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“Teaching the poor of the Irish nation”: The Endeavours of the Protestant “Sons of Erin” to Educate Their Catholic “Brethren” in the Age of Catholic Agitation, 1800–1850

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Abstract

In Ireland, the Protestant missionary impetus of the early 19th century, known as the 'Second Reformation', coincided with Daniel O'Connell's movement for the emancipation of Catholics and the Repeal of the Union which concurrently met with resounding success. As the Irish nationalist movement was becoming more and more catholicised, The Irish Society for Promoting the Education of the Native Irish through the Medium of Their Own Language promoted access to the Bible in “the pure Gaelic language and the Irish character” for both the spiritual salvation of “the [poorer] sons of Erin” and “the political repose and moral amelioration of Ireland.” Even if the Second Reformation has often been considered as an attempt at anglicising the Irish through conversion, a reassessment of the reciprocal influences of Protestant missions and Irish nationalism is timely. Therefore, this paper, relying on a wide range of archival material, intends to examine how the discourse of this Protestant society disrupted the status quo of Irish and British identities. Was the Society's redefinition of Irish identity, which combined a shared Irish culture with loyalty to the British state, perceived by O'Connell's nationalist movement as a threat or an opportunity? This exploration of the relationship between Christianity and nationalism highlights the complex ties that can be found between several layered identities and disrupts the binaries of the vernacular being promoted by the champions of independence and of native languages being erased by the advocates of imperial rule.

Keywords: Education; vernacular; nationalism; loyalism; identities; Irish history; Protestantism

Introduction

Protestant missions in Ireland have often been associated with English “xenophobic nationalism” and accused of disrupting previous “general religious peace” (Bowen, 1978: xi, 206) by the “declaration of war” represented by the Protestant crusade to convert Catholics launched by William Magee's sermon at St. Patrick's Cathedral on the 24 October 1822 (Bowen, 1978). More recently, Protestant missions have been compared to a “vast institutional and ideological machinery that lay behind the drive to make Ireland a Protestant country” (Whelan, 1995: 136). This machinery included “a fully developed political doctrine rooted in the belief that the source of Ireland's social and political problems was the Catholic religion” (Whelan, 1995) – a doctrine widely shared among Protestants.

However, beyond the issue of British colonisation in Ireland, the contribution of the Evangelical movement to Irish nationalism still needs to be explored. By examining overlooked aspects of the relationship between Christianity and nationalism, this study intends to shed light on the complex ties that can be found between several layered identities and to go beyond the binaries of the vernacular being promoted by the champions of independence and of native languages being erased by the advocates of imperial rule. This article focuses on the case-study of the *Irish Society for the Education of the Native Irish through the Medium of Their Own Language* to explore the reciprocal influences

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of Protestant missions and Irish nationalism in order to better assess the extent to which the Irish Society stands apart in British attempts at anglicising the Irish people through education and conversion. Relying on the cross-examination of committee proceedings, personal and institutional correspondence, as well as British and Vatican official decrees, this article will discuss previous assertions regarding the Irish language in order to show the revolutionary nature of the use of the vernacular in a context of rising nationalism. Nevertheless, their interest in the “pure Gaelic language” cannot be considered apart from the Society’s missionary enterprise in Ireland and the complexity of its motivations. Finally, this paper will examine how the Irish Society’s missionary approach partook in a competition to gain popular support between diverging forms of what could be termed “loyal nationalism”.

A revolutionary Irish education

On February 28, 1819, in one of the new buildings of Sackville Street, Dublin that faced the recently erected Nelson’s Pillar in memory of the victor of Trafalgar, James Hewitt (1750–1830), Lord Viscount Lifford and Dean of Armagh, Mr Justice Fox (1757–1819), Colonel William John Gore (1767–1836), son of the Earl of Arran, and several clergymen gathered in the office of the *Irish Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Native Irish through the Medium of Their Own Language*.² During this committee meeting, they adopted an address prepared by the Revd Joseph d’Arcy Sirr (1794–1868), the son of Henry Charles Sirr (1764–1841), city mayor of Dublin, asking:

Will any of the more fortunate sons of Erin exclude their ignorant Gaelic Brethren from the advantages to be derived from the perusal of the Sacred volume, [...], doom them to an eternal barbarism [...]? Away with so ungenerous and unmanly a desire from those who having been nationalized among them have received their nurture from the same soil [...]. Is the command to ‘search the Scriptures’, addressed to all the world, but the Gael of Ireland? (IS, A [TCD/7644]: 12b)

This address was to be presented at the first annual meeting of the newly founded society on St. Patrick’s Day – a sign of his adoption by Irish Protestantism (Claydon and McBride, 1999). Its main objective was to convince members of the Dublin elite to support their endeavours to provide both nominal Protestants and Roman Catholics with education and Bibles in Gaelge. The plea emphasises both the charitable urge for “nationalized” Anglo-Irish Protestants – as they would define themselves – to bring the Bible to everyone, and the expected civilising effect of Bible-reading on their Gaelic countrymen. It also epitomises the British conviction that “the British Empire had been providentially ordained to facilitate the spread of the pure Protestant gospel” (McLeod, 2015: 12). Thus, they displayed an original “admixture” of Protestant missionary spirit with a professed Irish identity. Benedict Anderson has drawn attention to the awakening interest in the native language in the Irish nation-building process and highlighted how the promotion of English as a “vernacular language-of-state [...] elbowed Gaelic out of most of Ireland” (Anderson, 2006: 78). Yet, for most of the 19th century, Irish nationalist movements, such as the Catholic Association, and then the Repeal Association, still had no real interest in the vernacular. Their attitude was completely different from the “Gaelic revival” of the 14th and 15th centuries which had led to a form of cultural assimilation of Old English (Boyce, 1995). Daniel O’Connell, the leading advocate of Irish independence,³ even considered that he could “witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish” (Muller, 2012: 108).

² From now on the ‘Irish Society’, the ‘Society’ or the ‘IS’.

³ Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847), a fervent pacifist, was the most famous leader of the Catholic Association for Emancipation in the 1820s, before leading the Repeal of the Union movement in the 1840s. He is commonly known as ‘the Liberator’ in Ireland and beyond.



Conversely, for the Irish Society (IS), the vernacular was “an original language, the purest dialect of the Celtic [...] better suited to convey abstract truths to the mind of the unlearned than the English or any compounded tongue” (ISL, 1842: 16). We may therefore wonder how to interpret such a contrast.

In the historiography, the rules of the IS have generally been interpreted either as a prejudiced view of the language that ought to be extinguished or as a rejection of all that was native as barbaric. Donald Akenson thus asserts that the IS had “[n]o interest in preserving the language” and saw it only as “[the] quickest vehicle for reaching the souls of the peasants” (Akenson, 1970: 85). And indeed, several declarations could indicate such intentions. In the first pages of the Committee proceedings, we can read in the entry for 28 February 1819:

“the Committee trust that if they meet adequate encouragement in the prosecution of their Class comparatively few years will have elapsed before they shall effectually have supplanted the Gaelic Language in every part of Ireland, [and] established the Language of Britain in its place”. (IS, A [TCD/7644]: 14; 28)

Besides, their first rule stated that the native Irish may employ their instruction in the vernacular as “a means for obtaining an accurate knowledge of English” (IS, A [TCD/7644]: 3). Hence, their motivations seem to fit Irene Whelan’s analysis – that in the context of British global expansion, the “colonizing power”, through education and the legal system, would seek to permeate and control “the culture of the colonized” to improve their condition and in doing so justify their subjection (Whelan, 2005).

However, evidence demonstrates that this ‘imperialist’ mindset still went hand in hand with a genuine interest in the Irish language (Bowen, 1978), at least from some of the Irish Society’s most influential members. Until now, historians have tended to overlook the context in which the IS was established. Yet, looking more closely at the events that led to its foundation and their historical context provides invaluable insights. Their consideration for the language definitely contrasted with contemporary social prejudices, and some of their arguments in favour of the vernacular were even highly critical of former English policies towards Ireland (Mason, 1843: 8–9; 327). One should not overlook the fact that the promotion of the vernacular could still appear as an act of separatism less than two decades after the Act of Union and the abolition of the Irish parliament, of which the last speaker, RH John Foster (1740–1828), was one the Irish Society’s vice-presidents. Indeed, the ban instituted by Henry VIII, which associated the use of *Gaeilge* with treason,⁴ was still in force. Besides, suspicions seem to have remained present in British society, as the committee had repeatedly to answer criticisms and reiterate their denial of promoting the Irish language for its own sake.

First and foremost, the rules of the Society were directly inspired by the results of a query on the propriety of teaching in Irish that had been submitted to clergymen of the Church of Ireland in the preceding years by the *Association for Discountenancing Vice* (ADV). In his *Memoir of Power le Poer Trench, Last Archbishop of Tuam*, Joseph D’Arcy Sirr explains that the ADV eventually rejected education in Irish because of the great prejudices existing towards the vernacular and the fear that the Irish language would supersede the English one (1845: 549). No wonder then that the IS presented the use of the Irish language as a means to acquire English. Besides, this query played a decisive role in the establishment of the Society, since those who were convinced of the necessity of fostering Irish

⁴ Stat. Ire. 1786: 28 H 8. C.xv., qtd in Thomas Crowley, *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland, 1537–2004*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 14.

education decided to go ahead with this revolutionary step in favour of their fellow-countrymen. They were strongly encouraged by Christopher Anderson, a Scottish Baptist minister who was the founder of the Gaelic School Society in Scotland. As a specialist in Gaelic languages and printing history, his influence was decisive.⁵ He wrote to the committee in 1818:

knowing that I am now addressing an Irish Committee with reference to their own countrymen I would earnestly entreat their continued zealous attention to that object – teaching the Native Irish to read their own Language. Well assured as I am, that whatever may be advanced at present against this – the day will come when those who have taken up this object and prosecuted it, will be regarded as among the best benefactors of their Country. (signed) Christopher Anderson (IS, A [TCD/7644]: 6b)⁶

Hence, the first rule and other assertions⁷ could also be interpreted as a form of compromise and as a means to convince those who rejected the maintenance of the Irish language.

Secondly, the Irish Society's very existence proceeded from an initiative launched earlier by Thaddeus Connellan.⁸ A native Irishman, he first endeavoured to rally members of the elite in Ireland, as his correspondence with the Knight of Kerry, Maurice Fitzgerald, shows (Fitzgerald Papers, 9 oct 1816 [PRONI/639/6]).⁹ Thanks to his connection with the British and Foreign Bible Society, Connellan was a regular visitor to William Wilberforce from 1817 onwards. On May 30, 1817, Connellan was accompanied by the young J.D. Sirr, whose piety was noted by Wilberforce (William Wilberforce, [Bodleian Library/MS Wilberforce c. 37]). The latter promptly accepted the offer to become a Vice-President of the Irish Society of Dublin and remained one of its loyal contributors thereafter. With other members of the Clapham group, Wilberforce also contributed to the foundation of the London Irish Society in 1822. To gain and reassure their supporters in England, they published a *Brief Sketch* (1818) written by W.S. Sankey, in which they justified their use of Irish by referring to Queen Elizabeth I's provision of the Irish-type font at her own charge and her decision to print an Irish prayer book.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, it was also a means to put their endeavours in line with the Reformation's elevation of the vernacular Scriptures. Besides, their antiquarian approach led them to adopt Christopher Anderson's design (IS, A: 5), which after close examination of various printed books, the Bedell's printed Old Testament (1685) and New Testament (1681), as well as his manuscript of the Old Testament (1640s), turns out to be similar to Bedell's manuscript. They also referred to Dewar's *Observations* (1812),¹¹ which had identified two million Irish speakers out of the total population (IS, 1818, A, [TCD/7644]: 9).

⁵ In 1828, he published his *Historical Sketches of the Ancient Native Irish and their Descendants*; [...]. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1828.

⁶ Their emphasis. Christopher Anderson (1782–1852) was a Baptist theologian and preacher from Scotland who deeply influenced the IS by his promotion of the evangelisation of the Scottish Highlands, through schools and itinerant teachers, and by founding the *Edinburgh Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools* (1810). The Society regularly corresponded with him.

⁷ Reiterated in 1831 during the Tithe War.

⁸ A teacher and a supporter of the Gaelic language, Thaddeus Connellan (1780–1854) published the first dictionaries and schoolbooks in Irish. A convert from Catholicism to Protestantism since 1807, in 1810 he asked the *Baptist Irish Society* and the *British and Foreign Bible Society* to publish an Irish New Testament and promote the instruction of the Irish through their vernacular language. Sir Robert Peel mentioned his endeavours in 1814 (De Brún, 2009).

⁹ Maurice Fitzgerald was a Vice-President from the start.

¹⁰ The proceedings attribute the authorship to William Sankey, who resigned from the committee shortly after over financial disagreements.

¹¹ The total population was estimated at c.6 million.



Thirdly, these revolutionary decisions did not go unnoticed and raised suspicions. Evidence shows that in 1826 the Irish Society was still accused of threatening the promotion of English among the “natives”. Indeed, two members of the committee, the clergymen Robert Winning and John Gregg, deemed it necessary to advance a new resolution, stating:

the opinion entertained by some that the communication of knowledge through the medium of the Irish language would serve to spread & perpetuate the language in this kingdom, is demonstrated to be fallacious, by the daily proofs [...] of an ardent anxiety [...] to acquire a more perfect knowledge of the English language. (IS, B [7645]: 59)

Despite denials of this kind, several later decisions tend to confirm the Society’s genuine interest in the Irish language, or at least to refute a simplistic approach to their professed contribution to its eradication. The IS first ensured that the “teachers [...] be persons ‘competent to instruct their neighbours in the Irish language and character’ [...]” (De Brún, 2009: 85). In his study on the IS teachers, who were mainly Catholic, De Brún even considers that many were Irish scribes and poets who collected Irish manuscripts.¹² Besides, the Society’s correspondence shows that teachers and people alike rejoiced in having books in their mother tongue (De Brún, 2009). More importantly, in the early years of the Society, Henry J. Monck Mason, the chief-librarian of King’s Inn¹³ – mistakenly identified as one of the Society’s founders – forwarded a motion, “respecting the Establishment of a professorship of the Irish Language, in connection with this Society” (IS, B [7645]: 10b). A close friend of the poet Thomas Moore at Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), in the 1790s, he was also a founding member of the Hiberno-Celtic Society in 1818 (Whelan, 2005). His dream finally came true in March 1836, and the committee thus expressed themselves:

[W]e desire to express our satisfaction at the accomplishment of an object sanctioned in the year 1836 by the unanimous vote of the Provost and Board of the University namely the Establishment of a Professorship of the Irish language which we conceive to be an important means toward qualifying the rising class of ministers for carrying the message of mercy to the native population. (IS, C [GA/0182]: 167)

Finally, the active support of several Dublin University scholars led to the establishment of an Auxiliary Association in 1842–43, presided by the Provost, Revd Franc Sadleir,¹⁴ who considered the University “the seed plot of the Church” and wished to promote an Irish “missionary spirit” and Irish preaching (University Dublin Association, 1845). Finally in 1845, Henry J. Monck Mason was once more the one to raise the issue of an Irish scholarship, which was submitted to the Board of TCD in early March 1845, and finally adopted before the Annual General Meeting on 17th March. It was named the Bedell scholarship, after the Anglican bishop famous for his Irish translation of the Bible and his promotion of the vernacular (1845: 240–245).

On one hand, this emphasis on the “Ancient language” and its closeness to Irish hearts on the part of these Evangelicals shows that, contrary to assertions that Protestant antiquaries’ interest was

¹² Among whom many were Catholics. The 15th Report of the London Irish Society (parent society established in London in 1822) refers to 1090 Roman Catholic schoolmasters, 1837, p.10.

¹³ The Irish Society was established on June 23, 1818, whereas Monck Mason was admitted into the committee only on October 24, 1818 (IS, A [7644]: 4a).

¹⁴ Franc(is) Sadleir (1775–1851), FTCD. He was from 1824 to 1836 Erasmus Smith professor of mathematics, and from 1833 to 1835 regius professor of Greek. In politics Sadleir was a Whig, and his advocacy of Catholic emancipation was earnest and unceasing. He was in 1831 one of the first commissioners for administering the funds for the education of the poor in Ireland (ODNB). He was elected a member of the IS committee for the second year in 1819 (IS, A [7644]: 19b).

brought to an end by the 1798 rebellion before being resumed in the 1820s, it was still vivid among the Irish Society, and among influential members of the Dublin elite and of Dublin University (O'Halloran, 2012). On the other hand, it reveals how the defence of the Irish language was linked to the promotion of religious conversion. Indeed, the Society partook in the Evangelical movement as defined by Bebbington – a “movement of taste that stressed, against the mechanism and classicism of the Enlightenment, the place of feeling and intuition in human perception, the importance of nature and history for human experience” (Bebbington, 2005: 80).

A Protestant crusade or a missionary enterprise?

The strongest feeling in an Irishman's breast is a veneration for antiquity, and this strong feeling is cherished by education, by association, by party teaching, both in politics and in religion (a truth well known to the agitators of the present day): the turns which this feeling takes are, to love the primitive language, and as the people are led to suppose it to be, the primitive religion of Erin; and to detest the Saxon tongue, and the Saxon creed. (IS, 1832: 20–21)

Thus expressing their analysis of the people of Ireland, the committee members of the London Irish Society – a society established in 1822 not as an auxiliary, but as a parent society dedicated to the raising of funds and the promotion of the work in London – clearly identified the Irish people, their Gaelic language and Catholicism, as “primitive”, or closer to tradition and antiquity. In that sense, they agreed with the perception of the Catholic Association of Daniel O'Connell. However, while they acknowledged the importance of the language, they intended to bring them the Bible as a way for them to reach a form of enlightened Christianity. Thus, Catholics were, as Marietta Van der Tol and Matthew Rowley put it in the introduction, denied “coevalness” and othered “as coming from another place as well as from a lesser advanced time”.

Beyond the stress on feelings, the promotion of the Irish language also proceeded from the Evangelical zeal to preach the gospel in the vernacular and call for conversion, which was manifest in the Irish Society's appeal to the love of the Irish for their mother tongue. On a large scale, it was connected with the network of Bible societies, but on the national level it partook in the endeavours of what was to be known as the ‘Second Reformation’ movement. The movement has been described as “an attempt to integrate the Irish Catholic population into the British Protestant state by securing the conformity of the Irish people” (Brown and Miller, 2000) and an “exercise in cultural transformation and state building” (Brown, 2001). Yet, sincere religious convictions and Evangelical specificities should not be overlooked in analysing the development of home missions in Ireland. Whatever their political leanings may have been – and they were not homogenous within the IS – one should keep in mind that Evangelicals sought the conversion of all, whether Protestants, Jews, or Catholics, urging the “hearers to turn away from their sins in repentance and to Christ in faith” (Bebbington, 2005: 5). Thus, the mention of the Irish being in “barbarison” and the call of the Irish Society to bring them the light of the Scriptures is also to be understood in spiritual terms, since the “line between those who had undergone the experience and those who had not was the sharpest in the world. It marked the boundary between a Christian and a pagan” (Bebbington, 2005). In the early years, the Society clearly focused on instructing the Irish in order to facilitate their access to the Scriptures, hence the close collaboration with the *British and Foreign Bible Society* (BFBS). To fulfil that objective, they rejected controversial teachings and were cautious not to arouse tensions with Roman Catholic priests. They sometimes had to remind their collaborators that such was their course, as their answer to Revd Neligan shows. The latter wanted to open schools on Colonel Jackson's estate,



and they advised him to meet the local priests first, to assure them “that the Irish Society do not attempt to make proselytes, & that any of their schoolmasters who have interfered with the religious opinions of their pupils further than all persuasion of Christians are agreed, have done so without their consent [...]” (IS, A [TCD/7644]: 38). This was also clearly expressed in the instructions given to the masters, in a circular letter attached to the Second Report: “You are to avoid all controversy on religious subjects in the School, and merely to teach and read the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make wise unto salvation.” (IS, 1820: 25). However, this did not prevent opposition from the priests and the Catholic hierarchy.

This opposition had started relatively early because of the increasing local successes of the Society’s Irish schools. Growing concerns had led to the development of schools by Roman Catholic religious orders, such as the Christian Brothers. In 1820, the erection of Edmund Ignatius Rice’s Institutional schools had indeed been sanctioned by the apostolic brief “*Ad Pastoralis Dignitatis Fastigium*”, dated 5 September 1820, to ensure:

to the poor Catholic Boys of this Country the opportunity of being educated in the faith and principles of the Holy RC Religion, and rescuing them in great measure from the seductive Zeal of Sectarians and Bible School Societies whose efforts, especially of late, have been unceasing to subvert the faith of these poor children, taking advantage of their poverty, and endeavouring by artful kindness and presents to withdraw them from the fold of Christ, the holy RC Church (SC Irlanda, vol. 24/1: 23).

1820 was also the year when Daniel O’Connell, former member of the Kildare Place Society,¹⁵ resigned from its board of managers because they supported the Irish Society (Akenson, 2012). As FitzGerald puts it, “[i]t was this issue that first drew the Catholic priests to O’Connell’s flag” (2013: 17). His opposition intensified in 1826, when he condemned “the falsehood and lies of the Irish Society” (IS, B [TCD/7645]: 66) at a meeting of the Catholic Association. The IS had abstained from any public reaction “in expectation of the evidence by which he might support it”, since O’Connell’s charge concerned a “Resolution of the Irish Masters and Scholars” – a plea from Catholics to require access to the Scriptures and demanding Irish schools.¹⁶

A change in the Irish Society’s strategies would not be without consequences and would worsen their relationships with Catholics. While precaution and respect were at first the motto of the IS, developing Irish preaching nonetheless was of increasing interest for IS members, since spiritual conversion was also their objective. Initially, the Society had considered that Irish preaching and the circulation of sermons would put the circulation of the Scriptures at risk (IS, A [TCD/7644]: 50b). However, in 1826 they agreed to the establishment of a Ladies’ Auxiliary to the Irish Society (LAIS) who would mainly employ itinerant Irish readers to diffuse the Scriptures to the population, though their object was instruction and not evangelisation. The LAIS thus undertook the missionary side of the work. While certain members, like Anglican Archbishop William Magee,¹⁷ who declared in a sermon in 1822 that Catholics were “blindly enslaved to a supposed infallible ecclesiastical authority” (Wolffe, 1991: 33), clearly shared anti-Catholic leanings, others rather shared Thomas Chalmers’s conviction that “exclusion on the grounds of difference of religion was not justified if danger to the State had ceased” (Wolffe, 1991: 45). Nevertheless, with the growing success of the Emancipation

¹⁵ *Kildare Place Society*.

¹⁶ For example, on the Isle of Aran and in Kerry in 1821, vol. A, p. 59–60.

¹⁷ Archbishop of Dublin William Magee (1766–1831) gave a highly controversial sermon in October 1822, which Bowen identifies as the start of the ‘Second Reformation’ or ‘Protestant Crusade.’

campaign led by O'Connell and the passing of the Catholic Relief Act in 1829, evangelisation became more crucial, as Protestants could no longer rely on discriminating laws to promote their religion. Chalmers's exhortation in the *Record* was what inspired them:

[t]he nation is now put upon its trial: Protestantism has quitted the vantage ground of privilege and power, to descend in the arena of equal conquest. If the spirit which animated the first Reformers is still alive, we entertain no fear for the issue of the contest. (Wolffe, 1991)

While acknowledging the religious pluralism of the kingdom, this missionary turn also enhanced the imminent necessity to preserve the nation from the Catholic 'other' through conversion, now that the Catholics had been incorporated within 'the people'. No wonder then that more emphasis was put on Irish preaching in 1830, following a meeting of Christian friends "who took in consideration the necessity of a more extensive use of the Irish language in promoting the Evangelization of Ireland" (IS, B [TCD/7645]).¹⁸

As Bowen reminds us, "[p]reaching to Catholics in Irish was usually considered by the priests to be a sign that the parson had become aggressive in religious affairs – that he was a proselytiser" (Bowen, 1978: 155). Crossing language borders was identified as trespassing the frontier between testimony and proselytism, thus mixing several kinds of disruptions of the status quo – ethnic, linguistic, and territorial – to promote the ultimate subverting border-crossing: religious conversion. However, giving popular access to the Bible was in itself a transgression of the Papal edicts, since Pope Leo XII had issued in 1824 a first encyclical in which he condemned Bible societies, namely the BFBS, because they strove "by all means, to translate, or rather to counterfeit the Holy Scriptures in all national languages" (Archivio Segreto Vaticano, 1854: 48).¹⁹ It was then reinforced in 1827 by a second encyclical, "Dirae Librorum" (ASV, 1855: 77).²⁰ Therefore, long before the development of the *refuges* for converts, equivocally named 'colonies' in Achill and Dingle by local Protestants, the Catholic Association capitalised politically on opposing the Irish Society, which was supported by the BFBS (Bénazech Wendling, 2019 & 2021). As these colonies provided work and houses for the peasants who had converted to Protestantism while attending Irish schools, their denunciation by the Catholic local elite provided "a forum for the airing of grievances about proselytism" and also gave priests experience in participatory democracy", such as sharing political platforms during mass meetings, that would prove ultimately beneficial to the Repeal movement (Whelan, 2005).

For some in the historiography, promoting conversion was significant enough of overtly aggressive behaviour. And indeed, the Evangelical movement has often been accused of waging a war against Catholics because they sought their conversion (Brown, 2001). However, this overlooks the fact that conversion was also desired for "nominal" Protestants. Similarly, previous studies focused mainly on Evangelicals who opposed Emancipation, while many among the founders of the Irish Society supported it. This may stem from the fact that previous studies focused on missions established mainly by English Protestants, such as the ICM. Indeed, as Bowen summarises, "what the missionaries brought from England was not only English Evangelicalism, but an extension of British culture and civilisation, which neither the Irish Catholic nor indeed the Irish Protestant welcomed without qualification" (Bowen, 1978: 252). Nevertheless, this eludes some of the complexities of the Evangelical movement for converting Ireland, which was initiated by people who considered

¹⁸ 4th June 1830.

¹⁹ "[A]c modis omnibus intendit, ut in vulgares linguas nationem omnia sacra vertantur, vel potius pervertantur Biblia."

²⁰ His successors would follow his steps in the next decades.



themselves as Irishmen, whether Catholic converts or Anglo-Irish, thus proving that “the balance between religious conversion, social improvement and political identity was complex” (Holmes et al., 2017: 93). Furthermore, while the Act of Emancipation may have demonstrated the success of the Catholic Association in gaining the support of the Irish Catholic bishops and popular masses, it did not end “the hopes of uniting the peoples of England and Ireland in a common faith”. On the contrary, the following years saw renewed missionary efforts, which could also represent a competitive form of Irish “loyal nationalism”.²¹

Redefining Irishness?

Together let [the British muse and her elder sister] walk abroad from their bowers, sweet ambassadors of cordial union between two countries that seem formed by nature to be joined by every bond of interest, and of amity. (Brooke, 1789 in Valone et al., 2008: 194)

Far from putting an end to both Catholic demands and Protestant missionary efforts, the post-Emancipation era witnessed a competition to win the hearts of the Irish masses that took place between two conceptions of the Irish nation, advanced by actors who all proclaimed loyalty to the crown. Protestant missions have often been presented as counteracting the rise of Catholic nationalism by anglicising the Irish, and rightly so. However, evidence reveals the *chiaroscuro* of a missionary discourse infused with Irish national sentiments, thus complexifying the portrait of Protestant missions in Ireland. While the nationalism of O’Connell’s movement has now been extensively studied, references to Ireland as their nation, to the love of Erin, and to their society as national permeate the discourse of the Irish Society’s members and therefore cannot be associated with British “xenophobic nationalism” as such. Some may consider these professions as hypocritical or as a form of Trojan horse meant to dupe Irish Catholics. The numerous scholars among the founders, often members of the Royal Irish Academy (Henry J. Monck Mason, Charles Orpen, Franc Sadleir, James Todd, etc.), were in fact the heirs of the 18th century antiquarians, who believed that the study of Celtic culture and antiquities “would unite the various ethnic groupings in Ireland” (Ní Mhúngaile, 2008: 188). Indeed, the emphasis on the ‘pure Gaelic’ language by the IS may be partly considered as an attempt to find a common ground between the “natives” and the “Anglo-Irish” in a form of “cultural unionism”, clearly visible in their Address:

Let Irishmen of wealth, & influence, & energy, come forward, in the noble work of regenerating some of the fairest portions of our Island it is their neglected brethren who crave their Birthright a full and unequivocal participation in a common inheritance. Nor let our fellow subjects beyond the channel refuse to aid in so desirable an enterprise they shall be repaid fourfold into their bosom. [...] Let no narrow policy impede the general weal or procrastinate the admission of Three Million of our fellow Countrymen to the unqualified enjoyment of British privileges and happiness. (IS, A [TCD/7644]: 13b–14)

Contrary to the “language essentialism” of Thomas Davis in the late 18th century – which identified the Gaelic language as the roots of Irish identity but did not seek to preserve or encourage it yet (Ó Tuathaigh, 2017) – the Irish Society committee members clearly identified themselves as Irishmen, while demanding for their countrymen, the same privilege of access to the Bible in the vernacular as a means of “regeneration” for the nation. It thus confirms David Hempton’s assertion that “in each country evangelical enthusiasm contributed both to the expression of national distinctiveness and to

²¹ The term has also been used by Taras Kuzio to distinguish the different nationalist groups according to their relation to the federation (Kuzio, 2007: 181).

a shared British Protestant nationalism” (Hempton, 1996: 49). This sense of national identity, whether inherited from Gaelic origins as was the case for Thaddeus Connellan, or adopted by Anglo-Irish, was manifested from above by an elite who “showed an interest in native relics and antiquities” such as Irish manuscripts. Taking pride “in the glories of an ancient civilisation” (Ó Tuathaigh, 2017), they are often accused of spoliation. Indeed, it may be perceived as appropriating “the common name of Irishman” (Claydon and Bride, 1999). Even if they did not endeavour “to establish a common bond with their catholic countrymen” by renouncing their privileges, they nonetheless facilitated a process similar to that of the *Old English* some centuries earlier. Hence, following their predecessors, they no longer tended to “switch backwards and forwards between Englishness and Irishness” (Barnard, 1999), but rather redefined their Irishness as sharing an Irish cultural legacy, as well as belonging with many other nationalities to the British Empire. Some members of the committee, such as Robert Daly, Anglican Bishop of Cashel (1843–72), the son of R.H. Denis Daly, had indeed been former supporters of Henry Grattan and promoted a “Protestant version of Irish nationalism” (Bowen, 1978).

However, this initial attitude evolved in the 1840s and 1850s when the Irish Society of London became deeply influenced by Ultra-Protestants. After changes in governmental policies mainly regarding education, such as the foundation of the National Education system in 1831, the increase of the Maynooth Grant or the establishment of Queen’s Colleges in 1845 that we have studied elsewhere (Author, 2021), outcries of ‘No Popery’ became vocal again as Irish Protestants felt their status was being threatened. On 23 June 1845, the National Club was established in London “to support the ‘Protestant Principle of the Constitution’” and oppose the government’s policies (Bowen, 1978). Beyond the shared patronage of the Duke of Manchester and the Earl of Roden, we can find indications of connections between the National Club and the Irish Society’s network. Indeed, the National Club contributed financially to the Dingle and Ventry Mission, a *refuge* colony founded for converts in 1839 (Dingle and Ventry Mission Association, 1849: 30) in connection with the IS. Two tendencies seem to have emerged within the Irish Society, perfectly illustrated on the local level of the Dingle peninsula (in County Kerry on the West coast of Ireland) by two distinct characters: the local convert Thomas Moriarty, who claimed to meet no opposition from the Catholics in his Ventry parish, and Samuel Lewis, an English clergyman close to Alexander Dallas (1791–1869), who favoured controversial sermons and met harsh opposition from Catholics in Dingle. Moriarty and Lewis were both working for the Irish Society. In 1847, Dallas was in epistolary contact with the Irish Society of Dublin to gain the support of the committee for his evangelisation campaign (IS, C [ICM/GA/0182]: 305). As a member of the ISL, Dallas was unsatisfied by the Dublin Society’s mild approach and the committee’s refusal to capitalise on the Famine. With Edward Bickersteth (1786–1850), he pushed for the creation of a ‘Special Fund for the Spiritual exigencies of Ireland’ which benefited the ISL and the LAIS during the Famine (ISL, 1848: 12; IS, C: 286), but was met with apprehension on the part of the ISD and other supporters, such as the Primate of Ireland. Since they were reluctant in taking advantage of people “suffering under the famine” (Beresford, 1847, PRONI/D3249/C/8/14), Dallas and other Ultra-Protestants established a new mission in 1849, the *Irish Church Mission to the Roman Catholics* (ICM), considering this ‘national calamity’ as a providential opportunity to gain converts (Moffitt, 2010). Clearly inspired by premillennialism and the conviction that the fall of Napoleon would be followed by that of the Pope, Dallas and his followers relied on an imagined ‘End Times’ Protestant victory in Irish hearts that led them to disregard Irish Catholics’ beliefs and traditions. However, such disregard proved to extend to the Irish people as a whole, Anglo-Irish included, as the fate of the Irish Society of Dublin demonstrates. Despite concerns expressed by the Dublin committee, financial restrictions led them to reach an agreement with the



London committee in favour of a merger with the ICM in 1853. To reassure them, Dallas asserted in his letter to the Dublin committee that he “had no desire that the ‘Irish Society should lose its nationality or cease to exist’” (Bowen, 1978: 227). To prove it, the agreement entailed a territorial division, reserving the Irish-speaking areas for the IS, but the alliance only survived for three years, as the ICM was only interested in conversions, and not in Irish education. Besides, the Dublin Irish Society committee strongly opposed any “open aggression”, a position that was similar to the great majority of Irish Protestants who, as Bowen stresses, refused to irritate their Catholic neighbours (Bowen, 1978).

As the ISD lost ground on their own island, Dallas and the ISL displayed a strong sense of British superiority which is quite visible in the 17th report:

[s]criptural education is the best security for subordination, and that the Irishman will not be turbulent if he may but hear the ‘story of peace’; the soothing accents of that voice, which can calm the raging elements, and even assuage the more turbulent wrath of man. (ISL, 1839: 21)

Similarly, the reports of the Dingle Mission clearly show hints of cultural superiority. Arthur E. Gayer, then secretary, thus stressed “the comparative cleanliness and comfort which mark the converts”, that did strike the peasants who “are beginning to ask for ‘that book that made England so great’”, as if the Bible alone could be the source of British power and stability. The “cultural imperialism” studied by Bowen is therefore undeniable from the Famine onwards. But, while there was a ‘culture war’ between English protestants of the ISL and Irish Catholics, it was also a confrontation between different kinds of national awareness between the ISD and its Catholic opponents. Hence, the confrontation was more complex than a simple opposition between Irish and English nationalisms, since the sense of national identity demonstrated by the founding members of the Irish Society of Dublin combined a form of Irish national awareness with imperial pride. However constrained locally that pride might have been, this version of Irish awareness was in direct confrontation with the nationalism advanced by O’Connell. As Protestants, they did not question their colonial legacy, and contrary to O’Connell’s movement, they dissociated Irish identity from a religion they considered intrinsically linked to the past. Moreover, since O’Connell had chosen to emphasise the catholicity of Irish identity in his strategy to gain the support of the people and the Catholic Church, many Protestants distanced themselves from nationalist demands. Historians generally agree on the fact that Protestant missions played an important role in the catholicisation of the Irish nationalist movement led by O’Connell.

However, the number of pupils in Irish schools alone cannot explain the fears of the Catholic Church and elite. At first, many priests either supported the efforts of the Society, or at least did not oppose it, as this letter from the Roman Catholic Bishop Kinsella of Ossory shows:

It must also be allowed altho’ I disapproved of the Bible without note or comment as a school book that I was liberal in my views having made an offer to Rev. Denny to join him in a school in employing a Protestant Master and I a Catholic [...].²²

How then did the Irish schools become a real threat to the definition of Irish identity advanced by the Catholic Association? The Commissioners of Education had estimated the total numbers of enlisted pupils at 568,954 in 1826 (FitzGerald, 2013: 21). Notwithstanding the fact that the 3,000

²² To Paul Cullen, 3 January 1831, Rector of the Irish College, CUL 35.

pupils may seem derisory in comparison, the Catholic Church and O'Connell's concerns are better explained if we consider that the main bulk of the pupils were adult peasants and therefore were potentially the same people who assembled during mass meetings. Besides, adult pupils became more and more numerous in the pre-Emancipation period, reaching more than 14,000 out of a total of c.19,000 pupils in six years.²³ No wonder then that "the priesthood moved virtually *en bloc* into political agitation and organisation" (McDonagh, 1975), playing a pivotal role in O'Connell's movement. Since the National Education system and the Queen's Colleges were perceived as a means to "deatholicize the country," even more so were the Evangelical endeavours in Irish education (Dr Cullen, 1850, ICR/KIR/NC/1/1850/62). Evangelical activity thus became "a useful scapegoat" (Wolffe, 1991) that partook in strengthening the link between the native population of Ireland and the Catholic Church in a unified "resistance to evangelical missions" (Whelan, 2005). In this context, accusations of corrupting the converts were published in the local press,²⁴ which passed on to posterity as "souperism". Letters denouncing the danger of Irish schools pervade Paul Cullen's correspondence. They are described as "insidious snares [...] calculated to lure" the Catholic peasants and "executed by heretics", "snares" that were even worse than the previous persecutions by the Anglican government to effect "the annihilation of Catholicity".²⁵ While such accusations of souperism before the Famine concentrated around the use of Bibles at school, they proved to be more accurate during the Famine as schools indeed distributed food and clothes. Because of this unfair religious competition, there was a legitimate fear of losing the cultural dimension of their Catholic faith.

In their attacks against Protestant missions, some also aimed to protect the conception of Irish identity that was advocated by the Catholic Defence Association and the Repeal Movement. In his letter to the Catholics of Ireland of July 1826, O'Connell stated that Irish Catholics were "the people, emphatically the people" and that "the Catholic people of Ireland are a nation" (Hempton, 1996), thus othering the Protestants from the Irish people. According to him, not only were the Catholics the true Irish people, but "the Catholic Church [was] a national church" (Boyce, 1995). Since it demanded "political autonomy *and* religious recognition", and even religious exclusivity in the national character, it fits Rieffer's definition of religious nationalism (Barker, 2009). Nevertheless, if we follow here the broadest definition of nationalism as "conscious and deliberate efforts, by political, economic, social or cultural means, to develop and assert a perceived national identity, generally through the sustaining or creation of a corresponding nation state" (Wolffe, 1994: 15), they did not oppose the Irish Society's conception of national identity on the ground of complete political separation. Indeed, O'Connell's nationalism professed to be loyal to the Crown. As Whelan argues, "[t]he essence of [...] 'liberal unionist' or 'Catholic liberal' [ideology,] was that loyalty to the constitution", since it was "the most effective way to secure the political rights still denied to Catholics". Therefore, Protestants did not have the monopoly on loyalty, as "once restored to their rights the Catholics of Ireland would be proud to see their country [...] admitted as a full and equal partner in the British union of nations and would prove the equal of any of the other nations when it came to loyalty" (Whelan, 2005). In a way, both the Catholic Association and the Irish Society combined a sense of Irish national identity and loyalty to the Crown, entangled with obedience to their respective churches which they perceived as national.

²³ Cf. 5th, 6th, and 7th Report of the Irish Society.

²⁴ For example, "The Dingle Mission", *Kerry Examiner*, 18 March 1845. "A 'Souper' Invasion", *the Sligo Champion*, August 22, 1853. BNA.

²⁵ N. Kearney to Cullen, 14 August 1850, 39/1/VIII/66A, p. 2; Michael Montague, 1850, 5 June 39/1/VIII/20, Cullen Papers, DDA.



Conclusion

All in all, could the Irish Society's conception of national identity really be considered as a form of religious nationalism? While they claimed to defend the interest both of their Irish "Brethren" and of the Established Church – even excluding from their committee Protestants who did not belong to it – their conception does not match Gellner's definition of nationalism, since they did not hold a congruent political and national unit (Gellner, 1983), thus confirming Oliver McDonagh's assertion that after the Union, "most Protestants had reverted to a conscious dependency on Britain, making them again 'outer Britons'" (McDonagh, 1983: 17). Far from sharing "the necessity of degaelicising Ireland" of their patriotic predecessors, they still demonstrated, as their 18th century predecessors, "the transient and conditional nature of Anglo-Irish nationalism" and the will to see "Irishmen 'melted'" (McBride, 1999: 260) in the religion of the Britons.

Conversely, O'Connell's movement called for the abrogation of the Union and the reinstatement of the autonomous parliament, even if he wished to remain within the Empire.²⁶ Indeed, complete independence meant losing the advantages derived from the Empire both for Ireland and the Catholic Church. If the Irish language was not promoted by the Catholic hierarchy beyond its use for pastoral needs in the first half of the 19th century, it was also because their missionary horizon was the expanding British Empire (Ó Tuathaigh, 2017). The continuing development of Protestant missions in Ireland underscored the necessity of the Catholic Church to invest their efforts in home missions. This is what the Propaganda Fide and Paul Cullen would do, by promoting ultramontanist in Ireland and the whole United Kingdom. What both movements shared was in fact a "nationalism of faith" (Boyce, 1995). On the one hand, O'Connell and the Catholic hierarchy promoted an autonomous Ireland where the Catholic Church would regain its leading position of the 'national' church. On the other hand, the Irish Society defended an Irish national identity within a Protestant United Kingdom, thus remaining promoters of the Establishment on which they relied for their mission. Notwithstanding the contribution of the Irish Society to Irish nationalism in its catholicisation, the legacy of the Irish Society can eventually be traced in the inspiration they provided to the Gaelic revival that was to emerge in the late 19th century in their desire to promote and preserve the Irish language. Indeed, beyond the specific situation of 19th century Ireland, this study once more sheds light on the intricacies of layered identities shared by individuals, groups, and nation states, which comprise a blend of cultural, political, linguistic, religious, and sometimes imperial senses of belonging, and which are becoming increasingly complex with the modernisation, pluralisation, and globalisation of human societies.

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²⁶ This and the catholicization of the movement would eventually arouse tensions within the Repeal movement and contribute to the emergence of the Young Irelanders.

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