

Whose Homelands? Fictions, Facts and Questions of the Irish Diaspora

Introduction

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With over 70 million living outside the island of Ireland, the Irish are today one of the largest diaspora communities in the world. This “diverse array of people” scattered throughout the globe view Ireland “as a place of origin”, and “claim some connection with her, either directly through emigration or indirectly through descent from emigrants” (Robinson 1995; Fitzgerald and Lambkin 2008, 294). The so-called “global Irish family” is highly influential to the life, the politics, and the economy of their “homeland”, as well as being central to exile narratives that question, explore and engage with aspects of cultural “rooting and routing” (Clifford 1994, 309), while also shaping new notions of identity and of belonging. Focused on conceptions of “home” from a transnational perspective, this special issue of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* draws attention to migrant narratives and stories of the dispersal of the Irish over the centuries to reflect on ways in which individual and collective experiences of migration forge people and places – both homelands and host-lands. “Home” is intended here as a special space where “the whole *self*, the self beyond the street-wise surface, can come to rest, where there is *room for morally open and complete relationships*, in which *proximity* is searched for, no *distance* is kept, where *responsibility* is needed and wanted” (Bauman 1995, 135, emphasis added). The place we call “home”, in other words, is inherently mutable and adaptable, and this is especially so within diasporic contexts and dynamics whereby migration is “a way of life” proper (O’Connor 1996, 50). The field is vast and complex, but it is also extremely fascinating and challenging as present understandings of the past change, migration networks expand and develop to become more sophisticated and varied, therefore demanding that further investigations are carried out, old narratives are re-read, and new narratives produced. For such reasons the approach here is deliberately multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, with each essay seeking to capture and shed light on a broad range of fictions, facts and questions of the Irish diaspora.

The expression “Irish diaspora” is of a relatively recent coinage. Academically it was introduced in 1976 in the title of a survey by Lawrence McCaffrey (*The Irish Diaspora in America*), and it was mentioned again in the title of an article on the Roman Catholic Church in the 19th century (Gilley 1984), neither of which fully engaged with the complexity of the historical and cultural phenomenon they referred to¹. The notion that the “Irish diaspora is a world phenomenon” and therefore that “it can only be understood as such” is found in *The Irish Diaspora. A Primer*, D.H. Akenson’s seminal study of 1993 (271)². By then, the semantics of “diaspora” was beginning to extend beyond its traditional confines. No longer simply used to define “the dispersal of the Jews” and of the Armenians, in the 1960s “diaspora” encompassed also the Afro-Caribbean community living in the United States, and by the 1990s it acquired a more inclusive and clearly “secular” meaning (Spindler 1998, 10), owing largely to the launch of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, a dedicated forum for academic discussions of the phenomenon³. The notion of *diasporas* (in the plural) was soon introduced (Safran 1991), and within a few years the concept evolved further into “global diasporas” (Cohen 1997) as scholars from different fields of knowledge engaged in what looked like, but clearly was not, “an impossible quest” (Spindler 1998). Indeed, the pursuit of a theory of the diaspora brought to an understanding of it in terms of what Kenny here defines “an *idea* that people use to interpret the world migration creates”, prompting several questions as well as a diverse outlook on the history of migration across the globe of which the Irish are no doubt among its most prominent actors.

Over the past two decades “the Irish abroad” have become *de facto* “the Irish diaspora” (Fitzgerald and Lambkin 2008, 277), a significant lexical and conceptual change encouraged from outside academic circles by the work and words of Irish Presidents Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese. In 1995, the former pioneered a caring culture that would embrace the communities of Irish people across the globe and reinforce the connection between the nationals liv-

¹ Fitzgerald and Lambkin (2008, 280) trace an earlier reference in Fr. John O’Brien’s *The Vanishing Irish. The Enigma of the Modern World* (1954). An Irish-American priest, O’Brien “was the first commentator to discuss the Irish worldwide coherently in terms of “homeland” and “diaspora” (2008, 40).

² For a history of the term see Enda Delaney (2006), and Kenny, here.

³ Edited by Khachig Tölölyan, *Diaspora* “is dedicated to the multidisciplinary study of the history, culture, social structure, politics, and economics of both the traditional diasporas – Armenian, Greek, and Jewish – and the new transnational dispersions which in the past four decades have come to be identified as ‘diasporas’. These encompass groups ranging from the African-, Chinese-, Indian-, and Mexican-American to the Ukrainian- and Haitian-Canadian, the Caribbean-British, the Antillean-French, and many others” (<www.utpjournals.press/journals/diaspora/scope>, 05/2019).

ing at home and those living abroad. Robinson's urge for a new stance on the past called for a different attitude, one that would "cherish" the diaspora, and move beyond the undeniable trauma of enforced migration that was so central to Irish history (Robinson 1995). A year later, in an address to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Robinson reiterated her conviction that "the painful pattern of emigration has resulted *ironically* in a *vibrant resource* which should be included into a *modern* (i.e. broader) *sense of Irishness*" (Robinson 1996; emphasis added), beyond territoriality. Echoing Art. 2 of the Irish Constitution, her speech was an invitation to look back with different eyes to Ireland's past, incontrovertibly traumatic yet not exclusive to the Irish, ultimately (indeed *ironically*) functional to the country's booming economy of the Celtic Tiger years. President McAleese was equally influential in popularizing the notion of a "global Irish family" as a "resource" and a "strength" that would allow Ireland to effectively *re-imagine* herself, and to "transcend, transform, *reduce the imagined thing to reality*" (McAleese 2003; emphasis added).

The belief that Ireland was an "an unfinished business" or a "first world country *with a respected and real third world memory*" (*ibidem*; emphasis added) prompted political and scholarly discussions that would succeed in relocating the Irish diaspora and the controversial issue of Ireland's migration history within a wider conceptual and globalized framework. Such a rethinking of the past as an empowering and liberating force that can effect community cohesion, strengthen international relations, enable self-assertion and enfranchisement for women (Gray 2003; Nolan 2009; Walter 2003; and Charczun, here), to cite a few instances of its potential, has proved advantageous on many counts, possibly leading to the creation, in 2014, of a dedicated Ministry of State, and the launch of the Global Irish Diaspora Strategy and of the Global Irish Civic Forum. Both practices treat diaspora as a *process* (entailing relocation, connection and return), and as an *idea* "through which people seek to make sense of the experience of emigration" (Kenny 2017). In 2013 the government's policies were expressed in the new design of the Irish passport, which celebrates Ireland's culture through popular images of her landmarks, poetry, music, dancing, sports and the recognition of the diaspora by way of Art. 2 of the *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, the Irish Constitution, significantly cited in Gaelic and in English⁴:

Tá gach duine a shaoilaítear in oileán na hÉireann, ar a n-áiríteara oileáin agus a fharraigí, i dteideal, agus tá de cheart oidhreachta aige nó aici, a bheith páirteach

⁴ On the launch of "Global Irish: Ireland's Diaspora Policy" see <www.dfa.ie/our-role-policies/our-work/casestudiesarchive/2015/march/global-irish-irelands-diaspora-policy-launched/> and <www.dfa.ie/media/globalirish/global-irish-irelands-diaspora-policy.pdf> (05/2019). The dual language text of Art. 2 is reported between p. 3 and p. 33 of the new passport.

I náisiún na hÉireann. Tá an teideal sin freisin ag na daoine go léir atá cáilithe ar shlí eile de réir dlí chun bheith ina saoránaigh d'Éirinn. Ina theannta sin, is mór ag náisiún na hÉireann a choibhneas speisialta le daoine de bhunadh na hÉireann atá ina gcónaí ar an gcoigríoch agus arb ionann féiniúlacht agus oidhreacht chultúir dóibh agus do náisiún na hÉireann.

It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.

The new passport is an interesting narrative in its own right, one which reflects today's broader understanding of "the Irish Nation" and of how it has come to represent a homeland to 70 million "Irish" people across the globe. It is no longer or simply "a question of time, blood or territory", as Kay McCarthy maintains in her contribution, but rather a "psycho-socio-cultural" matter, "a matter of perception, tradition and practice". It is indicative of what Kevin Kenny here terms the "second" or "contemporary diasporic moment", which views "Ireland and the overseas communities connecting in an interactive global network" with the Irish government acting "as the central player". The question of *whose homeland* thus becomes apt and timely in the light of contemporary changes and translocations worldwide, with the Irish diaspora being especially interesting to our scope. Matters affecting the home community shape the reality and landscape of the host community, and in turn these influence the way in which diasporic experiences are recounted and received.

Whether fictive, factual or a combination of both, narratives of the Irish diaspora rely upon national mythologies and popular literary sources on exile and migration to tell their stories of individual and collective transnationalism⁵. The staple of much literature and drama from and about Ireland, exile and migration have inspired works dedicated to the intricacies of dislocation long before "the currency of diaspora discourse" (Clifford 1997, 255) gained its place in the global communication market. James Joyce was a pioneer in this respect, and to a large extent he remains unchallenged in his capacity to express the condition of displacement, a state of being somehow similar to a river's flow or a cycle, where the end is the beginning, where home can be everywhere, nowhere, and elsewhere, at the same time. Tom Murphy (remembered in Rosangela Barone's tribute) and Brian Friel (recalled by Carla

⁵ In "Cherishing the Irish Diaspora", President Robinson cites from Tom Murphy's *Famine* (1977) and from Eavan Boland's "The Emigrant Irish" (1987), while President McAleese recalls Derek Mahon's "Rathlin Island" (1982) in her speech of 2003.

de Petris) most especially follow in Joyce's footsteps in that they adopt and adapt his migrant idiom and insights to investigate, each in their own special way, "the elusive quality of home" and the inevitable "confusions, unease and discontents" of everyday life, with exile and migration being central to both playwrights' aesthetic preoccupations⁶. These experiments in life writing, to borrow Melania Terrazas' wording, have shaped the grammar of future generations of writers who have since contributed to explore and articulate tales of uprooting and rerouting. A comprehensive bibliography of literary works on the Irish diaspora would be too long to be reproduced in the present context, but it would certainly include the names of Pearse Hutchinson, Anna Livia, Cherry Smyth, Joseph O'Connor, Mary Morrissy, Mike McCormack, and Eimear McBride, the writers featured in the essays that make up this monographic section. Along with them is also Evelyn Conlon, author of "Imagine them ..." (a title that perhaps echoes McAleese's diction), a short story written for this occasion and published here for the first time. Like other tales of the Irish diaspora this one too is about impossible encounters, broken dreams and great expectations; it is a narrative which amplifies distant voices, records their untold stories, and seeks to "interpret between privacies", to use Friel's words (1980, 90)⁷. Mary Lee, Conlon's protagonist, is one of several female heroines whose existence surfaces among other narratives of disconnection, often linked to the Famine decade (1845-1855) and to the indelible mark Ireland's holocaust has left on the collective sense of home. It is no wonder that the Famine/Great Hunger is cited in a number of contributions published here, including articles by Kenny, McCarthy, Anna Charczun, and Heather Levy. A primary cause of that "foundational moment in the formation of Irish communities abroad" (Kenny), the *Gorta Mór* is O'Connor's setting in *Star of the Sea* (2002), a celebrated novel which reports the life story of Irish governess and Famine survivor Mary Duane and provides "a feminist excavation of strategies of diasporic strength" along the lines of Gayatri Spivak's conceptualization of the "Other" (Levy)⁸.

Mass migration of the Famine period allowed its survivors to "remake themselves through work", itself a "defining force in the Irish-American experience" (Murphy 2009, 20 and 19) of which a career in acting or dancing remain fine expressions. In this respect, the history of the American Musical

⁶ Brian Friel, in Richard Pine, "Obituary notice", *The Guardian*, 2 October 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/02/brian-friel>> (05/2019).

⁷ The notion of "listening to and amplifying voices" as opposed to "giving voice" to the voiceless is central to Alessandro Portelli's democratic approach to oral history recording, a methodology that treats interviewees as full humans rather than flat sources of knowledge. Cf. Portelli (2013, 276), cited in Sarah O'Brien (2017, 24).

⁸ The author of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak is also a member of the Advisory Board of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*.

(Moloney 2009), and the development of a specific dancing tradition, represent fertile grounds for enquiry within and beyond academia, as McCarthy's reflection shows. Her article tells of how diaspora gave life to hybrid performance practices resulting from "the encounter between traditional [Irish dance] modes and the pre-existing cultures of the host countries" which "had an impact on the old styles in the so-called pure form". Over a century later, Michael Flatley's *Riverdance* venture, a global phenomenon begun 25 years ago, would offer audiences worldwide a remarkable instance of "cross-fertilisation between the Irish-born and those who believed they belonged to the diaspora, especially the large transatlantic, Hiberno-American contingent" (McCarthy). An understanding of diaspora as a creative process facilitating cross-fertilisations and cultural encounters is central to Pearse Hutchinson's experience as a migrant writer. "A wonderer and a keen observer" of Spain, Hutchinson was attracted by that country, and eventually moved there in 1951. Similar to Ireland, regional Spain (Catalonia and Galicia) inspired his poetry over two decades (1950s-1970s) as Verónica Membrive argues in her article. Based on unpublished sources archived at Maynooth University, her study explores the life of an Irishman who felt an "exile at home, neither in exile nor at home", a poet who engaged in the language and identity question of his adopted homeland.

Life in diaspora allows for a re-definition of one's identity, but it also helps re-orient "the self's sexual identity to emerge on different terms to those prevailing in the country of origin", as contended by Charczun. Her article, and the one that follows (by Emer Lyons), are powerful expressions of the diasporic sense of place as lived from a queer perspective. Charczun focuses on the experiences of writers that explore and speak of "lesbian desire" beyond the restrictions of Irish patriarchal heteronormativity while also dealing with aspects of inclusivity within already established lesbian communities. Lyons reflects on the homelessness of lesbian poets within the dominant (i.e. patriarchal) poetic tradition, in the face of which poetry enables a re-appropriation of the homeplace – a place "to come to", through a process at once creative, "painful, shameful and erotic".

Post-Tiger austerity and post-crisis migration trends make up the geopolitical dimension that is central to Kenny's research on the history of the Irish diaspora and which is crucial also to works of fiction by Mike McCormack (*Solar Bones*, 2016), Mary Morrissy (*Prosperity Drive*, 2016) and Eimear McBride (*The Lesser Bohemians*, 2016). Addressing the question of "whose homelands", Jason Buchanan considers how "austerity fiction" serves to articulate the impact of global capitalism upon local communities, with special emphasis on the interaction between cultural products and economic forces. His article reflects on Ireland's recent transformations to contend that "the complex nature of the global financial crisis is not only an economic and political issue but also one that is deeply embedded in the emotions

and thoughts of the individual". The traumatized individual is the start and end point of McBride's neo-modernist fiction, which Gerry Smyth views in theatrical terms, as a "rehearsal of (versions of) national identity". Exposing the bad faith of both austerity and political isolationism, McBride's second novel seeks redemption for its displaced protagonists, ultimately affirming that "Irishness was and continues to be negotiated throughout the modern era" (Smyth).

Questions of integration are central to articles that investigate the Irish diaspora from a non-literary standpoint, nonetheless disclosing interesting views of its practices, transitions, transformations and adaptations. Gráinne O'Keefe-Vigneron charts Irish emigration to France to fill a scholarly gap of thirty years and map the community of Irish people living "on the ground". Looking at recent EU policy, and to the potential impact of Brexit upon Irish-French relations, this essay traces a profile of the Irish diaspora based on recent data on education, employment, language, integration, and standard of living, proving in its conclusion that "on the whole", the Irish in France "have integrated with relative ease", having registered a "high level of job and life satisfaction" in their new home place. Celine Kearney and Martin Andrew take us to *Aotearoa*, New Zealand, the place where Kearney's Irish-born grandparents moved to, and where she currently lives and works as a researcher and a representative of the "Southern Celt" community. The study presents ethnographic and auto-ethnographic insights based on a narrative enquiry conducted among 40 Irish residents of the region and dedicated to the discursive construction of culture and identity. These people's "lived and told stories" remind us that language is both a "contingent" and a "significant and constitutive factor of identity", especially in contexts of colonization by force – a common ground for both the Maori and the Gaelic languages. We are also reminded that readers ought to become active participants in processes of cultural connections and re-connections with "subjugated voices" (Kearney and Andrew). Along the same lines, albeit with a different methodology and scope, Aedan Alderson – a "mixed-Indigenous Mi'kmaq and Irish scholar" – considers the Irish diaspora and its "participation" in situations of "illegal occupation of Indigenous nations by British colonialism". Focusing on Canada, Australia and the United States, this compelling study poses questions as to the responsibility on the part of the Irish diaspora in countries where the indigenous community suffers "dehumanization and colonization", and calls for a "shared sense" of homeland from "responsible guests of *our* host-nations" who should partake in the global project of decolonization.

Facts and fictions often intertwine in narratives of the Irish diaspora that explore, challenge and question concepts of the place we call "home". And "place", as Ivan Brady writes, is a "geography of earth, mind, body and lived experience of the seen and unseen" (2005, 905). The quote concludes

one of the essays collected here but it sums up the perspective and focus of other contributions equally centered on diasporic homelands. Among them is a group of articles about the political and politicised dimensions of the Irish diaspora. Andrew Maguire looks across the Irish sea, to a region in Yorkshire called “West Riding”, a stronghold of political activism on the part of constitutional Irish migrant nationalists seeking to obtain “legislative independence for their homeland under the banner of Irish Home Rule”. The article assesses “the deep sense of *amor patriae*” of the Yorkshire-Irish to demonstrate “the effectiveness of the migrant vote” in the area in the period 1879–1886. Political activism of Irish emigrants is the theme of Thomas Tormey’s thorough investigation of nationalism in Scotland from 1913 onwards. The revolutionary Scottish-Irish “played a major role in the transnational movements associated with campaigns for Irish independence”, most especially the Easter Rising of 1916, in which they fought. Tormey analyses the activities of the Volunteers in comparison to other veterans of 1916 as well as showing how they were well integrated within the local community as well as the wider separatist movement. Political and cultural activism lie also at the heart of Patrick Callan’s detailed reconstruction of the history of Glasnevin Cemetery and its role in relation to religion and constitutional nationalism. From its foundation, in 1832, Dublin’s unique resting place became a focus of commemoration of the patriotic dead largely owing to the influence of the Irish diaspora in America. Acknowledged in papers that had an outreach to the Irish-American community, Glasnevin soon began to attract a steady stream of visitors and gained its status as a national cemetery. Seen from our “decade-of-centenaries” (2013–2022) perspective, nineteenth-century debates over this contested “home” place emerge as illuminating, if not thought-provoking. And indeed, as Callan concludes, Ireland’s national cemetery “continues to interrogate and respond to its historical legacy”.

North-American print media had a determining role in matters such as public memory of the Nation’s dead and the revival of the Irish language as a transatlantic cultural and political endeavour. The latter aspect is the subject of Fiona Lyon’s investigation. Focusing on the period between 1857 and 1897, Lyons demonstrates how US revivalist publications and organizations helped consolidate “imagined communities” of Gaelic speakers, across geographical borders, thereby showing “a sense of responsibility towards the homeland in terms of language and politics”. Her study ultimately asserts the value of transatlantic networks between the US Irish diaspora and Ireland in terms of language revival movements, and other political, cultural and educational developments in the decades that followed.

The Irish-American experience is no doubt a chapter of primary importance in the history of the diaspora worldwide. One half of the 70 million Irish living abroad resides in the US (Kenny 2013), a remarkable figure

which has contributed to the consolidation of myths such as “the hands-that-built-America” legend, popularised by the U2 in a song in 2002, and based on the widely-accepted idea that the Irish, more than any other immigrant ethnic group, had really made America. This would have been through their work and commitment, and through a deep-felt gratitude towards a land that had saved them and given them all sorts of opportunities (Salis 2019). As with most myths, not everything about them is accurate, yet something holds true. A case in point is the long-standing and mutual influence of Ireland and the US, a double bind between homelands that embraces various ambits – cultural, political, economic, social, religious – to which all essays here turn their perceptive eyes. One especially – by Timothy J. White and Emily Pausa – interrogates the difference made by the US diplomacy in negotiations of the peace process in Northern Ireland. This research traces and evaluates the complex pattern of cooperation between Irish nationalist politicians, the Irish-American diaspora, Irish-American politicians and the US government in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and how such interactions helped change American foreign policy towards Northern Ireland.

The history of the Irish diaspora is an unfolding tale of dislocations and relocations; like a “field of force” it helps connect trauma and stability, austerity and prosperity, peace and conflict, memory and forgetting, distance and vicinity, local and global. These encounters demand diaspora to be constantly re-negotiated, re-articulated, somehow narrated again⁹. A powerful *idea*, to recall Kenny’s words, diaspora is also a potent and enriching motif, whose endurance would hardly trivialise what Edward Said terms “the tragic fate of homelessness in a heartless world” (2002, 146), even when value is given to its creative potential and “more benign variety” (145), the way Robinson and McAleese have done. Exile *is* “a terminal loss” (138), which prompts the question of what gets lost and what is found as de Petris reminds us in her (reflection on) translations. For her, Eavan Boland’s exile poetry is a political act of “appropriation” and “critique” of Irish emigration that also defines the contours of Ireland’s historical diaspora. While images of a traumatic past are being evoked, we are reminded of the horrors of displacement, of exile’s discontinuities and unbearable pressures, the fact that diasporas are phe-

⁹ The notion of the “field of force” is taken from Theodor Adorno and adapted to Seamus Heaney’s conception of the work of art in Eugene O’Brien’s study of the poet’s prose. The field of force “connects the emotional, the rational, the conscious, the unconscious, the somatic and the cerebral” and it represents a “constituent of poetised thinking”. Accordingly, Heaney, who often returns to the themes of place and displacement in his writings, focuses on “given binaries of thought in order to dislodge and relocate in a more fluid structure, wherein their own adversarial potency will become lessened through being part of this broader and more plural structure” (2016, 127-128).

nomena of enormous political, economic, cultural and social implications. We are also reminded that exile stories and histories testify the complexities, tensions, fragilities and potentialities of people who are “permanently in transit” (Morrissy 2016, 62) as they long for a sense of home, away from an ancestral home.

Diasporas are about homelands and their people, and every people “is a fact [...] of mentality, language, feelings, history. A fact of spiritual ethnicity. [...] A fact of will [...] *the will to exist*.” What nationalist Jordi Pujol writes of his people, the people of Catalonia, equally applies to the Irish, wherever they may be. To them too, perhaps more than anything else, the will to exist “assures survival, promotion, blossoming” (1980, 22). It is this *voluntat de ser* that grants “the possibility to build up one’s own country” when threatened “by the loss of collective and individual identity, subjected to an alienating situation as a people and as individuals” (1980, 277)¹⁰.

Scholars and readers who engage with narratives of the Irish diaspora are called to reflect on the issue of Ireland’s exceptionalism, and therefore the extent to which her diasporas ensue from a peculiar national trend or character. No doubt there is a distinctive set of traits in the Irish transnational experience, but as scholars have argued, as the history of other diasporas tells us, and as some of the essays here demonstrate, the phenomenon is also peculiarly global, owing largely to new modes of migrating and of conceiving one’s sense of “home” within a cosmopolitan web of connections and interconnections. Ireland today is both “part of the global, multi-levelled diasporas of most countries of the rest world” and “a global aggregate of its own multi-levelled, local and regional diasporas” (Fitzgerald and Lambkin 2008, 284). This complex web of interweaving narratives, settings and characters is ultimately what makes the study of the Irish diaspora a challenging and rewarding experience. The following essays reflect this spirit and conviction as they add to extant and current research, each one with a different voice, approach and focus, each of them offering stimulating and original insights. Altogether they provide a comprehensive and updated bibliography on Irish transnationalism, a valuable resource that can contribute to future investigations and further our understanding of the fictions, the facts and the questions of the Irish diaspora.

¹⁰ The will to exist “is the effort of a country to strengthen its identity by building up a nationalism which does not stand against others nor attempts to defend the country by isolating it” (Guibernau 1997, 100).

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