Charles Fanning
Irish-American Scholar

Charles Fanning of Bridgewater’s English Department is a man on a mission. An Irish-American scholar with five books to his credit and numerous published articles and papers, Fanning has spent his professional life exploring and explaining the literary contributions of the Irish who settled in the United States.

Fanning’s work on the Irish experience in America has been both a joy and a struggle. While he is excited and proud of his scholarly accomplishment, Fanning is also saddened by the prejudice shown toward the work of Irish-American writers. For example, Fanning points out that the writings of James T. Farrell of *Studs Lonigan* fame have been long overlooked by the American literary establishment and in some cases vilified by Anglophile New York critics who relegated Farrell’s work to the level of dime store novels.

To counteract the injustice done to Irish-American writers, Fanning recently published *The Irish Voice in America: Irish-American Fiction from the 1760s to the 1980s* (University of Kentucky Press) which is the culmination of eleven years of research tracing the numerous strands of writing by the Irish in America. As Fanning proudly states, Irish-American literature is the largest body of ethnic writing in this country, yet Fanning adds with some sorrow that to most Americans, even second and third generation Irish in the United States, this writing is largely unknown and under-appreciated.

Fanning describes his work as part of a renewal of interest in Irish culture in the United States, a renewal designed to replace harsh stereotypes with pride. Today there are numerous signs that Fanning is not alone in his attempt to revive Irish culture in America. Irish step-dancing, courses in the Gaelic language, and historically-informed concern for the so-called “troubles” in Northern Ireland, point to a revival of Irishness in this country.

Charles Fanning takes pride in the role Bridgewater State College has played in the Irish revival. Fanning notes that Professor Vincent Gannon of the Music Department taught one of the first Irish literature courses on an American college campus years before Boston College and others began develop-
ing programs about the Irish experience. Even today, Fanning and his colleague in the English Department, Maureen Connelly, offer one of very few two-semester course sequences on Irish literature in New England.

Yet for all the success Fanning has had advancing the cause of Irish and Irish-American literature, he continues to see the persistence of traditional stereotypes. Contemporary examples of Irish-bashing include a recent cartoon in a local paper showing a beer-guzzling Irishman with a shamrock on his shirt and the children’s animated movie *An American Tail* presenting the Irish (mouse) immigrant as a corrupt politician. Moreover, Fanning is also disappointed in the general apathy of many college students with Irish-American backgrounds who seem unconcerned by negative stereotypes and in some cases eagerly advance those stereotypes.

Fanning, however, is most critical of fellow authors such as Mary Gordon who in her highly praised novel, *Final Payments*, continues the Irish-bashing by filling her book with drunken priests, repressed pietistic spinsters, and neighborhoods of malcontents and right-wing yahoos. In Fanning’s view, the work of authors like Gordon reflects a new wave of anti-Irish writers and critics who seem bent on continuing to present the Irish in a negative light.

But while there is much to be concerned about in terms of anti-Irish writing, Fanning is quick to point out that not all of the recent writing on the Irish is in the Gordon mold. Contemporary Irish-American writers such as Elizabeth Cullinan, Thomas Flanagan, Maureen Howard, and William Kennedy are favorites of Fanning. In novels about the Albany Irish such as the famous *Ironweed*, Kennedy uniquely combines earthy realism and poetic vision, and Flanagan’s *Year of the French* is one of the great historical novels of our time.

Although writers like these win Fanning’s praise, the real literary hero is this unsung scholar from the English Department. Charles Fanning has made an invaluable contribution to Irish-American heritage. By presenting the proud tradition of Irish writers in America, Charles Fanning is certain to receive the recognition of his academic peers and the gratitude of the Irish-American community. Bridgewater is indeed fortunate to call him one of its own.