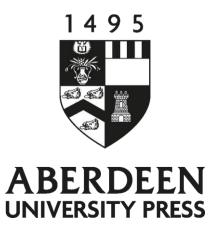*Journal of*
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Articles

Language, Heritage and Authenticity: Nicholas Michael O'Donnell and the Construction of Irishness in Australia

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Jonathan O'Neill

Nicholas Michael O'Donnell (1862–1920) was an Irish Nationalist and founding member of the Gaelic League in Victoria.[1] Australian born, of Irish parents, he maintained an interest in his Irish heritage and genealogy, contributing to 'Our Gaelic column' in local Melbourne paper, *The Advocate*. In his lifetime he amassed a library of over 600 books along with pamphlets and manuscripts (donated posthumously to Newman College, University of Melbourne). The majority of the collection is of Irish interest and much is in the Irish language. O'Donnell even annotated some in his self-taught Irish. He corresponded with Douglas Hyde and Patrick Dineen proficiently in the language. He is all the more interesting for his activities in the language at a time when it was seen by the majority of Irish migrants and the Catholic Church as a hindrance to integration.[2] His autobiography and the annotations he left in his book collection are clear indications that he had an eye to his place in history.

O'Donnell clearly identified as an Australian: 'Now, being an Australian by birth myself, I have not and cannot have any objection to a genuine spirit of Australian patriotism so long as the scope and object of that sentiment is bounded by the ocean that breaks upon our shores. Let us all love Australia our motherland, think for her, plan for her, work for her and let us according as we are of English Irish or Scottish descent, revere and cherish the history and fame of the land we sprang from.'[3] Though he identified as such he had an intense awareness of his Irishness. His dedication to his heritage, Irish history

[2] Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (Sydney, 1987), 177–8.
[3] Nicholas Michael O'Donnell, 'My Autobiography', National Library of Australia, Microfilm, 1915, 8–10.

and nationalism along with the Irish language shows an equal identification with what we now interpret as a diasporic consciousness. The purpose of this essay is to analyse O'Donnell's collection, activities and writing from a diasporic and postcolonial perspective. How and why did he construct a particular image of Ireland? How are notions of heritage, deterritorialized identity and temporality deployed symbolically amongst the diaspora? Is this emblematic of a greater diasporic occurrence and how does it compare with contemporary diasporic engagement with the language?

The notion of Irish diaspora is often contested, sometimes controversially. What is thus to be understood by the term Irish diaspora, given that migrants dispersed to various different lands and encountered a plethora of alternate experiences? The popular usage of the term is relatively recent with regard to the Irish. It was brought to the fore during the presidency of Mary Robinson who used it as one of the themes of her presidency in the 1990s in Ireland. It must be noted that terms such as the sea-divided Gael had been in use much earlier. Patrick O'Farrell makes note of the various cultural, religious and class traditions of those that left.[4] The Catholic strain of nationalism, of which Nicholas O'Donnell was representative, became the dominant discourse however. O'Donnell, in studying his genealogy, traced distant family members to England, Australia, America and New Zealand, indicative of the expanse of the Irish diaspora even within one family. O'Donnell knew that settling in a new land meant a certain rupture with the traditions of the old world:

> We in Australia are now in the condition of human plantation and settlement that America was in during the 16th and 17th centuries. The breakaway from old world connections and associations is already complete. 'The exile shall not return more'. In most instances he is dead and buried in the land of his adoption. But his children still live and remember his rehearsal of his boyhood days in the cradle land of his race; and so it is still easy to trace the blood back to the ancestral cot before oppressive laws or perhaps the spirit of adventure drove the early colonists from the motherland to the Eldorado or the Tír na n-Óg that they pictured Australia to be.[5]

Importantly O'Donnell uses the word exile here. This has been noted by

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⁴ O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, 5.

⁵ O'Donnell, 'My Autobiography', 4.

Kerby A. Miller in *Ireland and Irish America* as one of the motifs of emigration. The narrative of imposed exile became key to the Irish diaspora. Miller has suggested that some explanation for this may be drawn from the lack of a word for emigrant in Irish Gaelic. The language uses, instead, the word *deoraí* which literally means exile. 'Thus' he states, 'the Irish language, when combined with the poets' interpretation of post-conquest Irish history, provided both patterns and heroic models to predispose the "native Irish" to regard all those who left Ireland as unwilling and tragic political exiles.'[6] O'Donnell similarly recognised the significance of remembering his forebears and invoked Irish mythology in doing so. Contemporaneously, successive Irish politicians have also recognised the significance of the Irish emigrant population and indeed it is recognised in article two of the constitution under the section entitled 'The Nation': 'the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.'[7] The constitution crucially does not afford the extended diaspora any of the rights associated with citizenship but it does seem to fall within the concept of the Irish nation. In *Postnationalist Ireland*, Richard Kearney defines a number of the expanding and varied understandings of the concept of nation. He includes, or perhaps extends this to include, the concept of diaspora. 'A … more generous, understanding of the nation comes under the rubric of the "*migrant* nation" – or the nation as "extended family". Here the definition of the nation remains partially ethnic, but is enlarged to embrace all those emigrants and exiles who live beyond the territory of the nation-state *per se*'.[8] The significance of the size of the Irish diaspora in comparison with the current Irish population is not lost on Kearney. 'If over 70 million people in the world today claim to be of Irish descent, it is evident that this definition of nationality, or at least of national genealogy, extends far beyond the borders of a state or territory'.[9] Kearney further notes the sense of allegiance or affiliation felt by people of Irish origin even when they have not been born in the country or perhaps culture in which they place an allegiance. 'Irish-Americans, Irish-Australians or Irish-Britons, for example, can affirm a strong sense of national allegiance to their "land of origin" even though they may be three or four generations from that land and

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[6] Kerby A. Miller, *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration* (Dublin, 2008), 16.

[7] Bunreacht na hÉireann, http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/upload/static/256.htm [accessed 12 May 2010].

[8] Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London, 1997), 5.

[9] Ibid.

frequently of mixed ethnicity'.[10] Patrick O'Farrell has noted, on the other hand, that the Irish in New Zealand had integrated well into local society and did not maintain the same separate sense of Irish identity as Irish Catholics in Australia or America.[11] Edmundo Murray has hypothesised in an Argentine context that the majority of Irish emigrants to Argentina considered themselves British.[12] Often images of the diaspora and home are deployed romantically as with Mary Robinson's candle at Áras an Uachtaráin, which was heavily imbued with symbolism and invoking the old Irish custom of livery. The Irish 'ethnicity' of the diaspora is often drawn on for tourism and marketing reasons.[13] And indeed, the figure of 70 million has recently been used by *The Irish Times* in an advertising campaign to people of Irish origin. The story of migration has, as such, become part of contemporary narrativised Irish identity. The Irish diaspora, as this group has become known, seems to hold a special place in the Irish 'national consciousness'. It forms a part of the narrativised identity, used as a tool in depicting the 'Irish story'. The cultural significance, and popular size of this group assumes a role of far greater significance in this storytelling than does the Irish language, but the language was, nevertheless, a constituent part of this emigration and seems to be assuming a role in a contemporary diasporic proclamation or reclamation of heritage.

Heritage, ethnicity and nationalism are all themes which are evoked when dealing with the diaspora both contemporaneously and historically. Nicholas O'Donnell's invocation of his 'Irishness' certainly encompasses these themes. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* describes him as 'Irish nationalist and Gaelic scholar.'[14] He was born at Bullengarook in rural Victoria in 1862 and due to his scholarly ability was sent to school in West Melbourne, eventually completing a medical degree at the University of Melbourne and setting up practice in Victoria Street, North Melbourne, the most Irish part of the city.[15] His interest in Irish affairs and Irish cultural activities manifested themselves

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Brian Walker, 'The Lost Tribes of Ireland', *Irish Studies Review,* 15:3 (2007) 267–82.

[12] Juan José Delaney, review of Edmundo Murray, *Devenir irlandés: Narrativas íntimas de la emigracíon irlandesa a la Argentina. 1844–1912* (Buenos Aires, 2004), *The Southern Cross,* No. 5888 (2004) available at http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=ids&req uesttimeout=500&folder=115&paper=164 [accessed 9 May 2010].

[13] Reginald Byron, *Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology: Irish America* (Oxford, 1999) 297; Howard Hughes and Danielle Allen, 'Holidays of the Irish Diaspora: The Pull of the "Homeland"?', *Current Issues in Tourism,* 13 (2010), 1–19.

[14] Chris McConville 'O'Donnell, Nicholas Michael (1862–1920)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (17 vols to date, Melbourne, 1988), XI, 60–1.

[15] Ibid., 61.

early on, particularly his devotion to Irish nationalism. He became president of the non-sectarian Celtic Club from 1907–9, and was also a central figure in the Irish National League of Victoria, becoming president of its successor organisation, the United Irish League. As Chris McConville asserts:

> From the 1890s O'Donnell promoted Irish cultural activities. Almost alone at first, he seized on the Irish cultural revival and battled to revive Gaelic while the Irish-born in Victoria were dying out. His enthusiasm kept the Gaelic League alive in Melbourne and he became one of Australia's outstanding Gaelic scholars, writing extensively on Irish language and politics in both Gaelic and English.[16]

Similarly Patrick O'Farrell describes him as Australia's foremost Gaelic scholar: 'His mastery was real. O'Donnell developed an interest and expertise sufficient to form a professional friendship with Douglas Hyde, among the greatest of Gaelic scholars and activists: O'Donnell provided Hyde with a transcript of the late Middle Irish text Hyde published as 'The Adventure of Leithin' in *Legends of Saints and Sinners* (1915).[17] The language was obviously an integral part of 'Irishness' for O'Donnell, allied with, as we shall see, Catholicism and a nationalism based on a proud and distinct past. This correlates with the Gaelic Revival in Ireland but what brought about O'Donnell's interest and enthusiasm in the language when, as previously mentioned, most of migrants wished to integrate with the English-speaking majority? Val Noone points out that there is some evidence that he may have had exposure to it through his Aunt Ellen, with whom he lived for a number of years.[18] This influence is alluded to in O'Donnell's autobiography: 'She was a good woman, mild and gentle in disposition, fond of fun and humour and prepared to make the best of life in adversity. She spoke Irish well and had a fair share of memorised Irish verse at her command.'[19] Although written in English, his autobiography contains a frontispiece with an Irish epigram:

> Truagh sin, a leabhair mhóir bháin,
> Tiocfaidh an lá ort go fíor,

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[16] Ibid., 61.
[17] O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, 179.
[18] Val Noone, 'Nicholas O'Donnell: "Australian born…but a good Irish scholar"' *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies,* 9 (2009), 95–111.
[19] O'Donnell, 'My Autobiography', 164.

Go ndéarfaidh neach os cionn cláir
'Ní mhaireann an lámh do scríobh.'

It's a pity, oh big and brilliant book,
The day will surely come for you
When someone will say about your contents:
'The hand that wrote you no longer lives.'[20]

This epigram appears in a number of Irish manuscripts from the 18th and 19th centuries. Denis King has noted that such epigrams have their origins in comments left by scribes in their manuscripts. 'Such comments are common in Irish manuscripts, a kind of graffiti recording the passing thoughts, feelings and opinions of the scribes.'[21] This and the annotations in his book collection demonstrate both O'Donnell's aforementioned desire for posterity and his scholarship and interest in an older Ireland, a lost 'golden age' in which he perceived that the Irish kept learning alive in Europe. O'Donnell's sentiments on this are reflected in his lecture published by the Celtic Club in Melbourne, *A Lecture on Ancient Ireland: Its Civilisation, Art and Valour.*[22] The lecture was delivered on 16 April 1900 at the Guild Hall, Sydney and was published by the *Advocate,* the Catholic newspaper in which O'Donnell would later publish 'Our Gaelic Column'. The funds from the lecture and publishing were to defray the debt of the 1798 memorial in Waverly Cemetery, Sydney. Both the cover page of the lecture and the monument itself are richly imbued with romantic symbolism such as Celtic crosses, harps and wolf hounds. The monument was completed with Ogham inscriptions reading 'The bright days of ancient Ireland will dawn once more.'[23]

This epitaph is symbolic of the emotion and nostalgia evoked in O'Donnell's lecture. The lecture was delivered in a polemical style, lamenting the treatment of the Irish at the hands of the English and invoking the glorious and proud history of Irish civilisation prior to colonisation. O'Donnell, in an almost postcolonial manner, challenged the constructed subalterneity of the Irish in relation to the coloniser:

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[20] Translation by Val Noone.

[21] Dennis King, 'Uch a lám', *Sengoídelc: Quotations from Early Irish Literature*, http://www.sengoidelc.com/node/180 [accessed 14 May 2010].

[22] Nicholas Michael O'Donnell, *A Lecture on Ancient Ireland: Its Civilisation, Art and Valour,* (Melbourne, 1900).

[23] Seventeen Ninety Eight Memorial, Walls, http://www.98memorial.bigpondhosting.com/walls/walls.html [accessed 24 November 2009].

The public is taught that the Irish at some remote period were discovered by the English who found them barbarians; just as Captain Cook one day made the acquaintance of the aborigines of Botany Bay. It is taught that the English have ever since been trying to refine and civilise the Irish; but that their best efforts have been met with ingratitude and were wasted … So accustomed are we from day to day to this damnable reiteration of inferiority – sometimes plainly stated, always inferentially hinted at – that we have grown only too ready to acquiesce in this hateful and untrue estimate of the history of our race.[24]

O'Donnell refuted this false portrayal of 'Irishness', delving back into the sort of hagiographic history of the Irish that was earlier deployed in an anti-colonial manner by Geoffrey Keating (Seathrún Céitinn). O'Donnell evoked an antiquity for Ireland that would place it in succession to classical Greece and Rome. He covered the 'perfection of the clan system', Brehon Law, and early Christian learning stating that while the rest of Europe was in turmoil Ireland 'became not only the Athens but also the Mecca of its age for religion.'[25] Ancient Irish valour was explained and the treatment culminated with the last stand of Gaelic civilisation under Hugh O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell at the battle of Kinsale. This invocation of valour, temporality and classicality was important in establishing an authenticity to claims of an ancient civilisation which existed and functioned prior to English 'interference'. Religion was also an important tool in depicting the civilised Irish in opposition to their neighbours:

Ireland had learnt and accepted the faith of the true God when neighbouring races of Western Europe were still slunk in the sloughs of paganism, worshipping sticks and stones, and the sun and the moon. And she taught these people their Christianity and evangelized them; and by way of manifesting their gratitude, up to a period within the memory of the grandfathers of some who are listening to me here to-night, the descendants of these same people made it a felony for the Irish to practice their old religion.[26]

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[24] O'Donnell, *A Lecture on Ancient Ireland*, 3.

[25] Ibid., 9.

[26] Ibid., 20.

The sense of persecution and victimisation at the hands of the coloniser is profound and significant here. O'Donnell continued in this vein:

> Finally, they were made Pariahs and Ishmaels in the land that bore them, or else they were swept off to the Barbadoes to die as slaves or sent to perish in the unholy wars of Gustavus Adolphus in Russia – anywhere out of Ireland to make room for the hungry adventurers and confiscators of Great Britain. In the zenith of her glory the story of Ireland shines out from those ages of old like a beacon-light in the darkness – brilliant, dazzling and superb. Aye, even in the day of defeat and subjugation the history of our race is a grand one.[27]

Britain was constructed here as a calculating force, clearing Ireland of its people and ancient culture and enforcing subalterneity on those that remained. The binarism of O'Donnell's construction of Ireland and Britain continues through the text and is an anti-colonial or perhaps even decolonising attempt at inverting the traditional binaries of the British-Irish relationship constructed under colonialism. This sense of persecution is akin to what Kerby Miller describes in his description of the term 'exile' in the Irish diasporic context.

O'Donnell portrayed the dispersal of the Irish throughout the globe as beneficial. They were seen as a vehicle of this proud civilisation and because of their persecution they would have an innate understanding of the struggle for freedom and a recognition of oppression:

> the sufferings of the Irish people in their own land have unfortunately been but of little material use to Ireland. Every fresh turn of the screw only served to render the condition of the captive more abject and more helpless, but persecution and misgovernment have led to the dispersal of the Irish people over the civilized globe, and into their exile they have carried with them the lessons they had learnt in their own land and became in the land of their adoption foremost as leaders in every struggle for freedom.[28]

O'Donnell's lecture on ancient Ireland and his attachment to the Irish language are good examples of what Gerry Smyth (developing Homi Bhabha's

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[27] Ibid., 21.
[28] Ibid., 21.

second mode of decolonisation, nationalism) terms *radicalism*:

> focusing on what is imagined as unique and different about native identity. This mode of critical decolonisation involves the rejection of metropolitan discourse, a celebration of difference and otherness, and the attempted reversal of the economy of discourse which constructs the colonial subject as inferior.[29]

This was not unusual and formed part of the cultural nationalism being deployed in the Ireland of the time. Why, though, did O'Donnell feel the need to put such time and effort into extending this in Australia, constructing a deterritorialized identity and a great concern for a country he had not visited? To some extent he revealed this motivation in his autobiography:

> It is with the object of furnishing those who come after me with as full an account as I have been able to obtain of their ancestors and pedigree that I am writing this book. How many gilded Americans today would pour out their dollars like water to be able to trace their pedigree in orderly precession back to England, Ireland or Scotland! While this was still possible it was neglected and then a stage came when it was for ever too late.[30]

O'Donnell seemed to fear that it would soon become too late for him to record his family history for the benefit of future generations. His relatives in Australia were old and ailing. He was left with attempting to contact relatives in Ireland and the response he received, as was often the case, was one of caution and trepidation:

> It is a pity to have to admit it but the replies received from Ireland were neither copious nor elucidative. The relatives in Ireland appeared to believe that I was labouring under the hallucination that I was descended from a 'grand', 'noble', 'wealthy' family and were apparently afraid to disabuse me of the idea for fear of disappointing and paining me! It is hardly necessary to say that I have cherished no such delusions.

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[29] Gerry Smith, 'Decolonization and Criticism: Towards a Theory of Irish Critical Discourse' in Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (eds), *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (London, 1999), 35.

[30] O'Donnell, 'My Autobiography', 4.

> My ancestors I knew to be tenant farmers in Ireland and I am familiar
> enough with Irish history to know too that those who were dispossessed
> at the time of the confiscations under Elizabeth, James, Cromwell and
> William had at least as 'grand' and 'noble' a blood and pedigree as the
> English bodaigh [louts] and adventurers who robbed them of their
> lands and supplanted them.[31]

Even though he was aware that he was from a tenant-farming background he
attempted to link this to a form of mythical past, to a noble blood. The blame
for the loss of this is again laid firmly with the English.

O'Donnell also feared that his sense of Irishness, and that of his
descendents would be erased by a hegemonic English culture in Australia:

> I must not omit another consideration that has had some influence on
> me in stimulating me to leave this book to my descendants. I believe
> that the future will see here in Australia a tendency—covertly forced by
> the authorities—to the obliteration of old-world <u>racial</u> sentiment and
> the ingenious suggestion and gradual substitution of a common local
> sentiment which the majority will endeavour to make English in tone
> and spirit—to found it if I may put it that way, on English history and
> English pride.[32]

He countered this vociferously on grounds of nationality, blood and religion:

> But what have we Irish to be proud of in English history? The experience
> of our race in the old country has been that of oppression and callous
> cruelty at the hands of their English rulers. I wish my descendants to
> know as I <u>feel</u> that though Australians by birth and fealty they are Irish in
> blood and have not a drop of English blood in their veins. I wish them
> also to be unflinching in their fidelity to the Catholic faith. It ought to
> be part of their nature like their nationality. Because they are Irish they
> ought to be proud to be Catholic and they ought to be truly Catholic
> because they are Irish. They must be prepared to suffer injustice and
> bear obloquy for being Irish and Catholic as their ancestors suffered
> persecution and even death for the same cause: and they will be ranked
> as traitors of the traditions of their ancient race if they ever deny either

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[31] Ibid., 6.
[32] Ibid., 8.

their race or their faith. I hope none of my seed, breed or generation
will ever disgrace the grand old name of O'Donnell by renouncing his
race or his creed.[33]

Again O'Donnell here was invoking almost mythical qualities for his Gaelic
name and was vitriolic in his diatribe at the thought of anyone attached to the
name denying the 'essence' of their ethnicity or identity. The historical memory
of persecution and subalterneity seems unavoidable. Where does this ardent,
and at times extreme, nationalism come from in O'Donnell? In some ways
the fear of loss is reflected in a folkloric attitude to emigration. David Lloyd
describes this in writing on one of Máirtín Ó Cadhain's short stories: 'The
motifs of change, transmission, translation that cluster around the moment
of scattering, the scattering of a people for which that of the gems and the
money are mere figures, recur constantly to the idea, deeply inscribed in Irish
folklore, of emigration as a death, a crossing over from which the emigrants
will not return, or, if they do return, will do so "changed", subject to a Lethe-
like forgetting.'[34] O'Donnell sought to stem this tide of forgetting with what
may have seemed like an anachronistic memory in his Australian context.

Some of O'Donnell's rhetoric bears a striking resemblance to a document
published in Boston in 1911, *The Irish Vindicator both of Race and Language: An
Appeal to the Irish Race to Save the Irish Language*.[35] This text, beginning with an
Irish-language epigraph, also asserts the antiquity of the Gaels and is even
more aggressive in its polemic than O'Donnell's. It also evokes a sense of
diaspora with the term the 'sea-divided Gael', calling on them to heed the
history and language of their ancestors:

But if the race is not in Ireland, it is abroad all over the world, in both
hemispheres, north and south; and the universal multiplication today,
of the Irish race, which went close on extinction as late as two centuries
ago, may be an indication that they are destined for some important
mission in the future, both at home and abroad. They have a record in
the far back past that no nation in the world thus far, is able to produce;
and 'No people can look forward to prosperity who cannot often look

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[33] Ibid., 12.
[34] David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin, 2000), 69.
[35] P.J. O'Daly, *The Irish Vindicator both of Race and Laguage: An Appeal to the Irish Race to
Save the Irish Language* (Boston, 1911). My thanks to Kathleen Williams at the O'Neill
Library, Boston College, for notifying me of this.

back to their ancestors.' With the Irish language revival Ireland will become again the School of Europe, as it was before for ages anterior to the Anglo Norman invasion.[36]

Incredible freight is placed upon the language here. It is to be the vehicle for the salvation of an entire culture. The Gaelic revival provided an opportunity for people of Irish descent 'to demand an equal part in the determination of the character of the new nation' having previously been seen as foreign to the 'Englishness' of the nation.[37] O'Donnell was not alone in this sentiment. The *Advocate,* for which he wrote 'Our Gaelic Column', was replete with Irish nationalist sentiment, covering nationalist affairs ongoing in Ireland, as well as activities of the various supporting societies in Australia. Coverage was given to St Patrick's Day activities and the various hurling matches that were being organised. The Irish language in 'Our Gaelic Column' was often taken from Hyde's collections of poems, or from *An Claidheamh Soluis*, Patrick Pearse's newspaper. In later years there was a section dedicated to the learning of the language. O'Donnell was instrumental in importing a Gaelic font for the publication of the column. Matthew D. Staunton has noted how this font often reinforced a separate sense of Irish identity, arguing it was being deployed as propaganda.[38] Seamus Deane suggests 'aesthetically pleasing but commercially expensive typefaces were essentially cultural weapons in a war of religion and political propaganda'.[39] In this context, although it forms part of a nationalist matrix, it is important to note that it was used as a cultural weapon in the assertion of an identity.

Again, turning to America here, it is possible to discern how some of this nationalist sentiment came to the fore outside of Ireland. Úna Ní Bhroiméil quoting Dale Light writes in *Building Irish Identity in America* that: '[T]here was no common historical experience to bind together Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century America and to instil in them a sense of ethnic identity'.[40] Indeed, Ní Bhroiméil concludes that 'it was nationalism that seemed to unite the Irish most clearly in the new world'. She states that as well as political

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[36] Ibid., 14.

[37] O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, 244.

[38] Matthew D. Staunton, 'Trojan Horses and Friendly Faces: Irish Gaelic Typography as Propaganda', *Revue Lisa/Lisa e-journal,* III (2005), 85–98.

[39] Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford, 1997), 194.

[40] Úna Ní Bhroiméil, *Building Irish Identity in America, 1870–1915: The Gaelic Revival* (Dublin, 2003), 20.

independence other aspects of nationalism such as history, music and the language were often given as reasons why the Irish deserved respect and status. Journalists in Irish-American publications sought to evoke the 'greatness' of the old country and reinforce the concept of the Irish constituting 'a distinct and superior race complete with admirable traits and worthy characteristics': 'In 1884, the *Irish World,* in an article about an Irish musical performed in New York, "An Bard agus an Fó", linked language and music with the self-respect of the Irish and with their rights to nationhood.'[41] This demonstrates that the Irish diaspora was active in identity politics and that the language played a constituent part. Given that such an enormous number of emigrants during and since the Famine have come from Gaeltacht areas it is reasonable to assume that there were Irish-speaking communities amongst the diaspora. This is most well documented in the United States, where there have been Irish-language sections in newspapers, and Irish-speaking priests were sent to officiate in communities where, anecdotally at least, there were large numbers of people with no English. The settlement of these Irish communities in America seems to have followed a discernable pattern: 'Immigrants needed sponsors to ensure their survival until they found employment. Sponsors were often family or friends from the home village in Ireland. Due to this custom, different American cities or parts of American cities (as is the case of New York) were settled by Irishmen and women of one particular county or another.'[42] Despite the fact that these communities were relatively close-knit and often maintained connections with family in Ireland (attested to by collections of letters in Irish), the Irish language ceased to be used as mode of communication. This is due to similar reasons as in Ireland; English was seen as a language of progression and Irish as economically inhibitive. Indeed the stigma attached to speaking the Irish language persisted outside of its cultural environment despite the strong rhetoric of the importance of language to nation, culture and identity. Yet, it is not unusual that Irish effectively died out in North America when one considers the hegemonic position of English, which has to a large extent effectively subsumed or assimilated languages with a greater degree of prestige than Irish, such as German or French. Given this, why, as Úna Ní Bhroiméíl asks, 'would the American Irish support the Irish language or its revival?'[43]

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[41] Ibid., 29.

[42] Thomas W. Ihde, *The Irish Language in the United States: A Historical, Sociolinguistic and Applied Linguistic Survey* (Westport Connecticut, 1994), 79.

[43] Ní Bhroiméíl, *Building Irish Identity in America*, 30.

Ní Bhroiméil uses Joshua Fishman to show that for many immigrants the language would have been a source of embarrassment and an obstacle to assimilating with mainstream America. This is particularly so given that Irish stereotypes were often exported with the immigrants to the 'new world'.[44] Similarly, Patrick O'Farrell notes that 'the facts of Australian life in regard to Gaelic are best illustrated by an incident in 1800 when a group of Irishmen who had been talking in Gaelic were brought to trial on this basis alone'.[45] '[L]anguage loyalty and language maintenance became aspects of consciousness for many immigrants as they became aware of their "groupness". Allied to this was the fact that, 'dependant as they were on transmuted ethnicity rather than upon a daily ethnic way of life, language maintenance may have become ideologized and wedded to a philosophy which combined national mission.'[46]

This conception of the language amongst the diaspora seems, to a certain extent, to have persisted. The contemporary renewal of interest in the Irish language in Ireland seems also to be mirrored amongst the diaspora, with a large demand for Irish-language classes. This is often linked to exploring an Irish identity, 'Irish-Americans who seek to define more fully what it means to be Irish in America often turn to the language of their ancestors.'[47] This is paralleled in a study of Welsh diasporic use of the language in a newspaper called *Y Drych*. 'Welsh tradition is not so much being kept alive as being revisited nostalgically – one might say reinvented. Correspondents to *Y Drych* appear to value Welsh as a heritage language, more than as the living, politicized, antagonistic social force that it is in contemporary Wales.'[48] Could it be that, despite the fact that Nicholas Michael O'Donnell was fluent and in regular contact with interlocutors in Ireland, he was, in his attachment to the language and nationalism, also revisiting nostalgically and reinventing an Irish tradition, invoking a distinct past? His lecture and autobiography would suggest so.

Writing on a diasporic sense of loss and attempts to retain or invoke a sense of past culture Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins note that: 'At other times, in other contexts, holding on to the lost culture may assume more epic

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[44] Mary J. Hickman, 'Migration and Diaspora' in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge, 2005), 123.

[45] O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, 27.

[46] Ní Bhroiméil, *Building Irish Identity in America*, 30.

[47] Ihde, *The Irish Language in the United States*, 80.

[48] Niklos Coupland, Hywel Bishop and Peter Garrett, 'Home Truths: Globalisation and the Iconising of Welsh in a Welsh-American Newspaper', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development,* 24 (2003), 172, citing Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

and dramatic dimensions, and involve the invocation of a "mythic past".[49] They use a poetic analogy to describe this phenomenon of 'loss' and the mythologised sense of homeland and culture that is constructed in a new society. They cite Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1991) as an example of this tendency towards mythologisation. The experience of separation from home culture here is conceived as a 'fall from paradise.' "'Loss", says Hoffman, "is a magical preservative. Time stops at the point of severance, and no subsequent impressions muddy the water you have in mind. The house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them. Nostalgia–that most lyrical of feelings–crystallises around these images like amber".[50] The crystallisation of these poetic images and interpretations of the home culture is certainly resonant with the diasporic idealisation of the homeland constructed by O'Donnell. In his peroration he attempted to explain, even justify, what could be understood as a diasporic patriotism for the 'homeland':

> That emotion of the human breast which we call patriotism, or love of country, may originate in two distinct ways–an objective and a subjective way. It may be aroused by familiarity with the physical feature of one's country and all the fond associations and memories connected therewith. It may also be engendered by a close acquaintance with the history and legendary lore of one's country and by a healthy pride in noble past. This is the truest and most enduring type of patriotism; for it has its source in study and contemplation, and in the exercise of the faculties of comparison and criticism.[51]

We see here an explanation of how the diasporic community can love their country of origin even without having visited. This 'subjective' and 'studied' approach to love of one's country was deemed to be equally valid by O'Donnell.

Towards the end of his lecture his tone changed, despite his earlier rhetoric, to a certain sense of compassion for his English-Australian compatriots: 'So under the rising beams of the new Democracy, the English, Scottish and Irish masses, too long deluded and estranged by the wiles and intrigues of malevolent men will cleave together in a brotherhood that will never be dissolved, because it will be sanctified by a mutual love and trust that will live to the end of

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[49] Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins, 'Banal Transnationalism: The Difference that Television Makes' in Karim H. Karim (ed.), *The Media of Diaspora* (London, 2003), 91.

[50] Ibid., 91.

[51] O'Donnell, *A Lecture on Ancient Ireland*, 20.

time.'[52] This would seem to be quite a turnaround, but perhaps if O'Donnell's attachment to language and nationalism was largely symbolic, it is not such as surprise. This is not to denigrate the energy and effort he evidently put into what became in many aspects a life-task. He was clearly committed to his cause. The Irish language in this matrix is a badge of an 'authentic Irishness', an all encompassing direct link with the past, providing reaffirmation of an essential identity, against what is feared, in O'Donnell's case, to be an identity-effacing Englishness (one could read globalization today). The language was the key register in which a proud and ancient heritage could be invoked (not wholly dissimilar to a contemporary resurgence of interest in the language). It lent authenticity to this reclamation of heritage and thus had an incredible amount of cultural significance invested in it.

Colin Graham suggests 'that "authenticity" has increased in its value as a marker of what is Irish as Ireland has (partially) moved out of its anti-colonial mode.' [53] He concludes that the persistence of authenticity in Irish culture can be seen as a desire for validation arising 'from the cultural crises of colonialism and its de-authenticating of the colonized'.[54] Although Graham writes this on contemporary Ireland it holds true with O'Donnell's diasporic project too. Writing on tracing alternatives and potentials for transformation from spectres of the past David Lloyd writes that 'The form of the imagined future is sketched in the ruins of the present.'[55] The language in this context can be viewed as such. Lloyd continues

> [m]emory, in this respect, is at once the memory of damage – of dispossession, coercion, 'disappointed hope' – and the memory of an alternative that has not been realized. But to view the latter memory as mere nostalgic fabrication would be to miss the dynamic of the past: the work of memory is not to preserve the past in its fixity, but to loosen from the truncated becomings of the past the fluid possibilities that defy the notion that the social formation in dominance is the only historical possibility.[56]

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[52] Ibid., 22.

[53] Colin Graham, "…maybe that's just Blarney': Irish Culture and the Persistence of Authenticity' in Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (eds), *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (London, 1999), 25.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Lloyd, *Irish Times*, 72.

[56] Ibid.

It is this 'social formation in dominance' that O'Donnell eschewed in his writing and his promotion of the language. In seeking to come to terms with a ruptured past and an unforgiving present Nicholas Michael O'Donnell is representative of a diasporic utopian impulse to connect with and invoke some authentic essence of 'Irishness'. In his case it was deployed through the symbols of nationalism, religion and language. The fervour of his activities in these areas is striking. His desire for posterity was matched by a desire that his progeny and other Irish-Australians not abandon his cause. Yet O'Donnell was not entirely recalcitrant, for he was a pragmatist in his wish for a harmonious Australia and as such was caught in a classic diasporic bind: the desire for the persistence of his heritage and the desire to assimilate without turbulence into a new 'brotherhood of mutual love and trust' with his compatriots.

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