

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

45 – *The Best Are Leaving*
(22 January 2020)

THE BEST ARE LEAVING:
Emigration and Post-War Irish
Culture

Author: Clair Wills

Publisher: [Cambridge University Press](#), 2015
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

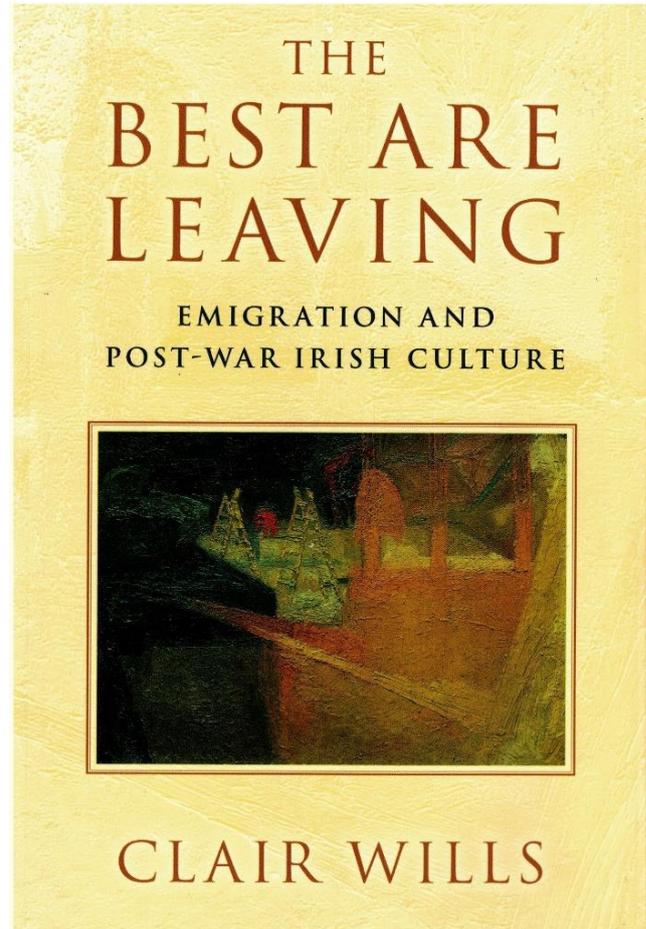
Descriptor: Painful but fascinating account of how Ireland, living in the long, black shadow of Eamon De Valera and his anti-British moralism, drove so many young people out of the country—mostly to Britain.

RusRoL relevance: *Shows how STATUS (Irish race/cultural chauvinism) failed to hold the attention and loyalty of those preferring a life of CONTRACT (free work and leisure in hedonistic Britain).*

Quote: “Four out of every five children born in Ireland between 1931 and 1941 emigrated in the 1950s.”

Reason to read: One of the best books I have read about post-independence Ireland. It shows what a catastrophic—I use the word advisedly—impact De Valera’s authoritarian Catholicism had on the Irish people. They were victims of his psychological imbalance, and the consequent imbalance of so many people he chose to serve him. It is not a pretty story. I particularly liked it for the awful vision it offers of life in some future “little Scotland” if it were ever to be captured by the virtue maniacs who currently haunt the half-empty halls of Holyrood. Their deepest desires are as airless and self-centred as De Valera’s were. They want to repress all unsanctioned freedom, just as he did. They want to starve creative Scotland of the oxygen of spontaneity, just as he did Ireland. (See Flann O’Brien’s mockery of dead Eireann: “A polite and truly Gaelic knock came to the door...”)

Professor Wills tells a melancholy story well, and with heart-breaking vividness when she quotes Irish writers who understood the link between nostalgia and nowhere. She is herself a half-Irish semi-



émigré, who is now a noted authority on Irish literature in London. The most important single fact she gives us is this: “Four out of every five children born in Ireland between 1931 and 1941 emigrated in the 1950s.” (p. xii) That represented a total failure of governance, and implied a higher rate of emigration than was caused by the famine of the 1840s (see review 44: [The Great Irish Famine](#) by Enda Delaney).

Taking the two books together, it seems fair to argue that Trevelyan’s free market did less *avoidable* harm than De Valera’s vision-induced, Vatican-compliant one. After 1846, around one out of eight million emigrated. Clair Wills says, “During the 1950s more than 400,000 people left independent Ireland, nearly a sixth of the total population recorded in 1951.” (p. 1) That is more than the post-famine years, though of course then there were many deaths too, but that is another subject and one best covered by Professor Delaney. The post-War Irish story is essentially one of “a traditional Irish small-farming culture in decline and a secular, industrial, modernising, urban British culture” which was just across the water and hungry for Irish workers. (p. 2)

The result was tragic. Professor Wills comments: “For a time in the mid-1960s it was London teams (with London specially designated an Irish county) which took the all-Ireland trophies in the Junior Championships of the Gaelic Football League – there can have been few more damning indictments of the project of national independence.” (p. 7)

Main talking points:

1. In connection with the modern Scottish political trick of using popular illusions about the past to justify repressive policies in a very different present, this point is important: “Emigrants carried with them pride in the nation that had failed to provide for them. In time, this was to develop into a sentimental attachment to their Irishness... Part of the story of the Irish in Britain is about how the emptied-out Irish countryside became filled with meanings and associations which *continue to determine our understanding of Ireland today.*” (p. 8, emphasis added)
2. In connection with “nostalgia for traditional peasant culture”, Prof. Wills notes: “The attitudes... formed a key element of nationalist theories of Irish exceptionalism. The idealisation of the peasant way of life was central to Sinn Féin and Gaelic League ideologies.” (p. 11) “The long shadow of revivalist idealisations of Gaelic peasant culture fall across these post-war descriptions of west-of-Ireland emigrants, which counter subtle forms of class snobbery (the best as the educated and most respectable) with subtle forms of ‘racial’ snobbery (the best as the most Gaelic and least corrupted by alien values).” (p. 24)
3. Why did the Irish leave their native sod? Prof. Wills describes the view of the poet and commentator, Patrick Kavanagh, on “the failure of marriage and generation. With the young women long gone from the rural community and the old turned to barrenness and bitterness, the neutered life of farmers barely differs above and below ground. Kavanagh’s vision has come to stand for certain aspects of the death of rural Ireland – the spiritual and sexual hunger of the small farm in the shadow of what by the mid-50s would be termed ‘the vanishing Irish.’” (p. 27) The causes of that death, Kavanagh continued, were “the traumas of family violence, sexual abuse, clerical repression, and the patriarchal authoritarianism of rural Gaelic Ireland in mid-century.”

4. The Gaelic way of life does not sound like it had much to recommend it. One celebrated author (much quoted here), M.J. Molloy, created a character, Nana, a “bachelor’s daughter” (*sic*), who was the only sort “‘humble enough to wed into a farm between a bog and a river.’ Poorly fed, beaten and abused, with no education, and no experience of ease let alone beauty or luxury, she may be the only type able to survive the adverse conditions of rural life.... The abuse Nan suffers is graphically shown onstage, underlining the cruelty of a system which requires the stamping out of all signs of individuality and self-fulfilment, at least in women.” (p. 59) M.J. Molloy’s brilliant simplification of all this is the bald statement: “The simplest definition of an economic a farm is one big enough to secure a wife.” (p. 76) To me, the key lies in the verb “secure”, not “support” as that has a continuing sense. “Secure” means simply trap once, after which no real attention need be paid to the wife in a country which did not permit divorce.
5. Associated with this is the danger to Irish culture of the female will-to-life. Women, Prof. Wills says, “were associated with the dangers of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and a drive towards materialist excess, precisely because their desires for domestic comforts and small personal luxuries were reasonable, and not excessive. There appeared to be no way of protecting the traditional small farm economy, and the community life that went with it, once the principles of consumerism and acquisitiveness were allowed... By default, girls wanted too much. They wanted stockings, they wanted a social life, they wanted to go to the cinema, they wanted their hair done.” (p. 77)
6. De Valera’s vision of Gaelic rural life was quite different. Clair Wills quotes him in her previous, equally fascinating, book, *That Neural Island: a History of Ireland during the Second World War*, as talking, on RTE in 1943, of “an island of saints and scholars” where he said the “countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.”

It is relevant that De Valera made this weird speech on St Patrick’s Day. That was a few days after the end of the battle of Kharkov in the Ukraine. It was also at the height of the U-boat war in the Atlantic. De Valera’s refusal to assist in any way with that made it much more dangerous for the Allied sailors to protect the world from a force which made Cromwell’s New Model Army look amateurish. Many of those sailors were Irishmen who refused to take De Valera’s cowardly view of the war for the future of the world. He preferred to let them and the Soviet Army do the dirty work of eliminating the Nazi threat to Ireland’s firesides. That was not a privilege that Soviet “maidens” had. But they were Communists, it might be argued. If so, then what about the 39 Catholic nuns who were machine-gunned in the Kairiru islands, off new Guinea, by the Japanese Navy on the day De Valera delivered his speech? How were they helped by vacuous visions of cosy homesteads on joyous islands of saints and scholars?

Left Field: Thinking about the level of nostalgia associated with the Gaeltacht and the pre-modern west of Ireland, the unwary reader might be tempted to conclude that the Irish preferred life under British rule—or would have done if it had been called something else, like rule by Europe. Can it really

be, as this text unintentionally implies, that “the Celt” (to use a nationalist Irish racism) prefers to have others telling it what to do?

Style: Literate, clear and precise, yet without the sense of style one might have hoped for in a half-Irishwoman. On a second reading, I came to the conclusion that English academia has not been kind to Prof. Wills as she seems to have lost the attractive mix of paradox, irony and knowing sentimentalism which is such a distinctive feature of the best Irish writing. There are hints of this in her account of her contact with the Irish émigré community, to which she was related, on drab Sunday lunch-times in Hammersmith pubs. (pp. xi-xiv) There, I imagine the old clichés about the Emerald Isle and The Forty Shades of Green were repeated endlessly over pints of porter by people who could not fit into English society any more easily than they could go back “home” after decades away. Yet some did fit in. Prof. Wills mentions Eamonn Andrews, Terry Wogan, Dave Allen and Val Doonican, but only in passing. Perhaps that is the subject of another book. If so, it could usefully include some who really made an impact in Britain—one such would be Prof. Delaney. There have been thousands and thousands of others, and Britain has benefitted immensely from their contribution to national and indeed international life. Leaving that aside, I have the sad feeling that Prof. Wills has become accustomed to a restrictively “English” style of writing that runs counter to the natural instincts and amusing absurdities that so many Irish see all around them. Could she be another victim of De Valera? Like so many of the rebel Irish, the “long fella” was at some profound level (especially in the insistence on private individuality and the authority of the written word) almost more English than the old English—a puritan at heart. I’d rise a glass of dry sherry to that!

Publishing quality: Fine (not enough pictures, though)

Smile(s): Not many, another opportunity lost, I fear.

Author: Clair Wills was Professor of Irish Literature at Queen Mary University of London when she wrote this book. Now she is King Edward VII Professor of English Literature in the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge.

Link(s): Prof. Wills talks in the opening part of this long discussion of “globalisation” and Ireland—something De Valera would have abhorred. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rls2XZR5w7c>

Overall recommendation level: VERY HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk.

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