

*The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project*

Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Bernadette Whelan by Dr. Elizabeth Renker  
August 23, 2021 (Columbus, Ohio; Limerick City, Ireland)

**ER:** This is Professor Elizabeth Renker. It is Monday, August 23, 2021. I'm in Columbus, Ohio and I have the great pleasure today of speaking with Professor Bernadette Whelan, Professor Emeritus in the Department of History, University of Limerick, and she is speaking to us from Limerick City in the Republic of Ireland this morning. Professor Whelan's scholarly expertise includes extensive work on American-Irish diplomatic relations and, in fact, she has a new book out in 2021—congratulations, Professor Whelan—called *De Valera and Roosevelt: Irish and American Diplomacy in Times of Crisis, 1932-1939*, out from Cambridge University Press. Professor Whelan is also an historian of women's history and is currently writing a history of Irish First Ladies. She's a past president of the Women's History Association of Ireland and is a member of the Royal Irish Academy.

Now, those of you who are new to our series or who have been listening to the other interviews, will be interested to know that two of Professor Whelan's publications have made a significant impact on Piatt studies. In 2010 she published a book called *American Government in Ireland, 1790-1913: A History of the US Consular Service*. And those of you who perhaps have not learned that much about the Piatts' lives yet will want to make immediately the connection between that book and the fact that J.J. Piatt, Sarah's husband, was employed as the US consul to Cork, beginning in 1882. And we're going to talk about his job today; Professor Whelan is our world expert on J.J. Piatt's role as US consul. Really, she's *the* person in the world we can talk to about that topic, so that's going to be very interesting today. And also in 2013, she published an extremely important article on the Piatts in Queenstown. And Professor Whelan, I'm going to ask you to talk about the changing names and terms for some of these places that we're discussing that can be confusing to people who are learning about it for the first time. She published this article in *New Hibernia Review*, specifically talking about Sarah and J.J. and their family living as Americans in Queenstown in the late nineteenth century. And of course, that takes us into a lot of topics related to Professor Whelan's expertise on, not only the history of the US Consular Service, but what's going on in Ireland at this point in time. What do Sarah and J.J. step into when they go there as people who really don't know that much about Ireland. So anyway, I'm really excited about the chance to have this talk today, and Bernadette, I'm going to ask you if you would say a few words about what brought you to be working on J.J. Piatt and that led you also to thinking about Sarah as his wife.

**BW:** Well, first of all I wanted to thank you very much, Professor Renker, for inviting me to talk to you today and to talk to your audience, who I understand many of whom might be students, and I'm really delighted to be able to share my information and knowledge with them. I think your project is wonderful. As I said, I was involved with women's history for a long time, and obviously it's a key theme in my work. And one of the things I was involved in is what was called the Women's History Project, where we were also trying to retrieve lost figures, particularly

female figures, in the past. So, to be contacted by you, really, was a great joy to me as we can now try and move on a little bit and learn a little bit more about Sarah.

So, to come to your question. As you mentioned, I'm a historian of diplomacy, and in particular, of American-Irish diplomatic relations. What has always interested me is the place of Ireland in US foreign policy. A major theme from the existing scholarship about that would be that Ireland has a special place in US foreign policy, and my pieces throughout my whole academic career, which really perhaps doesn't say much for it [laughs], centers on examining that: how special *was* that relationship, in particular.

My first book, which was based on my doctorate, was based on the Marshall Plan, which your audience would be very familiar with: the postwar recovery program which the Americans sponsored to deal with and try and recover and rehabilitate the European economy after the second World War. And from that then I decided to go backwards in time, in terms of chronology. And the work that you referred to earlier, which was a history of the US Consular Service, that came my way as a topic really because I had engaged with and found a lot of, a whole run of consular material. The US Foreign Service, as it's known today, consisted at the time of diplomats and consular officers. And we are *much* more familiar with the diplomats than we are of the consular officers, except perhaps, when we lose our passports, and they are the first person that one goes looking to, to have it replaced. So, when I was looking at these reports, and I realized that they actually went back to 1790, which as a historian and your students who are there, particularly graduate students, will know the importance of finding a run of primary source materials. So these consular reports really traveled from 1790—particularly those for Ireland—through to 1906, and then they pick up again in another format from 1906, indeed, through to today almost. But the ones that are accessible in the National Archives Records Administration in College Park in Maryland outside Washington [D.C.], meant that they were particularly exciting because one could access, as I say, the whole run of them there. So, while the history of the US Consular Service in Ireland might appear like a very dry topic and, indeed, often institutional history seems like that, and in some ways it attracts people to work on it who are of that mindset, but what also interested me from these reports was the data that was available and information about the individual consular officers. So I set out, not just to document what I called American government in Ireland, but also to document the individuals who were there, and to try and humanize the service that was being provided throughout that period. So it was in that context of looking at these men—and they *were* all men—we don't have the first female appointed to the US Foreign Service until the 1920s. I began, then, to look at more and find out more information about their own personal lives. And of course what always interested me was that it wasn't just individuals who would travel and be appointed to Ireland, but also with wives, and family would travel with them. So it was within that context that I came across J.J. Piatt and his wife, Sarah, and their children.

So from then, obviously, that was a small part of this larger book, so I couldn't spend too much time on it. But it intrigued me enough to try and work on an article in relation to it, and of course that's often the more exciting bit when you're interested in something like women's history, because then you can really delve into the personal side of it. And then to my great joy,

I found the Piatt Family Collection of papers which are in Yale University, visited the university and was very kindly received there, and began to come across his letters which there are more of, and I suspect, Elizabeth, you will know more about that. But at the same time, when I began to explore other sources of material—and we can talk further about that, or we can talk about now—I began to realize that there was more to be said. Particularly when I discovered her reputation as one of the leading American poets, and that was particularly exciting. I began to wonder, well, what *did* she do during that 10-year period? So did Ireland in any way influence her writings, etcetera? So that was really how I came upon the Piatts. And indeed, then looking at Irish-based sources, was able to discover and learn a little bit more about her.

**ER:** Well, thank you very much, that's extremely interesting. I have so many questions for you today. I think maybe I'll start with the last topic you talked about before we delve more into the Piatts' lives, because one of the things I find our audience is very interested in is how scholars go about their essentially, I like to call it, detective work. I find that the general public, as well as scholars who don't work in archives, are always very interested in just exactly *how* do you do this kind of work. And, of course, that kind of archival discovery process has been essential to your work. And it's also essential to mine, especially now that I'm writing Sarah's first biography. There is no other biography to stand on. And your work has been a tremendous help to me, and I thank you for it. It's one of the reasons I'm so excited to talk to you today. And one of the things we share, is that both of us have gone to Yale to work in the Piatt Family Papers. Roughly what year, do you think you were there? Do you recall, approximately? You did the article in 2013, so I'm thinking you must have been there—

**BW:** 2010, 2011, or something like that, I'd say.

**ER:** Yeah, okay. So I was there in, let's see, I was there in 2018. So you were there before me, and another person who was there before both of us is Paula Bennett. Paula Bernat Bennett, and I want to mention her because also, I see her in your footnotes, and I'm thinking she must be the person that you turned to when you first started thinking about Sarah as a poet. Because Paula Bernat Bennett's work and her selected edition of Sarah's poems [*Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*], this was really the first entire book<sup>1</sup> dedicated to recovering Sarah as a major poet. And so you were following on that moment when Paula Bennett's edition appeared and people in my field of nineteenth-century American literature started saying, really for the first time, "This is a voice we don't know, and it's a voice we need to start hearing." So, the Piatt Family Papers, as you know, is a vast collection. I wonder, roughly, how long were you able to stay there?

**BW:** Well, I think the first point to be made is that I, as a historian, would always believe that I'm working and building on the work of previous historians. You even mentioned there about Paula Bernat Bennett's book, which *was* particularly useful. But you know, one of the things

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett's was the first selected edition published by a university press. Larry R. Michaels' *That New World: The Selected Poems of Sarah Piatt 1861-1911* (West Liberty, OH, Mac-A-Cheek Foundation for the Humanities, Piatt Castles and Toledo, OH, Bihl House, 1999) was chronologically the first. [Renker's note]

that I got particularly excited about was Clare Dowler's 1936 article ["John James Piatt, Representative Figure of a Momentous Period"]—

**ER:** Ah, okay.

**BW:** —on J.J. Piatt. So, you know, that was even earlier again. And when you find little nuggets like that, it confirms that there is something more to be said here. So, by the time I got to Yale—and I only spent a week there—but what they very kindly did was photocopy most of files for me.

**ER:** Great. Well, before I ask you to take us into some issues of context, you know, what's going on in Ireland when the Piatts arrive there in 1882, that's something our audience really will be very interested to hear and that most Americans, I can say, never learn in our school system. But for now, I just want to return for a minute to you mentioning Clare Dowler's thesis. This will be interesting to our audience as well, because as scholars, you and I share this commitment and duty, really, to go back and comb through what have prior scholars done? Whose shoulders are we standing on, and in what way? And one of the things I love about doing these interviews is getting to talk to people and say, "Thank you for your work, you know, it's been so important." So, in my area of nineteenth-century literary studies, one of the really interesting things about the difference between Clare Dowler's master's thesis on J.J.—John James Piatt—and what happened with Paula Bernat Bennett's edition and why it was so important, is, first of all, notice that something has changed from a focus on a male writer to a focus on a female writer. And that's a topic that's of interest to both of us, Bernadette, that shift. And J.J. and Sarah were both well-known poets in their lifetimes, but in the nineteenth century we're talking about a time when male poets received more attention. Female poets were expected to write about certain topics in a certain way. Male poets had more room. But J.J., by the time you get to later in the twentieth century, J.J. has fallen from view as a literary figure. He's treated as a—even Dowler says—kind of an emblematic figure of a lost era. And so what happens when Larry R. Michaels and Paula Bernat Bennett and Jessica Roberts and William Spengemann<sup>2</sup> start saying, "We have to go back to this woman poet that no one now has heard of," they are reclaiming a voice that is talking about topics, calling out issues, writing with a sense of irony in ways that she didn't always get attention for in her own lifetime because of these, again, conventions around "the woman writer." So that's one of the reasons why Sarah's voice has come back with such tremendous force since the greater recovery of women writers starting in about the 1970s. So that's an interesting shift from Dowler to Bennett that I thought it would be worth mentioning for our audience. And now I wonder, Professor Whelan, could you take us into Irish history when the Piatts are arriving? What is J.J.'s job? What's he doing there? What does he step into when he gets to Ireland?

**BW:** Indeed. The first point, I think, for your audience to realize is that his arrival in Ireland is obviously to do with the US Consular Service. One of the phrases often used to distinguish the

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Spengemann with Jessica F. Roberts, *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1996). [Renker's note]

consular service from the diplomatic service is that courts and ports were different places. So the diplomat was based usually in the political capital city, where the center of power was, and the consular officer was based in the port. So by the time the Americans—and it is part of state building, that every state—in terms of having its legitimacy as a political entity recognized, its independence recognized—establishes a foreign service for itself, and the aim is to gain recognition of that state. So, having representatives abroad was one way of doing that. Because it wasn't just that J.J. is sent abroad. It's that he's accepted by the host government, which in this case is the British government, to come to Ireland. And he's in a long line, as I mentioned earlier, of consular officers who first come to Ireland in 1790.

But the state of the US Consular Service from, really, the late eighteenth century *throughout* the nineteenth century, is one that is poorly funded. There's no training, they're not salaried, and often you have them in many ways, they become a derided official who are most associated with bribery, corruption, nefarious activities—largely because they're involved in monetary transactions, as we'll see. So, J.J. comes to Ireland as part of that system. The consular system is also characterized by the spoils system, which dominated US political life, and indeed many would suggest is still there today, in the sense that not all of the foreign service appointments were made on the basis of merit. And the Queenstown posting is a minor posting. But they are still of use, to be able to reward individuals who have, in some way or other, assisted you as a president or your party as a political party within your state, within your county, within your town. So they're used for those purposes. So somebody like J.J., who needs an income as he does, is well connected, as we see from a lot of the memorials that are even advertised in the newspapers—I think it's the *Chicago Herald* that describes the literary fellows that have supported his application to become a consular officer. So he comes into the category of the spoils system, because somebody had to be awarded a favor for him to be appointed—but then he also comes under the category of patronage, for his artistic life being supported in some way or other, which does again suggest the extent to which he was a known and accepted poet at that time. So there are the two contexts that J.J. arrives into Ireland in the early 1880s.

And you could ask the question, “But where did the idea come into his head to become a consular officer?” And, as we know, his friend and mentor William Dean Howells had been appointed in 1861 as the result of writing a biography for Lincoln. So he had been appointed to Venice. And, unfortunately, for a lot of these consular officers and those who were seeking, *chasing*, consular posts, a lot of them thought that there was a lot of money to be made. They thought they'd be set up for life. Unfortunately for a lot of them, it didn't turn out like that. And indeed J.J., as we'll see, is one example of that.

So the context that he comes to Ireland in the 1880s is a consular service that is still bedeviled by these weaknesses that I mentioned earlier. But it's also, interestingly, a service that is trying to reform itself. So the first attempts of reform of the US Consular Service are in the 1830s. It happens again 1856, and then again in the 1870s when there's a complete review of the service. And there *are* attempts made throughout that period to try and professionalize the occupation, the activity as consular officer, to provide salaries, and to provide allowances, and

this would be a key issue for J.J. And he's part of that. As a result of that, then, the officers are in turn being asked to provide more fulsome reports, as we'll see, and he's very good at that. And his reports, that's why they're so useful to historians, providing this outsider's view on, in this case, Ireland, in this case, Queenstown, in the 1880s. In terms, therefore, of these two big themes that characterize US Foreign Service, the continuing iniquities and difficulties and then this movement towards reform, he comes in at the kind of cusp of that, but, in many ways it suits him because he is a reforming individual himself.

Now initially, as we know, he wanted Frankfurt am Main ["Frankfurt on the Main"] in Germany, which was well known as a—would be a quite wealthy sinecure to obtain. And the salary was about \$7,000 a year. He doesn't get it. Instead, he gets Queenstown, where he gets a salary of \$2,000. So that for him was an immediate problem, and an immediate disappointment for him, for when he comes to Ireland. So that's the context to his arrival in Ireland.

**ER:** Thank you, that's extremely helpful. This is that the kind of granular detail about how J.J. ends up there that is so useful to me and others who just didn't really understand: how was it that J.J. ended up getting appointed to Ireland? Now, to land in Ireland in 1882, as they do, and as you've just said, he originally didn't want to go to Queenstown, I'm imagining them getting off the ship and J.J. entering a position of that kind, and they must have been—I'm guessing here and I'd love to hear you talk about this—there must have been an incredible learning curve about what was going on, politically and in terms of the everyday lives of the Irish people, that J.J. was kind of instantly thrown into because—and please, if I phrase this the wrong way, please correct me—but I believe you point out in your work that what was called Queenstown at the time, now Cobh, C-O-B-H, for our audience—but at the time Queenstown, was the major port for migrants leaving Ireland for the United States, is that right?

**BW:** Correct.

**ER:** So what is going on for the Irish people, what is going on—you said J.J. had to be accepted as US consul, had to be accepted by the government of Great Britain.

**BW:** Okay, the first point to note is that, unlike the twentieth century and current times when a foreign service officer has been sent abroad, they're given a briefing document. So they're given a full file of information about the country they're coming into, and that covers everything: economic, social, political, powerful individuals, cultural figures, etcetera. There was no such thing as a briefing document then. Secondly, there was no such idea of bringing somebody into the state department to give them, physically, a briefing with perhaps former officers who'd been there, or officers who've been brought home from that posting. So, instead, he may not even have visited the state department in Washington. He may have just got his letter telling him that he was going to be appointed, he had been accepted by the British government, and that he would be going to Queenstown, which previously called Cove, C-O-V-E, then Queenstown, and then it reverts to its Irish spelling, C-O-B-H, Irish language spelling, after 1922.

When he's arriving in Ireland into Queenstown itself, the first thing is that, previous to that, consular officers would have had to go to London where they would have been presented with an official document that was signed by the monarch of the day saying that he'd been accepted as a foreign service officer in whatever the port was that he'd been appointed to. That had been ended, and so by the time J.J. is appointed, he goes straight to Queenstown. Now just to explain a little bit: Ireland at the time, 1880s, is part of the British Empire. The American colonies had left at the end of the eighteenth-century, Ireland was still a part of the British Empire up to 1922.<sup>3</sup> So therefore, it does *not* have its own government. Irish politicians who are elected in Ireland—and they *are* Irish—they attend a parliament in Westminster. That meant that any appointments, such as what we're talking about, had to be, as I said, accepted by the British monarch.

So the world that he's arriving into, first of all: Ireland is a colony. It doesn't have its own government. But at the same time, by the 1880s, its political status is one of *constant* upheaval. Because of the emergence of, once again—but this time, a strengthening—nationalist movement. And that nationalist movement emerges in the form of a literary revival, a revival of what is seen as all things Irish, which would become important in the world that the Piatts would occupy. But that world would also encompass a [political] movement towards achieving independence for Ireland, and it is based on two issues. One is gaining control of the land of Ireland for Irish people and, secondly, gaining control of the government of Ireland to be located within Ireland. So the 1880s is particularly important for that stage, that evolution of Irish nationalism.

Now, one of the many reasons why you have this radicalization, as can be seen, of Irish nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century, is because of what was a *major* famine in Ireland, which some of your audience may know as the Great Famine, or in the Irish language is called Gorta Mór, just the Irish version of "Great Famine." But there were many famines in Ireland, it's just that that one which occurred between late 1845 and going through into 1852, 1853, that famine hit very hard and in a very deep fashion. And one of the major consequences of that famine was to reduce the demography, the population of Ireland, from 8 million to 6 million in the matter of less than 10 years. So it's an amazing population decrease, and a decrease in population that continues through to, would you believe, the end of the twentieth century in Ireland. It's only in the last 30 years that the Irish population has begun to revive to anything like those levels. What happens to those people? Death, disease, and then also evictions. Because the land of Ireland is owned largely by landlords, many of whom were based in Ireland, many others are what are called absentee landlords, non-resident landlords, the majority of whom are based in London or in their estates throughout England or Wales or Scotland. So the population of Ireland greatly decreases in that period. Where do those people go? They go to, largely, the United States. Others go to Canada, they go to Australia, other parts of the British Empire, particularly where English speaking.

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<sup>3</sup> Ireland was a dominion member of the British Commonwealth until 1949 when it became a republic [Whelan's note].

So that flight from the land is a permanent and is a constant theme in the world that J.J. comes into and Sarah comes into in the early 1880s. And really it affected so much of the way the economy develops and the way society develops as well. But just to relate it a little bit more, then, to the United States: because you have these huge departures in the post-famine period to the United States, so many of those people are going out with strongly anti-British and a hatred for anything and all British. It is that generation then, that post-famine generation, who will fund the radicalization of Irish nationalism that I've talked about earlier that J.J. would come into. He comes into what's called a Land War.<sup>4</sup> So that world he comes into is a world of flux. It's a world of change, and *constant* change. And he, coming into Queenstown, coming into Cobh, coming off the boat, may have known nothing about this, or little or nothing. Unless he read specific newspapers in the United States. Unless somebody had told him something about it. So, we can continue with that world he comes into in Queenstown if you'd like, Elizabeth.

**ER:** Can we return to the phrase you just used, "Land War"? And would you tell our audience a little bit about what that means, as a term.

**BW:** Indeed, yeah. As I said, the country is in flux. It's in a time of great change. And previous consular officers had identified for their officers at home and their bosses at home, the economic patterns that are developed in Ireland after the famine. So what you had was a predominance of agriculture in the majority of the country, largely the south, the west, and the east, and the dominance of manufacturing in the northern part of the country centered on Belfast and what is called Londonderry/Derry still today. So there were very few alternative sources of employment for people in Ireland. And therefore, when something like the agriculture fails, what you then begin to have is a movement developing called the Irish National Land League. And the Irish National Land League is seeking improvement in the rights of particularly the landless laborer who may own a little bit of property or may want to own some property. I don't mean property in terms of acres, I mean property in terms of a small cottage and a quarter of an acre around him and his family.

So what has happened by the time J.J. has come, is that attempts at land reform legislation to give the landed laborer, to give them a fair rent, to give them free sale—in other words, the ability to sell their cottage and their bit of land, if they wanted to. Or if they wanted to stay, fixity of tenure, that what they were on would be *theirs* for their lives. That legislation had failed, and so what emerged was the Irish National Land League. Davitt and Parnell established the Land League to withhold the payment of rent.<sup>5</sup> So what do landlords do if they can't get rent? They start evicting again. They then have to rely on the local police, the Royal Irish

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<sup>4</sup> The Land War was a period of agrarian agitation in rural Ireland in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. While there were many violent incidents and some deaths in this campaign, it was not actually a "war", but rather a prolonged period of civil unrest [Whelan's note].

<sup>5</sup> Michael Davitt established the League, an agrarian organization. Charles Stewart Parnell, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party which sought home rule for Ireland, was elected President and John Devoy, leader of the Fenian movement in the United States supported it also. [Whelan's note]



constabulary. And Ireland is one of the most heavily militarized societies, going right into rural Ireland. There are barracks all over the place, and you can still see them today. And so you have constant evictions, you have violence in the countryside, you have individuals who are seen to represent the landlord, like the land agent, the local police officer, in turn being killed.

And the country therefore is in a state of agrarian upset and constant violence when he arrives in. He is very insightful from the very beginning. He sees the two sides, but, as we'll see, his own instincts, his sympathies, are more with the landless laborer or the small tenant farmer.

**ER:** Yes, I have to say your book on the history of the US Consular Service for me was an absolute page turner. I found it riveting. And some of the things you're explaining to us now are *so* helpful, not only for people interested in these historical topics, but for those of us who are working on the Piatts. It is *incredibly* helpful to understand what it meant that Sarah and J.J. essentially get plucked out of the United States. They don't have much time—I was just rereading some of the letters from the Piatt Family Papers getting ready for our talk today, and you see J.J. being kind of surprised that he gets the appointment. And he only has a few months to get himself to Ireland. He has to find a ship himself. You know, again, going back to the—this is not a professional job where the government's managing stuff. J.J. has to get his whole family over to Ireland in a couple of months. So they get plucked out of Ohio, and there's a letter from Sarah around that time saying, "I guess there's no place for us in our own country." It's wonderful to hear her, again going back to some of the ideas about women writers at the time. You can hear her in her letter; she is no shrinking violet. She's got a sarcastic, ironic, direct, hard-hitting kind of voice, and she says, "I guess there's no place for us in our own country." So to imagine them landing there in the midst of this complicated history, and J.J. having to step into a consular position, and then having to basically learn through daily life what's been going on in Ireland. And it's so interesting to hear you, and also to read about it in great detail in your book, talk about: where are J.J.'s sympathies? How do we tell what's evolving for him as he learns about Ireland, the Ireland he stepped into. And we can see similar things in Sarah's poems about Ireland. But I want to return to some of the things I learned from your book, and again, please rephrase what I've said if it doesn't sound accurate. But, very, *very* illuminating for me to hear you place what you were just describing, I think you used the phrase, "the liberal instincts," that we hear coming from J.J. after just a few months, in terms of his sympathy with the Irish people and the landless people and the suffering people--after just a few months, when technically speaking, his allegiance is supposed to be to the British government, because we're talking about a diplomatic relationship with the *British* government, not with the Irish people. Does that sound roughly correct?

**BW:** Well, his allegiance is to the American government.

**ER:** Okay, all right. But as an American government *representative*, he's not supposed to *side* with the colonial population, is that right?

**BW:** Well, there is always an issue with any foreign service. Their concern always is that the individual “turns native.” But at the same time, remember, it’s a service that isn’t that professional.

**ER:** Yes, right.

**BW:** So, they’re not reading every report in any great detail that comes in. And in terms of the state department bureaucracy, it really only begins to expand towards the 1890s when US foreign trade abroad is given huge support by Congress. And so the State Department itself, it doesn’t have the greatest resources to be reading this stuff. So it’s rare, unless somebody complains, that there would be criticism of the way of his reporting from Ireland. Usually, the common complaint within the State Department is when something happens, they don’t have background information, they go back looking over reports, and they see they’re largely culled from newspapers. J.J.’s reports aren’t like that. J.J.’s reports are 10 and 12 pages. I mean, his literary prowess *really* comes out in them. And so, therefore—and he’s able to cover all sides. So even though I presented, you know, two little excerpts from him there that suggest perhaps that he was less sympathetic to one than the other, at the same time, that wouldn’t have been too noticeable in a very long report, you know.

**ER:** Okay.

**BW:** I mean, one of the things where, at this time, he is particularly critical, is what the British introduce into Ireland—the British Government—in order to quell this agrarian violence, is what’s called the Coercion Act. And the Coercion Act meant that, it gave almost, kind of increased the powers of police and military to arrest people, hold them without any charge. In other words, a suspended habeas corpus. And that was something that he was quite critical of. But so were other American consular officers in Ireland, particularly those based in the southern, eastern, western counties less in the north, because you can already see there, and you actually *can* see there within the consular officers based in the Northern counties—what is today, Northern Ireland—a greater sympathy with the Northern community who, as I say, it’s much more industrial-based activity, and factory work is available. So for those in the south, the west, and the east, there is an element of criticism that comes through of British government policy. But British government policy introduced the Coercion Act, that’s just one in a long line of coercive acts.

But eventually, in terms of, then, that world that he’s living in, that political upheaval begins to calm down, once there is the introduction of greater legislation, stronger legislation, that covers any of the lacunae and the gaps in the previous land legislation and satisfies land tenants and landless laborers who are able to acquire land. So there is a calming by the time they leave—by the early 1890s—there’s a calming of activity. And the major issue that has taken over by then, which he also comments on, is the Home Rule activity. And so side by side with that demand for land reform was a demand for Home Rule. And Home Rule at the time only meant that there would be Irish politicians, elected in general elections, would be based in Ireland and also in the

Westminster parliament.<sup>6</sup> So J.J. is also reporting on that and the movement towards Home Rule. And this is one of the wonderful things about them being there for the 12-year period. There are very few officials who are foreign service officials, who are allowed to stay abroad for such a lengthy period of time, who see a country actually improving and progressing and moving towards some sense of stability. Now what they're also seeing, as we'll see when we talk about their own personal literary circles, is that they're part of a circle that is seeking to achieve independence.

**ER:** Well, that would be a great topic, I think, for us to move toward now: their circles. We've talked about, you know, J.J. being a US government employee and he has certain duties, even though not well articulated for him at this point in time. But the Piatts lived full lives as human beings with all kinds of social connections. You and I have talked about this, we see in their letters how much traveling they did. They traveled around the country, they visited lots of places. Sarah's poems about Ireland are full of, what you called in one of our earlier conversations one-on-one, "a sense of place." She *really* writes about—and it was one of the things I loved about being in Ireland—going to the places she wrote poems about. And I understood the poems so much better once I was in those places. So it's not like they're just living in a small town and not going anywhere. They have full, robust lives. Another thing that I think our audience wants to remember is they had a lot of children. And their daughter, Marian, the eldest, was born in 1862. So Marian is living her young adulthood in Ireland. She was the only daughter they had. The rest were boys. But, she's a young woman in Ireland. And we also know from Marian's letters and things family members wrote about her, Marian was going to London. Marian attended a play with William Butler Yeats. So this I hope, now Bernadette, you can take us into this idea of their circles. Who are the people? What kind of a world is this that the Piatts are part of?

**BW:** Yeah, I mean, I think, they come into Cobh, Queenstown, which to us would seem today to be a very small village. And indeed, one can wonder, then, how *did* they integrate into these larger national political circles and wider circles? And one of the strengths of being a consular officer in Ireland was the prestige and respect that it was accorded. And it was from the very beginning—from when the first officer was appointed in 1790—it was seen as a very important position, not just by the British government, but then also by any Irish officials. And, indeed, so therefore, the US consular officer is immediately integrated, first of all, into an administrative world, into a commercial world, and into a cultural world. And that cultural world that they—because their reputations have gone before them. Now, it takes a while for hers to come through, but certainly J.J. is seen as an established poet, and a poet with some reputation in the United States.

But what you begin to see very quickly is an important figure who picks up on particularly Sarah, and that is Katharine Tynan. Katharine Tynan was a novelist, a poet, a journalist, born in County Dublin. She's Catholic, her father is quite a wealthy farmer, she'd been well educated,

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<sup>6</sup> The Home Rule movement as noted was led by Charles Stewart Parnell whose mother was American and he can be considered as part of a transatlantic political exchange. [Whelan's note]

and then she also had been a member of what was called, I mentioned earlier, the Land League. There was a Ladies' Land League who supported people who had been evicted and that really was—her major political interest lay in the Nationalist Movement. So she was very much regarded as a prominent figure—particularly as she got into her 20s—within the Nationalist Movement, and she herself began to—she was writing poetry from a very early age—began to publish. And began to publish in a magazine called *The Irish Monthly*. Now, *The Irish Monthly* is a magazine that was very popular. Its editor was a man called Father Russell [Rev. Matthew Russell], who was a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, but he had *extremely* eclectic tastes. And so, therefore, he gave quite a prominent position—given the time—to Katharine Tynan and to her reviews. And she produces some really, I mean—there's at least a 10-page review that she produced which is just called "Mrs. Piatt's Poems," and it's published in 1886. Now, for some of your students who are here present with us, they'll find *The Irish Monthly* in JStor, and it would be extremely useful for them to be able to read what she says about Sarah's work.

Katharine Tynan's reminiscences [*Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences, 1913*] are online and are free. And even though she misstates one of her early meetings with the Piatts, it's very clear that by 1886 she said that, "they had brought me a new friendship, the Piatts, these American poets." And she particularly, then, spends quite a lot of time recalling her time in Queenstown, how she met them, and indeed, more importantly, how she found the household. And what's clear is that it was a household which one suspects survived on very little money. The other aspect that she comments on, which is quite interesting, is that she describes them as kind of, they're almost two very frail people. But because they're so engrossed in their own literary worlds, and that their constant writing, bits of papers, and yet bringing up this very rambunctious and lively family. She says that initially she was a little afraid of Mrs. Piatt. And I think, I kind of feel that that might have been because of her reputation. But very quickly they settled in, and they become firm friends.

So, Katharine Tynan brings them into an Irish literary world. She brings them in, then, to the world of *The Irish Monthly*. And there's many more reviews of Sarah's and J.J.'s work in that. They visit her in Dublin. And Katharine Tynan had set up what was almost a salon, which some of your students who take literature classes will know, was a way in which women, in particular, who were wealthy, who were patrons of the arts, were able to gather literary figures around them, usually in their own homes. And it meant that they had access to that public world, because they were, as we know, unwelcomed, largely, into many of the academies. So, the Piatts become part of that world.

Within that world, then, that's where she meets the young Yeats. He says to Katharine Tynan at one stage, "Thank you for introducing me to J.J. And thank you for bringing my material to his attention." Whether anything came of that, we don't know. But, I mean, it is a particularly interesting little nugget. We know, also, part of that world was Aubrey De Vere [Aubrey Thomas de Vere]. He's also a poet and an author. He then goes from Protestantism to Catholicism, so

he's in a sense, he's a very strong mind of his own. One would be able to find further material on him in an entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, which is available online.<sup>7</sup>

And J.J. talks a lot about Aubrey de Vere as well. The third part of that literary world who I just would like to mention are the Sigersons. And the Sigersons are also another who become a staple within the cultural revival and the Irish literary movement. The Sigersons—Dr. Sigerson [George Sigerson] is a medical doctor, quite well off, good practice in the center of Dublin. And it's him and his family that they meet with as well. And because one of the two Sigerson daughters—there's Dora and there's Hester—she and Arthur Donn Piatt, J.J. and Sarah's son, obviously take a shine to each other, and so that becomes a courtship. Katharine Tynan brings down Hester every now and then to Queenstown, we know. That relationship develops and, as we know, the couple eventually marry. And Arthur Donn will become a key figure in that literary revival along with Hester and along with the Sigersons. And, indeed, even today, the Sigerson family would be well known within Irish cultural circles.

So those connections, the Tynan connection, the de Vere connection, and then the Sigerson connection: they become part of that literary world which the Piatts come into, and I think explain then, why they want to move to Dublin and gain the Dublin consulate. He begins lobbying for that, 1888, 1889. It's quite early. He's getting his father onto it, he's getting Robert Warren or his friend onto it to see, can he be transferred there. They do get it eventually, as we know, they do get to Dublin. They only spend a few months there, but he wanted to stay on. And then he launches this *major* campaign in Dublin to get support from Trinity College professors and a whole many other of the literary giants in the Irish literary world at the time, to try and stay in Dublin.

**ER:** Yeah, that's a fantastic turn in the story, we talked about at the beginning of our discussion when he's not that thrilled to have been appointed, and then he makes a lot of effort to stay. And the people also, if I recall correctly, the people also really supported that. There were petitions and signatures to keep J.J. on—

**BW:** Except [interrupting], sorry—that's not unusual.

**ER:** Oh, okay. Oh *good*, thank you. That's not unusual.

**BW:** That's not unusual.

**ER:** Can you say a little bit more about that? It's important to put that in that context, because otherwise it sounds like they really, especially esteemed J.J. and wanted to keep him. Would you tell me more about that?

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<sup>7</sup> See [De Vere, Aubrey Thomas | Dictionary of Irish Biography \(dib.ie\)](https://dib.ie/entry/aubrey-thomas). De Vere was a vital contributor to the establishment by Lady Augusta Gregory of an Irish theatre, later the Abbey National Theatre in Dublin.

**BW:** I mean, one of the ways that, one of the few ways that individuals were able to exert some authority over any kind of appointment or agitated any way for anything, you would have groups of individuals that would come together and put together petitions and testimonials. It's not unusual that there would be these testimonials and that there would be—I mean, he did it himself, to get to the job in the first place. He prints it in the newspapers. So I mean, obviously, those who didn't support him wouldn't have signed it. But there were enough who did.

**ER:** Okay, great. Now I'd like to ask two questions. One, first, is a question of definition. And then I wanted to return to a topic you cover in your book, which is where you help your reader—and this reader in particular, I told you, it was it was a page turner for me, based in your very deep knowledge of this topic—putting J.J. kind of in the context of other consuls in Ireland. You know, how did he compare? So I want to get there for a minute. So J.J., in terms of, how the people felt about him, what his attitudes were toward Ireland, and so on: was he different? It's like you just said: well, it wasn't unusual that there was a petition. Was J.J. unusual in any way as a consul, or did they all basically have his kinds of positions? That's where I'm going. But my first question, I want to return to a question of terminology. You and I were able to talk about this a little bit before the interview began, and it is an issue of terminology that I think Americans really struggle with, and I would love to hear you talk about it. And that is the terms “Irish language” and “Gaelic.” Could you just tell us a little bit about those terms? Were they different in the nineteenth century than they are now?

**BW:** Okay. The first thing is that the word “Gaelic,” the origins of it, the root of it, is the word “Gael.” And “Gael” is the Irish language for an Irish person. And the phrase itself, “Gael” or “Gaelic,” is one that—the term “Gaelic” in particular becomes very important towards the 1890s in the context of that revival of a separate Irish cultural identity, one that's separate from the anglicized world, from anything that's to do with English speaking.

**ER:** Okay, and then also just to follow up to that: I believe in Irish schools today the curricular subject is called “Irish language.” Is that right?

**BW:** That's correct.

**ER:** Okay, and so is the term “Irish language” today in Ireland a synonym for Gaelic?

**BW:** Yes, it is.

**ER:** Yes, it is. Okay, and was the term Irish language also being used in the late nineteenth century? Or, Gaelic was really the center of that?

**BW:** Yeah. I mean, I have in front of me here a census of Ireland, 1911, for Arthur Donn Piatt, his wife, Hester, and their son, Donn Piatt. And what's written in here is, in this specific one, is whether they're able to speak the Irish language. And some of them actually insert into it that they can speak Gaelic, some put—others, not the Piatts—that they can speak Irish. So, it's used interchangeably.

**ER:** Okay. All right, good. Thank you, that's very helpful. And now, you know, I'm looking at the clock and I could keep asking you questions for a very long time, but I realize you have a busy day and I need to let you go very soon. So I thought, maybe to wrap up in addition to any concluding thoughts you might like to share with us, I just wanted to ask you to talk about the next generation of Piatts: Sarah and J.J.'s kids.

**BW:** Yeah. I think they're a very nice bookend to this, because what they show us is this idea of a fluid identity, a transatlantic identity. The Piatts come to Ireland, initially J.J. and Sarah, as Americans, they encounter Irish culture and Irish identity. Arthur Donn marries into a very strongly Irish/Gaelic cultural background to the Sigersons. He marries Hester Sigerson. And then their son, Donn. He then, in turn, he becomes what would be seen as more Irish than the Irish themselves. He would become very Irish, in the sense that, he is born in Ireland, his identity is Irish, indeed, even his economic activity—he's a translator of languages and specifically documents from English into Irish, Irish into English, in the Irish parliament. And he himself developed a prominence as a writer and a strong literary figure and was well known. Just one of the interesting things is: there's a file in the National Library of Ireland, which is in the Patrick Joseph McCall Papers. And there's a report of expenses and subscriptions for an Arthur Donn Piatt monument in what is the National Cemetery in Dublin, in Glasnevin in 1914. There's a lovely photograph, and written on the curb was, "Some Irish friends who loved him have jointly raised this last tribute of affection."

**ER:** Yes, thank you, I agree. That's outstanding place to end. And thank you so much, Professor Whelan, for speaking with us today and sharing your expertise. It's a thrill, personally, for me to get to talk to you about our shared interests. Thank you again for all the work you've done, and we are grateful to you for participating in our interview series.

**BW:** Thank you very much, Elizabeth. I was honored to be asked, and I want to wish you and your students the best of luck with this work. It is *extremely* important in terms of retrieving this very important woman and her material. And I think what we can see, because they were in Ireland for so long, is that those Irish themes come through strongly. And we see that element of sympathy that she had, but also that she brings a completely new view of the way Ireland should be perceived abroad as well, and particularly in the United States.

**ER:** We can have a whole other conversation about the Irish poems and I hope we'll have a chance to do that someday. But for now I'm going to say thank you and goodbye, and we appreciate your time today.

**BW:** Bye bye.