“Here, am I, in the midst of this immense forest”: Irish Immigrants in the American Wilderness

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In 1823 the Irish American author James McHenry published his first novel with the intriguing title The Wilderness or Braddock’s Time: A Tale of the West. “A writer of agreeable songs and lyrics and several popular novels” (Oberholtzer 213), James McHenry is now a nearly forgotten author, “a melancholy evidence that best sellers a century ago [are] as now often tawdry things” (Warfel 68). There has been no sustained scholarship done on him let alone on this single work and Robert E. Blanc’s James McHenry (1785-1845): Playwright and Novelist, the only book-length study devoted to this author, was published in 1939 and received few and unfavorable reviews on the part of contemporary critics: “unhappily Dr. Blanc’s textbook clichés in the midst of frequently repeated banal phrases do not support the conclusion that McHenry ‘is not an altogether negligible figure’” (Warfel 68). Recently James McHenry has been recognized as “the first Irish historical novelist” (Cahalan 45) and in the overview of the author included in the volume on Nineteenth-Century American Fiction Writers Maureen Ann Sullivan asserts that “McHenry’s contribution to literature should not be forgotten since he was the first American fiction writer to explore . . . Irish legendary themes” (186). Charles Fanning, the most prominent scholar in Irish American literature devotes almost an entire chapter to James McHenry, “the first Irish immigrant to make a strong bid toward earning his American living in belles lettres” (43) and a “pioneer in the definition of Irishness for an American audience” (43) since The Wilderness,
his first novel. More recently, this work has been selected for one of the projects in digital humanities at Stanford University: the text encoded “was prepared to be fully searchable for research purposes including concordance, keyword, quote, and ‘hypothetical’ searches” (Project Description).

More valuable for some of its cultural rather than literary elements, this novel is particularly relevant for two reasons: it is the first novel to describe the Irish experience in the American West and it deals with the Irish Presbyterians of Scottish descent leaving Northern Ireland, a group not often represented in Irish American literature which has tended to focus on the Irish Catholic tradition.

In his novel McHenry recounts the fictional experiences of the main character Charles Adderly and the Frazier Family, “the first Ulster Protestant immigrant family in American fiction” (Fanning 44), including historical figures in the invented plot such as George Washington and General Braddock. Through a series of thrilling, complicated and sometimes highly improbable adventures, an Irish Protestant immigrant family moves from County Derry in Ulster to Philadelphia and then to a farm by the Ohio River initially as prisoners of the Indians and then as free settlers living in peace with all the tribes around them. Charles Adderly arrives at the Frazier’s farm as the leader of the first expedition of the Ohio Company after a dangerous and exciting journey along the Ohio River, and falls in love with the Frazier’s adopted daughter, Maria. Because of their common Ulster Protestant origins, the Frazier family heartily welcomes Charles who has managed to become a prominent and wealthy merchant in Philadelphia, his adopted town. After several battles between the French and the English each helped by different Indian tribes, with a long section devoted to the English defeat at the Battle of Braddocks’ Field, the Fraziers and Charles decide to move back to Philadelphia where Charles and Maria finally get married.

My essay will show the transference of Irish immigrants’ traditional love of land to an intense relationship with nature and the landscape around them when they take their chances in the New World. A close analysis of the novel will show that after the crossing of the Atlantic the initial pastoral reverence for an idyllic Ireland gives way to an aggressively colonial attitude toward the American wilderness, their new home, on the part of Frazier and his countrymen. At the same time this objectification of nature solely “valued in terms of its usefulness to [humankind]” (Garrard 18) contrasts with the respect for nature on the part of the American Natives with whom the Irish immigrants come in contact when invading their land. The Natives’ respect for their homeland can be found in the words of the Natives as reported by James McHenry who anticipates Aldo Leopold’s theory of a “land ethic” as formulated at the end his A Sand County Almanac according to which “human beings are neither more nor less than citizens” (Garrard 72) on the Earth: “A land ethic changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (Leopold 204).
As regards the representations of nature, and of human beings in nature, the novel is noteworthy in that it depicts a significant variety of relationships between human beings and the world around them. It shifts from a Neoclassical pastoral approach to a more anthropocentric perspective on nature which will be one of the emerging attitudes of the pioneers in their expansion in the American West. Furthermore, Indian cultures and their different “constructions of nature” (Garrard 39) testifies to a third attitude toward the land: the ecocritical glance. It is interesting that these contrasting perspectives are contemporaneous: the variations are not due to the passing of time but to spatial variations as regards the cultures described.

“One bright morning in April, 1723” (8) Gilbert together with his wife Nelly sails from London Derry with a sorrowful heart and the idea of leaving Ireland for just seven years, the time to “make his fortune” (7) in America and become “rich enough to return home, and live the remainder of his days like a gentleman” (7). The entire story is marked by a tone of melancholy that starts as soon as the couple takes their last look at their native country “gazing at the fast retiring promontory of Inishowen, which was the last vestige of dear Ireland to be seen” (8). “Dear” and “sweet” are the most recurrent adjectives referring to Ireland which is always a source of heartrending grief every time it is mentioned. In spite of all “its poverty” (7) Irish immigrants always dream of going back. One of the most revealing descriptions in terms of the relationship to Irish nature takes place more than twenty years after Nelly and Gilbert’s departure from Europe. The Frazier family meets for the first time Charles Adderly, the future husband of their adopted child, and Nelly evokes for him the last images of Ireland still clearly impressed on her mind.

Nelly’s recollections of Ireland as portrayed by McHenry are decidedly shaped by the European pastoral tradition considered by Lawrence Buell an “unavoidable ground-condition” (Buell 32) of Western thought: “pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment, . . . part of the conceptual apparatus of all persons with western educations” (Buell 32).

“Alas, [cried Nelly] bonny Manghrygowan will ne’er be out of my head although all the Irish in America were to settle beside us. Its bonny green meadows, and its hawthorn hedges, wi’ their sweet smelling blossoms, and its soft dimpin’ burns, wi’ the yellow primroses, an’ speckled daisies on their banks, an’ the sweet pretty larks, an’ the thrushes, an’ the lads an the lasses, an’ the sports of a summer evening, an’ the jokes an’ mirth of a long winter’s night—ah! I cannot think o’ them without a sore heart for I’ll ne’er see them again! (106)

What Terry Gifford defines as the first use of the term pastoral is a historical poetic form that has its roots in classical authors like the Greek Theocritus and the Roman Virgil. Their poems talk about country life and the carefree life of shepherds in beautiful, simple and dreamlike landscapes, though they maintain contact “with the working year and the real social conditions of country life” and invariably present “a tension with other kinds of experience” (Williams 16, 18).
The Wilderness cannot be defined as pastoral in genre but it contains passages and descriptions that adopt the pastoral mode. Talking about pastoral in relation to James McHenry entails a reference to the version of pastoral, sometimes denominated Neoclassical, “that was promoted by French theorists in the second half of the seventeenth century and imported into England at the beginning of the eighteenth century” (Patterson 193). The Neoclassical tradition is an idealized form of pastoral from which all signs of contemporary hardship are banished in favor of delightful Arcadian images of rural life: in the Golden Age of the Neoclassicists, pastoral is relocated “under the sign of the “fête campêtre . . . Sweet, docile and untroubling, it was unmistakably a gentleman’s version of pastoral” (Patterson 206).

A convinced and conservative disciple of Pope (Oberholtzer 218), the foremost exponent of Augustan pastoral poetry, James McHenry adopts Pope’s version of pastoral and his suggestion that pastoral should be rendered delightful using some illusions: “and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd’s life, and concealing its miseries” (Pope 6).

In Nelly’s recollection of Ireland all miseries have been excluded and the illusion is made complete through the use of several pastoral conventions. Hunger, poverty, destitution summed up in the elegant expression “want of funds” (7) at the beginning of the book are completely absent and the natural landscape makes Ireland “bonny,” attractive and beautiful. The setting is gentle and welcoming with no sign of danger, time seems suspended in a perpetual summer and work is never mentioned. Human beings fit perfectly into the natural rhythm of the changing seasons: they are busy in outdoor leisure activities during summer and winter holds no threat. Far from being connected with starvation, dampness and death the long winter nights are recollected in terms of “jokes and mirth.” A sense of security pervades the entire scene.

Contemporary deep? Committed? Ecologists see in the natural philosophers of the Period of Enlightenment (among others Bacon, Descartes and Newton) the basis for a new practical philosophy that promotes reason as a means for humanity to achieve “total mastery over nature” (Garrard 62). Once human beings become “the lords and possessors of nature” (Descartes 49), the natural world is reduced to pure resources, or in Heidegger’s terms “enframed” with all beings as “mere instruments of our will” (Garrard 62): “Thus when man, investigating, observing, ensnares nature as an area of his own conceiving, he has already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve” (Heidegger 9).

McHenry’s Irish immigrants arrive in the New World equipped with the approach toward nature promoted by the Enlightenment and the Augustan’s pastoral enthusiasm for landscape gardening and improvement of nature through

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1 In his book Robert Blanc shows that McHenry’s “subject’s theories stemmed largely from the classicists of the eighteenth century” and calls him “ a classicist living in the Romantic period” (Halline 474).
a radical transformation and subjugation of the environment. The Irish natural landscape is a tamed one that differs from the New World wilderness. Green meadows, bushes and small trees, colorful and harmless flowers, weak and fragile rivulets as well as personified birds represent a nature of beauty, softness and delicacy that contrasts with the vastness, the obscurity and the overwhelming power of a kind of nature indifferent to human beings and impossible to limit and transform. Irish immigrants define the American wilderness as a place where

there was then nothing to be seen but an unceasing and monotonous continuation of gloomy, thick, and, in many places, impenetrable forests, covering vast and awful mountains and wild and gloomy glens and valleys; concealing lonely rivers and impassable swamps; and yielding inaccessible retreats to numerous races of wild animals and beasts of prey, and human savages. (43)

The Wilderness is viewed with ambivalence by the Judeo-Christian tradition in that it is both “the environment of evil, a kind of hell” (Nash 15) but also “the environment in which to find and draw close to God, . . . a sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society” (Nash 16). For Irish settlers, however, it almost invariably coincides with an unwelcoming, dangerous, unmapped and unintelligible territory to be transformed.

Implicit in the idealized, artificial representations of the Ireland of neoclassical sensibility, is the anthropocentric perspective on nature of Gilbert Frazier who fully intends to put into practice his intention to disentangle and transform the American wilderness through his intelligence and toil: “His farm advanced yearly in improvement, and its produce in value; for being long the only cultivator of the soil for many day’s journey around him, and living convenient to a navigable river, . . . he could always without difficulty, make a ready and profitable sale of his surplus produce” (24). His relation to the wilderness is conceived in terms of “management of a farm” (11), “habits of industry” (19) and economic gain so that nature is not appreciated in itself but only as a reservoir for human goals and achievement.

It is precisely Frazier’s attitude toward the American wilderness that persuaded James McHenry’s editor to republish the novel after twenty-five years. In the preface The Wilderness is defined as “an American work, abounding in incidents connected with the early settlement of the Great West” (i). The new edition is meant to be a tribute to the efforts of the pioneers of the past “the fruits of which have displayed themselves in the well-tilled farms and splendid cities, teeming with millions of intelligent and happy people, that cover the whole West”(i).

Only when the Irish settlers have transformed the wilderness into a pastoral setting and the landscape of the New World has been remodeled on the landscape of Ireland can they feel that the United States is their “home”: “it was now that Gilbert began, in the midst of the desert, that course of industry which, in a short time created a smiling and comfortable farm round him, and which, in a few years, attached him so much to the place, that he abandoned all thoughts of

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ever leaving it” (23). Seen from a distance Gilbert Frazier’s house is a “neat and prosperous looking farm, with its warm fences, its orchards, its meadow-ground, and its fields of maize, and its stacks of grain, surrounding a large, substantial log-dwelling house, of comfortable appearance” (90-91). It is an unexpected sight in the “midst of a barbarous and pathless wilderness” (87) that takes Charles Ad- derly by surprise and fills him with “home-felt comfort” (9). Charles attempts to achieve on a larger scale what Frazier had achieved for his and his family’s survival: the possession of the land and the subjugation of wild space.

This craving for land is what makes Irish, and in general, European settlers come into conflict with the Indian Natives and with their completely different attitude toward the land and the Earth. In the several speeches of Indian Chiefs reported in the novel, some of which James McHenry claims to have “taken nearly verbatim from Washington’s Journal” (II: 195), there is a recollection of a peaceful and prosperous past in which Indian tribes lived in harmony in a natural world given to them by the Great Spirit: “There was a time . . . when we lived in peace, where our fathers had lived, for more than a hundred generations, and every man hunted the deer and the buffalo, without danger from the encroachments and attacks of strangers” (II: 195). The Indians’ boundless sense of gratitude for the Great Spirit who made the landscape around them and “gave it to their fathers, and to their sons for hunting ground” (49) probably has its origins in the Indians’ awareness of being totally dependent on the generosity of the Great Spirit: “What are we without [the great spirit]? Were it not for him, we should have neither deer, nor buffalo, nor bear’s flesh to eat, nor air to breathe, nor water to drink “ (63). The land is given to them as a gift and is not associated with the idea of conquest.

What emerges from the speeches of the Indian chiefs reported in the novel is that the idea of a land to be conquered and possessed coincides with the arrival of the white man on the American continent. While talking to Charles, Chief Shingiss wonders why French and English fight over a land that is not theirs: “Brother! I will speak freely, your people and the French dislike each other, and many of us dislike you both. Your two nations disagree about this country which belongs to neither of you. . . . Is it not strange that your white nations should quarrel more fiercely about our property than we ourselves?” (49). Being granted the land by the Great Spirit to ensure their survival, Indians are not obsessed with property and they readily consent to white people settling in their territories as long as, Chief Shingiss continues, “you trade fairly, and behave peaceably, and make no attempt to engross our land” (50). But both French and English have a different attitude toward property which the Natives cannot fathom. For the Europeans the land is not given by the Great Spirit but is there to be occupied through violence and murder; the white invaders are indifferent to ancestral customs and “make pretentions” (II: 195) on Indian land according to an economic and anthropocentric ideology that does not entail the need to survive:

These oppressors are proud—they think to grasp the whole earth.—They robbed and murdered our fathers, and took more land from them than they can use. That land they
unjustly hold to this day; yet they are not satisfied . . . they say that the mere treading upon our ground makes it theirs, and they think that wherever we see the prints of their feet we should abandon the country (II: 196).

Despite all the attempts to share the land in peace by the end of the novel the council of the old Indian chiefs realizes that it is no longer possible for them to affirm in front of the Europeans that “this is our land and not yours” (II: 196). They now realize that they are doomed to be exiled from the country “the Great Being above [had] allowed . . . to be a place of residence for us” (II: 197).

What becomes evident through the events narrated in the story is that the Irish immigrants feel lost in the wild, unknown, untrammeled nature of the New World. Their sense of extraneousness is in stark contrast to the American Natives’ sense of being at one with the wilderness around them. Irish immigrants can consider the United States as their new home only when they have made it a copy of what they have left behind on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. This process of transformation and control over nature is achieved in the novel through the adoption of a neoclassical pastoral overview of nature.

In her provocative book *Pastoral and Ideology* Annabel Patterson reveals “how writers, artists and intellectuals of all persuasions have used pastoral for a range of [manifold] functions and intentions” (7). Throughout the centuries authors have reinterpreted the pastoral in terms of their ideological values. In particular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, authors used pastoral conventions to celebrate the great estates of the landed gentry, thus turning pastoral into a political tool. According to contemporary critics the neoclassical pastorals of artificial, labor-free and delightful portraits of country life created a false ideology “that served to endorse a comfortable status quo for the landowning class” (Gifford 7). More specifically Roger Sales argues that this “literary form came to be used to prevent the questioning of the power structures that underpinned land ownership and, indeed, the complete fabric of society” (Gifford 8).

Influenced by neoclassical pastoral poetry that idealizes English country life and its social and economic relations McHenry seems to use Neoclassical pastoral conventions to validate Irish immigrants’ appropriation of the land in the New World. The landowners in Pope’s “An Epistle to Bathurst” and “An Epistle to Burlington” are guardians of stability and the social orders and actively participate “in the construction of an Arcadia for the future” (Gifford 35). Similarly, Gilbert Fraziers is an active agent in the transformation of a country “which, in the recollection of many yet living, was long the scene of want, hunger, desolation, terror, and savage warfare” (McHenry 6) into a place of peace, stability and prosperity. This is what entitles him to the possession of the land he has so bravely and unfailingly contributed to transform and shape into an idyllic, care-free facsimile of the Irish countryside.

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