

Introduction to 'Irishness and the Culture of the Irish Abroad'

Ellen McWilliams and Tony Murray

For a small island on the periphery of Europe, Ireland has had a remarkably global impact in regards to its people and culture. Successive waves of migration are, at once the refrain of a centuries-old tradition and at the same time simply a reflection of a current worldwide phenomenon.¹ Irish history and mythology are replete with stories of exodus and exile. From Colmcille's departure from Ireland in the sixth century through the Celtic sagas of the early middle ages, the Flight of the Earls and the Wild Geese of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the great migrations after the Famine in the nineteenth, the notion of leaving, as Patrick Ward points out, 'has deep roots in the Irish psyche'² In recent years, the international refugee crisis, the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union and the introduction of draconian immigration legislation in the United States have all refocused attention on the global political context within which any study of Irish migration is currently undertaken.

By bringing together a wide range of historical and geographical perspectives on the Irish abroad, this special issue will examine a dual and interconnected notion of diasporic Irishness by analysing how the lived experience of migration (past and present) and the cultural and literary responses to that experience have influenced the way it is more generally shaped and disseminated. Due to its widespread commodification through popular culture, Irishness in the twenty-first century has, in the words of Diane Negra, become a 'particularly performative and mobile' notion.³ Well before the advent of cinema, TV and the internet, however, the migration of thousands of Irish migrants across the globe had already played a formative role in how notions of Ireland and the Irish were perceived and reproduced. As Irish people have migrated to an ever more diverse range of locations over recent decades, Irishness has become an increasingly globalized concept. Like each new phase of Irish migration, the one that began with the financial collapse of 2008 has prompted new evaluations of not just the social and economic nature of the Irish diaspora, but of what it means to be Irish.

Whilst the cultural contributions of the 'New Irish', i.e. the migrants who settled in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years, are still in their infancy, this other diaspora may prove more important in future notions of what it means to be Irish than its more familiar diaspora abroad. However, the financial crash of 2008 and the subsequent return to large-scale outward migration from Ireland has emphatically turned the spotlight once more on the approximately seventy million people worldwide claiming Irish nationality. In an attempt to offset the impact of the economic downturn, the Global Irish Economic Forum was established in 2009 with the objective of harnessing this diaspora to promote 'brand Ireland' by creating a 'global cultural profile'.⁴ An Irish government initiative designed to encourage the Irish abroad to celebrate their Irishness by visiting Ireland followed in 2013. But, while 'The Gathering' attempted to promote a sense of seamlessness in the relationship between the country and its diaspora, it was criticized in some quarters for exploiting its migrant population.⁵ The establishment of a Minister of State for the Diaspora and Overseas Aid in 2014, the publication of the *Global Irish Diaspora Policy* the following year, and more recently the commitment to a referendum in June 2019 on whether to grant Irish citizens abroad the right to vote in future Presidential elections are evidence of how the Irish state has begun to belatedly recognize that the country's diaspora represents a crucial lever of 'soft power' in an rapidly globalising and globally-dependent political future.⁶ The global impact of literature and culture, in particular, is formally recognised by the Irish state as supplying one of its 'greatest competitive advantages, acting as a "door opener" that helps to secure jobs, trade, investment and tourism.⁷ But, rather than simply showcasing a monolithic sense of Ireland to the world, the creative energies of the Irish abroad provide reflections and re-articulations of what means to be Irish informed by multiple diasporic perspectives.

David Lloyd (who has long maintained a healthy scepticism in regards to the theoretical efficacy of 'diaspora' in Irish Studies) has, nevertheless, by recognising the work of the social scientist, Avtar Brah, argued that 'a critical theory of diaspora must grasp the historical experience and the various discourses of diaspora in a dialectical manner in order to differentiate diaspora as such from the general movement of peoples and the national longings of diasporic collectivities from either individual desires for at-homeness or the ideologies of belonging generated by nation-states.'⁸ Meanwhile, as the geographer Mary Gilmartin points out, facts and figures alone still fail to capture 'the extent to which migration affects people and places: the anxieties and the excitement, the threats and the possibilities, that emerge from the decisions of one or many people to live in other places.'⁹ Following on from recent special

issues on the Irish diaspora in this journal, the body of work in this special issue encourages new understandings of collective cultural conditions and personal specificities of Irish migration over time as well as space.¹⁰ By examining how the culture of the Irish abroad is historically as well as geographically conditioned and mediated, it aims, therefore, to bring a dual perspective to bear on understandings of Irishness in the 21st century. It pursues different lines of inquiry in thinking about the transnational transmission and transformation of Irish literature and culture and the relationship of these circuits of exchange to the diasporic community. It is especially interested in bringing to light neglected strands in this history of exchange and in offering new ways of reading diasporic modes of literature, history, and popular and material culture.

Willeen Keough explores the inheritances of Irish nationalist resistance in her study of Whiteboyism and Ribbonism in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Newfoundland and the different forms of resistance that took root with the establishment of these movements on Canadian soil. Peter Kuch recovers the missing history of travelling Irish dramatic repertoire in nineteenth century New Zealand and examines its reception as a distinctive but often overlooked theatrical experience in the communities where it was staged. Sinéad Moynihan offers a new approach to thinking about a different form of public spectacle – the annual Rose of Tralee Festival. Her essay offers an incisive study of the festival in the context of race and the ‘Roots Journey’ to and from Ireland and Irish media responses to the same. Frances Harkin focuses on the diasporic and the local in her research on the Gaelic Athletic Association in London and the role of sport in fostering cohesion amongst the Irish community in London. Tina O’Toole offers an investigation of migration and materiality in her study of the American Dress and its place in the history of transatlantic return as imagined in Irish literature and culture. While all of these approaches focus on visible histories of migration and return, Gavin Doyle’s essay on Eileen Myles centres on loss and mourning and how the hauntings of Ireland’s emigrant history are manifest in work of one of Irish America’s most eminent poets. In our own contributions we explore the Irish writer’s relationship with the world in revisiting some of the lesser examined transnational moments in the work of James Joyce and in thinking about the afterlives and legacies of Joyce in the oeuvre of the transatlantic writer, Maeve Brennan. The special issue ends with reflections on Irish literature and Ireland’s diaspora in the contemporary moment in an extended interview between Liam Harte and Belfast dramatist Martin Lynch about their collaboration on *My English Tongue, My Irish Heart*, which toured the Republic of

Ireland, Northern Ireland and England in 2015. The interview is an exegesis of a creative process that looks at the origins of the play, its journey to the stage, and the challenges of dramatizing the experience of the Irish in Britain.

Bibliography

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Castles, Stephen and Mark J. Miller. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 'Promoting Ireland through our culture'. <https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/trade-and-promotion/promoting-ireland/promoting-ireland-through-our-culture/> Accessed 18 September 2017.

Devlin Trew, Johanne and Michael Pierse (eds.). *Rethinking the Irish Diaspora: After the Gathering*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

'Diaspora gathering details unveiled'. *Irish Times*, 1 September 2009. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/diaspora-gathering-details-unveiled-1.845616>

Accessed 26 July 2017

'Gabriel Byrne slams The Gathering', *Irish Times*, 5 November 2012. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/gabriel-byrne-slams-the-gathering-1.746675>

Accessed 26 July 2017.

Gilmartin, Mary. *Ireland and Migration in the Twenty-first Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

Lloyd, David. 'What's in a Name: The Dialectics of Diaspora and Irish Emigration'. *Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*, 12 April 2013.

<https://breac.nd.edu/articles/whats-in-a-name-the-dialectics-of-diaspora-and-irish-emigration/> Accessed 28 July 2013

McWilliams, David. 'Ireland's future depends on diaspora's 'soft power'', *Irish Independent*, 3 October 2007.

McWilliams, Ellen and Bronwen Walter (eds.). 'New Perspectives on Women and the Irish Diaspora', *Irish Studies Review* 21:1 (February 2013).

Moore Quinn, E. (ed.). 'Texts and Textures of Irish America', *Irish Studies Review* 23:2 (May 2015).

Negra, Diane. *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*. London: Duke University Press, 2006.

Ward, Patrick. *Exile, Emigration and Irish Writing*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002.

¹ See, Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*.

² Ward, *Exile, Emigration and Irish Writing*, 27.

³ Negra. *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, 2.

⁴ 'Diaspora gathering details unveiled', *Irish Times*, 1 September 2009.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/diaspora-gathering-details-unveiled-1.845616>. Accessed 26 July 2017

⁵ 'Gabriel Byrne slams The Gathering', *Irish Times*, 5 November 2012.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/gabriel-byrne-slams-the-gathering-1.746675>. Accessed 26 July 2017. A recent collection of critical essays addressing the aftermath of 'The Gathering' is further proof of its unintended consequences. See, Devlin Trew and Pierse (eds.), *Rethinking the Irish Diaspora*.

⁶ For an early usage of term 'soft power' in relation to the Irish diaspora, see McWilliams, 'Ireland's future depends on diaspora's 'soft power'', *Irish Independent*, 3 October 2007.

<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/david-mcwilliams/irelands-future-depends-on-diasporas-soft-power-26322411.html>. Accessed 18 September 2017.

⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Promoting Ireland through our culture',

<https://www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/trade-and-promotion/promoting-ireland/promoting-ireland-through-our-culture/>. Accessed 18 September 2017.

⁸ Lloyd, 'What's in a Name', *Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*, 12 April 2013.

<https://breac.nd.edu/articles/whats-in-a-name-the-dialectics-of-diaspora-and-irish-emigration/>. Accessed 28 July 2013. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*.

⁹ Gilmartin, *Ireland and Migration in the Twenty-first Century*, 7.

¹⁰ McWilliams and Walter (eds.), 'New Perspectives on Women and the Irish Diaspora', *Irish Studies Review* 21:1 (February 2013); Moore Quinn (ed.), 'Texts and Textures of Irish America', *Irish Studies Review* 23:2 (May 2015).