


[McMahon on Connolly, 'On Every Tide: The Making and Remaking of the Irish World'](#)

Review published on Thursday, March 16, 2023

Sean Connolly. *On Every Tide: The Making and Remaking of the Irish World.* New York: Basic Books, 2022. 544 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-465-09395-3](#). 

Reviewed by Cian T. McMahon (University of Nevada, Las Vegas) **Published on** H-Water (March, 2023) **Commissioned by** Yan Gao

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58593>

The history of Irish migration has been a lively field of scholarly study since the middle decades of the twentieth century when folks like Oscar Handlin began dedicating themselves to writing social histories of American ethnic groups. “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America,” Handlin famously declared in *The Uprooted* (1951), “then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.”[1] The same might be said of the Irish and their past. Over the past forty years, Irish migration as a subject of scholarly analysis has blossomed in universities around the world. Volumes have been written on the reasons people left Ireland. Many more books and articles have been dedicated to their lives and experiences in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere. And yet global syntheses of the Irish diaspora are few and far between. It is in this context that Sean Connolly’s excellent new book, *On Every Tide: The Making and Remaking of the Irish World*, has appeared.

At first glance, readers of Irish history might be surprised to see Connolly’s name on the cover of a book about Irish migration. A professor emeritus and visiting research fellow at the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen’s University Belfast, Connolly is one of the leading historians of early modern Ireland. His five previous books, including *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845* (1982), *Contested Ireland: Ireland 1460-1630* (2007), and *Divided Kingdom: Ireland 1630-1800* (2008), established his reputation as an expert on the political, economic, social, and religious dynamics that shaped Ireland in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. That Connolly could turn around and successfully engage as big and complicated a subject as Irish migration in the later modern period is a testament to his intellectual curiosity, wit, and work rate.

Although parts of this book could easily serve as required reading in an undergraduate course on Ireland and Irish migration, this book is primarily designed for a broad general audience. Historians in search of painstakingly articulated theoretical concepts and historiographical debates will not find them here. Connolly has been there and done that in other books. Instead, *On Every Tide* is designed to give readers a broad, sweeping—at times entertaining, at times thought-provoking—narrative history of when, where, and why Irish people moved around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and how they fared when they got there. Over the course of more than five hundred pages, Connolly ties together the various streams of over eight million Irish people who flowed to places like the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom between 1800

and 2000. Employing a blend of primary and secondary sources, the chapters are organized chronologically, with each one largely focusing on a particular destination.

The book has a strong narrative drive, but it situates this storyline within the structural dynamics that shaped the world the Irish inhabited at the time. In particular, Connolly does an excellent job of outlining how the rapid expansion of industrialization, settler colonialism, and commercial networks in the early nineteenth century set the stage for the Irish to head for North America and the antipodes. The early 1800s witnessed the emergence of “an international trade in people,” Connolly writes, “providing the free but cheap labor essential to the continued growth of the emerging world economy” (p. 9). Later, in the mid-twentieth century, the migratory tide turned from North America to the United Kingdom as “a diaspora based on mass movement across oceans [gave] way to a transfer of people across a narrow sea” (p. 334). He also analyzes how the decline of popular religion was linked to the increase of mass migration as “growing numbers of men and women were finding alternative ways of coping with the unsatisfactory realities that surrounded them” (p. 23).

Any shortcomings in this big history of the Irish abroad are, in some ways, reflective of shortcomings in the field as a whole. As a result, the eighteenth century gets relatively short shrift. The experiences of women are discussed here and there, but there remains a tendency to implicitly equate “emigrants” with “men.” Connolly touches on racial identity and such theories as “whiteness” but wisely avoids wading too deeply into complicated (and largely unresolved) debates and theoretical backwaters. These are issues that plague the field as a whole, but Connolly paddles his way through them with verve and intellectual dexterity.

All in all, Connolly’s *On Every Tide* is a very well-written and carefully organized book on a big and complicated subject. Indeed, Connolly’s previous work on Irish social history has enabled him to bring fresh insights to the topic. Armed with these kinds of fresh ideas, this book offers new and exciting perspectives on the history of the Irish diaspora.

Note

[1]. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 3.

Citation: Cian T. McMahon. Review of Connolly, Sean, *On Every Tide: The Making and Remaking of the Irish World*. H-Water, H-Net Reviews. March, 2023. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58593>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).