

# British Association for Irish Studies Newletter

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**J. M. SYNGE**

the subject of

**FOCUS INTERVIEW**

with

**MARY KING**

**BATTLE IN THE BOOKS: THE IRISH IN U.S. SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS**

**THE SMURFIT ARCHIVE OF THE IRISH IN BRITAIN**

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BAIS NEWSLETTER NO. 27

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## EDITORIAL

*Focus Interview 17* strikes me as one of the liveliest in the ongoing series. Mary King's original and impassioned interpretation of the anger in John Synge's plays commands attention. I am very grateful to the Stephens family for permission to reproduce on the cover James Patterson's 1906 crayon portrait of J.M. Synge.

Sid Brown's reflections are the fruit of an extended study of the representation of Irish in US school textbooks, chronologically arranged in nine sections from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1990s. *Paradigm: Journal of the Textbook Colloquium* published last October an article entitled 'The textbook furore in the 1920s'. *Battle in the Books 7* climaxes with an incisive account of a textbook furore in the 1990s.

There is a progress report on the Archive of the Irish Diaspora in Britain at the University of North London by Tony Murray, the administrator of the Smurfit Archive of the Irish in Britain. I very much agree with Tony's view of the Archive of items from the past as primarily concerned with the *future* better documented understanding of the Irish Diaspora in Britain.

There is a report on the presentation of the BAIS Bursaries 2001 Awards at the Irish Embassy towards the end of May. The splendid occasion was tinged with a certain sadness at the knowledge among those present that the occasion was the last presentation of the annual Awards by Ted Barrington whose outstanding years of service as the Irish Ambassador in London come to a close in September.

**Copy and/or discs (Word 97) with articles, reports, notices, letters etc. to be included in No. 28 should be sent to Jerry Nolan, 8 Antrobus Road, Chiswick, London W4 5HY by 9 October 2001.**

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### **17 FOCUS INTERVIEW: Mary King on John Synge**

Mary King has written a brilliant study of one of the great Irish dramatists in her book *The Drama of J.M.Synge* (Fourth Estate/Syracuse University Press, 1985) wherein is highlighted the importance of Synge as an European figure with a strong interest in Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx – dimensions which have been long obscured by the standard version of Synge, first penned by Yeats in the wake of Synge's early death in order to celebrate the supreme creator of Irish peasant plays. Mary King's book provides independently minded analyses of those peasant plays but, above all, focuses the text and context of Synge's early play which was rejected by Yeats but which she has edited and published in its complete two-act version as *When the Moon Has Set (The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol 11)*. The occasion of this Focus Interview was twofold: the renewed interest in Synge sparked off by publication of Bill McCormack's *Fool of the Family: a life of J.M.Synge*; and the publication and first performances in Stratford-upon-Avon of Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* which has prompted some critics in the British Press to see McDonagh as the contemporary heir to the Synge tradition in drama.

**JN:** Why did W.B. Yeats cast himself as Synge's crucial mentor in those widely read self-dramatised accounts of his own life?

**MK:** I believe Yeats needed to imagine himself as the 'Great Inseminator', source and guardian of 'the genuine' Irish cultural revival. He played many parts, wore many masks, exploring this role – and Synge's premature death made it easy to sustain an unchallenged mentor position in relation to him. More specifically, concerning the 'The Irish Dramatic Movement', Yeats imagined himself, in a way, as God the Father; Synge as the Son, the Word made peasant flesh; and Lady Gregory as a kind of brooding Holy Spirit breathing Ascendancy *noblesse oblige*. Edward Martyn, I'm afraid, becomes almost a written-out sidekick supplying the greasy pence for the first performances. In his Nobel Prize address, Yeats almost obsessively resorts to this scriptural imagery when describing the foundation of the Irish Literary and Abbey theatres. That said, Yeats did help Synge become a successful writer and dramatist by involving him in the plans for an Irish theatre. He recognised and affirmed his creative genius, but his mentorship was not crucial in the way *in which Yeats projects or imagines it*, that is, in encouraging him to go to a wild island off the Galway coast, as he cavalierly called the three quite distinct Aran islands, and study its life because that life had never been expressed in literature. Synge didn't aspire to become that kind of primitivist peasant dramatist. Even if Yeats offered some such advice, Synge didn't take it at the time or in the spirit suggested because he went to the Aran Islands for his own reasons, with a mind well prepared to observe and evaluate the complexities of island life. The islands, Synge knew, were examples of uneven development rather than homogenous wild primitivism because they were enmeshed into the economies of Britain and the United States. Besides, Synge family connections with the Aran Islands and the West, as landlords, missionaries and business entrepreneurs, were long established and fraught. While Yeats was concerned to 'recreate' a unifying 'lost' past, Synge was far better placed to contextualise the complexities of the actual place.

**JN:** How was the view of the Abbey Theatre as 'Synge Theatre' after the Playboy riots fitted into Yeats's cultural politics?

**MK:** I suppose there's a sense in which the *Playboy* and the Playboy riots were a delayed turning-point for Yeats's cultural politics, bringing him, ultimately, somewhat closer to Synge's understanding of a subversive or critical national drama, or even 'peasant drama'. Originally, Yeats envisaged the Irish Literary Theatre as exercising a mystical influence in helping to re-create the Golden Age of a pan-Celtic race. Yeats claimed to want its plays to be remote, spiritual and ideal. Synge's poetry involved presenting an antithetical down-to-earth realism by means of violence, calling a shift a shift, interrogating the highly dangerous relationship between gallous story and dirty deed, most of which, by the way, form the crux of Martin McDonagh's equally controversial *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* written almost a hundred years after Synge's *Playboy*. Synge's shocking drama provoked a strong reaction among a new brand of Catholic middle-class nationalists. That reaction must have alerted Yeats to the insidious challenge to his dream of spiritual leadership by a cultural politics which was both anathema to him but was, of course, a mirror image of his own 'Ascendancy' pretensions. Perhaps it alerted Yeats to the sentimentality often lurking in exclusionary ideals, a theme which Yeats himself did not confront until he wrote *Purgatory*. Yeats's immediate reaction to the Abbey riots was to move towards a dangerously potent racist version of cultural politics when he set up Synge as an aristocrat rejected by the ignorant mob. For Yeats, 'the mob' would be saved from vulgar urban democracy by its Ascendancy betters spreading the news of a religion of poetry which, he argued, must satisfy the overwhelming need of the Irish race for beneficial influences which were not being met by the ideas popular in English or American democracies. Yeats did not foresee that in due course Synge, the Abbey Theatre's realistic peasant dramatist, would be utterly changed by the new urban Catholic middle-class into a nationalist agenda of reactionary politics.

**JN:** How satisfied was Synge with the Abbey's staging of his peasant plays?

**MK:** Synge worked closely with those staging his plays. The company was small and 'hands on' and he had a major say in everything – from casting to voice training, set design and lighting, and choice and deployment of costumes and props. He learned from the Fay brothers and he taught the players much. A strong supporter of stylised movement, he approved delivery of lines while the actors 'held' a gesture. Like Yeats, Synge longed for notation resembling a musical score, to indicate how lines should be spoken. He was meticulous about stage directions, and masterly in choice and deployment of costumes and props. Of course, it's wrong to think of him as a 'peasant realist'. The first productions of his plays were not examples of 'social realism'. What the first audiences saw was a trenchant view of an authentic Ireland which most didn't want to acknowledge.

**JN:** Is there enough evidence to pin down Synge's own form of Irish nationalism?

**MK:** There's no evidence that Synge formulated any political or cultural philosophy of nationalism, although he did think critically about forms of nationalism and imperialism that he encountered in his travels and in his readings of history and sociology. We know that he read Weber, Marx and Nietzsche and studied Celticism and French and German philology, all of which were imbued with concepts and ideologies of nation and race, from left to ultra-right. His non-dramatic writings point to support for Irish Home Rule on the grounds that the whole moral and economic condition of Ireland had been diseased by prolonged misgovernment and many social misfortunes. Quite unlike Yeats, he saw little hope in Ascendancy-led cultural resurgence. He regarded the Anglo-Irish aristocracy as well past their sell-by date, as even degenerate. He saw socialism as a way to justice and equity. Although, *pace* Yeats, he often thought politically, Synge was never a 'party man'. There's no evidence in his writings of any enthusiasm for the politics of the nation state or any support for an exclusionary ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious agenda for 'Ireland in the new century'.

**JN:** Why was Yeats so determined to obliterate Synge's early Ibsenite play *When the Moon Has Set*, a play which your scholarship has done so much to place at the centre of Synge's creative drive?

**MK:** There's no simple answer to that one. I suspect that Yeats was deeply disturbed by Synge's anatomy of 'Ascendancy' disease and decline. In *When the Moon Has Set*, Synge struggles explicitly to come to grips with the Irish Ascendancy's degeneration during the nineteenth-century, while Yeats was busy eliding in favour of the magnificence of his heroic eighteenth-century invention. In *When the Moon Has Set* Synge's actually striving in his own way to reverse intimations of decadence and degeneracy – in essence, to unwrite Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Probably Yeats disliked Synge's attempts to dramatise the benefits, as well as the guilt and fear of pollution associated with confessional and class miscegenation. It's possible, even, that Yeats thought Synge's Ibsenite play too close in spirit to Martyn's Ibsenite plays of the Irish Literary Theatre *The Heather Field* and *Maeve*. Yeats would have felt antipathetic towards the play's Darwinian colouring. Eventually Yeats himself came to terms with similar themes very belatedly in *Purgatory*. The play did not at first seem immediately 'actable'. That said, it was certainly as playable as Wilde's *Vera*. It's a pity that Yeats and Lady Gregory so condemned it out of hand. It's interesting, if rather pointless, to speculate about what Synge might have produced if he had been encouraged by them to continue to dramatise overtly the tensions between a decaying Ascendancy and a rising Catholic bourgeoisies. The Costellos in *When the Moon Has Set* may speak a peasant dialect, but they most certainly not primitives: they are a repressed class becoming aware of wrongs done them by their masters. But Yeats didn't want to know.

**JN:** How did Synge's persistent preoccupation with *When the Moon Has Set* continue to influence his development as a writer?

**MK:** Synge wrestled with the same themes and preoccupations indirectly in the so-called peasant plays. I've argued this more fully in my book, and it has been developed biographically in Bill McCormack's recent book. There's little doubt that Synge hoped at some point to write a play more explicitly dealing with Irish middle-class equivalents of Ibsen's themes and preoccupations. We know that he worked on a novel about nurses, illness, religion and 'union affairs'. His semi-autobiographical prose works, the 'Vita Vecchia' and 'Etude Morbide', are much closer in manner, style and overt preoccupation to *When the Moon Has Set* than to his famous peasant plays.

**JN:** How did Synge regard Yeats as a fellow Abbey director and fellow playwright?

**MK:** Difficult to say much about that. Synge had a high regard for Yeats as poet, but the regard was far from slavish or uncritical. Sometimes I feel that part of Synge's revenge for the rejection of *When the Moon Has Set* was his opposition to Yeats's idea of producing more European and classical plays and his espousal of peasant plays only for the Abbey Theatre. He agreed with much of Yeats's approach to dramaturgy – the most important difference being that he wanted the Abbey company to be more democratic. Synge once said about the Abbey: 'Yeats looks after the stars and I look after everything else.' I should think that he regarded Yeats's plays up to 1909, the year of his death, as bordering on the 'breezy, spring-dayish and Cuchullanoid'. I have argued in my book that Synge's last play *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was probably written in part as a counter-text to Yeats's *Deirdre*. I don't doubt that had he lived to see them, Synge would have recognised the later developments in his former mentor and applauded *The Words Upon the Windowpane* and, above all, *Purgatory*.

**JN:** Do you think that recent critical assessments of Synge have fundamentally tackled what you recently rather memorably described in a letter to *London Review of Books* as 'peasant Synge-itis'?

**MK:** I suppose recent historical, critical and biographical work should have made it impossible to view Synge as merely 'a writer of peasant plays' because the Yeatsian terms of praise have been successfully problematised and deconstructed. Most certainly Synge criticism has greatly benefited as has the styles of production now desirable in the presentation of his plays. Katherine Worth has always seen Synge as a modern European dramatist. Declan Kiberd in *Synge and the Irish Language* dealt a deathblow to the myth that Synge's 'peasant dialect' was a form of stage Irish. My own book *The Drama of J.M. Synge* was, I like to think, a ground-breaking reassessment in the 1980s. There has been some outstanding reinterpretations of Synge's work in Bill McCormack's *From Burke to Beckett* and more recently in the biography, and in Nicholas Grene's work and his edited collection of essays from the Synge Summer School. It will take yet more time, however, to persuade aficionados of Yeats's versions of 'The Irish Revival' to put aside their mage-coloured spectacles and look directly at the nature and significance of Synge's achievements. Perhaps our best hopes lie with the young players, producers and directors emerging from the many experimental theatres and theatre workshops in Ireland and elsewhere, and with dramatists who have little interest in seeing Synge either through the Yeats's eyes or through that coarsened tradition of 'peasant realism' which was always a travesty of his drama.

**JN:** Recently some of the London critics declared *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* by Martin McDonagh as an example of a modern dramatist's feeding off Synge's depictions of the West of Ireland – what do you think about that?

**MK:** A loaded question! Let me try to deal first with 'the West of Ireland', and then with connections between Synge and McDonagh. For me Synge's western seaboard settings are analogues, not for any simplistic primitivist *Tir na nOg*, but for the underdeveloped regions of Ireland. 'The West' was both opposed to and attracted by the politics and economics of its urban and metropolitan centres. Early twentieth-century colonial Ireland was on the cusp of

major changes politically, culturally, religiously and economically. Undoubtedly, Synge felt emotionally attracted towards a primitivist 'Western' vision, but he knew that Ireland was an integral part of the British Empire, part of Europe and embroiled culturally and economically with the emerging power of the United States of America. This, as he indicated in *The Aran Islands*, was the context of emergent nationalist aspirations in a post-Parnell situation. Now *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World* are explicitly set in the West. *Riders to the Sea* can be played on several levels: a tragedy of a subsistence economy giving way to the pressures of price and commodities; a threnody for the decline and fall of a noble but doomed culture; a warning about an Ireland maddened by oppression, emigration, failed revolution and famine. *The Playboy* takes the gloves off completely, to contest bare-fisted the sentimentalised versions of 'The West', whether emanating from Yeats's idealism or from emerging Catholic nationalisms. Bullying, whinging, double-dealing, incest, decadence, sexual perversions and torture are shown to be part and parcel of 'The Western World'. Boredom, bullying, gamesmanship and repressed sexuality erupt into dangerous hero-worship and collapse into betrayal. When I recently read *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, I was startled by the affinities between his excoriating highly intelligent contextualised dramatisation of the politics and psyche of sentimental ultra-right-wing republican violence in the midst of today's 'Celtic Tiger', and Synge's prescient anatomy of the dis-ease afflicting the Irish body politic one hundred years ago. If Dublin remains unable or unwilling to mount a production of McDonagh's *Lieutenant*, preferably at the Abbey alongside Synge's *Playboy* produced along the lines of Mary Borgatta-Kelly's recent brilliant post-modernist production with her Red Rua Theatre students at Bray, County Wicklow, then Ireland has learnt very little from the revised assessments of Synge's drama.

**JN:** Do you think that Synge's peasant plays are currently most in danger of an Irish Heritage metamorphosis into a brand of Irish culture ideal for touristic consumption?

**MK:** The danger is real. A more widespread understanding of Synge's contribution to the Irish Revival is urgently required. The Irish society that Synge castigated in his plays suffered mostly from the kindred ills of imperialist exploitation and repression and incipient nationalist authoritarianism and internecine hatreds. Today Synge's plays in vibrant performance can still make the Irish realise the folly of exulting in an 'ideal' national identity which can so easily degenerate into the words and action of racism. As we talk, Ireland may be welcoming the necessary tourists but is showing less than a hundred thousand welcomes to those modern strangers at the door, the immigrants and the refugees.

**JN:** A final question to a native of County Wicklow who has returned home – to what extent is Synge himself nowadays accepted by the locals in his native county as 'one of ourselves'?

**MK:** As Wicklow becomes absorbed into Greater Dublin' there are very few genuine locals. Since returning to Wicklow, I've seen two intelligent local productions of Synge's plays. I've already mentioned Red Rua's *Playboy*. The other was *In the Shadow of the Glen*, played by a rural amateur drama group, actually in a lonely cottage at the head of a long glen in the Wicklow Hills. But how can Synge be seen as 'one of ourselves' when we Irish don't know who we are and like to identify ourselves by what we are not? The Synge Summer School is successful, but that's hardly evidence of Wicklow taking a son to its bosom! The angry spirit of Synge would hardly have it otherwise!



Dr. Mary C. King  
Author of *J.M.Synge's Drama*

### THE ARCHIVE AS A MIRRORED BALL: *TELL YOUR STORY*

In an essay for the collection *Migrations: The Irish at Home and Abroad* in 1990, Liam Ryan wrote: 'Emigration is a mirror in which the Irish nation can always see its true face'. Today perhaps we might suitably substitute 'immigration' for 'emigration', but the metaphor of the mirror serves as a useful one for capturing the essence of the project I have been involved with for the last twelve months. In June last year a three year development programme, funded by the Smurfit Foundation, was launched at the University of North London to preserve, catalogue, expand and disseminate a unique collection of documents, photographs, books and audio-visual materials relating to the Irish in Britain. As part of the launch, items from the Smurfit Archive of the Irish in Britain were exhibited to the public for the first time. During the all too brief three days available to do this, I met and spoke to countless local Irish people as well as visitors from further afield. My abiding memory from the time was watching the way in which people saw their own experiences of migration and life in Britain reflected back to them in a way that is still relatively rare for the Irish community in Britain. Allied to this were the many individual stories people had to tell me, how similar or different their experiences were to those displayed and how important it was to them for their voices and personal histories to be

acknowledged also. No single repository, of course, can pretend to reflect adequately the multifarious dimensions of a community as large as the Irish in Britain, but the fact that so many visitors to the exhibition wanted to contribute to the development project, in however small a way, convinced me of the importance of ensuring such a venture had to attempt to be as inclusive and representative as possible.

The Smurfit Archive of the Irish in Britain was originally donated to the Irish Studies Centre at the University of North London by the Irish in Britain History Group in 1991. The IBHG which was set up in the early 1980s began to collect documentation and oral interviews on the Irish in Britain as no other such collection existed at the time. Since moving to UCL, the collections have been significantly expanded and due to better access arrangements, many more people have been able to use the Archive than would otherwise have been the case, in some cases from as far afield as Japan and Australia. Many visitors have remarked on the positive advantage of being able to access so many sources for their research under one roof. Examples of some of the holdings we have are a copy of the first ever book-length history of the Irish in Britain by John Denvir published in 1892, a collection of St.Patrick's Day programmes produced for events in

London dating back to 1922, oral history recordings of individuals' experiences of migration to Britain in the 1930s, photographs of Irish community events in the 1950s and political posters from the 1980s. In addition to this the Archive has recently acquired its most significant donation to date, the prison letters of Guilford Four man Paul Hill for which we are now looking for funding in order to preserve them to BS5454 archival standards. The Archive is regularly consulted by researchers, programme-makers, historians and journalists from Britain, Ireland and further afield. Tim Pat Coogan's recent history of Irish migration *Wherever Green is Worn*, the TV documentary on the Irish abroad *The Irish Empire* and Clare Barrington's bibliography of *Irish Women in Britain* are just some of the works for which the Archive has been consulted. A TV documentary for RTE on the second generation Irish in Britain with the working title *Not Quite White* is one of the projects being currently researched here. In addition to visits, the Archive deals with numerous telephone, e-mail and letter enquiries requesting information, literature searches and referrals to other Irish agencies in Britain.

The Smurfit Archive of the Irish in Britain contains a substantial collection of materials documenting the experiences of the Irish in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s as well as more widely researched periods such as the 1980s. One of the aims of the archive is to be historically and geographically comprehensive and inclusive as possible and in this regard filling in some of the glaring gaps in the collection is a big priority. The gaps include: the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the experiences of the Irish in Scotland, photographic records of the Irish at work in Britain, documentation on the Unionist community in Britain).

The three year development programme of the Archive was launched in part to address this issue and is progressing in various key ways. Firstly the collections must be adequately preserved. The Archive contains a number of rare and

fragile materials whose preservation for posterity is a very high priority. It is our aim in the near future to acquire dedicated archival space within the university to ensure the safe housing and appropriate access for users. The expansion programme entails outreach, liaison and consultation with various organisations and individuals in order to acquire new materials. In particular, the Archive is keen to expand its collection of photographs, recordings and ephemera. A schedule of oral interviews with individuals about their personal experiences of life in Britain is part of the initiative. Dissemination and ever widening access to the data held by the Archive is an important goal. The Archive helped fund and support *Shades of Green: A Directory of the Irish in Britain* which was edited by Clare Barrington. There are plans to publish in 2003 an up-to-date annotated bibliography of research on the Irish in Britain. In conjunction with this, the creation of a website detailing the holdings of the Archive will publicise its existence and encourage links and liaison. Integral to this will be the establishment of a computerised photographic record of the Irish in Britain in order to safeguard the integrity of the images and facilitate wider access. There is now a programme of exhibitions and illustrated talks about the Archive touring Britain. These are designed to encourage regional participation in the project as well to display items from the collections for people who are unable to visit the Archive in London. Projects for collaborative initiatives such as book launches and theatrical projects are being worked on in the hope of bringing together individuals working across the academic and community sectors.

Finally, may I suggest an extension of the metaphor of the mirror by way of a comparison between the Archive and a mirrored ball in a great assembly hall? Apart from containing numerous small individual mirror tiles, which may be said to represent each of the items in the collections, once the mirror ball begins to spin and be projected far and wide, the rotating items should invite all kinds of



new patterns of storytelling. We Irish have a special historical and cultural affinity with storytelling. No story – be it academic, fictional or autobiographical – can develop until the story is spread as widely as possible. The Archive is a process rather than a product, with an open invitation to ALL sections of the Irish community in Britain to join in the storytelling. Despite the token presence of the Irish category on the recent British

census forms, there persists a massive ignorance throughout British society in the awareness and recognition of the contributions, needs and achievements of the Irish in Britain as compared to other ethnic minority groups. Hopefully The Smurfit Archive of the Irish in Britain will be seen as a wake up call to all Irish in Britain: **TELL YOUR STORY**. The Smurfit Archive is fundamentally as much about the future as the past.

**Tony Murray**

### **BATTLE IN THE BOOKS 7: THE IRISH IN U.S. SCHOOL HISTORY TEXT BOOKS**

With the assistance of a grant from the British Academy (to whom acknowledgement is made). I conducted a survey of approximately one hundred history text books used in US schools throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Almost half of those read had, at best, minimal passing remarks ranging from a simplistic sentence on the tragedy of the Irish Famine to such intriguing snippets as the blaming of Mrs. O'Leary's cow for causing the Chicago fire.

Most texts appeared, for the most part, cosmetic. Their 'Irish context' is no exception. Unsubstantiated 'evidence' of generosity to the Irish during the 1840s is offered and a rosy picture of the triumph of the 'melting pot' ideology is proclaimed up to the 1960s. The Irish Famine received cautiously non-judgemental treatment for the most part. The British government usually emerged comparatively unscathed especially when its record was measured alongside its record in previous centuries. No mention was to be found in any text of the apprehension felt by established Irish-Americans to subsequent waves of Irish immigration during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In general, it would be appropriate to describe textbook treatment of the great calamity for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as characterised by 'more in sorrow than in anger'.

Amazing 'facts' on Irish history of Irish migration in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century

continued to be produced. One piece of misinformation for young Americans is that most Irish spoke little or no English, another is that some sailed so far west that they disappeared out of the pages of history completely. One question, set somewhat ambitiously, invited students to write about how an Irish peasant might feel about the British government in the 1840. Another asks how a newly arrived Irish immigrant react to the United States. A rogue question like 'Why did so many Irish immigrants travel steerage?' had more chance of stimulating a thoughtful response from the student.

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century textbooks writers regarded Scotch/Ulster Irish with a degree of respect not usually accorded to the post-Famine, mainly Catholic, immigrants. Heroic figures such as 'Old Hickory' Andrew Jackson featured prominently and, for the most part, were treated with uncritical acclaim. While the ideology of the 'melting pot' was in vogue, texts played down the facts of divisions and did their best to soft-pedal, for example, Irish-American political corruption in big cities such as Chicago as the best educational preparation for acculturation.

John F. Kennedy's 1960 victory (with a little help from Chicago's Irish-American Mayor Richard J. Daley) should have given Catholic Irish-Americans their long sought national recognition and triumph in the school textbooks. But the fabled

'luck of the Irish' deserted them. Coinciding with Kennedy's victory there began to grow the strident demands of other minority groups such as Blacks, Hispanics and Feminists all in search of maximum attention. With space at a premium in the battle of national attention, it is not surprising that Irish-Americans found themselves in a no-man's/person's land caught between the forces of the traditional WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) values and the radical history of the 1960s which was beginning to appear in state guidelines.

In one text concerning itself with Civil Rights there appeared unreferenced statements from Malcolm X in which he justified violence by citing the example of the Irish. Ironically the text was first published about the time when there had been ugly demonstrations in cities like Boston against school bussing in which the 'Southies' (the blue collar Irish of that city) had been to the fore. As the 1960s descended into riots, division, bloodshed and debacle overseas texts displayed a great reluctance to disturb the restless youth in the nation's classrooms by questioning the American 'Melting Pot' Dream. Gradually the growth of 'student participation' began to undermine such bland assumptions.

A change of direction began with the introduction of original source material for discussion purposes in school history textbooks. Compared with Black, Chicano and Feminist material, the Irish input in this tendency was small but not insignificant in new attempts to portray the immigrant experience as a continual process in the United States over the centuries. With the demise of the 'melting pot' ideology by the 1970s and the rise in the importance of the richness of distinctive ethnicity, there remained an interest in 'Irishness' but for the most part it remained on the periphery of the other more impassioned ethnic debates. The image of the weeping woman with the harp as Ireland's symbol was refusing to die.

Realistic, fresh and critical views on such topics as the ugliness of the Civil War conscription riots and the evidence of Irish-American violence towards Blacks began to be introduced into the texts of the 1980s. In many otherwise revised texts, only the activities of such Irish-American politicians as Joseph McCarthy and Mayor Daley were still safe from the new scrutiny. Similarly no text made any mention of the strong strategic interest the British perceived they had in Ireland (which might have been likened to the interest of the United States in Cuba), or the often violent prejudice Irish-Americans had frequently demonstrated towards other arrivals from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe as well as Asia. That tried and trusted text *Magruder's American Government*, which had been regularly updated in new editions since 1917, appeared in 1994 with its well established antipathy towards immigrants wryly modified with the inclusion of a Don Wright cartoon depicting 'Native Americans' viewing the arrival of the Mayflower with alarm and comment 'There's goes the neighbourhood!'

One textbook writer sternly reminded his youthful readers of how little Americans knew of foreign affairs and mentioned the subject of Ireland. Occasionally textbooks devoted some space to the deep historical roots of the Northern Ireland situation. One intriguing traces it all back to the year 1500! Another, with a striking photograph of a burning car, poses the question: 'Do think Margaret Thatcher's response to terrorism appropriate?' and pins down its young reader with the deadly supplementary 'Why or why not?' It has often been suggested that many Americans find it difficult to grasp the difference between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One recent text included a map of Europe in 1941 with a striking colour key to emphasise the contrasting neutrality of the Irish Free State and of the British Province of Ulster at war with Germany.

In the 1990s Irish history in school textbooks really hit the headlines in New

York. New York's not very Irish-sounding Governor decided to ensure that the state's high school students would henceforth be legally required to study the Irish potato famine/hunger as attempted genocide perpetrated by the British. On both sides of the Atlantic, as well as the Irish Sea, the story has spawned some tabloid newspaper column headings with angles like 'Patiki's Hot Potato' and 'Patiki's Half-baked Proposal' being plugged. A bill pending in Congress would require the Department of Education to include the event in all model curricula with an appropriate section in school texts. This 'Battle in the Books' has spread to such states as Maryland and New Jersey among others, with the Great Irish-American cause having already secured an overwhelming postal vote it seems. In February 1999 both the Irish Republic and the US issued postage stamps with an identical design depicting a 'coffin ship' and the captions 'Irish emigration' and 'Irish immigration' respectively.

The context for Patiki's action was the long, sustained pressure organised by a range of Irish-American groups within New York and outside its boundaries. That persistent feeling of exclusion among Irish-American groups must have made an important contribution in persuading the Governor to pursue his proposal. It would be tedious in the extreme to list the multitude of Irish-American organisation in existence. A random trawl through their serried ranks will suffice to confirm that they are as potentially formidable as they are committed to various aims. It might be argued that recent powerful tendencies such as suburbanisation and mass culture should have contributed to the break-up of the consciousness of Irish traditions that once provided the ballast for Irish-Americans and their political leaders. However there is some evidence to the contrary.

In 1995 'The American Friends of Sinn Fein' raised \$1.3 million. The Ancient Order of Hibernians regularly organises 'pilgrimages' to the Emerald Isle. Jig dancing, Celtic Christianity, tin whistle blowing and Gaelic can be studied at the

Irish Arts Center located at 553 West 51 Street, New York whilst the periodical *Eire-Ireland* (published by the Irish American Cultural Institute) contains a wealth of scholarly articles of high quality for subscription holders. What all these varied groups seem to share is a determination to emphasise the Irish contribution to the development of the United States and to retain as much as possible of genuine and imagined traditions. One of the most triumphant images in the quest is the logo of the Irish American Cultural Institute which takes the form of a Celtic eagle.

Governor Patiki's willingness to jump of the Irish-American bandwagon was not surprising given the electoral possibilities offered in New York. The American Irish Historical Society's headquarters is in Fifth Avenue. Its journal, *The Recorder*, has included many articles on such themes as the number of Irishmen who aided Columbus and/or Washington. In 1947 its cover, complete with the motto 'That the world may know' provided a photograph of the Society's Annual Banquet at the Hotel Biltmore, New York, showing the well-heeled descendants of the 'Famine Irish' tucking into a sumptuous spread at a time when hated England was in the grip of post-war austerity and the Famine's centenary had just passed. On a more mundane but contemporary note a lapel button/badge (complete with a leprechaun and the American flag), inscribed '100% Irish-American and proud of it', can be bought for 25 cents in New York. In 1999 the American Irish Historical Society awarded Maureen Murphy a grant to 'develop and coordinate the new Famine Curriculum' in New York State. The Irish Famine Curriculum Committee is located at Moorestown, New Jersey under the chairmanship of James Mullin. The American Cultural Institute has taken the initiative in the rebuilding the ship 'Jeanie Johnston' which carried many of the 'Famine Irish' across the Atlantic. Irish Famine web sites have been set up by such groups as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Irish-American Foundation: downloadable information from 'Songs of the Great Famine', 'Blight Simulation

Software' and 'The Lie of the Irish Potato Famine' frequently links the present Northern situation very simplistically with the English lie about the Great Hunger.

But Pataki's sponsorship of the Famine Curriculum should not be reduced simply to a matter of vote-grubbing in New York. The whole phenomenon should be understood in the context of the legacy of acute Irish-American sensitivity first acquired during the half-century after the Famine when the US was dominated by the WASPS. The Irish-American response to big country challenges was to concentrate their numbers in large, key cities like New York and Chicago where they grouped to wield maximum local political and social influence. The growth of public education meant that state and local authorities became responsible for

the purchase of block orders of school textbooks. An important part of the Irish-American battle began belatedly to be waged in those textbooks alongside the other minority groups in the demand for ethnic recognition in textbooks about the development of the United States. Earlier Irish disappointments is sharpening the resolve to succeed in establishing the Famine Curriculum which at the very least would establish the credentials of the Irish-Americans as the descendants of victims in an age where the ideology of historical victimhood gains minority ethnic groups publicity and recognition. A ceasefire in this battle for a better place for Irish-Americans in the history of the United States seems nowhere in sight.

**Dr. Sidney Brown The Open University.**

### **BAIS POSTGRADUATE AWARDS 2001**

At a reception in the Irish Embassy in London on May 31 2001, hosted by the Irish Ambassador, Ted Barrington and Clare Barrington, the third BAIS Postgraduate Awards were presented to four Irish Studies students engaged in research at higher educational institutions in Great Britain. The Awards consist of individual awards of £1000 each to assist postgraduate students with the costs involved in pursuing research. Applications for the awards were judged by a panel of academics, chaired by Dr Eibhlín Evans. The scheme was initiated by BAIS in 1999 and is now becoming an important feature of BAIS activity. Born of the awareness of the need for supplementary funding for postgraduate students, BAIS now seeks to use the unique position it occupies within the field of Irish Studies in Britain to promote high quality research through assisting those involved at an early stage.

In his speech Ted Barrington supported the Awards and endorsed the efforts of BAIS in this regard. He applauded the individual projects of the students involved and went on to claim that research in Irish Studies was an important activity in helping to spread knowledge and understanding generally, but particularly in contributing to cultural and educational links between Ireland and Britain. The Good Friday Agreement would not have been possible, he claimed, without the insights and understanding gleaned from recent academic research. In presenting the awards, The Ambassador wished the winners every success in their individual projects.

The reception was attended by members of the BAIS Council, members of the Postgraduate Awards Committee, academics, writers and friends of this year's winners who were as follows:

**Jessica Barkhuff** Sommerville College Oxford  
Research Subject: History

'To Own and Honour': Proprietorship and Partisanship of Irish-America after the Anglo-Irish Treaty 1921

**Matthew Kelly** Balliol College Oxford  
Research Subject: History

Themes and Influences in Advanced Irish Nationalism 1882-1914

**Paul Murphy** Staffordshire University Stoke-on-Trent  
Research Subject: Literature

The Cultural politics of Representation in Irish Drama 1899-1949

**Tadhg O'Sullivan** Trinity College Oxford  
Research Subject: History

Cultural Frontiers and Frontier Culture: Narratives of Social Improvement and National Character in Ireland 1790-1835

**Dr. Eibhlín Evans Convenor: Postgraduate Bursaries**



Paul Murphy    Eibhlín Evans    Ted Barrington    Tadhg O'Sullivan    Matthew Kelly

## NOTICEBOARD

News from the Irish Text Society  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Irish Text Society/UCC Seminar**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> in this series of annual seminars will take place at University College Cork on 10 November 2001. The seminar will focus on Volumes 42, 45 of the ITS main series **Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill/ The Life of Aodh Ruadh O Domhnaill**. The provisional programme is as follows:

**Dr. Marc Caball:** The Work of Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird and Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird in the context of the O'Donnells

**Professor Micheal Mac Craith:** *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh* in the context of Renaissance Literature

**Dr. Nollaig Ó Muraile:** Paul Walsh as editor of *BAR*

**Professor Damian McManus:** The Language of *BAR*

**Professor Pádraig A. Breatnach:** Lughaidh Ó Cleirigh and *BAR*

**Dr. Hiram Morgan:** The Real Hugh O'Donnell

For further details go to <http://www.ucc.ie/locus/ITS.html> or contact the ITS/UCC Seminar Committee, Combined Departments of Irish, University College, Cork, Ireland

### **Publications of previous ITS/UCC Seminars**

*Fled Bricrenn: Reassessments*, edited by Pádraig Ó Riain (priced at £15 stg. ) contains the proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> Seminar in 1999 which focused on the text *Fled Bricrend – the Feast of Bricriu*, edited by George Henderson. Henderson's edition of this important tale of the Ulster Cycle was first published for the Society in 1899 under the imprint of the publisher, folklorist and Celticist Alfred Nutt, a founder of the Society.

The proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Seminar in 2000 will be launched at this year's seminar which was devoted to the work of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair, a colossus-like figure amongst the Gaelic poets of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The ITS Main Series of publications consisted of Irish-language texts with English-language translations, notes etc.

ITS Contact for further information: **Seán Hutton Honorary Secretary**  
E-mail: [SHuttonSEANFILE@aol.com](mailto:SHuttonSEANFILE@aol.com)

### **COLÁISTE NA NGAEL**

Lá Gaelach – Cressing Temple Archeological Centre, Witham, Essex

Saturday 8 September 2001

A day of lectures, music and language classes in a beautiful historic setting. There will be a guided tour and lunch in the Centre's restaurant.

Coláiste na nGael, Church Stretton, Shropshire

Saturday & Sunday 13 & 14 October 2001

A friendly weekend of language classes at all levels. There will be historic walking tours and music. Church Stretton is an attractive village well served by regular trains. There is plentiful local accommodation.

For more information, contact **Christy Evans**, Shenfield High School, Alexander Lane, Shenfield, Essex, CM15 8RY 01277 226422 or **Cathal Ó Beirne**, 4 Duncan Way, Hartford, Huntingdon, PE29 1SZ 01480 450412

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**DATE FOR NEXT BAIS COUNCIL MEETING SATURDAY 21.06.01**

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