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Meredith Cary

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Going Home: The "Returned Yank" in Irish and Irish-American Fiction

by MEREDITH CARY

IRISH-AMERICANS seem to dream of going "home." They set out with an interested sense of their genes and a fond understanding of John Wayne in *The Quiet Man*. Yet when they arrive in actual Ireland, what they find isn't home, if we are to trust recent fiction from both countries. Since novels depicting returns are not particularly alike in other ways, their common use of "returned Yanks" suggests the topic has entered international literary culture. Its implications for social and genetic identity emerge from a detailed analysis of representative works.

Julia O'Faolain's *No Country for Young Men*¹ confronts the idea in its simplest form. This work's hero, James Duffy, lives in Los Angeles, as O'Faolain did at the time of writing. James is in the grip of an identity crisis provoked by defeat on several points. He has been denied tenure at a university where his wife is tenured. His marriage has stalled in a relationship which is more motherly toward him than wifely. His self-image compares miserably with a now flourishing buddy from his glory days as an athlete. All these problems seem very American and therefore escapable if he goes to Ireland to find himself.

His decision is presented as a California-style absurdity, but in fact James does define himself in Ireland. On the most mechanical level, he sees suspected cousins on every street corner and is startled by them because their faces seem scarred as well as familiar. He is taken aback by their stature since most of them seem shrunken. As he gradually adjusts to new norms, he adopts an Irish view of himself as large and placid. When he falls in love, he discovers he is physically glorious in Ireland, even though he was nothing special in Los Angeles.

Emotional exploration carries its shocks, however. Love might be expected to soften cultural discrepancy, particularly because assimilation is a basic assumption of Gaelic cultures.² And yet, in this case, differences sharpen. The American hero demonstrates in love sexual skills and habits which stun and astound the grateful Dublin heroine. In exchange, the heroine offers a behind which is "generous" and "exuberant" (177)—qualities which working out has made obsolete in Los Angeles. Her symbolic name might have warned James

1. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1986. Citations are to this edition.

2. For an impassioned statement of this function in Irish history, together with its absence in the current context, see James Plunkett, *The Gems She Wore: A Book of Irish Places* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 11-12.

about the larger significance of her love, but he only vaguely knows there is a myth involving Grainne.³

Grainne points out that her name's first syllable, "gra," is the Gaelic word for "love" (170). She doesn't realize that, whenever they wish to be polite, late-twentieth-century Americans routinely say "love" when they mean "sex," and so she fails to warn the hero of the word's complexity. In Gaelic, *gra* includes a sense of yearning and of tenderness—concepts which are often missing from American usages of "love." Encountering such multiplicities for the first time, James is understandably "possessed" (210). Having, as he says, no friends in Ireland, he writes confessional letters to his wife in Los Angeles, appreciating her silence in return as he gropes to express feelings for which Americans have no language.

Social assumptions confuse him as well. Since sexual situations can be "fluid" in Los Angeles, he doesn't worry about what seems like polygamy to Grainne. Yet, as he adapts to Dublin, he finds himself wondering how to behave toward "his" cuckold—because this concept is not much used in California, he doesn't know the rules. His cuckold rescues him by taking charge of the men's relationship with a matey breeziness which leaves the hero even more confused. Does his cuckold know and not care? Does he know and not want to talk about it? Does he not know?

His uncertainty toward his lover's husband is echoed in his uncertainty toward his lover. Wanting to make his relationship permanent and, as a side effect, public, James insists they have a right to happiness. Both elements of this claim provoke scoffing disbelief from Grainne. Happiness isn't one of the life goals embraced in "her town" (230) since Dubliners tend to define their loyalties instead of discussing their rights.

As Grainne begins to understand James, her reaction combines wistfulness with disbelief. In her opinion, Americans choose only the "workable halves of truths" (242). She is tempted by this American procedure, but it doesn't resolve her family life. Not only is her relationship with her husband ill-suited to such an attitude, but her teenage son also doesn't fit, partly because he is at a prudish age but also because he orients his values by seeking out the most sexually repressive element of his society. Grainne worries that he will find out about her affair and disrespect her. Her concern both is and is not appropriate. Her son has judged Grainne without waiting for her difficulties with her tempting American—he has contempt for her already because she dragged him to England to live temporarily in a halfway house for battered wives. He loathes this experience because going to England interrupts his Irishness. Given the son's feelings when the novel begins, he cannot think less of Grainne after he discovers her affair.

What Grainne should have dreaded is more concrete. Her son describes his disgust to his uncle, a public figure whose involvement brings the American sexual story into line with the politics which seem so much more real in Ireland.

3. The sexual and gender implications of this myth are discussed in Jean Markale, *Women of the Celts*, tr. A. Mygind, C. Hauch, and P. Henry (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, Ltd., 1986), 226-28.

The official interpretation is unimaginable to James, since he came to the country explicitly intending to avoid politics, and he assumes he has done so. His travel expenses are being paid by a film company which plans to document Ireland for American audiences. His job is to carry out a preliminary investigation by taping the recollections of old-timers while avoiding politically sensitive topics.

Unfortunately, James knows so little about Ireland that he can't recognize what topics are sensitive, and so he blunders into an exposé of the normally unmentioned murder of an American visitor two generations earlier. His doing so seems like the point of his trip in political Dublin. Neither the American Embassy nor the Irish government is willing to believe he is sexually obsessed with a not particularly spectacular and often bewildered middle-aged housewife. Instead, they rely on the common sense of their own context and conclude that he is using sex, in "conventional" American fashion, as a cover behind which he can bring American help to the IRA.

So world-weary an interpretation of his emotional maelstrom leaves James floundering, and the two governments rest their case by sighing and deporting him after a lecture on the cliché of using sex to mask violence. James's reaction is unflinchingly American—he shrugs governments aside and sneaks back to Grainne in the grip of a love which is as genuine as he can visualize.

One of Grainne's neighbors sees James's return as the sexual preoccupation it actually is. A dubious character who attracts teen malcontents, including Grainne's son, this man considers politics to be normal, but sex is disgusting, and so he rids the neighborhood of its pest by killing the American.

Such an outcome focuses the difficulties created by "returned Yanks." Is it their Hollywood glow which bewitches normally resigned Dubliners? Is it their money which equates with gun running to threaten Irish community? Is it their inventive sexuality which disrupts Irish families? Is it their childlike belief in happiness which seems tempting enough to destroy Irish social order? Is it their obliviousness to the power of neighborhood eyes which makes them impossible to control?

"Yes" is this novel's answer to all these questions. A returned Yank seems so large, in addition to being glamorous, wealthy, insatiable, simplistic, and confident. Such a definition of the heroic is at total odds with the Irish view. In other circumstances it might be ignored, in keeping with Gaelic traditions of banishment in plain sight.⁴ However, a boycott can't solve this problem because of what James symbolizes. Genetically, he is as Gaelic as anyone he meets. Since his differences show what Irish genes produce under other circumstances, he constitutes a reproach to stay-at-home Irish by challenging them to wonder if their situation on their island springs from a preoccupation with the *unworkable* halves of truths.

4. Pre-Christian Gaelic justice is described in most discussions of druids. See especially Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 108-09. See also Frank Delaney, *The Celts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986), 94-95.

O'Faolain's personal background—she lives elsewhere part of the time and is the daughter of one of Ireland's literary greats—makes the national orientation of her work somewhat ambiguous, but James Hynes's parallel novel, *The Wild Colonial Boy*,⁵ is unmistakably American. Like O'Faolain, Hynes uses an ironic predicament to launch his returned Yank. In Hynes's *The Wild Colonial Boy*, Brian Donovan is the grandson of a "real" Irish revolutionary who has paid for his activity "by a lifetime away from his country" (14). Having flourished in America, the grandfather continues to participate in the revolution by occasionally sending money "back," using the more expendable family members as couriers. The fact that Brian, the present courier, has no interest in or knowledge of Irish politics is symbolically appropriate to the family's conviction that the grandfather doesn't "know what he does anymore" (15).

Hynes's third-generation hero never intends to be other than "American." In Ireland he looks up long lost cousins, but his only reason for traveling is to oblige—a trait Irish evidently see as standard in Americans. He is willing to serve his grandfather's purposes, but this reaction is affectionate rather than political—he is moved to tears by his grandfather's enduring passion, but he isn't at all convinced by it. He suspects his grandfather's memory of killing a Belfast policeman may be simply a glorious tale meant to beguile American women. Eventually, an Irish traveling companion shows Brian the place on the road where his grandfather actually did shoot a "B-Special," but to Brian that episode constitutes "shooting a cop" (49), and he has very American doubts about the rectitude of such an act.

Brian has come to Ireland carrying money. However, in Ireland, money means weaponry, and so the symbol is quickly exchanged for the fact. He finds himself transporting plastique because he is vulnerable to an apparently universal combination of manipulative insults and boys' club taunts about playing the game. To a scornfully watching Irish woman, the recruitment ritual seems like a "brotherhood of bruises and testosterone" (68), but it is real to the men of both nations and so neither recognizes that their bargain is dangerously incomplete. Brian agrees to carry the plastique simply as an activity. His Irish counterpart cannot conceive of so apolitical a personality and therefore fails to notice that Brian's loyalty is not engaged.

The importance of motivation becomes clear as soon as Brian is on his own. He has participated in strategy sessions by offering boyish, American-consumerish jokes which seem like routine American silliness. In fact, however, his behavior warns of his embarrassment over participating in a war he doesn't consider his own. Not knowing what cause he is serving, he tries to guide himself by asking "what would grampa do?" (64, 70, 179). This appeal backfires, however—rather than grasping an inherited loyalty, he begins to see his grandfather's past in a new light.

Exposed to the present lives of "revolutionaries," Brian decides his grandfa-

5. New York: Atheneum, 1990. Citations are to this edition.

ther is heroic only if a hero is "a man who'd made his name by failing to accomplish what he'd set out to do" (196). This definition is so alien that Brian's sense of being an American is affirmed. More minor behavior patterns also emphasize the discrepancy. He has trouble recognizing the sound when his Irish counterpart laughs. And the Irish can't understand his American habit of smiling at cops and confidently asking their help.

His nature is most sharply defined when he falls in love with a traveling companion, Clare Delaney, an American in Ireland looking for innocent roots. In contrast to their Irish counterparts—a husband and wife who frankly battle as a part of love and who participate as equals in the guerrilla war—the American lovers tease and preen in a puppyish, clumsy, but appealing way, protecting each other and preoccupying themselves apologetically over when and whether sex might be appropriate.

When Brian confides his accidental political involvement, Clare decides to help him, partly because she is falling in love and partly because she "hates it" that her Irish cousins "don't care" (271). Still, she protects herself from the reality of what they are doing by calling the plastique "you know," and both of them retreat to the language of childhood, promising "scout's honor" (239) and calling the all clear from hide-and-seek. With love as an impetus, Brian decides he is tired of Irish reality which increasingly seems like "lies and threats and deceptions" (292). His American skills allow him successfully to deliver the plastique, but he is horrified when it is used.

His belated shock underlines what seems like American innocence to the Irish, and it also emphasizes the second American story in this novel. Unlike Brian, Clare came to Ireland in a nonpolitical way. Once there, however, she discovers political feelings which commit her more strongly to Irish causes than her Irish cousins seem to be. The difference is one of the reasons she falls in love—she yearns for companionship with someone who shares her values. She insists on justice, for example, where her Gaelic cousins see only guerrilla war. She also enjoys using her skills, helping Brian escape surveillance with the very American command, "trust me," as she claims with American-style satisfaction, "I'm good at this" (246). In fact, she is "good at this," and so she becomes involved in Brian's illegal activity. Her participation is really nothing more than an exploration of her very American habits, skills, and attitudes, but it makes a co-conspirator of her.

These American "guerrillas" react very differently from their Irish counterparts, the Gaelic husband and wife who look on pain and danger as simply the fortunes of war to be risked equally. When the plastique stops being something unmentioned in the bottom of Brian's backpack, and turns into a bomb which kills, maims, and destroys, Clare goes back to her Gaelic cousins in tears, but she protectively hides the cause of her distress by claiming she had a fight with a boyfriend. Brian also behaves protectively. Dreading that Clare may keep his secret and thereby share the guilt for something she never intended, he turns himself in to the English police in order to tell his story in a way which will assign all the American involvement to him. He knows what these police will do to him,

but he nevertheless approaches them “smiling and apologetic” (348), American style. Brian’s skills would make him a hero like his grandfather if he were willing to use them in a dedicated way. Instead, he turns informer, destroying his guerrilla success out of loyalty to a higher-ranking American emotion: protective sexual love.

This parallels O’Faolain’s novel in several ways. In both works Americans seem childishly uncomplex. They are startlingly ready to enjoy their own lives while accepting the rights to individual choice on the part of others, and their passion focuses disconcertingly on sex rather than on politics. Since their central values are so different, they constitute a direct threat to Irish civilization when they “return.”

This judgment is affirmed by a recent Irish novel which approaches the idea from a very different point of view. In *Firefly Summer*, Maeve Binchy⁶ tells the story of a man whose grandfather went to America when he was evicted from his family home in Ireland. Patrick O’Neill has never been to Ireland, but he has focused his life on “going back” and “walking in his rightful place” with “head held high” (56). He does go “back” with the confidence and the attention to detail to be expected of a man who is wealthy by his own efforts. He is big, handsome, energetic, capable and charming, and his children are “golden” (92). As a result, the O’Neills are the center of any group they join.

In many ways Binchy is kind to her Americans. Patrick is characterized as generous to a fault—so giving he must learn to curb his generosity. He is courteous—so endlessly praising and tactful that he seems less than honest. He is optimistic and willing—so resilient that normal emergencies don’t defeat him and only a total disaster can slow him enough to let him rethink. In other words, he has the qualities admired by the Irish village he joins, but he has them in such excess that they constitute a disruption.

He plans to build a major hotel which other returning Yanks can use as a base while they search for their roots. Since his hotel will transform the village into a tourist spot, Patrick is determined that the change must bring prosperity to everyone. This focus on the good of the community sounds Irish, but it takes a very American form. As the building program nears completion, Patrick begins hiring hotel workers, but he warns them that changes will be required. Americans expect to be answered when they say “thank you,” for example. Reacting isn’t an Irish habit, but they must learn it. He also reminds job seekers that American tourists will wish to see the “real” Ireland. To Americans, that doesn’t mean complacent village life, it means “shamrocks.”

In ironic parallel to Patrick’s lectures on what Ireland is, Binchy shows what Ireland is to the Irish who lived in the village before Patrick turned it on its head. When it is time for finishing touches on the new hotel, Patrick’s designer comes over from America to supervise the decoration which will make it a first-class

6. New York: Delacorte, 1988.

resort. To Patrick, Rachel is an essential co-worker. But to the village, she is Patrick's "fancy woman" (204). In deference to local custom, Rachel stays in a separate hotel, but Patrick goes to her room as soon as she arrives, and unembarrassed sex in the afternoon is an American innovation to the people who spread the word.

Many such surprises are amusing or simply interesting differences, but the sum is crucial. A widower, Patrick is a model of single male parenthood. By nature a care-giver, he is attentive to community details and solicitous of everyone's turf and their ego. Skilled at managing, he plans ahead, anxious for everyone's betterment in terms of their own possibilities. In other words, he is the center of his own life, and, through kindness, he dominates the lives around him.

In the family across the road—his Irish counterparts—Patrick's role belongs to the woman of the house. A matriarchal family, the Ryans revolve around Kate, the wife and manager, while the husband dreams of being a poet as he enjoys a writer's block. However, the family changes when Kate obliviously walks in front of one of Patrick's bulldozers and the driver doesn't see her in time to avoid breaking her back. In a gradual transition over the months of her convalescence, her husband takes control. He loses weight, becomes better-looking, begins planning ahead and coming up with good ideas for their business. He has always been better with their children than Kate was, and now he becomes almost the family's whole resource. In other words, he becomes more like Patrick. Crying out against the change, Kate becomes pregnant, retreating to biology as her only uniqueness in this new mode.

In Binchy's novel the returned Yank is very clearly an Irish creation. His talk, for example, is not American—instead, he sometimes speaks English, sometimes Australian, sometimes Texan. However, when the shock of language is set aside, Binchy's implied theory of American behavior does not contradict comparable American views. Patrick seems boyish because he is so friendly, but he is surprisingly competent, nevertheless. He is wealthy by Irish standards, and this impression is strengthened when he doesn't mention the financial worries which might make him less mythic, as Americans tend not to, for fear of seeming to whine. Exuding American individuality, he seems uninhibited, his impulses controlled only by tact. In other words, Patrick is charismatic, but when his attitudes are examined without the cloak of his personal aura, they are exposed in an uglier form. Patrick represents Americans at their best, and, even at his best, he is an emblem of destructive money and threatening sexuality.

Rather than negate Patrick's enchanting nature, Binchy reveals his dark side through his son. Patrick's sex appeal is part of his "little-boy" charm (242), but the son uses his inherited glamour as a basis for seduction and blackmail. Patrick gets his excitement by taking calculated business risks, but his son exercises his inherited gambling spirit in card rooms which eventually involve him with the IRA. The son has not learned his father's attention to detail, and so, when the IRA orders him to take temporary custody of gelignite, he carelessly stores it where it will explode and destroy his father's dream of building "Ireland's finest hotel"

(597). The explosion burns the son's handsome face so severely that even the local policeman can't bear to look at his injuries.

The son hasn't wished to be Irish, but his punishment certainly is. For months the community has been warning itself that he is "dangerous" (470). Even though they don't know the full depths of his depravity, they have been shivering at hints which contrast with his glorious good looks. As a result, when he is seen to be in danger, the Irish community simply watches and refuses to help. He has been outwardly beautiful, like the sins of the world, but by his own acts he ends exposed in his eternal frightfulness.

This purgatory vision casts the son in the usual "returned Yank" role. However, the father also is destructive in a way which might not be apparent to American novelists. Binchy uses Patrick's "fancy woman" as an explanation of what is most wrong with the American presence. Rachel is a kind woman, and, although she knows she is being gossiped about, she never lets that awareness interfere. She makes friends where she can, and she offers generosity even where nothing is given in return. She is determined to "help the women and girls" of the village (389). She shops tirelessly, out of sight in Dublin, in order to donate cloth she pretends comes to her free as samples. She helps the local dressmaker turn the fabric into flattering dresses by following designs Rachel develops as if her time also were free. She encourages awkward children and suggests new hairstyles for older women who have given up on their looks. In other words, her help consistently takes the form of improving outward attractiveness.

Rachel's personal sweetness keeps the villagers from noticing what is really going on, and Rachel is too American to see the implications of the changes she plans. In situations where she understands Patrick's impact, she openly tries to help people adjust. She discusses alternatives with the pubkeepers who will suffer from his hotel's competition, for example, and she suggests modernization to storekeepers who will have to compete with American-style boutiques. Yet it is the subtler adjustment of encouraging women and girls to become preoccupied with their looks which proves to be the more invasive change. In a matriarchal society, women don't need to be obsessed with sexual signals, but Rachel is too thoroughly American to recognize this difference, and so her kindness furthers the shift toward a patriarchal pattern where women's primary value is in their appeal to men.

Binchy's cultural depiction rests on a strong tradition. Speaking in the video documentary-history, *Mother Ireland*,⁷ Bernadette Devlin contrasts Ireland's persistently female image with the "fatherland" image of "aggressive countries" such as "America," and she questions the wisdom of the Irish tourist industry's invitation to "new invaders" from fatherland countries. The point is not theoretical. According to eyewitness accounts of Ireland's revolution and civil war, participating women were trained in the use of small arms and rifles, and they were treated as equals by Irish Volunteers, even though conventional histories

7. Anne Crilly, director (Derry: Derry Film and Video, 1988).

for the international market tend to write around or ignore such unusual realities.⁸

Women's status in Ireland is not widely understood by international novelists, partly because it is a subject of apparently endless debate.⁹ Nevertheless, some unusual aspects of the culture seem agreed upon. Even unsympathetic commentators admit that, in the mythic stories which preserve the oral history of pre-Patrick Ireland, women figure importantly as property owners, as warriors, and as central figures in their own lives. Further, among the nine types of marriage recognized under pre-Anglicized Irish law, some categories established women at the center of family, finances, and home.¹⁰

That these ancient patterns persist is unconsciously demonstrated in a recent true-crime account where conventional sociological theory is set aside in favor of factual reportage of real behavior. Educated as a political scientist and working as a journalist, Barry O'Halloran characterizes the Irish community his nonfiction book analyzes, and he then adds matter-of-factly that the family under discussion is "matriarchal."¹¹ For such a culture, the oblivious American assumption that patriarchy is universal understandably becomes a threat.

Americans are unlikely to see this aspect of themselves as a problem, and, outside of literature, the Irish tend to leave it unmentioned. As a result, happy nonfiction accounts abound. There is, for example, the *Irish Voice* series recounting the experiences of an American couple who have gone back to an Ireland the husband has never seen.¹² As well, Niall Williams and Christine Breen have chronicled their return to the village of Christine's forebears.¹³ In spite of Williams' and Breen's shock over domestic working conditions which strike them as being scarcely twentieth-century, they evidently feel welcomed. On the other hand, they analyze the success of their move by listing their literary and artistic prizes and by taking pride in their establishment of an American-style exercise class. In other words, they value themselves for having instructed their Irish neighbors on the advantages of competition and outward attractiveness.

In contrast to these nonfiction writers, American novelists seem to sense the destructiveness of an insidiously personal impact beneath the cordial surface. Writing from the context of an "aggressive" nation, they are hampered when they try to grasp exactly what it is they sense, and so they use the internationally visible IRA as a sufficient symbol.

The problem appears to be a recent one. During the nineteenth century, travel was so difficult that crossing the Atlantic was a one-way trip, and "American wakes" were held in order to say a final goodbye to departing family members. However, in the early part of the twentieth century, easier travel enabled

8. See Sighle Humphries' discussion of historical events and of the problems of history in *Mother Ireland*.

9. The difficulty of understanding this unique culture through the double patriarchal filter of church historians and of English historians is discussed by Kenneth Nicholls and by Katharine Simms in *Women in Early Modern Ireland*, ed. Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1991), 17-42.

10. For a discussion both of the confusion and of the law, see Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series, No. 3 (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), 68 ff.

11. *Lost Innocence: The Inside Story of the Kerry Babies Mystery* (Dublin: Raytown Press, 1985), 31.

12. See David Van Buren's column, beginning July 9, 1991.

13. *O Come Ye Back to Ireland* (New York: Soho Press, 1987).

individuals to go to the United States to make their fortune and return to Ireland as "Americans." For example, a generation before his daughter wrote about a Los Angeles native's struggle with Ireland, Sean O'Faolain considered the plight of individuals who "come back."¹⁴ In Sean O'Faolain's novel on this topic, individuals who return really are coming back—they were born in Ireland and grew up there. Their exiles' dreams make Irish life mythic as in the later novels, but the people they return to remember them as themselves, and so this novel's "Americans" are *not* larger than life. One returns as a derelict, for example, recoiling from his failure in America, and one comes back confused by the loss of his social identity. As a former resistance fighter now on the run, he has a shadowy social claim in Ireland because of the embattled past, but his role doesn't exist in America. Reduced to the common lot by their struggles, such individuals create no particular stir when they return.

Evidently, therefore, exiles become disruptive only when they have grown up as "Yanks." After generations away, Americans may have Gaelic traits and Gaelic "memories," but they use them within a non-Irish value structure which is destructive despite their innocence and the cordiality of the Irish who have remained at home. From the Irish point of view, then, both countries might benefit if "returning Yanks" were to take seriously the nineteenth-century ceremonial farewell. Having been "waked," exiles may live on, but not as Irish. Returning, they would do well to put their American values into quarantine at customs. If they carried into the country only the lesser, physical explosive which current fiction assigns to them—gelignite—they might leave intact more of the culture they came looking for, the hundred thousand welcomes.

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