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The Irish in the South

David T. Gleeson

Editor's Introduction

The most famous fictional white southerner apparently inherited some of the looks “of her florid Irish father.” In personality too, Katie Scarlett O’Hara, named for her Irish Catholic grandmother, was the one most like Gerald O’Hara. He had fled the attentions of angry “Orange” landlords intent on his arrest, and founded his version of the mythical “Tara,” seat of the ancient High Kings of Ireland, in the Georgia countryside.¹ Margaret Mitchell, of course, drew from her own Georgia Irish Catholic background when writing *Gone with the Wind*. Indeed, some speculate that Scarlett was based primarily on her Irish-American grandmother, Annie Fitzgerald Stephens.² Yet, for many, this story is the extent of the Irish connection with the US South. *Gone with the Wind*—especially its 1939 movie adaptation—has become “a brand that rivalled fellow Atlanta institution Coca Cola in name recognition, and perhaps more importantly, as the main source of information about the South for its millions of readers and viewers.”³

Along with its highly inaccurate version of southern history, portrayed in both the book and the movie, its contribution to the history of the Irish in America has also been minimal. Some Americans are dimly aware of “Scotch-Irish” ancestry in the South from the Colonial era, but serious connections between Ireland and settlement in the region pretty much ended with the American Revolution.⁴ It was with great pleasure then to accept John Countryman’s invitation to edit the second volume of *Irish Studies South* focused on the Irish in the South. There is a strong demographic basis for this subject. The first social historians of the South had come across accounts of the Irish in the region beyond the Revolutionary era. The first monograph on immigrants in the Confederacy recognized their presence, too.⁵ Those interested in southern workers also found in the censuses, especially from the Seventh Census (1850) onward, when place of birth was listed, that there were many Irish laborers, artisans, and domestics among the urban working classes of the antebellum South. Social historian Dennis Rousey described these out-of-place Irishmen and women (along with their German neighbors) as “aliens in the WASP’s nest.”⁶

These Irish in the antebellum South were indeed an important element of its towns. Savannah’s Irish, for example, made up over 14 percent of the city’s overall population and 22 percent of its white population in 1860. They were a vital element of its working population, especially on the railroads and docks that were at the center of the city’s wealth, moving cotton from Georgia to the North and overseas. They revitalized the Catholic Church in the city, leading to the founding of diocesan see in the city in 1850 and of a new parish, naturally called St. Patrick’s, on the west side of town, close to the Central Georgia Railroad,

in 1863. St. Patrick's Day, celebrated in the city since 1813, became much more public with the first public parades, and the Irish became an integral part of the city's politics. Indeed, Georgia secessionists included a local priest in their first secession meeting in Johnson Square after Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency in 1860, explicitly to appeal to Irish voters. While not as large an influence, the Irish in other southern towns and cities such as New Orleans and Richmond were very visible minorities.⁷

The end of the Civil War, however, marked a decline in the Irish presence in the South. Irish immigrants stopped coming to the region. There were much better economic opportunities in other parts of the United States. The South's sharecropping and textile mills were just not appealing to Irish immigrants. Those who remained, like Margaret Mitchell's ancestors, integrated into the majority white Protestant community, retaining their societies and their Catholicism, but very much as part of the "New South," which offered advancement for whites only.⁸ Yet, cultural links remained. Father Abram Ryan, the son of Irish immigrants, became the "poet priest of the Confederacy" with his Lost Poems like "The Sword of Robert E. Lee" being learned by white southerners for generations after the Civil War. Thomas Dixon dedicated his racist novel, *The Klansman*, to his "Scotch-Irish" ancestor.⁹ Kieran Quinlan has shown us how Ireland continued to influence white southern writers beyond those with ancestral connections. Eudora Welty, for example, took inspiration from the writings of Elizabeth Bowen, visiting Ireland and Bowen, as well as welcoming the Anglo-Irish writer to Mississippi.¹⁰ Bryan Gienza re-examines old and finds new connections in the Irish Catholic writers who helped "invent" the South. His reassessment of Flannery O'Connor as truly Irish, as well as his close readings of more contemporary southern writers like Pat Conroy, Anne Rice, and Cormac McCarthy, indicates the important Irish influences on the development of a distinct regional identity.¹¹

This second volume of *Irish Studies South*, then, seeks to examine further the historical links as well as the continued cultural influences of Ireland on the South. The first article by Brian Cudahy explores further the influence of Bishop John England, the Cork-born bishop of Charleston from 1820 to 1842. England's important influence on the early Catholic Church in the United States has been recognized before, but Cudahy looks at England through the important clerical doctrine of collegiality, again being reinforced by the new Pope Francis. Joe Regan takes the story of the Irish in the antebellum South out into the countryside, assessing their lives through the prism of the Catholic activities beyond the towns and cities. He finds that what Emmet Larkin described as the "devotional revolution" among Irish Catholics during and after the Great Famine did not stop at Ireland's shore.¹² Bryan McGovern looks at the influence of the Young Irelanders on the development of a distinct southern political nationalism before the Civil War. Recent work by Paul Quigley highlights that southern partisans looked abroad for ideas on how to create a new nationalism for their section, but McGovern shows how some of the most important influences were among the Irish exiles living in the South.¹³

From Irish migrants this issue then shifts to the continued cultural influences between Ireland and the South, but also links back to the first volume, a special on Seamus Heaney, with

Amanda Sperry and Jill Goad's analysis of the use of photographs in the works of Heaney and Nathalie Trethewey. Long an admirer of Heaney's poetry, and interested in the parallels between the Northern Ireland and the South, Trethewey also paralleled Heaney in the use of photographs in her poetry to tell stories challenging the traditional white narrative of southern history. Next, Charlotte Headrick tells the extraordinary story of southern playwright John Stephens and the work of the Atlanta Theatre Gael company, for which he directed over seventy-five plays. His own work, *Farewell to the Fair Country*, provides a particular southern take on the story of the Great Famine's legacy in the South, focusing on the lives of the immigrants it brought to the region.

Theatre Gael no longer exists, but Irish plays are still performed throughout the South, often thanks to university theatre departments. C. Austin Hill develops this theme by reflecting on his experience of presenting Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* to an Appalachian audience in east Tennessee. Though some of the participants and some of those who saw it had some notion of long-lost Irish ancestry, the main power of this Irish play for a southern audience is the parallels they see between their southern and the Irish historical experience. This issue then hopefully highlights again the significance of researching the Irish and Ireland in the southern story. As the Irish again come to the South in larger numbers and business connections between the region and Ireland increase (as recognized by the Irish government's recent establishment of consulates in Atlanta and Austin), there will be room for exploring new links and cross influences. This reality means perhaps that "Ireland [still] has not yet become unlike the South, nor the South unlike Ireland," and that today's Irish and their descendants will continue their involvement "in engineering the mindscape of the South."¹⁴ Emblematic of these connections, we conclude this issue of *Irish Studies South* with Nathalie Anderson's poem, "Somebody's Saints March In," which highlight that in both places "old times there are not forgotten." That fact can, of course, be both a blessing a curse, but nonetheless it is always interesting.

Notes

¹ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936; repr. 1991), 3, 34.

² Darden Asbury Pyron, *Southern Daughter: The Life of Margaret Mitchell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4-5, 20-22, 252.

³ *Gone with the Wind*, dir. Victor Fleming, Selznick International Pictures/MGM, 1939; Geraldine Higgins, "Tara, the O'Haras, and the Irish *Gone with the Wind*," *Southern Cultures* (Spring 2011): 44.

⁴ The fact that James G. Leyburn's *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962) is still in print speaks to the continued interest. Leyburn concentrates on the southern colonies.

⁵ See for example Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929; repr., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 186; Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940).

⁶ Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, "Native and Immigrants, Free Men, and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum South," *American Historical Review* 88 (December 1983): 1175-1200; Dennis C. Rousey, "Aliens in the WASP Nest: Ethnocultural Diversity in the Antebellum Urban South," *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 152-64.

⁷ David T. Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1-2, 36, 58-61.

⁸ David T. Gleeson, *The Green and the Gray: The Irish in the Confederate States of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 187-220.

⁹ Donald R. Beagle and Bryan A. Giemza, *Poet of the Lost Cause: A Life of Father Ryan* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008); Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1905), 1.

¹⁰ Kieran Quinlan, *Strange Kin: Ireland and the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 227-34. For others, see "The Irish" special issue of *Southern Cultures* (Spring 2011).

¹¹ Bryan Giemza, *Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

¹² Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland 1850-75," *The American Historical Review* 77 (June 1972): 625-52.

¹³ Paul Quigley, *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Quinlan, *Strange Kin*, 268; Giemza, *Irish Catholic Writers*, 279.

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