

Maureen O'Hara

When Maureen O'Hara was just a little girl, an old Romany gypsy read her palm and declared, "You will leave Ireland one day and become a very famous woman known all around the world. You are going to make a fortune and be very, very rich. But it will all slip through your fingers one day." Indeed, that is exactly what happened to the Irish actress once dubbed "The Queen of Technicolor" but there were also many more surprises along the way.

Maureen FitzSimons was born on August 17, 1920 in Ranelagh, County Dublin, the second of six children to Charles and Marguerite FitzSimons. Her mother was an accomplished actress and singer who also ran her own high-fashion clothing showroom. Her father was also successful in the clothing business and was part owner of the famed Shamrock Rovers football team.



The FitzSimons children were introduced to the arts at an early age. Maureen organized backyard stage shows for the neighborhood, conscripting her siblings as supporting players when needed. Recognizing their daughter's love of performing, her parents sent her to elocution school and enrolled her in dancing and singing lessons. She also excelled in sports, especially Irish field hockey and fencing, which certainly gave her an advantage over Cornel Wilde and Errol Flynn in her swashbuckler movies in later years. By the time she was ten, she had won almost every Feis award for drama and was hired to perform classical plays over the radio. When she was just fourteen, Maureen was accepted by the Abbey Theatre to pursue her dream of classical acting and operatic singing. Maureen started at the bottom of the ladder-- painting scenery and building sets-- gradually working her way up until, at seventeen, she was cast in a new play at the Abbey. But fate stepped in and changed her plans or was it, as Maureen always said, that gypsy of long ago working her magic? Just days after she won the part, she and her parents went to dinner at a Dublin hotel where the manager introduced her to a popular American singer who was performing in Dublin that week. They exchanged a few words, but Maureen must have made an impression on him because a few days later the Abbey called her to say that a London studio had contacted them and wanted Maureen to go to London for a screen test, all thanks to the singer's recommendation!

The screen test was a total disaster, but, nevertheless, Maureen was invited to sign up with London's biggest talent agency. Again, was it Maureen's

Irish luck or was the gypsy turning the wheel because Charles Laughton, the great British actor, happened to be in the office on the day of her signing. He liked her immediately, even after viewing the disastrous screen test, and offered her a seven year contract with his studio, Mayflower Pictures.

And so, at age seventeen with permission from her parents, Maureen moved to London with an aunt acting as her guardian to learn the movie business as Laughton's protégé. She made her screen debut in a low-budget musical



called "My Irish Molly," the only picture she made under her given name FitzSimons. Even though the movie was a flop, she learned invaluable lessons about performing in front of a camera, as opposed to acting live on a stage. Her next film, "Jamaica Inn," was notable for three reasons: Alfred Hitchcock directed it; it was the first film she and Laughton ever did together; and lastly, Laughton changed her surname to O'Hara because he said her name was too long for the marquee.

"Jamaica Inn" did well at the box office, but more awaited Maureen before the end of the shooting of "Jamaica Inn": Laughton was going to take Maureen to America to film "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and she would play the role of Esmeralda! She, her mother and Charles Laughton would set sail on the Queen Mary in June 1939, expecting to be in the States for three months.

But just hours before boarding, a strange, almost inexplicable event occurred. A young man from the studio, George Brown, who had pursued Maureen relentlessly, convinced her to marry him, even though she had no strong feelings for him. In her 2004 memoir, *'Tis Herself*, she wrote, "I was having an out-of-body experience, and my brain had just abandoned me when I needed it the most. I was numb, beyond feeling, and watched my intellect move to a chair and sit in the corner."

On board the Queen Mary, her mother and Laughton found out about the marriage. It was decided between them that this marriage would not be acknowledged in any way. Two years later the marriage was annulled.

During the filming of "Hunchback," Hitler's Third Reich invaded Poland and Maureen's plans for a quick return to Ireland after shooting the film were dashed. In addition to this misfortune, Laughton informed Maureen that he

was selling her contract to RKO owing to the impending bankruptcy of his Mayflower Pictures. Maureen was now on her own.

"Hunchback" proved to be an enormous success, but once Maureen was a part of RKO, she was cast in a series of low-budget films. Her next breakthrough came when John Ford, the brilliant and controversial director, decided to cast her in his upcoming film, "How Green Was My Valley." Ford had seen Maureen in "Jamaica Inn" and "Hunchback" and liked what he had seen. It took just one informal meeting at a party between Ford and O'Hara for Ford to make his decision to cast Maureen in his film. This was the beginning of an artistic collaboration between the actress and director that would span twenty years and five films.

"How Green Was My Valley" earned ten Oscar nominations and won five Academy Awards, including Best Director for John Ford. This successful movie cemented Maureen's strong professional relationship with Ford and put her career on firm footing, but once again her personal life was in upheaval.

Her mother having returned to Ireland, in Maureen's loneliness she began seeing Will Price, an RKO employee. Sadly, Maureen married Price, perhaps beguiled by his Southern charm, perhaps owing to her loneliness and insecurity. She soon discovered that he was an abusive alcoholic and a wastrel who lived off his wife's earning while running up enormous debts. Fortunately for Maureen, out of this bad marriage came her only child, Bronwyn. For Bronwyn's sake, Maureen stayed with Price.

Her next movie, "To the Shores of Tripoli" (1942), was a big hit and was credited with more new enlistments to the Marine Corps than any other promotional campaign that year. It became a model for other service films made afterwards. Maureen was very active with the Hollywood community in selling war bonds and assisting at the Hollywood Canteen, a free club for servicemen.

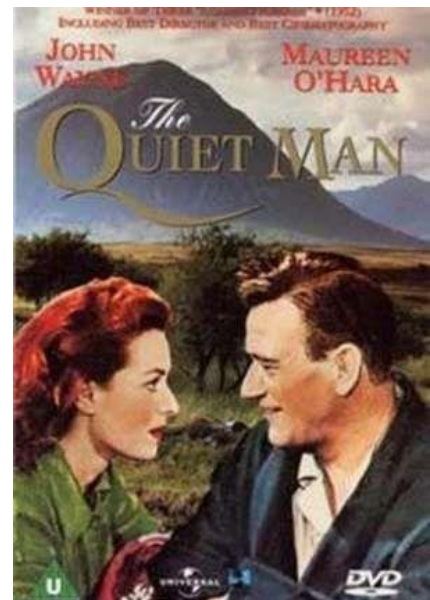
For the next five years, Maureen starred in a number of adventure and swashbuckler films, such as "The Black Swan" and "The Spanish Main," many of them in Technicolor which highlighted her red hair and deep green eyes. She used her natural athletic ability to perform physical feats which other actresses would shun. Starting with "Hunchback" and continuing through her career, Maureen performed many of her own dangerous stunts, including a fall off a balcony and an afternoon bath in a giant mud pit. She enjoyed great camaraderie with the stuntmen who instructed her and considered her one of their own.

Her next blockbuster hit came in 1947, the classic "Miracle on 34th Street." Maureen knew from the outset that this film would be a success but never envisioned that it would become a classic. In her memoir, she wrote, "'Miracle' has endured all this time because of the special relationship of the cast and the crew, the uplifting story and its message of hope and love, which steals the heart all over the world every year."



Maureen's first movie with John Wayne, "Duke" to Maureen, was "Rio Grande," directed by John Ford. The film was one of a Western cavalry trilogy done by the Ford "stock company," that is, the same cast and crew working each movie. The company was like family-- eating meals together and entertaining each other with songs, stories and comedy sketches. The films were all the better for the closeness of the cast and crew. But there was a dark side to Ford that Maureen was to discover. One minute he was her best friend and the next he was insulting her. Ford was especially harsh to John Wayne, belittling him and insulting him in front of the entire company. Their shared experience at the hands of John Ford helped O'Hara and Wayne to bond as friends for the rest of their lives.

The film which Maureen O'Hara and John Wayne were born to star in, "The Quiet Man," began production in June 1951. Excitement was everywhere in Ireland at the news that a John Ford movie was to be filmed in Ireland. The outdoor locations were to be shot in Galway, Mayo and Clare and the indoors in Hollywood. Of course, "The Quiet Man" was the biggest thing to ever happen in the beautiful little village of Cong. Electricity was brought in, telephone service expanded and jobs as extras offered to the local people. Hasn't every visitor to Cong, even today, said, "This is where 'The Quiet Man' was filmed"? For Maureen, filming what was to become her personal favorite movie in Ireland was a magical experience. Reconnecting with her Irish roots and being a part of an Academy Award winning movie lifted her spirits but burdens in her personal life brought her to earth.



When Will Price saw that divorce was imminent, he and his business partner cleaned out all of Maureen's bank accounts just prior to her departure for Ireland. She was broke except for the studio paycheck which she was still receiving. It seemed that another one of the old gypsy's prophecies had come true. Maureen divorced Price in 1952 after ten years of misery with him.

After the divorce, Maureen's career kept her busy. She played in four movies with John Wayne, including "McLintock," one of her favorites. More mature roles came her way, such as the role as mother of twins in "The Parent Trap" and the wife of Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation." She was a popular guest star on every variety show on television in the 1960's where she could showcase her beautiful soprano voice. She even recorded two albums. Happily, Maureen found a man she could love, retired Brigadier General Charles Blair of the United States Air Force, whom she married in 1968. General Blair, a war hero whom she knew through her family, seemed to be the real-life version of what John Wayne was on the screen. When they married, he was senior pilot for Pan American and later managed with Maureen Antilles Airboats, a commuter seaplane service in the Caribbean. Busy with the airline, Maureen retired from acting in 1973 and became the publisher of "Virgin Islander" magazine for which she wrote her monthly column, "Maureen O'Hara Says."

Tragically, Charles Blair was killed in a mysterious plane crash in 1978. Though completely devastated, Maureen rallied to build a new career on the ten happiest years of her life as president and C.E.O. of Antilles Airboats, the first woman to become president of a scheduled airline in the United States.

Maureen was coaxed out of retirement several times—once in 1991 to star with John Candy in "Only the Lonely" and again to make three highly rated television movies. Today at age 88, she divides her time among homes in Glengariff, County Cork and in Arizona and St. Croix.

Maureen O'Hara's list of awards and honors is as long as the list of charities for which she has been a benefactor. She has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame; she led the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City as Grand Marshal in 1999; and she was named Irish America Magazine's "Woman of the Year" in 2005. But perhaps her greatest tribute she ever received were these words spoken about her by her lifelong buddy, John Wayne: "I prefer the company of men, except for Maureen O'Hara. She's the greatest guy I ever met."

(Written by Anne Fitzgerald - 2008)© Irish Cultural Society of the Garden City Area