The strange history of the Irish donkey

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INTRODUCTION

These donkeys provide a provocation that can't be met: a stubborn and inscrutable view from a world that can never be fully known
-Isabel Nolan[1]

Although the donkey was a late arrival to Ireland's shores its impact was more than just economic. From the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth the donkey was central to the economic life of the western seaboard, the poorest part of the country, eminently gifted for working the inhospitable and rocky terrain of the west. But as the nineteenth century wore on, the donkey became a central image in the representation of Ireland, both at home and abroad, both negative and positive. Decades after having been replaced by the tractor, the donkey remains an icon, flexible enough to serve a variety of interests.

It is easy to elide the importance of such a humble animal and written sources are few and far between. One significant source of knowledge has been largely ignored: the place of the donkey in the visual imagery of Ireland.

This paper will trace the career of generations of donkeys with the help of paintings, engravings, illustrations, cartoons and photographs.

The long gestation

The Irish term for an ass, *asal* , as in many other European languages, derives from the Latin. As the Roman Empire did not extend to the cold shores of Hibernia, nor did the empire's favourite beast of burden and references in early Irish literature and manuscripts are confined to the biblical. In the corpus of surviving poetry from the eight to the ninth century there are many animals present but not the ass.[2] Remains of horses, however, have been found at megalithic sites stretching back four thousand years.
The earliest explicit reference to an ass is contained in a legal manuscript from around 1194 concerning the visit of a papal Emissary, a Cardinal sent to Ireland to instruct ecclesiastics to submit to the English crown. The cardinal was sent on his way minus his asses, mules and horses (*eich agus miul angus asain*). The response of the Pope was to sell the tributes and dues of Ireland to the English King thus adding a further layer to the spurious justification for the subsequent invasion of Ireland.[3]

Having made its mark on Irish history,[4] In January 1919 the donkey makes another fleeting appearance on the stage of Irish history. In that month, the Anglo-Irish War was opened by an IRA attack on a police unit transporting explosives to a local quarry. The explosives were being carried by donkeys. the donkey vanishes for centuries. The next known reference is from 1642 when an ass is taken as part of the spoils after the burning of Maynooth Castle. A further silence ensues until a painting by Thomas Roberts, known as the 'Mozart of Irish art', [5] entitled *A Bay Mare and Two Donkeys* (1773) shows two well fed and groomed donkeys grazing on what is clearly a county estate **[IMAGE 1]**. This raises the question as to the function of the two animals since they were clearly not put to work in any way. The Romans were aware of the curative qualities of asses milk – as, of course was (reputedly) Cleopatra – and the English gentry of the 17th century shared this belief particularly as a cure for consumption and as a cosmetic aid for aging

skin. In a fragmentary Jane Austen novel[6] called *Sanditon,* a Lady Denham trumps the therapeutic advantages of asses' milk:

> Well, Mr. Parker, and the other is at boarding school, a French boarding school, is it? No harm in that. They'll stay their six weeks. And out of such a number, who knows but some may be consumptive and want asses milk; and I have two milch asses at this present time....

Many books of the period on the topic of domestic medicine are also favourably disposed towards asses milk which almost reaches the status of a cure all, but is universally recommended in cases of consumption, one of the great killers of the age [7]

By the turn of the century, the donkey (it is about this period that the word ass is gradually being replaced by the term donkey, although the Irish word remains *asal)* begins to make a regular appearance in paintings and engravings **[IMAGES 2, 3, 4]**. There is some evidence that during the Napoleonic Wars, in particular the Peninsular War (1808-14) donkeys were brought to Ireland from England and traded for horses.[8] By 1808 the donkey seems to have been in extensive use in Co. Clare on the western seaboard. A survey of the county, carried out in that year, reports:

> Very great use is made of mules and asses , for carrying baskets and similar goods, such as poor people usually load them with: for such persons as one not able to keep a horse, they are a great convenience.[9]

Although a number of such statistical surveys were published, this is one of the few- and the most extensive- reference to the use of donkeys during this period.[10] Further evidence of the use of donkeys is supplied by a painting from 1820 **[IMAGE 5]** by William Turner de Lond entitled *Market Scene, Ennis Co. Clare* in which two donkeys are standing in the foreground one clearly rigged out to pull a cart.

Nineteenth century Ireland: economy, social structure and the donkey.

Ireland in the 1830s was an agrarian country controlled by an aristocracy alien in nationality, language, religion and culture from the vast majority of the population. The landlords despised the lower orders, who returned the compliment with a ferocious blend of covert contempt and hatred masked by a genial subservience. Arrogant aristocrats used the law and the army to enforce their exploitation of the poor tenants, who defended themselves the only way they could: by collective solidarity, threats, assassination, and mass agitation. These unequal conditions, coupled with the incompetence and greed of the landowners, could only lead to catastrophe. Such is the subject of Gustave de Beaumont's best selling study of 1839, *Ireland: Social, Political and Religious*.[11]

By the middle of the nineteenth century the donkey was well established as a component part of the rural economy – as well as having a role in more urban settings – particularly on the western seaboard, the poorest part of the country **[IMAGE 6]**. The socio-economic structure of 19th century Ireland was defined was defined by two central factors- rule from London backed up by an extensive apparatus of repression and a land system, based upon confiscation in the 17th and 18th centuries, which forcibly placed land ownership in the hands of a tiny minority of English and Anglo-Irish (Protestant) landlords.[12] Rural unrest was endemic and the plight of the rural poor difficult to imagine. Their marginal existence was totally dependent upon the potato and the famine of 1845-1852 was to fall heaviest on this section of the population: one million died from starvation and disease and another million emigrated. Oddly enough, as the population declined precipitously the number of donkeys in the country rose steadily.

Distribution Of Mules And Asses By Province ('000) 1871 [IMAGE 7]

	MULES	ASSES	POPULATION	RATIO TO POP
LEINSTER	**7.1**	**48.7**	**1.3 M**	**1:26**
MUNSTER	**6.4**	**48.7**	**1.3M**	**1:27**
ULSTER	**1.8**	**24.7**	**1.8M**	**1::68**
CONNAUGHT	**4.3**	**58.2**	**850**	**1:14.5**
TOTAL	**20**	**180**	**5.4M**	**1:27**

This would seem to indicate that the geographic distribution and social usage of the donkey was more complex than it might seem. Extreme poverty was not confined to the western seaboard- although it was more extensive in these areas- but also existed in the large estates in the richer inland counties where cottiers were totally dependent on the potato crop. In many of these micro-economies, the donkey had little economic use: the potato was planted and harvested by hand and whatever stock was reared for the market, pigs, geese and perhaps a goat was brought there by foot. Smaller farmers in these areas (1-5 acres) were likely to own a factory made cart[13] **[IMAGE 8]** which allowed them to provide services such as delivering turf and selling farm produce. As can be seen from the table above, the greatest concentration of donkeys was in Connaught, the most westerly and deprived area of the country.[14] Although there were more than twice as many horses on the country as asses and mules – 536,000 to 200,000 – the ratio of one group to the other was distinctly different in Connaught. In the three other, more fertile, provinces there were almost three times as many horses as donkeys while in Connaught there were slightly more of the latter.[15]

A brief list of tasks carried out by the humble donkey in the West [IMAGE 9)

Clearing rocky fields
Moving turf from bogs
Ploughing
Transport, manure, potatoes, milk to creamery etc.
Moving seaweed/sand/ shells as fertliser and cash crop[16]
Personal/family transport
Family pets, recreation.
Grinding corn

The donkey proved to be eminently suitable for the topographical and economic demands of the western landscape and local resources. As well as being beyond the pockets of cottiers the cart was not suitable for the steep and rocky fields which characterised the west **[IMAGE 10]** but the sure footed donkey, equipped with two baskets or creels or pulling a type of sled – a *slipe*[17] **[IMAGE 11]** suitable for a multitude of activities: clearing stones from fields, transporting turf for fuel, seaweed for fertilised or as a cash crop, moving manure or potatoes or as a simple mode of transport on market days. The donkey and slipe were perfectly suited to the terrain and form of agriculture practices: 'The poor man's tractor' and survived well into the 20th century.

Given the central role played by the donkey in the economy of the western seaboard well into the twentieth century it may seem strange that there seems to have been no research carried out in this area apart from brief and glancing references to the 'economic importance' of the donkey. The preference, prior to the Great Famine, had been to broadly ignore the 'Hidden Ireland':[18] the one third of the population, 700,000 landless labourers and 300,000 cottiers and their families[19] living on the very edge of destitution until the 'West' became another imaginary landscape and subject of nostalgia for a world which was both, paradoxically, created and destroyed by the machinations of English colonialism. The blandishments of romanticism were not simply confined to poetry and prose but fed into the visual arts and subsequently were to become a central element of nationalist ideology.

The donkey and the Great Famine of 1843-1850

Natural factors cause crop failures, but human beings cause famine
W.A. Dando

The donkey population survived the Great Famine in better condition than their human masters. **[IMAGE 12]**

Ireland: human and donkey population 1800-2000 [20]

Blue: Human Population Red: Donkey Population. (CSO, 1997)

In contrast to the precipitous decline in the human population- the total population of Ireland fell by 20% between 1841 and 1861 and continued to fall for another century- the donkey population showed a steady rise from 93,000 in 1841 to just over 130,000 in 1847 (the worst year of the Famine for human mortality rates) to a high point of 256,000 in 1914.[21]

The figures for Connaught are even more dramatic. The human population fell by 30% in the same period (from 1.4 million to 930,000 in 1861 and 846,000 by 1871) while the donkey population came close to doubling in the same period, from c.33,000 in 1841 to 63,000 in 1871.

On the other hand, the horse population remained relatively stable during the same period but when the numbers started do decline after the Second World War[22], the fall in numbers was dramatic: from around 450,000 in 1947 to less than 100,000 two decades later a population probably smaller than that of the donkey.[23]

Not only did the population fall dramatically – and nowhere more so than in the West where the highest proportion of the animal resided – but the number both of landless labourers and marginal peasant holdings (1-5 acres) also show a steep decline after 1850. One thing is clear: neither horses nor donkeys were slaughtered for food.[24] Unlike the horse and donkey population, the numbers of pigs and poultry all declined steeply during the famine[25] as a replacement, however short lived, for the potato as a food source and because the potato was their main source of food.[26]

The rise in the donkey population[27] can probably be attributed to economic and social changes brought about by the Great Famine. Small farms increased in size and demand for agricultural produce rose with a return to economic growth[28] and increasing urbanisation. The overall rise in economic activity increased demand for the talents of the industrious donkey.[29]

Imagining Ireland

Romantic Ireland is dead and gone
It is with O'Leary in the grave
-W B Yeats.

A nation is an imagined community[30] constructed from a rummage bag of odd components. Fitting these components together, discarding, inventing and modifying, is the task of nationalist movements which must come up with a construct, however ramshackle, which is capable of convincing enough people that the national project, independence, is both coherent and viable. A central component of Irish nationalism was religion since religion in Ireland was not simply about faith but about identity, culture and land.

Daniel O'Connell, in creating a mass movement for catholic emancipation, saw emancipation as a necessary step on the way to creating a national consciousness and the eventual repeal of the union with Britain. The ultimate failure of emancipation, when achieved, to lead to repeal, made it clear that a new impetus was needed and this was found, to a large extent, in cultural nationalism inspired by 19th century romanticism. A crucial trope[31] of the project of cultural nationalism was the peasantry of the West of Ireland – particularly those living on the offshore islands – seen to embody in their everyday practices a way of life free from the corruptions of modernity, the bastard child of colonialism.

Perhaps the most influential and sophisticated example of the genre emerged from visits to the Aran Islands by the poet and playwright, James Millington Synge, first published in 1907.[32] **[IMAGES 14, 15, 16, 17, 18]** Although himself a member of the Anglo-Irish ruling elite, Synge did not fall into the trap of the 'conservative pastoral'[33] an attitude towards the native population which was reinforced by that new toy of the leisured classes, the camera. Nor did Synge approach the culture of the Aran Islands with the uncritical eye of a cultural nationalist. To complicate matters further, nor did he share the cosmopolitan disdain for cultural nationalism, neatly encapsulated by James Joyce in the conversation between the vocal nationalist, Molly Ivors[34] and Gabriel Conroy who intends to take his holidays in France:

> – And haven't you your own land to visit, continued Miss Ivors, that you know nothing of, your own people, and your own country?
>
> – O to tell you the truth, retorted Gabriel suddenly, I'm sick of my own country, sick of it![35]

Apart from the text itself, Synge took his camera to the islands and the photographs were eventually published in 1971.[36] The photographs were taken with the full permission of people he had come to know and are deeply embedded in the everyday practices of the Islanders, expressing history, memory and community. Synge avoids the danger posed by Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography:*

> It offers in one, easy, habit forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others – allowing us to participate, while confirming alienation.[37]

Synge's photographs show the reality of island life and he was in no doubt as to both the hazards of the island environment- drowning while fishing were commonplace – and the brutal reality of landlordism.[38] Synge was also less than romantic about the attitude of the islanders towards animals. In *The Aran islands* he comments on this trait of the islanders:

> Although these people are kindly towards each other and their children they have no feeling for the suffering of animals..... If two dogs fight at the slip when we are waiting for the steamer the men are delighted to do all they can to keep up the fury of the battle.....They tie down donkeys' heads to their hoofs to keep them from straying, in a way that must cause horrible pain, and sometimes when I go into a cottage I find all the women of the place down on their knees plucking the feathers from live ducks and geese (p.146-7).[39]

This may well be the sheltered and well-heeled urbanite speaking, but it is a far cry from the rose-spectacled vision of island life associated with romantic nationalism.

The romantic ideal of an uncorrupted rural Ireland was to edge out the more clear eyed vision of Synge and present an imagined community in which the donkey was to play an important role.

The donkey as metaphor

It was not only cultural nationalists who turned the corpse ridden and deserted western landscape into an rural arcadia since the construction of an imaginary Ireland was well underway soon after the Famine. And the donkey was to play a leading role in the transformation of the image of a rural Ireland replete with sullen and sly Neanderthal peasants, ever ready to murder landlords and their agents into a land of smiling colleens dancing around well tended thatched-roof cottages to the delight of happy children and old women tending their spinning wheels observed by well fed and happy donkeys. That Ireland played the role of an antidote to the negative side of modernity was not new. Terry Eagleton locates the origin of an uneasily positive Irish 'other' in the eighteenth century:

> Nationalism is of course a product of political modernity; but it is also a 'pre-political' current which elevates sentiment over the state, historic bonds over the effective management of the economy, the instinctive over the institutional. None of this proved particularly welcome to the metropolitan establishment; but in the form of Gaelic sentiment' it could furnish a precious resource for an England increasingly conscious of the emotional anaemia attendant upon modernit*y.*[40]

What was different in the late nineteenth century was the infiltration of a sanitised Irish other into popular culture initially through travel books and then ubiquitous postcard.[41] The travel books of the intrepid Mr. And Mrs. Hall, both of Anglo-Irish provenance but who spent most of their life in England. An account of their tour of Ireland was first published, in three volumes, between 1841-1843 and numerous other rose-tinted accounts of Ireland appeared over the next fifty years proving immensely popular with the English reading public. Many of their books were still in print up until the First World War .**[IMAGE 20]** By the opening of the Franco-British Exhibition in London in 1908, the romantic image was well established. The Exhibition contained a mock Irish village called Ballymaclinton*,* and the images speak for themselves. **[IMAGES 21, 22]**

As one can see, the donkey has now reached iconic status. These images were produced as postcards – spreading the message – the postcard was the instant messaging of the pre-digital age arriving the next day with unfailing reliability – to all section of the English- and Irish – population, not to mention the Diaspora.[42]

It began to appear that the Irish, initially the most impoverished and marginal section of the population- were specifically put on earth to fill the emotional void created by the dubious blandishments of modernity. From being an almost invisible beast of burden the Irish donkey underwent a startling metamorphosis into an almost mythical entity, a unicorn made flesh.

Artists such as Paul Henry, perhaps the most popular Irish artist of the 20th century[43], transformed the inhospitable and forcibly depopulated landscapes of the West into a rural arcadia **[IMAGES 23, 24]** decorated with well dressed peasants and well cared for donkeys. Female artists- most of whom seem to have been scions of the Anglo Irish gentry[44] were equally adept at producing sanitised rural scenes. **[IMAGES 25, 26]** It was not until the 1980s that the Belfast artist Micky Donnelly (who shares his birthplace with Paul Henry) visually undermined this tradition disrupting the tradition of romantic landscape painting,[45] and the place of the donkey within it. **[IMAGES 28, 29]** The mythologizing of the West continued apace after Irish independence in 1922 as it offered the new state the opportunity to transform what was originally a colonial discourse into

nationalist rhetoric and Paul Henry found a new source of income in designing posters for the Irish tourist industry, pure landscape, with the odd cottage but devoid of people or animals: the landscape as pure ideology.

Meanwhile, as the twentieth century progressed, the donkey still continued to toil and the lot of the small farmer saw little improvement. A report of the Department of Agriculture in 1971[46] had this to say on the condition in the West:

> Less than 25 per cent of farm homes have piped water, 21 per cent had toilets, 18 per cent had bathrooms, 75 per cent had electricity, 21 per cent had television, 3 per cent had telephones and 26 per cent had motor cars

However, it can be safely assumed that most of them had a donkey or two.

Some photographs from the period, as opposed to paintings, show the reality of rural life which was far removed from the sugar coated image presented to the world. The most egregious Celtic Fantasyland was produced by the postcard company, John Hinde International, whose supersaturated colour postcards encapsulated and reinforced the gamut of stereotypical images[47]. The iconic nature of the postcards was acknowledged by an exhibition held at the Irish Museum of modern Art (IMMA) in 1993. Of twenty three images of Ireland in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition nine contain a donkey, or two. The most famous postcard, *Collecting Turf in Connemara,* **[IMAGES 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35]** manages to bring a bewildering array of stereotypes together into one of the most dense and enduring tropes of 'Irishness'.[48]

In the claustrophobic world of the tangled symbolic and real that is Ireland, the humble donkey has managed to find a place. As the economic importance of donkey power declined precipitously after the country joined the European Union in 1974 and the *manna* from Brussels that was the Common Agricultural Policy transformed the work and lifestyle of the farming community the donkey became both a fashion accessory and- almost- a national symbol. Artists continued to play with donkey images, **[IMAGES 36, 37, 38]** the popularity of children's books about donkeys continued unabated[49] and adult writers and poets paid homage.[50] The donkey has also been immortalised in song and dance tunes. See: www.comhaltas.ie/music/detail/shoe_the_donkey/

CONCLUSION

The Irish Donkey Society was founded in 1972 with: *the aim of raising the status of the donkey in Ireland,* and during the halcyon days of the Celtic Tiger the donkey as a family pet became a status symbol. According to the economist David McWilliams[51], writing in 2008, the price of a three year old mare tripled between 2005 and 2005 from €500 to between €1,200 and €1,800 making the donkey ... *the poster-boy of the sophisticated elite.*

Inevitably, the role of the donkey as fashion accessory was not to last. The implosion of the Irish banking system brought an end to the short lived era of conspicuous consumption and the donkey, along with other pets such as pedigree dogs, horses and even cats were abandoned by their owners in ever increasing numbers. Even a smallish rescue centre for animals, the Skibbereen Animal Rescue in West Cork had 106 dogs, 76 horses ponies and donkeys and over 80 cats by December 2011[52]. During the same year over 200 donkeys were exported from the Donkey Sanctuary at Liscarrol in Cork to sanctuaries in England. According to the animal welfare officer at Liscarrol, there has been no letup in the numbers of abandoned donkeys since 2011, now averaging over 400 a year taken in by this sanctuary alone and the numbers are still increasing. There are no accurate figures on the number of donkeys in the country – estimates vary from under 4,000 (Department of Agriculture) to 20,000. There are also no collated figures on the

number of donkeys in animal rescue centres around the country but even a rough calculation makes nonsense of the official figures which are clearly ridiculously low. Given the recent horsemeat scandals, there must be at least a suspicion that at least some donkeys are entering the human food chain.

The current situation of the Irish donkey can hardly be described as a happy one. The dramatic changes in agriculture since the 1970s have made the services of the donkey- and the farmyard horse – virtually redundant although anecdotal evidence would suggest that the ever rising cost of oil has led, in some areas, to redeployment to tasks such as turf transportation as many rural families return to the bogs as a source of fuel. Given the ever rising costs of fossil fuels, the humble donkey may well make a comeback in the not so distant future.

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