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Robert Callahan
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Abstract
This article describes a discussion that the author had with John O'Leary, an Irish poet. It discusses the nature of what it means to be "Irish" and "Irish-American" and talks about how many modern people of Irish descent are focusing more on the ancient Irish traditions rather than the stereotypical Irish-American images of famine victims and green beer.

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The Quest for Identity: A Conversation with John O'Leary

Robert Callahan

I walk into the office of Dr. John O'Leary, Irish poet and visiting professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan University, unprepared for the critical and intimate self-examination of my own identity and value system that would occur during the hour. John, as he prefers to be called, sits in front of me with his plain, unbuttoned, white t-shirt, wispy red hair extending in all directions, a crooked-tooth smile, and lively blue eyes. He has a personable, approachable and genuinely friendly aura about him that emanates from his sheer physical appearance and soft-spoken voice. From the moment I sit down, he begins talking to me about his own immigration story, what it means to be Irish, and why he uses ancient Irish traditions and references to folklore in his poetry. I look down at my notebook and the questions I have long prepared for the interview, and I know that they are of no use to me now.

John is a storyteller like the old men in his Western Ireland hometown pub that spent all hours of the night telling stories to enthusiastic listeners. I eagerly listen as he articulates a new Irish identity and cultural nationalism—one based on a militant view of Ireland's geography and ecology, anti-Catholicism, sympathy with the ancient Irish cultural and folk traditions, and a rejection of alcohol. John defines his generation—what he calls the "Mary Robinson generation"—in terms of a reaction to the false idea of the Irish people's identity as "victims." John's definition contrasts much of the historical scholarship and popular beliefs surrounding Irish immigration, particularly the notion of the Irish immigrant as an "exile."[1] In his book *Special Sorrows*, Matthew Jacobson states that the Irish were "not emigrants merely, but living symbols of oppression."[2] As John tells me his immigration story, I notice how often he speaks of the famine immigrant generation and how alien and isolated America and Illinois must have seemed to them. Even though John rejects the notion of the Irish people as "victims" or "exiles," his language and stories reflect the immigrants' shared experience of oppression and understanding that contributes to his own identity as both an Irish citizen and Irish-American.

John begins his immigration story by commenting on his father and grandfather's contrasting experiences:

> The history is basically three generations making the same commute, rather than emigrating, between West Cork and Boston. My tradition isn't exactly that of my grandfather, coming over to work on the railways to help pay for the land back in Ireland. Mine was more like my father. He came to Boston penniless when he was fourteen in a kind of classic immigration story. He came and found quick manual work right

> off the boat in order to earn some money for bread, and his boss noticed that he caught on to things and was pretty sharp. He suggested that my father go to trade or night school, and through that kind of schooling, he earned a scholarship to MIT. My story is much like my father's in the sense of exporting professional skills [as a professor] of a high order and exploiting the Irish card.

John's use of the word "commute" to describe the travel between Ireland and the United States reveals his conception of the relationship between the two countries. In the typical sense of the word, people usually commute from the home to a place of employment. Even though John was born in Boston (which, to some, should make America his "home"), he views America solely in terms of employment and opportunity. In a similar context, many Irish faced starvation with little economic opportunity during the Great Famine of the 1830's. The notion of an Irish exile to the United States prevails throughout much of the historical scholarship concerning Irish immigration, particularly in Jacboson's text. Even though John would later reject the Irish "victim" stereotype, the language he uses to describe his family's immigration experiences still reinforce aspects of this commonly held historical conception of Irish immigration.

John's perception of the "commuter" relationship between Ireland and America also reveals the important role Irish immigrants played in economically supporting Irish communities and regions in the homeland. For John, "it has been the economic pattern that the west of Ireland has been supported by emigrants sending money home." According to William Shannon, "Remittances to Ireland from individuals in [the United States] were at the rate of $1,000,000 annually in the 1840s and rose to ten times that figure over the next twenty years."[3] Many Irish immigrants, including members of John's family, viewed America in terms of a temporary work arrangement to pay off bills in the homeland. This type of emigration to the United States out of economic necessity reinforces the label of the Irish immigrant as an "exile."

John also implicitly recognizes one of the aspects of John Bodnar's new paradigm in historical scholarship concerning immigration to the United States. John says that his immigration story was much like his father's in terms of "exploiting the Irish card." To explain what that means, he said, "It's comparatively quite easy for me to find work because there is that Irish network: 50 million Americans of Irish descent. All those people form a network that is built into all kinds of political, social, and work structures." Likewise, John's father used his ethnic connections to get a job working for the railroads right off the boat.

A recent McLean County Historical Museum exhibit listed the most commonly brought object to America by Irish immigrants. Interestingly, one of

the most common objects brought over was an "emigrant directory" given by the railroads that had information on Irish settlement and employment opportunities.[4] The ethnic network John describes and devices such as the emigrant directory proved to be collective strategies immigrants used to succeed and survive in America. Throughout American history, Irish immigrants have not been isolated and powerless but rather active participants in the shaping of their new lives through diverse collective strategies in the New World.

When I ask John about Illinois and his experiences moving to the state, I receive a very peculiar but provocative reply. He focuses on the Illinois landscape and imagines how both the first Irish immigrants to the area and the famine immigrants must have felt coming to the state:

> One thing which has been exercising my imagination very much since I came here is how completely alien and strange this landscape must have seemed to people coming from Ireland. The land in Ireland is based around small fields and farms. I mean, the average size we're talking about in the west of Ireland forty years ago was fifteen acres. That is nothing but a field here. People would fight the Thirty Years' War, entire Iliad's, over the ownership of tiny patches of land like that. The enormous expansion of the imagination the prospects that this landscape might have provided for some was a completely destructive experience and for others a huge imaginative opportunity for success in Illinois.

Helen Ross Hall, who emigrated from Ireland to Bloomington, Illinois, in 1869, expressed disillusionment and shock similar to that in John's imagination of the first immigrants' experience with the Illinois landscape. In her memoirs, she wrote: "The train stopped at the old Chestnut Street depot and my first glimpse of real Midwestern mud came as I stepped onto the platform and saw a wagon of coal sunk to the hubs of the wheels in the soft rich McLean County soil... The driver was cursing... I was wondering what sort of place this was."[5] While some Irish immigrants in Bloomington expressed shock and disillusionment with the landscape, many took advantage of the land's unique economic opportunities. Both the Irish and the German farmers introduced commercial dairy farming into the area and were successful in part because of the ethnic networks that allowed them to "find ready markets for milk products in nearby towns."[6]

While John can imagine the shock and disillusionment of early Irish immigrants to the United States and Illinois, he feels that the shock has lessened for his generation:

> I had seen skyscrapers on TV before I ran up to one. I was much more prepared for the shock. The experience of strangeness when I came back to America (I was born in Boston, you know) wasn't there for two reasons: this whole globalization phenomena made me more much more aware of what to expect, and the culture I grew up in had strong American influences, not only in the forms of external media but also in the family, since my father spent most of his time in America. Progressively, the cultures are getting more alike.

Globalization and the trend toward cultural homogeneity in the late twentieth century have had a profound impact on the way people identify themselves. As American movies, fast food, and rap music seep into remote cultures and nations around the world, the peoples of the world seemingly are coming closer together. But increasingly, and in reaction to the influx of "American" culture, people around the world are also reasserting their cultural differences, whether in religious or ethnic/tribal form (one such example is the emergence of a Muslim Jihad against the encroachments of American/Western culture). John's anti-globalization stance came out when he said, "The previous generation did this business of selling out every kind of resource in the country and building tourist developments wherever they could, and my generation has made it its business to fight against that." John resents the McDonald's fast food restaurants that have popped up near his hometown in Ireland, and part of his self-identity lies in resisting the encroachments of globalization and reasserting cultural difference by focusing on the uniqueness of Irish culture.

What makes John and his generation's reassertion of difference or cultural nationalism so unusual within the context of larger anti-globalization movements is that the new Irish nationalism rejects many of the aspects most closely linked to traditional Irish culture. For example, Catholicism is historically and popularly connected to the Irish. One historian has "recently suggested that, given the centrality of the Catholic church in 'sustaining the ongoing Irish identity' against the encroachments of Anglicanization, 'it was inevitable that Irish and Catholic over time would become virtually interchangeable terms.'"[7] Yet as John says, his generation is "militantly anti-Catholic," unlike previous ones. "The churches have emptied fast, and I personally welcome that. To me, it's a very evil institution that has oppressed the Irish people, and people of my generation would use those very same words." Lawrence McCaffrey states, "[I]ndeed, the generation of Irish-American Catholics who came of age in the 1960s led the way in embracing an ethnicity that had little connection with the Catholic Church."[8] As mentioned before, John and his generation also reject the traditional label of the Irish as "victims" and Irish immigrants as "exiles." In reference to Irish victimization, he says,

> The generation before me has this 150-year commemoration of the famine. In my generation, the commemoration was a joke. 'What? Are you going to celebrate genocide?' You know, like 'Happy anniversary of our genocide?' This seemed ridiculous... My generation would be much more defined by a reaction against the notion of victimization.

Interestingly, the Great Famine has historically been used as a defining experience for the Irish and Irish-Americans. Much of the Irish cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth century focused on the shared historical experiences of oppression. British misrule and the sufferings during the famine proved to be constant themes in Irish-American newspapers and novels. Many Irish-American writers, such as James Jeffrey Roche of the *Boston Pilot*, defined "Irishness" in terms of masculine political rebellion and developed the idea that "to be truly Irish is to be by nature a rebel."[9] Being a pacifist and deeply troubled by the incessant violence in Ireland, John also rejects the definition of the Irish in terms of violent political rebellion. Many Irish-Americans of John's generation similarly condemn the terrorist political violence of the Irish Republican Army, seeing no point to continued bloodshed in the region. At a time when people around the world are trying to discover and find their self-identity amidst the pressures of globalization, it is shocking to see a generation reject many of its historically most defining cultural experiences and symbols.

While John rejects many of the institutions and beliefs popularly and historically associated with the Irish, he articulates a new type of cultural nationalism based on a "militant view of Ireland's geography and ecology" and a "sympathy and connection to ancient Irish cultural traditions" (i.e.- Irish language, music, folktales). He feels that globalization and the beginnings of widespread industrialization have had a destructive impact on Ireland's natural environment, polluting the beautiful, majestic Irish landscape. Part of his generation's cultural nationalism involves protecting the natural beauty of the Irish landscape because it is such a distinctive part of the homeland. Likewise, the importance of geography and location for immigration and identity was a central point of Matt Garcia's *A World of Its Own*. Even though Garcia focuses on how the unique landscape of the citrus suburbs affected Mexican immigration and identity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I think his larger argument about geography's importance can also reveal much about the new Irish identity in the late twentieth century.[10] In my opinion, an Irish and Irish-American ethnic identity based on the preservation of Ireland's landscape may be problematic because most Americans of Irish descent have not been to Ireland or owned land there.

However, it is also ironic that land is the focus of John's generation's Irish identity. As William Shannon points out in references to the reluctance of the famine generation to the farm in the United States, "The Irish rejected the land

But as I look at the institutions and focal point of the old Irish identity (i.e.- Catholic Church, famine, political rebellion), and then those John proposes for the new Irish identity (i.e.- preserving Ireland's landscape, ancient language, peasant folk music, folktales), I feel as if I can't relate to them, either. I no longer attend my Catholic church, and nobody has ever told me any stories of the immigrant famine generation. I own no land in Ireland and have not even set foot in the country. I do not know any of the ancient folktales or traditional stories. Yet, despite my inability to relate to both Irish identities, I still consider myself Irish. Perhaps Reginald Byron best explains my inability to relate to my heritage when he says, "As each succeeding generation has become more American and less Irish, and personal accounts of the nineteenth century immigrant experience handed down through families have dimmed and disappeared, perceptions of what is 'Irish' have become increasingly informed by an American popular culture of Irishness."[12]

My personal perceptions of what is Irish coincide exactly with Byron's claim. I associate Irish with four-leaf clovers, leprechauns, and alcohol. Actually, I associate drinking with the Irish more than any other characteristic. John compares the alcohol consumption of the Irish to that of the Native Americans and says that alcoholism in the two cultures can be seen as a "post-traumatic stress response" to their people's respective genocides. While he recognizes a possible cause for widespread Irish alcoholism, John also believes that Irish culture "condones" and "tolerates" widespread alcoholism in men. Heavy drinking came to be seen as symbolic of Irish identity because of the culture's seeming toleration of it, and, as Richard Stivers states in his book, *Hair of the Dog*, "heavy drinking became a means of consuming one's ethnic identity and heritage."[13] For Americans of Irish descent who know nothing about the famine, Irish history, or ancient traditions, drinking is one of the only ways left to symbolically express their Irish heritage. According to this view, Irishness is a "commodity that can be bought and sold," and many people, including myself, "identify their sense of Irishness almost entirely with their consumption of commodities with Irish associations."[14]

After finishing my talk with John, my mind went back to the first day of class when we filled out a survey dealing with ethnicity. The survey asked whether my ethnicity was an important part of my life, and I answered that it was. My interview with John made me realize that my previous conception of what it means to be Irish was rather narrow and superficial. I always thought that Irishness for Irish-Americans involved varying degrees of wearing green, heavy drinking, and involvement in Saint Patrick's Day parades. John sparked my interest in my Irish heritage and ethnicity. I realize that Irish-Americans can express their Irishness in culturally positive and non-stereotypical ways, such as in the appreciation of ancient folktales, traditions, and music. I want to ask my family members and relatives about possible stories handed down over the

years that may have Irish roots. At a time in my life when I am increasingly questioning American values and my identity as an American, I find myself searching for some other type of identity. Before my conversation with John, my clearly Irish last name meant little to me. After speaking with him, I think knowledge of my Irish heritage and ethnicity will help me to better understand my life experiences and discover who Robert Jon Callahan really is. As John said, "We cannot escape our history." I certainly cannot escape it any longer.

Endnotes

[1] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1.

[2] Ibid., 13.

[3] William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), 39.

[4] "People" exhibit in the McLean County Historical Museum in Bloomington, Illinois.

[5] Glenda Riley, "From Ireland to Illinois," *Illinois Historical Journal* 81, no. 3 (1988): 168.

[6] McLean County Historical Museum.

[7] Jacobson, *Sorrows*, 68.

[8] Lawrence J. McCaffrey and others, eds,. *The Irish in Chicago* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 55.

[9] Jacobson, *Sorrows*, 132.

[10] Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 5.

[11] Shannon, *American Irish*, 27.

[12] Reginald Byron, *Irish America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 263.

[13] Richard Stivers, *Hair of the Dog: Irish Drinking and its America Stereotypes* (New York: Continuum, 1976), 197.

[14] Ibid., 261.