did buy songsters in great numbers. These were dime pamphlets with colored illustrations on the cover and the lyrics to popular songs inside. The 1874 crop of Theatre Comique songs appeared in *Harrigan and Hart's Since the Souphouse Moved Away Songster*, which directed that “Muldoon, the Solid Man” was to be sung to the air of “Colleen Rhue.”³⁴

There are quite a few Irish songs of that name but this particular “Colleen Rhue” (*cailín rua* or “red-haired lass” in Irish), though presumably familiar to Harrigan's New York Irish fans, is obscure today. The tune in Harrigan's sheet music for “Muldoon, the Solid Man” is closely related, however, to the melody of two very popular 19th-century Irish songs, “Youghal Harbour” and “Boulavogue,” as well as to “Moreton Bay,” a well-known Australian-Irish song of the penal colony era. The melody of Harrigan's “Muldoon” is even closer to that of “Omagh Town,” a song in the repertoire of many traditional singers in Ireland's north.³⁵

Harrigan's songs continued to be heard in barrooms and around parlor pianos for many years after the showman took his final bows. Jimmy Walker, New York's playboy mayor of the Prohibition era, was famous for his renditions of Harrigan songs like “My Dad's Dinner Pail.” New York governor and presidential candidate Al Smith was another notorious Harriganite who, at a ceremony for the 50th anniversary of the Brooklyn Bridge, cheerfully sang “With Danny by My Side,” a Harrigan number about courting on the bridge in the days when the span was new.

Some Harrigan and Braham songs had an afterlife in oral tradition in North America. As theater historian Gerald Bordman noted:

Harrigan's songs were among the most popular of his era. Hits such as “The Mulligan Guard March,” “The Babies on Our Block,” and “Maggie Murphy's Home” had widespread and long-lasting vogues. While they are largely forgotten today by modern playgoers and singers, they have, oddly, been absorbed into active folk traditions and have been collected in the United States and Canada by folklorists.³⁶

For a time, at least, “Muldoon” also survived in oral tradition in this country. It was, for example, included in a 1922 Minnesota Historical Society collection of songs gathered from lumberjacks and Great Lakes sailors.³⁷

The Folk Process

Having been adopted by other entertainers and by traditional singers, “Muldoon” became subject to a process of collective editing and elaboration. The third verse, with its very local New York references, suffered the most alteration. A San Francisco broadside version (“as sung by Hughey Robinson at Buckley's Varieties”), for example, changed a number of New York place names to refer to California locales.³⁸ The variant printed in 1922 by Minnesota folklorists had no third verse at all.

The true transformation of “Muldoon, the Solid Man” into a folk song took place in Ireland, where the version of the song popularized by William Ashcroft quickly escaped from the music halls into the oral tradition. This setting of “Muldoon” surfaced again in 1932 on a 78 rpm disc made in London by an Irish baritone who recorded under the name Sam Carson.

“Sam Carson” was the very Loyal Protestant alias of Samuel Greenfield, a doctor from Larne, County Antrim who also recorded songs like “McNamara's Band” under the more Hibernian monikers “Dan Quinn” and “Barney O'Leary.” Greenfield, like Ashcroft, used Harrigan's melody but altered the lyrics to remove some of the American flavor. Instead of singing that he came “in the *Daniel Webster* across the sea,” Carson sang that “my cousin Jimmy came along with me.” For New York's Fourteenth Ward, he substituted “the Dublin road.” General Grant was replaced by “the grand Lord Mayor” and Muldoon's Manhattan tenement was transformed into the more Irish or British “lodging house.” Instead of controlling “the Tombs” and “the Island,” Carson's Muldoon sings “I control the style when I'm at Brighton.”³⁹

A narrow definition of “oral tradition” might exclude the transmission of folk material via modern recordings. In the 20th century, however, such recordings have played a very important role in preserving Irish folk songs and dance tunes and disseminating them among traditional musicians. The highly influential 78 rpm recordings made in New York in the 1920's and '30's by Michael Coleman and other Irish fiddlers are a well known example of this phenomenon. Carson's recording likewise helped keep “Muldoon” alive to the present day.

Frank Harte, a renowned Dublin traditional singer, has a setting of the song with a melody similar to Harrigan's and with two verses and a chorus nearly identical to that recorded by Carson. Harte can't recall exactly where he learned the song, but he knew of Carson's record and remembered hearing informal renditions of the song in Dublin pubs. ⁴⁰

The late Dominic Behan was another Dublin singer who heard “Muldoon” in the pubs. The ballad-mongering brother of playwright Brendan Behan, Dominic was the author of “The Patriot Game” and other popular Irish songs of the 1960's, many of which he adapted from older folk material. In 1965 he published “Sit Yeh Down and I'll Treat Yeh Decent,” a song based on “Muldoon, the Solid Man” that had the following chorus:

Sit yeh down and I'll treat yeh decent
Sit yeh down and I'll fill your can
Sit yeh down and I'll treat yeh decent
For I am Muldoon, the solid man.⁴¹

Behan's song was obviously related to Harrigan's original. His melody and chorus, however, were closer to “I'll Lay Ye Doon, Love” a song fragment collected by folk revivalists in the 1960's from Scottish traditional singer Jeannie Robertson.

“I'll Lay Ye Doon, Love,” a song that made its way to Aberdeen in Scotland's northeast, is metrically identical and melodically similar to “Muldoon, the Solid Man.” The verses, based

on the typical Irish folk song device of an overheard lovers' conversation, bear no relation to Harrigan's lyrics. A mention of "the banks of the pleasant Bann," however, is evidence that the song crossed to Scotland from northern Ireland. The chorus, moreover, has clear (if corrupted) echoes of "Muldoon":

I'll lay ye doon, love, I'll treat ye decent
I'll lay ye doon,love, I'll fill your can
I'll lay ye doon love, I'll treat ye decent
For Bol' Errol he is a sorried man **42**

A version of "Muldoon, the Solid Man" much closer to Harrigan's original was recorded in Ireland in 1996 by the County Tipperary singer Dick Hogan.**43** Hogan's version of the song draws on several sources. He first heard "Muldoon" in the 1970's from the late Nioclás Tóibín, a great County Waterford singer better known for *sean-nós* (old-style) songs in the Irish language than for Irish-American music hall ditties.

According to Hogan, Tóibín's version included numerous corruptions of the original lyrics. While singing "Muldoon" in London in the 1980's, however, he was given another set of lyrics by an Irishman who had found them in an old issue of the popular magazine *Ireland's Own*. Though these lyrics were identical to those in 19th-century American songsters, Hogan still didn't realize that "Muldoon" was a Harrigan composition. In the uninhibited tradition of the true folk singer, he created his own setting of the song by adding some lines borrowed from Dominic Behan's "Sit Yeh Down and I'll Treat Yeh Decent."**44**

Muldoon Returns to America

"Muldoon, the Solid Man" may have survived into the late 20th century in the folk underground of Ireland, but in Harrigan's own country the song seemed to have been completely forgotten. It was folklorist and musician Mick Moloney who brought Muldoon back to America.

Moloney, a Limerick-born singer and plectrum instrument virtuoso, is a product of the Irish "ballad boom" of the 1960's. These were years when the international folk music revival and the American success of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem inspired a new wave of guitar-strumming Irish folkies to rediscover their musical heritage.

Moloney cut his teeth as a performer and recording artist with the Johnstons, a popular ballad group of the day that also included singer/guitarist Paul Brady. In 1973, however, he moved to Philadelphia to pursue graduate studies in folklore at the University of Pennsylvania. There Moloney began to undertake serious research into the history of Irish music in the U.S. and to play an important role in the burgeoning revival of Irish traditional music in this country.

One of the musicians Moloney contacted in New York was Father Charlie Coen, an east Galway concertina player, flutist and singer who at that time was working in a Staten Island parish. Moloney recruited Father Coen to perform with "The Green Fields of America," a touring group of traditional musicians and dancers. In their travels together, he heard Coen humming snatches of "Muldoon, the Solid Man." Moloney was intrigued by the song, but the "musical priest" didn't have all the lyrics. Another of Moloney's musical friends, Frank Harte of Dublin, did and supplied Mick with the Ashcroft/Carson version of the first two verses in 1982. Moloney then began to add "Muldoon" to his concert repertoire.**45**

In the course of his researches, Moloney discovered Harrigan's third verse in an old songster. Adding it to the lyrics he had gotten from Frank Harte, Moloney recorded this composite version of "Muldoon, the Solid Man" on *Uncommon Bonds*, a 1984 Green Linnet LP he

made with the fiddler Eugene O'Donnell. On that recording, Moloney enjoyed what he described as the fulfillment of “a 20-year-old fantasy” when he was joined on the chorus by Paddy and Bobby Clancy of the famous Clancy Brothers.**46**

Mick Moloney brought “Muldoon, the Solid Man” to the attention of a new generation of Irish-Americans in the 1980's and Dick Hogan is helping to give the song a renewed vogue in Ireland in the 1990's. “Muldoon” can now be heard in concerts and informal Irish music sessions on both sides of the Atlantic and there seems no doubt that Ned Harrigan's memorable character will live on well into the 21st century.

1. "Muldoon, the Solid Man" (New York: E.H. Harding, 1874).
2. Other Harrigan songs still be heard today in Ireland include "Moriarity" and "The Real Old Mountain Dew," though the latter is now sung to a different melody than that composed by Dave Braham for Harrigan.
3. Koger, Alicia Kae, *A Critical Analysis of Edward Harrigan's Comedy*, University Microfilms, 1984, 36-37.
4. Howells, William Dean, "Edward Harrigan's Comedies," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1886, quoted in Rose, Sidney, "Edward Harrigan and His Plays," unpublished manuscript in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.
5. *New York Morning Telegraph*, June 21, 1903, in Townsend Walsh scrapbook of Harrigan memorabilia, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.
6. Koger, op cit., 8.
7. McKay, Richard C., *Some Famous Sailing Ships and Their Builder Donald McKay* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928). The *Daniel Webster* was built for Enoch Train's White Diamond line by Donald McKay, the greatest American shipbuilder of the 19th century. The statesman for whom the ship was named gave a speech at the launching but was interrupted when the ship's owner, Enoch Train, fell off the pier and had to be fished out of the water. When Train & Co. failed in 1856, the *Daniel Webster* was sold and renamed *Hygeia*. According to John Robinson and George Francis Dow, authors of the series *The Sailing Ships of New England* (Salem, MA: Marine Research Society, 1924), the ship was last reported in service, under the name *Harewood*, in 1877.
8. The Fourteenth Ward was created in 1827 by splitting off parts of the Sixth and Eighth wards. It was bounded on the south by Walker and Canal Streets, on the north by Houston Street, on the east by the Bowery and on the west by Broadway. Harrigan later placed his best-known character, Dan Mulligan, and the fictional Mulligan Alley in the Fourteenth Ward, from which Mulligan ran for alderman in the 1880 play *The Mulligan Guard Nominee*.
9. Riordon, William L., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). The book was originally published in 1905 and Plunkitt's real-life political career with Tammany Hall was already underway when Harrigan created the character Michael Muldoon.
10. Quoted in Williams, William H.A., *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream: The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800-1920* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 200.
11. Harrigan, Edward and David Braham, "The Babies on Our Block" (New York: Wm. A. Pond & Co., 1879), reprinted in Moody, Richard, *Ned Harrigan: From Corlear's Hook to Herald Square* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980).
12. John Philip Sousa later borrowed the same title for one of his own marches.
13. Moody, op cit. The fire companies fought each other as often as they fought fires. Tweed had to step down as foreman of "Big Six" in 1850 after one particularly well-publicized brawl. See Hershkovitz, Leo, *Tweed's New York: Another Look* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1977).
14. Allen, Oliver E., *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 5.
15. Hershkovitz, op cit.
16. Harrigan and Hart's *Slavery Days Songster* (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1875).
17. Harrigan, Edward, "Holding the Mirror Up to Nature," *Pearson's Magazine*, November, 1903.
18. It was incidents like that inspired Harrigan to write a scene into his 1886 play *The O'Reagans* in which the "U.S. Black Marines" are mobilized to protect the flag because the politicians had "grabbed all de stars out of it and are now wearing de stripes." Harrigan's relations with Tammany politicians are discussed in Kahn, E.J., Jr., *The Merry Partners*:

- The Age and Stage of Harrigan and Hart* (New York: Random House, 1955).
19. Theatre Comique playbill in Townsend Walsh scrapbook, op cit.
 20. Koger, op. cit., 47. Plots were never the strong point of Harrigan's theater, even in later years. His attitude toward this aspect of dramaturgy might best be summed up by Leander Tuck, a playwright character in his 1884 play *Investigation*: "Plots are nothing to me. My brain is a storehouse where Dramatic Incidents are as numerous as flies in a Catskill boarding house." (*Investigation* manuscript, Harrigan Papers, New York Public Library).
 21. Harrigan later put the same kind of overstuffed verbiage into the mouths of the title characters of his often-revived plays *Old Lavender* and *The Major*. W.C. Fields, an old vaudevillean before he went to Hollywood, cultivated a similar stage persona and may well have been influenced by Harrigan.
 22. Harrigan biographer Richard Moody lists *Muldoon, the Solid Man* as having been first performed in "Jan. (?), 1874." In her 1984 Ph.D. dissertation on Harrigan, Alicia Kae Koger noted some suspicion about the sketch's authorship and date, but she also gave 1874 as the year of first performance in a Harrigan bibliography published in the journal *Nineteenth Century Theatre* (Volume 19, Numbers 1 and 2, 1991). No playbill, advertisement, review or other reference can be found, however, to prove that Harrigan ever actually staged the sketch. The final scene of the Muldoon script finds a pistol-packing Michael Muldoon breaking into the Blackwell's Island lunatic asylum to rescue the daughter of his political patron from a blackmailing kidnaper. The locale and its resident lunatics, who include a man who thinks he's a kite, another who thinks he's a horse and an actor gone "crazy on Shakespeare," did turn up later in Harrigan's 1877 sketch *Our Irish Cousin* (Theatre Comique playbill, Townsend Walsh scrapbook, op cit.).
 23. *Harrigan and Hart's Down Broadway Gallant '69th' Songster* (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1875).
 24. Kahn, E.J., *The Merry Partners: The Age and Stage of Harrigan and Hart* (New York: Random House), 1955, 186. Kahn's book includes no footnotes, and he did not indicate his source for this assertion. Playbills for 1875 Boston productions of *The Doyle Brothers* in the New York Public Library make mention of several other sketches incorporated into the play, but not *Muldoon, the Solid Man*.
 25. The Theatre Comique advertised in the New York *Herald* for Sunday, December 17, 1876 that Harrigan and Hart would perform *Who Owns the Line?* that week, with Harrigan singing "The Solid Man" as Michael Muldoon and the versatile Hart playing Bernard and Mrs. Grady as well as Ellen Muldoon.
 26. New York *Daily News*, December 4, 1904.
 27. Two such broadsides, one from Philadelphia, the other from San Francisco, are in the New York Public Library. Neither credits Harrigan as author, which probably indicates that they were pirate editions.
 28. Van Every, Edward, *Muldoon, the Solid Man of Sport* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1929). In Francis O'Neill's influential 1903 tune collection *Music of Ireland*, the song air "The Irish Champion" is given the alternate title of "Muldoon, the Solid Man." As this tune is unrelated to Harrigan's melody, the title is probably a reference to the famous wrestler.
 29. A script for *Muldoon's Picnic*, credited to one Charles L. Kenney, is in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library. Kenney's Muldoon, like Harrigan's, is a politician with a fondness for whiskey and grandiloquent talk. The script is undated, but as it is typewritten, is probably later than the versions performed by Carroll or Barry and Fay. A summary description of the latter's *Picnic* appears on a

November 7, 1881 playbill from Boston's Howard Athenaeum (also in the Billy Rose Collection). Like the Kenney script, it includes a roller-skating routine featuring Muldoon (played by Fay) and his sidekick Mulcahy (played by Barry) and concludes with a "three-hand reel."

30. Barry and Fay's career was chronicled in Odell, George C., *Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. XI. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).
31. Joyce, James, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1959), Penguin edition, 94.
32. Biographical information on Ashcroft from Watters, Eugene and Matthew Murtagh, *Infinite Variety: Dan Lowrey's Music Hall* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975). Data on his performance history in New York from Odell (op cit) and from advertisements and playbills in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library. Watters and Murtagh were in error in stating that Ashcroft "opened the Theatre Comique, with himself as principal comic."
33. Watters and Murtagh, op cit.
34. *Harrigan and Hart's Since the Souphouse Moved Away Songster* (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1874). "Since the Souphouse Moved Away" was a song featured in *A Terrible Example*, another Harrigan sketch first performed in the spring of 1874.
35. *Omagh Town* is credited to Michael Hurl, a journalist from County Derry who lived most of his life in Luton, England. The lyrics were first published in 1949 in *On Lough Neagh's Banks*, a collection of Hurl's poetry and songs, and reprinted in the singer Paddy Tunney's book *Where Songs Do Thunder* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1991). In a letter to the author, the Ulster folk song authority John Moulden wrote that the air now associated with "Omagh Town" was attached to the song by the late County Antrim singer Robert Cinnamond. It is possible that Cinnamond borrowed this melody from Harrigan's "Muldoon," but the basic tune is very common and, according to Moulden, is used for about three percent of all known Irish folk songs.
36. Bordman, Gerald, *Oxford Companion to American Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
37. Dean, Michael C., ed., *The Flying Cloud and 150 Other Old-Time Songs* (Virginia, MN: The Quickprint Press, 1922), 102. The version of "Muldoon, the Solid Man" in that collection was reprinted in Wright, Robert L., ed., *Irish Emigrant Ballads and Songs* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975).
38. Undated broadside in special music research collections, New York Public Library.
39. Carson, Sam [Samuel Greenfield], "Muldoon, the Solid Man" (London: Regal Zonophone MR694, Irish pressing IZ194). Discographer Philippe Varlet provided information on the recording and on Carson's other aliases. Traditional music scholar and record producer Harry Bradshaw supplied the identification of Carson as Samuel Greenfield. The first verse and chorus of Ashcroft's version of "Muldoon, the Solid Man" were printed in Watters and Murtagh, and are nearly identical to Carson's lyrics.
40. Telephone conversation with Frank Harte by the author, September, 1996.
41. Behan, Dominic, *Ireland Sings: An Anthology of Modern and Ancient Irish Songs and Ballads* (London: Essex Music Ltd., 1965). In the notes to the song, Behan indicated that he had heard "bits" of the original "Muldoon, the Solid Man" from his Aunt Julia and from pub singers. He added a chorus, he wrote, "to make it a real drinking song."
42. Kennedy, Norman, *Ballads and Songs of Scotland*, Folk Legacy Records, FSS 34, 1968. A slightly different version, also credited to Jeannie Robertson, was recorded by Jean Redpath on *Frae My Ain Countrie*, FSS 49, 1973. In Redpath's version, the chorus concludes "surely he is an honest man." Both recordings are available on

cassette from Folk Legacy Records, 85 Sharon Mountain Road, Sharon, CT 06069, telephone (860) 364-5661. I am indebted to Jo-Ellen Bosson for bringing this song to my attention.

43. Hogan, Dick, *The Wonders of the World*. This independently produced CD, which includes Hogan's unaccompanied rendition of "Muldoon, the Solid Man," is available in the U.S. from Ossian, U.S.A., 118 Beck Road, Loudon, NH 03301; telephone (603) 783-4383; HYPERLINK "http://www.ossianusa.com" www.ossianusa.com.
44. Letter to the author from Dick Hogan, October 1996.
45. This history of Moloney's acquaintance with "Muldoon, the Solid Man" has been distilled from remarks by Moloney at a 1983 concert at New York's Eagle Tavern (private recording in the possession of the author) and in an October, 1996 conversation with Moloney by the author.
46. Moloney, Mick and Eugene O'Donnell, *Uncommon Bonds* LP SIF 1053 (Green Linnet Records: New Canaan, CT, 1984). Now available in CD or cassette from Green Linnet Records, 43 Beaver Brook Road, Danbury, CT 06810, telephone (800) 468-6644, HYPERLINK "http://www.greenlinnet.com" www.greenlinnet.com.

Footnotes

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