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Astrid Wind

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and the Politics of Staging
American Indians in the 1790s**

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Astrid Wind

Irish Legislative Independence and the Politics of Staging American Indians in the 1790s

Soon after his arrival in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1788, Lord Edward Fitzgerald met the Mohawk Joseph Brant and through him established contact with other Iroquois Indians. He was swept away by the ideals of equality and liberty that he saw embodied in their culture, and he rhapsodised in a letter to his mother: 'if [I could] I really would join the savages; and, leaving all our fictitious, ridiculous wants, be what nature intended we should be'.¹ A year after his arrival in America, he was given the name Eghnidal by Six Nations leader David Hill, and he promptly reported home to Ireland: 'I have been adopted by one of the Nations, and am now a thorough Indian' (Moore 1:147). Returning to Europe he spent time with Thomas Paine in revolutionary Paris in 1792 and became a champion of Irish independence until his violent death in 1798. But being an adopted Indian Wan Irish republican leader held a particular irony. Fitzgerald became the living example of how the literary representation of American Indians was intricately bound up with Irish politics in the 1790s, a time when analogies between the Irish and the Indians were ever present in peoples' minds. When delegates from the Irish Parliament arrived in London in 1789, Betsy Sheridan reported to her brother, Richard Brinsley, that they were jeered and treated 'like so many Indian chiefs'.² Perceiving and treating the Irish in terms of North American savages or vice versa was of course nothing new,³ and images of Indians and the Irish still intersect today, most notably in the poetry of Paul Muldoon. Similar to the Indian who appears in Muldoon's 'Meeting the British', receiving the present of 'blankets embroidered with smallpox', American Indians in

¹ Quoted in Thomas Moore, *The Life and Death of Lord Edward Fitzgerald*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1831), 1:91. My thanks to Dr Fiona Stafford and Michelle O'Connell for their valuable suggestions on Irish–Indian connections.

² Fintan O'Toole, *A Traitor's Kiss. The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London: Granta Books, 1997), 247.

³ See Nicholas P. Canny, 'The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 30:4 (October 1973), 575–98.