

What do you
understand by the
notion of an invented
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My understanding of invented tradition is that of certain practises or certain ideals that are not necessarily particularly widespread or prevalent in society yet are encouraged or appropriated by a state or group of people to suit a certain ends or to promote a certain ideal that fits in with the image the state or group of people wishes to promote of itself. These invented traditions serve the function of providing a link with a suitable past or establishing a sense national or group identity through shared heritage. Examples of such invented traditions are apparent in the resurrection of the Independent Irish state of 1922. It is the aim of this essay to highlight some of these invented traditions and to shed some light on the purpose they served for those who implemented them.

The catalyst for the outbreak of revolution in Ireland in the Easter Rising of 1916 was twofold, firstly the desire to drive the British Empire from Irish soil, and secondly to establish, or as the Nationalists may say, resurrect an independent Irish state. The first part was achieved eventually in 1922 with the creation of the Irish Free State but only after much sacrifice and with the exception of six northern counties which became Northern Ireland and remained a part of the British Empire.

The second part of the objective of the ‘Rebels’ of 1916 would appear on the surface to be a relatively simple task but the reality was far more problematic. The Irish nation that the Nationalists had claimed to be reviving, “In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood” (Proclamation of the Republic of Ireland, p181, AA100 set book 2), had not existed in its purest form for many hundreds of years, having been invaded, occupied and suppressed, first by <https://assignbuster.com/what-do-you-understand-by-the-notion-of-an-invented-tradition-essay-sample/>

the Anglo-Normans in the 12th Century, and most recently by the British Empire.

It was necessary then for the Irish Nationalists to establish some common thread connecting the Ireland of the time, with the Ireland of centuries before, the pure Ireland, untouched by foreign invaders and settlers. They did this by carefully selecting certain cultural symbols of 'her old tradition of nationhood', that expressed the individuality of Ireland and its people.

Some of the cultural symbols chosen by the Nationalists that corresponded with the Ireland of antiquity or the Middle Ages, as in the case of promoting Gaelic as the national language, were as foreign to some people of Ireland as they would be to someone from the other side of the world. Indeed, the attempt to establish Gaelic as the national language by making it compulsory in schools and decreeing that anyone employed in the civil service should speak Gaelic alienated many Irish citizens who had little or no understanding of what was supposed to be their mother tongue.(1)

It is in this sense then where the notion of invented tradition comes in, for Gaelic to be the national language of a country you would reasonably expect for the large majority of people to speak that particular language, however, it is clear that a significant proportion of the Irish population did not speak Gaelic as Ireland had been a multilingual society since the early Middle Ages. This is then a deliberate attempt by the Nationalists to promote one tradition over another, regardless of whether it accurately represents the cultural or lingual Irish landscape of the time.

What then is to be gained by such a policy? We have already read that the Nationalists placed great stock in the Ireland of centuries past but it was not just a strong sense of nostalgia that compelled them to introduce Gaelic as the national language. Reverend O’Hickey informs us in a pamphlet from 1898 that a nation’s language is “ It’s most striking symbol – the one invincible barrier against disintegration (...) the only certain guarantee of its continuance and perpetuation” (Ideals of the Gaelic League, p180, AA100 set book 2).

The Nationalist’s basis for preferring the Gaelic language over the English language it seems was not a practical decision but a symbolic one. Firstly it emphasised the individuality and the unique intelligence of the Irish people, secondly it provides the newly formed state a shared link with the past (a running theme in traditions, invented or otherwise), and thirdly it provides a strong and vital foundation for the future of Ireland as independent state.

Examples of the selective whim of the Irish Nationalists and the image of the nation they attempted to construct are also evident in the architecture they choose to preserve, and, perhaps most strikingly, in that they left to decay.

After the Irish fight for independence and the Civil War that followed which lasted from 1916 – 1922, many important buildings in Ireland had been badly damaged. The Nationalists entrusted The Office of Public Works with restoring and renovating some of the buildings that had been damaged in the fighting such as The General Post Office which had witnessed the birth of the uprising, the Four Courts and the Custom House.

The two main principles the Nationalists had in mind when undertaking this restoration work reveal much about their attitude to their past and the image they wished to project for the future of Ireland. Firstly, only Irish materials were to be used in the restoration work. The Custom House for example had been originally constructed in Portland Stone from England. However, in the restoration of the dome they used Limestone, a material native to Ireland.

The second principle was that certain buildings were to be left to decay such as Dublin Castle and the Royal Hospital Kilmainham. The reason behind this thinking was simple; Dublin Castle had long been the seat of English political power and the Royal Hospital was where the commander of the British troops had lived. So it seems both these sites were a clear symbol of British power and oppression. Despite the fact that these buildings were on Irish soil and no doubt built by Irish labour, the connection they held to the all too recent past of British rule was too fresh in the memory of many Nationalists. It was only due to the foresight of Eamon De Valera, elected president of the Dáil in 1919, that prevented the demolition of Dublin Castle, he decided that future generations should have the chance to decide for themselves whether or not Dublin Castle should remain intact.

We have seen then what we often view as the defining features of a nation's character such as its national language, or its heritage and architecture, are not always the organic representations of the tradition and history of that particular nation as we might expect. In some cases these 'traditions' have been tweaked and modified in order to suit a certain political ends or born out of the necessity to promote one culture at the expense of another.

The necessity at work here was that of the need to construct a sense of nationalism among the Irish people. Nationalism may seem an offensive or unsettling notion today, especially since the horror of WWII, but I believe it was absolutely vital for small nations such as Ireland at the time to avoid being swallowed up in the vast and ever increasing empires of Western Europe.