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New World Irish

*Notes on One Hundred Years
of Lives and Letters in American
Culture*

Jack Morgan

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NEW WORLD IRISH

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COVER: This Celtic cross, in the cemetery at Funks Grove, Illinois, was erected—and dedicated in April of 2000—by the McLean Illinois Historical Society. The monument was raised to honor the memory of some fifty Irish-immigrant railroad workers buried in a common grave there in the 1850s. Regarding the Irish laborers constructing the Alton & Sangamon Railroad line in those years, the memorial plaque, inscribed in Irish and English, notes: "Their sacrifices opened central Illinois and made it possible to develop the riches of the land we share today."

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*To Deborah McWilliams,
and to Maureen and Kevin—
the last of the Mohicans*

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My mother had been buying an encyclopedia called The Wonderland of Knowledge...Every week there was a coupon in The New York Post; for the coupon and a dime the newspaper sent us a volume. We would soon have them all, and they were truly wonderful. My mother found the right volume and turned to some maps and showed us where Ireland was....

—PETE HAMILL

Clairvoyant Ireland
Eras and eras encircled by sea
The barrows of my ancestors have spilled their bones
Across the singing ear in hear of shell....

—SUSAN HOWE

In the state of the Bronx...I learned that inescapable Ireland was of course...a state of grace or drift of mind or music heard or something felt...What a noble commonwealth such a state is, how I exulted when I heard it was a “state of mind,” safe from England and poverty. Why had they come? How could they leave the small truth, that accurate island.

—ROBERT KELLY

Preface

Ireland in the American Grain

& hear the creek
of a ghostly fiddle
filter through
American earth

—John Montague

“The American Grain” here refers to the grain as in wood grain; the phrase is drawn, of course, from the title of William Carlos Williams’s classic *In the American Grain*. Like those in Williams’s book, the chapters that follow here may be read as individual case studies, but they were written with a single volume in mind and thus are interactive and serve to contextualize one another. There have been by now generations of fine scholarship on Irish America resulting in numerous thesis-informed monographs. I have chosen rather to work in the essay form because of the freedom it offers to walk about, as it were, to note and investigate—something especially appropriate to the narrative of the Irish in America, which still remains to be filled out and which is so disparate and resistant to a single, overarching apprehension. The quasi-independent essay approach as well offers the advantage of finding and interrogating neglected, ignored, and even uncanny material, fitting it into the established Irish American discourse—that at least has been my ambition.

This book draws upon roughly a one-hundred-year arc of the New World Irish narrative, but of course makes no attempt to be anything like exhaustive—Protestant Irish immigration, and Irish immigration to Canada, for example, are barely referenced. Especially sought out, and especially with regard to the nineteenth century, have been the rather considerable, underreferenced materials, often positive in nature, found in accounts of and responses to Irish immigration by “host culture” writers—observers not themselves Irish or Irish American—Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Phillips, Margaret Fuller, Mark Twain, Harold Frederic, Sarah Orne Jewett, Walt Whitman, and others. So while prevalently Irish American, these chapters are as well Irish/American, the

slash implying something different—Irish and American interinvolvement, something not always equivalent to the term “Irish American” as the latter is normally employed. Books such as Rosemary Mahoney’s *Whoredom in Kimmage*, Thomas Lynch’s *Booking Passage*, Nicholas Grene’s *Nothing Like it*, or, here, Murial Rukeyser’s *The Orgy* would exemplify another aspect of this interinvolvement, being accounts of American ventures into the land and culture of Ireland.

* * *

The opening lines of *Finnegans Wake* refer to commodious recirculation, the American Irish exchange, the coming-back-around of myth and story to Ireland “from North Armorica.” The title of Joyce’s book itself comes from a song of American Irish origin bearing the tale of the hod-carrier Finnegan’s “great fall of the offwall” (Colum, *Treasury* 611). When in 1887 Yeats dreamt of starting a school of Irish poetry, Eamon Grennan has noted, he would reveal to an anonymous correspondent his belief that Whitman was “the greatest teacher of these decades.” A teacher of cultural nationalism, Grennan observes, Whitman, with his un-British, American voice, was for Yeats a “literary Parnell” (30). And such literary interconnections have continued. *The New Yorker* Magazine, for example, as Maureen Kennelly points out in a recent *Irish Times* article, has had a remarkable impact on the Irish short story and its standing in the world of literature. From the 1950s to the present Irish writers have appeared in that magazine’s prestigious and lucrative pages—Frank O’Connor, Mary Lavin, Benedict Kiely, William Trevor, Brian Friel, and Edna O’Brien, for instance, and more recently Colm Toibín, Roddy Doyle, and Claire Keegan. Kennelly notes that Brian Friel once remarked that, financially, if it were not for *The New Yorker*, he couldn’t live (12).

This study, however, considers expressions of commodious circulation mainly in their Ireland-to-America aspects. An Irish orientation in America had already taken hold when in the 1840s and 1850s Whitman witnessed the influx of Irish exiles, America’s ur-immigrant group, to Manhattan and Brooklyn optimistically, addressing Ireland, the old woman of tradition, merging myths of the New World and the maternal Island:

Yet a word, ancient mother,
 You need crouch there no longer on the cold ground

 Even while you wept there by your fallen harp, by the grave,
 What you wept for was translated, pass’d from the grave,

The winds favor'd and the sea sail'd it,
 And now with rosy and new blood,
 Moves today in a new country. (388)

By 1910, Francis O'Neill, immigrant from Cork and reknowned Irish musicologist, was observing that: "More and better Irish music can be heard in dozens of American cities than in Cork or even in Dublin" (58). Irish American interest in Irish traditional music in turn helped reinvigorate interest in it in Ireland, and in the 1950s Bob Dylan, in New York, was influenced by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem—the commodious circulation ongoing.

Like most recent literary work in the area, however, the present book might be characterized as Irish American elegy in good part, as perhaps post-Irish American. The Irishness of Irish America understandably started to fade, certainly after a century or so, but so has Irish American identity as a thing in itself faded and in the maw of American mass culture may soon be, to quote Edward Hagan, "warped beyond recognition" (6). The sense of separation from Ireland has lately been accelerated thanks to the Ireland's becoming, however problematically, a Euro-zone player, the suburbanization of Irish America, the distress of Catholicism, and other trajectories, not the least of which are the contemporary revisionist critiques bent on putting the lie to the "Irish mystique" entirely and focusing on "the debilitating effects of traditional [Irish] self-representations." DeValera's Ireland, with its remnants of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, appears to have been replaced by the cynical ideology of a multinational, technological culture. *The Iceman Cometh*, with its ardently demythologizing Hickey bringing gloom to a Greenwich Village saloon, is proving a prescient, symbolic Irish text in the light of the academic parsing of "Irishness" begun in the 1980s and 1990s. As Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran observe, "with its surplus of mythical resources, with a tradition that grants superior status to the word, Ireland has proved an irresistible site and text for deconstructionists and hyper-realists. They have outdone one another in trying to demonstrate that the country does not exist: that it is a figment of the British imagination..." (1).

Ireland, that is, is portrayed as the invention of the Ascendancy, and Yeats, et al., as purveyors of a bogus poetic project rather than as, more complexly, the creators of an oppositional discourse to the prevailing positivism of their day (Witoszek and Sheeran 72). Stateside, another form of demythologization has occurred. In Michael Stephens's *The Brooklyn Book of the Dead*, Leland Coole stipulates that he wants to be waked in the old urban neighborhood and in the bars beneath the

Brooklyn El, forgetting that this remembered world is long gone and “boarded up” (Stevens 1). That phrase is in fact broadly apt as old neighborhood Irish America and all the ethnic and interethnic life it afforded is now, either metaphorically or literally that—boarded up. Lawrence McCaffrey, among many others, has noted that the migration from the old Irish American city culture to the suburbs has shattered Irish American cultural cohesion and turned out—like Hickey’s counsel to his bar cohorts one would note—to trace a journey “from someplace to no place” (*Diaspora* 169). Irish American identity was for some time deeply invested in the Catholic city parish and parish schools. Never mind the more recent sordid calamity that has befallen that investment; James T. Fisher, writing of the guitar mass decade, penned perhaps the classic sentence regarding American Catholicism already unhinged: “Several of the nuns who taught in my junior high school took flight without even returning our homework” (610).

Irish American culture traditionally nurtured a legacy of memories from an older, long-colonized country that was a less staid and stable place than Irish American memory would have it. This is one of many factors that have made Irish American self-definition in turn problematical. Witness the controversy in which the 1996 exhibit “Gaelic Gotham,” which I attended at the Museum of the City of New York, became embroiled. The American Fenian movement, for instance, which, as Thomas N. Brown observes, “reveals American Irish nationalism in its finest flowering, and full ambiguity,” was hardly touched upon there (41). Criticism of the New York exhibit in general made clear that there was scant agreement as to how the nature and history of Irish American culture, even within the limited parameters of a single major American city, might be conceived.¹ Further typical of the varieties and conflicts of Irish American identity, Mary Gordon, writing as an Easterner to whom even Chicago Irish Catholics are a different breed, notes: “Chicago is a thousand miles west of New York, a thousand miles farther from Rome. It opens out onto those large, incomprehensible prairies settled by people without much Irish or Italian blood” (89). Her analysis may be a little tongue-in-cheek, but I would have to confess as an erstwhile Easterner that it was once somewhat my impression as well. Historian and Chicagoan McCaffrey, on the other hand, characterizes the Midwest Irish as having been more in touch with general American culture, having broader perspectives than the Irish on the Atlantic seaboard. Eastern Irish Americans, he argues, “continued to exhibit paranoia while their counterparts on the urban frontier were growing comfortably with their cities” (*Textures* 31).

Michael Harrington suggests something similar to McCaffrey's perception when he describes the St. Louis Irish American context as very different from the more insular ethnicity he discovered when he went east to college at Holy Cross:

St. Louis had been founded by French Catholics. The white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were, therefore, somewhat arriviste, and the old Catholic Cathedral down by the levee had greater status and historical importance than any Episcopalian house of worship. Since we shared a religion with the aristocracy of the city... I was welcome at the larger debutante balls as a son of the middle class even though I was only two generations removed from steerage. And we did not necessarily cluster in neighborhoods. On the most important street of my youth there were more Jews than Irish. (6)

* * *

In his story "The Year 1912," written in Irish, Mairtin Ó Cadhain describes the intersection of the Irish and American imaginations from the farther shore as a girl prepares to leave the west of Ireland for the United States, having recently purchased that iconic item specific to the journey, the American trunk:

She had been nurtured on American lore from infancy. South Boston, Norwood, Butte Montana, Minnesota, California, plucked cords in her imagination more distinctly than did Dublin, Belfast, Wexford... Life and her ideas of it had been shaped and defined by the fame of America, the wealth of America, the amusements of America, the agonized longing to go to America... and though she was lonesome now at leaving home it was lonesomeness shot through and through with hope, delight and wonder... She let herself be led out to dance on the stone floor, dressed as she was for America. (33)

The United States represented this bright possibility for the Irish, perhaps especially so for Irish women. As [chapter five](#) here notes, though, once immigrants settled in America, however comfortably, Ireland in retrospect often filled their imaginations, and they often conveyed that remembered Ireland to Americans—Irish Americans or not.

The Irish domestics in Sarah Orne Jewett's house regaled the Jewett daughters with glowing tales of Ireland. The Irish in Utica, New York, meanwhile turned the novelist Harold Frederic into an incurable Hibernophile. Something similar happened later to Betty Smith growing up in Irish Brooklyn. Though the daughter of German parents, she wrote very well about urban Irish America. She is famous for *A Tree*

Grows in Brooklyn, but her quite remarkable, however peculiar, novel *Maggie Now* (1958) has never been extended the attention it deserves. The Mexican American writer Richard Rodriguez, for another example, provides a glimpse of his education in Sacramento, California, under the influence of Irish-born nuns who served as a link between Mexico and America—"between my father's dark Latin skepticism and the native cherry tree of Protestant imagining...After the 'Morning Offering' and 'The Pledge of Allegiance,' our young hearts were plunged in the cold bath of Ireland...Our gallery, our history, our geography was Ireland...Earth was Ireland and heaven was Ireland (221)."

There has been a considerable literary preoccupation with Ireland on the part of other non-Irish American writers as well. When Ernest Hemingway composed a list of books he would rather read again for the first time than have a million-dollar annual income, it included a remarkable five Irish works (e.g., as against four American): *Dubliners*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, Yeats's *Autobiographies*, and George Moore's *Hail and Farewell* (Baker 175–76). He had obliquely expressed his admiration for Moore's skill in the art of literary anecdote in *Green Hills of Africa*, and Moore's hard-edged memoirs no doubt were an influence on Hemingway's own eventual venture into that genre, *A Movable Feast* (*Green Hills* 196). Interrogating the roots of imagination, Wallace Stevens wrote of archetypal Irish landscapes. "Shadows like winds," he writes, "go back to a parent before thought, before speech, / At the head of the past. / They go to the cliffs of Moher rising out of the mist..." (501–502). And Jack Kerouac writes of his time as a merchant sailor in *Vanity of Duluo*: "and the ships come into a bright part of sea...on the right flat green meadows of Ireland itself with thatched huts and cows...I stood there crying, my eyes were pouring tears, I said to myself, 'Ireland, can it be? James Joyce's country'" (173).

I am writing this preface in Missouri where the previously mentioned Captain Francis O'Neill, renowned collector of Irish music in America, taught school in Knox County in 1868–69 after leaving Ireland and being shipwrecked as a sailor in the Pacific. He later settled in Chicago where he eventually became police superintendent. In his *Irish Folk Music* he provides a vivid description of the traditional music activity in northeast Missouri in the late nineteenth century:

Except two tunes...picked up in the San Joaquin Valley, California, in my nineteenth year, no Irish music was added to my repertory until I became a school teacher in Edina, Knox County, Missouri...Mr.

Broderick, the school director with whom I boarded at Edina, was a native of Galway and a fine performer on the flute. Not a week passed during the winter months without a dance or two being held among the farmers. Such a motley crowd—fiddlers galore, and each with his instrument. Irish, Germans, French...and never a misunderstanding or display of ill-nature marred those gatherings. (16–17)

Michael Donaghy, in his poem “A Reprieve,” describes an intimidating O’Neill later as a police captain, making an Irish fiddler-prisoner in a Chicago jail cell come forth with tunes he can transcribe:

Five thousand miles away Connaught sleeps.
The coast lights dwindle out along the west.
But there’s music here in this lamplit cell,
and O’Neill scratching in his manuscript like a monk
at his illuminations... (85)

Many writers and scholars since have shared Captain O’Neill’s rigorous devotion to writing critical things down, keeping the record. In the field of music specifically, Mick Moloney, for example, has carried on the tradition. When I had occasion to read-reread recently, in two weeks’ time, two Maureen Howard novels, Neal Shine’s *Life with Mae: A Detroit Family Memoir* (2007), Ron Ebest’s *Private Histories* (2005), James Rogers and Matthew J. O’Brien’s collection *After the Flood* (2009), and Maureen Waters’s *Crossing Highbridge: A Memoir of Irish-America* (2001), it occurred to me how rich and remarkable the Irish American written witness, once meager, has become. Irish immigrants to America over the decades have in the end been well served in literature by their descendants and other American observers—probably better than have immigrants of any other ethnicity. The narrative of the Irish exodus to North America and the developments following have been faithfully recorded by writers such as Thomas N. Brown, Kerby Miller, Charles Fanning, and numerous others who, not unlike Francis O’Neill, have labored assiduously, like monks at their illuminations, with a determination that important things not be lost. Sometimes along the way the record has been poetically rendered, the diasporic sensibility, migration and memory, coming through by typically Irish indirection. I think that is the case in Padraic Colum’s “A Drover,” though America is not directly referred to in the poem. Colum himself was an émigré who lived most of his life in the United States and died there. The drover speaks to his cattle as they travel away from

their home landscape to better grazing. He movingly addresses what was for a long time the American Irish exile's drift of mind—their devotion to the remembered Zion, however bleak, despite Babylon's comparative abundance:

I will bring you, my kine,
Where there's grass to the knee,
But you'll think of scant croppings
Harsh with salt of the sea. (*Selected* 24–25)

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