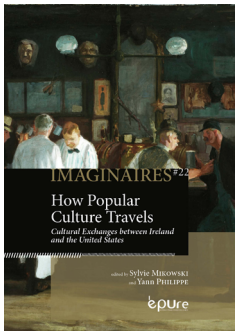

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Representing the Irish in the United States: The Circulation of Erskine Nicol's Popular Artworks in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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Erskine Nicol (1825-1904) was a Scottish painter whose pictures were mainly devoted to the representations of Ireland and the Irish, as can be seen with *The Legacy* also called *Good News*, which today is preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston. Nicol became popular in the United Kingdom in the 1850s: his artworks were sold and exhibited in Great Britain as well as in Ireland, and they were also shown in the United States or in France thanks to the international networks set up by British art dealers in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the British art market had utterly changed, a transformation marked by the booming of independent art galleries[1]. Such an evolution contributed to develop the commerce of British artworks abroad, and in particular in the United States. In the nineteenth century, American art collectors were fond of European paintings, an interest which was much to the benefit of British art sellers, who were looking for customers all around the world, and more precisely in British territories or ex-colonies, the United States having declared their independence in 1776.

But this newly acquired independence – the Revolutionary War being ended in 1783 by the Treaty of Paris – did not break up all ties between the

1. "Great Britain's art market took shape in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the relaxation of laws restricting the importation of pictures, the development of a system of auction sales, and the emergence of the independent art dealer. […] As the market grew in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, dealers increasingly traded in contemporary British art". Pamela Fletcher, "Creating The French Gallery: Ernest Gambart and the Rise of the Commercial Art Gallery in Mid-Victorian London", *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 6 (1), 2007, http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring07/143-creating-the-french-gallery-ernest-gambart-and-the-rise-of-the-commercial-art-gallery-in-mid-victorian-london (last accessed 5/11/2020) p. 1-27, p. 2.

U.S.A. and the U.K., as many Americans never forgot their British ancestry. Hence, seventy years later, in the 1850s, British artworks were coveted by the wealthiest – who could buy original paintings – and also by the members of the working class, who indulged a growing passion for engravings. How did art merchants use this fondness to sell the artworks of British artists such as Erskine Nicol? Did they have the power to make an artwork popular?

To answer these questions, this article will examine the way in which Erskine Nicol's paintings were made popular among American collectors thanks to the networks of British art dealers. This will lead to an examination of the key role played by international exhibitions which gave both visibility and value to Nicol's pictures in the United States. Such events allowed a great number of visitors to admire works of art, and it is interesting to observe how representatives of all social classes were keen on the painter's images of Ireland and the Irish, considering that American editors printed copies of them in the thousands for the American market.

Buying Erskine Nicol's Irish Pictures in America

The fact that British art dealers had customers on the East Coast of the United States can be guessed from the presence of Nicol's paintings in the collections of individuals such as A. T. Stewart, who had bought for himself *A Disputed Boundary* (1869)[2], an oil on canvas that his contemporaries estimated at 10,000 dollars.[3] This is the reason why, as early as 1858, *The Art Journal* noted the popularity of Nicol on the other side of the Atlantic: "[Nicol's] sketches of Irish life and character are even more popular in the United States and in Canada, than in his own country."[4] This observation might have been a little exaggerated, since Nicol was undeniably more famous in the United Kingdom than in America, but it remains that his genre paintings were very appreciated over there.

In the United States, these private collectors often accepted to exhibit their own paintings to the general public during temporary exhibitions. In New York, for example, the Vanderbilt family had acquired Nicol's painting called *Paying the Rent* by 1885, as confirmed by a journalist of the *New York Times*.[5] A few years later, another painting by Nicol, *Looking Out for a Safe Investment* (1876), entered their collection. This picture was lent by the

2. "An American Millionaire's Gallery", *The Art Journal*, London, 1 May 1887, p. 156.
3. "The Art Gallery; A List of Pictures in Mr Stewart's Collection", *The New York Times*, 12 April 1876, p. 8.
4. "The Royal Scottish Academy", *The Art Journal*, 1 April 1858, p. 100.
5. "His Art Treasures", *The New York Times*, 9 December 1885, p. 2.

family to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, along with many other artworks from their private collection, between 1902 and 1920.[6]

Similarly, the collection of an American art lover called Fales comprised a painting by Nicol entitled *A Partial Eclipse of the Moon*, which had already been exposed in Dundee in 1873, and which was shown in New York in 1881, where it was commented by a journalist of *The New York Times*: "*A Partial Eclipse of the Moon*, by Erskine Nicol, is one of the gems of the collection; the coaxing hand and seductive face of the cheerful wife, and the discontented scowl of the man, tell their story in lines of exquisite beauty and finish."[7]

The circulation of Nicol's canvasses in American private collections was made possible thanks to the international networks of some British art dealers. These dealers did not hesitate to circulate the artworks in their possession in order to exhibit them regularly in different sale rooms, in Great Britain or in foreign countries, going as far as America or Australia.[8] The exhibition rooms showing the paintings played a crucial role in their sales, and this accounts for the multiplication of such commercial galleries in the middle of the nineteenth century. The circulation of Nicol's works in this kind of exhibitions must have given more value and popularity to his production because the more expensive his paintings were, the more fashionable he was. It would then be interesting to focus on the identity of these merchants who invested in Nicol's artworks, in order to better understand how they could influence their exchange value.

Nicol's works circulated in the private galleries of several sellers, such as Arthur Tooth, who had opened his own shop in London in 1866. Tooth had begun his career as an art dealer in 1842, the year when his father, Charles Tooth, had created the company "Tooth & Sons." The London business was quickly made prosperous, which allowed the son to open some more commercial galleries in New York, as well as in Paris.[9] Thomas Bayer and John Page believe that, from the 1870s onwards, Tooth had become one of the most reputable dealers in the English capital.[10] He mainly invested in paintings made by the British artists of his time whose production was frequently exhibited at the Royal Academy and he bought numerous pictures directly from Erskine Nicol.[11]

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6. Winifred Eva Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, Arno, 1974, p. 192.
7. "The Fales Collection; Quaint Relics and Rich Art Works; Brief Description of the Exhibition", *The New York Evening Express*, 25 October 1881, np.
8. Robert Verhoogt, *Art in Reproduction: Nineteenth-Century Prints after Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Jozef Israëls and Ary Scheffer*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam U.P., 2007, p. 216.
9. Thomas Bayer & John M. Page, "Arthur Tooth: A London Dealer in the Spotlight, 1870-71", *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 9 (1), 2010, http://19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring10/arthur-tooth (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 1-24, p. 2-3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

Tooth seemed to have developed an interest in Nicol's canvasses from the 1860s because his London gallery already exhibited two of his works in 1868.[12] In 1886, the dealer was selling from his exhibition the painting called *Under a Cloud* (1876), which had been presented at the Royal Academy eight years earlier, in 1878. The exhibition set up by Tooth in 1886 was well received, as evidenced by the comment published in *The Illustrated London News*:

> Mr Tooth relies chiefly upon foreign artists to provide attractions which may compete on equal terms with the more purely national exhibitions of the season; and it must be admitted that taste and judgment have presided over the selection brought together. […] Mr Nicol's *Under a Cloud* […] may be advantageously contrasted with Mr Faed's *Alone* […], for probably both pictures were painted at least ten years ago, and add to our regret that the former artist has been unable to pursue an art for which he was specially gifted.[13]

It is true that by the 1880s, Nicol painted less pictures in oil than before, which was probably due to health issues. Besides, it is likely that the first works by Nicol that Tooth had exhibited in this gallery had been bought directly to the artist. Bayer and Page demonstrated that Tooth had bought almost half his stock to painters themselves, at least in 1870 and 1871.[14] Considering that this practice was particularly profitable for this merchant, he must have favored these direct purchases when he started his business. Indeed, the paintings bought directly to artists were much less expensive than if he had bought them in an auction house.

Yet, Arthur Tooth could also spend extravagant amounts of money to obtain paintings by Nicol which were sold by auctioneers. In 1891, he disbursed 409 pounds for *Waiting at the Crossroads* (1868), sold by Christie's in London[15], after a real match against a New York merchant, as is reported in *The Scotsman*:

> *The Crossroads*, by Erskine Nicol, A. R. A, a fine work, which after a sharp competition was secured by Mr Arthur Tooth for 390 gs., the under bidder being Mr Carmer, a well-known New York dealer.[16]

This anecdote brings to light the value given to Nicol's production by art merchants in the 1890s, which must have encouraged Arthur Tooth to

12. "Mr Tooth's Third Winter Exhibition", *The Art Journal*, London, 1 December 1868, p. 284.
13. "The Spring Exhibitions", *Illustrated London News*, London, 3 April 1886, p. 345.
14. Th. Bayer & J. Page, art. cit., p. 6.
15. Algernon Graves, *Art Sales from Early in the Eighteenth Century to Early in the Twentieth Century*, London, Graves, 1818-1921, 3 vols., 1921, vol. 2, p. 286; "Art Sales", *The Times*, London, 13 April 1891, p. 13.
16. "Sale of Water-colours and Modern Pictures", *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh, 13 April 1891, p. 3.

go on with his investments.[17] This was how Nicol's paintings could be seen in the different private galleries that Tooth possessed to attract art lovers, especially in New York, where there was an obvious interest for images illustrating the social and political tensions in Ireland.

Indeed, the protagonist waiting for his coach at the centre of the painting is isolated from the other characters by his posture and attitude, something which did not escape the attention of the art critics of the time, who identified him as "unmistakably English".[18] It is true that the painter suggests that this haughty visitor is not Irish: he has come to Ireland for hunting, as can be guessed from the birds which are tied by his gamekeeper. The young man is seated at his feet, on the left, and behind him stands an old beggar, extending her hand. To the right is seated an Irish piper, so that the triangular composition expresses the domination of the Englishman over the Irish characters, who all depend on this foreigner's money. Such a situation echoed the social order of Ireland's predominantly rural economy, where land was owned by a class of often absentee landlords, who seldom cared about those who worked and lived on it. Such a reception of *Waiting at the Crossroads* can be explained by the understanding of the Famine as a consequence of the maladministration of Irish land by Anglo-Irish landlords, an interpretation which was deeply-ingrained among the Irish who settled in America in the middle of the nineteenth century.

17. In 1897, he offered 165 guineas to possess *The Price of the Pig* (1864, 38 x 48 cm), sold at Christie's, in London. In 1902 he bought *In Doubt* (undated) for 975 dollars during an auction in New York which was held in the Waldorf-Astoria to sell the collection of an American art dealer named S. P. Avery Junior. "Sale of Pictures", *The Scotsman*, 22 March 1897, p. 8; "Avery Art Collection Sale", *The New York Times*, 21 March 1902, p. 6.
18. "Royal Scottish Academy's Exhibition; First Notice", *The Scotsman*, 18 February 1869, p. 6.

Fig. 1 – Erskine Nicol, *Waiting at the Crossroads*, oil painting, 71 x 105 cm, 1868. Reproduced with the kind authorisation of the Frick Library, New York[19]

Thus, when Tooth chose to buy this painting, he was probably aware that the motif would strike a chord in America, where the picture could be sold through multiple networks. Tooth's choice of setting up his business in London allowed him to be at the heart of the British art trade, as indicated by Anne Helmreich: "The model of networks is highly relevant for how objects were able to travel in […] galleries".[20] Galleries run by these merchants were indeed linked by common commercial interests. Not far from Tooth's exhibition in London could be found other sellers who appreciated Nicol's work, such as Thomas McLean, who opened his own commercial gallery towards 1865 at n°7, Haymarket.[21] There, he showed pictures like *Squaring Accounts* in 1876[22] and he owned many other works by Nicol, such as *Waiting for an Answer* (1862)[23], *The New Boots* (1866)[24] or *Paying the Rent*, which he bought for an exceptional

19. I would like to thank Suz Massen and Elizabeth Lane, who both work at the Frick Library in New York, for their generous help in my research about Erskine Nicol's paintings entitled *Waiting at the Crossroads* and *A Disputed Boundary*.
20. Anne Helmreich, "Traversing Objects: The London Art Market at the turn of the Twentieth Century", in Charlotte Gould & Sophie Mesplède (eds.), *Marketing Art in the British Isles*, Farnham/Burlington, Ashgate, 2012, p. 135-146, p. 140.
21. About McLean's gallery, read the following page (last accessed 24/03/2014): http://learn.bowdoin.edu/fletcher/london-gallery/data/pages/as600.html.
22. "Mr McLean's Gallery, Haymarket", *The Art Journal*, London, 1 June 1876, p. 180.
23. McLean bought this oil on canvas measuring 46 x 66 cm at Christie's in London on 20 May 1888, for 189 pounds (lot 263). The picture came from the collection of James Patry Graves, *Art Sales*, vol. 2, p. 286.
24. This oil on canvas from 1866 (58 x 45 cm) belonged to David Price and was auctioned at Christie's in London on 2 April 1892 (lot 96). McLean got it for 200 guineas (or 210 pounds). Roberts, William, *Memorials of Christie's: A Record of Art Sales from 1766 to 1896*, London, G. Bell, 1897, 2 vols., vol. 2, p. 180; Graves, *Art Sales*, vol. 2, p. 284-288, p. 286.

amount of money in 1869, that is to say two years after its presentation at the international exposition of 1867 in Paris.[25] After McLean's purchase, the work appeared on the American market in the 1870s and it joined the collection of Franklin O'Day, an inhabitant of Saint Louis who, according to one of his contemporaries, bought it for 10,000 dollars, and sold it later to William H. Vanderbilt of New York.[26] Wishing to make his collection known to other New Yorkers, Vanderbilt had *Paying the Rent* exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art between 1886 and 1903. Later on, it was bought by Helen C. Merritt, of Los Angeles.[27] The story of this painting suggests that McLean contributed to the circulation of the artwork in the United States where its price increased over time.

On 18 April 1945, it was auctioned at Parke & Bernet, in New York, where a customer obtained it for 1,500 dollars (lot 157), and then, on the first of January 1980, it was sold at Butterfield's, in San Francisco (lot 34) for 28,000 dollars.[28] Therefore, the fact that this oil on canvas travelled between the United Kingdom and the United States doubtlessly contributed to raise its value, which leads us to question the links between Nicol's popularity and the circulation of his artworks in international exhibitions.

The International Circulation of Artworks: a Key Challenge

Nicol's paintings were exhibited in a certain number of vast exhibitions which were called "universal expositions", originally designed to put forward the major innovations developed in each country. But in the 1850s, fine arts were included in such exhibitions and Nicol had his first paintings presented in a universal exposition in Paris in 1867. Then, it was mainly at the end of the century that his paintings could be seen in such fairs on the other side of the Atlantic.

For instance, it was in 1881 that American visitors of the Chicago Interstate Industrial Exhibition had a chance to discover *An Irish Merrymaking*.[29] Six years later, the same event happened again in Chicago

25. McLean succeeded in buying this work at an auction on 8 May 1869, at Christie's (London) for a little over 1,102 pounds (lot 102). The other pictures by Nicol which circulated in the private collection of McLean were *Precautionary Measure* (unknown date), *Signing the New Lease* (1868), *The Lease Refused* (1863, 56 x 43 cm), *His Legal Adviser* (1876, the version measuring 78 x 109 cm) and a second version of the painting called *The Day after the Fair* (1860, 25.5 x 33 cm). Graves. Art Sales, p. 285-286.
26. J. Thomas Scharf, "Mr Day", *History of Saint Louis City and County, From the Earliest Periods to the Present Day*, *Including Biographical Sketches of Representative Men*, Philadelphia, Everts, 1883, 2 vols., vol. 2, p. 1297-1298, p. 1298.
27. Information sent on 21 April 2014 by Janell Snape who works at Bonhams' in San Francisco. I am very grateful for her long-lasting help in my research.
28. Information sent by Janell Snape.
29. Kirsten M. Jensen, "The American Salon: The Art Gallery at the Interstate Industrial Exposition: 1873-1890", Phd dissertation, New York, City University, 2007, 2 vols., vol. 2,

and George Seney, a New Yorker, lent the painting by Nicol called *Bashful*.[30] George Seney had already lent another painting by Nicol, that is to say *Always Tell the Truth* (n°78), for the Louisville Industrial Exhibition (Kentucky) of 1883, where art lovers could also observe *An Irish Merrymaking* (n°130), then owned by Joseph W. Bates. The fact that *An Irish Merrymaking* appeared again at Louisville indicates that it was probably well received when it was displayed two years earlier in Chicago, in 1881. So, in the United States, industrial expositions favoured an interest in Nicol's paintings, since they circulated from exhibition to exhibition.

The details and truth of Nicol's Irish scenes were also praised in 1876, a year when an Irish painting by the Scottish artist was selected for the Philadelphia Centennial.[31] The oil in question was *Paying the Rent*[32], a scene belonging to the tragicomedy which had already been displayed in Paris in 1867. The painting put forward the difficult relationships between landlords and tenants in Ireland, so that it exemplified an aspect of Irish history, which probably accounts for this choice by the selection committee of the Philadelphia Centennial.

Fig. 2 – Erskine Nicol, *Paying the Rent*, oil on canvas, 122 x 166 cm, 1866, private collection, USA. © Amélie Dochy.

p. 379.

30. Jensen. p. 477.
31. Bruno Giberti, *Designing the Centennial: A History of the 1876 International Exhibition in Philadelphia*, Lexington, Kentucky U.P., 2002, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130hm4w (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. x-xi.
32. United States Centennial Commission, *Official Catalogue of the International Exhibition, Seventh and Revised Edition*, Philadelphia, J. R. Nagle, 1876, second part: "Art Gallery, Annexes and Outdoor Works of Art", DOI: 10.5479/sil.418823.39088007071319, p. 38.

Actually, the American public was probably more sensitive to the situation of Irish peasants depicted in the canvas than to its humorous effects, as can be guessed from the important number of Irish immigrants who came to Philadelphia and who settled there from the seventeenth century onwards, with record figures being reached in the nineteenth century since, in 1850, there were 72,312 people born in Ireland in Philadelphia County while, in 1860, they were 95,458.[33]

The majority of these immigrants came from rural areas severely hit by the Famine (and noticeably by the Great Famine between 1846 and 1852), but also by the evictions which led to the depopulation of Irish agricultural lands throughout the century. In Philadelphia, they mainly settled in the working-class districts where Black Americans already lived[34] and they were generally hired in the industrial neighbourhood of Kensington and Southwark where they worked in the textile factories or in the construction of new means of transportation such as the canal or the railway.[35]

Considering that the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition was open to everyone and that the entrance ticket only cost 50 cents[36], even workers with low income could visit it. Amongst them, there must have been people of Irish origin who were interested in the land of their ancestors and who came into the sections of the exhibit devoted to Ireland. Driven by a form of nostalgia, these American visitors probably saw the peasants painted in *Paying the Rent* as characters with which they could easily identify since many of them, or members of their own family, might have been faced with similar economic troubles.[37]

Therefore, the iconography of Ireland imagined by Nicol was circulated in American exhibitions which were visited by all strata of society. Thus the most humble art lovers interested in Ireland could see these pictures and later on, they could even acquire their reproductions, as they were widely circulated in the United States.

33. Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia: Ten Generations of Urban Experience*, Philadelphia, Temple U.P., 1973, p. 29.
34. D. Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 18-21.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 31-33.
36. The Libray Companion of Philadelphia, "The Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, PA", https://lcpimages.org/centennial (last accessed 8/11/2020).
37. Dennis Clark explains that in the middle of the 18th century, Irish migrants who hoped to settle in Philadelphia were sometimes withheld in Ireland by their landlords to whom they owed money; they thus prevented the boats with their indebted tenants on board to set sail for America. D. Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Reproduction, Circulation and the Value of Irish Pictures by Nicol in America

According to Walter Benjamin, the mechanical reproduction of art is an issue in itself, because it causes the original artwork to lose its "aura". Benjamin defines the aura of an artwork as its "*hic and nunc*", meaning that an authentic painting is necessarily related to a precise place and an exact moment in time, which makes it unique[38]. According to Benjamin, reproducing an artwork is undermining its authority, its historical value and the relationship that the onlooker may entertain with it. For the philosopher, it is mass culture which is responsible for this degradation.[39] Reproduction would then be the result of a demand by a mass public trying to appropriate a work of art, even if this appropriation makes it lose its authenticity. It is true that in Nicol's time, art became more accessible since a greater number of collectors were likely to buy artworks or their reproductions:

> Public interest in art kept pace with the expansion of art reproduction. The culture of the Enlightenment, pursued by a motley collection of societies, journals, reading circles, exhibitions and other cultural institutions, had brought increasing numbers of people into contact with art. […]. The visual arts, literature and music were no longer the preserve of a small cultural elite […]. Reading prose and poetry, playing a musical instrument and collecting art in reproduction literally brought the arts into many people's homes.[40]

38. "In even the most perfect of reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place. […] The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity […]. Technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. […] These changed circumstances may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of the artwork. And although this can apply not only to art but (say) to a landscape moving past the spectator in a film, in the work of art this process touches on […] authenticity. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. […] And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object". Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael William Jennings, Brigid Levin Doherty & Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 2008 (1939), p. 21-22.

39. "What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye […] a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. In the light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura's present decay […]. Namely: *the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction*. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in a […] reproduction. And the reproduction, as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels, differs unmistakably from the image", in W. Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 23. Italics are in the original text.

40. Robert Verhoogt, *Art in Reproduction: Nineteenth-Century Prints after Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Jozef Israëls and Ary Scheffer*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam U.P., 2007, p. 16.

The fact that paintings were hung on the walls of Nicol's contemporaries was nothing new because, for a very long time, the wealthiest art lovers embellished their dwellings with large pictures. On the contrary, the emergence of buyers belonging to the middle class or even the working class was a recent phenomenon. They also started to decorate their homes with original paintings or their reproductions: from the middle of the century onwards, there were collector's items affordable for almost everyone. If, as we have seen, the popularity of an artist can be estimated according to the prices paid by rich collectors for his original artworks whenever they are offered for sale, especially at auctions, it can also be observed that in the eyes of a wider public, the value of a painting can be evaluated thanks to the number of its reproductions.

Nicol worked with the most influent print-sellers of his time, such as Henry Graves (1806-1892), whose business was active in London between 1827 and 1926.[41] The editor spotted the most popular paintings during the exhibitions of the Royal Academy and the Royal Scottish Academy and, as soon as he realised the first successes of the painter within the Scottish gallery, he launched the reproduction of several of his pictures, which was a very expensive process. As reminded by *The Art Journal* in 1850, it was an investment that had to pay back:

> The print-publisher must be a man of taste and judgement, as well as a capitalist, to select such works as are adapted for engraving, and such as will be able to afford him a return for the large sums invested in bringing them out.[42]

Nevertheless, Henry Graves did not wait until the moment when Nicol was made internationally famous to launch reproductions of his canvasses depicting Ireland. He ordered a copy of two paintings called *Outward Bound* and *Homeward Bound* to Thomas Herbert Maguire (1821-1895), who had to engrave these two full-length portraits, the first showing a ragged migrant on an Irish quay, staring at a poster advertising a ship line to New York, while in the second, the same protagonist could be seen neat and well-dressed pondering on an American dock in front of another poster promoting "the fast sailing barque Washington" about to leave for Dublin. The copies were published on the 24th of May 1854, both in London and in New York, thanks to Graves' collaboration with the American editor Williams, Stevens & Williams.[43]

41. F. M. O'Donoghue, "Graves, Henry", in Leslie Stephen & Sidney Lee (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. London & New York, Macmillan & Smith, 1885-1904, 63 vols, and three supplements, 1901, Supplement II, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1901_supplement/Graves,_Henry (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 346-347.
42. "The Publications of Mr Alderman Moon", *The Art Journal*, London, 1 January 1850, p. 30, quoted by R. Verhoogt, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
43. A great number of pictures by Nicol were reproduced thanks to lithography. The technique consisted in drawing the work on a limestone with an oily pen. Then, some acid was applied

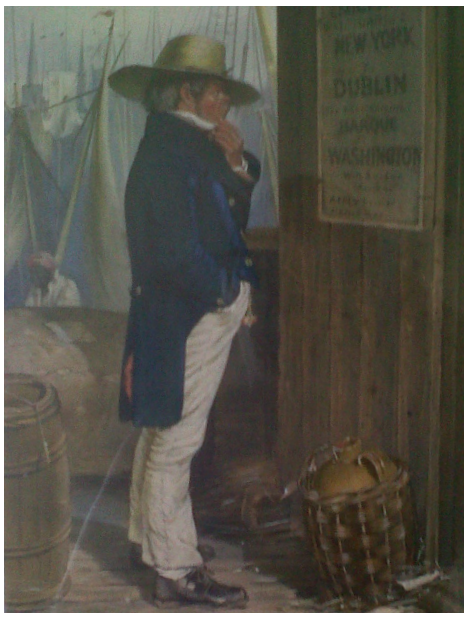

Fig. 3 (L) – *Outward Bound*, coloured lithograph engraved by T. H. Maguire after Nicol's painting, 34 x 27,6 cm, 24 May 1854, London / New York. © Amélie Dochy.
Fig. 4 (R) – *Homeward Bound*, coloured lithograph engraved by T. H. Maguire after Nicol's painting, 34 x 26 cm, 24 May 1854, London / New York. © Amélie Dochy.

In the next year, Graves continued to have reproductions of Nicol's pictures printed in the American city, noticeably when he asked John Robert Dicksee (1817-1905) to realise a lithograph of *The Flower of Connemara*, a picture by Nicol dated 1855. The final copies – showing a dreamy boy bent over an embankment with a few mushrooms and a hat placed to his left – were printed in London and New York on 27 August 1855.[44] Then, in 1856, Graves had the colour lithographs of *Homeward Bound* and *Outward Bound* reprinted, which demonstrates their success. As the litographs were not numbered, it is impossible to know how many copies were printed exactly, but according to Verhoogt, the technique used to make lithographs could produce up to thirty or forty thousand examples because the lithographic limestone was a highly resistant surface.[45]

to the stone to erode all the zones which were not protected by grease and this process was eventually stopped by the use of a moistened sponge rubbed over the surface. Some ink could then be applied with a roller over the lines which had not been attacked by the acid. The last step was to press the stone over a sheet of paper. Such a technique allowed to make black and white lithographs, but it was also possible to produce coloured versions with a successive application of colours on the stone. Gérard Denizeau, *Vocabulaire des arts visuels du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Minerve, 2004, p. 97.

44. I am grateful to Ronan Teevan, of Caxton's, a print seller in Ireland, as he gave me all this information by email on 15 August 2012.

45. R. Verhoogt, *op. cit.*, p. 44, 84.

Usually, such reproductions were sold for a little more than ten shillings[46], a modest amount which confirms that lithographs were addressed to collectors of little means, who could not afford to buy originals. As a result, their purchases were often made "by default". For Wilfrid Meynell, these art lovers were extremely keen on Nicol's artworks:

> Such art as Mr Nicol can never fail to be highly popular […]. If any proof were needed, it can be found in the eagerness to possess engravings from his pictures which is shown by the same class of collectors who, not in a position to acquire the pictures themselves, gather together and highly prize the replicas in black and white of the works of such masters as Wilkie and Webster[47].

Here, Meynell clarifies that collectors who "prized" the reproductions of Nicol's pictures also bought copies of other genre paintings, and especially those of David Wilkie or Thomas Webster (1800-1886). This suggests that there also were art lovers who were specialised in the collection of engravings. Across all strata of society, these collectors gathered copies and classified them according to their topic, genre, artist or period[48] and from the popularity of Nicol's Irish pictures and engravings on the American market, it can be guessed that some of them treasured representations of Ireland as a form of remembrance of their Irish heritage.

The fact that art dealers or a renowned editor like Graves had faith in Nicol had an impact on the young artist's popularity, because his engravings already circulated in the English capital when he experienced his first successes at the Royal Academy in 1857. In addition, Henry Graves was not the only editor to reproduce and circulate copies of Nicol's works[49], which suggests that it was a profitable business for several of them, even in the United States. Other editors overseas were interested in Nicol's production because of its reproducibility, such as the French company Goupil or the New Yorker Knoedler & Co. The latter also invested in scenes of Irish life depicted by Nicol, such as *His Legal Adviser*, illustrating the feeling of perplexity and surprise of a lawyer listening to the worries of his angry client who dramatises the cause of his troubles with an eloquent gesture of his right hand, pointing at some invisible enemy. Such a challenging

46. These engravings could be bought at Cowleson's Gallery, on Lothian Street, for a little over 10 shillings. "Specific Articles for Sale", *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh, 9 August 1905, p. 11.
47. Wilfrid Meynell, *Some Modern Artists and their Works*, London/Paris/New York, Cassell, 1883, p. 150.
48. R. Verhoogt, *op. cit.*, p. 213, 249.
49. Michael Knoedler was involved in various partnerships to publish prints in New York, but he was also personally interested in Nicol's works. In 1910, he bought *Collecting his Thoughts* (1865) and *Yours to Command* (1865). "Butler Paintings Sold for $264,835", *The New York Times*, 8 January 1910, p. 2. The French editor Goupil, whose publishing house had a branch in New York and who was Michael Knoedler's former employer, had also purchased a painting by Nicol called *Paddy's Mark* between 1869 and 1874 (information from the Paul Mellon Centre).

attitude was doubtlessly enjoyed by the American public, who was fond of stories illustrating rebellion against undue authority.

Fig. 5 – *His Legal Adviser*, black and white engraving by Victor Gustave Lhuillier after Nicol' s painting, 35 x 46 cm, published by L. H. Lefèvre in London and Knoedler & Co. in New York, 18 November 1882, private collection. © Amélie Dochy.

To the contemporaries who saw the picture at the Royal Academy in London, there was no doubt that the scene was located in Ireland as *The Illustrated London News* remarked on the "hibernically humorous" aspect of the picture[50], and then on the "anxious consultation" of this "Irish squireen".[51] The ensuing engraving, published simultaneously in London and in New York on 18 November 1882 was equally well-received, according to the *Huddersfield Chronicle*, which found its "silvery tone" particularly "charming"[52], or the *Art Journal,* judging it as "admirably etched" and predicting that "if the plate only attain[ed] to the popularity which the picture achieved when in the Academy [in London], no doubt the publisher [would] be well satisfied."[53] The journalist's prophecy turned true,

50. "The Royal Academy", *Illustrated London News*, 5 May 1877, p. 419.
51. "The Royal Academy; Second Notice", *Illustrated London News*, 12 May 1877, p. 450.
52. "The Huddersfield Fine Art and Industrial Exhibition", *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, Huddersfield (West Yorkshire, England), 7 July 1883, p. 8.
53. "New Etchings and books", *The Art Journal*, London, 1 February 1883, p. 164.

as is demonstrated by the fact that later on, Knoedler and Co. launched other reproductions of Nicol's works such as *The First Catch,* engraved by W. H. Simmons and published in 1892 with the help of the print-sellers F. J. Pilgeram and L. H. Lefèvre.[54] These associates had taken on Ernest Gambart's business, and they had financed prints based on Nicol's paintings in the 1870s.

It was not so rare that paintings by Nicol, as well as their reproductions, travelled into the United States because in 1880, the engraving called *The Trio*, published in New York by Cassell in the *Magazine of Art* prompted *The New York Times* to write the following comment: "We have had in the United States quite a number of Mr Nicoll's [*sic*] paintings, which have been fully appreciated." Moreover, for the journalist of *The New York Times*, *The Trio* was the "leading illustration"[55] of the magazine, a compliment which was confirmed in the daily three years later, when this image was published again in another book edited in New York[56].

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It can be concluded that the reproductions of Nicol's pictures sold well and that they contributed to the popularity of the artist, without any questioning of the authenticity of such copies by the painter's contemporaries. In the context of the nineteenth century, it could even be said that these reproductions participated in the construction of the "aura" of Nicol's paintings since they allowed his production to become famous across various sections of society and in different geographical places which could be as remote from his homeland as the United States.

Reproduced in the thousands, Nicol's iconography of Ireland circulated around the world and constructed an image of this country in the collective imagination. His contemporaries were so familiar with his pictures of Ireland that reality reminded them of Nicol's paintings, in the image of this Scottish traveller who came to the United States in 1866 and who wrote, as he discovered the town of Richmond in Virginia:

> The steam whistle now sounds […] and we see Richmond, before us with its tall spires and conspicuous square Capitol. At the wharf, there was such a scene as would have delighted the eye of Erskine Nicol. It was literally hanging with darkies in every conceivable sort of dress – coats, belonging to all periods of the century; and hats, still

54. Erskine Nicol, *The First Catch*, engraved by William Henry Simmons, 75 x 59 cm, London, Pilgeram & Lefèvre, New York, Knoedler & Co, 1892.
55. "New Books", *The New York Times*, 11 December 1880, p. 7.
56. "The frontispiece of [*Some Modern Artists*] is a capital etching by Lalauze from *The Trio*, a painting by Erskine Nicol, A. R. A. In Nicoll [*sic*] we find a British artist of great humor and the highest skill". "Holiday Books", *The New York Times*, 10 December 1883, p. 3.

> more incongruous, adorned the outer man of these gentry. They were mostly touters for the hotels or hack-drivers; and the bawling and general excitement they manifested was ten times worse than a combination of the scene enacted daily at Greenock quay and the Tower of London[57].

Although the author's patronising tone is quite shocking for today's reader, this testimony sent to Edinburgh's newspaper *The Scotsman* reveals the ways of seeing of that time. The Scotsman's feelings as he first glimpsed African Americans on the quays of Richmond resulted from the racial prejudices of his time: in the eyes of that visitor, the Blacks and the Irish were inferior in terms of civilisation, a belief which was not necessarily shared by Eskine Nicol, especially at the end of his life. Yet, at the beginning of his career, he did resort to degrading stereotypes of the Irish to produce a number of humorous images and caricatures for the British public which were not intended for the American market and which nourished anti-Irish prejudices in Scotland.

On the contrary, Nicol's images circulating on the American market tended to enhance Irish grievances through the motifs of rural life and its social tensions, poverty caused by colonisation and emigration. By selecting the pictures they showed in their galleries according to a clever division of their markets, art merchants managed to use their customers' beliefs, fears and hopes to make their pictures popular. While in Great Britain, Nicol's iconography could consolidate an image of despondency and chaos, in American exhibitions, it could offer a more hopeful vision, based on the bravery and resilience of Irish migrants. This shows that whether positively or negatively, Nicol influenced the way Irish identity was perceived in the nineteenth century so that elements of popular culture such as pictures, engravings and prints had the power to fashion the collective imagination.

57. "A Visit to Richmond", *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh, 4 June 1866, p. 3.