

Ruhr Universität Bochum
Englisches Seminar

In what ways are the people of Ireland subject to their
history?

Essay for the course
'Culture, Memory and Identity –
Politics, War and History in Northern Ireland'
in summer term 2005
John Poulter (B.A.)

submitted by

Björn Wilmsmann
Stefan-George-Str. 15a
46117 Oberhausen
bjoern@wilmsmann.de

on 30 July 2005

Table of Contents

1. Abstract

2. Introduction

3. The Origins of Contemporary Irish Identity

4. Irish Discourse and Identity in the Light of Irish History

5. Conclusion

6. Literature used

1. Abstract

When thinking of present-day Ireland and especially present-day Northern Ireland one cannot avoid taking into consideration Ireland's diverse history. The current political situation, the conflict that is still present between the multifarious factions in Northern Ireland despite the Good Friday agreement and the resulting peace process, which ostensibly has come to an end for the time being, and the dominant discourses in Irish life are connected inextricably with Ireland's past or rather with what views and subjective truths the respective factions derive from this past when regarding the past from their specific perspectives.

This is how the various conquest of and plantations on the island of Ireland and the religious and political conflicts these processes entailed worked their way through into present ideologies and identities.

In the following I shall try to expound this idea in more detail, first of all by shedding light on what processes and events actually gave rise to the current situation, especially the one in Northern Ireland. Afterwards I shall try to exemplify this by furnishing evidence of how the making of Irish history reverberates in the contemporary discourse, identities and prevalent ideologies in Ireland.

2. Introduction

History can be, as it is usually done in non-academic discourse, regarded as a concept objectively representing past events and historical figures, but it can be considered a biased outlook on the past that serves the aims of a particular group with its particular ideology, too. The latter stance towards historical discourse and how it is created allows for history being seen as a construct of a dominant ideology, which bears on how meaning and identity are created in the present. On the other hand, the way in which meaning is

created in the present likewise has a reciprocal effect on history. Thus, history and present-day discourse can be deemed to be mutually related to each other.

This relation becomes obvious in every kind of society, but hardly anywhere does it become so conspicuous as when one is dealing with Irish society and Irish history. Irish history has always been subject to the influence of, some would say the tampering by, several factions with their particular ideological background that again has nourished on a specific way in which history has been told or as Salazar (1987, p. 375) puts it: 'Irish and British identities in Ireland are the product of the crystallization (should we say fossilization) of the historical process that turns itself into a belief system.'

There are, on the one hand, the views usually sported by Irish Republicans, which represent the Irish people as having lived under constant oppression by foreign forces and those fighting this oppression as glorious freedom fighters without ever reflecting their actual deeds more considerately.

On the other hand, there are the Unionists claiming that their well-being or even just survival as Protestants in the area known as The Six Counties – or Ulster, as they like to name it – has always been threatened by the Catholic majority. According to this particular way of thinking the British fortunately protected the protestants in Ulster from being suppressed by Irish Catholics. These different perspectives on Irish history have a huge impact on the people of Ireland, since they, and the faction they belong to, draw on history to gain and delineate their respective identities from what perceived history tells them about the reasons for their individual situation.

This struggle between two competing mainstream ideologies is made even more intricate, forasmuch as it is not simply a question of ethnic differences between a Gaelic and a Briton heritage and the national borders dividing the Republic of Ireland and the UK, but a religious issue as well. The fact that the Gaelic population of the island of Ireland for its biggest part adheres to a Catholic religious tradition, whereas the English and Scottish plantations in Northern Ireland are a strictly Protestant society, led to persecution and oppression for religious reasons, evoking and exacerbating prejudice and hatred towards the respective opposing party as well.

Being aware of this, the conclusion that everything and everyone in present-day Ireland is subject to events of former times and how these are being referred to from distinct perspectives is quite close at hand. Moreover, this is why the conflict in Northern Ireland and the people of Ireland and how they see themselves cannot be understood without taking into account history and how it is perceived.

3. The Origins of Contemporary Irish Identity

In this section I shall try to outline the historical events, which gave rise to current Irish and Northern-Irish identities, cultural discourses and the conflict in Northern Ireland.

In order to trace the roots of identities and prevalent discourses in Ireland and the struggle for dominance brought about by the contrary positions these identities stand for, one has to go back as early as the beginnings of recorded Irish history, since the foundation for Ireland as a catholic community was already laid when St. Patrick supposedly arrived on the island of Ireland and helped in converting Gaelic people to christianity.¹

Another aspect that seems to be recurring in Irish history is the rule by foreign powers, which first came into being when Norsemen (or Vikings) came to Ireland at about 795 and at a later stage, namely by 1170, the Normans under the Earl of Pembroke, called 'Strongbow', whose name incidentally is still commemorated in the name of a cider brand, settled in the South-East of Ireland, that is in the kingship of Leinster, since they were invited by Dermot Macmurrough (or Diarmait Mac Murchada in Irish Gaelic) in order to regain his kingship, which he had lost due to opposition of confederated Irish forces under the high king Ruaidrí mac Tairrdelbach Ua Conchobair.

This establishment of a rivalling Norman dominion caused Henry II to invade Ireland in 1171 in order to safeguard his dominant position. This invasion,

¹ Most historical information and dates presented in this paragraph are taken from Kee (1980), with some supplements from the Wikipedia article on Irish history.

which interestingly was licensed by the then Pope Adrian IV 'as a means of curbing ecclesiastical corruption and abuses'², was the cornerstone of British dominance on the island of Ireland during the centuries to follow.

After this period of Viking, Norman and English conquest and prevalence there was a resurgence of Gaelic cultural dominance and a corresponding decline of Norman power, which also led to the Statutes of Kilkenny, which were intended to keep the Norman nobility from becoming too 'Irish'. This again can be regarded as a first struggle of competing identities for the most dominant position in Ireland.

Another issue that is essential for the development of Irish identity is the Reformation and Henry VIII breaking with Rome, since the Irish, in contrast to the English, the Welsh and the Scottish, did not accept Protestantism and remained Catholic. This gave rise to efforts to re-conquer and colonise Ireland.

In the time from 1608 onwards several counties got confiscated from the Irish and used for Scottish settlements, the so-called plantations. The events of the time following these plantations are quintessential when regarding discourse and identities in Northern Ireland today. In 1641 Irish Catholics successfully rose against English and Protestant rule of Ireland, but in 1649 the island was conquered once more by Oliver Cromwell, Catholic landowners were dispossessed as a punishment and the land was given to Scottish and English settlers. The former landowners then were exiled to Connaught in the mid-west of the island. In 1689, when the Catholic king James II. was deposed by Parliament and superseded by the Protestant Dutch aristocrat William III. of Orange³, grandson of William I., Prince of Orange and Count of Nassau (also called William the Silent), who led the Dutch revolt against Spanish sovereignty⁴, the Irish supported James II., as they hoped for a rescission of the Penal Laws and the land confiscations imposed by these.

In the course of the following war between Williamites and Jacobites the city of Derry (or Londonderry, as it was called by its Protestant inhabitants), the

2 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_History (14 July 2005)

3 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_III_of_England (14 July 2005)

4 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_the_Silent (14 July 2005)

only garrison with Protestant troops left at that time, was besieged in 1689, since, as tradition has it, apprentice boys, closed the city gates against approaching Catholic forces. However the siege was relieved later that year, when a relief ship broke the barricade on 11th of June.⁵ James II. was finally defeated by William III. of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and Jacobite resistance was vanquished at last at Aughrim in 1691. After the Williamite victory Penal Laws were re-enacted and enforced harshly, leaving only 14 per cent of the land of Ireland to Catholic owners.

The 18th century in Ireland was dominated by poverty among the Catholic, for instance resulting in the Great Famine of 1740-1741, which exacerbated the Irish decline and dislike for everything that was English. Although legislative independence from the Parliament in Westminster was devolved to the Irish Parliament by the end of the 18th century, Irish Catholic were not enfranchised, which gave rise to the United Irishmen movement led by Wolfe Tone, which was intended to overthrow British dominion.

The Irish Rebellion of 1798, which was instigated by this movement, was fiercely suppressed and due to these events the Act of Union, by virtue of which the Kingdom of Ireland and the Kingdom of Great Britain were merged as United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on the 1st of January 1801, was enacted. As a consequence of this act independent legislation for Ireland was abrogated again.⁶

The subsequent period of union with Great Britain is known for a severe famine, which lasted from 1845 to 1849 and which was mainly precipitated by a blight in the potato harvest in 1845. Moreover, the 19th century saw another 'vigorous, yet unsuccessful'⁷ campaign for Irish home rule.

After several futile attempts to establish home rule via Parliamentary means in the beginning of the 20th century a Home Rule Act finally was on the statute books in 1914 but never came into force on account of the onset of World War I. This made the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) start a rebellion in 1916, which later came to be known as the Easter Dublin Rising. This rebellion again was suppressed and several of the leaders were

5 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Derry (14 July 2005)

6 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Act_of_Union_1800 (14 July 2005)

7 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_History (14 July 2005)

executed. These events are still regarded by many British as a dastard attempt to achieve home rule, since the rebellion was directed against the Union during a period of weakness caused by World War I.

After the war had ended, the Irish Republic was declared and an Irish parliament (Dáil Éireann) met at Dublin. In the following years the IRB waged a war against the Royal Irish Constabulary and the British paramilitary forces known as the 'Black and Tans'. The assassination of twelve high ranking British intelligence officers known as the 'Cairo Gang', which was ordered by Michael Collins, the then Irish Finance Minister and head of the IRB, led to the events known as 'Bloody Sunday', during which 14 people were killed and 65 injured as British forces took revenge for the killings during a match of Gaelic football, which took place at Croke Park, Dublin. As a consequence public support for the republican government of Eamon de Valera grew, which finally entailed the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the secession of Ireland as the Irish Free State in 1922, yet excluding the six counties of the province of Ulster which were to remain within the Union. This latter fact resulted in the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) between supporters and opponents of the treaty. In the years to follow the civil war, a constitution for 'Eire' was created in 1937 and after World War II. the Republic of Ireland was declared and approved by Great Britain, but this approval excluded the six counties that make up Northern Ireland, which is still an issue today.

4. Irish Discourse and Identity in the Light of Irish History

The Irish have always drawn on the putative fact that resistance to British dominion and the way this resistance was carried out has been something with a justified moral cause (Boyce and O'Day, 1996), since British rule according to this outlook on Irish history was tyrannical and wrongful.

However, as I have attempted to reveal by epitomising the historical cause for present-day discourses and identities, things are not as easy as that.

First of all, the Irish question is not merely a matter of ethnicity, but rather a question of religious disputes and discrimination. The Welsh and most

certainly the Scottish people, for instance had their fair share of trouble with the Anglo-Saxons as well, but today there is no deeply rooted spite towards the English anymore, which is at least contributed to by the fact that there has not been so fervent an opposition against Protestantism, because the other parts of Britain, though not completely Protestant in religion, underwent Reformation, too. Discrimination against Catholicism was even harsher in Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom, simply because in Ireland virtually most of the population were Catholic and thus being discriminated against.

Moreover, it is this religious discrimination that the Irish derive their identity from, which can easily be seen when regarding their national symbols, like the Irish national hero St. Patrick, who presumptively converted the island to christianity. This is, most perspicuously, posed against the Ulster 'national' hero William of Orange, who is celebrated for having defended Protestantism in Northern Ireland.

In this respect it is important to recognise that the Irish have been keen on establishing an identity distinct from the Protestant, British one. In fact, there is hardly any nation which advertises itself better than the Irish, at least you will not find a nation with so widely known 'corporate' symbols like the harp or the shamrock. Furthermore, Ireland, even having its own font, is the only nation that has something like a 'corporate identity', which can be derived quite clearly from the past need to be distinctly Irish in order to survive in a predominantly Protestant environment without losing one's own identity as someone from Catholic Gaelic upbringing.

Another aspect coming into mind when thinking of Irish identity is the revival of the Irish, or more correctly the Irish Gaelic, language during the 20th century, which culminated in the Irish language not only being actively campaigned for by the Irish government, but also the introduction of Irish as an obligatory school subject. The idea behind that, again, is to create and to bear out a supposedly Irish identity featuring aspects which are distinctly non-British, even if this means artificially resurrecting a virtually dead language.

Furthermore, one can say that not only is identity for the Irish themselves determined by and accounted for by historical reasons, but also that Ireland in the world is famous (or notorious) because of the role history plays in the discourse of 'Irishness', which is chiefly due to the fact that a plethora of former Irish inhabitants emigrated to almost any part of world during plights such as the Great Famine.

A further proof of Irish history being alive and present in every-day life in (Northern) Ireland are organisations like, for instance, the Orange Order, which was founded to commemorate Protestant heroes like William of Orange and the Apprentice Boys of Derry (respectively Londonderry) and which is vigorously fighting for the Protestant cause in Ulster, or the various political or even paramilitary groups claiming to righteously represent the will of the people.

The importance of history in Irish and Northern Irish reality in particular, is scarcely anywhere revealed more blatantly than in cities like Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, where two groups with two different perspectives on their common history directly meet each other like in the Shankill, which is inhabited by a Protestant population only, and Falls Road in West Belfast, in which almost exclusively Catholic people live., since these areas of city not only show the rivalry between Catholics and Protestants, between Republicans and Unionists, but they have also been the scenery of many outrages between paramilitaries of each faction.

The so-called murals, which are a rather sophisticated form of graffiti, yet differing from the latter, as they are mostly approved by the owners of the houses on whose facade they are painted on, do not represent the struggle between the factions as violently, but are by no means less lurid. These murals show crucial events, positive and negative, in each faction's historical discourse and try to convey meaning and a particular political opinion tying in with that.

Another aspect of this way of conveying meaning via marking a territory, thereby showing the respective other faction who lives in a certain area is the painting of kerb stones in a particular faction's colours (red-white-blue for the Unionists and the Irish tricolour green-white-orange for the Republicans),

which reminds a bit of territorial behaviour known from certain kinds of animals.

Even the just mentioned Irish tricolour, which also happens to be the flag of the Irish Republic, is a reflection of in what ways the Irish are subject to their history, since two of the colours, green for the Catholic Irish and orange for the Protestant British population, stand for the two factions claiming the right to defend their cause and to influence cultural discourse.

Now finally, one might argue, as Republicans would most certainly do, that apart from all this long-lasting struggle and the rancour brought about by this struggle, it would be completely natural for the whole island of Ireland to be under the rule of only one nation state, this stance, however, is missing the fact that in former times it was much easier to travel via sea than via land, therefore it is pretty comprehensible that ties between Northern Ireland and Scotland and the Union as a whole are closer than they are with the rest of the island. Thus, there is no way to avoid the reality that the people of the Republic of Ireland are essentially Catholic and Irish in upbringing, whereas in Northern Ireland there also is a large part of the population feeling stronger ties to Scotland and England than to Ireland itself.

5. Conclusion

In this essay I, first of all, have tried to bear out the stance that history is not just some objective view on past events and historical figures, but is almost always influenced by the ideology and prejudices of particular groups or individuals, that is to say history not only reflects past as it actually was, but also, and even more so, represents history as a certain political or otherwise influential group wants it to in order to serve its particular discourse.

This means by consequence that creation and perpetuation of present-day meaning and history, as seen in a specific framework of meaning have a reciprocal impact on each other.

This relation between historical discourse and contemporary discourse becomes especially perspicuous in cultural discourse in Ireland, respectively

Northern Ireland, where the several factions compete against each other for the preservation and prevalence of their respective outlook on history, which is why there have been more or less futile attempts to rewrite Irish history in a more objective fashion in the past decades.⁸

Apart from that I have attempted to illumine the intricacies of Irish history in order to figure out that the origins and reason for the Irish question are by no means simple in nature, but that the conflict between the different factions in Ireland this question is about, interferes with ethnic issues as well as with purely political and especially religious ones as well.

Finally I have exemplified the relation between historical discourse and how it is reflected in specific cultural discourses and practices in Ireland showing that contemporary cultural practices can almost directly be traced back to their historical roots.

6. Literature used

- (1) Boyce, D.G. and O'Day, A. (eds.) (1996): *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist controversy*. London: Routledge.
- (2) Kee, R. (1980): *Ireland, a history*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- (3) Salazar, C. (1987): 'Identities in Ireland: History, ethnicity and nation state', in *Cultural Studies* vol. 1(3) pp. 369-385. London: Sage.
- (4) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_History (14 July 2005)
- (5) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Derry (14 July 2005)
- (6) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Act_of_Union_1800 (14 July 2005)
- (7) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_the_Silent (14 July 2005)
- (8) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_III_of_England (14 July 2005)
- (9) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloody_Sunday_\(1920\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloody_Sunday_(1920)) (14 July 2005)

8 See Boyce, D.G. and O'Day, A. (eds.) (1996)