

The learned gentlemen are in town: the British Association meeting of 1857 in Dublin's popular press

SHERRA MURPHY

Judging from appearances up to the present, the meeting in Dublin promises to be one of the most successful and brilliant reunions of the association that has ever taken place. A very large number have already taken out members' and associates' tickets, and fresh arrivals from England, the Continent and the provinces are hourly expected.¹

In late August 1857, the British Association for the Advancement of Science convened their peripatetic annual meeting in Dublin, bringing influential figures from the British scientific establishments and distinguished international guests to the city for a week of scientific and social exchange. The association's second conference in the city was widely covered in the daily press and in popular journals, with the *Freeman's Journal* in particular devoting copious, densely packed column inches to the minutiae of each day's activities. Careful reading of period accounts, however, reveals a subtext behind the reportage. As Elizabeth Tilley points out in her writing on the *Dublin University Magazine*, historians must seek to countenance the social and political undercurrents behind the recounting of events when utilizing the popular press as a factual source.² Periodical publications in nineteenth-century Ireland operated as a form of social discourse that must be understood as more than a collection of disinterested facts; then as now, facts were dependent upon a background and context for the fullness of their meaning. Press reports on the British Association meeting in Dublin reveal a number of circumstances and developments that illuminate the relationship between the scientific establishments of London and Dublin in the mid-nineteenth century.

Late nineteenth-century Irish newspapers and journals embodied forms of motivated representation, wherein the framing of events was habitually coloured by the political convictions of publishers, with each cohort of readers forming a general grouping of political and social positions. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that the reports on the British Association meeting were broadly enthusiastic and

¹ *FJ*, 27 Aug. 1857; also printed verbatim in the *Evening Freeman* and *The Nation*. ² E. Tilley, 'Charting culture in the *Dublin University Magazine*' in L. Litvack and G. Hooper (eds), *Ireland in the nineteenth century: regional identity* (Dublin, 2000), pp 58–65.

supportive, when papers and magazines ranging from nationalist to unionist might be expected to differ around a large public event involving key figures from British scientific, government and mercantile bodies. When placed in context, the apparent agreement within the press may be read in terms of mid-century concerns around the precise nature of Ireland's nationhood, and its representation within British spheres of influence. The institutions that hosted the meeting, chiefly Trinity College, the Royal Dublin Society and the Royal Irish Academy, were especially occupied by the open questions around Ireland's status as a nation and its position within the structures of the empire. In his study on the same period, Joep Leerssen makes the point that:

the quest for a national identity was twofold; it was national in its trans-partisan agenda, attempting to work out a shared sense of identity applicable to all Irishmen and transcending their internal sectarian and social differences; it was also national in that it attempted to distil such an invariant and universally shared awareness out of a contentious and conflict-ridden past, transcending thereby the violent vicissitudes of history and extracting from them an essential and unchanging principle of Irishness.³

Leerssen touches on the continuum between synchronic and diachronic nationhood, wherein immediate local conflicts are measured against the experience of a lengthy chronicled history, in an attempt to develop a collective identity. The nineteenth-century Irish scientific establishments sought to help shape such a 'shared sense of identity', through their ongoing efforts in fields of discovery such as geology and natural history. The scientific and cartographic studies that detailed the structures and populations of the island also established concrete signifiers of the nation, which could be understood and internalized by the entire population. Pioneering studies in geology, for instance, were ways of describing each region's physical particularity while establishing the shape, age and structure of the island as a whole, uniting its inhabitants through a common understanding of its most basic elements. Ongoing discoveries took their places within an unfolding context of geological time, framing each new discovery against a growing sense of the nation's antiquity as theories of geological time developed. The series of geological maps made from these studies provided a visual form through which local variations could be understood in the context of a unified whole. The development of geology in Ireland is inextricably linked to Richard Griffith, who was also deeply involved with the RDS throughout his life. He consistently presented his studies, maps and findings at British Association meetings, starting with the earliest form of his geological map at the 1835 Dublin meeting and continuing throughout his career. His progress was eagerly monitored by colleagues in Britain, who had ambitions toward creating a comprehensive map

³ J. Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination: patterns in the historical and literary representation of Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Cork, 1996), p. 4.

of the geology of the British Isles, and looked to him for accurate material on Ireland.⁴

The scientific committees within the Irish learned societies perceived themselves as 'trans-partisan', asserting that the collection and dissemination of scientific information was outside the purview of political partisanship. However, their membership profiles, with a preponderance of landed, mercantile and military connections, largely drawn from Anglo-Irish backgrounds, problematize any assertions of neutrality in the period. As civic bodies, the hosting organizations and their memberships generally advocated a version of nationhood that was multifaceted, though narrowly focused; beneficial to their interests and social positions, uniquely Irish in character and committed to the union.

Unusually for the period, the transmission of the conference proceedings in the press was broadly uniform in approach, emphasizing the particularity of Ireland through the subject matter of conference papers and reports on social events. The press also underlined the economic and practical implications of local scientific activities as demonstrative of Ireland's increasing sense of self-reliance and progress. Both the press and the local organizers appear to have been prompted in this regard by what Michel Foucault would term 'normalizing judgment'. Local organizers worked to bridge the divide of an unequal power relationship, within which London largely controlled access to funding, networks of publication and parliamentary influence; it was imperative, therefore, that Ireland be demonstrated, as fully as possible, to be secure, resourceful and fully committed to the overall goals of union. Pro-union perspectives and support for the imperial project are predictable, given the overwhelmingly Anglo-Irish makeup of the Irish learned societies, but press accounts of the events also indicate a more general attempt to counter the relentlessly negative representations of Ireland and the Irish at large in the English press. The standardized caricatures of the *Punch* cartoon, depicting the Irish as demonic, lazy, filthy, duplicitous or violent, were repeated to varying degrees throughout large swathes of the British press.⁵ The Dublin organizers of the British Association meeting appear to have been at pains to form convincing counter-representations, foregrounding diligence, progress and stability, which were then adopted and disseminated by the popular press.

Whether through explicit agreement or through an unspoken sense of shared purpose, the learned societies and the local press presented a united front for the appraising eye of the British Association. Ireland was exposed for the week to the penetrating gaze of the English scientific establishment, and the Irish men of science responded as though they were being examined, responding to scrutiny from their influential peers as though sitting an unwritten test. As Foucault notes, examinations have particular functions in hierarchies of power:

4 For a full discussion of Griffith's maps, see G.L. Herries-Davies, *Sheets of many colours: the mapping of Ireland's rocks, 1750-1890* (Dublin, 1983). 5 These ideas have been fully and famously treated in L.P. Curtis, *Apes and angels: the Irishman in Victorian caricature*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC, 1997).

The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish.⁶

Though strict Foucauldian readings of Anglo–Irish power relations are often unhelpfully reductive, his summation of the examination’s purposes is germane here. The annual meeting, in its way, functioned as a form of examination with a prominent social dimension. The British Association understood itself as the arbiter of emergent studies in the fields it encompassed. Its closely interwoven structures of social and professional relationships formed a self-referential and self-regulating mechanism of orthodoxy. Jack Morrell and Arnold Thackray, in their work on the early history of the Association, identify twenty-three men as central to its formation in 1831, and their correspondences reveal an intricate fabric of debate, observation and scrutiny from which a series of conventions for the practice of British science emerged. Scottish chemist James F.W. Johnston suggested in a letter dated 11 July 1831 that ‘The efficiency of the society will be destroyed if the terms of admission be too lax’, and proposed that membership be open to ‘all interested in science’, but that to have a vote, a member must have published on his subject.⁷ The association’s core membership remained tightly connected, and conforming to its internal rationales was essential for access to networks of information and professional correspondence. Anne Secord observes that ‘it was the elaborate etiquette of polite society that allowed the emergence of networks because it enabled one to know who to trust’, and that strict hierarchies of social interaction governed the exchange of scientific correspondence in the nineteenth century.⁸ Ireland’s men of science seem to have been determined to use these interactions to strengthen their reputations, as both scientists and Irishmen, displaying the quality of the work taking place under the auspices of their respective organizations, thus widening pathways for productive future relations with the centres of English science.

The opening address of the meeting, delivered by its president, Revd Humphrey Lloyd of Trinity College Dublin, was fully covered in the *Freeman’s Journal*. The article lists the dignitaries present for the inaugural proceedings: William Whewell, founding association member and master of Trinity College, Oxford was there, as was John Lord Wrottesley, president of the Royal Society and a frequent member of royal commissions on scientific topics.⁹ The list continued with lords, earls, generals, professors, barristers and members of parliament represented in abundance. British Association meetings followed well-established protocols, wherein science was framed by the ‘etiquette of polite society’, annually cementing personal and professional bonds. Presentations of recent research in key disciplinary areas were delivered

⁶ M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish* (London, 1977), p. 184. ⁷ J. Morrell and A. Thackray, *Gentlemen of science: early correspondence of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (London, 1984), p. 41. ⁸ A. Secord, ‘Corresponding interests: artisans and gentlemen in nineteenth-century natural history’, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 27:4 (1994), 383–408 at 389. ⁹ *FJ*, 27 Aug. 1857.

by members to their fellows, supplemented by public lectures and demonstrations, the whole augmented by public and private social events. Mounting a well-organized and stimulating event for these men and their peers would elevate the status of the Irish scientific establishment within London's administrative structures, such as the Department of Science and Art, bringing the benefits of increased attention and funding. The Irish learned societies carefully configured the event to demonstrate a resilient and buoyant Ireland, which, having banished the effects of the Famine, was eager to advance as a modern scientific, industrial and agricultural force alongside England. Exhibiting the island for the normalizing gaze meant representing Ireland as both partner and subject in the imperial context, a participant in empire-building but simultaneously a docile and loyal subject nation. The several papers on the trans-Atlantic cable then being laid between Valentia Island and Newfoundland placed Ireland at the centre of a vital advance in communications, with massive implications for the administration and security of the empire. Conference papers from members of Dublin's learned societies treating Irish subject matter, such as William Andrews' overview of the sea fisheries of Ireland, David Moore's botanical analysis of the plants forming turf bogs, or John O'Donovan's ethnological observations on the ancient Irish,¹⁰ formed part of a growing body of material that represented a nation with abundant resources and significant economic potential, with a sense of the unique richness of its own past and a desire to demonstrate Ireland's attractive qualities to a central administration more accustomed to focusing on famine, rural unrest and the threat of rebellion.

Two papers differ from the general norm in their reportage; predictably, the *Dublin University Magazine* and *The Nation* adopted differing stances, though both in ways that underline the desire to represent Ireland favourably to the assembled association membership. As Charles Withers et al. observe:

Newspaper reports are particularly valuable where they differ through editorial view or political affiliation or where they may be used in combination with other evidence, not least because they then highlight social and intellectual distinctions within such general terms as 'reception', 'audience' and 'science'.¹¹

These two influential publications stand in for the opposing poles of nineteenth-century Irish politics and their concomitant conceptions of nationhood. Though diametrically opposed in their political goals for Ireland, they are here in concert with the overall aims of the learned societies in representing Ireland to the visiting

¹⁰ *Report of the twenty-seventh meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, held at Dublin in August and September 1857* (London, 1858). ¹¹ C. Withers, R. Higgitt and D. Finnegan, 'Historical geographies of provincial science: themes in the setting and reception of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Britain and Ireland, 1831–c.1939', *BJHS*, 41:3 (2008), 385–415 at 410.

scholars. In introducing the British Association meeting, the conservative *Dublin University Magazine* proceeded with characteristic hyperbole:

The British Association is now paying its second visit to Dublin. Of the twenty-seven sessions of this rotary parliament of science, one was held in our city in 1835, and another in this year. During the interval, Ireland has learned much; she has awakened from a dream of petty independence, to cast her lot heartily with the sister island; she has given up agitation for industrial rivalry.¹²

Clearly eliding the complexity of contemporary political conditions, this opening paragraph summarizes common themes in conference proceedings and many press accounts; a desire to discard the recent past, to depict Ireland as politically secure, and to represent Ireland's emergent scientific modernity as partner to union. The nationalist weekly, *The Nation*, took a contrasting point of view, delivering sharp commentary on the British administration, but lauding Irish contributions to science. In welcoming the Association in the 29 August edition, the editors attribute the decline of science in Ireland to British rule, asserting that the scholars would find 'relics of a glorious past, evidence of a miserable present' and that 'when Ireland ceased to be independent, the arts and sciences fled the land'.¹³ On 5 September, *The Nation* synopsized the contents of conference papers that treated of Irish culture and economic independence, focusing heavily on John O'Donovan's researches into the antiquity of the Irish race as described in ancient texts, quoting Giraldus Cambrensis' twelfth-century manuscript stating that the ancient Irish 'grew up by nature into most beautiful, tall, symmetrical and well-formed persons, of well-formed and well-coloured faces'.¹⁴ The paper chose to foreground the genealogy of Irish culture and learning to lobby for the concept of a historically independent Irish nation, supported by reference to ancient manuscript sources. *The Nation* was anomalous in that it used the occasion to take a critical stance, though it did so by effectively using the frameworks of British science to imply a nationalist perspective through reporting the proceedings of the conference; it also praised the association, while maintaining its nationalist stance. Whether intentional or not, these two diametrically opposed political organs effectively maintained a consonance of civilized discourse for the British Association membership through their representations of the nation. The representation of Ireland was a key theme throughout many of the week's activities, but focusing on a few examples will tease out indications of general tendencies.

The Royal Dublin Society availed of the British Association meeting to inaugurate its new Natural History Museum, offering the building as a venue for scientific lectures and social events. On 27 August, a warm, pleasant Thursday evening, the building and its newly installed collections were unveiled at a *conversazione* attended by over 2,000 people. Published accounts of the opening highlighted local contrib-

¹² *Dublin University Magazine*, 1:217 (1857), 18. ¹³ *The Nation*, 29 Aug. 1857. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 Sept. 1857.

utors, emphasizing Irish names of international repute such as Richard Griffith of the Geological and Valuation Surveys, and Thomas Oldham of the Indian Geological Survey. The depiction of Ireland as stable, socially advanced and fashionable are discernable in the report on the museum's opening night:¹⁵

The number of guests received by the society on this occasion was upwards of two thousand, comprising the *elite* of every rank and fashion of our city – almost every class of society was represented – the nobility and the gentry, the dignitaries of both churches, the judicial bench, the learned profession, men eminent for their literary and scientific achievements, merchants, manufacturers &c. Indeed, we may say, without exaggeration, that there was scarcely a man of note in Dublin at this season who was absent.¹⁶

Large public events were signatures of the British Association's approach to popularizing science, with detailed exchanges of current scientific research enlivened by public and private social occasions. The Dublin meeting provided local organizers with opportunities to parade the city's civic attractions; they arranged an afternoon promenade at the zoo, a fete at the botanical gardens and an evening *conversazione* at the Royal Irish Academy. Trinity College launched a new museum, and the Royal Dublin Society's new museum hosted several important events. Press accounts of the social gatherings consistently reinforced the convivial atmosphere, stressed the large attendances, emphasized rank and fashion, and extolled the orderliness of the attendees. These reports must be understood through the lens of period representations; the British popular press was frequently peppered with references to conflict in Ireland. In the previous decade, a steady stream of press reports on O'Connell's Repeal movement and the Young Irelanders, as well as regular reports of land disputes and associated violent incidents, had reinforced a perception of Ireland as unruly and uncooperative in Britain's public imagination. Reports on the Famine had consistently portrayed Ireland as helpless and retrograde. The learned societies appear to have made a concerted, coordinated effort to counter these images by representing the island's first city as a smaller version of London, with civic amenities comparable for its size. The Dublin papers proffered the city, its civic spaces and its citizens as equal in sophistication to anything the British capital had to offer. The description of the Natural History Museum's opening night in the *Freeman's Journal* implied an orderly democracy within Dublin's leading scientific establishment, specifically suggesting an absence of sectarianism. Throughout its history, the RDS had consistently declared its organization free of religious and political bigotry despite its Anglo-Irish majority, and this particular report underscores that assertion, though the society had been criticized by the *Freeman's Journal* on numerous occasions on those very grounds.

¹⁵ Transcription is from the *Freeman's Journal*; the same account printed in the *Evening Freeman* and the *Dublin Evening Post*. The *Dublin Evening Mail* printed an abbreviated version, apparently adapted from the above. ¹⁶ *FJ*, 28 Aug. 1857.

As described in the *Freeman's Journal*, the displays of natural materials, books and images assembled for the opening night suggest the complexity of the ways in which the study of nature also described the relationships of science and the learned societies to the ongoing project of understanding the nation as an entity, both physically and conceptually. The displayed specimens represented their species or types, but simultaneously stood in for people, places, events and ideas. An extended extract describing the cases on the first floor indicates a sense of the logic behind the selections for the initial exhibition:

One of them contained a series of edible crustacea, and among them were quaint specimens of lobsters, enormous crabs &c. Another contained a series of edible molluscs – such as oysters, cockles, periwinkles &c., both these cases being instances of what might be done in the way of economic zoology. The next case contained the splendid collection of fossils made by our countryman, Captain McClintock R.N, from the Arctic regions. A large case, which extended nearly across the entire room, contained the collection of Arctic birds made by the same gallant officer; who, amid all the horrors of the inhospitable Antarctic [sic] regions, did not forget the cause of science, but brought home these unique collections, which will long bear ample witness of his preserving zeal and energy. The other half of this case contained a collection of birds from the Crimea, made during the Russian war by Assistant Surgeon Carte of the Light Dragoons. We could not but feel pleased and gratified of seeing thus prominently brought before the notice of foreigners and our English friends the results of Dr Carte's research in Crimean zoology, and we doubt if since the days of Pallus any such collection has been made; and this one too when engaged in the laborious duties of that war. The next case, in order of progression through the room contained a case of our own native Lepidoptera, which the Royal Dublin Society owe to the labours of the well-known entomologist the Revd Joseph Hunt. Part of this case was occupied with portions of the collections made in India by Professor Oldham and the honourable G.S. Gough.¹⁷

This extract is an example of the ways in which the Dublin organizers showcased Irish contributions to the progress of natural science, as well as to the overall goals of the empire. The displayed specimens from the Crimea, Australia, Africa, the Arctic and India were primarily collected by Irish officers and doctors serving in British regiments deployed in colonies and protectorates. In this context, the animals, plants and fossils carry a subtext of imperial service in specific regions that echoed current events. The text of the article emphasizes the service records of the collectors as well as the quality of the collections, situating them both within a definition of nationhood, which suggested that Ireland, while a unique entity, was also beneficial to the

¹⁷ Ibid.

stability of the Empire. The short descriptions of the indigenous materials reinforce this idea by stressing economic potential; the display of local crustacea and molluscs is cited as an example of the potential for 'economic zoology', implying that Ireland is re-imagining its use of resources through a scientific approach, applying the lessons of the Famine to explorations of alternate conceptions of nutrition, harvesting and capital.

The Arctic collections were the work of the Anglo-Irish explorer Francis Leopold McClintock, who had left six weeks previously on what would be his final trip to search for the remains of Sir John Franklin's lost expedition. A popular public figure, McClintock was also a keen natural history amateur and frequent contributor to the RDS collections. McClintock was a Victorian hero, lauded in the popular press for his ongoing devotion to Franklin's fate and to Lady Franklin's parliamentary efforts on his behalf, a man of action and purpose who persisted in the face of physical danger and governmental indifference. Walter Houghton identifies hero-worship as one of the defining tropes of the period, largely promulgated by Thomas Carlyle, who referred to it as 'the basis of all possible good, religious or social, for mankind'.¹⁸ The materials associated with McClintock would have been legible as the remnants of heroic acts, standing in for the man himself in his absence. They also testified to his efforts in mapping and claiming unknown territory in the northwest regions, and in the collection of rare and previously undiscovered specimens, increasing the archive of human knowledge, at risk to himself. This description of McClintock in the moderately nationalist *Freeman's Journal* establishes him as an exemplar who transcends divisions, a representation of admirable and heroic Irishness. The items in the cases and their descriptions in the press act as reminders that influential sectors of Ireland's population shared the value systems of the British Association's overall membership.

One of the more celebrated attendants at the annual meeting gave a widely publicized talk at the new museum on 31 August. David Livingstone spoke about his travels in Central Africa, during what proved to be a brief return to Scotland. Most Dublin papers gave succinct notice of the talk, but the *Dublin Evening Mail* printed a full synopsis of it, as well as Lord Lieutenant Carlisle's remarks afterward. Again heavily attended, with a catalogue of the city's important personalities present, Livingstone's lecture was a compendium of period attitudes toward exploration, religion, race and ideology, which are fully treated elsewhere. More relevant in this context are the crown representative's comments to the assembled company:

I will only say that the interesting region which has been the theatre of his journeying, that while the high behest of empire and of justice may now be calling upon some of our countrymen in that other great continent of the olden world to the discharge of stern and painful duties, I trust that in that Africa to which Europe owes such great attainment, our countrymen may

¹⁸ W.E. Houghton, *The Victorian frame of mind* (New Haven, CT, 1957), pp 305–10.

never be called upon to discharge any other mission than those which relate to extended commerce, increasing civilization and Christian philanthropy (loud applause).¹⁹

This single sentence does several things simultaneously: it foreshadows the scramble for Africa, references Ireland's role in the intensifying Sepoy Rebellion, and places Ireland firmly in the position of partner to, rather than opponent of, the empire. A large spread of images depicting events from India and the rebellion were published in the *Illustrated London News* that week,²⁰ and all the local papers covered the progression of the battles alongside their coverage of the British Association meeting, giving special attention to Irish regiments such as the Bengal Fusiliers (later the Munster Fusiliers). The comments delivered by the empire's seat of power on the island suggested a version of homogenous nationhood that presented itself as a foregone conclusion, ignoring domestic conflicts and ongoing calls for Irish independence in various forms, as well as strong Irish support for the Sepoy Rebellion in nationalist circles, consistently used by *The Nation* to signal that Ireland may soon follow suit.²¹ Carlisle's response to Livingstone's talk provided an opportunity for making distinctions between classes of subjecthood in an overall taxonomy of power. Geography and intent merge here to form a series of telescoping representations; Africa as an opportunity for enlightened improvement at the furthest margins of civilization, India as an ancient but wayward civilization in need of guidance and discipline, and Ireland as helpmeet, sharing a sense of duty and purpose within Great Britain's unfolding global enterprise.

The published accounts of the events at the new museum touch upon complex Victorian discourses of science and exploration as viewed through period lenses of heroism, service, knowledge and utility, and they function as representations of admirable Irishness acceptable within an imperial context. Due to the complexities of national allegiance in the period, this is ticklish territory, which the organizers attempted to navigate by means of conference papers that treated the unique qualities of Irish nature and culture, and which simultaneously emphasized the island's modernity and its antiquity. Their representations, however, situated Ireland in a delicate subject position within the hierarchies of the period; they demonstrate a distinct Irish identity, though not an independent one; proposed Ireland as a nation, but not nationalist; described it as part of the empire, but not a colony. Leerssen observes:

The difference between province and nation, crucially, involves a sense of historical individuality: the fact that Ireland looks back into a past that diverges from the English or British one, that traces its antecedents through a root system of its own.²²

¹⁹ *Dublin Evening Mail*, 1 Sept. 1857. ²⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 5 Sept. 1857. ²¹ M. Kelly, 'Irish nationalist opinion and the British Empire in the 1850s and 1860s', *Past & Present*, 24 (2009), 127–54. ²² Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination*, p. 147.

The tricky business of navigating between a sense of ‘historical individuality’ and normalized imperial subject was further demonstrated in the events organized toward the end of the conference. Spectacle was an important aspect of the annual conference, and the Irish organizers fulfilled this in a distinctive way. Rather than laying on fireworks displays or public demonstrations of new electrical devices, they arranged a series of trips to iconic locations as part of the conference proceedings:

Our readers are aware that, in addition to the meetings of the sections, the scientific lectures, the *conversazioni* and promenades which attend every meeting of this distinguished institution, several excursions of more than usual interest have been organized – namely, an excursion through some of the more picturesque localities in Wicklow, a visit to Lord Rosse’s monster telescope, a geological examination of Lambay, and an ethnological excursion to the Arran Islands. Pleasure and instruction will thus be most agreeably and profitably combined.²³

The country itself was displayed to visiting and local scholars as living evidence of topics covered in conference papers. Ireland, in essence, became a representation of itself through being presented as an active subject of study. The press reported the proceedings of these trips, the *Evening Freeman* and the *Freeman’s Journal* providing detailed coverage by sending along a correspondent with each group. The trip to the Aran Islands, led by William Wilde of the Royal Irish Academy, concerned itself with the history, antiquities and monuments of the islands. With a particular focus on Inis Mór and Dún Aengus, the group of seventy strong was lodged by local families and in a small hotel, and walked the sites on the island. At Dún Aengus, they were treated to an alfresco banquet between the cliff and the ruins, after which a meeting of the geography and ethnology section of the association was conducted with all due ceremony *en plein aire*; following the meeting, a bagpiper played and a number of the party danced a jig.²⁴ In addition to Wilde, the trip’s cadre of local luminaries included George Petrie, John O’Donovan and Eugene Curry, the reigning experts in antiquities and Gaelic language, culture and history. The three scholars were famous, in part, for their pioneering and influential work during the Ordnance Survey, which Leerssen argues was instrumental in creating a separate and distinct Irish identity:

One particularly important result of the Ordnance Survey at the ideological level was, then, that the sense of place and the sense of past became mutually linked and almost interchangeable, and that Ireland itself, as a geographical space, became inescapably also a vessel laden with the place-names, monuments, memories and cultural cargo of a Gaelic past.²⁵

²³ *FJ*, 28 Aug. 1857. ²⁴ *Evening Freeman*, 7 Sept. 1857. ²⁵ Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination*, p. 103.

It was the majesty of the Gaelic past that Wilde intended to bring to life for the visitors, using the Aran Islands as an unspoiled example of Irish antiquity and folkways. His display and framing of the ancient and ecclesiastical ruins on the islands, aided by Petrie, Curry and O'Donovan, were a means for representing the distinct particularity of Ireland, separate from England, though with related motifs. The size and remote location of the structure, framed by the dramatic backdrop of cliffs and sea, as well as the large group of locals who had gathered to observe the unusual event, were all presented by Wilde as concrete examples of myth, history and antiquity that could be found nowhere else. In his post-luncheon address to the group, arrayed on the grass in the sunshine at the base of the fort, he indicated the methods and ambitions of Irish antiquarian scholars:

Now, why have I brought you here, and more particularly here, where I stand at this moment to address you? . . . I now point to the stronghold prepared as the last standing place of the Firbolg aborigines of Ireland . . . Of that race we have a written knowledge. We can but make such conjectures as the light of recorded history has afforded us, reading it, comparing and referring it to what they have left us in these litanies of stone. It has been one of my fondest hopes to render Aran an opposition shop to Iona. (hear).²⁶

Wilde here conflates past and place as suggested by Leerssen, making them speak to a verifiable cultural history, while placing Ireland's ancient material remains on a footing with one of the most evocative sites in the British antiquarian tradition. Wilde then addressed an appeal for the preservation of the site to the locals gathered around the edge of the proceedings, which Curry repeated in Irish. Pre-eminent botanist and antiquarian Charles Babington said that:

as an English member of the association, he felt bound to express the gratification he had enjoyed. He wished to call their attention to the fact that the antiquities of these Isles of Aran, with all their singular interest, were scarcely known beyond the Channel (hear, hear). He had heard of Aran, it is true, but the interesting character of its antiquities was utterly unknown to him. He begged to move the thanks of the meeting to Dr Wilde, without whose unparalleled exertions their trip would never have taken place.²⁷

The spectacle of Inis Mór itself, its dramatic beauty, quaint locals and richness of archaeology, provided a living experience that mere fireworks could never match, presumably leaving a lasting impression on the visiting scholars and beginning the career of Dún Aengus as a tourist site. The effects of Wilde's efforts and the reactions of the assembled dignitaries are transmitted through the detailed recording of the excursion in the press, which also served as a set of representations for the local

²⁶ *Evening Freeman*, 7 Sept. 1857. ²⁷ *Ibid.*

readership. Wilde's framing of the islands and their treasures as rare, ancient and unspoiled underlined the value of Irish heritage for the reader, who could then enjoy satisfaction at the positive reactions of the visiting dignitaries.

The meetings of the British Association were integral aspects of the Victorian imperial project of knowledge production and dissemination. The administrative structures and civic institutions of the period were engaged with their own versions of the theory of everything, attempting to collect, define and classify all known phenomena in a bid to understand the fundamental shape of life, and to marshal the globe's territory and resources. Thomas Richards describes these efforts as the creation of an archive, with knowledge production as its central purpose:

Unquestionably, the British Empire was more productive of knowledge than any previous empire in history. The administrative core of the empire was built around knowledge-producing institutions like the British Museum, the Royal Geographical Society, the India Survey and the universities.²⁸

The Dublin meeting was a way of demonstrating Ireland's significant contributions to that project, with its scientific institutions, museums, surveys and their related studies operating in agreement with their analogues in the rest of the British establishment. If knowledge was power, the Dublin men of science made a concerted bid to figure at the centre of that power through their production of useful information and knowledge. The Dublin organizers and the local press largely succeeded in getting the attention of the British scientific establishment, as the meeting was subsequently dubbed one of the most successful in years. The British press, however, was another matter; the Dublin correspondent for London's paper of record, the *Times*, complained:

The morning papers groan under the weight of the reported proceedings of the British Association yesterday ... Twelve or thirteen columns of the minutest type are devoted to the reading of the papers, to the exclusion of almost every other topic of public interest. A *conversazione* in the evening at the Royal Dublin Society's house in Kildare Street wound up the second day's feast of reason.²⁹

Followed by short reports on agrarian murders and cattle disease, this brief, dismissive account likely did little if anything to raise Dublin's profile in the public imagination of the capital. Subsequent reports in the same week were also brief, and conveyed nothing of the complexity and excitement of the event.

Reports of the meeting in the news and popular press must be understood against the background of wider conditions. The *Times* often reflected a vision of Ireland as

²⁸ T. Richards, *The imperial archive* (London, 1993), pp 3–4. ²⁹ *The Times* [London], 29 Aug. 1857.

a semi-foreign backwater, unworthy of column inches unless it was causing trouble. Local reports, in contrast, illuminate the learned societies' 'trans-partisan agenda' of developing a national identity from an objective scientific framework, but these must be understood in terms of period tensions and conflicts. Questions around the fundamental nature of 'Irishness' remain open to this day, and the learned societies' observations around them centred on heady admixtures of class, breeding, education, locale, status and political loyalty, often wrapped in a cloak of scientific objectivity. To arrive at a nuanced understanding of the representations in the conference papers and in the press it is necessary to take period conditions fully into account. Leerssen makes cogent points regarding literary texts, which hold true for the press:

Literary texts float like icebergs in a sea of discourse, are nine-tenths submerged in a larger discursive environment which is chemically (if not physically) identical to their own substance, out of which they have crystallized and into which they will melt back.³⁰

The complex discourses around Ireland, England, nature, culture, power and identity are all deeply embedded within the papers presented to the conference and in press reports describing the events of the meeting. The appearance of a consonant set of sympathies between the organizers and the press are evident in the final stages of the meeting, where President Revd Lloyd underscored the importance of the daily press to the success of the endeavour:

Before he closed, they would suffer him, on behalf of the association, to thank the gentlemen of the press who had been unremitting in their attention and labours to record the proceedings of the association since it assembled (loud applause), and he believed he might fairly say that those proceedings, and the results obtained in the several sections, as well as in their general meetings, had never been so fully or truly reported (renewed applause).³¹

³⁰ Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination*, p. 2. ³¹ *Evening Freeman*, 4 Sept. 1857.