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# THE GREAT FAMINE IN IRELAND: A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DISRUPTION

Erick Falc'her-Poyroux 2014

## Abstract

Between 1800 and 1900, Ireland underwent changes that very few countries have ever experienced: a once vibrant language became synonymous with poverty and destitution and on average 20% of its population either left or died. In the process, the rural areas of the island suffered from a dislocation of their traditional communities, a fragmentation of their identities, and ultimately from a sense of loss of their grounding. In the years and decades following the Great Famine, the creation of new sports, the reviving or invention of Gaelic traditions, the rewriting of history, the spread of the Irish language abroad, a sense of self-confidence regained, the recreation and adaptation of a national literature, all point towards significant and constructive consequences. On the other hand, the generalisation of more radical forms of politics, coupled with the association between Catholicism and nationalism after independence, led to an exclusive society seeking a united façade identity at the expense of diversity.

This article proposes to examine the far-reaching impact of the Great Famine on Ireland's cultural and linguistic evolutions, as well as on issues of identity, leading to lasting social and political consequences.

In 1954, Irish author John A. O'Brien noted, albeit approximately, that: "*Ireland is the only nation in the world with half the population it had a century ago*"<sup>1</sup>. This article proposes to examine both immediate and long-term linguistic and cultural changes in Ireland from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all closely connected to the demographic changes and evolution in the population. Between 1845 and 1850, several technological innovations contributed to the exile of c. 1.5 million Irish men and women: cheaper road transport, the development of railway networks to the main cities, sailing ships and the new steamships to America or England. In parallel, it is now agreed that c. one million people died of hunger and diseases during the same period, through a combination of British *laissez-faire*, anti-Irish bias, rigidity, poor planning, inadequate solutions and providentialism. This depopulation of Ireland, mostly due to the Great Famine, continued unabated during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and forms the first backdrop against which linguistic and cultural changes must be assessed <sup>2</sup>.

It is often considered that the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Famine was a turning point in Ireland's cultural history, mainly as a result of the death and mass emigration of the poorer populations from the West of Ireland, where Gaelic Irish speakers were more numerous. However, census figures between 1841 and 1861 cannot confirm a specific depopulation of Irish-speaking areas: it is true that western counties like Mayo, Clare or Galway lost over 38% of their population during this 20-year time span, but so did English speaking counties such as Queen's County and

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<sup>1</sup> John A O'BRIEN (ed.), *The Vanishing Irish: the Enigma of the Modern World*, London: W.H. Allen, 1954, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> See Timothy GUINNANE, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland*, Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1997, 360 p.

King's County (today known as County Laois and County Offaly respectively)<sup>3</sup>. At the other end of the language spectrum, an Irish speaking county of the North-West like County Donegal lost proportionately less of its population (with a decrease of c. 20%) than English-speaking counties in the East, such as County Wicklow or County Waterford (both with a decrease of around 31%). Depopulation was indeed massive, but was not higher in Irish-speaking areas: the sense of dislocation of the traditional Irish community often described by historians<sup>4</sup> must therefore be regarded as an overall rural phenomenon, during a period of land-restructuring in Ireland, and more generally of European urbanisation and industrialisation. This loss of contact between towns and villages in Ireland which intensified after the Great Famine was also responsible for the slow disintegration of a once vibrant rural cultural life, and this fragmentation of rural communities constitutes the second backdrop for our study, which aims to show the far-reaching impact of the Great Famine on Ireland's cultural and linguistic evolutions, as well as on issues of identity, leading to lasting social and political consequences.

## Language and culture in peril

Gaelic Irish, the language spoken by a vast majority of people in the western counties of Ireland at the eve of the Great Famine, is a Celtic language first identified in Ireland around 400 B.C. It became a written language only in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., when the first manuscripts were crafted by Irish monks. Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it remained by and large a language associated with oral transmission and the vector of a tremendous body of Gaelic poetry inherited from the refined Bardic tradition.

Out of a population of almost 8.5 million in 1845, the number of Irish Gaelic speakers is difficult to define: distinguished economist and historian Cormac Ó Gráda suggests “an Irish-speaking figure of 3-3.5 million on the eve of the famine, an all-time high”<sup>5</sup>, while other studies have put the figure higher, at around 4 million<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the number of Irish Gaelic speakers after the famine is accessible, since the language question was included for the first time in the Irish census in 1851<sup>7</sup>. We therefore know that over 300,000 persons were listed as speaking only Irish, and over a million and a half as speaking both Irish and English. In total, over 28% of the population spoke Irish. Ten years after the Famine, the number of people who could speak Irish had declined to c. 19%, and again to c. 15% in 1871<sup>8</sup>. A simple subtraction between the lowest estimates for Irish speakers in 1841 and the official figures of 1851 show that at least 1.5 million native speakers either emigrated or died in just a decade.

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<sup>3</sup> Official census figures are available on the Irish Famine Atlas, by the National Centre for Geocomputation, NUI Maynooth: <http://ncg.nuim.ie/redirect.php?action=projects/famine/explore>. The complete original report can be consulted at: <http://lnk.nu/histpop.org/3j82>

<sup>4</sup> See for example Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland*, London: Pluto Press, 1997, 192 pp.

<sup>5</sup> Cormac Ó GRÁDA, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 216.

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, John Hutchinson, *Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State*, London: Routledge 1987, p. 75 or John O'Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland*, Cambridge 1994, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> The census for Scotland only included a language question as of 1881 and Wales as of 1891.

<sup>8</sup> The figure officially stands at around 3% in the Republic of Ireland today. For more information on these figures, see Andrew Carnie “Modern Irish: a Case Study in Language Revival Failure”, in J. Bobaljik, R. Pensalfini, and L. Storto (eds.), *Papers on Language Endangerment and the Maintenance of Linguistic Diversity, MIT Working Papers in Linguistics*, #28, 1996, pp. 99-114.

These figures can, however, only be regarded as basic approximations, for two main reasons: the first one is a relative shyness on the part of many native speakers to declare their ability to speak Irish, as stated in a Report to the Commissioners of National Education written in 1877: "*The returns do not include the entire number of people who speak Irish, since it is well known that many persons, for want of education in the vernacular, and of due appreciation of its value, do not admit their knowledge of the language*"<sup>9</sup>. The second reason, at least as notable, for the lack of precision in census returns is the fact that the figures for 1851, 1861 and 1871 had clearly been underestimated by officials: in 1881, the census report surprisingly had to account for an increase of almost 14% in the number of Irish speakers over the previous 10 years, in contrast to a constant decline since 1841, and therefore had to admit probable miscalculations in the previous census returns. Or rather, in the cautious words of the General Report: "*the increase in the number returned as being able to speak Irish and English may, in a great measure, be attributed to a more precise mode of seeking this information (...)*"<sup>10</sup>.

The decline of the language, which had in fact started before the Great Famine, but was now amplified by the rural depopulation, was inexorable, as was the shrinking of the regions where Irish Gaelic remained the language of the majority. As Great Britain was gradually becoming aware of the consequences of the Great Famine, both in Ireland and in the Highlands of Scotland, these regions were investigated by renowned geographer E.G. Ravenstein in 1879, in a major study of the evolution of Celtic languages over the past three decades: according to Ravenstein, the total area of the Gaelic-speaking regions in Ireland just after the Great Famine (1851) represented 9325 square miles with 1,328,938 inhabitants. In 1871, this figure had dropped to 5293 square miles for 545,658 inhabitants. Ravenstein regretfully commented that they were probably witnessing "*the lingering death of a language retreating before a more powerful neighbour*" and, more significantly, that "*the localities where at present day Irish continues to be the language of the majority, are remote, their area is comparatively limited, and their population less dense than in the more fertile English speaking districts of the island*"<sup>11</sup>. As a consequence, these Gaelic-speaking regions increasingly became associated with poverty after the Famine years, the widespread opinion being that "*Irish will butter no bread*" or "*Irish belongs to the age of the foot-plough and the sailing ship*"<sup>12</sup>. In 1890, Arthur J. Balfour (1848-1930), Chief Secretary for Ireland and future Prime Minister of Great Britain, toured Connemara and Co. Mayo with his secretary George Wyndham, who described the desolation he had witnessed in a letter to his wife:

*"We found at Carraroe a far greater depth of misery than any we have seen or I have ever imagined. It really made one sick to think of the extreme wretchedness of these people living on potatoes growing in mud and water between the rocks, their houses standing in morasses. For the first time, the people looked pinched and yellow and frightened. They all turned out, and gave Arthur shrill cheers. A most pathetic sight. You cannot conceive the poverty of this district. Hardly anyone can talk English. The majority have never seen a plough or harrow. There is no mill for twenty miles. They never eat meat, and are always on the brink of starvation. I do not trust we may be able to help them."*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The remark was made by Father John Nolan and J. J. MacSweeney of the council of the "Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language", and cited in Thomas Powell, "What Government is Doing for the Teaching of Irish", in *Y Cymmrodor: The Magazine of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, Vol. V, London: Whiting & Co., 1877, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> See General census report, Ireland, 1881, section XI: Irish speaking population, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Georg Ravenstein, "Gaelic Languages in the British Isles", in *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* Vol. 42, No. 3, Sept. 1879, p. 581-582.

<sup>12</sup> Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Ciara Breathnach, *The Congested Districts Board of Ireland, 1891-1923: poverty and development in the west of Ireland*, Dublin and Portland: Four Courts Press, 2005, p. 27.

The following year, in 1891, these Gaelic-speaking areas evidenced by Ravenstein unsurprisingly became the core of the Congested Districts established by Balfour, exceptionally poor and underdeveloped regions of counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry and Cork, which qualified for special economic assistance and relief from the government through an Act of Parliament<sup>14</sup>: in political terms, the Congested Districts Board formed part of his new policy of Constructive Unionism, supported by the Conservative Party and sometimes labelled “killing Home Rule with kindness”, a clear indication that poverty in Ireland following the Great Famine had become a major political issue.

As mentioned above, the decline of the Irish language had started before the Great Famine, gradually giving way to English. It was therefore highly symbolic that the military-minded Ordnance Survey should start in Ireland its coverage of the United Kingdom for the drafting of the most precise map ever made in the English language: Major Thomas Colby (1784-1852) and his staff moved to Ireland in 1824 to establish the first complete six-inches-to-the-mile maps of the country. The mapping process lasted for 22 years, ending on the eve of the Great Famine, and despite the strict official recommendations<sup>15</sup>, many Irish toponyms were lost or transformed by uninformed officers, with the result described in 1892 by Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), in his famous speech on the De-anglicisation of Ireland:

*“Our topographical nomenclature too – as we may now be prepared to expect – has been also shamefully corrupted to suit English ears; (...) many of the best known names in our history and annals have become almost wholly unrecognisable, through the ignorant West-Britonising of them. (...) Sometimes the Ordnance Survey people make a rough guess at the Irish name and jot down certain English letters almost on chance. (...) On the whole, our place names have been treated with about the same respect as if they were the names of a savage tribe which had never before been reduced to writing, and with about the same intelligence and contempt as vulgar English squatters treat the topographical nomenclature of the Red Indians.”*<sup>16</sup>

The creation in 1831 of the first National Schools (i.e. state-supported primary schools), whose aim was to establish non-denominational institutions where English was the only language in use, undoubtedly dealt a much greater blow to the Irish language. If free education and a provision for literacy can only be regarded as a major development in European history<sup>17</sup>, the resonance in Ireland was singular: gradually, all Gaelic-speaking children began to use English on a daily basis, and to associate it with a greater degree of culture and enlightenment, if not with the only path to modernity. As part of the official syllabus, one of the principal Geography lessons provided in 1859 by Reverend James Carlile (1784-1854), the Presbyterian chief commissioner of education, for instance, squarely stated that *“The island of Great Britain, which is composed of England, Scotland, and Wales, and the Island of Ireland form (...) the British Empire in Europe. The people of these islands have one and the same*

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<sup>14</sup> Purchase of Land (Ireland) Act 1891, Chapter XLVIII, Part II. The Congested District Act of Scotland was passed in 1897.

<sup>15</sup> In “Instructions for the Interior Survey of Ireland” (1825), Thomas Colby explained: “The persons employed on the survey are to endeavour to obtain the correct orthography of the names of places by diligently consulting the best authorities within their reach (...)” See John H. Andrews, *A paper landscape: the Ordnance Survey in nineteenth-century Ireland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 p.311.

<sup>16</sup> “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” in *The Revival of Irish Literature: Addresses by Sr Charles Gavan Duffy, KCMG, Dr. George Sigerson, and Dr Douglas Hyde*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1904, pp. 117-161. This episode of Irish history has been described in the play *Translations* by Brian Friel, London: Faber & Faber, 1980, 70 pp.

<sup>17</sup> Ireland's average illiteracy rate in 1841 was 72%. See Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine 1798-1848*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, p. 79.

language (all at least who are educated)"<sup>18</sup>. Irish was regarded as useless outside Ireland, not adaptable to modern and urban life, a very low prestige means of communication with a difficult grammar and pronunciation: overall, an insignificant number of books in Irish were printed before and after the Famine. Although the newly invented steam presses had considerably simplified the printing process, it benefited mostly the dominant language, English<sup>19</sup>.

Contrary to what is still heard sometimes in Irish militant circles today, no official rule was ever established for the prohibition of the Irish language in schools, but parents were so eager for their offspring to learn English that many schoolmasters adopted a system to prevent the children from speaking their native language, which may even have been in existence prior to 1831 in the "hedge schools"<sup>20</sup>. Many authors have described the use of the *Bata-Scóir* (or 'tally-stick') worn around the neck by children who had mistakenly uttered a few words in Irish, and where a notch would be inserted for every new offence<sup>21</sup>. With emigration intensifying, English had become the main key to escape the country, and relatives in America or England were adamant that the "new language" should be learnt before coming over. A letter from an emigrated father to his son, unusually written in Irish, thus emphasised: "*I gcuntas Dé, múin Béarla do na leanbháin, is ná bídis dall ar nós na n-asal a teacht anseo mac*"<sup>22</sup>. And Ravenstein was able to remark as late as 1879 that "*It is the national schools in which only English is taught, which have proved to be the great extirpators of Irish (...) probably not 5,000 persons throughout Ireland are able to read an Irish book, (...) not a single Irish newspaper is being published*"<sup>23</sup>.

Since the National Schools were non-denominational, no proselytising was supposed to take place in class, even though most schools were created and run by either the Protestant or the Roman Catholic Church. The attitude of the Catholic hierarchy towards the Irish language during that period was probably more akin to indifference and lack of concern than to hostility or support. It is certainly true that Irish Catholicism later became associated with Irish Nationalism, maybe as a late response to the Penal Laws, which lasted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>. It is also true that isolated clergymen worked tirelessly for the promotion of the Irish language, such as Father John Lanigan (1758-1828) or Archbishop John MacHale (1791-1881) of Tuam, who translated major works of literature into his

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<sup>18</sup> James Carlile, Alexander McArthur, Richard Whately (eds.) *Fourth Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools*, Dublin: Alex. Thom & Sons, 1859, p. 52, Cited in Robert Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> The first books in Irish using the new printing presses invented in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were scholarly volumes published in the 1840's and 1850's by antiquarian societies: the Irish Archaeological Society, the Celtic Society and the Ossianic Society.

<sup>20</sup> "*Officials figures suggest that in the 1820's between 300,000 and 400,000 children attended*" these clandestine schools. S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, Oxford: OUP, 1998, p. 238.

<sup>21</sup> See William R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, Dublin: James McGlashan, 1852, pp. 26-27, Karen Corrigan, 1996 "Language attrition in nineteenth century Ireland: Emigration as 'murder machine'" in Alison Henry, Martin Ball and Margaret McAliskey (eds.), *Papers from the International Conference on Language in Ireland, Belfast Working Papers in Language and Linguistics* #13, Belfast: University of Ulster, 1996, pp. 43-84. or Ulick J. Bourke, *The Aryan Origin of the Gaelic Race and Language*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1876., p. 40-41. No similar systems seem to have existed in Scotland or Wales at the time, but the same coercion method was also in use in Brittany and persisted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>22</sup> "For God's sake teach the children Irish and don't be blind like the asses who have come here." Emigrant letter provided by Seán Ó Dúbhda, respondent to the UCD Irish Folklore Commission emigration questionnaire in 1955, cited in Karen Corrigan, "I gcuntas Dé múin Béarla do na leanbháin: eismirce agus an Ghaeilge sa naoi aois déag" ("For God's sake teach the children Irish: Emigration and Irish in the Nineteenth Century") in P. O'Sullivan, *The Irish in New Communities*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992, pp. 150-151.

<sup>23</sup> Ernst Georg Ravenstein, *op. cit.*, pp 587 & 590.

<sup>24</sup> Catholic Emancipation was achieved through the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, although the minimum property qualification to vote was raised, and tithes still had to be paid to the Anglican church in Ireland.

native Irish<sup>25</sup>. But they were probably exceptions in the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and on an everyday basis, the Catholic Church in Ireland was always reluctant to associate with the native language: following its global tradition, it used Latin as the only language for mass throughout the world until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)<sup>26</sup>.

In addition, most Irish Catholic seminaries on the continent, where priests were trained for Ireland, had closed down in 1792 and 1793, threatened by the French Revolution: the first Irish seminary, St Patrick's College, was established in 1795 in Maynooth, Co. Kildare under King George III (1738-1820). Funded by the British government, it therefore trained all its future teachers and missionaries in English, probably because it was far more useful for missionary work abroad than Irish, but primarily because “*As a government-aided institution it could hardly have done otherwise*”<sup>27</sup>. Whatever the reasons why the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Ireland did not support the Irish language for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Professor Máirtín Ó Murchú could write in retrospect:

*The dominance of English in the domain of religious practise attributable to the establishment of Maynooth College must have been the greatest single blow to the Irish language. There is ample evidence to show that the Catholic Church became a major force of de-ethnicisation and Anglicisation.*”<sup>28</sup>

The post-famine era was a period of great expansion for the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, with a surge in the building of churches and far better attendance than before<sup>29</sup>. The Great Famine itself had often been felt to be a divine intervention, and the Catholic hierarchy had plainly embraced the view, bringing with it a stricter approach to Catholicism which included a severe attitude to old pagan beliefs and celebrations, but also to merry-making, dancing, gambling, drunkenness, etc. Even music and musicians were condemned by the Roman Catholic church, and ‘crossroads dancing’ all but disappeared, as lamented by distinguished collector Francis O’Neill (1848-1936), a native of rural Co. Cork who became Chief of Police in Chicago in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

*“the oldtime festivities and celebrations had been discontinued and those of the pipers not doomed to the poorhouse by reason of old age or blindness sought some other means of obtaining a living. Their instruments were put away, and in course of time even themselves, as well as their tunes, were forgotten.”*<sup>30</sup>

William Wilde (1815-1876, Oscar Wilde’s father), did not hesitate to blame the Roman Catholic Church, not only for the decline of the language but more generally for the disappearance of old traditions and the global decline of Gaelic culture, which it had all but banned:

*“(…) all the stories about the fairies and the pishogues are going fast, and will soon be lost to us and our heirs for ever. the old forms and customs too, are becoming obliterated; the festivals are unobserved and the rustic festivities neglected or forgotten; the bowlings, the cakes and the prinkums (the peasant balls and routs) do not often take place where starvation and pestilence stalk over the country.”*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John MacHale translated Moore’s *Melodies* in 1841, the *Pentateuch* for the Maynooth translation of the Bible in 1861, and one third of Homer’s *Iliad* between 1844 and 1871.

<sup>26</sup> The first mass ever written in Irish, *Aifreann Uí Riada*, by Seán Ó Riada, was performed for the first time in 1967 at St Patrick’s College in Maynooth, and is still used extensively today. Protestant mass was always in the vernacular, i.e. in the language the people understood.

<sup>27</sup> Maureen Wall, “The Decline of the Irish Language”, in Brian Ó Cuiv (ed.), *A View of the Irish Language*, Dublin: Government Stationery Office, 1969. p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Máirtín Ó Murchú, *Urlabhra agus Pobal / Language and Community*, Dublin: Comhairle na Gaeilge Occasional Papers 1, 1971, p 28-29.

<sup>29</sup> See Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 65-66

<sup>30</sup> Francis O’Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, Cork: The Mercier Press, 1987 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1913), pp. 269-270.

One of the main opponents to the use of Irish, however, was Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847), arguably the single most important Irish politician of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who had relentlessly fought for, and obtained Catholic Emancipation (1829) and with it the right to be elected to the Westminster Parliament. Although a native speaker of Irish from Co. Kerry, he had chosen not to defend it, on religious and cultural grounds. In an oft-quoted passage by his faithful supporter William J. O’Neill Daunt (1807-1894), O’Connell is reported to have dismissed its use in the following terms:

*“I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret its gradual abandonment. A diversity of tongues is no benefit; it was first imposed upon mankind as a curse, at the building of Babel. It would be of great advantage to mankind if all the inhabitants of the Earth spoke the same language. Therefore though the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of Irish.”*<sup>32</sup>

Such was his political and social influence that, even after his death in 1847 on his way to Rome, his reasoning lasted for several decades, leaving behind him a native language that was despised by the elite and slowly abandoned by the general population. English was now unquestionably the language of emigration, schools, books, newspapers, administrations, businesses, urban life, religion and politics.

## Revivals

In the footsteps of the Ossian controversy in Scotland at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one of the first realisations that Ireland’s cultural treasures were in great danger of disappearing had come in the 1780’s when an Irish businessman based in Copenhagen named James Dungan had decided to organise an annual music event in his native Granard Co. Longford, lamenting the fact that:

*“(…) persons placed in high situations, and who have in their power to do the most good by their rank or wealth for their own country are, I am sorry to hear, the least disposed to do it – I will not attempt to say by habit or by inclination. I am informed they know nothing of Irish music or Irish misery only by the name, so great are their desires to support and promote modern English music.”*<sup>33</sup>

Three harp festivals ensued in 1784, 1785 and 1786, each with a competition of harpers and a great ball, paving the way for a similar event organised by the Belfast Harp Society in 1792. Edward Bunting (1773-1843), only nineteen years old at the time, was then given the formidable task of saving the bardic heritage of Ireland by writing down all the melodies played by the harpers<sup>34</sup>. Among the countless outcomes of these musical events were the use of the harp as an emblem for the nationalist Society of United Irishmen (founded 1791), with its motto “*it is*

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<sup>31</sup> William Wilde, "Popular Irish Superstitions", in *The Dublin University Magazine*, Volume 33, 1849, p. 544.

<sup>32</sup> William Joseph O’Neill Daunt, *Personal Recollections of the Late Daniel O’Connell* Vol. 1, London: Chapman and Hall, 1848, pp. 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> Correspondence of James Dungan cited in the “Memoirs of Arthur O’Neill”, in Donal O’Sullivan, *O’Carolan, the Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958, pp. 162-3.

<sup>34</sup> These were published in 1796 by E. Bunting as *General Collection of Ancient Irish Music*, followed by 2 more volumes in 1809 and 1840. See Donal O’Sullivan & Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, *Bunting’s Ancient Music of Ireland*, Cork: The Mercier Press & Cork University Press, 1983, xvii + 226 pp.



*new strung and shall be heard*", and the use of Bunting's collected tunes by Thomas Moore for his poems, published in 10 exceptionally popular volumes between 1808 and 1834 under the name *Melodies*<sup>35</sup>.

Music was used again on the eve of the Great Famine by the Irish nationalist movement when Thomas Davis (1814-1845), co-founder of the weekly newspaper *The Nation*, asked his readers in 1842 to compose new lyrics on popular melodies, retelling Irish history with a nationalist passion. The response from their mostly urban middle-class readership went far beyond all expectations and 800 original songs in English were published between 1842 and 1845, two of which used the words "Ourselves Alone" – *Sinn Féin* in Irish – an expression soon turned into a nationalist slogan, and which became the name of a Republican party in Ireland in 1905. As a founding member of the political and cultural Young Ireland movement, Thomas Davis was also responsible for the article 'Our National Language' published in *The Nation* in April and December 1843, arguing that:

*"A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories – 'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river(...). Nothing can make us believe that it is natural or honourable for the Irish to speak the speech of the alien, the invader, the Sassenagh tyrant, and to abandon the language of our kings and heroes."*<sup>36</sup>

Unlike his successful request for new ballads, however, his hopes for a Gaelic language revival remained utterly unheeded by the vast majority of the upper-classes he was appealing to, but his terminology survived in nationalist speeches and texts.

The biggest inspiration for Irish men and women seeking to assert their cultural identity came at the peak of the Great Famine years, in 1847, when Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) founded the People's International League, which included no Irish delegates on its Council. Although sympathizing with the Irish request for participation and their "*just consciousness of human dignity, claiming its long violated rights*", he denied Ireland membership, officially because the country "*did not plead for any distinct principle of life or system of legislation, derived from native peculiarities, and contrasting radically with English wants and wishes*"<sup>37</sup>. Unofficially however, he admitted to a friend in the same year that "*Non abbiamo nel Consiglio irlandesi, perché verrebbe in campo la questione del Repeal che ci riuscirebbe fatale*"<sup>38</sup>. If this proved a flawed appreciation of Ireland's identity, it certainly proved a skilful sense of diplomacy, since his London-based People's International League had far more to gain from a friendly rapport with the British government than with Ireland. But the damage was done and the general movement questioning the British government's legitimacy in Ireland was now inspiring Irish citizens from very different horizons and on a much wider scale, amplified by the devastation of the Great Famine, which the nationalists exploited to exemplify the need for independence. From amateur historians to romantic idealists, and from songsters to language enthusiasts, the next 50 years would be devoted to a romantic reconstruction of Irish history and literature, and to a conscious differentiation from England.

Even more influential in the long term was the fact that the resentment born of the Famine years itself had now migrated and spread around the globe, finding a new lease of life in the radical nationalist Fenian movement:

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<sup>35</sup> See Charles Villiers Stanford (ed.), *The Irish Melodies of Thomas Moore*, London: Boseny & Co., 1895, 251 p.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas O. Davis, *The Nation*, 1 April 1843, pp. 98-101. *Sassenagh* or *Sassenach* is a derogatory Gaelic word for 'Englishman'.

<sup>37</sup> Cited by Bolton King, *Mazzini*, London: Dent & Sons, 1902, p. 106-107.

<sup>38</sup> "We have no Irish on the Council because that would bring up the question of Repeal which would be fatal to us", letter to Giuseppe Giglioli, March 1847, in Mario Menghini (ed.), *Scritti Editi ed Inediti di Giuseppe Mazzini (Edizione Nazionale)*, Imola: Paolo Galeati, Vol. XXXII, 1933, p. 65.

founded in New York in 1848 it soon developed all over America and Australia, with branches in England and links in Ireland with the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood, founded in 1858. In stark contrast to Daniel O’Connell’s peaceful ‘Repeal of the union’ movement, Irish nationalists were now fully embracing a new direction: an armed revolution in Ireland. With two failed mini-uprisings in 1848 and 1863, Repeal gave way to a patchy association of radical and peaceful movements, called ‘Home Government’, which quickly became ‘Home Rule’, a phrase probably coined by Reverend Joseph A. Galbraith in 1870. But their efforts in favour of the Irish language still remained largely secondary, and only one thing remained: *“Neither O’Connellite nor Fenian brands of nationalism did anything to foster Irish, and by the time a more advanced nationalist ideology adopted the old tongue it was too late”*<sup>39</sup>

The first association whose sole purpose was the safeguarding of the endangered language, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, was created more than 20 years after the Great Famine, in 1876. Very quickly, it produced a series of textbooks in Irish and, with full support from the Home Rule Party and the newly-founded Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO)<sup>40</sup>, it finally succeeded in officially introducing a tiny measure of Irish in schools in 1879: it could now be taught by a qualified teacher of the language as an “extra-subject”, outside school hours and at an extra cost for the pupil. It was only a small step forward, but Irish had at last been granted official recognition in the United Kingdom. More importantly, despite the official non-political posture of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, the context proved too difficult to resist and the linguistic battle clearly became politicised, which provided the inspiration for generations of nationalist enthusiasts, ever so intent on asserting their cultural differences with England.

It is interesting to note that, in enrolling culture as a practical tool for the affirmation of a specific Gaelic culture in the wake of the Great Famine, Irish militants did not build on intellectual ideals and theories, but on an unassuming feature of people’s daily life, with high emotional value: sports. The ‘Gaelic Athletic Association for the Preservation and Cultivation of National Pastimes’ (GAA) was founded in Co. Tipperary in 1884 by a famous athlete (Maurice Davin, 1842-1899) and a nationalist teacher (Michael Cusack, 1847-1906), under the threefold patronage of MP and activist Michael Davitt (1846-1906), Home Rule leader Charles Parnell (1846-1891) and Archbishop Thomas Croke (1824-1902). Its official aim was to restore *“an interest in the revival of ancient Irish pastimes”*<sup>41</sup>, but it was obviously devised to counter the invasion of other games regarded as “English”: Cricket, introduced in Ireland in 1792, Rugby, introduced around 1850, Football Association, introduced in 1878, and Hockey, introduced in 1886. If proof was needed of the political nature of the GAA, it was decided in 1885 to expel all members who had taken part in (or sometimes simply watched) non-Gaelic games. Although this rule was suspended in 1897, it was re-introduced in 1902 as Rule 27, when radical nationalists increased their influence

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<sup>39</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine*, Cambridge: University Press, 1989, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> INTO was founded in 1868 and is still active in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, considered as the most important teachers’ union in Ireland, both North and South. In 1874, it passed a motion to support the teaching of Irish, probably linked to the introduction of performance-related pay in 1872. See Nadine Lamelet-Mac Grath, *La langue irlandaise dans les écoles primaires en Irlande de 1831 à 1936 - Stratégies politiques et pédagogiques*, Ph.D. Thesis, Université Rennes 2, 2008, pp. 120-121

<sup>41</sup> John McKay ‘Gaelic Association for National Pastimes’, in the *Cork Examiner*, 8 November 1884.

within the ranks of the GAA. ‘The ban’, as it is popularly known, was only lifted in 1971, but Rule 42, which prevents non-Gaelic games from being played in GAA stadiums, is still in operation today<sup>42</sup>.

Following in the steps of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, but also in those of the now formidable Irish diaspora (in particular American Gaelic societies and their monthly journal since 1881 *An Gaodhal*<sup>43</sup>), Irish enthusiasts founded in 1882 the *Gaelic Journal / Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge*, the first bilingual publication of its kind. Its principal founder, the Protestant Douglas Hyde, still felt that more could and should be done, and he delivered a noted speech before the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin on November 25<sup>th</sup> 1892 entitled “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland”, in which he claimed with as much realism as idealism:

*“I have often heard people thank God that if the English gave us nothing else they gave us at least their language. In this way they put a bold face upon the matter, and pretend that the Irish language is not worth knowing, and has no literature. But the Irish language is worth knowing, or why would the greatest philologists of Germany, France, and Italy be emulously studying it, and it does possess a literature, or why would a German savant have made the calculation that the books written in Irish between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, and still extant, would fill a thousand octavo volumes (...); but perhaps the principal point of all I have taken for granted. That is the necessity for encouraging the use of Anglo-Irish literature instead of English books.”*<sup>44</sup>

The most celebrated of all Irish cultural associations, the Gaelic League, was founded by Douglas Hyde in this context in 1893, and despite its motto – ‘*Ní tír gan teanga*’, no country without a language – it meant to act far beyond the idea that language could build bridges between Catholics and Protestants: literature, history, music, dance, Saint Patrick, medieval manuscripts, dress, place names, first names, etc. were all enrolled in the promotion of a specific Irish identity and, in the longer term, for international recognition. In this context of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism, the objective was twofold: to deal with the lack of confidence of Irish men and women in their own culture in the wake of the Great Famine, but also to give a tangible existence to Ireland’s distinctiveness for the outside world. Not only did it hold adult classes in Irish but, in 1897 alone, it also created a festival with music competitions (*Oireachtas na Gaeilge*), it invented rules, regulations and costumes for solo dancing competitions (*Feiseanna*), and held the first ever Irish *Céilí* (ball) for group dancing in London, based loosely on a Scottish precedent. It then went on to absorb the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, to publish its own newspaper under the leadership of Pádraig Pearse (*An Claidheamh Soluis*, 1899), it backed a “Buy Irish” campaign (1900), convinced politicians to introduce more Irish teaching in schools (1903), made St Patrick’s Day an official bank holiday celebrated by Protestants and Catholics alike (1903) and, more significantly, encouraged the creation of a national literature through the revival of Irish mythology, with artists of the Irish Literary Renaissance such as William B. Yeats (1865-1939) or Lady Gregory (1852-1932). In 1977, Nobel laureate Séamus Heaney summed up the ambivalent Irish attitude to this movement, often called the ‘Celtic Twilight’: “*Although it has long been*

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<sup>42</sup> This is why Dublin has two stadiums: Croke Park, one of the largest in Europe with a capacity of over 80,000, for Gaelic games, and Aviva (formerly Lansdowne Road) for “*Field Games others than those sanctioned by Central Council*”: GAA Official Guide, 2013, Rule 5.1, p. 64. After two years of negotiation, a temporary lift of the ban was voted for Rugby and Football Association matches to be held in Croke Park while the Aviva Stadium was being built, between 2007 and 2009. It is still forbidden by the GAA today to play Rugby or Football on its grounds.

<sup>43</sup> *An Gaodhal*’s impressive front page masthead claimed “*Leabharaithe míosamhail, tabhartha chum an Teanga Ghaedhilge a chosnadh agus a shaorthughadh agus chum Féin-riaghla Cinidh na hÉireann*” (A Monthly journal devoted to the preservation and cultivation of the Irish language and the autonomy of the Irish nation).

<sup>44</sup> “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” in *The Revival of Irish Literature: Addresses by Sr Charles Gavan Duffy, KCMG, Dr. George Sigerson, and Dr Douglas Hyde*, op. cit., pp. 117-161.

*fashionable to smile indulgently at the Celtic Twilight, it has to be remembered that the movement was the beginning of a discovery of confidence in our own ground, in our own place, in our speech, English and Irish.*"<sup>45</sup>

The number of local branches of the Gaelic League grew steadily during its first decade of existence (227 in 1901), and its influence grew even more as the aspiration for Home Rule became more credible, reaching 600 branches in 1904 and 819 in 1922, with additional links in the UK and the USA<sup>46</sup>. With independence, however, came a swift decline: only 139 branches remained in 1924, although (or because) almost all prominent figures of the government were former or present members. The influence of the Gaelic League on the cultural, social and political life of the 29 years between its creation and the creation of the Irish Free State was thus fundamental in connecting the 19<sup>th</sup> century quest for cultural identity and the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggle for political independence. But in the meantime, the Gaelic League had lost its initial appeal to moderate Protestants on both sides of the border, and had become strongly associated with the Roman Catholic Church, which controlled most of the national and secondary schools, most hospitals and had taken over all major associations like the GAA or the Gaelic League.

The emergence of a Catholic nationalist culture in Ireland at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can, up to a point, be explained by the previous centuries' anti-Catholic prejudice from Britain ; but the birth of an overwhelmingly Protestant movement during the same period, with several Unionist parties radically opposed to Home Rule, also highlighted the demarcation lines and drew the positions further apart. Gradually, the Gaelic – or pseudo-Gaelic – past of the country became associated with its Catholic champions, and its reconstructed sources were offered as the only alternative to British rule, endorsing one single aspect of Ireland's multicultural past under an "Irish Ireland" banner, to the detriment of a more inclusive diversity. One of its most radical partisans was journalist David P. Moran, who could consider that all inhabitants of Ireland who were not of Gaelic stock were "*resident aliens*" and that "*the foundation of Ireland is the Gael, and the Gael must be the element that absorbs*" in order to keep Ireland Catholic<sup>47</sup>. As a consequence, if most leaders before the turn of the century, like Isaac Butt (1813-1879) or Charles Parnell, were Protestants, most of them after 1900 were Catholics, such as John Dillon (1851 -1927), John Redmond (1856-1918), or Charles Griffith (1872-1922). Sensing its deviation from the original motives of political, social and religious harmony, Douglas Hyde himself had resigned from the Gaelic League in 1915 after the annual conference in Dundalk, where radical elements linked with the Irish Republican Brotherhood had pushed for, and obtained, a motion in favour of complete independence from the United Kingdom. Although a founder of the Gaelic League and a respected figure of Irish political life, he was later banned from the list of patrons of the GAA, for attending an international soccer match between Ireland and Poland in Dublin in December 1938, as President of the Republic of Ireland.

After 1922, the leaders of the new Free State of Ireland, inspired by the Gaelic League, made Irish compulsory in schools, and required all civil servants and officials of the government to be able to speak Irish. Following in the footsteps of Thomas Davis' journalist work during the Great Famine years, they also used his terminology *verbatim* and inducted the Irish language as the 'National Language' in the 1922 and the 1937 constitutions. English was at first "*equally recognised as an official language*" in 1922, but fell to the position of "*second official language*" in

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<sup>45</sup> Séamus Heaney: "The Sense of Place", lecture given in the Ulster Museum in January 1977, in *Preoccupations, Selected Prose, 1968-1978*, London: Faber and Faber, 1980, p. 134.

<sup>46</sup> See Terence Brown, *Ireland, a Social and Cultural History*, London: Fontana Press, 1985, pp. 53-55

<sup>47</sup> David P. Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland*, Dublin: UCD Press, 206 (1st ed. 1905), p. 36-37.

the 1937 document<sup>48</sup>. In the state-funded schools of the Free State (and later of the Republic), Irish also became a compulsory subject in 1922, which has been a constant source of heated debates ever since, and a clear divide between the two main political parties still today: while the conservative Fianna Fáil party still argues for compulsory Irish, the more centre-right Fine Gael party has recently favoured a pragmatic approach, pressed by generations of Irish men and women who cannot speak Irish despite hundreds of hours spent in classrooms *as gaeilge*. On the other side of the border, Northern Ireland's Prime Minister Lord Craigavon could declare in 1934 that "*in the South they boasted of a Catholic State (...) we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State*"<sup>49</sup>: the Irish language was banned from schools and public signs after 1922, but was finally given official recognition in 2001 when Great Britain ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

In retrospect, recent figures seem to indicate that the Irish language has been saved, at least temporarily, in great measure as the result of an active policy on the part of the Irish government since independence: in 2011, 38.6% of the population in the Republic declared they could speak Irish, but only 1.7% used it daily outside the education system, with rather stable figures over the past few decades<sup>50</sup>. In Northern Ireland, where it was excluded from official use until 2001, 3.7% of the population over 3 years of age can "*speak, read, write and understand Irish*", although only a small minority of Protestants does<sup>51</sup>.

## Conclusion

Between 1800 and 1900, Ireland underwent changes that very few countries have ever experienced: a once vibrant language became synonymous with poverty and destitution and on average 20% of its population either left or died. In the process, the rural areas of the island suffered from a dislocation of their traditional communities, a fragmentation of their identities, and ultimately from a sense of loss of their grounding. In the years and decades following the Great Famine, the creation of new sports, the reviving or invention of Gaelic traditions, the rewriting of history, the spread of the Irish language abroad, a sense of self-confidence regained, the recreation and adaptation of a national literature, all point towards significant and constructive consequences. On the other hand, the generalisation of more radical forms of politics, coupled with the association between Catholicism and nationalism after independence, led to an exclusive society seeking a united façade identity at the expense of diversity.

Naturally, the Great Famine cannot be held directly responsible for all of these negative developments, but it is undeniable in our view that the depopulation of the country and the fragmentation of rural society in the 1840's produced long lasting effects whose consequences are still visible today. In short, the Great Famine initiated a long and gloomy era during which the decline of the language amplified, rural exodus increased, anger and bitterness intensified. This in turn became the basis for Ireland's cultural and political life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the foundations on which the Irish Free State was built. From the inclusion of the special position of the Church in the 1937 constitution to the official neutrality of Ireland during World War II, and even to some politicians' refusal to consider the English language as a legitimate language of the country, there was a clear – conscious or unconscious

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<sup>48</sup> See Article 4 of the 1922 Constitution and article 8 of the 1937 Constitution. The expression "national language" is still officially in use.

<sup>49</sup> See *Parliamentary Debates, Northern Ireland House of Commons*, 24 April 1934 Vol. XVI, Cols. 1091-95.

<sup>50</sup> The 2011 Census Report shows that 1,774,437 people in the Republic can speak Irish out of 4,588,252 (38.67%), of which 77,185 (1.68%) speak it daily. From the General Census Report for 2011; See Central Statistics Office, *This is Ireland (Part 1)*, Dublin: Stationery Office, 2012, 122 pp. Available from [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie).

– will on the part of Irish leaders to differentiate themselves from England and put Ireland on the map, culturally as much as politically. It took another fifty years after Irish independence, and a great deal of courage on the part of other politicians to achieve the maturity to tie the future of the country once again with Great Britain's, within the European Union (1972-1973). Ultimately it was up to Tony Blair, in anticipation of the serious negotiations which culminated in the Good Friday agreement of April 10th 1998, to make the first step of reconciliation and start healing the wounds, in this statement issued on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1997, four weeks after being appointed Prime Minister of the United Kingdom:

*The famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event. It is also right that we should pay tribute to ways in which the Irish people have triumphed in the face of this catastrophe. Britain in particular has benefited immeasurably from the skills and talents of Irish people, not only in areas such as music, the arts and the caring professions but across the whole spectrum of our political, economic and social life.*

Indeed, without the Great Famine, the Irish Diaspora would have been far less influential, from Britain, Australia and New Zealand to North and South America. There would have been no American movies by John M. Feeney, a.k.a. John Ford, no American Catholic President named John F. Kennedy, no Beatles in England, and many more besides, among the 70 million people of Irish descent throughout the world. As for those who stayed, arguably one of the main legacies of the Great Famine 150 years on, is this specific paradigm of human distrust for nature and man alike, combining humour and pessimism, that one so often meets in Ireland: the Irish cynic, famously portrayed by Oscar Wilde as “A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing”<sup>52</sup>, while Brendan Behan further refined the Irish paradox: “It's not that the Irish are cynical. It's rather that they have a wonderful lack of respect for everything and everybody.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Census 2011, Key Statistics for Northern Ireland*, Belfast: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, December 2012, 35 pp.

<sup>52</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 1892, Act III.

<sup>53</sup> E. H. Mikhail (ed.), *Brendan Behan, Interviews and Recollections*, Vol. 2, 1982, p. 186.