

Irish Nationalists in America: The Politics of Exile, 1798-1998

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David Brundage's *Irish Nationalists in America* employs no sleight of hand in its title. It is a short, well-crafted new survey of Irish nationalists in the United States from the late 18th century to the close of the 20th that is more than the sum of its parts. What Brundage attempts – and achieves – is a focused study of nationalism, and not just in its political expression and diplomatic implications, but in its social and cultural forms through two-and-a-bit centuries of US national life. He rightly argues that 'Irish nationalism was ... an almost textbook example of a transnational phenomenon, ... involving the movement of people and the exchange of ideas, information, money, and ... arms' (p. 6). In addition, he makes three claims. First, that 'the Irish in America had an enormous impact on the course of nationalism back in Ireland' (p. 2). Second, that 'Irish nationalists also exerted considerable influence on political and social developments in the United States' (p. 3). And finally, deploying Lord Acton's aphorism that 'exile is the nursery of nationalism', Brundage argues that 'long-distance' or 'diasporic' nationalism 'is as old as nationalism itself' (pp. 3-4).⁽¹⁾ If anything, this interpretive triptych undersells Brundage's distinctive contribution: by adopting a long historical perspective he is able to highlight the 'repeated rejuvenat[ion]' of Irish nationalism (p. 6), and it is this emphasis on generational change and transmission that distinguishes Brundage's argument from its historiographical antecedents.

The opening chapter introduces the book's most compelling presence, Theobald Wolfe Tone, whose image ghosts through the story thereafter (in his epilogue Brundage tells the story of a 1997 Sinn Féin event in New York City at which Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, and assorted guests are treated to 'feisty rebel songs' performed by the folk band The Wolfe Tones (p. 215).) Tone, born in 1763 in Dublin, co-founded the non-sectarian Society of United Irishmen, dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland. He lived in exile in the United States between August and December 1795 but was unimpressed by the new republic. He returned to Europe, first to France, then to Ireland as part of a French expeditionary force in autumn 1798. He was taken prisoner, tried and sentenced, but, before his execution, committed suicide. The real hero of this opening chapter is not Tone himself, however, but his wife, Matilda, whose labour in collecting, editing and publishing his writings in the 1820s made her the key curator of Irish-American nationalism in the early republic. In narrating his life as a study in nationalist commitment she established a benchmark for later proponents of the republican ideal. As Brundage argues, 'the act of publicly "remembering" Tone would ... become a weapon of immense value for the project of Irish nationalism' (p. 31).

Chapter two makes the case that the British government's crackdown on Irish republicanism in the 1790s created a radical diaspora that had a particularly significant impact on the politics of the United States. Brundage confirms the case made by David A. Wilson in his work, *United Irishmen, United States*, that these radicals strengthened the Jeffersonian coalition and fought for immigrant rights and religious toleration. (2) Even as they made the case for Irish republican liberty, however, they disagreed over the merits of the expansion of slavery, with some embracing an explicitly pro-slavery politics (p. 45). Chapter three highlights the transatlantic celebrity of Daniel O'Connell and investigates American support for his programme to Repeal the Anglo-Irish Union, as well as the impact that his vocal abolitionism had on perceptions of Irish nationalism in the United States. Brundage is particularly attentive to women's social activism in the service of the Repeal movement, and rounds out the chapter by highlighting the pull of Tone's politics for a new generation of revolutionary ideologues styling themselves Young Ireland.

Brundage makes the case for the Fenian Brotherhood being the 'first mass based Irish nationalist movement in American history' in his fourth chapter, and emphasises its relative autonomy from its Irish counterpart (p. 89). Its most important legacy, he argues, 'was in helping to hone a separate and distinct ethnic identity among the Irish, intensifying their sense of social and cultural difference from the mainstream of American life' in the aftermath of the cataclysmic Famine (pp. 89–90). Irish nationalism was one nationalism among many, he notes, but the only one that could mobilise such a large percentage of the American urban population. The US Civil War deserves more attention than it receives here, not least because, as Damian Shiels has detailed, it was the 19th-century conflict in which most Irishmen served, comparable in its broad impact on Irish society with the First World War. (3) We might also ask, as David Gleeson has, how southern and Confederate identities complicated the idea of a coherent Irish nationalist community. (4)

Chapters five and six address the intersection of land and national politics, the rise and scandalous fall of Charles Stewart Parnell, and the difficulties of holding together a transatlantic coalition in support of Home Rule politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chapter seven then turns to the Irish Revolution and the question of how revolutionary Irish nationalism became a mainstream proposition for Irish Americans, even as US entry into the war complicated their calculations. The immediate post-war period saw the 'high tide' of Irish American nationalism, as de Valera and his associates mobilised Irish America in support of US recognition of the provisional republican government in Ireland (p. 162).

Brundage's final two chapters cover the period from the end of the Irish War of Independence in 1921 to 1998's Good Friday Agreement. The Irish Civil War of 1922–3 was mostly met with 'incomprehension and revulsion' in the United States (p. 169); the Free State that emerged victorious slowly built support in the United States, though there was too considerable support for de Valera's anti-Treaty politics. Éire's pursuit of neutrality during the Second World War badly hurt Irish nationalist organisations in the United States and attempts to drum up interest in the border question in the 1940s and 1950s gained little traction (p. 184). The resurgent violence of the next four decades dragged Northern Ireland into US governmental calculations at

the highest level, which, Brundage argues, 'was perhaps the most astonishing development of this entire history' (p. 189).

Along the way Brundage highlights the ways in which Irish nationalist politics in the United States intersected with the social lives of immigrants and their descendants. He is particularly persuasive in demonstrating the ways in which this culture shaped engagement with labour politics. The most satisfying element of this study relates to labour of a different kind, however. Brundage is attentive to the sheer work involved in sustaining Irish nationalist ambition in the United States. Irish nationalism, he writes, 'was never just a matter of money or guns, meetings or petitions; it was also an ongoing work of political imagination' (p. 92). This entailed the narration, generation after generation, of collective memories of suffering, loss, and the inequities of British rule in Ireland. It also, one supposes, demands the marginalisation or suppression of alternative narratives of engagement in the British imperial project.⁽⁵⁾ Brundage writes this in the context of a discussion of John Mitchel's terse, barbed *Jail Journal*, published in New York City in 1854, but it is surely just as true in the repeated invocation of the book's protagonist, Wolfe Tone. In one haunting scene, Brundage recounts Roger Casement, on the verge of leaving New York for Germany, stating 'I am Wolfe Tone. I am the reincarnation of Wolfe Tone' (p. 145).

Brundage is clear in his focus and makes explicit that his study's centre of gravity is in the United States. There are nods to connections with Irish communities in Australia, Britain, and most notably British North America, as for instance in his brief comparative discussion of the Fenian Brotherhood (pp. 108–9) but he has no pretensions to writing a global history of his subject. It's worth highlighting that Brundage's footnotes for his introductory section offer a fantastic primer for anyone interested in comparative studies of migration and diasporic nationalism. This neatly complements moves being made by those historians of Ireland who are exploring the benefits and limitations of applying transnational methodologies in their work.⁽⁶⁾

Brundage strikes a balance between brisk coverage of his own primary research and an impressive synthesis of recent works on Irish America, including those by Angela Murphy, Ely Janis, Niall Whelehan, among others.⁽⁷⁾ These works, and the chronological coverage of the book as a whole, suggest that historians' focus has most often been on the period before 1921. The period between the Irish Civil War and the ratcheting of violence in the late 1960s is the thinnest here. So far as this is a product of flagging immigration and a relative lack of nationalist reimagining in this period, this serves Brundage's larger thesis; it might also point to the need for further work on the Irish diaspora in the United States in these decades. Though attentive to the role of women in what frequently a story of male agency and homosociality, it is debatable whether Brundage gives himself sufficient space to investigate 'the deep and often unspoken beliefs and attitudes about gender that have permeated Irish American nationalism as a whole', something that he has described elsewhere as a 'critical theme in recent studies of nationalism generally'.⁽⁸⁾

Though only a short volume, *Irish Nationalists in America* will supplant two studies that historians have relied on for a little too long: Charles Tansill's *America and the Fight for Irish Freedom 1866–1922* and Thomas N. Brown's *Irish-American Nationalism 1870–1890*.⁽⁹⁾ Tansill's was a diplomatic and political study that centred on Woodrow Wilson's antipathy to Irish nationalist politics and his consequent disregard for Ireland's right to self-determination. Brown, by contrast, saw Irish nationalism, even in its most aggressive forms, as a road to assimilation for immigrants otherwise alienated from the society they entered into. Brundage's emphasis on a diasporic understanding of Irish nationalism pulls us away from the assimilationist paradigm and situates the political and diplomatic struggle for Irish home rule in its social and intellectual context.

In writing this review I was minded to try and situate this work alongside the great heavyweight of Irish-American historiography, Kerby A. Miller's *Emigrants and Exiles*.⁽¹⁰⁾ Miller argued that Irish migrants were inclined to interpret their lives in the United States as 'exile', even in cases where this seemed to obviously mischaracterise their experience of migration. He suggested that this conceptualisation shaped the rhetoric of nationalism in an American setting. Brundage notes Miller's emphasis on exile, homesickness, and alienation (pp. 5-6) but otherwise keeps his cards close to his chest. His emphasis on rejuvenation and

renewal could be taken to complement Miller's argument (what prompts this renewal, after all, other than the continued migration of those who believe they have little choice but to leave Ireland?) and his closing sentence, about perceptions of exile, suggest as much. But an inclination to throw heavier punches would be welcome. Similar slugging would be helpful in addressing the obvious comparative question more directly: how far is this a representative model of exiled nationalism in the United States? Would a German, Cuban, Italian, or Filipino story illustrate the same intellectual creativity? The same dynamic response to new waves of migration? The same ideological fractures?

Overall, however, this is a sharp and well-written book, and the narrative that Brundage tells is compelling and neatly contextualised by shorter sections on political developments in Ireland itself. He forces us to appreciate the ways in which nationalism was perceived, not unjustly, as a liberating force by many in the 19th century without himself succumbing to romanticisation. There are no shamrocks or avenging wolfhounds here. Brundage offers, in closing, some small sense of contingency, occasioned by a reflection on the limits of Irish national sovereignty in the face of transnational capital and the organisations that underwrite its substantial power. What might happen next? More worrying, the revival of a more radical Irish nationalism in the context of an undermined Good Friday Agreement is not inconceivable (the book was published two months before the UK's referendum on EU membership). What might the transatlantic dynamics of that resurrection look like? My guess is that Brundage wouldn't be so rash as to suggest a hard answer – but any revival of Irish-American nationalism would surely involve some creative reinvention, just as it always has.

Notes

1. Baron Acton, 'Nationality', *The Home and Foreign Review* (July 1862), 14.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca, NY, 1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Damian Shiels, *The Irish in the American Civil War* (Dublin, 2013).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Gleeson, *The Green and the Gray: the Irish in the Confederate States of America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. On this engagement see, for instance, the essays in *Ireland and the British Empire*, edited by Kevin Kenny (Oxford and New York, NY, 2006).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See, for instance, the work collected here: <https://transnationalireland.com/publications/> [2] [accessed 10 December 2017].[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Angela Murphy, *American Slavery, Irish Freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic Movement for Irish Repeal* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2010); Ely M. Janis, *A Greater Ireland: the Land League and Transatlantic Nationalism in Gilded Age America* (Madison, WI, 2015); Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867–1900* (Cambridge, CA, 2015).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. David Brundage 'Recent directions in the history of Irish American nationalism', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 28, 4 (Summer 2009), 85.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Charles Tansill's *America and the Fight for Irish Freedom 1866–1922: an Old Story Based upon New Data* (1957); Thomas N. Brown's *Irish-American Nationalism 1870–1890* (1966).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford and New York, NY, 1985).[Back to \(10\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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