Kerby A. Miller

Ireland and Irish America
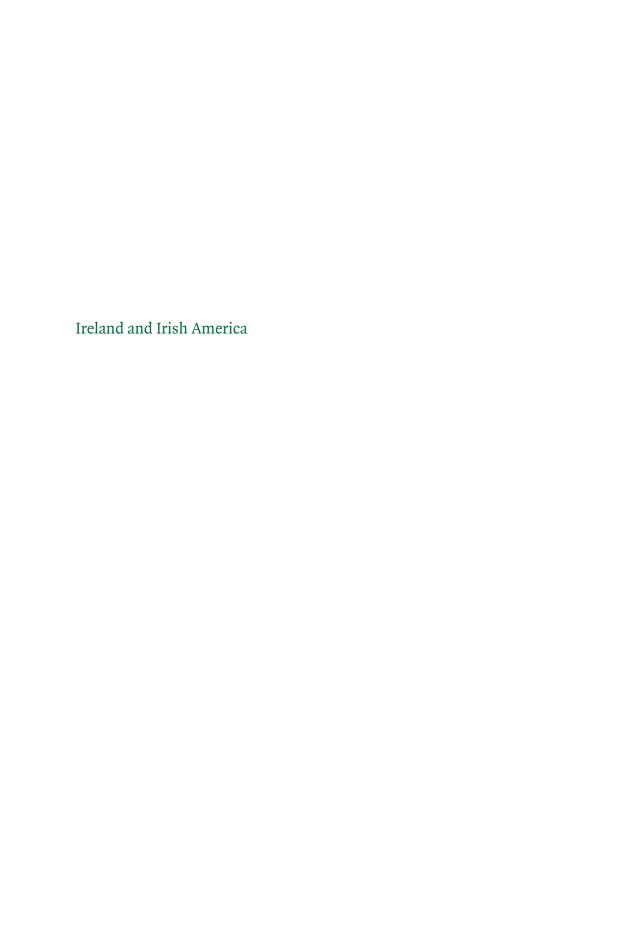
Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration

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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

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

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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',[3] and, in the words of a Catholic contemporary, that 'society' was in essence 'a combination of those who *have* against those who *have not*'.[4] 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'.[5]

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.

5   Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography, My First Life*, rev. edn. (New York, 1973), 35.

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.[6] 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