

Culture



Nancy SCHMITZ, *Irish for a Day: St. Patrick's Day Celebrations in Québec City 1765-1990*, Ste-Foy: Carraig Books, 1991; 295 pages, \$24.95 (paper)

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Volume 14, numéro 1, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083270ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083270ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Waddell, E. (1994). Compte rendu de [Nancy SCHMITZ, *Irish for a Day: St. Patrick's Day Celebrations in Québec City 1765-1990*, Ste-Foy: Carraig Books, 1991; 295 pages, \$24.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 14(1), 90-91.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1083270ar>

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By Eric Waddell

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The Irish of the Québec City area most certainly merit scholarly attention. Although insignificant today, in 1861 they accounted for almost one-quarter of the city's population. More important, geography and history condemned them to the status of a minority within a minority in Canada and, at the same time, to the delicate role of ethnic brokers between French Catholics and English Protestants, possessing as they did the religion of one community and the language of the other. Finally, many of the survivors of over two centuries of Irish presence in the provincial capital bear witness to a post-war federal dream: that relations between the two official language groups in this country are structured symmetrically, with francophone and anglophone minorities sharing common problems and both confronted with issues of their very survival. St-Malachie is a living witness to the affirmation that the assimilation of minority anglophone communities to the regional francophone majority does happen somewhere in Canada. Likewise the constant switching from English to French outside the classroom of so many of St. Patrick's High School students in Québec City. And then there are all those French Canadians who nonchalantly reveal the existence of an Irish ancestor lightly buried in the family genealogy . . . !

The Irish, in a very real sense, tell the tale of a country and of its peoples, or at least a certain tale, because much depends on who tells it and with what in mind. Nancy Schmitz is an outsider who set herself a task fraught with dangers in choosing to tell the story of the Québec City Irish. Was it prudence which incited her to articulate that story around a single event? The St. Patrick's Day celebrations are presented as the ultimate manifestation of collective experience and yet they are, perhaps, remarkably superficial in character and have been marked by an extraordinary ambivalence as to who does and does not participate in them. On the one hand, it is now (?) possible for everyone to be Irish on St. Patrick's Day (p.265) and, on the other, overt hostility was expressed in some quarters to Protestants and to "French speakers of Irish descent" (p.110) participating in the festivities. For my part, I have my doubts about the

decision to ascribe uncritically so much significance to a single event and to the presenting of that event as a primordial expression of group identity.

Whatever, Professor Schmitz tells the story of that day in incredible detail, year by year, event by event: parades, balls, dinners, masses, plays, shows, etc. . . over two hundred years of them. What happened, where, who participated, who played the organ, who made the toasts, who was in the cast, who sold the candy during the intermission. The information — which consists of a remarkable display of names, places, and dates — is complemented by a wealth of illustrations: programmes, newspaper cuttings, photographs — regrettably of variable quality. It is the fruit of ten years research.

There are four chapters on Québec City itself, two on events in scattered rural communities in the Beauce and in the Laurentian foothills — one of them focussing on a particularly vibrant community, Shannon, which has, through time and in spite of a loss of numbers, consolidated its "Irishness". The substantive part of the volume is placed between two brief chapters, an introduction which summarizes the history of the Québec City Irish and recounts the legend of St. Patrick, and a conclusion which reflects on matters of identity and destiny.

What reward does the book bring to the reader? It all depends on whether you are an insider or an outsider. Insiders will be able to trace the history of their family, find names, recall celebrations, feel pride (and, indeed, there are an abundance of superlatives in the text, no doubt with this in mind). All this is extremely important for a community whose past is glorious, whose institutions are numerous, but which has now become inconsequential, its role as an ethnic broker no longer required, its descendants scattered to the four corners of a continent, and its very survival at stake.

But what about the outsider? He or she who knows little of these exceptional Irish, but who seeks to comprehend their history, their internal dynamics, their place in the fabric of the larger society of which they are a part, will learn precious little I fear. The wealth of detail fades into trivia. Whole paragraphs and pages are likely to be skipped as the reader hastens forward in the search for discussion and interpretation. *Irish for a Day* is, in the final analysis, essentially an "album de famille".

For the Irish, St. Patrick's Day is an object of interest in itself. For the social scientist it is more

likely to be the key to the understanding of a whole community. Certainly, the closing chapter does touch on some broader issues — of “ethnicity of consent” as distinct from “ethnicity of descent”, of relations to the mother country, etc. — but the treatment is superficial and inadequate. Where an event has become, in many cases, a commodity, what has it to do with the persistence of Irishness? Where an Irish community celebrates in English an event which has for long ignored all the French-speaking Irish, what does it say about the nature of the ethnic experience in Québec?

Irish Quebeckers have reason to be proud of this book and they will no doubt respond enthusiastically to Leo McCullen’s urging, in the preface, that it be cherished. But scholars are likely to react differently and treat it with indifference or, at best, a source of reference for subsequent research.

Tanya BASOK, *Keeping Heads Above Water: Salvadorean Refugees in Costa Rica*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993; 184 pages, \$34.95 (hardcover).

By Anthony Winson
University of Guelph

Keeping Heads Above Water attempts to embed an empirical evaluation of development aid to refugees displaced by civil war in Central America within the wider theoretical debates on the sociology of development and ways of conceptualizing small-scale enterprise. As the author notes, a central weakness of the relatively few independent critical studies of refugee assistance programs that do exist is their failure to link the evaluation of assistance programs to the global economic context within which they unfold (p.xvii).

Basok’s specific focus is the development assistance apparatus that attends to El Salvadorean refugees in Costa Rica, and the first part of her book gives the reader a good general background to the civil strife in El Salvador that has given rise to the plight of tens of thousands of Salvadoreans forced to flee the repression of their government’s military apparatus. Basok has a particularly informative discussion of the relevant characteristics of Costa Rica as a country of asylum. She deals with a range of issues from immigration and labour laws affecting refugees, to significant changes in the nation’s eco-

nomie fortunes during the 1980’s and how they affected national sentiments and policies regarding refugees within Costa Rican national territory. Finally, this study analyses the factors affecting the social integration of Salvadorean refugees into their host society, including an insightful discussion of the cultural differences between Salvadoreans and their Costa Rican cousins.

The core of the book is based on fieldwork on thirty-seven “durable solution” and thirty “local settlement” projects set up with foreign development assistance funds to aid Salvadorean refugees. These projects entailed the establishment of small-scale enterprise employing refugees. The author organizes her analysis of the success or failure of these enterprises along two main dimensions. The first examines the relationship of these enterprises to larger capitalist firms in the national economy to see whether the specific nature of this relationship is a major determinant of project viability. The second dimension explored relates to *internal* characteristics of the refugee enterprises.

Basok’s conclusions regarding determinants of refugee small-scale enterprise viability challenge some of our theoretical assumptions regarding the relationship between the capitalist sector of third world economies and non-capitalist enterprise. More significant for their viability than their relationship with the capitalist sector, however, were the internal aspects of the production process of these small enterprises. Especially important factors seen to be undermining the viability of these refugee projects were the paternalistic approach of the aid agencies funding them, and the failure to provide the necessary machinery and training for many of them. In her conclusion the author makes a number of policy recommendations that examine how future aid projects might overcome the barriers to the success of small-scale refugee enterprise uncovered by her study.

There are a few aspects of the study that this reviewer took issue with. For example, parts of the book rely substantially on Costa Rican newspaper sources, and while the author does caution the reader once or twice that the local press was uniformly conservative throughout the 1980’s, the author does not confront the whole issue of what really was happening to the Costa Rican media through this period. In fact, there is much evidence to indicate that a substantial sector of the local press was working closely under the direction of the CIA-Contra project