

Imagining Ireland in the Great Exhibition of 1853¹

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Here artists, sculptors, chemists – all unite,
With merchants, traders and mechanics bright;
Whilst princes, nobles, dames, and ladies fair,
Combine to make this Theatre so rare.

Here history and chronicles agree
With mathematics and astronomy;
Whilst antiquarian, Celtic, old records
Show forth our kings, philosophers, and lords.

Here mighty foundries, all their works display,
In copper, brass, lead, iron, metal, clay;
Whilst bells, locks, safes, most satisfactory,
Prove Ireland's famous manufactory.

Antique remains which in our land abound,
Chancels, stained windows, fonts and holy ground,
Mitres, croziers, chasubles and stoles,
Christ's sacred image, and bells with solemn tolls.

May commerce throw its magic spells around,
And manufactures with their fruit abound;
May trade and agriculture e'er enhance
Thy worth, dear Erin, our inheritance²

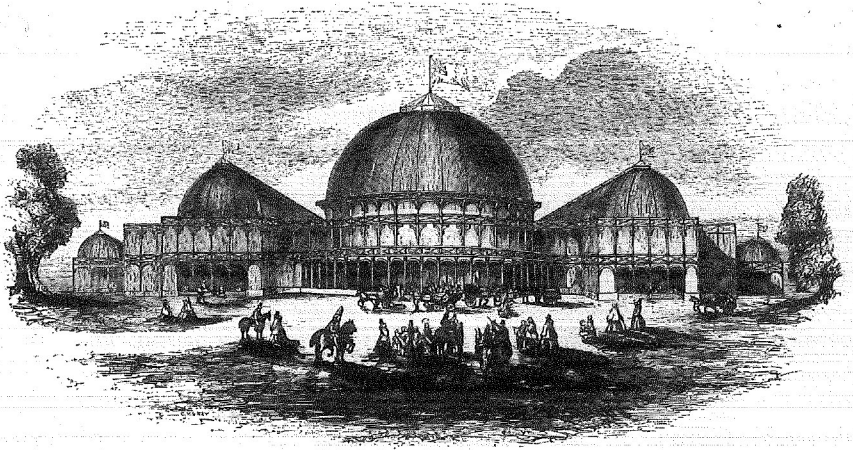
¹ I would like to acknowledge the logistical assistance of Siobhán Kerr on the illustrations accompanying this essay, and that of Eamonn Slater for much help with sources. My thinking on nationalism has been influenced by Steve Coleman's excellent unpublished paper entitled 'Nominalism, Language, and the Imagination of Nationalism', presented at the spring 1996 conference of the Anthropological Association of Ireland. Many discussions have sharpened my perceptions on the thesis of Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalisms*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1991). The final cause of this paper rests in the person of Raymond D. Fogelson who first interested me in the anthropological possibilities of World's Fairs. ² Selected stanzas from W.J. Battersby, *The Glories of the Great Irish Exhibition of All Nations, in 1853* (Dublin, 1853), pp 3-12.

The stanzas quoted above are taken from a prize-winning poem valorizing the proceedings of a world's fair held on Leinster Lawn in Dublin from May to October 1853. While the literary merit of the lines is, perhaps, debatable, the poet succeeds in locating an astonishing variety of objects, people, classes, disciplines and sensibilities within a particular representational and conceptual space. This space was an impressive, Crystal Palace-type structure, funded by the railway magnate William Dargan. It was the venue for an event whose name, tellingly, alternated between the 'Great Irish Exhibition' and the 'Great Dublin Exhibition' (Figure 1). While the site was a notable landmark in the city long after it was dismantled, it is now scarcely remembered.

Contemporary sources associated with this Exhibition vary in their conception of 'Ireland' as a region, a part of an empire, or a nation. These three terms, of course, share many interesting connections. They convey both a spatial sense and a sense of identity; when any two of them are paired, they almost inevitably point to a conflict. Small nations, for example, insist that they are indeed sovereign entities, while the larger states of which they find themselves a part insist on a derived regional reality for their constituent elements. Similarly, supra-national entities such as the European Union speak of the 'Europe of the Regions', in part as a way of claiming some of the symbolic terrain currently monopolized by its nation-states.³

International displays of art and industry housed in large purpose-built structures necessarily entail a relationship between all the terms used to describe identity and a sense of belonging. These exhibitions became increasingly institutionalized over the course of the nineteenth century, first, as part of the panoply of empire, and then as sites of national displays.⁴ These buildings presented and represented political units in relation to other political units through the display of commercial, artistic and antiquarian objects. 'Nations' received space for

3 Paranoid, late-nation-state fantasy distills this conflict most clearly. There was a quasi-comical fracas several years ago in the United States when a multi-coloured regional map of the country (on the back of a breakfast cereal box) was construed by some right-wing militia members as an indoctrination tool of the New World Order aimed at reconstituting the United States as a collection of regions ultimately under the aegis of a one-world government. 4 Universal Exhibitions and World's Fairs have become respectable academic topics, insofar as the sense of political authority, economic power and symbolic legitimacy that such fairs displayed, reproduced and/or aspired to, has at least been outlined. See John Allwood, *The Great Exhibitions* (London, 1979); Burton Benedict, 'The Autobiography of World's Fairs' in *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panoramic Pacific International Exhibition of 1915*, ed. Burton Benedict et al. (Berkeley, 1983), pp 1-65; *Fair Representations: World's Fairs and the Modern World* (Amsterdam, 1994); Raymond D. Fogelson, 'The Red Man in the White City' in D.H Thomas (ed.), *Columbian Consequences*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC, 1991), pp 73-90; Phil Patton, 'The Great Chicago Fair, a wonder of wonders' in *Smithsonian*, xxiv, no. 3 (1993), p. 38; and Robert W. Rydell, 'Selling the World of Tomorrow: New York's 1939 World's Fair' in *Journal of American History*, lxxvii, no. 3 (1990), pp 966-70.



1 'Front View of the Irish Industrial Exhibition Building', in John Sproule (ed.), *The Irish Industrial Exhibition of 1853: A Detailed Catalogue of Its Contents* (Dublin, 1854), p. 29.

'their' products and history. Regions of nations were also often recognized, but only insofar as they developed local themes within a broader nation-state symphony. For the cosmopolitan connoisseur the world itself was on display: products of every meaningful collection of peoples, every interesting area of the globe, showing the entire sweep of human progress, could be visited in the course of a long afternoon's stroll. The huge building, then, was to be at once emporium, spectacle and classroom, where both the learned and the ignorant could find excitement, entertainment and instruction. Meanwhile, all were expected to be awed by the power and the grandeur of a system that could bring all these delights together in one time and place.

Imagining Ireland

London 1851, New York 1853, Dublin 1853, Paris 1855 – four cities, four 'universal' exhibitions. Initially it might not seem that Dublin 1853 fits naturally into this group. London, New York and Paris of the 1850s were confident imperial centres, while being models of modernity and epicentres for its diffusion. Dublin at this time had the dubious distinction of being the centre to a hinterland just emerging from the devastation of one of the worst catastrophes in modern Europe. Even by the mid-nineteenth century, the sense that Dublin was a window on a lost pre-industrial urban charm is discoverable in textual

and visual representations of the city.⁵ While the Great Famine understandably offered a bleak prognosis for Ireland's future, the organizers of the Dublin spectacle also felt the looming presence of the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851.

Nonetheless, those who constructed the Temple of Industry clearly wanted their Exhibition to be placed in a certain class of spectacle (Figure 2). That these men had pretensions for this Exhibition is also seen in their representation of what they understood to be unproblematically the products of a colony. It is interesting to consider the contributions to the Dublin exhibition from British Guiana [sic], a 'collection made and forwarded at the sole expense of the colonists',⁶ conveniently classed under the following 'chief points of interest':

SECTION I – Saccharine productions, from the sugar cane ... Specimens of rums of very high proofs, one 62 o.p.

SECTION II – Fibrous substances

SECTION III – Substances used chiefly as food, and in its preparation.

SECTION IV – Materials used chiefly in the chemical arts or in medicines. Forty-five specimens of barks, chiefly known only to the Indian.

SECTION V – A most interesting collection of hardwoods, almost totally unknown in this country.

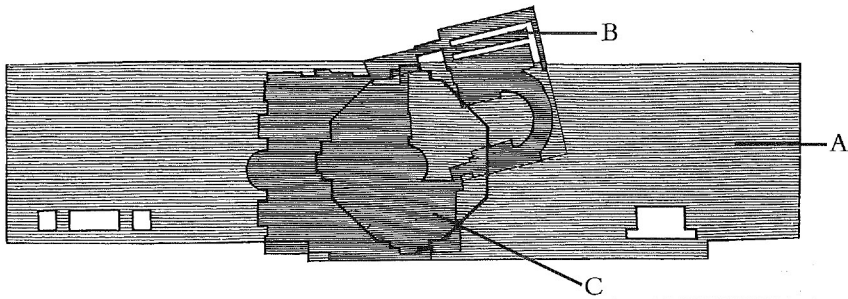
SECTION VI – Natural history and miscellaneous productions, a stuffed ocelot, a stuffed ant bear, a collection of six cases of insects, rare and very beautiful ...

SECTION VII – Indian manufactures in pottery, bows and arrows, cotton cloth, hammocks, fishing lines and nets. Two specimens of Indian huts, a wood skin or canoe, war clubs, &c.⁷

What connects this seemingly disparate array of items – raw materials in glass cases, stuffed animals, indigenous crafts and mysterious knowledge, a few white manufactures and, of course, local cuisine – is precisely the colonial narrative itself. It is the story of European colonists extracting both wealth and knowledge for the metropole in the cause of civilization. In this sense, it would have been perfectly at home in the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. The irony, of course, is that Ireland could itself have been seen in precisely the same light.

To imagine Ireland as a logical place for the display of such booty was itself a bold move, and recalls Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, in which imagining a nation as a political collectivity in the modern world is judged to be necessarily connected to the development of various types of media, requiring the standardization of language, the achievement of necessary levels of lit-

5 See, for example, Kevin O'Neill, 'Looking at the Pictures: Art and Artfulness in Colonial Ireland' in Adele M. Dalsimer (ed.), *Visualizing Ireland: National Identity and the Pictorial Tradition* (Boston, 1993), pp 55-70. 6 Thomas Jones, *Record of the Great Industrial Exhibition 1853, Being a Brief and Comprehensive Description of the Different Objects of Interest Contained in that Temple of Industry*, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1854), p. 63. 7 *Ibid.*, pp 63-4.



2 'Diagram showing comparative Sizes of the Exhibition Buildings of London [A], Dublin [B], and New York' [C], in Sproule (ed.), p. 33.

eracy, the development of an infrastructure to disseminate text and images across a given area quickly and conveniently. There is a performative element to this process which Anderson underplays, but which is taken up by other scholars like Homi Bhaba, who cultivate his ideas.⁸ Elements of this model are readily discernible in the staging of the Dublin Exhibition: in 1853 representatives of a Dublin bourgeoisie used a self-evident technology of empire – a World's Fair – to reconfigure Ireland symbolically, and transform it from a devastated region of the United Kingdom into a nation with a glorious past and a bright future. Understanding this project offers insight into some conflicting issues still very much present in Ireland.

The formidable obstacles arrayed against such a project for Ireland in the 1850s is underscored by Litvack's argument in this volume, concerning the absence of an Irish Court in the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. This absence recalled long-standing assumptions about the island and her inhabitants: the Irish were feckless in opposition to Saxon thrift; Ireland had folklore, whereas Britain had history; the island was without the arts of civilization, whereas Britain had industry and its associated economic power. Anyone who wished to 'imagine' Ireland in nineteenth-century Dublin experienced these oppositions as social facts. Such contradictions imply that any 'imagining' takes place in a stratified context where certain 'registers' are defined as handicapped with respect to dominant ones and marked accordingly.⁹ These stratifications define the relationship between imaginative freedom on the one hand, and the constraints of symbolic, material, and social necessity on the other.

⁸ See Homi K. Bhaba (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990), pp 1, 2, 308–11. ⁹ See Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'The Ethnology of National Identity' (paper presented at the winter conference of the Anthropological Association of Ireland, University College, Cork, 1993), and Steve Coleman, 'Nominalism, Language, and the Imagination of Nationalism' (paper presented at the spring conference of the Anthropological Association of Ireland, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1996).

Showing and Knowing

One way of approaching such issues in the context of 1850s Dublin is to look at a tradition of academic writing about universal exhibitions that stretches from Baudelaire through Walter Benjamin, and resurfaces in a slightly different fashion in Frederick Jameson. This trend sees an end-of-history sensibility foreshadowed in the priority of visual consumption and conceptual excess valorized by such exhibitions.¹⁰ The fear expressed in this writing is that this sort of celebration of excess imperils the possibility of a human subjectivity – perhaps even of thought itself.

This fragmentation is sensed by Baudelaire in his seminal 1855 essay on the Paris spectacle, 'L'exposition universelle',¹¹ and is highlighted more specifically in his 1863 essay 'Le peintre de la vie moderne': that 'le variable, le contingent, le relatif' is representative of modernity.¹² In characterizing the great fair in Paris, for example, Baudelaire wavers between a modernist celebration of diversity, and a despair concerning whether this profusion of bizarre objects can ever be brought into a system, either in terms of their aesthetic value or their position within a progressive hierarchy. Thus, we have foreshadowed his famous image of the *flâneur*, a man existentially strolling through a spectacle of commodities and consumption.

Adopting a contrary position to that of Baudelaire, the designers of Dublin Exhibition wished to convey a very specific experience of ordering subjectivity (Figure 3). The nature and organization of exhibits were not evidence of fragmentation; rather they embodied specific lessons for their audience. As the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser* recorded in an early issue:

The first sensation experienced by the visitor upon entering the Great hall of the Industrial Exhibition is that of wonder and admiration. For the moment everything crowds alike upon the eye and upon the mind. All is indistinct: statue, and bronze, and fountain, natural production and manufacture, textile fabric and works in the metals – all throng upon the gaze and solicit attention. By degrees, however, the eye becomes familiarised with the heterogeneous scene presented to it, and the intellect begins to discriminate between the various objects, and to classify them – to reason upon them.

Later the journal observed:

The Exhibition Building may truly be regarded as a great educational establishment, calculated to impress upon the minds of all classes lasting

¹⁰ See Lieven de Cauter, 'The Panoramic Ecstasy: On World Exhibitions and the Disintegration of Experience' in *Theory, Culture and Society*, x (1993), pp 1-23. ¹¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'L'exposition universelle' in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris, 1976), pp 575-97.

¹² Baudelaire, 'Le peintre de la vie moderne' in *ibid.*, p. 1421.

and important lessons; and it is fairly to be presumed that its value should be greatest to those whose range of observation is ordinarily the most limited.¹³

In a sort of panoptic reversal, the gazer is being disciplined here. More broadly, there is a sense in these and other descriptions that from an initial chaotic fragmentation, sensible order develops. The Exhibition building itself was involved in this process; its internal structure was designed both to delight and enlighten.

This sense of emerging out of darkness into light was inflected in a distinctly Irish direction by the caption accompanying a representation of William Dargan, the motive force behind the Exhibition, in a painting by James Mahony to commemorate Albert and Victoria's visit to the Exhibition in August (Figure 4).¹⁴ Significantly, it reads 'An uair is dorcha sé an uair roimh breacadh an Iae', which may be translated as 'The darkest hour is the one before the dawn'. This epitaph refers, of course, to the Famine, but is also prefigures the iconography of regeneration, such as the Gaelic Revival and the West's Awake. Well into the twentieth century, there has been a tension in this discourse of revival in Ireland with, on the one hand, a sense of alerting a moribund culture to its past glories, and on the other, a modern exhortation for national or regional economic improvement in order to join the developed world.

The objects displayed also embodied interesting lessons for Ireland. Their orderings did not just reveal the vast scope of general human progress; they also highlighted specific and venerable human distinctions. For example, the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser* described the wheel design on the funeral carriage of duke of Wellington:

As to the character of the designs used in England, it has sometimes occurred to us that they uniformly exhibit a Roman clumsiness, but also a Roman strength; in all Roman works, whether of bronze or marble, the same fault will be observed on comparison with the Greek, as in the English compared to the French, – and lest us add with the *Irish* also,

¹³ *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, no. iii (1853), p. 6; no. v (1853), p. 1. This journal is one of the main sources of information on the Exhibition. It ran for the 25-week duration of the spectacle. Several illustrated catalogues, with detailed descriptions of the objects displayed, were also published. See *The Exhibition of Art-Industry in Dublin* (London, 1853) as well as George Whammond, *An Illustrated Guide to the Great Dublin Exhibition* (Dublin, 1853), and John Sproule (ed.), *The Irish Industrial Exhibition of 1853: A Detailed Catalogue of Its Contents* (Dublin, 1854). Sproule in particular draws on the *Exhibition Expositor*. See also A.C. Davies, 'Ireland's Crystal Palace, 1853' in J.M. Goldstrom and L.A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy, and Society: Essays in Honour of the late K.H. Connell* (Oxford, 1981), pp 249-70.

¹⁴ For further information on the Mahony paintings of the Exhibition see Nancy Netzer, 'Picturing an Exhibition: James Mahony's Watercolors of the Irish Industrial Exhibition of 1853' in Dalsimer (ed.), pp 89-98.



- 4 James Mahony, *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert Opening the 1853 Great Dublin Exhibition* (1853).
By kind permission of the National Gallery of Ireland.

when the talent in design of our people is somewhat larger cultivated in the newly established schools.¹⁵

Such an object, of course, is the embodiment *par excellence* of the universal pretensions of the British Empire, complete with all the ambiguously Irish, strongly imperial associations of the Irish-born general who secured British hegemony on the Continent in the nineteenth century. Here, however, this imperial/universalist vehicle is subtly reinscribed in the project of demarcating specific national distinctions. Even more ironically, these venerable historical differences

¹⁵ *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, no. ix (1853), p. 5.

between English and Irish aesthetics await the development of indigenous manufactures that will emanate from the historically novel Irish industrial schools in order to reach their full potential.

William Dargan

The man who provided the financial means to configure and display such imagery was the most successful businessman in nineteenth-century Ireland. William Dargan (Figure 5) was a Carlow man whose biographical details are bound up with the conflicted thematics of the Great Exhibition. He was born in 1799, a year after several of his uncles were hanged in Leighlinbridge, County Carlow, for their part in the Rebellion of 1798. Despite this inauspicious beginning Dargan made a fortune relatively early in life in the railway boom of the 1830s.¹⁶ Indeed, he laid nearly all the rail lines still extant in Ireland.

Calling Dargan a railway magnate rather underestimates the scope of his interests. He also developed canals, the North Circular Road in Dublin, the Boyne Viaduct and the entire resort of Bray. He was a pioneer in marketing Ireland as a tourist destination, and developed joint-ticketing with his English counterparts, so that tourists could enjoy convenient holidays in the south and west of the island.¹⁷ Norman Macmillan, in a recent booklet on Dargan, noted that he was 'more significant in terms of Irish development than was his contemporary Brunel in England and Carnegie in the United States'.¹⁸

Dargan shares many of the complexities of the Exhibition that he went on to fund. His nationalist credentials, in terms of family connections, are unimpeachable. In crucial respects, however, he is very much the child of Daniel O'Connell, sharing with him membership of a modernizing bourgeoisie; facility with the linguistic and political vocabulary of the British Empire; the desire to build Ireland as a modern nation from the wreck of an old Gaelic order; the recognition of a Protestant ascendancy which had grown away from its metropolitan counterpart; and the belief that the great mass of poor people in the country required immediate social and economic development.¹⁹ Dargan was

16 See Norman Macmillan and Joseph M. Feeley, *The Tydall and Dargan Science and Engineering Exhibition* (Tullow, 1985); see also Sean O'Donnell, 'The Works of William Dargan' in *Éire-Ireland*, xxii, no. 1 (1987), pp 151-4. **17** Another figure who was central to the development of the Exhibition, a Mr Rooney, was also involved in the tourist trade; see Whammond. **18** Macmillan and Feeley, pp 3-4. **19** See Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars* (Swords, 1980). As part of this process of modernization, O'Connell was willing to sacrifice certain markers of cultural distinctiveness, such as vernacular Irish. For this reason he has sat very uncomfortably in those nationalist pantheons derived from the Young Irelanders, who argued for more complete cultural separation between Ireland and England and were willing to use force in the anti-imperialist struggle.

also a forger of the technologies of empire. He put together railways and canals, resorts and novel tourist marketing techniques that developed Ireland as a socio-economic unit, and reinforced an imperial sense that the island was different from the metropole.

Dargan wished to respond to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, and to the small but successful industrial show in Cork in 1852, which, crucially, had billed itself as 'national'.²⁰ Thus he proposed an exhibition with universal pretensions for Dublin in 1853, and offered £20,000 to initiate the project; he eventually contributed a little under £100,000 to ensure its completion by the opening on 12 May 1853. More than 600,000 people paid to see the Exhibition, and a similar number is estimated to have gone through on free passes; these figures were somewhat disappointing for the organizers, but impressive nonetheless.²¹ While it was estimated that between 15,000 and 18,000 people could occupy the building at any one time, daily ticket sales only reached about sixty per cent of this figure. A full complement of tickets was, however, sold on 30 August 1853, the day of the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert; hundreds more were admitted on free passes.²² After the Exhibition closed and the receipts were tallied, Dargan calculated that he had incurred a personal loss of about £20,000.²³

Dargan also believed that the legacy of this great spectacle should survive beyond the five-month public display. To this end, his organizers began a subscription to fund a 'Dargan Industrial Institute', the virtues of which were extolled by the authors of the *Exhibition Expositor* in very telling terms:

What Irishman would not gladly contribute liberally, when it is proposed to found a Great Industrial Institute which cannot fail to exercise an important influence on the improvement of the country for generations to come ... The want of persistent habits of industry has been long felt by our more industrious neighbours as being the cardinal deficiency under which we laboured – that which formed the basis of most of the ills by which we have been afflicted.²⁴

Dargan also left a legacy of another kind. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were so impressed with both the spectacle and with Dargan that they offered him a peerage – which, on account of his nationalist inclinations he promptly declined. This refusal came back to haunt him in later years when the National Gallery of Ireland was officially opened in 1864. Though the core of the collection was the Fine Arts section of Dargan's 1853 exhibition (Figure 6), and

²⁰ See John Francis Maguire, *The Industrial Movement in Ireland, as Illustrated by the National Exhibition of 1852* (Cork, 1853). ²¹ The figures quoted here represent about twenty per cent of the total attendance at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 in London. ²² See *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, no. xvi (1853), p. 7. ²³ See Jones, pp 32–3. Dargan's loss, if valued today, would amount to about £1 million. ²⁴ *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, no. xii (1853), p. 1.

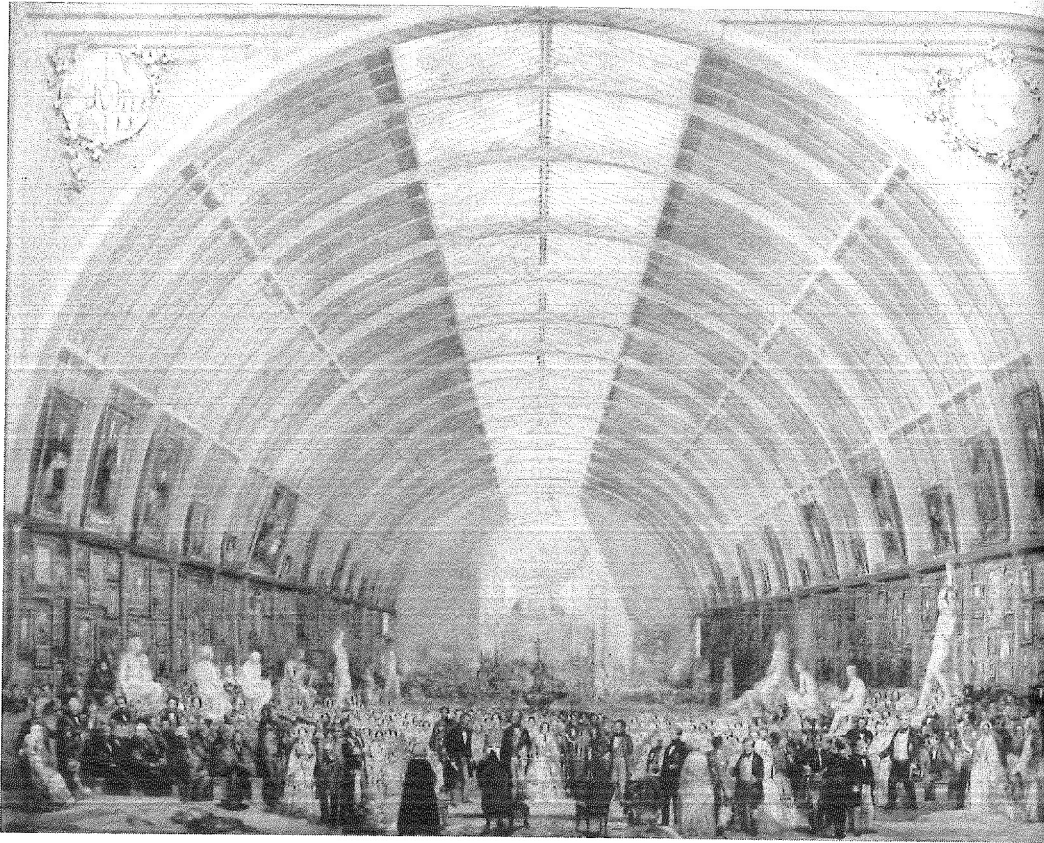


5 William Dargan. Frontispiece to Sproule (ed.), *The Irish Industrial Exhibition*.

local sentiment was strongly in favour of dedicating the building in his name, Dublin Castle and London did not forget his ‘insult’ to the Queen. Eventually a special Act of Parliament (1877) prohibited the naming of the new building after Dargan. Some consolation may be drawn from the fact that the statue of Dargan (erected in 1864) survived both the injunction and Westminster; it stands at the entrance of the gallery to this day.

The Politics of Representation

The committee that Dargan chaired with the task of planning the Exhibition included some of the leading lights of Dublin. If they were in any doubt about the perception of Ireland by the rest of the United Kingdom, the London papers were all willing to recall the failings that purportedly explained the country’s regrettable and chronic difficulties. As the London *Morning Herald* condescendingly wrote in the run-up to the great opening – after it became clear that the Dublin Exhibition’s collection compared favourably with that of the 1851 Crystal Palace spectacle:



6 James Mahony, *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in the Paintings and Sculpture Hall of the 1853 Dublin Great Exhibition* (1853). By kind permission of the National Gallery of Ireland.

It is good for us and good for Ireland that we should know that there are gentlemen of Ireland capable of planning and executing an enterprise ... – men like Mr Dargan, who can add to the Saxon virtue of thrift and steady perseverance an Irish generosity and openness of heart ...

Let us teach the Irish people to be proud of their exhibition – proud of their manufacturing skill which it will bring out into prominent display. Let us make them proud of the patience and perseverance which have carried it out ... and we do much to train that noble nation from the habits that press them – much to train them to the qualities that must be the foundation of prosperity and peace.²⁵

²⁵ Quoted in the *Freeman's Journal*, 28 March 1853.

While not willing to accede to this perception, the self-declared official publication of the Exhibition, the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, admitted the difficulty of connecting within the same ordering of things, 'Ireland', 'Art-Industry' and 'Modern'. The journal also saw hope in the intervention of Dargan, now stripped of his factitious 'Saxon' connections:

Paralysed as Ireland has been by famine, and distracted by party feuds and internal commotion – the object of sympathy, and it might be added the charity of surrounding nations – it was reserved for an Irishman to achieve a triumph to which either ancient or modern times affords no parallel.²⁶

One need not look far to find similar discussions of racial types in contemporary published sources describing Ireland and Irish problems to an educated imperial audience.²⁷ Thus, the jibe about 'Saxon virtue' would have been immediately recognizable to the committee trying to organize the Exhibition; it would have conjured up an entire universe of discourse concerning Ireland – a condensed version, as it were, of the problems that they were confronting. Such (re)visions were to be returned with interest when the official chroniclers of the Exhibition made the comparison between the clumsy, Roman aesthetic of 'England' and the supple, Hellenic artistic sensibilities of France and Ireland.

What Is National?

Given this background, it is not surprising that in the documents detailing the Dublin Exhibition and its contents, the word 'national' embodies certain tensions. Its most consistent use is with respect to Irish history, which, in the opinion of the committee and commentators – and, importantly, critics – flowed directly and unproblematically from the Celtic treasures that had built up in the past century of dilettante collecting and amateur archaeology. Thus, the 'Antiquities Court' in the 'Temple of Industry' became a topic of great interest.

The development or recovery of a Celtic past through archaeological endeavour had been accelerating since the late eighteenth century. Interest in these finds forged a curious coalition of Protestant antiquarians (who were often politically conservative), and urban-based, upwardly mobile Catholics. This coalition produced many of the institutions important to the Gaelic Revival. The Irish Archaeological Society, for example, founded in 1840, included among its original members such figures as George Petrie. In this same period, spectacul-

²⁶ *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, no. ii (1853), p. 1. ²⁷ See, for example, George Ellis's *Irish Ethnology Socially and Politically Considered; Embracing a General Outline of the Celtic and Saxon Races* (Dublin, 1852).

lar finds of jewellery, particularly the Tara Brooch, were provoking great excitement. Thus, in the year of the Exhibition, Petrie could write of this important discovery:

I would fain refer to the preservation of this valuable memorial of the ancient art of Ireland, as an important result of the efforts made by the Academy to illustrate the past history of our country, and place it on a solid basis. I shall not easily forget, that when, in reference to a similar remain of ancient Irish art, I had first the honour to address myself to this high institution, I had to encounter the incredulous astonishment of the illustrious Dr. Brinckley, which was implied in the following remarks; – ‘Surely, sir, you do not mean to tell us that the Irish had any acquaintance with the arts of civilised life, anterior to the arrival in Ireland of the English?’ Nor shall I forget, that in the scepticism which this remark implied, nearly all the members present very obviously participated. Those, at least, who have seen our museum, will not make such a remark now.²⁸

By this time, diverse figures had moved towards the appreciation of such objects as the tap-root of an Irish past, beyond the claims of creed, class and conflicted history. The organizers of the Exhibition were dogged in pressing home this point, as the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser* recorded:

Notwithstanding the ravages of wars, and the still more destructive effects of religious and political animosities, continued through several centuries, Ireland continues to be rich in valued remains of her early history to an extent which no other country of Europe that we know of can boast.²⁹

The organizing committee also made no secret of the fact that the collection on display at the Exhibition was to be the nucleus of a national museum to be opened in the wake of the spectacle. The point was emphasized in the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*:

This collection is still much less known than it should be, and we believe that it was in the hope of bringing its claims better before the public, [that they] will thereby be enabled to form a correct opinion of its extent and value, and an opportunity will be afforded to every one to assist in the establishment of the Museum – the only truly *national* one in Europe, except that at Copenhagen.³⁰

²⁸ *Ornamental Irish Antiquities*, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1853), pp 9–10. ²⁹ *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, no. xi (1853), p. 5. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, no. i (1853), p. 5.

The artefacts were not, however, only of antiquarian interest. They also demonstrated a facility for manufacture that many nations might envy; thus such antiquities could, according to the *Exhibition Expositor*, be read as modern:

Even in the lowest utilitarian point of view, some of the beautiful objects of Irish manufacture which the hall for Antiquities presents, may well occupy a place in juxtaposition with the triumphs of modern handicraft. The Brooches, Croziers, Crosses, and Shrines, which are there exhibited, are credible as specimens of workmanship independent of the great historic interest that they possess.³¹

Through the medium of the Exhibition, this collection was about to become modern in a novel way. Copies of the Tara Brooch had been available for exclusive purchase from 1849 – almost as soon as Mr Waterhouse – the jeweller who purchased it from the peasant woman whose children discovered it – had washed the mud off this treasure. The Irish Exhibition, however, was one of the first venues for the widespread marketing of modern, craft-produced jewellery in the Celtic style.³² Indeed, Queen Victoria herself purchased no less than four copies of the Tara Brooch and numerous copies of other Irish antiquarian jewellery as souvenirs of her visit.

The Civilizing Process: Region and Nation

The commentators on the Exhibition clearly felt the tensions within their representational project. What was possible for them to imagine was limited by the stratifications in the British Empire of the nineteenth century; their own imaginings in turn contained the stratification for a tangible future that was being summoned into existence through what and how the Exhibition was displaying. These stratifications are clearly discernible in the sentiments that the official commentators harboured towards some of their imagined countrymen.³³ According to the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, their contemporaries of all creeds and classes were ‘an excitable people disposed to carry aristocratic notions to a ruinous length’; the journal continues:

[they] cannot, therefore, have their attentions directed to such objects as those in which the Exhibition abounds, without awakening them to a sense of the delusion which they have so long entertained, and to a due

31 Ibid., no. vi (1853), p. 1. 32 Elizabeth McCrum, ‘Commerce and the Celtic Revival: Victorian Irish Jewellery’ in *Éire-Ireland*, xxviii, no. 4 (1993), pp 36–52. 33 See Paul Michael Taylor, ‘Collecting Icons of Power and Identity: Transformations of Indonesian Material Culture in the Museum Context’ in *Cultural Dynamics*, vii, no. 1, pp 101–24.

appreciation of those qualities without which national prosperity cannot exist. Everything connected with our Great National Exhibition, is calculated to impress this lesson on the mind in a most emphatic manner – to illustrate the errors of the past, and to bring about a change as regards the future.³⁴

This future would depend on the elevation and civilization of the sensibilities of the many – precisely the sort of movement the Exhibition was calculated to address:

And for all there are lessons of practical importance, which none are slow to discover – ... Reverence is inculcated, curiosity awaked, an inquiring spirit fostered or created, love of the pure and the beautiful increased, thought expanded from the narrow circle of selfishness and comparative ignorance to embrace the conditions of the interests of mankind; and the *taste* of the many (which history and experience alike shew to an important element in the formation of a people's character) is improved and practically directed to the consideration of what may be effected in increasing the pleasantness and comfort of home in refining personal habit, and modes of intercourse.³⁵

Nonetheless, certain regions of Ireland were clearly in need of more of this sort of development than others. In particular, the devastated western periphery of the island was seen to be in considerable need of advancement – a perception familiar to anyone acquainted with colonial depictions of Ireland as a whole:

We should regard the exhibition as having only in part fulfilled its function did it not include amongst the millions who will visit it many of even the small farmers of the remote regions of Donegal, of Erris, and of Kerry; and, of course, the whole of those of the intermediate districts. Is it conceivable that even the most plodding denizen of these remote regions can look on the various applications of mechanical power which the Machinery Court presents without having his thinking faculties sharpened ... Considering the jog-trot movements of the inhabitants of the rural districts, no greater service could be rendered to them than would be effected by a visit to the Exhibition.³⁶

In the end, the official commentators were disappointed with the reaction of the Irish masses to the great national educational project that was the Exhibition; few of them attended this edifying spectacle, as the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser* made clear:

³⁴ *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, no. iv (1853), p. 1. ³⁵ *Ibid.*, no. xii (1853), p. 2. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, no. v (1853), p. 1.

If this were a time of general depression in business, some excuse might be found in the admission fee, small as it is, being a consideration. But workmen of every class are now fully employed at high wages; and, moreover, the announcement of races in the vicinity of the city never fails to attract thousands, on each of whom the day's sport must entail and outlay of several shillings. Nor is there much hesitation in spending a shilling in the public house, though we are glad to be able to state that the vice of drunkenness is now much less practised than formerly. Frivolity of every kind can command votaries enough; but a great utilitarian and educational treat, such as the Exhibition affords, is regarded with comparative indifference!³⁷

Of course, the very class involved in producing this national/universal exhibition – an increasingly, but not exclusively, Catholic bourgeoisie – was intimately involved with trying to direct and/or suppress popular frivolities of every kind during this period. Thus, the seven hundred-year-old royal patent of the famous fair at Donnybrook was purchased in 1854 by an alliance of clerics, doctors and merchants based in Dublin, with the express intent of eliminating the fair as an annual event.³⁸ It is interesting to note the extent to which the list of Royal Patent subscribers and the list of sponsors of the Dargan Institute – the School of Industrial Education that was supposed to grow out of the Exhibition – overlap. More important, however, is the similarity of the discursive logic between the complaints of the writers in the *Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser* of the indifference of the Irish lower orders to the 'Great National Project', and the reasons listed for disbanding the Donnybrook Fair. Indeed the Lord Mayor of Dublin, who was himself an honorary member of the Great Exhibition Committee, argued for suppression of revelry and its replacement by railway tourism:

The Lord mayor in the chair reminded his audience of their object, believing of course that they were not the type of people who would be found at the fair, but were not immune to their evil effects through their servants. He forestalled objections that the people needed their recreations by stating that the railway provided the opportunity of going to other places and that from enquiries that he had made the fair was not important any more for the sale of cattle or horses.³⁹

Not only can no economic sense can be made of the fair at Donnybrook, but servants from the lower orders – distant but intimate – come back to the respectable classes at the end of their revelries bearing dirt and contagions into

³⁷ *Ibid.*, no. viii (1853), p. 1. ³⁸ Séamas Ó Maitiú, *The Humours of Donnybrook: Dublin's Famous Fair and its Suppression* (Dublin, 1995), p. 44. ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

even the best households.⁴⁰ Fortunately, both the railways (lines most likely laid by Dargan) leading to places of public resort (such as Bray, which was built by Dargan) now exist, providing more wholesome forms of entertainment.

Conclusion

Despite the contradictions between which the organizers of the Great Irish Exhibition were seemingly stretched, there still exists a sense of nervousness in documents about the Exhibition directed at the English reading public. The final passage of the introduction to *An Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibition of Art-Industry in Dublin* (1854) provides some sense of this concern. After praising the efforts and hospitality of the committee and the Exhibition as a whole, particularly the Antiquities Court, the anonymous author hastens to add the following:

We confide our volume to the public, repeating the prayer of the Lord-Lieutenant [who opened the Exhibition] that 'Almighty God will bless and prosper the undertaking,' and that, especially, it may be made the means of cementing more closely the bond of union between the two countries; making England and Ireland more thoroughly and essentially ONE; for of a surety that which benefits the one must prosper the other, THEIR INTERESTS BEING MUTUAL AND INSEPARABLE.⁴¹

Perhaps it is not surprising that middle-class fragments connected to the idea of an empire, and those involved in imagining a nation, recognize many similarities in each other's symbolic projects. As Anderson insightfully observes, imperial and national imaginings share many resources.⁴² Appreciating the specificity of the mode of representation chosen by élites is, however, crucial for understanding the effects of symbolic projects. It is also necessary to extend the concept of imagining beyond its restrictive mentalist sense.

The central feature of such this type of representational project is contradiction, which, in the case of the Dublin Exhibition, may be found at every level. One of the main technologies of empire, the train, produces among other things the possibility of marketing Ireland as a distinct tourist hideaway for harried metropolitans; yet this same phenomenon throws up a railway magnate who dreams of something different and creates a spectacular panorama to investigate its possibility. Economic and other development within a United Kingdom provides the classes, the resources and the discontent of a class fragment to develop this spectacle, which is conceived at once to impress London with

⁴⁰ See Ovar Löfgren and Jonas Frykman, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle Class Life* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1990). ⁴¹ P. vii. ⁴² *Imagined Communities*, pp 9-36.

things Irish, and to distance Ireland from the metropolis. Once begun, however, the organizers of this spectacle find themselves instructing people whom they consider as their own national lower orders in the behaviours appropriate to civilized life, by mobilizing colonial images of Ireland traditionally used to denigrate the island as a backward region of the United Kingdom.

Similarly, Queen Victoria visited the Great Exhibition in her capacity as imperial representative and purchased a great deal of jewellery, encouraging (she thought) regional economic development. Indeed, she also purchased a dozen boxes of comfits, several commemorative medals and many other objects in her first of four day-long shopping sprees.⁴³ Overall, she must have counted the trip a success, as the royal visits were the only occasions when the Great Hall was filled to overflowing (Figure 7). Victoria's purchases, along with innumerable others, helped to consolidate a distinctly Irish jewellery style that became increasingly important in the iconography of revival and political separation that developed later in the nineteenth century, and in many ways still marks 'Irishness' today. Indeed, many of the designs available in the Great Dublin Exhibition can still be obtained cheaply on O'Connell Bridge. They still mark Irishness – albeit now largely for North American tourists in search of their distinctive 'ethnic roots', and for continentals and others looking for icons of an 'authentic national culture'.

These contradictions develop from the deployment of symbols forged for one purpose, in the service of another. World's fairs in true metropolises are conceptually Copernican systems, with their centres – their 'here' – being both 'modern' and 'civilized', and marking a leading moment – their 'now' – in the universal history of humankind. If the astronomical metaphor is extended, the Great Dublin Exhibition of 1853 may be considered a system that would be better drawn by Kepler. The Exhibition's 'here' and 'now' are foci of conceptual ellipses. Spatially, its 'here' both summoned and distanced the presence of London – partly as an accident of borrowing a metropolitan technology without being a true metropole, and also as a consequence of insisting on the distinct nationhood of Ireland. Temporally, its 'now' was understood in relation to at least two different 'whens': the first, a distant but glorious past that needed to be in some sense reclaimed; the second, a bright future when the great but undeveloped potentials of the nation were to be realized.

In the Great Irish Exhibition may be glimpsed some recurrent thematics of an Irish modernity bound up with the conceptual triptych of empire, region, and nation. There is the valorization of the glories of a long past, and the worry that the Irish collectivity needs to rouse itself from an unfortunate slumber in order to keep pace with an already developed world. Looming over all, there is the janus-faced gaze of a bourgeoisie in the uncertain centre of Dublin; they cast a nervous glance towards London, wishing to measure up to a perceived



7 James Mahony, *The Fourth Visit by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to the 1853 Dublin Great Exhibition* (1853). By kind permission of the National Gallery of Ireland.

metropolitan standard, while recognizing that this point of comparison has configured them as both Irish and inferior, alongside a very ambivalent contemplation of their regional contemporaries. In other words, it is the other to the here and now – the regional, what is in the past, and what is in store for the future – that is the source of both inferiority and identity.