

“I’ve been very impressed by the articles you’ve published”

Historian Kerby Miller discusses Aidan Beatty and the writing of Irish history

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*Kerby Miller is the author of numerous scholarly publications on Irish history. His book *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* won the Merle Curti Award Best Book in US Social History and the Theodore Saloutos Award for Best Book in Immigration History and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Miller is presently curators professor emeritus at the University of Missouri, honorary professor of history at the University of Galway and scholar in residence at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. Miller recently joined Tom Mackaman and Jordan Shilton of the World Socialist Web Site for a discussion of his career, Irish history, Irish history-writing and Aidan Beatty’s misuse of Irish history in his recent book *slandering longtime Trotskyist leader Gerry Healy*.*

TM: Thank you for joining us, Kerby. A biographical question to start: What was it that first drew you to Irish history?

KM: My family was, primarily, what used to be called “Scotch-Irish,” having emigrated from Ulster, in the North of Ireland, before the American Revolution. My family was Protestant but its origins preceded the strong anti-Catholic, evangelical trends of the 19th and the early 20th century. So I grew up in a household which was Protestant, but was consciously Irish and generally anti-British in the sense that Britishness was associated with imperialism, aristocracy, monarchy and tyranny on both sides of the ocean. So, my early attitudes toward Ireland and Irish resistance to British rule were very favorable although very vague.

And then when I was a history graduate student at Berkeley, I was preparing to write a doctoral dissertation comparing slavery and race relations in the US and Latin America, but I got sidetracked into research on the great Civil War Draft Riots of 1863. And that rekindled my ancestral interest in Irish immigrants, because they played a major role in those riots. Also, I was quite taken by the traditional notion that many, if not most, Irish immigrants had seen themselves as involuntary “exiles” in the United States, forced to emigrate by British oppression and alienated from US capitalist exploitation. That resonated very much with me personally because this was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, during the Vietnam War, the student protests, when Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Fred Hampton were murdered. I certainly felt like an exile in the United States, just as I thought Irish immigrants had felt a century earlier.

And so it was really, I think, a combination of those reasons that turned me back to a sort of ancestral interest in Irish immigrants and Ireland, Irish history, the centuries-old struggle of the Irish, at least some of the Irish, against English imperialism. And I turned that into my life’s work.

JS: You spoke about growing up in a family in which British imperialism was seen as the oppressor and the force against democratic rights. I wonder if you could discuss your view of the revisionist school in Irish history writing, which seems to minimize, or at least relativize, Britain’s oppression of Ireland.

KM: My own background in that respect is not straightforward, in the sense that when I began studying Irish history I knew so little about it. And I was so unsophisticated politically and ideologically with regard to Irish historiography that when Irish historians told me that this or that was the latest, most important and most brilliant and sophisticated work about the Famine or some other aspect of Irish history, I tended to accept it without question. And it took me a long time before I began to realize that a lot of this new scholarship was designed to minimize the effects on Ireland of the British conquest and colonization, even of the great Famine of 1845–52, and to undermine popular support for Irish nationalism. I’m not sure that I had come to that point even in 1985, when *Emigrants and Exiles*, my first book, was published. It was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, but some of the reviewers didn’t know what to make of it, because I was taking some arguments from historians who were definitely revisionist and others from historians who were very pro-nationalist.

It wasn’t really until much later, when I began to fully realize the political and ideological implications of revisionism, that I became as critical of it as I am now. I think it actually even took me until the 1990s with the onset of the “peace process” in Northern Ireland, which led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. I had been associated with a lot of eminent Irish revisionist scholars and they had always claimed that they were not pro-British or anti-Irish nationalist, but were simply opposed to all violence, on all sides, and wanted it to stop. Their emphasis was all on the horror of the violence, which in many instances was horrible. But with the coming of the peace process and then the Good Friday Agreement, many of these very same people suddenly revealed themselves as very, very pro-British. What was most important to them was not that the violence should stop but that the British government and the Unionists should come out as the victors in the conflict.

TM: On the subject of revisionism, as you know, the *World Socialist Web Site* has written articles demolishing Irish historian Aidan Beatty’s biography of Gerry Healy. Have you been able to follow this controversy? What do you make of the discussion?

KM: I’ve been able to follow it in the articles that have appeared in the *World Socialist Web Site*. I know little or nothing about Gerry Healy, and I don’t think I’ve ever read much of anything written by Beatty until your work caused me to do some reading. I was very surprised to learn that in 2025 he’s going to be president of the American Conference for Irish Studies—the ACIS. It seems quite extraordinary. And I was even more surprised to learn about the academic and financial support that Beatty has received from various Zionist organizations, and that he has based much of his career on drawing positive historical analogies between Irish nationalism and Zionism.

TM: This brings up the question of just what it is about Irish history that the revisionists are fighting against. There’s a long tradition of struggle

against colonial oppression in Ireland that's, by the way, totally absent from Beatty's book, a glaring omission when one is ostensibly writing a biography of a socialist leader. How have these struggles found expression in the lives of the immigrants you've researched?

KM: That's a very difficult question to answer. One historian argued that something like a half-million people were evicted during the Great Famine—that is, in the late 1840s and early 1850s alone. So they were either evicted by their landlords, or if they were landless laborers or sub-holders, they could have been evicted by what were called strong farmers, that is, relatively well-off commercial farmers who might have belonged to the same church as the people whom they evicted.

Now the question is, to what degree would those people have been politically conscious so that they would conceptualize what had happened to them in a broader context, a broader political context, an anti-imperialist context. I suspect that a very large number of them would have done so because anti-British and anti-imperialist stories and themes were so popular in the folklore and the poetry of people in the Irish countryside.

What I argued in my own work was that the degrees of loneliness in America or the degrees of alienation from American life, which many Irish immigrants felt and expressed in their letters, were related to deep-seated historical and cultural reluctance to emigrate and a traditional blaming of England and of the landlord class for the poverty that had obliged them to emigrate. And I think, to get back to revisionism, I think that there was enough of that sentiment among the Irish in America, even many of those born in the US, that one of the Irish revisionists' primary objectives has been to try to convince Irish Americans that anti-British, anti-English, anglophobic, nationalist, anti-imperialist traditions are wrong. And that in order to be "modern" and sophisticated they should abandon those "outdated" notions and accept the allegedly "objective," pro-British, pro-American and pro-capitalist attitudes of the revisionists themselves.

JS: You spoke about the landlord system backed by the British and the violence that it caused and the horrific social conditions. The work that Beatty did on Gerry Healy, which we responded to on the *World Socialist Web Site*, contains a passage that I think sums up revisionism quite well and I just wanted to read it and see if you had a comment on it based on your own knowledge of the period.

He says, and I quote, "Galway had a tradition of rural agitation and even militancy in the later 19th century but had become quieter by the early decades of the 20th." And then he says, "The political violence that erupted in Ireland from 1919 onwards—posthumously called the Irish War of Independence—was mainly centered in Dublin on the east coast and the southern province of Munster."

So he's basically saying that this was a regional conflict in parts of Ireland that didn't really embrace the whole nation. What would you say in response to such claims?

KM: This is not really my research field, but I've always understood that there were important regional differences in the levels of anti-British, IRA activities during the War for Irish Independence.

However, I've been very impressed by the articles you've published, based on research by Galway historians like Conor McNamara and Fergus Campbell. I had not realized that there was so much revolutionary activity in County Galway—and so much counter-revolutionary violence by the Crown forces. Anyway, in general, I agree with you 100 percent. There's no question that Beatty, like most revisionists, does everything possible to marginalize the Irish revolutionary tradition and the evidence of Irish revolution—and also of British terrorism.

To take another example of revisionism, for many years several eminent Irish revisionist historians argued that in Monaghan, one of the south Ulster counties, the IRA murdered a woman, Kitty Carroll, solely or primarily because she was a Protestant, and therefore this was an example of how viciously sectarian Irish Catholic nationalists are. In fact, she was

murdered, after many warnings, because she was an informer. But, more important, Kitty Carroll wasn't a Protestant, she was a Catholic, and so religion and sectarianism were totally irrelevant. For many years, a few scholars kept telling that to revisionist historians: No she wasn't a Protestant, she was a Catholic; here's proof, here's more proof, here's triple proof that she was a Catholic. But the revisionists just kept playing the "sectarian card" and repeating that she was a Protestant and that was the only reason the IRA killed her. Finally, however, the revisionists gave up. They never admitted that she wasn't a Protestant, but finally stopped attributing Protestant religion to her. But then they made up another story that, well, the IRA had killed her not for political reasons, but because she had rejected the sexual advances of one of the IRA members. So, the revisionists stopped playing the "Irish nationalists are all Catholic bigots" card and began to play the "Irish nationalists are sexist pigs" card. Some of this stuff is quite amazing!

TM: I want to return to this comparison that Beatty makes between Zionism and Irish nationalism. Over the space of a decade he published a number of articles, a book, an edited volume, articles in Irish newspapers and appeared on podcasts touting this comparison, what he goes so far as to call a "shared history." What do you make of it?

KM: I think that you and I agree that the analogy between Irish nationalist resistance to British imperialism and the Palestinian resistance to Zionism is much more valid, much more historically accurate than Beatty's analogy between Irish nationalism and Zionism itself. Both the Irish and the Palestinians have been victims of "settler colonialism"—including genocidal methods—the former imposed by the British, especially in Ulster, the latter imposed by Zionism with British and now American complicity. So, to me, the analogy that Beatty is making seems quite false. It seems bizarre. It seems almost obscene.

JS: Continuing on the theme of analogies or comparisons, when you look at Irish history, movements like the Irish Volunteers in the late 18th century or the Fenian movement in the 1860s developed alongside or were influenced by revolutionary movements in the United States. Given your extensive research on Irish immigration, could you speak to us on this relationship between the movements on both sides of the Atlantic?

KM: The period about which I've written most recently is the late 18th and the early 19th century, because I was very interested in how and why many Ulster Presbyterians, both in the North of Ireland and in the US, defined themselves in that period as "Irish" and identified with Irish Catholic rebels in their mutual enthusiasm for the democratic and ecumenical ideals of the American and French Revolutions, and joined with Catholics in the United Irishmen and their failed rebellion of 1798 against British and landlord rule. I'm equally interested in the tragic, counter-revolutionary aftermath, because, by the mid-19th century, most Ulster Presbyterians in the US would define themselves as "Scotch-Irish," which had exclusively Protestant and usually politically conservative and pro-British implications. So, to me one of the more interesting themes of Irish-American history is not so much how Irish Catholics became nationalists and formed Irish-American nationalist organizations, like the Fenians, but rather how most Irish Presbyterians were politically and ideologically tamed and became what were called "Scotch-Irish" and, in relationship to Ireland itself, pro-unionist and pro-partition.

TM: That is a fascinating part of your historical work, how the arrival of the oppressed Irish Catholics altered consciousness among Irish in America of Protestant background. Could you speak about the Irish Catholic immigrants and the forms of discrimination that they faced? Maybe we could even draw you into making a comparison to the anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States today.

KM: I think that anti-Irish sentiment in the US was a combination of culture, politics and class. The poorest Irish were despised because they were of the lowest classes of white people in America, particularly the ones who had fled to America during the Great Famine, where they were

ridden by disease and half-starved when they arrived. It's also a question of culture. American Protestants inherited and expanded upon a legacy that was rooted in the English conquest of Ireland and justified in terms of the Protestant Reformation, which branded both the Irish and their religion as "backward" and "savage." There was a widespread belief that the so-called "wild Irish"—which included politically radical Irish Protestants as well as Catholics—were inherently "uncivilized," that they were ignorant, brutal, treacherous, untrustworthy and so on.

Finally, anti-Irish hysteria, and anti-immigrant prejudice generally, became politically useful whenever American capitalism, and the US political-party system, were in crisis. Today, the issue of immigration arises when American capitalism is arguably a very, very sick and a grossly unequal system, in which the American ruling class has offshored millions of manufacturing jobs, semi-skilled and unskilled laboring jobs, and when also there's a profound and ongoing political crisis, because both parties are controlled by the super-rich. In some respects, the United States today is not that dissimilar from the circumstances of the United States in the 1840s and in the 1850s, when anti-Irish sentiment soared while the American political system was falling apart over the question of slavery, and the American economic system was staggering between the financial panics of 1837 and 1857. But at that time very large numbers of white workers in the older seaboard states—native Protestant workers in the older seaboard states—could do then what they can't do now, and that is migrate westward to places like Wisconsin or Minnesota or Iowa where land was cheaper or wages were higher.

JS: Could you tell us about the Kerby A. Miller Collection at the University of Galway and what insights you've gained from the letters and memoirs of the emigrants?

KM: These are letters, memoirs and other documents that I began to collect and read in the 1970s. My doctoral dissertation was based on Irish immigrants' letters that I had located in libraries and archives, but I knew that I needed to find more. So, after I finished my dissertation, I got a postdoctoral fellowship at Queen's University in Belfast. While I was there, I made a public appeal through the media, asking people if they had any old Irish immigrant correspondence, and if they would loan their old letters to me long enough for me to photocopy them for my research. And as a result of that appeal, I got about 2,000 documents that people sent me.

And I did as promised. I photocopied and returned them, and then later used the material from those letters and memoirs in *Emigrants and Exiles*, which came out in 1985, and in my later publications. And ever since then I've been discovering additional collections of letters. Out of the blue, people have written to me, saying that they saw something that I published and asking if I'd be interested in seeing their own ancestors' letters. I always said, "Oh, yes, of course," and then once email developed, it became so much easier to communicate with people like that.

And so in the end, I ended up with thousands more documents. And a few years ago, my friend Breandán Mac Suibhne convinced me to donate the collection to the Hardiman Library at the University of Galway because his feeling was that the best thing to do with this material was to put it online and make it available to a wider scholarly and genealogical audience. So that's what's being done in Galway.

JS: It's a very broad question, but do you get a sense of the types of research that it has led to among scholars that you know? Are there particular issues that have come to light through the material that you've gathered?

KM: Between the late 1970s and my retirement in 2015, probably about 25 or 30 scholars, many of them graduate students, some of them Irish, some of them American, one of them from Cuba, learned about my collection and wrote to me, or I reached out to them. And either I sent them material from my collection if they could not afford to come to Columbia, Missouri, and sit down in my office and look at the material. Or they would come and they would visit for a week. And they would

pick out material that they thought would help them with their doctoral dissertations or whatever project they had in mind. To make their work most efficient, I would photocopy and send them the letters they had chosen.

These historians had a broad range of interests. Some scholars wanted to study what Irish immigrant women had to say about this or that topic. Or their research subjects were geographically or socially focused, in the sense that they were interested in Irish immigrants who became farmers in the Midwest, or miners in the Far West, or had lived in the South and had written home about slaves or slavery. So it was a great range of subjects. And I had a few of my own graduate students who used this material as well for their projects.

Almost everything that I myself have written in the last 50 years has been based at least in part on those letters and diaries and memoirs. But there's such a vast amount of material, and it covers so many subjects, that it's necessary to approach the material with some sort of conceptual framework or questions—sometimes based on class and class conflict, sometimes based on studying the immigrants' different regional or cultural origins in Ireland, or their different experiences in different parts of the US. I think that, generally, there were important differences between the experiences of Irish immigrants who were predominantly English speakers or Irish speakers, or Catholics or Protestants, or who came from relatively well-to-do, large farms or who came from the poorest, small-farmer and farm-laboring classes. Also, if immigrant adaptation is important, then what about the different American social, cultural or regional environments to which they had to adapt? Was an Irish immigrant who settled in New York City in, say, 1910 obliged to adapt to a very different situation than if he or she had settled in, say, Butte, Montana—or even in New York City fifty years earlier? Those are the sorts of questions that I've been trying to examine over the years and that most of the people who have looked at the collection have tried to examine as well.

TM: Could you tell us what you're working on now?

KM: One is a book manuscript that is now under review by a publisher. For the last several years I've been considering the question of Irish immigrant adaptation. I'm looking at the issue differently from what most people have done. Most have sort of assumed that adapting to American society—to its "rules" and values—was both necessary and desirable—that the US, the "world's greatest democracy"—was a society to which immigrants should adapt. I'm coming at the question from a different point of view, although it's also the point of view of many of the Irish immigrants themselves, who would for example write back to Ireland and say, "Dear Mother, this country is not what we thought it was" or "it's not what it used to be, because you have to do things and say things here that we never would have thought of doing or saying at home."

And then you had visiting Irish radicals like Liam Mellows and James Connolly, from a more politically sophisticated perspective, saying much the same thing of American society—that Irish immigrants were obliged to adapt or conform to an economic and a political system that was exploitive, brutal, corrupt, intellectually infantilizing—and that this had negative effects upon the Irish immigrants, because the only way they could "succeed," or even survive, was to embrace American capitalist and imperialist value systems, including class, racial and other prejudices. So that's the collection of essays that I've written over the last 10 years in various forms, some of which were published earlier, most of which were not.

The book will have an introduction, seven chapters and then an appendix, which will contain the full transcripts of two memoirs which are unusually interesting but have never been published. One is the memoir of a young Irish woman, a teenager, who arrived in Quebec in 1832 and who suffered through and barely survived the terrible cholera epidemic of that year.

And the other is the much longer memoir of an Irish immigrant who went to Chicago in 1882. He really exemplifies all the themes in the entire book because in the first part of his memoir he tells about how disillusioned he is with American society, how disillusioned he is with the capitalist system, how disillusioned he is with Irish immigrants and US-born Irish Americans who have already adapted to that system and who, in his eyes, have become very non-Irish, in that they've become sort of brutal, unsympathetic and instrumental in their attitudes towards other immigrant workers.

In the early part of his career he rebels against the capitalist system, he rebels against crooked foremen and exploitive bosses. He leads or is instrumental in leading strikes in Chicago during the early- and mid-1880s, the period of the rise of the Knights of Labor. But then everything changes radically with the Haymarket bombing of 1886 and the subsequent political repression. And a few years later he winds up his memoir by talking about how happy and proud he is to be a member of the Chicago police force—which was notoriously corrupt and whose principal function was to protect capitalism against striking workers, such as the memoirist used to be.

Also, I've been offered a contract by another publisher to produce a collection of excerpts from the Irish immigrant letters in the collection that I donated to Galway. So I'm beginning to work on that. And I have a couple of other long-term projects as well.



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