



The arts past and present

Ireland: Nineteenth century romantic reinvention

Narrator

The restoration of New Grange reflected a strand of Irish nationalism that looked for inspiration in ancient glories. But this devotion to the past was no creation of the new state. Its roots can be traced back to a potent set of sentiments and symbols that surfaced in the nineteenth century.

Vincent Comerford

In the early 19th century, especially by the 1840s, the development of print meant that visual symbols of all kinds come to be much more widespread and much more widely known and you get depictions of the shamrock and the harp and the wolfhound and the round tower, all of these things being widespread, to some extent in books and in newspapers and in journals but also in prints, which you know come to be found in quite ordinary houses by the 1840s.

Narrator

The spread of these cultural symbols coincided with a growth in the rhetoric of self-determination. Nationalists were quick to see the power of cultural symbols used for political ends.

Barry Murphy

I think the question of the roots of an understanding of heritage are in the romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Barry Murphy

In Ireland, of course, it was difficult to look for any kind of architectural heritage. We didn't have much apart from round towers and some Romanesque doorways, but the language and the various emblems, harp, shamrock, and so on was really the things that was used by nationalists, but they were feeding out of a very long history of romantic Ireland notions.

Narrator

Nowhere embodied this spirit of romanticism more than the Hill of Tara. It may appear unimpressive, but Tara is the symbolic capital of Ireland, seat of the ancient high kings. And no one captured its romanticism better than the 19th century poet and lyricist, Thomas Moore.

Archive music - John McCormack singing...

*The harp that once through Tara's hall
the soul of music shed,
now hangs as mute on Tara's wall
as if that soul were fled.
so sleeps the pride of former days...*

Narrator

By the middle of the 19th century Tara had become a nationalist symbol as well as a symbol of Ireland's romantic past.

In 1843, Daniel O'Connell, the architect of Catholic emancipation held a mass rally at Tara calling for the repeal of the Act of Union. It was attended by over half a million people. A contemporary illustration shows people carrying banners of round towers, Irish wolfhounds and other cultural symbols.

Vincent Comerford

The choice of Tara for one of O'Connell's great monster meetings in 1843 was quite clearly meant to be evocative and meant to identify with the image of the name of Tara, but O'Connell was not a cultural nationalist and the uses of the past that we associate with cultural nationalism really meant very little to O'Connell. O'Connell's view of the Irish past was simply one of continuous expropriation of the Irish by the English. It was very political and very black and white terms. It was a younger generation of his contemporaries, most notably Thomas Davis, who had the sense of the importance of cultural things, and clearly supported this kind of expression of nationalism.

Narrator

In life, O'Connell's supporters surrounded him with Irish cultural symbols. In death they did the same. O'Connell's heart is buried in Rome but the rest of his body is buried at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, the nationalist necropolis opened as a Catholic burial ground in 1832. His grave is marked by the tallest round tower in Ireland. It was designed by the antiquary George Petrie who appropriated a powerful symbol of early Christian Ireland by basing the tower on the one in Cashel, an important medieval Christian site and seat of a high king.