LAST of the VISIONERS

Ruth Clinton & Niamh Moriarty

LAST OF THE VISIONERS

The Model
Home of the Niland Collection
21 July - 9 September 2023

An exhibition of work by:

KEVIN JEROME EVERSON
GRACE HENRY
PAUL HENRY
SEÁN KEATING
MAURICE MACGONIGAL
EMILY MCFARLAND
KENT MONKMAN
WILLIAM ORPEN
NANO REID
GEORGE WILLIAM RUSSELL
TUQA AL-SARRAJ
STEVEN YAZZIE
JACK B. YEATS

curated by Ruth Clinton & Niamh Moriarty

ARTISTS

Kevin Jerome Everson's art practice encompasses printmaking, sculpture, photography and film, with over 200 shorts and twelve features screened internationally at film festivals, cinemas, galleries, museums and public and private art institutions. Everson's films, often shot on 16mm film using a handheld camera, contain candid depictions of the Black American experience as well as universal phenomena. The first screening in Ireland dedicated to Everson's solo and collaborative film work was curated by aemi for the Irish Film Institute in 2023.

Grace Henry (1868 – 1953) was a Scottish landscape artist, who spent a large part of her career painting in Ireland. Her body of work was re-examined in the 1970s, leading to wider public recognition. She has been acknowledged as a bolder painter than her once husband, incorporating more elements of the modernist movement.

Paul Henry (1876 – 1958) was a celebrated Northern-Irish artist noted for depicting West of Ireland landscapes in a spare Post-Impressionist style. He studied at the Belfast School of Art before attending the Académie Julian and Whistler's Académie Carmen in Paris. He married Grace Henry in 1903 and returned to Ireland in 1910 where they lived for 9 years on Achill Island.

Seán Keating (1889 – 1977) was an Irish romantic-realist painter who painted iconic images of the Irish War of Independence and the early industrialization of Ireland. He would spend two weeks each year on the Aran Islands and his many portraits of island people depicted them as rugged heroic figures.

Maurice MacGonigal (1900 – 1979) was an Irish landscape and portrait painter and an influential teacher. In 1917, MacGonigal was enlisted in Na Fianna Éireann, serving as an IRA dispatch rider during the War of Independence. In the 1920s he won a scholarship to the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, studying under Seán Keating.

Emily McFarland is an artist and filmmaker based in rural West Tyrone and Belfast. McFarland's work explores how shared cultural, social and economic narratives are constructed and retold over time. She is a co-founder of the artist-run publishing imprint Soft Fiction Projects and past co-director of Catalyst Arts, Belfast. In 2021 McFarland was selected for the Platform Commissions to present major new work as part of the 39th EVA International, Biennale of Contemporary Art.

Kent Monkman is an interdisciplinary Cree visual artist. A member of Fisher River Cree Nation in Treaty 5 Territory (Manitoba), he lives and works in Dish With One Spoon Territory (Toronto, Canada). Known for his thought-provoking interventions into Western European and American art history, Monkman explores themes of colonization, sexuality, loss, and resilience—the complexities of historic and contemporary Indigenous experiences—across painting, film/video, performance, and installation. Monkman's gender-fluid alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle often appears in his work as a time-traveling, shape-shifting, supernatural being who reverses the colonial gaze to challenge received notions of history and Indigenous peoples.

Major Sir William Orpen (1878 – 1931) was an Irish artist who worked predominantly in London. Orpen was a fine draughtsman and a popular painter of portraits for well-to-do in Edwardian society, though many of his most striking paintings are self-portraits. He was a mentor and friend to Seán Keating.

Tuqa Al-Sarraj is a Dublin-based multidisciplinary artist. Her practice combines mixed-media, found objects, collage, photography, video, performance and installation, navigating themes of memory, loss, and exile through social dialogues. Al-Sarraj holds a BA in Fine Art media from the National College of Art and Design and has previously studied at the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP), Ramallah. Al-Sarraj is a member of PalArt, a collective committed to increasing the number of Palestinian voices and stories in the arts and media.

Nano Reid (1900 – 1981) was an Irish painter who specialised in landscape, figure painting and portraits. She attended the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. Like other painters of the period, she travelled to the west of Ireland for painting inspiration, with her early work showing the landscapes, local people and fisherman of the west.

George William Russell (1867 – 1935), who wrote under the pseudonym Æ, was an Irish writer, editor, critic, poet, painter and Irish nationalist. He was also a writer on mysticism, and a central figure in the group of devotees of theosophy who met in Dublin for many years. Russell became increasingly unhappy in the Irish Free State (which according to W.B. Yeats he called 'a country given over to the Devil') and moved to England soon after his wife's death in 1932.

Steven Yazzie is a multidisciplinary artist working in painting, installation, video/film, and community collaborations. His work explores the complexities of the post-settler colonial indigenous experience as it relates to personal identity, community relationships, and the essential connection to the land as the source of life, stories, conflict, and healing. A proud member of the Navajo Nation, he is the co-founder of Digital Preserve LLC, a digital film production project which prioritizes collaborations with arts and cultural institutions, leveraging Indigenous issues and voices to the forefront of public discourse.

Jack Butler Yeats (1871 – 1957) was an Irish artist and brother to W. B. Yeats. While Butler's early work was predominantly in illustration, he began working in oils from 1906. His early pictures are lyrical depictions of landscapes and figures. Many west of Ireland scenes were set in his childhood home of Sligo. His work contains elements of Romanticism and later would adopt the style of Expressionism.

DEATH BY A THOUSAND WELCOMES

Taking the modern Irish painting canon as a popular imaginary for a rapidly changing new republic, *Last of the Visioners* considers how early 20th century representations of Ireland have come to shape our national and diasporic consciousness. Images of the rural Irish landscape in painting, photography and cinema have long contributed to a constructed sense of national identity, which in turn has influenced the state's relationship with emigrant and immigrant populations, our environment, and our built heritage. *Last of the Visioners* presents a selection of Irish paintings that were made during the formative years of the Irish State, alongside more recent pieces which in some way challenge the pastoral idealism of these earlier works.

Within the modern Irish painting canon there exists a tension between tradition and modernity, relating to developments in European Modernism as well as the political agenda of the Irish Free State in the early 20th century. Iconic and romantic visions of Ireland as exemplified in the work of Paul Henry, Maurice MacGonigal and Seán Keating were instrumental in the formation of a mythic and ‘essential’ Irish identity. This type of imagery contributed to the promotion the idea of a pre-, and therefore post, colonial society: comprising stoic country people, innocent of modernity and sinful city life[1]. Although they depicted a premodern vision of an unspoilt land, these paintings had a modernising effect insofar as they helped to create a new, homogenous national self-conception

which combined rural, folk ways of living with a strict, Catholic, moral ideology. This pastoral tendency in Irish painting can also be considered alongside the trend of 'primitivism' in Western art (e.g., the work of Paul Gaugin), which supposedly celebrated the 'natural' expressive creativity of untrained and 'naive' cultures[2]. The desire to create an authentic Irish style, rooted in an imagined version of a pre- or early Christian society, chimed with this sensibility, romanticising the past whilst making a political nationalist statement.

Portrait paintings provide further insight into the social relations of the day, but not without their own set of biases. George Russell's 'Portrait of Mary Colum' (1924), a Sligo-born writer who was active in the Irish Literary Revival and a founding member of the Irish Review[3], reveals the subjective lens of the painter in a telling anecdote from Colum's autobiography. Russell had invited her to sit for him because he was curious to hear her thoughts on modern poetry. However, she claims that he talked so continuously that she resorted to interrupting with fragments of verses in languages he didn't understand. Russell took 'revenge' by portraying her hair as unkempt and by making her mouth too large [4].

If fixed perspective landscape and portrait paintings imply a particular point of view, or subjectivity, then what kind of subject was being constructed by early 20th century Irish artists? It could be argued that landscapes, such as those by Henry and MacGonigal, with their neatly arranged hills

and cottages, impose a kind of artificial order on the world, therefore subtly reinforcing pre-existing power structures and continuing the colonial imagining of Ireland as a rugged wilderness populated by rustic peasants. Following a British tradition of the 'picturesque'[5], these artworks – often intended to depict and promote Ireland as a tourist destination following independence – perpetuated British imperial ideology, where unsettled nature (and nations) would be enclosed, not only by the administration of the Empire, but also inside the confines of a picture.

Key to this nationalist aesthetic was the elevation of the rural over the urban as a more essentially 'Irish' way of life. This is clear both from state propaganda (e.g., De Valera's famous 'The Ireland that we dreamed of' speech) and the infantilizing actions of the Catholic Church which, for example, in its mission to preserve the innocence of rural minds, ensured that certain objectionable films were only shown in cities[6]. The assumption that the countryside offered a pastoral antidote to the stresses of the urban marketplace is again consistent with Western European primitivist ideas, which paid little attention to the realities and difficulties of rural life at the time. Indeed, many prominent Irish artists active in the early to mid-20th century, including Paul and Grace Henry, George Russell (AE) and Nano Reid were not from a rural or west of Ireland background. Many were also of Anglo-Irish descent, such as Sir William Orpen and Jack B. Yeats. *Last of the Visioners* presents works by these artists that in some way convey the popular imaginary of the period leading up to and following

independence, as well as the early days of the burgeoning Republic. These pieces are displayed alongside more recent works from Ireland and North America that unsettle the often-bucolic visions of a different age.

Four Yeats pieces displayed in *Last of the Visioners*, made between 1906 and 1928, trace a trajectory in his career from more straightforwardly romantic works to expressionistic paintings that deviate from the pastoral aesthetic described above. ‘An Island Man’ (1906), showing a solitary figure gazing out to sea, is reminiscent in composition to ‘The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog’ (1818) by Caspar David Friedrich, the classic example of 19th century Romanticism. This small pen, ink and watercolour drawing was made as the frontispiece to John Millington Synge's travelogue, ‘The Aran Islands’ (1907). ‘Singing the “Beautiful Picture” and ‘A Western Town at Night’, (both 1925) depict small town streets in vivid and unusual colours that differentiate these scenes from stereotypical images of Irish villages, while ‘Johnny Patterson singing “Bridget Donoghue” (The Singing Clown)’ (1928) conveys the pathos of Irish ballad singing through the distorted rendering of the clown's face-paint and features. Patterson died in 1889 from injuries he sustained after an audience rioted in reaction to his (now lost) song ‘Do Your Best For One Another’, which asked Irish people to overcome sectarian divisions[7].

Political struggle is a common theme in Irish folk music, as can be heard in the song melodiously performed by Tommy

Doran in Tuqa Al-Sarraj's video ‘My Neighbour Tommy’ (2019). Again, there is a tension between tradition and modernity as linear time is disrupted by the song's lyrics, which collapse temporally distant events into one narrative. Resisting straightforward representation, Al-Sarraj's piece destabilises the fixed gaze of a traditional portrait and is reminiscent of Charles Baudelaire's description of modernity: ‘a particular relationship to time, one characterised by intense historical discontinuity or rupture’[8]. This is consistent with Ireland’s colonised and fractured history, which gave rise to songs like ‘Gay Galteemore Mountains’, as heard in the video. Ostensibly set on the day of republican leader Thomas Ashe's death in 1917, the song's protagonist then name-checks former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams and mentions the 1921 partition of Ireland. This disjointed sense of time is reflected in the editing of the video, which visually cuts between different moments, in contrast with the continuous and unedited soundtrack of Doran’s singing while he drives around an Irish town.

‘Top of the Hill’ (c. 1920) by Grace Henry offers an alternative perspective on the women of Achill Island, compared to paintings of the same subject by her then-husband Paul. The women are not shown bent double, working in a field, or looking anxiously out to sea as in his paintings, but enjoying a seemingly happy and sociable moment together. Nano Reid likewise presents a less patently romantic scene in ‘Achill Kitchen’, (n.d.), which shows the cramped and sooty conditions inside one of those cottages

so often painted from the outside (and devoid of inhabitants) by Paul Henry. Henry's iconic travel posters, first published by the London Midland and Scottish Railway Company in the 1930s, exemplify the tourist imagery that has advertised Ireland abroad from the colonial era until the present day. This is the arcadian ideal that would be adopted and projected by the Irish Free State, no longer realistic but 'symbolically Irish'[9].

Conjuring images of modernisation and progress, as well as colonial expansion and accelerated conquest, the railway provides a complex set of associations in both Ireland and North America. Presented to the public as a glorious feat of engineering and a crucial step in 'conquering' the American West, 19th century railroads drove the destruction of Indigenous peoples' way of life, abandoned thousands of unprepared settlers in a hostile environment, and vastly enriched a handful of urban capitalists through the exploitation of migrant labour. Early rail travel had further mixed connotations for African American people, associated with cruel separation of families during slavery as well as, more hopefully, with the Underground Railroad. Though not an actual railroad, the terminology of rail was used to describe a system of secret escape routes used by enslaved people to reach freedom. Later, after the Civil War, African Americans were hired as porters, cooks and waiters on trains. These roles, though they perpetuated stereotypes of African Americans as a servant class, provided employment and ultimately led to the formation of the first all-Black union in

1925, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

Two works by Kevin Jerome Everson trace the movement of Black Americans from south to north since the 19th century. The film, ‘North Mulberry Street’ (2021), makes subtle reference to another layer of North American rail history: the ‘Great Migration’, in which six million Black people travelled northwards between 1910 and 1970 to pursue education and employment opportunities and to leave behind the racial violence and oppression of southern Jim Crow laws[10]. Portraying freight trains travelling through Mansfield, Ohio (a state in which many African-Americans settled), the film shows an intermittently flickering light, faintly illuminating what appear to be train tracks. In contrast to the fixed stare of pastoral landscape painting, the eye of the camera appears to blink, offering the audience only short glimpses into this place and its history, resisting the traditional sense of control or mastery over nature and people found in western landscape art. Likewise, Everson’s film ‘Corn and Cotton’ (2011), which is centred around cash crops planted in the film-maker's ancestral homeland of Mississippi, disrupts easy perception of its subject. Comprised primarily of bodily and almost uncomfortably close shots of cotton bolls, the camera finally pulls back to show a field of cotton crops. The viewer is reminded of the exploitation of millions of enslaved people’s labour as well as the exploitation of nature itself for commercial gain.

Themes of land (mis)use and private enrichment appear again in Emily McFarland's video, ‘Curraghinalt’ (2019-20). The video offers a poetic insight into the protest movement established in the Sperrin Mountains in Co. Tyrone in response to plans submitted by US-owned Dalradian Gold Ltd ‘to permit the building of a major underground gold mine and processing plant in a landscape which is designated as both an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a Site of Special Scientific Interest’[11]. The piece, which opens with local musician and activist Conor O'Kane performing his rousing protest song ‘The Heart of the Sperrin Mountains’, combines footage of the surrounding landscape with audio recordings of the voices of volunteers with the Greencastle People’s Office who have occupied the site since early 2018. Community solidarity and resistance are foregrounded against a backdrop of corporate expansion and complex colonial legacies. The Crown Estate (a collection of lands and holdings owned by the British monarchy) will receive four percent of the profits generated by the mining operation, which goes directly to the Treasury of the central British government. It is striking to note that 25% of the land in Northern Ireland is licensed for mining, compared to just 0.2% of English land (that figure rising to 27% in the Republic). In fact, the island of Ireland has been described by the mining industry as the ‘wild west of Europe’ for environmental regulation and among the top ten most attractive places in the world for mining companies[12].

Resonances between Ireland and the Wild or Old West have

recurred over time, one early example being Seán Keating's painting, 'Men of the West' (1915), echoed again in Sir William Orpen's portrait of Keating, 'Man of the West' (1930). In Keating's painting three men, who look like they could have stepped off the set of any cowboy film, stand with guns and an Irish tricolour flag: defiant rebel heroes. One figure (Seán Keating himself, dressed in Aran Island attire) glares at the viewer, while the other two (posed for by Keating's brother) stare off into the distance. Keating's brooding stance appears again in Orpen's rendering years later, under a suitably gloomy sky. Ireland and the United States have each adopted the myth of the western frontier as a national ideal. Westerns portrayed a highly aestheticised vision of the 'frontier', as exemplified in the technicolour movies of John Ford, while, back in Ireland, the genre's archetypes were reflected in modern paintings such as 'Men of the West'. In both versions, the west represents an imagined frontier zone tinged with hardship and opportunity, a place somehow as yet uncorrupted by the creeping progress of modernisation. Familiar tropes from cowboy films overlap with the nationalist imagery described above, such as the sinful city, expansive skies and the 'empty' frontier, as well as stock characters including the wanderer on the road, or the resilient townsfolk.

Ford used the dramatic landscape of Monument Valley (Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaii in Navajo) as a backdrop for many of his Western films, including 'Stagecoach' (1939) and 'The

Searchers’ (1956), indelibly influencing audiences’ idea of the American West. In ‘Draw Me a Picture’ (2007), made as part of his ‘Drawing and Driving’ series, Steven Yazzie shatters the grandiose, colonial perspective of the western settler found both in landscape painting and cinema. Shots of the iconic buttes in the valley are interspersed with footage of the artist hurtling downhill at great speed, driving a gravity powered vehicle and sketching the scene around him. Yazzie's work challenges the western idea of man as separate from nature, creating drawings made in collaboration with the ground beneath him and reclaiming a sacred landscape that has often been associated with racist depictions of Indigenous people.

This dehumanising perspective, reflected later in Hollywood films, caused not only the mass destruction of Indigenous people, their way of life, and millions of bison from the fifteenth century onwards, but the ongoing oppression and institutionalisation of subsequent generations into the present day. Kent Monkman's film ‘Sisters and Brothers’ (2015) uses archival footage from the National Film Board of Canada accompanied by an urgent score to draw parallels between the extermination of the bison and the intergenerational trauma caused by the residential school system. The schools were established by the state, administered by the Church, and were designed to culturally assimilate Indigenous children into white society by removing them from their families and forcibly stripping them of their cultural heritage. The origins

of this model lie in the Christian missions of the early 17th century, which also operated on the colonial assumption that these people were backward and needed saving[13].

Last of the Visioners is an attempt to explore, through works of art, the impact that images can have on the formation of a national sense of identity. We are trying to understand the context in which early Modern Irish paintings were made, the intentions behind them and the influence they have had on the popular imagination since their creation. Contemporary attitudes towards numerous issues including land ownership, migration, the environment, heritage, tourism and progress can perhaps be more clearly comprehended by imagining these works as windows into a particular moment of history, both formally and in terms of subject matter. The contemporary works discussed above provide a counterpoint to these visions, representing the consequences of colonialism, church and state collusion and individualism, among others. They also offer hopeful moments of community solidarity, resistance and humour, providing an alternative way to approach our collective future.

— Ruth Clinton, July 2023

Seán Keating
1889–1977
Men of the West
1915
oil on canvas
courtesy of
Hugh Lane Gallery

Notes

1. Cusack, Tricia. ‘Tis’ the Wild Things that have the Real Beauty: Jack B. Yeats, Modernity and Other Worlds’ in *The Irish Review*, No. 21 (Autumn - Winter, 1997). Cork University Press, pp. 75-91

2. Booth, Mark Haworth. ‘Jack B. Yeats Until Now’. 1991. Cited in Tricia Cusack, ibid. pp. 75-91

3. A literary journal published in Dublin from 1911 to 1914, featuring authors such as W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne.

4. Kennedy, Róisín. ‘Portrait of Mary Colum’ in *The Niland Collection*. The Model, Sligo, 2020. pp. 93

5. Thomspon, Carl. ‘The Picturesque at Home and Abroad’: www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/the-picturesque-at-home-and-abroad

6. Rockett, Kevin. ‘Irish Film Censorship’. Dublin, 2004. pp. 113

7. Traynor, Jessica. ‘Johnny Patterson, the Irish singing clown who met a tragic end’ in *The Irish Times*, 2 April 2019

8. Baudelaire, Charles-Pierre. ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ in *Le Figaro*, 1863

9. Kennedy, S.B. ‘An Enduring View of Irish Identity: Paul Henry and the Realism of Fiction’ in *Irish Arts Review Yearbook 1999*. Dublin. pp. 102-106

10. The Great Migration (1910 - 1970), National Archives: www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration

11. McFarland, Emily. ‘Curraghinalt’. 2019-20

12. Sky News report: https://news.sky.com/story/protesters-vow-to-lie-on-the-road-to-stop-gold-mine-in-sperrin-mountains-of-county-tyrone-12895053

13. Erin Hanson. ‘The Residential School System’ 2009. Updates and revisions by Gamez, Daniel P. Gamez & Manuel, Alexa, 2020. https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/

THE HOUSE THAT FRANK BUILT

> Francis Rogan's prosperity is reflected in this red brick home [1].

In Sumner County, Tennessee, a team of archaeologists and conservators carefully dismantled a once fine brick house that had stood for 178 years. They numbered each component and shipped them all across the Atlantic. The destination was the Ulster American Folk Park, an open-air museum located outside Omagh in County Tyrone, where the house would be reassembled brick by brick [2].

In November, Ruth and I took a trip to see this assortment of homes and civic buildings from famine era Ireland and antebellum America. Together, we have been collecting stories of early migration from Ireland to so-called America, where people fleeing domestic hardship created by British policies settled across the Atlantic, only to become oppressors themselves in the 'New World'.

This historic relationship between Ireland and the United States has had significant consequences, including the involvement of Irish settlers in the genocide of Indigenous people and the destruction of their lands, as well as ongoing cooperation between our state and the US military. Shannon airport has served as a landing and refuelling point for planes carrying soldiers, cargo and prisoners since 1990[3].

Shannon Group PLC oversees Shannon Airport as well as another nearby folk park in County Clare. In 1959, a traditional thatched cottage was dismantled stone by stone from land designated for a new runway 'and it was from there the concept of Bunratty Folk Park was born' [4].The cottage made way for technological progress at Shannon and moved to this Ireland-themed park, cast as a humble cottage in an unspoiled landscape, as yet untouched by modernity.

Thus, an idealised version of Ireland was constructed by Irish Americans, embraced by Irish nationals, and sold back to Irish American tourists through our heritage industry. These heritage experiences allow the diaspora to embark on touristic pilgrimages to their 'homeland', paradoxically 'returning' to a place and time they have never before experienced, and that no longer exists[5].

After navigating the potato famine-themed section of the Ulster American Folk Park, we boarded a replica of the Brig Union ship, bound for Americay![6] We filed past the bunk beds in steerage and disembarked onto the cobbled streets of the 'New World'. The trail then led us out to the countryside, where we approached a final, formidable house.

This particular building had taken the opposite journey from the emigrants who set sail from Ireland in order to build these new homes and futures. Upon arrival, the bricks were meticulously reassembled into the stately house we see today, suspended in time but dislocated in space. The house is

curiously polka-dotted with the remnants of numbers that had indicated the placement of each brick in the overall composition. Inside the large living room, we took out the visitor's map and read:

> Francis Rogan's prosperity is reflected in this red brick home. However, the Rogans' wealth was owed to the work of enslaved people. Generations of African-Americans cleaned and looked after children in these rooms. Slavery in Tennessee officially lasted until 1865. The 1870 Census records there were five black people living here, labouring and cooking for the Rogans. Their names are recorded as Eliza Bill, Richmond, Jason Rogan, Rhodes, and Stokely.

Let's begin again from the point of departure.

Back in eighteenth century Donegal, the family patriarch, Hugh Rogan was a member of The Defenders, an agrarian Catholic secret society[7]. At this time, Ireland was subject to the penal laws, which suppressed many aspects of the native culture, including restrictions on Catholic land ownership, religious worship, and education.

Rival militias formed with The Defenders in constant conflict with the Protestant Peep o' Day Boys, who would raid Catholic homes under the pretence of confiscating arms. It was in these volatile conditions that an enduring philosophy emerged among the struggling tenant farmers, that the right to bear arms would guarantee them not only their liberty but

also their property [8].

In 1775, fearing arrest and conscription by British authorities, Hugh Rogan fled to America ‘in order to breathe the air of freedom’ [9]. After travelling to the region now known as Tennessee, Rogan joined an expedition along the Cumberland River to identify ‘new lands’ and to establish colonial settlements, violently defending them against the Cherokee, Shawnee and Yuchi First Nations[10].

The guerrilla warfare skills Rogan had honed in Ireland easily transferred to life in the Old West, where he rallied against indigenous defenders, aligning himself with the British colonists. A genealogy survey published in 1909 annals the settlers of Sumner County. Here Rogan is described as a ‘raw’ and ‘gallant’ Irishman, ‘always ready for service, always ready to fight the Indians and help protect his neighbors’. He was regarded as ‘a man without fear, with a big, kind heart, and was a general favorite among the pioneers’.[11]

Noel Ignatiev’s seminal text, ‘How the Irish Became White’, depicts how many previously disadvantaged Irish emigrants promptly adapted to a life of power and privilege in America. ‘To become white they had to learn to subordinate country, religious, or national animosities, not to mention any natural sympathies they might have felt for their fellow creatures, and to a new solidarity based on colour– a bond which, it must be remembered, was contradicted by their experience in Ireland’[12].

This process is no better exemplified than by our protagonist who, by the end of the century, had gained not only political, religious, and economic freedom, but had also acquired 1000 acres of fertile land where he built himself a traditional Irish stone cottage[13].

In 1825 Francis Rogan, Hugh's son, who had spent his entire life on the plantation, built a two-storey brick house in the Flemish style as a symbol of the family's increasing wealth and status. Although Francis was born in Tennessee to Irish parents, he followed the British and Continental European 'desire on the part of the colonists to recreate the familiar brick architecture of their homeland'[14].

The Rogans gained prosperity through the cultivation of cash crops on their farm, primarily wheat, tobacco, sweet potatoes, and corn. The farm relied on slave labour, and by the mid-nineteenth century, the family presided over one of the largest slave plantations in Tennessee, solidifying their position among the region's wealthiest settlers[15].

Brick-making took place at the property, with enslaved people likely shouldering much of this skilled labour. Enormous quantities of raw clay would be extracted from the river's floodplains, followed by an extended period of tempering (drying out through the winter months). Labourers would then shape the clay using wooden moulds, producing several thousand bricks to be fired in a purpose-built kiln[16].

These bricks housed several generations of Rogans until the residence fell into disrepair in the 1990s, leading to its acquisition and relocation to the Folk Park in Northern Ireland[17].

During the house's reconstruction, conservators discovered some bricks that held imperfections–handprints, dents, and marks left by people and animals present when the clay bricks were drying outside. Those bricks were carefully removed for further study and preservation. A conservation archaeologist involved in the project noted that 'at least one man and one small person' had been involved in the making of bricks[18].

After our visit to the house, we had the opportunity to meet with Liam Corry, the museum curator. Liam generously searched through countless climate-controlled halls to locate the box containing these displaced bricks. As he peeled away the white paper and packing foam, he revealed imprints from racoons and other unfamiliar North American creatures embedded in the red clay.

With care, Liam removed the final two bricks from the box. One bore a handprint, and the other a bare footprint, likely belonging to a child approximately seven or eight years old who lived, and apparently worked, on the plantation two centuries ago.

We imagine these imprints as conscious stowaways. Once hidden within the walls of this house, they have now

travelled across land and water to reveal themselves in present-day Ireland. The moulds, now museum artefacts, represent the connection between ourselves, our diaspora, and the legacies of institutional racism that continue to afflict the Global North.

As we grapple with surges of nationalist violence and nativism at home, each brick serves as a reminder and a warning. Sharing and retelling these stories of the Irish in America can open up a space to acknowledge our past struggles, confront our complicities and, crucially, build our capacity for solidarity.

The simple marks made by hand and foot pressed into damp clay beckon to us across time, serving as relics and fossils that give material substance to the narrative of a house and a way of life that was built by our ancestors.

— Niamh Moriarty, July 2023

A version of this essay was commissioned and edited by and first appeared in Mirror Lamp Press issue 8 at *mirrorlamppress.com.*

Notes

1. Ulster American Folk Park, visitor’s map: ulsteramericanfolkpark.org /ulster-american-folk-park-maps

2. ‘Tennessee Rogan House’. Overview document including comments from Stephen Brown, Tennessee project archaeologist and conservator. 2008, Ulster American Folk Park. pp. 3

3. ‘U.S. assurances about Shannon flights a “mockery”, says Bree’ in *Sligo Champion*. 28.06.2006

4. Bunratty Castle: www.bunrattycastle.ie/folk-park/

5. Rains, Stephanie. The Irish American in Popular Culture 1945-2000. 2007, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, pp. 101

6. Wright, Robert L. ‘The Irishman’s Farewell to his Country’ in *Irish Emigration Songs and Ballads*. 1975, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975

> Oh then, fare thee well lovely Erin’s Isle, for here I cannot stay,
> I do intend to cross the sea, bound for Americay,
> To leave the land that gave me birth, oh it makes my heart full sore,
> To leave that sainted island where the shamróg green do grow.

7. ‘Hugh Rogan - One Irishman’s Impact on Frontier Tennessee’. 2008, Ulster American Folk Park. pp. 1 & 6

> In 1998 Hugh Rogan’s stone cottage was also moved stone by stone to a new location in Bledsoe's Fort Historical Park outside Gallatin, TE.

8. Blackstone, William. 'Commentaries on the Laws of England'. 1765, Oxford. Book. 1, pp. 36

9. Cisco, Jay Guy. ‘Historic Sumner County Tennessee Genealogies of the Bledsoe, Cage and Douglass Families’. 1909, Nashville Tennessee. pp. 94

10. Native Land Digital: native-land.ca/

11. Cisco, Jay Guy. pp. 94. pp. 291 & 292

12. Ignatiev, Noel. ‘How the Irish Became White’. 1995, Routledge London & New York. pp. 96

13. ‘Hugh Rogan - One Irishman’s Impact on Frontier Tennessee’. pp. 1

14. Guymon, Gail. ‘An Historical and Archaeological Study of
Brickmaking in Knoxville and Knox County, Tennessee’. 1986, Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee. pp.10

15. ‘Tennessee Rogan House’. pp. 2

16. Guymon, Gail. pp. 15 & 56

17. ‘Tennessee Rogan House’. pp. 18

18. Ibid. pp. 2

OBJECTS

clay bricks with indentations
c. 1825
Rogan Plantation House
Sumner County, Tennessee
courtesy of the Ulster American Folk Park

quartz mica schist
545 million years old
core rock sample
Dalradian Supergroup (NE of Sperrins region)
courtesy of the British Geological Survey, Belfast

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Ruth Clinton & Niamh Moriarty are visual artists living and working between Leitrim and Sligo. Working in close collaboration for over a decade, they use performance, video, sound installation and storytelling, along with a detailed research process, to convey visions of transience and resistance. In their recent work, they are testing the possibility of creating a new narrative identity for Ireland that will acknowledge our struggles, admit our complicities and build our capacity for solidarity. In 2023, Ruth and Niamh are supported by the Arts Council of Ireland and Fingal County Council.

The Model

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