



Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, David N. Doyle, eds. *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xxvii + 788 pp. \$83.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-515489-4; \$108.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-504513-0.



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An Essential Resource for Irish, Early American, and Atlantic History

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Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan is a remarkable piece of work. Ostensibly, the editors intended to showcase a wonderful collection of documents including letters, diary entries, and memoirs that illuminate the experience of the earliest migrants from Ireland to America. Finding these obscure documents, transcribing and contextualizing them, are amazing achievements in their own right. But the editors—and we should really call them authors—have given us much more. Not only do they interpret each of these documents ranging from the mid-seventeenth to the early-nineteenth centuries, but they also provide penetrating explanations for the movement and adaptation of more than 400,000 men and women from the Old World to the New. By uncovering in rich detail the experiences of so many who animated early modern Ireland, America, and a broader Atlantic world, the authors have reclaimed a “lost” phase of Irish-American history. Through their efforts, we can now appreciate the scope and scale of Irish migration during the eighteenth century, as well as the human face of that movement.

Moreover, the authors suggest that the formative period of the Irish-American experience took shape not during the years of famine migration but much earlier, when Irishmen and women of all denominational stripes took advantage of the pre-industrial linkages between Ireland and America to better their lot. These men and women left Ireland and arrived in America during arguably the most formative periods of each nation’s past. And this epic movement, often overshadowed by the millions who would sail the ocean a few generations later, had great and lasting influences on both sending and receiving societies.

Irish Immigrants is the work of four writer/editors: Kerby Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce Boling, and David Noel Doyle. While the scope of the book reflects the broad Irish-American interests of David Doyle’s work—in particular his splendid book *Ireland, Irishmen, and Revolutionary America, 1760-1820* (1981)—the interpretations offered are “the final responsibility” (p. xii) of Kerby Miller, the author of the epic *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (1985). We see in *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan* many of

the sensibilities that animated Miller's earlier work. This book, like *Emigrants and Exiles*, suggests that a transatlantic approach, one rooted in the archives and literatures of both sides of the Atlantic, offers the only meaningful way to recreate the experiences of those who lived lives in both the Old and New Worlds.

The book, therefore, charts the fortunes of men and women who migrated as a single transatlantic sequence of experience. It covers who the migrants were and why they left, how they adapted to a new environment, and the effects these movements had on both sides of the ocean. The first two parts of the collection explore the Irish side of the equation, detailing the "causes" and "processes" of migration. The middle sections, more firmly rooted in America, offer a glimpse of the multifaceted ways different types of migrants struggled to make sense of the new societies and peoples they encountered. The authors arrange these chapters along occupational lines, examining the things migrants did to understand how they negotiated the New World. Finally, the book focuses on the ways in which these men and women shaped and were informed by the epic struggles of the late-eighteenth century—the American Revolution and the political tumults in Ireland in the years thereafter—by illustrating how the men and women who settled in America viewed their experiences through transatlantic lenses.

Each of these sections, which can stand alone, includes a number of letters arranged in chronological order that contribute to the broader themes discussed. The section on "farmers and planters," for example, begins with a letter from John Blake, who settled in the Caribbean in the seventeenth century, and concludes with a nineteenth-century letter from Pennsylvania to Donegal written by James and Hannah Crockett, whose extended family stretched from Ulster to New York City, New Jersey, and Tennessee. Although the settings of the two vignettes are separated by thousands of miles, and a century and a half, the similarities are striking. Blake and the Crocketts came to terms with a New World by employing Old World ways, and each tenaciously hung on to the transatlantic connections by which they defined themselves. The use of letters such as these often written to close relations back "home" gives the volume an intimate feel. Relying on private correspondence to frame a transatlantic narrative humanizes the movement of so many individuals whom we are all too accustomed to view as bits of demographic data. The authors have encased each of these letters in brilliant little essays that discuss what was going on in both sending and receiving regions and that offer in-depth portraits of each of

the subjects. Like these Irish migrants, the authors have proven amazingly adaptive, ranging far and wide over historiographical debates and demonstrating a familiarity with the details of disparate times and places.

Through these snapshots a number of patterns of early Irish migration to America emerge. For starters, we could call the men and women who left the "up-rooted" and the "un-rooted." Flying in the face of many assumptions about the Presbyterian character of eighteenth-century Irish migration, the book argues that all migrants did not sail from Ulster. No doubt, most did. Yet a small but vital stream of Catholics trickled over in the years before 1800. These people defy some of the enduring generalizations about early modern Irish migration. Before they left, they were not linked to America through the production of linen or through adherence to a reformed Protestant faith. In the fluid world of America, most would abandon their Catholic faith and meld in with their Protestant neighbors. Many of the Ulster Scots who left Ireland—the so-called Scots Irish—had a different experience in the Atlantic world. Some had only spent as little as a generation in Ireland, particularly in areas around Derry, which had witnessed a huge movement of Presbyterians from Scotland in the 1690s, before coming to America. Yet this culture of movement—a distinct aspect of a larger "world of motion" that Bernard Bailyn argues animated the whole early modern Atlantic—did not preclude them from holding onto faith traditions more tenaciously than their Catholic neighbors.

What emerges in this book, then, is a kaleidoscopic world of Presbyterians, Quakers, Anglicans, and Catholics facing periods of uncertainty in the Old World and betting their futures on a promising, yet just as uncertain, New World. These various peoples came from a fluid early modern Irish society—one, of course, defined along confessional lines, yet one caught in the grips of profound demographic, economic, and political change. If there was one constant, it was the viability of cultural and commercial bonds between Ireland and America. In the seventeenth century, these links would take the Irish, especially those from Munster, to places like Montserrat. A century later, the chosen destination became the American region most closely connected to Ulster: the Middle Colonies. Finally, in the early-nineteenth century, increasing numbers of Irish migrants immersed in a burgeoning industrial Atlantic economy would people the growing American cities in the East and the developing West.

The kaleidoscopic nature of the transatlantic experi-

ence prepared migrants well—perhaps too well—for the challenges of the New World. At times they found common cause with their Euro-American neighbors. All too often, however, this ability to get along in a plural world came at the expense of Indians. A number of documents dealing with the Scots Irish on the American frontier illustrate the vexed relationship this group had with Indians. As the title of the book suggests, America could be viewed as a new promised land. But something else is at work with the use of the term “Canaan.” At times, just as Protestants in Ireland could regard Catholics as beyond God’s reach (much like the Canaanites of the Old Testament), the Scots Irish could also view America’s natives. Just as the cursed Canaanites forfeited their land to a chosen people, so too, of course, did Ireland’s Catholics and America’s Indians. The men and women who traveled from Ireland to the New World demonstrated an amazing adaptive capacity in re-fashioning older cultural ways in a new context. However, Old World lenses at times could prove resistant to change; indeed, some of the more pernicious understandings of cultural difference that had flourished in Ireland—far from softening—hardened in America.

In *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, no stone goes unturned in finding the smallest detail of the lives and experiences of each of the subjects. Yet through this painstaking approach, a larger, vivid picture emerges. And at the heart of this portrait—and the book for that matter—lies the meaning of “Irishness.” Out of the transatlantic experience of migrants that reshaped Ireland and America “emerged modern ‘Irish’ (and ‘Scotch-Irish’) ethnic and political identities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.” These sensibilities would change, merge, and diverge over time as they “not only reflected but even helped create the categories of ‘Irish’ identity that emerged in contemporary political discourse on both sides of the Atlantic” (pp. 8-9).

Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan is a monumental achievement. Historians of early modern Ireland, colonial America, and the British Atlantic world now have at their disposal a rich resource that they can dip into time and time again to gain a more intimate understanding of what it meant to navigate the difficult shoals between the Old and New Worlds.

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