



## **Ireland and Biafra: hunger, history, politics and public opinion**

Title	Ireland and Biafra: hunger, history, politics and public opinion
Author(s)	Bateman, Fiona
Publication Date	2012
Publisher	Cambria Press

## Chapter Four

### Ireland and Biafra: Hunger, History, Politics and Public Opinion

Fiona Bateman

In an Irish newspaper in July 1968, a parallel of suffering was drawn between Biafra and Tudor Ireland. A letter written to the editor quoted Edmund Spenser's eyewitness account of famine in Ireland four hundred and fifty years earlier: "Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came, creeping forth on their hands, for their legs would not bear them: they looked like anatomies of death, they spoke like ghosts crying out of their graves."<sup>1</sup> Such was the emotive nature of public debate, engagement, and sense of national identification with the Biafran cause.

This chapter addresses the impact of the Nigeria-Biafra war in Ireland, drawing on newspaper accounts and diplomatic correspondence to demonstrate the power of the media and the complexities of modern global relationships, religion and politics.<sup>1</sup> Another aspect of the chapter refers to the power of memory and how historical events can be recalled both to provide interpretation of current events and to influence public attitudes in new contexts.

#### Media and Propaganda

The narrative of any war is bound to be contested, consisting of stories from at least two perspectives. Accounts of the same incidents may be at variance, either as a result of genuinely different understandings and experience of events, or for reasons of propaganda. Propaganda is a common practice in time of war in order to sustain the morale of the population and mislead the enemy. These reasons for multiple narratives might be considered inevitable, but in this war there was also a problem of

---

inaccurate reporting and third party “official sources,” such as British Parliamentary debates, which provided (and insisted on the validity of) information that was quite simply incorrect.

In addition to Irish television, newspapers, and radio reports, the British media in the form of newspapers and radio was widely available in Ireland. The BBC was faithfully relaying press releases from the Nigerian Federal government, while dismissing reports issued by the Biafran Press Services as ‘propaganda’. While there is no doubt that much of the Biafran press material was exaggerated and often wildly optimistic, there was, and is, no reason to believe that reports issued by the Federal side were any more accurate. News and information from various sources in Africa was augmented in the media by accounts of parliamentary debates, official government statements, and campaigns by assorted relief agencies. When journalists visited Biafra, another version of events emerged which suggested that there was intentional misinformation at the highest levels. It was reported in August 1968 “that some of the reports now being broadcast by the BBC and appearing in the British newspapers are blatant distortions of what is happening in Biafra – particularly on the war front.”<sup>2</sup> The Irish public was also privy to yet another source of information: first-hand accounts of events from Irish missionaries based in Biafra. Letters sent home by missionaries were published or read aloud to congregations at Mass. Additionally, on visits back to Ireland from Biafra, missionaries took the opportunity to address public meetings and were often interviewed for the local press. Statements from the Catholic Church on the conflict (even at the level of the Vatican) seemed to support the Biafran cause, much to the annoyance of the Nigerian government.

Faced with two competing discourses in the media that were in complete disagreement regarding the bombing of civilian targets and the threat of genocide,

what, and maybe more importantly “who” was the public to believe? Missionary sources were perceived as more reliable than members of parliament or media, which might be subject to government sanction. For Irish people, missionaries had a historic role in mediating representations of Africa, and they were the preferred source for stories at this time. As “eye-witnesses,” they were considered reliable and trustworthy, and their familiarity with the context from which they were reporting made them a valuable source to journalists. Therefore, in addition to their informal networks of communication such as letters to family and friends, they were often sought out by reporters. At the time, journalist John Horgan reported that the Nigerian government would have preferred all foreign missionaries in Biafra to have been repatriated, as “they provide an independent and unbiased group of witnesses to what is actually happening. As such they are clearly an embarrassment to the Federal side, and this is all the more true as they have become more vocal during the progress of the war.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, statements from the Pope had been interpreted as overly sympathetic to the Biafrans and critical of the Nigerians. Catholics in other parts of Nigeria had felt that the Vatican was taking sides. The Pope referred to the situation in Biafra with sympathy, saying: “We cannot think without deep sorrow of those good and hardworking people, now completely upset by civil war and dying of hunger and illness.”<sup>4</sup> General Gowon believed that the relief planes organised by Caritas, a Catholic relief organisation, were also carrying arms into Biafra, and that this activity was effectively being sanctioned by the Vatican. This led to his speaking out publicly against the Catholic Church, a move which would have exacerbated any anti-Federal opinion among Irish people.

During the period of the war, 1967-1970, the institutional Catholic Church still had a huge influence over the vast majority of Irish people. In the 1971 census, 92.4

percent of the population (total pop. 2,978,248) described themselves as Roman Catholic.<sup>5</sup> A survey carried out in 1973-1974 showed that over 90 percent of Irish Catholics attended Mass *at least* once a week.<sup>6</sup> It seems clear that on a national level, the Catholic Church in Ireland was potentially as effective as any large media organization could be regarding access to a sympathetic audience and opportunities to disseminate a message; it also had significant influence on the government.

In 1967 when war broke out, the embassy in Lagos was the only Irish embassy in any African state. That fact shows Ireland's close links with Nigeria, a connection which was historically based on the missionary relationship. Many Irish men and women were working as missionaries in Nigeria in May 1967 when Biafra seceded, and a large number now found themselves in the new state of Biafra. Given the option to return to Ireland, most chose to stay. Only the elderly or those in poor health decided to leave. Thus, although the war was geographically distant from Ireland, the event had a resonance for Irish people. Those who had relatives caught up in the events were anxious for their safety. At governmental level, there were diplomatic issues. There was also a religious aspect: the Church was worried regarding the continuation of the missions. However, as the conflict developed and conditions for the Biafran population worsened with widespread famine and reports of civilian deaths, the humanitarian issue took precedence.

### Missionary History

Some background regarding the relationship between Ireland and Nigeria will contextualise the events of 1967-70 as they were perceived and experienced in Ireland. By the 1950s Ireland's association with the continent of Africa was almost entirely defined in terms of missionary activity. The dominance of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the community, the school, and the home meant that no adult or

child could be unaware of the presence of Irish priests and nuns in what was still known as a place where “barbaric practises”<sup>7</sup> and “dark mysterious rites – deeds of foul and shameful character”<sup>8</sup> were enacted. The heroism and hard work of these individuals in snatching souls from the forces of darkness and transforming them into good Catholics was an international contribution of which the Irish nation was proud. As an aspect of popular culture, the “pagan missions” permeated everyday life. Children collected pennies for the “Black Babies.” Every shop counter held a collection box. Missionary magazines were popular reading material. Most families had a relative on the missions and a carved wooden elephant or antelope, a souvenir from Africa, on the mantelpiece. There were maps hanging in classrooms which represented the presence of Irish missionaries in various countries. Missionary maps were colour-coded like maps of the British Empire, with the highlighted missionary territories often described as Ireland’s “spiritual empire.” The images of Africa shown by missionaries on lantern slides in parish halls were the first pictures of the continent that were seen in most places in Ireland, and they made a powerful impression.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1920s when there was a surge in Irish missionary activity, the relationship with Nigeria had already been established, largely as the result of the work of one Irishman, Bishop Joseph Shanahan, who first went to Nigeria in 1902. His achievements there made him a hero to many of the young missionaries who followed; there is no doubt that he was the inspiration for many vocations. In appearance he was an impressive figure, tall and athletic. He was frequently compared to St Patrick, the man who had converted the pagan Irish. He himself saw the parallel, remarking: “He had a country peopled by a wild pagan tribe. So had I.”<sup>10</sup> His biographer too described his work as bringing Catholicism to a nation “exactly as

populous as the Irish and so like them in many respects that an Apostolic Delegate later dubbed the Ibo people ‘the Irish of West Africa.’”<sup>11</sup>

Missionary discourse frequently employed sensational and clichéd representations of Africa in order to attract support – both financial and in terms of vocations. In 1905, Shanahan sent a letter to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda requesting funds for two stations to be erected “right in the heart of this land of fetish-worshippers, baby-killers and cannibals.”<sup>12</sup> He was intent on attracting more priests to his mission. Fifteen years later, he was back in Ireland from Africa suffering from ill-health but determined to use his time productively. He addressed the students for the priesthood in Maynooth, and

[a]s he spoke, the students felt the land of their birth slip insensibly away from them and the dark mass of Africa rise before their vision – Africa with its countless millions of pagans, its devilish rites and cults, its voo-doo, its ju-ju, its forests and its swamps.<sup>13</sup>

While it is clear that Shanahan had a strong bond with the Ibo people, it is interesting that he still participated in and sustained the discourse which showed Africa as a dark, savage, and dangerous place; he might even be accused of having established the main tenets of the stereotypical views of Africa which became a stable and central aspect of Irish missionary discourse. These representations are found in what is termed “missionary propaganda,” for example magazines distributed in the schools and parishes, in his letter to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda and in his address in the seminary. The fact that these representations are widely found demonstrates how acceptable and perhaps ‘expected’ these views were. The missionary vocation was presented as one of sacrifice. Africa still had the reputation

of the “White Man’s Grave”; missionaries were often advised not to tell their parents where they were going as it would cause distress to their mothers.<sup>14</sup>

The relationship of Ireland and Africa was frequently presented in missionary texts as that of a mother and child. Ireland was the nurturing maternal presence and the continent of Africa was her offspring. The more paternalistic framing used in imperial discourse allows for greater emphasis on discipline and less on ‘spoon feeding’; it might be suggested that the ‘mother’ figure allows for representation of a more infantilized Africa. Despite having experienced colonization, the Irish missionaries showed little empathy with those they had been sent to convert. However, alongside the often insulting and demeaning accounts, there gradually emerges a respect and an acknowledgement of similarities, specifically between the Ibo and the Irish, which is based on more than a sense of common humanity.

#### Modern Missionary Work

By the 1960s, attitudes towards Africa were gradually changing, but a residue of the old established ideas remained. Missionary work was in a process of transformation and ideas such as justice, human rights, and the value of indigenous cultures were now at the core of pastoral work, including educational and health-related initiatives. When Biafra seceded from Nigeria and war broke out the mass evacuation of non-nationals was arranged, but many Irish missionaries were intent on remaining in Biafra. As time went on their function changed. In addition to running hospitals and coordinating aid supplies, they became a conduit relaying stories of civilian bombings and attacks to the Irish public and the wider world.

Despite the abundance of news from Biafra, it was difficult to get stories from an unbiased source. When a documentary team from the Irish national television and radio broadcaster RTE attempted to travel to Biafra to make a programme, it was

forced by the Director General to return to Ireland from Lisbon. It emerged that the trip was being funded by American Mr Bob Goldstein, who had a PR contract with the Biafran government. There was some debate about these events in the newspapers and suggestions that the government of the day had interfered and effectively censored the programme makers. RTE denied that there had been any consultation with or direction from the Department of External Affairs. In defence of its actions, the governing authority announced that “on reconsideration of the various inherent risks of the Biafran situation,” it had decided to divert the team to another assignment.<sup>15</sup> In the same article, it is mentioned that there are about 1600 Irish missionaries in Nigeria, including 200 to 300 in Biafra. The writer notes that it “is understood that the situation is so sensitive in the area that tremendous importance is attached by the Irish missionary orders to the greatest impartiality being shown by Irish commentators.”<sup>16</sup> In a subsequent article it is reported that at the time the Irish Government was under pressure “about the activities of some missionaries who had returned to Ireland and were openly involved in promoting the Biafran interest [...] There was a danger that Irish citizens in Nigeria could have found themselves in a difficult position.”<sup>17</sup>

Diplomatic contacts between the Irish and Nigerian states provide another strand to the story; official Irish sources persist in referring to ‘Biafra’ (in inverted commas) in all internal communications. The Nigerian Chargé d’Affaires in Dublin, Mr Akpoyoware, would alert his government to any reportage in Ireland which seemed to favour Biafra. For instance, the ‘bought-in’ programme on Biafra broadcast by RTE, in the absence of any Irish-made documentary, attracted his attention. He complained to the Irish government about ‘the unfavourable and unfair’ impression given by the programme.<sup>18</sup> Such official complaints were regularly relayed from the

Nigerian government to the Irish, and vice versa. A recurring trend in the archives is of the Department of External Affairs in Ireland being alerted to news of the bombing of markets, hospitals, or other civilian facilities. When the Minister asked for confirmation of details from the Irish Embassy in Lagos, they knew nothing of these events; they had no presence in Biafra. The embassy then requested details from the Federal authorities who initially denied that there was any truth in the reports. However, when the reports were corroborated from different sources, they were subsequently acknowledged and verified by the Federal authorities. It is clear that the missionaries, who were managing to get their eyewitness accounts into the public domain, had an important role in bringing these incidents to public attention. The Federal authorities were unlikely to volunteer details of attacks on civilians, nor would they even acknowledge the veracity of these accounts until the evidence was incontrovertible. However, not everyone was inclined to believe the missionaries' reports of atrocities. At a meeting with the British High Commissioner and Mr Olsen of the American embassy in Lagos to discuss the concern in Ireland regarding the bombing of hospitals, the Irish ambassador was told that both men felt the missionary accounts to be 'exaggerated and unreliable'.<sup>19</sup>

### Irish Government

The Irish Government had a number of concerns, primarily the welfare of Irish citizens resident on both sides of the battle lines. There was a growing popular support for the Biafran cause, but reluctance at the level of government to break ranks with British policy. It was a balancing act: some ineffectual interventions were proposed and aid was increased. Additionally, a large amount of effort was invested in averting diplomatic incidents which the activities of some rather politicized priests

were threatening to spark. While the Irish government was repeatedly criticized for cowardice and inaction, it persisted in maintaining a neutral stance.

The editor of the *Irish Times* attributed the Irish Government's inaction to commercial and Church interests.<sup>20</sup> He opined in July 1968, that "recognition of Biafra at an early stage would have given a lead . . . we should have been the first to extend recognition to a country undergoing torments such as Ireland has never suffered in modern history."<sup>21</sup> John Horgan, an Irish journalist who spent some time in Biafra for the *Irish Times*, interviewed the Biafran head of state and reported that 'Colonel C.Odumegwu Ojukwu [...] thinks that Ireland should bring direct diplomatic pressure to bear on Nigeria "to bring about a cessation of hostilities and a committal to negotiation as the only way of really solving our problem"' and that he had suggested "there is a lot the Irish can do." Horgan further quotes Ojukwu saying:

I think, too, that when there is very little a country can do, she can probably get a hearing in the world on a moral basis. I think she could cry out against the crime being committed against humanity in this area. I do not think any country should sit by and watch this kind of genocide [...] And in this too, I think you will find – and this is just a new thought which has just occurred to me – that, since the African countries seem to be terrorised by political clichés [sic], and the major powers, for their own economic considerations, are unwilling to do anything, perhaps the small country really does have a role to play in this. They have got no axe to grind. There are no pies for them to dip their fingers in.<sup>22</sup>

The suggestion that Ireland had international influence was a presumption that the Irish themselves were delighted to concur with. Realistically, a small country such as Ireland held very little diplomatic sway, and decisions were bound to be affected by

the stance taken by her European neighbours. Ojukwu may have hoped that Ireland would have influence in the United States, due to the large Irish-American population there. Any intervention from the U. S. in the war would have been significant but the U.S. was maintaining a neutral stance despite intense lobbying efforts. Already marginal in Europe, it was unlikely that the Irish government would break away from the consensus and intervene in African politics. Also, the missionary organizations were keen to remind the decision makers that there was the well-being of the missionaries throughout Nigeria and the future of the missions to consider. The Federal authorities were suspicious of missionaries; their safety was a valid concern. The *Nigerian Observer* of 23 July 1968 displayed a headline on the front page: “EXPOSED! Beware of the Man in Cassock,” warning that Ojukwu had many agents in Nigeria, a great many of them clergymen.<sup>23</sup> Fr Finbarr, an SMA priest who had just reached Nigeria, sent a letter home in the same month. He wrote partly in the Irish language, presumably to avoid censorship:

In Ireland you might think that the war is more or less over – but you’re wrong. The Eastern forces are still fighting strongly. In this part of the country the Church is in trouble due to something the Pope said recently about the fighting. It’s a good thing for us that Frank Aiken [Irish Minister for External Affairs] hasn’t recognised the new country. The armed forces say that we’re like the Pope – as bad as him! There are soldiers everywhere... here and there cars are stopped to be searched, all have weapons. It seems that the military state here is like Ireland in 1921.<sup>24</sup>

## Irish History

Irish history was brought up frequently in discussions of the Nigeria-Biafra war, inferring that the Irish people should take Biafra's side due to the common experience of having agitated for independence from Britain. Col. Ojukwu himself referred often to Irish history in efforts to draw connections between the Irish and the Biafran circumstance and to capitalise on a mutual distrust and dislike of the British. In an address of 1 July 1968 Ojukwu condemned the British involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra war and made reference to the Anglo-Irish war: "Their behaviour today against Biafra coincides with their behaviour in 1921/22 against another people struggling as we are doing today for self-determination and security. The pattern is the same."<sup>25</sup>

In interviews with Irish journalists Ojukwu was quick to joke about the Biafran-Irish connection. It was a strategy which displayed an intelligence and aptitude for reaching an audience. He was not beyond introducing an element of flattery, which no doubt guaranteed his audience's approval and sympathy for the cause. Horgan quotes him saying:

Ireland, of course, has a peculiar experience which is somewhat akin to ours, and we have had historical associations with Ireland. Oh yes. They are the people who really developed, civilised, or whatever it is. They have had a lot of contacts here, and I think they are in a better position perhaps, than most, to understand our problem. This is their own experience and their own association with us.<sup>26</sup>

A few months later Des Mullan reporting for the *Irish Independent* quoted Ojukwu concerning the Irish: "With them we have a special attachment – anybody who speaks

English in Biafra certainly has a little bit of Irish spirit in him,” he joked. “We always feel the Irish would understand our problem because it is a repetition of Irish history.”<sup>27</sup>

Many of the Irish in Biafra concurred with this assessment. John Horgan, describing the content of television and radio in Biafra, noted that while the Broadcasting Company of Biafra had a limited transmission,

One programme which has attracted a lot of comment has been ‘Freedom Ways’ – a series of readings given every week, and which has more than once featured the work of Pearse, Davis, Tone, Plunkett, and almost every Irish poet-patriot you care to name. There are no prizes for guesses about the people who made their libraries available.<sup>28</sup>

After the war, a missionary responding to allegations that priests should not become involved in politics said: “We stayed with our people in their war. Is that politics? We tended their wounds. Is that politics? We fed them and, when they starved, we came home to try to get them food. Is that politics? If so, then yes, we were in politics up to our necks.”<sup>29</sup> Certainly the perception was that at least some missionaries were politically involved. One of the journalists brought on a 3-day tour of the main cities and towns of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria mentioned in his article that: “From missionary priests of the Order of the Holy Ghost, who are committed to the Biafran cause and are actively supporting Colonel Ojukwu’s regime, I got a picture of how the war is being fought.”<sup>30</sup>

Ojukwu once joked that the “worst thing about the Irish is that they are white” and Horgan, reporting from Biafra in March 1968, commented that:

if skin pigment could be affected by will-power, many of the Irish in Biafra would have changed colour long ago in order to remove the last possible

barrier to full identification with the people among whom some of them have lived and worked for over twenty-five years. Today when you hear an Irish missionary use the word “we,” he doesn’t mean Irish, he means Biafran.<sup>31</sup>

In the same article, Horgan suggested that while few missionaries were involved in the politics of secession, most were unhesitatingly behind it as a fact, and virtually all considered the war to be genocide.

### Expectation of Solidarity

No doubt the commitment of the Irish missionaries in Biafra led to optimism there that the Irish government would show equal enthusiasm for the new state. Reports of Biafran expectations that Ireland would acknowledge Biafra and expressions of disappointment that the Irish government would not take the initiative were often implicit and occasionally explicit in media reports. When “top Biafran Minister” Mr Mojekwu was to visit Dublin, it was reported that: ‘He felt that the Irish had a special obligation to recognize Biafra because of historical background and because of Irish missionary associations with Biafra.’ He was quoted as having said: “We were naturally very disappointed when the Republic had not the courage to grant us recognition.”<sup>32</sup> At a press conference in Dublin, another Biafran representative Mr Francis Ellah spoke to reporters. He commented that “Nigeria likes to refer to this as an internal affair. When they are guilty of such an international offence as genocide, other countries should have spoken, particularly a country like Ireland which has a long association with us.”<sup>33</sup>

A handwritten September 1968 letter from Paul Keating, the Irish Ambassador in Lagos to the Minister for External Affairs in Dublin, illustrates the complex position the Irish diplomats were in. He begins: “Dear Eamon, one of the awkward

things about having locally recruited British staff (which is our position at the moment) is that one has to be careful in expressing what may appear to be anti-British sentiments – hence this manuscript letter rather than a typed one...” All official correspondence would have been typed by these staff, who he obviously suspects may pass on information to the British embassy. In the letter he criticizes the Irish media for representing the war as a religious one. He believes that this may have negative consequences for the missionaries. He says:

In particular I believe the Holy Ghost order will suffer and I would not be surprised if it is barred from this country after the war – When one thinks of the activity of Frs Kennedy, Doran and Byrne one is not surprised. [...] One major factor, I suspect, though I cannot of course prove, is the attitude of our British friends. For reasons of history probably and old anti-Missionary feeling they are still hostile to our priests and specially the Holy Ghosts. [...] ‘It may be too late now to counsel discretion and prudence to our people but they must I feel face up to the fact that in some months time at the most they may be ordered to pack up in certain areas. The Holy Ghost people will be difficult to defend. The Federals believe that their encouragement and support has helped the prolongation beyond the bounds of reason of a war that is costing thousands of lives and destruction of the wealth and reputation of this country [...] our people are there illegally [...] I am told there is a black list of 76 missionaries at the moment.’<sup>34</sup>

When the Nigerian Chargé d’Affaires in Dublin sent press cuttings from Irish newspapers to Lagos, the Irish ambassador was called in to defend or explain any pro-Biafra sentiments in the media, even though the government could in principle have no control over the stories that appeared. One advantage of this practice was that

Keating could remonstrate with the Federal government with regard to civilian bombings, leaving aside any arguments about issues of morality and simply pointing out that events such as these were bad public relations and would create anti-Nigerian feeling when reported abroad. For example, a confidential letter from the Irish Ambassador recounts a meeting with Mr Enaharo regarding such a bombing. The ambassador, with carefully chosen diplomatic phrasing, told him that coverage of bombings in Irish papers made it difficult for the government to maintain “understanding of the federal position.”<sup>35</sup>

Clearly neither the missionary organizations, the policy makers, nor the diplomatic corps were recommending official Irish recognition of Biafra. However there was a widely held public opinion that the Irish nation should recognise the Biafran state. How did such a groundswell of support for Biafra emerge? Certainly the comparisons drawn with Irish history influenced public opinion, but any comparison with Ireland’s historical and political context could be seen to have two different perspectives. When Ireland gained independence the island had been partitioned; six of the 32 counties remained under British control. If Biafra’s attempt to gain independence from Nigeria was compared with the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland having achieved independence from Great Britain then clearly support would be for the independent entity that was Biafra. However there was an alternative interpretation of the situation: Biafra’s desire for separate status might also have been compared to the six counties of Northern Ireland which had been partitioned from the remainder of the island of Ireland. In this case Biafra would have been seen as a part of the national territory which was rejecting a shared heritage and identity. While either interpretation seems possible, the first – a small courageous state struggling for independence – won out. The Irish tendency is to support the underdog. In any case,

the fact that Great Britain was supporting the Federal Government would probably have influenced the Irish to support the other side, regardless of any other factors.

In November 1968 a letter-writer to the *Irish Times* declared:

Last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising, giving due honour to those who against seemingly hopeless odds fought and gave their lives so that Ireland could be a free and independent nation. Every single argument used today against the cause of Biafran independence was used 50 years ago against the cause of Irish independence. Yet many fair-minded people in other lands gave us their support.

She goes on to suggest that Irish people travelling in Europe next summer would have to be prepared to explain why “it was right for the Irish to fight against union with England but wrong for the Ibos to behave in exactly the same way towards the Nigerians.”<sup>36</sup>

### Airlifts

Where the Irish people really demonstrated their concern and support for Biafra was in the delivery of aid. As is well documented, various government agencies and the Red Cross had proven incapable of negotiating the bureaucratic and diplomatic minefield that had developed. The night-time airlifts of food from Sao Tomé that landed in the dark at Uli airstrip have become the stuff of legend. Organised by Joint Church Aid, missionaries of different faiths worked together for the good of the people. This aid effort was an incredible achievement, as well as an indictment of official structures in the international community that could not deal with the diplomatic complexity of a civil war. Ignoring the ‘politics’ involved and focussed only on saving lives, the priests, the fundraisers, and the volunteers supplied

tons of food night after night to the starving Igbo people. Despite these efforts, many did starve; children suffering from *kwashiorkor* became a familiar image in Irish and British newspapers.

Whatever about sharing the honours with Vietnam as one of the first ‘televised’ wars, the Biafra-Nigeria war certainly provided images of the first televised famine. Images were broadcast widely and inspired a massive humanitarian response. Mary Holland wrote in reference to the Irish reaction to these images, recalling the fundraising campaigns for the ‘Black Babies’ which were widespread in Irish schools from the 1920s.

You chose a name for your black baby, and, for a penny a week out of your pocket money, you took him up 30 steps on a cardboard chart to heaven, where the child Jesus stood at the top to welcome him. Vast sums of money were collected in this way.

In 1968 the black babies of Catholic childhood started appearing on television. They were Biafran, and they were starving. For most Catholics it was as simple as that. The politicians, the businessmen, the professional Africa-watchers, had more complex reasons for backing Biafra, but, for most Catholics, the appeal was direct and irresistibly emotional.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout Irish history, famine was not an uncommon occurrence. Images of famine still have a special resonance in Ireland today. History records the great Irish famine of the nineteenth century as a catastrophic event which could and should have been prevented. During this famine, between 1844 and 1850, also known as “An Gorta Mór” or “the Great Hunger,” approximately 2 million people (almost a quarter of the population) died of disease or starvation. Queen Victoria became known as the ‘Famine Queen.’ It is widely believed that her government could have averted the

worst effects of the agricultural disaster that was the potato blight, but that by engaging in a laissez faire economic policy they allowed a famine to develop. For economic reasons, the government would not provide relief as it might interfere with private enterprise, and grain crops continued to be exported from Ireland while the Irish starved and died.<sup>38</sup> The knowledge that famines are caused by political and diplomatic decisions as much as by unavoidable factors associated with climate and natural forces prompted individuals with no prior experience to undertake fundraising, the purchase of food, and the arrangement of transport to ameliorate the effects of the war in Biafra. They firmly believed that action, rather than inaction for political reasons, is worthwhile and in this was case essential to save lives.

The catastrophic famine that developed in Biafra during the war with Nigeria has been described as “the first major disaster that was brought into the living rooms of the world by television, which, with its visual immediacy, challenged indifference to faraway suffering,”<sup>39</sup> In exploring the effects of the events in Western Africa on the Irish public, it should be acknowledged that although the transmission of the story was helped greatly by the new globalized media, Irish support and concern for Biafra was founded on print media and the presence of Irish missionaries and their commitment to tell the Biafran story to the world. Some missionaries did take an openly pro-Biafra stance and urged the government to recognise the besieged breakaway state. However, the missionary organizations, though supportive of the Biafran people and wishing to see an end to the conflict, were not in favour of the government taking such a stand. When the remaining missionaries were deported from Biafra at the end of the war, they received a heroes’ welcome. They also remained somewhat of a diplomatic embarrassment.

The final scene of a play written about Irish missionaries in Biafra brings to mind attitudes towards soldiers who returned to the USA from Vietnam. In the play one of the missionaries arrives back in Dublin expecting an official welcome, but the Bishop is attending a cocktail party in the Nigerian embassy and doesn't come to meet him. The next day the Bishop explains: "You are just a tiny bit of an embarrassment at this stage. The war is well over now and the wounds are healing and no-one wants unpleasant memories revived. You did a great job under conditions which are no longer relevant."<sup>40</sup>

However, the events of 1967-70 were not so easily forgotten in Ireland. Forty years later the details of the war, the politics, and the famine seem somewhat confused in common memory, perhaps as a consequence of the multiple narratives that were generated at the time. At the war's end the humanitarian situation remained in the news for a few months. But all media rely on stories of national interest to attract an audience and once the missionaries were no longer there the Irish connection was gone. Soon the story of Biafra, which had captivated the Irish imagination for so long, faded from the headlines.<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stella Hagan, letter, *Irish Press*, 25 July 1968. Quotation from Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596).

<sup>2</sup> Des Mullan, "Biafrans hope for major airlift of arms – and men – from France," *Irish Independent*, 28 August 1968, 12.

<sup>3</sup> John Horgan, "The Church and the War (I)," *Irish Times*, 19 March 1968, 8.

<sup>4</sup>National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) 2000/14/22, letter from Shields (Irish Ambassador in Rome) enclosing a translation of

the remarks ‘made by the Holy Father on Sunday last, July 21, before the recital of the Angelus at Castel Gandolfo,’ 23 July 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Mícheál McGréil, *Religious Practice and Attitudes in Ireland 1988-1989* (St Patrick’s College, Maynooth: Survey and Research Unit, 1991), 3.

<sup>6</sup> *A Survey of Religious Practice, Attitudes and Beliefs in the Republic of Ireland, 1973-1974* (Catholic Communications Institute of Ireland, Dublin: Research and Development Unit, 1975), in Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2002), 275.

<sup>7</sup> Sr Mary Anastasia, “Growth of Medical Work on the Missions”, *Capuchin Annual* (1955), 364-70, 365.

<sup>8</sup> James Mellett, *If Any Man Dare: Missionary Memoirs* (Dublin: Fallons, 1963), 118.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> John P. Jordan, *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria* (Dublin: Elo Press, 1949 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1971]), 33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. The 1971 edition omits the reference to “baby-killers and cannibals”.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>14</sup> Mellett, *If Any Man Dare*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> “TV Team Sent to Another Assignment,” *Irish Times*, 26 January 1968, 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> John Healy, “RTE Programme Not Screened as Dispute Worsens,” *Irish Times*, 14 February 1968, 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> NAI, DFA 2001/43/146, Letter from the Irish Embassy in Lagos, 23 October 1968.

<sup>20</sup> Editor (Douglas Gageby), “Thank you for Nothing,” *Irish Times*, 3 July 1968, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Editor, *Irish Times*, 6 July 1968, 11.

<sup>22</sup> John Horgan, “Biafra Seeks Irish Support for Cause: Urged to Make Approach to Nigeria,” *Irish Times*, 9 March 1968, 1.

<sup>23</sup> NAI, DFA 2000/14/22, enclosure in letter from J. Small, Irish Chargé d’Affaires Lagos.

<sup>24</sup> NAI, DFA 2000/141/23, 9 September 1968, enclosure with letter to Michael Cullinane, Templeogue, who had forwarded a letter from his brother to the Department of External Affairs. Original text: ‘B’ fheidir go gceapann sibh in Eirinn go bhfuil an cogadh beagnach thart ansa – a mhalairt ar fad. Ta lucht an Oirthir ag troid go laidir fos. San chuid seo den tir ta an eaglais i gcruachas anois toisc gur nduirt an papa rud eigin faoin troid le deanai. Ba mhaith an rud duinn nar thug Proinsias Mac Aogain aitheantas don tir nua. Deireann lucht airm ansa go bhfuilimid cosuil leis an papa – chomh dona leis! Ta saighdiuiri i ngach ait... ansa & ansiud stoptar gach gluastean le haghaidh cuardach – inneall [...] ag a lan acu. Is docha go bhfuil an staid mileata anso cosuil le Eire i 1921’.

<sup>25</sup> NAI DFA 2000/14/22, Biafra Press Services, Address by Ojukwu, 1 July 1968, 7.

<sup>26</sup> John Horgan, “Biafra Seeks Irish Support for Cause: Urged to Make Approach to Nigeria,” *Irish Times*, 9 March 1968, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Des Mullan, “Biafran leader hopes solution to conflict will be found in Africa,” *Irish Independent*, 26 August 1968.

<sup>28</sup> John Horgan, “Biafra at War,” *Irish Times*, 14 March 1968, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Holland, ‘Catholics and Black Babies’, *Observer*, 18 January 1970, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Lynch, “Ibos Prepared to Die Fighting rather than be Massacred,” *Irish Times*, 3 February 1968, 5.

<sup>31</sup> John Horgan, “The Church and the War (I),” *Irish Times*, 19 March 1968, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Des Mullan, "Top Biafra Minister to Visit Dublin," *Irish Independent*, 13 July 1968, 1. Also reported in *Evening Herald*, 15 July 1968.

<sup>33</sup> "Outside Intervention in Biafra Urged," *Irish Times*, 13 February 1968, 7. It is interesting that Mr Ellah's credentials and implied reliability are confirmed by the mention that he attended the Holy Family College at Abak, where he was taught by Monsignor Conway, head of the Irish College in Rome.

<sup>34</sup> NAI, DFA 2000/141/23, letter from Embassy in Lagos, 12 September 1968.

<sup>35</sup> NAI, DFA 2001/43/146, letter from Embassy in Lagos, 4 March 1969.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Cockburn, Letter, *Irish Times*, 18 November 1968, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Holland, "Catholics and Black Babies," *The Observer*, 18 January 1970, 4.

<sup>38</sup> For the history of the Irish Famine see, for example, Cecil Woodham Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (London: H. Hamilton, 1962) and Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-1852* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Aengus Finucane, "The Changing Roles of Voluntary Organisations" in *A Framework for Survival: Health, Human Rights and Humanitarian Assistance in Conflict and Disasters*, ed. Kevin M. Cahill (London: Routledge, 1999), 247.

<sup>40</sup> Desmond Forristal, *Black Man's Country* (Dublin: Proscenium Press, 1975), 45.

<sup>41</sup> In practical terms, the role of Irish missionaries and the nature of missionary work were changed forever and Africa Concern, the aid organization founded in Dublin to address the famine in Biafra, continues as Concern Worldwide to respond to major emergencies as well as participate in long-term development projects.