Why Study Irish and Irish-American History?¹

For some thirty-five years, I've studied the histories of modern Ireland, of Irish emigration, and of the Irish in America. I'm often asked, Why? I am not "Irish," as conventionally defined. In graduate school I received no training in these subjects. Yet one answer seems obvious. Between the early 1600s and the early 1900s, Irish emigration comprised one of the largest global movements of men and women in modern times, one that had profound effects on Ireland and the United States alike. A second, broader response is that the importance of past Irish migrations is further magnified in view of the enormous contemporary rural-to-urban migrations from and within the so-called 'developing world'. Like Irish migrations in previous centuries, these are driven and shaped by the march of imperial capitalism, by its socio-economic and political systems and inequities. Put starkly, in Ireland from the 1500s to the Great Famine of 1845-50 and beyond, and internationally from Fallujah to post-Katrina New Orleans today, "accumulation by dispossession" of the poor and the defeated is the iron thread that weaves Ireland's past and the global present into a seamless, bloody tapestry. The result is that we now inhabit a "planet of slums" and of refugees from imperial-capitalist "re-structurings" — a world ravaged by armed and unfettered greed and corruption, poised on the edge of ecological catastrophe. Thus, a final answer is that, if resistance to, even rebellion against, the powers that impose such tyrannies and inequities are inevitable and even necessary, then it is important to learn that, however inadequately or transiently, in both the distant and recent pasts, the Irish—sometimes Protestants as well as Catholics—

¹ This essay is adapted from the Introduction to my most recent book, *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration* (Dublin, 2008).
were often in the forefront of such resistance and rebellion, both at home and abroad. Their country's history had prepared them to recognize all too clearly, as one Irish Protestant put it, that "the rich always betray the poor," and, in the words of a Catholic contemporary, that "society" was in essence "a combination of those who have against those who have not." As Elizabeth Gurley Flynn wrote, an Irish or an Irish-immigrant heritage should always have been excellent preparation for militant radicalism, for "[w]hen one understood British imperialism, it was an open window to all imperialism."

These are the aspects of Irish and of Irish diasporan history that, to me, are most important and worthy of study and of remembering. Somewhat unusually, I have studied Irish Protestants as well as Catholics, because Ireland's conquest and colonization determined that their histories and identities would unfold in dialectical (and oft-malign) relationships on both sides of the ocean. For evidence, I have turned primarily to the documentation of Irish and Irish emigrants' experiences and attitudes found in thousands of their letters, memoirs, petitions, songs, and other personal writings. These documents provided rich information on the causes, methods, and results of Irish migration, and, equally important, on the perceptions of the emigrants, and their Irish correspondents, as to the "meanings" of their homeland, their departures, and their lives overseas. The letters, etc., enabled me to examine both the commonalities and the conflicts among the Irish and Irish-American communities; and, combined with other research (in Irish religious demography, for example), they enabled me to challenge conventional interpretations of Irish and Irish-American history. The result is a body of work that has focused, in different but complementary ways, on mass migration as the key factor in
shaping — and understanding — modern Ireland, Irish America, and the "world systems" in which their histories unfolded.