

WATERFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Charles Kean: Shakespearean Actor

Charles John Kean was born in Colbeck Street (in the same house as William Vincent Wallace, the composer), Waterford city on the 18th January 1811. He was the second son of Edmund Kean, the renowned Shakespearean actor, and Mary Chambers, an actress from Waterford. His father and mother divorced around 1825, forcing Charles to leave Eton at the age of sixteen. He decided to become an actor, after his father's failure to pay a four hundred pound settlement to his mother, which led Charles to turn down the offer of a cadetship by the East India Company in 1827.

Charles first appeared on stage at Drury Lane, but left London by the spring of 1828 for the provinces to achieve the fame and acclaim he hungered for. Success would follow with his performance in *Romeo and Juliet* in 1829 at London Haymarket, followed by a successful tour of *Richard III* in the United States. However, his zenith would be his role as Hamlet in 1838 at Drury Lane, which led him to be one of the great tragic actors of the age.

Charles Kean married Ellen Tree in 1842. There were tours in the United States between 1845 and 1847. In 1851 he became the manager of the Princess Theatre, which staged a series of successful Shakespearean revivals. Kean retired from acting in 1859 for the first time, and instigated a tour of the US, Jamaica, and Australia with his wife in 1863, returning to England by 1866. Kean's final treading of 'the boards' was in Liverpool in 1867. He died in Chelsea on the 22nd of January 1868.

Cian Manning