

The ways irish nationalists used history to support their ideas

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



For many centuries the British Empire dominated the globe, in this sphere of influence was the island of Ireland. Despite centuries of rule, elements of Irish society sought autonomy for the island, more revanchist elements sought for outright independence. A common idea among nationalists is that Ireland had suffered under British rule whilst reaping none of the benefits. In the Irish Republic today many of these nationalists are venerated. The belief is the critical importance of their cultural work as the foundation of political independence. This paper will explore how the nationalists used history to support their efforts in three distinct ways. That Ireland was spurred by grievances against the British. That Ireland's ancient independence and cultural uniqueness was a basis for the right to national self-determination. That the founding of pioneering cultural institutions proliferated and justified the nationalist cause.

To the citizens of Ireland their nation felt more a colony of the British Empire than one of its home islands. With its culture being usurped by anglicisation. One of these spurred citizens was the famous poet Thomas Davis. Davis was inspired by the Catholic emancipation of 1823, noting that Daniel O'Connell "prevailed in 1829 by the power of fighting not the practice of it; may he not do so again?" Seeking reform Davis was a founding member of the influential paper 'The Nation' first published in 1842. The Nation opened with revolutionary tone "The necessities of the country seem to demand a journal to aid and organize the new movements going on amongst us". The lines proved prophetic as many nationalist newspapers would follow albeit far more radical ones. In 1848 all Europe writhed under the potato famine, Ireland especially, tensions were high and revolutions proliferated. The

newspaper United Irishman debuted, recounting the events of revolutionary Europe, followed immediately by articles denouncing the system of tenant farming: “the farmers have not encouragement to place their money in the land”. The issue of absentee landlords was foremost in people’s mind. Historically much land was seized from Irish Catholics and distributed to new landlords, who lived abroad and spent their rent money elsewhere. The United Irishman touches on this issue “a landlord- who has no means of living except by the revenue he derives as a landlord”. Five months after the United Irishman’s debut the Young Irelander revolt would attempt to rectify the issue. Young Ireland was a splinter element of Davis’ movement who hoped to use the chaos of revolutionary Europe to seize the reins of state. The movement would fail but their sacrifice and the tricolor flag they received from fellow French revolutionaries would inspire future generations.

Nationalism is to promote one’s own culture and superior, to this end Irish nationalists promoted their culture as venerable. Douglas Hyde, the future first president of Ireland would speak plainly of his cultural ideas to the literary community, when he addressed the Dublin literary society in 1892: “When we speak of ‘The Necessity for De-Anglicising the Irish Nation’, we mean it”. The twilight of the 19th century saw numerous cultural groups emerge within Ireland. Hyde would make good upon his words; being a founding member of the Gaelic league in 1893. The Gaelic league expressed its veneration of the Irish past with the influential pamphlet; the ideals of the Gaelic League: “When did our English speaking history begin? ... for well over half a million – it has not begun at all. Our Gaelic-speaking history, on

the other hand, goes back through a long series of centuries". When elected President of the Gaelic League in 1902 Hyde further pushed his cultural revanchism when addressing the league: " If Ireland is to become a really cultured county, and an artistic country, she must cease to imitate, and must take up the thread of her own past." To recount the ancient history of Ireland is to recall the high kings of Ireland, who ruled independent of Britain only to fall to English invasion. Famed author William Yeats wrote profusely on fairy and folk tales of Irish peasantry. His poems and stories gave reverence to Ireland's past as distinct. Yeats was an Irish nationalist, if not politically than culturally, his famed poem the fisherman shows his veneration for the ancient Irish people. " All day I'd looked in the face What I had hoped it would be To write for my own race And the reality: The living men that I hate, The dead man that I loved, The craven man in his seat.

With the importance of Irish culture in the foremost of people's mind nationalists sought to create institutions in support of their reinvigorated culture. To this end Yeats sought to create a Irish cultural theatre in the heart of Dublin. Addressing his contemporaries he laid out his vision for a revived Irish theatre society: " We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and sentiment but the home of an ancient idealism". The buffoonery and sentiment of which Yates spoke of is addressed by Arthur Shields who worked at the abbey under Yates' direction: " There were not very many plays written about Ireland. There were only plays about comic Irish characters written primarily for English or American's". The founding of the Abbey was in effort to counter this negative caricature of the Irish. Many

future revolutionaries would attend and perform at the abbey, notably a signatory on the proclamation of the Republic, Patrick Pearse. Pearse had grown up an inheritor of the cause of nationalists, as his grandfather a supporter of nationalist causes. In Pearse's Irish nationalism was generational issue, in 1908 he founded St Edna's school in Dublin. Printed in the very prospectus of the school was written: " It will be attempted to inculcate the desire to spend their lives working hard, and zealously for their fatherland and if necessary, to die for it". Pearse's curriculum focused upon histories of Ireland to instill nationalistic values in the students. In Pearse's pamphlet *The Murder Machine*, he writes of how he uses history to instill nationalistic values " it should be the most important part of education, which some have defined as a preparation for complete life. And inspiration will come also from the hero-stories of the world, and especially of our own people". Citizens of Ireland often suffered under Imperial management, so the country had been a hotbed of rebellion against British rule for centuries. However such rebellions were often fractured, under various banners for different causes. Each generation of Irish Nationalists was enabled and enhanced by those who came before. While Davis looked back at the times of Catholic emancipation for inspiration, Yeats, Hyde and Pearse could look back at Davis' time for inspiration. For the study of history is standing on the shoulders of giants. Ireland now had a cohesive culture of nationalistic literati and thespians, who would all play pivotal roles in the future of their nation.