

A WOLF BY THE EARS

(A One Act Play)

By Mattie Lennon.

Characters;

SERGEANT MARTY McAteer; A man in his late thirties.

When the play opens McAteer looks slightly dishevelled with shirt open and tie loosened. He seems confident when talking to his friend on the phone but for the remainder of the time he appears to be unsure of himself.

GARDA BILL KILGANNON; A man in his mid forties.

He looks clumsy, moves slowly and has an "agricultural" appearance about him. He wears the heavy Garda overcoat and cap at all times and mostly keeps his hands in his pockets. He tends to lean against something whenever possible.

GARDA PADDY BLACK; A man in his late thirties.

He is dressed fairly tidy and is wearing well-worn shoes and a very old watch. He shows signs of parsimony when parting with coins and on more than one occasion he rummages in his pockets, finds a very short cigarette butt, which he lights from the fire with a paper spill.

GARDA LIAM SMITH: A man in his early thirties.

He is impeccably turned out; his uniform trousers pressed like razor blades and his shoes shining. He wears a signet ring, tie-pin, cuff-links and a fashionable watch.

He has a habit of filing his nails, replacing the nail file in his tunic pocket only to retrieve it a few seconds later. At every opportunity he looks in the mirror, combs his hair or straightens his tie. He also admires his reflection in the window.

HUGHIE DOHERTY; A man in his mid twenties.

He is dressed in farmers working clothes with turned down Wellingtons. His boots, trousers and jacket show traces of "bovine excrement" and judging by the expressions on the faces of the Gardai his clothes are offensive to the olfactory sense. He is unshaven.

MAIREAD FRIEL; A scantily-clad, well-spoken, voluptuous blonde in her mid to late twenties.

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SCENE;

The action takes place in the dayroom of a small Garda Station in a village in south Donegal. The time is the late sixties.

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There is a fireplace in the back wall, left of centre. To the right of centre is a door leading to the living quarters. On this door is a badly handwritten notice, "PRIVATE".

In the right hand wall there is a window and a door leading to the street.

Near the front in the L/H wall is a door leading to a cell.

A baton and Garda raincoat hang on a Peg-board on the L/H wall and beside it an old advertising mirror.

Notices on the wall include an advertisement for a Garda Benefit Concert, a sign about the licensing of firearms and another giving a list of penalties under the Noxious Weeds Act 1910.

There is a desk in front of the fire and a metal filing cabinet stands in the back R/H corner. There's a Garda cap on top of the filing cabinet.

When the play opens a clock on the mantelpiece is showing five minutes to five and a desk calendar proclaims it to be Friday, November 07th.

(Sergeant is sitting at desk)

SERGEANT; *(Leaving down Sporting Press and making phone call)* Hoya Mick....Marty here.....I see you have Scotstown Squire running in the fourth race at Lifford tonight.....is he in with a chance or is he.....?

No. I'm on my own here.....right so.....Smith, The Male Mannequin from Cavan, is due in any minute.....of course all he wants is the station to himself so that he can ring the quare one in France. What?.....Oh I think he wields his baton a bit nearer home as well.

I sent the other two gobshites out to bring in the Poet Doherty.....Oh he done nothing....He was in the wrong place at the wrong time....or the right place at the right time for us. Remember when Dinny Gallagher's rick o' hay was burned six weeks ago?.....Oh it was an accident; John Bryan was in it with the Cassidy one and one of them dropped a cigarette butt....it wasn't all they dropped says you.... But I can't let that out. The Bryans look after me....Oh I might be from the stony grey hills of Monaghan but I know which side it's buttered on alright.

An' you know what Dinny Gallagher is like ...but he's "good to us", so I have to do something... I can't be seen to ignore the destruction of two hundred pounds worth of hay...Oh he is..Oh Dinny has the connections all right...through his missus.... Oh it's better to have him on your side sure enough.

Anyhow I discovered that the Poet was out the night it was burned... Oh I didn't make the boys any the wiser....I told them he done it...

Oh, we'll get something out of him anyway....that's right...it'll give him something to write about.....it's about time someone took that lad down a peg, him an' his songwriting an' his rhyming..... Right, I'll see you in Lifford tonight....the dog is.....

Enter Garda Liam Smith

SMITH: ' evening Skipp..er.. Sergeant.

SERGEANT; *(looking at the clock)* Hello Liam. Anything new?

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SMITH; No. The Nailer Dunne was telling me that our friend "The Boxer" is driving around without any insurance. We'll keep an eye on him. Where's everybody?

SERGEANT: I sent them out to get Hughie Doherty. you know the poet fella... he burned Dinny Gallagher's rick.

SMITH: Dinny Gallagher's rick?. That's an unusual pastime for a literary person. Eliot wrote of the "burnt out ends of smokey days" but he didn't say anything about setting fire to hay. And Dinny Gallagher of all people.

SERGEANT: Aye, well you know what to do when he comes in.

SMITH: Yes Sergeant, but that Hughie Doherty is a dangerous bastard. He's a bit too handy with the pen for my liking. He'd write to the papers or report us to the Minister or anything.

SERGEANT: If he hasn't an alibi for the night of Saturday 27th September he can write to who he likes.

SMITH: OK, when he comes in we'll use the usual tricks...

(Enter Gardai Bill Kilgannon and Paddy Black pushing Hughie Doherty a man in his mid twenties ahead of them)

SMITH; Well?

BLACK; *(Hanging his cap on a nail, in R/H wall, between the window and door)* He didn't tell us anything yet.

SMITH: He will *(to Doherty)* Well, Hughie, what have you to say for yourself?

DOHERTY: I believe I'm supposed to have burned a rick of hay.

SMITH: There's no supposing about it, we know you were out that night.

DOHERTY: I was out. I got a lift home with the Doctor McHugh. Another man and myself.

KILGANNON: We know to the differ.

SMITH: Who was the other man that was...

SERGEANT: It doesn't matter who he was.. We know this lad burned the hay.

SMITH; Would it surprise you if I told you that you were seen lighting it?

DOHERTY; nothing you tell me would surprise me. I know your pedigree and if you were a greyhound pup I wouldn't buy you. A man can't be seen where he's not. I didn't burn any hay.

KILGANNON; We know to the differ.

DOHERTY; *(RAISING HIS VOICE)* I didn't commit any crime and you know it.

SERGEANT; Keep your voice down. I have enough evidence here to charge you.

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SMITH: Will I put this man in the cell, Sergeant?

BLACK; You'll get out when you decide to tell the truth.

(The Sergeant nods his head and Smith-careful not to soil his uniform with "farm waste"- ushers Doherty into the cell, As Doherty is being pushed into the cell he sings (to the air of The "Ould alarm Clock";)

"It happened up in Largabeg,

In November sixty nine,

I was makin' rhymes an' feeding pigs,

The day was far from fine.

The Gardai got contrary

And they..... "

Doherty's voice fades off as Smith bolts the cell door with a flourish.

SERGEANT; Right lads, you know the drill. I have to collate the census returns from Barnafadda. I'll do it in the kitchen an' have a cup of tea. *(He takes folder from filing cabinet and exits rear).*

SMITH: *(To Kilgannon, grinning and nudging Black)* Will you see what you can get out of the Poet, Bill? *(Kilgannon exits left into cell).*

SMITH: If the Poet starts about John Keates to Bill Kilgannon he'll think he's talking about a cattle-jobber from Ballymote.

BLACK: He mightn't be a match for the Poet sure enough.

SMITH; He wouldn't be a match for anything. It's a struggle for him to read the Sligo Champion. But he's been out to get the Poet for quite a while. He said that the Poet was lazy, in the wrong company, and Doherty heard it back and had something to say about it. Yeats described Irish Landlords as being: "lazy, trifling, inattentive, negligent, slobbering and profligate". I suppose Kilgannon would have attributed these qualities to Doherty if he could get his tongue around them. To hear an "alternatively motivated" individual like Bill calling anybody lazy is a joke.

BLACK: I know. I was in the squad-car with him one night, months ago, and we met the Poet behind at Rory's Brook, and him walking home.

Bill stopped and accused him of making faces at us and anything else he could think of. He tried every trick he knew to provoke the Poet into saying or doing something that would land him in trouble.

SMITH: Seemingly the townland that Kilgannon comes from has nothing to recommend it only a legend about a graveyard that's supposed to have re-located itself one night. It's a sort of a hamlet where everybody is related if you understand what I mean. It's a, "if she's not good enough for her brothers she's not good enough for me", sort of country. It just shows you the sort of place it is when even the dead don't want to stay in it. But I suppose anywhere that would produce the likes of Bill....Anyway, the Poet juxtaposed those two pieces of information into some sort of doggerel or a ditty and our colleague was less

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than enamoured of it. So he'll do his best to pin him now. You could say it was Doherty's own fault: Patrick Kavanagh, your fellow county-man, said: "anybody who writes poetry that a policeman can understand deserves anything they get".

BLACK: Bill must have understood whatever he wrote anyway.

SMITH; (*fake innocent as he notices a speck on his uniform and reaches for a clothes-brush*) Do you think he did it?

BLACK: I don't know. He's a know-all and could do with a bit of a come-uppance but I'm here since 1955 and the Poet hasn't done anything like this before.

SMITH: There's always a first time and according to the Skipper this is it for Hughie Doherty.

BLACK: Maybe he didn't do it.

SMITH: (*Thoughtfully*) Maybe not, but in the words of one of our most famous playwrights: "Some men were born to take raps or to be made into scapegoats."

BLACK: Who said that?

SMITH: It was John B. Keane but a more appropriate quote of his comes to mind right now. In "The Farmer's Boy" he said; "There are instances when your farmer's boy was not above setting fire to a haystack rather than take his grievances into court".

BLACK: We don't know of any grievances that the Poet has against Dinny Gallagher.

SMITH: No, but he would look on Dinny as being as thick as bottled pig-shite and as John Lydgate said; "Comparisons do oft get grievance".

BLACK: Talking about farmer's boys, what keeps Hughie Doherty there on a few acres of bad mountainy land? Old Master McCauley in Largabeg school told me that Doherty was one of the brightest lads he ever taught. He didn't do much with it.

SMITH: Ah, he's an only child. His father is old and his mother is an invalid and I suppose he doesn't like to leave them.

BLACK; Having him hauled in here won't do his poor old mother much good.

SMITH: It certainly won't but your fellow Monaghan-man didn't think that when he sent you and "Constable Addledepete" out to lift him.

BLACK; Marty Mcateer is only here twelve months. He has built up his own little network of snitches all right but he still doesn't know the score.

SMITH: He might know it by the time he's finished with the Poet. Doherty knows people and he's very pally with O'Donnell the Labour Councillor.

BLACK; I know. Did you see the write-up about him on last week's Donegal Democrat?

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SMITH: No. The only things I read in local papers are the GAA results. And, lately, you don't have many exhilarating ones in the Donegal Democrat. What did they say about Doherty?,

BLACK: I left it in the squad car. (*exits, stage right*)

(*Smith rushes to phone and starts to dial but drops the phone when Kilgannon enters, stage left, out of cell*)

SMITH; Well? Was he on about Robbie Burns?

KILGANNON: No. He didn't say anything about Bobby Byrne, he said him and Liam O 'Shea got a lift home with Doctor McHugh the night the hay was burned. Maybe Black'd get something out of him.

SMITH: He might. Black is not too fond of the Poet.

KILGANNON: No. The poet made a bit of a song about him one time. Remember when Paddy had the house rented off Dick Egan. A dacent man Dick. A Protestant but a dacent man. When Black was leaving the house, after he'd built his own house, it was wrecked. The childer had it wrecked. So he went in to give back the key to Dick at twelve O'Clock at night. But Dick was cute enough; he wouldn't take the key until he examined the house in the daylight. He was after getting legal advice don't you know.

SMITH: Yes, and then Paddy wanted us to do Dick's son for everything from an uncut ragworth to an unlicensed dog.

KILGANNON: It's true for you.

SMITH: And then the morning the Post Office here was robbed and Black got a blow of an iron bar on the head the Poet recorded it for posterity. (*sings*)

Oh Garda Black

He got a smack,

At twenty past eleven.

It missed his eye

By half an inch

And his brain by two-foot seven.

KILGANNON: Where is Black?

SMITH: He's gone to get an article about Doherty that was in the paper.

KILGANNON: Oh Paddy'll have plenty of information as long as it doesn't cost him nothing.

SMITH: He treats us very much on a need to know basis. He only tells us what suits him. He grew up only five miles from the Skipper. They're the same age so he couldn't be in the dark about him. Did you know Marty was a mental nurse before he joined the Guards? Paddy didn't tell us that.

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KILGANNON: A "keeper" like?

SMITH: Yes. He worked for four years in the Mental Hospital in Monaghan Town.

KILGANNON: They say some of them keeper lads does be as bad as what they do be minding.

SMITH: If you lie down with the dogs you'll get up with the fleas. It's not a great grounding for a career in the police sure enough. For, as John Clare said "...in a madhouse there exists no law". (*mischievously*) Wouldn't the Poet have a field-day with that information?

KILGANNON; Oh them Monaghan boys won't tell you nothin' unless it suits them.

SMITH; Did you know that Paddy claims to be a descendent of the Earls of Belmore?

KILGANNON: There was a Jimmy Earls lived in Dun..... I think he was a Monaghan man.....

BLACK: (Entering opening the Donegal Democrat and reading)

" When Hughie Doherty is not working on his small farm he puts the stories of contemporary "doin's an' sayin's" to verse in the time-honoured manner of the Bards of old.

In ancient times the Bard was respected and feared in the community; but with the passing of the old, Gaelic way of life the status diminished and in the nineteenth century the term was just used colloquially to denote any local character who put the happenings of the locality to verse.

Many such local troubadours were people of genuine ability who could catch the mood of the community ethos, which they mirrored in their 'versifications.'

I would place Hughie Doherty in that category and I feel he would rightfully be awarded the title of 'Bard' in his local community had he lived in earlier times.

His works range from the whimsical to the sombre and from the irreverent to the sublime. However, life, in the Ireland of yesteryear mirrored all of those aspects and what Hughie does is in direct

line of descent from the wordsmiths of yore."

KILGANNON: Did ye ever hear such a load of rubbish about a fellow that....

(*Sergeant appears in rear door, excited*).

SERGEANT: A guard shot dead in Falcarragh.....one o'clock today...Jim Mahony..I served with him in Letterkenny...A Bank Raidfive armed men..Jim was always a plucky lad..it said on the news headlines that it's

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thought they're the same gang that robbed the Raphoe bank on the eight of October.

BLACK: That was a tidy one. They walked in dressed as FCA men, robbed the place and were gone in a few minutes.

SERGEANT: According to the wireless they escaped today, with two thousand pounds, in a red Zepher.

BLACK; Two thousand pounds?

KILANNON: Will we set up a checkpoint?

SERGEANT; (Impatiently) They'd be in Dublin by now. Unless they're walking... Poor Jim Mahony God rest him. (*exits rear*)

KILGANNON: Nothing ever happens here. (*under his breath*) Thanks be to God)

(Sound of heavy vehicle stopping briefly and taking off again)

SMITH: There's the Dublin bus . He'll have the Provincial papers (*walking towards door*) I'll go in next door and get The Celt.

BLACK: Get me twenty Sweet Aftons (*gives him coins*)

SMITH: (counting money) Twenty cigarettes are one and tenpence. You're fourpence short.

BLACK: Amby always gives me a cut. Tell him they're for me.

(*Phone rings. Kilgannon answers it*)

KILGANNON: It's for you Liam.

SMITH: Hello...ah Tom..No, you didn't flummox me. I'd know a Glangevlin accent anywhere. No I didn't.....I had " a bit of business" to attend to in Bundoran ...I would have put a few bob on Knockroe Hero if I was there...no I suppose there isn't...and there's not many heroes in Glangevlin either. .yeah...Why am I not surprised?...I'm not surprised at that either...Well, if he knows there's no point in telling him. As Willlliam Blackstone said "It is better that ten guilty persons escape than one innocent suffer" . But of course Blackstone didn't spend four years working in an asylum. You may be sure of it....thanks Tom..I'll see you. (*hangs up*) That was Tom O'Reilly. He was stationed with me in Manorcunningham. He was talking to John Mc Bride at the races on Saturday. And guess what John told him? That he burned Dinny Gallagher's hay accidentally, he was in it with Julia Cassidy, and that the Skipper knows all about it.

BLACK and KILGANNON: What'll we do with the Poet?

SMITH: The words of Thomas Jefferson were hardly ever more apt: " We have the wolf by the ears and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other". (*exits, stage right.*)

KILGANNON: That fellow is as bad as Doherty, with his spakes. He hardly got that class of learnin' at Gurtnacloca National School.

BLACK: Ah, he's getting a bit of "private tuition", I think. There's a certain schoolmistress above at Barnesmore Gap and he puts the cuffs on her now and again.

KILGANNON: Do you notice how Smith seems to be more or less on the Poets side?

BLACK; Poetic courtesy?

KILGANNON; No.I think Doherty knows something about Liam. Remember he said something about pedigree to him when he came in.

BLACK: The Dohertys are great men for "the Pedigree." Hughie's father always says," Ye should always look at the Stud-book."

KILGANNON: An'do you remember the night young O'Donnell was knocked out here on the street with the belt of a baton? Well the Poet seen it..he knows that it was Smith's pal McMahon, that was transferred to Tubbercurry that done it.

(Smith enters)

SMITH: There seems to be something going on I see.....

BLACK; Where's me fags?

SMITH *(Ignoring the question)* There's something going on. They were talking in the shop about something that happened this morning. The Special Branch was mentioned but they all clammed up the minute I went in.

KILGANNON: *(looking out through window)* There's that Friel one heading this way and she looks to be in a class of a hurry.

BLACK; *(looking out)* She's not dressed for the Donegal winter anyway.

SMITH; *(Pushing them out of the way to get to the window)* She's a good journalist, Maraid, and a fine looking bird too.

KILGANNON; *(to Black)* Liam's mind is dropping below his belt again.

SMITH; *(laughing)* Maybe she wants to do a special on Doherty in custody. *(Mairead Friel enters from stage right. She makes straight for smith and flirts with him)*

MAIREAD: Liam, I'm after getting a scoop in Corock. Would you ever be a darling and let me phone in my copy to the Independent?

SMITH; Sure. Go ahead.

(Mairead sits up on desk, exposing a lot of limb and dials a number)

MAIRAID: Hello. Irish Independent? This is Mairead Friel, South Donegal correspondent, could you put me through to the news desk please?...Hello..Mairead here...I have a story...Ready? *(Reading from an A4 typed sheet)* "...Chief superintendent Seamus Fennell, this morning, led a mixed force of heavily armed Special Branch Detectives to a galvanised-roofed two roomed cottage at Corock in a remote area of South-Donegal, used from time to time as a hide-out by five wanted men."..

SMITH; That's just across the field from the Poet's house...

MAIREAD: *(Reading on)* "The men, who rented the cottage from Joseph Browne, are all wanted for questioning about the robbery of the Raphoe Bank on

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Wednesday 08th October. It was suspected at the time that the raiders were holed up in the mountains of South Donegal and the local Gardai carried out house-to-house enquiries.."

SMITH;...I like that..we didn't do any house to house enquiries anyway..

MAIREAD; (*Reading*) "The raiding party was wryly amused by what they found lying on the floor.....Some of the residents had been studying detective methods. Their reading matter included at least one copy of the American magazine 'The Detective'. Also found in the cottage were items of clothing and other things indicating that it possibly had been used as a cache by an illegal organisation. The clothing found included five FCA uniformsgot that?...great. (*She hangs up the phone jumps off the table, without taking the typed sheet, bumps into Smith, says a hurried "Thank you" and runs out the door*)

(*Black and Kilgannon stand open-mouthed*)

SMITH: I must say it's going to look great. Two Banks robbed, a Guard dead and the perpetrators living on our doorstep. And here are we looking after the important business of the day; interrogating a peasant/poet about a heap of dog-rushes that was burned accidentally; and all to appease a half arsed farmer-cum-huckster, like Dinny Gallagher, who might tip us off occasionally about some young lad riding around on an untaxed Honda Fifty.

BLACK: What's going to happen now?

SMITH: What's going to happen? What do you think is going to happen? Every last man of us will be transferred. (*Lightning up*) Ah, well. It'll be nice to get out of this kip. They'll probably send you back to Howth, where you started. (*recites*);

The boy stood on the burning deck

With arse against the mast,

And faced the opposition

'Til the hill-o'- Howth was passed.

And when the hill O'_Howth was passed

They threw.....

BLACK: It's all right for you to titter an' grin. You have nothing only a pair of football boots and what you have in your trousers. I have a family and I'm after building a house.