

IDEAS

Irish — and American — like me

I was reared on tales of Fenian heroes and martyrs and songs of revolution. But I learned that heritage is one thing, identity another.

By **Stephen O'Connor** Updated March 16, 2025, 3:00 a.m.



ERIN CADIGAN/ADOBE

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My father used to say, “You couldn’t be any more Irish if you were born in Ireland.” Genetically, that was probably true. But wasn’t Irishness more than that? What does it

mean to be at once steeped in old Hibernia yet two generations removed?

My grandparents emigrated from Counties Sligo, Limerick, and Cork. Fittingly, the first book I took out of the children's section of my hometown library was "The Life of St. Patrick." I attended St. Patrick's School, where in second grade we did not sing "The Wheels on the Bus" but a song of revolution.

The Minstrel Boy to the wars has gone

In the ranks of death you will find him.

His father's sword he has girded on,

And his wild harp slung behind him.

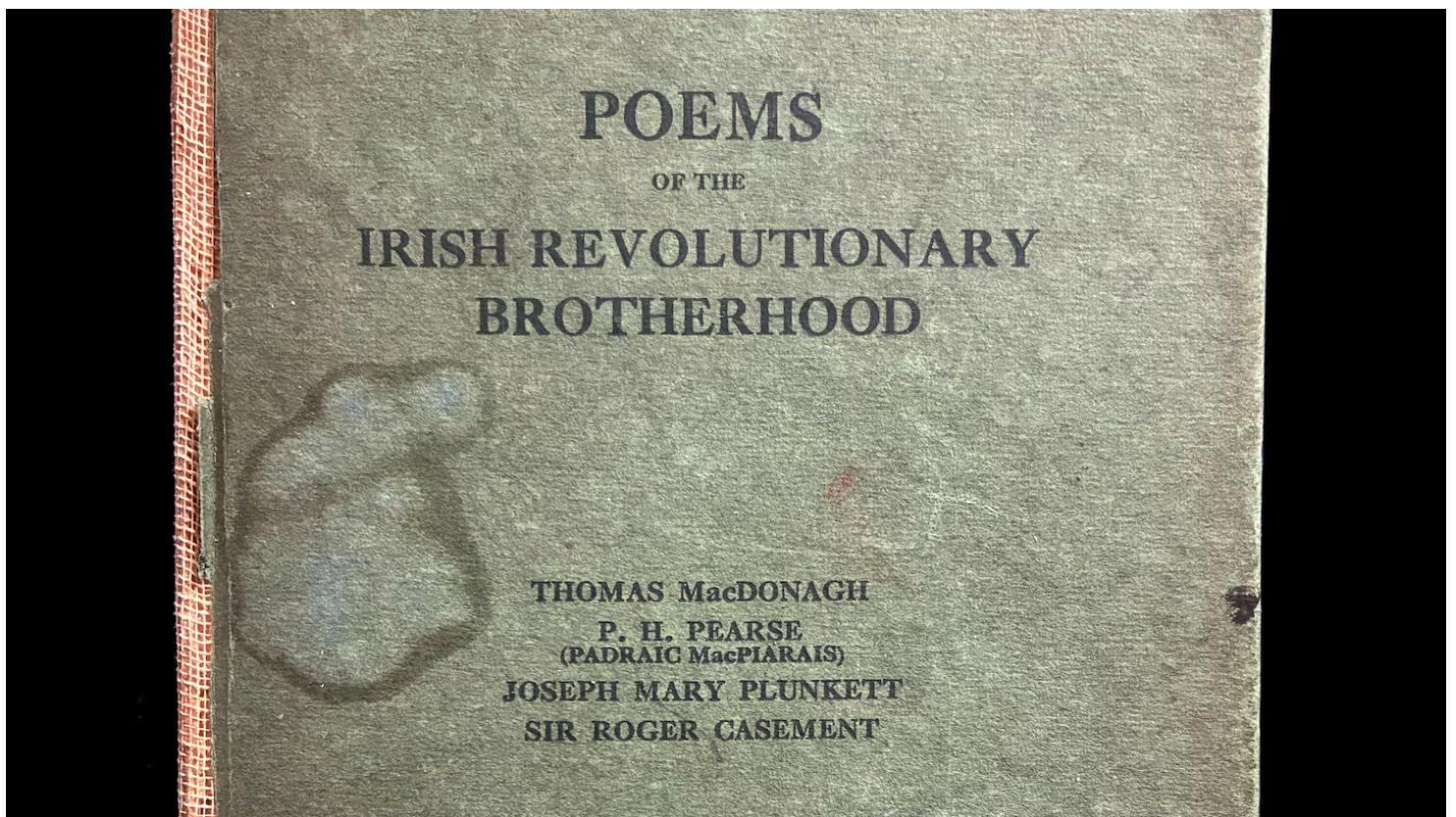
Ireland's was a culture infused with tales of martyrs and songs of bold heroes. I remember a print in the garage of my maternal grandfather titled "The Capture of Robert Emmet." Emmet had led an unsuccessful uprising in 1803. After what passed for a trial, he was sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered. Cue the poets and writers of ballads.

On Sundays, my father played Glenn Miller records, but also John McCormack and the Clancy Brothers. There again, amid the rousing and humorous songs, were sprinkled tragic ballads, such as the dirge-like "Kevin Barry," about "a lad of eighteen summers" who was hanged in Mountjoy Jail. The song concludes with a reminder that being Irish demands patriotic sacrifice.

At the Strand Theater in Lowell, I watched "The Fighting Prince of Donegal." When it ended, I stayed in my seat for a second showing, enthralled. Tales of Irish rebels sank into my consciousness, and the lines that immortalized them would forever swirl in

that cauldron of education and experience that make up our identities.

In 1966, I read Irish newspapers celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising: “Right proudly high over Dublin town, they hung out a flag of war.” One article contained a reproduction of the proclamation of the new Irish Republic, which I tacked up in my room. It began: “IRISH MEN AND IRISH WOMEN: In the name of God and the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.”



The author's copy of "Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood." STEPHEN O'CONNOR

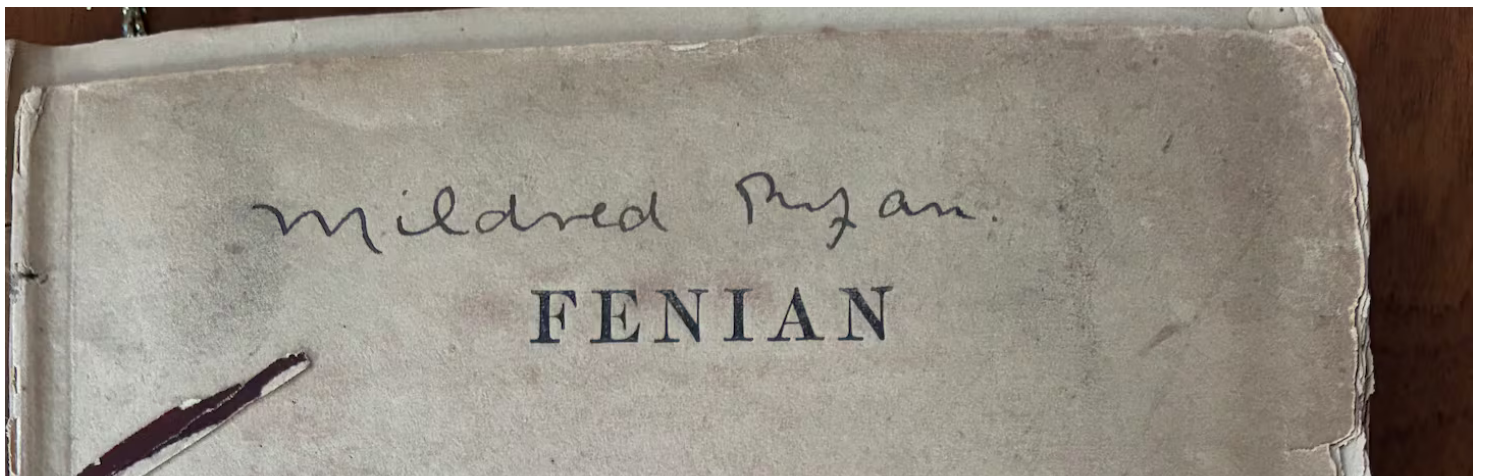
But I was not sure if I was one of Ireland's children, no matter what my father said. I was born in Lowell, after all. A fifth-grade teacher, at the end of a quiz, asked us to name a president. I wrote 'Éamon de Valera.' She slashed a red X through it and wrote, “Don't be silly.” Was my interest in this land I had never seen just silly?

In 1972, my father brought me to Ireland. We sat with old Hugh Toolin, my

grandmother's brother, before a turf fire in a small whitewashed cottage in Gurteen, County Sligo. We visited with a cousin, who I saw, when he answered the door, was the image of my grandfather. We walked through the General Post Office in Dublin with its great Doric columns, which in 1916 had been HQ for the insurrection and was destroyed by "Britannia's sons with their long-range guns," as Jamie O'Reilly sang it in his rebel song "The Foggy Dew."

I learned two things on that trip that stayed with me: One, that I'm the kind of person who looks backward more than forward, and two, that I am more American than Irish. There is a balance that the second-generation American who feels the ties of ancestral origins has to find. I played Irish fiddle music. I studied the Irish language and eventually attended University College, Dublin, to earn a master's in Anglo-Irish Literature. But when people in Ireland asked me what I was, I said simply, "American." I never wanted to become what we used to call "a professional Irishman."

The truth is, a Dubliner today has more in common with a Londoner than with an Irish Bostonian. I must always feel a deep connection to the snowy evenings of Robert Frost, the chiseled prose of Henry Thoreau, the lyrical genius of Emily Dickinson, the woodland paths of New England, the shores of her coast, and the varied people of my hometown. Still, the ballads, the sentimental songs, the folklore, and the writers and poets of Ireland are part of what made me, and many of us, Irish Americans.



HEROES AND MARTYRS.

EDITED, WITH AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION ON
"THE STRUGGLE FOR IRISH NATIONALITY,"

BY

JOHN SAVAGE,

AUTHOR OF "'98 AND '48, THE MODERN REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY AND
LITERATURE OF IRELAND," ETC., ETC.

BOSTON:

PATRICK DONAHOE, FRANKLIN STREET.

1868.

The author's aunt Mildred Ryan's copy of "Fenian Heroes and Martyrs." STEPHEN O'CONNOR

The identification with my heritage began long ago at my grandfather's knee and while listening to Liam Clancy recite Yeats's "Easter 1916" to the wail of pipes. I felt it while watching the Irish dancers at the St. Patrick's Day Show, where my father sang "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen" and the old Irish ladies cried. It was awakened by an

illustration in my grandfather's book, in which the Minstrel Boy lay fatally wounded and tearing at the strings of his harp.

The harp he loved ne'er spoke again

For he drew the chords asunder

And said, "No chains shall sully thee,

Thou soul of love and bravery,

Thy songs were made for the pure and free,

They shall never be sounded in slavery."

More than anything else, to be an American of Irish heritage is to have learned early the power of words, the magic of stories, and the imperative of freedom.

I traveled and worked abroad as a young man and experienced the richness of other cultures. Back in Lowell, I married a woman from Colombia. We've been together for 35 years. We recently had our DNA tested. I came back 100 percent Irish, as my father had assured me. My wife came back nearly half Native American, a mixture of Spanish and African, and ... 1 percent Irish. I tell our son and daughter that they should be proud of it all — not the sort of pride that puffs the chest or asserts superiority, but the pride every one of us should have in what our ancestors endured, what they survived, and how their stories became part of who we are.

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