

The Irish and Irish Studies in Montana

It is not known with any degree of certainty who were the first Europeans of the westward migration to settle in Montana, but it seems reasonable to state that the Irish, if not the first, were the group who came in the largest numbers and had the greatest impact on the history and culture of the state. Native-American lore preserves an illuminating record of a complex and extensive interaction between indigenous peoples and the Irish on many different levels. On one level, the happy consummation of native and Irish led to the emergence of the Méti community, a mixed-blood people who trace their ancestry back to the intermarriage of Indian and Irish-speaking settlers and whose unique culture of music and dance is unquestionably of Irish Gaelic provenance. In more turbulent times, Thomas Francis Meagher, Irish patriot, Civil War veteran and commander of the 'Fighting 69th,' and then governor of Montana Territory would use the fear of Blackfeet Indians to inveigle weapons from the federal government as part of a planned Fenian invasion of Canada. In June of 1876, Captain Myles Keogh, Carlow-native, recipient of the Papal Medal, and Civil War veteran would join General Custer in the infamous and ill-fated attack on Sitting Bull and the Indian confederation camped on the Little Big Horn. Keogh's bravery so impressed his foes that they honored him in not mutilating his lifeless body and leaving his horse, Comanche, by his side, the only living thing on the battlefield. Believing his Papal Medal to be a talisman and source of his courage and leadership, the Indians did remove the medal and gave it to Sitting Bull. Legend has it that later pictures of the great Sioux Chief show him with a crucifix and silver disk around his neck - Keogh's Papal Medal!

Against this classic western background of cowboys, Indians and cavalry, there emerged a city unlike any other in the Irish experience; for where the Irish would come and accommodate to the great metropolises of the east coast like Boston and New York, the Irish in Montana would build the city of Butte from the ground up and shape its character to reflect their Irish, Catholic and Gaelic ethos and heritage. This Irish town quickly came to play a central role in American labour history and to exert a powerful influence on all movements dedicated to the promotion of Ireland, her culture and political freedom. Great nationalist leaders such as Douglas Hyde, Eamon de Valera, Mrs. Mary McSwiney and others came to Butte seeking help for Irish cultural movements and the cause of Irish independence. They found a city where the Irish language was spoken, Irish dance and music were known to all, Irish Gaelic football was played competitively, and local papers reported tidings from Ireland as faithfully as local and national news.

The efforts made by Irish nationalist leaders to come to Montana is instructive of how important Butte and Irish-American communities were in the fight to preserve Irish culture and secure Irish independence. As far back as the time of the Great Famine, representatives of Irish nationalist movements had recognized that 'it is on the Irish of America that every movement for the advancement of the old country is largely dependent for support.' It is highly unlikely that the old language and culture of Ireland would be around today were it not for the support of Irish-America; it is also improbable that the Irish War of Independence between 1919 and 1921 would have been won were it not for the support of the Irish of America. The struggle to preserve Ireland's ancient culture and heritage continues and Montana, as home to the largest per capita population of people of Irish descent, has once again assumed a prominent role in this effort through its Irish Studies program at the University of Montana, Missoula.

The Irish Studies program at the University of Montana is a product of collaboration between faculty and the local community. For a number of years, research scholars have been examining the role of the Irish

in Montana; in the meantime, descendants of the copper-miners of Butte, anxious to preserve their Gaelic heritage, established a local group to teach Irish language, music and dance. In 2005, members of this group and faculty worked together to formulate a program of studies that combined rigorous academic study with a commitment to preserving and promoting Ireland's living Gaelic culture. Students will study Irish literature and history, learn of Ireland's unique contribution to western civilization, the role of the Irish in America, and, in particular, the much neglected but extremely important contribution of Irish America to the evolution of politics, culture and society in Ireland. Allied to this is the cultural program where students will learn to speak Irish fluently, acquire modern teaching methods to pass the language on to others, learn and participate in Irish music, dance, theatre and film. The objective is to make Irish culture accessible to those of Irish descent in Montana and the west coast, and to make this access affordable to all.

In 2006, her Excellency, Mrs. Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, in officially launching this program, described it as a tribute by those who draw the water to those who dug the wells. Those who dug the wells were the early immigrants from Ireland who worked and sacrificed to pass on their faith, culture and heritage. In many ways, the Irish Studies program is a continuation of that work, part of a legacy or tradition inherited from an earlier generation with all the obligations such entails. One of these obligations is to make access to the tradition affordable to all. In this regard, the Irish Studies program located in Montana's beautiful Rocky Mountains is relevant to all wishing to learn of the Irish and their remarkable culture.

If you are interested in more information, please contact me, Traolach Ó Ríordáin, at traolach.oriordain@mso.umt.edu, or our web site at <http://www.cas.umt.edu/irishstudies>.