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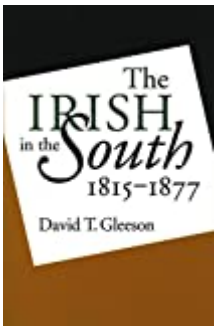

David T. Gleeson. *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xii + 278 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4968-2; $55.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-2639-3.

Reviewed by Mark I. Greenberg (University of South Florida, Tampa)

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Scarlett O'Hara and the Blarney Stone

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For author David Gleeson, *Gone with the Wind* offers insight into Irish immigration to the nineteenth-century South. "The ease with which the public accepted the Irish immigrant and [Gerald O'Hara's] fictional family as 'true' southerners emphasizes just how well the Irish had blended into the native population," he notes in the book's final paragraph (p. 194). By the 1930s, the Irish had become the region's "forgotten" people.

How Irish immigrants to the South went from outsiders to "forgotten" in a century forms a central theme in Gleeson's thought-provoking study, and it raises important issues in southern and immigrant/ethnic history. The white South's ethnic composition has received limited study, and immigrant/ethnic scholars have missed opportunities to address regional distinctiveness, he asserts. *The Irish in the South* seeks to bridge these two literatures by adding an ethnic dimension to southern history and a southern dimension to American ethnic history.

Contrasting the "forgotten" theme, Gleeson devotes considerable attention to Irish ethnic institutions and awareness. "It would not have been surprising if the Irish in the South, under pressure from a dominant Protestant majority, had jettisoned their diasporic baggage and sacrificed their Irishness for native acceptance. They did not, however, commit cultural suicide," he writes (p. 22). Instead, he notes countless examples of how the Irish exhibited a cultural heritage, used it to their advantage, diverged from contemporary ethnic stereotypes, and integrated into the non-Irish community.

Like many ethnic studies, the book begins with a familiar discussion of "push/pull" factors and migration patterns. Many Irish immigrants that came south landed first in a northern port, read of economic opportunities in the press, and moved southward in search of work. Overwhelmingly an agrarian population in Ireland, the Irish in America eschewed rural life. Unfamiliar with a cash crop economy, lacking capital, and fearing physical isolation and continued destitution, they settled overwhelmingly in towns and cities. At most 2 percent of the Confederate states' white population, the Irish urban presence exceeded 20 percent in 1860 Savannah and over 14 percent in Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans.

Seeking to give Irish workers agency in their economic lives and prove that they were "not victims of urbanization" (p. 37), Gleeson argues that Irish occupational status varied more widely than nineteenth-century observers revealed. "Despite an Irish presence in every sector of the urban workforce," he concedes "monotonous physical labor was the norm for the largest group of Irish workers" (p. 46). Premature mortality, yellow fever, and cholera placed great stress on almshouses. Crime, alcoholism, and violence further disrupted earning power and stable family life. Short discussions of an 1844 Memphis strike for a ten-hour day and unionism in New Orleans offer only slim support for the author's argument that the Irish were not "pliable victims of the southern economy" (p. 51). Largely missing from his discussions is slavery's impact on Irish economic life, patterns and methods of upward mobility over time or between generations, Irish labor networks, loan organizations, and other collaborative efforts.

Residential clustering, marriage, social and benevolent organizations, militia companies, and political activism for Irish home rule support Gleeson's assertion that the Irish exhibited an ethnic identity in the South. Faith in God offered cultural stability as well. Ulster immigrants established Presbyterian churches and Catholics gave Roman Catholicism a distinctly Irish tinge. After slow institutional development in the early 1800s and opposition to the predominantly French clerical leadership of the Early National Period, Irish Catholics successfully appealed to Rome for new sees in Virginia and South Carolina. Charleston's Irish bishops, John England and his successor Patrick N. Lynch, argued for the compatibility of Catholicism and republicanism, supported slavery, and worked to limit anti-Catholic sentiment among the overwhelmingly Protestant population. Lay leadership, changes in religious belief and practices over time, what role the Church played in the secession crisis of the 1850s, relations between northern and southern dioceses over slavery and secession, and interaction between Irish Presbyterians and Catholics receive little attention in these pages.

The Democratic Party actively courted Irish voters and played up Whigs' nativism, according to the author. The Irish responded by serving as the backbone of Democratic support in several southern towns. Though Irish immigrant politicians were relatively few in number, many more emigrants from the Emerald Isle organized on behalf of candidates and party policies. Returning to his theme of assimilation and acceptance, Gleeson contends that Irish immigrants' ability to sway close elections was "a major symbol of their integration into southern society" (p. 94).

Though Irish immigrants took the Know Nothing threat quite seriously, their acceptance into southern society faced little real challenge from the party, Gleeson asserts. Checking slavery's expansion and preserving the Union, more than nativism, drew southern supporters to the Democrats' chief political rival in the mid 1850s. Strongest in the cities where immigrants concentrated, the Know Nothings inflamed the population with their anti-Irish sentiment and elected mayors and council members in several cities. Tarred with an abolitionist label, the American Party's successes were short-lived, and by 1856 Irish voters had helped to oust its politicians everywhere except in New Orleans.

Irish interactions with slaves and free blacks and reactions to the secession crisis–covered in just twenty pages–form some of the most interesting but least developed material in the book. Irish immigrants' "white skin and their acceptance of slavery automatically elevated them from the bottom of southern society," Gleeson argues, and thus "they did not have to 'become white' but immediately exploited the advantages their race accorded them" (p. 121). Explicitly rejecting all "whiteness studies" for perceived weaknesses in the work of Noel Ignatiev and David Roediger, the author misses opportunities to address the complex relationship between race, class, and social status in the nineteenth-century South. He argues unpersuasively that acceptance came in part because native southerners "appreciated the economic value of Irish laborers" because "the Irish were willing to take on potentially high-mortality occupations, thereby sparing valuable slave property" (p. 193).

In addressing how an overwhelmingly non-slaveholding Irish population went from solid Unionists in 1850 to secessionists by 1860, Gleeson offers several suggestions but limited depth. Seeking to show that Irish immigrants' integration into southern white society guided their political views on the crisis, he briefly mentions allegiance to the Democrats, proslavery sentiment, support for the "southern way of life," Church-demanded loyalty to existing institutions, and perceived similarities between Ireland's and the South's political positions. This last idea he explores in just one paragraph and references a single 1858 newspaper article.

Factors propelling the Irish to support secession moved them to "volunteer in droves" for Confederate military service, because they "believed in the southern cause" (p. 155). Forming ethnic companies, carousing in

camp, and usually fighting with ferocity in battle, Irish soldiers also deserted in relatively larger numbers than native-born whites. On the home front, some Irish immigrants likened Union occupation of the South to British occupation of their native lands and sacrificed for the war effort. Others complained bitterly about new hardships and rioted for bread. When Union soldiers entered New Orleans in April 1862–just a year into the war–"many Irish New Orleanians were not too distressed" (p. 168). Slaves' emancipation and long-held fears of job competition drove angry Irish immigrants to violent repression of freedmen's newfound economic and political rights. With the key to their status abolished at war's end, thousands of Irish workers gave up on southern cities and left the region.

Just how "southern" Irish immigrants became remains unproven by book's end. Though Gleeson argues that the Irish "completed their integration into southern society" by 1877 (p. 173), he never defines the term and often uses "southern" interchangeably with "American" to describe the same actions and attitudes. What does it mean to be a southerner in 1815, 1850, the 1860s, or 1877? Is it more than support for slavery, states' rights, the Confederacy, and black codes? The author offers few if any regional comparisons of occupational structure, ethnic institutions, family life, residential patterns, and other topics regularly addressed by ethnic historians and found in the rich "southern distinctiveness" literature. These omissions prevent him from assessing whether "southerness" extended beyond conformity to pressing political issues.

Moreover, Gleeson provides weak analysis of the processes guiding immigrant acculturation and ethnic identity formation. Scholars such as Kathleen Conzen, Ewa Morawska, George Pozzetta, Rudolph Vecoli, and others have advanced sophisticated models that account for an uneven course influenced by stimuli internal and external to the immigrant community. To argue that Irish immigrants were "more southern and less Irish" (p. 186) in 1877 than 1815 overlooks a generation of scholarship and misses opportunities to explore how specific moments in time, such as a war, can affect identity and how a cessation of hostilities often relieves pressures on conformity. Rather than explaining how Irish immigrants had become "less Irish" in 1877, Gleeson could have offered insight into the shifting and multiple meanings of Irishness over time.

For Scarlett O'Hara and other southerners of Irish heritage, Old World and New World identities were not incompatible. In every generation, Americans of all backgrounds have held multiple, shifting identities. If by the 1930s the Irish became a forgotten people in the South, historians lost them. David Gleeson is to be commended for recognizing the important history and roles Irish immigrants played.

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