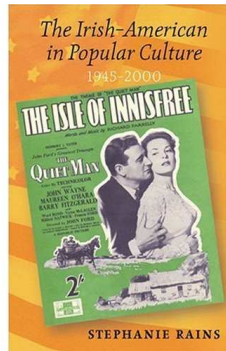


Nicoleta Stanca

Stephanie Rains. *The Irish-American in Popular Culture (1945-2000)*.

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The main theme of the volume by Stephanie Rains is the process by which late twentieth-century Irish-America engages with Irishness, focusing on the ways in which the diaspora relates to aspects of Ireland in the formation of their cultural identity. *The Irish-American in Popular Culture (1945-2000)* focuses on cultural practices relevant to diasporic identity formation, such as film and television, genealogy research, cultural tourism and material culture, materialized, for instance through Irish souvenirs. The economic and political connections between Ireland and America during the late twentieth century have also been considered.

In one of their recent priceless series of TV ads, Mastercard highlighted “the apparently unquantifiable nature of Irishness” (p. 1). Seen through the eyes of a Dubliner walking through the city, the ad watches American tourists buying leprechaun hats and green clothing, the voice-over announcing the price of each item purchased. Then, the Dubliner settles into a pub with a pint of Guinness in front of him and with the voice-over reminding us of “what it means to be Irish – priceless” (p. 1). Thus, the ad tackles a major theme in popular culture regarding Ireland from the 1990s onwards – the nature of Irish identity, its connections to the process of commodification in a context of globalization and its role in the identity construction of the Irish American diaspora.

The five chapters are arranged thematically, rather than chronologically although we could claim that the book deals with the period between the end of the Second World War and the end of the twentieth century. According to the author, this period has been relatively neglected within the examinations of the Irish American diaspora; therefore, the writer’s merit is greater for approaching the topic. The period under scrutiny is especially interesting as it marks a time when the Irish-American is “returning” (p. 3) to Ireland for the first time, as represented in films (*The Quiet Man*), novels (*Angela’s Ashes*), memoirs, roots tracing statistics and tourism texts. To these, we could add the enormous commercial success of Irish cultural products in the USA during the 1990s, ranging from U2’s music to *Riverdance*, from Irish pubs to Seamus Heaney’s poetry. Their impact on the identity formation of Irish America and the connections of popular culture to Irishness in general, have been contested,

which makes it an interesting point for discussion regarding Irish-American ethnicity during the post-Second World War period.

Chapter 1 “The Political Economy of the Diaspora: Irish-American Politics and Capital in Ireland” considers the political economy of Irish America’s relationship to Ireland, focusing upon financial and political influence between the two nations. The author attempts to clarify the reasons for Irish America’s engagement with Irish political economies since 1945. The career of John F. Kennedy, his election in 1960 as the first Irish Catholic president, is a significant example of the complexity of the Irish-American diaspora’s engagement with Irish political issues.

Chapter 2 “Irish ‘Roots’: Memory and History in the Diaspora” moves on to discuss the nature of later-generation diasporic identity, through an examination of the Irish-American search for Irish ‘roots’, along with the ways in which this cultural practice reflects wider changes in the concepts of history and memory. Reconstructing family narratives through genealogical research becomes increasingly popular. Chapter 3 “Heritage and Consumption: Irish-American Tourism and Material Culture” focuses on Irish-American cultural consumption, with a particular emphasis on material culture and discusses the ways in which these cultural objects transmit and influence concepts of diasporic identity. At the Irish fair organized in New York in 1897, one of the most popular attractions among Irish emigrants was a large map of Ireland, divided into the thirty-two counties, and filled with “genuine” soil from each county. “Visitors were invited, for a fee of ten cents, to walk again upon the soil of ‘home’. Many did so, displaying great emotion in the process, which was duly reported by the Irish-American press.” (p. 99)

Chapter 4 “Fiery Colleens and Fighting Irishmen: Representations of Gender with Irish America” is a discussion of the ways in which popular representations (especially film) of the relationship between Irish America and Ireland have a strong emphasis on gendered national and diasporic identity, and examines the ways in which this has operated during the late twentieth century. Hollywood forms of representation are especially suggestive from this point of view in movies, such the 1981 ABC/EMI television mini-series *The Manions of America*, a diaspora family narrative starring Pierce Brosnan.

The last chapter “Mapping the Diaspora: Theorizing Irish-American Identity” analyses the theoretical understanding of diasporic identities and maps the influences within considerations of Irish America and other global diasporas. Topics, such as diaspora studies, centers and margins, diasporic space, ethnicity studies in the USA, are discussed in chapter 5. The “Conclusion” of this study encompasses its very essence, i.e. “it is essential, however, that Irish studies on both sides of the Atlantic recognizes how central popular culture and cultural practices are to all aspects of Irish culture as it is lived”. (p. 230)

Another important feature of this book is that it focuses on the Irish-American diaspora’s relationship to Ireland and examines the ways in which contact of various kinds with the “homeland” (p. 3) and its culture has continued to inform their diasporic construction. The book is of great value to those interested in social history, film and television studies and all aspects of popular culture.

We express our gratitude to the Irish Embassy in Bucharest for the book donation that has enabled the rewarding reading of the book reviewed here and of many others, beneficial to our Irish Studies research.