Reconsidering Joyce: Imagined Globalised ‘Gatherings’ and Ireland’s Recurring Failures

Abstract:
Ireland’s rate of emigration is continuing to increase with one person leaving the country to live abroad every six minutes. Since the current financial crisis began in 2008, 397 500 people have emigrated with most travelling to the UK, Australia and Canada in search of work (Smyth, 29/8/13). It is in this context of a new generation of Irish diaspora that this paper examines how Irishness is maintained and imagined. James Joyce wrote his article ‘Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages’ (1907) whilst he was in self-imposed exile; it was from this distance that he could criticise the Revivalists’ approach to Irishness and their focus on an idealised, romantic, distant past. Such a distance from Ireland now gives many Irish immigrants the benefit of a sharper focus and correspondingly, a more impassioned critical perspective. This paper explores the conflicting notions of Irishness: firstly, that rooted in ‘holistic’ nationalism bounded by tradition and evident in current efforts in Ireland to re-mythologise Irish identity via ‘The Gathering’ and the ‘Global Irish Forum’; and secondly, the Irishness that is focused on an acceptance, analysis and criticism of Irish ‘failure’ in an effort to break cycles of boom/bust and challenge future passivity. By utilising Joyce’s article, which is now over one hundred years old, this paper contends that there is a recurring tension about what it means to be Irish. While immigrants are encouraged to re-imagine a romantic past, recently exited Irish that want to reassess failure cannot make a difference for Ireland. Whilst Irish political nationalism is often viewed as unhelpful and backward, we propose, like Joyce, that remembering the past as it happened is perhaps more useful for an Irish diaspora than a program of remembering a depoliticised cultural past that ‘forgets’.

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