Abstract

Historical biography can reveal much about an individual's perception of his/her national or cultural identity, particularly when that life is lived in a translocational or transnational context, as with the Irish diaspora during the Victorian heyday of the British Empire. The case of the Irish-Scot Charles Gordon Neill M.I.C.E. [Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers (London)], civil engineer, New Zealand colonial parliamentarian (1866-1875) and Catholic philanthropist, makes an intriguing case study in Irish diaspora studies given the tension between his Irish Catholic background with its consequent commitment to faith-based charity, and a desire to pursue an Empire career in civil engineering, surveying and politics. The vicissitudes of fortune drove O'Neill, a bachelor, to passionately pursue in extremis both his religious charitable ideals and professional ambition. This cyclic saga played out successively in Western Scotland and Glasgow until 1864, New Zealand (1864-1880) and finally New South Wales (1881-1900), the latter two being colonies commencing their own journey to national identity. Extensive research has uncovered much about the inner motivations of O'Neill, and how and why he fully embraced an Irish identity following settlement in Sydney in 1881, despite his not being born in, nor ever visiting, Ireland himself. Understanding the tension within O'Neill’s cultural identity is informed by the insight of historian Terence McBride concerning the social identity of the Irish of nineteenth century Glasgow. McBride’s analysis proposes that such groups and individuals could have acted out of loyalty to a fusion of ideals which were ostensibly contradictory in character and yet regularly expressed as components of a uniform world-view. My study reveals why, in O'Neill’s case, this fusion ultimately broke down, and much about the role that the St Vincent de Paul Society served in providing Catholic Irish with a sense of religious and social fulfilment, both in Glasgow and colonial Sydney, during an era dominated by Protestant philanthropic and benevolent works.

Stephen Utick MScSoc (UNSW) MLitt (ANU) MA (ACU) PhD (ACU) was awarded his PhD in history in March from the Australian Catholic University.