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Leaving Out the Boring Bits: Writing the Family in the Australian-Irish Diaspora

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Issues of purity, cultural loss, and whiteness all play significant roles in Australian-Irish diasporic identity (Walter, 2001). Much writing on the Australian-Irish diaspora was made before the emergence of diaspora as a rigorous field of critical enquiry and articulation. As a result, much of the work is placed in a subjective, interactive field of sentiment and ambiguous statistics rather than in a critical framework. This complements the unstable nature of family stories as malleable oral tradition (Walter, 2001: 206).

The process of what Toni Morrison terms 're-membering' (1984: 213) has a strong impact on cultural and social structures. Kinship structures in particular seek to mark themselves culturally through re-memory, as generational gaps exacerbate loss of connection and knowledge in lieu of known facts and stories. In this paper, I will be using an example from my own family to illustrate this process.

‘Irish Diaspora’: A Problematic Term

Central to the investigation is the question of diaspora itself in the Irish context. Bronwen Walter, Jim MacLaughlin and Breda Grey all express wariness of the term in regards to the ongoing mass emigration of Irish men and women. Walter writes, ‘Power is often overlooked in the celebration of diaspora and hybridity in contemporary cultural criticism.’ (2001: 7-8)

Breda Gray’s reservations are centred more directly on the rhetoric coming from the Republic of Ireland’s political leaders and academics on the diaspora. Gray posits that ‘Questions of how, and in whose interests, the academic and political focus is shifting from the national to the global must be addressed in contemporary analysis of Irishness’ (1997: 231). She argues that this rhetoric actually alienates the people it is trying to engage, especially women. She writes:

  diasporic experience is discussed mainly in cultural, political and economic terms in such a way that it ignores the many ways in which culture, politics and economics are gendered and literally ‘classified.’ Cultural representations of the Irish diasporic woman are few and far between. (Gray, 1997: 229)

She goes on to outline the strong resentment the women participating in her study felt towards Mary Robinson’s speech, entitled ‘Cherishing the Irish Diaspora.’ The women felt, justifiably, that in the speech Robinson laid full responsibility of passing on Irish
culture to their children onto women (Gray, 1997: 229) while at the same time excluding them from the experience of migration, which is typified in hegemonic rhetoric as ‘masculine’ and ‘adventurous’.

Jim MacLaughlin expresses stronger reservations about Irish hegemonic rhetoric on the diaspora. He expresses his skepticism in what he describes as a deep suspicion of increasingly sanitised views which suggested that today’s Irish emigrants were moving to benign taxfields and fields of opportunities in Europe. This was what political leaders in particular suggested after they ‘rediscovered’ the reality of emigration (MacLaughlin, 1997b: 3).

He points out that, despite the rhetoric, ongoing Irish emigration is not behavioural, or cultural, or undertaken in a spirit of adventure (MacLaughlin, 1997a: 6). The highest proportion of Irish émigrés continues to be by far from the rural poor and the working class. These people have not ‘chosen’ to emigrate for a better lifestyle or opportunities. They have been displaced (MacLaughlin, 1997a: 9). MacLaughlin argues that, at the heart of this continuing displacement, are issues of class struggle and capitalism (1997a: 6).

‘Diaspora’ has become, as MacLachlin, Gray, and Walter point out, a sanitising and homogenising political buzzword in relation to the Irish. Their reservations must be considered in a globalised capitalist economy. However, while the traps of popular discourse on diaspora and hybridity and their avoidance of structural issues must be noted (Kalra, Kuar & Hutnyk, 2005: 15), these arguments lack a consideration of the generational nature of diaspora. Kalra, Kuar & Hutnyk posit that discarding diaspora ‘marks groups who have never migrated but are the offspring of migrants as not belonging to a particular place’(2005: 14). Their own reservations in regard to the Irish diaspora are quite different. They describe groups such as the Irish and the Jews as “white but not quite”(Kalra et al., 2005: 115); groups who have both suffered colonial oppression and yet have access to the privileges of the dominant hegemony due to colour and, in the Irish case, English as a first language (Kalra et al., 2005: 115-117).

They write:

Parallels such as comparing racism against the Asians and the Irish in England, or proclaiming the Irish as the ‘Blacks of Europe’ are limited: ‘Black' remains an opportunistic category for the Irish, one which they can easily slip out of as and when they want to… (Kalra et al., 2005: 116).

This analysis explodes the conceit that the contemporary experience of Irish emigration and diaspora is comparable to that of groups marked by different skin colour and language. It also rightfully subverts the popular concept that Irish Catholics are somehow completely innocent in the violent oppression of indigenous peoples in Australia (Bielenberg, 2000: 224-225) or of similar acts of slavery and genocide in colonial contexts in the United States, Africa and India.

However, this analysis disregards the experiences of past generations of Irish migrants, who were often subjected to racial persecution, restricted freedoms and rights, resulting ghettoisation, and, in the case of Irish Catholics, religious persecution. Also, in its resentment of the Irish ease of assimilation into white hegemonies, this analysis also disregards issues of ‘passing,’ cultural loss, displacement, gender and the position of cultural minority groups within Irish identity. Bronwen Walter reports that, in a 1997 survey, ‘respondents were asked, “Have you ever felt the need to play down your Irish identity?” A substantial minority (19 per cent) said they had . . . ’ (2001: 176). Children of Irish émigrés are typically encouraged to assimilate into the dominant culture. This is partly because of Irish concepts of cultural purity—the migrant parent does not see the child as ‘authentically’ Irish—but it is also to avoid persecution (Walter, 2001: 215-266). When Kalra, Kuar & Hutnyk write, somewhat archly, ‘there
appears to be a fetishization of the "loveable Irish rogue" (2005: 116), they present this as a positive experience. What it is, in fact, is an infantilizing, gender-specific stereotype—not only a decidedly negative experience, but one that is not applicable in any way to Irish women.

This kind of omission of women from the analysis reverberates throughout all areas of the Irish diaspora. Walter has found that major gaps are created as women's experiences of migration are often uncommunicated (2001: 205) because women do not have access to the dialogue of emigration, and are thereby lost. This process builds gaps and silences into family histories and cultural loss over generations is thereby exacerbated.

Between the malleability identified by Kalra, Kaur & Hutnyk and the silences and deliberate suppression of identity described by Walter, there emerges what I will term a 'trickster' element to diasporic Irish identity. In a generational context, this shifting identity of ancestors and the need to rebuild a family identity results in storytelling. In my own family, oral stories of Irish ancestors are all, tellingly, of men, women's stories having been lost. They contain large elements of re-memory, parables of suffering, romanticism, and the sheer enjoyment of storytelling. The men are mysterious figures who are somehow inaccessible and who failed, in one way or another, to convey any clear account of themselves to their children. The ultimate trickster character is represented in my great grandfather, Henry John Dobson.

Irish Diasporic Kinship and the Role of the Trickster

‘Family’ and ‘kinship’ are subjective terms. Kinship structures vary, and are built along sentimental and practical lines as well as on concepts of consanguinity and affinitive links. However these variations do not exist in a vacuum. Kinship structures vary according to purpose and according to dynamics of exchange. Anthropologist Peter Schweitzer observes:

kinship comes in a variety of packages and with a multitude of meanings attached.... However, the celebration of diversity of ethnographic detail carries a variety of potential pitfalls and dangers.... If we look beyond the local meanings of...individual cases we see a limited number of social constellations in which these culture-specific concepts of relatedness are employed. The structural constraints of how people engage kinship bring us back to the 'functional' aspects.... [K]inship strategies are employed predominantly within two major fields of power: relations between people and people, and relations between people and things (2000: 207-208).

He adds that to assume these terms relate directly and solely to politics and economics would be a mistake. More abstract concepts are also involved. He cites concepts of health and personhood in Inuit societies, vision quests in Amazonian communities, and concepts of honour in Portuguese and Turkish societies as examples (Schweitzer, 2000: 208).

In the absence of known facts and ongoing cultural transmission in my own family, a connection to a sense of Irishness (or being Irish) is largely built on stories of ancestors. My two paternal great grandfathers figure largely in this, but of most interest is my grandmother’s father. This trickster character has come to embody perfectly the Irish diasporic notions of oppression, and, indeed, the ‘loveable Irish rogue.’ Stories about this character change according to need, and are highly unreliable. Even the certain facts are confusing.

These are the facts that are more or less known. Henry John Dobson had two birth certificates. One places his birth in Wicklow, Ireland; the other in Kent, England. Before coming to Australia, he married a woman in Margate, Kent. They had at least one son. The woman’s family was outraged by the marriage and probably had it annulled. The
family in question probably paid Dobson a regular allowance—a remittance—to leave the country and emigrate to Australia. At some point, he won a lottery and bought a hotel in Griffith. He and his friends then proceeded to drink it dry, and he was soon back to where he started. During this period he married, possibly an act of bigamy, my great grandmother, Sarah Halford. She was 19 years old at the time of the marriage and twenty years his junior. They had a family. One of the youngest children was my grandmother, Eileen. She had no idea about the previous family until one day, near the end of the Second World War, a telegram arrived, telling her father that his first son had been killed in battle. His son had been named after him.

Here is an example of a more unreliable story: Henry John Dobson ran a hotel in Griffith. One day, an Englishman began playing high and mighty with the Irish publican. Incensed, Dobson shot him. The man survived and the matter was brought before the court. Fortunately, the judge was Irish too. He let Dobson off with a warning, making his sympathies clear. This story had always been told by my grandmother and her siblings as a proud one—one that marks our family out as authentically Irish, and emphatically not English.

Sometimes, Dobson is conveyed as an alarming yet emotionally distant alcoholic. At other times, he is musical, charming and a lady killer. Sometimes, my grandmother was named after his first girlfriend in Ireland and sometimes not. He has been described variously as ‘a wide boy,’ a ‘rogue,’ a ‘nice man,’ and a loving, if distracted, parent. An analysis of why someone who had the experiences he had had might be variously an alcoholic, a ‘wide boy’ or a ‘rogue’ is never entered into. These considerations are uncomfortable and potentially upsetting, definitely not entertaining. Nor has anyone in the family ever openly concluded, to my knowledge, the obvious: that the English birth certificate is the forgery. Dobson is left in an unsullied state of ambiguity, in an unstable field of identity, that gives power to the storyteller. Our family has become skilled, in its processes of re-memory, in leaving out the boring bits.

Despite this, the assumption has always been firmly in place that Dobson was a ‘mad Irishman’ of one description or another—until recently. My grandmother has recently begun a process of revising her portrayal of her father who is as much a mystery to her as it is to her children and theirs. She has begun to reject aspects of the character that may be seen as unsavoury or rebellious, such as drinking, temper, and so on—characteristics she associates with his Irish identity (and, by extension, ours). On my last visit, I brought up the story of the shooting with my grandmother. I was a little taken aback when she denied all knowledge of the story. I was totally lost for words when she went on to say, ‘Why would he shoot someone, just for being English? He was English himself’ (Eileen Flattley, personal communication, 18th May 2007).

**Writings on the Irish Diaspora – A Dubious Legacy**

Popular writings on the Irish diaspora, often posing as academic texts, similarly leave out difficult or boring topics. There are further gaps, also. These pertain to the experiences of Irish blacks, gays, Jews, travellers, transgendered, gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer identities (Walter, 2001; Grey, 2004) and, of course, women. One unintentionally hilarious example of this last omission can be found in a book entitled *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer*. On the cover, the book proudly proclaims itself a necessary item for any serious student in the field. In a chapter entitled ‘Women and the Irish Diaspora: The Great Unknown,’ it reads:

> The single most severe limitation on our knowledge of the Irish diaspora is this: we know surprisingly little about Irish women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, either in the homeland or in their New Worlds. With any ethnic group this sort of deficit would be a serious problem, but with the Irish it is especially debilitating, because females were half of the diaspora. (Akenson, 1996: 157)
The chapter then draws to an abrupt, vaguely apologetic close. In total, the chapter takes up two pages of the book.

In North America, writings focus on mythologies about the Great Famine in a conscious effort to 'build' an Irish identity (Wonneberger, 2004: 117). Irish identity in the 'States is celebrated and fetishized (Wonneberger, 2004: 117). It is therefore a major market for writings concerning the Irish diaspora, and has until recently attracted far more attention both from within and without the 'States than the Australian example (which has, in turn, attracted more attention than other parts of the globe according to Walsh (2003: 9)). It is a highly sentimental market, with a pre-formed line of rhetoric in place. It focuses on the Irish emigration of past centuries and ignores the ongoing wave of large-scale emigration from Ireland to the United States. It is a move which affects not only the ways in which the diaspora is actualised within the 'States, but lines of rhetoric within itself. Of Irish diaspora scholarship within the Republic of Ireland, MacLaughlin writes:

we...know more about...pre-Famine trends, including the status of Irish emigrants in Victorian Britain and...the United States in the nineteenth century, than we do about young Irish school leavers and college graduates in the international labour market today (1997a: 5-6).

Equally sentimental, also largely retrospective, Australian writings on the Irish diaspora are less informed and less genealogical, yet less histrionic in nature, compared to American writings. They are, however, equally uninformative. A typical example of this kind of work is that of Tim Pat Coogan's Wherever Green Is Worn. Coogan's chapter on Australia is made up of thinly-disguised hagiographies, describing the lives of people from, for example, Ronald Ryan, the last man to be hanged in the State of Victoria, to the recent federal Prime Minister, Paul Keating. The work has a tendency towards hyperbole and uses sporting metaphors, possibly in an attempt to create a masculine, working class tone. The result is highly emotive sentences, such as 'Early Australian society was brutal. Like rugby out-halves, there were two types of people, the quick and the dead' (Coogan, 2000: 439).

Coogan's writing positions Irish Australians as honourable outsiders. He places his characters as other to the hegemonic, Anglo-Saxon construction of whiteness. His Irish heroes are humanitarian and considered in nature; 'decent' people who are beneficial to society as a whole. He presents his subjects as either martyrs (Ryan), success stories (Keating), or educators. At one point, he informs us that Irish convicts were instrumental in educating their less refined English jailers and in running the colonies on their behalf (Coogan, 2000: 439-440). He describes the settlement not as what it actually was, a penal colony, but instead in more appealing terms as an 'antipodean adventure' (Coogan, 2000: 439-440). Equally, Coogan's writing betrays a type of conservatism that appeals to certain Australian-Irish notions of purity and morality. His description of Melbourne's Archbishop Daniel Mannix, who strongly supported the right-wing Democratic Labour Party and its de facto leader B.A. Santamaria, is glowing. Coogan makes much of the D.L.P.'s 'success in combating Communist influence on the trade unions' from the mid-'fifties (Coogan, 2000: 493).

Conclusion

Cultural productions of the Australian-Irish diaspora, both in family stories and in popular writings, involve a process of self-marking that seeks to differentiate 'Irishness' from hegemonic constructions of whiteness. At the same time, it carries conservatisms that perhaps reflect notions of purity and correct behaviour that stem from within Irish culture itself (Grey, 2004: 84-104). The two processes, one written and one oral, link to create a volatile field of cultural creation. Selective truths, denial, forgetting and re-memory, all play a part in the process. Gaps in knowledge—lost to processes of
assimilation, the unvoiced experiences of women, and the effects of disenfranchisement—are symptomatic of an ongoing process of displacement, economic, geographic and cultural, a process which is actively denied by rhetoric both within and without the Republic of Ireland.

In my own family example, connection to a sense of diasporic ‘Irishness’ feels tenuous and forced on one hand, and yet entirely self-defining in another. My family's surname, if nothing else, has actively marked us out as not-English, not hegemonic, and in a small way “white but not quite” (Kalra et al., 2005: 115). Is it enough of an affinity to have allowed a private cheer when the parliament of the Republic of Ireland snubbed an Australian Prime Minister John Howard on his official visit and yet not enough of an affinity to claim any sort of a right to a cohesive Irish identity? Intrinsic to this doubt is a sense that I have no idea what it is like to be ‘Irish’—in itself an abstract notion—or even to be at a remove of one generation.

This sort of Irish-Australian identity is marked by double move. One is towards a conscience of the outsider; one who stands in opposition to the oppression of minority groups, hegemonic capitalism and the politics of globalisation. The other is towards a 'pure' position of whiteness, although alternate, which in itself rejects minority positions while labelling itself 'an underdog' as typified by Coogan’s representations of 'Irish success stories.' Ultimately, the move the individual makes is one of choice. The choice involved is between which stories you choose to listen to and which ones that you choose to forget.

References


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