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PART III

The Construction of Irish Identity

The historical context and the

19th century reconstruction

Contemporary European nation states have gradually assumed their current shapes and boundaries over centuries of conflict. Many were formed by elites in core ethnic groups, which became expansive and conquered peripheral peoples. These expansive kingdoms or empires differed in the extent to which they sought to incorporate, culturally, the peripheral groups — to develop conceptions of peoplehood and rituals of solidarity which included or excluded the conquered peoples, or to co-opt the peripheral elites.

The expanding 'British' state in the seventeenth century appears to have been irredeemably assimilationist in aim, attempting to wipe out contending cultures and differentiated ethnic identities. 'The conquest of Ireland, as envisaged, for example, by Sir John Davies in 1603, was intended to ensure that the whole Irish people would, in a relatively short time, become in every way a part of English civilization'⁷. But as de Paor goes on to note, this did not in fact happen. The 'ancient Gaelic world' and its institutions were not modernised or integrated into the British system but were simply condemned to inferiority and left to rot away into a cultural desert. What emerged in the old United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland was a polyethnic system, in which the culture and Identity of the Irish remained differentiated but were not granted equality in status or dignity. A stratified, hierarchical system of the cultures was created, and over time this was continually reinforced by institutional mechanisms – the schools, labour market processes, the mass media. The rituals of the state associated authority and power very closely with the culture of the higher classes of the dominant core, and helped to co-opt many peripheral elites into the culture and social solidarity of that core elite.

In the reaction to the imperialism of the late 19th century, individuals and groups in Ireland attempted to recreate a consistent ethnic ideology which would reverse the meanings associated with being Irish and would return dignity and social status to the Irish people. In doing so, they were both reflecting and seeking to use the ideology of nationalism which had swept through late 18th and 19th century Europe. The central themes in European nationalism have been summarised by one writer as follows:

There is a natural division of mankind into nations. Every nation has its own personality or character (sometimes even a mission to the world) which is a product of its history and culture. In addition, all nations have the right to run their own affairs, and only by doing so can a nation realise its full potential. Finally, the first loyalty of the citizen, of each individual, is to the nation state³.

Nationalist ideology portrayed 'the nation' as an already existent fact – as a natural consequence of differences in culture. However, much of the activity of national movements was devoted to constructing and constituting the nation which was to control its own affairs and command its citizens. Butt Philip suggests that almost every nationalist movement in Europe developed according to a common pattern (see note 8). The first stage was nearly always

a form of antiquarianism, often indulged in by the aristocracy or gentry as a hobby – a revival of interest in local history, archaeological remains, placenames, folklore and so on. The 19th century Irish gentry were no exception, founding a succession of societies (The Gaelic Society of Dublin, 1806; the Ibero-Celtic Society, 1818; the Irish Archaeological Society, 1840) all devoted to antiquarian investigation, even of what was then still a living language⁹.

In the second stage this dilettante interest is transformed into an intellectual movement with its object as the systematic rediscovery of ‘the nation’: its history, its culture, its language become the focus of detailed scholarly analysis and interpretation. In Finland, for example, which was separated from Sweden and handed to Russia in 1809, the ‘discovery’ of the *Kalevala*, the Finnish epic which was compiled in 1835 out of poems found in the Karelian region, ‘laid the groundwork on which to build the national continuity, or rather an illusion of it, of Finnish culture’¹⁰, and its promotion and translation into other European languages was vigorously undertaken by the Finnish Literary Society. The Slovene people of Eastern Europe, reduced to a regionally divided peasantry in five centuries of Habsburg rule, found their nationhood in the origin myth provided by the poet Valentin Vodnik with his poem ‘The Revival of Illyria’, based on the mistaken belief that the Illyrians were the direct ancestors of the Slovenes.

In time, such work and its perspective becomes part of the consciousness of the civil and political leaders, as ‘the nationalist Idea offers a new analysis of the condition of their country, one that not only explains at a glance the source of their discontents, but which often carries revolutionary implications for the system of government’¹¹. With the fourth stage the ideas are communicated to the population at large and are used as a basis for attempting to bring about change.

This four-stage model is intended to capture, however schematically, a process of nationalist development which was not confined to those groups who were still struggling to establish themselves as ‘nations’ or to create their own independent nationstates. It was a process through which many of the established states in Europe were passing as well, for they were also experiencing a need to command the loyalty of all their citizens and to formulate justifications for their juridical and political arrangements. What the model does not bring out sufficiently clearly is the interaction between processes at the centre and the periphery – the extent to which the development of ‘the nation’ among peripheral and dominated peoples could parallel and reflect the development of the concept among the dominant group from which they were trying to differentiate themselves. In the Irish case, for example, one writer, Percy Allum, has gone so far as to suggest that the emergence of the Gaelic ethnocentrism at the end of the 19th century, which was to have such a strong effect on our later conceptions of our nationhood, was directly the responsibility of the great English historians a few decades earlier¹².

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of great importance in England and elsewhere to the formation of history itself as a science, and in England the new science became focussed on the issue of explaining English political stability. Many of the more eminent English historians of the time, such as Freeman, Froude, Stubbs, Kingsley, explained it by tracing the evolution of the English constitution and political institutions back to their origins in an Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic institution, ‘the March’ Such a reconstruction of English political history not only connected the present English nation with its past, but also provided a justification for the

contemporary imperial state: it created a basis on which intellectual leaders in

England ‘propagated everywhere their certainty of the superiority and purity of the Anglo-Saxon race, and its historical mission, in the wake of Greece and Rome, which made it the matrix of the political and intellectual leaders of the whole world’¹³. This history also provided an explanation for why other races, and particularly the Celts and the Irish, were inferior - the argument that the Irish had no experience of the sort of Teutonic political institutions which guaranteed order and liberty could easily transform into the argument that the Irish are ‘totally incapable of establishing any social organisation whatsoever’¹⁴ because of their race and national character (and should not, therefore, be conceded Home Rule).

Allum points out that as the century wore on a historiographic tradition developed in Ireland which was both in opposition to and virtually a mirror-image of the one which developed in England. Irish history became shaped by a search for evidence that Ireland has been a cradle of European civilisation when England was still only a barbaric region. Where English historians focussed on ‘the March’ as the source of English distinctiveness and virtue, Irish historians discovered ‘the sept’ and the ancient Gaelic system of communal rights of property as the foundation of Irish cultural greatness. Allum concludes:

One can thus say that two stereotypes were formed, and two historiographic traditions which had many points in common ... It must be added that this way of thinking is very entrenched and, under forms which are now more sophisticated, has dominated historiography until very recently’⁵.

In this context, de Fréine, in *The Great Silence*, introduces the term “national parallelism”:

With the national revival it was natural to assert that the Irish, although a subject people, were no less endowed than their conquerors. They could not claim as theirs anything that was characteristic of England, because that might weaken their claim to separate nationality; on the other hand, not to have it could betoken inferiority. The problem was overcome by inventing what we might call “national parallelism” ...¹⁶

Thus, where the English had common law, the Irish discovered Brehon law; where the English had soccer, the Irish invented Gaelic football; where the English had a Roman script, the Irish recovered the Gaelic script; and whereas the English wore trousers, historically the Irish had worn kilts. de Fréine adds: ‘It was not appreciated that nations are not replicas of a common design, with a stock number of component parts, nor that it was possible for nations, as for people, to have certain characteristics in common without detracting from their individuality’¹⁷. But this misunderstands the way in which ethnic identity develops, according to Barth: it develops in interaction across group boundaries, through which the features which define what I am must have their parallel in defining how you are different from me.

The clearest and strongest expression of this strategy of ‘national parallelism’, it could be said, was the attempt of the Gaelic League to revive the Irish language as the counter to the language of the English nation. Indeed, it has been remarked that Douglas Hyde’s famous lecture on *‘The Necessity of de-Anglicising Ireland’* (1892) ‘was preaching, in the name of Ireland, the same cultural purity which Freeman and Froude had preached twenty years previously in the name of England’¹⁸. The question of whether a separate language is one of the ‘stock number of component parts’ which any nation requires for survival is still today one to which there appears to be no easy answer, although we offer our view on this in Part IV. Certainly, it is easy to ridicule or parody some of the ways in which Hyde sought to summon up an Irish nation which would be different but not inferior: for example, Lee’s

mockery of his ‘obsession that trousers were an exclusively English contribution to civilisation’ so that ‘In his zeal for kneebreeches, for example, he came close to

proclaiming “Down with trousers” as the battle cry of his brave new Ireland”¹⁹. Such parodies, based on the assumption that Hyde’s interest in reviving Irish was that of a traditionalist and anti-modernist who sought only to purify the ancient Gaelic nation of intrusions from a vulgarised modern English culture, do little justice either to the context in which Hyde wrote or to his own central ideas.

The revivalist ideology of the Gaelic League under Hyde needs to be placed against a background which includes both external, European-wide changes and the political and social context within Ireland itself at the time. At a European level, the Gaelic League could point to a number of movements within which connections between the development of the nation and the development of a national language had already successfully been made. One example would be Norway, which gained Independence from Denmark in 1814 through entering a dual monarchy arrangement with Sweden. At that time, the language of administration and education was Danish; the older Norwegian tongue, which had less than half the number of speakers which Irish then had ²⁰, survived only as the spoken language of the ordinary people and was fragmented by marked dialectical differentiation. ‘Norwegians in the generation after 1814 faced the reality that the country, after 400 years of union with Denmark, lacked its own voice. The tradition of Norway as an Independent nation had never died, but there was very little that could sustain it...²¹. The continuing use of Danish by the Norwegian upper class meant that a cultural union with Denmark continued after political ties were cut. From the middle of the century on, Norwegian political self-assertiveness towards Sweden was accompanied by a strong national cultural movement, whose central element was the language question. By the 1880s, a standardised version of Norwegian had been developed, and was recognised, as it is today, as one of the country’s two official languages. One writer states that:

The most profound consequences of Norwegian cultural nationalism generally and of the promotion of Landsmal particularly are to be found in the social field. By giving first priority to the values of the peasant society, it strengthened the self-respect and vitality of the rural communities which were seriously endangered by the extensive process of socio-economic transition which Norway entered upon in the middle of the nineteenth century. The cultural movement became a strong counterbalance to the forces of centralisation and contributed to preserving the balance between centre and periphery²².

Within Ireland, the reality within which Hyde developed his ideas was that by the end of the nineteenth century the majority of Irish people already accepted political nationalism, and many expected that Ireland would get some form of Home Rule in the near future. In that context, the Gaelic League was only one of a number of movements which were attempting to give a cultural, economic or social content to the new society which would emerge. Horace Plunkett, in founding the co-operative movement among Irish farmers, envisaged cooperation not just as a means of putting Irish agriculture on a sound economic basis, but as a way of restoring self-respect to rural Ireland, and, over time, generating an economic and social and moral revival that would transform the whole country. Sinn Féin, in the early years of its development, sought to treat the political tie with England as irrelevant and to build up an alternative administration in Ireland, focussed on the General Council of County Councils, which would work towards the modernisation and industrialisation of the economy. Sinn Féin and the IAOS shared the belief that the tactics of the orthodox, Home Rule nationalist movement, in particular its concentration on parliamentary agitation, were morally and materially bad for Irish people. They felt that such tactics prevented the Irish

people themselves from attempting to improve their situation. Both bodies sought to replace this by ‘administration’ and the construction of institutions which could administer economic development. Hyde, while clearly within the same perspective, concerned himself not with economic or administrative development

but with something which he believed lay deeper than this: the growth of a genuine national consciousness out of which alone, he believed, an Irish parliament would be able to act authentically. The central problem as Hyde saw it was that Irish national identity had been severely eroded during the centuries of British rule, producing, on the eve of limited self-government, a national context filled with dissonance. Ethnic pride in being Irish was a persistent reality, but the cultural basis for asserting that pride was one of which most people in Ireland were ashamed.

It is for this reason that the vision of the 'nation' which Hyde offered was a millenarian one, suffused with romantic claims which were necessarily exaggerated for the purposes of cultural and social mobilisation. Hyde's policy of 'de-anglicisation', 'a peaceful and necessary development of the political nationalism'²³, expressed with extraordinary effectiveness the insight that an Irish nation state could be built on Irish lines only when the Irish people overcame a central ambivalence in Irish society: that of always imitating England and English culture, yet hating to do so.

In the face of cumulating processes of economic and social integration into the larger UK market and society, which were continually marginalising and increasing the dependence of Irish society, Hyde and the Gaelic League ideologists identified provincialism as the most threatening development: the gradual absorption of cultural, class and status models from English society, particularly among the rising Irish bourgeoisie as they strove for 'status legitimacy' It was almost inevitable that this group should turn to ready-made British models for the construction of status-enhancing life styles; even as merely provincial variants of English middle or upper-middle class life styles, the legitimacy of these claims to social honour would have been very hard to resist in the minority situation of Irish ethnic culture. To Hyde, provincialism meant living in a world in which the Irish were always on the periphery, never at the centre; a world in which there would be no impetus, as Peadar Kirby puts it, to 'unlock the pools of creativity in each of us'²⁴. Hyde's solution was to foster the philosophy that Irish identity has to be formed on the basis of independence of mind, integrity of culture, confidence in national character, and liberality of thought and self-expression. The only appropriate instrument, he argued, by which Irish identity could be secured for the future, so that Ireland could lead its own life in its own way, and with its own 'centre', was through the development of its own language. The widespread use of a provincial variant of someone else's creation, even with the vigour being imparted to that at the time through the work of Yeats, Synge, O'Casey and others, could not be a lasting solution. In similar vein, Hyde sought to restore the broken continuity of the Irish nation with an ancient past by arguing that the essential reality of Irishness is based on Gaelic history, and by proclaiming a knowledge of Gaelic culture and traditions the birthright of all Irish people.

The Gaelic League ideologues may have overstressed the idea that only the re-establishment of meaningful links with a Gaelic past could provide an authentic basis for Irishness, but they were extremely perceptive in understanding the dangers accompanying the gradual absorption of class and status influences from English society into the new elites in Ireland. We believe they were also perceptive in their understanding of the way in which language can facilitate this process.

The ethnic or national identity which Hyde and his fellow nationalists shaped as the basis for a new Irish state was thus a very deliberately 'constructed' identity. It was constructed out of a reaction to centuries of domination by English imperialism, and out of a conscious search for an alternative basis on which to create an authentic, confident and historically continuous sense of peoplehood.

Whatever reservations we might feel about it today, with the dubious benefit of hindsight, it must still stand as an extraordinary achievement and as a reminder that ideas can make history; what has been achieved once can be achieved again. This constructed identity made the Irish language and the Gaelic heritage into dominant symbols of national distinctiveness. Their place could have been filled by other symbols: religion, race or territory. Indeed, religion has remained in competition with language as a dominant symbol of Irishness to the present day. To Hyde, however, one of the great virtues of the Irish language was that it could be an inclusive rather than a divisive badge of identity, one which while signalling commonality could nevertheless be used to express and even reinforce the different religions and cultural traditions which existed on the whole island. In the Ireland of that time, it was possible to choose one's language in a way in which it was not possible to choose one's religion: to choose Irish was to make a conscious commitment to the Irish nation. In the words of a later Protestant Irish-speaker:

Fundamental to all Irish nationalist thought is the way in which – despite the (understandable) identification of the national struggle with Roman Catholic pieties at many points – Protestants are accepted as Irish if they show any willingness at all to see themselves in that light an unpretentious support for and use of Irish by any Protestant can cause her or him to be accepted as 'fully' Irish generally. Characteristically, such an identification with the Irish language... produces a feeling in Irish Roman Catholics that the Protestant is 'really' Irish as nothing else does, not even faithfulness to death in the cause of armed struggle for nationalist ideas²⁵.

To speak Irish is not the only way, but it is one very clear way, of signalling that for the speaker the Irish people, their history, their culture, their aspirations, are at the centre not the periphery of the meaningful world.

Irish and identity in the new state

In the period before the foundation of the Irish state, the Gaelic League achieved much success for the language restoration, in two particular respects: it generated wide interest among adults in learning at least the elements of the language, and it raised the status of Irish as a subject in the schools. In 1900, for example, 109 national schools offered Irish as an extra subject; by 1922 this had risen to 1,878. And between 1905 and 1915 3,672 primary teachers were given the qualifications to teach Irish – the great majority of them trained in the League's own recognised teacher training colleges. The work of the League directly influenced the policies adopted towards education in 1922 when the new government reorganised the curricula of both primary and secondary schools to give the Irish language, Irish history and Irish cultural traditions a significant place²⁶. However, this focus on educational reform which marked Gaelic League activities from its early years may ultimately have proved very costly. By the 1940s, as one writer has remarked, 'Irish has become fatally associated with the purgatorial fires of the classroom, the terrors of the irregular verb and the distortions of ingrown virginity'²⁷.

The nativism of the Gaelic League was rooted in origin myths which elevated the cultural and social residues surviving in the western islands and the

Gaeltacht into the fountainhead for a new society. But the people who lived in those areas did not necessarily share such idealisation: they looked on Irish as a substantial disadvantage to their economic adjustment (mainly through emigration) in an English-speaking world. It was perhaps a major failure of the League that it did not manage to ensure that Irish became the working language of the IAOS movement; in that context, particularly of those of its workers, like

George Russell, who were in direct contact with the often still Irish-speaking farmers of the West. The opportunity to give Irish an economic as well as an educational role in the new state was missed²⁸.

Finally, the effect on the development of a native high culture in the early decades of the new state was in some respects disastrous. It was, as Kiberd has argued, a cruel irony that the attempt to restore Irish at the end of the 19th century coincided with the emergence of some of the greatest writers in English whom Ireland has ever produced²⁹. The response of the most doctrinaire members of the League, such as Pearse, to the Anglo-Irish revival was to argue that no national Irish literature could emerge from English-language writers, thus creating an artificial barrier between the two traditions which persists to this day in Irish schools and universities. The refusal within Ireland to recognise Anglo-Irish writers as Irish could be offset by the growing recognition in the wider English-reading world that they were not only Irish writers but great Irish writers: the effect on writing in Irish, however, was that it became 'quarantined', as Kiberd puts it, into the hands of nationalist propagandists, grammarians and bureaucrats. For example, An Gum, the Publications Branch of the Department of Education, employed creative geniuses like Máirtín O Cadhain agus Seosamh O Grianna to translate novels of Victorian England into Irish. Kiberd goes on to say:

The language movement was afflicted with pedants and puritans of every kind, tight-lipped young idealists who dreamed of creating a republic of bicycle clips and handball medals ... As O Cadhain wearily observed in retrospect, to read the mass of modern writing in Irish is to be confronted with a body of literature composed explicitly for an audience of credulous schoolchildren and pre-conciliar nuns³⁰.

The association of Irish with national identity in the new nation state became, to paraphrase Maureen Wall, little more than a 'ragbag of sentimental trappings'. The new state did not seriously try to live its own life through the language, or to undertake the heroic efforts which would have been necessary had it genuinely attempted to fulfill the Gaelic League programme. The linguistic and cultural revolution through popular participation which had been begun by the League became rationalised and bureaucratized by the state through formal and technical means. As Osborn Bergin pointed out, the people handed it over to the government, the government handed it over to the Department of Education, the latter handed it over to the teachers, and they passed the job over to the children who were too weak to refuse it³¹. The learning of Irish in school became too often not a culturally developing experience through which new meanings could be forged, but rather a matter of learning to recite the experience of others, and others often very foreign to the audience involved. It became associated with a package of cultural and ideological elements which had to be swallowed whole: Irish music, dance, republicanism, particularistic versions of history, conservative Catholicism and general anti-Britishness. Although it did, over time, ensure that few members of the population lacked at least 'a few words of Irish', and that a substantial section today are moderately fluent bilinguals, pride in and love of Irish appears to have survived almost despite the experience of 'school Irish'. All the evidence suggests that for the majority of the population it takes a few years out of school to recover one's love for the language, after the drubbing it gets in the formal school process (see CLAR Report; note 38).

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As the ideology about Irishness constructed by Hyde and others became established and crystallised under the Cumann na nGaedhal government, and subsequently under Fianna Fail, it came to be experienced by many as an authoritarian culture - one that was imposed and static, even artificial. It became a formal system, rather than a lived experience. The Gaelic League had sought to build upon pride in history: 'to render the present a rational continuation of the past' as Hyde said³². In fact, as we have suggested earlier, the past had to be recreated in order to make it continuous with the desired present. But once created, both past and present appeared to ossify in the early decades of the new state.

It would be, of course, extreme to suggest that all of the current malaise in Irish identity could be attributed to the failures of the educationalists in relation to the teaching of Irish: as extreme as it would be to suggest that the history of the language in the 20th century is irrelevant to our current difficulties. Nevertheless, what happened in relation to Irish can be seen in many ways as the clearest example of a much broader pattern, a broader failure to appropriate and reconstruct for ourselves the possibilities that were made available to us. We have left the really important elements of our identity in the hands of elites and experts, and they have returned them to us as doctrines externally imposed.

One could suggest many reasons to explain this. One might mention the way in which the Republican take-over of Sinn Féin from 1917 on and its subsequent assumption of leadership of the political nationalist movement coincided with a growing vacuum in economic and cultural nationalism. 'But what was Sinn Féin policy? Nothing more clearly reflects the political sophistication of Sinn Féin than the adroitness with which it evaded this question', writes Lee ³³. The national question had become defined in the 1918 elections as purely a question of political independence from Britain.

One might also mention the way in which, after political independence, the shaping of Irish national identity passed from the hands of an urban intellectual elite into those of an increasingly conservative rural establishment. Writing on the development of nationalism in Finland from the 1860s on, Klinge comments on the division between the liberalist culture of the urban bourgeoisie and the 'Fennomania' of the rural bourgeoisie:

which stressed agrarian values and found its political support in the traditional rural community, among the farmers and the clergy. This trend ...saw the moral and material values of the traditional rural society as the underpinning of the national culture. The ideal was the independent, landowning farmer, living witness to the ancient agrarian continuity and a Finnish independence ...³⁴.

As Klinge goes on to note, it was a vision which excluded both the surplus agricultural population of Finland, many of whom emigrated, and the urban proletariat. However, this vision was to be profoundly challenged after the turn of the century by the development of a strong socialist movement, something which did not occur in Ireland. Nor did we find in our rural nationalism the strengthening of the rural periphery against the core and centralising pressures, which Haugland associates with it in Norway ³⁵.

The elevation of rural Ireland to the core of Irish national identity – not for its Gaelic culture but for its supposed traditional rural values – involved an idealisation of the rural which was in many ways a false one, which obscured both the social and economic trends undermining that society and the real vitality and sources of dynamism which potentially existed within it. It has been argued that this misleading and stifling idealisation was connected with

writings by Irish writers in English:

The notion of the peasant and of the country which the peasant embodied was not a reflection of Irish reality but an artificial literary creation, largely made in Dublin, for Dubliners. It was a political image of the countryside which helped to create a sense of social cohesion in a country which was trying to define itself over against English.³⁸

The ideology, adds O'Toole, created 'a strong identification between the peasant and childishness, and for England, an identification between Ireland and childishness'. The language of writers like O'Flaherty or O Faolain when they

were writing in English, in describing the Irish peasant is:

the language of the British imperialist talking about the wild savages of the jungle - naive, animal-like, part of the landscape, outside of history – and the fact that it was not seen as such is a mark of how effectively the revival had nationalised colonial attitudes, internalising a process which belonged to the colonial mentality and selling it back to the outside world as a reflection of Irish reality.³⁷

O'Toole sees this rural idealisation as profoundly nostalgic and backward-looking; the country is 'the location of the collective past', an attitude which both 'served ideologically to obscure the change that has taken place in the countryside, making it economically more like the city', and prevented the development within Irish ideology of a Utopian tradition which would be focussed on the future, on transformation, rather than on preservation and the past

Irish responses to Irish identity today

The stratified system of ethnic identities and cultures created within the old United Kingdom of Ireland and Great Britain still remains very deep-seated and pervasive within Ireland today, evident in social behaviour and in the way in which such things as accents, speech modes, and forms of self-presentation in interaction are performed and interpreted. From the perspective of the old core elite, the English and especially the Southern English, the cultural forms of the more peripheral ethnicities are still largely defined as deviant, exotic, unpresumed, and occupying the lowest level of the status order. BBC Radio 4, for example, regularly receives complaints from listeners about people with pronounced 'regional' accents like Scottish being allowed to occupy central positions such as newsreader or continuity announcer; such voices may be acceptable within particular programmes but they do not appear acceptable to many when presuming to represent the nation addressing itself.

In Ireland, research suggests that we have internalised a stratification system for language and accents which approximates very closely to that of the old core elite. The closer a speaker's accent is in English to that of the English 'Received Pronunciation' standard, the more likely he is to be assumed to belong to a higher status occupation like a solicitor or bank manager, to have qualities of leadership and self-confidence. Even more than accent, however, choice of language produces stratifying responses among Irish hearers. A person who speaks Irish:

is seen as being smaller, uglier, weaker, of poorer health, more old-fashioned, less educated, poorer, less confident, less interesting, less likeable, lower class, of lower leadership ability, lazier and more submissive compared to an English speaker. Basically, an Irish speaker is more undesirable. He is more likely than an English speaker to be a farm labourer or a small farmer³⁸.

Interestingly, similar research in Wales suggests that the core elite's stratification along ethno-linguistic lines is not internalised there, or is much more strongly resisted: even Welsh people who do not speak Welsh 'find

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Welsh-speaking Welshmen more desirable and evaluate them more favourably on a number of affective dimensions than Welshmen who speak only English'³⁹.

English as used in Ireland is subject to continuous pressures to normalisation and standardisation in line with a received English standard. There has been, as one writer points out, very little academic, political or economic support for projects to describe, codify or standardise 'Hiberno-English'⁴⁰. The continuing position occupied by Irish as the symbol of identity and national cohesion has left English as the language of purely utilitarian functions. In spite of its great success internationally, the Anglo-Irish literary revival at the turn of the century failed to establish Hiberno-English to the Irish as a form of speech with its own 'national validity',

clearly distinct from other varieties of English and able to be used to symbolise ethnic identity and difference. The forms of English spoken by higher status groups in Ireland today and encouraged by RTE, for example, while clearly discernible as Irish-accented, appear to be so close to the English approved norm that they are easily accepted as a high-status norm in England.

The combination of elements and attitudes that are central to the construction of Irish ethnic identity today (from both our own perspective and that of others) draws different responses from different class and status groups within the society. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, Irish commercial and industrial elites were coming to occupy a more and more dependent position within the larger British economy. Their economic activities were increasingly confined to the importation and distribution of British products within Ireland, and the handling of raw materials for processing in Britain. The same period saw the final destruction of the traditional upper class, which although it was, or was perceived as, ethnically distinct from the mass of the population had nevertheless made available to the rising middle class a relatively indigenous model of a high-status group lifestyle. The rising Catholic bourgeoisie in general were thus very vulnerable to adoption of British lifestyles and status symbols and to an increasing provincialisation, as Hyde saw.

Hyde's struggle to create and sustain a distinctive cultural nationhood seems to have been successful in transforming the allegiance of some sectors of the middle class more than others. At least if we can take support for Irish, as indicated in Census returns among different occupational groups, as a guide, in the early years of the new state those in professions, in state employment, and on larger farms were more likely to have been affected by the new ideology than were the commercial and industrial classes (bank officials, auctioneers, insurance officials, company directors and secretaries) or some predominantly urban service and skilled manual groups⁴¹. But the numerical strength, at least, of such groups was small in the new state which was predominantly non-urban, non-industrialised, with a class structure dominated by the 'self-employed' and the petite bourgeoisie, and in which the farming community was the key to political power⁴².

The occupational and class structure has undergone large-scale transformation since that time, and particularly since the 1960s; while agricultural employment has contracted markedly, with the virtual disappearance of 'relatives assisting', employment within manufacturing and productive industries has expanded, and so in particular has white collar 'service work' – in commerce and finance and in professional and technical services. The structural change involved a stabilisation and expansion of the middle class, rather than marked individual upward mobility. Such mobility as has occurred into the urban middle class seems to have come from medium and large farm families and from the lower middle class. Those

involved in commercial and financial enterprises and in business generally are now a far more dominant group in the population as a whole than they were, and support from 'the business community' rather than the farmer is today the key to political power⁴³.

Liam de Paor has described the contemporary middle class in the Republic as:

quasi-anglicised Irish ... Inheritors neither of the Gaelic nor of the English cultural tradition ... a rootless Catholic middle class, which has only a tenuous verbal ideology to sustain it, neither a peasant culture nor a bourgeois culture going back into the past⁴⁴.

In fact, the strength of cultural identification and ethnic ideology varies considerably among different sections of the middle class today, and the differences can be explained to some extent at least by differences in the route through which people have gained access to middle class occupations⁴⁵. Up even to

the mid 1950s the Irish state used the education system to try to develop an ethnic ideology which would guarantee loyalty to itself and legitimisation of its institutions among its citizens. People who gained access to middle class positions largely as a result of high educational qualifications – particularly professional and semi-professional groups – developed as a result a quite strong attachment to the symbolic and cultural bases of Irish identity and to some extent the capacity to transform and develop an indigenous Irish culture through their competence in the Irish language. The growth of what we might call an ‘ethnocultural’ identity among the more highly educated sectors of the middle class is also strongly linked to employment within the state sector rather than the private sector⁴⁶. On the other hand those groups for whom education was not an important criterion for access do not appear to have developed this sort of identity. This is true of large farmers, access here being largely determined by inheritance, and particularly of the more powerful and influential commercial and industrial elites for whom up to the 1960s access was still largely shaped by various forms of sponsorship. Since that time, recruitment into business and commercial positions has become very much more dependent on the possession of high educational qualifications; but this has coincided with profound changes in the syllabus and orientations of the education system itself so that the link between achieving high educational qualifications and achieving access to Irish culture, history and literature is no longer so strong. Increasingly, school pupils who are anticipating a career in commerce or business are by-passing the school subjects, including Irish, which could form a basis for development of Irish cultural identity.⁴⁷

Thus, many members of the commercial and business elite today still tend to accept the old stratified system of ethnic symbols and identities within the Anglo-Irish world, and to identify with the status symbols of the dominant core. This is expressed, for example, in Anglicised accents and speech styles, and an attitude that characterises Irish as the ‘bog language’ It is overlaid with a patina of internationalism in bourgeois consumption styles, yet the particular form this takes, in housing styles, diets, leisure activities and names for children for example, is articulated through an anglicised world view. This group are also the most likely to be involved in cross-national interactions with their counterparts in Britain, the United States and Europe; in Barthian terms, we could say that they are the group least equipped to maintain ethnic boundaries through such interaction, as they most lack the bases on which to sustain and defend a belief in the equal status and validity of their own ethnic identity with that of others. It would appear that only some professional groups, or other sectors of the middle classes today who have learned to appreciate their culture, and are somewhat competent in the use of Irish, are able to define Irishness in terms of a distinctive culture which one can take pride in as neither inferior nor superior to that of others.

The Irish working class tends to adopt Irish nationalist ideology, but often without the broader cultural bases for appreciating or developing a distinctive Irish culture. The result can be a form of ethnocentric, even xenophobic, nationalism, for example as expressed in militant Republicanism. Indeed, it could be argued that the major response to the question of identity in Ireland has been a militant Republican rather than an ethnocultural one. But Republican nationalism, for the past decade at least, has had increasing difficulty in sustaining its legitimacy. As a version of Irishness it is no longer a vibrant mobilising force, nor a sufficiently enduring ideological statement of what the Irish people can aim for or what they want to see constructed. And it is one which has been subjected to sustained critique by many leaders of Irish opinion, who, horrified by the violence of events in the North of Ireland, have turned to the condemnation of nationalism per se. In some cases this has produced an association of nationalism in general, and Irish nationalism in particular, with excesses of visceral reaction, blind

emotion, even racist or Nazi sentiments. Conor Cruise O'Brien's writings provide an example:

Even under the most benign definitions of nationalism, much more is subsumed than simple affection for one's fellow citizens, and one's native place. Collective selfishness is there, aggression, and the legitimization of persecution, with at the back of it all, the old doctrine of the superiority of one's own nation, the *Herrenvolk*. . .⁴⁸

Such contemptuous assertions only make sense if they rest on a larger denial of the validity of distinctive differences in Irish identity and culture. And what is ignored or forgotten in them is the shape of 'British' and specifically 'English' identity and a recognition that specifically English nationalism is itself an equally persisting reality. The implicit ground on which such critics stand, as they wrestle with the problems of Irish nationalism, is essentially a 'British' or 'English' liberal one; a ground which, we have earlier argued, presents itself as 'universal' or 'civilised'. The denial of the value and authenticity of Irish national identity is based on an acceptance of the outsider's standards as more valid. This deference to English hegemony leads to a cultural and spiritual impoverishment of Irish life; an argument against the use of violence by militant Republicans today which was premised on a position internal to Irish culture would transcend and develop the internal dynamic of Irish identity, instead of denying it.

Some writers have argued that Irish national identity today is primarily focussed on and articulated through the medium of the state itself. Neither cultural nor ethnocentric definitions of identity are any longer needed to sustain an identity which is quite visibly signified in the activities and institutions of an autonomous political unit. Indeed, it is often suggested that this is a natural and inevitable progression, to be found in all nations which have achieved political independence:

Nationalism, after all, is the frustrated expression of an aspiration to independence which is being denied. When the aspiration is fulfilled, nationalism gradually wanes. Already by the 1960s this State had outgrown the emotional manifestations of nationalism. These had given place to a quiet and assured acceptance of nationality⁴⁹.

We have already argued that nationalism as an ideology was not confined, in either the 19th or 20th centuries, to nations aspiring to independence; arguably, its strongest adherents have been found in existing states which, for one reason or another, sought to reconstruct the 'nation' on which their legitimacy depended. Nevertheless, it is useful, as this comment suggests, to distinguish between a 'nationalist ideology', in the sense of the ideas and aspirations held by a particular nationalist movement, and a 'national identity' which owes less to the arguments of intellectuals and more to the taken-for-granted practicalities of the lived experience of ordinary

Individuals⁵⁰. These lived experiences constantly remind and explain to individuals that they are subjects of this, and not some other, state (the subjects of this state's laws, the audience for this state's public service broadcasting, the participants in this state's education or welfare Institutions and so on). It can be argued that such experiences are what, in the contemporary world, define and create the 'people' which the state claims to represent.

It seems to us that while there is much truth in that claim, it is only a partial account of the situation. It suggests that the national identity which is conferred on the citizens of a state in this way cannot be subject to reflection or challenge, as they have no other resources of meaning for 'peoplehood' to counterpose against the arrangements of the state. In the Irish situation, the many failures of the state to deal with major problems in Irish society – poverty, unemployment, emigration – its failure precisely to 'cherish all the children of the nation equally' – continually problematises the relationship between the political institutions and

the 'nation' they supposedly define. And these problems are 'lived experiences' for increasing numbers of the population. Moreover, a sense of national identity which was defined purely through subjection to the institutional arrangements of the state seems more likely to be a temporary condition signalling a crisis in identity, than a 'quiet and assured' acceptance of who we are. We would be more inclined to agree with de Paor, when he says that the fact that today 'it is not a sense of identity which sustains the State, but the State, for the moment, which sustains a sense of national identity', is due to the rapid and bewildering change of the last decades as well as the failure of broader cultural definitions of Irishness to get any more than a 'tenuous verbal hold' on the elites who currently dominate Irish society. ⁵¹

Through its control of the education system and of access to employment in the civil and public service, the state in the early period of independence, as suggested earlier, established not just the juridical but the social conditions through which at least some groups in Irish society developed a sense of their identity as Irish. Today, both the dominance of public service employment in the occupational structure as a whole, and the management of recruitment into it on terms favourable to this development, have contracted markedly. The role of the state in maintaining Irish ethnic identity - like the role of the Irish language - has become more symbolic and ritualistic than dynamic. Piellon (see note 43) suggests that although the state has generally achieved a remarkable appearance of consensus in presenting its own vision or 'project' for the future of Irish society as a project shared by the whole nation, it has been able to do this by, broadly, leaving to other groups (the church, educationalists, sporting and cultural associations and the Irish language movement) the task of continuing to define and articulate the social and cultural distinctiveness of that nation. Yet its own activities, in many respects, work to deny the validity of the definitions that these groups offer. ⁵² If pictures of our political leaders meeting the political leaders of other 'nations', or accounts of the trials of Irish citizens in non-Irish law courts, or encounters with passport officials at the boundaries of other states, are experiences which define to us what we are not, they do not define for us what we wish to be. And finally, in an international context in which existing political arrangements may have an insecure future - in which the idea of the 'nation state' itself, never fully adequate as a description of the major political structures in the world, is increasingly questioned as the most suitable to further human development - an identity which depends on the state can not provide the resources we need to take hold of and fashion our own future.

Notes to Text

1. 'Introduction: Thinking Otherwise' R. KEARNEY (Ed.): *Across the Frontiers - Ireland in the 1990s*. Dublin: Wolfhound 1989.
2. Peadar KIRBY: *Has Ireland a Future?* Cork and Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1988. pp. 7-8.
3. See for example *The Interpretation of CuLtures*, New York: Basic Books 1973.
4. In F. BARTH (Ed.): *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. London: Allen and Unwin 1969.
5. For useful discussions of this process, see H. Abramson, 1976, 1980.
6. Clearly, political and military interests were also involved, in the emergence of the particular configuration of nation states found in contemporary Europe.
7. Liam De PAOR, 'Ireland's identities', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977-81)*, edited by M.P. Hederman and R. Kearney. Dublin:Blackwater Press.
8. Alan BUTT PHILIP, 'European nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth century', in R. Mitchison (Ed.): *The Roots of Nationalism - Studies in Northern Europe*. Edinburgh: John Donald, 1980. p.1.
9. See Alan BLISS: 'The standardisation of Irish', In *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, pp. 908-14.
10. Matti KLINGE: "'Let us be Finns" - the birth of Finland's national culture', in R. Mitchison (Ed.): op. cit. p.70.
11. BUTT PHILIP, op. cit. p.4.
12. Percy ALLUM: 'The Irish Question', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, pp. 643-51.
13. ALLUM, op. cit., p. 644.
14. Quoted by Allum and attributed to Froude.
15. ALLUM, op. cit., p. 645.
16. Sean de FREINE: *The Great Silence*. Dublin and Cork: Mercier Press, 1978 (second edition). pp. 51-2.
17. De FREINE. op. cit., p. 52.
18. ALLUM, op. cit., p. 645.
19. Joseph LEE: *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848-1918*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973. p. 141, p. 138.
20. De FREINE, op. cit., p.7.
21. Prof. Einar HAUGEN, quoted in D. Greene: 'Language and nationalism', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, pp. 331-5.
22. Kjøll HAUGLAND: 'An outline of Norwegian cultural nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century', in R. Mitchison (Ed.): op. cit., pp. 28-9.
23. D. GREENE, op. cit., p. 333.
24. Peadar KIRBY: *Has Ireland a Future?* p. 105.
25. Risteard O GLAISNE: 'Irish and the Protestant Tradition', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, pp. 864-75.
26. See Séamas OBUACHALLA: 'The Language in the Classroom', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, pp. 849-61.
27. Declan KIBERD: 'Writers in quarantine? The case for Irish studies', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, p. 349.
28. Peter KUCH: 'Mananaan Mac Lir as monoglot — George Russell and the Irish language', In *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, pp. 880-889.
29. KIBERD, op. cit., p. 342.
30. KIBERD, op. cit., p. 349.
31. Bergin's actual words are quoted in Terence BROWN: *Ireland — a Social and Cultural History 1922-79* Glasgow: Fontana 1981, p. 53.
32. Quoted in T. Ó hAilín "Irish Revival Movements" in O Cuiv (Ed.) *A View of the Irish Language*, Dublin: Government Stationery Office, 1969
33. LEE, op. cit., p. 161.
34. KLINGE, op. cit., p. 74.
35. See for example Hugh BRODY: *Inishkillane - Change and Decline in the West of Ireland*. London: Allen Lane 1973.
36. Fintan O'TOOLE: 'Going West — the country versus the city in Irish writing', in *The Crane Bag* (Final Issue), 9, 2, 1985, pp. 112, 113.

37. O'TOOLE, op. cit., p. 113.
38. Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research, *Report*, Dublin, Stationery Office 1975. Appendix V. Matched Guise Study, p. 454.
39. H. GILES, D.M. TAYLOR, R.Y. SOURHIS: 'Dimensions of Welsh Identity', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 7, 2, 1977, pp. 165-74.
40. Jeffrey L. KALLEN: 'The English language in Ireland', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 1985, 70, pp. 127-42.
41. See D. HANNAN, H. TOVEY: 'Dependency, status group claims and ethnic identity'. Proceedings of the Sociological Association of Ireland, 1978.
42. See T. GARVIN: 'Nationalist elites, Irish voters and Irish political development — a comparative perspective', *Economic and Social Review*, 8, 3, 1977.
43. See Michel PEILLON: *Contemporary Irish Society - an Introduction*. Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1982.
44. De PAOR, op. cit., p. 360.
45. See HANNAN and TOVEY, op. cit.
46. See An Coiste Comhairleach Pleanála: *The Irish Language in a Changing Society - Shaping the Future*. Dublin: Bord na Gaeilge, 1988.
47. See An Coiste Comhairleach Pleanála: *Irish and the Education System*. Dublin: Bord na Gaeilge, 1986.
48. C.C. O'BRIEN: 'Nationalism and the reconquest of Ireland', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, p.95.
49. John A. MURPHY: 'Further reflections on Irish nationalism', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, p.309.
50. See James WICKHAM: 'Nationalism and dependent capitalism - the case of Ireland', Proceedings of the Sociological Association of Ireland, 1976.
51. De PAOR, op. cit., p. 361.
52. See *The Irish Language In a Changing Society* for a further discussion of language policy in this respect.
53. John MACNAMARA, in 'The Irish language and nationalism', *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, p. 126.
54. In 'Irish Music Defined', In *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*. p.915.
55. See, for example, Risteard O GLAISNE (op. cit.), and Padraig O SNODAIGH, 'Hidden Ulster Revisited', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, pp. 876-8.