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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kieran Quinlan. *Strange Kin: Ireland and the American South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xi + 289 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2983-8.

Reviewed by Margaret Sankey (Department of History, Minnesota State University Moorhead)  
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## Myth and History in Ireland and the American South

Despite receiving public acclaim, the Coen brothers' film *O Brother Where Art Thou* (2000) has also had its share of criticism for the way it makes use of tried and true stereotypes of the South. Similarly, *Ballykissangel* (a television series first broadcast on BBC 1 from 1996-2001), in many ways an English view of Ireland, causes dismay among many in Ireland for its portrayals of the emerald isle. These two products of popular culture point to the challenge inherent in presenting either of these cultures, let alone both, free of fable, myth, or worse. Kieran Quinlan, born in Ireland and a professor at the University of Alabama Birmingham, may be the perfect person to handle the strange and wonderful relationship between Ireland and the South. Their inhabitants have much in common: they both live in rural areas dominated by a more urbanized and industrial region; they have a history of occupation and warfare (both open and guerilla); and they have strong traditions of religious piety and "lost causes" as well as the irony of being peoples who can be characterized by a spectrum ranging from noble and heroic warriors, writers, and musicians, at one end, to redneck and Paddy jokes, at the other.

Fortunately, recent literature is cracking the old myth of the South as Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, which typically described Irish emigrants as Ulster Scots-Irish as opposed to Irish Catholics. Scholars are also showing that emigration from Ireland was not nearly as monolithic as originally seen. Irish men and women left their homes for reasons that were not always dictated by religion or conflict with the British government. Nevertheless, both of these myths of Irish emigration have persisted for a

long time due to patterns of cultural production that nurtured them. Quinlan has some fascinating examples of the ways in which history has been rewritten on both sides of the Atlantic to include men like the Scots-Irish Andrew Jackson, whom Eamon de Valera incorporated into a 1919 wreath-laying ceremony that he led. Another part of this process was the appropriation of other histories, which resulted, for example, in non-sectarian French Revolutionary ideals having an effect on the way American southerners and Irish people identified themselves.

The thorniest issue in Quinlan's account, which he lays out in absorbing detail, is slavery. Slavery in the United States shaped the Irish consciousness in fundamental, and ironic, ways, especially as regards the roles of oppressor and oppressed. In Ireland, pro-independence leaders like Daniel O'Connell waved banners with freed West Indian slaves signifying a free man, while a white Irishman in chains represented oppression and chattel slavery. Irish people in the American South, and Irish visitors to the South, grappled with slavery, too, often influenced by the nativist and anti-Catholic leanings of northern abolitionists. These same Irish migrants could also, on occasion, evince clearly pro-slavery views as well. Quinlan quotes a 1921 W. E. B. DuBois article in which he claimed that African Americans were the most sympathetic to the plight of the Irish seeking Home Rule (as Frederick Douglass was to the increasing reports of famine during his lecture tour of Ireland in the early 1840s). But regrettably, Du Bois noted, it was too often the oppressed (e.g. Irish migrants) who were quick to abuse others (e.g. African Americans) at

the behest of an even bigger oppressor. There is almost no better example of what DuBois was talking about than the career of John Mitchel. A Young Ireland leader, Mitchel was tried and sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land in 1848, and, having escaped to the United States in 1853, eventually landed in Tennessee and became a pro-slavery newspaperman and lecturer. In another equally mind-boggling episode, Oscar Wilde, soon to experience the machinery of British justice, was unperturbed by the delay of his train to accommodate a lynching. And yet, although born into slavery as the sons of an Irish-American planter and a mother who was legally a mixed-race slave, the Irish-African Healy brothers (James Augustine, Patrick Francis, and Alexander Sherwood) rose, respectively, to positions as Bishop of Maine, head of Georgetown University, and director of the seminary in Troy, New York even as Roman Catholic orders in the south owned slaves for a good portion of their lives. Moreover, one of their sisters rose to the rank of mother superior.

These recombinations and juxtapositions of views and experiences also point to another theme in Quinlan's work: exchange. Quinlan treats the Atlantic much as his subjects did—as a permeable boundary crossed often and with significant cultural baggage. He assembles ripples of Irish-Southern influences to convey the flow of these Atlantic exchanges. Thus, in Ireland, Daniel O'Connell considered his anti-slavery stance (which compared slavery to Cromwellian “potato plantations”) carefully in light of American financial support to his cause. On the other side of the Atlantic, he gives examples such as a case linking Oscar Wilde's visit to Jefferson Davis; Davis's daughter Varina Anne's biography of Robert Emmet (*An Irish Knight of the 19th Century: Sketch of the Life of Robert Emmet* [1888]); and the “lost cause” poetry of Father Abram Ryan, author of “The Sword of Robert E. Lee,” which was popularized in musical form (1867). Even more striking, Ryan, a Roman Catholic priest, was held in esteem by the nascent Klu Klux Klan, which regarded him as an unofficial Protestant for his contributions to the cause.

The themes of exchange and crazy-kilter *bricolage*

come together when Quinlan takes on perhaps the most prolific generator of southern stereotypes, *Gone with the Wind* (1936), by delving into Margaret Mitchell's family background and the extent to which the book has wedged Irish Catholics into the vision of the Civil War south. Interestingly, although Mitchell's own research was flawed by poor historical interpretations available at the time, her social hierarchy of the Irish, from the poor Slatterys to the storekeeping Kennedys to the plantation O'Haras, may be more in line with a diversified Irish population as seen in recent studies.

The cross pollination continues into Reconstruction, as both the Irish and postwar southerners created heroes and educational vehicles to memorialize their suffering and wrap it in explanations. Quinlan's use of both literary and historical sources is particularly strong here, as he is able to give evidence not only from secondary examinations like Wolfgang Schivelbusch's examination of national defeats (*Die Kultur der Niederlage: der amerikanischen Süden 1865, Frankreich 1871, Deutschland 1918* [2001]), but also from poetry, speeches, and popular culture, not the least of which is the prominence of Irish comedians touring in blackface. The twentieth century has seen no lessening of the relationship, whether it be Ian Paisley's southern college degree, or the admiration of Robert Penn Warren for Yeats (but loathing for northeastern Irish-Americans), or the friendship of Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen.

As Quinlan points out, both Irish and Southern history are seemingly inexhaustible subjects with broad appeal, ensuring a reading audience for popular, literary, and scholarly examinations of these areas. His deft handling of the material, and the marvelous bits of detail he provides—such as Atlanta being the largest consumer of Guinness in America, post-bellum Mississippi spending one-fifth of its budget on prosthetic limbs, or Wolf Tone's plans to colonize Hawaii—ensure that these provocative chapters will find their way into the way I think about and teach British, American, and Atlantic history. As a monograph, this book is suitable and extremely useful for courses across the disciplines of literature, history, and religion.

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