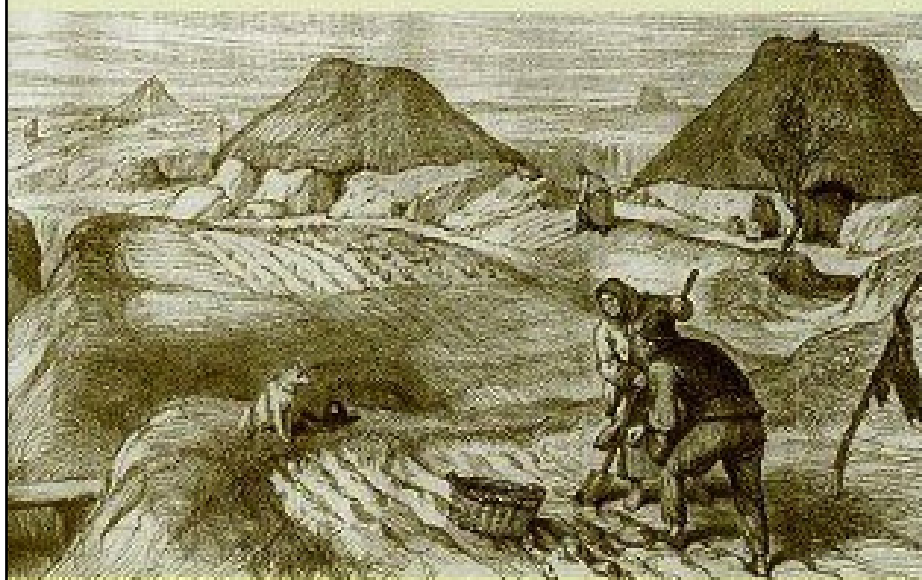


HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE IRISH DIASPORA

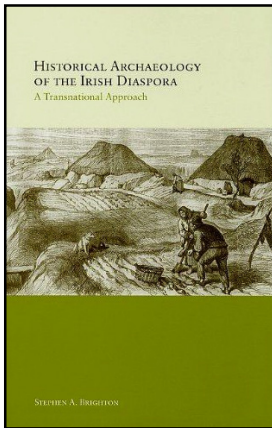
A Transnational Approach



STEPHEN A. BRIGHTON

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Historical Archaeology of the Irish Diaspora: A Transnational Approach

Stephen A. Brighton. 2009. University of Tennessee Press. 226 pp., 34 figures, 5 tables, 5 appendices, bibliography, index. \$49.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Deborah L. Rotman, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame.

Stephan A. Brighton combines archaeological and historical evidence to explore the Irish Diaspora in America. He employs comparative data sets from Ballykilcline, County Roscommon, Ireland as well as the Five Points neighborhood in Manhattan, New York, and the Dublin section of Paterson, New Jersey. The primary material classes of his study include refined earthenwares, glass medicine bottles, and tobacco pipe bowls.

The book is divided into six chapters, each of which addresses a particular aspect of his overall project. Brighton begins by positioning his work within the context of historical archaeological studies of the Irish diaspora. His discusses the ways in which identity, particularly ethnicity, have been addressed in previous analyses of Irish-America. Brighton emphasizes how meaning is constructed, the role of the ideologies of modern capitalism in racializing Irish immigrants, and the relevance of their Old World histories in shaping their New World experiences.

Brighton proceeds by critically analyzing the term *diaspora* and cogently summarizing the relevant literature. He highlights the tremendous variation in the social, political, cultural, religious, and economic circumstances that have shaped Irish emigration over time. By underscoring the range of variability in the factors contributing to the displacement of peoples within the Irish diaspora, Brighton adds texture and dimension to understanding the ways in which immigrants were alienated from or incorporated into their new communities. Shared memory, stigmas and stereotypes, and transnational connections to Ireland served to reinforce collective life within the diaspora and contributed to identity formation. Brighton also stresses life cycle, age, gender, socioeconomic class, length of time in America, marital status, and other social dimensions as important factors in shaping the lived experiences of Irish immigrants in the United States — emphasizing the tremendous diversity of the Irish diaspora. The theoretical framework in this chapter is one of the most significant aspects of this volume.

Next, the author moves from theoretical discourse to a specific engagement with the Irish diaspora and its unique historical trajectories. Brighton summarizes germane historical events, including legislation that marginalized Irish peoples in their homeland, creating structures of unequal social power in Ireland and America. In sound archaeological practice, he elaborates the contexts from which people came as well as those into which they arrived. The transnational perspective which organizes this volume – that is, seeking to understand emigration and immigration from both sides of the Atlantic — makes an important contribution to the scholarly literature not only of the Irish diaspora, but of other displaced peoples as well.

The historical context of pre-Famine rural Ireland is developed in the subsequent chapter. Brighton provides an overview of the agricultural practices, divisions of labor, gendered social relations, and other features of rural Irish life. He also summarizes the archaeological excavation of the Nary family cabins in Ballykilcline, County Roscommon, the material evidence from which serves as a critical baseline for the material conditions of the rural poor in Ireland as well as for interpreting the historical and archaeological data from Irish immigrant sites in America.

The author then turns his attention to the United States, specifically the Five Points neighborhood in New York and the Dublin section of Paterson, New Jersey. In this chapter, Brighton emphasizes the anti-nativist discrimination encountered, social reform efforts such as the temperance, tensions between Protestant and Catholics, and the rise of the Irish nationalist movement, among other social forces that shaped life for Irish immigrants in America. Importantly, his discussion of these topics highlights the ways in which Irish immigrants navigated the complex social landscapes of which they were a part.

Finally, Brighton weaves together the many lines of archaeological and historical evidence to interpret how ceramic dishes and their attendant social rituals changed over time and illustrated the incorporation of Irish immigrants into their cultural milieus. At the same time, a persistent pattern of self-medication with patent medicine bottles demonstrates the alienation and discrimination they experienced relative to the medical profession in America. In addition, an analysis of symbolism on tobacco pipe bowls shows a continued investment in the social, political, and economic struggles of their homeland and the ways in which those transnational concerns shaped identity in America.

This volume will naturally be of interest to general readers seeking to learn more about Irish-America, diasporic phenomena, and nineteenth-century history. Academics in Anthropology, History, and American Stud-

ies might use this work as supplementary reading in a course that explores these areas. The detailed, holistic, and evidence-based approach that Brighton uses makes it ideally suited for a classroom setting.

My critiques of the volume are relatively insignificant. Many of the artifact photographs were of poor quality and highly pixilated, making it difficult to clearly observe the patterns being featured (e.g., Figure 10). In addition, there are a few places where the text is highly redundant or repeated verbatim from an earlier section, all of which are likely vestiges of this volume's early permutation as a doctoral dissertation. Finally, the organization of the volume was not entirely user-friendly. The presentation of the archaeological data, especially that of the Nary cabins, precedes the discussion of its meaning and significance by dozens of pages. I found I had to keep flipping back and forth as I read to refresh my memory of the salient details. These issues constitute minor distractions, however, in what is an exceptional volume overall.

Historical Archaeology of the Irish Diaspora: A Transnational Approach is well researched, detailed, and thorough in its investigation of the experiences of Irish immigrants in their homeland and in the United States. Brighton has done an excellent job of presenting the rich and complex history of the Irish diaspora. He has provided a model for other scholars to interpret not only the material remains of other Irish immigrants in America, but of other diasporic peoples as well.