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**Review of**  
**Mystery of the Irish Wilderness: Land and Legend of Father John Joseph**  
**Hogan's Lost Irish Colony in the Ozark Wilderness**

by: Leland and Crystal Payton  
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I was not surprised to discover that the MYSTERY OF THE IRISH WILDERNESS, painstakingly researched and penned by Leland and Crystal Payton, won the Gold Medal for best Regional Non-Fiction in 2009. The award was richly deserved. Over the years one grew accustomed to reading snippets of information about the Irish Wilderness. Facts were few and there were many who doubted the existence of anything other than a fanciful name on a forestry map. The Paytons have provided a meticulously crafted manuscript which ties all the loose ends together enabling us to know why and how the Irish Wilderness settlement came to reality. It was a noble endeavor with a sad ending. The authors wisely allow Father Hogan, the proposer and strongest supporter of the settlement, to express his sentiments and report his observations in his own words. The book is adequately supplied with clear maps which clarify the context and it is beautifully illustrated with photographs which are a tribute to the rugged scenery of the Ozarks. This is a book for all Missourians who value their heritage. It portrays the struggles immigrant Catholics endured to preserve their Faith. For members of the clergy it highlights the demands of ministry among a constantly moving pioneering population. Those who are challenged to solve the "mystery" of the book's title should read it more than once. I recommended it highly.

The sesquicentennial of the Irish Famine in 1998 spawned a number of reappraisals of the impact of this disaster which resulted in a vast exodus of the Irish, mostly Catholics, from their native land. Those who survived the "coffin ships" and the rigors of the long North Atlantic crossing, especially during the winter months, were not always welcomed with open arms. Penniless, ill-clad and frequently emaciated they were often confronted with shop front proclamations emphatically stating that "NO IRISH NEED APPLY." But there was no going back and their sheer numbers combined with a reluctant willingness to accept the lowest rung of the economic ladder gradually blunted their resistance of discrimination.

The early waves of Irish immigrants tended to remain close to the Atlantic port cities in both the United States and Canada. As time passed some of them, along with other European immigrants, headed west. St. Louis offered an attractive option as it was enjoying phenomenal growth. Its population increased tenfold between 1840 and 1860 and ten years later it was the third largest city in the United States exceeded only by New York and Philadelphia. 1849 was an *annus horribilis* for St. Louis: an outbreak of cholera claimed 4000 lives and a disastrous fire destroyed a large section of the city along the Mississippi waterfront. On the plus side a young man, recently arrived from Ireland, started his studies at the seminary in Carondelet to become a priest of the then Diocese of St. Louis. John Joseph Hogan was ordained in 1852 and in due time he became the protagonist in the saga of the Irish Wilderness.

What became known as the Irish Wilderness was Father Hogan's attempt to solve, at least partially, a pastoral problem. His parish assignments in St. Louis drew his attention to the fact that many of the newly arrived from Ireland were unemployed, often the victims of discrimination and living in deplorable conditions. This was especially the lot of the young men although some of the fittest among them managed to get work constructing the railroads which criss-crossed Missouri. The young women may have attained a little more stability in their lives by becoming domestic servants and the tenders of other peoples' children. Life expectancy among the immigrants was low as tuberculosis, then known as consumption, took a terrible toll.

Father Hogan's dream was to set up a self-sustaining community of small farms where young couples and their children could live productive and happy faith-filled lives far from the poverty of the city slums. To do this he negotiated, with the assistance of others, the purchase of thousands of acres of government wilderness land not far from the Eleven Point River straddling the counties of Oregon and Ripley in south-east Ozark country. Considering the array of problems which Father Hogan faced, amply documented by Leland and Crystal Payton, the limited success of the settlement could be classified as the "miracle" of the Irish Wilderness. Unfortunately, it never had an opportunity to grow to maturity. It became one more casualty of the Civil War, its lands and infrastructure destroyed or abandoned and, strangest of all, its inhabitants vanished. Therein lies the mystery of the book's title. Where did they go? Some may have returned to St. Louis; others may have continued west becoming indistinguishable in the tide of humanity expanding America's frontiers. The Irish who fled the Great Famine, when the potato crops failed year after year in their ancestral homeland, were extremely reticent about their experiences. To this day historians are finding it difficult to document the tragic event. Does this same reticence apply to the settlement participants, and their descendents, to the extent that nobody left a record, written or oral, of what happened when the settlement was plundered? It was a noble undertaking which ended in failure but sometimes we Irish equate failure with guilt notwithstanding the clear evidence that unpredictable and external events brought down the curtain on the Irish Wilderness. Luckily the ruins remain and the area is preserved within the far greater area of the Mark Twain National Forest. These mute relics are akin to the abandoned stone cabins on the Mayo coast and they tell the same story: people lived and people died in this place but now the only sound is the song of the birds. Genealogists searching for Irish connections in the mid 1800s may wish to check the names of those who were part of the Irish Wilderness at that time. Somebody, somewhere, may find a connection which will solve the mystery. In the meantime we should read this book, maybe visit the Wilderness and ponder anew the extraordinary life of Father Hogan who, in later years, was called upon to face even greater challenges than the establishment of a rural settlement for Irish immigrants.