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The Irish Odyssey of James McCarroll

Michael Peterman

For over two decades I have been on the trail of an energetic and creative Irishman named James McCarroll, who made a literary life for himself in Canada and the United States in the nineteenth century. It has been an exciting academic journey overall, marked both by small discoveries and occasional dead ends. As much as James McCarroll wrote and published, especially during his time in Canada, his politics eventually led to an eclipsing of much of his record and his reputation. Over the years, I have

tracked down and accumulated several feet of files about his life and extant records of his writing; hence, a biography and a compilation of his writings are not too far in the distance. Even better, there is a publisher patiently awaiting each volume.

James McCarroll lived from 1814 to 1892 and spent his days equally divided between three different countries—Ireland, Canada, and the United States. Living in Massachusetts while teaching at Bridgewater State University in spring 2011, I have continued to pursue my research into his life, his writings, and the measurable effects of his mercurial Irish temperament, even as I have found suggestive parallels to his life mirrored in the stories of a few prominent Irish Americans who settled in the Boston area. Chief among them is Irish-born John Boyle O'Reilly (1844–1890) who, though he belonged to the next generation, shared a number of McCarroll's passions in his own early days, notably an interest in poetry and journalism and, most importantly, a short-lived commitment to Fenianism in the late 1860s.

James McCarroll was raised in County Leitrim in western Ireland and immigrated as a seventeen-year old with his family to Upper Canada in 1831. The McCarrolls were Church of Ireland people who had likely tired of the

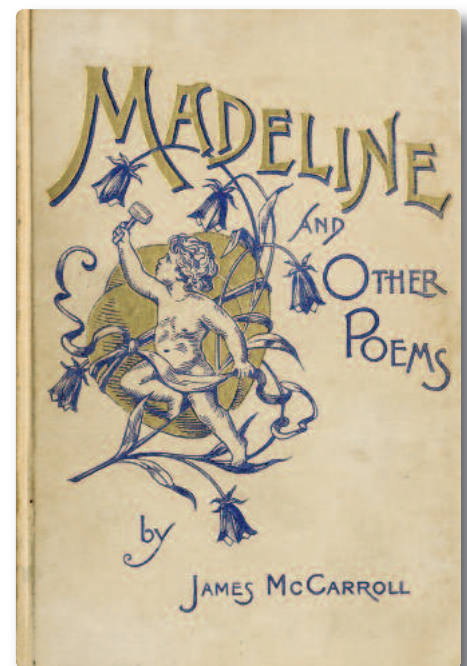
persistent pressures that they faced living as Protestants in a rural and intensely Catholic region of Ireland as the Great Liberator, Daniel O'Connell, was exercising a growing influence in the Irish countryside. In fact, as a sergeant and the Bandmaster in the Leitrim militia, James's father, Robert McCarroll, would likely have faced secretive and sometimes open hostility from Catholic groups; indeed, night-raiding vigilantes, sometimes operating under the fearful banner of "Captain Rock," often terrorized Protestants, especially authority figures, seeking money and weapons.

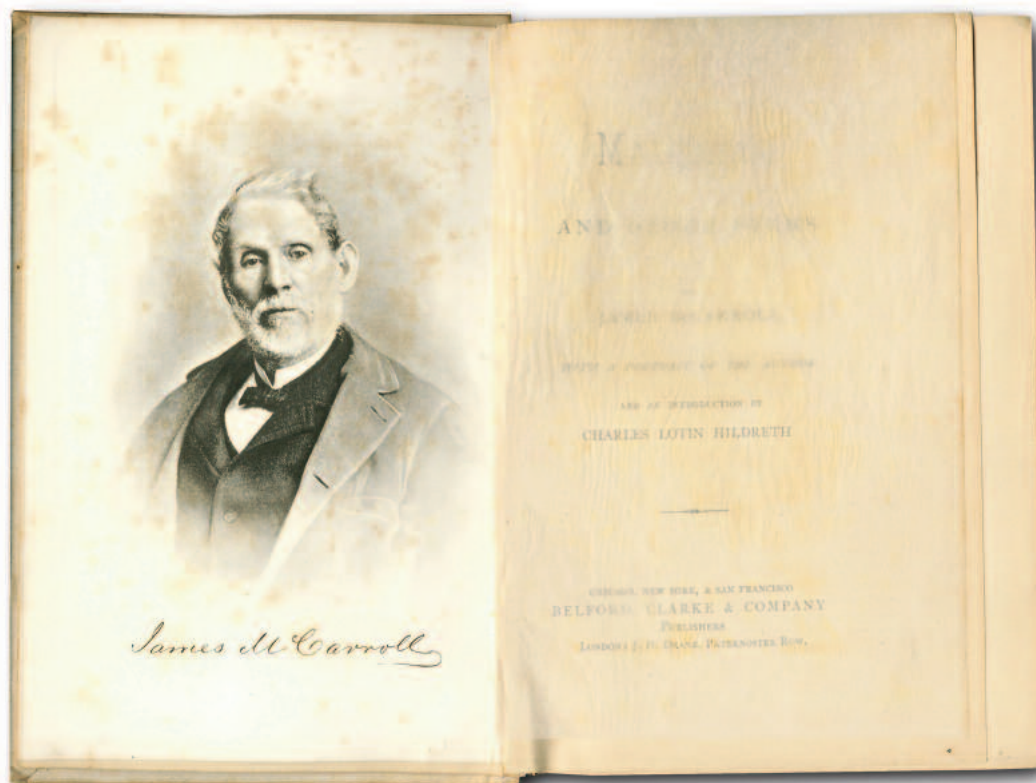
While in Leitrim, young McCarroll received what he called a "classical education" and was a protégé on the flute. Once in the backwoods of Upper Canada (later known as Ontario), he chose to settle in the fledgling backwoods town of Peterborough, where he met his wife and found work as a shoemaker (his father's military job), music teacher and journalist while, apparently, rising to the position of Secretary in the local Orange Order. From 1843 to 1846 he owned and edited his own newspaper, the Reform-supporting *Peterborough Chronicle*, which he lost in a printing-office fire in the summer of 1846.

That loss proved critical. It rendered him bankrupt, briefly, and it forced him to reconfigure his working life. Moving to

Cobourg, he taught music at a local hotel, continued to write for newspapers and magazines, and sought, above all, to gain a patronage appointment for his services in support of Reform. In 1849 his ship came in. He received a government appointment in the Customs Department through the largesse of Irishman and former Reform journalist Francis Hincks, who by then had become Attorney General of the province. His appointments with Customs would pay increasingly well for close to 15 years.

His customs work took him around the province, from Cobourg to Niagara Falls to Port Credit to Toronto. It was while working in Toronto as one of Her Majesty's Outdoors Surveyors (1855–64) that he became well and widely known as a writer and musical performer in the colony. During his decade there he was able to write for numerous newspapers and magazines under both his own name and such pseudonyms as "Terry Finnegan" and "Professor Pike, UCD." He wrote prose and poetry in crisp Victorian English,





but he became best known, and much admired, for his mastery of the brogue, joining that retinue of popular Irish writers (Samuel Lover, the Banim brothers, William Carleton, Charles Lever and later playwright Dion Boucicault) who turned the stage-Irish voice and character into a positive force in nineteenth-century literature. His poetic oeuvre included his “Irish Anthology”—poems written in the brogue, typically for amusement and comic effect. One example of this was his fascinating poetic tribute, “To Moore,” dedicated to the elderly Thomas Moore (1779–1852), one of his greatest sources of inspiration. It appeared in 1849 in a Peterborough newspaper. Here the brogue works brilliantly in both questioning Moore’s (usually) sentimental view of love, even as McCarroll deftly traces the high-points of his long and distinguished career. I can’t think of a more impressive and clever poem written in Canada at this time.

Terry Finnegan—“the inimitable Terry” in the words of one newspaper—wrote

letters from his tavern in a seedy part of Toronto to one of Canada’s leading Irish politicians, Thomas D’Arcy McGee, then one of Montreal’s elected members of Parliament. Appearing in a number of Toronto satiric magazines, these weekly letters were humorously cast, but their serious intention was to urge McGee to keep the interests of the Irish in Canada at the forefront of his political consciousness, whatever the political circumstances and pressures he faced. By the winter of 1861 when the Finnegan letters began to appear first in *Momus* and then in *The Grumbler*, the political winds were beginning to shift significantly; the idea of the creation of a country called Canada (by the union of Canada West, Canada East and the Maritime provinces) was in the wind and gaining momentum.

McGee was a man of many parts and great potential. He was a highly regarded journalist, an author and renowned orator who, in 1867, became one of the Fathers of Canadian Confederation. Moreover, he had first come to prominence as one of the

members of Young Ireland in the Rebellion of 1848. But, by 1861 (having moved to Montreal from the United States four years earlier), he had emerged in Canada as a rising political star; for many Irishmen he offered the promise of a politician who could promote a new level of Irish political prominence in Canada. Certainly, McCarroll was excited by McGee’s potential. He devised that Terry would write to D’Arcy as a friend and relative, as a fellow Irish-Catholic, steeped in old-country experience and nostalgia, and always eager to share a cup of “Irish tay” (read whiskey). His letters are a romp in the brogue; they are often vivid and lively. They also provide a number of satiric and comic observations about pre-Confederation Canadian life, but they do belong to the political moment and thus require a good deal of footnoting for contemporary readers. In the first letter (14 March 1861), for example, Terry advised McGee to

have a little more of the bird of passage in you, and step across the Spaker on the first decent opportunity. You can’t work the Pope and

John Knox wid the same sthring.
 Be independent, as they say...
 That's the way to make money.
 Always keep one leg loose on the
 flure *Animus vesther ego*. – “mind
 your eye,” as poor Mulloy of the
 “strawberry Beds” used to say –
 the Lord rest him. You're not like
 Joe Goold or Tom Short. There's
 something in you and we want
 to get it out. Take care of that
 Frinchman. I'll write you regularly.
 Let me hear from you at wanst.

In all, Terry wrote over 50 public letters to McGee from 1861 to 1865. They change in emphasis and purpose over those five years, darkening in response to the personal problems that McCarroll was experiencing. I refer here particularly to the sudden loss of his Customs position and his subsequent mounting anxiety. Indeed, he was by then so caught up in his Irish identity that he insisted on seeing his problems as essentially Irish in nature, belonging to the “No Irish Need Apply” school of dismissal, which he saw as far too prominent in Canadian politics and life.

From a position of considerable recognition and cultural status in Toronto in the early 1860s, with ready markets for

his comic letters, poems, stories, and musical and theatrical reviews, he risked that prominence and his reputation by “going Fenian.” He did so quietly at first, imagining that he enjoyed the confidence and support of both Catholics and Protestants in the city—a rather vainglorious assumption for the time; moreover, he believed, as did many Fenians in the 1860s, that there was a large body of Irishmen in Toronto and Canada West who would readily support an armed expulsion of the English from the colony if the right opportunity presented itself. Thus, in poems like “Three Loaded Dice,” he attacked government leaders like John Sandfield Macdonald for their political stances and, by 1865, he even turned good-humored Terry Finnegan into “Terry Fenian” in a couple of poems like “The Fenian's Vow.” Under increasing duress, he aligned himself with Toronto Hibernian Society leaders such as Patrick Boyle and Mike Murphy, and undertook editorial work and writing for Boyle's new newspaper, *The Irish Canadian* (which began in January 1863).

Having lost his valued Customs appointment in September 1863 (his position was eliminated by the govern-

ment as redundant), he did not behave circumspectly. He railed in newspaper articles about those who had betrayed him and even began his own satiric magazines as a means of keeping his situation and that of the Irish before the public.

A deep-seated restiveness and anger came to characterize his final two years in Toronto. In a series of begging letters to his one-time drinking friend, John A. Macdonald, then the Attorney General of Canada West and soon-to-be the first Prime Minister of Canada, he detailed his situation and his ongoing struggles, calling attention to his blamelessness, his immediate need for reparation, and even outlining some of his strategies for making a living, including the creation and promotion of his one-man comedic and music show that he performed in cities and towns across the province in 1865. The reading of a Terry Finnegan letter or two was always a popular part of the bill as was a comic lecture, “The House that Jack Built,” in which he mocked the grandeur of England and its empire. For his part, Macdonald promised several times to help when the moment was right, but nothing came to pass. McCarroll was nothing if not impatient.

“TO MOORE” (JAMES MCCARROLL 1849)

*Arrah, who would believe you're the boy that supposes
 That love always lies on a shake-down of roses,
 Inhalin' its splendid perfume;
 Whin you've seen him yourself—aye in all kinds of weather—
 On a wad of ould sthraw, with a dozen together,
 And a different sint in the room!*

*Ah, thin lave off your jokes and your swindling figaries
 That's sung from the poles to the bilin' Canaries
 Though the manes of enchantment I'm sure—
 For you've ruined the Turks and the Frinch and all nashuns,
 With your haythenish stories and thricks, and translachuns
 From that dhrunken, Greek son of a ____.*

*From this kind of doins', begorra I'm thinkin'
 Your apt to “blaze blazes” at humbug and dhrinkin
 And “followin' out your own whim”;
 And by ____ what's more, mind “the devil is in it”
 If half the young gossoons that know you this minnit
 Shouldn't dash off their names with an “M!”*

*“But whare is the use?” whin, to prove all I minshun,
 We sarch your own books, you lade off our attinshin
 In a way that would puzzle an elf;
 For just at the spot where we turn up our noses,
 You scahmer you're ready to Gul thim with roses,
 Till we lose every thrace of yourself!*

In the end, with his frustration and sense of victimization boiling over, he decamped to Buffalo in February 1866, ostensibly to perform his one-man show. In the end, however, he stayed on, aligning himself with the rising Fenian campaign in that border city. While in Buffalo, he edited two short-lived Fenian newspapers, *The Globe* in 1866 and *The Fenian Volunteer* in 1867. In making public his decampment, he became a man who had to be watched closely by Canadian border spies because of his knowledge of Canadian ports and their vulnerabilities. At the same time he had to leave behind his ailing wife Ann and his four daughters. Ann died in Toronto that same year.

McCarroll published his second book on his own in Buffalo in 1868. *Letters of Terry Finnegan* (first series) had appeared in Toronto in 1864. Entitled *Ridgeway: An Historical Romance of the Fenian Invasion of Canada*, that second book “was a novel whose narrative sought” to glorify Fenian goals even as its Introduction attacked John A. Macdonald for his many faults.

The question of how long his Fenian commitment endured is very difficult to measure. It was, I would conjecture, a flame that burned itself out within a few years. What I have found is that by the late 1860s he was earning a living of sorts by writing for non-Fenian periodicals. He found himself engaged in what he called journalistic gypsyism in New York state, but he was, as a stringer, working his way toward an editorial connection to Frank Leslie’s influential publishing empire in New York City. Later, he worked in various capacities for Leslie from 1872 until the early 1880s and he had a hand in editing both *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and *Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner*.

The rest of his New York life is mostly traceable through his writing and addresses. Sadly, there are no family papers to provide guidance here or elsewhere. He took up work for various

encyclopedia projects in New York and in his last years he was a regular contributor and editor for both *Belford’s Magazine* and *Humanity and Health*. He wrote plays in the 1870s and published *Nearly a Tragedy: A Comedy* in 1874 in New York. His final book appeared under the Belford, Clarke imprint in 1889. It was entitled *Madeline and Other Poems* and it brought together many of his poems over his long literary life, though, surprisingly “To Moore,” among others, was not included. In the collection’s Introduction, Charles Lotin Hildreth, his colleague and friend at *Belford’s Magazine*, stressed that McCarroll had made his literary way “in the very marketplace of life,” adding that he “probably ha[d] the honorable distinction of having edited or been connected with more newspapers, journals and magazines than any other man in America.” In the age of Mark Twain and Bret Harte, this was a bracing assertion.

James McCarroll offers researchers like me a literary life in fragments. His Fenian activities cost him dearly in terms of reputation and legacy. Influential and prolific though he had been in Canada before 1866, he soon dropped out of sight to all but a few watchful Canadian friends. Then, when another Irish immigrant, Nicholas Flood Davin, wrote his apparently comprehensive book, *The Irishman in Canada* in 1878, he left out McCarroll entirely. Thereafter, studies of nineteenth-century Canadian writing mostly ignore him.

My challenge is to gather up as many McCarroll fragments as I can and to restore him to the kind of place and recognition that the quality of his writing merits. His impetuosity and his desperate politics cost him dearly, even though Fenian writing projects allowed him to keep on as a writer and editor in the wake of his major and extended disappointment and to resettle himself in the United States. No such

fragmentation marks the post-Fenian literary career of John Boyle O’Reilly, though his own trials were frightening. He had been an active Fenian in Ireland and when arrested was sentenced to death by the English authorities. His sentence commuted, he was sent to Australia as a prisoner where he attempted suicide on one occasion. Escaping Australian imprisonment by boat, he eventually arrived in Boston. There he came to reject armed Fenian revolt and made a striking career for himself as editor of *The Boston Pilot* and as a poet, and continued to support the ideal of Irish independence. A statue in his honor stands on the Fenway in his adopted city.

James McCarroll has no such commemoration. My goal is thus to bring him back to a kind of fullness by gathering his many extant fragments together and by, among other arguments, looking closely at the stage-Irish tradition which he so deftly exploited and the background of the scientific racism of Victorian era that he, a proud Celt, sought valiantly to resist. Indeed, certain of his identifiable newspaper columns suggest that, in his valuing of Celtic achievement and commitment to culture, he was thinking along the lines that Thomas Cahill developed in his best seller of the last decade, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (1995).

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