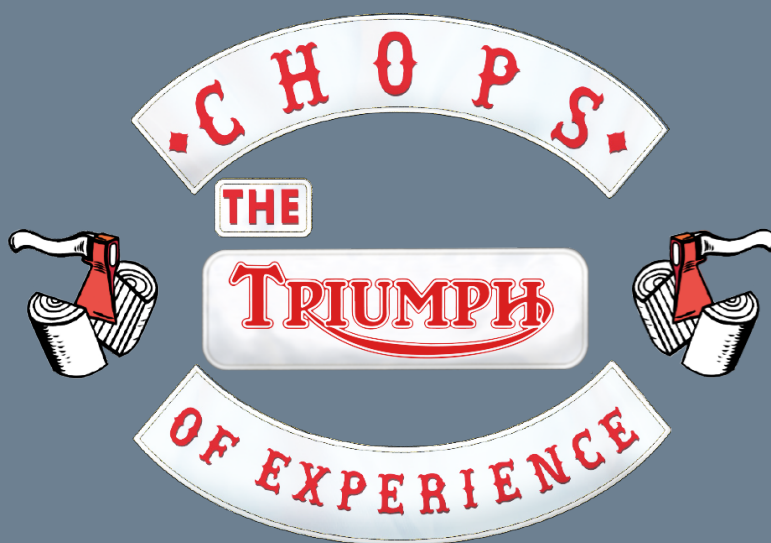


Jonathan White

# The Man Who Shook the Hand of Buffalo Bill



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Nowadays, whenever the Algonquin Round Table is mentioned, it is usually in connection with its most celebrated alumna, Dorothy Parker. But among the dozen or so regulars of that “Vicious Circle” of New York wits & literati in the 1920s, there was a man with Irish connections who is worthy of recall – Marc Connelly. Playwright, screenwriter, director, actor, journalist and by the time of his death at the age of 90 in 1980, the last surviving member of that group.

Connelly’s versatility was on display early – at the age of seven, he established the Marcus Connelly Opera House in his parents’ living room. There he had free reign as actor, author, director and proprietor. He added to his repertoire with hypnotism demonstrations while at boarding school. A good student, he had aspirations to go to Harvard. But his father’s untimely death and the loss of the family business meant that the surviving Connellys were obliged to go to live with relations in Pittsburgh, where Marc got a job on a local newspaper. He started by collecting monies owed for classified ads but with skill and ambition, within a year he was a fully-fledged reporter. Among his duties was second-string theatre critic which allowed him to feast on drama, comedy and vaudeville.

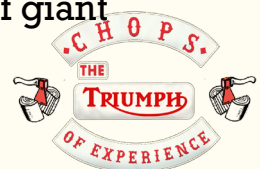
Before long he was moonlighting as a dramatist for local groups. His first play, *\$2.50* played to poor attendances as potential patrons mistook the title for an outrageously high ticket price. He was engaged to write book & lyrics for a comic opera, *The Amber Express* which eventually found its way to Broadway with few of Marc’s words still remaining though he received full credit in the abysmal reviews.



But he took the opportunity to move to New York and commenced a prolific career, culminating in the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1930 for his play *The Green Pastures*. This retelling of stories from the Old Testament, set in America's Deep South featured Broadway's first all-black cast. His writing for the stage continued until the year of his death but he also had a busy spell as a screenwriter, notably scoring an Oscar nomination in 1938 for *Captains Courageous* adapted from the novel by Rudyard Kipling.

Many years later as a young boy I was fortunate enough to be introduced to the great man. As he always did on such occasions, he solemnly shook my hand and advised "Now! You can tell your friends that you shook the hand of the man who shook the hand of Buffalo Bill". And it was true. When Marc was young, the Connellys ran a hotel in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Among the notables who stayed there while performing in the town was that famous Indian scout turned self-promoting legend who toured his spectacular show, "*Buffalo Bill's Wild West*" the length and breadth of the USA and Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.

But this second-hand brush with greatness was not all Marc had to offer to the young. Each year he threw a lavish Thanksgiving Day party for the children of his friends (who were also invited). And as he and my father had gravitated together over a love of things Irish and literary, this included us. This party coincided with the famous Macy's Parade whose star attractions – a series of giant inflatable replicas of cartoon characters – could be viewed not from below as usual but at eye level through the windows of Marc's apartment on Central Park West.



In addition, there were individual ice creams moulded in the shape of a turkey and gifts of the latest battery-powered toys imported from Japan whose like we had never seen.

On the pretext of completing an elementary school English assignment – it was probably something along the lines of *The Most Interesting Man I Ever Met* rather than *Conversations with Great Writers* – I sought and was granted a private interview. On arriving at his apartment, I was struck by how – minus the crowds and the party paraphernalia – it was even more of an Aladdin’s Cave than I had previously noticed. With an old newspaperman’s instinct for the needs of a young tyro, my host helpfully pointed out and explained some of the treasures of his travels on display – a Balinese mask used in community dances, a large tapestry from Ceylon, a Japanese kite whose tail measured 55 feet and was strung along several walls of the living room. He disclosed that he had recently returned from a round-the-world trip; unremarkable perhaps for one whose stock-in-trade was now chiefly travel writing but to my innocent ears it made him seem akin to Phileas Fogg. I sought the requisite biographical details and finished with the most salient question from all celebrity interviews I was familiar with. “His favorite foods are his own pancakes and caviar” I reported. Reading it now, I realise that Marc probably wisely decided not to trouble me with an explanation of what blini were.

Although his father – Patrick Joseph Connelly – was actually born in Pittsburgh and spelled his surname in a way that few Irish Connollys would, Marc had an abiding love of Ireland and the Irish.



In his days as a literary lion, he was friendly with Yeats, Shaw, James Stephens, Oliver St. John Gogarty and Lennox Robinson. He continued to visit Ireland well into his eighties but in addition to the urban, literary beau monde, he enjoyed the countryside too. Each time he landed at Shannon Airport, he hired a taxi to take him directly to wherever Duffy's Circus was playing that night. Arriving by water in Cootehall, Co. Roscommon he plucked a flower from the hedgerow and placed it behind his right ear – “to show the natives I am unmarried”, he assured the startled parish priest. On another occasion he joined us on a cruise across Lough Derg. As the afternoon wore on and Marc's impending transatlantic departure began to loom, my father threw caution to the winds and abandoned the marked channels. This led to us hitting the rocks not once nor twice but three times. When we finally deposited our precious cargo, shaken but not stirred, he thanked us, “above all for not breaking into “*Nearer My God to Thee*”.

When Marc published his memoirs, *Voices Offstage*, I received a copy inscribed “For Jonathan who shared so many of these adventures across the years”. I was 10 years old at the time. But I took it as an acknowledgment that I had lapped up repeated tellings of these tales, some taller than others. And perhaps an inkling that I would continue to share them across many more years.



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***Jonathan White** is an actor and writer. Born in Dublin, he grew up in New York and began his professional career while still a student at Trinity College, Dublin. Over more than 40 years, he has played on stages across Ireland as well as working extensively on screen and radio. His play To Hell in a Handbag (co-written with Helen Norton) debuted in 2016 and has toured widely since.*  
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