



UP front

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This town turns green this time each year. For a few weeks, everyone feels Irish, at least a little bit.

As Americans, many of us attribute our Americanism to someone, within a handful of generations, with the courage and faith to come here with no guarantees of comfort, safety, health, or wealth. While Colonial-Era Irish were generally educated and skilled, a trip to the New World was not easy. There were tales of streets paved with gold, but there was a sober reality that the real pathway to a "better life" would lead to as much pain and struggle as bliss.

Many 19th Century Irish immigrants, typically poorer and less schooled than their predecessors, experienced a common story: Fleeing famine, poverty, or limited prospects for a working man's existence in crowded urban quarters, surrounded by their countrymen and refugees from other hardscrabble pockets of Europe and Asia. They joined construction crews and police forces and served as household help and re-created the pubs of their fading memories. They clung to the Catholic Church and joined societies to both seek and provide aid to fellow Hibernians. By the mid-1800s, more than half of America's newcomers were of Irish descent.

Irish immigrants toiled – sometimes derided for their humble circumstances – under trying conditions, so their offspring wouldn't have to. They were often shunned as outsiders and disparaged with labels like "Mick (a reference to the 'Mc' at the beginning of many surnames)," "Paddy (alluding to St. Patrick, their patron)," and "Bridget (a stereotypical domestic servant)." Their success led to new forms of resentment, and the lexicon of bigotry expanded to include "Narrowback (a child of broad-shouldered, laboring émigré Irish, whose American-born progeny had a softer life and consequently slighter physique)."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, roughly 10 percent of Americans claim Irish ancestry, ranking the group third behind German and Mexican as the most prolific sources of today's citizenry. Ironically, although Savannah seems to identify as very Irish evidenced by its centuries-old, widely famous St. Patrick's Day parade, Georgia is one of the least densely Irish-American states in the country. Fewer than seven percent of

Georgians trace their roots to Ireland, while one in five New Hampshire natives do. In fact, Georgia is the un-Irishest-by-the-numbers state east of the Mississippi, and North Dakota is a deeper shade of emerald than the Peach State.

"You're only as old as you feel," and perception plays a role in cultural identity, too. I consider myself to be Italian-American, yet only one of my four grandparents kicked himself out of "The Boot" and sailed into New York Harbor by way of Naples. Per a few drops of my spit and the algorithms written by 23andMe, I'm more German than anything else. I have almost as much of Slovenia as Italy in me, though I'm not sure how.

Yet my surname ends in a vowel. I obsess over food, and I cook for pleasure. I like nice clothes, and I talk with my hands (sometimes). I'm typing this from an airplane on the way home from Rome, which I visit around this time year after year (artichoke season and low tourist counts). Jenna and I enjoyed a wedding blessing one-year ago from a priest during Mass at Santa Maria in Trastevere, a Roman basilica more than a millennium-and-a-half old, known for its 13th-century mosaics, and it felt like we were exactly where we were meant to be. We dream of an apartment on Via Giulia where the future grandkids can visit. We long to return the moment we leave. So, I celebrate Columbus Day with my paesani, just as so many Finnegans will proudly wear green for most of this month.

We all came from somewhere, yet we're all concurrently here. Which is an amazing and mystical product of countless small and large forces and big and little decisions over unknowable spans of time. We celebrate, with equal vigor, our individuality and the sameness that connects. We are all Irish, for at least one day.



Scott A. Lauretti

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