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Tipperary Historical Journal
2004

Commemorating Croke: ethnic nationalism as spectacle

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> Remembrance . . . becomes a cardinal element in the unification of history in the [nineteenth] century; towards the end of the century it becomes institutionalised in the penchant for centenary commemorations (of Moore, of O'Connell, of Tone) and in the cult of funerals, which appear simultaneously with the growing belief in a revival of dead ideals and in a redemption for Ireland from the historical entropy of Europe . . . the cultural history of Ireland offers an excellent example of the various modalities of turning history into either myth or into spectacle.[1]

Introduction: Ethnic and civic concepts of Nationalism

Since it is impossible to define 'nation' in such a way as to make it immediately and self-evidently acceptable to all possible members of a specific nation, disputes inevitably arise as to what constitutes the essential signs of a nation'.[2] Hugh Kearney in his essay. 'Faith or Fatherland?' deals with the centenary commemoration of O'Connell's birth in 1875. He interprets the celebrations as a struggle to establish the image and nature of Irish identity. Was it religious or secular? Was the nationalism it invoked ethnic or civic? Was Daniel O' Connell to be seen 'primarily as a figure sponsoring Catholic emancipation or as an advocate of the repeal of the Union?' Pivotal to Kearney's analysis of the events surrounding the O'Connell unveiling is the distinction he draws between ethnic and civic concepts of nationalism. To illustrate this vital distinction he draws on the contemporary constitutions of France and Germany:

> In a recent book *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* Rogers Brubaker contrasts the way in which the French define citizenship (*ius soli* – the law of the soil) according to which those born on French territory are regarded as French, with the German definition which demands familial descent (*ius sanguinis* – the law of blood). Brubaker sees French citizenship as civic, German nationhood as tribal. The distinction is not merely an academic one since it affects the legal status of immigrants. French national identity encourages acculturation, so that, for example, M. Balladur born of Romanian parents, could be accepted as completely French and able to aspire to the Presidency of France. In contrast German national identity, with its emphasis upon German blood, makes it difficult if not impossible for third or fourth generation Turkish immigrants fully fluent in the German language to become German citizens, whereas ethnic Germans, emigrating from Russia and non-German speaking, run into no such difficulties.[3]

O'Connell, who had made the clergy the 'local cogs in his political machine', was in 1875 being reclaimed by the Catholic clergy as their symbol.[4] Foremost in the O'Connell celebrations was the then newly-elected Archbishop of Cashel and Emly, Thomas Croke. In the opening speech of the centenary celebrations, Croke sought to ignore O'Connell's role as a politician. He linked Catholicism to Irish middle class success by stressing the link between O'Connell's accomplishments in life and Irish Catholicism. In doing so, Croke sought to show that there

could be linkage between Catholicism and success. Croke, himself a member of a privileged class, had been educated in Paris and Rome, and now saw himself as a natural leader.[5] Kearney, in dealing with this theme states:

> In nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland there was tension between the two images of the Irish nation, a secular image looking back to Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet and the French Revolution, and a religious experience of a persecuted people during the Reformation and the post-Reformation period.[6]

Tension between secular and religious

These secular and religious tensions were to manifest themselves in a small rural town in Tipperary at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Croke memorial overlooking the square of the market town embodies some of the strains which existed in Thurles in the early years of the twentieth century. Thurles, a 'cathedral town' and 'cradle' of the GAA, is essentially a market town.[7] The east bank of the river Suir is dominated by a myriad of church properties, convents, schools, seminaries, a bishop's palace and cathedral, reflecting the powerful role of the Catholic church in the town.[8] The erection of a monument to Archbishop Croke is highly symbolic and particularly so in the context of 1920s Thurles. As a member of the Catholic hierarchy, he was a leading nineteenth century nationalist figure and in commemorating such a figure the powerful religious image of the Irish nation was taking precedence over the secular. Up to then, memorials to ecclesiastical figures had been placed in the ambit of Thurles Cathedral – most notably a monument to Archbishop Leahy (who instigated the building of Thurles Cathedral) but now an Archbishop was to be commemorated in bronze at the focal point of the town.

The Croke monument can be interpreted as illustrating the 'essential signs of the emerging new nation'. Those 'essential signs' were allowed to come to prominence and in doing so, 'excluded the alien so as to emphasise native or ethnic achievements'.[9] Croke, a symbol of successful Gaelic, Catholic Ireland was to be made an emblem of 'ethnic achievement'. Initially, the plans to commemorate Croke were surrounded by controversy. In 1903 the Tipperary County Board of the Gaelic Athletic Association proposed that a memorial be erected to Dr. Croke. Nothing was done about this proposal until late 1912, when it was decided to run the Croke tournaments to raise funds for the memorial in Thurles. The tournaments were a huge financial success and subsequently it was decided by the Central Council of the GAA to use the money to buy a pitch in Jones's Road, Dublin and to give £200 towards the Croke Memorial.

This was considered a derisory sum by the Tipperary County Board of the GAA and an 'insult' to Croke's memory. The Central Council formed a sub-committee to confer with the Archbishop of Cashel and Emly rather than their colleagues on the Tipperary Board, who were after all the initiators of the original proposal. This meeting is an indication of the attitude of the Central Council towards the proposed memorial: the Archbishop was seen as the natural leader in Thurles and thus, religious nationalism was taking precedence over its secular equivalent. On 27 July a meeting took place between Luke J. O'Toole, secretary of the Central Council and Archbishop Fennelly's representative, Father Bannon, to discuss the proposed Croke memorial in Thurles. As most of the money was to be spent on the ground which they had decided to name after Croke, O'Toole endeavoured to fob off Bannon by suggesting that a marble altar and stained-glass window could be erected in the cathedral, this being a more appropriate memorial for an Archbishop. Bannon replied that there was no room for another altar and that it was the

view of the Thurles clergy that a bronze statue should be erected to Croke's memory.[10]

At a meeting in 1913 the Tipperary Board wanted the All-Ireland final to be postponed to enable them to discuss the Croke Memorial funds and the Central Council was attacked. The Tipperary members alluded sarcastically to 'that democratic body' and they considered it 'unusual to call a grounds a memorial'. In January 1914, the Tipperary Board instructed its solicitor to commence litigation to prevent the Central Council from disposing of the Croke money in the manner already decided by the council. In short, the Tipperary County Board wanted all the funds raised to be allocated for a large monument to be erected to the memory of Archbishop Croke in Liberty Square, Thurles.[11]

That there were dissenting voices at the Tipperary meeting is evidenced in the newspaper reports. Mr Ryan of Newport stated that when Dr. Croke wrote his historic letter it was addressed to the Gaels of Ireland – implying that Dr. Croke had more Gaels in mind than the Gaels of Thurles.[12] Throughout these debates, indications of a *mentalité* of alienation can be glimpsed, that is, alienation of a people from its capital city and in turn a people rigidly excluding the 'alien' (the non-Gael). The dismissal of the pitch (now *Croke* Park) with its connotations of secularism as a suitable memorial is indicative of a community seeking to clearly define itself in terms of Catholicism. In contrast, a memorial in the form of a bronze monument (imbued with Catholic iconography) was more in keeping with the ideal of an imperious Catholic nationalism. It is also illustrative of a community in the process of rigidly defining itself in terms of Catholicism and anti-Englishness. The antithesis of Gael was everything English or Anglo-Irish. This *mentalité* was to reinforce itself at the laying of the foundation stone for the Croke statue on Saint Patrick's day 1920.

Laying of foundation stone –1920

In January 1920 the town of Thurles was in turmoil when a series of reprisals followed the shooting of R.I.C. men in the town. The town was sacked by the R.I.C. and the murder of Sinn Féin / I.R.A. members followed.[13] In March of that year, Thurles street names were changed by the Urban District Council. The new nationalist names were suggested by the Gaelic League and these were to replace what were considered English sounding place names e.g. Kickham Street to replace Pike Street and Mitchel Street to replace Quarry Street.[14] The more descriptive place names with their echoes of 'alien' history were replaced by the more patriotic references, which 'emphasised native or ethnic achievement'. [15] The Gaelic League, never strong in North Tipperary, named its branches in a way which evoked both religious and secular nationalism.[16] The Thurles branch of the League, founded in 1901, was named after Croke[17] but seems to have faded away; by 1920 the town had another branch – this one named after the recently-deceased Sinn Féin TD for East Tipperary, Pierce McCan, who had died in Gloucester Prison.[18] The chairperson of the McCan branch was Dr. Michael O'Dwyer, the person responsible for altering the town's placenames to their patriotic form.

On Saint Patrick's day 1920 the foundation stone was laid by the Archbishop of Cashel and a pageant of Irish patriotism was staged. Concluding his speech, Dr. Harty spoke of the distinctiveness of being Irish and the correlation between 'our games and a distinct nation'.[19] On the platform the messages on the banners proclaimed this distinctiveness with their emphasis on Irish-Ireland – 'Our aim – Ireland Irish', 'Irish education, Irish language, Irish games' and a quotation from Pearse: 'A Nation is a stubborn thing – very hard to kill'. Notwithstanding the strident proclamations of Irishness, the only time the Irish language was actually spoken was

when Mr McCarthy, chairman of the Cork County Board of the GAA, spoke. He began his speech in ungrammatical Irish: 'níl Gaeilge maith agam ach is fearr dom Gaeilge briste a labhairt ná Béarla is deise go raibh sa domhain ná riamh'. Having uttered the 'cúpla focal', he, then continued with a long speech in English.[20] Rev. M.K. Ryan C.C. Thurles and President of the Tipperary County Board gave a bitter speech emphasising the purpose of the GAA and Croke's role in the association. Ryan, like Croke, had been a prominent Land League activist in Tipperary and was not noted for his tact.[21] He was vice-president of the Gaelic League and was known by the nickname 'the General'.[22] The speech was concerned with creating what could be interpreted as a conservative homogenous community:

> But there was only one section, one Association that made up their [sic.] minds that the memory of Doctor Croke should live for ever and the section was the Gaelic Association . . . He was glad to say that the National University and many of the colleges had fallen into line and that the youths in those colleges were not ashamed to recognise their fine old pastimes and afraid to put welts on their hands, 'by wielding the camán' (hear, hear). One great benefit derived from the Association was that it had done away with parochialism. The Gaels were bound in a bond of brotherhood by the GAA the like of which nothing else could bring about.[23]

Image of a Nation in Bronze – 1922

The resultant monument with its symbolic iconography has resonances of the nineteenth–century Irish antiquarian revival with its emphasis on exalting 'the past to comfort the present'.[24] But it also contains key elements (such as flowing robes) of Renaissance sculpture; elements which were widely used throughout Europe to exaggerate perceived characteristics of 'the great man'. F.W. Doyle-Jones, an Irish artist based in London, was commissioned by the GAA to make the Croke monument. Doyle-Jones exhibited works of Irish nationalist interest in the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts – a bust of Michael Collins, a relief entitled 'The Offering of Youth on the Altar of Patriotism' and a study from life of John Redmond.[25] The Croke statue figure holds a breviary and is set on a triangular pedestal. Its flowing Archbishop's robes are quintessentially in the classical style. The monument encompasses a desire to celebrate a distinctive identity of 'Irish Ireland', 'one with links to an ancient pre-conquest past and with a single Catholic tradition, culture and language on the one hand, and Roman Catholicism on the other'.[26] Within the niches in the pedestal are miniature figures of St. Patrick and a female figure with a broken harp – Erin.[27] The female figure, as encoded in the representation, occupies the role of an allegorical figure, signifying the idealised passive role of women in the emerging Irish State. Inevitably, women were represented occupying the role of the muse or as the art-historical referent in the manner of the O'Connell monument in Dublin where the four large winged female figures represent 'Patriotism', 'Courage', 'Fidelity', and 'Eloquence'. But the Croke statue also has resonances of the romantic nationalist iconography of Davis and the Young Ireland movement with its symbolic invocation of round towers and harps.

When Archbishop Harty of Cashel unveiled the monument in June 1922, his description of the figure 'recalls something of Thomas Davis' attempt to imagine a nationalist statue of O'Connell in which the history of Ireland could be read in his features'.[28] He noted 'the bold and rugged features that told of the strength of character that won victory in many an Irish struggle . . . the brow that indicated the brilliant intellect' and 'the piercing eyes that flashed in anger when our country's wrongs were recalled', all depicting an image of the almost aristocratic natural leader

Croke Memorial, Thurles

(Photos: Pat Bracken)

of the Gael.[29] The emphasis on the bishop as natural leader of his community was reinforced by the complete absence of politicians at the ceremony. Presumably, their absence arose from a desire to distance the unveiling from the complicated factionalism which followed on the Treaty.

Perhaps the absence of politicians indicated a vacuum which the Church could and would readily fill. The siting of the monument in Liberty Square where the only pre-existing monument was a memorial to the 1798 rebellion is also significant. The '98 centenary statue, not unveiled until 1900, is more secular in imagery than the Croke memorial: the monument has figures depicting Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Robert Emmet – all Protestant patriots from the republican pantheon. The siting of the (higher and larger) Croke Memorial in the same area typifies Kearney's 'tensions within Ireland between two images of the Irish Nation – the secular and the religious'.[30]

Indeed religious imagery was the predominant one at the unveiling of the monument on 4 June 1922. The Catholic clergy dominated the ceremony, and the letter that Croke had written to the GAA on 18 December 1884, in reply to the invitation to become a patron, was read in full by Archbishop Harty, who, as Archbishop of Cashel, was also automatically patron of the GAA. The reading of the letter again enforced the distinctiveness of Catholic Irishness and the exclusion of the 'alien'. In part of that letter, Croke listed the Gaelic pursuits that were being lost:[31]

> Ball-playing, hurling, football kicking, according to Irish rules, casting, leaping in various ways, wrestling . . . If we continue travelling for the next score years in the same direction that we have been going in for sometime past, condemning the sports that were practised by our forefathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them, and putting on, with England's stuffs and breadcloths, her masher habits and such other effeminate follies . . . we had better at once, and publicly, abjure our nationality, clap hands for joy at the sight of the Union Jack and place 'England's bloody red' exultantly above the 'green'

Fr. Ryan proved true to his title 'the General' of Tipperary nationalism and rejoiced in his role as one of the main speakers; his use of colourful language left no one in doubt regarding images that should constitute Catholic nationalism at that time. He particularly exulted in the use of hyperbole, portraying Croke as a great nationalist warrior:

> He lived through that scourge, the famine of 1847 . . . it was then he read in the English 'Times' that cruellest sentence in the history of journalism. 'In a short time a Catholic Celt will be as rare in Ireland as a Red Indian on the shores of Manhattan'.[32]

Coming full circle, Daniel O'Connell was again being reclaimed by the Catholic clergy as a symbol of Catholic nationalism rather than secular nationalism: Ryan referred to the presence of Croke at O'Connell's high mass in Rome on 10 June 1847. Another icon of ethnic Irish nationalism was also in evidence at the 1922 unveiling of the Croke monument – the Irish language. The president of the Gaelic League, Mr. Ó Murthuile, concluding his speech, asked 'for how long more will we rest satisfied to speak English, the while calling ourselves Gael'?[33]

The significant exclusion of politicians from this event is testimony to the powerful status of the Catholic hierarchy in the new state of 1922, a state in which 'politicians would play an entirely subsidiary role to that of the church and in which the President would continue 'to court the church throughout his tenure of office'.[34] The images and icons interwoven in the spectacle that surrounded the setting up of the Croke Memorial sought to evoke the 'essential signs of a nation'. The images were intrinsically religious and tribal[35] and told an ethnic story of Irish nationalism, making effective use of public spectacle.

Notes

1. Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cork, 1996), p. 226.
2. Hugh Kearney, '1875: Faith or Fatherland?' in Stewart Brown and David Miller (Eds.), *Piety and Power in Ireland, 1760-1960 Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin* (Belfast, 1997), p. 67.
3. Hugh Kearney , 'Contested Ideas of Nationhood', in *The Irish Review*, (1997), p. 1.
4. Fergus O'Ferrall, *Daniel O'Connell*, (Dublin, 1998), p. 56.
5. Mark Tierney, *Croke Of Cashel*, (Dublin, 1976), p. 76.
6. Hugh Kearney, '1875: Faith or Fatherland?' in Stewart Brown and David Miller (Eds.) *Piety and Power in Ireland, 1760-1960 Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin*, (Belfast, 1997), p. 67.
7. William Corbett and William Nolan, *Thurles – the Cathedral Town*, (Dublin, 1989), *passim*.
8. F.H.A. Aalen, K. Whelan, M. Stout, *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, (Cork, 1997), p. 195.
9. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge, 1985), p. 334.
10. Marcus de Búrca, *The GAA: a History*, (Dublin, 1980), p. 114.
11. *The Tipperary Star*, 1 November 1913.
12. *The Tipperary Star*, 26 July 1913.
13. James Kennedy, *A Chronology of Thurles 580-1978*, (Thurles, 1978).
14. *The Tipperary Star*, 21 February 1920.
15. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge, 1985), p. 334
16. Diarmuid Breathnach, 'Gaeilgeoirí Thiobraid Árann sna Laethanta Tosaigh' in Liam Prút (Ed.) *Dúchas 1986-1989*, (Dublin, 1990), pp. 216–218.
17. *ibid* p. 227.
18. *The Tipperary Star*, 7 February, 1920.
19. County Library, Thurles, 'Thurles History by Canon Fogarty', BK.4 – unpublished manuscript.
20. *The Tipperary Star*, 20 March 1920.
21. James O'Shea, *Priest, Politics and Society in Post-Famine Ireland*, (Dublin, 1983), p. 131-132; 227.
22. Diarmuid Breathnach, Máire Ní Mhurchú, *Beathaisnéis a haon*, (Dublin, 1986), p. 98.
23. *The Nationalist*, 20 March 1920.
24. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge, 1985), p. 333.
25. Judith Hill, *Irish Public Sculpture: A History*, (Dublin, 1998), pp. 190-191, 272.
26. Lawrence McBride, *Images, Icons and the Irish Nationalist Imagination* (Dublin, 1999) p. 148.
27. *ibid*.
28. Judith Hill, *Irish Public Sculpture: A History*, (Dublin, 1998), p. 191.
29. *The Nationalist*, 10 June 1922.
30. Hugh Kearney, '1875: Faith or Fatherland?' in Stewart Brown and David Miller (Eds.) *Piety and Power in Ireland, 1760-1960 Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin*, (Belfast, 1997), p. 67.
31. *The Tipperary Star*, 10 June 1922.
32. *The Tipperary Star*, 10 June 1922.
33. *The Nationalist*, 10 June 1922.
34. Joseph Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985:Politics and Society*, (Cambridge, 1989), p. 157.
35. Hugh Kearney , 'Contested Ideas of Nationhood', in *The Irish Review*, (1997), p. 1.