

Southern Journal

Reflections on the South

Causes Lost, Redemptions Found

Ireland and the American South share a familial resemblance.

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IT WAS AUGUST 1977, JUST A COUPLE of days, as it happened, before Elvis Presley's death in Memphis, Tenn. In the noisy, bustling JFK airport, an immigration officer was examining my Irish passport with its accompanying J1 visa that would allow me to pursue graduate studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

"You won't understand the people down there," he remarked ominously without looking up at me. I was momentarily puzzled, even vaguely insulted. Had he just read the Irish Gaelic wording on my passport and assumed that English was only my second language, an "acquired speech" as James Joyce had called it?

All of a sudden the officer's face lit up in a broad grin. "Say *y'all*," he teased, routinely stamping my documents and then shoving them back into my hand without waiting to hear my befuddled reply.

The immigration officer's poking fun at the Tennessee to which I was reluctantly going, rather than the Ireland from which I had just come, brought to mind once again all the negative comments I'd previously heard from American friends about the South, its cultural and economic backwardness, oppressive religious fundamentalism and bitter racism. Drowned out were the often curious and even occasionally envious remarks of Irish and English fellow students who, however, hardly knew anything at all about the place.

The more adventurous, or perhaps cynical, among the latter even suggested that Music City was likely to be more exciting than staid Oxford, the proverbial "home of lost causes"

from which I had received my undergraduate degree just weeks earlier. In any case, I now had to brace myself for my first encounter with this strange land seemingly so unlike my own and even less, I suspected, like the England where I had been living for the previous four years.

A few days later, as I sat in the airport limo riding through downtown Nashville and recalling that I had seen it described as "the Athens of the South," I thought glumly of how little resemblance the city bore to its Grecian prototype. Even its famed replica of the Parthenon seemed no more than a pathetic and disorienting imitation, ill placed in a low-lying city park. Everything European was very far away, not least because of the oppressive heat of the place. I had indeed entered a "New World."

More than two decades later, however, my perceptions *have* changed. I have certainly become more accepting and even celebratory of traditions and barely understood hierarchies not my own, phenomena to which many residents of European background remain jadedly condescending through their entire lifetimes in America. It takes the modern voluntary immigrant a while and requires some empathy to acknowledge that the Irish-American, or German-American, or even English-American experience and history represent not a mere unfortunate cultural displacement but is just as valid as his own and has simply shaped communities and families in a different way from that which has formed his identity.

More specifically, I am now aware that many of the South's inhabitants are my dis-



tant kin, and that its historical experience bears a striking, if somewhat unfamiliar, kinship with my own country's. Numerous defeated peoples—Poles, Japanese, those from the countries of the former Yugoslavia or of Latin and Central America, to mention just a few—have found it easier to identify their experience with that of the American South rather than with the more successful parts of the United States. Indeed, the traditional South in many of its social, political and economic aspects is probably more typical of the struggling world at large than is the rest of the nation. What is unique about the Irish relationship with it, however, is that *both* kin and kinship are involved.

Insofar as they are concerned with the matter at all, American Southerners—or at least white Southerners—tend to think of themselves primarily as English, with some admixture of Scottish, a perception that would be surprising to many of the present-day inhabitants of the British Isles. Certainly, few of the standard histories of the South make even passing reference to Ireland or the Irish. It is as though the latter had never been there at all. The states of the former Confederacy instead are seen as the home of quintessential American Anglo-Saxonism.

From 1607 when the Virginia Company of London founded the Jamestown colony

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(or even the slightly earlier “lost colony” of Roanoke in today’s North Carolina), the dominant narrative of Southern culture has been characterized by its sequence of British names—in terms of its people and, for the most part, its places.

But the perception of the American South as being essentially Anglo-Saxon minimizes the quite unique contribution the Scotch-Irish in particular have made to many areas of Southern life, perhaps because, as E. Merton Coulter claimed in 1935, they “were individualistic and greatly lacking in self-consciousness.” Even if the southern states of the eastern seaboard can be said to have a distinctly English origin, its western borders and Gulf coast have been significantly influenced by Spanish and French incursions, nationalities also complex in their ethnic compositions.

It should hardly be surprising that a South that until recent times barely mentioned its Native and African-American populations—despite that African-Americans comprised at least a third of those living in the region—should also have passed over in complacent silence the untidy remnants of other cultural contributions. . . .

Ireland figures in the Southern drama in many different ways: as a country from which a not-insignificant component of the Southern population originated; as a land with a strikingly similar historical experience of defeat, poverty and dispossession; and finally, at least in the Anglophone world, as a culture that has clear resemblances with that of the American South, not least because of the remarkable 20th-century literary achievements of both unlikely places. Ireland is to England, the argument sometimes goes, as the American South is to the United States: Both places have long been the “problem,” if also frequently romanticized regions, of otherwise “progressive” nations. They exist, all too really if often unwillingly, as the untamed peripheries of their respective centers.

It was very much in such a vein that half a century ago, the Irish short-story writer Seán O’Faoláin remarked that in his own County Cork and William Faulkner’s rural Mississippi, “There is the same passionate provincialism; the same local patriotism; the

same southern nationalism . . . the same vanity of the old race; the same gnawing sense of defeat; the same capacity for intense hatred . . . the same oscillation between unbounded self-confidence and total despair; the same escape through sport and drink.” In 1993 the dean of Southern historians, C. Vann Woodward, following O’Faoláin’s steps, noted that James Joyce and Faulkner “were conscious of the provinciality of their culture and its subordinate relation to a dominant one.”

I live in Birmingham, Ala., a Southern city with no especial Irish connections, but which nevertheless is home to a fortress-like Quinlan Castle (the only one in the world that I know of) that daily flies, as all proper castles do, the Union Jack, and that is marked by a shield sporting an accurate rendering of the rather undistinguished family’s coat of arms. Two of my great-aunts came to the state early in the 20th century as Roman Catholic nuns and are buried in a convent cemetery in Mobile. In the 1870s, Charles Stewart Parnell considered investing in the city’s new steel industry—his older brother already being a peach farmer in the state—and only changed his plans when his train was derailed outside Birmingham, an ill omen for the superstitious future leader of the Irish Home Rule party, a man destined to be celebrated as the “uncrowned king” of this country. According to one account, it was even his brother’s discontent with the indignities of Reconstruction that sharpened Parnell’s own perception of English-Irish injustices. At Birmingham’s Roman Catholic cathedral in 1921, an Irish-born priest was fatally shot by an itinerant Methodist preacher because he had just performed a wedding ceremony between the preacher’s rebellious daughter and a dark-skinned Puerto Rican. In the celebrated trial that followed, the defendant was successfully represented by the able Hugo Black, then a member of the Ku Klux Klan but who was to go on to become one of the most liberal members of the U.S. Supreme Court and whose own ancestors claimed that they had fled Ireland in the 1790s because of being related to the proscribed revolutionaries Thomas Addis Emmet and his better-known brother, Robert.

In more recent times, Irish connections—random, curious, sometimes significant—

persist. The current Earl of Bantry in County Cork was for many years a farmer in Alabama and taught English at one of the local private schools. A recent candidate for the Irish presidency, a popular singer of staunchly conservative outlook, resides here, too, though I was not aware of that until she began to run for office and a number of Irish journalists sought out my uninformed ear. Almost the first person I met on arrival in Birmingham in 1986 was a Lebanese restaurant owner who had lived for years in Dublin and still retained his Irish passport.

On my way to work during the last couple of years, I have begun to notice the frequency with which a Guinness truck is parked outside a popular restaurant (nearby Atlanta now being the No. 1 consumer of that beverage in the United States), making me fondly nostalgic for a youth spent watching that company’s barges lower their grimy red and black funnels as they passed beneath the Liffey bridges of “dear dirty Dublin” in the 1950s.

O’Faoláin’s comment that Ireland would be a wonderful place in which to live in 200 years’ time has received a kind of early fulfillment in the many exiles returning to it in the last few years, while on the other side of the Atlantic numerous relocating African-Americans have confessed that they now find the South—though there is a preferential hierarchy among its states—the most congenial part of the United States in which to live. Certainly, the economies of both places have improved dramatically, even if large areas of acute poverty still exist. By one reckoning—not at all easy to believe—it is estimated that the Southern states now have the fourth largest economy in the world. Meanwhile, Ireland is regularly, if rather provincially, touted as the “Celtic Tiger” that came from far behind to catch up with, and occasionally outpace, many of its European allies in economic activity.

Should the American South continue to prosper, it is likely that it will attract a new generation of Irish immigrants as it already has done in regard to Latinos and set off a new cycle of comparisons.

This essay is adapted with permission from Kieran Quinlan’s book Strange Kin: Ireland and the American South.