My research is made from the words of Irish people who search the past for their future. They appear as unremarkable folk: they live in ordinary houses, decorated with framed pictures of their families. They prefer talking to writing. They are emigrés, members of Ireland’s lost generations, scattered from Birmingham to Buenos Aires. As such, they are often presumed to have formed their memories in the absence of place.

My research interrogates this presumption. I work to accrue migrant stories, using cultural history and linguistics to promote a deeper understanding of narrative and memory as it pertains to the Irish Diaspora.

Irish emigration — What is troubling about Irish emigration is not the act of leaving but the myths that precede it. By 1948, the notion of Irish identity as an extension of the Irish landscape was deeply imprinted upon the cultural imagination. “Land frames human endeavor” announced geographer Emyr Estyn Evans, following his survey of Ireland’s human geography in the 1950s. Later, the folklorist Henry Glassie would carry out a decade-long study of a small townland in County Fermanagh. His conclusion, like Evans’, sings to the indelible relationship between memory and place in 1970s Ireland. “The landscape we share with the dead swells into an encompassing mnemonic, embodying our history and urging us to judgement”, Glassie writes, in his own transcendent language.

For those concerned with the development of the still young Irish free state, these were comforting, wholesome thoughts that helped to set the march of the nation. Conversely, for Irish migrants now living in bedsits in Birmingham and Croydon, they crippled the mind. The idea of native landscape being a preservative of Irish identity tortured those who suspected their own decay in its absence. As the years passed, it seemed, the identities of Irish migrants would lose their very essence, left to spoil out foreign. In 2006, when I asked Bill Collins, an Irish immigrant in Birmingham if he ever thought of returning home to West Limerick, he answered like this:

“I can’t go back to Ireland. We’d be Brits if we went back. And that is the saddest part of it.”

Myth and memory — My research works to disrupt this closed-circuit arrangement of Irish memory, Irish landscape and Irish identity. Recording stories with Irish women has been especially helpful in this regard. As an oral historian, I have learned that female narrators proffer two rare gifts. First, as demonstrated by Svetlana Alexievich, women seem better equipped to recall memories of what a thing felt like. The death of a beloved child, the loss of a cherished parent: such is the matter of their memory. Second, as my current work suggests, women tend to use matrices of proximity rather than conflict to tell their stories. By prioritizing stories of their relationships — of families, friends or neighbours — women’s memories reveal a logic of interdependence that seems to transcend a logic of borders.

In our globalized world, with narratives of nationalisms aggressively re-emergent, such insights as to the true vectors of memory seems increasingly urgent.

Sarah O’Brien received a PhD from University of Limerick. Her doctoral research, funded by the Irish Research Council, investigated Irish associationalism in post-World War II Birmingham. Her subsequent research on the Irish in Argentina won an outstanding research award from Riocht na Midhe and was published as a monograph in 2017 by Palgrave Macmillan. Current research will be published with Indiana University Press in 2021. Widely published, she is Director of Trinity’s Centre for English Language Learning and Teaching and Assistant Professor in the School of Linguistics, Speech and Communications Sciences.
“The landscape we share with the dead swells into an encompassing mnemonic, embodying our history and urging us to judgement” (Henry Glassie).
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