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That Much Credit: Irish-American Identity and Writing

"ARE YOU IRISH AT ALL?" Davin asks Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, raising the question of identity just at the historical moment, between the death of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1892 and the Easter Rising of 1916, when romantic Irish nationalism, W.B. Yeats's Celtic mist, was spreading over the Irish landscape. Davin challenges Stephen's detachment, but he refuses to be counted in the ranks of Irishmen. "You talk to me of nationality, language, religion, I shall try to fly by those nets."[1] More than a century later, those nets are in tatters: nationality, language and religion no longer clearly determine identity in a world of instant communication, easy mobility and cultural internationalism. Yet, Davin's ironic question remains relevant, both to citizens in the divided island of Ireland and to those of what has come to be called the Irish Diaspora, particularly in America.

Contemporary Irish identity for Frank McCourt is characterized by an ebullient internationalism. "It is to live on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, or anywhere else, and to be able to say, You've come a long way, Michael or Maggie. You've come singing and dancing and remembering." Perhaps Michael and Maggie also come to repossess a bleak but memorable Irish heritage and to redefine a harsh but triumphant American experience in comic, salvific terms, as McCourt recasts his sad Limerick childhood in *Angela's Ashes* and celebrates his happy American immigration in *'Tis*.[2] Certainly the Ireland of McCourt's youth, 1930-1949, is dead and gone; Eamon De Valera's Ireland—poor, rural, insular and devoutly Catholic—has been blown asunder by

modernity and prosperity. Today, despite its not wholly resolved Ulster "troubles," Ireland, a land once defined by the ancient emblems of the wolfhound and the round tower, has transformed itself into the Green Tiger of global economic and cultural importance.

Identity in Ireland has long been defined by relations to England: Ulster Protestants insisted upon their Britishness while Irish Catholics, North and South, affirmed their Irishness. Since the Good Friday Agreement of 2000, brought about in part by cooperation between the governments of Britain and the Republic of Ireland, participation by former warring factions in Northern Ireland and intervention by representatives from the Clinton administration, particularly George Mitchell, the English-Irish polarization has become diffused; after the horrors of September 11, 2001, the peace process in Northern Ireland intensified. The IRA began the destruction of its arms supply, though many Ulster Protestants deliberately clung to an archaic idea of Britishness, pro-monarchy and anti-Catholic, that was fading elsewhere, even in Tony Blair's England. As journalist Kevin Cullen, who covered Irish politics for the *Boston Globe* for more than a decade, has written, "the Irish and English peoples have never been more aware of each other's similarities or more tolerant of their differences."[3]

As the Irish have become more European, less partisan and more accepting of diversity, they are also becoming, it could be said, more like their Irish-American cousins. Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole suggests that Irish immigrants who left for America, along with their descendants, have long faced issues of identity and modernity. "Not just our present [in Ireland] but our future is their past."[4] Perhaps, now, all of those who think of themselves as Irish fall into the category of the Irish Diaspora—citizens of everywhere, at home only in an Ireland of the mind. What does it matter to be Irish, or Irish-American, at all?

The identity issue has been addressed, reformulated, debated and revised in the United States in the last half century, a period when cultural definition for Irish-Americans grew less determined by family, community, religion and politics. Historians,

journalists and politicians have reexamined this issue; even more persuasively, creative writers have eloquently recounted and reimagined Irish-American experience. More than a century and a half after the Famine of 1845-49 sent so many thousands of Irish into exile, the vision of a lost homeland and a sense of Irishness persists in the minds of the descendants of these displaced Irish.

William Shannon's *The American Irish: A Political and Social Portrait*, published in late 1963, defined Irish-America at the peak of its political achievement and cultural celebration, but also on the brink of its decline as a coherent ethnic force.[5] His story of the Irish immigrant, a redemptive realization of the dream of success in America, begins in the despair of the Great Famine and climaxes in the reassuring triumph of Kennedy's Camelot. Just over a century after Patrick Kennedy fled the 1845-1849 famine that devastated Ireland, leaving the Wexford village of Dunganstown for Boston and the New World, his grandson, John F. Kennedy, was elected President of the United States.[6] For Shannon, Kennedy embodied all that was worthy in the Irish-American tradition. "The new President and his administration bodied forth in full and accurate form the three main themes of the history of the Irish in this country: the poetry, the power, and the liberalism. ... He personified political traditions that were specifically Irish and Catholic."[7] Émigrés, the dear departed of "American wakes" in Ireland who became the Paddys and Bridgits of the servant and laboring class in America, had at long last arrived, as evidenced by in this handsome, witty, young president.

Shannon's study arrived at the White House just before Kennedy's trip to Dallas; he promised to read it on his return. "But he is gone," along with Irish-America's moment in the sun, as Daniel P. Moynihan wrote in *Beyond the Melting Pot* in 1963. Kennedy's 1960 victory was, then, both a vindication for Irish-Americans and their "final moment of ascendancy"—their "last hurrah," as Moynihan put it.[8] Shannon and Moynihan celebrated the Irish-American story but also underscored its transience.

Shannon restricts his interest in Irish-Americans to "the

Catholic Irish, . . . only to those who thought of themselves as Irish and who are related to the Irish community in some meaningful way." However, forty years after Shannon's influential study, cultural definition for Irish-Americans is more problematic: attention to the scope of this saga, before the Famine and after Kennedy, has grown; the definition of the Irish immigrants has become both more inclusive and less certain; the implications of their long journey are now less clear. By the end of the 20th century some 44 million Americans claimed some Irish identity, divided loosely into 24 million of Protestant descent and 20 million of Catholic lineage.[9] Early in the 21st century it is clear that the principal traits for those who call themselves Irish-American—Catholicism, Democratic Party politics, the cultural values of the parish—have sufficiently eroded to make Irish-American identity less an inescapable heritage and more an elective affinity.

Indeed, some wonder if Irish-Americans have lost their ethnic identities in the American middle class. Lawrence J. McCaffrey, leading historian of Irish-American experience, posed the key questions in *The Irish Diaspora in America*: "Has their trip from Irish Catholic, urban neighborhoods to suburban melting pots been a journey to achievement and contentment or an excursion from someplace to no place?"[10]

Two polemicists, Noel Ignatiev and Tom Hayden, see the journey from Ireland to America as a bad trip. They argue that the Irish sold their souls for American success and need to be reminded what it means to be *truly* Irish.

The terms of discussion concerning Irish-American identity are considerably amplified and politicized in Noel Ignatiev's 1996 work, *How the Irish Became White*. Focusing upon a narrow segment of Irish-American history, the Irish background and the American presence of post-Famine émigrés in Philadelphia and New York City, Ignatiev sets out to show "how the Irish went from being members of an *oppressed* race in Ireland to being members of an *oppressing* race in the United States."[11] Irish

immigrants, according to Ignatiev, rejected the appeal of Daniel O'Connell, Ireland's Great Liberator, "to join with the abolitionists in America, to join the struggle to overthrow slavery." That is, they concerned themselves primarily with advancing their own interests through the agencies of the Democratic Party, labor unions, the Catholic Church and "forms of urban disorder—race riots, for example," notably the Draft Riots in New York City in July 1863. The Irish in America thus "chose" to become what Ignatiev calls "white," his contemptuous, shorthand term for success. "To me being 'white' means being part of a club, with certain privileges and obligations." The Irish, originally designated as outsiders in American, thus learned to *pass* for white.[12]

Ignatiev, then, has imposed a color trope upon America's class division. In doing so, he blames the Irish for adapting to harsh conditions they did not choose. While his terms may apply some rough justice to, say, 1870, they have little relevance in the 21st century, where citizens of all racial and ethnic designations occupy every level of the American economic strata. Surely it makes as little sense to argue that successful African-Americans are "white" as it does to designate Irish-American failures—exemplary Irish-American alcoholics in works of fiction: James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan, Eugene O'Neill's Tyrone family or Alice McDermott's Charming Billy, improvident dreamers who drink themselves to early deaths—as "black."

Tom Hayden, political activist, California State Representative and author of *Irish on the Inside*, sees his Irish-American family as "white" in Ignatiev's terms. Hayden grew up in Royal Oak, a post-war Detroit suburb, in a family of assimilated, middle-class Irish-Americans. He worshiped at the Shrine of the Little Flower, the former parish of Father Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest" of the 1930s who inveighed against Communists and Jews, telling his largely Irish-American parishioners "on this earth you must belong to the church militant or get the hell out of it. ... There is no middle ground in this battle between Christ and the anti-Christ."[13] Hayden's father supported Joseph McCarthy's "superpatriotism and hatred of atheistic commu-

nism," but Tom recoiled from "the image of Irish Catholics as sputtering, drunken, overzealous Cold Warriors."

Hayden attempts to recover the "Irish radical past," buried beneath his pious, patriotic, middle-class background. He was, he belatedly discovers, named after Thomas Emmet, Irish rebel and Irish-American reformer, who serves Hayden as a role model for identity redefinition. As Ignatiev might put it, Hayden "chose" to be black when he worked in the civil rights movement in the American South in the 1960s; he also chose a radical line of Irishness, going to Northern Ireland with IRA and Sinn Fein sympathies. (Hayden argues that British propaganda persuaded Irish-American assimilationists to view the IRA as "outside agitators," but here he ignores the terrorist violence, ethnic exclusivity and authoritarian righteousness at the heart of Irish Republicanism, traits from which most Irish-Americans recoiled.)[14]

Hayden experienced an epiphany in 1968, watching (on television) Catholic civil rights marchers in Northern Ireland sing "We Shall Overcome." Suddenly he saw the Irish as a people recoiling from a "trauma," the Famine, just as Jews were defined by the Holocaust and African-Americans by slavery. Padraig Pearse, who led the 1916 Rising and called for blood sacrifice to achieve Irish independence from England, became a Hayden hero, as did Pearse's latter-day counterparts, Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, former IRA hard men who became political leaders of Sinn Fein. The renewed "troubles" in Northern Ireland of the 1970s served as a stage on which Hayden discovered, perhaps invented, his Irish-American identity. Ian Buruma, for one, was appalled by "Hayden's use of Northern Ireland as the playground for his own psychodrama," reducing the long-standing and complex Irish situation to a mere identity crisis.[15] Hayden, in the process, also repudiates his family's assimilationist cultural heritage and gives primacy to his new-found Republican Irishness (with requisite overtones of Celtic romanticism) "on the inside." Hayden and Ignatiev thus stretch the definition of Irish-American identity but, in the process, limit it to a set of political positions which exclude most Irish-Americans.

Mary Gordon, critic and novelist, blames Irish Puritanism, "linguistic colonization, occurring at the same time as a preservation of national identity, a self defined in highly local terms, [and] the creation of parallel worlds" for the paucity of Irish-American literature.[16] Provocatively, Gordon insists that "a course in American Irish Literature would take up barely half a semester." After Eugene O'Neill, Scott Fitzgerald and James T. Farrell, Gordon admits to her syllabus short list only J.F. Powers, William Alfred, Elizabeth Cullinan, Maureen Howard and William Kennedy.

Mary Gordon offers her own fictional version of the Jansenist Irish-American community in *The Other Side*, a work of striking bitterness. This novel centers upon the lives and offspring of two Irish immigrants, Vincent and Ellen MacNamara, a married couple who disagreed for sixty-six years until Ellen knocked Vincent down and he was sent to a nursing home. Ellen imparted to her children and grandchildren a bleak vision of Ireland that Vincent could not alter. When their grandson went to Ireland he saw that his family suffered from "the sickle-cell anemia of the Irish: they had to thwart the joy in their lives. You saw it everywhere in Irish history; they wouldn't allow themselves to prosper."[17] *The Other Side* confirms its characters in their dour vision. Gordon illustrates her thesis of Irish-American failure in a novel that thwarts all joy. Neither those crossing to "the other side" nor those who stayed at home could, it seems, escape the curse of their Irishness.

Yet Irish-Americans have loosened the ties that once bound them. There has been identity erosion among Irish-Americans, caused by the dispersal of former Irish-American communities, the slackening grip of the Catholic Church over its members in Ireland and in the United States, and, since Ronald Reagan, the weakening bond between Irish-Americans and the Democratic Party; even alcohol consumption, once an essential ethnic trait, has decreased among Irish-Americans. At the turn of the 21st century, however, writers continue to recompose Irish-American

life in striking works of fiction and autobiography, works that reveal all that has been destructive and redemptive in Irish-American life.

Historian Thomas Brown suggests, "Nothing strikes the historian of the American Irish so forcibly as their desire to wield power. As churchmen, nationalists, and politicians, they were possessed by the need to bend others to their will."[18] William Kennedy deals with the mixed blessing of political power in his Albany novels, his saga of Irish-American problematic adjustments. What politics did for and did to Irish Americans is the subject of his 2002 capstone novel, *Roscoe*.[19]

Behind the fictional framework of *Roscoe* stands the actual history of Albany's Irish political machine, led by Dan O'Connell, what Kennedy, in *O Albany*, calls a "remarkable construct. Since the early 1920s, the O'Connell Machine had swept almost all city and county offices, held control of the county legislature and all local seats in the State Senate and Assembly."[20] As a reporter for the *Times-Union* in the 1960s, Kennedy attacked the O'Connell machine for its slowness in accepting civil rights; however, as a novelist, Kennedy credits the political process that gave up-state Irish-Americans the same access to power as that held by their urban counterparts in Tammany Hall. Irish-American "identity was fixed by both religion and politics, but from the political hierarchy came the way of life." Jobs, security along with available vices "came to you because you gave allegiance to Dan O'Connell and his party. The power that he held was so pervasive that you often didn't even know it existed until you contravened it. Then God help you, poor soul. Cast into outer darkness."[21] Roscoe Conway, a Falstaffian, back-room political fixer, has no desire to deny the Irish-American political machine. He just wants "more room in my head" than politics allows. In this Irish-American exemplary tale, political success is won at the cost of an expense of spirit, a smothering of the self.

Eugene O'Neill's intensely autobiographical drama, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, has also been seen as an informing parable of

Irish-American life and character. O'Neill invited this reading, tying his life to his art, when he insisted "the critics have missed the most important thing about me and my work, the fact that I am Irish."[22] William Shannon recognizes that the four members of the Tyrone family are "archetypes of the American Irish character": a doomed, dramatic, eloquent and isolated family, united by addictions, accusations and love. *Long Day's Journey into Night* dispelled Irish-American sentimentality by focusing attention on the destructive elements in Irish-American family life: ambition, piety, pretense, insecurity, accusation and addiction. American Irishness for O'Neill was what Irish history was for Stephen Dedalus, a nightmare from which he was trying to awake.

Two recent memoirs extend the implications of O'Neill's play and illustrate the break-down of the Irish-American family unit in the second half of the twentieth century. In *An American Requiem*, James Carroll, born in 1943, portrays such a family, his own, split by conflicts of conviction that range from politics to religion. In *All Souls*, Michael Patrick MacDonald, born in 1966, dramatizes the destruction of such a family, his own, by a corrupt community, racist politics, crime, and drugs. Taken together, these autobiographies illustrate the deterioration of long-standing Irish-American identity patterns but also testify to the Irish-American writer's power to prevail over debilitating circumstances, to tell hard truths about his own kind, to create persuasive parables of redemption.

James Carroll was a Catholic priest from 1962-1975, when he applied for laicization, left the priesthood (though not the Catholic Church), married, became a father and a successful novelist. His mother, Mary, was "a staunch, chin-high Catholic woman" who saw in his ordination the fulfillment of "a lifelong Irish dream" in her role as "mother of a priest."[23] His father, Lt. General Joseph F. Carroll, "a fluent patriot, a man of power," was, like James Tyrone, a rigid and ambitious Irish Catholic. Joseph Carroll arrived at his high rank through struggle, climbing from the Irish ghetto of Bridgeport, Back of the Yards Chicago (memorialized by Finley Peter Dunne's "Mr. Dooley" columns), to Loyola, then to the seminary, which he left to marry. His son,

James Carroll, born of this marriage between a pious, proud mother and a Jansenist, guilt-ridden father, was to have been ordained a priest by another stern father figure, Francis Cardinal Spellman, a supporter of America's war in Vietnam and an adherent of the Vatican's conservative factions. James Carroll, then, was the heir of a demanding and confining but also identity-affirming traditional Irish-America that insisted upon self-abnegation, the primacy of faith in family, church and country. He too would need more room in his head than was allowed by Irish-American religion and politics.

Carroll was initially attracted by the liberalizing spirit emanating from the papacy of John XXIII and from the Kennedy presidency; however, during the Johnson administration the activist priest, poet and prophet, Daniel Berrigan, became his hero. While General Carroll served the Defense Intelligence Agency as its first director, Father Carroll joined anti-war protests and defined himself as one who "had stopped believing in my father's God and all that went with it: a God more American than Christian, more Roman than Catholic, a God of orthodoxy, conformity, sexlessness, and patriarchy. ... I was discovering the God of Jesus Christ, the blasphemer, the heretic, the criminal, the disgrace."[24] James Carroll made his own sense out of his Irish Catholic background and left a telling testimony of his journey of understanding.

Catholicism and paternity dominate James Carroll's sense of Irish-American identity.[25] "Jesus came to understand Himself by understanding His father."[26] Growing up a generation later, stuck fast in an Irish-American ghetto, a world away from Carroll's privileged and peripatetic upbringing, Michael Patrick MacDonald was less impacted by the Catholic Church and he knew no father. MacDonald's instinct as a boy led him even further than Carroll in opposition to the Catholic hierarchy. "Even as a kid I always felt torn between the Catholic Church and its rules for who's in and who's out with Jesus, and a deeper relationship with God that might be found anywhere."[27] MacDonald's world was defined by his mother and his place: South Boston. His hard life both shows the century-long persistence of ethnic

ghetto defensiveness among some Irish-Americans and his personal triumph over such limits.

"My oldest memories are of my mother crying."[28] Mother of nine children, Helen MacDonald did all she could to hold her family together and to infuse them with pride in their Irish identity. Abandoned by Michael's father, she was told by a priest and her family to make the best of a bad marriage ("to offer it up," as Irish Catholics were instructed), but Helen, a battler, sued Dave MacDonald for non-support. In 1973, when she moved her growing family into the Old Colony public housing project in South Boston, she was thrilled, for, as everyone said and as Michael quickly came to believe, Southie was "The Best Place in the World."[29]

Historian Thomas H. O'Connor, who grew up in South Boston, notes, "of all Boston's neighborhoods, South Boston has survived with perhaps the fewest changes in its ethnic, social and religious composition. It is one of the last surviving relics of a distinctive way of life that goes back to the early days of immigrant Irish families and old-time political bosses."[30] The neighborhood, separated by a canal and a highway from downtown Boston, held fast to its Irish identity, particularly on St. Patrick's Day, but also became famous for its insularity and defensiveness. Southie citizens had a look about them, MacDonald says, "as if they'd spent much of their time defying whatever shit had come their way."[31]

During the battle over court-ordered busing for the integration of public schools in the mid-1970s, James Carroll served as a monitor, helping to protect African-American students from Roxbury who were being bused into largely Irish-Catholic South Boston and Charlestown; at the same time, members of MacDonald's family were throwing stones at the buses filled with black students they saw as invading their turf. Nothing better illustrates the divisions within the Irish-American community and its insecure relations with mainstream America than this scene: James Carroll inside a bus being stoned while young Michael MacDonald watched his brothers throw stones. Indeed, both Carroll and MacDonald saw court-ordered busing as a test

of character for the Irish-American community.[32] Further, nothing better illustrates the capacity for candor and the search for redemption within this community than these eloquent memoirs by Carroll and MacDonald, these artful acts of atonement.

As Farrell's Studs Lonigan was defined and doomed to an early death by his surroundings, South Side Chicago, so were MacDonald's brothers and sisters determined by a life, such as it was, in Southie, where drugs drenched the projects, sanctioned crime ruled the streets and Irish pride meant battling black students and outsiders who supported them. "In the end it didn't really matter who we were united against, as long as we kept up our Southie loyalty."[33]

Caught in the crossfire of these forces, the MacDonald family was shattered. Michael's sister Mary had two children but no husband; his brother Davey received shock treatments at fourteen; his brother Kevin dealt drugs for Whitey Bulger, leader of the Irish mob; his brother Frankie had to join the Marines to keep from being prosecuted; Davey, drugged, jumped off a roof and died; Ma was shot by a stray bullet; sister Kathy, drugged on angel dust, either jumped or was pushed from a roof and was maimed for life; Kevin was arrested for stealing a car and told to keep his mouth shut by Whitey's men; then Kevin married with Whitey serving as his best man; finally, Kevin, arrested for a jewelry store heist, died by hanging in jail; Frankie was shot during a Wells Fargo robbery and murdered by one of his fellow thieves; his brother Stevie at age thirteen was charged with murder. So, for Michael MacDonald's family did Southie, the best place in the world, an Irish-American haven, become the killing fields that include shocking instances of death by suicide, murder or drugs.

> The hearses kept rolling down Dorchester Street, where in better days we'd watched the St. Patrick's Day parade and the anti-busing motorcades. And every time it was another Southie mother's turn to see her child off at Jackie O'Brien's [Funeral Home], it brought Ma right back to reality. She started going to all the wakes, even if she didn't know the family, and in about a year she counted that she'd been to thirty-two, all dead from suicide, drugs, or crime.[34]

This long day's journey into night brought Michael back to reality as well, as his courageous memoir illustrates. Michael came a long way to write this book, starting out as a loyal son of Southie, one of those who bear the "Southie look," which includes the "Southie cut" and the "Southie dot" on their wrists. His mother sang Irish rebel ballads in Irish bars, songs adapted to Southie's anti-busing campaign. But still the buses came. They "knew we were going to lose this one. But that made us even more like the Irish, who were always fighting in the songs even if they had to lose and die a glorious death."[35] Lose they did, then busing passed, replaced by disco and drugs, an even more destructive turf invader. By age twelve, Michael carried his brother's mescaline pills to a club aptly named *Illusion*, where Michael won dance contests.

Just as it was believed that everyone looked out for each other in Southie, everyone "knew" that Whitey Bulger hated drugs, though it was understood he did skim money from dealers. Still, it seemed far-fetched when, in 1988, reporter Kevin Cullen suggested in the *Boston Globe*—a newspaper detested in Southie for its support of busing—that Whitey, the presumptive Irish Robin Hood of Southie, the crook who protected his own, was an FBI informant, working hand-in-glove with another son of Southie, FBI man John Connolly.[36] Whitey Bulger not only promoted the drug trade that was devastating Southie; he not only murdered Southie lads; he was someone who betrayed his own kind, an *informer*, the worst crime for an Irishman. "The people of South Boston have been had," decided MacDonald, before he left Southie for four years.[37]

He returned in 1994, disguised in the Southie garb of scally cap and sunglasses, working for a group dedicated to breaking the code of silence that protected criminals from prosecution. On All Soul's Night, at Gate of Heaven Church, MacDonald listened to mothers testify against their sons' killers and spoke himself about his own dead brothers and sisters. He was not sure whether he loved or hated Southie, but he moved home again in order to write this searing book about his ample and vital Irish-American family brought to ruin by lethal community

values—insulated, isolated, proud, repressive, aggressive South Boston, where one of his brothers, Frankie, the boxer, after he was strangled to death by his own friends, was buried in his Golden Gloves robe, along with "the usual for Southie's buried children: Rosary beads, Irish flags, and shamrock trinkets collected from the annual St. Patrick's Day parade."[38]

In Alice McDermott's novels the lives of her characters are defined by weddings and wakes, sacramental rites in the Catholic Church, secular occasions which remind us of all life can offer and suddenly take away. McDermott's *Charming Billy* (1998) is an achieved fictional realization and revision of Irish-American myths, an informing parable of destructive and redemptive elements in Irish-American life. McDermott sets her poignant tale firmly in the context of Irish-American literature, for once-charming Billy Lynch drinks himself into an early grave, in the manner of Farrell's anti-hero in *Studs Lonigan*. McDermott's novel is framed around a wake, as are Mary Doyle Curran's *The Parish and the Hill*, Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold*, McDonald's *All Souls* and many other works in this genre; family members battle over who is to blame for addiction, as they do in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; Catholicism thwarts the behavior and shapes the fate of her characters, as it does in William Kennedy's *Ironweed* and, indeed, in most works of Irish-American literature. But *Charming Billy* reconfigures Irish-American archetypes, from the sad drunk to his nobly sacrificial wife, lending convincing compassion to their struggles; in her novel Irish Catholic beliefs are at once criticized for their prohibitions and justified for their breadth of vision; finally, McDermott reimagines the idea of Ireland, here personified as desperately greedy, while America is, in her surprising mythic reconfiguration, a place of sustained if naïve faith.

Death and resurrection provide the plot turns in *Charming Billy*, set in 1983, a novel which opens at an after-funeral dinner where Irish-Americans meet to mourn Billy Lynch, to try to make sense of his and their own lives and, of course, to drink to all that was and might have been. Maeve, Billy's widow, presides at a Bronx restaurant "that, lacking only draught Guinness and a

peat fire, might have been a pub in rural Ireland. Or, lacking dialogue by John Millington Synge, the set of a rural Irish play."[39] Of course, McDermott's ironic point, without the Guinness, the peat fire and the Synge-song dialogue, these Irish-Americans from Queens are a long way from Tipperary or any other Irish county.

For all that, they see themselves as Irish; the idealized idea of Ireland as an inviolate isle beyond the sea pervades their consciousnesses and shapes their identities. Ireland's four green fields became a compensatory visionary landscape, a lost Eden, for Irish-Americans who forgot the trials of starvation and political repression which their ancestors escaped, for Irish-Americans who refused to believe reports of the hardships and isolation Ireland continued to endure during and after World War II. The romantic dream of Ireland illustrates the latent idealism and vulnerable sentimentality among Irish-Americans but also reveals their susceptibility to denial and deceit. As the novel's narrator notes, the capacity to believe is balanced by the "capacity to be deceived, since you can't have one without the other."[40]

Charming Billy is narrated by the daughter of Dennis, Billy's friend. She drinks "Billy's drink" after the funeral, with her father and Billy's former drinking buddy, Dan. When sentimental Dan says they should have let Billy drink and find his release from pain, realistic Dennis argues that Billy sober might have lived another twenty years. While her elders talked, the narrator "moved the ice around in Billy's drink. Give the man that much credit," she thinks, wondering if her father will destroy Dan's faith by revealing that Billy was betrayed by the Irish young woman he worshiped. But only silence, apart from the sound of ice at the bottom of their glasses, filled the room as they concentrated on "a way to make sense. Or else a way to tell the story that would make them believe it was sensible."[41]

McDermott's narrator, like McDermott herself, seeks to make her Irish-American story sensible, believable, giving "that much credit" to her own kind. At the end of the novel—at the end of the day, as they say in Ireland—the narrator writes:

> As if, in that wide-ranging anthology of stories that was the lives of the saints—that was, as well, my father's faith and Billy's and some part of my own—what was actual, as opposed to what was imagined, as opposed to what was believed, made, when you got right down to it, any difference at all.[42]

Charming Billy, says Alice McDermott, is "about faith, and what we believe in, and above all what we choose to believe in."[43]

Contemporary Irish-American writers have kept the faith in their identity. Hard truths are insisted upon by Irish-American academic analysts and creative writers, but so is compassion for a people who were persecuted and starved in Ireland, then escaped to America where they were exploited for generations. Their cultural limitations—clannishness, blind faith in their religious and political leaders, defensiveness and aggressiveness—should be understood, if not forgiven, as means of adaptation and survival. Mary Gordon's complaint over "the paucity of Irish-American literature" seems churlish when applied to a people who were late to gain mere literacy and, as this essay suggests, underestimates the record of achievement in the 20th century. The works of William Kennedy, James Carroll, Michael Patrick MacDonald and Alice McDermott demonstrate that Irish-American writers are, a century and a half after the Great Famine, still engaged in redefining Irish-American identity in compelling works of literature.

NOTES

[1]James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*. New York: Viking Press, 1966 [1916], 202-203.

[2]Frank McCourt, "Puddle Jumping," *Irish-America*, Oct./Nov., 2000, 40. *Angela's Ashes*. New York: Scribner's, 1995. *'Tis: A Memoir*. New York: Scribner's, 1999.

[3]Kevin Cullen, "The Making of A Peace," *Boston Globe Magazine*, December 16, 2001, 12.

[4]Fintan O'Toole, "The Ex-Isle of Ireland," *The Ex-Isle of Ireland: Images of A Global Ireland*. Dublin: New Ireland Books, 1996, 30-31.

[5]William V. Shannon, *The American Irish: A Political and Social Portrait*. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

[6]Michael Coffee, ed. With text by Terry Golway, *The Irish in America*. New York: Hyperion, 1997, 3-4.

[7]Shannon, 393, 401.

[8]Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, 2nd ed.. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970, 287.

[9]Maureen Dezell, *Irish-America: Coming into Clover—the Evolution of A People and a Culture*. New York: Doubleday, 2001, 9. Dezell follows Shannon's lead and limits her focus to Irish Catholic Americans, though she acknowledges "that the term 'Irish-American' is not truly a semantic equivalent for 'Irish Catholic.'" Dezell is not entirely certain just "what, if anything, does Irish identity consist of in the United States today?" Her Irish-America is less demographically determined, she grants, than a "culture," loosely bound by politics and beliefs, "characteristics and a sensibility," which echo ethnic stereotypes. Kevin Kenny, in *The American Irish*, offers a more inclusive definition of the American Irish, as "people of Irish origin, regardless of religion or regional background, living within the borders of the present-day United States." Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*. UK: Longman, 2000, 3.

[10]Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Diaspora in America*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1976, 10.

[11]Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

[12]Interview with Noel Ignatiev by Danny Postel, March 17, 1996, WZRD-FM, Chicago; published in *ZMagazine*.

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[15]Ian Buruma, "The Blood Lust of Identity," *New York Review of Books*, April 11, 2002, 14.

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[17]Mary Gordon, *The Other Side*. New York: Penguin, 1989, 160.

[18]Thomas N. Brown, *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870-1890*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1966, 133.

[19]William Kennedy, *Roscoe*. Viking, 2002.

[20]William Kennedy, *O Albany! Improbable City of Political Wizards, Fearless Ethnics, Spectacular Aristocrats, Splendid Nobodies, and Underrated Scoundrels*. New York: Penguin Books, 1983, 46.

[21]Ibid., 43-44.

[22]Ibid., 43-44.

[23]Cited in Shannon, 278.

[24]James Carroll, *An American Requiem: My Father, and the War that came Between Us*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

[25]Ibid., 222.

[26]The role played by Carroll's mother in the formation of his faith is

recounted in Carroll's study of Catholic anti-Semitism, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

[27]Ibid., 122.

[28]Michael Patrick MacDonald, *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999, 40.

[29]Ibid., 16.

[30]Ibid., 1.

[31]Thomas H. O'Connor, *South Boston: My Home Town*. Boston: Quinlan Press, 1988, 2.

[32]MacDonald, 59.

[33]J. Anthony Lucas, in *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families*. (New York: Vintage, 1985), explores class warfare between Irish-Americans before and during Boston's busing crisis of the mid-1970s.

[34]MacDonald, 76.

[35]Ibid., 201.

[36]Ibid., 86.

[37]Dick Lehr and Gerard O'Neill, reporters for *The Boston Globe*, chronicle the relations between Bulger and Connolly in *Black Mass: The Irish Mob, the FBI and A Devil's Deal*. New York: Public Affairs, 2000.

[38]MacDonald, 222.

[39]MacDonald, 186.

[40]Alice McDermott, *Charming Billy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998, 4.

[41]Ibid., *Billy*, 277.

[42]Ibid., *Billy*, 220-222.

[43]Ibid., *Billy*,280.

[43]Alice McDermott, interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, *News Hour with Jim Lehrer, Online News Hour*, Nov. 20, 1998.