

The sinking of Charles Macklin's scholarship

In January 1772, the actor and playwright Charles Macklin suffered a major blow: much of his property was lost in a shipwreck off the Irish coast, including his books and personal manuscripts. James Kirkman, one of three early biographers of Macklin, recounted the misfortune:

When Mr. Macklin left London, in 1771, he shipped all his furniture, plate, pictures, and a very choice and valuable library of books, worth upwards of five thousand pounds, on board a Dublin trader, then lying in the River Thames, but, unfortunately, this ship was stranded on the Coast of Ireland, off Arklow, and almost the whole of Mr. Macklin's property was lost.¹

Subsequent accounts of Macklin's life and career have produced no further details of the event; the ship has never been identified, errors have been propagated, and the impact of the loss has been understated in the leading account of Macklin's life. The wrecking has, for example, been seriously misdated, as in John McVeagh's account: 'In 1780, when a ship went down in the Irish Sea, Macklin lost a mass of unfinished writings'.² The standard reference work by Highfill *et al.* – *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors [...]* – also misdates the event, albeit not as wildly as McVeagh. This work notes that Macklin 'played at Limerick on 13 March 1772' (which itself is erroneous) and that '[s]hortly thereafter a shipwreck on the Irish coast drowned many of his books and some important manuscripts, including one on the "Science of Acting"'.³ There are other inaccuracies in this account and the phrasing has

¹ James Kirkman, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Macklin*, 2 vols (London, 1799), II, 46.

² John McVeagh, 'A Kind of *Comhar*': Charles Macklin and Brian Friel' in Alan J. Peacock, ed., *The Achievement of Brian Friel* (Gerrards Cross, 1993), 215-28, 227.

³ Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, 16 vols (Carbondale, 1984), X, 18. Macklin could not have performed in Limerick on 13 March 1772 since, according to John C.

fostered an incorrect idea that Macklin was actually aboard the ship: it is the basis for Barbara Mackey's assertion that Macklin 'was shipwrecked [sic] off the coast of Ireland', when, in fact, it was only his chattels that were aboard the ill-fated ship.⁴ A further telling of the event which is extraordinary because of its slightness is given in William W. Appleton's still standard biography of Macklin. Appleton passes over 'the loss of the greater part of Macklin's books and manuscripts in a shipwreck off the Irish coast' in a single, unfootnoted sentence.⁵

In response to these accounts, this note identifies for the first time the ship on which Macklin's property was lost and thereby dates the accident precisely. It also untangles parts of the correspondence that followed the event, and it considers further the significance of the loss to Macklin who, had the ship not foundered, might have become known not only as an actor and playwright but as 'the actor, playwright and scholar Charles Macklin'.

Macklin, who was originally from Donegal in the north of Ireland, travelled from London to Dublin in early November 1771. Up to the end of October he was engaged at Covent Garden Theatre, reprising his celebrated Shylock as well as performing in his own afterpiece, Love à la Mode. He then moved to Dublin in order to begin a new engagement at the Crow Street Theatre, arriving on 11 November and beginning performing on 6 December as Sir Francis Wronghead in The Provoked Husband. His property was sent after his departure, packed up by his wife who followed later, arriving on 24 December.⁶

Greene, he was on stage in Dublin; see John C. Greene, Theatre in Dublin, 1745-1820: A Calendar of Performances, Volume 2 (Bethlehem, 2011), 1371. Subsequent points regarding Macklin's performance dates in Dublin derive from Greene's Calendar.

⁴ Barbara Mackey, 'The Lost Acting Treatise of Charles Macklin', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Washington D. C., 1998), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED421735> (accessed 10 April 2019).

⁵ William W. Appleton, Charles Macklin: An Actor's Life (Cambridge, MA, 1961), 150.

⁶ Mrs Macklin's arrival in the Le Despencer packet boat from Holyhead was reported in Finns Leinster Journal, 28 December 1771 – 1 January 1772.

It is actually understandable that the ship carrying his belongings has not previously been identified. No wreck matching the details given in Kirkman's account appears to have been recorded in Lloyd's List in the issues from the weeks following Macklin's own travels.⁷ A number of later 'wreckologists' have devoted extraordinary efforts to tracing and cataloguing shipping disasters around the Irish coast, but no wreck near Arklow, in County Wicklow, at the time in question appears in the major directories such as Richard and Bridget Larn's Shipwreck Index of Ireland and Edward J. Bourke's three-part Shipwrecks of the Irish Coast.⁸ However, a trawling of Irish newspapers – conducted using the digital Irish Newspaper Archive – does present a report of a wreck which, on the grounds of date and location, is almost certainly that referred to by Kirkman. The report appears in the issue of Finns Leinster Journal for 22-25 January 1772:

On Saturday the 11th inst. the Ann and Catherine, Patt. Brown, Master, from London, with merchant goods, bound for Dublin, was unfortunately run on shore on the rocks at Arday, between Arklow and Wicklow; the crew were providentially preserved, and it is expected that the greatest part of the cargo will be saved.

Corroboration of this grounding of the Ann and Catherine – a vessel which is recorded in Lloyd's Register of Ships (1764) – is found in a long letter in Freeman's Journal by a gentleman signing himself 'Gratitude'. The letter was published more than a month after the 11 January disaster on 15 February following a salvage effort, and the author's purpose is to praise the good behaviour of those involved and to pay tribute to the landowner, Christopher Fitzsimons, on whose property the ship had run aground. 'I am one of those', he writes,

⁷ The version of Lloyd's List which has been consulted is reproduced here: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000549597> (accessed 10 April 2019).

⁸ Richard and Bridget Larn, Shipwreck Index of Ireland (Redhill, 2002); Edward J. Bourke, Shipwrecks of the Irish Coast, 1105-1993 (Dublin, 1994); Shipwrecks of the Irish Coast, Vol. 2: 932-1997 (Dublin, 1998); Shipwrecks of the Irish Coast, Vol. 3: 1582-2000 (Dublin, 2000).

that suffered by the Wreck of the Ann and Catharine, at Arday, near Arklow, in the County of Wicklow. Soon after her Disaster, I went down there, and was an Eye-witness of her unfortunate Condition, from the Rage of the Winds and Waves, and of the greater Ruin that Inhumanity threatened her by general Plunder. [...] in the Case of the Anne and Catharine [...] instead of gratifying the savage Lust of accustomed Plunder, every Assistance that Power, Advice, Influence, Attention and personal Attendance could procure, was administered, without Favour or Distinction of Persons, to the general Interest of the distressed Owners and Insurers of that unfortunate Vessel.

Nor did the Humanity of the Gentleman I am now describing stop here, no, every Accommodation likewise that Bed, Board and chearful Hospitality, in the best Sense, could furnish to those, whose Losses or Concerns, on this Occasion, had brought to the Roof of Christopher Fitzsimons, Esq, was procured and given with a Benevolence, that would have done Honour to the most social Nature in the most virtuous Times.⁹

We know that, in addition to this grateful gentleman, Charles Macklin also visited the wreck, probably sometime between 13 January and 29 January since he did not appear on stage in Dublin between those dates. He was in his early seventies at this time, and the effort may have been detrimental to his health. His daughter, the actress Maria Macklin, wrote to him from London on 6 May 1772, and expressed her concern:

I sincerely lament the loss of your most valuable Library. it was indeed a dreadful Stroke. yet I had rather that all the Books in the World had been lost sooner than you

⁹ Freeman's Journal, 15 February 1772.

shou'd have suffer'd such an Illness or have ventur'd down to the Wreck in such Weather.¹⁰

In fact, an earlier letter from Maria, written on 8 April, also expresses great concern about his health but does not mention the shipwreck.¹¹ Given that Maria writes of the loss of the books in the 6 May letter in the manner of someone responding to news, it seems that Macklin, for some reason, first informed her of his bad health and only subsequently told her of the shipwreck. Of course, Macklin's indisposition may have had nothing to do with visiting the wreck: he was sufficiently healthy to perform at Crow Street on three nights in February and three nights in March; he could, due to no heroics in the sea, simply have become ill subsequent to these performances.

Why he should not have informed Maria of the wreck is unclear, but in fact he was not in touch with her at all for a considerable time until around late March 1772. Here it is worth correcting an error in Highfill *et al.* which misleadingly suggests that a letter sent by Maria Macklin on 23 March 1772 is a response to news of the wreck and of a consequent illness. The account in Highfill *et al.*, after mentioning the wreck, states that 'A letter in the Harvard Theatre Collection dated 23 March 1772, from Maria in London to her father at Crow Street, inquires anxiously about his health and hopes he will be able to play for her April benefit'.¹² This is both misleading and wrong. The letter does not enquire after his health; Maria is rather asking anxiously why she has not heard from her father, and there is no sense in this letter that Maria is aware of the shipwreck. This is perhaps a minor detail, but given that the multi-volume Highfill *et al.* is a standard reference tool, it is worth noting that it needs

¹⁰ Houghton Library, TS 943.2, extra-illustrated copy of Kirkman, *Memoirs*, II.i, 54.

¹¹ Folger Shakespeare Library, Y.c.5381(1).

¹² Highfill *et al.*, *Biographical Dictionary*, 18. The letter is in an extra-illustrated copy of John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage* (1832), Houghton Library, TS 937.4, V.viii, 511.

sometimes to be treated with extreme caution: it is a remarkable work of scholarship but is not without errors and traces of hasty composition.

Returning to Macklin, it may be stating the obvious to note that he had been extremely unlucky. As is noted in the Finns Leinster Journal report, it was expected that ‘the greatest part of the cargo will be saved’, plus there was a helpful landowner on hand, yet Macklin apparently lost, in Kirkman’s words, ‘almost the whole’ of his property. A monetary value could be put on some of that loss. Macklin had insurance and became involved in a lengthy, long-distance claim from his London-based insurers, using his daughter as an occasional intermediary. On 9 December 1772 Maria wrote to him reporting:

The affair remains just as it did, & will do so till you send over more Proofs to satisfy the Insurers that you had Goods on board to the Value of the sum insured. They are vastly troublesome, but it seems it is a Rule with those People never to pay the sum insur’d for till they have given as much Trouble as possible.¹³

Whatever financial recompense Macklin ultimately received, though, would not have been true compensation for his loss. Kirkman states that what Macklin ‘had to regret most was the destruction of his books and manuscripts, the labour of many years close study and application’.¹⁴ Macklin was indeed both bibliophilic and studious. A sense of his bookishness is expressed in a further letter sent to him by Maria which has only recently come to light. On hearing of the wreck, she actually wrote two letters to him on 6 May, and she clearly knew what sort of medicine her father would appreciate: ‘pray let me know if there are any Books of any kind that you want that I can send you’.¹⁵ In the years following the shipwreck

¹³ Folger Shakespeare Library, Y.c.5381 (2).

¹⁴ Kirkman, Memoirs, 46.

¹⁵ This letter was auctioned by International Autograph Auctions Ltd on 5 July 2018, with an image presented here: https://www.autographauctions.co.uk/0099-lot-28-MACKLIN-MARIA-1733-1781-English-Actress-Singer-and-Dancer-daughter-of-Charles-Macklin-1690-179?auction_id=0&view=lot_detail (accessed 10 April 2019). The other letter of 6 May cited earlier states that she will write him a further letter.

Macklin reestablished a significant personal library; by the time of his death in 1797, he had gathered a collection of more than 3000 volumes, which would take five days to be auctioned off when it was sold by his wife.¹⁶ The drowning of his personal manuscripts, though, left a more challenging gap and it was one that he was ultimately not able to fill. Writing after Macklin's death, Kirkman presents this loss as one that not only affected Macklin but also reached far beyond him:

It was not Mr. Macklin alone that had to lament this loss; the Stage, and the whole of the dramatic world, suffered very materially by the shipwreck; the merciless waves destroyed his Treatises on the Science of Acting, on the Works of Shakespeare, on Comedy, Tragedy, and many other subjects, together with several manuscripts of infinite value and importance to the British Theatre.¹⁷

Macklin had long held scholarly aspirations. With little early schooling, he was fundamentally an autodidact who reportedly began his self-education in earnest in his thirties, alongside his work as an actor.¹⁸ Subsequently he clearly sought recognition as a man of learning, as was apparent from his ultimately aborted retirement from the stage in the 1750s, when he set up a coffee-house and tavern in Covent Garden at which lectures were given, under the title of the 'British Inquisition'. There he lectured on Shakespeare, the modern theatre, public speaking techniques, history and other topics, but the venture soon failed, leaving him both disappointed and bankrupt. Thereafter he might have channeled his scholarly ambitions through the press – as it seems he intended to do – but no published work of theatrical scholarship ever came to fruition.

¹⁶ A Catalogue of the Library of the Late Mr. Charles Macklin, Comedian, Deceased (London, 1797).

¹⁷ Kirkman, Memoirs, 46-7.

¹⁸ John Bernard, Retrospections of the Stage (London, 1830), II, 76.

Can the shipwreck be held responsible for this? It is possible that it did indeed ruin Macklin's career as a scholarly author. The Ann and Catherine could well have been carrying a whole stack of manuscript treatises that were polished and ready for the press. But we should not rule out the possibility that, while Macklin certainly suffered a distressing loss, he partly used the shipwreck, consciously or otherwise, as a basis for telling a story to himself – and to Kirkman – which explained what he saw as a gap in his achievements, and that an alternative cause of non-achievement in that area actually lay elsewhere within him or in the ongoing demands of his life as an actor and playwright.

PAUL GORING

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim