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Contents 6:4 Clár Ábhair 6:4

5

Editors' Notes: Nótaí na nEagarthóirí

9 NATASHA CASEY

Riverdance: The Importance of Being Irish American

26 THOMAS E. HACHEY

The Rhetoric and Reality of Irish Neutrality

44 DANIEL TOBIN

Filíocht Nua: New Poetry

55 LIAM HARTE

History, Text and Society in Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing*

68 GARY MURPHY

The Irish Government, the National Farmers Association, and the European Economic Community, 1955–1964

85 DAVID GRAHAM HAYNES

Unstable Tadhg in Sheridan's *The Field* (1990)

98 EARL G. INGERSOLL

The Psychic Geography of Joyce's *Dubliners*

108 ADRIAN FRAZIER

Moore's *Hail* and Yeats's *Farewell*

120 MICHELLE SWEENEY AND JACK MORGAN

Ancestral Voices: Padraic Colum and the Celtic Creature Poem

136 RÍONA NÍ FHRIGHIL

Imní an Scáthaithe: Eavan Boland agus Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

Exhibitions: Taispeántais

150 MAUREEN E. MULVIHILL

The Camera Does Not Lie: Revisiting Bloody Sunday (1972–2002)

155

Reviews: Léirmheasanna

25

Clúdach: Cover

159

News of Authors: Nuacht faoi Údair

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Natasha Casey



Riverdance: The Importance of Being Irish American

Arguably there are many identity options available to the average middle-class, American citizen at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A remarkable increase in the allusions, images, and representations of Ireland in the United States during the last two decades firmly situates "Irish-American" at the top of that identity option list. Irish-themed films, made-for-television movies, children's television programs, dance and theater productions, television commercials, books, music, festivals, and theme pubs constitute some of the more obvious successes in this seemingly endless popular culture inventory.¹ Moreover, alongside these high profile genres, one must acknowledge the rapidly growing industry of Irish-themed catalog shopping that predictably relies on the old standards of Waterford Crystal and Belleek China, but also offers such items as the *Irish-American Heritage* video that guarantees to teach your children how to count in Gaelic (only up to ten though), the Notre Dame Fightin' Irish Afghan, and Innisfree Perfume—The Essence of Ireland, with lavender oil from the fields of County Wicklow complete with quotations from Yeats on the bottle. Taken together, these products seem to provide something for every middle-class Irish American so that, to borrow Adorno and Horkheimer's dramatic phrase, "none may escape."² What, then, is the allure of all this Irishness? Some light may be cast on this question by considering two of the most successful Irish-themed productions of the last twenty years—*Riverdance* and *Lord of the*

1. Here is a partial list, by category: Films: *Making Ned Devine*, *Far and Away*; Television Films: *The Magical Legend of the Leprechauns*, *Durango*; Children's Television Programs: *The Mystic Knights of Tir Na N'og*, *So Weird*; Dance and Drama Productions: *Riverdance*, *Lord of the Dance*, *Feet of Flames*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*; Television Commercials: Lucky Charms cereal, Irish Spring soap, Dr. Pepper soda, Folger's coffee, Mercedes Benz automobiles; Books: *Angela's Ashes*, *Tis, How the Irish Saved Civilization*; Music: Sinead O'Connor, The Cranberries, U2, The Guinness Fleadh; Theme Pubs: Thady Con's (New York), the Fado chain.
2. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 23.

lowing year where the reception was considerably different. The *New York Times* measured its approval of Flatley's "extravaganza" by noting the different levels of Irish content in the competing shows: ". . . unlike 'Riverdance', a plotless amalgam of Irish dance and other dances of Celtic origin, Mr. Flatley's show has a narrative and includes only Irish material."⁷ Furthermore, unlike *Riverdance*, *Lord of the Dance* has no female lead with which Flatley must share the spotlight. Instead, there are two women who duel for the star's affections in yet another variation on the seemingly ever-popular femme fatale-virgin theme. In contrast to *Riverdance*—described by the *New York Times* as a "mishmash of a variety show with a one-world theme,"—*Lord of the Dance* has a clear and simple narrative in which "Mr. Flatley must vanquish a stomping array of masked men and resist the temptations of a sultry seductress."⁸ But perhaps the differences between the two shows may be best characterized by noting where each found a permanent home—*Riverdance* at the Broadway Gershwin Theater in New York; *Lord of the Dance* at the New York New York Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas.⁹ Despite the criticisms concerning the varying levels of Irishness, both *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* were in general greeted favorably by the American press and critics, predictably lauded by such magazines as *People*, which named Flatley one of the "50 Most Beautiful People in the World" in 1997¹⁰ and venerated by the general public, which clamored to buy the tickets and accompanying merchandise that made both productions incredibly successful.¹¹

American popular culture during the last decade or so has reinforced distinct and often contradictory images of Irishness, images that simultaneously reject and encourage historically familiar stereotypes. The *New York Times* noted the following on the occasion of *Riverdance*'s United States debut in 1996: "At Radio City Music Hall, where the show opened on Wednesday night for a sold-out run through Sunday (Yes, St. Patrick's Day), there wasn't a stage leprechaun in sight."¹² At the same time, historically familiar representations of Irishness continued to resonate with United States audiences. NBC's mini-series *The Magical Legend of the Leprechauns* (1999) and episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager* (2000), set in the computer-simulated Irish town of "Fair Haven," are

7. Valerie Gladstone, "The Man behind the Duel between Irish Blockbusters," *New York Times*, 2 March 1997, B8.
8. Kisselgoff, C5; 9. Gladstone, B8.
9. By 2002 *Riverdance* had left Broadway. *Lord of the Dance*, however, continued on in Las Vegas, still charging upwards of \$50 a ticket.
10. Except for the *New York Times*, which both condemned and exalted both sows between 1996 and 1998. *People Weekly*, May 12, 1997, p. 135.
11. By the middle of 2002, more than 11 million people worldwide had bought tickets for *Riverdance*.
12. Kisselgoff, C5.

Dance—and the ways in which they appeal to notions of Irishness in contemporary Irish America.

Irish-American dancers Jean Butler and Michael Flatley, together with a troupe of musicians, singers, and step-dancers, provided the interval entertainment at the 1994 Eurovision song contest in Dublin, which had some 300 million television viewers worldwide. Their performance broke the traditional rules of Irish dancing by combining Butler and Flatley's modern ("sexy") approach with the rather worn, more traditional (never "sexy") dance form. Following the enormous audience response to what was essentially the half-time show, this six-minute performance was expanded into a ninety-minute production featuring a combination of modern and traditional Irish dance, Spanish flamenco and Russian folk dancing. By 1996, *Riverdance* had grown into a music and dance "extravaganza," proving enormously successful first in Ireland, where it played to sold-out crowds, before moving to London and then around the world.³

During the height of this success Michael Flatley, after a "dispute involving money and artistic control" left the show.⁴ By time it opened in the United States (1996), English-born, though of Irish parentage, Colin Dunne had replaced the Irish American, and *Riverdance* was declared "officially a phenomenon" following its initial eight performances at Radio City Music Hall, returning for another twenty-three, and then touring Chicago, Los Angeles, and Boston.⁵ *Riverdance* went on to the 1996 Kennedy Center Honors event and reprised the role the following year at the Grammy Awards ceremony at Madison Square Garden, where it won a statuette for best musical show album.

Meanwhile, Michael Flatley's new rival show, *Lord of the Dance* opened in Dublin on July 3, 1996, to mixed reviews. In London critics castigated his show. A *Daily Telegraph* critic noted, "I admit there is a perverse if ignoble pleasure in watching a monster ego run riot, but in the end, there is only one word for it all—embarrassing."⁶ *Lord of the Dance* made its United States debut the fol-

3. Journalists seemed very unsure as to how to classify and label *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*—theater, dance, mass spectacle? Each show was repeatedly referred to as an "extravaganza," which deftly avoided questions of cultural hierarchies. See: Peter Marks, "On Stage and Off—Ireland without Clichés," *New York Times*, 16 February 1996; Ann Kisselgoff, "Irish Steps and Their Kin," *New York Times*, 15 March 1996, C5; Salley Sommer, "An America Approach to the Steps of Old Ireland," *New York Times*, 14 April 1996, C8; Bruce Weber, "Onstage and Off—Hoofers Step Out," *New York Times*, 29 December 1997, E1; Lawrence Van Gelder, "Footloose," *New York Times*, 5 January 1998, E1.
4. Jennifer Dunning, "Moral Duel with Light and Smoke," *New York Times*, 7 March 1997, B3.
5. Peter Marks, "Radio City Reprise for 'Riverdance,'" *New York Times*, 21 June 1996, C2.
6. Natasha Casey, "Irishness with Nimble Feet and an Overblown Ego," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 14 October 1997, B1.

just two of many examples in this category. On occasion, the two categories overlap, both exposing and illustrating the inherent hegemonic forces of popular culture. The film *Waking Ned Devine* (1998) for example, successfully managed to utilize stock characteristics from both traditional and decidedly modern Irishness repositories.¹³ While the film contains many clichéd and traditional cinematic signifiers of Ireland—including a dramatic rural landscape, whitewashed cottages, excessive drinking, priests, and ubiquitous musical locals—folk values in the village are temporarily disrupted by the prospect and subsequent introduction of lottery money, and even the Catholic church agrees to deceive the authorities for £30,000. Predictably, though, by the film's conclusion the villagers quickly abandon their newfound greed and restore their "true" values. This temporary disruption, however, foregrounds a distinctly new element in mainstream narratives about Ireland emanating from that country's still recent economic prosperity and the resultant modifications in both American and English dominant paradigms concerning the character of the Irish. Given this new cultural terrain then, where are *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* located?

From its inception, *Riverdance* actively eschewed the archetypal Stage Irish image and insisted on emphasizing "modern" Ireland. In 1996, about one month before the production attracted mass attention in the United States, the *New York Times* ran an article under the headline "Ireland Without Clichés" in which the producer of *Riverdance*, Moya Doherty, stated, "I was tired of clichéd images of Ireland . . . I wanted to show the Ireland I know and love, that it is modern and in step."¹⁴ Instantly, *Riverdance* embodied a new respectable Irishness, neo-terric and traditional, spiritual rather than religious, sanitized—devoid of both political signifiers and, as the *New York Times* observed, stage leprechauns.

In the mid-1990s, *Riverdance* encountered a middle-class and white Irish America eager to embrace an alternative popular image. The stage Irish image had long become passé and, although Joyce might be required high-school reading in Ireland, in the United States it remains endlessly fashionable academic fodder. *Riverdance* was the perfect vehicle for those at neither periphery and proved an immediate success with many middle-class Irish Americans. The show offered a new alternative image that signified both their wealth, for ticket prices ensured that the majority of the riff-raff stayed at home and watched it on video, and social status, for even Liam Neeson attended its New York premiere. The mass availability of the show through assorted merchandise, videos, and CDs, as well as incessant PBS airings—where a "free" *Riverdance* or *Lord of the Dance* video was often offered or for higher pledge levels, both the video and CD—helped garner further attention and even larger audiences. However, it is

the figure of Michael Flatley as the original feature and anchoring showman in both "extravaganzas" that accounts, in part, for their ongoing, middle-class audience appeal.¹⁵

Michael Flatley constantly portrays himself as the embodiment of the American Dream. Replete with conventional tropes, this popular ideology is played out repeatedly in successive media interviews: his immigrant Irish parents; childhood working-class struggles in Chicago ("they used to call me 'Mick' at school, so I was in fistfights every day"); battles against seemingly impossible odds (he was told at age eleven he was too old to learn Irish dancing); his victories (first American to win the world Irish dance championships); and of course, his fabulous wealth (he reputedly earned a million dollars a month in 1997).¹⁶ Flatley also consistently frames his story in American maverick versus European traditionalists terms. In a 1997 interview for the *Los Angeles Times*, Flatley explains the European critics' bias against him:

I did it my way, which may be more flamboyant than the British press cared for, but it's typically American. . . . This is the country of Muhammad Ali, Hector Camacho, Sugar Ray Leonard and Michael Jordan.¹⁷

Michael Flatley's exemplification of the American Dream is emphasized further in his biography, "Considered an artist, a maverick, a role model and an entrepreneur, Michael Flatley has proven time and time again that where there is a *will* there is a *way*."¹⁸ American Dream ideology, of course, emphasizes individuality, and disregards institutional structures, barriers, and extant power mechanisms. It operates as a unifying characteristic of middle-class American identity. It is an alluring, entrenched, and insidiously successful cultural myth. Michael Flatley's success is "proof" that the American Dream is alive and attainable in spite of critics' (see Europeans) disdain (see elitism).

Although notions of the American Dream have long operated as a commercially successful popular culture strategy, Irishness in the past seldom has. A cursory historical glance reveals that, aside from the obvious green paraphernalia marketed every March, few Irish-themed products prior to the late 1980s garnered universal consumer attention in the manner in which they do today. Indeed, Irishness in the United States courted and signified a predomi-

15. In correspondence with KERA, my local PBS television station, both shows were referred to as "Michael Flatley" programs, again underlining the perception that Flatley was the driving force of both productions, even though he had left *Riverdance* in 1996 before the show's arrival in the United States. Michael Borth to author, 16 January 2001.

16. Patrick Pacheco, "From Chieftains to Dance 'Lord,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 26 March 1997, F1.

17. Pacheco, F1.

18. Extracted from the biographical notes in the Michael Flatley press kit from Baker Winokur, Ryder Public Relations, New York, 1999.

13. Ironically, *Waking Ned Devine* was shot not in Ireland, but on the Isle of Man.

14. Marks, C2.

nantly working-class audience through its associations, clubs, bars, and above all through ardently patriotic and nationalistic music. This latter form is a particularly useful measure of the shift in class and consumption. Irish music was, until quite recently, synonymous with nationalist tales of English oppression and Irish freedom performed by Tommy Makem and the Wolfe Tones, among others. Today, however, Irish music in its American mainstream variety can be located in the respectable (see apolitical) genre of world music where artists such as Enya, The Chieftains, and Mary Black thrive. Is this class transformation merely consumer culture taking its natural course? What has changed in the intrinsic nature or at least the popular perceptions of Ireland in the United States that Ireland suddenly deserves respectability? Attempts to answer these questions must consider the role and impact of the "Celtic Tiger."

The success of Irishness on the cultural stage of the United States coincided with the largest economic growth in the history of Ireland. In the contemporary marketplace, sustained economic prosperity ensures significant cultural capital and global status. In many ways this transition for the Irish was not such an involved task. They were not demonized beyond all salvation like some groups and, although they have been subject to enormous stereotyping in the United States and Britain, the imperial ideology that viewed them as a quirky and amusing nation—though of course incapable of running their own affairs—can be comfortably reworked and utilized to sell the new economical success, but still 'Irish' Ireland. The paradox quickly becomes apparent: Enya and *Riverdance* operate within this new paradigm, on the one hand, while tourism literature and *The Magical Legend of the Leprechauns* simultaneously reassert traditionally familiar constructions of the Irish on the other.

Despite some inevitable backlash aimed at both *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*, including commercials for Apple Jacks cereal and Dr. Pepper soda, stand-up routines by Dennis Leary, and parodies in various films most notably *Mafia!* and *Wrongfully Accused*—not forgetting the highly successful "Liverdance" computer screen saver—both productions continue to draw enormous audiences. John Fiske argues that "... much popular culture is ephemeral—as the social conditions of the people change, so do the texts and tastes from which relevances can be produced."¹⁹ While this seems inevitable in a majority of cases, Irishness has managed to maintain its prominent position and apparent relevance despite the usual fleeting nature of popular culture. If *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* are little more than consumer-propelled fads, what accounts for their longer shelf life?

Irish immigrants arriving in the North American colonies may have been

surprised to find that, despite the new surroundings, English attitudes toward them altered little. Winthrop Jordan notes that, "... for Englishmen in the seventeenth century the Irish were a special case, and it required more than an ocean voyage to alter this perception."²⁰ This special status became even more conspicuous as tremendous numbers of rural Irish began arriving on America's doorstep during the mid-nineteenth century. The impact of this influx had an irreversible effect both on the popular images and discourses of the day and in solidifying future stereotypes. It is worth noting, as Perry Curtis has observed, that these nineteenth-century representations were often crucially affected by another popular fixation of the time, pseudo-scientific theories of race.²¹ Physiognomy, phrenology, and other "sciences" established the Irish in popular culture realms as a group less than "white," and often coequal with African and African-American groups. Dale Knobel observes that during the nineteenth century the label Irish "... mobilized an entire sub-language that defined and evaluated all to whom the term was deemed to apply."²² Noel Ignatiev argues that, "... while the white skin made the Irish eligible for membership in the white race, it did not guarantee their admission; they had to earn it."²³ These and other writers have successfully delineated the motivations behind the hierarchies of race both in England and the United States, suffice to acknowledge here that imperialist economics and dominant WASP ideologies all played important, if obvious roles. The crucial question raised here concerns how Irish America managed the transition from the category "black" (race) to "white" (ethnicity) and, in terms of contemporary culture, largely disregard the realities of that historical conversion?

From the first English in search of freedom in the sixteenth century until well into the nineteenth century Americans consistently grappled with issues of identity. Although these new Americans adopted predominantly English customs, values, and norms, for a substantial period of time in its early history, the term "American" meant "not English." As more immigrants and slaves arrived, the question became critical. For a time, "Christian" was used to distinguish between the immigrants on one hand and indigenous peoples and slaves on the other. This was quickly replaced by the distinctive adjective "free." Jordan notes that once both these terms were problematized by ex-slave converts in particu-

20. Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 47.

21. See L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971).

22. Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), p. 16.

23. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 59.

19. John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 6.

lar, a new "term of self-identification appeared—white"²⁴ ultimately leaving little room for others to maneuver. The Irish, despite agreeable skin tone, were consigned to social status below Anglo-Americans, junior members, if so fortunate, in the newly established dominant white club of America. In response to this reality, and in familiar patterns of racism, large numbers of Irish immigrants eagerly clamored to adopt the norms and values of the dominant group, edging hopefully closer to full membership club benefits. From Irish America's participation in the nineteenth-century New York draft riots to the recent and well documented contemporary conservatism, misogyny, and homophobia of high profile Irish-American groups—"hyper-whiteness" as Lauren Onkey usefully termed it—all highlight the success of the membership drive that began over three hundred years ago.²⁵

Ironically, as the American Irish gained acceptance into the club, finally becoming American, they opted to reassert the very essence that disbarred their ancestors from the club for so long—Irishness. According to the 2000 census, thirty-nine million Americans designated themselves as having Irish ancestry. What happened to not only "Irish" but also the concept of "American" that has allowed "Irish-American" to become a common declaration without so much as a discontented antipatriotic murmur—in stark contrast to the furor over terms like African American, Mexican American? The label Irish has migrated from connoting an ethnicity to a race to a blurring of the two categories—Irish American—in which it now signifies both a race (exclusively white) and ethnicity (fashionably Irish). Irish America no longer has to contest the opprobrious "black" label; today the adjective "Irish-American" announces its own whiteness.

The uses of this white Irishness are many. Self-proclaimed Irish-American politicians include Daniel Moynihan, Edward Kennedy, and most productively Ronald Reagan, who used his nebulous sense of Irishness extremely effectively in successive presidential campaigns. Bill Clinton also utilized it during his 1992 campaign, which is ironic given that his idol John F. Kennedy often did his best to ignore it—apart from when he visited Ireland in 1962, of course. Such celebrities as John Ford, Rosie O'Donnell, Dennis Leary, and Conan O'Brien have flaunted their Irishness. Even Martin Sheen articulates and promotes his Irishness by appearing in television commercials for the Irish Tourist Board. In fact, during the last two decades, a substantial segment of white America has consistently and often emphatically articulated its Irish-American identity. A prac-

tice that is continuing to gain momentum, it should be viewed as a strategic method of powerfully and subtly accentuating its own whiteness.²⁶

In *Riverdance*, the audience is introduced to African-American gospel singers about two thirds of the way into the show. Themes of immigration precede their appearance as the two main Irish dancers leave Ireland and arrive in America. Against this same setting, the African-American gospel performers emerge on stage singing "when will our freedom come"? An obvious parallel is encouraged here between the African-American quest for freedom and equality and the arrival of Irish immigrants into the United States precisely because they were denied those same liberties. The narrative highlights the persecution suffered by both groups and the resultant appreciation they have for one another. Lauren Onkey notes that many "... Irish artists and political activists have made such a lateral move by using images and expressions of African-American oppression to illustrate Ireland's experience of colonialism."²⁷ Other prominent examples that express and encourage this Irish American alignment with African Americans include U2's album and film *Rattle and Hum*; the 1991 film *The Commitments*; and the musical group the Afro Celt Sound System. Similarly, *Riverdance* foregrounds Irish musicians performing harmoniously with African-American gospel singers.

Unfortunately, the historical reality shared by these communities is not quite as melodious. In general, though there are some well documented instances to the contrary, Irish immigrants in the United States failed to establish alliances with African-American groups in the nineteenth century and little has altered since, apart from the regularly trotted out example of civil rights marches in Northern Ireland garnering inspiration from Martin Luther King, Jr. This reality has not interfered, however, with popular notions that insist on an Irish alignment with the causes and struggles of African Americans. Although it is highly unlikely that the gospel-singing element of the show contributed much to the overall success of *Riverdance*, its inclusion consoled Irish-American audiences by assuring them of their egalitarian past. The African-American aspect of *Riverdance* was scarcely acknowledged in the media coverage of the production. In its first major review of the show, the *New York Times* had only the following to say on the segment: "Ivan Thomas, an American baritone, has a fine voice and a less than show-stopping song about freedom."²⁸ Subsequent reviews offered little additional comment.

26. "To speak of whiteness is, I think, to assign everyone a place in the relations of racism." Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 6.

27. Onkey 45.

28. Kisselgoff, C5.

24. Jordan, p. 52.

25. Lauren Onkey, "Not Quite White? Black 47's Funky Céili," *New Hibernia Review*, 3, 1 (March, 1999), 52.

In contrast, *Lord of the Dance* is in many ways more revealing than its predecessor on account of its presenting "only Irish material," and showing no African-American element.²⁹ Despite Michael Flatley's public allegiances with African-American athletes and celebrities,³⁰ his *Lord of the Dance* production is an all-white spectacle. The sole allusion to a racial Other in the show surfaces with the introduction of the dark-haired femme fatale who dances to vaguely Eastern European and Asian music. The blond hero's momentary seduction but ultimate rejection of her depraved behavior leads her to doom. Revealingly, within four months of each other, two articles appeared in the *New York Times* alluding to the prevailing white element in both shows:

And mention of the crowd-pulling Irish song-and-dance show, "Riverdance," prompted Peter Murray, the director of the Crawford gallery in Cork, to sniff at "all those black-clad young people goose-stepping around the stage."³¹

Then along came the corporate Celtic blockbusters of the late 1990s, "Riverdance" and "Lord of the Dance" with a whistle skirling while ranks of vigorous step-dancers clattered away in formation, something like an Irish "Triumph of the Will."³²

Though disparaging in its first opinion and glib in its second, the *New York Times* inadvertently highlights Irishness, whiteness and fascism—all pleasantly tolerating each other within the accepted realms of the "national popular."³³ Though convoluted, in the case of *Riverdance*, and absenteeism, in *Lord of the Dance*, characterize the vastly different approaches to race and ethnicity the shows adopt, whiteness is valuably, albeit temporarily, conspicuous nonetheless.

In addition to issues of race and ethnicity, another element of the appeal of Irishness in the United States is its consistent correlation with notions of the "folk." Jonathan Culler has noted that "one of the characteristics of modernity

29. Gladstone, B8.

30. "I did it my way, which may be more flamboyant than the British press cared for, but its typically American," he [Flatley] said of his male diva stage presence. "This is the country of Muhammad Ali, Hector Camacho, Sugar Ray Leonard and Michael Jordan." Pacheco, F1.

31. Alan Riding, "The Arts Find Fertile Ground in a Flourishing Ireland," *New York Times*, 21 December 1997, 2: 1.

32. Jon Pareles, "A Sweet Sound Curdling into Cliché," *New York Times*, 8 April 1998, E10.

33. "The notion of the 'popular-national' (or, more frequently 'national popular') is one of the most interesting and also most widely criticized ideas in Gramsci's thought. . . . It is important to stress, however, that it is a cultural concept, relating to the position of the masses within the culture of the nation. . . ." *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare, Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1999), p. 421. Stuart Hall poses the "national popular" as "a crucial site for the construction of popular hegemony" in his article "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10 (1986), 26.

is the belief that authenticity has been lost and exists only in the past."³⁴ Ideologies of folk, as ubiquitous as they are today, must be situated in this context. As Regina Bendix reminds us, "the crucial questions to be answered are not 'what is authenticity?' but 'who needs authenticity and why?'"³⁵ Ian McKay argues that the folk, ". . . were less people in their own right and more incarnations of a certain philosophy of history."³⁶ A leading proponent of that philosophy was the eighteenth-century German writer Johann Gottfried von Herder who characterized the folk as, ". . . 'wild' and 'lacking social organization. . . . closer to nature. . . .'"³⁷ and described folk music and poetry as ". . . the language of the soul or the heart" encapsulating ". . . the cultural core before society complicated it."³⁸ The intrinsic dilemma then is evident: the folk are enchanting to those already corrupted by society's modernizing forces as they represent a connection to idealizations of the past when life was less "complicated." However, the folk are also patently uncivilized, compared to those living in the modern, though corrupt, world.

In contemporary manifestations, few are crowned "folk." Certainly the Irish, Scottish, and to a lesser extent the Welsh are all folk. Switzerland and some Scandinavian countries are occasionally inhabited with folk, but this designation usually occurs within the confines of tourism literature. Why is it that the Germans or French or English are rarely defined as folk? Assuredly they all have substantial folk traditions and, notably, France is currently experiencing unprecedented interest in its own folk (see non-Parisian past). According to the last census, over fifty-seven million Americans laid claim to German ancestry.³⁹ Why is not "German-ness" sweeping the nation? A European or at least Western passport seems a requisite in order to be considered folk. Nonwestern peoples remain resolutely designated as "primitive," "uncivilized" and from "undeveloped" or "developing" countries. What then, makes the Irish unmitigably folk? Some obvious factors that encourage this alignment of Irishness with folk include the commercial appeal of forty million consumers laying claim to an Irish-American identity, the absence of a language barrier (begging the question of Irish or Gaelic), and the ever-present stereotype of the Irish as

34. Jonathan Culler, "Semiotics of Tourism," *American Journal of Semiotics*, 1 (1981), 132.

35. Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 21.

36. Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 14.

37. Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 6-7.

38. Bohlman, p. 54.

39. www.census.gov. 23 January 2001.

metal and rock bands as Horslips or Thin Lizzy, both of which left an indelible mark on the Irish musical landscape. Even in the New World, such bands as Black 47, as Lauren Onkey illustrates, with their hip-hop and rap proclivities present an unacceptable twist on what it means both to perform Irish music and be Irish-American.

During the 1997 ceremony at Madison Square Garden in which *Riverdance* yet again provided the half-time entertainment, three Irish recordings were rewarded with a Grammy: Enya's *The Memory of Trees* won for "best new age album," The Chieftains won in the "world music album" category with *Santia-go*, and *Riverdance*, at the height of its success, scooped an award for "best musical show album." All three can be conventionally categorized as "folk." In his work on "political pop," Robin Denselow maintains that folk music and politics are unavoidable allies. Today, however, the commercially successful variety of folk music seems to enjoy critical acclaim and popularity through its conspicuous lack of political relevance. The "timeless essence and integrity" of Irish traditional music, as the tourist board assures us, can continue because, though it thrives in a modern setting, it has not compromised its essence. If the essence of folk in the past was political, then clearly compromise has occurred. However this connection between folk and integrity continues to be a prominent theme in writing on Irish music: "In Ireland, folk was no mere fashion that would disappear when Dylan became bored with the protest and picked up an electric guitar."⁴³

Many writers fail to acknowledge, however, how tremendously popular folk music has become and how dramatically the reception of folk has altered—particularly in the United States, and especially during the past two decades. Today Enya's or Clannad's brand of Irish music crops up in the most unlikely places from commercials to film soundtracks, even when Ireland bears no relevance to the product or plot. Ultimately, Irish music remains synonymous with the lineage of The Chieftains. Though they devote albums to other types of world music, The Chieftains remain quintessentially Irish (traditional, rural, folk) and consequently make the tourist board's list. They continue to perform for presidents at the White House on St. Patrick's Day. Their tunes are still the most likely to be heard following a news story about Ireland on National Public Radio, when such musical signifiers are deemed obligatory.

The winners at the 1997 Grammy Awards also serve to remind us how frequently "Irish" is conflated with other terms such as "Celtic"⁴⁴ and "New Age."

43. Robin Denselow, *When the Music's Over: The Story of Political Pop* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 162.

44. "Picture this: more than a million tapping toes. And that's just the ones in the audience. Where does one see such a spectacle? At Radio City Music Hall, where the perennially popular Celtic music and dance extravaganza 'Riverdance' returns on Thursday." "Beating Busby Berkeley," *New York*

idiosyncratic, quirky, but ultimately lovable characters. Neither German, French, or English stereotypes can claim these latter characteristics. Herder himself could have been writing about the Irish as he compiled his first volume of folk songs in the late eighteenth century, such is the ease with which they conventionally qualify for the category of folk. Some two hundred years later the Irish are still described as primitive, tribal and they clearly (at least for a good nine hundred years or so) lacked social organization—all three characteristics plainly demonstrated by the continuing "Troubles."⁴⁰

Music and dance are two key signifiers of folk ideology. On its website, Bord Fáilte furnishes the would-be traveler to Ireland with the following thumbnail history:

Since the 1960s, traditional Irish music has grown in popularity, both in Ireland and abroad, through groups as diverse as The Clancy Brothers, The Dubliners, Clannad, The Chieftains, De Dannan and Altan, who have put traditional music into a modern context without compromising its timeless essence and integrity. Another example of this phenomenon in Irish culture is the international hit show 'Riverdance', which brings together the best of Irish song, dance and music.⁴¹

Despite the existence of many traditions—Spanish, Russian, African-American—and not just those voguish Irish ones in *Riverdance*, and notwithstanding its claim of identifying diverse groups in the traditional music sphere, the Irish Tourist Board supplies a revealing inventory of officially sanctioned artists constituting the acceptable face of Irish music in which *Riverdance*—though noticeably not *Lord of the Dance*—is the latest addition. The anomaly of the list is The Dubliners, a sort of precursor to The Pogues.⁴² Once caustic and anti-establishment, The Dubliners are now incorporated as quirky, urban, harmless characters. Both politically resolute and enormously successful, The Wolfe Tones are disqualified as clearly too political by their anthem "A Nation Once Again." The younger band The Saw Doctors is omitted: its ska and reggae-infused sounds are certainly not "Irish" enough. Naturally, there is no mention of such Irish

40. "That voice, primitive and complex at the same time, is as much a part of the Irish tradition as any array of instruments, and it can be heard in the best of the music by Sinéad O'Connor, Van Morrison, Dolores O'Riordan of The Cranberries, and, not least, in The Pogues' singer Shane McGowan." *World Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Simon Broughton et al. (London: The Rough Guides, 1994), p. 14. "With a new kind of tribal pride, and more money in their coffers, the Irish are making their presence felt in the academic world as well." Dimitia Smith, "The Irish Are Ascendant Again," *New York Times*, 3 October 1996, C20.

41. www.irishmusicboard.com/usefulfacts/artsandculture.asp, 30 January 2001.

42. "The Pogues," said fan and producer Elvis Costello, 'saved folk from the folkies.'" Broughton et

In the United States all three idioms seem to connote the requisite "folkness" and "tradition" that render accuracy irrelevant. The culture and impact of *Riverdance* in the United States has produced and embraced an eager consumerist audience that considers Irish music authentic, historical, and traditional—whimsical luxuries that the United States, as the remaining superpower, cannot now afford to grow at home. In an article attempting to explain the appeal of Irish music in the United States, Peter Appleboome of the *New York Times* wrote:

But others say Irish music travels so well because at its roots the culture has always been both intensely local and possessed by a sort of visceral pantheism. Mr. Cahill [author, 'How the Irish Saved Civilization'] says Irish culture from antiquity has always had the same ecumenical qualities as it does now. 'From the start, Irish culture was always a mix of pagan and Christian; it's always had very emotional ties to the earth, to cosmic events, to the idea of the world as a magical place', he said. 'In that sense it's very flexible, protean, transportable. So the druidic aspects of Irish culture have a lot in common, for example, with the nature religions of North America.'⁴⁵

Out, then, is the historical stereotype of the Irish as dogmatic Catholics and in is "visceral pantheism"? To suggest that the allure of Irishness is connected with the belief and worship of all gods is comical in light of the relentlessly Christian nature of the dominant United States culture. Nevertheless, it is an opinion in which we are usefully returned to Herder's myth of the folk as spiritually "closer to nature."

Barbara O'Connor situates the resurgence of interest in Irish dance within the larger ongoing contemporary folk revival. Though dealing exclusively with set dancing in the context of Ireland, O'Connor's observations touch on the complexities of the United States, where, the resurgence of interest in folk cultures, especially the Irish variety must be considered alongside the announced death of and subsequent desire for traditional communities. O'Connor argues that dance is popular because it is viewed as a way of accessing an "authentic folk culture."⁴⁶ In a 1997 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Michael Flatley provided some evidence for O'Connor's argument: "When the music starts, and I can hear the dancers moving like a powerful locomotive, my heart starts beating and I feel something passionate and ancient and deep being uncovered in me."⁴⁷ Dominant American sentiment insists on interpreting Irish music as a

⁴⁵ *Times*, 22 September 1997, E1. "Outsiders have been discovering the Celtic heritages, lately through the popularity of 'Riverdance.'" Jon Pareles, "Celtic Eyes Smiling as Feet Are Dancing," *New York Times*, 13 November 1996, C20.

⁴⁶ Peter Appleboome, "Rooted in Old Sod, Music Grows All Over," *New York Times*, 6 June 1998, E1, 46. O'Connor, p. 150.

means of connecting with the past, the authentic and the folk and, for many Americans, this is a fetish that requires little encouragement. The consumption of dance by paying audience members and buyers of compact discs and videos must be considered an extension of this presumed access to and desire for authentic folk culture.

Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the appeal of Irish dancing in the United States. The success of both *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* as "pop Irish folk culture"⁴⁸ phenomena attest to dancing's enormous allure. One local public television station KERA (Dallas, Fort Worth, Denton) provided some revealing statistics illustrating at once the popularity and profitability of both shows during the period 1996–1998. During the height of its success around St. Patrick's day in 1997, *Riverdance* was broadcast five times in a week in conjunction with a KERA pledge drive during which the show earned an average of \$29,000 per airing. During this same period, *Lord of the Dance* also aired five times and made over \$25,000 in pledges for the station. According to the assistant manager of on-air fundraising at KERA, both shows "exceeded . . . expectations" and its screenings were "quite a success."⁴⁹ The fascination with Irish dance had just about exhausted its run, at least on North Texas public television by 1998. In March of that year *Riverdance* again aired on KERA, this time however it was broadcast on eleven separate occasions over six days but made less than a third per airing in pledges than the previous year. Similarly *Feet of Flames*, a *Lord of the Dance* spin off, aired three times over as many days making under half of what *Lord of the Dance* earned a year earlier.

Certainly by time 1998 had come to a close, all kinds of Irish dancing shows were being used to raise money for public television, effectively saturating the market. Yet, though the national fanfare has long since abated, both productions remain startlingly successful. In 2001, *Riverdance* had spawned three separate dance troupes: The Liffey troupe touring Europe, The Shannon troupe, a permanent fixture at the Gershwain Theater on Broadway and The Lagan troupe touring the United States.⁵⁰ Similarly, *Lord of the Dance* also produced three troupes: Troupe 1 traveling in Europe; Troupe 2 resident at the Beau Rivage Hotel and Casino in Biloxi, Mississippi; and Troupe 3, a permanent attraction at the Broadway Theater in the New York New York Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. However, by the beginning of 2002, *Riverdance* was reduced to two troupes, one touring North America and the other touring Europe and

⁴⁷ Pacheco, E1.

⁴⁸ Appleboome, E1.

⁴⁹ Michael Borth to author, e-mail, 11 January, 16 January 2001.

⁵⁰ In 2001, tickets for performances of *Riverdance* at the Gershwain Theater, New York, cost between \$25 and \$80.

“... learn to understand our desires in terms of the commodities produced to meet them; we learn to think of our problems in terms of the commodities by which to solve them.”⁵⁶ In respect to the consumption of Irishness in the United States, however, it remains to be seen just what problems are being solved, whose desires are being fulfilled, and to what end?

~ MCGILL UNIVERSITY

55. www.census.gov, 23 January 2001.

56. John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 182.

Asia. Meanwhile, *Lord of the Dance*—now called *Michael Flatley's Lord of the Dance*, capitalizing on what Frank Hall described as the “media cult of the individual”—continues to enjoy enough success to maintain its three troupes.⁵¹

Alongside the dancing fad, other methods of accessing folk culture during the last two decades have emerged in the United States, including the increasing number of Irish language classes. In 1997, the *New York Times* featured a story detailing this latter, somewhat peculiar trend. It noted that, “there are about 20 different places in New Jersey where Irish classes are offered.”⁵² The story continued by attempting to explain the motivations of students wanting to learn this complicated and obscure language:

Students may have come after seeing ‘*Riverdance*’, or watching the movie ‘Michael Collins’, or reading Frank McCourt’s memoirs, ‘Angela’s Ashes.’ They may love Irish music, dance or poetry. The majority are long-assimilated Irish-Americans looking for a piece of their past. A smaller number are Irish immigrants taking advanced courses. Others have no Irish ancestry at all.⁵³

Irish language classes and the appeal of *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* in the United States—not to mention the growth of Irish Studies and university exchange programs and the equally fascinating, growing trend of Irish theme pubs—may well be interpreted as attempts to procure authentic meanings and identities.

Riverdance and *Lord of the Dance* are today firmly established in the popular consciousness of the United States. Both shows continue to be referenced in the most unlikely of places, including soft drink commercials on television and the financial desk and sports pages of the *New York Times*.⁵⁴ The most recent United States census figures note that almost 14 percent of white Americans consider themselves of Irish ancestry, and that number jumps to 16 percent if one includes the confounding category of Scotch-Irish.⁵⁵ That equals approximately a fifth of the total white population. Ultimately, as Fiske observes, we

51. See Frank Hall, “Your Mr. Joyce is a Fine Man, But Have You Seen *Riverdance*?” *New Hibernia Review*, 1, 3 (Fall, 1997), 134–42.

52. Barbara Stewart, “More Irish than Ireland: Learning a Language That’s More Than a Brogue,” *New York Times*, 18 May 1997, New Jersey ed., 13: 8.

53. Stewart, 13: 8.

54. “If you belong to a record club and have allowed the company to automatically debit your credit card as soon as you order that ‘*Riverdance*’ CD, you are paying for the merchandise even before you receive it.” Joe Queenan, “Some Inadvertent Tosses Out the Fiscal Window,” *New York Times*, 4 January 1998, 3: 8.

55. “The two-time bronze medalists enthralled the audience at the Canadian Championships with a fleet-footed rendition of ‘*Riverdance*’ that earned two perfect scores for technique and four for presentation.” Reuters, “Bourne-Kraatz Capture Sixth Title,” *New York Times*, 12 January 1998, C7.