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I greatly appreciate Donald MacRaild's comprehensive and enthusiastic review of *The American Irish: A History*.<sup>1</sup> [1] Such a detailed and laudatory review needs no direct response, let alone a challenge or refutation, on my part. Instead I would like to say a few words about my general perspective on Irish-American history, about the evolution and structure of the book, and about the concept of "diaspora" as applied to Irish history. My comments on these three related questions will serve as a complement to the various lines of inquiry opened up by MacRaild's reflective and wide-ranging review essay.

The type of history I write and teach is best called "transatlantic." It deals with Irish history in both Ireland and North America simultaneously, examining patterns of migration, of cultural continuity and change, and of economic and political interaction. My first attempt to write this sort of history was a doctoral dissertation in U.S. history called "Making Sense of the Molly Maguires," which eventually became a book of the same name.<sup>2</sup> [2] On one level, the approach was quite narrow, telling the story of a group of Irish mine workers in Pennsylvania the 1860s and 1870s, twenty of whom were hanged for sixteen murders committed, according to the authorities, as part of a conspiracy imported directly from Ireland. On another level, the approach was very broad, for the story contained at its heart the principal themes in both Irish and Irish-American history in the mid-nineteenth century: land, famine, and emigration on the Irish side and, on the American, industrialization, the Civil War, and immigration.

The actions of the "Molly Maguires" in Pennsylvania, it became clear, would make little sense unless they were placed in an Irish as well as an American context. In Ireland, the socio-economic structure of rural society in general, and of specific regions like the north-western and north-central counties, needed close attention, as did the long history of agrarian violence embodied by such shadowy groups as the "Ribbonmen," the "Whiteboys"-and, indeed, the "Molly Maguires," who first emerged in north-central Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s. Making sense of the American phase of the violence, in turn, required a proper understanding of patterns of immigration, labor, and religious devotion, along with the politics of anti-immigrant nativism and the origins and impact of the Civil War. The "Molly Maguires" in Pennsylvania were a rare transatlantic example of a form of violent protest deeply rooted in the Irish countryside. Bringing the Irish and American strands of their story together in a single narrative resulted in the form of history that I later began to call "transatlantic." And that is the approach I have taken ever since.

While my work on the Molly Maguires examined a single dramatic episode, *The American Irish* applies the transatlantic approach on a much broader scale over a much longer period. The book examines Irish-American history from beginning to end, starting with the Ulster migrations of the eighteenth century and ending with the evolution of the Northern Ireland peace process, in both Ireland and the United States, in the 1990s. And, of course, it deals not just with labor protest but with all aspects of the Irish-American past. As part of the series "Studies in Modern History," edited by David Cannadine and John Morrill, the book offers a synthesis spanning three centuries, it is based mainly on secondary rather than primary sources, and it is intended primarily for students and general readers, while still being of considerable use to the specialist. It is the first synthesis of its field in a generation, and unlike any other previous book it covers not only the

classic period from the 1820s to the 1920s but the entire eighteenth and twentieth centuries as well. Thus, while so many traditional accounts of the American Irish, and so much popular understanding of their history, begin with the Famine and end in the 1920s, my own book extends the analysis backward by more than a century and forward by three or four generations, integrating the entire 300-year period into a single history.

Putting a book of this sort together is a challenge. But the beauty of writing this particular book, especially given its intended audience, is that I was able to write it by teaching it. At the University of Texas I offered three undergraduate seminars on the subject, which allowed me to determine the principal themes of the book: emigration, immigration, labor, religion, politics, and nationalism, with the analytical categories of race, class, and gender deployed as appropriate. After three semesters, then, I had my themes; the only problem was that I still had not written a word (or, to more precise, I had written six, one for the name of each theme). So I converted the class into a course of lectures, first at the University of Texas and then at Boston College, inviting the students to critique each week's material as vociferously as they wished and integrating their concerns and demands into the re-worked versions of the lectures that made their way into the evolving manuscript. There is no passage in *The American Irish* that was not at some point discussed in a classroom. I can therefore feel quite confident that I have written the right book for my intended audience.

Armed with my six thematic categories, I did at one point deceive myself into thinking that the book would more or less write itself. All I would have to do, I told myself, was to write a chapter on each of my six themes, with every chapter beginning in 1700 and ending in 2000. Of course, I realized soon enough that this analytical framework, while very useful for research and organization, would produce a book that was at best unwieldy and repetitive. Interestingly, the same thing had happened when I wrote my first book: I began with a thematic model for purposes of research and organization but, when it came time to write, I abandoned this model in favor of a chronological approach, interweaving the analysis into a narrative history. In my own work at least, telling the story of change over time has provided the most compelling mode of historical explanation. *The American Irish* is unabashedly chronological in structure, its six chapters bearing the following titles: "The Eighteenth Century," "Before the Famine," "The Famine Generation," "After the Famine," "Irish America, 1900-1940," and "Irish America Since the Second World War." Moreover, as the titles of the middle chapters are intended to convey, the Great Famine stands at the heart of the narrative.

Within the overall chronological framework, each of the six chapters examines the six basic themes of the book as a whole. Thus, as MacRaild notes, all of the chapters begin with a detailed account of the conditions in Ireland that led to mass emigration, without which the history of the Irish in America can make little sense. The remainder of each chapter examines such themes as immigrant settlement patterns, social and geographical mobility, labor and class, race and gender, and religion, politics, and nationalism, the relative weight of each theme varying by period. And every chapter (except the last) incorporates into the narrative a debate between historians, a critical point on which interpretations of history have differed. From the synthetic historian's point of view, it can be deeply satisfying to review and adjudicate controversies of this kind. But I present these often very lively debates primarily for the reader's pleasure, not my own, and I do so in the conviction (gleaned from teaching and repeatedly endorsed by my students) that excursions into historiography and interpretation are a strong incentive, rather than a distraction or a bore, to undergraduates and general readers studying history.

The debates integrated into the first two chapters concern questions of ethnic and racial identity in the United States. Chapter 1 examines (very briefly) and refutes the "Celtic Thesis," whereby the population of the new United States in 1790 has been divided into so-called "Celts" and "Saxons," the former including the Ulster Irish. According to this rather strange theory, America to the south of Philadelphia was settled largely by Celts and to the north by Saxons, determining in large measure the course of American history, including the Civil War, when southern Celts and Cavaliers were bested by northern Saxons and Roundheads (the innate tension between them providing a causal explanation that conveniently deflects attention away from slavery).<sup>3</sup> [3] Chapter 2, as MacRaild mentions, considers the recent, very influential debate over white racial formation ("how the Irish became white"), that had its origins in Irish-American and American labor

history. My critique of the historiography in this case suggests that both the degree of Irish racial subjugation and the degree of Irish responsibility in altering the course of American race relations are open to considerable exaggeration. At the same time, much greater attention is needed in this area to the history of women and to the Irish culture from which the migrants came.[4](#) [4]

The contentious historiography of the great Irish potato famine is considered in Chapter 3. Between 1846 and 1855 ("the famine decade") an estimated 1.1 million people died in Ireland and another 2.1 million emigrated, amounting to more than one-third of the pre-famine population. The famine and its memory remain the defining moment in Irish-American history and, contrary to the efforts of a recent generation of historians, I place it very much at the heart of Irish domestic history as well. The debate presented in Chapter 3 counterpoises the now familiar "romantic nationalist" and "revisionist" interpretations of the famine, concluding that the latter, in standing the former on its head, unwittingly reproduces a slanted and extreme position of its own (protestations of dispassionate objectivity notwithstanding). Instead of choosing between these two antagonistic and perhaps outmoded interpretations, I endorse an emerging school of historiography that, for want of a better word, I call "post-revisionist." This new interpretation concedes much of the revisionist case, for example that various demographic, socio-economic, and cultural changes (concerning population decline, language use, and patterns of landholding, marriage, and migration) actually have their origins in the early nineteenth century and beyond and not simply in the great upheaval of the 1840s. That upheaval, nonetheless, greatly magnified and accelerated these changes, such that the famine can still be seen as modern Ireland's great watershed event. The "post-revisionist" perspective rejects all talk of deliberate genocide, but points to a pervasive providentialist belief among British officials and opinion-makers that the famine represented an opportunity for re-making Ireland. The British government, moreover, bore direct responsibility for the actions it did and did not take to avert the catastrophe. In endorsing this interpretation, I have opened myself to the charge of one recent reviewer that my approach to Irish history is not only "bleak" but "old-fashioned." So it bears repeating here that "post-revisionism" in this case is not simply a euphemism for unreconstructed romantic nationalism. Far from being old-fashioned, it represents the latest and most sophisticated phase of Irish famine scholarship.[5](#) [5]

The historians' debates in the remaining chapters have to do with questions of labor and gender, nationalism, and politics. Chapter 4 yields two debates, one on the social bases of support for Irish-American nationalism and the other on the nature of domestic service, the primary occupation for Irish-American women. In the former debate I reinsert the question of social radicalism into the traditional polarity between physical force republicanism and constitutional nationalism.[6](#) [6] In the latter I challenge previous historians' conception of service as a launching pad to liberation, emphasizing instead the nature of the relationship between mistress and servant.[7](#) [7] Although service could indeed be a training ground in American middle-class morality, it was also by definition a servile form of labor in a republican democracy whose more privileged members frowned upon servility. In Chapter 5, I examine competing theories of the rise, functions, and decline of Irish-American urban machine politics.[8](#) [8] Only Chapter 6, which deals with the contemporary era, lacks a historiographical controversy, reflecting the undeveloped state of the scholarship on that period.

Let me close, as promised, by saying a few words on "diaspora," the critical new concept (new in the Irish case, that is) which MacRaild discusses in opening his review essay. The term "diaspora," as he suggests, is potentially a useful one for historians of Irish migration. If a single theme dominates current historical writing, at least in the United States, it is the need to transcend the boundaries of nation-states and write global histories. The history of American immigration is no exception; indeed, it lends itself perfectly to a transnational approach. So too does the history of Irish migration, which despite the centrality of North America has always been global in scope. Given that Irish migration was a genuinely global phenomenon, moreover, it has become increasingly clear that the story of the Irish in one part of the world can no longer be told without reference to the Irish elsewhere. Historians of the American Irish, for example, clearly have much to learn from the history of the Irish in Britain, Canada, or Australia. In seeking to encompass the global dimension to their subject, historians of the Irish-like historians all over the world in the last ten years have turned increasingly to the concept of diaspora.[9](#) [9]

Yet, as MacRaild points out, it is striking how few historians say precisely what they mean by this term.

"Diaspora" has entered academic discourse with a vengeance, but all too often as a synonym for every type of population movement, migration, or displacement, or (even more vaguely) for minority status, postcolonial identity, and the processes of globalization. Unless one makes some effort to give the term a meaning, it actually means very little; and if the term is intended simply as a loose substitute for, say, migration, then it is not clear why one would need to use the term at all. Moreover, the historian who decides to investigate the possible meanings of the term immediately confronts a wide array of theoretical literature fraught with more than its share of disagreements, contradictions, and incompatibilities. The term "diaspora" has no agreed-upon meaning. Some scholars define "diaspora" very narrowly, insisting that it be reserved for the Jews and, possibly, for African slaves and Armenian refugees.<sup>10</sup> [10] But where does one draw the line? A second, increasingly popular group of theorists defines the term very broadly to include "imperial," "trade," and "labor" diasporas as well as those based more traditionally on conquest, catastrophe, or exile.<sup>11</sup> [11] And a third group, avowedly "postmodern" by persuasion, objects to all typologies, seeing the "diasporic" as a state of mind and a form of discourse (which amount to the same thing).<sup>12</sup> [12]

The point here is not to endorse one position or another, but simply to echo MacRaild's comment that the meaning of the term "diaspora" is not self-evident and that using it unreflectively may be worse than not using it at all. The future of Irish migration historiography undoubtedly lies in the global arena, beyond the confines of individual nation states. But until the theoretical and practical possibilities of "diaspora" have been clarified, scholars could do worse than to remember that the very nation-states we are today so busily transcending were the essential building blocks of modern history. If our object of inquiry is the past rather than the present, it might be better to compare and contrast the history of migrant groups within nation states, no matter how arbitrarily they were constructed and defined, than to transcend these real national and state differences by ignoring them. Treating the global Irish as if they all belonged to a single diaspora runs the risk of impoverishing a rich and complex history.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [13]. Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (London and New York: Longman, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> [14]. Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> [15]. See, for example, Ellen Shapiro McDonald and Forrest McDonald, "The Ethnic Origins of the American People, 1790," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXXVII (January 1980): 179-99, with communications by Francis Jennings and Rowland Berthoff and a reply by the McDonalds, 3rd ser., XXXVII (October 1980), 700-3; Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, "Celtic Origins of Southern Herding Practices," *The Journal of Southern History*, 51 (1985): 165-82; Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1988); and, for an excellent critique, Rowland Berthoff, "Celtic Mist Over the South," *Journal of Southern History*, 52 (November 1986): 523-46.

<sup>4</sup> [16]. See Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, Vol. 1., *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York: Verso, 1994) and Vol. II., *The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 1997); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1992); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> [17]. As examples of the "revisionist" perspective on the famine I cite R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845-52* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1956); Mary Daly, *The Famine in Ireland* (Dublin: Dublin Historical Association, 1986) and "Revisionism and Irish History: The Great Famine," in D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day, eds., *The Making of Modern Irish History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); and R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988), 318-44. My examples of "post-revisionism" are Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine* (London:



Thames and Hudson, 1995) and *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), both of which are especially good on providentialism; and, on famine relief among other questions, Cormac O'Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), especially Chapter 8, and *Black '47 and Beyond. The Great Irish Famine: History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), especially Chapter 2. Evidence of a "romantic nationalist" perspective is harder to find, as there was never any such school of professional history. The target of much revisionism was popular rather than academic history, as exemplified by John Mitchel's infamous comment that "The almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."

[6](#) [18]. See in particular Thomas N. Brown, *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870-1890* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966); Eric Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League in Irish-America," in Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Victor A. Walsh, "'A Fanatic Heart': The Cause of Irish-American Nationalism in Pittsburgh During the Gilded Age," *Journal of Social History*, 15 (1981): 187-204.

[7](#) [19]. See in particular Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Janet Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

[8](#) [20]. By far the best account is Steven P. Erie, *Rainbow's End: Irish Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

[9](#) [21]. I have spent much of the last year working on a historiographical review essay critically examining the concept of diaspora and its applicability to the Irish case.

[10](#) [22]. This, indeed, was its standard meaning before the 1960s.

[11](#) [23]. Perhaps the most influential are William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora*, 1 (Spring 1991): 83-99, and Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

[12](#) [24]. See especially James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology*, 9 (1994): 302-38.

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