

THE IRISH ARTS CENTER: A Case Study in Ethnic Revival

by Donal Malone

NYIHR member Donal Malone recently received his Ph.D. in Sociology from CUNY's Graduate Center. He is a lecturer in Public Policy at St. Peter's College, New Jersey. His dissertation was on New York's Irish Arts Center which is located on West 51st Street. Mr. Malone presented a summary of his research at the NYIHR 4 March 1989 meeting.

The Irish Arts Center is a cultural organization founded in New York City in 1972 by a small group of political activists. The founders had two related objectives: to revive Irish identity in America through the arts, and to mobilize support for the nationalist cause in Northern Ireland. Although their idealistic goals were perhaps unattainable from the outset, the organizers of the Center and their supporters did succeed in creating a viable organization with an elaborate program of cultural activities that provided some skills and promoted the Irish arts among the general public.

For several years the Center prospered, relying on income from cultural activities and the efforts of members who worked as volunteers. This early success, however, proved hard to sustain and the organization went into decline for a period in the early 1980s, losing the support of its members and becoming dependent on government grants. The Center's difficulty in sustaining its original vision and eventual decline is best understood in the context of larger social forces that gave rise to the organization and its development.

The Revolt Against Modernity

In the 1960's a countercultural movement emerged in the United States, in which many young people rebelled against the alienating effects of modern bureaucratic society. They rejected the values and lifestyles of their parents as sterile and materialistic, and embarked on a search for alternative ways of living. In their quest, some experimented with drugs and other forms of hedonistic escape, while others turned to communitarian movements, spiritual pursuits, radical politics, or traditional culture. As one observer noted at the time, these manifold pursuits represented American youth's attempts to "transform the rationalistic bureaucratic formalized pattern of relationships which they believe characterize mainstream American life."¹

The Irish Arts Center is best understood in the context of this youth rebellion when American youth sought respite from the rationality and impersonality of contemporary society. Led by an assortment of political and social activists, the Arts Center set out to revive traditional Irish culture, not only for aesthetic reasons, but as a model of a way to live. In common with those who had led the Irish Literary Revival in turn-of-the-century Ireland, the organizers of the Arts Center saw traditional Irish culture as an alternative to modern society with its emphasis on individualism and profit. The supposed rural simplicity and communal values of pre-industrial Ireland were contrasted with the complexity and competitiveness of the modern world. Against the disorienting and fragmenting forces of contemporary society, Irish folk culture was held up as a superior way of life, a symbol of the integrated community. As one former leader described the impulse behind the Center: "It was a cultural enterprise by urban Irish and non-Irish who saw in Irishness a symbol of a more fully human possibility in community."

Like many other revival movements, including the one in Ireland at the turn of the century, the Arts Center contained an atavistic impulse. Thus the organization emphasized the restoration of "traditional" Irish culture and generally eschewed more recent Irish and Irish American cultural forms as diluted or distorted versions of the original one. For example, the Center celebrated pre-Christian, Celtic holidays and customs that have long since disappeared in Ireland. Like the Romantics in the nineteenth century, the Arts Center looked to primitive mythology and peasant culture for a more authentic tradition, one furthest removed from the corrupting influences of civilization. This quest for authenticity is also part of an age-old struggle to restore the last unity of man. As one commentator described the impulse to recreate the past:

Only in the revival of primitive myth, in the immediacy of poetry, and in the revival of passion, can we reconstitute ourselves as both feeling and thinking human beings.²

Thus, at one level, the Center's attempt to reestablish traditional Irish culture can be seen as an attempt to create some form of community in the face of the alienating affects of modernity.

The Irish Arts Center's roots in the counterculture can be seen not only in its veneration of traditional culture, but in its politics as well. Its founders and organizers were schooled in the radical politics of the counterculture. They were political and social activists who had participated in the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam War activities, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and union organizing. Because of this influence, the Center was organized as a participatory democracy in which the members ran the organization, taking part in most decisions, and doing most of the work as volunteers. In addition, the group was committed to forging ties with minorities, labor unions, and the local community.

While the Arts Center's participatory democracy and outreach efforts reflected the activist wing of the countercultural movement, its emphasis on amateur participation in the arts, self-expression, and personal development was more reminiscent of the movement's introspective branch.³ This broad orientation made the Center attractive to a variety of individuals (including non-Irish), with a diversity of motives.

The Irish Arts Center is one example of a variety of alternative, anti-bureaucratic organizations that arose in the 1960's and 1970's as part of the growing resistance of many young people to the impersonality and authoritarianism of formal institutions.⁴ In search of greater autonomy, spontaneity, and mutual support, these young people formed their own collectives. They were usually volunteer-run community-oriented groups such as free schools, alternative newspapers, medical or legal clinics, and art centers.

In contrast to bureaucratic organizations, these collectives are committed to operating as participatory democracies. In addition, there is little division of labor, and members are encouraged to contribute to the organization in a variety of ways. Further, members are motivated by a commitment to shared ideals, rather than by the incentives of salary, supervision, and rules common in bureaucracies. Finally, in search of community, collectivist organizations stress intimacy and warmth in relations among the members and judge the members more according to personal attributes than by official position as in more formal structures.

The Reaction Against Assimilation

The countercultural movement was one influence, but the Irish Arts Center should also be seen in the context of the general

resurgence of ethnicity in America during the late 1960's and early 1970's. In attempting to reverse the tide of assimilation that appeared to be overwhelming them, many of America's older ethnic groups began to reassert their cultural identities and, in the process, rejected any suggestion that they were disappearing into the mainstream. Although the cultural revival among America's white ethnic groups was partly a response to the rising demands of blacks for greater equality, it also signaled a yearning for history and community.

For many white ethnics, moving up in American society meant severing or weakening many ties to the past, ties which were later deemed valuable. In reflecting on their past, they lamented the loss of their cultural heritage and the sense of belonging it provided, and sought to recapture it. For many Irish Americans, as descendants of one of America's oldest immigrant groups, there was an acute sense of loss. For example, Lawrence McCaffrey, a historian, declared:

Irish identity is going, going, and soon it will be gone. And it will be difficult—probably impossible—for the American Irish to recover something that has almost disappeared. . . the trip from the old city neighbourhoods to the suburbs has been a journey from someplace to no place.⁵

Andrew Greeley, the sociologist, lamented:

The legitimation of ethnicity came too late for the American Irish. They are the only European group to have overacculturated. They stopped being Irish the day before it became all right to be Irish. The WASPS won the battle to convert the Irish into WASPS, just before the announcement came that permanent peace had been made with ethnic diversity.⁶

As if in response to the specter of complete assimilation, in the 1960's and 1970's some of the Irish in America began to take a renewed interest in their cultural past. William D. Griffin, a historian, has noted this phenomenon:

Recently, many Irish Americans have joined in the general revival of ethnic consciousness and search for "roots" that has developed in the United States. The manifestations of this movement range from genealogical quests to debates over whether assimilation was inevitable or, after all, desirable. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this desire to recover cultural heritage has been the proliferation of groups promoting traditional art, music, and dance, and the study of the history, mythology, folklore, and language of Ireland.⁷

The Irish Arts Center was one such group that emerged with a mission to restore a culture it saw on the verge of extinction. Its founders and organizers felt the Irish in America had lost touch with their Old World heritage. In the view of these activists, the remaining vestiges of Irish culture were symbolized by St. Patrick's Day and its association with drinking, shamrocks, leprechauns, stage Irishmen, and Tin Pan Alley songs. They believed this portrait of the Irish in America was not only demeaning, but largely an artificial creation to serve commercial interests. They aimed to present an older, "truer" picture of Irish culture, one which would give Irish Americans a more positive image of themselves. As Jim Dowd, the primary force behind the Arts Center, told the *New York Times* in the fall of 1972 at the Irish Arts Center's inauguration:

There are few real Irish people in the United States. They know little about authentic Irish culture and care less. The Irish American is a victim of cultural disintegration, as much so as the Mayan Indian. We have to go back to the beginning, to learn again what it means to be Irish.⁸

The organizers of the Irish Arts Center hoped to reverse the assimilation process by transporting traditional Irish culture to America, in the belief that it provided a sound basis for a lasting ethnicity.

Irish Nationalism

Another impetus behind the Irish Arts Center was the creation of popular support in the Irish-American community for the struggle in Northern Ireland. As activists on behalf of Irish nationalism, the originators of the Center found little support in the Irish-American community. They attributed this indifference to a diminished sense of ethnic identity among Irish Americans. As a result, the activists resolved to revive Irish culture in America, as a way to promote Irish nationalism. As Dowd explained it:

Most of the Americans I dealt with did not identify with the movement at all. Most Irish immigration took place in the nineteenth century, before the renaissance of Irish culture that began in the early years of this century. I realized that they needed, far more than another organization, a consciousness of their own heritage.⁹

Although the Arts Center did not succeed in producing a groundswell of American-based support for Irish nationalism, it did turn out several individuals who became activists in the movement here. Moreover, despite the Center's mantle of political neutrality, Northern Ireland politics has been a constant in the life of the organization. For example, over the years the Center has lent its name, support, and resources to a variety of groups and events dedicated to the cause of Irish nationalism. In addition, the conflict in Northern Ireland has often been a theme in the plays and other events produced by the Center. Further, the development in the early 1980's of a comprehensive Irish history program in the Center can be traced to a rise in tension in that part of the world at the time. This gave an unanticipated boost to the organization, bringing in new members, volunteers, and students. Aside from courses that focus on "The Troubles," the history program sponsors lectures and films devoted to them. However, the Arts Center's identification with Irish politics has also been a source of conflict, as members debated whether it was appropriate for an arts organization. Overall, though, Irish nationalism and the Center's identification with it, helped to rekindle ethnic loyalties and pride among the members.

The Irish Arts Center grew out of Irish American support for the Catholic civil rights campaign that began in Northern Ireland in the late 1960's and which evolved into a nationalist movement by the early 1970's. For those who organized the Center, their support of Irish nationalism was an extension of their political and social activism on other fronts in America at the time. Thus, the Irish Arts Center is best understood against the backdrop of the turbulent sixties when Northern Ireland erupted once again, when America's youth rebelled against the state and other authorities, and her ethnic groups rose up to reclaim their heritages.

Given this historical context, two sets of factors account for the Center's brief decline during the early 1980s: 1) internal organizational contradictions, and 2) societal obstacles to ethnic revitalization. The Irish Arts Center was established as a cultural organization for political reasons. However, by focusing on its cultural programs to spread its ideological message, the organization attracted many members and participants who were drawn to the activities themselves and not the reasons behind them. For example, they were drawn to the activities for entertainment, escape, the search for roots or a chance to develop some skills. This diversity of motives created conflict over the purpose of the organization.

Thus, almost from its beginning, the Center was divided and



A Home for Irish Culture...

That's what we've built at the Irish Arts Center. A place where thousands of Irish Americans have rediscovered their heritage. We are preserving and communicating an Irish culture that's ten thousand years old and as modern as tomorrow:

- Our classes in Irish music, dance, language and history bring more people every year a new understanding of their Irish roots.
- Our theatre draws rave reviews as the premiere showcase for Irish drama in America.
- Our music and dance festivals bring together the finest artists from Ireland and America.
- We publish *An Gael* and *Litr Naughta*, our newsletter, which will keep you in touch with everything we're doing.

You can help us reach out to thousands more with this vital message of Irish culture as a National Member, Sponsor, or Patron of the Irish Arts Center.

A 1989 ad for the Irish Arts Center. Its logo employs the Irish phrase, "An Caidheamh Soluis", The Sword of Light, the name of the old Gaelic League newspaper.

weakened by its inability to define itself as an organization. Unity of purpose could not be achieved because members were unable to reach a consensus on the nature of Irish culture, that is, whether it is political, artistic or recreational. The Center's insistence on operating as a communitarian democracy and its resistance to professionalization and bureaucratization undermined the organization's effectiveness. Eventually, it was unable to adequately support its ambitious program of activities and had to change the focus of its operation during the last years of the 1980s.

Aside from these internal factors, the Center's difficulty in sustaining its original idealism and activism had to do with the fact that its members were widely dispersed, and only segmentally attached to Irish culture and community. In this respect the Center stands in sharp contrast to the traditional Irish community that was cemented together by overlapping institutions of family, church, pub, and neighborhood and fraternal associations, not to speak of the spontaneous and intimate encounters associated with sharing a common residential space. Thus, in both its success and failure, the Irish Arts Center points up the obstacles to revitalizing ethnicity under the conditions of modern urban life.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Andrew M. Greeley, *Why Can't They Be Like Us? America's White Ethnic Groups* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), p. 14.
- ² Taken from notes of a classroom lecture by Joseph Bensman, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York.
- ³ A number of authors have noted that the counterculture was not a monolithic movement, but consisted of various subdivisions which could be roughly divided into two branches: one directed toward political and social reform, the other focused on personal exploration. Cf. Joseph Bensman and Arthur J. Vidich, *American Society: The Welfare State and Beyond* (revised ed.), (South Hadley, Mass: Bergin & Garvey, 1987); Kenneth Keniston, *Youth and Dissent: The Rise of a New Opposition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971); Daniel Yankelovich, *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the 70's* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).
- ⁴ This discussion of the development of anti-bureaucratic organizations is based on an article by Joyce Rothschild Whitt, "The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models," *American Sociological Review*, 44 (August 1979): 509-527.
- ⁵ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Diaspora in America* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 176.
- ⁶ Andrew M. Greeley, *That Most Distressful Nation: The Taming of the American Irish* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1972), p. 263. Greeley has since reversed himself to argue that ethnicity continues to be a salient feature of Irish American life. See Andrew M. Greeley and William C. McCready, "The Transmission of Cultural Heritages: The Case of the Irish and Italians," in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975).
- ⁷ William D. Griffin, *A Portrait of the Irish in America* (New York: Scribner, 1981).
- ⁸ "Irish Arts Center—A Proud Beginning," *New York Times*, December 7, 1972.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*

President's Message (Continued from page 2)

of the Irish in New York book project; Jim Hurley, who has loyally appeared to record the minutes of long business meetings; Pat Cahillane, Jr., who has computerized our accounting procedures and who makes auditing something to actually look forward to; and Angela Carter, whose infectious delight in ever-unfolding developments—aside from her willingness to do anything and everything for the Roundtable—makes all our efforts worthwhile. Go raibh mile maith agat!

Here's to the 1990s, a decade which I believe promises exciting progress for the New York Irish History Roundtable—thanks for being with us!

Best wishes, Marion R. Casey.

Extra copies of
New York Irish History
(Vols. 3 & 4) are available from
Irish Books and Graphics,
90 West Broadway, New York, New York 10007
(212) 962-4237