



# 'Tinkers': Synge and the Cultural History of the Irish Traveller

*Mary Burke*

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The history of Irish Travellers is not analogous to that of the 'tinker', a Europe-wide underworld fantasy created by sixteenth-century British and continental Rogue Literature that came to be seen as an Irish character alone as English became dominant in Ireland. By the Revival, the tinker represented bohemian, pre-Celtic aboriginality, functioning as the cultural nationalist counter to the Victorian Gypsy mania. Long misunderstood as a portrayal of *actual* Travellers, J.M. Synge's influential *The Tinker's Wedding* was pivotal to this 'Irishing' of the tinker, even as it acknowledged that figure's cosmopolitan textual roots. Synge's empathetic depiction is closely examined, as are the many subsequent representations that looked to him as a model to subvert or emulate. In contrast to their Revival-era romanticization, post-independence writing portrayed tinkers as alien interlopers, while contemporaneous Unionists labeled them a contaminant from the hostile South. However, after Travellers politicized in the 1960s, more even-handed depictions heralded a querying of the 'tinker' fantasy that has shaped contemporary screen and literary representations of Travellers and has prompted Traveller writers to transubstantiate Otherness into the empowering rhetoric of ethnic difference. Though its Irish equivalent has oscillated between idealization and demonization, US racial history facilitates the cinematic figuring of the Irish-American Traveler as lovable 'white trash' rogue. This process is informed by the mythology of a population with whom Travelers are allied in the white American imagination, the Scots-Irish (Ulster-Scots). In short, the 'tinker' is much more central to Irish, Northern Irish and even Irish-American identity than is currently recognised.

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