The Emmet legend

In the final months of the American Civil War a powerful letter was sent to President Abraham Lincoln pleading for the life of a young Confederate spy who had been sentenced to death. This was the case of Lieutenant Samuel B. Davis, a distant relative of the Confederate president, who had made an heroic speech from the dock after being found guilty. Senator Willard Saulsbury, no friend of either Lincoln or his administration, begged him to study the speech carefully and 'compare it with the celebrated defence of Emmet' (7 February 1865, Abraham Lincoln papers at the Library of Congress, series 1). It was a shrewd gamble. Emmet's famous speech was required reading for aspiring orators in the United States in the nineteenth century and Lincoln had been so impressed that he memorised it in his youth. The evening before the execution Lincoln sent an executive order saving the life of Davis.

The dramatic story of Robert Emmet's life and death created a powerful legend. It also gave rise to its own folklore. One play, written at the beginning of the twentieth century, offered a bizarre explanation for why the rebellion failed. In this version a young woman got horribly drunk on the night of 23 July 1803 and made sexual advances on Emmet, who was so disturbed he took out his pistol and shot her dead. As a result, the rising was cancelled.

A few years later a touring acting company staged the trial of Robert Emmet in the Irish provinces. In one town the crowd were particularly nationalist and became increasingly hostile towards the actors who were playing the forces of the crown. As the evening went on the theatre company decided to put their own safety first. When the jury was asked to declare their verdict Robert Emmet was found not guilty.