How to practice Irishness: Hyphenated Identity at Irish American Cultural Centers

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The typical member or patron of an Irish American cultural center is hungry for an “authentic” experience. Irish Americans several generations removed from their homeland may travel to these centers in Chicago, Kansas City, Cincinnati, San Francisco, and beyond to temporarily and memorably explore their heritage. And yet, the cultural center is a strange creature: part museum, part school, part community center…and oftentimes, part pub. The patrons of such institutions have become increasingly diverse and, therefore, harder to please and more difficult to reach. Contemporary centers are taxed with juggling the wishes and expectations of three major groups, not to mention smaller sub-groups.[1] However, the time has come to acknowledge that the Irish American cultural center is not only a gathering place or a location of ethnic belonging but is in fact a social movement in its own right, one that has been overlooked in the larger field of American Studies. Reliant upon an army of volunteers and generous donors, the cultural center is a unique, fragile, expressive, and dynamic snapshot of American culture. Irish Americans have asserted their identity, their protest against complete assimilation and acculturation, through the purchase and self-sustainment of such organizations for generations.

Most centers were founded in the second half of the century, coinciding with the influx of emigrants in the 1950’s and 1960’s, whose number is estimated to have been around 68,000 between 1941 and 1961 (Almeida 549). This wave of emigration prompted a desire to have somewhere to congregate as an ethnic group outside of political, civic, and religious institutions. This timeframe also coincides with an historical trend that may have stocked the halls of these venues, namely the 1976 American Bicentennial and the wave of ethnic and racial exploration of the 1970s. In other words, Irish Americans were not alone in their endeavor: not only did the 1960’s and 70’s give rise to the formation of Irish festivals across the country as well as the establishment of Irish Studies programs at colleges and universities, but the nation also witnessed a renewed interest in Jewish culture following the Holocaust (including the massive success of Fiddler on the Roof and Exodus), a larger presence of Hispanic, Chicano and Latino Studies departments and festivals, and a return to hyphenated identity for descendents of European immigrants. Many of these initiatives have succeeded, in that they continue to thrive in the twenty-first century. However, the Irish cultural center remains largely overlooked in scholarship, often passed off as nothing more than a place where people can celebrate St. Patrick’s Day.

Although the centers were established as enclaves for displaced immigrants, they are sustained year after year by their descendents. As Margaret Hillessy explains, these Irish Americans, generations removed, are at liberty in a way the emigrant generations were not;
they do not face ethnic or religious discrimination or even the desire to assimilate into a homogenized American society. Instead, they are “free to explore the other side of the hyphen” outside of protective parishes or neighborhoods (17). They are American enough to re-become Irish and are Irish enough to commit time and resources to sharing Irish culture with the rest of America. They are also more removed from the political side of Irish identity than before; the shift toward culture and away from strict anti-British sentiment or militancy has allowed for the formation of non-profit apolitical organizations (Almeida 561).

In participating symbolically in their ethnicity, patrons of cultural centers are able to determine their current needs. They are empowered to partake in their own cultural self-formation, and with the variety of programs and events offered by the cultural center, the individual Irish American is able to position himself or herself in relation to what he or she perceives to be the most essential elements of his or her own brand of Irish Americanism.[2] For this type of exercise, the cultural center is paramount. Additionally, the cultural center ultimately allows individuals to resist the need to identify one or more particular activities as essentially more authentic than others…or even in how they personally define what “authentic” culture means. In this way, we may view the center as a social movement in that it asks or invites patrons to define their own ethnic experience; the variety of the cultural center allows anyone walking through the doors to self-fashion his or her version of heritage. The dynamic nature of the center stands in direct opposition to, say, the more static nature of a museum. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett frames the museum as a virtual place standing in for a real destination; if we apply this to a cultural center, we can see how Ireland is transferred stateside. Of course participants or members do not enter a cultural center space with the same expectations of visiting another country; yet, a certain “essence” of Irishness is certainly transmitted to a fixed location. This accounts for the prevalence of actual Irish employees at Irish American centers. The essence is enough to encourage further exploration.

Indeed, it is the development of one’s Irish identity as the product of such centers, a need to understand how that identity translates into one’s own individual life and relationship with the outside world, that is most remarkable. The choice of Irishness available at a cultural center, in addition to the maintenance of Irishness, is the key to the community’s success. As Peter Quinn points out, the magical thing about Irish Americans is not the sheer number but how they “stayed Irish,” how a desperate mass of refugees over the years “regrouped as quickly as it did, built its own far-flung network of charitable and educational institutions, preserved its own identity, and had a powerful influence on the future of both the country it left and the one it came to” (682). In this light, an Irish American cultural center is much more than a clubhouse for those of common heritage: it is a testament to the incredible fortitude and foresight of an ethnic group yearning to stake a claim.

So what exactly are they attempting to claim? Although they may have the reputation for catering to certain stereotypes and exalting sentimentality to keep the doors open, I would argue that cultural centers view themselves as an authentic slice of the immigrant experience in America, a way in which to segregate one’s heritage, even to reject previous attempts at assimilation. In hiring employees newly arrived from Ireland, in resurrecting old-style dance
and song, and in cherishing the art forms of storytelling, Irish language, and Celtic design, they challenge old assumptions of immigrant life and establish new parameters for its legacy. In other words, the Irish American cultural center stands as a monument to those who built it; those who return to revisit their roots, no matter how tenuous, carry the burden of adding another link to the chain of the Irish immigrant story.

NOTES

1. The three main groups include the older generation of Irish emigrants who arrived in the 1950’s and 60’s, the children of this generation who grew up within a dichotomous Irish American culture, and those of Irish heritage several generations removed from Ireland.

2. For example, patrons/members may gravitate toward one or more specific expressions of Irish culture: Irish language lessons, Irish step-dancing, sean nós dancing or singing, music lessons, concerts, lectures on Irish history, sporting events, festivals, etc.

WORKS CITED


Quarterly Horse 1.3 (March 2017), http://www.quarterlyhorse.org/spring17/singel.