Ireland and Irish America
Ireland and Irish America
Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration

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Field Day Files 3

Series Editors: Seamus Deane and Breandán Mac Suibhne

Field Day Publications
Dublin, 2008
For Cara —
darling daughter —
who deserves a book of her own.

And in tribute
to the Whiteboys,
the Steelboys,
and others who strove with gods
against their world’s destruction.
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Acknowledgements

The research, initial writing, and revisions of the essays in this book have incurred many debts, over many years, that I am very glad to acknowledge. Perhaps the most important are to Arnold Schrier, who kindly gave me access to his pioneering discoveries of Irish immigrants’ letters; to David N. Doyle, Ireland’s premier scholar of the Irish in North America, who has generously shared with me his vast knowledge of that subject; and to Bruce D. Boling, whose reflections on Irish culture and language, and whose eloquent translations from Irish, have informed and adorned my work. Scarcely less valuable have been the aid and advice provided by Kenneth M. Stampp, who inadvertently turned my doctoral research in Irish directions, and by a host of other friends and colleagues, including: the late Thomas B. Alexander, Malcolm Campbell, Marion Casey, the late Dennis Clark, the late Patrick J. Dowling, David Emmons, David Fitzpatrick, Peter Gilmore, the late E. R. R. Green, Patrick Griffin, Patricia Kelleher, Carla King, Ted Koditschek, Joe Lee, Dale Light, Peggy Lynch-Brennan, Steve and Beth Ruffin MacIntyre, Breandán Mac Suibhne, Tim Meagher, Michael Montgomery, Gerry Moran, Cormac Ó Gráda, Trevor Parkhill, Linda Reeder, Bob Scally, the late William V. Shannon, Peter Toner, Vic Walsh, Kevin Whelan, and David Wilson. Special thanks must go to: Jim Donnelly and David W. Miller, who have provided advice and support since the early 1970s; to Liam Kennedy, my long-time friend and collaborator on many scholarly projects; and to my former colleague, Michael Thorn, who taught me how to think critically about Irish history and everything else. Of course, none of these individuals is in any way responsible for the accuracy or the interpretations of the material in these chapters. Indeed, on many issues, some of these historians and I have profound disagreements; yet, in the rancorous worlds of Irish and Irish diasporan scholarship, it is gratifying that we have shared our discoveries and opinions with mutual respect and (I hope) mutual enrichment.
I also wish to thank Seamus Deane and Breandán Mac Suibhne, for inviting me to publish my essays with Field Day. I am grateful as well to the editors of many academic journals and book publishers, detailed in the first citation to each chapter, for granting Field Day permission to republish my essays, as revised, in this volume. A heartfelt thanks also to the hundreds of people, on both sides of the ocean, who over the past thirty-five years have patiently guided my quests for Irish immigrants’ letters, memoirs, and similar documents in their libraries and archives, or who kindly granted me access to the privately held manuscripts written by or to their own immigrant ancestors; some of these donors, too, are mentioned in the citations to the chapters in this work.

In addition, I gratefully acknowledge the support of many institutions and funding agencies that have made my scholarship possible, including: the Research Council of the University of Missouri-Columbia, the Weldon Spring Foundation and the Research Board of the University of Missouri system, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, the Irish American Cultural Institute, the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame, the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, the Huntington Library, the Ford Foundation, the Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Foundation, the American Irish Foundation, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Institute of Irish Studies at the Queen’s University of Belfast.

For their unfailing assistance and patience, my sincere thanks as well to the current and former members of the staffs of the Missouri State Historical Society and of the University of Missouri’s History Department and Ellis Library — especially of the latter’s inter-library borrowing service. I am grateful also to Hilary Bell and Ciarán Deane, both in Ireland, who respectively copy-edited the text and worked on the page-proofs of this book manuscript, and to Autumn Dolan, of the University of Missouri’s history graduate programme, who created the index.

Finally, I can never express sufficient gratitude to my beautiful wife Patricia and to our three wonderful children — Eoghan, Michael, and Cara — for all the years of love and support.
Introduction

For more than thirty-five years, I have studied the histories of modern Ireland, of Irish emigration, and of the Irish in America. I am often asked, Why? — particularly since neither my own ethno-religious background nor even my graduate training in history holds any clues to explain my scholarship’s trajectory. One response seems obvious. Between the early 1600s and the early 1900s, Irish emigration comprised one of the largest global movements of men and women in modern times, one that had profound effects on the histories, societies, and political cultures of Ireland and the United States alike. A second, broader answer is that the importance of past Irish migrations is further magnified in view of the enormous contemporary rural-to-urban migrations from and within the so-called ‘developing world’. Like Irish migrations in previous centuries, those today are driven and shaped by the march of imperial capitalism, by its socio-economic, cultural, and political systems, processes, and consequences. Put starkly, from Elizabethan Munster to ‘Black ’47’, to Fallujah and post-Katrina New Orleans, ‘accumulation by dispossession’ is the iron thread that weaves Ireland’s past and the global present into a seamless and often bloody tapestry.¹ The accumulated, accelerating result is that we now inhabit a ‘planet of slums’ and of refugees from imperial-capitalist ‘re-structurings’² — a world ravaged by armed and unfettered greed and corruption, poised on the edge of ecological catastrophe. Thus, a final response is that to me resistance to those systems, processes, and consequences, to their tyrannies and inequities, seems both necessary and desirable. And, however inadequately or transiently, in both the distant and recent pasts the Irish — sometimes Protestants as well as Catholics — were often in the forefront of such resistance, at home and

¹ David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (London, 2006), 43; also see his *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, 2003), esp. ch. 4.
² Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York, 2006).
abroad. Arguably, their country’s history had left many of them with little to lose. More important, it had prepared them to recognize all too clearly, as one Irish Protestant put it, that ‘the rich always betray the poor’, and, in the words of a Catholic contemporary, that ‘society’ was in essence ‘a combination of those who have against those who have not’. Indeed, as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn once posited, an Irish or an Irish-immigrant heritage should always have been excellent preparation for militant radicalism, for ‘[w]hen one understood British imperialism, it was an open window to all imperialism’.

Of course, human limitations, the cultural and psychological effects of colonialism, and the exigencies of emigration ensured that many Irish ‘understood’ but darkly, and others not at all. In recent years, moreover, most writers about Irish history and migration have sought to keep that ‘window’ of insight and empathy tightly closed — or to deny its very existence — cloaking such subjects in the allegedly neutral ‘inevitabilities’ of ‘progress’, ‘market forces’, or ‘legitimate national interests’ and ‘security’. My own writings, by contrast, are attuned to the essentially political contexts that shaped Irish (and other) mass migrations: to the structures and consequences — and to the horrors and humiliations — of old and new forms of imperial power; and also to the ‘accommodations’ that most ordinary people were obliged or ‘encouraged’ to make within those structures. My work is likewise sensitive to the conflicting class and cultural forces, structurally conditioned but arising from within Irish and Irish-American societies, that sometimes prompted but also circumscribed the forms and outcomes of Irish resistance — in the process often warping Flynn’s ‘window’ into a mirror of narcissistic or even paralysing illusions.

When I began my research, I turned for evidence of Irish emigrants’ experiences and attitudes to their personal letters, memoirs, and similar documents — initially to collections in Irish and North American archives, then to those still in private hands. Among these I found rich and largely untapped information on the causes, methods, and tangible results of Irish migration, and, equally important, on the perceptions of the emigrants, and their Irish correspondents, regarding their homeland, departures, and lives overseas. Both the continuities and the discrepancies between the attitudes expressed by the emigrants, and the Irish and Irish-American ‘public’ interpretations of emigration, led me to examine more closely the social, cultural, and political systems that had generated such oft-contradictory views. Likewise, the similarities and differences among the accounts written by Irish emigrants of varying regional, social, religious, and cultural backgrounds, prompted still deeper investigations into Irish and

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3 Henry Joy McCracken (1767–98), leader of the United Irishmen at the battle of Antrim, executed thereafter; see Mary McNeill’s *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken, 1770–1866: A Belfast Panorama* (Dublin, 1960); and A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Summer Soldiers: The 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down* (Belfast, 1995), quotation on p. 239.

4 Theobald McKenna (d. 1808), cited in David N. Doyle, *Ireland, Irishmen and Revolutionary America, 1760–1820* (Dublin, 1981), 168. McKenna was an aristocratic conservative, not a revolutionary like McCracken; nevertheless, what Doyle calls his ‘Hobbesian view’ would have resonated in his lifetime among Catholic Whiteboys and Defenders, and, later, among Fenians.

Irish-American societies. That research uncovered demographic and other data that often qualified or contradicted both scholarly and popular interpretations of Irish and Irish migration history.

The result is a body of work that focuses, in different but complementary ways, on mass migration as the key factor in shaping — and understanding — the histories of modern Ireland and, of course, of Irish America. The essays in this book address both, because mass migration made them inextricable. Likewise, they deal with Irish Protestants as well as Catholics, because Ireland’s conquest and colonization — executed, justified, and often resisted in religious as well as secular frameworks and language — determined that their histories and identities would unfold in dialectical (and oft-malign) relationships, in Ireland and America alike.

This book is divided into three parts, followed by an epilogue. The five chapters in Part I focus primarily on Catholic Ireland: on how its culture’s ‘traditional’ emphases were hammered by conquest and poverty, and later shaped by the needs of its own secular and religious spokesmen, into ideological programmes and imagery that promoted Irish aversion to British rule and to mass migration — yet that also ensured the hegemony of an Irish Catholic ‘establishment’ whose wealth depended on both British capitalism and mass migration. The essays in Part II likewise explore the interplay of culture and class, on both sides of the Atlantic, but principally among Irish Presbyterians and Anglicans. At least implicitly, these chapters challenge the conventional ‘two traditions’ (Protestant versus Catholic) paradigm of Irish and Irish diasporan history, which has underpinned Ireland’s partition and bifurcated the study of the Irish in the US into separate ‘Irish-American’ (Catholic) and ‘Scotch-Irish’ (Protestant) camps. Instead, I contend that Irish Protestant identities were forged, not only in the Protestant-Catholic (colonist-native) dialectic, but by the power relationships within Protestant Irish societies in Ireland and in the US. Finally, the chapters in Part III focus primarily on Irish America (Catholic, as conventionally defined). Paralleling those in Part I, they explore how class and culture, and gender as well, shaped Irish-American society and its political culture, in symbiotic relationships with those both in Ireland and in Protestant Anglo-America.

All chapters are based heavily on Irish emigrants’ transatlantic letters and memoirs: my principal ‘windows’ into the lives and attitudes of the emigrants and their correspondents in Ireland. The essays were produced initially and (with one exception) published between 1980 and 2006: three in 1980–89; seven in 1990–99; and six (including the Epilogue)

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6 For further discussion of this paradigm and its political implications, see the Epilogue of this volume; and also Kerby A. Miller, ‘Ulster Presbyterians and the “Two Traditions” in Ireland and America’, in Terry Brotherstone, Anna Clark, and Kevin Whelan, eds., *These Fissured Isles: Varieties of British and Irish Identities* (Edinburgh, 2005), 260–77; and reprinted in J. J. Lee and Marion R. Casey, eds., *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York, 2006), 255–70. And for a broad critique of this and other paradigms dominant in recent Irish and Irish migration historiography, see: Kerby A. Miller, ‘Re-Imagining Irish Revisionism’, in Andrew Higgins Wyndham, ed., *Re-Imagining Ireland* (Charlottesville, Va., 2006), 223–43.
in 2000–06. Because of that lengthy time span, and their complementary subject matter, all chapters required at least minimal revisions to create a collection that would be coherent and (hopefully) without undue repetitions. Otherwise, however, these essays remain substantially the same as originally written.
I. Culture, Class, and Emigration in Irish Society