

The New Irish: The Imagined Community of the “Irish-American”



A Project of Auto-Ethno-Biography

By James Bland

What is an Imagined Community?

- Nationalism, patriotism, or identity that is wholly or partially artificial, not natural
- Cultures that are suppressed and then re-emerge, fueled by rebellion or change
- “The Longing for What Never Was”
- US Census: more than 36,000,000 Americans self-indentify as Irish-American.

Why Was Irishness broken?

- British and American genocide and repression almost destroyed the Irish race: some aspects vanished
 - Cromwellian genocide
 - Racism
 - Economic Disparity
 - Legal Sanctioning
 - De Facto slavery in Ireland

What Was Lost?

- Language
- Catholicism and Ancient Faith
- Property Rites and Communal Rule
- Gaelic sports, rites, dances, and martial arts

Diaspora

- Irish Diaspora was varied both chronologically and geographically over a century
- No one Mecca for Irish expatriates, and no “authority” of Irishness
 - Unlike Jews (New York), Poles (Chicago), Armenians (Hollywood), etc.
- Norman Mercenaries, Flight of the Wild Geese, Cromwell’s genocide, 1798, Famine of 1840’s
- Boston, New York, Western railways, Chicago, Mexico, Spain, Chile, Canada and Australia

The Quest is Simple:

- *The Irish-Americans want an Irishness that Americans can claim as their own, free from the British, and still applicable to modern America*

Sources of Irish Identity are taken from what the Americans can still hold onto

- Music
- Catholicism
- Political Ideology
- Irish history, selectively chosen
 - Warriors and Saints (before the British)
 - Expatriate soldiers, settlers, and laborers (away from the British)
 - Rebels and tricksters (who beat the British)

Music

- Punk Music
 - Comfortably colludes with Irish attitudes of protest
 - Accommodates Irish melody and accompaniments (banjo, accordion, pipes, whistle)
- Folk Music
 - Irish genuinely (harp, flute, whistle, pipes, bodhran)
 - Combined with foreign elements (banjo, guitar, accordion, harmonica)
 - Irish were instrumental in the 60's folk revival
 - Bob Dylan's greatest influence was Liam Clancy
 - Pun Intended

Catholicism and Politics

- Respect of Veterans
 - Irish “Cannon fodder” of British, Americans
 - Respect for community defenders
- Community Sanctity
 - Most sacred thing is home, friends
 - Little concern for greater region (no established nation)
- Charity, Generosity
 - Both generosity of folk heroes and Catholic virtue
- Inviolability of the Church

Storytelling

- Oral tradition, jokes, songs, and “morality plays”
- Embody Irish virtue, memorialize Irish struggles, and instruct in being Irish
- Passed down by family, Church, friends
 - The focus of my study

Truth, Time, and other Irrelevancies

- Time and Truthfulness are independent of the story, for the most part
 - Used only when a historical figure or event gives greater gravity or specific humor, to an event
- Few real divisions of time
 - Pagan Era (gods, magicians, druids and warriors)
 - Christian Era (Saints, Vikings, abbeys)
 - Expatriates (after the arrival of the “uninvited guest”)
 - The Irish Joke (modern racial concepts embraced)

The Race of Happy Wars and Sad Love Songs

- Phrase first coined by Englishman G.K. Chesterton, but adopted by the Irish as their own
 - A favorite line of Tommy Makem and Luke Kelly
- Emphasizes the noble bravery of Irishmen and their disastrous relationships with women
- Both epic and comic
 - Wars: Incredible battles vs. witty and trickery
 - Love Songs: Tragic ends vs. marital disputing

My Personal Link to this Study

- I have been hearing stories and songs and homilies of Irishness since birth
- Study of history found a direct disconnect between world history and “Irishness”
 - Greater socio-economic context versus black-and-white of the “uninvited guest”
- Became a storyteller myself since college
 - As a presenter, TA and housemate

Process of Auto-Ethno-Biography

- Began by examining the most impactful stories of my own family's identity
- Crossed-listed them with “traditional” canon
- Began retelling them to other people
 - Casual setting
 - Observed my own changes to the story, what details sustained the story itself
 - Time and truth soon abandoned

Story Selection

- Cattle Raid of Cooley
 - Herculean characters that defy death and the gods
- Fionn MacCumhail and the Bold Fenian Men
 - Merry band of comrades who embody community
- The Abbey Saints: Patrick, Brighid, Colmcille
 - Build a community around a faith both Catholic, pagan
- Spanish Expatriates
 - Fight for community and faith: Bring the Irish to them!
- “The Barroom Hero”
 - A witty soldier who is both noble and sorry in foolery

Example Story: How County Monaghan Traded Her Politicians for Beggars

- Comical Happy War
 - Trickster
- Irish-Joke era
- Isolated case of Irish interacting with the British: “to ridicule the uninvited guest”

Example Story: How County Monaghan traded her Politicians

- Accepted beggar is the hero: communal sanctity, faith in one's own; even a beggar
- Against the British: an outsider who *gives nothing* to the community, and does not *make himself a member*
- Ends with a witticism: a joke, and not a ballad
- Did it happen? Does it matter?