

# **THE STRANGE HISTORY OF THE IRISH DONKEY**

**Jim Smyth**

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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<sup>1</sup>*

*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 Decades after having been replaced by the tractor, the donkey remains an icon, flexible enough to serve a variety of interests.*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

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Nolan, *The Weakened Eye of Day*, exhibition IMMA, Dublin 2014

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 eighth to the ninth century there are many animals present but not the ass<sup>2</sup>. 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 agus 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<sup>3</sup>.

Having made its mark on Irish history,<sup>4</sup> 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' <sup>5</sup>, 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**).

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<sup>2</sup> Irish, a Celtic language, is the third oldest written language in Europe (after Greek and Latin) and has been in constant usage and development . The written language first emerged from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly , 1997, p.121, Bergin, 1914.

<sup>4</sup> In January 1919 the donkey makes another fleeting appearance in Irish history. The Anglo-Irish war began in that month with an IRA attack on a police escorted delivery of explosives to a local quarry in Tipperary. The explosives were being carried by donkeys.

<sup>5</sup> Laffan,H, Rooney,E , 2001.



Thomas Roberts, Gallery of the Masters, A Bay Horse and two Donkeys, 1773

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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 17<sup>th</sup> century shared this belief particularly as a cure for consumption and as a cosmetic aid for aging skin. In a fragmentary Jane Austen novel<sup>6</sup> 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....*

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<sup>6</sup> Austen, J, 1934 p.

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 <sup>7</sup>

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 (**Image 2,3,4**). There is some evidence that during the Napoleonic Wars, in particular the Peninsular War (1808-1814) donkeys were brought to Ireland from England and traded for horses<sup>8</sup>. 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<sup>9</sup> .*

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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

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<sup>7</sup> Buchan, W, 1769.

<sup>8</sup> It is said that over half the horses at the Battle of Waterloo were Irish and that one of napoleon's horses, *Merango* was bought at the Ballinsloe Horse Fair which was then- and still is- the largest horse fair in Europe. It is difficult to be precise about the donkey import-export trade. There seems to have been a flourishing donkey export trade around 1900 from the port of Waterford, (Kissane, 1990) and there are probably more recent statistics which, however, do not distinguish between donkeys and horses. Ireland exported almost 5.5 million kilos of horsemeat in 2012. How much of this is donkey meat is not known. (Guardian, 13.02.2013.)

<sup>9</sup> Dutton, 1808

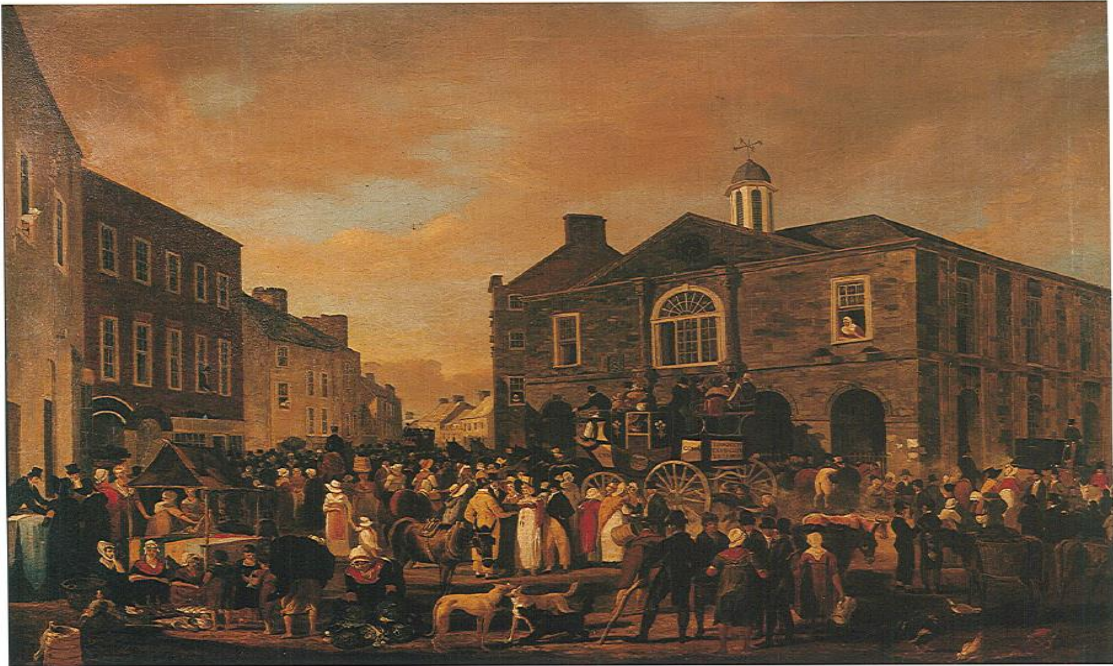
<sup>10</sup> Dutton, 1808. The Dublin Society, founded in 1731 to *promote and develop agriculture, arts, industry and science in Ireland* undertook a number of surveys of counties of Ireland designed to promote economic improvement. The surveys, by their very nature, did not challenge the landlord system, which was probably the greatest barrier to improvement, but the surveys nonetheless proved a fascinating insight into the condition of rural Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth century.





Joseph Peacock, The Pattern at Glendalough, 1813

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## **19<sup>TH</sup> 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*.<sup>11</sup>*

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**).

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<sup>11</sup> Originally published as: *L'Irlande: sociale, politique et religieuse*, Paris, 1839. From the introduction to the English edition of 2006 (OUP) by Tom Garvin and Andreas Haas, p.V.



The socio- economic structure of 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland 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 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which forcibly placed land ownership in the hands of a tiny minority of English and Anglo-Irish (Protestant) landlords.<sup>12</sup> 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 <sup>13</sup>(IMAGE8)

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<sup>13</sup> The spoked wheel, until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was expensive to make and confined to the carriages of the rich. Flat farm carts with spoked wheels were being manufactured in Dublin by 1808 but could only be afforded by better off farmers and traders. In any event, they were not suitable for the rocky and rugged terrain of the West.

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<sup>14</sup>. 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<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The marginal lands of the west were sparsely populated until the Cromwellian Wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century which resulted in the confiscation of vast tracts of land and the expulsion of the native population, some as slaves to the West Indies and many to Connaught. Cromwell is reputed to have said of the Irish 'To hell or to Connaught'.

<sup>15</sup> 61,000 horses to 62,400 donkeys. The category 'Horses' also included ponies and would have included the Connemara pony, The Connemara pony is indigenous to County Galway, and is an intelligent and sociable

## **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, POTATOS, MILK TO CREAMERY ETC.
- MOVING SEAWEED/SAND/ SHELLS AS FERTLISER AND CASH CROP<sup>16</sup>
- 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<sup>17</sup> **(Image 11)** suitable for a multitude of activities: clearing stones from fields, transporting turf for fuel, seaweed for fertilized 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

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animal. Although now favoured as a family pet, and for its qualities as a show jumper, in latter years it played a similar economic role to the donkey.

<sup>16</sup> Harvesting seaweed was brutal and dangerous work. Apart from its use as fertilizer the crop could be sild for the production of iodine and cosmetic products. Local production of cosmetics from seaweed is still carried out. One producer contacted said that they did not use donkeys as the terrain was too difficult. They carry it up on their backs (AlgAran Teoranta, Kilkar, Co. Donegal)

<sup>17</sup> ‘Slipe’ comes from the Irish: sliobradh: to drag along.

ignore the 'Hidden Ireland'<sup>18</sup>: the one third of the population, 700,000 landless labourers and 300,000 cottiers and their families<sup>19</sup> 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. (**image12.**)

### **IRELAND: HUMAN AND DONKEY POPULATION 1800-2000<sup>20</sup>**

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<sup>18</sup> The romantic recreation of 'The world we have lost' takes different forms. In England- the writings of Thomas Hardy are typical- the reaction to industrialisation was fatalistic and instrumental. Hardy may have seen farm mechanisation's effect on the sturdy English labourer as 'a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves' but the *nouveau riche* of Victorian England were content to both commodify the landscape and create islands and illusions of an imaginary rural for themselves. Irish nationalists faced the paradox of celebrating the (shrinking) Irish speaking areas as the ultimate repository of the Celtic soul while attempting to destroy the landlord system that had created it.

<sup>19</sup> The term 'landless labourers' is a little misleading. Agricultural workers would generally have a small plot of land (rented or otherwise) and perhaps a share in a bog for fuel.

<sup>20</sup> As noted previously, official statistics on the current donkey population are unreliable. The CSO figure is about 4000 but the charity, The Donkey Sanctuary, puts the figure at 20,000 (2014) [www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/project/ireland](http://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/project/ireland)



**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<sup>21</sup>.

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.

<sup>21</sup> Turner, 1996, p.48.

On the other hand, the horse population remained relatively stable during the same period but when the numbers started to decline after the Second World War<sup>22</sup>, 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<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup>. Unlike the horse and donkey population, the numbers of pigs and poultry all declined steeply during the famine<sup>25</sup> as a replacement, however short lived, for the potato as a food source and because the potato was their main source of food<sup>26</sup>.

The rise in the donkey population<sup>27</sup> 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<sup>28</sup> and increasing urbanisation.

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<sup>22</sup> There would seem to be a relationship between horse numbers and war. The uneven pattern horse numbers in the latter half of the nineteenth century seems to correlate with Britain's Imperial wars which created a demand for mounts. .

<sup>23</sup> Accurate statistics on the donkey population exist until about 1953; figures are estimates after that date based upon voluntary returns. Before that date agricultural statistics were collected by the local police.

<sup>24</sup> There is no evidence, statistical or otherwise, that any member of the equine family was ever a source of food in Ireland. In the case of the Great Famine those most affected would either have been too poor to possess a donkey or, if they had one, would have sold it.

<sup>25</sup> Turner, 1996 p.48ff.

<sup>26</sup> Only about 50% of the potato crop was for human consumption. Although mainly the food of the poor- the one third of the population which consumed about seven kilos a day per adult male- as fodder for pigs and poultry the potato was buffer in time of scarcity as the farmyard animals bore the brunt. See O'Grada 1989 p. 24ff.

<sup>27</sup> There is some evidence that there was flourishing trade in the export of donkeys although statistics are hard to come by. See Kissane, 1990 p.32 (**IMAGE13**)

<sup>28</sup> Geary, F, Stark, T, 2002.

The overall rise in economic activity increased demand for the talents of the industrious donkey<sup>29</sup>.

## **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<sup>30</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism. A crucial trope<sup>31</sup> 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

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<sup>29</sup> It would take further research into newspaper archives to ascertain the value of a donkey in monetary terms. However, a report on sales at the Ballinasloe Horse Fair of 1898 (Then, and still, the largest horse fair in Europe) contains the information that : *The French government made purchases of a big number of rough animals (presumably horses) at prices not exceeding £25.* Given that foals were sold at the same fair for £3-£7 it would be safe to assume that donkeys went for under £5, the same price as one would have paid in the 1960s ( Damien Mac Con Uladh)

<sup>30</sup> The term *imagined communities* comes from the title Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking book (1991).

<sup>31</sup> Other preoccupations of the movement were the revival of the Irish language, a literary revival,

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<sup>32</sup>. **(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'<sup>33</sup> 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<sup>34</sup> 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!<sup>35</sup>*

Apart from the text itself, Synge took his camera to the islands and the photographs were eventually published in 1971<sup>36</sup>. The photographs were taken with the full permission of

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<sup>32</sup> J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*, 1907.

<sup>33</sup> I owe this concept to Declan Kiberd, (2000) who describes the conservative pastoral as *...in which a leisured aristocracy plays at being poor in a spurious attempt to wish real class differences away (p.421)*.

<sup>34</sup> This scene takes place in the short story, *The Dead* (Joyce, *Dubliners*, 1994, p.216) The irony of the names will not escape the reader: Molly, a mock Irish name straight from the Music Hall, Ivors, a surname of impeccable colonial provenance. The object of her edgy banter, Gabriel Conroy, has the name of an archangel prefixed to a surname of unmistakable Gaelic lineage.

<sup>35</sup> James Joyce, 1994, p.216.

<sup>36</sup> Stephens, L (1971) *My Wallet of Photographs by J M Synge*. The photos are reproduced- the quality is inferior to those in *My Wallet*- in the OUP edition of *The Aran Islands* (1979).



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<sup>37</sup>.*

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<sup>38</sup> 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)<sup>39</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> P.167, quoted in Kiberd p.423. See also Sontag (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>38</sup> The eviction scenes he photographed speak for themselves. Tim Robinson in his book *Stones of Aran*, writes of the dangers of puffin hunting. Puffins, which migrate south via Ireland, would overnight on the cliffs of Inismore. Hunters would be lowered down on ropes under the cover of darkness with a sack and a cudgel, a dangerous activity compounded by the illegality of the enterprise as puffins 'belonged' to the absentee landlord. Police would sometimes arrive on the Island to dig around cabins in search of puffin bones which could result in a prison sentence for the householder.

<sup>39</sup> The preoccupation with the welfare of animals, however well intentioned, was broadly confined to members of the upper classes. Richard Martin, 'Humanity Dick', who founded the Society for the Prevention of cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 1822, was born and lived in a castle on the mainland with a view of the Aran Islands. Paradoxically, Martin once fought a duel with a man who had shot his friend's wolfhound, and the legislation seems to have been mainly enforced against the lower orders (**IMAGE 19**).

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 modernity<sup>40</sup>*

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<sup>41</sup>. The

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<sup>40</sup> Eagleton, 1998, p.75

<sup>41</sup> The popularity of the slyly subversive music of Thomas Moore in English drawing rooms of the early nineteenth century laid important groundwork. As Eagleton writes (1998):

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 **IMAGE 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<sup>42</sup>.

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 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>43</sup>, transformed the inhospitable and forcibly depopulated landscapes of the West into a rural

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*..it remains true that, however mawkishly, he placed Ireland almost single-handedly on the cultural agenda of his day, quick as he was to perceive that the country, in a certain reading of it, lent itself marvellously to the emergent structures of feeling of post-Enlightenment Europe. (p.157)*

<sup>42</sup> Similar mock Irish villages were features at World Fairs in the USA and elsewhere during this period.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Henry was a very successful artist. In post-independence Ireland he was bought by the Irish urban middle classes and shot to the top of the best selling (and most expensive) list of Irish artists during the latter decades of the last century . His work was particularly favoured by the denizens of the Celtic Tiger, the bankers

arcadia (**IMAGE 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<sup>44</sup> were equally adept at producing sanitised rural scenes (**IMAGE 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<sup>45</sup> and the place of the donkey within it (**IMAGE,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<sup>46</sup> had this to say on the condition in the West:

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and property developers, the very people who were despoiling the rural landscape decorating their walls with now abandoned and derelict housing developments.

<sup>44</sup> See Adams, *Irish Women Artists 1870-1970*.

<sup>45</sup> The romantic projection of rural Ireland, in both painting and later photography as well, of course, in literature should be seen in the context of Ireland's colonial status. The problem was not depicting rural poverty- any number of English artists made a living from such images of the English rural poor- but the political implications of painting the reality of evictions, famine and rural unrest in Ireland were unwelcome to an English audience and it was in London that a painter's career was decided. (Marshall, 1996). Another Belfast artist, Dermot Seymour also disrupted the romantic tradition (Smyth, 2001,2004,2012)

<sup>46</sup> Scully, 1971. In an editorial about the return of the bodies of ten young 'tattie hookers' who were burnt to death in a shed they were living in near Glasgow we find a graphic description of life on Achill Island ( where Paul Henry produced his romantic images: :

*Year after year, six thousand men and women of Ireland are driven to the stony Scottish fields for the poor employment that their own land denies them. They do the work the lowest Scottish labourer refuses to do, for a wage the lowest Scottish labourer will not accept; they live in foul surroundings: they are treated with contempt. Irish Times, 20.09. 1937*

*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<sup>47</sup>. 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*, **(IMAGE ,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'<sup>48</sup>.

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

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<sup>47</sup> John Hinde himself was quite aware of what he was doing. In an interview with the *Irish Times* to mark the opening of the IMMA exhibition he is quoted as saying *I photographed donkeys and cottages simply because you can't imagine a Connemara bog without a donkey walking across with panniers of peat....it is part of the landscape in the same way as the Irish cottage is a living thing which grew out of the ground. It is true that in some cases my images were doctored and distorted, but if you photograph of the west coast of Ireland it would come out as practically monochrome so we sent out to create visually the impression you thought you had.*

<sup>48</sup> The children in the picture are brother and sister Paddy and Mary Lyddon. Mary subsequently moved to England and Paddy died, aged 65 in April 2013. His death was widely reported in the Irish and international media. See Ciaran Walsh, 2013.

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<sup>49</sup> and adult writers and poets paid homage<sup>50</sup>. The donkey has also been immortalised in song and dance tunes.

[www.comhaltas.ie/music/detail/shoe\\_the\\_donkey/](http://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<sup>51</sup>, writing in 2008, the price of a three year old mare tripled between 2005 and 2005 from E500 to between E1200 and E1800 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<sup>52</sup>. 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

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<sup>49</sup> See bibliography:

<sup>50</sup> See bibliography:

<sup>51</sup> McWilliams 2008

<sup>52</sup> *Irish Examiner*, 22.12.2011.

alone and the numbers are still increasing. There are no accurate figures on the number of donkeys in the country- estimates vary from under 4000 (Department of Agriculture) to 20000. 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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