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Manhattan

Frank McCourt flicks through the roll-call of the Irish who have led New York and wonders why such success never bred a bard

Green in the Big Apple

AFTER the second World War, after they'd seen Paree, you couldn't keep 'em down on the farm or anywhere else. Besides, they hadn't come from farms. Maybe their parents had — come from the farms, that is: dug the potato, milked the cow, tended to the pig, lowered the pint, sung the sad song.

Back from the wars, the young Séans and Michaels and Marys said "Hi" to their parents, took a look at the old neighbourhoods, and headed for the suburbs. They chanted the mantra of the time. We Want A Better Life For Our Kids, and with GI Bill as the great, shining key opening university doors, they were able to get that better life. It was the last generation of Irish-Americans who might have heard stories of Risings and Civil Wars directly from the lips of participants, the generation that would spawn the baby boomers who wanted no part of history.

The Irish-Americans, "narrowbacks", were leaving a New York City still largely

To Weekend 2

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away, or a few hours out of Kennedy, it is still "away".

The new Irish, and those who have taken the next step to becoming the new Irish Americans, are the first to be presented in large numbers with an intriguing possibility dished out by the twin engines of economic advance and advanced technology. It is now possible to re-emigrate "home" while, in some cases, never even fully forsaking New York.

There are not a few New York Irish who have returned to Ireland while leaving a business up and running in Queens, the Bronx or its technically suburban and increasingly green neighbour, Yonkers. The spur is often comparative economic equilibrium, a novel concept in the context of Ireland and the US. For some, going back is promoted by the arrival in the world of children, little Yanks, and the belief that they will grow up better educated and somehow less materialistic in the old country.

This latest twist on the great New York Irish story is without precedent. Borders, the ocean and you're all millionaires over there!" That's quite a reputation to live up to, especially when, for most Irish New Yorkers, daily life is a matter of sprinting to stand still.

But, for more than just a few, reality is now beginning to catch up with that myth and a terrible new burden has been born. You're only really "making it" in America when you can afford to come back "home".

Next thing, making it will be having two homes — one here, one there — and a life spent as a glorified transatlantic commuter. The pioneers of such a lifestyle are already fast at it.

There are moments, indeed, when the thought of life in the New York of 1898 seems to retain a most idyllic appeal, blessed as it was with the ironic peace granted the immigrant soul by a one-way ticket.

But that was then, and this is definitely the new Irish now.

● Dublin-born Ray O'Hanlon emigrated to New York in 1987. He is senior editor of the weekly *Irish Echo* and author of *The New Irish Americans*, published by Roberts Rinehart

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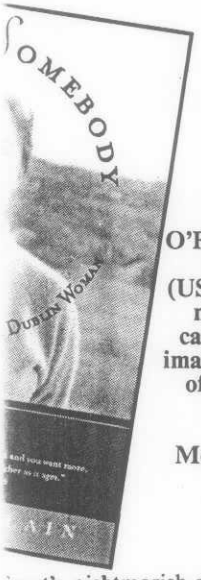

Nuala O'Faolain's memoir (US edition near left) caught the imagination of readers primed by McCourt's nightmarish recollections

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been warmly reviewed and
old in a remarkably short

ever, a guarantee of success.
Reading In The Dark was
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while Anne Haverty's novel
was largely ignored despite
Newsday and *The Boston*
McCourt's *A Monk Swim-*
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ray recently wrote of the
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s streets, the craving for any-
some odd alignments. On
49th Street, for example,
se restaurants, Thady Con's advertises itself as the city's first Irish village theme bar.

Opened three years ago by O'Sullivans from Cork and Healys from Leitrim, the bar has a bicycle leaning against the wall, hobnail boots on the hearth and serious set dancers. "It is as if you have been transported to a corner of rural Ireland," Dan Barry wrote of Thady Con's in the *New York Times*, "one frozen in the distant and sanitised past." In a less nostalgic tradition, the long established Sin É Cafe in the East Village continues to attract celebrity walk-ins while An Béal Bocht in the Bronx provides a similarly fashionable venue at the other end of the city.

Irish neighbourhood bars, with their gigantic televisions and Bobby Sands posters, still exist in Irish-American enclaves on Long Island, Queens and throughout the five boroughs, but the new generation of Irish cafes and bars serves the market not the parish. "The Catholic Church was the total centre of Irish life here," novelist Peter Quinn remarked in the *New York Times*, "But it has lost that position and that space is now being filled by this great cultural energy."

That energy was particularly evident last week at the Guinness Fleadh on Randall's Island in New York, where performers like Los Lobos and Patti Smith shared the stage with Sinead O'Connor, Mary Black and others. Billed as "the Ultimate Irish Music And Culture Festival," the huge, eclectic gathering demonstrated that there is infinite room under the ever-expanding green umbrella. The only entry qualification seems to be enthusiasm and marketability.

"Sheer bloody genius," Seamus Heaney quipped when asked to account for the recent success of the Irish. If some observers detected a note of irritation in the poet's reply, it was because they knew how he felt. There is a growing sense, particularly among some Irish writers in New York City, that it has all become a little too easy. "We have to remember the writers who really had to struggle," novelist Colum McCann recently remarked, "like John McGahern, Edna O'Brien. Writers who wrote to break their hearts, not just to get the next advance." It is ironic that this increasingly vocal concern about the state of the Irish soul is regarded in this materialistic city as the surest proof of its authenticity.

From Weekend 1

Green in the Big Apple

Irish. Third Avenue, from 14th Street to 96th Street, was one long Irish bar. It was said you could go in the door of the downtown Treaty Stone and not emerge till you reached the uptown Ireland's Thirty Two. All around Manhattan there were Irish dance halls: The Caravan, the Tuxedo, City Center, the Jaeger House, the Leitrim House. In all five boroughs there were dinners and dances sponsored by various social, cultural, political, and country organisations. All you needed to fill your calendar was an Irish newspaper, the *Irish Echo*, the *Irish World*, the *Irish Advocate*. On Sundays, you could head up to the Bronx and cheer for your county in hurling or Gaelic football.

There was comfort in knowing, too, that the Irish were still powerful in politics, that one of "our own" sat in the mayor's chair at City Hall — Bill O'Dwyer from Bohola, Co Mayo, though you might wonder about his brother, Paul, and *his* strange left-wing leanings. There were rumours that Paul was involved with the IRA and, strangest of all, that he was helping run arms to Israel.

There was comfort, too, in the thought that the post-war police department would be forever in the hands of the Irish. All you had to do was think of the long line of recent police commissioners: O'Brien, Murphy, Monaghan, Kennedy, Leary, Codd, McGuire. The department door was always open for the young Irish-American recruits and if they didn't want the cops there was always the fire department. More Irish commissioners: Quayle, Monaghan, Cavanagh, O'Hagan.

Italians, Germans and Poles had complained for more than a century about Irish control of the Catholic Church in New York City. And no wonder. The roster of archbishops and cardinals, reading from present to recent past, is proof of the Irish stranglehold: O'Connell, Cooke, Spellman, Hayes, Farley. Over in Brooklyn they let in an Italian bishop, Mugavero, for two decades but we have a Dailey now, they way it should be, Séan.

From the earliest days of Tammany Hall the Irish in New York understood the nature of power and they knew how to get it. They provided the organisation's bosses from the 1860s to the glory days of Al Smith in the 1930s. It was said the first Irish boss, Honest John Kelly, found Tammany a horde and left it an army. Richard Croker inherited the army and passed it on to Charles Francis Murphy who put Jimmy Walker in the mayor's chair. Croker and Walker shared an experience — they were caught with their hands in the till and had to leave the country.

Out there in the suburbs, Irish-Americans were now engaging in that most American of all pursuits: wondering who they were. There was the St Patrick's Day Parade. Kiss me, I'm Irish. Wear green. Think green. Drink green. Listen to Governor Hugh Carey: "The Irish march up Fifth and stagger down Third."

Yeah, let's take the kids to the parade or let them march with their schools, Our Lady of This or That. Let 'em be proud of their heritage, whatever the hell that is.

Wait, wait. We have something to be proud of and here he comes. John F. Kennedy. We've been drifting towards the Republican Party out here. After all, if you join the country club and play golf you know it's gonna be Republican. But still — Kennedy!

He's so glamorous: that smile, that hair, that tan, and he's got that drop-dead beautiful wife and that family. He makes it so exciting to be Irish we don't mind admitting we might vote for him.

An Irishman, Mike Mansfield, leads the United States Senate. Another Irishman, John McCormick, is Speaker of the House. Robert Wagner, half Irish, is mayor of New York. A great time to be Irish.

The times they are a-changing. The veterans who moved to the suburbs and, for the most part, shuffled off the Celtic coil, are now wondering what's happening to their kids, the boomers. You break your ass working to send your kids to college, hoping they'll have a better life. But look at this: the boys are letting their hair grow, the girls look like slobs, they're hanging out with Negroes, for Chrissakes, singing protest songs over Vietnam and Civil Rights and the goddam environment.

The Irish began to disappear from New York City politics. They were resting, regrouping, expressing themselves in other ways. For 50 years — and more — they had dominated New York journalism: E. L. Godkin, Jimmy Cannon, Bill Corum, Jimmy Breslin, Pete Hamill.

But where now are the playwrights and poets? Where are the bards of the New York Irish experience? Tommy Kelly (New York) and Colum McCann (Dublin) have given us novels of underground New York, *Payback* and *This Side Of Brightness*, respectively. Where is the big O'Neill-type play, the significant "narrowback" poem?

The bars of Third Avenue are now pure Celtic chic: wood panelling, stained glass, menus offering "lite" food for the expanding waistline. Midtown Irish bars are a moveable feast of travellers from the Old Country — journalists, actors, politicians. Everywhere the sweet smell of success. Nowhere the voice of the poet.

Frank McCourt