Looking back on the 1916 Easter Rising and the dawn of the Irish Republic, W. B. Yeats noted that “Patrick Pearse had said that in every generation must Ireland’s blood be shed.” And indeed, in every generation, from the 1790s to the 1920s, Irish blood was shed for the cause of Irish independence from British rule. Theobald Wolfe Tone, thirty-five years old, took his own life in prison in 1798 rather than be hanged as a traitor. Pearse himself was executed in 1916 following the unsuccessful Easter Rising. Every generation has its own unsuccessful uprising and its own executed nationalist martyrs. This long and sad history raises many questions: How is it that Irish nationalists felt it imperative to stage a revolution every generation, no matter how hopeless? How did this version of a nationalist identity endure down through all this time and across multiple continents? What shared vision led poets and lawyers, farmers and printers, peasants and lords, to sacrifice themselves to such an elusive idea?

A simple answer to those questions is that these many activists and organizers were driven by nationalism. This answer, however, only gives a name to the question. In this book I explore the development and mobilization of the different nationalisms that inspired many different campaigns, each with its own organizational base, all sharing organizational and conceptual space defined by the term nationalism. This idea emerged from an antinationalist context and then grew and changed through many forms and across national borders, across oceans even, to return each generation in a new form. The medium for its generation, development, suppression, transformation, and
reemergence can best be understood as a transnational field of nationalist organizations, each acting according to its own vision of Irish nationalism.

Nationalism is routinely treated as a given, an essential part of who we are. Studies of nationalism show it to be a social construct, a perspective that we are taught to adopt, a narrative device with which to identify ourselves and name our peers. In this work, I am particularly looking at nationalism as an organized construct and as the strategic outcome of collective efforts. Just as other forms of collective identity are promoted in a political domain by social movements and cultural campaigns, forms of nationalism acquire their contours through deliberate action. As nationalism is a relatively modern concept, and given that we have a vast historical body of evidence of life and social meaning prior to nationalism achieving its current taken-for-granted status, the historical case of the emergence and development of Irish nationalism offers a crucial perspective on nationalism overall. Further, the almost startlingly early development of Irish transnational nationalism speaks directly to phenomena that have only recently become part of our studies of national identities in a globalizing world.

The Irish nationalist movement was born in the 1790s out of Enlightenment ideas. It has been resurrected, referenced, and remade many times since then while still retaining the essence of its origins. Prior to that time, the Irish people did not generally speak of themselves in national terms. The period that Thomas Paine called the Age of Revolution introduced new ways of thinking about autonomy, collective identity, and self-determination, and Irish nationalism was necessarily a product of that age. In the development of Irish nationalist thinking, however, Thomas Paine was neither the first nor the most lasting source of American influence.

The American Revolution had an immediate impact on Irish political discourse. The Society of United Irishmen, leading Ireland’s first nationalist movement, looked to the United States and to American patriotic rhetoric to define its new vision. With the colonists’ defeat of Britain, the United States became the preferred point of reference for the movement. Activists wrote poems and songs about America, casting the new nation as the model for their own hopes and dreams. In its late revolutionary phase, the society introduced its Irish Catechism, to be used by Catholic peasants known as the Defenders, who joined the nationalist movement.

*What is that in your hand?*
—*It is a branch*
*Of what?*
—*Of the Tree of Liberty*
The idea of America as the land of liberty served as a powerful symbol for the Irish efforts to free themselves from British rule. The American Revolution (and that of France, with some reservations) was a beacon for the Irish to follow. Liberty could be won at home, as it had been in America, or sought overseas. England had been the most common destination for voluntary Irish emigration prior to American independence. Afterward, for those with republican leanings, the United States held the soil on which their dreams would grow.

In the present era of increasing transnational mobility, collective-identity constructs are made problematic for millions of people by the simple fact of living in a different nation from the one in which they were born or raised. Migrant and diasporic communities are well aware of the limitations inherent in thinking of nationalism as a singular concept. For these people and their families, multiple forms of nationalism compete for primacy in their self-definitions while others around them may impose demands or assumptions about their supposed loyalties and obligations. While theorizing transnationalism is a relatively new development, people have been living through these uncertain states for a far greater period. The case of Irish transnationalism from the nineteenth century onward demonstrates the underlying mechanisms of collective-identity formation at a distance distinct from the modern conditions of communication and transportation, let alone shared cultural media.

This study is not about the physical entity of an Irish nation. I am interested in the cultural idea that the Irish people saw themselves as a nation with or without a state of their own or autonomous control of their geographic boundaries and that they could nurture and pursue this vision from outside the country itself. From the perspective of this study, the Irish nation is an identity marker, and it is in defense of their sense of identity that so many people have fought. As Martin Sökefeld has observed, “Identity does not explain anything; identity has to be explained.” It was the idea of Irish citizenship as newly conceptualized in the modern era that drove the events
preceding Irish independence for more than one hundred years. Although we know a great deal about the events of this period, there is still much to be learned about how ideas become identities.

The largest part of my answer to this question is that collective identities have to be negotiated within collective spaces. In simpler terms, organized collective action creates the idea of the collective. Organizations such as governments, social movement groups, churches, teams, armies, clubs, and schools institutionalize and propagate ways of thinking about the world and our place within it. Participants in those organizations adopt forms of speech and behavior that reinforce those ways of thinking. We refer to collectives of organizations that share some generally understood area of work or concern as an organizational field. Fields of organizations create the conceptual spaces in which competing ideas interact to produce new products of the imagination. In the case of Irish national identity, the conceptual work underlying the idea was not even limited to acts within Ireland. A considerable portion of what we now recognize as Irish identity was organized and transmitted transnationally. Born in Ireland, the idea took root and grew in France, Australia, and, especially, the United States. From there it found its way back across the ocean to help build the modern Irish Republic.

Historians of Irish emigration and of Irish American immigration have long noted the prevalence of private associations, aid societies, and even secret societies informing and structuring the social, economic, and political lives of the middle and working classes on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet the relationship between the two spheres of activity remains underexplored. Further, while the contributions of specific U.S. associations to particular questions—such as Irish American assimilation or Irish resettlement programs—has been studied, the larger issue of the role of private associations in the formation of an Irish American identity has not been considered.

The social imaginary of an independent Ireland may indeed have been rooted in Ireland before it grew in America. The form in which it grew, as Irish nationalism bolstered by varying degrees of republicanism, underwent the reverse journey. Ultimately, the resettlement of Irish nationalists in the United States determined the course of the nationalist agenda. The nationalist agenda became a transnational effort.

Scholars of contemporary transnational social movements have observed that the globalization of markets and state power has both facilitated and frequently necessitated the corresponding organization of transnational extra-state movements for social change. In such models, global changes in patterns of mobility, communications technologies, and economies increase the accessibility of social worlds beyond the home nation. Migrants depart
IntroduC tIon  |

from their sending nations, more or less settling into new communities in receiving nations, from which vantage point their shared sense of national identities may be transformed in several possible directions. One of these paths involves adopting a renewed attachment to the sending nation—the old home—the imagination of which becomes increasingly salient to the migrants as their daily lives abroad provide constant reminders that they are not really of the social world in which they presently live. With their hearts and minds divided across multiple nations, the migrant communities construct new, transnational identities for themselves that depend, in part, on dynamic reconceptualizations of the home national identity.14 As a collective, they are not fully a part of either the sending or receiving nations yet are attached to both and thereby in a state of becoming a new entity defined by this state of betweenness. The conjunction of increasing globalization in all facets of social life with contemporary attempts to measure transnational political activity has encouraged a reconsideration of earlier cases of political organizing across state borders.15 The same processes that enable transnational identity formation in the present may be found in the past, but with more work to achieve it.

Collective identities are negotiated, narrated, and performed. We can extend our understanding of these processes from within social movements to larger fields of organized collective action. This perspective reveals how organized collectives, including both organizations and fields of organizations, provide space for the negotiation while narratives provide the substance. Shared spaces and interactions within those spaces encourage people to refine their shared-identity stories, the narratives of their collective past, and the “moral debts” that they owe to that past.16 People who choose to join any one community-defined group are choosing to participate in the meaning-making exchanges that occur within that field. In this manner, the making and remaking of either official histories or challenger versions of history are crucial to both the imagined nature of a collective community and the identities that individuals adopt with respect to those communities. These identity claims are subsequently performed through shared acts. These may include transitory events, such as a daylong strike to demonstrate workers’ abilities to act as a collective, and ongoing acts of normal life, including, for example, rituals and prayer, styles of clothing and food, and the repetition of the shared stories that define them as a group. Ritualized acts of collective identity such as parades, holiday celebrations, toasts, and oaths reify certain narratives as the official versions to be recognized and shared throughout the entire community.

Therefore, organizations provide the spaces in which defining narratives are negotiated and shared while also creating the potential to mobilize people
into larger acts under the banner of their shared-identity statuses. Acts reflect and refine the narratives that have given shape to them. As Jeffrey Olik summarized, “Collective memory is something—or rather many things—we do, not something . . . we have.” Understanding organized processes in this way can further inform our approach to nationalism and national identities.

The Birth of a Nationality

Most of the social structures out of which we construct collective identities—gender, class, race, religion, and nationality—operate as modes of segregation through which social life is routinely divided. Other divisions such as occupation, region, and various elements of what is called a shared culture also structure the experienced groupings of our social world. The institutionalization and reification of boundaries between groups of “us” and groups of “them” are reinforced by a host of routine acts of inclusion and exclusion. Through dynamic and ritualistic practices we construct imagined communities of nation and nationality, which extend to both subnational castes and ethnic groupings within the nation and supranational communities of coreligionists and racial categories. Less essential groupings need to be more consciously constructed and mobilized. That is, more work has to be done to imagine and build such communities and to negotiate a stable outcome from fluid recombinations of existing ideas and labels. Research on the construction of collective-identity groupings for political mobilization has emphasized the cognitive framing of both shared identities and perceived group status. Collective identities are seen as accomplishments brought about by organized communities. Indeed, the primary goal of numerous social movements has been to achieve recognition for their identity claims. In such cases, a common identity is first defined within a community and then, through collective action, exported beyond its boundaries.

Nationality, which Benedict Anderson famously described as an “imagined community,” simultaneously empowers those who share a national identification while excluding or repressing others. Anderson demonstrated how it centralizes state power over populations. Yet within a divided nation, the cultural construct of the people of a nation having common goals and interests, the notion that the people are all in it together, has the potential to challenge other such constructs and to build community. The notion of an imagined community can be used to either prop up or tear down institutions of authority.
Although it appears to be an essential category now, nationality is contingent and constructed. And as a construct, it must be negotiated. There is no single moment, year, or decade in which the nation, in its modern form, came into being. “The modern sense of the word is no older than the eighteenth century, give or take the odd predecessor,” notes Eric Hobsbawm, who views the idea as emerging from the end years of the period known as the Enlightenment. Nor did nationalism necessarily follow immediately from the establishment of nations or the extension of the concept of citizenship from the city-state to the nation-state. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, however, believed that this particular notion solidified in 1792, for which reason Rogers Brubaker begins his reframing of nationalism with that date. Not incidentally, Goethe’s realization occurred on the battlefield as the cry of “Vive la Nation” became a revolutionary cause. The nation was a thing for which people fought, together. This new image of the nation was the product of an organized campaign of nationalism, “not [an] entity, but [a] contingent event.” National collective identity was an accomplishment of organizing. It required work to create it.

Liah Greenfeld, tracing the development of early modern notions of nationalism in Europe and its transition into a more familiar mode, has argued that “the basic framework of modern politics—the world divided into nations—is simply a realization of nationalist imagination; it is created by nationalism.” Early nationalism, in this model, was created by English elites and only later acquired a more democratic quality. The events of this book begin in the later period of the development of this imagination, when the idea of the nation began to merge with the idea of citizenship.

Something of this spirit was in the air in Ireland from at least the 1780s. The Volunteer movement of that decade had come to symbolize the Irish people’s self-organized efforts at self-protection and, therefore, empowerment. Their origins and allegiances contrasted markedly with the British-appointed government of Ireland, headquartered within “the Castle” in Dublin and ruling by authority of “the Crown” in Westminster.

In Ireland, as in prerevolutionary America, challengers to state power had a unique advantage: their ruling government was foreign to their physical nation. Observing closely as the French and American revolutions had claimed to confront illegitimate authority, the Volunteers and their associated political clubs asked “whether it should not be more reasonable to mend our state, than to complain of it; and how far this may be in our own Power.” To “mend” the state is hardly a revolutionary claim, and so there was no legal threat in raising it. The phrase “our own Power,” however, indicates
their intent that the part of “our state” with which they were concerned did not extend across the Irish Sea. They did not have to ask why they should allow Britain to rule in Ireland. Raising the question of what the Irish people wanted was enough to make that point. Such questions were matters of public discourse, raised in a wide assortment of private clubs and societies, then published and discussed in pubs and on street corners everywhere. Irish national identity was becoming a matter for enlightened debate, if not yet military action. As the United Irishmen wrote in an address to Scottish reformers in 1792, “We will not buy or borrow liberty from America or from France, but manufacture it ourselves, and work it up with those materials which the hearts of Irishmen furnish them with at home.”

The Enlightenment period led European thinkers in several directions. Primarily it ushered in the notion of scientific reason, elevating the study of science above mysticism and religion in the quest for universal truths. It also called into question the traditional forms of power and social organization, creating space for radical republicanism, the fall of monarchies, and a renewed interest in the idea of democracy at all levels of society. The Age of Enlightenment ushered in the modern notion of “nation-state societies defined by territorial boundaries.” This period also saw a growing awareness of the power of narrative to shape reality and the emergence of historiography as a concern among both scholars and other writers. Enlightenment thinking contributed to the rapid expansion of civil society in England, in Ireland, and elsewhere. Social political clubs, fraternal societies, and numerous other public bodies, where the questions of the day could be argued, flourished, as did scientific academies and newspapers. In England and Ireland, Whig clubs became famous for drinking, eating, and arguing as early as the 1690s and apparently continued in this tradition up through the 1790s. In the midst of all this socializing these associations somehow laid the foundations for Irish nationalism.

In addition to the open political and cultural clubs of the time, secret societies thrived in eighteenth-century Ireland, as they did throughout the British Empire. They were popular for a number of reasons, not least of which was the fact that open opposition to the power of the Crown was potentially punishable by death. In response to sedition laws, collective action for social and political change underwent revolutionary changes from the late 1700s into the early 1800s.

Collective action circa 1750 in both Ireland and England was “mostly local in scope, adopting forms and symbols peculiar to the relationship between claimants and the objects of their claims, either acting directly on a local relationship or asking privileged intermediaries to convey claims to more distant authorities.” Much of the collective action in Ireland con-
cerned land disputes and organized resistance to the unrelenting transfer of control of the land from Catholic to Protestant hands under the Penal Laws. These were not primarily political claims, let alone nationalist ones. They represented the most effective and arguably safest organization of power available to the least powerful groups. They did not require much by way of agenda setting, political strategizing, or networking with elite allies. On the other hand, the early-dawn raids of secret agrarian societies benefited from a wealth of pitchforks, cutting tools, and torches, resources that were readily available to even poor farmers. James Scott refers to these tools and strategies together as “weapons of the weak.”

What Scott calls “everyday forms of peasant resistance” attributes a deep symbolic understanding and a sense of theory to peasant resistance that is rarely credited. The actors involved understand how small their actions are and yet also understand that such actions, repeated often and widely, undermine the power of their oppressors. Peasant activists perceive that they are achieving what they can without extending into the far riskier territory of trying to accomplish more. They do not plan together or otherwise coordinate, yet clearly they act collectively in that many such groups of peasants anonymously engage in the same acts of subversion. They share an understanding and some amount of strategy without formal coordination. They target small material goals, like poaching for food or burning fences to slow the construction of enclosures. Nonetheless, their purposes are political. They are saying no in the only way they can.

Materially, the Irish peasants of the late 1700s were best able to organize in a vigilante style to discourage and possibly slow the tide of disfranchisement from the land. Pragmatically, under conditions in which most protest action was illegal and penalized in the most draconian terms, secrecy was almost essential to any long-term resistance movement. Prior to the 1780s there simply was no popular discourse on national rights and no history of the Irish acting together as Irish citizens in opposition to non-Irish authority. The mostly Catholic peasants shared a cultural history, language, and place with one another and with their mostly Protestant landlords, with whom they were in constant conflict. The idea that they were oppressed by England, and that national identity rather than class or Christian sect was the reason, had not yet caught on and could hardly be openly suggested. Under those conditions, are we justified in merging the peasant resistance with later political clubs and later still revolutionary efforts as part of a single field of related forms of organized collective action? I think so.

An underclass that resists the oppressive conditions of a highly stratified society may well normalize resistance in day-to-day acts of nonrebellion. But
an underclass that can name its enemy and imagine this enemy defeated may be more likely to see its daily resistance as a temporary phase that they must endure until the enemy is vulnerable enough to allow more direct forms of challenge. A peasantry that can emulate the acts of others in the same conditions as themselves is actively constructing a common identity or even a class consciousness. Such a peasantry may well form organized bands of secret actors, with leaders, names, and sworn oaths such as the Whiteboys and Defenders developed. They were not simply stealing back a little of the land, food, or dignity that had been stolen from them. They formed the vanguard of the greater resistance movement that they imagined would someday arise. And when it arose in the 1790s, they were ready to join.

To grasp the processes by which collective identities take shape, it is crucial to consider the constructed nature of the boundaries between groups. That is, we must lump together many associations seen from one perspective even as we split them apart when seen from another. The Defenders, for example, were a Catholic secret society composed of a Catholic peasantry acting against Protestant laws and Protestant landlords. The United Irish Societies were mostly Protestants (particularly Presbyterian dissenters) of the upper classes who, if their efforts against British rule had succeeded, would have become the elites of the new Ireland. In these and other ways, the two groups were quite distinct in their goals, targets, and memberships. At the same time, both these and many other associations operated within a culturally recognized—but otherwise unnamed—organizational field defined around questions of power and privilege in Ireland. In this sense, they were keenly aware of one another, sensitive to possible alliances, sharing a certain amount of membership overlap, and frequently in contact. In short, they acted as strategic co-participants in a shared field of action targeting British rule.

Organizational fields have been characterized as “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life.” Recent research has further demonstrated that such fields may be deeply nested: the outermost recognizable field defines the particular area of social life broadly while subfields within share a focus on some more limited aspect of that area of concern. In contemporary usage, the idea of a shared area of institutional life typically implies strong connections among participants, such as geographic proximity or tight internet connectivity. The construction of a shared transnational field with embedded national subfields in the nineteenth century was a unique accomplishment of Irish organizing. Transatlantic migration and other lengthy sea voyages formed the backbone of this network. The United Irish uprising provided the touchstone
for further mobilizations across greater distances and organized over longer stretches of time.

The failure of the United Irish uprising in 1798 led to passage of the Act of Union, under which Ireland lost all semblance of an independent legislature. With the leaders of the last rebellion killed, imprisoned, or in exile and most forms of collective action outlawed, Irish nationalism was in a weak position when Robert Emmet led a brief and utterly hopeless further rebellion in 1803, the main goal of which seemed to be to communicate that Ireland would not willingly accept union. Emmet martyred himself for the idea that rebellion was necessary.

Further efforts at national organizing in the name of Irish nationalism occurred throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, most notably in 1848, 1867, and 1916. Each campaign drew on the language, framing, and nationalist vision of the United Irishmen, often extolling the heroes and martyrs of past campaigns to motivate the latest campaign. Each campaign also expanded on the cultural nationalism of the United Irishmen into new directions, creating new contexts for popular collective action. And while I focus on the meaning-making work of nationalist organizing, we should not overlook Martin Sökefeld’s observation that “the discourse of the nation is intrinsically connected with issues of power.”

John Mitchel, who would be convicted of treason-felony just before the 1848 uprising, founded a nationalist paper called the United Irishman in January of that year. The paper’s motto was a quotation attributed to the 1798 hero and martyr Theobald Wolfe Tone. Nationalist debates preceding the 1916 Easter Rising were featured in a new separatist paper also called United Irishman, founded by Arthur Griffith in 1899. From generation to generation, Irish nationalists sought to “reclaim” the independent nation that the 1798 rebellion should have established. They were not simply continuing to pursue the same goal. They sought to correct a historical error and reclaim the Ireland that was supposed to have existed. Yet each also brought their own unique framing to the same questions.

In many respects, the story of the rise of Irish nationalism resembles that of many other European nations. However, two key features make the Irish case unique. First, its coming of age as a nation occurred under control of the British Empire under conditions that Irish nationalists perceived to be a foreign occupation. Ireland allegedly had its own political and civil institutions, but the British Crown significantly restricted their use. The status of the Irish as British subjects undermined the idea of the Irish as citizens of
Ireland. In this respect, the case of Ireland bears a greater resemblance to that of non-European nations conquered during the age of empire building. The Irish under British rule were denied the opportunity to define themselves in the manner of their own choosing, to present themselves to the world. In Jonathan Friedman’s terms, this made them a “people without history” and thereby in need of a new, self-constructed cultural collective identity.41

Second, while Britain was actively and aggressively trying to suppress Irish nationalist discourse and organizing, Irish nationalists moved their efforts to safer spaces outside British influence. In other words, Irish nationalism was in many respects a transnational accomplishment. In this respect, the case under study departs from Greenfeld’s model of nationalism which, in Charles Tilly’s summary, applies to “people subject to a common political authority.” The American Irish had physically and legally moved beyond that authority yet chose to identify primarily with the people and nation they left behind.42

This analysis focuses on the creation and mobilization of nationalist visions from the perspective of these two unique features. The Irish emigrated all over the world during the period under study. And while France was always an integral part of their efforts, I primarily look at the role of America, the American Irish, and the organization of Irish American transnational nationalism. It was in the United States that the Irish nationalists principally organized during the long years of movement abeyance at home.43 The United States provided shelter for United Irish political exiles fleeing prosecution prior to the 1798 uprising. Following the failed uprising, the surviving leaders also mostly migrated to the United States. This same dynamic was repeated after the defeat of the Young Ireland uprising as nationalists in the American Irish communities provided support to the rebels of 1848 and welcomed their émigrés after. A similar dynamic occurred after 1870, when Fenian prisoners were released on condition of exile and primarily rejoined their colleagues in the United States. In each case, the leaders of past uprisings in Ireland found a home and a community of supporters in America from which to continue the mission of their particular nationalist vision. Indeed, far more of the planning and organizing efforts for the Fenian uprising of 1867 took place in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia than in any part of Ireland. And it was the American-born Éamon de Valera, whose scheduled execution after the Easter Rising in 1916 was commuted in part out of respect for his foreign citizenship and who became the president of the short-lived Irish Free State and the first president of the Irish Republic.

The great exodus of Irish people throughout the world and so often to the United States provided material conditions under which transnational collective identities could grow and thrive. But new or changing identities
must be negotiated, argued, developed, and disseminated through organized collective action. The American Irish transnational nationalist identity developed through the interactions within the organizational field of societies, fraternal orders, and other voluntary associations formed by Irish people at home and abroad. Not all of these associations were nationalist in purpose or orientation. Nonetheless, the very broad and active field of organizations throughout the two nations, pushed by nationalist social actors, spawned an organizational bridge from Ireland to the United States. This transnational organizational field was supported by an existing transnational imaginary even as it created a space of exploration and negotiation wherein the imaginary itself was continuously transformed. Named organizations within the American field created the spaces within which the Irish abroad discussed and debated the nature of Irish identity—past, present, and future. Both sectarian and nonsectarian associations participated in these discussions either within or beyond the context of religious identity. As a field, these groups’ views coalesced around shared nationalist ideas. Organized collective action aimed to bring their ideas into reality.

In a sense, the American Irish were deterritorialized twice. Like any comparable migrant group, they were physically removed from their former homeland. But even before that, in the increasingly popular representations of Irish history, their land had been removed from them. They were deterritorialized before they left home. Thus, they were more loyal to the imagined Irish nation that should be and should have been than to the Ireland that they had left behind.

It is plausible that the Irish formed the first transnational community in America, having begun to settle in the United States in large numbers from the early seventeenth century. The American Irish played prominent roles in the American Revolution, not just as individuals but in larger numbers organized into ethnic associations, and committed to Irish support for the cause. George Washington himself accepted an honorary membership in one such association, praising them as “a Society distinguished for the firm adherence of its members to the glorious cause which we are embark’d upon.” But the Irish communities in America at that time tended to be of the merchant class, migrants for economic opportunities. They were compelled by the pull of the New World. They were from Ireland, but, as they presented themselves through their societies, they were Americans by choice. The Irish diaspora and the rise of transnational activism came later with the arrival of those who were pushed out of British territory.

For the late-arriving American Irish with nationalist sympathies, the home nation was an unfinished project. They had not so much left their
nation as they been forced, by economics, law, or politics, off the land where they had been building or hoping to build a nation. The American Irish in the nineteenth century were engaged in a project of nation building. As nationalists of a land that they defined as being under occupation, they were not creating a community of imagined affiliation; they were projecting a future community of a future nation that they hoped to create, justified by an imaginary past that they hoped to reclaim.

Evidence from Ireland and the United States demonstrates the development of a transnational nationalist identity that sustained and supported the idea of Irish independence throughout the nineteenth century. David Wilson has documented the political and cultural alignments between the Irish in the United States and the Irish in Ireland following the 1798 uprising. Michael Hanagan demonstrates the transnational nature of Irish nationalism during the Fenian movement. And Ely Janis has shown that even British political leaders took note of the transnational organizing behind the Land League in the early 1880s.

Given its somewhat intangible nature, however, the American role, although often noted, is frequently misunderstood. Viewing organizational efforts in Ireland and the United States as fundamentally distinct, historians, political scientists, and sociologists have failed to capture either the interdependence of the two or the implications of this interdependence. The dynamic drawing together of American and Irish nationalisms through the mechanism of a transnational organizational field reveals far more than just a crucial moment in the long independence movement of a single nation. The organizational dynamics of this case reveal how conceptions of nationhood and nationality are constructed and made durable and portable across space and time, or across different political and social contexts.

**A Method for Theory Building**

This book traces the historical development of a few shared ideas and goals over more than a century of organized collective action. All of these events have been examined before in great detail both from a macro perspective (focusing on large social forces and cultural trends) and a micro perspective (looking at the impact of significant individuals). In this work I seek to fill in the meso level, treating organizations as my unit of analysis and viewing the larger field of organizations as the primary social context in which they operate. Thus, I measure how cultural variables, or ideas, are introduced at the organizational level and strategically propagated throughout the surrounding field before they can become part of society at large. Many past studies of
individual organizations, particularly within social movements, have shown how such groups can work to change cultural ideas. In this book, I follow an enduring field of organizations, the span of which was far greater than any one movement or group, to demonstrate how the field itself can incubate and shape the values, ideas, beliefs, and goals of a people beyond the work of any of its constituent parts. Concurrently, I demonstrate how the field was structured and reshaped by the organizations within it and how the nature of the field at any point in time measurably represents many of the collective properties of the communities from which they arise.

The concept of an organizational field has a long and useful history from its roots in early structural work by Georg Simmel through the cultural fields described by Pierre Bourdieu, through contributions to social movement studies by Bert Klandermans, Russell Curtis and Louis Zurcher, Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, and, to some degree, me. For the most part, I use language derived from Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam’s work on strategic action fields (SAFs), described later herein in more detail. One of the key insights of the SAF model is that fields simultaneously operate in nested levels, wherein a field of action concerning great questions or campaigns such as those concerning the workings of democracy contain smaller but self-contained fields concerning related matters such as access to polling places. Further fields may be contained within those, including, for example, campaigns for minority rights in a society that include work on equal voter access. These smaller fields may well intersect with other fields, such as those concerned with disability rights, which may be independent of the larger field with which we began. The same holds true for levels of organizing. National-level fields of collective action encompass multiple smaller, localized fields, which in turn have smaller groups within them. By extension, I find that the same principles hold as multiple national fields with shared interests and other connections can effectively form a transnational strategic action field (TSAF), which I describe in more detail elsewhere.

To make sense of the continuity of ideas carried by the Irish nationalist field, I draw on two strands of research. The first is the complex and extensive literature on nationalism, which has included considerable work on the origins of nationalist ideas, the social construction of collective identities, the political power of imagined communities, the place of nativism and other forms of exclusion within the imagination of the nation, and contentious politics over citizen rights. Alongside these concepts and weaving through the development of Irish nationalist visions is the idea of reclamation, which I developed in greater detail in an earlier paper. In short, the enduring logic of reclamation claims is to imagine a past version of society, the nation, the
community, or some other collective entity as it should have been in order to frame current campaigns for change as movements to “restore” the imagined entity to its rightful condition. In other words, rather than claiming that the society could be better, one claims that the society was once on a rightful path to a better state, but that this path was unjustifiably blocked, and that the righteous path must be reclaimed. This idea guides many of the claims examined throughout the book.

A considerable amount of the progress in contemporary social movement theory has come about by conceptually isolating sustained movements for social change from more fleeting acts of protest on one side and from revolutionary movements on the other. Having kept these different strands of contentious politics distinct for as long as we have, we now have a wealth of information about both their similarities and their differences. In the present work I cut across the spectrum of nationalist collective action, attending primarily to their similarities to capture the continuity and interactions among all of the different campaigns and different social actors. The many organizations that rose and fell under the banner of Irish nationalism over the long period of study can therefore be seen as co-participants in one lengthy struggle that took many shapes according to the context of the moment. Looking at the trajectory of the overall field of organizing also reveals how the actions and claims made by any one group at one time exhibit a logic and strategy that make sense in the context of the overall field and of their place in the system of interorganizational relations.

Finally, this study contributes to our understanding of transnational collective action and transnational identities. A relatively new yet fertile area of research, transnational studies, has established the strength of enduring ties to the former homeland among migrant communities, the frequency with which economic migrants support their families and communities “back home” through remittances, and the participation of migrant communities in transnational politics. Developments in transportation and communication have made these acts relatively easy and fairly commonplace. The American Irish transnational political activism required considerably more work and risk. This example from the nineteenth century shows how strong the ties of shared identities can be in the absence of enabling technologies and how long they have been in the making. Importantly, this case demonstrates the key role of shared identity constructs independent of family ties.

The research for this book relies primarily on the content analysis of archival materials left by organizations and organizers from 1791 to the present. Many of these materials are collected in research archives, including the Department of Early Printed Books at Trinity College, Dublin; the New
York Public Library; Burns Library at Boston College, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and the American Antiquarian Society. Additionally, several key societies and organizations have published their own official histories with reproductions of original materials. And, despite the great age of much of this organizational field, many of the associations under study still operate and have websites. To define and re-create the organizational fields in the United States and Ireland for any given period, I have relied on meeting minutes, public notices, government surveillance reports, memoirs, court records, personal letters, and newspaper accounts. I have incorporated the analysis of approximately fifty organizations into my model of the American Irish SAF.

Following the recommended practices of current work on social research, I have undertaken a multistage content analysis of the documents. Organizational materials were initially parsed for references to the key concepts of organizational identity, membership, goals, forms, framing, networks, and political/social/other orientations. Second, text was coded for references to Irish identity, nation, nationalism, and their offshoots (“national heroes,” “martyrs to the nation,” and so on). The contours of the Irish nationalist field were therefore defined by the total set of groups and associations concerned with Irish national identity, who interacted in some manner (cooperatively or not) with others in the field. Subsequent readings identified indicators of relations within the field, including coordination, requests for resources or information, the movement of people, materials or funds, evidence of conflict, questions or discussions pertaining to goals, methods, collective identity, authorities, or other interorganizational or interpersonal relations. Some of the data concerning actual events or actions come from secondary sources, while primary sources address the varied perceptions and intent of those events. While each organization is considered within its own national, political, and chronological context, materials from the American and Irish associations are analyzed together as equal participants in the larger organizational field.

This analysis of nationalist campaigns examines the negotiations and roles among those organized in America and Ireland to challenge the existing power structure in Ireland. It does not give equal attention to the incumbent British administration or its supporters. For the sake of concision, I do not include actions organized outside the two focal nations, though there were many.

How Identity Becomes Transnational

Nationalism, including the powerful sense of belonging to a nation and owing something to its well-being, emerges from shared experience but is given form by political action. The social construct of a nation or a national
identity becomes even more flexible among transnational communities. The old country may be idealized or more freely criticized. In memory and reconstruction, the migrant or diasporic collective identity diverges from that of their co-nationals back home. Transnational communities may consciously and strategically propagate versions of their nation and national identity that challenge the official history of the existing state. Among the Irish in America, all of these strategies were evident. Nationalist activists and writers spoke openly of British tyranny in Ireland and the freedoms of the New World even as an uncountable myriad of migrants wrote longing letters to their families back home extolling the beauty of the land they had left behind. Many thousands of working Irish in America supported efforts to free Ireland while simultaneously seeking to establish their citizenship in the States.

The issue of who belongs to a nation is always fraught with conflict and ambiguity. In the case of American history, Richard Alba provides evidence that U.S.-born descendants of white Europeans were able to construct a new collective identity as European Americans, emphasizing their shared differences from black and Latino immigrants rather than the difference in their nations of origin. Whiteness, like all racial labels, was an artificial identity category. While this finding demonstrates the continuing salience of assimilation and acculturation processes, in contrast to the transnational thinking that prevails for many other populations, it also reinforces the socially reconstructed nature of national identity. Much of the interaction between American Irish communities and native-born Americans therefore concerned the exclusion of the Irish from the category of whiteness and efforts by the Irish in the United States to demonstrate their white credentials. For most of the nineteenth century, embracing American identity status required new arrivals to cast off any identification with their countries of origin. This expectation was particularly challenging for Irish nationalists who were still very much involved in Irish politics. Their attempts to manage this challenge led to the emergence of what we would now call a transnational identity.

This transnational identity took shape gradually through experience and changes in the organizational fields of Irish nationalists and other associations across more than a century of work. Improvements in transportation and communication aided its growth. Much more importantly, Irish activists within and outside the United States developed a transnational consciousness much more quickly than the British government had. As a result, actions taken by the Crown to suppress political activism in Ireland, such as exiling movement leaders, actually fed into the transnational movement discussed here. The following chapters address the key moments in the development of this consciousness, summarized in Figure 1.1.
Chapter 2 explores the origins of modern Irish nationalist thinking through the work of the Society of United Irishmen and the debates over Irish identity fostered by their new cultural nationalist vision. The United Irishmen challenged the taken-for-granted social divisions in place in the 1790s, particularly the sectarian division between Catholics and Protestants. Working through popular newspapers and other clubs and societies, the United Irishmen attempted to reorient the political discourse around the division between the English and the Irish. While their call for a citizen uprising in 1798 was a failure, their reform efforts created the model of the new Irish citizen.

Chapter 3 follows the disillusioned, exiled United Irishmen to the United States. There they found a receptive emigrant community eager to embrace their vision of a new Irish republic following the American model. The activities of the nationalist activists within the American field transformed their cultural nationalism into a political nationalism centered in America.

This period saw a growth and expansion of the American Irish field from a loose collection of mostly local associations into a national network of societies with a larger vision. Sectarian divisions in the United States were less severe than they had been in Ireland, and the fact of being Irish was more salient to their identities in America than the form of their Christianity. As the ideas behind American nationalism, nationality, and citizenship began to stabilize throughout this new nation, the working legal and political uses of those concepts appeared ill-equipped to properly assign categories to migrant populations. In this cauldron of ill-defined identities, the Irish in America invented a new collective identity for themselves, giving rise to one of the earliest and most prominent dual-identity communities in the United States.

Chapter 4 considers the American resistance and response to a growing presence of politically active Irish communities. The nativist period spawned numerous associations and political movements against immigration,
Chapter 1

Catholicism, and the Irish over a period of decades. These movements seized on the visible involvement of the American Irish in the affairs of Ireland to portray all immigrants as un-American and thereby justify their own positions. In response, the field of American Irish associations moved from political nationalism to a more militant nationalist position.

The politicization of anti-Catholic sentiment in America accelerated the defensive politicization of the Irish communities into their more revolutionary stance. Many in this community actively supported what would become a brief and scattered attempt at a new rebellion in 1848 under the Young Ireland banner. The failure of that movement and the arrival of the Young Ireland exiles reiterated the post-1798 realignment: the nationalist movement in Ireland was actively suppressed while the American version grew stronger. These events fostered the emergence of a tangible transnational identity among the American Irish nationalists. 57

Chapter 5 traces the mobilization of this transnational identity into a transnational nationalist movement. The Fenian Brotherhood and its Irish counterpart, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, spent ten years preparing for the next uprising. This movement was directed almost entirely from New York through a network of interorganizational linkages.

The Fenian movement showed a surprising amount of promise when it launched in the late 1850s. The richness of the Fenians’ resource base and the leadership of authentic nationalist martyrs and exiles gave them the materials they needed to fulfill their mission as well as the aura of legitimacy to lead these efforts. The decentralized nature of the transnational coordination, coupled with the highly centralized structure of local organizational fields in various American cities and Irish counties, supported a rapid dissemination of their message. Ultimately, however, it did not support an actual uprising. The movement had too many leaders in too many places, asking the same people for too much over too many years. It finally broke apart into transnational splinters, leaving an exhausted and suspicious community behind. Nonetheless, the movement has been credited with awakening the revolutionary potential of Ireland while demonstrating the value of transnational organizing for the Irish cause.58

The Fenians did not succeed in overthrowing British rule in Ireland at that time, but the independence movement was not entirely defeated. The organized Irish nationalists in America created something so new that even they did not know how to manage it.

In Chapter 6 we see the splitting of much of the transnational nationalist field as many of the organizations chose to move back toward the institutional politics that had once been called parliamentary or constitutional nationalism.
While a small number of militants stepped up the use of violence in their campaign for independence, those groups lost control of the agenda of the nationalist field. Irish associations appealed to the Irish and English parliaments for a limited form of self-rule. American Irish associations appealed to the U.S. government to support those efforts. Even as the institutional approach made some headway, physical force nationalism was reasserted in Ireland, leading to the Easter Rising of 1916. This attempted rebellion also failed. Unlike its predecessors, however, the 1916 uprising led directly to the declaration of the Irish Free State and the eventual founding of the independent Republic of Ireland, excluding Northern Ireland. Although their militant actions were hopeless, the insurgents’ nationalist agenda had gained considerable legitimacy in the early twentieth century. The idea of Ireland as an independent nation was starting to look like an inevitable event.

Chapter 7 reflects on the impact of this emergent collective identity on the Irish and Irish Americans of the present day with an eye toward a deeper understanding of nationalism and transnationalism in the twenty-first century.

The Long Arm of Imagination

In December 1921, Irish delegates negotiated a treaty with the British government almost establishing the long hoped-for Irish Free State, a nation with its own president and parliament, equal to all other states within the British Empire. A final sticking point to the treaty was the oath of allegiance required under British law for all parliamentarians. A last-minute change in wording written by Irish leader Michael Collins replaced the promise to “be faithful and bear true allegiance” to the British monarch with the less onerous phrase “I ___ do solemnly swear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of the Irish State . . . and that I will be faithful to HM King George V, his heirs and successors by law, in virtue of the common citizenship of Ireland with Great Britain.” Even in this weaker version, the Irish cabinet split over the question of the oath, with Representative Kathleen Clarke succinctly stating that “I took an Oath to the Irish Republic, solemnly, reverently, meaning every word. I shall never go back from that.” The divisions represented by the oath split the new nation, leading to a lengthy and disastrous civil war culminating in a bitterly divided land.

This breakdown among the nationalist leaders reflected a number of recurring trends evident in the movement since the 1790s. First, there is the matter of the weight of history. For more than one hundred years each generation of the Irish had organized their own efforts to end British control
and create an independent Irish nation. Each generation acted in the name of those who had come before, promising to fulfill their vision. To the cabinet members who refused compromise, their willing acceptance of something less than independence for the whole of Ireland would constitute a betrayal of the dream for which so many had been martyred. The deaths of Tone, Emmet, and others all the way to James Connolly in 1916 could not be redeemed until their cause, to make all citizens Irishmen and all Irishmen citizens, was secured.

Second, this conflict also underscored the importance long given to oaths and promises from the start of the movement. Catholics and dissenters were kept out of power by requiring state officials to pledge loyalty to the Church of Ireland, which they simply would not do. Nationalist activists were executed on the charge of swearing illegal oaths to suppressed organizations. Each generation of activists had made their own pledges to each other and to Irish independence. The promise to remain true to this idea was handed down from the launch of the first Society of United Irishmen. Their history was a narrative of heroes who would not break their vows.

A third issue was that the nationalists were rarely united enough to win. Any complex field of organizational actors will host multiple competing agendas and interests. A considerable amount of the action that occurs within a field involves struggles between dominant groups and challengers to that dominance. With each new attempt to unite the nationalist field, the leading groups could lead for only a limited period before others with different priorities sought to take their place. Unity was the first claim and the defining ambition of the United Irishmen, and it remained an essential point of reference for those who came after. Yet unity was always elusive. The reality within the shifting and growing field over time is always found to be a temporary alignment of interests around shared goals that cannot sustain the challenge of managing the remaining details. Collective action, like collective identity, is a series of compromises.

Finally, Irish nationalism was unable to overcome centuries of sectarian division. This was the great challenge of the 1790s, and it remained equally immovable through contemporary times. After centuries of Protestant political, cultural, and economic dominance over the Catholic majority of Ireland, the mostly Protestant northern counties feared what might happen to them under the rule of a Catholic state. Ulster, once the center of radical reforms, wished to remain a part of Great Britain. They called themselves loyalists; the nationalists called them traitors. The divisions remained sharp.

“The history of Ireland remains to be written,” wrote Sir Roger Casement in 1914, on the eve of World War I and a few short years ahead of his
execution, “for the purpose of Irishmen remains yet to be achieved.” From Casement’s perspective, the “purpose” of the Irish was singular and did not need to be explained. The progress of this purpose was winding and traveled through a surprising amount of both time and space. Now, a century after Casement’s observation, this history has been written a great many times. The following chapters do not offer a revision of those histories; rather, I focus on neglected areas, shedding light on the idea of Irish national identity as it was imagined, organized, and brought into being. For all of its convolutions, this is a thread that runs from Dublin in 1791 to Dublin in 1921. It is an idea with a long memory.