

### Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South.

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#### Recommended Citation

Quinn, John F. (2014) "Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South.," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.1.19

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss1/18>

## Review

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Winter 2014

**Giemza, Bryan** *Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South..*  
Louisiana State University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780807150900

### Bringing to Light the Role of Irish Catholics in the South

Bryan Giemza is convinced that Irish Catholics have done much to shape the culture of the American South but have not received their due from scholars. To remedy this situation, Giemza, a professor of English at Randolph-Macon College, has completed a comprehensive study of Southern-connected Irish Catholic novelists, poets, essayists and diarists from the early nineteenth century to the present. He examines a disparate lot ranging from Father Abram Ryan, the Confederate poet, to Anne Rice, the contemporary author of dozens of vampire tales. While Giemza has difficulty drawing conclusions about such a varied group of writers, he does note that all saw themselves as outsiders to some extent and that this understanding shaped their work.

In figuring out who to include in this study, Giemza had to address several questions. If writers had been raised Catholic but had abandoned their faith as adults, should they be considered? Likewise, how should he treat authors who were of Irish descent but appeared to have little or no interest in matters Irish? And what of those authors who only lived in the South for a time and did not refer to the South in their work?

Giemza is determined to be as inclusive as possible so his writers need not be practicing Catholics or Irish or Southern enthusiasts. For example, he notes that most Cormac McCarthy critics see him as having repudiated his Catholic upbringing. Still, Giemza claims that McCarthy has a "liturgical mode of writing" and is committed to Catholic ethical views and thus deserves to be on his list (26, 205). Giemza devotes a lengthy chapter to McCarthy and tries to demonstrate that Catholicism has left a subtle imprint on him.

He also spends considerable attention on Flannery O'Connor even though he readily admits that she had little interest in Ireland and only used Irish characters in one of her short stories. Acknowledging that she was first and foremost a Catholic writer and intellectual, Giemza nonetheless argues that she and her family were very much a part of Savannah's Irish elite. Thus, in his view she was more Irish than she realized.

While Giemza tries hard to justify his choices, in the end it is hard to see Flannery O'Connor as an Irish writer or Cormac McCarthy as a Catholic novelist. Similarly, Pat Conroy, the author of *The Great Santini* and *The Prince of Tides*, seems an awkward fit. When contacted by Giemza, Conroy told him that he "couldn't stand Ireland" and made clear that he had no interest in Catholicism (242-244). Nevertheless, he too made it onto Giemza's list.

Giemza's book would have been stronger if he had been more selective in his choice of authors. Still, this work has many strengths and it should be noted that some sections of it should appeal especially to readers of *Civil War Book Review*. For example, he draws an interesting portrait of Father Ryan, the Irish-born poet and journalist who served as a Confederate chaplain during the Civil War. Ryan's poems lauded the heroism of the Confederate forces and were memorized by Southern schoolchildren in the decades following the war. Giemza also considers John Dooley, a well-heeled Virginian who took part in Pickett's Charge and spent the last months of the war in a Union prison. Dooley kept an informative diary chronicling his wartime experiences. Giemza briefly describes as well Rose O'Neal Greenhow, who undertook daring spy missions for the Confederacy and tried to serve as an emissary for Jefferson Davis in Europe. She wrote up her exploits before the war's end. Giemza thinks that it is no coincidence that all three of these Irish Catholics were staunch Southern partisans to the bitter end. No doubt they were convinced of the righteousness of the Confederate cause but Giemza reminds his readers that they were outsiders as well intent on proving their loyalty to the South.

Giemza also offers an insightful sketch of Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone with the Wind*. He provides a close reading of the novel, noting its many Irish allusions and the links between Scarlett O'Hara and Melanie Hamilton and Mitchell's own family members. Giemza can see why Mitchell had Irish characters figure prominently in this Lost Cause epic. Just as the Irish had been defeated but not broken by the English, Mitchell wanted Southern whites to respond with the same defiant spirit to the humiliations they had suffered at the

hands of the Yankees.

While Mitchell was proud of her Irish heritage and of the role that the Irish played in defending the Confederate cause, Giemza sees the same sort of status uncertainty in her as in the Civil War era writers. He thinks that may account for her decision to convert from Catholicism to Episcopalianism. Although she left the Catholic Church, Giemza notes that Mitchell's nephew made the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta the beneficiary of 50% of the royalties from *Gone with the Wind*.

Ultimately, it is not clear how much these Irish Catholic outsiders have contributed to the South's literary culture. To his credit, Giemza does not make any sweeping claims about their influence. Instead, he speaks of "cross-pollination" when looking at these authors and their relationship with the South (30). These writers probably did shape Southern culture more than scholars before Giemza have acknowledged and no doubt were affected by living in a region where Irish Catholics were always a marginal presence.

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