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Two Diasporic Moments in Irish Emigration History: The Famine Generation and the Contemporary Era*

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Abstract:

In some usages "diaspora" refers to a social process (relocation or migration) and in others to a social entity (a migrant group or ethnic group). Both approaches require scholars to define diaspora, but the criteria often seem arbitrary. Rather than posing a timeless question ("What is a diaspora?"), this article examines diaspora as an *idea* that people use to interpret the world migration creates. Diaspora in this sense reached its peak historical significance for Ireland in two distinct periods, but for quite different reasons: the era of the Great Famine, when mass emigration gave rise to a powerful transnational sense of exile; and the era since the 1980s, when changes in the academy, popular culture, communications, and especially government policy produced a new sense of connectedness among the global Irish.

Keywords: Diaspora, Emigration, Famine, Government, Irish

1. The idea of diaspora

About 10 million Irish men, women, and children have emigrated from Ireland since 1700. Remarkably, this figure is more than twice the population of the Republic of Ireland today (4.8 million), it exceeds the population of the island of Ireland (6.7 million), and it is higher than the population of Ireland at its historical peak (8.5 million) on the eve of the Great Famine in 1845. As many as 70 million people worldwide claim Irish descent, about half of them in the United States (Hout, Goldstein 1994; Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [hereafter DFA], 2015, 10). Most people

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who have grown up in Ireland since the Famine have known that, by early adulthood, they would have to grapple with the decision of whether to stay or leave. The decision is part of the Irish life cycle. How are we to explain a phenomenon of this scale and impact? Diaspora is perhaps the most common explanatory framework in use today.

Until quite recently, "Diaspora" – usually with an upper-case "d" – referred principally to the dispersal and exile of the Jews. Over the course of the twentieth century, the term expanded to cover the involuntary dispersal of other populations. Although mass emigration has long been one of the defining themes of Irish history, "diaspora" was rarely used in Irish academic circles before 1990, and scarcely at all in popular culture. It has since become the term of choice in the Irish case. The popularity of diaspora in Ireland is generally dated to the presidency of Mary Robinson, who lit a symbolic candle in the window of her official residence, *Áras an Uachtaráin*, to recognise all people of Irish descent around the world as being in some sense part of the Irish nation, a gesture that embraced everyone from the most recent wave of emigrants to the descendants of those who had left in the distant past.

During the "Celtic Tiger" (1995–2007), a period of extraordinary (if in the end unsustainable) economic growth fuelled by American investment, EU funding, and speculation in the construction sector, Mary Robinson's call for cooperative projects between the Irish at home and abroad paid off in numerous ways. Many Irish emigrants returned during the boom and, for the first time, significant numbers of immigrants arrived from other countries. For only the second time since the Great Famine, the population of Ireland rose rather than declining due to emigration. In a speech called "Cherishing the Irish Diaspora" in 1995, delivered to a joint session of the *Oireachtas* (Ireland's Parliament), Robinson noted how the "diaspora", forged in the tragedy of the Famine and involuntary emigration, had become one of Ireland's greatest treasures – a term she clearly intended in an economic as well as a political and cultural sense. Significantly, when the Irish Constitution was revised in 1998 as part of the Belfast Agreement bringing peace to Northern Ireland, a clause was added to Article 2 stating that "the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage" (*Bunreacht na hÉireann* [Constitution of Ireland] 2018, 4).

It was in this optimistic – indeed, headily optimistic – economic, political, and cultural context that the term "diaspora" came to occupy a central place in the discourse about Irish emigration. As President Robinson had noted, the word evoked an element of tragedy in the Irish case (as it often does). But the Celtic Tiger roared triumph rather than tragedy, with the term "diaspora" celebrating the new global Irish family rather than lamenting the circumstances of its creation. "Diaspora" always has multiple possible meanings, some of them contradictory, and recent Irish usage is no exception. It will be good at the outset, therefore, to consider some of these meanings.

Problems arise when the term is too rigidly defined, but also when its meaning is left entirely open-ended.

The etymology is worth dwelling on for a moment. The Greek noun *diasporá* derives from the verb *diaspeirein*, a compound of *dia* (over or through) and *speirein* (to scatter or sow). Contained within "diaspora" is the root, *spr*, which can be found today in such English words as "spore", "sperm", "spread", "sprout", and "disperse" as well as the Armenian word for diaspora, *spurk*. It was in Jewish history that the term assumed its most familiar form. The noun *diasporá* first appeared in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the opening books of the Hebrew Bible produced by Jewish scholars in Alexandria around 250 BCE. In the Septuagint, *diasporá* connotes a condition of spiritual anguish accompanying God's dispersal of those who disobeyed His word. As Deuteronomy 28:25 puts it: "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms on earth" (*New International Version*). The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, citing this passage, gives two related meanings for "diaspora" – a social *process* ("the dispersion of Jews among the Gentile nations") and a social *entity* ("all those Jews who lived outside the biblical land of Israel"). As an example of the latter usage, the dictionary cites the case of the Irish in the United States: "the Famine, the diaspora and the long hatred of Irish Americans for Britain" (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993, s.v. "diaspora"; Kenny 2013, 2).

The semantic span of the term "diaspora" expanded dramatically after World War II, for reasons that were only partly connected to the history of migration. The number of international migrants increased significantly, such that the period since the war is sometimes referred to as the Age of International Migration or the Age of Diaspora (Castles, Miller 2013). The total number of migrants today is certainly higher than ever before, yet the *rate* of migration – measured as a proportion of the global population – is not as high as it was a century ago. A combination of other forces contributed to the rise and current ubiquity of "diaspora". The dismantling of European empires inspired new forms of transnational solidarity, for example among people of African descent in the Caribbean, France, England, and the United States. Decolonisation also forced certain communities to remigrate, for example South Asians in East Africa and Chinese in various parts of Asia. Involuntary migration achieved greater international prominence through the UN's definition and protection of refugees. New forms of technology and communication facilitated faster, more efficient migration. And national governments began to devise inventive ways to connect with their overseas populations in search of economic and political support (Kenny 2013, 9).

In this context, "diaspora" came to be applied retroactively to groups other than the ancient Jews whose dispersal had been notably involuntary –

including Armenians, people of African descent, and the Irish. Then, starting in the 1980s, the term began to proliferate to an extraordinary extent in both academic and popular usage, to cover migration and displacement of all kinds. With the proliferation of usage, inevitably, came a decline in coherence. Diaspora is often used today as a synonym for international migration. But if every migration is diasporic, what does the term "diaspora" signify? If migration and diaspora mean the same thing, is there any reason to use the latter term other than for purposes of stylistic variation? How does migration history look different if diaspora is used as category of analysis? The sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2005) nicely captured the problem in an article called "The Diaspora Diaspora", in which he demonstrated how the concept had acquired so many meanings that it was in danger of signifying nothing in particular.

Ironically, much of the confusion about the term "diaspora" stems from the quest to impose a single, fixed definition (Kenny 2013, 11; Kenny 2003a, 141-142). Scholars have produced a variety of typologies for this purpose. One group has proposed frameworks so comprehensive that almost every form of migration counts – not just the catastrophic cases but also the migration of merchants, workers, and colonisers (e.g., Cohen 1997). A second group, finding this approach too broad to be useful, has tried to establish fixed criteria to pin down what diaspora is and is not, with a given group qualifying (or failing to qualify) as diasporic depending on how many of the criteria it meets (e.g., Safran 1991, 83-84). But who gets to decide on the criteria? The lists often seem arbitrary, and because they include different orders of experience – the nature of emigration, for example, as distinct from the experience of alienation abroad – consistent comparison across migrant groups becomes impossible (Kenny 2013, 11-12). With these concerns in mind, a third group of scholars, mostly literary and cultural critics, has tried to determine not what "diaspora" *is* but what it *does*, in other words how the term produces meaning in systems of discourse (e.g., Clifford 1994). Who uses "diaspora", under what circumstances, and to what effect?

Building on the third approach, this article sees diaspora neither as a process nor as a social entity, as the dictionary definition suggests, but as an *idea*. Instead of seeking a definitive answer to a timeless and static question – "What is a diaspora?" – historians can examine evidence to determine how and why people use the idea of diaspora in specific times and places. People of many different kinds – migrants, but also scholars, journalists, and policy makers – use this idea to interpret the world that migration creates. Viewed in this way, diaspora is simultaneously a category of analysis and a category of practice, and it carries different meanings depending on who is using the term and for what purpose. As an idea, diaspora has three overlapping elements: *relocation*, *connectivity*, and *return*. This formulation, it should be emphasised, is not intended to smuggle in a typology through the back door. It

is simply that whenever people use the idea of diaspora, they always have one or more of these three elements in mind. All three elements do not have to be present at once, and people do not necessarily need to use the *word* "diaspora" to think about migration within the conceptual framework described here (Kenny 2013, 13-15).

The first element, *relocation*, refers strictly to the process of departure, regardless of the subsequent history of settlement abroad. For the most part, diaspora is used to describe population movements that are catastrophic in origin or involuntary in character – the Babylonian captivity, African transatlantic slavery, the Irish Famine exodus – even if, in recent years, the term has increasingly been deployed to describe migration in general. Irish emigrants in the Famine era had an understandable and well documented tendency to see their departure as involuntary exile, making diaspora in its more traditional meaning an appropriate explanatory framework. Historians can acknowledge and interrogate the diasporic claims of Irish emigrants in various periods, examining how they used diaspora as a category of practice. But historians can also use diaspora as an analytical category in order to distinguish between different kinds of departure in different periods (Kenny 2013, 16-39).

The second element, *connectivity*, stands independent of the first. In other words, regardless of the form of migration, emigrants and their descendants can and do build diasporic connections abroad. When the members of an emigrant community in a given country of settlement involve themselves economically, politically, or culturally in the affairs of their "homeland", they may or may not begin to see themselves as a diaspora. This form of interaction, after all, is very common. A less common, but more interesting, form of connectivity involves communication not only between a single overseas location and the "homeland" but within a web of globally scattered communities – for example, modern Chinatowns – connected in a multipolar rather than a unilinear form. These interrelated global communities can be seen as nodes within a network, in which the "homeland" forms an essential but not necessarily central location. When connectivity is understood in this way, diaspora provides a powerful framework for understanding migration history. Irish nationalists in nineteenth-century New York, Toronto, and Sydney, for example, engaged in a self-consciously transnational conversation about the liberation of Ireland and the creation of an Irish nation. For the hardline, physical force republican tradition of Irish nationalism in particular, New York City rivalled and at times surpassed Dublin in generating leaders, ideas, and money (Kenny 2013, 40-60).

The third and final element of the idea of diaspora is *return* (60-86). Every conception of diaspora features a homeland, whether real or imagined. Return can be literal, as in the Zionist movement; more often it is metaphorical, spiritual, or political, but no less potent for that. People of African descent in the Americas who longed to go "back to Africa" in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries knew that, for the most part, they had no place to go to and could not have afforded to return even if there was such a place. But this very impossibility, far from rendering their longing to return irrelevant, made it all the more poignant and powerful as a source of solidarity. Irish Americans at the turn of the twentieth century had some of the lowest rates of return from the United States, comparable to those of Jewish Americans. Even when finances were not an obstacle, there was little to go back to in an Ireland whose dismal economic performance compelled more than two million Irish people to emigrate over the remainder of the century, most of them to Britain. In the absence of large-scale return, Irish communities abroad were sustained by a powerful sense of exile. The exile motif originated partly in the pre-migration culture of rural Ireland (Miller, Boling, Doyle 1980; Miller 1985), but it was also the product of bitterness and alienation stemming from the Great Famine – the gravest catastrophe in Irish history and the central event in the country's emigration history.

2. The Famine generation

In the standard scholarly works on diaspora, the Irish are the European emigrant group most likely to be included, typically by virtue of the Great Famine and the emigration it unleashed (Cohen 1997; Chaliand 1997). A strong case can be made for the utility of diaspora as an explanatory framework for this massive wave of emigration. It was triggered by a catastrophic event. It featured considerable involuntary relocation. The emigrants dispersed to several destinations at once. And they nurtured a strong sense of banishment and exile overseas. That said, one needs to be careful not to collapse the entirety of Irish emigration history into a template set by the uniquely traumatic events of the Famine generation. Most emigrants who left Ireland before and after the Famine – and some who left during the crisis – did so for conventional economic reasons, in search of work and opportunity abroad, the same fundamental reasons that have been at the heart of most mass emigrations throughout history. For the Famine emigration in particular, however, a diasporic framework has considerable explanatory power.

Between 1846 and 1855 – the period that historians refer to as the "Famine decade" – Ireland's population was reduced by one-third, an event without parallel in European history. Over 1 million people died of starvation and famine-related diseases and about 2.1 million emigrated, more than in the previous two centuries combined. About 1.5 million of the emigrants went to the United States, just over 300,000 to British North America (many of whom then trekked overland to the United States), roughly the same number to Britain, and tens of thousands to Australia and New Zealand. These 2.1 million emigrants represented one-quarter of Ireland's population on the eve of the Famine and accounted for the largest European mass emigration,

in proportional terms, in the nineteenth century. The Irish were the single largest immigrant group in the United States in the 1840s, accounting for 45 per cent of the total flow. In the 1850s they and the Germans each made up about 35 per cent of the immigrants. By 1860, one in every four residents of New York, Boston, Liverpool, and Glasgow were Irish-born. The Famine also set in motion the massive wave of emigration from 1856 to 1921, when another 4.5 million emigrants left the country (Kenny 2018, 666, 669).

The Famine emigration was the foundational moment in the formation of Irish communities abroad – especially in the United States, where the emigrants asked hard questions about British relief policies. Did crop failure necessarily have to lead to starvation and mass emigration? When the potato failed, why was no adequate source of food provided as a substitute? The British government experimented with various temporary measures, selling corn meal at cost price, providing indoor relief in workhouses and outdoor relief via public works projects, and even briefly distributing food free of charge via soup kitchens. In 1847, however, these centralised efforts were abruptly abandoned in favour of local responsibility and chargeability. "There is only one way in which the relief of the destitute ever has been, or ever will be, conducted consistently with the general welfare, and that is by *making it a local charge*", wrote Charles Trevelyan, the British official in charge of Famine relief in Dublin (quoted in Gray 1995, 153; emphasis in original). The Poor Law Extension Act of 1847 placed the burden of relief on local taxes, with landlords and commercial farmers supposed to support the new system. The results were catastrophic: as tenants could no longer pay their rents, their landlords could not pay the taxes and, rather than subsidising the poor, they had every incentive to evict them, sometimes with packages of assisted compulsory emigration (Gray 1995, 64-73; Ó Gráda 2000, 49-52). The moderate Irish nationalist leader and member of the British parliament, Isaac Butt, objected that Irish starvation was an imperial rather than a local problem. There was "no such thing as an English treasury", he pointed out, merely "the exchequer of the United Kingdom". Converting Famine relief from a central to a local responsibility, Butt concluded, made the Union "a mockery" (quoted in Gray 1995, 157).

It was the Irish in the United States who voiced the most stringent criticisms of British policy. From his American exile in 1861, the Irish revolutionary John Mitchel wrote that "a million and a half of men, women and children were carefully, prudently, and peacefully *slain* by the English government" (Gray 1995, 179). Potatoes had failed all over Europe, yet there was Famine only in Ireland. "The almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight", Mitchel notoriously concluded, "but the English created the Famine" (178). Most historians, especially those based in universities, have disagreed with this verdict on the grounds that genocide involves deliberate intent to exterminate (Ó Gráda 2000, 10). Nonetheless, as Gray (1995, 82, 152-154; 1999, 227-283, 328-338)

has demonstrated, many high-ranking officials and members of the British establishment embraced providentialist and *laissez-faire* thinking in their eagerness to let history take its course unhindered by government intervention. And more recent historians have raised the case for genocide, understood in a historically specific sense: not "the deliberate, systematic annihilation of an entire ethnic group or religious group by mass murder" as defined by the post-Holocaust U.N. Convention of 1948, but "the deliberate, systematic use of an environmental catastrophe to destroy a people under the pretext of engineering social reform" (Ó Murchadha 2011, 196-197; MacSuibhne 2013, 9-12). When confronted with the horror of Famine, a natural reaction is to recoil and treat it as an undifferentiated whole. But any judgement on the Irish catastrophe requires the historian to enter into the internal history of the crisis, to understand how it changed over time, and to evaluate the policy decisions that were taken and not taken. Regardless of what conclusions emerge from this analysis, it is undeniable that Mitchel's words mobilised Irish emigrants and their descendants around the world, especially in the United States. Historians therefore need to take these words seriously, even if they disagree with them analytically. The idea that the British created the Famine contributed to a powerful sense of exile among the Irish abroad, lending a strongly anti-imperialist dimension to their diasporic nationalism.

Partly as a result, the overseas Irish were unusually active in the political affairs of their homeland. From the Famine generation onward, Irish immigrants and their descendants in Britain, North America, and Australia were deeply involved in the two major types of Irish nationalism: moderate, non-violent constitutionalism and physical force republicanism. Within the various countries of settlement, support for different types of Irish nationalism varied by class, gender, and recency of arrival. There was also significant variation between these countries: republican and anti-imperial nationalism found a natural home in the United States; moderate constitutionalism was stronger in the British imperial settings of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Leading Irish political figures such as Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt made extensive tours of the United States in the 1880s, building support for Irish nationalism among the communities established by the Famine generation. The American Irish orchestrated the escape of Irish political prisoners from Australia to the United States and sent money, arms, and munitions to support insurrections in Ireland. Irish revolutionaries and journalists in New York City, Boston, Chicago, London, Sydney, and Dublin engaged in an explicitly transnational exchange of ideas about the best strategies for securing Ireland's independence (Brown 1966; Brundage 2016).

In an apparent paradox, diasporic nationalism of this kind could serve as a powerful force for assimilation rather than accentuating the alienation of the Irish overseas. The origins of Irish-American nationalism, as Brown (1966) demonstrated in a still-influential thesis, often lay not so much in di-

rect concerns about Ireland as in a desire to improve the standing of the Irish in their new communities abroad. Irish-American nationalists fought for Irish freedom, to be sure, but in doing so they were hoping to win acceptance and respectability in their adopted country. An independent Ireland, they believed, would raise their status internationally, and the very act of political mobilisation would demonstrate their fitness for citizenship in a participatory democracy. This argument, it must be said, fits moderate constitutional nationalism better than the physical force tradition, given that engagement in political violence was an unlikely path to respectability. And, as Foner (1980) pointed out, most Irish Americans during and after the Famine were members of the working class, forging an oppositional culture of their own rather than simply aspiring to middle-class status. Yet their radical brand of nationalism too was directed mainly toward American ends. The trope of exile at the heart of Irish diasporic nationalism, in short, was never simply a matter of lamentation or homesickness; it could also be a powerful force for communal cohesion, political mobilisation, and social advancement in the host communities.

It is important to reiterate, in conclusion, that the Famine generation was only one episode in the long history of Irish emigration. Two million emigrants left the country in the Famine decade, but the history of Irish emigration stretched over three centuries from 1700 to the present. At least 1.5 million emigrants left Ireland in the 150-year period before the Famine, and as many as 6.5 million in the 150 years after the catastrophe. Imposing a single, undifferentiated concept of "diaspora" on the entirety of Irish emigration history can reduce that history to a morality tale based on the unique trauma of the 1840s (Kenny 2013, 32). One of the biggest pitfalls of diaspora is homogenisation. The concept, as Patterson and Kelley (2000, 20) remarked, has a strong tendency to conceal "differences and discontinuities" and to erase "complexities and contradictions as it seeks to fit all within the metaphor". The history of Irish emigration consisted of five distinct waves – the eighteenth century, the pre-Famine era, the Famine era, the post-Famine era, and the twentieth century and beyond – that varied considerably in their causes, regional origins, and destinations as well as by class, gender, and religious composition. To collapse these separate phases into a single type is to rob history of its diversity and diminish its protagonists.

Diaspora has an even stronger tendency to homogenise emigrants once they have settled overseas. Viewed from this perspective, the Irish (like many other migrant groups) become a single global people, ignoring divisions of class, gender, and regional origin as well as the considerable differences between the countries where they settled. A single point of geographical origin, in other words, produces an ostensibly unitary people abroad, regardless of local circumstances or social differentiation. To offset this tendency, it is useful to adopt a comparative perspective alongside a transnational approach,

analysing the differences and the similarities in emigration patterns over time, and between the countries and regions of settlement, and not just the exchange of people and ideas between these places (Kenny 2013). By the same token, just as patterns of emigration differ from one period to the next, the relative weight of the three constituent elements of the idea of diaspora can be expected to shift accordingly.

The remainder of this essay will examine precisely this kind of shift. If relocation was the dominant element in the Irish idea of diaspora during the Famine era, the dominant element in the contemporary era is connectivity. This is not to say that either element was absent in the other period, merely that their relative importance changed over time. The massive relocation of the mid-nineteenth century gave rise to new communities overseas, which built connections back to Ireland and, eventually, among themselves. Connectivity was important in this era, in other words, even if relocation was fundamental. By the same token, emigrants continue to leave Ireland in sizeable numbers today – mostly for Britain and Australia rather than the United States – even as Ireland and the overseas communities are tied together in a complex global network by forms of connectivity that do not involve migration. Technology and communications are one important dimension of this network. But perhaps the most significant development in recent years is that national governments have emerged as major players in the diasporic arena, forging powerful new connections with their overseas communities. The Irish government in particular has launched a sophisticated and successful campaign to connect with its "diaspora".

3. The contemporary era

For many social scientists, the term "contemporary era" might refer to the current decade, but for historians it is likely to cover a longer time span. The contemporary era of immigration history in the United States, for example, refers to the period since the reforms of 1965, which abolished the national origins quota system and ushered in a genuinely global phase of immigration. For the purposes of this article, the "contemporary era" refers to the period since the 1980s, when diaspora assumed its current popularity in academic and popular discourse about Irish emigration. This period, in turn, contains two distinct and slightly overlapping phases: from the 1980s through 1998, when associational life among the overseas Irish, especially in the United States, derived much of its vitality from engagement with the political conflict in Northern Ireland; and from 1995 to the present, when the promise of the "Celtic Tiger" gave way to severe economic recession, renewed emigration, and a profound national crisis. The emphasis of the Irish government's "diaspora engagement" shifted accordingly, from high-level political and diplomatic cooperation during the peace process, to confident

cultural assertion at the height of the economic boom, to hard-headed outreach efforts after the crash.

It is worth considering at the outset that there are ways of thinking about ethnicity and diaspora other than through the popular but elusive category of "identity". The sociologist Dan Lainer-Vos (2012, 2013), for example, examines the formation and functioning of ethnic and diasporic groups – and nations – as a *practical* matter, involving governments, institutions, and associations. For Lainer-Vos, putting together and maintaining affiliative groups of this sort involves a set of concrete problems to be solved rather than (or in addition to) a community to be created in the abstract. These groups, he argues, are "stitched together" rather than "imagined" (the seductive but elusive term favoured in much of the humanities). Lainer-Vos concentrates on financial transactions, for example bond drives, in his analysis of how diasporic communities work.

Ted Smyth (2018), in a compelling analysis of the retention and transformation of Irish-American ethnicity over time, adopts a similar approach, revealing a strikingly broad and powerful array of Irish cultural, academic, and political institutions in the United States in the 1980s. Among the most prominent of these were ethnic newspapers, county associations (based on place of origin in Ireland), the Gaelic Athletic Association, *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Eireann* (which promoted Irish traditional music and dance), the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the American Conference of Irish Studies, and the Irish American Cultural Institute. Politically, the "Four Horsemen" of Irish America – Thomas P. O'Neill (Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives), Senators Edward Kennedy and Patrick Moynihan, and Governor Hugh Carey of New York – emerged as powerful supporters of moderate constitutionalism, working closely with John Hume in Northern Ireland and exerting considerable influence over American policy. Noraid (Northern Irish Aid), on the other hand, supported physical force republicanism, serving as the U.S. fundraising agent of Sinn Féin and the IRA. Overall, Smyth concludes, Irish-American associational life in the 1980s was so robust largely because of its engagement with the political conflict in Northern Ireland.

By the late 1990s, at the height of the "Celtic Tiger" and with the worst of the conflict in Northern Ireland at an end, Irish cultural self-confidence was at an all-time high. Most of the organisations Smyth discusses were thriving, along with many more. *Riverdance*, which was first performed in 1994, brought unprecedented attention to Irish dance and music. In the academic world, important new centres of research and study were joined in a network of conferences, journals, student and faculty exchanges and, above all, by the Internet. The critical electronic forum at this time was the Irish Diaspora list, moderated by Patrick O'Sullivan, the director of the Irish Diaspora Research Unit at the University of Bradford. O'Sullivan edited a six-volume se-

ries of essays called *The Irish Worldwide* (O'Sullivan 1993-1997), doing more than any other individual to help create the emerging field of Irish Diaspora Studies. By the year 2000, the United States had nine Irish Studies centres or programmes, Britain had five, Canada and Australia had three each, and Brazil had one. Most of these centres and programmes dealt with themes of migration and diaspora as part of their conception of Irish Studies, and at least six in Ireland were devoted specifically to this theme (Kenny 2003b).

Then, in 2008, disaster struck. With the collapse of the "Celtic Tiger", Ireland suddenly and brutally became a nation of emigrants once again. From 2008 to 2014, over 240,000 people left the country (DFA 2015, 14). The Irish government was already closely involved with diaspora affairs. A report by the Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants, an independent advisory group established by the government led to the establishment of the Irish Abroad Unit and the Emigrant Support Programme within the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2004 (13). At this point, the primary focus was on aging Irish immigrants in Britain, most of whom had left Ireland in the 1950s. The government's engagement with diaspora affairs rose significantly after the economy collapsed. In 2009 and 2010, the Global Irish Economic Forum and the Global Irish Network were established "to provide mechanisms for some of the most successful Irish overseas Irish to connect with Ireland and identify ways to contribute to Ireland's continued recovery and economic development" (14). The government declared that 2013 would be the "Year of the Gathering", an opportunity for all people of Irish origin (or inclination) to contribute to the country's cultural and economic recovery (Glucksman Ireland House Podcast 2017). This announcement was greeted with considerable cynicism in some quarters, with the Irish actor Gabriel Byrne, who had been named Ireland's first "cultural ambassador to the United States" in 2010, denouncing The Gathering as a "scam" and a "shakedown" (*Irish Times*, 10 November 2012). What would have been really surprising, however, was if the Irish government had *not* engaged in efforts of this kind, especially during so grave a crisis, given the size and resources of the overseas Irish population.

Governments around the world were busily engaged in similar efforts. In 1998, Armenia declared that it would strengthen links with its diaspora (*spurk*) through a special department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first Armenia-Diaspora conference met in Yerevan in 1999, and five more were held by 2017. The Armenian Constitution was amended in 2008 to introduce a form of dual citizenship, including voting rights, for qualified people of Armenian descent abroad. The Chinese government, although it does not permit dual citizenship, encourages economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation among the global Chinese via the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO). The Indian government, which also prohibits dual citizenship, has offered a variety of incentives to attract investment by overseas Indians. The African Union, meanwhile, declared the African Diaspora its sixth region in 2003.

In March 2015, the Irish government released a major report, *Global Irish: Ireland's Diaspora Policy*. Throughout the report, the government used "diaspora" in the familiar sense of a social entity – Irish and Irish-descended people living abroad. But in deploying the idea of diaspora the government was also constituting the meaning of the term. As the "first clear statement of Government of Ireland policy on the diaspora", the report began by announcing its vision of "a vibrant, diverse global Irish community, connected to Ireland and to each other" (DFA 2015, 2). On this basis, *Global Irish* outlined a comprehensive and imaginative set of proposals and guidelines. Ireland, the report noted, had long been recognised as "a leader in diaspora engagement" (10) and this expertise showed through on every page of the report. In his Foreword, the *Taoiseach* (head of government), Enda Kenny, T.D., laid out the rationale for the new policy:

> The voice of this small nation is hugely amplified by the many millions around the globe who are Irish by birth or by descent or by affiliation. Our diaspora are [sic] an important part of our story as a nation. They are part of who we are as a people, what we have done and where we have gone in this world. Their existence is the end result of a long history of emigration which for many was not considered a matter of choice. (6)

It was in this context that Kenny announced the creation of Ireland's Ministry for Diaspora Affairs, with Jimmy Deenihan T.D. as its head (DFA 2015, 6). Deenihan, in his own Foreword to *Global Irish*, noted that the new Ministry spanned the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and he announced that he would chair an Interdepartmental Committee to ensure "a whole of government approach towards diaspora issues" (9).

The government was forthright about the economic crisis that had triggered its new policy. At the end of the twentieth century, the *Taoiseach* noted, the Irish people had thought the days of mass emigration were behind them, but "the economic crash of 2008 once again deprived our people, and particularly our young people, of the jobs and opportunities at home that they deserve" (6). As the *Tánaiste* (deputy head of government), Joan Burton, T.D., noted in her Foreword:

> The size of our diaspora gives us a reach and a voice throughout the world that is the envy of many other nations. We have been very fortunate to be able to draw upon their experience and expertise in overcoming our recent economic difficulties and getting this country back on its feet and creating jobs. […] As we strengthen our economic recovery we look forward to continuing to work with the diaspora to ensure that Ireland's future is secured for all of our people. (7)

Burton concluded optimistically: "The cranes are on the skyline again, the jobs are emerging again. A generation stands ready to come home to a

Republic of equality, of opportunity, of hopes and dreams and possibilities" (*ibidem*).

Global Irish took seriously the government's commitment, indeed obligation, under the constitutional amendment of 1998 to connect with and support the overseas Irish. As the introduction to the document put it:

> The Irish have an affinity to and with each other that is not bound nor defined by geography or time. This first ever comprehensive statement of Ireland's diaspora policy is firmly rooted in Article 2 of the Constitution of Ireland which states that 'the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage'. There can be no more clear-cut statement of the importance of the relationship between Ireland and our diaspora. (10)

Successive generations of the Irish overseas had "given Ireland a reputation and reach that other nations envy", the report noted, but emigration continued to be perceived as a loss to Ireland, especially "a loss of young people, with their energy, innovation and capacity to drive change" (*ibidem*). While many emigrants found opportunity abroad, others suffered hardship and needed support.

The government would come to the assistance of these needy emigrants, just as it called on the more prosperous members of the "diaspora" to assist Ireland in a time of great need. "Irish people all over the world", as Charles Flanagan, T.D., the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, noted, "have played their part in Ireland's recovery in recent years, and in restoring Ireland's reputation and place in the world after a period of unprecedented economic challenges". Those who wanted to give back to Ireland had done so in a myriad of ways – through the Global Irish Network and the Global Irish Economic Forum, by encouraging friends to visit Ireland, by setting up businesses, and by introducing people abroad to the richness of Irish culture. "Our diaspora is both an asset and a responsibility", Flanagan concluded. "For some the journey has been hugely positive while for others emigration has been a cause of pain and heartache" (DFA 2015, 8). This phrase, "an asset and a responsibility" nicely captured the report's reciprocal conception of diaspora. The government had a responsibility to the overseas Irish; but, as members of the extended Irish nation, they too had a responsibility to help Ireland when they could.

While a few governments – notably Mexico's and Italy's – have formalised such *quid pro quo* arrangements by extending voting rights to their citizens abroad, *Global Irish* was circumspect on this matter. "The issue of voting rights in Irish elections is of enormous importance to many Irish citizens abroad", the report acknowledged. "They have expressed this through well organised and vocal campaigns and in submissions to this review of policy"

(19). The government conceded that allowing Irish citizens abroad to vote in certain elections – for example, for President of Ireland – would "allow them to deepen their engagement with Ireland and to play a more active role in Irish society. It would further the wider goal of enhancing diaspora engagement" (*ibidem*). But implementing and managing such a policy would be challenging, *Global Irish* warned, and it would raise questions about the extent to which voting rights might be extended in cases where citizenship was passed down through the generations, "including to those who have never visited or engaged with Ireland". Rather than proposing action, the report recommended that various ministries analyse the policy, legal, and practical issues and report back to the government (*ibidem*). In the meantime, Ireland's diaspora engagement would be based on a five-part policy based on the guiding principle of connectivity.

4. A five-part policy for the Irish diaspora

The five-part policy proposed by *Global Irish* exemplifies the range and power of government outreach efforts in the contemporary era. The policy was designed as one that:

> *Supports*: those who have left Ireland and need or want support;
> *Connects*: in an inclusive way with those, of all ages, around the world who are Irish, of Irish descent or have a tangible connection to Ireland, and wish to maintain a connection with Ireland and with each other;
> *Facilitates*: a wide range of activity at local, national and international level designed to build on and develop twoway diaspora engagement;
> *Recognises*: the wide variety of people who make up our diaspora and the important ongoing contribution that they have made, both individually and collectively, in shaping our development and our identity;
> *Evolves*: to meet changing needs in changing times. (DFA 2015, 4)

Under the first heading, "Supporting the Diaspora", the Irish government committed to provide multiannual grants under the Emigrant Support Programme, keep welfare at the heart of its approach to diaspora issues, and increase its focus on the mental health of emigrants (4, 26-29). "While many of our emigrants are better equipped than before for the demands of emigration", the report noted, "there are still those who remain vulnerable and for whom emigration is a challenging experience" (25). The government recognised the needs both of departing and returning emigrants and of people of Irish descent around the world. In 2014, it had provided financial support to 210 organisations working with emigrants and the Irish diaspora in more than twenty countries across five continents (*ibidem*).

The Emigrant Support Programme (ESP), managed by the Irish Abroad Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in partnership with Ire-

land's embassies and consulates abroad, was the key to this first component of the policy. As "a tangible expression of the Government's support of, commitment to, and interest in the global Irish community" (*ibidem*), the ESP assisted over 470 organisations in more than 30 countries in the period 2004-2014. Grants totalled over €126 million, ranging from very small amounts for grassroots community and voluntary groups to large allocations for non-profit organisations (*ibidem*). The ESP, *Global Irish* promised, would continue to fund projects that celebrated, maintained, and strengthened links between Ireland and the global Irish, and addressed the needs of vulnerable emigrants, including Travellers, the undocumented, the elderly, prisoners and former prisoners, and those suffering from mental illness, alcoholism, or psychological distress. It would also fund projects that furthered the work of the Global Irish Economic Forum, supported business networks in their efforts to connect Irish people at home and abroad, and improved awareness and understanding of diaspora issues through research (25, 28-29).

Under the second heading, "Connecting with the Diaspora", *Global Irish* addressed the central element of the idea of diaspora in the contemporary era. "One of the main themes running through this Policy is that of *connectivity*", Minister Flanagan wrote. "Our network of embassies and consulates around the world will continue their outreach to the diaspora engaging with Irish communities" (8; emphasis added). The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade would build on that outreach "by availing of the opportunities presented by fast evolving technology which, in recent years, has transformed the ability to stay in touch and to remain connected" (*ibidem*). *Global Irish* placed a strong emphasis on improving "communications and connectivity between Ireland and its diaspora". As the report put it:

> Effective communication is essential to real diaspora engagement. With modern technologies, it is more important and more possible than ever to engage with Irish communities globally. The need to communicate better with the Irish abroad was one of the strongest themes to emerge from the public consultation on diaspora policy. People want to feel connected and they want the Government to play a role in achieving this. (34)

The report noted that since the establishment of the Irish Abroad Unit in 2004, communications had evolved significantly: "Current means of mobile communications and widely available social media were in their infancy at that time – Facebook was set up in the same year as the Irish Abroad Unit, Skype was established just a year earlier, and other networks and tools, such as Twitter did not yet exist" (11). Social media would play an important role in the new policy, but also more traditional forms of communication such as letters, telephone, and email. As the report put it, "We want to communicate with the Irish abroad in the ways they choose to communicate with each other" (35).

To facilitate better communication, Flanagan announced the creation of the Global Irish Hub (<https://www.dfa.ie/global-irish/>). Run by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Hub would "provide a portal for the diaspora – a single place to find information on support services, Irish heritage, staying in touch, business and education, finding Irish networks in other countries and information on returning to Ireland" (DFA 2015, 8). Flanagan encouraged people abroad who were born in Ireland or of Irish descent to register on the Hub and to subscribe to the new *Global Irish Newsletter* (<https://www.dfa.ie/global-irish/staying-in-touch/newsletter/>), which would issue regular communications by email to the overseas Irish, along with a weekly *eNewsletter* with the latest news and job announcements. Efforts would also be made to enhance access to Irish television and radio stations and to support media coverage of diaspora issues at home and abroad (DFA 2015, 35).

Among the cultural arenas identified by *Global Irish* for particular attention and development were genealogy, arts, culture, music, language, and historical commemorations. "The desire to trace family history", the report noted, "is often the incentive for an individual of Irish ancestry to activate their links to Ireland" (33). Here, once again, was a corrective to cynicism: whereas the figure of the "returning Yank" in search of his or her roots is sometimes ridiculed in Ireland, the government respected the search for origins and saw opportunities to make further connections. Arts, culture, and music, meanwhile, were the source of deeper and more extensive links. "More than any other aspect of Ireland or our Irishness, our culture reaches all corners of the world", the report noted. "It is one of the most effective ways of connecting with the global Irish diaspora, strengthening links to home and maintaining expression of Irish identity through generations" (36). "Culture Ireland", a division of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, would continue to support Irish arts, film, and music worldwide, helping to generate new audiences among the global Irish and beyond (*ibidem*). The government would also support *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* in its promotion of traditional Irish music and dance, including classes, festivals, tours, published recordings, and books and tutorials (*ibidem*). Literature got only a passing nod – to Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett – perhaps because this form of Irish culture was already renowned around the world, but the report acknowledged the Irish Studies programmes at Notre Dame University, New York University, and Charles University, Prague as providing "a formal opportunity for the diaspora to engage with their heritage in an educational setting" (7). In the realm of Irish-language, the government would continue to fund initiatives by *Glór na Gael*, *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*, and other organisations. And, with the period 2013-2022 billed as the Irish "Decade of Commemorations", the government saw an important role for the Irish abroad, not least because many of the leaders of the 1916 Rising

were born or spent part of their lives overseas. Ireland's network of embassies and consulates, the government noted, would have a central role to play in this regard, as would the ESP (39).

Global Irish also announced a special initiative, *Fréamhacha*, aimed at "deepening the ties with Ireland of younger non-Irish born members of the Irish diaspora" (5, 38). A pilot programme, modelled on the "growing focus in countries with large diasporas on providing an opportunity for the children of emigrants to strengthen their links with the country of their parents or grandparents through immersive visits to their 'home' country" (38), would sponsor two-week stays by young Irish Americans (similar to the visits by many Jewish American teenagers to Israel). These short visits, the government anticipated, would be "an important tool to nurture a greater mindfulness of heritage in diaspora populations" (*ibidem*). The programme was abandoned after the one-year pilot, but private groups continued to organise a limited number of visits. Just as Irish-American cultural organisations today realise the importance of connecting with young people if a sense of ethnicity is to survive, the success of outreach efforts by national governments would seem to depend in part on similar initiatives.

Finally, *Global Irish* identified sports and St. Patrick's Day as especially important in fostering diasporic connectivity. Among Irish sports, the report naturally singled out Gaelic games, which it claimed were being played increasingly abroad (36). With approximately 400 clubs outside the island of Ireland, the Gaelic Athletic Association had "arguably [...] greater reach into the Irish diaspora than any other organisation" (42). "In many locations", the report noted, "GAA clubs provide a first port of call for new emigrants, giving them an immediate circle of familiarity and support" (*ibidem*). In the United States, however, Gaelic games do not have a realistic chance of competing with the national sports of baseball, basketball, and football, and to a growing extent soccer, which suggests that the government's position was more patriotic than pragmatic in this case. As for St. Patrick's Day, *Global Irish* noted that it was "celebrated in more countries around the world than any other national day and reflects the distinctive nature and reach of the Irish nation". This day of national and international celebration offered "a platform for Ireland to engage with the world", an opportunity "to communicate with the world when the world is listening" (8).

"Facilitating Diaspora Engagement" was the third component of the new policy. Working with the Clinton Institute at University College Dublin, the government convened a Global Irish Civic Forum in Ireland in 2015 "to discuss the challenges facing the Irish abroad and to capture the voice of ordinary Irish emigrants" (5, 42). This conference was followed by the Fourth Global Irish Economic Forum, also in 2015, in a new format emphasising greater engagement with organisations based in Ireland and greater participation by women and young people (5, 44). Another Irish Civic Forum met

in Dublin in 2017. Although *Global Irish* was a blueprint for policy, the report emphasised that the government was "just one part of the complex web of networks and organisations that connect people in Ireland and across all continents under the single banner of being Irish" (23). Its role was "primarily one of support and facilitation". Financial support was a key part of this approach, but also institutional support through Ireland's network of embassies and consulates (*ibidem*).

Irish business networks, the report noted, were flourishing around the world due to increased emigration and enhanced technology, but they had yet to reach their potential. These networks, the government believed, could be used to promote Ireland as an attractive location for business and to attract investment and entrepreneurship. Yet there was no platform to bring Irish business networks from around the world together. The government announced that the ESP would welcome proposals to this end, especially those concerning "diasporic networks for female professional development" – a theme emphasised in a recent report by the Clinton Institute, "Supporting the next Generation of the Irish Diaspora", which had identified "the emergence of a young, female, professional element in the Irish emigrant communities" (Kennedy, Lyes, Russell 2014; DFA 2015, 45). Philanthropy, as *Global Irish* observed was "still at an early stage" in Ireland, whereas members of the "diaspora" both Irish-born and of Irish descent, had given significant sums to Irish projects, programmes, and organisations. Alongside particular individuals, the report singled out the Ireland Funds as "as a remarkable example of diaspora giving". Founded in 1976, the Funds were operating in twelve countries by 2015 and had raised more than $480 million for over 3,000 organisations. The Ireland Funds' vision of "the global Irish making a difference together", the report concluded, "could serve as a guide to all those seeking to work for shared good in this area" (DFA 2015, 45; Smyth 2019, 5).

Global Irish placed a strong emphasis on the possibility of return to Ireland. "In times gone by", the report noted, "leaving Ireland was often perceived as a life sentence particularly by those who were left behind. That is no longer the case and attitudes to emigration have changed along with the changing nature of emigration" (DFA 2015, 11). In its "ongoing work to deepen economic recovery", the government would strive to create the conditions whereby those who had to leave the country for economic reasons could return. The government would work to ease the logistical challenges, including recognition of qualifications acquired abroad and lack of affordable housing and job opportunities. The "Safe Home" emigrant support service (which had originally provided help in securing affordable housing only for older Irish-born emigrants seeking to return) would provide information and advice for anyone who was considering returning to Ireland, along with support for those who had done so (<https://www.safehomeireland.com/>).

In a creative touch, *Global Irish* envisaged an important place for Ireland in the field of Diaspora Studies. Given the centrality of emigration to Ireland's historical development, the government committed to "Support efforts to use Ireland as a hub for research into the potential and reach of diasporas and the practical application of such research" (DFA 2015, 5, 47). With more than 230 million international migrants in the world in 2015, the report noted, Ireland was "ahead of most countries in efforts to engage with our citizens abroad and their descendants. Initiatives like the Emigrant Support Programme and the Global Irish Network are original and inventive and point the way for others to follow" (46). Learning, the report continued, is based on sharing knowledge, and in this respect Ireland's universities, non-governmental organisations, private individuals, and the government itself had much to give and much to receive. The government would "support efforts to use Ireland as a hub for research into the potential and reach of diasporas and the practical application of such research" (*ibidem*).

In the fourth component of the new policy, "Recognising the Diaspora", the report saluted the day-to-day work of Irish officials overseas in their efforts to connect with Irish communities and noted the high-level engagement with those communities during ministerial visits. The government encouraged Irish people, organisations, and communities to engage with the nomination process for the Presidential Distinguished Service Award for the Irish Abroad, initiated in 2012 to recognise persons living abroad "who have given sustained and distinguished service" to Ireland or to Irish communities overseas (DFA 2015, 5, 49). The report also promised to reevaluate the ill-fated Certificate of Irish Heritage scheme (5, 50). Introduced in 2011, the certificates recognised the Irish identity felt by people around the world who were not entitled to Irish citizenship. The government honoured some high-figures under this programme, including former U.S. President Bill Clinton, President Barack Obama, the actor Tom Cruise, and the Olympian Lord Coe, but everyone else had to buy the certificates (€40 for the piece of paper or €120 with a frame). Not surprisingly, only 3,000 had been sold by 2015 and the scheme was discontinued later that year.

Finally, and importantly, *Global Irish* recognised that Ireland's "diaspora" was not static. Under the heading "Evolving Diaspora Policy", the government declared that it would encourage research and implement policy in line with the changing character and needs of Irish communities abroad (5, 17, 52). As a subset of this policy, it would launch "an alumni challenge fund to provide seed-funding to new collaborative initiatives by Irish institutions to target their Irish and non-Irish graduates working internationally" (5, 53). The report also recognised the substantial number of immigrants who had come to Ireland in recent years, their contributions to local communities, and the new networks of migration and diaspora opened up by their presence (5, 52).

5. Conclusion

Of the three elements of the idea of diaspora, relocation and connectivity have been uppermost in the Irish case, with their relative weight varying over time, while return has been of much less importance. Reverse migration from the United States to Ireland was more significant than historians have realised and it had a considerable impact on Irish rural history (Fitzpatrick 2019). But it was on nowhere near the scale of Italian return, which reached rates as high as almost 50 percent from New York City and Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century (Gabaccia 2000, 72-73). In the absence of reverse migration, however, connectivity contains within itself an element of return – not literal or physical, but emotional, cultural, or political. To forge connections with Ireland or with other Irish communities abroad is to partake in the creation and maintenance of something akin to a transnational Irish nation – in other words, the idea of a diaspora – that does not entail living in Ireland as a *sine qua non* of Irishness. The Irish nation, as the *Global Irish* report put it, "includes all those who feel a bind to Ireland" (DFA 2015, 11).

With emigration from Ireland to the United States reduced to a trickle today compared to the Famine generation, Smyth (2018) has raised important questions about whether, and in what form, Irish American associational life can survive. While the content of Irish-American ethnicity has changed in the generation since the 1980s – from nationalist politics to culture, to put the matter in shorthand – he finds that its vitality has not diminished. The current and emerging sense of Irishness in the United States, far from being simply a diluted version of the old, is more "inclusive and confident" (Smyth 2018, 16, 69) and for that reason it is likely to endure. But for how long, and in what form, remains an open question. Irish America today, as Smyth observes, lacks a single animating political issue comparable to its engagement with the Northern Ireland conflict in the 1980s. And the lack of replenishment through immigration raises the spectre of symbolic ethnicity. Yet connectivity can survive in the absence of immigration, providing a powerful force of economic, cultural, and political cohesion.

This article has demonstrated how the Irish created an idea of a diaspora in two quite different periods, under two distinct sets of circumstances. Out of the trauma and upheaval of the Famine years, emigrants built regional and local communities abroad, sustained by a common sense of exile, which eventually formed connections between themselves as well as with Ireland. The Irish idea of diaspora in this period emerged from the bottom up and it had a strong political dimension in the form of nationalism. In the contemporary era, with Ireland and the overseas communities connected in an interactive global network, diaspora also has a strong political dimension but the Irish government has emerged as the central player. "A diaspora policy will not create or define the diaspora", the *Global Irish* report states. "What it

can do is contribute to the activation and mobilisation of the Irish overseas, and further a sense that they are part of a community" (DFA 2015, 11). Yet this assertion, born of a tactful desire to be been seen as facilitating rather than directing the activities of the overseas Irish, does justice neither to the extent of governmental power nor to the idea of diaspora. Everyone who uses this idea helps shape its meaning – and no-one more so, in the contemporary era, than national governments that reach out to engage with their overseas populations.

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