THE BOOK OF IRISH AMERICAN Poetry
from the Eighteenth Century to the Present

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INTRODUCTION

Irish American Poetry and the Question of Tradition

What does it mean to be an Irish American poet? The question is not just rhetorical, for it raises to consciousness the issue of a certain kind of imaginative identity that rarely, if ever, has been adequately explored. In fact, the question is so fundamental that we might want to rephrase it in such a way that something of what is at stake behind the question enters into its form. So: Does the experience of being Irish American predispose the Irish American poet to embrace any characteristic themes, subjects, or styles? Is there in such poetry something that might be identified as a uniquely Irish American sensibility, in the same way one might identify Jewish American poetry or African American poetry? And, if not, is it worth even using the appellation “Irish American Poetry,” as though such a thing existed in any artistically commendable form? Such questions construe Irish American poetry as a problem to be wrestled with, and possibly constructed, rather than as an established tradition to celebrate alongside Irish American forays into politics or the entertainment industry. Charles Fanning, for one, remarks in his ground-breaking *The Irish Voice in America* that while Irish American fiction and drama constitute a distinctive and complex literary heritage, Irish American poetry has been afflicted by a “simplicity” that verges on the stage Irish:

Over the years many Irish Americans have published poems, and by the 1880s critic E. C. Steadman was referring to an “Irish-American School” of poets. This poetry has often been popular, and the legions of green-covered volumes of verse stretching back to the 1810s and the 1820s have had their effect on the Irish-American literary self-consciousness. And yet, there have been few memorable Irish-American poems, especially before recent times. The problem has been an endemic blight of programmatic melancholy or bravado that emerged from the experience and perception of forced exile. The stock-in-trade of Irish-American poetry has been the immigrant’s lament for a lost, idealized homeland and the patriot’s plea for Irish freedom from British oppression. Such materials make good songs
but bad verse that exhibits simplistic strains of nostalgia and righteous indignation.¹

Unless one is willing to elide any distinction between “popular” poetry, say, of the kind one might have found in Gill’s Irish Reciter or The Household Anthology of Irish Poets (1886), and the poetry of considered literary achievement, it is fruitless to contradict Charles Fanning’s judgment. Moreover, if we assume as Charles Fanning does that an Irish American literature must by definition involve distinctively Irish American “subjects, themes, styles, plot-lines and character types,”² then what perhaps ought to be a dominant theme in Irish American poetry—the immigrant experience—is virtually absent from the work of those Irish American poets who have assumed, in some notable cases, highly prominent positions within the pantheon of American poetry.

One prime exception to this state of affairs is the poetry of John Boyle O’Reilly, a poet and journalist of commanding presence in late-nineteenth-century America, whose work represents a more serious and complex engagement with Irish America. However, as Conor Johnston observed, for all its seriousness most of O’Reilly’s poetry is finally characterized more by a “documentary style” than by any self-justifying aesthetic impulse.³ Nevertheless, in poems like “Crispus Attucks” and “At Fredericksburg,” O’Reilly’s self-consciousness at being an Irish American immigrant powerfully fuels his aesthetic engagement with American history. Indeed, his identification with Crispus Attucks reveals his sympathy with the fate of African Americans, as well as the heroic struggle of a people to maintain their dignity in the face of oppression. In O’Reilly’s imagination, African Americans and the emigrant Irish are joined together in a uniquely American quest for freedom. Similarly, though in “At Fredericksburg” O’Reilly commemorates Irish American dead who fought for both the North and South in one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, the poem ultimately celebrates the equality of all races: “Who loveth the Flag is a man and a brother, / No matter what birth or what race or what creed.”⁴ Such poems place the Irish American experience at the heart of the American experience and join Irish American poetry to other ethnic poetries that seek to examine the question of what it means to be an American.

John Boyle O’Reilly’s is not the sole example of an Irish American poet whose work confronts such definitively American issues. Born in 1774, Thomas Branagan addresses the question of slavery head-on in his “Avenia” (1805). Branagan conceived of the poem as a tragic epic of the slave trade and, as such, something of an abolitionist’s zeal infuses the poem’s heroic romance. More importantly, Branagan’s work, like O’Reilly’s, anticipates an ongoing encounter
between two ethnic groups whose relations with each other have shaped Ameri-
can history. Born in 1760, Mathew Carey’s “The Plaigiscuriad” and “The Por-
quiniad” (1798) are by his own account “Hudbrastic poems.” With their terse
satirical wit, these mock epics illuminate the rich political ferment of New York
City during the post–Revolutionary War period. All of these works, along with
the poetry of John Boyle O’Reily, establish the concern with American history
and politics as significant themes in Irish American poetry. As such, among the
multitude of Irish American poems that invoke the immigrant’s lament for a lost
history, there are those that intend to explore and often celebrate the history
of the exile’s new nation. Though not included in this volume, Charles James
Cannon’s “The Crowning Hour” and James Riley’s “Patos, Hispaniola 1492” are
nineteenth-century poems that, while not great poetry, nonetheless exemplify
the desire to commemorate one of history’s most significant turning points—
Columbus’s discovery of America. Both poems anticipate Hart Crane’s “Ave
Maria,” the first section of his epic The Bridge. Indeed, their foreshadowing of
Crane’s great work is remarkable. “Te Deum laudamus / O Thou Hand of Fire,”
so Cannon’s poem ends, as does Hart Crane’s. In turn, the self-conscious explo-
ration of American social relations as well as the plight of laborers in the poems
of James Jeffrey Roche and Daniel O’Connell presages the work of such leftist
poets as Lola Ridge and Thomas McGrath. Likewise, the place of Louise Imo-
gene Guiney among these poets, as well as Kate McPhelim Cleary, augurs for the
full flowering of American women’s poetry in the twentieth century. At the very
least, the work of these poets offers a more nuanced picture of the place of Irish
American poetry within the tradition of American poetry as it developed over
the course of the nineteenth century.

Beyond the interesting cases of John Boyle O’Reily, Thomas Branag-
an, and others, the issue of Irish American poets embracing Irish American
themes—if not constructing an Irish American identity—becomes even more
murky when one considers those American poets for whom Ireland has no an-
cestral allure, and who yet have taken Ireland as inspiration for their own imagi-
native work. Though a minor poem, Walt Whitman’s “Old Ireland” brings the
Shan Van Vocht, or Old Mother Ireland, into the purview of his own demo-
cratic vision. “What you wept for was translated,” Whitman writes, “passed from
the grave, / The winds favored and the sea sailed it, / And now with rosy and new
blood, / Moves today in a new country.” Here, the iconography of the Irish emi-
grant experience becomes assimilated into the cosmos of Whitman’s America. In
Wallace Stevens’s “Our Stars Come from Ireland,” and most notably in “The Irish
Cliffs of Moher,” Ireland again becomes the prism through which an American
poet at once envisions and defines his work. In “Our Stars Come from Ireland,”
it is through contemplation of his native place that the poet’s fictional Tom McGreevy (as opposed to the Irish poet, Thomas McGreevy, who corresponded with Stevens) defines his sense of identity. Not surprisingly, McGreevy’s immigrant consciousness is, for Stevens, illustrative of the imagination. It embodies “the westwardness of everything,” as do the Irish cliffs of Moher in Stevens’s poem of that title, where the imagination’s return to its primal elements—“earth and sea and air”—is spurred inescapably by what Seamus Heaney might have called “the backward look” to origins: “Who is my father in this world, in this house, / at the spirit’s base?” In a similar vein, though without the canonical security of Whitman and Stevens, recent American poets like Chris Agee, Julie O’Callaghan, Richard Tillinghast, and Knute Skinner have found in Ireland an alternative to the contemporary consumerist landscape of America. Such poets assume more than merely a tourist’s glancing encounter with Ireland, while American poets like Robert Frost, Louis Simpson, Hayden Carruth, Elizabeth Spires, and J. D. McClatchy have written notable poems that demonstrate at least a passing influence of Ireland and Irish culture, though the poets themselves claim no Irish ancestry. Does the work of these poets warrant being called Irish American? On the other hand, to muddy the waters further, there are those writers of Irish American ancestry who would find being labeled “an Irish American writer” limiting for their work. A good poet is a good poet, and defining the poetry through the lens of ethnicity detracts from and perhaps even diminishes the individual artistic achievement. Why align oneself with what Yeats called derisively “the poetry of the point of view”? Writers would prefer to steer clear of such aesthetic and critical harbors, the way Elizabeth Bishop sought to exclude her work from anthologies of women’s poetry. Yet can we imagine an anthology devoted to the poetry of American women without Elizabeth Bishop? While some lament the loss of the ideal of a pure aesthetic judgment, and others exult in the victory of multiculturalism in politicizing our understanding of literature and culture, the reader who wishes to pursue the question of whether there is such a thing as Irish American poetry will have to negotiate these extremes by weighing the claims of ethnicity and identity against those of aesthetic integrity. Such is the intention of this volume.

From yet another perspective, however, the sheer prominence of certain Irish American poets within the history of American poetry argues for the affirmation of an Irish American tradition, especially if we refrain from narrowly defining a poet’s thematic and aesthetic inclinations. Surely, one can remain open to such preoccupations, especially when one considers the work of Edwin Arlington Robinson and John Gould Fletcher, two poets on the cusp of Modernism whose Irish American heritage enters passingly, albeit obliquely, into their work.
Still, given the poet’s Scotch-Irish ancestry, Fletcher’s work in particular offers passage into an important estuary of Irish American poetry that anticipates the work of poets like Kathryn Stripling Byer, Carolyne Wright, Michael McFee, and Michael Chitwood—poets whose Scotch-Irish inheritance informs their sense of identity and hence their poetry. Between Fletcher and these contemporary poets, the work of A. R. Ammons stands as one of the high water marks of American poetry.

The presence of Irish American poets at the advent of Modernism offers similar vantages. In his poem “To Robinson Jeffers,” Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz chides the preeminent American poet of nature’s austerity and majesty for proclaiming “an inhuman thing.” Yet, as Milosz’s poem suggests, the source of what he sees as Jeffers’ embrace of human diminishment before brute nature lies, initially at least, in a deep-seated cultural identification. “If you have not read the Slavic poets so much the better,” Milosz’s poem begins, “there’s nothing there for a Scotch-Irish wanderer to seek.” For Milosz, Jeffers is not so much an American as someone whose Scotch-Irish ancestry and Ulster heritage—and in particular his father’s Calvinist theology—shapes his imaginative identity. Unquestionably there is a stark transcendence and virility to Robinson Jeffers’s vision, and while we might want to hesitate before endorsing Milosz’s cultural rebuke, his insight nevertheless raises the question of whether there is something in Jeffers’ poetry that is distinctly Irish American, or a variation of being Irish American: a restlessness born, perhaps, of historical circumstance, as well as a preoccupation with nature, place, and the metaphysical. So we may ask whether there is more than merely a generic thematic connection between Yeats’ “rook-delighting heaven,” or Heaney’s victims of tribal violence, and Jeffers’ own disturbing version of the sublime among California’s brooding headlands.

In contrast, Marianne Moore is a poet whose imaginative proclivities and evocations of people and places and particularly animals incline toward the fabulous. Her whole sensibility stands in stark contrast to that of Jeffers. Not surprisingly, the difference is perhaps most evident in both poets’ use of line. Moore’s formal interest in the precision of syllabic verse appears utterly alien to Jeffers’ vigorous free-verse. And if, to risk being fanciful, Robinson Jeffers braces himself like a hermit on Skellig Michael before the violent majesty of nature, then we can likewise picture Marianne Moore similar to a monk bent over an illuminated manuscript obsessively working over one of her fantastic creatures. Nevertheless, in the last line of her poem “Spenser’s Ireland” she writes “I am troubled, I’m dissatisfied, I’m Irish,” a declaration that resonates with the more turbulent stirrings of Jeffers’ efforts to “befriend the furies.” Indeed, “Spenser’s
Ireland” is a noteworthy poem by an American modernist whose influence and achievement ranks her, with Jeffers, among the most significant twentieth-century American poets. Moreover, it is a highly anthologized poem that both admits and explores the poet’s Irish ancestry. From yet another standpoint, however, one might object to the poem’s declaration that Spenser’s Ireland “has not altered;— / a place as kind as it is green,” the “greenest place” the poet has “never seen,” for in so doing the poem effectively disavows history even as it obscures the fact that, considering the great English poet’s own administrative role in a mechanism of conquest, Spenser’s Ireland was anything but kind. As such, while Marianne Moore’s “Spenser’s Ireland” stands as an artistically achieved moment of consciousness on the part of Irish American poetry, it also defines the limits of that consciousness within the poet’s sense of identity.

Both Jeffers and Moore were born in the latter years of the nineteenth century, and taken together their work comprises a significant Irish American contribution to American modernism. Lesser figures like Lola Ridge, Ernest Walsh, and Horace Gregory became significant practitioners and exponents of modernist poetic practice. Lola Ridge’s “The Ghetto” is an example of modernist poetry that stands as a corrective to the Rightist program of figures like Pound, Eliot, and Yeats. Ridge’s poem rejects anti-Semitism through her imaginative identification with the Jews of New York’s Lower East Side. Her’s is a neglected achievement. Largely forgotten, the later poems of Ernest Walsh anticipate the experimental poetics of “postmodernity.” In turn, Louise Bogan, who was born near the turn of the century and whose paternal grandfather emigrated from Derry, stands as one of this century’s most important early exemplars of what Adrienne Rich called “the female sensibility” in poetry. Though known more for her novels, Kay Boyle’s poetry is also significant in this regard. While the question of being Irish American does not fully enter into Louise Bogan’s poetry, her terse visionary and at times incantatory poems are laudable for their willingness to engage often unconscious, irrational processes as fit subject matter for poetry. Her work crosses the Romantic tradition with depth psychology even as she breaks new imaginative ground for poetry written by women. In the poem “Hypocrite Swift,” her abiding concerns find expression by exposing the great Anglo-Irish satirist for a misanthropy that belies his seeming liberality: “Stir / The bed-clothes; hearten up the perishing fire. / Hypocrite Swift sent Stella a green apron / And dead desire.” Bogan’s critique of Swift is part of a wellspring of American feminist poetry that eventually flows into the work of Adrienne Rich and many others, and then onward and then back to Ireland through the work of Eavan Boland.

A similar spirit of directness and radical politics inheres in the poems of Thomas McGrath. Born in 1916, McGrath was a lifelong communist and cam-
paigner for social justice who refused to testify before the McCarthy House Subcommittee on Un-American Activities, and whose poems range formally from a Whitmanesque expansiveness to the concision of haiku. While certainly his political beliefs have curtailed a general appreciation of his achievement (though his work has been lauded with numerous fellowships and prizes), there is no diminishing his poems’ passionate intensity even as they avoid merely “documentary” or political cant. His concern with political exile, with social and metaphysical justice, places him prominently within a tradition of poets of dissent, of which the Irish are not excluded. In his epic, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, those passions find expression by reference to the Irish American working class of which his own family was a part. Another “epic poet” of Irish American ancestry is Charles Olson, whose Maximus poems join Ezra Pound’s influence to a uniquely American sense of place. At the same time, his “Enniscorthy Suite” and “The Grandfather-Father Poem,” among others, give his postmodernist sensibility an explicitly Irish American context. To these auspicious names from these first two decades of twentieth-century American poetry we may add that of Robert Fitzgerald, a poet in his own right whose magisterial translations of Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, are among the finest produced in this century.

Few American poets, of any ethnicity, have been as troubled or disaffected as John Berryman and fewer still, with the exception of Lowell, Plath, and Sexton, have dramatized their own psychomachia with as much vigilance and artistic strength. Born in 1914, of the same stellar generation of poets that produced Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Delmore Schwartz, Berryman’s Irish connection may be traced through his grandmother Mary Kanar whose family emigrated from County Cork. Of particular significance to seeing Berryman’s work through the prism of “Irish American Poetry” is the final section of his masterwork, *The Dream Songs*. There, Berryman makes a pilgrimage to Ireland which comprises nothing less than an imaginative confrontation, if not with his ancestral roots, than with one of the most significant “hiding places” of his own artistic powers. “I have moved to Dublin to have it out with you / majestic Shade, You whom I read so well / so many years ago,” so he writes in *Dream Song* 312. The Shade is obviously William Butler Yeats, and the urgency with which Berryman seeks to “have it out” with him is testimony to the Irish poet’s influence on his American disciple. Moreover, given the fact that Berryman’s eastern passage is a journey through which he leaves “behind the country of the dead,” we can understand the poet’s self-imposed exile from America as a kind of return from Tir na nOg, an imagined reversal of the nineteenth-century immigrant’s journey; or Stevens’s Tom McGreevy—troubled, dissatisfied, Irish—pursuing his ghosts under the aegis of his fixed stars.
Lesser instances of an American poet’s engagement with compelling Irish shades are John Logan’s “At Drumcliffe Churchyard, County Sligo” and “Dublin Suite: Homage to James Joyce.” Logan’s work, though not of the same monumental power as Berryman’s, likewise reveals a considerable autobiographical impulse as well as a fascination with the theme of the poet’s peripatetic physical and metaphysical wandering. The like is true of the poetry of Alan Dugan who has won two Pulitzer Prizes and two National Book Awards, and whose work is fueled by an acerbic wit which, in the poem “Mockery Against the Irish Censorship,” he turns against a country that “was better in its dream” because it has sought to curtail the imaginations of its poets. In marked distinction to Dugan’s poetry, the richly celebrated and highly influential work of Frank O’Hara engages the world with little if any dissatisfaction. His own wanderings through the streets of his beloved New York are occasions for discerning wonder within the quotidian and recording those spots of urban time with painterly precision. To his name we may add James Schuyler’s, whose Pulitzer Prize winning The Morning of the Poem in both sensibility and imaginative execution emerges from O’Hara’s fascination with the off-hand and occasional as a source for poetry. Still more explicitly visionary is the work of Galway Kinnell whose ecstatic religious sensibility makes him equally at home evoking the vivid street-life of a modern immigrant ghetto in “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World” and embarking on a kind of metaphysical dreamquest in The Book of Nightmares. Less prominent, the poetry of Ned O’Gorman likewise evinces a strong religious and particularly Catholic sensitivity. In this it resembles the work of the Jesuit poet, Daniel Berrigan, though O’Gorman’s is more traditionally formalist in temperament. Leo Connellan’s poetry, in turn, exhibits an affinity for both the New England landscape of the poet’s childhood and the urban landscape of his years as a businessman in New York. His The Clear Blue Lobster Water Country is yet another personal epic by an Irish American. Connellan’s grandfather “The O’Dock,” the central figure of the poem, may be compared to Wallace Stevens’s “The McCullough,” the major-man of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Both are Irish American figures, though where Stevens’s giant is an imaginative invention Connellan’s enjoins the real historical circumstance of a particular poet’s imaginative growth.

Born to the same generation of poets as O’Hara and Kinnell as well as Connellan, X. J. Kennedy’s work exhibits a wryly satirical intelligence, as well as a formalism that ties the emergence of his work in the 1950s to the New Formalists of today. In contrast, the poetry of Robert Creeley embraces a minimalist aesthetic—in his own words an aesthetic of “the hearth.” Creeley’s poems are almost always short and focus on the moment, though with none of O’Hara’s
penchant for lush, seemingly off-hand description. Instead, Creeley’s work operates through a pared-down clarity of perception, and so the poems assume an almost etched quality. His connection with Charles Olson through the Black Mountain School of American poetry establishes his work, as well as Olson’s, in the center of the American avant-garde. In turn, though not as influential as Creeley’s work, Robert Kelly’s poems and the poems of Ted Berrigan record an Irish American presence likewise influenced by the work of the Black Mountain Projectivists. Finally, yet another Irish American who has had a profound influence on the history of American poetry is James Laughlin. A devotee of Ezra Pound, Laughlin not only wrote his own poems, but at the master’s suggestion began New Directions, one of the most important avant-garde houses in American publishing history.

Nevertheless, despite all of these achievements, with the exception of certain individual poems and poets, few from among this diverse group places their work consistently within an explicitly Irish or Irish American context. If there are common themes—social or psychic dissatisfaction, the relationship to family, to the natural world, to history, varying brands of religious sensibility—they only occasionally refer to anything that might be identified as an specifically Irish American ethnic milieu. The same could not be said for most, if not all, important African American poets, and the recent publication of Stephen Rubin’s Telling and Remembering, as well as Jonathan Barron’s Jewish American Poetry, suggests the prominence of a specifically Jewish American poetry. One obvious reason for this circumstance might be that, for specific social reasons, the Irish like other peoples of European lineage were able to assimilate more fully into American society than either of these groups, despite their having been largely vilified early on as a minority whose religion and cultural practices were deemed anti-American. Alongside of African Americans, Irish Americans competed for a foothold in American society, and like “Jim Crow” and “Jim Dandy,” the drunken “Paddy” of Thomas Nast’s cartoons exemplifies the tendency to belittle if not dehumanize the emigrant Irish during this period in American history. Nevertheless, horrific displays of racism such as the New York Draft Riots of 1863 illuminate the extent to which the common experience of oppression and marginalization can lead to greater discord and alienation rather than a sense of common experience and purpose.

Placed against the backdrop of such social forces, the achievement of Irish American poets—great as it is through such figures as Jeffers, Moore, Bogan, Berryman, and O’Hara—reveals something of a collective cultural amnesia. As we have seen, one key exception to this set of circumstances is the work of John Boyle O’Reilly whose importance in this regard is underscored by Paul
Laurence Dunbar’s poem in homage to the Irish American poet. Nevertheless, while the Irish American poetry of the nineteenth century remains largely “pro-
grammatic”\textsuperscript{15} in its treatment of Irish America, the more notable work of those who follow largely neglects to treat substantially the historical and social circumstances from which Irish America arose.

This has not been the case among those Irish poets who have spent substantial periods of time in the United States and whose presence here has greatly influenced their work. Padraic Colum’s extended sojourn in America warranted that his work be included in at least one American anthology of poetry. The like is true of Oliver St. John Gogarty.\textsuperscript{16} Brian Coffey’s “Missouri Sequence” was born of his time as visiting professor at the University of St. Louis during the late forties and early fifties, and reveals the profound influence of Wallace Stevens. Similarly, Thomas Kinsella’s poem “The Good Fight,” inscribed to John F. Kennedy on the tenth anniversary of his death, and Eavan Boland’s poem “The Emigrant Irish” demonstrate these Irish poets’ success at giving voice to what should be considered Irish American subjects. The same might be said of Derek Mahon’s \textit{The Hudson Letter} and Peter Fallon’s \textit{The Deerfield Series}. And what of Paul Muldoon’s hybrid excursions—his \textit{immrama}—into Ireland and America? Are such poets merely Irish tourists in America, or do particular poems by such poets offer a vantage from which to inquire what it is to be Irish American? Muldoon has become an American citizen, and so his work warrants inclusion on that basis alone, but what of Boland, Mahon, Fallon, and the earlier figures, Colum, St. John Gogarty, and Coffey? Why not include Heaney’s “Westering,” or “Remembering Malibu”? Unlike these poets, the direction of Heaney’s “American” poems is retrospective. America occasions thoughts of Ireland in the Nobel laureate’s work, rather than exhibiting a sustained presence in its own right, such as may be found in the American poems of these other Irish poets. For that reason I include their work in this volume.

To a much larger degree, James Liddy— who has spent over thirty years teaching and writing in the United States—has composed a hybrid body of work that may be understood as a marriage between the Whitman tradition as embodied in American Beat poetics, and Kavanagh’s parish, with undertones of Beckett and Ashbery. Younger poets like Eamon Grennan, Eamonn Wall, and Greg Delanty continue a tradition of writers who to varying degrees engage Irish American themes more strongly and readily than most Irish American poets whose work has been incorporated into anthologies of American verse. Greg Delanty’s poems might be said to explore the boundary between Irish-ness and American-ness, while Eamonn Wall’s reveals something of a pioneer’s passion for exploring the continent and its history, including Native America. Both of
these poets place the new Irish emigrant experience at the forefront of Irish as well as Irish American poetry. One Irish American poet whose work is rarely seen as Irish American is John Montague. Montague’s oeuvre, of not only Irish but international renown, is in large part the product of what he has called his “double birth”—his having been born in America to Irish immigrant parents at the beginning of the Great Depression and then re-patriated back to County Tyrone in his early childhood—as well as his almost mythopoetic connection to his ancestral home. If any poet has succeeded in portraying the complex world of Irish America in light of his own “double consciousness” it is John Montague. His is a path similarly traveled by Padraic Fiacc, who emigrated from Belfast to Hell’s Kitchen in New York City and returned.

In many ways John Montague is a pivotal figure, for in his work the idea of being an Irish American poet enters into and becomes to a great extent the subject of the poetry. In this regard his work at once overtly manifests an imaginative identity that has remained unexamined in most Irish American poetry until recent years, and establishes a bridge to the old world without recourse to nostalgia at the same time as it anticipates those newer Irish American poets who seem determined to include at least some of their own historically charged ethnic identity into their poems. Brendan Galvin is one such poet who understands his work as emerging from a specifically Irish American milieu. In addition to being obsessed with landscape and seascape in and around his native Massachusetts, in his Saints in Their Ox-Hide Boat Galvin establishes a metaphorical connection between his own identity as a poet and that of the Irish saint who, in legend at least, “discovered America” centuries before Columbus or the first Norse settlers in Newfoundland. Galvin’s embrace of the natural world is as vital as Jeffers’, though more palliative in its recognition of the human presence in nature and the value of human work. Likewise, Tess Gallagher’s poems move with ease between both Irish and American subjects, enjoining each with a lyricism that borders on the visionary. Still other poets like Maura Stanton, Alice Fulton, Dennis Finnell, Ethna McKiernan, Nuala Archer, Thomas Lynch, Mary Swander, Maureen Seaton, Larry Levis, R.T. Smith, Gibbons Ruark, Billy Collins, Michael Heffernan, Ben Howard, Phillip Dacey, Katherine Stripling Byer, Michael Waters, and Terence Winch often write poems that emerge from a sensibility that is uniquely Irish American. Others, like Michael Ryan, James Galvin, Peter Cooley, Richard Kenney, Heather McHugh, Mekeel McBride, Diana O’Hehir, Killarney Clary, Marie Howe, Campbell McGrath, and Brigit Pegeen Kelly, while not always writing explicitly out of an Irish American context, collectively have produced a range of work that speaks to the vitality of the Irish American presence in the wide and varied world of American poetry. That variety ranges stylistically
from the experimental poetries of Susan Howe, Fanny Howe, and Maureen Owen to formalist narratives. Add to that Alice Fulton’s poems that cross physics with the Irish American poet’s concern with metaphysics and what one discovers is a remarkable diversity of styles and subject matter within the poetry being written by Irish Americans. There are many others whose poems exhibit not only the widest possible range of sensibilities but also geographical affiliations that extend through every region of the country from Appalachia to Las Vegas, from North Carolina to Alaska. Moreover, the awards bestowed on Irish American poets range from Yale Younger Poet Awards and state poet laureateships to Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards, American Book Awards, the Lenore Marshall Prize, the Kingsley Tufts Award, and MacArthur Foundation grants. To observe, then, that the poetry of Irish Americans remains a vigorous presence within the heritage of American poetry, a presence that is by now well nigh indispensable, is to point out what ought to be obvious.

Yet is it the same thing to claim that the poetry of Irish Americans has an indispensable place in American poetry as it is to claim there is a tradition of Irish American poetry? Reformulated in the light of such a diverse company of poets, the question of whether there is at least a lineage of Irish American poetry is already answered—in the affirmative. More specifically, one might argue that a tradition of Irish American poets exists within the multiple traditions or schools that compose American poetry—modernists, projectivists, confessionalists, Beats, New York School, deep imagists, formalists, and postmodernists of various stripes. At the same time, at least in part such an affirmation rings hollow. As T. S. Eliot observed, “tradition is a matter of much wider significance” than “the blind or timid adherence” to the literary culture’s successes.18 Crucial to Eliot’s understanding of tradition is his perception that tradition is composed “not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence.” He argues that a person can intuit “a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole literature of his country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.”19 Discredited as Eliot remains in some critical circles, his idea of what he called “the historical sense” has become, if anything, more critically acute in recent decades. Indeed, Eliot’s historical sense may be seen as explicitly politicized through contemporary theory’s broadened awareness of history and its injustices as well as its recognition of cultural and ethnic hybridity. Dislodged from its implicit assumption of European cultural dominance and its air of “ethnic absolutism,”20 Eliot’s ideal order “of existing monuments” may seem more a necropolis to be dismantled than a city of the mind, a tradition that evolves as new talents extend and reconfigure its boundaries. Of course, Eliot’s own encompassing interest in non-western cultural traditions
ought to mitigate against seeing him as merely a Eurocentric prig. Eliot’s idea of tradition may yet survive both the tidal wave of politicized criticism and his own dubious political and racial views, provided such an understanding of tradition can become resilient beyond its original intent in order to become even more worldly, more encompassing—a “traveling tradition” to adapt Paul Gilroy’s use of the concept of “traveling cultures” in his book, *The Black Atlantic*.

I raise such intractable issues now, however belatedly and briefly, if only to shift the question of whether there is a tradition of Irish American poetry away from “genetic templates” and clearly identifiable Irish American contexts toward an understanding of tradition that is flexible enough to embrace an inclusiveness and plurality that might keep alive the question of tradition in the ongoing process of seeking to define it. From this perspective, the neglect of explicit Irish American themes in the work of certain prominent Irish American poets becomes an essential part of the story. At the same time, the motifs of travel and exile, often with reference to water, and the recurrent figure of “the west,” perhaps constitute an almost unconscious subtext for the theme of dispora in Irish American poetry.

Likewise, the image of Ireland in American poetry as portrayed in the works of poets who are not necessarily Irish American ought to be brought under critical consideration. African American poets like Gwendolyn Brooks have written poems that give us important and challenging images of Irish America. The Irish maid, Patsy Houlihan, in Brooks’s “Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat” offers a sympathetic model of endurance and protest for the African American maid who takes her place in Mrs. Miles’s bigoted home. While Gwendolyn Brooks is clearly not an Irish American poet, this is a poem of obvious relevance to Irish America. In any case, to decide whether a poet is Irish American by applying a genetic formula—one quarter Irish makes you eligible for the Irish soccer team—seems equally specious. Indeed, from one perspective the purpose of this anthology is to shift the locus of identification away from genetic templates and toward a cultural nexus so that ethnic claims, while acknowledged and respected, might also enjoin a wider scope of definition and aesthetic expression. For example, “After the Digging” by Jewish American poet, Alan Shapiro, may be the most sustained treatment of the Irish Potato Famine in American poetry, and stands alongside Brendan Galvin’s “1847” and James McMichael’s “The Begotten” as one of the few lengthy treatments of the subject. By enjoining the work of such non–Irish American poets, Irish American poetry—both conceived of as a product of Irish American poets, and as production itself of social, cultural, and historical forces—may assume an important place alongside other significant traditions within the wider world of American
poetry. Indeed, the world opened by such considerations may reveal an imaginative space wherein the many traditions that compose American poetry can be seen in the light of new perspectives. It may also expand our understanding of Irish poetry. If this is true, the tradition of American poetry may itself come to exist as a more self-conscious, complex and evolving whole—a traveling tradition in the richest possible sense. If Eliot is still instructive in such matters it is in his recognition that to remain vital traditions must be attentive to both the past and the present in the attempt to bring into being a future that is not entirely foreseen. However it is constructed, Irish American Poetry will need to reconcile the claims of the individual talent to the evolving standards of just such a living historical sensibility. From such a vantage, within its limits, this anthology seeks to be a testing ground rather than a canonical template for what it means to be Irish American.

In keeping with these assumptions, I have organized the poems historically and in three parts that reflect, as much as possible, general distinctions in the stylistic and thematic orientations of the poets as well as the evolving scope of American poetry. Part One: A Fluent Drift, begins with George Berkeley’s “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” and ends with Padraig O’Heigeartaigh’s “My Sorrow Donncha” and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “John Boyle O’Reilly.” Where Bishop Berkeley’s poem looks forward to the rich cultural flowering that was to come over the next three centuries, O’Heigeartaigh’s poem, composed in Irish, looks backward toward the Old World and sings out of the tragic sense of exile and loss that so many Irish experienced in making their way to the New. Dunbar’s poem acknowledges the centrality of O’Reilly in Irish American poetry. Between them, I have culled a sampling of the best poetry produced by poets who have been lost or ignored by American poetry. These poems mostly fulfill the conventions of nineteenth-century verse, though I have sought to select works both of some artistic merit and that might also communicate a sense of cultural and historical urgency—an engagement with time, place, Ireland and America that precipitates the developments to come. Among these are poems like Thomas Branagan’s lost Abolitionist-Homeric epic, “Avenia,” and John Boyle O’Reilly’s “Crispus Attucks,” both of which exemplify an Irish American concern with the plight of African American oppression. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s homage to O’Reilly likewise bears witness to a shared belief in freedom, and in the common aspirations of African and Irish Americans. Such poems offer a counter-vision to the racism and mistrust that has historically plagued relations between these two ethnic groups. Similarly, the poetry of Alice Cary, Louise Imogen Guiney, and Kate McPhelim Cleary anticipates the contributions of a plethora of Irish American women to American poetry in the twentieth century.
Appropriately, then, Part Two: Modern Tide begins with Lola Ridge. Like John Boyle O’Reilly, Ridge emigrated from Ireland by way of Australia, though where O’Reilly escaped a Fenian prison term in New South Wales to become one of the most celebrated literary figures of his time, Ridge escaped the lace shackles of a complacent middle-class life to become a powerful voice of the American proletariat. In Lola Ridge’s work we find a distinctly modern sensibility expressed in a distinctly modern idiom, and as such the modernist achievements of Marianne Moore, Robinson Jeffers, and Charles Olson find their herald in her, as does the groundbreaking work of Louise Bogan. Moreover, the premature death of Ernest Walsh foreclosed the development of a distinctly Irish American consciousness in modernism. Part Two also includes the second generation of poets whose work traces the shift from modernism to postmodernism, among them John Berryman, Thomas McGrath, and John Montague. Berryman, a supreme literary insider in the mid-century dominated by Robert Lowell, and McGrath, the ultimate literary outsider anathematized in the McCarthy hearings for his radical politics, demonstrate the breadth of the Irish American contribution to American poetry during the period. In turn, William Carlos Williams pervades John Montague’s distinctly hybrid Irish American “double consciousness.” Following Charles Olson’s lead at the Black Mountain School of Poetry, Robert Creeley, Ted Berrigan, and Robert Kelly furthered the experimental tradition in American poetry. Add to them James Liddy’s adaptation of Beat Poetry and Frank O’Hara’s centrality to The New York School, and Irish American poets begin to reveal themselves as something of a force in the world of American “contrarian” poetics. In contrast, the work of both X. J. Kennedy and Ned O’Gorman locates itself within the formalist tradition of American poetry. In all, Part Two exemplifies the tendency of Irish American poetry to move beyond convenient stylistic categories at the same time as it remains faithful to an abiding preoccupation with history, with other ethnicities and traditions on the American cultural landscape, and with its own evolving consciousness. Like Dunbar’s poem from the previous century, Gwendolyn Brooks’s “Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat” demonstrates an intimacy of common cause between African America and Irish America that often has been overlooked.

While on the one hand the sheer variety of voices, as well as the evolving continuities within schools and traditions in the American poetry of the mid-century, mitigates against any clear demarcation between Part Two and Part Three, I have chosen to begin Part Three: Further Harbors with the work of Brendan Galvin. In the poetry of Brendan Galvin, Irish American consciousness manifests itself in a sense of history and culture uniquely its own and, most importantly, that consciousness no longer relies on the immediate experience of
the emigrant for articulation but explicitly and consistently inheres in the work of a poet for whom the immigrant experience is a part of a generational awareness. Of course, the work of such poets as Leo Connellan and X. J. Kennedy reveal a distinctly Irish American sense of identity, but the extent of Brendan Galvin’s engagement with history is more pervasive—witness “Carrowkeel,” “Hearing Irish Spoken,” and “1847.” At the same time, the tradition of Irish emigrant poetry that begins in the nineteenth-century and continues through modernism and postmodernism finds its continuation in the “New Irish” poets, Greg Delanty and Eamonn Wall. It is a long tradition that begins in the nineteenth century where the major figure is John Boyle O’Reilly, and proceeds through the work of Lola Ridge, Padraic Colum, James Liddy, and Eamon Grennan, before arriving at the New Irish Poets. Noteworthy also are the poets for whom America becomes not only a place of arrival but a point of embarkation back to Ireland, though one that continues to haunt their imaginations. George Berkeley, James Orr, Oliver St. John Gogarty, Padraic Fiacc and, most importantly, John Montague are among this group. Among Irish American poets a generation or more removed from the emigrant experience, we find a wide range of sensibilities extending from the highly experimental to the formal. We also find Irish American poets emigrating back to Ireland and England, such as Chris Agee, Julie O’Callaghan, and Michael Donaghy. Perhaps what binds all of these poets together is an implicit desire to extend the historical consciousness developed over three centuries. In these new poets we find a mix of irreverence and reverence, of popular culture and the sense of tradition, of Irish, American, and global concerns in a multiplicity of idioms that signal still further harbors, new imaginative “landings.” From this perspective, the journey metaphor that has underwritten the subtitles of this book intends to speak to the ongoing passage of Irish American poetry within its own evolving traditions, in dialogue with other ethnic American poetries, and within the “traveling” tradition of American poetry as it moves into the twenty-first century.

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2. Ibid., 3.
9. Ibid.
11. With the exception of the early, difficult to find works of Mathew Carey and Thomas Branigan, I have refrained from including quotations from book-length poems such as those by Thomas McGrath, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*; Leo Connellan, *The Clear Blue Lobster Water County*; Brendan Galvin, *Saints in Their Ox-Hide Boat*; and Mary Swan¬der, *Driving the Body Back*, with the hope that the interested reader will seek out these works on their own, and read them in their entirety, as is appropriate.
19. Ibid.