

# Irish-American History as Soul Retrieval

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## Foreword

It is visible, sometimes painfully, when someone does not know important parts of human history. It is also visible when someone does not know their ethnic history. My Italian and German-American friends are often like my Irish-American friends, vaguely aware of an ethnic past.

As I write this, I know in my travels to Ireland later in the year and I know I will stick out as an American who has lost his Irishness and is on a vague, groping attempt to win something back in the return to the home soil.

This essay is an attempt to be less vague in my quest, to go from the historical to the spiritual, the collective to the individual, to take a run at being more comprehensive, less groping and searching, to increase the chances for serendipity and grace along with the systematic and ordered.

I got pulled under by Jungian psychology in my 50s—what lies outside of waking consciousness that is bigger than us and needs to be attended to? I say pulled under versus overwhelmed, because the feeling was one of being drawn by a riptide into deep water. This feeling of a large undertow, a current under the surface of daily life is still going on and most likely won't stop, but will take different forms. It took the form of the soul quest to Ireland.

It also took the form of an ethnoautobiographical quest. I cannot stop asking the questions: what is my loss for not knowing my ancestral history, and what is my gain if I became aware of the particulars of the Irish/Celtic life-stream of DNA, biological and psychological, from which I spring?

My first task was to apply that history in both an American pragmatic fashion, and in a less pragmatic act of late-in-life ethno

-psychic integration. Here I focused on art, myth and interviews with Irish-Americans.

My approach to this quest was foremed from this idea: If I read history in a certain way I can understand it imaginatively and expand my awareness. So, my second task in my ethnic search was to see what the history really is. I confined myself in this part to reading and reflecting on three books of Irish and Irish-American history.

I participated in the historical/mythic dimensions of human life as I did this work with my fullest heart intensity and mental curiosity. This first part was based on history, but I worked for understanding and for a practical application through imaginative psychic assimilation. I had been pulled under and I was heading for more ancient history and myth.

## Why Ethnic and Cultural Identity

Cultural amnesia is real and widespread. Modern societies train us to succeed and not be, and so many of our learning gaps are encouraged and allowed. My Jungian Studies friend Sean Fitzpatrick knows little about his Irish past—his gap is exposed with one question. (“Wow, your Irish name—so tell me about your Irish herit-age?”) As a Schuster with six of my eight great grandparents full Irish, but my dad's dad's dad German, my surname is German. I am unlike Sean. I am disguised. I am never exposed. My Irishness is not on my sleeve, visible, ready.

My questions as I read all this history and absorbed the art and culture are the following: What difference does it make to be from Irish stock? Or any stock for that matter? Why does it matter? Aren't we all humans encountering the same life force and questions? Yes, of course. But that does not mean that we are also not highly particularized individuals, like no other of the many billions of us who are living or who have lived. If we are to establish an authentic identity we need to work to discover that particularity. And we must also work on the intermediate space, the cultural between the universal and the particular also deserve our careful attention. Looked at graphically, the following may help:



Depending on who we are, and what stage of our life we are in, any one or combination of the three positions are the ones that primarily concern us at any particular time. We affirm both poles of our identities—the universal and the particular—by affirming the cultural.

## Part I: Irish-American Amnesia: Myth, Art and Narrative Interviews

“Even amnesia, the absence of remembrance, cannot erase the imprint of the past. Recalled or unrecalled, memory is embedded in the way we love, hope, believe... Memory is a reel of endless, haunted gossip, a montage of snippets, remnants, patches, whispers, wisps, the way our parents held us, the acceptance or reluctance in their arms, shadows on the nursery wall, the smell of cut grass, chalk dust, mother’s breath” (Quinn, 2007, p. 48).

I read the following books, artistic in nature, as part of this soul retrieval: *Looking for Jimmy*, by Quinn; *Charming Billy*, by McDermott; *Essential Celtic Mythology*, (Clarke, 1997).

I visited the Center for Irish Studies at St. Thomas University in Houston Texas, spoke with the director and went to two of the lectures in early 2013, one on Celtic Spirituality and one on the four visits Queen Victoria made to Ireland in her reign.

### **Charming Billy, by McDermott**

This National Book Award winning novel captures the snippets of an Irish alcoholic whose tattered life is never healed. I allowed myself one dive into this dark set of Irish whispers, the alcoholic shadows. The protagonist Billy cannot find happiness in his life so he focuses on redemption. Here is a passage that captures the Irish sense of the tragic:

“Drunk, when Billy turned his eyes to heaven, heaven was there....Heaven was there, utterly necessary, utterly sensible, the only possible reconciliation of the way he must live day by day and the certainty he’d felt that life meant something greater. The only redemption, the only compensation for the disappointment, the cruelty and pain that plagued the living” (McDermott, 2004, p. 216).

The flip side of celebrated Irish joviality is this longing-laced, Irish sadness, the kind the bagpipe can convey like no other instrument. McDermott captures the darkness, the tragic view of life linked to the Catholicism (and to Irish myth) that so linked to my natural sense of exile and Celtic/human alienation from the modern world into which I was born.

## The Movies

The two movies I chose to experience had varying degrees of escape through romanticism in them

### **The Quiet Man**

*Description:* The Quiet Man, (Ford, 1952) with John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara, was set in Ireland. An Irish-American boxer keeps his identity a secret as he falls in love with the Irish lass, they have a troubled beginning to their relationship and to life in the village to which he returns.



Emigrants Leave Ireland, by Henry Doyle, 1868. Public domain

The romanticism here is pronounced as there is no real attempt, other than the one scene of the death of the boxer, to explore the darker sides of Irish alcoholism, economic struggle or difficulty of any kind. It is fun, love, community, fighting for the joy of it, drinking as daily lubricant, love as natural outcome, return to the old sod as a homecoming. The importance of the movie for me was the clichés, the shallow but real look at Irish by an Irish director (Ford was born Feeney) and the history. The Irish here are not the shovel-carrying brutes of the mid 1800’s, but the partially civilized charming clan whose backwardness is cute, and even entertaining for Hollywood by the 1930’s.

### **Angels with Dirty Faces**

*Description:* Jimmy Cagney plays a slum kid who lives a life of crime but who may repent in the end.

In the second movie I watched, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, (Brown et al., 1938) the gritty Irish underworld life is captured. The politics, the economics, may be fairly realistic in this portrayal, even the negative effects of a penal system that creates criminals instead of rehabilitating them that leads to death, not defiance. However, the starry-eyed, idealistic priest working against all odds, and even his old friend redeemed at the electric chair, is as sentimental a view of Catholicism as the Pope could ever want.

### **Looking for Jimmy, by Peter Quinn**

This half historical, half artistic, uncategorizable book of essays, *Looking for Jimmy* by Peter Quinn (Quinn, 2007), takes on all topics with imagination and energy: three big ones being the Democratic Party, the Famine and its wake, and the Catholic Church. I found myself going back over his sentences repeatedly as the words were so powerful, beautiful original.

Quinn speaks to my experience, though I was in Iowa when he was in New York, but that did not matter in all instances, like this one:

”Contra the assertion of my good friend Frank McCourt, the Irish-Catholic childhood isn’t the most miserable of all. I was blessed as well as burdened, graced more than cursed. Yet I find little to lament in the loosening identification of Irish with Catholic. As well as idolatrous, the equation of religion and nation is, in the end, poisonous to both” (Quinn, 2007, p.151).



Irish immigrants did much of the work of digging the canals to power mills in Lowell, MA. Lowell National Historical Park

I could not agree more as my Irish Catholicism was as much a huge blessing as it was a huge, but not insurmountable, burden. Yet he nuances the religious identification process more:

“Breaking the reflexive association of religion and ethnicity, however, isn’t the same as saying that religious values fare formed in a vacuum, divorced from history and devoid of cultural content. My faith is rooted in my Irish-Catholic heritage. It couldn’t be otherwise. That’s who I am” (Ibid).

Such is my experience with my Irish Catholic DNA. I had to make peace with it some time ago, an uneasy one on occasion, and now a Jung-inspired one, but a peace nevertheless, with an appreciation for all faiths and Eastern sensibilities.

What do I take away, integrate and absorb from this art? The sadness, the beauty, the singing, the cliches, the history, the alcohol, the brawling, the un-Anglicanized, raw Irish spirit. Surely all of this. But the real answer is I don’t know yet. It is too early. I see the history in the art and because of Quinn primarily, the imagination and art in the history. I see the human spirit in its Gaelic version, the tribe I come from, romanticized, celebrated, bemoaned and suffered. I listen to the music more attentively. I see the last 400 years, like the history I read, and I feel the need to go before that, to more primordial, mythic roots.

## Celtic Myth

For this paper, having read the last several hundred years of my ancestry on both sides of the Atlantic, I needed to go back to the myths and sense more of the dawning of the Irish life I now bet-

ter appreciate. Ethnoautobiography includes, and is indeed founded on, myth and narrative.

For example, Deidre of the Sorrows is in some ways the

history of the Gaelic sensibility in the world of the West, of commerce and progress. It is the story of the Irish people, betrayed by the economic system into which they were colonized. The betrayal of the famine, which if not socially engineered was socially allowed at many levels. At the level of the individual psyche, the myth is the masculinized ego, and the power drive, eventually killing the feminine soul, betraying it and negating its energy for connection and community.

## The Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to calibrate my experience of my amnesia against the experience of other Irish-Americans. It was a fascinating and very informative part of the study.

New York Irish-American women—Julia McNamara and Anne Whelehan Smego are mid-life, super-smart, career-oriented Irish ladies who knew what it was like to be Irish in American. They both have their Irishness right under their skin, because of time, only one or two generations, and because of practices and exposure.

Siobhan Murphy, like Anne and Julia, is first generation, five sibs, her parents had moved to NYC in their twenties and she was born in the first year of their marriage. Summers back in Ireland. “My house was like an Irish museum,” she said. “My parents really never left.” Her parents needed Irish mementos everywhere. This was the first in person story I had heard of the trauma of leaving home. The others were in the history books. Siobhan, pronounced Sha-van (Gaelic has no v letter) was the most Irish of the lot. She marched in the St. Patrick’s Day parade with the Hibernians for years, playing the bagpipes. She knew the most Gaelic.

These three had some amnesia, but nothing like mine. After their interviews, I was jealous and inspired, relating and yet distant from their stories. They were close in space and time to Ireland.

A fourth non-family interview was with Susan Starkey, a Detroit Irish Polish Catholic, now in Denver, who spent many of her middle years, with her husband, reclaiming her Irish roots with trips to Ireland. She had had amnesia like myself in her 20’s and 30’s and then her Irish identity came back to haunt her and

she did her Erin exploration. Less amnesiac than me, much more than the New York City crew, Susan was like a missing link in a fossil trail, a bridge to the New Yorkers who seemed more Irish than I could almost fathom.

My Aunt Dorothy is the remaining member of her generation. Born in 1924 in Waukon Iowa, the northeast corner of Iowa bordering Minnesota and Wisconsin, Dorothy described how very little Irishness specifically had been passed on to her consciously. Like her older sister, Rita, my mom, Dorothy was full Irish—Quinn, O'Brien, Healy and Cunningham are the grandparents, but the move into modern life in rural Iowa had none of the New York cultural heritage.

Dorothy was like me and her brothers and sisters and my sisters and cousins—we are very Irish and don't know what that means or what difference it makes except in broad strokes. But we are proud of it somehow. My Cunningham cousins, all from the same area, graduates of St. Patrick's, tell the same story as Dorothy. Most of their Irishness is consciously lost and unconsciously present. Their conversation is laced with stories that end with a laugh, a perfectly delivered punch line after the set up that reveals an insight, a surprise, a way of seeing the world through Gaelic irony and artful language.

The final interview was with Maureen Murdock ([www.maureenmurdock.com](http://www.maureenmurdock.com)), who has written about her journey with her Irish identity and presented seminars on it. She was very articulate about her Irish roots and the meaning of this Celtic stream in her life. She talked about the lamentation of the Irish, the creativity and comedy and alcohol as outlets for the lamentation. She thought mythically—how the long suffering martyr and the hero myths operated in her life. She had a profound awareness, many trips to Ireland, and was a Peter Quinn for me with a psychologist's view, and a Jungian one at that. I was moved by her depth and she was the perfect end to my interviews.

## PART II: The Books of History

I read history to gain a felt sense of the stream of life called Irish and Celtic and Gaelic. So I encountered history more than read it, absorbing the books while I was interviewing American Irish about their stories and while reading some contemporary Irish writers. It took me four months to absorb these books, and to gain a sense of the sweep of history that landed me as an amnesia-suffering, amnesia-denying Irish American in the Midwest of the United States in the middle of my life.

### ***Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, by Kerby A. Miller**

One of this Miller's summary ideas reveals the slant taken by this sociologist/historian from the University of Missouri.

"The central thesis of this book has been that Irish-American homesickness, alienation, and nationalism were rooted ultimately in a traditional Irish Catholic worldview which predisposed Irish emigrants to perceive or at least justify themselves not as voluntary, ambitious emigrants but as... "exiles" compelled to leave home by forces beyond individual control..." (Miller, 1985, p. 556).

This compendious book covers the economics, the social strata, the penal laws, being kicked off the land, the overpopulation; the strong (better-off) farmers smaller in number versus the ever-present and multiplying poor peasants, the industrialization, especially to the North; the religion, the politics, the agriculture; the lack of self-determination; the consciousness of emigration and exile by Presbyterians and Catholics—that these two sub-groups weren't that separate at first, and both fought for independence from Britain. And the emigration—the pre-famine, famine and post famine emigrations and what the emigrants thought and felt in Ireland and what they encountered in the United States.

Miller writes about how the Anglicanization and the rationalization (a type of modernizing and Anglo-Saxon inculcation and acculturation) of the Irish never happened fully. Try as the Brits did for decades, the Gaelic language never left, and modern rationalism never took over. The Celtic sense of magic and mystery and the invisible world close to the visible world, a sense that was brought forth from pre-Patrick, druidic times, never was far below the surface for the Irish.

For me, reading Miller was a type of chapter by chapter soul retrieval through intellectual/historical comprehension. I could see the imaginal energy streams of Irishness, the big rivers, tributaries and small brooks, the factions within factions, the eddies and historical swirls.

His main thesis on exile was fundamental to Irish history and to me personally. How I have felt like an exile in my life! Miller elucidates why that fits into my Irishness. His phrase "rationalize the land" is so telling. He was using the term economically but it was my experience as a child. In school and at home I was parentally and culturally projected into modern life, reasoned into school success so I would be a career success. My parents were 'rationalizing' the economic and professional ascent of the family as my older sister and I were sent off daily to excel, to learn how to prosper and make a living in modern American life. We were the new Irish taking our place along the WASPS of America in mid-twentieth century, assimilating and amnesiac.

I was naturally melancholic for much of my early adulthood, like an exile should be. The idea of success and belonging in the world as it is came later to me, in my mid-30's when I gave my business a run for more than two decades, with my Canadian-Irish wife no less, equally amnesiac. I had kids to raise and fund.

I was positivistic and stayed un-Irish and grew business and corporate-like, fitting in as best as possible with my customers.

So I was an exile twice over. In a bottom line world of American world of commerce, I was not at home even when I made it my living for a good time, helping leaders find their voice. And secondly, in my Cunningham/Schuster-McDonough Irish clan of Irish Catholics who kept their Catholicism, love of Notre Dame and Democratic politics for the most part, but lost their Irishness, I had no sense of my ethnic identity. I had noticed some things about me. I loved to dance and was pretty good at it. I had an interest in what was pre-Roman Catholic, pre-science. I was drawn, pulled under with that rip tide, to visit my rural roots and in Iowa. There I could drink in my cousins, my aunts, and the feminine energy of belonging to a clan.

All this poetry and music and alienation and melancholy and feminine and Iowan sod was my Gaelic past, my Erin roots, edging their way into my soul. I understood faeries and leprechauns without knowing faeries and leprechauns. I understood turf and the old sod, and grew beans and tomatoes in the summer to get my fingers dirty. I was an unsuspecting Irish exile—modern, sensing the wasteland, not very interested in success, modern and not knowing how much I missed my anything-but-modern Irish identity. Miller's book on emigration and exile helped me understand all this. He gave me the external context for the journey inward. I had a start on the content, the what, of my quest. He gave me a working view of history. There was more to absorb.

### ***How the Irish Became White*, by Noel Ignatiev**

Ignatiev's book is a snapshot into the decades' long history of blacks and Irish in an economic/ race/class struggle that defined the larger America, but was writ large in the Erin/African conflict. Ignatiev names this period for how the Irish "turned white." For a few decades at least the Irish were on a level with the black slaves who had been forced here, sharing the same neighborhoods and working the same jobs. They shared a common bond for a time, as seen in this pamphlet for the Irish in the 1840's in Boston:

"Irishmen and Irishwomen! Treat the colored people as your equals, as brethren. By your memories of Ireland, continue to love liberty—hate slavery—CLING BY THE ABOLITIONISHTS—and in America you will do. honor to the name of Ireland" (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 10).

The bond was short-lived.

Ignatiev is a Marxist-like thinker whose primary view of life is through class struggle and the fight for a decent wage. He did not care about Irish consciousness, Gaelic roots, Celtic spirituali-

ty. He cares about labor. The struggle for a fair wage was upon the Irish when they landed on American shores.

The author explored how the Irish could turn white, that is, be eventually accepted, after several generations of Anglo-Saxon prejudice, as members of society, by virtue of the skin color.

The Irish who at first sympathized with the blacks need for freedom, which was not unlike the Irish struggle with England, turned against blacks in large measure as the fight for jobs got sharpened.

The southern plantation owners found a wedge they could exploit—they gave money to Daniel O'Connell in Ireland and to his forces for Irish freedom against England. By doing so, the abolitionist Irish voices were muted, and the Irish assimilation "over and against" blacks was enabled. The bond between blacks and the Irish was dissolved:

"The truth is not, as some historians would have it, that slavery made it possible to extend to the Irish the privileges of citizenship, by providing another group for them to stand on, but the reverse, that the assimilation of the Irish into the white race made it possible to maintain slavery. (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 11).

This was a very useful book for a romantically leaning Irishman like me to read. The Irish were somewhat the victim in this book, like they usually are. But they were the victimizer as well. They not only took advantage of the blacks they encountered, they created advantages and banned against them. They learned to knock African-Americans down the rungs on the ladder of society so they could have a few rungs near the bottom for themselves. Ignatiev does not present a pretty story of Irish sentimentalism here. All Irish should read this book.

My older sister once said this about our family: "the central organizing principle in our family was our dad's career." It was about labor and how to improve upon it. My dad's upwardly mobile life was about escaping rural and mid-sized city poverty.



My dad and I stopped fishing together when he took his final big executive job in Cincinnati. No more fishing was an apt symbol of non-Iowa, Irish-amnesiac life. We were drifting away from our roots and getting amalgamated in the malls and TV culture of middle class Ohio.

From Miller and his exile expose, I had travelled to Ignatiev's work on the troubles of ebony and ivory, career mobility

and the racist mid-18<sup>th</sup> century truth of my clan in a capitalist world of winners and losers. I found part of the Irish shadow, not the alcoholism that is well documented, but the racism that is less so.

### ***The Irish Americans*, by Jay P. Dolan**

This third book was the one that brought tears at the closing paragraphs on a cold February night in Columbus Ohio. This was the book that brought me to the present.

Dolan started with the struggle in Ireland but his perspective was primarily American and 20th century. He writes about the canal digging poverty days, like Ignatiev:

“In a condescending manner, Charles Dickens said, ‘Who else would dig and delve, and drudge, and do domestic work, and make canals and roads...’ ‘The poor Irishman, the wheelbarrow is his country,’ observed Ralph Waldo Emerson. Wherever there was hard, dirty work, there you would find the Irish (Dolan, 2008, p. 43).

What I found the most useful in Dolan was the coverage of the generation of my parents and the decades of my life, which, taken together, are about a century now. It was a century of assimilation and amnesia. Instead of the old clannish stick-together Irish, a new kind of patriotism and identity with the whole, the kind I grew up with, was emerging:

“The new leadership in the Hibernians sought to promote a more tolerant American ethos...St. Patrick’s Day had become an American holiday, no longer reserved for the Irish alone. Uncle Sam had trumped St. Patrick.” (Dolan, 2008, p. 221).

I was Irish, not knowing I was Irish or that I had come from a struggle for opportunity. I was the traveling wandering nuclear family, descended from the nuclear family of my dad and in my own nuclear family for eleven years, de-tribed, un-clanned. I became “rationalized” for work in business, organized and culturally amalgamated.

Dolan was not naïve in pointing out the “victory” of assimilation. He knows it comes with amnesia.

“Another way to explain the Irish renaissance is to recognize that in moving out of Irish neighborhoods into the American suburbs, the Irish have experienced a loss of identity.”

Dolan also quotes a sociologist who in some ways explains my quest, my need for this independent study course in Irish-American Amnesia:

“Mary Waters wrote, ‘Being ethnic makes them feel unique and special and not just vanilla . . . They are not like everyone else. At the same time, being ethnic gives them a sense of belonging to a collectivity. It is the best of all worlds; they can claim to be unique and special while simultaneously finding the community and conformity with others that they also crave.’”

Waters and Dolan bring me back to the beginning of this essay on the ethnobiographical history of this mostly Irish soul who had lost the middle of his identity on the scale of universal—ethnic/cultural—unique. I started to sense the reason why, even though I tried to fit in for a time in my career, that my quest into the mainstream of corporate performance was, once and for all, really an attempt to find and expand the veins of humanity that survive inside corporations and to help transform them into forces for social good. My middle ground of Irishness had indeed provided me with a middle space from which to operate, make a living and fit into the world. Only I missed its essence, almost all of it, with the amnesia of modern life. I lost that middle identity. These three history books help me to reclaim it. Soul retrieval began.

## **Conclusion**

I had come to the end of the history and art and interviews and had put my toe into the Masters project ahead of me in the next semester. I was heading toward Celtic myth and spirituality, the early Irish-Catholic Church, the foundations of the Irish American identity I was excavating.

Early on in the my Saybrook University Professor Jurgen Kremer’s (and Jackson-Paton, his co-writer) work on ethnoautobiography he says we have a call “to reengage anew the thorny, complicated issues of personal and cultural identity... (and, interestingly enough) individualism is a pernicious threat to much of what we hold dear.” ... Identity is not individualism because people are complex webs of place, history, gender, ancestry, ever growing and changing.” (Kremer & Jackson-Paton, 2013).

And so I am. This paper both documents my changes and has changed me. I am more Irish than ever before and know I have just begun. I am still wondering and wandering, restlessly and happily so.