



Interim Cine Gael treat:  
Tribute to Maureen O'Hara

## Description

# How an Irish lass became a darling of the American silver screen

By Byron Toben

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As WestmountMag regulars well know, I have been a fan of the **Cine Gael Montreal Irish Film Series** for many years.



Photo of Maureen O'Hara from Modern Screen magazine – Image: Public Domain

Founded in 1992, it is approaching its 30th anniversary. Unlike other film festivals, which range from 3 to 10 consecutive days, it is spread out weekly over several months, from February to April, with an opening wine and cheese and a closing gala buffet. The nine or so films included are not limited to those made in Ireland but also those featuring Irish actors or directors. In addition, subscribers are usually invited to one or two interim events, usually at Hurley's Irish pub, featuring novelty short films or music.

The 2020 season was curtailed partly through its repertoire with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2021 season managed to proceed entirely online. As I missed the interim special events, I posted on this site my own special. It was the charming 1948 film, [The Luck of the Irish](#), with **Tyrone Power** and **Anne Baxter**. The Cine Gael team is working vigorously to release a 2022 edition.

In the meantime, I am posting another interim event. It is a tribute to the first Irish-born superstar actress, **Maureen O'Hara**. I am predisposed to her as she capped her acting days by owning an airline, which I discovered during my airline trade association days.

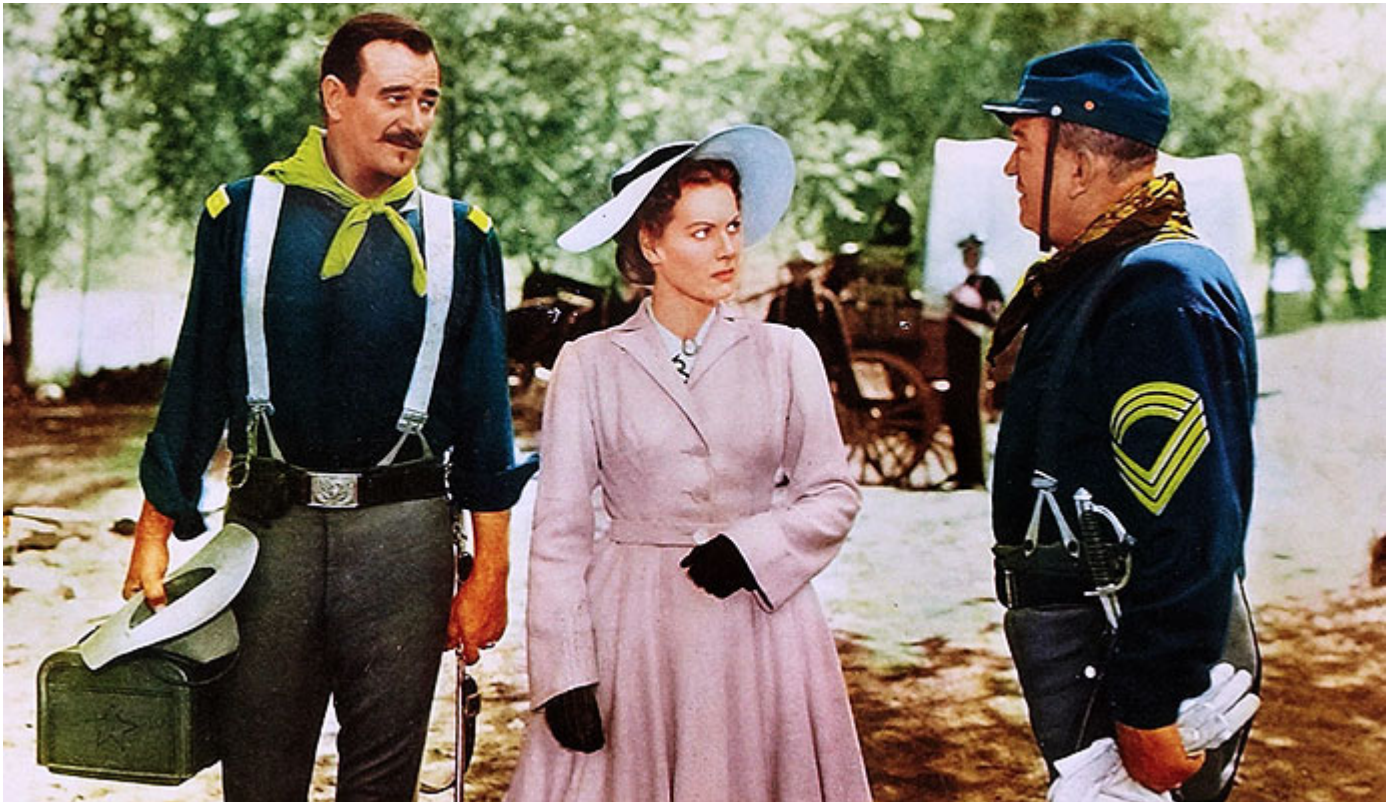
Born in Dublin as Maureen Fitzsimons, she became like **Shirley Temple**, **Ginger Rogers** and **Judy Garland**, a famous child actor. This led her to be "discovered" at age 18 by none other than **Charles Laughton**. He convinced her to change her last name to O'Hara and co-starred with her in her first movie, made in England, **Jamaica Inn** (1939), directed by **Alfred Hitchcock** and based on the Daphne Du Maurier best seller novel. The plot involved an

Irish orphaned Maureen moving to Cornwall to live with her only remaining relative, an aunt married to the owner of an inn.

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Turns out that the inn is the rendezvous for a den of poor thieves who exist by luring ships to the rocky coast by switching light tower beacons to cause wrecks and salvaging the cargo. She rescues a government spy on this practice from hanging by the brigands, and they seek refuge from the local rich guy (Laughton), who turns out to be in cahoots with the brigands.

Laughton, lured to the USA, brings her along and she starts an enviable career including *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) about Welsh coal miners, pirate and cowboy films leading to her being dubbed “The Queen of Technicolor,” the Christmas classic *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) with **John Payne** and **Edmond Gwenn** and, of course, *The Quiet Man* (1952) with **John Wayne**.



Maureen O'Hara with John Wayne in Rio Grande – Image: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

While she never won an individual award from the **Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences**, in 2014, she was granted a **Lifetime Achievement Award** by that body. She was also the subject of many TV interviews such as a 2000 Larry King chat and a 1957 *This is Your Life* surprise episode.

In 1973, she managed her husband's Caribbean Antilles Airboats airline and inherited it when he died in a crash in



1978. She passed away at 95 in 2015 and is buried next to that husband, a retired air force general, in Arlington National Park.

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Most of her older movies can be seen for free on the internet. Among the other leading actors paired with her on-screen, besides the aforementioned, were **Errol Flynn, Henry Fonda, James Garfield, Robert Newton, Walter Pidgeon, Tyrone Power, Anthony Quinn** and **Jimmy Stewart**.

Her autobiography, ***Tis Herself***, was published in 2004. That same year, she was honoured with a **Lifetime Achievement Award** from the **Irish Film and Television Academy** in her native Dublin. Here is a video from that ceremony.

*Feature image: The Black Swan with Tyrone Power and Maureen O'Hara, Public Domain*

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**Byron Toben**, a past president of *The Montreal Press Club*, has been *WestmountMag.ca*'s theatre reviewer since July 2015. Previously, he wrote for since terminated web sites *Rover Arts* and *Charlebois Post*, print weekly *The Downtowner* and print monthly *The Senior Times*. He also is an expert consultant on U.S. work permits for Canadians.

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