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### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Kirkland, R. (2014). Creating Irish London: Modes of Performative Irishness in London, 1870-1890. *Nordic Irish Studies*, 13(2), 137-154. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24332413>

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Source: *Nordic Irish Studies*, 2014, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2014), pp. 137-154

Published by: Dalarna University Centre for Irish Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24332413>

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## **Creating Irish London: Modes of Performative Irishness in London, 1870-1890**

*Richard Kirkland*

However else it has since been mythologised, traduced, or belittled, it is clear that the movement known as the Irish cultural revival broke upon the social structures of late nineteenth-century Irish London like a wave, washing away much that had become anachronistic, residual, and compromised. Led by a modernising (usually Irish-born and Catholic) intelligentsia, and characterised by a refusal to countenance assimilation with the host community, the aim of this movement was nothing less than the creation of what John Hutchinson and Alan O'Day have termed 'an autonomous modern nation capable of competing in the international economic and political order'.<sup>1</sup> In this they functioned alongside the other recognisable type of revivalist from this time, the romantic (often privately funded and Protestant) Irish poet, diarist, and scholar; figures that usually had longer term familial and social connections to London. These two types of revivalists would make common cause when expedient, but were also careful to draw a clear distinction when it was otherwise deemed necessary. Certainly in their political determination the modernising intelligentsia were much more hard line about the possible ways in which culture might be mobilised in the service of national renewal. As such, they were the 'shock troops of the cultural revival',<sup>2</sup> absolutely dedicated to their objectives, and determined to create new structures for Irish national life in the wake of Charles Stewart Parnell's fall.

Given the ambition of this aspiration it is perhaps unsurprising that what they found in the pre-existing political and social organisation of the Irish community in London was to appal them. By the late 1880s, the Home Rule movement in London was both lacking in dynamism and a cause that was gradually losing its galvanising effect on the political life of the Irish community. Alongside this, the influence of the Catholic Church in the capital was fitful at best, and for the most part the Irish poor remained locked in squalid and desperately overcrowded slums, with little opportunity for education or economic advancement. They also remained the victims of much overt anti-Irish prejudice. That said, if this new generation of revivalists found Irish London to be morally and politically

paralysed, it can be argued that the lack of appeal was mutual. R.F. Foster has observed that in general it is 'striking that the new, Anglophobic, culturally separatist organisations did not, unlike the old Home Rule structures, appeal to the Irish in Britain'.<sup>3</sup> Certainly a key effect of the revival was that it forced people to decide which side they were on, making distinct affiliations which previously had been comfortably (or sometimes less comfortably) imprecise. The political polarisation of the early twentieth-century engendered a new stringency about classification which would dismiss many who would previously have considered themselves securely Irish as mere 'West Britons',<sup>4</sup> a term of abuse that assumed a particular waspishness among the circles of elite Irish London.

In London, then, the revival is not merely a historical label used to demarcate a series of attitudes towards culture and politics that became prevalent around 1890, but rather a phenomenon that declared itself with a self-conscious insistence, transforming – and often rendering anachronistic – previous ideological conceptions of what Irishness was and how it might be utilised. Indeed, even as early as 1894, the London-based Irish journalist William Patrick Ryan, in his self-published *The Irish Literary Revival: Its History, Pioneers and Possibilities* was historicising the movement, emphasising those elements of it that were distinctive to London, and anticipating its revolutionary potential. 'Its aim is to teach Ireland to see herself, to be herself, to set her in her true place, realising her nature and her mission. It is an effort to bring knowledge, books, brave hopes, Celtic idealism as her ministering spirits', the book's conclusion proclaimed, with a certain breathless intensity.<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps because of such singularity of purpose that much of the scholarly interest in Irish London has been focused on this period. Certainly, the dynamism of the revival, its intense attachment to an ideal, and its complex networks of influence and coterie, makes it a compelling subject for historical inquiry. Moreover, the professionalisation that the movement brought to the matter of Irish identity left a record of achievement that remains clearly visible. The quotidian work of Irish organisations in London at this time required the organisation and recording of membership lists, the keeping of accurate minutes, accounts and publication subscriptions, and this was second nature for the new generation of Irish revivalists who were often civil servants, teachers or journalists by day. Even allowing for the fact that this sudden upsurge of activity was concentrated around a comparatively tiny number of people – effectively the emergence of a number of elite groupings within a more diffuse constellation of interests and attitudes – it is still the case that in this

period much of our sense of Irish London goes from a period of hazy indefinability to sudden sharp relief.

London's revival, then, shone brightly, but the light that it spread has tended to cast in shadow those experiments in producing and performing Irish identity that were taking place in the British capital prior to its onset. It is, of course, in the nature of self-declared movements to traduce that which has preceded them, and yet, such activities, while lacking something of the revival's cohesiveness and unity of purpose, are in themselves of historical and cultural significance. For this reason it is the aim of this essay to deepen a perception of nineteenth-century Irish London by concentrating on the cultural production of the London Irish in the 1870s and 1880s, recognising the extent to which this activity prefigured the revival, but also the ways in which it was *sui generis*. In important and sometimes curious ways this is not just about identifying a narrative able to chart the rise of Irish nationalism as an identifying marker – although that is a major element – but is also the story of how previously inchoate communities, finding themselves with elements of a shared identity, began to recognise a larger allegiance through the production of culture. In this the idea of an 'Irish London' was created as a meaningful entity for social change, allegiance, and ethnic identification. Although the startling achievements of the revival has tended to reveal some of the shortfalls of this activity, for instance exposing its blindness to the stratifications of class, its failure to properly account for the unique and complex positioning of the diaspora condition, and its tendency to fall back on a sentimental and erroneous view of conditions in Ireland itself, it also demonstrates an insistence on the necessity of endurance in the face of hardship that refuses the condescension of posterity.

As is well known, in the years after the Famine the number of Irish people in London grew very dramatically to over 100,000, or something like 5% of the overall population. As Lynn Hollen Lees identifies in her foundational study *Exiles of Erin: Irish Migrants in Victorian London*, these immigrants fell into three broad categories: the middle class, artisans, and rural workers.<sup>6</sup> Of these, the latter category was by far the largest and the group that had the most difficulty in adapting its skill base to the demands of an urban economy. It was these Irish that populated London's many urban slums in shockingly overcrowded conditions. Indeed, as Sheridan Gilley and Roger Swift observed when discussing their collection of essays *The Irish in the Victorian City*,<sup>7</sup> for the poorest of the Irish immigrants conditions could hardly have been worse:

Our collective view was that the great mass of the Famine influx especially was poor; that it was discouraged and was in a large majority without any of the skills which the British economy was willing to reward; that it was without the contact with urban employers possessed by the English poor; and that many of the immigrants had left a rich Gaelic language and culture for a setting in which this past inheritance had no meaning and no encouragement to survive. Large numbers – already weakened by disease, exposure and hunger – died in Britain of starvation and cholera, while the collapse of Young Ireland and the eclipse of Chartism, in which some of the immigrants had taken part, had left them without a political voice. Disliked for their religion, their politics and their race, they were in Britain as exiles in Babylon; and it must have seemed highly problematic how far this separate social identity would survive.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these dire circumstances, there were always traces of an Irish collective visibility, but in many ways these moments only revealed just how disparate the Irish population in London actually was. During the 1840s and 1850s, for instance, the immigrant Irish of the St Giles Rookery, the labyrinthine and much-feared heart of Irish population in London, would make one of its rare ventures out of its stronghold to parade to Hyde Park Corner on St Patrick's Day. This was a determined statement of presence for a community that was usually deemed to be in the lowest strata of London society, but there is nothing in this activity that suggests any larger alliances or a wider perception of Irish commonality.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1870s, as the traumatic crisis conditions of the Famine receded, Irish emigration to Britain declined, and those that had remained from the earlier wave were, as Hutchinson and O'Day have observed, 'older and increasingly tending towards assimilation'.<sup>10</sup> As a result of its sudden and often brutal deracination, much of what constitutes the cultural practice of this group is now lost. Reginald Hall has noted in his research on Irish musicianship in London that while there was 'limited activity in singing, instrumental music-making and dancing' and 'indications of some activity in households, kinship and friendship networks and the community', ultimately 'the extent and detail of the surviving rural practices if this immigrant population may [. . .] never be known'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, beyond the obvious horrors of St Giles and Seven Dials, it is not even possible to locate Irish London as an entity in this period with any great confidence as the various Irish communities spread across the city were often from particular parts of Ireland and did not recognise any larger social constellation. Lacking consistent political mobilisation and representation,

or even a newspaper to articulate its case or press its claims, the London Irish often evade the historical gaze.

If evidence of the activities of the Irish population in London at this time is fitful, Irish politics, by comparison, could hardly have been more dominating. From the emergence of the Home Rule movement in the 1870s, through the Land War of the 1880s, and the rise of the cult of Parnellism, the London Irish were continually buffeted by events taking place elsewhere and were rarely actors in their own right. For instance, although Parnellism had its own specific powers of attraction for the Irish in London, and while Parnell himself placed importance on meeting and addressing London Irish political groups, the extent of the movement's penetration into the networks of the London Irish society was uneven at best. Indeed, of all Irish political activity at this time, perhaps the most notable for the London Irish was the Fenian bombing campaign of 1881-1885, terrorist activity which included the detonation of bombs on the London Underground system, at the Tower of London, and Parliament. This was of particular significance because, as Niall Whelehan has argued, this violence was intended to be of a scale 'sizeable enough to ignite a nativist backlash against the Irish population in Britain'<sup>12</sup> with the aim of provoking a greater revolutionary conflict. This chain of events never occurred although it was the London Irish who would endure the repercussions of the bombings through sporadic, if usually small-scale, outbreaks of retributive aggression. This was predicted by one of the bombers, William Lomasney who, as the dynamite war was in preparation, 'was deeply concerned about the terrible revenge which would be exacted upon the Irish living in England if such a campaign took place'.<sup>13</sup> If not quite on the scale that Lomasney feared, the alarm that the bombings caused certainly hardened attitudes against the Irish in London and encouraged the spread of anti-Irish sentiments in the popular media. Typical of these was an article in the London periodical, *Funny Folks*, 'The Irish Terror in London' from 1883, which prophesied the escalation of the terror campaign to include 'the blowing up of the Nelson column', an attempt 'to shoot Mr. Gladstone with an airgun, during his walk across St James's Park', 'the burning of Madame Tussaud's, and the houghing of the Temple Bar Griffin'. As a result, the article continued, newspapers 'preached a crusade against the Celtic inhabitants of London, and fearful scenes were enacted in the Irish quarters about Drury-lane and the Seven Dials. The tocsin pealed from the churches of St. Mary-le-Strand and St. Giles, and the hands of the metropolis were red with Hibernian gore'.<sup>14</sup> The humour of this is barbed, and it is left ambiguous as to whether *Funny Folks* would have objected to such genocide or not.

In terms of the history of terrorism the dynamite campaign is of considerable interest and yet, despite its spectacular nature, it is notable how little it appeared to influence the political orientation of the Irish community in London itself. That said, the attacks established an atmosphere of living that would become the norm for the community for much of the next century; the condition of a life lived within the poles of assimilation and prejudice, of being part of the city while also finding oneself held apart from it. The London Irish community became the object of both fetishisation and suspicion, and it was this bifurcated existence that creates the particular, and easily distinguishable, attitude that many Irish have held towards London since. For this community, London is both a kind of home, a place of distinctive Irish settlement, culture and economy, and, at the same time, a place of strangeness, hostility, and prejudice.

Although, as I have noted, Irish migrants to London were predominantly proletarian, unskilled, and focused on a very narrow range of activities, as Hutchinson notes, from 1871 'an increasing proportion of migrants oriented to civil service and teaching positions in England (particularly London) because of the growth of secondary education and professional training in Ireland, combined with limited employment opportunities at home'.<sup>15</sup> John Denvir, writing in 1892, argues that the major catalyst for this was the introduction of the competitive examination system for the Civil Service which led to an influx of Irish appointments, and 'a greater proportion of them, perhaps, than of the other nationalities of the empire'.<sup>16</sup> 'As a rule, there are no truer Irishmen, and, being men of education, they are often able to render valuable assistance to the cause' he elaborates. However, despite their increased numbers, the Irish middle class in London remain slightly elusive in accounts of the period. This may be because, as Foster puts it, for many writers and historians they were 'statistically invisible and ideologically unattractive',<sup>17</sup> in that they were more prone to assimilation, and further removed from the resources of a Gaelic culture still visible in the London Irish working class. However, as Foster also notes elsewhere, Victorian London 'was the magnet for generations of middle-class Irish *arrivistes* determined to make their mark'.<sup>18</sup> As a result Irish middle class and elite activity in London was readily identifiable, even if this was often only as an object of slight ridicule. In 1881 *Funny Folks* reported that London was 'full of Irish refugees, timid women, who have fled before the Land Leaguers, or have been despatched by husbands and fathers across the water to a place of safety'. As a result, the article continued, 'this influx of interesting Hibernian femininity will naturally exercise an influence on the fashions of the coming season', leading to such phenomenon as 'a run upon bog-oak



ornaments', 'worn by all persons of fenny pretensions to *chic*'.<sup>19</sup> Despite such satire, the Irish middle class in London do become more willing to self-represent in this period and were of crucial importance in the creation of the large-scale cultural projects that occur in the 1870s and 80s. Certainly it is impossible to imagine such a significant phenomenon as the foundation of the Southwark Irish Literary Club in 1883 occurring without the presence of civil service trained mobilisers such as Frank Fahy and John T. Kelly.

Perhaps the most important account of Irish life in London from the beginning of the period this essay is concerned with is Hugh Heinrich's *A Survey of the Irish in England* from 1872. A collection of articles originally written for the *Nation* newspaper, Heinrich's work is neglected when compared to other nineteenth-century accounts of Irish life in London, and even Alan O'Day, the book's most recent editor, suggests it is a source that should only be used advisedly. Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings it is of value in that, as O'Day notes, it 'falls into a vital time gap between the flood of Famine era refugees and the second wave of Irish emigration consequent on the agrarian depression of the later Victorian age'.<sup>20</sup> As a result it records something of what were a developing set of key ideologies and affiliations among the emigrant Irish at this time. Heinrich, Irish-born but resident in England, was an enthusiastic nationalist, and had been active in the Amnesty campaign for Fenian prisoners in the 1860s before becoming an energetic exponent of Home Rule. In 1871 he founded the *Irish Vindicator*, the first newspaper for Irish migrants in London, although this was not a success and closed after only four months.<sup>21</sup> His survey of the Irish in England, written for A.M. Sullivan, the sympathetic editor of the *Nation*, was his next project and would prove to be his major contribution to the cause of Irish Home Rule. Although in many ways a sentimental account beholden to many of the most pernicious stereotypes about the Irish at this time, his central diagnosis of the maladies affecting the Irish in London was stark. As he observed:

The prodigality of the landlord class and the poverty of the poor East-end outcasts are but evidences of cause and effect – the one of which must be arrested before the other can be checked. Till an Irish Parliament either holds out sufficient inducements to the Irish landlords to reside at home, or imposes a penalty on absenteeism, Irish wealth will be squandered in England.<sup>22</sup>

As this indicates, for Heinrich the emigrant Irish in London were but symptoms of an economic and political sickness evident in Ireland itself. The landlord class flaunted itself in London society, revealing nothing

more substantial than its own parasitism, while the Irish East End was sucked ever further into the hopeless poverty that increasingly defined its condition. 'There are thousands – tens of thousands of the Irish people in London alone who are lost – lost irretrievably. [. . .] Our people are crushed, physically debased, and morally ruined by the dreaded circumstances almost inseparable from their lot', he lamented.<sup>23</sup> In this Heinrick did not deem the Irish themselves to be at fault but rather their association with the English: 'Everything good which the Irish in England have preserved is their own; their vices in nine cases out of ten are acquired'<sup>24</sup> he insists repeatedly. As this indicates, Heinrick's study argues strongly against assimilation and for the preservation of a distinctly Irish set of cultural attitudes in a manner which would prefigure some of the de-anglicising rhetoric of the revival twenty years later.

Despite this, Heinrick's account balances his pessimistic analysis of the dangers that the London Irish face with constant reminders of the community's implicit cultural vibrancy, proclaiming 'there is in London, as in nearly all the large towns in England, an immense force of Irish life, energy, and intelligence, which, if organised and united, would constitute a most valuable aid in accomplishing the national regeneration of their native land'.<sup>25</sup> Key to this potential was the city's Irish middle class and he argues strongly for the political benefits that would accrue were it able to establish common purpose with 'the great army of Irish industry which swarms in the marts and docks, and whose voice is potent in the democratic council or popular assembly'.<sup>26</sup> With such sentiments the *Survey* was, to a great extent, a propaganda piece for the Home Rule campaign, and much of his consideration of London discusses the prospects for the city's then rapidly growing Home Rule Association.

While the overall value of *A Survey of the Irish in England* as a record of a community is debatable, elements of it are revealing. Most obviously, its very existence indicates that, while it is not in a good condition, there is clearly an Irish community that Heinrick can refer to; in other words, an idea of Irish London signifies within the terms of social organisation. Moreover, the survey provides useful information about the extent to which the Irish were deeply integrated into all sections of skilled and professional activity. Although at this stage it was scarcely mobilised in any meaningful way, the political potential of this grouping was palpable, and this awareness was a key factor in the various attempts to characterise and perform Irish identity in the subsequent two decades. Despite his non-assimilist instincts, it is also worth noting Heinrick's continual concern with the politics of representation and how the Irish community appears

and appeals to the rest of British society; an emphasis that is indicative of typically pre-revivalist ideologies of national formation.

There were other indications of the change in the manner in which the London Irish chose to self-represent during this period. By 1872 some of the wilder elements of the celebration of St Patrick's Day in the city were coming under greater regulation, and were replaced by more formal displays of organised respectability. This was driven by the Catholic Church, and took the form of a pledge, the 'Truce of God', which required abstinence over the period of St Patrick's Day 'so as not to have the anniversary of Ireland's patron disgraced by scenes of riot and debauch'.<sup>27</sup> St Patrick's Day was also the traditional date for Irish political demonstrations in the capital, a custom so firmly entrenched that when one year passed without one (in 1878) it attracted comment.<sup>28</sup> These rallies gradually declined in attendance after the 1870s and by 1882 had been abandoned entirely.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, interest in the commemoration of the day continued to grow although its emphasis moved from politics to leisure; by the early 1880s the calendar of Irish-themed events listed in the *Daily News* was remarkably extensive and encompassed nearly all areas of the city. The keynote event amidst these celebrations was an annual concert at the Royal Albert Hall, which usually consisted of military bands playing popular Irish music. Resolutely unionist in tone, this occasion represented the symbolic encapsulation of state-sanctioned engagement with Irish culture in this period; it was the celebration of a national if not a nationalist day.

There were, however, other forms of Irish identity which wished to make themselves heard. The major example of Irish mobilisation at this time, and a significant landmark in the history of Irish London, was the series of monster meetings in support of the Amnesty campaign for Fenian prisoners held in Hyde Park. The largest of these was held on 3 November 1872 where, according to the *Morning Post*, there 'could not have been less than 20,000 persons assembled', with 'Piccadilly and Oxford Street [. . .] thronged with people of all classes and both sexes hastening to the park'.<sup>30</sup> The gathering was so large, the article speculated, for four reasons: 'the strong appeal made to the working classes by the Fenian Amnesty Committee', the Home Rule association mobilising the London Irish community as a whole, the fine weather, and (tellingly) 'the expectation of a scene consequent upon the anticipated interference with the meeting by the police'. Processions from different parts of London organised to march on the park. These originated from areas including Paddington and Hammersmith, with the largest, representing the East End, from Clerkenwell Green. This parade 'was headed by a brass band, and

accompanied by a number of flags, conspicuous amongst them being a green silk one with the inscription "God save Ireland," and carried by a young Irish woman dressed in green silk'. Also prominent was a large banner with the inscription 'Disobedience to tyrants is a duty to God'. The composition of the meeting was clearly heterogeneous, with the report noting a large number of women, English working men, and, what it termed, 'higher classes' represented. The rally passed a series of resolutions including one which noted that the:

Treatment of Fenian prisoners, considered in conjunction with the Algerine-like rule of the Government in Ireland, and the treatment of so-called rebels in Jamaica and India, combine to exhibit the true spirit of British policy, and contrasts most strikingly and unfavourable with that of the United States of America after the suppression of a protracted and sanguinary civil war.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the anticipation of police violence the meeting was conducted in good order, and at its conclusion the crowd dispersed from the park singing 'God save Ireland'.

There were, then, a number of significant aspects to this event: the participation of a nascent Irish labour movement including a noteworthy number of women, the involvement of sympathetic non-Irish working class marchers, a militancy that was at least prepared to countenance resistance to oppressive policing, and, perhaps most significantly, a high degree of organisation. This mobilisation of the Irish worker was of a wider importance for the politics of the city as a whole. Indeed Denvir's study of the Irish in Britain observed that the 'Irish may be said also to be the backbone of other popular movements in London', noting that:

Not only do you find them in the ranks of the purely Catholic and Irish societies, with their bands, banners, and patriotic emblems, but in connection with other political and temperance organisations – if one may judge from the handsome banners, on which you often see depicted such subjects as 'Sarsfield,' 'The Irish Parliament House,' and 'O'Connell', with quotations from Tom Moore and harps and shamrocks galore.<sup>32</sup>

Even accounting for the propagandist element of Denvir's book, certainly the organisation of Irish labour in this period which he identifies was an important factor in the history of popular protest in London.

The Irish Festival organised at Alexandra Palace in north London in March 1876 was, if anything, an even more determined statement of

presence. Held on the Saturday after St. Patrick's Day, the event brought together many diverse Irish groups from across the capital and the south of England including Home Rule associations, Irish language movements, and temperance societies. According to the *Daily News*, its significance lay in the fact that it 'afforded an opportunity of bringing for the first time the Irish organisations of London conspicuously to the fore'.<sup>33</sup> Despite some organisational problems which entailed that those who had 'accepted literally the request to "come early"' found themselves drifting about the Alexandra Park and Palace in a helplessly unemployed condition',<sup>34</sup> eventually the band of the St Anne's Total Abstinence Society struck up and the celebrations began. The numbers in attendance were large – estimated at 20,000 by the *Daily News* and 25,000 by the *Freeman's Journal* – and the tone was good humoured. After all, as the *Freeman's* observed (somewhat ridiculously), 'no one knows better how to enjoy a day's outing than an Irishman, full of frolic, high spirits, and good humour, except it be the rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed, daughters of Erin'.

The programme for the day included 'a performance of Irish music on the grand organ, followed by more Irish music from the band of the 1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex Engineers, and, the most Irish of all, there was an entertaining contest between half a dozen national pipers'.<sup>35</sup> Later in the day there was a production of *The Colleen Bawn*, followed by further recitals, while outside a hurling match was 'played with the greatest zest and good humour',<sup>36</sup> and a number of Irish jig dancing contests were held. The celebrations culminated in the early evening when a grand march past of the various organisations took place on the Palace's East Terrace with a spectacular host of banners and around twenty bands. Following this parade most of the crowd dispersed although the festival atmosphere stayed with them; even those who later found themselves stranded at King's Cross station waiting for connections were entertained by an impromptu concert of Irish musicians with 'the more youthful and energetic of the company dancing a jig on the platform'.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile back at Alexandra Palace the day concluded with a banquet at which the chairman of the event, Mitchell Henry, the Home Rule MP and industrialist, proposed a toast to the Queen and then spoke passionately, and at some length, on the subject of the endurances of Irish history. 'Ireland has erected her alters to religion and patriotism, and has refused to bow the knee to the grim and blind idols of the new materialistic faith', he thundered. As his speech illustrated, while the tone of the event was for the most part celebratory, it was also politically resolute. Although short on detail, his call for the Irish to 'throw off the chains of intellectual, moral, and physical debasement'<sup>38</sup> was

pitched at a level of political radicalism that was unusual for such events at this time.

The ambition of the Festival, then, was impressive, and as an early instance of the kind of Irish event that would become increasingly visible in London through the rest of the century its importance is clear. For Hall, the event was notable because it ‘brought together middle-class and working-class interests’, but this confluence should be understood more as a loose coalition of Irish orientated groups seeking to assert a presence rather than as an overt political strategy. Alongside this, the temptation to see the Festival as a proto-revivalist happening should be resisted, if only because of the manner in which the themes of the event seem in contradiction with what might be understood as the major tenants of revivalism. As Henry’s speech vividly illustrated with its insistence on Ireland’s ‘religious fervour and undying patriotism’, the dominant force for Irish unity and subsequent action remained an ideal of Christian faith, however variously that faith was conceived, and in few of the speeches that followed the banquet was there any sense in which Irish identity might be otherwise conceived or represented. Moreover, while the great possibilities of Home Rule were touched upon a number of times, the dominant theme of the banquet was instead the obduracy of national survival, the necessity of resisting assimilation, and the ultimate endurance of Irish identity when cast adrift from Ireland itself. In his banquet speech Michael Francis Ward, member of the Home Rule League and MP for Galway Borough, developed the implications of this in striking ways:

If any other nation sends out a colony to another country it is rapidly merged into the life of the other country and is lost but an Irish colony is never lost (applause). They had planted an Irish colony long ago in France when they were driven out of Ireland by overwhelming power – that Irish colony to a certain extent still exists to-day, and, its head is the ruler of France (cheers). In late times they had sent Irishmen all over the world when they were driven forth by England, driven forth to colonise, sometimes at the point of a bayonet, frequently at the point of a crowbar, and as a result he asked was not there now an Irish nation in America and in Australia bigger than in Ireland? (cheers) That Irish nation had been driven forth dishonestly by the strong right arm, but driven forth as it were providentially, for in every large colony of England it stands up against England’s crushing power (hear, hear). Ireland had to congratulate herself on the fact that wherever she sent her sons they never ceased to be Irishmen, and never ceased resisting oppression (hear, hear, and applause).<sup>39</sup>

As this indicates, the Irish Festival looked forward to the possibilities of an Irish future both in Ireland and the diaspora, but in so doing, it returned repeatedly to the disaster narrative of nineteenth-century Irish experience. To put this differently, the threat of national cultural annihilation which had arisen repeatedly over the previous century remained vivid.

It was in these ways that Irish London began to recognise itself and as a collective identification it would become increasingly visible in London during the course of the remainder of the century. This was in part due to the progress of the Home Rule cause, but it is also important to recognise the manner in which Irishness and Irish personal identity was increasingly mobilised as a way of structuring urban leisure activity. In this the ways in which Irish identity positions would be performed, reiterated, and remade, could be surprisingly various. From the growth of Irish language classes among the burgeoning and aspirational clerical class, to the phenomenon of the Irish cockney comedian, from the itinerant Irish musician playing jigs for step dancers on Hampstead Heath, to middle class parlour concerts of Irish harp music, Irishness in London in the 1880s was highly visible and usually fashionable.

The economic element of this positioning was also increasingly important. Irish industries and crafts were penetrating London markets and subsequently the markets of the empire, and these commodities were often entirely reliant on an Irish identification for their appeal. The highpoint of this activity was the Irish Exhibition held at Olympia in West London from June to October 1888. This extensive and ambitious<sup>40</sup> event interpreted its brief broadly and represented to the public for an entrance fee of a shilling displays of Irish manufacturing and arts, performances of Irish music, military manoeuvres, galleries of visual arts, fabrics, and ceramics, and exhibitions detailing Irish history, nature, and culture. Although avowedly 'non-political' in its aims, the event could hardly avoid enmeshing itself in the intensity of Irish politics at this time. As Brendan Rooney points out, 'one might view the Irish exhibition as a rather extravagant public relations exercise, designed to appease the English public and amend their image of Ireland and the Irish in general'.<sup>41</sup>

The scale of the event was not perhaps remarkable when compared to other trade exhibitions in London at a time of confident imperial expansion, but was certainly significant in the context of Ireland and Irish manufacturing. In the exhibition hall there were nine avenues of displays, while a subway led from the hall to a six-acre outdoor site containing reconstructions of Irish scenes at their most compelling. The centrepiece of the exhibition was undoubtedly the 'Donegal Industrial Village', a mock-up of a typical rural Irish settlement designed by Alice Hart, the founder of



the Donegal Industrial Fund. A heavily idealised version of a typical Donegal settlement, the village consisted of twelve thatched cottages (which burned Irish peat), a large cross imported from Ireland at its centre, a holy well, and a ruined Irish tower. The cottages were populated by actual Donegal peasants, who were employed in demonstrations of their native crafts such as weaving and embroidery.<sup>42</sup> Other spectacular exhibits included a reconstruction of Blarney Castle, a Celtic round tower, and even a fully functioning dairy complete with sixty cows and attendant milkmaids in costume at which there was daily production of butter and cheese.<sup>43</sup> Alongside these, the *Belfast News-Letter* reported that ‘fountains, a switchback railway [an early form of roller coaster], and tobogganing slide have been added to gratify and amuse visitors to this unique exposition of Irish industries’.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the permanent displays, the exhibition also hosted a number of individual events most notably the ‘Fancy Fair’ in July at which famous women whose ‘potent influence may be said to regulate fashion and govern “Society”’,<sup>45</sup> dressed in Irish fabrics and jewellery, replaced the Irish peasants on the craft stalls in the area known as the ‘Old Irish Market Place’ (an area modelled on a market in Belfast). Notable personalities taking part included Lady Aberdeen, Countess Tolstoy, Constance Wilde, and Lady Gladstone,<sup>46</sup> and the atmosphere on the first day of the Fair was crowded and feverish with excitement. As the *Belfast News-Letter* reported ‘the rush of people was enormous and the limited space quickly became uncomfortably warm’.<sup>47</sup> The Fancy Fair energised an exhibition which had previously appeared worthy but slightly dull, lacking ‘the indispensable touch of the showman’s hand’ as the *Daily News* put it.<sup>48</sup> If nothing else, it indicated not only how fashionable Ireland was at this time, but also something of the sympathy felt for Ireland’s cause among London elites. The *Morning Post*’s daily listings of all the women taking part on each day of the fair were certainly very extensive,<sup>49</sup> corroborating the *Belfast News-Letter*’s estimate that ‘about 400 ladies of rank have expressed their willingness to take part’.<sup>50</sup> If such figures are correct then the Fancy Fair can be judged as something close to a phenomenon of its kind.

If such patronage indicated enthusiasm and sympathy for the cause of Irish economic renewal after the disasters of the previous decades, the event would resonate with the substance of Irish politics in other more contentious ways. As Janice Helland observes ‘the exhibition was meant to be strategic and compensatory as Home Rule debates proliferated; in retrospect, it represents a microcosm of tensions on the eve of Parnell’s fall from grace’.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Parnell himself was positively inclined towards the event, attending the opening of the exhibition and contributing a range of



marble stones from his quarry at Avondale to the display hall. But the complex mixture of accommodation, dialogue, and stern refusal, which typified much of pro-Home Rule strategy at this time, was also evident at the exhibition. Alongside the educative and illustrative element of the exhibition – its liberal commitment to enabling a better understanding of Ireland’s situation – there were also clear indications of where the limits of that appeal might lie. Most tellingly a visiting group of musicians, the Barrack Street Band from Cork, refused to play ‘God Save the Queen’ after the conclusion of their performance, choosing instead to leave the stage with their instruments. The *Belfast News-Letter* reported that ‘this behaviour was of so unexpected and startling a nature that the public appeared unable to realise the state of affairs until a Nationalist Member of Parliament began to applaud the retreat’.<sup>52</sup> A military band was summoned from its recital elsewhere in the grounds to perform the necessary anthem and the organisers banned the band from performing again at the exhibition. In explanation, the musicians themselves claimed that ‘they dared not go back to Ireland if they had played “God Save the Queen”’.

Perhaps the key significance of the Irish exhibition was the manner in which it refracted Ireland in crazed and distorted ways, creating an image of the homeland that seemed to mirror the distortions and selective ellipses of the emigrant consciousness. This was a “Virtual” Ireland,<sup>53</sup> as Foster has described it, and as such was only the most extravagant example of a phenomenon that could be identified in different forms and media across London during this period. When the revival declared itself in the 1890s, these visions would soon appear hopelessly anachronistic and sentimental. As a more deliberately professionalised movement reflective of specific class interests, its main activists were concerned with promulgating a quite different conception of Irish identity disseminated via a new set of practices. If Irishness in London in the 1870s and 1880s was typically recognised through performance, exhibition, and parade, it is noticeable how the revival instead privileged individual contemplative acts such as creative work and (most obviously) reading. Indeed reading groups such as that generated by Eleanor Hull’s and Lionel Johnson’s *The Irish Home Reading Magazine*,<sup>54</sup> published under the auspices of the Irish Literary Society, were a key way in which networks of common cause were established across London, and thus helped in the creation of a self-conscious elite. Similarly indicative is the sternly censorious tone of *Inisfáil*, the Gaelic League’s London journal, which continually praised the virtues of punctuality, self-discipline, and combination, in contrast to what it saw as ‘English insult, caricature, and drivel’,<sup>55</sup> and the failings of its own more ‘apathetic members’.<sup>56</sup> Certainly the stakes were high. The first

issue of *Inisfáil*, appearing somewhat belatedly eight years after the Branch had been founded, described the London Gaelic League in its 'intellectual order' as 'suggestive, at its best, of the beginnings of a national university', with its goal the creation of 'an awakened, trained, alert, enlightened people, with a clear consciousness of its strength'.<sup>57</sup>

This shift, heralded by the revival's new priorities, did not mean that public, organised displays of Irishness were no longer apparent in this period, but rather it indicates that such performative moments were now used to reinforce a sense of individual Irish identity which was primarily imagined through the private consumption of texts and the acquisition of key knowledge. The scale of this could be impressive. As the journalist Charlotte O'Connor-Eccles observed with some wonder in 1902, 'the visitor to the Athenaeum Hall, Tottenham Court Road, will find on any Monday evening some two hundred young men and women assembled to study Gaelic'.<sup>58</sup> It was in such ways that the revival made its appeal to Irish London; it could provide a coherent political rationale, structured leisure time, education and self-improvement, and to some degree a support network that provided a form of social security. And yet much of it was also chimerical. The revival's stern warnings about the dangers of assimilation, voiced most insistently through the pages of *Inisfáil*, could not prevent the reality of the fact that the shifting, conditional, nature of ethnic identification in emigrant consciousness allowed for integration with many host practices, even while it protected the primacy of other cherished native habits and observances. Indeed, although the revival offered itself as a design for life, coherent and self-contained, we might argue with the benefit of history that its real purpose was to create, through a series of insistent rhetorical strategies, the idea of the Irish subject as an agent of political change. And in the years leading up to 1920 it is in this way more than any other that the movement would prove seismic.

## Notes and References

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- 40 It would probably be more correct to note that the exhibition was over-ambitious. The delays in construction were such that building work was still in process long after the exhibition opened, while the event as a whole made a substantial loss – debts that were passed on to the members of the organising committee.
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- 43 It is of interest that Francis Fahy's memoirs record his experiences of the Olympia exhibition and note that: 'The special feature of which for us was an Irish produce Section, and of that produce, most Irish and most attractive, a group of some dozen dairymaids from Kerry, whose dark hair, blue eyes and dazzling complexions had become the talk of London. Good Heavens, the quantities of milk and butter and "barmbrack" we consumed at their stall, and the difficulty it was to drag us away from it'. Francis Fahy, 'Ireland in London – Reminiscences', from *The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001*, ed. Liam Harte (London: Palgrave, 2009) 100.
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