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A Minority of a Minority of a Minority: the Irish in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to illustrate that whilst the Irish presence in South Africa was never great in influence, it was disproportionate to its numbers. The reasons for that are first, because the Irish clustered in a few specific occupations, thereby creating an impression of numbers, and second, because many of the better-off Irish were prominent in the professions and in the colonial service.

A major challenge facing the historian of the Irish diaspora in the whole of the southern-African subcontinent is the scarcity of sources. There are few shipping lists and fewer collections of emigrant letters. This is a consequence partly of climate, partly of the unsettled nature of the region, and partly because of the nature of Irish settlement.

Lesi sabluko sizama ukukhombisa ukuthi nakuba ubukhona bama-Ayirishi eNingizimu Afrika bungabanga namthelela otheni ekuguquleni izwe, babungalingani ngokobuningi babo. Izizathu zalokho ukuthi, okokuqala ama-Ayirishi ayesabalele ezindaweni ezikhethekile, ngaleyo ndlela eqhakambisa ubungako bawo, okwesibili ngenxa yokuthi iningi lama-Ayirishi ayesemgangathweni ayevelele emsebenzini oqeqeshelwe kanye nomsebenzi kahulumeni obusayo. Inselelo enkulu ebhekene noSomlando abafuduka e-Ireland ezweni lonkana lase-Afrika eseningizimu ukungabikho kwezidingonqangi. Uhlu lwamagama abantu abafuduka e-Ireland luncane futhi nezincwadi eziqagula abafuduki aziziningi. Lokhu kudalwa nganhlanye yisimo sezulu, nokungaxili kwabantu endaweni futhi nangesimo sokwakha kwesizwe sama-Ayirishi.

There has been a continuous Irish community in South Africa for over 220 years, since before the United States won its independence or the first fleet sailed for Australia. Yet, the existence of this small but influential population has, until this generation, been largely airbrushed out of Irish historiography. A recent edition of the popular journal “History Ireland” devoted to the Irish in Africa contained no article relating to the Irish in South Africa. This is extraordinary given the fact that South Africa is the only

part of the continent where the Irish had and have been a notable presence. That there have been Irish people walking the streets of Cape Town since at least the 1780s has been forgotten in Ireland. This is in part due to the fact that the advent of Afrikaner-dominated governments resulted in Irish emigration to South Africa being reduced to a trickle in the post 1910 colonial era. But it is also a product of the interesting reversal of allegiance especially amongst the Catholic population in Ireland. In the 1890s, nationalist Ireland was fervently pro-Afrikaner¹. In the 1990s, they were fervently anti-Afrikaner. Simply put, in the years of the apartheid regime, the Irish at home did not want to know that there was an Irish heritage in South Africa².

This chapter looks at this “forgotten” Irish community. It surveys what statistical information there is and looks at the jobs which attracted the Irish to Africa. It looks at the role of the Irish in the missionary field and their very different role in politics and public life.

NUMBERS

The tables below give some indication of the small number of first-generation Irish who lived in South Africa³. Professor D.H. Akenson has estimated a multiplier of x3.375 to calculate the ratio between the first-generation Irish and “the entire ethnic cohort”. Even when that is taken into consideration, the number is tiny, say, 60,000 in 1904. And yet, it is remarkable just how much impact this handful of souls had on South Africa.

Date	Cape	Natal	Total
1875	3,759	n/a	n/a
1891	4,184	2,229	6,413

Table 1.
Irish-born population at the Cape and Natal, 1875 and 1891.

Date	Born in Northern Ireland	Born in Irish Free State/ Republic of Ireland	TOTAL
1904	-	-	17,899
1911	-	-	14,572
1918	-	-	11,822
1921	-	-	12,289
1926	n/a	n/a	12,336
1936	482	10 140	10,622
1946	1,197	7,706	8,903
1951	1,366	8,254	9,620
1985	4,040	7,219	11,259
1991	n/a	4,265	n/a

Table 2.
Irish-born population in South Africa, 1904 to 1991.

These numbers are small, but it must be remembered that total South African immigration figures in the 19th century were not massive and by 1911, the Irish were, in fact, the fifth-largest immigrant population in White South Africa, behind England, Scotland, the Russian empire and Germany. At no time after 1911 did the Irish population in South Africa exceed 1% of the total White population. The distribution of this Irish population is reflected in Table 3. The Cape and the Transvaal predominated, reflecting the regions where employment was available.

Date	Transvaal	Cape	Natal	Orange Free State
1904	30%	48%	12%	10%
1911	45%	36%	12%	7%
1936	42%	36%	19%	3%
1946	41%	36%	21%	2%
1951	41%	36%	21%	2%

Table 3.
Distribution of Irish-born people by settlement region.

The problem was that there was no sustained Irish immigration into South Africa. If 2,000 Irish came in 1903, then 345 came in 1913. This inevitably led either to a static population or to a decline.

Four other characteristics of Irish immigration to South Africa need to be highlighted. The first is that it tended to be predominantly male immigration. Irish women were not so likely to migrate to South Africa, though some did come. This was not the trend with migration to America. The primary result of this was that Irish lads tended to marry or cohabit with local women or merge into other “settler” groupings with the concomitant effect that ethnic identity became less pronounced.

Secondly, Irish immigrants were slightly older than might be expected, being in their mid-to-late twenties. This maturity helped them gain and retain employment.

Thirdly, the proportion of the Protestant Irish to Catholic Irish population was higher in South Africa than in Ireland. Only two Cape African-Irish were listed in *Burke's Irish Landed Gentry* (1895): the celebrated public figure Charles Edward Herbert Orpen and the now long-forgotten magistrate of remote Peddie, Walter Rumbold Piers. There were none listed for Natal. Yet the Anglo-Irish and Ulster Presbyterians were a feature of 19th-century South Africa. The celebrated preacher Rev. William Johnston recalled when he visited Cape Town from Ireland being accosted in the street by a stranger who said, “You know me, Sir? Oh yes, I have often heard you preach in Carrickfergus”. An analysis in particular of the Anglo-Irish contribution is long overdue, as indeed it is for the rest of the English-speaking world.

And, finally, those who came tended to have a skill or were semi-skilled. They were also better educated than many Irish who made their way across the Atlantic. All these characteristics helped give prominence to the Irish far in excess of their actual physical numbers.

OCCUPATIONS AND CAREERS

The Irish in South Africa were, and still are, a minority of a minority of a minority. That is, they were a minority of the English-speaking community, who were a minority of the White population, who were a minority of the total population. This said, the fact that they were concentrated in specific trades and occupations, in addition to their skills and maturity, meant that they appeared to be more prominent than they actually were. The Irish were to be found in significant numbers on the railways, in the police, in the mines and connected with retailing.

A number of Irishmen, mostly from the north of Ireland, made good in business. The most notable were the brothers John and Joseph Orr from Benburb in County Tyrone. John Orr came to South Africa in 1883. He was eventually joined by his brother in 1891. Together they built up a famous retail chain of stores which remained a household name in South Africa right through to the late 1980s. Having opened a shop in Cape Town, John Orr moved to the bustling town of Kimberley and, in October 1886, opened the doors of John Orr & Co. The empire steadily expanded. In 1951, it became a public company, by which time it was employing 2,500 people and conducting some 20,000 transactions a day. John Orr became mayor of Kimberley in 1910 and was again mayor between 1916 and 1919. John Orr died in 1932 and Joseph in 1953⁴.

Then there was R.H. Henderson who, if not quite on the scale of the Orrs, was none the less a prominent retail store owner. Robert Henderson arrived in South Africa in 1884 and opened his first shop in Kimberley in 1887. He went on to open stores in Durban (1895), Boksburg (1902), Johannesburg (1906) and Germiston (1907). Henderson was mayor of Kimberley during the famous siege of 1899-1900. He was described as “a raconteur of a high order, as well as being a genial and hospitable host”⁵.

William Cuthbert (1859-1916) from Dungiven came to South Africa in 1881 and built up a boot-and-shoes retail empire, carefully following a policy of buying the buildings he occupied. As Nicholas Southey has observed, by 1906 Cuthbert had 70 branches operating throughout southern Africa, representing a combined capital investment of over £250,000 and reserve funds of £80,000. A reserved man, Cuthbert was nonetheless president of the South African YMCA for two years. He donated £2,000 for the organ in the Assembly Buildings in Belfast⁶.

In the Transvaal, there were also McCullagh and Bothwell's stores and in Natal, McNamee's furniture chain. All these stores, and especially John Orr's, tended to look favourably on any young Irish person who turned up in the country looking for a job. In that respect the Irish aped the American-Irish in operating a job-cornering concern for their ethnic cousins.

In Kimberley, the superb 1897 colonial mansion owned by John Orr and named “Dunluce”, the name of the famous castle in County Antrim, still stands. It remained in the family until as late as 1975. It is a merchant prince's house and even outshone the man-

sion built in Pretoria by the second-generation (and somewhat sinister) Irishman Solomon Gillingham, the concession holder and friend of President Paul Kruger.

But even before these entrepreneurs became South African household names, there were small Irish commercial enterprises all over the subcontinent. For example, in Jeppe's 1877 *Transvaal Book Almanac*, advertisements are carried for the following Irish businesses:

James Donoghue, builder, Potchefstroom

R.L. Daly, "Transvaal Winkel", Potchefstroom

J.R. McCormack, general-agent en vendu-afslager [discount sales], Lichenburg

B.G. Lennon and Co, chemist and druggists, Port Elizabeth

J.E. Fannin, government land surveyor, Newcastle

Some Irish made their names through their pastimes. Sir Alfred Hennessy (1873-1963), the founder of the South African Automobile Association, was one such person. Another was Alfred Duggan-Cronin, who, as a mine manager between 1919 and 1939, devoted most of his spare time to photographing mine workers at his mine. These included African men from all over South Africa and beyond its boundaries. Today, a gallery of Duggan-Cronin's work, containing some 8,000 photographs, exists in Kimberley⁷.

MISSIONARIES

It is difficult to exaggerate the depth of commitment to the African population which was and is given by Irish missionaries in South Africa. Though never terribly large in numbers – perhaps 2,000 at one period, now reduced to a quarter of that number – Irish missionaries have been actively involved in education, health and general pastoral work in the subcontinent for over 150 years. They have gone to remote parts of the country rarely visited by the urban White elite (at least until wilderness experiences and birding became fashionable) and they have promoted the welfare of their flocks with a devotion which has earned them the gratitude of many.

It would, however, be naive not to mention two negatives from the start. The first is that there have been those who feel that missionaries have undermined traditional African culture, traditional religion and African society in general: "First the mission and then the red soldier". The reality, however, is that the red soldier would have come with or without the missionary. And there can be no doubt that once colonialism was well embedded, the missionaries were a bastion of support, practical advice, encouragement and at times, especially in more recent decades, defence for down-trodden African communities.

The second negative is slightly different, in the sense that the missionaries were themselves at one time the subject of discrimination. Indeed, prior to 1795, Catholicism was banned at the Cape by the Dutch East India Company. Later the *Roomse gevaar* or Roman Catholic peril was considered to be a very real threat to the Afrikaner states of the interior. The penal laws discriminating against Catholics were resolute features of the

old South African Republic. That said, it is interesting to note that this was not always the case when it came to dealing with “Irish papists”. A common dislike of *die Engelse* [the English] mollified sectarian hatred and several Irish priests came and quietly carried out their work unmolested. There was a vibrant and often rather rowdy Irish mining community on the Rand during the 1890s, which was in no way persecuted by the authorities because of its Catholic faith.

The stronghold of Irish missionaries was in the Eastern Cape, where every 19th-century bishop was Irish, in sharp contrast to the Colony of Natal, where the French held sway.

PUBLIC LIFE AND THE PROFESSIONS

The Irish may have been thin on the ground numerically, but the public awareness of an Irish presence, especially in the Cape and in Natal, was greatly enhanced by the remarkable number of Irish in public life and in the professions.

As Table 4 well illustrates, there was no shortage of 19th-century Irish governors in South Africa. It is little wonder that it was said when Fermanagh man Sir Lowry Cole landed at the Cape in 1828, people on the dockside were heard to grumble, “Not another Irishman sent to rule over us”⁸.

Name	Dates	Region
Earl Macartney	1797-1798	Cape
Earl of Caledon	1807-1811	Cape
Sir John Cradock	1811-1814	Cape
Maj-Gen. Robert Meade (Acting governor)	Various	Cape
Maj-Gen. Sir Rufane Donkin (Acting governor)	1820-1821	Cape
Maj-Gen. Richard Bourke (Acting governor)	1826-1828	Cape
Lt Col. Sir Galbraith Lowry Cole	1828-1833	Cape
Lt Col. Sir Peregrine Maitland	1844-1847	Cape
Col. Sir Henry Pottinger	1847	Cape
Col. John Maclean (Lt governor)	1864-1865	Natal
Sir Garnet Wolseley (Administrator)	1875	Natal
Col. Owen Lanyon (Administrator)	1879-1881	Transvaal
Sir Garnet Wolseley (High Commissioner)	1879-1880	South-East Africa
Sir George Pomeroy Colley (High Commissioner)	1880-1881	South-East Africa
Sir Hercules Robinson	1881-1889	Cape
Sir William Butler (Acting governor)	Various	Cape
Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson	1893-1901	Natal and Zululand
Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson	1901-1910	Cape
Sir Hamilton Gould-Adams	1901-1907	Orange River

Table 4.
List of Irish governors.

To this list of luminaries should be added various politicians⁹. The most prominent of these are listed in Table 5:

Name	Prominence	Region	Period
Thomas Upington	Prime Minister	Cape	1884-1886
Albert Hime	Prime Minister	Natal	1899-1903
William Porter	Attorney General	Cape	1839-1865
	Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)	Cape	1865-1872
Andrew Barnard	Colonial Secretary	Cape	Late 18th/early 19th century
Harry Alexander	Colonial Secretary	Cape	Early 19th century
William Field	Collector of Customs	Cape	Mid-19th century
William Shaw Field	Collector of Customs	Natal	Mid-19th century
William Henry Harvey (Botanist)	Treasurer General	Cape	1830s
Philip Allen	Treasurer	Natal	1852
J.F.E. Barnes	Colonial Engineer	Natal	1889

Table 5.

Some prominent South African politicians who were born in Ireland.

Apart from the Irishmen in politics, education and religion, there was a healthy representation of Irishmen on both the Cape and the Natal judicial benches. These include Justices Cook Campbell, Dwyer, Fitzpatrick (father of Percy Fitzpatrick), Gallwey, O'Connor, Sheil, Upington (the "Afrikaner from Cork") and Ward.

Irish architects included Philip Dudgeon, who in 1882 designed the Standard Bank in central Pietermaritzburg basing it on the Bank of Ireland in Belfast. Sir Hugh Lane stands pre-eminent as a connoisseur and collector in the South African art world in his generation. He was the first director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, a role he served with distinction before being appointed director of the National Gallery of Ireland in 1914.

Robert Gozier from Caledon in County Tyrone was, from 1815 to 1852, Postmaster General at the Cape. And Sir Thomas Maclear was the Cape's pre-eminent astronomer¹⁰. In the field of journalism, Limerick-born Frederick York St Leger founded South Africa's first daily newspaper, the "Cape Times"¹¹. These and many other Irish people were known and respected members of society.

IRISH SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

The Irish did not, as a whole, follow their American cousins into the ghetto. This was, in part, because the Irish who came were generally skilled or semi-skilled, were not destitute and came because they wanted to come, not because they had to flee Ireland

through economic or sectarian necessity. This is not to say, however, that there were not Irish concentrated in certain areas of the cities.

In late Victorian and Edwardian Cape Town there was an “Irishtown” in Newlands, where poor Irish immigrants lived. They worked in Olhsson’s Brewery and lived in little cottages in the lanes, running up the back of Table Mountain. They are all gone now and the cottages are desirable and expensive residences for the wealthy. Only a few street names – Kildare and Dublin – give any indication that once poor Irish immigrants eked out a living in that attractive spot. Another Irish area in Cape Town was in Woodstock. Those were in the days when Irish brogues could be heard quite frequently in the streets of Cape Town – many of the constables on the beat being Irish, as were a lot of the horse-drawn omnibus drivers.

Up the coast, in Port Elizabeth, an equally poor Irish community lived down near the docks, where the clock tower was built. And south of Durban, in Umbogintwini, a somewhat more affluent Irish working-class community existed. They were employees of the Kynoch explosives factory, who, from 1907, had been brought out from Arklow, County Wicklow, by the parent company in Ireland. This community thrived and survived long into the 20th century, even having its own hurling team – though who they played against is something of a mystery. By the 1980s, descendants survived with names such as Cunningham, Gilbert, Hayden, Hughes, Kavanagh, Kelly, Knott, Lee, McCull, O’Brien, O’Connor, O’Neill, Roche and Woolahan¹².

In the tents of the early mining camps – in Kimberley, the Witwatersrand and Pilgrim’s Rest – there was no shortage of Irish characters. Finally, in Johannesburg, after the settlement emerged from the shanty wood and corrugated-iron huts, at one time or another there were pockets of Irish settlement. In 1896, there were Irish *uitlanders* [foreign migrant workers] concentrated in wards 3 and 4. At that time, there were 807 Irish living within three 4.8 kilometres (3 miles) of the Market Square in Johannesburg and an additional 190 in the suburbs, making a total of almost 1,000 Irish in Johannesburg¹³.

Later, the Johannesburg suburb of Killarney was also an Irish area. But before that, from the 1890s, there was a noticeable Irish presence in the working class suburb of Fordsburg. Indeed, it was here that many of the Irish were recruited for the Irish commando in the South African War. It was also from here that many Irish took part in the 1922 insurrection – the Rand Revolt or the “White Soviet” – which had its own Sinn Féin Commando¹⁴.

It is interesting to record some of the places in South African which were named either after Irish people or Irish places. These include:

- Avoca
- Belfast
- Biggarsberg Mountains
- Caledon
- Cradock

Donnybrook
 Dromore (farm)
 Field Street (Durban)
 Kildare Street (Cape Town)
 Killarney
 KwaMashu
 Himeville
 Home Rule (farm)
 Maclear
 Mary Fitzgerald Square (Johannesburg)
 Porterville
 Rorke's Drift
 Sir Lowry's Pass
 Smith Street (Durban)
 Upington
 Wellington

With the present move within South Africa to rename settlements and streets, some of these Irish-related names will disappear.

IRISH RURAL SETTLEMENT

In 1820, as part of the wider 1820 "English" settlement plan, 350 Irish were brought out to the Cape. But instead of locating the Irish in the Eastern Cape along with the other immigrants, they were sent up to the arid region bordering on Namaqualand. Here, outside Clanwilliam, the Irish tried to eke out a living on the parched stony moonscape, with less than 25 centimetres (10 inches) of rain a year. Not surprisingly, resentment soon set in. Rev McClelland wrote, "The poorest curacy in Ireland would be preferable to our present situation"¹⁵. Thompson in his *Travels* records that it was:

[...] indeed a most extraordinary circumstance that such a number of people should have been set down in this place, which is barely sufficient for the competent subsistence of two boor's [Afrikaner] families ... there did not appear to be above forty acres of land fit for cultivation in the whole place¹⁶.

The Irish were regarded as trouble from the start. One woman on board the *Northampton* noted, "Great disturbance with the Irish people sharpening both sides of their knives"¹⁷. Matters were not helped by Rev Parker, a fervent Irish Protestant cleric who accompanied the immigrants, deciding that sectarianism was at the root of the matter and launching an attack on Colonel Bird, the Catholic colonial secretary at the Cape. In 1823, Parker published a pamphlet entitled *Jesuits Unmasked at the Cape*. Not surprisingly, the Irish were not popular in Cape Town. After much unpleasantness, they were moved to the Eastern Cape to join the other 1820 immigrants. Six Irish families remained in Namaqualand and a few in Cape Town. But the Irish soon settled into the

Albany district and were forgotten in Cape Town, except no doubt by Colonel Bird, who lost his job¹⁸.

A few years later one traveller's comments suggested that the Irish had settled in, though they met with the usual lot of the Eastern Cape farmer:

On my way I called at Captain Butler's, an Irish settler, abounding in hospitality, but at that time, poor fellow! but ill supplied with the means of exercising this liberal disposition, so general among his countrymen. We dined upon a little cheese and butter-milk; but it was his best, and given with cordiality. A short time before, his only daughter, a child about three years old, had died of the bite of a serpent, which she had trod upon while playing in the garden. Poor Mrs Butler appeared very disconsolate, and her mind in a morbid, disordered state, in consequence of this distressing event¹⁹.

In 1823 the *Barossa* sailed from Cork in Ireland to the Cape with 352 people on board. This was the idea of John Ingram, who received a Cape government bounty of £14 for each immigrant landed. The scheme was dogged with problems and the indentured servants Ingram brought into Table Bay complained bitterly of their treatment and wrote home to Ireland that the Cape was "in a state of starvation".

In the 1840s, the Cape's humanist Irish attorney general, William Porter, suggested in the Cape's parliament that Ireland should be a source of emigrants to South Africa. He was quoted as saying:

With regard to the great question of Emigration, as an Irishman, coming from a country where he had seen the utmost excess of misery arising from the circumstances of there being more hands than can possibly obtain employment, to a country where he found there was such great difficulty in obtaining hands, and such inconvenience and diminution of happiness experienced from the Want of persons to act as servants, he should surely be as much disposed as any man to adopt measures which would yield relief to one class, while they would bring prosperity to another²⁰.

Various other schemes met with little more success and sometimes with more notoriety. "Gross improprieties" occurred on board the *Gentoo* when in early 1851 it sailed between Ireland and the Cape. Carrying 46 single Irish women, the hi-jinks on board shocked polite Cape Town society. The Captain and ship's surgeon (who had a young woman sleeping in his cabin) were reprimanded. Only four young women were exonerated and the ship's steward was praised for his "exemplary forbearance". It appears that in consequence of this importation of attractive young women, Cape Town acquired its first Irish brothel complete with "a pretty horse-breaker"²¹.

If the denizens of Cape Town were outraged by the prospect of "loose Irish women" in their midst, they were equally horrified at the thought of Irish convicts being dumped on them by the British authorities. In 1848/1849 this became a real threat when the prison hulk *Neptune* sailed into Table Bay with former Young Irish convicts on board. Fierce protests erupted in Cape Town, eventually resulting in the authorities rescinding

their plan to establish a convict settlement at the Cape. The *Neptune* sailed on to Tasmania and with it went the prospect of a large Irish population in South Africa.

With the conclusion of the Crimean War, a scheme was hatched to settle German mercenaries who had fought for the British in the war in the Eastern Cape, between East London and King William's Town. There then emerged a plan to import Irish young women to that region who, it was supposed, would marry some of the 2,362 former mercenaries. Shipping young women across the globe was not unknown in the Victorian period, though it had not been the practice in South Africa.

In 1857, there duly arrived at East London, aboard the *Lady Kennaway*, 153 single young Irish women, 42 married couples and 36 children. Not surprisingly, this somewhat seedy enterprise did not work out as planned and only a few of the soldiers married anyone from the party. A local businessman, Henry Barrington, was probably not far off the mark when he wrote:

For I do not think they will marry such lazy beggars – had they houses & gardens & pigs to shew it might have been very different. I do not suppose the drunken profligate white labourers here much wish to encumber themselves with wives tho' some few will in time – I suppose the soldiers will be on the look out, but they have no great inducements to offer²².

As if to symbolise the failure of the scheme, the *Lady Kennaway* was shipwrecked off the mouth of the Buffalo River. The young women dispersed across what was then called British Kaffaria, in East London, King William's Town and as far afield as Grahamstown. Most became domestic servants. Two years later, Lady Duff-Gordon recorded that "every ragged Irish girl is in place somewhere"²³.

Mrs Bull has estimated that between 1923 and 1900 only about 14,000 Irish came out to the Cape on assisted passages²⁴. She has also shown that by the late 1850s and early 1860s, there was distinct hostility to the very idea of any Irish being allowed into the Cape under any immigration scheme. The Irish were viewed as troublesome, drunken and indolent. In 1860, the Cape's immigration agent in London was instructed to suspend any further Irish immigration. This did not prevent 1,187 Irish entering the Cape between 1860 and 1863.

During the short-lived British occupation of the Transvaal (1877-1881), a scheme was hatched in Ireland to promote the new colony as an area of agricultural settlement. Farms in the Transvaal of 2,500 hectares (6,000 acres) were offered for sale, but to no avail. The Irish were not keen to leave one rural setting for another and only a few ever made it as farmers in South Africa. Bernard McGahon from Armagh had the farm Dromore in East Griqualand and had, it was claimed, "more cattle than could be conveniently be counted". But he was an exception.

By the 1870s, however, the Irish were well aware that previous schemes to settle Irish people in rural South Africa had been disastrous. By 1876, the "Cape Town Daily News" was noting:

We are afraid we could not induce the Irish labouring classes to come to this colony in anything like sufficient numbers. They know nothing of it beyond having a dim idea that it is associated with Kaffir wars; but they know all about America and Australia, or think they do, having heard them talked about from their infancy by those who had friends there²⁵.

Only in the 1890s did the more traditional Irish-type emigrant arrive in the Transvaal Republic. The police detective force in Dublin Castle, the seat of British government in Ireland, were well aware of it and no doubt delighted that they were losing their prime troublemakers to South Africa²⁶. It was, however, for many Irish emigrants, an Irish republican sojourn rather than a settlement. With the tide turning against the Boer forces in the South African War (1899-1902), many of these lads either fled the country or were carted off as prisoners of war to Ceylon or St Helena. Just before he departed the dying Boer republic in May 1900, the Irish radical and former Member of Parliament, Michael Davitt recorded his thoughts:

Farewell Pretoria! You will soon cease to be capital of a Nation. The enemy of nationhood will make you another of his "centres of civilisation". Brothels, paupers, hypocrites, gospel mongers in the pay of British mammon, and all the other inseparable accompaniments of Anglo-Saxon progress will replace the kind of life you have been familiar with; not a perfect life, not a blameless one, but one infinitely better, cleaner, and more truly civilized than the one which will begin here the day the ensign of England will float once more over a defeated Nationality²⁷.

In 1921, Tomas O'Cuilleainain, writing in "The Republic", the only Irish-South African popular journal ever to be published, observed:

Mere Irish flesh and blood, or an Irish name, do not make an Irishman. An Irish soul is needed. There are hundreds of young South Africans, men and women, Irish on both sides for two generations, who are in no sense Irish. Their parents and grandparents might [as] well have come from Yorkshire or Devon. They have Irish blood, but they are English of English. In no other country has there been such a complete loss of nationality²⁸.

Why was this? With the various Irish settlements, why did the South African-Irish forget their Irishness after the first generation? Why did they become "ideal immigrants"? The answer lies in the nature of Irish settlement as discussed above. The South African-Irish differed significantly from many of those unfortunate Irish who were swept up in the mass-emigration waves of the 19th century. The Irish in southern Africa were not on the whole the downtrodden in the coffin ships. They tended to be better educated; better skilled; generally speaking, better prepared to cope with the rigours of emigration and all the psychological trauma it brought in its wake. The Irish who landed at Table Bay tended to be driven by adventure and ambition rather than by the desperate need to escape destitution. Not surprisingly, this created a somewhat different mindset. The fact that perhaps 45 to 50 percent were Protestant, some Anglo-Irish, also has to be taken into consideration.

This said, the caricature of the Irish as irresponsible drinkers was not infrequent among non-Irish, English-speaking Whites. This was not helped by the existence of some notori-

ous Irish-run liquor shops, such as John Mulcahy's in Cape Town. Reports of St Patrick's Day celebrations getting out of hand did not help matters either. One such event at Guttman's Hotel in the new shantytown of Johannesburg in 1887 was reported as follows:

Disgraceful Proceedings

The Anniversary Celebrations of St Patrick's day, the Patron saint of Ireland, was celebrated by the sons of the Emerald Isle, on Thursday evening, the 17th instant, by banquet at the Royal Hotel. There were about a hundred present, and although the catering could hardly be surpassed, the dinner was a decided failure. Waiting for half an hour for "soup," and fully as long for each successive dish, is not the orthodox idea of a public dinner. Yet such was the case, and as a result, only a few happened to be satisfied. These few by their clamorousness managed to engross the services of the waiters and as the stomachs of these gourmandisers are not easily satisfied, those who had any sense of refinement, had to go without and content themselves in the enjoyment of a sight which would have delighted the heart of a dog kennel keeper²⁹.

It is little wonder then that by 1900, there were "No Irish" signs in the windows of some Cape Town boarding houses.

But this image is belied by the reality on the ground. Most Irish were as sober (or as intoxicated) as any other group in the region. Indeed, and ironically, the Irish were heavily into the aerated mineral water business with such firms as Daly's of Durban, Sullivans of Beaconsfield and Reilly's of Kimberly. Besides those detractors of the Irish as drinkers might well have listened to Lord Chesterfield's famous dictum, "The gentlemen of Ireland are never so fit for doing business as when they are fit for nothing else".

Today, Irish whiskey, such as Bushmills, Tullymore Dew and Jamesons are freely available in many liquor stores but this was not always the case. In 1934 an Irish government report noted, "Irish whisky is practically unobtainable in the bars hotels etc in South Africa ... Jameson and Powers Whisky are carried on all South African trains"³⁰. It is also worthy of note that the author has on more than one occasion been reprimanded by hotel proprietors because the Irish at functions he has organised have not drunk sufficient to make the bar profitable for the evening.

IDENTITY

In 1921, Ireland was divided, six of the 32 counties of Ireland where Protestants were in an overall majority being called Northern Ireland and remaining part of the United Kingdom. The rest of the island, the 26 counties, acquired complete dominion status within the British empire and became the Irish Free State in 1922. Identity in Ireland was then, and to a degree still is, associated with one's religion. Either one belonged to the majority Catholic section of the community and was a nationalist or one was a Protestant and a unionist who wanted Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. The Protestants were in turn divided into two main groupings – the Anglo-Irish, whose numbers have

fallen dramatically since partition in the south of Ireland, and the Presbyterians, who are mainly concentrated in the north-east of Ireland, in the Northern Ireland state. Such simple divisions, of course, hide many a facture, and, as is well known, many Irish nationalist leaders prior to the establishment of the Irish Free State were Protestants.

Not all ordinary Irish people were so fortunate as to be able to define themselves in the broad sweep terms associated with religion. In the enrolment forms of the old Cape Mounted Police, under “Nationality” young Irish recruits might write anything from “Irish”, “British” or “English” to “Catholic” or “yes”.

Following the Good Friday Agreement (10 April 1998), which resulted in an uneasy return to peace in Northern Ireland, one of the greatest challenges facing the “peace process”, the search for a negotiated settlement to the Northern Ireland conflict, was that of identity. Most Protestant folk in that region, if asked what they were would reply “Ulster” or “British”. “Irish” had been allocated to or even appropriated by the Catholic population. Only the most maverick Protestant might venture to say “Irish”. But two generations ago, Ulster Protestants had no problem in both calling themselves Irish and in carrying a British passport, which, of course, was the only passport available before Irish passports were issued by the Irish Free State.

When it came to the Irish abroad, paradigm shifts were slow in coming. Not surprisingly, “Irishness” tended to be emphasised. The sentimentality for Ireland in the north-eastern United States of America, shared by so many of the destitute who flocked into the urban ghettos, resulted in heart-rending songs of migration: idealised Ireland, usually in a thinly disguised sexual form of a young woman; bitter and at times irrational hatred of the British or “English”, as they were usually referred to, the former being used mainly as a political slur, the latter as racial.

But in Africa, things were different. Those Irish who came to South Africa had a different mindset to those who fled from rural poverty in Tipperary to the slums of Pittsburgh. Not to put too fine a point on matters, they were freer. Professor Don Akenson has commented that South Africa not only defines one end of the spectrum of Irish migration, but also that South Africa gained the “cream” of the Irish. Whilst that is obviously controversial, it does hold a core of truth in that things were very different in Africa. The Irish experience was different and the attitude of the Irish settlers created a different mentality³¹.

This is why there are no South African-Irish sentimental songs yearning to “cross the great Karoo to Ireland” or weeping over leprechauns dying on the highveld. This freedom manifested itself at different times in different ways, not least in the early 19th-century in Irish lads cohabiting with African women or women of colour. The plethora of Irish names, such as Ogle, Fynn, Cane and McBride, in the Coloured³² community today is testimony enough of this.

This phenomenon is confirmed in the diary of the first resident Catholic bishop in South Africa, Irish-born Raymond Griffith, who actively and personally campaigned

against White men living with African or Coloured women. In his diary for 2 September 1838, the bishop recorded:

After communion I preached on the Gospel and after Mass, Baptised, at great lengths, the Black woman (Lisa Arms) who had lived in sin with McMahon [from near Limerick]. I had already recd. her promise and I believe it sincere, that she wd. no longer continue so to live. MacMahon promised same and sleeps no longer under the same roof. She is 55 or 60 years of age and he can't be less than near 50. Not content however with this, I made them both renew the promises before all present ...³³

But the bishop's influence was fairly localised and we know that there were also Irish lads who, having often deserted from the British army, made their way quietly across the Kei River where they settled amongst the amaXhosa, beyond the Eastern Cape's frontier. A case in point was Clare-born Henry MacDaniel, who having deserted from the British army made his way across the Kei River into the land of the iXhosa leader Hintsa, where he appears to have stayed³⁴.

As one anti-slave pamphlet noted in 1828, there was "Irish blood" within the slave population:

In one of the most genteel families in Cape Town an Irishman is kept, for no other apparent purpose but that of improving the stock of the slaves. The children of this man are the fairest and handsomest slave children I have seen in South Africa³⁵.

As the century progressed, as with the rest of White South Africa, racial exclusiveness became more marked amongst the Irish. The fact that Irish commando leader John MacBride is alleged to have had a liaison with a Coloured women in the mid-1890s is, however, an interesting reflection on how thin the dividing line remained between the races. It is difficult to make sweeping statements about race attitudes but it is noteworthy that out of all the immigrant groups which came to South Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the black African population holds the greatest affection for the Irish³⁶.

A correspondent to *The Globe*, who wrote under the *nom de plume* "Natalian", suggested that, had the Zulus been allowed to enlist in the imperial forces in 1914, this great singing nation would have had a version of the battle song "It's a long way to Tipperary" that might have run as follows:

Ukude, ukude ku Teepelayly,
Ukude, 'mpela ku hamba,
Ukude, ukude ku Teepelayly,
N'intombi 'nhle ng' asiwo.
Hlala kahle Peekadeely,
Njaloki Lestel Skwell,
Ukude. Ukude ku Teepelayly,
Lapi kona 'ndhliziwo yami³⁷.

The author organises a black-tie dinner/lecture on an Irish theme in the Royal Hotel in Durban once a year. While people from Northern Ireland do attend, he has on more

than one occasion been informed by Protestants from those six counties that this is an Irish event and not for them. But in 1900, M.C. Seton, writing in “The Gael”, could quite honestly claim that:

The writer has joined with fiery Ulster Orangemen and a Catholic priest from Cork in celebrating St Patrick’s Day on the Karoo, and Irish blood is a sure recommendation to the friendship of all Cape Irishmen.

What is interesting is that Irish “Orangeism” then existed in South Africa and had done so since 1852³⁸. Table 6, compiled by the late Rev. John Brown illustrates the point³⁹.

Loyal Orange Lodge number	Place	Founding date	Defunct
561	Pietermaritzburg	1876	1886
610	Simonstown	1885	1895
679	Durban	1892	1895
660	Beaconsfield	1893	1898
Do	Pretoria	1898	–
692	Johannesburg	1895	1899
51	Cape Town	1895	1899
689	Johannesburg	1896	1906
691	Rondebosch	1900 (moved 1905)	–
Do	Cape Town	1905	–
766	Cape Town	1905	–
755	Germinston	1905	1907
761	Pretoria	1905	–
772	Johannesburg	1905	1907
52	Pretoria	1905	–

Table 6.
Loyal Orange Lodges in South Africa, 1876-1907.

Two things must, however, be remembered relating to this matter. The first is that Orangeism was probably more closely connected with the Irish in the British army in South Africa than with the permanently resident Irish in South African society. The second point is that in this period even within the Orange Order, attitudes were not as bitter then as they were later to become because of political circumstances in 1912, when a measure of self-government was discussed for Ireland, or even later, in 1968, when the recent conflict in Northern Ireland commenced. What is remarkable is that Ulster Orangeism survived in South Africa until the early 1960s⁴⁰.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Irish Catholics had no hesitation in attending the St Patrick’s Day dinner chaired by the Irish (and Protestant) Walter Hely-Hutchinson, governor of both Natal and Zululand. R.H. Henderson recalled when he became mayor of Kimberley in 1899 that a Newryman living in the mining town sent a lad with a note to him, the contents of which read, “Dear Mr Henderson, I’m so glad you are our mayor – it’s time we had a change from these Englishmen. If you could lend me just one pound, would you please give it to the wee boy”⁴¹.

Twenty years later things were beginning to change somewhat, as Archbishop Denis Hurley OMI recalled at the opening of the ground-breaking Ireland and Southern Africa conference, held in Durban from 26 to 28 July 1990, when he began his address with the following words:

Very early in my educational career, before I had reached Standard I in a little government school on Robben Island, I reported to my mother that our teacher had asked us what church we belonged to. "What did you say?" asked mother. "Irish", I replied. "Don't say that again", said mother. I left the matter there in that childhood acceptance of the incomprehensibility of many adult reactions. As far as I remember, Mother did not explain the difference between Irish and Catholic. Later I came to the conclusion that the unacceptability of the proclamation of my Irish identity arose from the political situation at the time. It was in 1921 and the Irish rebellion was in full swing under leaders like Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins and, in the light of the atmosphere created by the loyal South African English Press, proclaiming oneself Irish was like waving an A.N.C. flag in Bloemfontein a year ago⁴².

NOTES

- ¹ D.P. McCracken, *Forgotten protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer War*, Belfast 2003.
- ² Id., *Irish heritage in South Africa, 1787-2007*, an expanded version of the present paper published by the South African Heritage Council, Pretoria 2008.
- ³ Figures and percentages for Tables 1, 2 and 3 are extracted from British colonial and Union of South Africa census reports (1875, 1891, 1904, 1911, 1918, 1921, 1936, 1946, 1951, 1985, 1991). See also D.H. Aken-son, *Occasional papers on the Irish in South Africa*, Grahamstown 1991, ch. 3.
- ⁴ N. Southey, *Dogged entrepreneurs: Some prominent Irish retailers in South Africa*, in "Southern African-Irish Studies" ["SAIS"], 1992, 2, pp. 169-173.
- ⁵ See R.H. Henderson, *An Ulsterman in Africa*, Cape Town 1945.
- ⁶ Southey, *Dogged entrepreneurs* cit., pp. 173-175.
- ⁷ See www.openafrica.org/participant/duggan-cronin-gallery, accessed on 29 June 2009.
- ⁸ H.W.J. Picard, *Lords of Stalplein*, Cape Town 1974, p. 59.
- ⁹ Information for these two tables is mainly extrapolated from J.L. McCracken, *Irishmen in government in South Africa*, in "SAIS", 1992, 2, pp. 25-38; Id., *Irishmen in South African colonial parliaments*, in "SAIS", 1990, 1, pp. 73-82; Picard, *Lords of Stalplein* cit., and the five volumes of the *Dictionary of South African Biography*, Pretoria 1968-1987.
- ¹⁰ See D. McCracken, *The nature of Irish settlement in southern Africa*, in "SAIS", 1992, 2, pp. 17-19.
- ¹¹ P. McCracken, *Shaping the times: Irish journalists in southern Africa*, in "SAIS", 1992, 2, pp. 140-162.
- ¹² Michael Lee to Donal McCracken, 25 April 1988.
- ¹³ *Rapport van den census directeur: census 15 July 1896*, Johannesburg 1896, pp. 54-55, quoted in D. McCracken, *Odd man out: The South African experience*, in A. Bielenberg (ed.), *The Irish Diaspora*, Harlow 2000, p. 261.
- ¹⁴ J. Krigler, *The Rand Revolt: The 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa*, Johannesburg - Cape Town 2005, pp. 57, 72, 75, 106, 271, 314-315.
- ¹⁵ G. Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony, 1793-1821*, vol. xvii, London 1905, p. 4.
- ¹⁶ G. Thompson, *Travels and adventures in southern Africa*, London 1827, p. 308.

- ¹⁷ G. Cory, *The rise of South Africa*, vol. 2, London 1913, p. 27.
- ¹⁸ See G.B. Dickason, *Irish settlers to the Cape: History of the Clanwilliam 1820 settlers from Cork Harbour*, Cape Town 1973.
- ¹⁹ Thompson, *Travels and adventures* cit., p. 29.
- ²⁰ W. Porter, *The Porter Speeches*, Cape Town 1886, pp. xli-xlii.
- ²¹ E. Bull, *Aided Irish immigration to the Cape: 1823 to 1900*, in "SAIS", 1992, 2, pp. 269-271.
- ²² K.P.T. Tankard, *The Lady Kennaway girls*, in "SAIS", 1992, 2, p. 282.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 278-286.
- ²⁴ Bull, *Aided Irish immigration* cit., pp. 269-277.
- ²⁵ "Cape Town Daily News", 2 February 1876.
- ²⁶ D.P. McCracken, *Inspector Mallon: Buying Irish patriotism for a five-pound note*, Dublin 2009, ch. 10; Id., *MacBride's Brigade: Irish commandos in the Anglo-Boer War*, Dublin 1999, pp. 17-21.
- ²⁷ Michael Davitt in Pretoria, 25 April 1900, Davitt papers, Trinity College Dublin.
- ²⁸ "The Republic", 12 February 1921.
- ²⁹ Supplement to "The Standard and Transvaal Mining Chronicle", Saturday 19 March 1887.
- ³⁰ National Library of Ireland, Dublin, MacLysaght papers, Ms. 3206.
- ³¹ See two excellent volumes: D.H. Akenson, *The Irish diaspora: A primer*, Toronto - Belfast 1996; Id., *Occasional papers on the Irish in South Africa*, Grahamstown 1991.
- ³² The term 'Coloured', referring to people of mixed race, is still used widely in South Africa, not least officially for the collection of statistical information in the drive to create a more equitable society.
- ³³ J.B. Brain (ed.), *The Cape diary of Bishop Patrick Raymond Griffith for the years 1837 to 1839*, Pretoria 1988, pp. 160-163.
- ³⁴ P. Philip, *British residents at the Cape 1795-1819: Biographical records of 4 800 pioneers*, Cape Town 1981, p. 246; D.P. McCracken, *Insurgents and adventurers, 1806-99*, in "SAIS", 1992, 2, p. 40.
- ³⁵ Anon., *Remarks on the Demoralising influence of Slavery by a Resident of the Cape of Good Hope*, London 1828, pp. 6-8.
- ³⁶ D.P. McCracken, *MacBride's Brigade: Irish commandos in the Anglo-Boer war*, Dublin 1999, p. 165.
- ³⁷ Charles Kent papers, file 12, Campbell Collections, University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal. The original First World War army marching song ran as follows:
 It's a long way to Tipperary,
 It's a long way to go.
 It's a long way to Tipperary,
 To the sweetest girl I know.
 Good bye Piccadilly,
 Farewell Leicester Square.
 It's a long way to Tipperary,
 But my heart lies there.
- ³⁸ The Orange Order was founded in 1795 and is an exclusively Protestant political and cultural organization.
- ³⁹ J. Brown, *Orangeism in South Africa*, in "SAIS", 1992, 2, p. 115.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-119.
- ⁴¹ R.H. Henderson, *An Ulsterman in Africa*, Cape Town 1944, pp. 68-69.
- ⁴² D. Hurley, *Opening conference address*, in "SAIS", 1991, 1, p. 7.

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