

University of South Florida

From the Selected Works of Matthew Knight

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“Growing Irish Studies at the University of South Florida.”

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“Developing Irish Studies in at USF in Tampa, Florida,” ACIS 2019 Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, March 2019.

In August 2013 I was hired as the Head of Special Collections at the University of South Florida Libraries; on the same day my wife Jennifer was hired in the History department. Having met in a Celtic Studies programme, we had always said that no matter where we ended up, we were going to make Irish Studies happen. Little did we know that we would be attempting this in what seemed at first to be a somewhat unlikely place: Tampa Florida. Yet, aside from being a warm tropical environment not counted among the core US industrial cities that received massive influxes of 19th-century Irish immigrants, as we were, you might be surprised to learn that the Tampa Bay region actually does possess a significant and highly active Irish-heritage community.

But back to the beginning. On my first day in Special Collections I did what I’m sure every other reasonable person would do: I scoured the rare books and archives for anything related to Irish or Celtic Studies. What I found both surprised and delighted me. It turned out that since 1968, the USF Libraries had been home to the papers of Dublin-born Dion Boucicault, perhaps the most popular and prolific playwright of the Victorian age. Though the materials had been processed, very little had been done over decades to promote this collection—rivalled only in importance perhaps by the University of Kent in England. On top of that discovery, I also found that the library housed the papers of Francis J. Thompson, a former professor at the University of Tampa, whose 1940 dissertation entitled “Fenianism and the Celtic Renaissance” (all 1283-pages of it) immediately caught my attention, as did a letter home from Dublin he wrote in 1936 mentioning a lovely lunch at Jack B. Yeats’ home where he met a nice

young man named Beckwith who had recently written a book on Proust. I may have been shushed for the first time in my life in a library when I exclaimed, “that was Samuel Beckett, my God, man!” [This slide shows questions he prepared to ask Yeats for his research—Boucicault was number 1!] Anyway, Thompson’s family had also donated a small collection of “Anglo-Irish” books that made up a part of his home library, and while we only had 70 volumes, they included signed works by WB Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa and others. Turns out the bulk of his collection had been donated to University of Tampa years before. This was a sore point with the family, as I learned, for many of these rare books were put into the circulating collection. But more on this later. Cognizant that it is much easier to grow an existing collection than create a new one, I was encouraged almost immediately.

From 2013-2015 I and my wife spoke on topics related to Boucicault, the Irish Literary Revival, and Irish history and culture at conferences, community gatherings, and student and university events whenever we got the chance. Now, no one will be surprised to know that such offers typically rolled in on St. Patrick’s Day, and sometimes Samhain, but the dog and pony show has its place in everyone’s career! And, lo and behold, after I spoke on Thompson’s dissertation at a library event, I was approached by one James J. Harkins, former president and founder of the local chapter of Ancient Order of Hibernians, who asked if I might be interested in taking a look at his papers and library, as he was looking to downsize. Yes, I said, why yes I would. Harkins donated his research papers and a small library of about 250 books, mainly related to Irish History. They were more of the “medium-rare” variety, but contained volumes that could help form a core of a reference collection. But it was a start! Also, it turns out that news travels fast in the AOH community, and not a week went by until I was asked by

another member, Pat Garland, native of County Louth, if I would be interested in his library. His donation had a significant number of rare books, and included a 1690 James II coin—Jacobite gun money—that added some exhibit potential to the collection. Just like that, with just under 2 years' effort and a cost of \$0 to the university, the Irish Studies collection had grown from 70 to more than 500 volumes. In that period, I was also awarded a modest, but important grant from the Gladys Delmas Foundation to digitize a portion of the Dion Boucicault Theatre Collection. The award was fulfilled and a proof-of-concept web page created, although a full grant to complete the work has thus far eluded us.

Anyway, while I was working on building and advertising library collections, my wife Jennifer had been busy adding courses to the curriculum. The History department happily allowed her to teach directly in her specialty, and she created the courses “Celtic History” and “A History of Ireland” as well as taking over the “Viking History” course, of course giving it a distinct Irish spin. When these courses regularly filled to capacity, even while growing from 45 to 90 student classes, opportunities logically increased—everyone wants the SCH, right? In the Fall of 2015, Jennifer and I put our heads together; how could USF get a course that made use of special collections, allowed undergraduates to engage in primary-source research, engaged with the community, and could expand the Irish Studies offerings? We initiated the development of an innovative new course that would include direct interaction with Irish primary sources held in Special Collections; the curation of a publicly displayed exhibition; and direct interaction with the local community in the form of collecting oral histories for the new “Celtic Heritage Oral History Initiative” that Jennifer was concurrently developing. The resulting course, “The Irish in America” was co-taught by Jennifer and me, and covered

both the historical study of the immigrant experience of the U.S.'s massive Irish and Irish-heritage population, as well as integrating opportunities for undergraduate research and community engagement. In Spring of 2016, the course "The Irish in America" ran for the first time, and filled to capacity at 45. The students were highly engaged with the primary source work in collaboration with USF Special Collections, curated a public exhibit based on this work that was displayed in the library for the month of March, and approximately half of the class elected to participate in community interviews for the Celtic Heritage Oral History Initiative as their term project. Many of the interviews were conducted with the collaboration of the Dunedin Historical Museum, which generously donated their space to us for a community luncheon and interview event. All of the community members who participated in interviews left feeling excited and validated by the experience. The students communicated that they had gained an entirely new perspective on the wealth of knowledge and experience available in their own backyard. Further, the experiences of 19th-century Irish immigrants to the U.S., and the subsequent wave of racism that was clearly evidenced in many of the primary source materials that students worked with, bear a striking level of similarity to issues of immigration and race that are currently at the epicenter of the national discourse. We engaged the students in discussions of these issues frequently in class. Students then took this heightened awareness of the experiences of past Irish-Americans with them when they encountered community members in their oral history interviews. Several interviewees shared experiences of struggle and discrimination that proved to be eye-opening experiences for the students. I truly believe that students left the course as better-informed and more empathetic citizens due to this element of community interaction. One of the students self-produced her interview as a video on

youtube, which can be viewed here as an example:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRqkOoYw5_g .

Expanding the breadth of the Oral History Initiative was an ambitious undertaking, and required a significant investment in leg work. We reached out to numerous community organizations, including The Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Dunedin Historical Museum, the area's many competitive bagpiping groups such as the St. Andrew's Pipes and Drums of Tampa Bay (otherwise known as Jennifer's dad's pipe band), the Naples Saint Patrick Foundation, the New World Celts, and many individual community members. While the primary goal was to secure volunteers for the Celtic Heritage Oral History Initiative, we also took the opportunity to inform these organizations of the many ways in which the USF History Dept. and USF Libraries were supporting and contributing to Irish and Celtic Studies. In the midst of these community outreach efforts, from the courses that were being taught, to the expanding holdings in the USF library related to Irish Studies, the members of these community groups were astounded and gratified to hear that their cultural interests were being advanced at USF. These outreach meetings created several significant and lasting collaborative relationships. This community, we found, is perhaps fractured and insular, but is also eager for engagement and inclusion.

As a case in point, the library and the history department co-sponsored an event to both commemorate the centennial of the Easter Ring and publicly acknowledge the Harkins and Garland donations to special collections in April 2016. Happily, this zero-budget event attracted more than 160 people—in a capacity 85 room! Most of our colleagues at USF certainly were surprised. As we gazed out over a sea of silver-tops in bright green Ancient Order of Hibernians membership polos, New World Celts kilts, and

dozens of interested students, a puzzled colleague mused, “Who knew?!” My wife rather hastily replied to her: “I did!” We also received another pleasant surprise at this event as both the Mayor of Tampa’s office and the Board of County Commissioners presented us with proclamations declaring it to be “USF Irish Studies Day.” Not to be outdone, both the National and Florida AOH presidents presented us with plaques, and Irish flag, and a copy of the proclamation of the Irish Republic. The Ladies AOH stole the show, however, when they presented my wife Jennifer with more two plaques and an oversized novelty cheque pledging 500 dollars to support Irish Studies at USF. By the time my talk on the role of America in the Rising began, it was 50 minutes past the start time. But we had our first cash donation, and no end of office wall decorations!

At this time, I need to make a rare positive comment about Facebook, and a proud shout out to the power of ACIS connections, for it was soon after this event that I saw a notice on the ACIS feed announcing the potential donation of a collection of books owned by Dr. Michael Krauss that focused not only on the Irish language revival, but the efforts to revive Cornish and Manx as well. A contact email was given in the post, and I immediately wrote expressing interest. Though it took some convincing, Dr. Krauss and his family eventually donated more than 675 books and scarce pamphlets along with some of his research papers and his 1958 Harvard dissertation studying the Irish dialects of the Aran Islands to USF Special Collection. The vast majority of Krauss’ books are held only by 1-4 libraries in the United States—I think you know who you are! But we were certainly proud and humbled to be in this company. Some Krauss materials do not appear to have any other US holdings than USF.

In the Spring of 2017 we ran the “Irish in America” again with full enrollment and continued to develop the oral history project. This term, students primarily worked with

members of the Sun City Center Ancient Order of Hibernians. (For anyone unfamiliar, the AOH represents the largest and oldest Irish Catholic mutual aid society organization in the US, founded in 1836 and still serving over 80,000 members nation-wide.) The course now runs every Spring semester, and has been given its own official course number by the state of Florida—as has Celtic History—no longer running as “Special Topics” courses. The Chair of the History department also asked if I would like to teach a senior capstone seminar on a topic of my choice. “Irish Rebels and Revolutionaries” quickly filled and ran in the Fall of 2017. The curriculum was growing, the collections were growing, but we still felt we needed to do more outreach.

Enter Facebook again. In Spring 2017, as I was grading papers, I saw a Facebook alert on the ACIS feed and read that PhD candidate Elizabeth Ricketts was asking the ACIS hive mind if anyone had an idea for collaboration on a DH project for her summer course. I’m happy I looked, because when I saw that she was at USF I quickly wrote, “Get over to Special Collections in the Library ASAP! Please!” We worked together on editing and transcribing plays of Dion Boucicault over the summer in hopes of applying for a large completion grant for the digital collection, and Elizabeth was also able to do a for-credit internship in Spring 2018 through the English Department. In that semester, we co-wrote a \$231,000 CLIR grant, which, while ultimately unsuccessful, set the stage for future collaboration and grant opportunities. Ultimately, though, we now had the attention—and full support-- of the Chair and two major professors in the English department. In that light, Elizabeth was allowed to incorporate Irish material in her classes, spreading the word around campus about Irish Studies at USF and involving another department in our efforts.

In Spring of 2018 both Jennifer and I were approached by the History Graduate Studies Coordinator who said he was being flooded with requests to apply to the Master's Program to pursue topics in Irish history, and needed more course work at the undergraduate level. It turns out this flood was more like five students, but Jennifer and I happily took them on for Directed Reading courses that semester. One of these students is here today, in her first year of the Master's program and first time presenting at a major conference. See Lauren Leigh Saturday morning as she discusses Alice Milligan and the Irish Revival. We also encouraged Lauren to attend the summer Irish-language classes at Oideas Gael, and she came back glowing about the experience.

We are now in Fall 2018, and happy to report it was an eventful semester. Until this time, any Irish dignitary who came to Tampa had the University of Tampa as his or her only "academic" contact. Despite the fact that they have no Irish course offerings at all. Through our many efforts to get the word out—including me approaching the Mayor at an even one night saying to call USF not UT next time—hey, you gave us a proclamation!—we received a notice from the Consulate General of Ireland for the South-Eastern United States that he would be in Tampa in October and asked if we would be interested in hosting an event. Well, we were. His talk 'Ireland & America: Transatlantic Connections Then & Now' was attended by nearly 200 members of the USF student body, staff, and faculty, as well as many community members. It was a huge boost, and generated emails of full support for Irish Studies from the Chair of History and the Dean of the Library. Up until this time, our efforts were not yet officially recognized.

But with this new-found support, we knew it was time to turn to the "dark side" and contact University development about establishing an endowment to support

student travel to learn Irish and purchase library materials. The Vice-President of Development was at the Consul General's event, and clearly saw opportunity there. With full support from her office, Jennifer spoke to the Florida AOH and LAOH membership about perhaps drawing the National Organization in to create a named endowment fund. While the national AOH has not yet stepped in, the Florida chapters generously established the AOH/LAOH Endowment for the Promotion of Irish Studies at USF in December 2018. I'm proud to say I contribute with each paycheck!

And to cap off what was already a wonderful semester, I happened to bump into the Head of Special Collections at the University of Tampa at a workshop. We discussed all things Francis J. Thompson, and, as he was retiring January 16 2019, he felt like it was time to "do the right thing for the family." My annoying requests and pleading over five years had paid off! On January 4 2019 I picked up nearly 600 monographs and periodicals that Thompson's family had donated to the University of Tampa in the early 1980s. Many have already been catalogued and some are very scarce indeed. Between the generous donations of Jim Harkins, Pat Garland, Michael Krauss, Francis J. Thompson and my own personal trifling donations, the Irish Studies collection is over 1200 catalogued items, with hundreds more awaiting processing and cataloging. I hope that you will join us on Friday for the "A Day at the Library" showcase generously hosted by the Burns Library at Boston College. I have brought a small selection of items from these collections for display.

So, over the course of just under five years, we've raised the exposure of students at USF to topics, resources, and participatory projects in Irish and Celtic Studies by leaps and bounds, and, where essentially nothing more than a few disparate archival materials existed before, we are now seriously considering the implementation of a

formal program in Irish studies, in the form of a minor concentration or certificate program. We have already raised this possibility with the History department chair--of which department I now work half-time-- and, based on student response to these efforts so far, he sees this as a legitimate goal. Notwithstanding the wonderful students we have the pleasure of working with, however, none of this would be possible without the community support that we received. It took a good deal of effort to raise community awareness, but the Irish heritage community was receptive and supportive once we did. In other words, they weren't going to 'come to us', but outreach efforts mobilized the large preexisting body of potential resources to great results. Institutional support for bringing Irish Studies to USF was minimal at best, and so it was necessary to look to other avenues. What this all points to in my opinion is a welcome crumbling of the Ivory tower, and a decline in separation between university and community. While scholars should naturally always be wary of working with organizations pushing special interests, and obviously never permit any outside forces to determine what gets treated in curriculum, we are wasting valuable resources when we neglect to incorporate the community into university education and, sometimes, it can make all the difference.

Lastly, thank to the efforts of Elizabeth Ricketts and Lauren Leigh, there is an official Irish Student group on campus, fully sanctioned by the university and privy to all the funds and benefits of other societies. Hopefully, this roll continues through 2019 and beyond!

Future plans: Develop oral histories, create USF Irish Studies web presence, develop more courses for the curriculum, co-teach new interdisciplinary Irish revival course with the English department for inclusion in the General Education program, grow endowment to support students and collections.