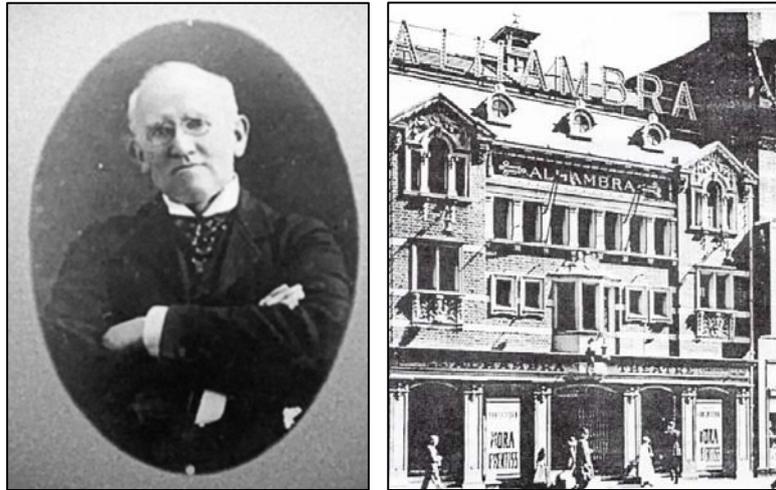


HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



WILLIAM JOHN ASHCROFT (1840 – 1918)

Now largely forgotten, the story of William John Ashcroft is worth recalling in the history of comedy in Northern Ireland. Ashcroft was the outstanding 'Irish' comedian of his generation and a much loved performer who had a pervasive impact on the representation of Irish people in British popular culture.

Born in 1840 in Rhode Island, USA, Ashcroft was a talented singer, comedian and dancer, who bought the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties in Lower North Street, Belfast in 1879. Ashcroft's parents had emigrated from Belfast to the States and he had always retained an ambition to live in Belfast. After a successful career on the stage in America, he married the English actress Kitty Brooks, and relocated to England where he achieved even greater fame and fortune. With the proceeds of his success, he purchased the first music hall in Belfast, the Alhambra, when he and his wife visited the city during a tour in August 1879.

Performers at the music hall included Charles Coborn, Dan Leno, Harry Lauder, Vesta Tilley, Charlie Chaplin's father and Marie Loftus, to name but a few.

Jim McDowell, in his history of Belfast music halls and early theatre, says: *"Willie John was an extremely talented Irish-American who also visited the music hall circuit on the British mainland. He featured as 'Muldoon, the Solid Man', and had a turbulent, at times scandalous, private life, which seemed to endear him to Belfast audiences, lived as it was in the public eye. Brawls and punch-ups were commonplace, yet for over thirty years his career flourished"*.

Ashcroft had another big success with 'McNamara's Band', a song written especially for him by John Stamford, the stage manager of the Alhambra. Stamford may also have written other songs for Willie John, including the very popular 'The Brick Came Down' and 'The Old Familiar Faces'.

With competition from the Empire Theatre and the Grand Opera House and the emergence of cinema, box office receipts at his theatre fell during the 1890s. Ashcroft's music hall career diminished after 1900 when, separated from his wife and suffering from poor mental health, he was forced to sell the Alhambra. He had attempted suicide in the theatre in 1895 following his involvement in a scandalous court case. Nevertheless he continued to perform and undertook a number of tours in Britain before his health failed.

Benefit performances for 'the Solid Man' were held in Dublin and Glasgow but Ashcroft never recovered. He died in January 1918 in Belfast's Purdysburn Asylum and is buried in Belfast City cemetery. His famous theatre, the Alhambra, was demolished in 1959 following a fire.

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