

JOHN M. GRONDELSKI

Bern, Switzerland

Feargal Cochrane, *The End of Irish America: Globalization and the Irish Diaspora*. Irish Academic Press, Dublin 2010, Pp. 221.

Christopher Shannon, *Bowery to Broadway: The American Irish in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, University of Scranton Press, Scranton 2010, Pp. 220.

American Polonia and the Irish American Diaspora share much in common. Both originated in large measure in the 19th century, though the Irish preceded the bulk of the Poles by half a century. Both are largely Catholic and settled in America's industrial cities. Both have been periodically revived by new waves of immigrants. And both today are pondering questionable futures.

The future is the focus of Feargal Cochrane's book, which explores the situation of Irish America under the impact of globalization. He notes that, under the impact of globalization, the Irish who go to America today differ in significant ways from their forebearers, and few have contact with the established Irish American community. (Polonia reports a similar phenomenon: today's Polish immigrant rarely seeks out, much less joins, existing Polonian organizations). The lack of membership leads to the aging of the extant groups, raising questions about their futures.

Cochrane argues that globalization is largely responsible for this phenomenon. Unlike the immigrant of yesteryear, today's arrival is much less likely even to think that he has left the old country permanently. Many arrivals do not even imagine themselves as immigrants until they make themselves conscious of the roots they have established – career, marriage, children, and home purchase – forcing them to reckon with what they have *de facto* become. Yesterday's immigrants knew they were on a one way journey; today's are able to board a cheap, six hour flight back to Eire almost at will, to call home anytime practically cost free on Skype, and to listen to Irish radio and television by satellite and cable. They are simply not as

decisively cut off from their roots as their great grandparents were. Furthermore, under the impact of globalization and America's cultural influence in the world, today's immigrant does not experience the same gulf his predecessors did vis-à-vis U.S. society. Indeed, he is just as likely to want to explore American culture as he is to preserve his Irish roots.

The economic ascendancy of Irish Americans, coupled with the professional character of many immigrants today, also affects the Diaspora's relations to the old country. One obvious and positive way is through economic investment, particularly in the boom years of the Celtic Tiger. Another is through a more modern branding of Ireland as a tourist destination, both for Irish Americans with a nostalgia for „the dear land of our fathers” as well as for those without a drop of Irish blood. On the political front, however, Cochrane notes both positive and negative developments. Positively, he traces the evolution of Irish America's role in securing American involvement in the Northern Ireland peace process, observing how the Diaspora's lobby changed from the dictum „England out of Ireland!” to engagement in a negotiating process. Negatively, he notes how the political clout of the assimilating Irish American community has been blunted, particularly in comparison to more organized and issue oriented ethnic lobbies like the African Americans and Latin Americans.

Finally, Cochrane explores the folkloric element of the Irish Diaspora. He uses the annual New York City St. Patrick's Day Parade, which marked its 250th anniversary this year, as a case study in changing patterns of Irish identity, with particular attention to the controversy in the 1980s over overt homosexual participation in the Parade. (The Parade is sponsored by a Catholic fraternal organization, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and prominently involves the Archbishop of New York. In the 1980s, a group of self-identified Irish homosexuals sought and were denied permission to march in the parade under their own banner. Similar controversies occurred in Boston, fueling debates about religion and ethnicity). Another area of folkloric nostalgia are imitations and importations of Irish pubs, which raises questions of how one can commercially transplant a homegrown community institution.

Folkloric images assume a more central focus in Christopher Shannon's excellent study of the depiction of the Irish in American cinema. In contrast to Poles and Polish Americans (whom M.B.B. Biskupski has shown, in *Hollywood's War with Poland, 1939-1945*, largely escaped Hollywood's attention but were depicted negatively on those few occasions they caught Tinseltown notice), Irish Americans generally received favorable treatment by the American film industry in the 1930s and 1940s. From gangster movies to films whose starring roles depicting priests („The Bells of St. Mary's,” „Boys Town,” „Going My Way”), Shannon takes readers on an intriguing film trip through the Irish „urban ethnic village.” But, by the 1950s, that Irish American village was also beginning to

pass (as its Polish counterpart would, but generally about a decade or more later – see Wróbel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish American Community*) Shannon argues that John Ford's „The Quiet Man” „forever marked the end of Irish culture in America” (p. 202). With John F. Kennedy's election, Irish Americans in pursuit of their ethnic identity began looking to high brow literary culture in Ireland, not the urban ethnic culture of New York and Boston. „College and university literature departments sang the praises of Yeats and Joyce, not Cagney and Crosby” (p. 205). But eventually even that got old, and Shannon offers a provocative if somewhat damning summary of the globalization of Irish culture and contemporary cultural *ennui*: the mainstream of literary modernism which has ceased being the avant-garde, the economic success of Ireland, and the gradual settlement of the Ulster question have „made it more difficult to think of Ireland as a rural retreat from urban modernity. Rootless, cosmopolitan Americans in search of cultural roots now travel to Ireland to meet rootless, cosmopolitan Irish” (pp. 205-206).

Cochrane's study is thought-provoking and challenging, a bracing attempt to articulate and analyze trends afoot in Irish America. The need for a similar study of Polonia is self-evident, and Cochrane's could provide a useful template. One may not always agree with the author (e.g., on his general sympathy for the thrust of secularization in Ireland), but his overall argument demands attention. Besides being fascinating in itself, Shannon's study is a useful comparative to Biskupski's, particularly since Biskupski notes that in 1940s Hollywood, the Irish were the default model for „ethnic” in American film.

From a Polonian perspective, the experience of the Irish American Diaspora can be instructive. One should not make facile comparisons, and there is one enormous advantage that distinguished the Irish from the Poles in terms of finding a niche in America: the lack of a language barrier. (In some ways, the Polish ethnic experience might be more akin, e.g., to that of Italian Americans). Too few American and Polish scholars study American Polonia. Almost none do it in comparative ethnic perspective. That is too bad, because it could be both enlightening and mutually enriching.

