

Immortal Mr. Dooley

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WHEN FINLEY PETER DUNNE, the creator of Mr. Dooley, died in 1936 in his seventieth year, the surprising thing to those who remembered his writings was that he had lived on into the era of the second Roosevelt. Somehow one took it for granted that he had been dead a quarter of a century. He seemed so much a part of that American interlude between the Spanish War and 1914, that he could survive it only as an anachronism. The war, Theodore Roosevelt, and Dunne's Dooley essays form an inseparable association. That war gave Dunne, the young newspaper man, an overnight fame; Roosevelt—his most famous essays were on the Rough Rider—gave him substance. Beyond this decade he did not develop. Although a final book of his was published after World War I, the catastrophe was not reflected in its pages.

During the course of his life Dunne wrote some 700 Dooley essays in which he assumed the *alter ego* of Martin Dooley (born in Roscommon in the year of Victoria's accession), a saloon-keeper in an Irish immigrant section of Chicago. Mr. Dooley, in these essays of anywhere from 800 to 2,000 words, commented weekly from behind the bar of his Archey Road saloon on the life, customs, events local and otherwise, politics and personalities of the United States in its confident expansion at the turn of the century. The superficial effect was humorous. Yet veiled beneath this genial brogue with its wry twists and exag-

gerations was a cold analytical mind, as sharp in criticism and often as bitter as has appeared on the American scene.

Mr. Dooley's speech is a transcription of an Irish dialect in which, as Dunne wrote in his preface to the first Dooley volume, "one can hear all the various accents of Ireland from the awkward brogue of the 'far-downer' to the mild and aisy Elizabethan English of the southern Irishman, and all the exquisite variations to be heard between Armagh and Bantry Bay, with the difference that would naturally arise from substituting cinders and sulphuretted hydrogen for soft misty air and peat smoke." His is an eighteenth century mind, occasionally swept by savage indignation, but lacking the subsequent belief in progress and perfectability. Dunne, with his race memories of Ireland, cursed the misery of the Chicago slums. In another age he might have collaborated on the Drapier Letters. Yet though he looked for pragmatic reforms he did not believe in reformers. At heart he was a tory. In religion he remained what Santayana called a free-thinking Catholic, content to live and die within the tradition of the church without, however, accepting it personally.

The Dooley books were a triumph, yet the triumph was limited to scarcely more than a decade. Even as Dunne wrote his essays, that "aisy" dialect was being superseded by the flat accent of the second generation. The image of the Irish laborer

shouldering his pick or on the way to the rolling mill was no longer characteristic. Irish immigrants were changing their status, moving up into the middle class as their places were taken by new waves of immigrants from other lands. As the brogue declined in the old Celtic matrix of the larger cities, younger readers found the Dooley essays difficult. Mr. Dooley went out of fashion. He is remembered today chiefly by those of late middle-age. For anyone who has grown up since 1914 his language is a handicap. Yet it is certain that as Dunne's era falls into perspective people will turn to his Dooley essays again, for their wisdom, for their historical intimacy, for the feeling of urban immigrant America as it was at the beginning of this century—and they will find that they read him with delight.

One can hope that the present re-issue of Dooley essays by Mr. Louis Filler for the fourth volume of the American Culture and Economic Series is an indication of such a turning (in spite of the deplorable cover of the paper-back edition).^{*} It is a relatively short volume, more tendentious than the earlier selection published shortly after Dunne's death. Inevitably any culling of the Dooley essays misses much, for there is no substitute for those faded green books embossed with gilt harps and shamrocks. Mr. Filler sees Dooley as one embodiment of the reformist progressive era. From this point of view he prefers to omit such essays as *The Idle Apprentice* where the human dilemma is innate. Nor do his selections give much indication of Dooley's stern philosophy, though in its final development Dooley becomes Man.

Dunne was born in Chicago of respectable lower-middle-class Irish parents. His family lived within the Irish pale not too far from Archer avenue—the Archey Road of the Dooley essays—and Dunne's childhood was spent for the most part in parochial association with the poor Irish

laborers and their families who formed the bulk of the neighborhood. He graduated from high school—a proof of his family's middle-class status—and at the age of seventeen went to work as an office boy for the *Telegram*, the poorest of Chicago's journals. Before long he began to do police reporting. A few years later after several intervening newspaper jobs he had a chance to go on to the *Herald* where he wrote political news. It was at this time that he began tentatively to experiment with Irish dialect.

He found the dialect a medium for expressing certain things that could not be said outright in the Chicago of that time. Writing a few months before his death, Dunne related that as a young reform journalist he realized that it might be dangerous to call a politician a thief, but no one could object if a comic Irishman called him one. "If I had written the same thing in English," he wrote, "I would inevitably been pistolled or slugged, as other critics were. But my victims did not complain. They felt bound to smile and treat these highly libellous articles as mere humorous skits."

Mr. Dooley's beginnings were casual, almost accidental. There was a dignified and voluble Irishman by the name of McGarry who kept a large public-house near the *Chicago Tribune*, much frequented by newspaper men. Dunne happened to be there the afternoon of Jay Gould's death and was so amused by McGarry's remarks on the financial buccaneer, that he wrote them up as a short piece, attributing them to a Colonel McNeery. Dunne soon realized the possibilities of this type of essay. What he did not realize was that McGarry might object to his caricature. When after some months he did object, Dunne altered the milieu of his pieces to the Archey Road saloon "forninst th' gas-house and beyant Healey's slough and not too far from the polis station" where his great character Martin Dooley appeared for the first time. A minor character, John McKenna, the small-time politician who was the foil to

^{*} *Mr. Dooley: Now and Forever*, selected, with Introduction and Commentary, by Louis Filler. (Stanford, California: Academic Reprints. \$3.75).

McNeery, was transplanted to Mr. Dooley's establishment, to be superseded in later years by the ingenuous Hennessy.

During the whole of Dunne's newspaper career the Dooley essays were a side-line, a small once-a-week interlude from his daily editorial tasks. Yet what began as a light aside gradually developed a deeper vein, almost as if Dunne himself were unaware of what he was doing. Mr. Dooley was always amusing, but underneath the comic manner the social criticism became sharper and more inclusive. At times in these unsigned pieces the humor gave way completely to bitter anger.

It was the Spanish-American War that made Mr. Dooley a national figure and brought Dunne fame overnight. Those essays on the course and motives of the war, on governmental inefficiency, red tape, national bombast, and the faults and foibles of the military, are still ludicrously funny today when the incidents and leaders are forgotten. No one remembers General Miles and General Shafter, but their weaknesses, through Mr. Dooley's eyes, have become the weaknesses of brass-hat authority everywhere. Dunne always had the ability to puncture pretension with a rapier phrase. Congressmen might talk about expansion and manifest destiny, but Mr. Dooley had the last word:* "Take up th' white man's burden an' hand it to th' coons." Of the occupation of the Philippines Dunne wrote: "Whin we plant what Hogan calls th' starry banner iv Freedom in th' Ph'lipeens," said Mr. Dooley, "an' give th' sacrid blessin' iv liberty to th' poor, down-trodden people iv thim unfortunate isles,—dam thim!—we'll larn thim a lesson. . . . 'Naygurs,' says we, 'ye mis'erable, childish-minded apes, we propose f'r to larn ye th' uses iv liberty. In ivry city in this unfair land we will erect school-houses an' packin'-houses an' houses iv correction; an' we'll larn ye our language, because 'tis asier to larn ye ours than to larn oursilves yours.

* See the essay "Expansion," p. 65 of *Mr. Dooley: Now and Forever*.

An' we'll give ye clothes, if ye pay f'r thim; an' if ye don't ye can go without. . . ."

Dunne was at his most hilarious, and caused the most attention nationally, with his pieces on Admiral Dewey and the destruction of the Spanish fleet. As he explained it in his old age, "it was not until the war with Spain was declared that Dooley gained what was, to the author more than anyone else, an amazing popularity. I have always attributed this to the possibility that the articles reflected the feeling of the public about this queer war. It was a feeling made up of contempt for the foe with quite a distinct apprehension that perhaps our fighting establishment was as stupid as our politicians and as unprepared for war."

Although Eugene Field had earlier urged Dunne to print a selection of the Dooley essays it was not until the time of their nation-wide popularity when Dunne received numbers of requests for permission to reprint them that he was finally persuaded to publish a representative group. *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War*, a book of 49 essays and a preface about the Archey Road signed only with the initials F.P.D., was the literary sensation of 1898. It went through six editions in eight months and was pirated in three separate editions in England. Everyone was quoting Mr. Dooley on subjects ranging from imperialism to golf, the new woman, and the Dreyfus Case. At the age of 31 Dunne had become a celebrity. Instead of the ten extra dollars that he once received for his weekly Dooley pieces he now realized large sums from their syndication. A year after the appearance of his first book he published *Mr. Dooley in the Hearts of his Countrymen*, a volume made up for the most part of his Chicago essays. Though lacking the novelty of the first one it was still extraordinarily successful and the reviews were even more favorable.

Just before the publication of his second book Dunne went to England where he was welcomed almost as warmly as he had been

in America. On his return he resumed his editorial position for some months, but Chicago and newspaper work there now seemed a limiting and limited field. The Dooley articles had made him financially independent, and he decided to go to New York and devote himself to literature. Although the syndicated weekly articles would support him Dunne never considered these dialect essays a really permanent literary form. He wanted to write a straight novel, perhaps the Great American Novel long dreamed about by so many.

In leaving Chicago he left his early environment behind him, figuratively as well as literally. His later books expanded beyond the intimacy of that Irish slum by the stockyards. Mr. Dooley would continue to speak from behind his bar with the same cutting humor and the same ability to expose a situation or deflate an individual in an off-hand sentence that had the power of a concealed time-bomb, but he would speak of national and international events now. Instead of Gavin the undertaker and his crates or some dead "Connock" man, the articles turned either political or dealt with general subjects such as Christian Science, Wall Street, Thanksgiving, Newport, the Paris Exposition, and so on. Dunne was read by millions, he became a power in the land, discussed at cabinet meetings and feared by politicians, yet the simple humanity and the sub-surface tragedy of the Archey Road were dimmed.

During the next three years Dunne published three more Dooley books. It was the period of his great influence. In retrospect he seems part of the events he wrote about. There was an exuberant and an apparently inexhaustible vitality to Dunne's mind that could range at large over current phenomena and suddenly reveal the heart of the matter in a single luminous paragraph. Mr. Dooley's observation that "th' supreme coort follows th' iliction returns" is still current in standard English, used by many unconscious of its origin. When Theodore Roosevelt's naively egotistical book on his exploits in Cuba appeared it was Mr. Dooley

with his "Alone in Cubia" who took the Rough Rider's measure. He could do the same for any number of people from Senator Beveridge's oratory ("Ye could waltz to it") to the Emperor of Germany going to his bedroom "f'r to wurruk on th' book he's goin' to br-ring out nex' year to take th' place iv th' Bible." His definition of a fanatic was final: "A man that does what he thinks th' Lord wud do if He knew th' facts iv the case." And there was always his never-failing fun, as when he maintained that "all expositions is a blind f'r th' hootchy-kootchy dance." The pages of the Dooley books are strewn with such pungent aphorisms.

Yet contrary to the impression given by these essays, Dunne was not an easy writer, and as time went on he found increasing difficulties with his work. The freedom from newspaper routine that he had come to New York to find did not give him the enlarged creative capacity he had hoped for. His writing outside of dialect consisted for the most part of spasmodic editorial work for magazines. There were times when he dropped Mr. Dooley altogether. Then after a gap of months he would resume a new Dooley series and arrange for syndicate publication. Before long however he would find his inspiration flagging, he would begin to miss his commitments and finally he would cancel the series unfinished.

Instead of his five annual volumes it was three years until his next book was published, then five more years before *Mr. Dooley Says* appeared in 1910. It was no longer apt as others had been. For the first time a Dooley book aroused no public response. Mr. Dooley had begun to date. The Roosevelt Square Deal was over, and Dunne was no longer the contemporary spokesman and wit that he had been ten years before.

His literary output trickled away. Now his social life became increasingly an alternative to his creative life. After his marriage in 1902 he had assimilated easily into the fashionable world of New York. He knew almost everyone of prominence, from literary figures like Mark Twain to

financiers and presidents. Most of the year he lived in the city, spending his summer on Long Island and making occasional winter trips to Palm Beach and Aiken, South Carolina. He was a member of many clubs, and as the years went by found more and more satisfaction in the convivialities of club life.

Just after the war he gathered together a small number of fugitive Dooley pieces, added to them here and there, and published *Mr. Dooley on Making a Will*. It was the last Dooley book to appear in his life-time. Although parts of it were written during World War I it scarcely reflects the war at all. And for the first time it shows a definite decline, even though there are essays in it where the old irrepressible wit still bursts through. Dunne's inspiration might slip but he could never, at least in dialect, be a bad writer. Yet through these pages one senses the strain, the forced effort, the uncongeniality of a motivation that was primarily financial.

It was for financial reasons again that Dunne once more revived the Dooley series in the mid-twenties. Mr. Dooley seemed uncomfortably out of place in the era of bootleggers, hip-flasks and saxophones. Perhaps it was symbolic of his status to find him now running a speakeasy. Dunne wrote these essays under contract, painfully and reluctantly, yet even with the tide against him he could not wholly deny his genius.

"Th' saloon destroyed th' home," said Mr. Dooley, "but th' home has turned like a rattlesnake an' destroyed th' saloon—th' home an' home brew. . . ."

"There ain't as much drunkenness as there was. I know that," said Mr. Hennessy.

"No," said Mr. Dooley, "but what there is is a much more finished product."

It was not unworthy of the past.

When Dunne received a legacy from his friend Payne Whitney he threw over his contract and abandoned Mr. Dooley for good. In the next decade he wrote a few non-dialect fragments—a skeletal memoir,

a defense of the indefensible Harding whom he had known socially, a few unsuccessful pieces in the form of a letter to his son in which he made a labored effort to show his modernity. Nothing more of significance was to come from his pen. His personal life continued to revolve around his clubs, increasingly, he found an anodyne in alcohol. From all accounts he was a witty and amusing companion to the end. He had merely outlived his creation.

Yet in the more permanent world of art his creation has outlived him. In Mr. Dooley Dunne brought into existence a unique character, a fictive personality that would last far beyond his own life-time and the lives of his contemporaries. Martin Dooley behind the bar of the little gas-lit room heavy with the scent of liquor, nutmeg, lemon peel and what he called "proletariats" is the written word formed into a human being. There are not many such characters in our western literature.

Dunne was able to express his fundamental self only through the personality of Mr. Dooley. Like Don Quixote, the character that began as a figure of fun ended by overshadowing the author. Dunne himself was superficial, an Epicurean. Dooley is a stoic for whom life is a mystery, the universe a riddle, human progress a mirage. He did not share his countrymen's facile optimism. It was no comic figure who could write: "I've been up to th' top iv th' very highest buildin' in town, Hennessey, an' I wasn't anny nearer Hivin thin if I was in th' sthreet. Th' stars was as far away as iver. An' down beneath is a lot iv us runnin' an' lapin' an' jumpin' about, pushin' each other over, haulin' little sthrips iv ir'n to pile in little buildin's that ar-re called skyscrapers but not be th' sky; wurrukin' night an' day to make a masheen that'll carry us fr'm wan jack-rabbit colony to another an' yellin', 'Pro-gress!' Pro-gress, oho! I can see th' stars winkin' at each other an' sayin', 'Ain't they funny! Don't they think they're playn' hell!' . . ."

For Mr. Dooley one can expect no honesty, perfectibility, or happiness in this

“gob iv arth that we live on f’r a few hours, spinnin’ round f’r no sinsible raison in th’ same foolish, lobsided circle, an’ comin’ back to th’ same place ivry year, without thought or care iv th’ poor crathers hangin’ onto it. . . . A betther race would be wasted on it. We may be bad, but we’re plenty good enough f’r what we get fr’m th’ wurruld.”

At the most one can keep a little loving-kindness and preserve one’s own integrity in the face of the common dilemma. It is before that dilemma and that mystery that men are truly equal. “I, mesilf,” Mr. Dooley maintains, “am ivry man. Barrin’ iddyca-tion an’ th’ business we’re in, th’ King iv England an’ Martin Dooley is all out iv th’ same peck measure. If I know mesilf, I know thim all. King, Czar. . . . they’re all me with betther or worse clothes. . . . All men are ME. Th’ little tape line that I use f’r mesilf is long enough an’ acc’rate enough to measure anny man in the wurruld, an’ if it happens that I’m ladlin’ out red impeeryalism at tin cints th’ glass instead iv breakin’ stones at Joliet or frinds in Wall Shreet it’s because I started th’ way I did.”

We are indeed each of us every man. And yet who is this everyman, this self? Mr. Dooley finds him essentially unknowable.

“How can I know anything,” he asks “whin I haven’t puzzled out what I am mesilf?” In a dark vision he sees this awareness only in one’s dying. Then in these final fleeting moments may come the self-knowledge that has been denied a man all his previous years.

“F’r the first time in ye’er life ye’re alone. F’r the first time in ye’er life ye ar-re y’ersilf. Hivin knows how many years ye’ve been somebody else. Ye’ve been ye’er wife, ye’er fam’ly, ye’er relations, th’ polis-man on th’ beat, th’ doctor, th’ newspaper reporther, th’ foreman at th’ mills, th’ laws iv th’ land, th’ bartinder that gives ye dhrinks, th’ tailor, th’ barber, an’ public opinyon. Th’ wurruld has held a lookin’-glass in front iv ye fr’m th’ day ye were born an’ compelled ye to make faces in it. But in this here particular business ye have no wan to please but y’ersilf. Good opinyon an’ bad opinyon ar-re alike. Ye’re akelly un-throubled be gratichood an’ revenge. No wan can help ye or stay ye. . . .

So it is. Under the bright verbiage, the racial wit, the at times impish humor of the Dooley essays runs this sombre and un-alterable counter-current that is the classic tragedy of human existence.