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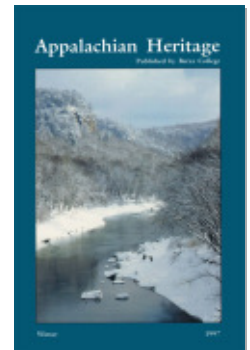
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Eileen McCullough Johnson

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More Than Blarney

Eileen McCullough Johnson

“May the luck of the Irish shine bright on your way...”

“If you think you understand the Irish, you’ve been misinformed,” so goes an old Irish saying. The same can be said of the people of Southern Appalachia.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, over four hundred books were printed about Appalachia and its people. Two of the most popular were *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* and *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, by John Fox, Jr.

He was born in the Kentucky Bluegrass region but moved to the mountains at the end of the nineteenth century, an era when the outside world was beginning to break through the mountain barriers to exploit the rich timber and mineral resources of the area. He was thus positioned to witness the mountain experience in its unadulterated form before it vanished forever.

In the so-called local color movement, other writers portrayed mountain folk as “quaint, simple”: a people living in that “other America.”

These false depictions gave little or no credence to the strong character, fierce independence, honesty, integrity, hospitality, family strength, and loyalty of the people.

Hollywood and TV producers in later years picked up on the “marketable” myths begun by Fox and other writers. These myths were perpetuated in such shows as *Li'l Abner*, *Dukes of Hazzard*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and others. Writers turned out scripts about the ignorant, slothful, violent mountain man with his squirrel gun over one shoulder and moonshine jug on the other. He was often tagged with the derisive term “hillbilly.”

The author studied Celtic links at universities in Scotland, North Wales, and Limerick, Ireland, and Appalachian literature and culture at Berea College and Appalachian State University. This is an excerpt from a book-length manuscript, “More Than Blarney: The Irish Influence in Appalachia,” which will be published by Wolfhound Press this spring. Of Irish ancestry, she lives in North Carolina.

The South of course, has always had to contend with a stereotype of characters: good-natured darkies eating watermelon while flatfooting in the dust around simple slave cabins, cruel overseers, Scarlett O'Hara belles, Klansman out to keep the Negro in his place, toothless backwoodsmen drinking moonshine and thumping the banjo, and hell-fire-and-brimstone preachers tramping the Bible Belt and preaching eternal hell-fire to all sinners.

In the 1960s, myths about Appalachia were enlarged by bright-eyed eager young people, mostly from the Northeast, who invaded the mountains in their Volkswagens and white tennis shoes, intent on "helping these backward people." As an old mountain man drily observed: "They popped in, popped off and popped out."

And about every twelve-fourteen years, some public figure, usually a politician running for office, discovers Appalachia and makes the region a cause to garner votes.

Ireland too has suffered from stereotypes. The popular image often shows this lovely little country to be an Irish stew of dewy-eyed colleens, inebriated poets, busybody priests, and happy drunks who stagger from one pub to another. Paddy, the stage Irishman, telling jokes and warbling a teary "Mother Macree," only adds to this image.

The reality is far different. Ireland is a most conservative, morally oriented country. Abortion has not been allowed and in spite of vigorous efforts, a legal divorce has just recently been legalized.

I have lived for sixteen years in the mountains of North Carolina and have traveled extensively in Ireland. As I came to know both places, I was struck by the many similarities between the people of Ireland and those of Appalachia: a hatred of pretense, a strong resistance to authority, a great love of independence, intense joy in music and dance, and a rich tradition of telling tales, jokes, and stories. I began to understand that much of the old culture survived because of the isolation of Appalachian mountain cabins and Ireland's stone cottages.

Before my second trip to Ireland, several friends asked: "Why are you going back? They're killing people over there!" It was true our newspapers and TV were filled with stories of the violence in Northern Ireland.

From comments like these, and in talking to mountain people, I realized that they knew little about Ireland, the home of their ancestors. This, in spite of the fact that many early settlers in Appalachia came from the province of Ulster, in what is now Northern Ireland.

Similarities between the two peoples and a lack of knowledge about Ireland gave me the idea for this book. I wanted to show the origin of the common strands that weave back and forth between Ireland and

Appalachia. I wanted to delve into the rich oral tradition of stories and music, to explore the many versions of these old songs and tales. The old ballad “Barbara Allen,” for example, still popular in the mountains, was known as early as the 1600s. The Library of Congress has 700 versions!

To understand where this heritage comes from, it *is* necessary to know something about Ireland. Eire, as the Irish call their Emerald Isle, is an English-speaking island nation on the northwestern edge of Europe. It is smaller than the state of Indiana. Before the devastating potato famine of the 1840s, Ireland had a population of eight million. During the famine, over a million people starved and another three million emigrated to survive. Today Ireland has three and a half million people.

Ireland’s history has been a desperate struggle against seven and a half centuries of British oppression and exploitation, culminating in the Anglo-Irish war of 1916–21. After much bloodshed, a treaty was signed, dividing Ireland.

The Republic, the larger southern part, comprises twenty-six counties. It is independent, makes its own laws and has its own currency, the Irish pound (punt). Its capital is Dublin and it does not pay allegiance to the British crown.

The remaining six counties make up Northern Ireland. Its currency is the British pound sterling, its capital is Belfast, and it regards Great Britain as its sovereign.

The violence we have heard so much about occurs in the cities of Northern Ireland, mainly Belfast and Derry, and not in the Republic.

Ireland is a very old country. It is generally believed that man appeared in Ireland as early as 6000 B.C. When I started writing this book, a friend asked: “How do you know Ireland is such an old civilization?”

Evidence of a long and rich past is found in the ancient burial tombs, standing stones, old sagas, and illuminated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells*, and in round towers and dramatic high crosses. The Irish, like their descendants in Appalachia, have always had great respect for their dead. Over the centuries, many people left their imprint on Ireland. In ancient times, the Druids, a mysterious priesthood, had a strong influence on ritual and ceremony.

Other early people crossed the narrow channel between Scotland and Ireland, only thirteen miles in some places. They were fishermen and traders who could do business in Northern Ireland and be back home in Scotland for supper!

Next came the Celts, who spread across Central Europe and swept into Ireland about 1500 B.C., in their civilization's prime. They were powerful tribes of skilled metal-workers (who left exquisite gold jewelry), who had a knowledge of agriculture and animal husbandry. They were also warriors of unparalleled ferocity whose women fought right alongside their men.

The Celts were flamboyant, bold and dynamic, but also given to drunkenness and boasting. Many legends, stories, and heroic sagas tell of the exploits of these fearless warriors.

Their judgment in battle could be questioned, but never their bravery or courage. Some historians believe that it was this trait of reckless courage that powered the Confederate cause in our own Civil War. And the famous rebel yell came directly from the Celts!

History and legend have been interwoven in Ireland for centuries. Though there was much evidence of earlier peoples, it was the Celts who put their stamp on the Irish character and culture. And it is these traits that today make the Irish different from the other people of Western Europe.

Later invaders—the Vikings and the Normans fought to control Ireland. The land was wrested from the Irish farmers and controlled by an Anglo-Irish aristocracy who paid allegiance to the British crown. Though England treated Ireland as a colony, she was not granted colonial status.

The native Irish were never assimilated or subdued. They remained hostile. After the terrible famine of the 1840s, conflict with the British intensified.

In the long course of human history, two major events did not affect Ireland. The Romans, with their structured system of law and civil authority, never invaded Ireland. And the Industrial Revolution, which swept over much of the rest of the world, bypassed Ireland, except for the area around Belfast.

Today, Ireland's haunting beauty and the genuine warmth of her people, so similar to that of the people of Appalachia, make it the wonderful country it is.

A Word About the Scotch (Scots) Irish

Most of the Irish who settled the mountains of Southern Appalachia emigrated from Northern Ireland. Generations before, their people had come across the narrow waterway from Scotland, with the promise of free land from the British crown.

By 1717 these people thought of themselves as Irish of the

North and had come to hate British oppression. The ships that brought them to America sailed from Irish ports: They came from a province of Ireland where their families had lived for generations.

When they arrived in America, the names they gave their settlements showed strong feelings for Ireland as their mother country, rather than Scotland: names such as Derry, Tyrone, Armagh, Donegal, Londonderry, Coolerraine, were all names from their homeland.

It is noteworthy too, that the venerable *Encyclopedia Britannica* does not have a category for "Scotch Irish" nor do they list it in their index. The term "Scotch Irish" was coined in America and is unknown in Ireland. And if you ask an old Appalachian what he is, he will say, "I'se Arish."

It has been said that two centuries bypassed the people of Ireland and of Appalachia. This isolation was in a way a blessing, for it helped preserve the old ways.

Look beneath the surface of our fast-paced age. If you hate pretense, love personal freedom, have a lingering resentment of authority, and are fond of good music and a tall tale, your Irish heritage is showing.

It's more than Blarney.

