The Construction of Irish Identity in American Literature

Christopher Dowd

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The Construction of Irish Identity in American Literature

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for Adrienne

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Preface

I was drawn to this project by the gaps I perceived in the current scholarship. While studying the work of American literature scholars, I often noticed a glossing over of Irish ethnicity in discussions of texts with significant Irish characters. Critics would misinterpret or misunderstand the Irish dimensions of the character, sometimes even asserting claims that were factually wrong about Irish Americans. It was obvious to me that taking these works out of an Irish context had often led to bizarre distortions of meaning, as has been the case with interpretations of Huckleberry Finn that cast him as a symbol of Anglo-Protestant normativity. I believed that bringing the insights of Irish Studies to bear on these texts could explain away some of the confusions and cast new light on old topics.

That is not to say that there are not gaps in Irish-American scholarship as well. Though scholars in this field have done an excellent job analyzing the work of American writers of Irish heritage, there has not been nearly enough work that studies the ways in which non-Irish writers influenced, and were influenced by, Irish-American literary production and the ways they participated in the shaping of Irish-American identity. I believed that Irish-American studies could benefit from examining the links between Irish-American texts and the broader canon, and I was interested to see how these linkages might impact conversations about race, ethnicity, and nationalism taking place in other fields of interest.

My goal has been to write a book that falls somewhere in the gap between American and Irish-American scholarship. Although there is some obvious overlap in subject matter between these two areas, they are too often studied in isolation from each other. There has not been as much scholarly interplay between them as there ought to be, and I hope that this book might contribute to resolving that issue.

As colleagues read early drafts of this project, it became clear that writing for these two different scholarly audiences required appealing to readers with different critical contexts. Without a doubt, readers with backgrounds in Irish-American studies will be familiar with writers like Dion Boucicault and James T. Farrell; however, to readers outside the field, these authors might seem more obscure. Similarly, the critical controversy

surrounding T. S. Eliot's racism has been thoroughly debated by critics of American modernism, but might be less familiar to those specializing in Irish-American studies. I have endeavored to make each section of this book accessible to readers no matter what their context might be.

For this project, I have focused on nine authors whose Irish characters seemed to revise popular conceptions of Irish identity in America. The selections I have made are by no means exhaustive, and at certain points I considered several alternate choices (which I hope to revisit in the future). What drew me to specific texts were the characters, not the authors. I wanted to explore several variations on Irish identity, and more often than not, I chose a particular text because the characters offered a way to examine some aspect of that identity that I had not yet considered. Sometimes this methodology afforded me the opportunity to revisit favorite works, but other times it took me into areas I never expected to study in depth. It was a joy to read and write about Mark Twain, but I had never been significantly interested in Margaret Mitchell's work until I began writing this book. Yet, both Huckleberry Finn and Scarlet O'Hara offer unique opportunities for studying the way literature participated in the construction of ethnic identity.

Out of necessity, the scope of this study is limited to the period of massive Irish immigration to the U.S. that began with the arrival of the Famine generation in the mid-nineteenth century and ended around the time of the Great Depression. Yet, there is still much work to be done in understanding Irish-American identity prior to this period and afterwards. In addition, I have limited my focus to Irish Catholic identity and have not addressed in any detail the importance of Scots-Irish characters in American literature. These areas will undoubtedly be fruitful subjects for future research.

Acknowledgments

Mary Burke provided substantial guidance and feedback during the years it took to write this book. She was my first and often most critical reader, and every page of this book is the better for her input. Her friendship and enthusiasm contributed substantially to the enjoyment I had in pursuing this project, for which I thank her.

Clare Eby, Brenda Murphy, Tom Shea, and Donna Hollenberg also read my manuscript and provided valuable feedback. I am also grateful to Greg Semenza, Jerry Phillips, and Liz Hart. They were all supportive of my work and helped shape the methodology and discipline with which I approached this project.

I received financial support for the writing of this book from the Timothy F. Moriarty Irish Literature Fund, the University of Connecticut College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, the University of Connecticut Department of English Graduate Program, and the Missouri Southern State University Faculty Research Fund.

For their research assistance, I would like to thank the Homer Babbidge Library (especially Richard Bleiler); the George A. Spiva Library; the University of South Florida Libraries Special Collection; Special Collections, Templeman Library at the University of Kent, Caterbury (http://library.kent.ac.uk/library/special/html/specoll/theatre.htm); and Spencer Scott, Photographic Unit, Templeman Library.

I am in debt to the colleagues, friends, and students who (whether they know it or not) helped me to stay focused and inspired me to write.

There were several moments where my research for this book overlapped with family history, and I have been grateful for the opportunity to know my family better. I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, Bob and Gail Dowd, for their continued support.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife Adrienne, whose impact upon this project is immeasurable.

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Introduction

The Irish are a persistent presence in American literature during the period that stretches from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. They crowd together below decks in Melville and climb the ship's rigging in Cooper; they promote temperance in Whitman, but drink themselves to death in Twain; in James they build shanties along New York's East River and in Crane they work the streets and run frontier hotels; they are among the Southerners in Faulkner, as well as the pioneers in Cather; they entertain high-society crowds in Wharton and privately pray for forgiveness in O'Connor; they go to war in Fitzgerald and plot murder in Eliot; in Steinbeck they lose their fortunes and in O'Neill they lose their sanity. Occasionally, the Irish feature prominently in these works; often, they lurk in the background. Yet, if we are to believe some of the more cursory literary histories, it would appear that, despite this abundance, Irish Americans only exist as two types of character: the lace-curtain social climber and the romantic street tough. This is gross oversimplification. There is more to the Irish in American literature than a mere collection of Teagues and Paddys.

The history of Irish characters in American literature involves much more than a simple parade of stereotypes, and in fact, it complicates the very concept of ethnic stereotype. Though many writers resorted to exploiting the clichés of the drunk thug, the corrupt politician, and the blarney-spouting policeman, there also is a significant heritage of Irish-American characterization that problematizes, defies, or re-appropriates the stereotype for new, often subversive, ends. In order to fully appreciate the dimensions of Irish identity in American literature, we must consider the characters with complex, even problematic, claims to that identity. It is not enough to look for simple patterns that confirm supposed ethnic truisms (either positive or negative); rather, we need to explore the discrepancies within, and the liminality of, Irishness during this pivotal period in U.S. history. Irishness is not and never has been a stable cultural concept in America, despite the supposedly essential and timeless implications of the ethnic stereotype. By studying the literary representations of Irish-American characters, we can witness just how dynamic and responsive Irishness has been to its shifting political and cultural contexts.

The following four chapters put forth an argument for reconsidering the presence of the Irish in the American literary imagination. I hope to lay out a model that will open up scholarly exploration of material that is far more dynamic, diverse, and integral to our understanding of our nation's literature than has been previously thought. I want to revisit familiar territory to uncover the oft overlooked imprint left behind by Irish-American characters, as well as explore new ground where the literary imaginings of ethnic others shifted popular consciousness. By illuminating the imaginative uses that writers found for the Irish-American character, I intend to trace an ethnic narrative from its inception through its maturation and show how it became the prime model for nearly all subsequent ethnic narratives in the U.S.

I am interested in the way that writers of various backgrounds and heritages used Irish-American characters as metaphoric figurations of persistent national anxieties in order to ignite debate on the most immediate social, cultural, political, and religious issues of the day. Often, literary representations of civility, faith, whiteness, patriotism, purity, personal success, family unity, economic prosperity, and moral righteousness all depended on the presence of an Irish-American character who embodied none of these qualities. This character came equipped with ready-made popular associations that made it the ideal shorthand for representations of the unwanted, the outcast, and the vulgar.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American writers developed a habit of talking about social and cultural deviancy through the metaphorical presence of the Irish. By casting the Irish-American character as perpetually unfit, writers developed a literary device for contemplating destabilizing urges within society and centrifugal pressures toward chaos and savagery. The Irish-American character offered a unique way to personify a whole host of public fears in the body of one person. Through literary constructions of Irishness, writers could discuss political corruption, theories of criminality, threats to public health, challenges to social welfare, the issue of temperance, labor unrest, and the decline of domestic manners and morality. Writers engendered in the character a subtle, but substantial, threat. The Irish existed at the threshold of American identity, and the antidote to this threat required the shoring up of the national identity along ethnic boundaries.

Irishness became a literary figuration of something at once familiar, but at the same time foreign; it became a symbol of essential difference. Ralph Ellison started a line of analysis in 1970 that scholars of African-American literature continue to develop.[1] Ellison wrote that white American authors often "seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the 'outsider'" ("What America"). A similar phenomenon can be seen in literature that makes use of an Irish-American presence, with one significant difference. The Irish-American character was never imagined to be the opposite of the white

ideal the way the African-American character was; Irishness was not a "shadow" of white Americanness. Instead, the Irish-American character was imagined as a deviation or perversion of the Anglo-American, made all the more monstrous and threatening by its similarities to the mainstream population. It helped define the limits of the American community, not by counterpoint, but by nuance. The Irish-American character showed exactly where an individual crossed the line from white normativity into deviant otherness, from the status of insider into the realm of the outsider. More so than any other ethnic identity in America, the Irish were monstrous doppelgangers for the dominant Anglo-Saxon population because they could almost pass as mainstream Americans despite what was believed to be their fundamental deficiencies.

My project emerges from a need to make literary Irishness less invisible and a desire to understand how it became invisible in the first place. The following pages seek to explain where the Irish-American character came from, how it developed in the nineteenth century, what it became in the twentieth century, and why it remains, even now in the twenty-first century, a profound signifying presence in our popular imaginings.

Literary accounts of the arrival and integration of the Irish into American culture comprise a quintessentially American narrative. These are stories about how ethnic outsiders become cultural insiders. They are stories of transformation in which immigrant loyalty, communal allegiance, poverty, and ethnic bias are not obstacles to success, but rather tools for Americanization. An understanding of the Irish-American character in literature is important because it reveals an evolving understanding of the nature of ethnic identity in an increasingly modern and nationalist American context.

Stories about the Irish in America exemplify some of the earliest and most substantial discussions about ethnic immigrant identity in American culture. Being the first and largest ethnic community to migrate to the U.S. during the immigration boom that began in the nineteenth century, the Irish became touchstones against which the success and failure of future immigrant groups were measured, and similarly, Irish-American stories came to serve as templates for other ethnic narratives. Irish-American writers pioneered methods of ethnic self-representation and stereotype subversion; they learned to write simultaneously for sympathetic and hostile readers; they established rhetorical strategies to subvert social and political expectations; they found ways to criticize their community without undermining it; they demonstrated how to use ethnic identity as an organizing principle for a novel or play; and perhaps most importantly, they revealed how ethnic material could be both artistically and commercially appealing to a broad segment of the population. One of the interesting things about these stories is just how familiar they have become due to their influence on generations of immigrant writing and public discourse about ethnic others. It is hard not to see connections between early Irish-American

writers and contemporary Asian-American and Latino-American authors, for instance; or to not recognize very familiar rhetoric in recent debates about illegal immigration, including accusations of biological and sociological contamination almost identical to nativist attacks on the Irish over a century ago.

In contemporary American society, Irishness has been largely absorbed into a homogenous white culture, so much so that many Irish Americans would be surprised at the degree to which their ethnicity would have served as a badge of difference a century ago. For many, it is hard to imagine that the Irish were once considered non-white and a threat to the nation's security, health, and economy. Similarly, Irishness has become a largely invisible ethnicity to many modern literary critics due to the almost complete assimilation of the Irish into mainstream American culture in the twentieth century. Too many critics simply do not see Irishness or do not think it relevant. As a result, many Irish-American characters have been de-ethnicized in the critical literature of the past century. Yet, when read within the contexts of their era and conditions of creation, the Irishness of many of these characters emerges as an integral part of the story. Acknowledging the Irishness of such quintessentially American characters as Huckleberry Finn and Scarlett O'Hara challenges some long-held presuppositions and allows for a deeper understanding of the literature and the culture that produced it. I hope to show that such a project is possible and necessary.

This study is not a history of Irish Americans, nor is it a description of the realities of their lives. Instead, I offer an exploration of the dynamic ways in which Irishness was popularly conceived in an American context and show how imagined ethnicity had a direct and immediate impact on the American nation. The process of ethnic identification was—and continues to be—a fundamental aspect of American identity. Examining how writers popularly constructed Irish-American ethnicity through literature reveals the mechanisms by which ethnic groups impact the formation of national communities.

Previous critical work on Irish-American literature has generally fallen into two categories: taxonomies of Irishness or histories of Irish-American writers. I believe the former approach to be minimally useful and even in some cases significantly flawed. Too often these studies function like bird-spotting guides, offering us the opportunity to go out into American literature and identify the various types of Irishmen, but not providing any real understanding of the significance of these types or how they function in a broader cultural context. At best, the taxonomical approach offers some rudimentary framework for understanding ethnic categories, but too often it makes claims to "authentic" ethnicity, which actually reinforces the basis of racial and ethnic stereotyping. The latter approach, which focuses on the lives and works of Irish-American writers, is important, but only provides half of the picture. These studies only show how the Irish perceived themselves, not how others perceived them. To understand the construction

of Irish identity in America, we need to consider a broader sampling of authors which includes those who have no Irish heritage.

The most significant study of Irish-American literature remains Charles Fanning's *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction* (1990). Fanning's study is by far the most comprehensive and wide-ranging, and is notable for renewing interest in writers like Finley Peter Dunne and James T. Farrell. In his work, Fanning establishes a framework for understanding and appreciating Irish-American fiction in its historical context and marks out those texts that defined certain eras of cultural change. Several literary studies of the past decade have built on Fanning's work, including Ron Ebest's *Private Histories: The Writing of Irish Americans, 1900–1935* (2005), Margaret Hallissy's *Reading Irish-American Fiction: The Hyphenated Self* (2006), and Daniel J. Casey and Robert E. Rhodes' "The Tradition of Irish-American Writers" (2007).

Fanning's work emphasizes what makes Irish-American fiction "uniquely American literature" (1). As he focuses on writers from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, he repeatedly shows how issues of alienation and assimilation provided these writers with their subject matter. Irish-American fiction has been fiction about a transplanted people, a struggling minority, an enduring ethnic population, and an assimilative success. In this sense, it has been quintessentially American and predictive of other ethnic literatures. In the following chapters, I extend Fanning's line of inquiry by considering the uniquely American aspects of the Irish-American story as told by a lineage of writers that includes numerous non-Irish writers in addition to well-known Irish-American authors.

Fanning states at the outset of his study that he is only interested in "Irish-American prose fiction" and that Irish-American poetry and drama fall outside the scope of his study (1). Irish-American poetry remains relatively understudied, though Irish-American drama has attracted considerable scholarly interest. John P. Harrington, author of the foundational text *The Irish Play on the New York Stage, 1874–1966* (1997), has edited the most important recent collection on the Irish theatrical diaspora, *Irish Theater in America* (2009). In his introduction, Harrington suggests that the complexity of studying Irish-American drama emerges from "the tension created by performing it—Irishness—before an audience in part identified with Ireland and in part unrelated or actively hostile to it" (xvi). Harrington's comment here seems relevant far beyond the scope of just theatrical work and succinctly points to what I perceive as the dynamic through which Irish identity was constructed in public discourse. Irishness was often just as much a performance off the stage as it was on the stage, and it was constructed in the tension between self-identified Irish Americans and a non-Irish population who frequently displayed hostility to all things Irish. Harrington's studies of Irish drama focus on the theatrical event and the performance, not just on the text written by the Irish-American playwright. As such, his work acknowledges that the (often non-Irish)

audience participated in the way Irishness was constructed on the stage. I have attempted to approach the texts discussed in this book (drama, prose, and poetry) in a similar manner. By focusing on the construction and performance of Irish identity and not just on the issues surrounding Irish-American authorship, I try to examine Irishness as a topic emerging from multiple American contexts and across several genres.

This is not a study of Irish-American literature, per se, but rather a study of Irish Americans in literature. Whereas Fanning set out to understand "the fictional self-image of the American Irish," I seek to understand that self-image in relation to the image of Irishness held by others (4). Ethnic group identities are never constructed entirely from within, but always in interaction with other groups. The boundary that defines Irish-American identity has been built by Irish-American writers such as Dion Boucicault, Ned Harrigan, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James T. Farrell, and Margaret Mitchell, as well as by non-Irish writers like Mark Twain, Harold Frederic, Frank Norris, and T. S. Eliot. This study will show how Irish-American identity was produced and perceived across a large segment of American literature by looking at both texts that rarely have been considered in an Irish context before and texts with more obvious Irish-American origins. By placing such works side-by-side, I hope to show the ways in which literature participated in the imagining of an Irish community in America and helped construct an ethnic boundary that redefined the country.

AMERICAN NATIONALISM AND THE IRISH IMMIGRANT

The literary works considered in this study were written during a period in which nationalism obsessed the public. From the end of the Civil War through the turn of the century, America underwent a radical shift in national identity unlike any other period in its history and was host to turbulent public debate regarding the fundamental ideologies and essential qualities of being American. Individuals were no longer sure what united them as a national community or what qualified someone to be an authentic patriot during such an era in which American nationalism displayed mutable, even contradictory, properties. Several significant historic developments led to this anxiety regarding American nationalism, the most important being the Civil War and its fallout.

The Civil War had established a relatively new concept for America: national unity was more important than local loyalties. During the Reconstruction, the government emphasized political, social, and economic cooperation as a tonic to overcome sectional animosity. The passing of the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted due process and equal protection to former slaves, radically changed the concept of American identity by legally eliminating race as a criterion for citizenship. Despite this, race still figured prominently in actual public perceptions of American identity. In

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