

University of Galway Research Repository

The Irish Empire

Title	The Irish Empire
Author(s)	Kenny, John
Publication Date	1999
Publication information	Kenny, J. (Winter 1999/00) 'The Irish Empire.' Review of 'The Irish Empire', a documentary for RTE by Alan Gilsean, Dearbhla Walsh and David Roberts. 'Film West' 39, 16-7
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1064

The Irish Empire

A Five-Part Series of 50-minute documentaries by RTÉ in conjunction with the BBC and SBS Australia.

Dir: Alan Gilsonan, Dearbhla Walsh, David Roberts.

Prod: James Mitchell, Ritchie Cogan.

Narr: Fiona Shaw.

There was a wild colonial boy ... Or so we innocents at home thought. If the sonorous title of one of RTÉ's most significant recent ventures is to be credited, the Irish abroad have never been quite the endemically anti-imperial or blameless exiles that many history books take them to be, and the lines of the traditional emigrant song may have to be changed to 'There was a wild colonialist boy ...' Piloted on 15 November, *The Irish Empire* was guaranteed a wide cachet: It was a prime-time broadcast (9.30p.m.), and given the fact that the subject-matter of emigration has left few Irish people untouched at some level, viewership was further guaranteed. As might be expected from five thematically arranged fifty-minute programmes, the series managed to cover an impressive range of emigration stories in its transhistorical sweep; as might not have been expected however, the five programmes were held together by a fairly predictable and fundamentally monotonous ideology that manifests itself in the commentary of many of the selected interviewees and also in the script. While it would be impossible to condense the detail of the whole series, before commenting on the unfortunate unifying aspects it is only fair to attend to the undeniably informative content of each instalment.

Emphasising that some seventy million people worldwide either see themselves as Irish or claim Irish descent, and introducing most of the commentators involved in the series, the first programme (Alan Gilsonan) had the onerous task of performing as an overview of the following four. It stretched from discussion of early Irish migrations like that of the Dál Riata, to the Irish communities and centres of learning established throughout western Europe by Irish monastics, to the post-Cromwellian movement of Irish soldiers into the armies of Spain, to the new mass emigration to Canada and then America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the post-war Irish in Britain and the continued patterns of emigration in the eighties and nineties. Two of the more poignant moments in the series were included here: Marianne O'Gallagher, historian, is patently moved as she shows us a Quebec graveyard where thousands of Irish would-be emigrants were buried in mass graves; and, in what seemed for many viewers to be the overall highlight, an elderly Newfoundland descendant of Irish emigrants speaks (in such a strange Irish-Canadian accent that it requires subtitles) of his 'leanings' towards the Irish and delivers this resounding line: 'They talk about the time of the Famine ... Whether it happened or not I don't know ... Did you ever hear of it?'

Episode two (David Roberts) struck an immediate contemporary note by focusing on Irish workers on the Sydney Olympic sites and subsequently ranges from such unusual topics as Irish settlements in Barbados to the more familiar area of the rise to power of Irish-Americans and the less glamorous tale of Irish labourers in Britain. The individual case of Australia, and the tradition of 'irreverence' the Irish there are perceived to have established via such figures as Ned Kelly, forms the more interesting narrative thread and a nice item for the factfile is given in the elaborated

story of Peter Lalor (brother of James Fintan Lalor) who, on the behalf of gold diggers, was the first to swear allegiance in Australia to a non-British flag.

There is no doubt that a popular perception has taken the typical emigrant to be a working-class man, or that the written history of Irish emigration has, with only a few exceptions, ignored the women's sector. But the typical strategy of devoting a separate programme (No. 3, Dearbhla Walsh) to women's emigration comes with what should be, by now, recognisable drawbacks: However well intended, this kind of corralling of women's issues makes avoidance of the area all the easier for those who will have no truck with feminist 'special pleading'—even if greatly interested in the series generally, those who just couldn't be bothered with emigration as it specifically applies to Irish women had to just tune out and tune back in the following week. Imbalance in gender issues is surely better redressed when 'the women's untold story' is told simultaneously with that of men (the series was notably lacking in interviews with younger *children* of emigrants), not when one sex's experience is considered to be, as the programme's subtitle has it, 'A World Apart'. As the programme stood, it was highly affective in places. After a fashionable start with the Banshees, a New York based group of female artists, it progressed to tell the story of the concentration of Irish maids in American households and the economic significance for Ireland of the money they sent home; of the historical and contemporary situation of Irish nurses in Britain; of the involvement of Irish nuns in missionary activity since the nineteenth century. While an impactful event is recalled by Mary MacAleese on a visit to Australia relating to the shipment there of over four thousand orphaned girls and young women from Irish workhouses between 1848 and 1850, perhaps the most touching interview comes when Mary Williams, who became a bus conductor in England after a term in America, relates how she feels she lost one family when she herself emigrated and now has lost a second due to the erosion of her own children's Irish identity.

In many ways, the subject of the fourth episode (David Roberts) had the broadest contemporary resonances. It focused on the functioning of religious affiliation in emigrant communities and it moved from a report on nineteenth-century anti-Catholic fervour in Cleator Moor (near Whitehaven in Cumbria), a town that had become known as 'Little Ireland' due to the influx of Irish miners, to the consciously oppositional stance of new Catholic education in Australia, to the musically inclined Presbyterian settlements in the Appalachians and the influence of these on the evolution of the evangelist movements.

While programme five (Alan Gilsean) should have been one of the more consequent since its task was to bring the emigration story up to date, it turned out to be the most tedious. Disproportionate attention was given to The Rose of Tralee competition, presumably under the assumption that it in some way encapsulates the essence of emigrant culture both at home and abroad. It is always good fun to hear a Rose from New Orleans opine 'I was expecting green pastures and little houses here and there' as she arrives in Ireland, but this story used up the time that might, instead, have been given to talking to a larger cross section of contemporary emigrants. There were some interviews with interesting, though not necessarily representative people like designer Peter O'Brien in Paris, but the episode was perhaps most memorable for the efforts of the commentators to generalise on the emigrant experience and on the nature of modern Ireland. And it is in some of the comments here and in the summary offered by the script that the problems with the underlying ideology of the series become patent.

Devised as a kind of risqué oxymoron (one of the main points of the series is to question the idea that the Irish, because of their own experience, were inherently anti-imperial), the series title can be interpreted as the notional endgame of what at this stage might be termed traditional revisionism. The implied story goes: Far from being the unwitting victims of the British Empire, as the targeted older nationalist history would have us believe, the Irish themselves formed their own international empire and were frequently the agents of British and American colonialism. Historian, Donald H. Akenson, best represents this approach, claiming that the idea of emigration as tragedy has been etched ‘unthinkingly’ in ‘traditional memory’, and that—*au contraire* as it were—the Irish ‘very cannily moved into the opportunities these empires provided’. With the usual presumptuous iconoclasm of this kind of revisionism, he asserts: ‘Now, when I’ve said that, I’ve opened a terrible potential wound ...’. Much more sympathetic than this kind of presumptive will to enlightenment is Luke Gibbons’ approach whereby, in the final programme, he insists that a phenomenon like ‘nostalgia’ should be itself carefully rethought and understood. The series would have had a more balanced feel if that line of thinking had been further pursued.

Though the interviews are commendably edited so that different and often opposing viewpoints and interpretations are sometimes given in quick succession, there are inadvertent and telling contradictions regarding the interpretation of ‘empire’. In the final programme, Fintan O’Toole, one of the series’ script consultants, insists that as well as there being an Irish ‘cultural’ empire there has been a ‘literal’ Irish empire whereby, for instance, native Americans were slaughtered to further colonial land interests (the coiner of the phrase ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian’ was an Irishman). Towards the very end however, Shaw reads from the script: ‘The Irish Empire exists only in the mind. It is a set of imaginative connections, shared memories and common desires. A vague but powerful sense of belonging.’ If we are going to tell history we might as well be as precise as possible in our nodal terms: There is nothing vicarious or ‘vague’ about empire. It involves highly centralised control and a directed administration (as, for example, that wielded by historical Britain and by Microsoft); and the only programme that illustrated any relevance for the phrase ‘Irish empire’ was the fourth where there was a focus on the way Irish missionaries concertedly obliterated local spiritualities, and where some appreciable accusations are made by one Patrick Dodson, the first (and now ex-) Catholic Aboriginal priest. Only once, and briefly, is the suitability of ‘empire’ as a paradigm or metaphor for the variegations of the Irish diaspora questioned—by Richard Kearney in the final programme.

This ideological packaging aside, impressive lists of archival sources are credited for these programmes and the series consultants, Paddy Fitzgerald (Centre for Emigration Studies, Omagh), Piaras Mac Éinrí (Irish Centre for Migration Studies, Cork), and Patrick O’Sullivan (Irish Diaspora Research Unit, Bradford) are all eminently qualified and provide, themselves, some incisive analysis as interviewees. Notwithstanding the almost interminable filler shots of sunscapes and seascapes, the series does perform as an educational tool, particularly in the tangible sense it gives that the terrain it covers is only the topsoil of hugely fertile ground for young historians, sociologists, economists and cultural theorists looking for a specialism. These programmes will in future years be seen to have deserved their press-release description as ‘A Landmark New Series’, but only so long as they are regarded, not as any kind of revisionist *fait accompli*, but as a provocative initiatory effort at moving

the Irish diaspora away from the catchphrases of *Áras an Uachtarán* and towards the imperative of popular reconsideration.

John Kenny.