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THE MAKING AND MAINTAINING OF THE IRISH DIASPORA

Creació i manteniment de la diàspora irlandesa. Història d'un país abocat a l'exterior

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Introduction

The story of the Irish diaspora is intertwined with that of English colonial rule and after Irish independence with post-colonial interdependence. During the 120 year period stretching from 1801 to 1921, some eight million people emigrated from Ireland, the migratory tendency only being reversed in the very late twentieth century. It is now likely that the economic demise of what had been called the "Celtic Tiger" - but in retrospect was it only ever a paper tiger ? - will once see again young Irish emigrants seeking economic refuge in established diasporic communities, or in new ones.

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European colleges

Well before the massive emigration of the 19th C, the Irish had been working and settling on the European mainland. As early as the 16th C young Irishmen pursued their studies in Europe's universities and even established their own Irish student hostels in France, Spain, Spanish Flanders and in Italy. The hostels also acted as hubs for Irish merchant and military communities. The first Irish college was founded in Lisbon in 1590, and in 1592 Philip II became the patron of a similar college in Salamanca which over the following half century educated 400 Irish seminarians. After the Battle of Kinsale (1601-1602) which ended in the victory of the English against the Spanish-supported rebellious Gaelic Irish, large numbers of Irish migrants arrived in Spain, and Irish student communities and colleges were established in Santiago de Compostela, Valladolid, Madrid, Alcalá, Valencia, Evora and Seville.
In Spanish Flanders Christopher Cusack established St. Patrick's College at Douai in 1594 and colleges were later set up in Antwerp (1600), Lille (1610) and Tournai (1616). Irish Franciscans, repressed by the English in Dublin, were very active in the Low Countries, and they founded St. Anthony's College in Leuven (Louvain) in 1607 with professors educated at the University of Salamanca; the college was renowned for its Irish language studies. In 1625 a second Franciscan college, St. Isidore's, was set up in Rome and became known internationally for its scholarship in history and theology.
While many of those who took up residence in these communities in Spain, France and Flanders were mature, already ordained men in their twenties and thirties who could thus support themselves as army chaplains or by giving religious instruction to children in the local Irish communities, others were in their early teens and depended on bursaries. As many as two thirds of these youngsters sought work on the European continent never to return to Ireland. Indeed, a continental education was a means for propertied Irish families to dispose of their second and third sons and thus keep their estates intact since under the law of *gavelkind* (equal division among all male heirs) estates were split up.

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Irish Mercenaries

The Irish also served as mercenaries in foreign armies. In 1587 an Irish force of a thousand plus men fought in Spanish Flanders and over the subsequent two decades 20,000 Irish soldiers served there. After the débâcle of the Spanish military intervention in Ireland in 1601-1602 Irish soldiers joined the army of King Philip who felt he had a moral obligation to the Irish aristocrats and their men. Significant numbers of military refugees including many of the leading aristocrats, such as Dennis O'Driscoll, Lord of Castelhaven, arrived in Spain with their families. So numerous were they that the Spanish council of state set up the office of Irish Protector in 1604 with some 800 Irishmen receiving financial help from the crown. But while Spanish authorities were glad to deploy the Irish fighters in Flanders they were also keen to repatriate the non-military Irish immigrants or "gente inútil."

Later on, in the 1640s, Spain suffering from a shortage of manpower recruited over 20,000 Irish mercenaries to fight against the French, and against Portuguese and Catalan rebels. But Irish soldiers often deserted the Spanish army to fight with the French, and in 1653 Philip IV declared that in Catalonia the Irish had betrayed him, the majority of them passing over to the enemy. Irish mercenaries continued to fight for the Spanish and the French throughout the 17th and 18th centuries up until the series of European revolutions that erupted in the late 1780s.

Social mobility in Europe

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries migrating Irish began to gain access to the higher social strata of European societies entering professions such as banking, medicine, civil service, and the arts.

After the defeat of James II of England, Louis XIV was obliged to provide for James and his Irish followers and dependants. The merchant Daniel Arthur who had established a bank in Paris was among those to profit from this Jacobite migration, facilitating the circulation of funds amongst Jacobite refugees. The numbers and success of Irish migrants in 18th C Paris even permitted the founding of an Irish Freemasons' lodge: "l'Irlandaise du Soleil Levant" composed of doctors, medical students and priests. One ex-soldier who made a felicitous transition to civilian life was Richard Hennessy of County Cork who joined the French Army in 1748 and in 1776 went into the brandy export business in Cognac and Bordeaux.

Taking advantage of the French-Spanish corridor opened by the Bourbons on the Spanish throne, a number of those who had been part of the Jacobite migration to France moved south to Spain. Most notable were Ricardo Wall ((1694-1777) who served as Spanish ambassador to London in 1748. Wall was later appointed Spanish foreign minister and secretary of state. Wall's entourage included another celebrated Hispano-Irishman, Bernard Ward whose *Proyecto economico* (Madrid, 1779) is considered Spain's most important 18th C work on political economy.

The New Irish Diaspora

In the early 19th C European Irish colleges started to go into decline, and Irish migrants, who were increasingly anglophone, now preferred destinations where English was spoken.[i] Britain's manufacturing activity attracted large numbers of Irish immigrants.

At the end of the 18th C the size of Ireland's population (4m) was more than half of England's (7m). This was due to the cultivation of the potato from the 1720s onwards; the potato increased the nutritive capacity of a patch of land by a factor of three. The population thus doubled between 1780 and 1831 when it stood at almost 8m. But Ireland's population soon went into steep decline and twenty years later had fallen to 6.5m. The potato blight of 1845, 1846 and 1848 eliminated the basis of Ireland's population growth. Between 1845 and 1855

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almost a million people starved to death, and during the decade that stretched from 1845 to 1855 2m emigrated.

In England no middle to large size town was without an Irish community and the impoverished Irish labourer was absorbed into England's industrial development and the expansion of it Empire. Already the British Army was heavily dependent on Irish recruits. By 1830 Irishmen constituted 42 per cent of Britain's long-service army maintaining order in Ireland and advancing Britain's interests in the colonies, especially in India, and in the Opium War of 1839-42 in China.

The impact of the large Irish communities on 19thC English industrial conurbations was not merely economic but also political. The Irish shunned English political parties in favour of those defending "orange and green" causes. For instance, a quarter of Liverpool's population was Irish or of Irish descent and until as late as 1929 Liverpool's Irish-populated North End Constituency elected an Irish Nationalist as their member of the Westminster parliament.

One of the causes of continued emigration after the mid-eighteenth century was Ireland's incapacity to produce its own capital, its economy could simply not sustain its population, and while large but unquantified numbers moved to the British 'mainland' between 1841 and 1925 there was massive emigration beyond Britain's shores: four and three quarter million to the USA, around 75,000 to Canada and almost 400,000 to Australia.[ii] By 1911, one third of all people born in Ireland were living abroad.

Anti-Irish Racism

Nineteenth century Irish emigrants were frequently the object of a racist discourse of denigration.

In England, from the mid-18th C onwards the scientific evolutionary debate led racist ideologues frequently to compare Irish people to apes. Author of *The Water Babies,* Charles Kingsley wrote to his wife from Ireland in 1860: "I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country...to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not see it so much, but their skins...are as white as ours."

But for many the Irish were indeed black. John Beddoe, who later became the President of the Anthropological Institute (1889-1891), wrote in his *Races of Britain* (1862) that all men of genius were orthognathous (having less prominent jaw bones) while the Irish and the Welsh were prognathous and that the Celt was closely related to Cromagnon man, who, in turn, was linked, according to Beddoe, to the "Africanoid."

Harper's Weekly ran a captioned illustration of three racial types: The Irish Iberian; the Anglo-Teutonic, and the Negro. The caption read "The Iberians are believed to have been originally an African race who thousands of years ago spread themselves through Spain over Western Europe...They came to Ireland and mixed with the natives...who themselves are supposed to have been of low type and descendants of savages of the Stone Age who in consequence of isolation ...had never been out-competed in the healthy struggle of life and thus made way according to the laws of nature for superior races." As late as the 1930s, G. R. Gair, of the Scottish Anthropological Society, claimed that while most of the inhabitants of the British Isles belong to the "tall, stolid, phlegmatic northern race," the "Nordic race," in the "western part of the British Isles we have a branch of the Mediterranean race" and a consequently "marked distinction in mental outlook and culture."[iii] The Irish were also said to "possess a higher ratio of criminals than the natives;" "possibly also to inherent racial reasons, it is also an ascertained fact that the Irish are more subject to certain diseases than the Nordics;" and "insanity, and other undesirable features, are greatest...in those classes in which the Irish form the greater section of the population."

John Beddoe had even invented the "index of nigresence" which proved that the Irish were close to the aborigines of the British Isles who in turn had traces of 'negro' ancestry.

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After the acquisition by London zoo of its first gorilla, the satirical magazine *Punch* published in 1862 a piece entitled "The Missing Link" attacking Irish Immigration. The *Punch* satirist noted "A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met within some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool....It comes from Ireland...it belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages: the lowest species of Irish Yahoo."

Irish America

The reception accorded to Irish migrants in nineteenth-century America was hardly better. In the mid-nineteenth century before the massive arrival of Italians and other Europeans, the Irish found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, just ahead of the black slaves. When the Brunswick canal was built in Georgia, black slaves and white Irish labourers were segregated supposedly to prevent violence between them. There were indeed such racial incidents but the bosses also fear that slaves and poor whites might sympathize and strike together. The solution for the plantation owners and canal builders was to assure the fidelity of poor whites by paying them to be overseers of black labour, thus constituting a buffer between the slaves and their owners.

Antagonism between Irish labourers and other white workers was at first to do with conditions of pay. But soon the antagonism took on a religious hue as local-born white workers being mainly Protestant. Politicians soon diverted the American-born protestants into the Republican Party and the Irish into the Democratic Party with religion replacing class politics, and the working class as a whole being fragmented and weakened.

In America, again Irishmen were once more recruited as volunteers to fight another's battles. In the 1846 war against Mexico, half of the American General Taylor's army were recent immigrants, mostly German and Irish. But the "patriotism" of the Irish Americans was uncertain and many enticed by better pay deserted to the Mexican side, the Mexican army even boasting a San Patricio Battalion.

In the Spring of 1847 hundreds of thousands of Irish people flocked to the ports hoping to board a boat out of poverty and starvation. Many sailed first to Liverpool, the cheapest way out of Ireland. There they could seek work on the railway and canal construction or local industries and stay with friends and family. Those who had the fare and were fit enough to pass the rudimentary medical tests boarded ship for America. More than two thirds of all Ireland's emigrants migrated to America. Conditions on board the barely converted cargo ships were horrendous. The stories of the voyage, that took six to eight weeks, hardly differ from the accounts of ships that had brought black slaves and later German, Italian and Russian immigrants to America's shores. The plague and cholera were common. Fatalities en route were routine and those who survived arrived in a sickly condition; many died on arrival in the in makeshift quarantine camps.

The new immigrants found themselves in poverty-stricken conditions, and with no means to proceed westwards, crowed into over-populated East-coast tenements. In Boston in 1850, the Irish slums were insanitary and the mortality rate among children was extremely high. Cholera epidemics ravaged the immigrants living in the western and eastern sections of New York. Secret societies such as the "Corkonians" and "the Connaughtmen" emerged in the Irish American labourers' ghettoes. Working conditions were bad and Irish labourers were frequently the object of gross exploitation. The railroad constructors were notorious for treating their workers no better than slaves. In the late 1840s New England farm women began to desert the mills as more and more Irish immigrants replaced them. Company towns grew up around mills in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey employing immigrant workers who contracted their whole family to work for a year. They lived in company slums and were paid in vouchers redeemable only in the company stores.

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In New York the Irish were despised by the American-born white population and were obliged to compete with the city's black population for jobs as dockers, barbers, waiters and servants. There was strong opposition from the Irish community to the abolitionist movement as Irish workers feared competition from freed slaves.

Between them three thousand Irish and ten thousand Chinese working for one or two dollars a day over a period of four years built the first transcontinental railroad. But relations between the Irish and the Chinese labourers, who were obliged to accept even lower wages, were poor. In 1870 at the height of the post-Civil War media campaign to exclude the Chinese from America, the Irish-American newspaper, *The Irish Citizen*, emphasized the alleged inferiority and immorality of the Chinese, and demanded racial rather than ethnic discrimination as the foundation of United States immigration policy: "We want white people to enrich the country, not Mongolians to degrade and disgrace it."

The Irish were now getting jobs thanks to the political machines that wanted their votes. Those who became policemen encountered the new immigrant communities. In 1902 the funeral of a rabbi turned into a riot as Irish migrants objected to Jews coming into their neighbourhood. The police force, dominantly Irish, was found to have aided the rioters rather than protecting those in the funeral procession.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Italians, Russians, Southern Europeans and East European Jews constituted the main immigrant population to the USA, but Irish immigration remained significant. In 1921, the Irish-born American population was close to 1m. Together with second and third generation Irish migrants they felt intensely about the cause of Irish Nationalism, which in the USA could even be considered a mass movement. The Friends of Irish Freedom founded in 1916 boasted 300,000 members by 1919, while the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic founded in 1920 had 700,000 members a year later. Many of the leaders of these group were wealthy Irish-Americans, an in particular lawyers, although Irish-American trade unionists were also active, the Irish-American Chicago Federation of Labour condemning the executions of Irish 'prisoners of war.'

Today some 35m Americans, more than 10 per cent of the US population, claim some Irish ancestry. During the twentieth-century, this Irish-descended population formed a well of sentimental and nostalgic support for Ireland that in the 1970s and 1980s also translated into financial support of Nationalist anti-British movements in Northern Ireland.

Back to Britain

Despite Irish independence emigration continued throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, but there was a decline in emigration to the United States in part due to the Great Depression, and from the mid-1930s Britain was the main destination for Irish emigrants. During the Second World War Irish women and men constituted a valuable pool of labour, and during the war some £21m were remitted back to Ireland. After the war, Ireland's economy in contrast to Britain's merely limped along and between 1951 and 1961 412,000 people emigrated. During the UK boom of the 1950s and 1960s such was the attraction of emigration that there were calls in Ireland for its prohibition, but economic reality prevailed. The Irish diaspora for much of the twentieth-century had had a major impact on the Irish economy and continued to do so into the 1960s. The Irish in England played an important role in sustaining Irish finances; the remittances of emigrants in 1961 alone totalled £13.5, the equivalent of Ireland's entire school education budget.

The diasporic community was continuously replenished with new migrants, and in 1970 it was estimated that 1m Irish-born people were living in Britain. Emigration which had abated during a brief moment of relative affluence in the 1970s, soared again in the 1980s with 130,000 people leaving Ireland between 1983 and 1988. Ireland's graduates were emigrating en masse and the 1980s saw the advent of an exiled yuppie class. Tens of thousands of young qualified Irish became illegal immigrants in the USA, while the NIPPLES (New Irish Professional People Living

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in England) gave rise to a vibrant young London Irish cultural scene. Even after a renewed upturn in Ireland's economic circumstances emigration continued to add to the British Irish community. In 2000, some 850,000 Irish-born people were living in Britain. But aside from the spectacular success of the Irish young graduates, many Irish people in Britain still lived in poor conditions and were afflicted by high mortality rates. As Ireland became wealthier there was even talk of repatriating or at least assisting the poorer Irish in Britain.

What has made and continues to make the Irish diaspora special is its unique dynamism based on its more or less continuous re-population by new migrants. Emigration has been a constant feature of the history of the Irish nation state, and many have seen this as the main failing of the independent Irish state itself. But this same migration has also forged the nature and vibrancy of its diaspora. In the spheres of ideas and culture the diaspora has ensured a constant ebullience that has protected Ireland from the kind of cultural isolationism and provincialism of its larger island neighbour.

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[i] By the mid twentieth century only three Irish colleges survived: Paris, Rome and Salamanca and the latter closed in 1951.

[ii] Numerous smaller communities sprang up around the globe spawning micro-histories, such as that of the Irish community in Argentina, which today are starting to attract attention.

[iii] "The Irish Immigration Question" in *The Liverpool Review* Vol IX, Nos.1-3 (January-March 1934).

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