

Seton Hall University

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All Eyes on the Irish: Professors Consider how Their Descendants Have Left Their Mark on New Jersey

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All eyes on the irish

Professors consider how immigrants and their descendants have left their mark on New Jersey

*By M.J. Fine
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It isn't easy being green —just ask the Irish. Long oppressed in their own country by British rulers, many sought their fortunes in America, only to face harassment and prejudice because of their religious customs and immigration status. No, it wasn't easy at all. But they persevered, and by passing down their cultural values and talents one generation at a time, Irish-Americans have become an integral part of this nation's fabric.

When it comes to their tribulations and contributions, Seton Hall professors Maura Grace Harrington and Marta Deyrup practically wrote the book. "The Irish-American Experience in New Jersey and Metropolitan New York," which they co-edited, was published in November by Lexington Books.

To get in the spirit for St. Patrick's Day, we gabbed with Harrington and Deyrup over email about how Irish-Americans shaped New Jersey and how New Jersey has shaped Irish-Americans. What follows is a condensed version of the conversation.

Question: What should all New Jerseyans know about how Irish-Americans influenced our state?

Maura Grace Harrington: Irish-Americans are a unique ethnic group, but the Irish-American experience is universal. Largely because of religious difference, Irish-Americans were the first noticeably ethnic group in the United States. As such, Irish-Americans paved the way for other ethnic groups. Irish-Americans faced the same challenges and have striven for the same opportunities as all immigrant groups. This is why, on St. Patrick's Day, everyone is Irish!

Marta Deyrup: Irish immigrants were crucial in establishing the position of the Catholic Church in New Jersey and in the country at large.

Q: What immigrant experiences do Irish-Americans have in common with other groups? What forms of prejudice did they face in New Jersey?

Deyrup: The Irish have been in the U.S. since the early 1600s —since the very start of our history —and their emigration to this country continues to this day. Like other groups, the Irish emigrated because of ecological disasters —I am thinking of the Great Famine —the unsettled economic conditions caused by two world wars and lack of employment in their own country. Like many immigrant

groups, they suffered persecution and discrimination. Even in New Jersey, we had the policy in the mid-19th century of “ No Irish Need Apply.”

Q: What sets Irish-Americans apart from other ethnic groups?

Harrington: The Irish story, which is still being written, is ultimately a story of working hard, remaining loyal to family and nation, triumphing over difficulties — and then reaching back to help others do the same.

In fact, the life of St. Patrick himself followed this same pattern. Born into a family of Roman citizens, probably somewhere on the west coast of Britain, St. Patrick was taken as a slave to Ireland when he was a young teenager. His struggles as a slave led him to a deeper appreciation of the Christian faith in which he was raised, and through his faith, he found the inspiration to escape slavery. But he did not hesitate to return to Ireland as a missionary in order to minister to the very people who had enslaved him.

St. Patrick, “ The Apostle to the Irish,” is the model we are taught to follow, from childhood through adulthood. And we like to think living this way —overcoming adversity and helping others to do the same —is specifically Irish, and, by extension, Irish-American. More realistically, I think it’ s fair to say this Irish way of life is the American way of life, too.

Q: Irish-Americans have been very successful in politics, including several prominent New Jersey governors and many lawmakers. Is there something in the Irish nature that lends itself to public service?

Harrington: Ireland’ s long history of domination by its more powerful neighbor has bred in the Irish mind and heart a keen sense of justice and a desire to promote freedom. Through the centuries, under the direction of charismatic leaders, the Irish people have undertaken dozens of rebellions, some materially successful and some morally successful.

But a deep desire for self-determination and for the promotion of human rights has been constant throughout the years, even with changing political allegiances.

When the Irish emigrated to America, they brought with them the ability to organize and the inspiration to work toward a dream, whether or not they fully expected the dream to become reality. And, happily, dreams often do come true.

Q: We think of certain jobs as having a lot of members of Irish descent, such as law enforcement. How did that come about and how has it evolved over the years?

Harrington: Because of Ireland’ s history, even the jobs that we today consider safe were, at various times in Irish history, considered to be risky. These risky jobs were positions of honor and continue to attract Irish-Americans to their ranks.

For decades in Ireland, Irish Catholics were forbidden to pursue formal education. As a result, very courageous and daring teachers founded “ hedge

schools” and taught their students under cover in the outdoors. The value the Irish place on education continues even today.

Also forbidden for many years in Ireland was the public practice of Catholic faith. Priests were not looked upon kindly and were, in fact, by celebrating Mass, disobeying the law. This made the Catholic faith even more valuable to the Irish people and raised the social status of priests, who were bravely doing a dangerous job. Irish and Irish-Americans filled American seminaries through the latter part of the 20th century, and in New Jersey, we still see a great number of Irishmen entering the priesthood.

When the celebration of Mass was forbidden in Ireland, laymen stood watch to warn the priest and congregants when armed forces were approaching. And even in the U.S., especially in the years of the Know-Nothing riots, Irish laymen stood guard at parish churches to protect them from vandalism and destruction.

The penchant for careers in law enforcement is tied to this dedication to protecting what the Irish hold dear.

Q: Being so closely associated with pubs and bars seems like a blessing and a curse. In what ways do Irish-Americans react to that?

Deyrup: Readers who have been to Ireland know that the pub is a place where people gather socially, share a pint, talk and listen to music. It is in no way like our idea of a bar, where people gather primarily to drink. However, this stereotype of the “hard-drinking Irish” is woven into our own cultural fabric in the United States.

The caricature of the drunken Irishman has been a staple of English and American literature and theater for many years, dating back to the 17th century, just as in modern times St. Patrick’s Day, a religious holiday, is seen as an occasion for drinking. It is a very offensive stereotype to many Irish-Americans, hence the establishment a few years ago of the Sober St. Patrick’s Day celebration in New York City.

Do the Irish drink more than other nationalities? I don’t know.

Q: What conditions shaped the wry, often resigned tone we associate with Irish literature?

Harrington: Irish literature arose from a culture that has been beset (or, as some would argue, improved) by a series of invasions. And for much of its history, the island has been fractured into dozens of small kingdoms, making protecting it from invasion very difficult. Foreign occupation that lasted for hundreds of years and still is in place in six counties, has made it very difficult to expect great change at any time.

And, on top of this, a history of recurrent crop shortages, the worst of which contributed to the Great Famine of the mid-19th century, has caused a great deal of sorrow and uncertainty about the future.

For most of Ireland’s history in the past 1,500 years, Christian faith has been the driving force behind survival and improvements that have been made slowly,

over time. And what I'd identify as the mark of the Irish take on the Christian message is optimistic stoicism.

With this underlying worldview, it's understandable that dry humor, characterized by an appreciation of the incongruous and unexpected combined and with a sense of melancholy, would find its way into Irish literature.

Q: How has Irish music thrived in the United States when many other groups' music has been marginalized or assimilated?

Deyrup: There is something about Irish music that many different cultures identify with. Traditional Irish music is being played and listened to not only in the United States and Ireland but in Japan, Russia, Croatia, Germany and elsewhere on the globe. Maybe it is the fact that it is a living tradition. The music is relatively simple to play and is based on lively traditional rhythms —the reel, the jig, the polka and the hornpipe.

We have some of the finest musicians in the world playing right here in the tri-state area —Joanie Madden, Martin Hayes, Tony DeMarco, John Nolan, Brian Conway and his sister Rose Flanagan, John Reynolds and his wife Margie Mulvihill, Linda Hickman and Iris Nevins, for starters.

Q: What role do parades play in celebrating Irish culture?

Harrington: New Jersey is home to an incredible number of St. Patrick's Day parades. The last time I counted, New Jersey municipalities were hosting more than 25 St. Patrick's Day parades each year!

While locals enjoy their hometown parades, die-hard St. Patrick's Day revelers of all ages participate in parade-hopping, attending as many as two parades each weekend for the entirety of St. Patrick's Month (yes, "Month"). For some of us, parades are a way of life every March. (And yes, some of us do get sunburn at St. Patrick's Day parades.)

What many casual observers might not realize is that the members of Irish-American and Celtic-American organizations are part of a huge network that truly keeps Irish-American traditions alive in the Garden State. These individuals work together to host St. Patrick's Day parades in March; Irish hurling and camogie exhibition and competitive games from spring through fall; Irish festivals in the summer; and music and dance competitions, concerts, and performances year-round. These Irish enthusiasts are part of a vibrant and close-knit subculture that is sometimes fractured by rivalries but ultimately thrives on interorganization cooperation.

Q: How is Irish culture being handed down to younger generations?

Deyrup: Step dancing is very popular, and there are many schools in our area. There are also traditional schools of Irish music and dance. We are very lucky to have in our area several comhaltas, Irish organizations that promote and nurture Irish cultural traditions.

Harrington: When my family came to Paterson from County Clare in the early part of the 20th century, the children of Irish immigrants (my grandmother

included) attended Irish language classes in order to keep Irish traditions alive in America, which, even then, was a pluralistic nation.

In addition to the abundant opportunities in New Jersey for children to learn the Irish arts of music and dance, there is a growing movement to give children access to training in the Irish sports of hurling and camogie.

And, less formally, within homes, Irish-American parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, still tell children about their Irish heritage, and what it means to be Irish.

While third-generation Irish-Americans don't have the same view as their grandparents did of what it means to be Irish-American, their ethnic identity is no less valid. With the emergence of each new generation, we learn more and more what it means to be both Irish and American, and we discover the possibilities that the hyphenated Irish-American identity presents.
