



# Consumption and Identity

Mary P. Corcoran

*The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*

Edited by Diane Negra

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- 1 For a more sociologically grounded account of how a changing Ireland brings with it new risks but also new opportunities, see M. P. Corcoran and M. Peillon, eds., *Uncertain Ireland* (Dublin, 2006).
- 2 David McWilliams, *The Pope's Children: Ireland's New Elite* (Dublin, 2005). See also *In Search of the Pope's Children*, a three-part series made by RTÉ Television, broadcast in November 2006.

There are at least two explanations that can be advanced for the current preoccupation with Irishness. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the Irish demographic landscape has changed beyond recognition. Ten per cent of the Irish population is now foreign-born, and new immigrant communities are making not just the cities but also country towns and villages their home. The integration of these groups into Irish society has moved issues of identity centre stage. In 2004, the question of who is Irish (and more crucially, who is not) lay at the heart of the referendum on citizenship and the subsequent amendment of the Irish Constitution. Second, there is a widespread feeling that economic gains have come at the expense of a 'traditional' Irish value system. This has engendered a kind of existential anxiety among social and cultural commentators. For example, the ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, received extensive coverage in November 2004 when she pronounced that the materialism of modern Ireland should be recognized for its faults and that we should 'begin tiptoeing back to the Church'. Self-absorption and the pursuit of the material, O'Reilly argued, had hardened Irish hearts. John Boorman has taken up this theme in his recent film, *The Tiger's Tail* (2006), proffering an excoriating analysis of the materialism, vacuity and downright greed unleashed by the Celtic Tiger.<sup>1</sup>

Workers dye the Chicago River green to begin the city's St. Patrick's Day celebration, 11 March 2006. The tradition of dyeing the river dates back over 40 years. Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images.

The vogue for self-examination was evidenced by the success of David McWilliams's book, *The Pope's Children*, published in 2005, and the follow-up TV series in late 2006.<sup>2</sup> The book enjoyed a

wide readership and the TV series drew a large audience. McWilliams identified a plethora of new types that inhabit modern Ireland. 'RoboPaddy', for example, borrows against properties at home to

accumulate a property portfolio abroad. The ‘Decklanders’ of suburbia engage in conspicuous consumption, literally decking out their back gardens to create the ambience of the south of Spain. ‘HibernianCosmopolitans’, or HiCos, blend aspects of Irishness (such as love for the Irish language and a predilection for organically grown Irish food) with more cosmopolitan outlooks and tastes. In doing so, they simultaneously distinguish themselves from the middle mass of suburbia, and identify with the global transnational élite. ‘I shop, therefore, I am’ appears to be the new gospel. Irishness is performed, not through saintliness or scholarship, but through conspicuous consumption. The Irish, McWilliams tells us, relentlessly buy decking, botox, plastic surgery, handbags, fast food, slow food, spa hotel breaks, alcohol, exotic holidays, and so on. Mostly, though, the Irish buy houses — ranches in the countryside, penthouses in the city, seaside properties in Sunny Beach, Bulgaria, and Daytona Beach, Florida. McWilliams sketches a post-modern vision of Ireland and the Irish, as a people increasingly defined not by what they produce, but by what they consume.

Diane Negra’s edited collection speaks to both of these quintessentially post-modern themes — identity and consumption — and their attendant enchantments and disenchantments. The formation of identity is the outcome of a constant negotiation with those around us, and a parallel process of internal negotiation.<sup>3</sup> In *The Irish in Us* contributors wrestle with the theme of Irish identity, how it is constructed and deployed, and how identity politics are played out in popular culture. As a corollary, the book explores how new patterns of consumption of material culture provide the means for shaping, reshaping and appropriating Irish ethnicity. Not surprisingly, most of the analyses in this book take as their starting point the phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger and the particular transformations it has occasioned. The Celtic Tiger economy

is itself a product of globalization, so its impact reverberates far beyond the island of Ireland. The contributors to *The Irish in Us* are concerned with the manifold ways in which Irishness and Irish identity have become inscribed in popular culture texts and have migrated from the ethnic margins into the American mainstream. Audiences beyond Irish America now play with notions of Irishness, and, in the process, contribute to its further hybridization and commodification.

In considering identity, several contributors allude to the palpable tensions inherent in our understanding of how Irishness has come to be defined, particularly within popular culture. A number of the essays are predicated on a view of Irish performativity as fundamentally a process of ‘becoming, not being, white’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the notion of Irishness as a form of liminal whiteness resonates throughout the book. Lauren Onkey, for example, quotes Van Morrison’s refreshingly candid comment on his lowly status as a Paddy in England in the 1960s: ‘To be in London and to be Irish, you were fucked.’<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, several essayists suggest that the success of Irishness lies in its capacity to function as a differentiating device, without risking classification as ‘the other’. In this sense, the Irish fit Georg Simmel’s classic characterization of ‘the Stranger’ — they occupy the ambiguous position of being outside of society while also being a part of it.<sup>6</sup> The Irish are both the same and different, or as Stephanie Rains suggests, ‘the extent to which Irishness now constitutes a relatively comfortable version of whiteness, may well be an important consideration in its popularity among those of mixed white ethnicity’.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Catherine M. Eagan suggests that Irish Americans’ renewed interest in ethnic identity is part of an effort to reassert lost innocence and still benefit from the privileges of whiteness.<sup>8</sup> The issue of identity therefore, crystallizes around the issue of whether Irishness, as

- 3 Ian Craib, *Experiencing Identity* (London, 1998), 4
- 4 Maria Pramaggiore, ‘“Papa Don’t Preach”’: Pregnancy and Performance in Contemporary Irish Cinema’, 117
- 5 Lauren Onkey, ‘Ray Charles on Hyndford Street: Van Morrison’s Caledonian Soul’, 174
- 6 Georg Simmel, ‘The Stranger’, in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York, 1950), 402–08
- 7 Stephanie Rains, ‘Irish Roots: Genealogy and the Performance of Irishness’, 155
- 8 Catherine M. Eagan, ‘“Still ‘Black’ and ‘Proud”’: Irish America and the Racial Politics of Hibernophilia’, 50
- 9 Diane Negra, ‘The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture’, 3

- 10 See Mary P. Corcoran, *Irish Illegals: Transients between Two Societies* (Westport, 1993).
- 11 Onkey, 'Ray Charles on Hyndford Street', 174
- 12 Michael Malouf, 'Feeling Eire(y): On Irish-Caribbean Popular Culture', 318–53
- 13 Onkey, 'Ray Charles on Hyndford Street', 178
- 14 Maeve Connolly, "'A Bit of a Traveller in Everybody": Traveller Identities in Irish and American Culture', 282–317

we understand it today, is fundamentally determined by an oppressed past, or a privileged present. Neither position proves ultimately satisfactory and most of the contributors appear to subscribe to the view that 'Irishness seems to move between a quasi-blackness and a politically-insulated ethnic whiteness'.<sup>9</sup>

Here, issues of identity are primarily explored in the context of popular culture. But they are, of course, always alive in political discourse. For instance, illegal Irish immigrants in New York city in the 1980s invoked their 'minority' status as exploited, undocumented workers at the same time as they used their platform as members of a privileged white ethnic group to lobby for immigration reform.<sup>10</sup> The new Irish in the United States in the 1980s benefited greatly from their perceived status as white English-speaking ethnics, rather than as members of the more prosaic lumpen-proletariat of illegal aliens. This conferred on them an almost quasi-legal status, which smoothed the way for a programme of regularization.

In the early 1990s *Bringing It All Back Home*, an acclaimed TV series, demonstrated the process of musical osmosis that lay at the foundation of the canon of Irish traditional music. Irish music is the outcome of many disparate influences and is constituted simultaneously through the local and the global. This theme is revisited in an extended essay by Lauren Onkey, in which she argues that the profound and ambiguous impact of African-American music on Irish culture is embodied in the life and work of Van Morrison. She claims that in sharp contrast to more tendentious equivalences that have been drawn by others between black and Irish experiences, Morrison's *œuvre* suggests 'that the relationship between blackness and Irishness can be a modern, transatlantic and creative one that provides alternatives to fixed identity rather than one that re-inscribes colonial, racial stereotypes'.<sup>11</sup> Morrison is perceived here

as a troubadour version of globalization, adapting and reworking soul music and diaspora experiences through his own locally grounded experience. Morrison's work is also informed by his own lived experience of being Irish in London in the 1960s, and the years that he spent in the United States experimenting with black music. Onkey returns repeatedly to the issue of authenticity, a theme that resonates through the whole book, most notably in Michael Malouf's essay on Afro-Caribbean interpenetration of Irish culture.<sup>12</sup>

Morrison's ability to weave R & B and Irish musical styles meant that for Irish-American audiences 'Morrison could be a conduit, to an authentic, mysterious, ethnic Irishness that had guilt-free connections to African Americans'.<sup>13</sup> While other forms of Irish popular culture such as *Riverdance* are critiqued for ignoring the racial, gendered and class divisions that stratify ethnic groups, Morrison is lauded for his reflexive interpretation of his own Irish identity through black music. Morrison can keep us guessing or, as Onkey puts it, he 'trades in an authenticity of interdeterminate' — we cannot disentangle the various cultural, social and ethnic filaments that, woven together, produce his particular version of soul music. Morrison, of course, is not the only exponent of this kind of post-modern reflexivity. The music of the Pogues is also embedded in a kind of migratory narrative that links the particular (individual stories of emigration) with the universal (the diasporic sense of dislocation) in a *mélange* of musical traditions and styles.

Onkey's exploration of how identity is formed in and through a range of disparate influences is highly relevant to present-day Ireland, where issues of ethnicity and difference, race and tolerance have become ever more significant. The challenge of interculturalism remains acute and is brought into sharp relief in any examination of the fate of the Irish Traveller community whose self-identification as a distinct ethnic



Wall mural representing rural Ireland, Yonkers, New York, December 2005. Photograph: Stan Honda/AFP/Getty Images.

group remains controversial. In the film *Into the West* (1992) the discrimination experienced by the Traveller community as an indigenous, yet racialized, ethnic minority in Ireland is foregrounded. As a result, Maeve Connolly suggests, the film may also be seen as offering a starting point for a more self-conscious examination of Irish identity.<sup>14</sup> While the analysis of the films presented here — *Into the West*, *This is My Father* (1998) and *Traveller* (1997) — is compelling, an opportunity was lost by not considering the recent *Pavee Lacken* (2005). *Into the West* self-consciously locates itself within a heritage dreamscape and stars Hollywood actors, but the grittier *Pavee Lacken* uses child actors drawn from the Traveller community itself to explore one family's day-to-day struggle with poverty, bureaucracy and prejudice in contemporary Ireland. Directed by Perry Ogden, it has as its pivotal focus a spirited and resilient young Traveller girl. This sets the film apart from *Traveller*, *This is My Father* and *Into the West*, all of which, Connolly says, fail

to engage with the actual experiences of women. Connolly concludes that patterns of suspicion and intolerance, developed in relation to Travellers, are readily extended to encompass other racialized minorities, even when they too are classed as 'white'. Recent research carried out among the Polish and Chinese communities in Dublin appears to bear out this assessment. Both groups provide evidence of being subjected to prejudicial attitudes, as well as individual and institutional discrimination. Given their virtual exclusion from economic, social and political power in Ireland, it remains to be seen how these new Irish communities will be represented and will begin to represent themselves in the Irish cultural domain.

A second theme that animates *The Irish in Us* is that of the valorization of Irishness within American consumer culture. Irishness, it seems, is a commodity that can be invented, imagined and ultimately consumed. Several of the essays in this volume seek to interrogate theoretically the

Wall mural representing Irish culture, Yonkers, New York, December 2005.  
Photograph: Stan Honda/ AFP/Getty Images.



- 15 Negra, 'The Irish in Us', 14  
 16 Seamus Heaney, 'Correspondences: Emigrants and Inner Exiles', in Richard Kearney, ed., *The Irish at Home and Abroad* (Dublin, 1990), 23  
 17 Alas, when they return, many are disenchanted by the changes that have occurred in Ireland. See Mary P. Corcoran, 'Global Cosmopolites: Issues of Self-identity and Collective Identity among the Transnational Irish Elite', *Études Irlandaises*, Special Issue on Ireland/America in the twentieth century, 28, 2, (2003).  
 18 Natasha Casey, "'The Best Kept Secret in Retail': Selling Irishness in Contemporary America', 84-109

Hibernophilia 'that drives the consumption of Irish themed plays, dance performances, film, and television and the economies of tourism, genealogy and kitsch'.<sup>15</sup> Despite all the transformations that have occurred in Ireland since the 1990s, romantic Ireland is not dead and gone. Negra points out, for example, that the phenomenally successful painter Thomas Kinkadee, who specializes in nostalgic landscapes, interprets Ireland through the lens of rurality, tradition and stability. This is not simply a projection of Irish Americans, but is also common among returned Irish emigrants. For returners, place is treated as having particular existential significance. During their sojourns abroad, whether or not they eschewed an ethnic persona, they nevertheless clung to a particular imaginary of the country and the community they had left behind. There is nothing new about this, of course, as all emigrants over the generations have been sustained by drawing on an imagined Ireland, what Seamus Heaney has described as 'a mythologically

grounded and emotionally contoured island that belongs in art time, in story time, in the continuous presence of a common, unthinking memory life'.<sup>16</sup>

Frequently the decision of returning Irish emigrants to leave the cities of New York and London is bound up with a sense of existential isolation. They feel disconnected from their past, and disconnected from their present. The moral resources necessary to counter isolation are to be found in webs of familial, friendship and communal affiliations, which returners believe to be more readily accessible in Ireland than in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

According to Natasha Casey, the primary associations that Irish-American consumers have with Ireland, remain highly romanticized and sentimentalized.<sup>18</sup> Her contribution speaks to the currency of Irishness among discerning (and not so discerning) consumers. She demonstrates how new markets can be constituted

through repackaging ethnic products and symbols. In turn, these are appropriated by consumers who seek ethnic authenticity. George Ritzer, in his classic study of the new means of consumption, has pointed out the myriad ways in which the means of consumption have diversified in recent years and how globally recognizable brand identities have assumed such importance in people's everyday lives.<sup>19</sup> The Irish are as implicated in this headlong rush to consume as is everyone else. While upper middle-class Americans appropriate Irish goods and products to 'add value' to their weddings, in Ireland upper middle-class teenagers (colloquially known as D4s) dispatch their parents on shopping expeditions to New York to purchase clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch. Irish shoppers have become the best kept retail secret in America. 'Just Nipping Across to the Shops' was the headline of a recent newspaper article, which argued that 'as mass movements go, the pre-Christmas exodus to the Big Apple hardly matches the dramas of the Wild Geese or the Famine ships, but it surely says as much about the wealthy of twenty-first century Ireland as those earlier events were markers of more difficult times'.<sup>20</sup> An estimated €5 million was spent last year on pre-Christmas shopping trips abroad. While Casey focuses on the appeal of Irishness to those America shoppers seeking to distinguish themselves from the masses, Irish shoppers are embracing Americanization and the global brand culture.

Casey distinguishes between three disparate groups that consume Irish-themed material culture. The first are self-designated Irish Americans who have a strong attachment to Ireland. The second group is made up of deviant consumers of Irishness — for example, extreme right-wing groups who have appropriated Celtic iconography to elaborate their white supremacist views. Irishness, in essence, is used as 'a white identity marker'.<sup>21</sup> The third group identified is the ancillary consumers of Irishness, mainly

white suburban middle- and upper middle-class Americans who lay no claim to Irish ancestry but covet all things Irish. This is suggestive of post-modern flexible identities, wherein people chose their own signifiers and avatars, projecting onto them their desires, aspirations and alter egos. Irishness for them becomes something that is performed in the backyard, much as McWilliams's 'Decklanders' perform 'the Mediterranean' in theirs. These consumers seek to demonstrate their quirkiness, individuality and taste, thereby marking themselves out from others but, as David Harvey has observed, this ultimately leads to the serial reproduction of homogeneous culture.<sup>22</sup>

In the era of consumerism, ethnicity is increasingly seen as a form of tradable currency — a cultural palette from which Americans (and indeed the Irish) can pick and choose symbols and signifiers to form their own bespoke identities. This is not to deny the continued political significance of ethnicity. Indeed, Negra argues that in post-9/11 America Irishness has become a crucial discursive platform for articulating white working-class legitimacy and innocence. In the realm of popular culture, received notions about the primordial elements of Irish ethnicity continue to be questioned and subverted as Maria Pramaggiore and Gerardine Meaney demonstrate in *The Irish in Us*.<sup>23</sup> Irishness as an identity marker or as a means of consumption cannot be taken for granted. Its meaning can change from the poetic to the political to the polemical and back again.

The Irish diaspora, in common with other national and ethnic collectivities, 'construct[s], and continually reconstruct[s], a sense of themselves by reference to the signs provided by cultures'.<sup>24</sup> In his challenging work on the multicultural project in the United States, Schlesinger delineates the key features of collective identities: first, the making of identities is an active process. We are what we are because of how we

- 19 George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (Thousand Oaks, 1999)
- 20 *Irish Times*, 25 November 2006
- 21 Casey, "The Best Kept Secret in Retail", 96
- 22 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989)
- 23 Pramaggiore, "Papa Don't Preach", 110–29, and Gerardine Meaney, 'Dead, White, Male: Irishness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*', 254–81
- 24 Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York, 1991), 44

25 Kevin Morley and David Robins, *Spaces of Identity* (London, 1995), 5

as a group have evolved and interrelate to other groups. Second, the complex process of creating traditions and of activating collective memories occurs in a temporal dimension — our version of history, or mythology. Third, there is a spatial dimension to our understanding of the collectivity. The primordial attachment of a collectivity is often to a particular land or territory. In a world where the constraints of time and space are rapidly being obliterated, it has been argued that ‘places are no longer the clear supports of our identity’.<sup>25</sup> In this context, more and more of us inhabit a liminal space in which we must master the various contradictions and ambivalences associated with identity formation in late

modernity. Increasingly we do this through symbolic means.

Several decades ago, Herbert Gans coined the term ‘symbolic ethnicity’ to give expression to *à la carte* ethnic identification. *The Irish in Us* provides striking examples of this in relation to Irishness and sheds new light on the central issues surrounding ethnicity, performativity and popular culture. The book succeeds in exploring the multifaceted ways that the trope of Irishness has suffused American popular culture, and it lays bare the ideological implications of the heightened performative and mobile qualities of Irishness. ■