1. Introduction

Whenever Ireland and the Irish are portrayed or discussed in the media, it is often through recourse to centuries-old stereotypes. When the twelfth-century Norman chronicler, Gerald of Wales, wrote of the Irish that they were “a wild and inhospitable people” who were nevertheless incomparably skilled musicians, he was contributing to the construction of a set of characteristics, behaviors, and personality traits that would often be returned to. A number of recent news items illustrate how longstanding stereotypes continue to influence people’s perceptions of the Irish. In January 2011, the Irish American website IrishCentral carried a report headlined “Australian immigrants complain about fighting Irish image.” Accompanying the report is an excerpt from an Australian current affairs television show, concerning the reactions of residents to the behavior of clientele frequenting a bar in their neighborhood. Against a backdrop of Irish music and Guinness signs, the item includes CCTV footage of drunken brawls taking place on the street outside the bar. When one of the residents is asked “Who are these people?” she replies “Well a lot of them are Irish.” Another resident confirms this perception, stating that “I’m sure they couldn’t get away with it in County Kerry or wherever the hell they come from.” In March 2012 the Irish Independent reported that an Australian employer had placed an advertisement for bricklayers but had stipulated that no Irish need apply. In May 2012, the Australian Visa Bureau posted a news item on its website warning that the “rowdy Irish Down Under” risked having their visas revoked, a warning that was picked up and debated by Irish media outlets including the BBC Radio Ulster’s Talkback program.¹

Yet in addition to these persistent negative perceptions of the Irish, in recent years scholars such as Diane Negra and Vincent J. Cheng have identified Irishness as the safe, respectable face of ethnic America. Cheng points to the popularity of films such as Michael Collins (1996), The Boxer (1997), and Waking Ned Devine (1998), and the music of U2, Enya and Riverdance, to suggest that in the United States, “Irishness is clearly ‘in.’”
Similarly, Negra has argued that Irishness had become “the most marketable white ethnicity in late-twentieth-century American culture.” In her 2001 article “The New Primitives,” Negra suggests that, in an era in which white working-class identity is perceived to be under threat, Irishness operates as “the ideal identity credential,” a marker of innocence, nostalgia, tradition, and family values. The “positive currency,” to use Negra’s term, of Irishness in America today of course relies on the operation and utilization of certain familiar tropes about Ireland and the Irish. Ireland is a romanticized rural idyll, a heritage site encapsulating a return to values that appear to have been lost in modern America. Negra argues that the Irish in America are representative of a proud, white American working class for whom family and a sense of history are of crucial importance. What is particularly interesting about these relatively positive, yet simplistic and nostalgic representations of the Irish in recent American popular culture is that they are utilized to bolster American identity at a time of uncertainty and insecurity in an increasingly multicultural society.2

There is evidence that in early-nineteenth-century America too, representations of the Irish also served to strengthen native-born Americans’ images of themselves at a time of insecurity and uncertainty about the cohesiveness of the young nation. In his 1986 study of the stereotyped Irishman “Paddy” as he appeared in American culture during the antebellum period, Dale T. Knobel sees in representations of the Irish from this period evidence of native-born Americans’ desire to construct “a distinctive national character that might provide them with a usable past, with a unifying present, and with a predictable future.” The marking of ethnic groups, including the Irish, as “other” against which American-ness could be measured was part of this process. When native-born Americans in the early antebellum period characterized the Irish as economically, politically, and intellectually dependent, they were bolstering their own right to nationhood while at the same time marking the Irish as unsuitable for American citizenship.3

Importantly, though, it was not just native-born Americans who were engaged in a process of identity construction in the nineteenth century. As immigration to the United States increased during the second half of the century, immigrants themselves were also faced with the task of constructing a new identity, one that would allow them to find a place in their new society while at the same time maintaining a link with their old home. Writing about images of the Irish in American popular music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, W. H. A. Williams suggests that Irish emigrants arriving in the United States in the nineteenth century found that the stereotype of the savage, drunken Paddy had crossed the Atlantic before them.