

Robert Schmuhl. *Ireland's Exiled Children: America and the Easter Rising*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 232 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-022428-8.



Reviewed by Mathieu Billings (Notre Dame)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Amidst a resurgence of Irish scholarship anticipating the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, historians have been slow to reexamine this subject from an American perspective. Indeed, the documentary film *The Irish Rebellion* (2016), co-produced by the University of Notre Dame and aired in the United States on PBS, sought to inspire an academic audience as much as it aimed to inform a popular one. Fortunately, Robert Schmuhl has begun to address this lacunae in *Ireland's Exiled Children*, an important book which explores the impact that Irish America had upon the Rising while laying the groundwork for future scholars to explore—and reexamine—the political, social, and cultural connections between Ireland and the United States.[1]

In this concise and well-written monograph, Schmuhl argues that Irish America played a unique role in the conception, execution, and public reaction to this seminal event of Irish independence. Quoting a speech delivered by President Kennedy to the Oireachtas of Ireland in 1963, Schmuhl maintains, “No people ever believed more deeply in the cause of Irish freedom than the people of the United States” (p. 157). The revolutionary Proclamation of 1916, after all, had recognized the support of only one other country by name: America. And millions of its “exiled children” in the United States, four of which

are the subjects of this book, funded and energized the cause. To be clear, the Rising was orchestrated and carried out in Ireland, not America, a point which Schmuhl clearly acknowledges: “it would stretch historical accuracy to paint 1916 too brightly in red, white, and blue” (p. 4). Nevertheless, Ireland’s emigrants and their fellow supporters played an integral part in the popular independence movement which began with the Rising and continued through the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

Schmuhl references not only the personal writings and correspondence of influential revolutionaries and politicians; he taps into the deep waters of American journalism as well. Unlike in Ireland, where a lack of contemporary sources have continued to challenge historians’ efforts in gauging public responses to the event, Americans commented frequently on the subject. As Schmuhl notes, for two straight weeks, beginning on April 25 and concluding on May 8, prominent newspapers such as the *New York Times* dedicated front-page coverage to the Rising. Despite the Times’s initial condemnation of the insurrection, the execution of fourteen rebel leaders and the incarceration of thousands that followed “made the British look cold-blooded and motivated by revenge rather than justice” (p. 6). As the *Washing-*

*ton Post* put it two days after the final executions on May 12, the gathering of two thousand protestors triggered in DC what the paper “expected to become a nation-wide movement in sympathy with the Irish revolutionists” (p. 12). Overall, the author’s research of newspapers, as well as the personal correspondence of key participants in America, marks an important and unique contribution to scholarship on the Rising.

Schmuhl organizes his work into four chapters, each a biographical essay addressing the preparation, fighting, and aftermath from the perspective of Irish American “exiles.” Chapter 1 explores the “intrigue of exile” through the life of John Devoy, a native of County Kildare who was exiled for treason in 1871. In America, Devoy became an ardent *Fenian*, or Irish revolutionary. For the founder of the *Irish Nation* (1880) and *The Gaelic American* (1903), only violent insurrection would win independence from Britain, as it had in the United States. Devoy not only organized financial support for the Rising; his leadership in the Friends of Irish Freedom advocated for the recognition of a sovereign Ireland at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. With the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, he lived long enough to see the fruits of his decades-long strife and eventually supported Michael Collins and the pro-treaty faction during the civil war that followed. Quoting the words of P. H. Pearse, signatory of the 1916 Proclamation, Schmuhl agrees that Devoy was truly “the greatest of the Fenians” (p. 43). In chapter 2, the author examines the “romance of exile” through the poetry and journalism of Joyce Kilmer, whose columns in the *New York Times Magazine* depicted the Rising, contrary to the editorial conclusions of his employer, from a perspective sympathetic to the rebels. In the aftermath, Kilmer both influenced and reinforced sentiments shared by millions that “America’s voice will speak resolutely and clearly on the side of Ireland” (p. 68). Although neither Kilmer nor his ancestors came from Ireland, his “adopted ethnic identity” was Irish (p. 59). “In his mind, as well as in his heart,” Schmuhl writes, “he, too, was one of the ‘exiled children’” (p. 46). When America entered the global conflict in 1917, Kilmer enlisted in the “Fighting Sixty-Ninth,” New York’s renowned Irish-American infantry regiment, although he never returned. A German sniper killed him in 1918. Chapter 3 follows the decisions and deliberations of President Woodrow Wilson, whose “denial of exile” contrasted with Kilmer’s romantic legacy. Unlike Kilmer, Wilson could trace his heritage to Ireland, from where his Ulster Protestant grandfathers had emigrated during the nineteenth century. Also un-

like Kilmer, Wilson did not sympathize with Irish revolutionaries. Despite his rhetorical appeal during election campaigns, and the counsel of his Irish American secretary Joseph Patrick Tumulty, the president never really regarded the Irish Question as anything other than a domestic disturbance for Britain. When the Rising began in 1916, Wilson regarded it as a “great shock” (p. 82). When he attended the Paris Peace Conference, he ignored the pro-independence voices for Ireland, despite his rhetoric of self-determination for the people of Poland and Czechoslovakia. When the US Senate failed to ratify the Versailles Treaty, Wilson blamed Irish American politicians. Privately, he found the Irish “untrustworthy and uncertain” (p. 100). To be clear, Schmuhl does not attempt to explain whether Wilson’s antipathy “could have derived from his Ulster ancestry or his deeply held conviction that hyphenated Americanism had no place in U.S. public affairs” (p. 116). Nevertheless, Wilson did nothing to help the cause of Irish independence.

In his fourth and final chapter, Schmuhl examines the life of Éamon de Valera, an American Irish participant in the Rising, whose legendary escape from the firing squad represents the “myth of exile.” Born in the United States to a Spanish father and an Irish mother, de Valera’s American citizenship has long been regarded as having saved him from execution by the British. Untangling de Valera’s own accounts from British correspondence and other scholarly works, Schmuhl concludes that de Valera’s American birth did little, if anything, to save him from execution. Rather, his late capture and incarceration bought him time. By the time his number came up, public opinion—in Ireland and the United States—had already compelled the British to halt their reprisals. In light of de Valera’s own documentation, Schmuhl contends that during the decades that followed, the American-born Irishman clung to the narrative, despite its inaccuracy, in order to “keep the ‘exiled children’ in the United States in his corner—and his own biography helped strengthen those transatlantic ties” (p. 148). Not until the summer of 1969, by which point de Valera was serving his second term as the president of Ireland, did he acknowledge that his American birth would not have saved him. Appropriately, *Ireland’s Exiled Children* concludes with de Valera, an American-born Irishman, participating in the insurrection that John Devoy, an Irish-born American, had funded and envisioned.

Despite the author’s thorough researching of his subject, *Ireland’s Exiled Children* is hardly an exhaustive look at the Rising from an Irish American perspective—a point which Schmuhl himself concedes. Indeed, it is one of the

strengths of this work that it may serve as a launching pad for further inquiries: How did the Catholic Church, dominated by an Irish hierarchy in American cities, respond to the events of 1916? How did Irish American women, who represented more than half of the Irish population in the United States, contribute? It would also be worth further exploring how the American experiences of labor advocates such as James Connolly, who resided in the United States from 1902 to 1910 and was executed for having participated in the Rising, as well as James Larkin, who was stateside in 1916, differed from Devoy and de Valera in their outlooks on Irish independence. US historians would like to know how newspapers outside of the urban northeast portrayed the Rising and its aftermath. Did public support for Irish independence affected nativism and immigration restrictions during the 1920s?

Among the most important contributions of this work, however, is the subtext of a “special relationship” between the people of Ireland and the United States. Ordinarily attributed to British and American cooperation during and after World War II, the term “special relationship” underscores the close diplomatic and military ties that bound the two powers together through the early twenty-first century. Yet as Schmuhl points out, in 1916, “‘the special relationship’ between the United Kingdom and the United States didn’t exist yet” (p. 84). In fact, the Easter Rising of 1916 revealed a social and cultural bond, made visible by the writings of Joyce Kilmer and others journalists, between Ireland and America. Public opinion in the United States, particularly following the execution of fourteen rebel leaders and the internment of nearly two thousand suspected insurgents, reflected a “special relationship” between the two peoples. With origins in the American Revolution and Ireland’s failed Rebellion of 1798, this rapport had been nurtured for more than a century by ordinary people—from the “bottom-up rather than top-down” (p. 155). By 1960, America’s “special relationship” with Ireland had not only led to an

independent Irish republic; it culminated with the election of an Irish Catholic president in the United States. Given recent scholarship which highlights the contributions made by the Irish in American history—as the country’s first ethnic group, power brokers of urban machine politics, and key players as well as opponents of an American empire—Schmuhl’s monograph suggests a framework for renewed scholarship and dialogue between Irish and American historians.[2]

*Ireland’s Exiled Children* is a welcome addition to Irish and American studies, as well as to the fields of immigration and nationalism—topics particularly relevant in the early twenty-first century. It is lucidly written and accessible to both specialists and nonspecialists, even including a chronology of events spanning from the 1840s to the 1930s. At an affordable price, general readers will surely enjoy Schmuhl’s storytelling and prose. Just the same, this work’s most important audience is academic.

#### Notes

[1]. Recent scholarly works on the Rising in Ireland include: Fearghal McGarry, *The Rising: Easter 1916* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Clair Wills, *Dublin, 1916: The Siege of the GPO* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish Rebellion* (Lanham, MD: Ivan Dee, 2006). Michael Doorley’s work on Irish-American nationalism stands as a noteworthy exception to this lacunae. See Michael Doorely, *Irish-America Diaspora Nationalism: The Friends of Irish Freedom, 1916-1935* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2005).

[2]. James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (New York: Liveright, 2014); and Emily Conroy-Krutz, “Empire and the Early Republic,” *H-Diplo* essay no. 133 (September 10, 2015), <http://tiny.cc/E133>.

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