

'TISN'T AN IRISH HISTORIAN EXPOSES HIS COUNTRY'S MYTHMAKING FROM THE GREAT POTATO FAMINE TO 'ANGELA'S ASHES.' DUBLIN IS DISTRESSED

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"ANGELA'S ASHES," "How the Irish Saved Civilization," "Riverdance," pubs with Gaelic slogans above the taps and a middle-aged warbler having a go at "Danny Boy" onstage: Irish nostalgia sells, all right. The green brings in the green. And yet it's a certain brand of history that moves the product, the pints, the tickets to the sort-of-Celtic dance extravaganzas. What sells are stories and symbols that tell people what they want to hear - stories that boil Irish history down to an emerald glop of cliché, sentimentality, and wishful thinking. At least this-is the view of the Oxford University historian Roy Foster, one of the most elegant and probing writers on Irish topics and also one of the most controversial. In Ireland itself, where history matters, Foster attracts Cornel West-scale publicity. He's the leading figure in a generation of "revisionist" historians who have chipped away at what they describe as Irish myths. American readers are about to get a fresh taste of his stiletto pen and icon-smashing habits when his latest book, "The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland," hits these shores. It skewers Frank McCourt (his memoir is "played on one note, without depth or nuance, and with a beady eye fixed on the reader throughout"). It eviscerates American activists who compare the Irish famine to the Holocaust. And it hangs out to dry pop historians and "heritage industry" types who, Foster fears, are turning his country into one big cheesy

Foster's sweeping survey, "Modern Ireland: 1600-1972," published in 1988, is a much-debated classic. As the official biographer of William Butler Yeats - volume two is due out next year - he's in a position to shape interpretations of Ireland's greatest poet for generations. A handsome 53-year-old with swooping Yeatsian hair and no shortage of black in his wardrobe, he also cuts a stylish figure on the English and Irish literary scenes.

His fans say he is a key figure in shifting Irish historiography away from Isle-of-Saints-and-Scholars clichés and an obsession with proving the Irish are the Most Oppressed People Ever (MOPE, some wits call it), toward more complex ideas about Irish identity. "If you wanted to name the 10 leading historians in the world, he'd be on that list," says Timothy Guinnane, an economist and historian at Yale who's written on 19th-century Ireland. And yet Foster has also been condemned by Gerry Adams, former Irish Republican Army militant and current mainstream Northern Ireland politician, for undermining all that Irish patriots hold dear.

Less easily dismissible Irish pundits and scholars attack him, too, for criticizing Irish Catholic nationalists of the past (they say that in doing so he offers apology, unwittingly or not, for British colonization). When Foster got his job at Oxford, in England, in 1991, the Irish Times ran an unsigned profile basically calling him a sellout. Meanwhile, its top literary columnist has hailed his "tough-minded grace and sensitivity to nuances."

In "The Irish Story," Foster takes aim at a simple, potent narrative about Ireland. That story stars a holy

island nation. It suffered under English rule for centuries, nearly died, and then rose, liberated and reborn, in 1922, with partial independence. The story, in its basic shape, mirrors the life of Christ. And the story, in Foster's view, has bred boatloads of sloppy thinking and historical myopia - and a whole lot of wallowing.

...

Foster's iconoclasm comes, in the most literal sense, from his hometown of Waterford, 80 miles south of Dublin. His mother and father were both teachers at an independent Quaker school, where Foster also studied. If you think identity politics run rampant in the United States, try Ireland.

Foster is forever answering questions about his background. ("Why do you ask that?" he barked at an English reporter last year who asked him if he was "completely Irish.") Mostly that's because he's a Protestant, though a secular one, in a country that's over 90 percent Catholic. "It would be pointless not to say that I was educated in the liberal humanist protestant - small p - tradition, and that that must have left its mark," Foster says. "But I would think it's the liberalism and the humanism that are transmitted in the way I write - the protestantism not being relevant to the intellectual way I conceive things."

After undergraduate and graduate studies at Trinity University, he eventually landed at the University of London. Biographies of Charles Stewart Parnell and Lord Randolph Churchill, key figures in Irish politics in the late 1800s, came first, followed by the seven-year project that took him to a whole new level of acclaim and notoriety: "Modern Ireland." Other scholars had questioned aspects of the traditional Irish narrative in articles and dissertations. Foster, though, was the first to stitch all those separate threads together into a grand synthesis. The book tartly challenged Irish verities on almost every page.

For instance, Foster argued that the Irish famine, which killed perhaps 1 million people and scarred the Irish psyche for generations, was not quite the historical hinge it was sometimes described as. For one thing, large-scale emigration and declining birth rates began well before the infamous failure of the potato crop in the 1840s (though the famine accelerated both). He also broke with the tradition of demonizing the English. He pointedly noted that "no amount of [scholarly] disagreement can conceal the devastating extent of depopulation or the horrific conditions in which lives were lost." Yet he also argued that the English government's policies in 1846 - distributing food, imposing price controls, mounting public-works programs - were "more effective than sometimes allowed." Even in 1847, when the government shifted to a more laissez-faire approach - cutting back on handouts, telling near-broke Irish lords to help their own people - London officials were merely adhering to the reigning economic theory of the day. "Government policies were by no means passive, and certainly not careless," Foster concluded, "but they were generally ill-founded."

Not careless. Ill-founded. Foster still gets slammed for the mild language in that chapter.

Getting tapped for the Yeats biography would have seemed like a career-topping laurel if it didn't come with the faint hint of a curse. Two scholars had already failed to complete the project. The first, literary critic Denis Donoghue, squabbled with the Yeats family over terms of access to the archives. The second conducted research for 10 years, sat down at his desk to write, and promptly died.

Foster, however, defied the hex and even won over most of his detractors with the first volume, "The Apprentice Mage" (1997). One of his frequent sparring partners, the Derry-born novelist and Notre Dame professor Seamus Deane, ended his review with an unlikely exclamation: "May the next volume arrive soon!"

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In "The Irish Story," Foster drops the guise of objectivity he adopted for the Yeats project - the daggers come out again, wielded by a silky stylist with an instinct for the jugular. In one essay, Foster traces the Ireland-as-martyr story back to 1867 and the publication of "The Story of Ireland," by the journalist-politician A. M. Sullivan. One of the most popular books in the nation's history, it influenced what schoolchildren were taught into the 20th century. "In cruelties of oppression endured," Sullivan asserted, "Ireland is like no other country in the world." Under England's boot it had suffered "an agony the most awful, the most prolonged, of any recorded on the blotted page of human suffering," yet it was poised to "arise glorious and immortal." (Sullivan also included a helpful description of home life in the enemy land: "one black catalog of murdering, wife-beating, and infant-choking.") Other Irish writers, at around the same time, revived tales of mythical Celtic kings and warriors, reinforcing both national pride and the notion of a lost paradise.

Of course, all countries tell sentimental, flattering stories about themselves - think George Washington and the cherry tree or Manifest Destiny. But Foster says there's something unique about the Irish Story, something at once distinctly self-abasing and self-promoting. "The new modernized, liberated Irish consciousness feels a sneaking nostalgia for the verities of the old victim-culture," Foster writes. "Which was also, in its way, a culture of superiority."

"The concept of a perennial victim produces a very emotionally powerful and emotionally coherent story," he adds, speaking recently by telephone from a vacation spot in County Kerry. "But it also leads to a kind of denial that any other elements in the Irish Story have any part to play."

A denial of elements in the Irish Story like, say, the two-thirds of the Northern Irish who would prefer to remain part of the United Kingdom. Gerry Adams, with his "child-like solipsism," simply refuses to see that they exist, Foster writes. And others who, like Adams, can't see Ireland except as an oppressed land and a "virtual-reality Green and Gaelic world," also fail to see how secular, bland, and suburban - how un-"Irish" - today's prosperous Irish Republic has largely become. To be sure, Irish history has gotten a bit more objective since Sullivan's day. But even some professional historians got in on the act in the festival of self-indulgence that marked the 150th anniversary of the Irish famine, Foster writes. In 1997, performance artists "wept" all day on the streets of Dublin. Entrepreneurs labored to build replica "coffin ships" (they hoped to sell tickets for transatlantic journeys to Americans, but the project went bankrupt). A 200-acre Famine Theme Park opened in West Limerick.

"Journalists were arguing that one reason for our problems - why we drink and all of it - was that we had `repressed' the memory of the famine," Foster says. "It just doesn't make sense." After all, the famine had hardly been forgotten. In America, politicians teamed up with Irish-American activists to ram the famine onto high-school "genocide studies" curriculums in at least two states. "It's votes, of course, but a lot of it is very bad history," Foster writes. (It's fair to say that almost no academic historian shares the view that the famine was outright genocide.)

In response to this orgy of "Irish self-validation," Foster cites the notion that Ireland may suffer from an "overidentity crisis." To counterbalance the fetishization of the past, he puckishly relates a journalist's suggestion that the next commemoration of the famine might involve "raising a monument to amnesia, and forgetting where we put it."

To Foster, there's something childlike about the simplistic Irish view of history. And that's where the charming Frank McCourt comes in.

Ireland has a long tradition of generating memoirs of sentimental, "fantasy" childhoods, childhoods in which, as Foster writes, "light comes from oil lamps" and "sustenance from pot ovens and milk churns." McCourt pulled off the ingenious trick, Foster suggests, of tweaking the classic Irish formula to produce a memoir of a sentimentally awful Irish childhood. "Angela's Ashes" and its follow-up, "'Tis," had the added bonus of playing to an American prejudice: Namely, that the Old World eats its young and "everything will come right in the United States."

He smacks McCourt around a bit more, accusing him of leaning on other writers more than he admits - plucking a description of a stern schoolmaster from James Joyce, borrowing a splash of local color from Sean O'Casey's memoirs of his deprived childhood. And he catches a few historical inconsistencies. (McCourt, for instance, has his father visiting shady characters in suspect neighborhoods to pick up his IRA pension in the 1930s; Foster points out that such pensions were distributed openly by the government.) McCourt was unavailable to comment, but he's long maintained every word he wrote was true. In fact, to charges of making things up he has replied, "I wish I did."

McCourt, at least, gets off easy compared to his tag-along brother Malachy, whose own memoir, "A Monk Swimming," Foster calls "slack, whoozy, flatulent." Easy, too, compared with Gerry Adams, whose misty autobiography somehow manages to skip over his many years in the IRA, during a period when it was at its most murderous.

In the essays in "The Irish Story" that go beyond savaging other people's simplifications, Foster prefers to focus on people who don't fit the approved storyline, Yeats above all. Yeats, he reminds readers, now an unchallengeable Irish hero, was loathed by more than a few Irish at the time of his death in 1939. After all, the poet, a Protestant (!), lived part of the year in England, didn't write in Gaelic, and fought church-sponsored censorship laws. Foster emphasizes that many of Yeats's fellow proponents of a Celtic Dawn were more sympathetic to mescaline and mysticism than to the mother church. Foster also explores how the English novelist Anthony Trollope's early love of Ireland shaped several novels - then curdled into hatred of the place. And he hails as a model social critic the late Irish essayist Hubert Butler, who once wrote that "the essence of the Irish situation" was "the collision of cultures."

That's ultimately Foster's own view of his country. Ireland has no single "soul," he thinks, but is defined, instead, by overlapping worlds: Protestant and Catholic, religious and secular, literary-modernist and procensorship, rural and high tech. All of these at once and none exclusively.

When "The Irish Story" came out overseas last fall, however, Foster's critics slammed what they saw as the same old biases. "The book uncritically celebrates posh Irish Protestants," wrote the Irish-English literary critic Terry Eagleton in the London Guardian, "reserving most of its flak for nationalist Gaels. It is withering, on the whole, about Irish anti-colonialism, but much more reticent about rebuking the unionists."

Trollope hated Irish rebels partly because they interfered with his regular fox hunt, Eagleton observed, yet Foster's treatment of "that racist bigot . . . is far more affectionate than his lip-curling comments on the much less noxious sentimentalism of Frank McCourt."

"First off," Foster replies, "I'm from the Republic of Ireland. I'm from Waterford, the deep South. I grew up surrounded by the nationalist world view. I'm writing about what I know. I'm not writing as much in this book about the equally myopic unionist view, though I take some swipes at it."

He also knocks Eagleton for assuming Ireland is neatly divided into posh Protestants and working-class Gaels: That's part of the old Irish Story. "I'm a product of middle-class teachers, small farmers - a very ordinary Irish background," Foster says. What American professor has to defend his parents' religion or explain his class status?

The emotional intensity of the Irish historical debate, however, he's quick to point out, is also what makes it so gratifying and stimulating to be a history professor there. Ireland, after all, remains a place where even politicians take stands on how best to talk about what happened in 1601, 1798, 1847.

"Ireland," Yeats once wrote, "must not be allowed any special privilege of ignorance or cowardice." Yeats made the comment while defending Tolstoy and Flaubert against the censors. But it was also a life philosophy.

Foster sometimes quotes the line. But not too often. Quoting William Butler Yeats, after all, is yet one more Irish cliché.

[Illustration]

Caption: One-room hovel in Famine Theme Park, West Limerick, Ireland. / PHOTO / BRIAN GAVIN/PRESS 22

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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