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SWEET, CHANCY AND TRANSIENT

Knute Skinner, *Fifty Years: Poems 1957-2007* (Salmon Poetry, 2007), €15.

'Irish-America' was once a simple phenomenon – though painful for those forced by economics to be part of it. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Irish and American literatures intersected on the manner (and outcomes) of a westward exodus. The novella *Maggie: a Girl of the Streets* (1893) by Stephen Crane, better known for *The Red Badge of Courage*, depicted Irish immigrant life in the slums of New York. Ten years later, George Moore's story, 'Home Sickness' (in *The Untilled Field*) has in common with *Maggie* a character who is a Bowery bartender, though in this case he is one who makes an ill-fated return journey to the old country. When in America, he yearns for Ireland; when in Ireland, he yearns for America. Wherever he is, he'll suffer from home-sickness.

In that sense, then, perhaps it wasn't so simple after all. Nevertheless, literature was concerned with the Irish in America, and hardly at all with Americans in Ireland. By the 1930s, with James T Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, the fictional locus moved from New York to Chicago. If Americans did venture transatlantically east, it wasn't for long: Stephen Crane produced a series of 'Irish Notes', essentially journalistic reports to himself, as if he were a collective folks-back-home. Perceptive as they were, they were the work of an outsider, interpreting the West Cork village pub in terms of his own geocultural frame of reference: 'On an old mahogany dresser rows of plates face the distant range, and reflect the red shine of the peat. Smoke which has in it the odour of an American forest fire eddies through the air.'

Then, in 1963, JFK visited Ireland and the special relationship acquired new dimensions. Kennedy joked that if the travel arrangements of their respective forebears had been different, de Valera might have become President of the US, and he (JFK) would have been President of Ireland. It has been suggested that as Ireland became less oppressive for intellectuals and the US became more so, there followed a mini-exodus in the direction opposite to the traditional one. Better for an American poet to find himself among the culchies than among the hicks – especially if the former weren't really culchies after all, but in fact proved supportive of readings or festivals, and with an enthusiasm to rival that of the metropolis, Hibernian or otherwise. It's all a long way from Stephen Crane contemplating the degraded populace of Ballydehob. US-born poets such as Chris Agee, Ivy Bannister, Knute Skinner and Richard Tillinghast are integral

