

## **How significant a contribution did the Irish Diaspora make to nationalism in Ireland?**

The significance of the Irish *diaspora* to Irish nationalism is not limited to the nineteenth-century. Today, the influence can be seen in the composition of Irish nationalist history and its prominent figures as well as to the perception of Irish nationalism in Ireland and worldwide. There can be little definition between the two terms 'nationalism in Ireland' and 'Irish nationalism', for several reasons. The influence upon nationalism today, relies partly on the writings of nationalist authors. These nationalists are not limited to Ireland and, as such, it cannot be referred to simply as 'nationalism in Ireland'. Similarly, the influence upon Irish nationalism is not limited to its perception within Ireland. The Diaspora took many cultural ideals to the new worlds, including the belief in Irish nationalism that was intensified by the experiences of each of the emigrants. Particularly of note is the influence of the Irish-Americans upon the perception of Irish nationalism within their adopted nation. Another important factor, in analysing the impact of the Diaspora upon nationalism in Ireland is the definition of the term: its definition is unclear. The influences upon each emigrant were different.

The 'Irish' were themselves multi-cultural. It is documented that the influence of the Irish Famine had a great impact upon the Diaspora but at least 1.5 million emigrated from Ireland in the half-century prior to the Famine. Of that figure, many were not what would be considered as the Irish Diaspora: they were not all Irish Catholics; much of the pre-Famine exodus was from Protestant backgrounds. Therefore, there is a difficulty in analysing the impact of the Irish Diaspora upon nationalism in Ireland. Both terms are difficult to fully define. Thus, the relationship between the two is even more difficult to identify. Nonetheless, with reference to the ideology of Irish nationalism in the United States and Great Britain, the impact of the Diaspora upon nationalism, 'at home', will be assessed.

The impact of the pre-Famine emigrants on nationalism is precarious. To one extent, this Diaspora forged an important significance to the nationalist cause. To another, the effects within Ireland were less significant. The birth of Irish-American nationalism proceeded the Famine period. The goals of leaders such as Charles O'Connor was 'to make Irish men, as a class, respectable in the eyes of their fellowmen, Ireland must arise from her present state and become a nation'.<sup>1</sup> The formation of societies to push for Catholic Emancipation and the creation of the American repeal movements were an effort by the Irish-American middle classes to consolidate their position within their adopted nation. The weakness of the pre-Famine Irish-American nationalism stemmed in part from the heterogeneous nature of the pre-Famine emigration population: The pre-Famine immigrants to North America were not the victims of the miseries and subsequent historical rhetoric of the Great Famine. The early Irish-American view of nationalism in Ireland was not based upon the Catholic Republicanism that became so prevalent following

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<sup>1</sup> Charles O'Connor, cited in Kerby A. Miller Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America (Oxford, 1988) *hereafter* Miller, p.277

the Famine. It stemmed, in part from the Patriot movement of the eighteenth-century. Home Rule and equalitarianism in Ireland was an objective of the Friends of Ireland societies but, as Kerby Miller has argued, the motives for this early Irish-American nationalism was to reinforce the Irish social groupings with the homogenous culture of the United States. The vocal elements of the early Irish diaspora were made up of protestant middle classes who had chosen emigration, largely. Thus, the impact upon Ireland was of little significance prior to the Famine of the 1840s – its intention was to gain approval from the ‘native’ Americans. This comment is made more evident by the collapse of the American repeal associations following Daniel O’Connell’s comments against American slavery. In the United States at the beginning of the eighteenth century, for example, many Irish-Americans used nationalist sentiments for political gain and exploited the nationalism for pragmatic domestic purposes. Leaders such as O’Conor hoped that Irish-American nationalism would teach ‘the native American... the true character of the natives of Ireland’ and not, necessarily, have beneficial effects in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Where this early nationalism was important, was that it formed the basis for Irish-American nationalism and historical sentiment that would become an increasing part of nationalism in Ireland. This nationalism drew upon American delusions and fed Irish bitterness against the oppressive alien elements within Ireland that increased over the next two centuries.

Perhaps the most important factor is yet to be addressed: the existence of the Diaspora to the nationalist cause. At what point, did the emigrants that left Ireland, for whatever reason, become ‘Exiles’? The prominent figures that left Ireland over the course of the nineteenth-century were legally exiles: men like John Mitchell, Charles Gavan Duffy and the ‘Martyrs of 1848’. Others, that travelled to the New Worlds prior to the Famine were metaphorical exiles – driven from their homes to foreign nations – so the nationalist history suggests. The image that these emigrants did not wish to have left home is a powerful one – that they were driven out of Ireland due to the effects of the Great Famine. In addition, the emigrants that left for the new worlds prior to the Famine felt little comfort in their new homes. As Donald Akenson has argued, the Irish emigrants were ‘self-aware responsible persons, each of whom made a conscious decision to leave Ireland’.<sup>3</sup> This view is in contrast to how many nationalists and members of the Irish Diaspora have viewed the emigration in history:

[Their] disappointments abroad encouraged a Catholic Irish propensity to avoid individual responsibility for innovative actions such as emigration and to fall back on communally acceptable “explanations” embedded in archaic historic and literary traditions and reinforced by modern Irish political rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

The nationalist explanation for the emigration was due to those that had forced these Irish to leave their homes. The blame was laid at the hands of bailiffs, tithe collectors, landlords and protestant figures that symbolised

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, pp.278-9

<sup>3</sup> D H Akenson The Irish Diaspora: A Primer (Toronto, 1996) *hereafter* Akenson, p.37

<sup>4</sup> Miller, p.277

British oppression against the Irish people. The Irish Diaspora left their homes through forced emigration and to escape exploitation at home. Due to a lack of success abroad, and the American scorning of the poor Irish immigrants, the blaming of the British was both inevitable and enviable. Emigrants became exiles when they failed to achieve what they had desired. Similarly, even those that found themselves in the midst of plenty saw the responsibility in the same light: Catholic emigrants to the United States who achieved economic success were exiles of the post-war economic crises of Ireland and escaped to a world where there were no landlords or tithes to pay. There were no organised 'alien churches' or restrictive legislation against the success of an individual Irish Catholic. Thus continued the focus of the Irish-American and the Diaspora's recriminations against the British oppression in Ireland: nationalism in the new worlds was focused on the rhetoric of accepted visions of history, not necessarily the facts of the situation. The arrival of the Famine further intensified the ideology of 'exile' and impacted on the ideology of nationalism in Ireland.

The Great Famine affected the ideology of nationalism in Ireland on a grand scale. The large numbers that emigrated and died during the catastrophe influenced Irish nationalism throughout the period. The significance of forced exiles such as John Mitchell in the new worlds is clear: The writings of these nationalists intensified the perception of nationalism both at home and abroad. The political motivations of his 'historical analysis' of the Great Famine in *The Last Conquest of Ireland* blended the theme of British culpability with Irish bitterness to the extreme: the 'rape of Ireland' was immortalised by the coming of the Famine. The sheer existence of the Diaspora across the globe was evidence that the British oppression in Ireland. Literary works further intensified this ideology of blame and recrimination such as George Bernard Shaw's Irish-American character, Malone, in *Man and Superman*:

English rule drove me and mine out of Ireland. Well, you can keep Ireland. Me and me like are coming back to buy England; and we'll buy the best of it.<sup>5</sup>

The causes and consequences of the Great Famine legitimised nationalist interpretation and imagery. The need for land reform and industrialisation intensified the calls for independence from the United Kingdom. The conditions of the vast majority of the population was held to be the responsibility of the Act of Union and British imperialism, the economy was in stagnation and the essence of 'Irishness' was oppressed.

'Patriotism' and the term 'Patriot' refer to a new awareness of Irishness that emerged toward the end of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century. The birth of Patriotism was as a result of several contributory factors following the Jacobite wars at the end of the seventeenth century. Ireland's constitutional status as a separate kingdom had been supported by opponents of Thomas Wentworth (1640-1) and reaffirmed at the convention of 1660-61 that rejected claims of English legislative supremacy.

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<sup>5</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, Act IV, v.56

Professor Connolly notes that such proclamations of independence 'foreshadowed eighteenth century patriotism'.<sup>6</sup> The nature of patriotism was exemplified by the writings of prominent figures throughout the period and demonstrated the desire for the Protestant Ascendancy to maintain their own rights and call for a certain degree of legislative independence or at least representation. The writings of Molyneux and Swift were not just about independence. In *The Case* Molyneux suggested that the 'kingdom of Ireland [join] the Union' but it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the English saw political gain in such a move. By this time however, Patriotism had developed into its own form of nationalism in favour of a fully independent parliament, arguing for constitutional and commercial equality with England. Patriots began to see English legislative authority as 'slavery to be governed by laws made without representation'.<sup>7</sup> The Act of Union and its implications had a similar affect on the ideology of nationalism, particularly with the writings of Mitchel. The union is seen historically as a further indication of the oppression of the Irish people and her economy. Thus, the removal of patriotism from Ireland contributed to the nationalist vision that formed during the nineteenth century that had an impact on both sides of the Atlantic.

Patriotism was an eighteenth-century protestant reaction to the political situation of the day. The early Irish-American nationalist stemmed in part from this protestant nationalism. Irish Patriotism affected both its American equivalent and early Irish-American nationalism. William Molyneux wrote: 'liberty seems the independent right of all mankind' and that to tax the Irish people 'without [their] consent is little better, if at all, than downright robbing [them]'.<sup>8</sup> The Patriots 'built for themselves a whole sophisticated culture, reflected not only in their houses, but also in [their] literature', which curiously, 'was the first version of modern Irish nationalism: a Protestant version'.<sup>9</sup> Like the American protestant cries for independence as formalised in the Declaration of Independence; Patriotism was firmly founded in issues of taxation, religious liberty, and 'government by consent'. Rarely, as the Patriot movement manifested itself into nationalism in Ireland did 'Republic' become a battle cry. The popularisation of the language indicative with Patriotism by the nationalist movement is evident from Patrick Pearse's *Proclamation of the Republic* of 1916. The language mirrors both that of Molyneux and Swift, moulds it with that of Republicanism, and echoes the American declaration of 150 years before. The influence of the Diaspora between the signing of these two documents is significant in that it suggests a link between the modes of politics between America and Ireland. However, the practical significance is less stark. It is certainly true, that Irish-Americans became involved in the US electoral system but this embrace did not influence so greatly, as too have a direct causal relationship. Nonetheless, the ideological contribution of the link between the new nations and Ireland was a significant factor.

The Gaelic Revival made an impact in Irish-America, Britain and in the homeland. It became a method of communication for nationalist ideology and

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<sup>6</sup> S L Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford 1999), p.114

<sup>7</sup> James Lydon, *The Making of Ireland* (London, 1998), p.233-34

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p.229

<sup>9</sup> Robert Kee *Ireland: A History* (London, 1997) *hereafter* Kee, p.56

made a significant contribution to nationalism in Ireland. The launch and success of groups such as the GAA that actively discriminated against British involvement was a fundamental part of the nationalist movement that identified 'Irishness' as both separate and unique. The GAA attached itself at once to the Fenianism of nineteenth century Ireland in a popular mobilisation of the Irish people. The literary organisations developed the ideology for the bourgeois Irish. In the United States and Britain mirror organisations of the Gaelic League sprang up throughout the period. Many of these organisations were focused only on a small percentage of the middle-class Irish diaspora and did not make a great direct contribution to nationalism in Ireland. The success of the GAA was never mirrored by the Diaspora elsewhere.

The most significant contribution of the Diaspora to the Gaelic Revival was that of the metaphorical and rhetorical language of the new nationalism. The Diaspora's involvement in the Gaelic Revival was not significant to the escalation of nationalism. Where the Diaspora made a more significant direct contribution to nationalism in Ireland was their electoral power with the Britain. The quest for moderate Home Rule mobilised far more of the Irish in Britain than Fenianism did. Their electoral mobilisation in places like Liverpool certainly intensified the strength of the nationalist party at Westminster. The Irish in Britain thus made a significant contribution to the question of Home Rule.<sup>10</sup> Irish-Americans, too, played their part in a direct contribution to nationalism in Ireland. However, the significance of the arrival of civil-war veterans to Ireland in the 1860s was only metaphorical and ideological. The Fenian leader James Stephens sent 'urgent calls to the American Fenians for men and supplies' but these never materialised on a significant scale.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the contribution made by the Diaspora was not directly significant. Instead, it intensified the ideological nature of nationalism in Ireland and not that of physical nationalism. Although advocates of armed insurrection were amongst much of the Diaspora they did not physically enter the armies of nationalism. The Diaspora would lend nationalism, the 'American', Eamon de Valera however.

The Diaspora was successful at raising money for organisations back in Ireland and mirroring them in the United States. The Diaspora, particularly in the United States, raised great funds for the nationalist Republican movements following the Great Famine. Large funds were raised from the US for the Land League between 1879 and 1882 and ten million pounds was raised between 1919 and 1921 for de Valera's 'American Association' for the 'Recognition of the Irish Republic'.<sup>12</sup> The existence of the Irish Diaspora internationalised the 'cause' of emigration that was the British oppression in Ireland. The nature of emigration, although voluntary as Akenson has argued, was irrelevant to the responsibility of mass emigration from Ireland. Voices in the new worlds argued that not only was the cause of the Famine and subsequent exodus but that the problems resulted from the lack of independence of Ireland. The nature of the oral tradition amongst the Diaspora escalated the need for an independent Ireland and certainly for

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<sup>10</sup> R F Foster Modern Ireland (London, 1989) *hereafter* Foster, p.367

<sup>11</sup> Kee, p.111

<sup>12</sup> Foster, p.360

reform. The impact of the Famine immigrants influenced Irish-American nationalism greatly, 'the anger and sorrow of the new arrivals would fuel nationalist fires and fill nationalist coffers for the rest of the century'.<sup>13</sup> The ideology of the new arrivals to the United States was that of 'exile'. The distance to the North America, the Cape and the Antipodes was too great for an immigrant to ever harbour a desire to return back to Ireland. The significance of the Diaspora is important to the interpretation of nationalism following the Famine. Pearse's recognition of this important element is evident in the language of the Proclamation; nationalism in Ireland was 'supported by her exiled children in America'. There was no distinction between the 'Irish' of the Diaspora – Protestant or Catholic. This vision was further reflected by the terminology of the Proclamation:

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

The theoretical equality between the Irish Diaspora demonstrated the hindrance to which the Irish people had found themselves whilst under 'British rule' and echoes the ideology of Thomas Jefferson's document to King George III. A significant contribution made by the Diaspora was transferring the ideals of the new worlds into the rhetoric of nationalism. The ideals of Patriotism, that had transplanted itself upon American nationalism, came full circle and affected the nationalism of Pearse that marked the beginning of the Irish War of Independence.

The significance of the contribution of the Diaspora to nationalism in Ireland was largely rhetorical and ideology. The direct contribution to nationalism was less influential. There was no great causal relationship between the Diaspora's actions abroad and the affect upon nationalism in Ireland. The impact of the Diaspora upon Irish history by its 'nationalist' nature is far more interesting historical focus. However, although the association between the Diaspora and nationalism in Ireland is complex they are difficult to separate. The ideology of the 'exiles' is the most significant contribution that the Diaspora made to the nationalist cause. This ideology manifested itself in language of Patrick Pearse's speech on the steps of the GPO. By 1916, the nature of emigrant Irish history made its way, rightly or wrongly, into to mainstream nationalist history. With hindsight, the overall significance of the Diaspora to nationalism was great. A closer look, however, sees the relationship as far more rhetorical.

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, p.279

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