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## **IRLANDZKA KWESTIA NARODOWA W TWÓRCZO CI MUZYCZNEJ ZESPOŁU THE DUBLINERS**

### **THE IRISH NATIONAL QUESTION IN THE MUSICAL WORKS OF THE DUBLINERS**

#### **Streszczenie**

Najskuteczniejszym narzędziem do budowania narodowej świadomości jest znalezienie negatywnego punktu odniesienia w postaci obcego narodu lub państwa. Dla Irlandczyków są nimi Anglicy, których chętnie określa się mianem Anglosasów, a nawet Sasów, oraz Wielka Brytania. Dzieje Irlandczyków naznaczone są angielskim uciskiem, który w czasie reformacji zyskał kolejny faktor w postaci prześladowania religijnego. W konsekwencji katolicko stała się znakiem rozpoznawczym Irlandczyków i to w sytuacji, gdy nie brakowało Irlandczyków wyznania protestanckiego, którzy nie identyfikowali się z angielsko-brytyjską koroną. Irlandczyków chętnie prezentowano jako ludzi zacofanych, stąd też tak samo spoglądano na popularny wśród nich muzyk folkowy. Zasięg powstałego w 1962 roku zespołu The Dubliners było wzmocnienie irlandzkiej dumy narodowej – wielu uwierzyło, że nie ma konieczności, aby naśladować to, co angielskie lub amerykańskie. Wystarczy pozostać sobą. W wykonywanych utworach The Dubliners nawiązują do ważnych wydarzeń z historii irlandzkich zmagających się o niepodległość. Można wskazać na rewolucję z 1798 roku, wielki głód (1845–1849), powstanie wielkanocne (1916) i niepokoje w Irlandii Północnej w dekadach po II wojnie światowej. Wiele postaci pojawiających się w balladach wykonywanych przez The Dubliners, nawet pies o imieniu Master McGrath, ma historyczny charakter. Do dzisiaj utwory w aranżacji The Dubliners są traktowane jako wzorcowe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Anglia, Irlandia, katolicyzm, nacjonalizm, The Dubliners, Wielka Brytania

#### **Abstract**

One of the most powerful means of fostering national consciousness is the establishment of a negative reference point, often embodied by a foreign nation or state. For the Irish, this has

historically been represented by England, frequently referred to as the Anglo-Saxons or Saxons, and more broadly, Britain. Irish history bears the scars of English oppression, which during the Reformation was exacerbated by religious persecution. As a result, Catholicism emerged as a core marker of Irish identity, despite the presence of Protestant Irish who did not align with the English or British crown. The Irish were commonly depicted as a backward people, and their traditional folk music was often dismissed with similar disdain. The Dubliners, a band established in 1962, contributed significantly to the bolstering of Irish national pride. Through their influence, many came to believe that there was no need to emulate English or American culture; it was sufficient to remain authentically Irish. In their repertoire, The Dubliners reference significant events in the history of the Irish struggle for independence, including the Revolution of 1798, the Great Famine (1845–1849), the Easter Rising (1916), and the subsequent decades of conflict in Northern Ireland. Many of the figures appearing in the ballads performed by The Dubliners—including even a dog named Master McGrath—are drawn from history. To this day, the songs interpreted and popularized by The Dubliners are held as quintessential examples of Irish musical heritage.

**Keywords:** Britain, Catholicism, England, Ireland, nationalism, The Dubliners

## **Introduction**

While individual nations operate in broadly similar ways, each possesses qualities that make it unique. Regarding the Irish, their diasporic character is frequently highlighted—the fact that the majority of people with Irish heritage live outside Ireland, primarily in the United States. Another distinctive feature of the Irish is the mode of expressing patriotic sentiment, often conveyed through music, specifically in songs referred to as (folk) ballads. In this tradition, the band The Dubliners, active from 1962 to 2012, is a fitting representative. To this day, many folk artists emphasize that The Dubliners were a central artistic inspiration for them.

This article is divided into three sections: the first presents the issue of Irish nationalism, the second examines The Dubliners and their work, and the third identifies the national themes present in their songs. The terms nationalism and nationalist are used here in a neutral sense, as confirmed by the fact that Irish groups identified with these terms—often positioned politically toward the center—do not condone violence.

The author has analyzed The Dubliners' works using personal music collections, the streaming service Deezer, and online platforms YouTube, Discogs, and AZLyrics. For readers wishing to broaden their knowledge of Irish history, particularly on Irish nationalism, it is recommended to consult the work of Professor Wawrzyniec Konrad Konarski (1957–), considered in Poland to be an outstanding expert on the subject<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The following works are worth noting: Wawrzyniec Konarski, *Nieprzejednani: rzecz o Irlandzkiej Armii Republiki skiej* (Warszawa: Agencja Wydawnicza Tor, 1991); Wawrzyniec Konarski, *A predominant party system: the case of Ireland* (Warszawa: no publisher, 1994); Wawrzyniec Konarski, *Nacjonalizm w nowo ytniej*

## 1. Foundations of Irish Nationalism

When exploring national identity, the simplest answer often emerges in the form of a negative reference point, such as an unfavorably perceived nation or state. For the Irish, this reference point is anything British, but especially English, or—historically—Anglo-Saxon or Saxon. This perception stems from historical experiences involving close to a thousand years of political, economic, cultural, and religious subjugation of Ireland by its eastern neighbor.

A fundamental tenet of Irish nationalism is the vision of a state encompassing the entire island of Ireland. Consequently, the current political arrangement, with Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, is deemed unsatisfactory. Ireland's lack of a historically centralized state has resulted in a form of Irish nationalism rooted in cultural unity, focusing on shared heritage, language, customs, and culture.

Irish nationalism is inspired by leftist movements that emerged from the French Revolution. In the Irish context, left-wing ideology aligns naturally with nationalism, as the majority of Irish people belonged to the British proletariat, largely disconnected from the landowning class often associated with right-wing conservatism. Thus, the Irish working class held leftist views while simultaneously defining their national identity through Catholicism.

A key period for the crystallization of Irish nationalism can be traced to the 16th century, during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Protestant persecution led the Catholic Irish—of both Celtic ancestry and Norman descent—to unite around shared goals of faith and homeland. Efforts to increase Protestant control over Ireland began under Henry VIII (1491–1547), meeting with resistance as evidenced by the Kildare Rebellion (1534–1535). A consequence was the plantation of Scottish and English Protestant settlers in Ireland throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, dispossessing Catholic landowners and initiating a centuries-long religious conflict<sup>2</sup>.

A surge in nationalist activity occurred following the 1641 Irish Rebellion, when Irish leaders attempted to establish an independent Irish state. Under the Kilkenny Confederation, Irish leaders advocated for an Irish kingdom independent of English authority, while

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historii Irlandii, 1782–1921 (Poznań : Towarzystwo Polsko-Irlandzkie, 1997); Wawrzyniec Konarski, *Pragmatycy i idealci ci: rodowód, typologia i ewolucja ugrupowań politycznych nacjonalizmu irlandzkiego w XX wieku* (Pułtusk: Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna; Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, Wydział Dziennikarstwa i Nauk Politycznych, 2001); Wawrzyniec Konarski, *System Konstytucyjny Irlandii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Stanisław Grzybowski, *Historia Irlandii* (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977), 165–172.

accepting a shared monarch. England's response under Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was a brutal invasion of Ireland from 1649 to 1652<sup>3</sup>.

During the 18th century, members of the Irish Parliament (primarily Protestants) called for increased Irish autonomy. The Irish Patriot Party was established and succeeded in gaining legislative independence for Ireland in 1782–1783. The party's nationalism embraced both Catholic and Protestant elements, and many independence advocates were Protestant nationalists. Inspired by revolutionary events in France, the Irish Rebellion of 1798 sought similar goals, but was suppressed, and in 1800, the Irish Parliament voted to dissolve itself in favor of union with Great Britain, leading to the formation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801<sup>4</sup>.

The Irish national movement evolved along two paths. The first, exemplified by the Young Ireland movement, supported republicanism and viewed violence as a means to achieve a secular state for equal Irish citizens, exemplified by the unsuccessful 1848 uprising. The second, more moderate nationalist path opposed the use of violence. Though both movements were largely Catholic, the Church hierarchy supported the non-violent approach, leading to the Catholic Emancipation Bill of 1829, which secured political and religious freedoms for Catholics<sup>5</sup>.

The Great Famine (1845–1849), caused by a potato blight, intensified anti-British sentiment. An estimated 1.5 million Irish died from hunger, while over a million emigrated. Rural populations declined by a quarter. The famine became a key component of Irish national consciousness, encapsulated in the often-quoted words, "God sent the blight, but the English sent the famine," highlighting the perception that food supplies (such as grain) in Ireland were purposefully withheld from the starving<sup>6</sup>.

Subsequent nationalist organizations, including the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Fenian Brotherhood, organized the 1867 uprising. Efforts toward Irish self-governance were also pursued within the UK Parliament at Westminster. The intellectual Celtic Revival movement of the 19th century aimed to uplift Irish culture, partly through periodicals,

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<sup>3</sup> Grzybowski, *Historia Irlandii*, 226–229.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Kucharski, *Historia Irlandii w ródłach. 1155–1998* (Brzezia Ł. ka: Wydawnictwo Poligraf, 2013), 52–55.

<sup>5</sup> John Henry Whyte, „Wiek Daniela O'Connella (1800–1847)”, in: *Historia Irlandii*, ed. Theo W. Moody, F.X. Martin (Pozna : Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, 1998), 256–258; Mieczysław ywczy ski, „Z dziejów stosunku Watykanu do Angliji w latach 1843-1844”, *Przeł d Historyczny* 33 (1935): 319–320.

<sup>6</sup> Grzybowski, *Historia Irlandii*, 288–291.

promotion of the Irish (Gaelic) language, and traditional sports. However, the Irish language did not become a central carrier of national identity, a role instead played by English<sup>7</sup>.

Irish nationalists faced opposition from Ulster Protestants, who in 1912 established the Ulster Volunteers—a unionist, loyalist paramilitary group, later restructured as the Ulster Volunteer Force. Their aim was to block Home Rule for Ireland, promoted by Irish nationalists. In response, the Irish Volunteers were founded in Dublin in 1912 and took part in the Easter Rising (April 1916). Following the execution of 15 Rising leaders and the imprisonment of others, public sympathy for violent independence efforts grew. British authorities mistakenly held the minor republican party Sinn Féin responsible for the uprising, boosting its political significance among the Irish. After the Rising's collapse, the Irish Volunteers united with the Irish Citizen Army, forming the Irish Republican Army (IRA), whose goal was to separate Ireland from Great Britain. This campaign ultimately succeeded, leading to Irish independence in 1921<sup>8</sup>, with the country's final symbolic departure from the British Commonwealth occurring in 1949<sup>9</sup>.

An important factor in the progress of the "Irish Question" has been, and continues to be, the Irish diaspora, especially within the United States. A prime example is Éamon de Valera (1882–1975), who was both a prime minister and president of Ireland. As one of the leaders of the Easter Rising, de Valera was sentenced to death. However, he was spared due to his American citizenship, as the British sought U.S. support in their war against Germany. De Valera also sought U.S. backing for Ireland's independence aspirations<sup>10</sup>.

However, independence did not unite the island under a single state, as Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. This led to a surge in national conflict, commonly identified as a Catholic-Protestant divide. A symbolic moment was Bloody Sunday: on January 30, 1972, British soldiers in Derry shot and killed 13 people participating in a protest against tightened laws allowing detention based on terror suspicions and prohibiting demonstrations and public gatherings<sup>11</sup>. Some stability emerged with the Good Friday Agreement, reached on April 10, 1998, in Belfast by the governments of Ireland and the United Kingdom alongside Northern Ireland's major political parties<sup>12</sup>.

The 2016 Brexit referendum marked a pivotal shift in Northern Irish views toward the U.K., with 56% voting to remain in the European Union, contrasting the overall U.K. vote to

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<sup>7</sup> Grzybowski, *Historia Irlandii*, 308–320.

<sup>8</sup> Agnieszka Piórko, *Historia Irlandii Północnej* (Toru : Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2008), 34–36.

<sup>9</sup> Grzybowski, *Historia Irlandii*, 345.

<sup>10</sup> Grzybowski, *Historia Irlandii*, 329–331.

<sup>11</sup> Piórko, *Historia Irlandii Północnej*, 100–107.

<sup>12</sup> Kucharski, *Historia Irlandii*, 90–101.

leave<sup>13</sup>. Nationalist views have since grown stronger in Northern Ireland, with many citizens feeling closer to Ireland than to Britain, especially as Catholics made up 42% of the population in 2022<sup>14</sup>.

## 2. The Dubliners and Their Work

The Dubliners were formed in 1962 in Dublin as The Ronnie Drew Ballad Group<sup>15</sup>. Over five decades, band membership shifted, but Dubliners Ronnie Drew (1934–2008) and Luke Kelly (1940–1984) are most closely identified with the group. It was Kelly's inspiration from James Joyce's *Dubliners* that simplified the group's name<sup>16</sup>. Kelly's "balladic," mystic tones<sup>17</sup> contrasted with Drew's gravelly, "whiskey-soaked" voice<sup>18</sup>. Kelly played the banjo, Drew the guitar, and other members contributed accordion, bodhrán, concertina, mandolin, violin, tin whistle, and cello. They originated in Dublin's O'Donoghue's pub, a popular performance spot in the 1960s<sup>19</sup>.

The first members of the group were: Ciarán Bourke (1935–1988), Ronnie Drew, Luke Kelly, Barney McKenna (1939–2012), and (since 1964) John Sheahan (1939–). Over the course of 50 years, the following members also joined the group, listed chronologically by their time of joining: Bob Lynch (1935–1982), James McCann (1944–2015), Seán Cannon (1940–), Eamonn Campbell (1946–2017), Paddy Reilly (1939–), and Patsy Watchorn (1944–).

Already in the 1960s, The Dubliners performed regularly on stages in Dublin and London. During this time, they collaborated with Dominic Behan (1928–1989), a respected Irish singer-songwriter, author of songs, short stories, novels, and plays, who wrote many songs for them, including *McAlpine's Fusiliers*. Thanks to him, they signed a contract with the Northern Irish record label Major Minor Records and had the opportunity to learn how to perform on larger stages. Their songs were played on the waves of the radio station associated

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<sup>13</sup> Iwona Pawlas, „Brexit as Challenge for the European Union”, *Horyzonty Polityki* 8 (2017): 64–65.

<sup>14</sup> „Main statistics for Northern Ireland. Statistical bulletin. Religion”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-statistical-bulletin-religion.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Archival materials featuring performances by The Ronnie Drew Ballad Group are available on YouTube.

<sup>16</sup> Ronnie Drew, *Ronnie* (Dublin: Penguin Books, 2008), 58–59.

<sup>17</sup> This characteristic of his voice is particularly noted when he performs two songs, namely The Dubliners, Scorn Not His Simplicity and The Dubliners, Raglan Road.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth comparing the songs associated with him, namely Seven Drunken Nights and The Old (Auld) Triangle. The above description of Drew's voice is justified to the extent that one considers the fact that the members of The Dubliners were known to be heavy drinkers, with the exception of John Sheahan, who was a teetotaler. See: Des Geraghty, Luke Kelly. A Memoir (Dublin: Basement Press, 1994), 110; "John Sheahan interviewed by Gay Byrne," acc. November 27, 2023, <https://youtu.be/Zlaaqo4nNuw>.

<sup>19</sup> Drew, *Ronnie*, 62.

with the label, Radio Caroline<sup>20</sup>. In 1967, their songs *Seven Drunken Nights* and *The Black Velvet Band* took high positions on the charts in Ireland and the UK. The former reached the top 10 of the British singles chart, ranking eighth, between songs by The Rolling Stones and The Beatles. It was noted that 40,000 copies of the single were sold within two days<sup>21</sup>.

In the 1970s, The Dubliners were recognized not only in Ireland and the UK, but also on the continent and in the US. Interest in the band gradually waned, only to rise again in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, thanks to a collaboration with The Pogues. Among the popular songs they performed together were *The Irish Rover*, *Jack's Heroes*, and *Whiskey in the Jar*<sup>22</sup>. In 1995, Ronnie Drew left The Dubliners, which led to a decline in their popularity. The band reminded the public of themselves during milestone anniversaries: 25th in 1987, 40th in 2003, and 50th in 2012<sup>23</sup>. The latter anniversary marked the official end of their activity. The band was honored with the *BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards* for their overall body of work<sup>24</sup>. The musical continuation of The Dubliners is represented by The Dublin Legends.

It is often claimed that The Dubliners perform songs that belong to the space of Irish folk<sup>25</sup>, which is not entirely justified. The themes in their songs encompass not only Irish topics but also broader contexts with which Irish identity is associated – Celtic identity (including Scottishness) as well as Britishness. In addition to classic ballads, The Dubliners' repertoire includes politically themed songs. These include praise for the IRA, warnings about nuclear war (including the threat from the USSR), social injustice (including the discrimination of blacks in the USA and Irish Travelers), and famine in Sudan. The political motifs, especially the issue of the IRA, led to their songs being banned by Irish state radio and television (RTÉ) from 1967 to 1971. The ban was also explained by the obscene content found in their songs. The song *Seven Drunken Nights*, which was banned by RTÉ but played on Radio Caroline (which reached listeners in Ireland, the UK, and the continent, including the Netherlands and Germany), contributed to the international popularity of the band<sup>26</sup>.

The Dubliners' work played a significant role in shaping Irish national consciousness, both in Ireland and in the diasporic space. Until then, folk music had been considered something indicative of personal backwardness, something to be ashamed of, particularly the

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<sup>20</sup> „Phil Solomon”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/music-obituaries/8550941/Phil-Solomon.html>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ronnie Drew September Song*, re . Sinéad O'Brien (Irelandia, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> The Dubliners, *Ronnie Drew September Song*.

<sup>23</sup> „The Dubliners 50th Anniversary Concert 2012”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://youtu.be/wxNj2X3V5II>.

<sup>24</sup> „Folk Awards”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/events/folk-awards-2012/>.

<sup>25</sup> *Luke – A Documentary on Luke Kelly*, re . Sinéad O'Brien (Irelandia, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> „Luke Kelly. Prince Of The City”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://youtu.be/OpUFGwCrmSI>.

English language in its Irish variant. The Dubliners, who as Irishmen achieved international success, helped their fellow countrymen discover in a “wonderful” way that one could be both modern and traditional. They were not ashamed of how they spoke or of being categorized as part of the Irish proletariat. This had particular significance for those living in the UK, who still vividly remembered the signs displayed in pub windows that read “No Irish, no blacks, no dogs.”<sup>27</sup>

Recalling the work of The Dubliners, Bono, the lead singer of U2, emphasized that it suddenly became clear that Irish people did not need to try to be British or American but should remain Irish<sup>28</sup>. Among The Dubliners, Ronnie Drew was particularly seen as the embodiment of Irishness (a complete Irishman), as well as a personification of Dublin. Bono stated that in his voice there was Ireland, and Ireland was not just rain and the British, but it was Ronnie Drew. His voice was distinctive. In English, it is described as a gravel/gravelly voice<sup>29</sup>. John Sheahan recalls that when he first heard him sing, he was shocked that a person could produce such sounds. He added that it reminded him of coal scraping on the floor<sup>30</sup>. Drew was praised for his ability to communicate musically. The story conveyed through the clearly sung words effectively reached the listeners<sup>31</sup>.

Luke Kelly was also presented as a kind of "national treasure," of which Dublin, in particular, should be proud. The confirmation of this belief is the fact that the city authorities financed two monuments commemorating him. A documentary film was dedicated to him, in whose title there was a reference to this "monumental duality."<sup>32</sup> Another prominent place dedicated to Kelly is one of the bridges over the Tolka River in Dublin.<sup>33</sup>

The Dubliners distanced themselves from political issues. If these topics appeared in the songs they performed, they were presented in a light-hearted manner. Ronnie Drew recalls, as an example, the 1967 song *The Old Alarm Clock*. He adds that the band members, with the exception of Luke Kelly, were skeptical about songs calling for rebellion (*Irish rebel songs*)<sup>34</sup>. It turned out that this distancing was unsustainable. Kelly's clearly political perspective, which was shaped by his association with communist activists during his youth in

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<sup>27</sup> „Luke Kelly. Prince Of The City”; „No proof? How the infamous ‘No Irish, no blacks, no dogs’ signs may never have existed”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://www.irishpost.com/life-style/infamous-no-irish-no-blacks-no-dogs-signs-may-never-have-existed-racist-xenophobic-148416>.

<sup>28</sup> The Dubliners, *Ronnie Drew. September Song*.

<sup>29</sup> Drew, *Ronnie*, passim.

<sup>30</sup> „Ronnie Drew – Ronnie (RTE One 2008)”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://youtu.be/Tl2it-x-D4Q>.

<sup>31</sup> The Dubliners, *Ronnie Drew. September Song*.

<sup>32</sup> *Two Lukes*, dir. Adrian McCarthy (Irlandia, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Drew, *Ronnie*, 158.

<sup>34</sup> „Ronnie Drew – Ronnie (RTE One 2008)”.



the UK<sup>35</sup>, along with the changing situation in Northern Ireland, which led to violence (including against children), made it impossible to remain indifferent. The audience itself began to take the light-heartedness accompanying the presentation of political themes, including musical stories about the IRA, seriously, viewing them as a call to action<sup>36</sup>.

Referring to Luke Kelly's political views, Ronnie Drew stated that although he did not agree with them, he would not allow their differences to ruin the friendship they shared. Ultimately, Kelly's final chapter in life strongly aligned with "Irish Catholicism," exemplified by his funeral, which was led by seven priests, including Phil Coulter's brother (1942–), the author of the song *Scorn Not His Simplicity*, which became associated with Kelly.<sup>37</sup>

In summarizing the presentation of The Dubliners' work, it should be noted that although most of the songs they performed were not written by them, they were the ones who popularized them in Ireland, the UK, on the continent, and across the ocean. Therefore, to this day, their songs are treated by successive folk groups as a musical paradigm, in which arrangement fulfillment, and even excellence, is reflected. They are often referred to as the "definitive version."<sup>38</sup>

### 3. National Themes in The Dubliners' Works

The title of the ballad *God Save Ireland* refers to the words spoken by Irish prisoners facing death. By invoking God's name, they ask for grace for their homeland, Erin, which they call "the Isle," hoping it will become a great and free nation. The enemy who hinders them is the vengeful English tyrant. This piece, along with others, underscores a fundamental component of Irish national identity: a negative reference to all that is English, and more broadly British, especially in a state-related context. In contrast, the Irish view Welsh and Scots as "Celtic brothers" despite their lack of a fighting spirit, having quickly succumbed to English power or having been bribed<sup>39</sup>. Sadly, some Irish, too, serve the English for material gain<sup>40</sup>.

The Irish rebel against the English because they have no choice. In the introduction to the ballad *Rebellion*, Ronnie Drew notes, "The history of Ireland is a history of oppression and the struggle of the people against it. The history of grasping landlords and conniving

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<sup>35</sup> Geraghty, *Luke Kelly*, 46–48.

<sup>36</sup> „Ronnie Drew – Ronnie (RTE One 2008)“.

<sup>37</sup> „Luke Kelly. Prince Of The City“; Geraghty, *Luke Kelly*, 135–137.

<sup>38</sup> „Luke Kelly. Prince Of The City“.

<sup>39</sup> The Dubliners, *The Sea Around Us*; The Dubliners, *The Battle Of The Somme / Freedom Come-All-Ye; Parcel Of Rogues*.

<sup>40</sup> The Dubliners, *For What Died The Sons Of Róisín*; The Dubliners, *The Saxon Shilling*.

politicians who sought to deprive the people of their birthright. At regular times in Ireland's past these grievances have boiled over the ordinary people have reacted in the only way open to them – rebellion.”<sup>41</sup> Rebels were treated harshly, often sentenced to death by cruel methods or given long prison terms, including transport to penal colonies in Australia<sup>42</sup>.

*The Dubliners* frequently evoke three events pivotal to Irish patriotism: the Irish Revolution (1798), the Great Famine (1845-1849), and the Easter Rising (1916).

In the ballad *Boulavogue*, we meet Father John Murphy (1753–1798), one of the heroes of the Irish Revolution, who led his people in a fight against Protestant tenant farmers (yeomen). Despite his cruel death after the defeat, he inspired others to continue the struggle for Ireland's freedom. Another ballad about the revolution is *The Rising of the Moon*, focusing on the battle between the United Irishmen, led by Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763–1798), and British forces. Wolfe Tone, like Father Murphy, is seen as a national hero. John Kelly (1773–1798), a prominent figure in the revolution, is commemorated in the ballad *Kelly the Boy From Killane*.

The theme of the United Irishmen, commonly called “Croppies”<sup>43</sup> and their struggle is also featured in *The Croppy Boy*. The main character, betrayed by his cousin for a guinea, is sentenced to death and buried in an unmarked grave. Another revolutionary who has become a fixture of Irish national mythology is Roddy McCorley, hanged in 1800.<sup>44</sup>

Besides the 1798 revolution, the memory of the Great Famine holds a vital place in Irish national consciousness and appears in *The Dubliners'* works. *The Fields of Athenry* is the best-known famine ballad, often sung by Irish football fans in stadiums<sup>45</sup>. In this ballad, a man named Michael from Athenry steals grain to feed his family and is exiled to a penal colony in Australia. As he bids farewell to his wife, he urges her to raise their child with dignity. The famine, which forced many Irish into emigration, also surfaces in the ballad *Now I'm Easy*.

*The Dubliners* reference the Easter Rising in songs like *Oró, Sé Do Bheatha 'Bhaile*, sung in Gaelic. This wedding song gained a political twist when Patrick Pearse (1879–1916)—a teacher, lawyer, poet, and leader of the Easter Rising—added new verses calling for the Irish to reclaim their land. The ballad *The Foggy Dew* advises that the Irish should fight

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<sup>41</sup> „The Dubliners – Rebellion”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://youtu.be/TZcWo1UCZQ4>.

<sup>42</sup> The Dubliners, *The Black Velvet Band*; The Dubliners, *The Fields of Athenry*.

<sup>43</sup> This term refers to the short hairstyle (crop) worn by the Irish, signifying opposition to the British (Protestants), who were associated with powdered wigs.

<sup>44</sup> The Dubliners, *Roddy McCorley*.

<sup>45</sup> „Irish Fans Sing Fields of Athenry Against Spain, Euros 2012”, acc. 27.11.2023, <https://youtu.be/fZmYv6kDutw?t=30>.

against “Britannia’s Huns” rather than alongside them against the Turks at Gallipoli (1915-1916). Though the Easter Rising was ultimately crushed, the world looked on with admiration at those “who bore the fight that freedom’s light might shine through the foggy dew.”

Ireland’s independence in 1921 brought mixed feelings, as Northern Ireland remained separate and still needed to be united with the rest of the island. This cause requires commitment, and sometimes even sacrifice, as seen in *The Patriot Game*, which tells the story of Fergal O’Hanlon (1936–1957), an IRA fighter who, along with Seán South (1928–1957), became a national hero after dying in an attack on a police station in Brookeborough, Northern Ireland<sup>46</sup>. British soldiers’ presence in Northern Ireland intensified tensions, reflected in *The Town I Loved So Well*, which, despite the hardships of life in Derry, is a prayer for a better future for the beloved town.

Centuries of English presence in Ireland have left a clear mark, one that many did not accept<sup>47</sup>. This is why, in 1966, the IRA destroyed a statue of Lord Nelson in Dublin, a moment commemorated in the ballad *Nelson’s Farewell*. In a humorous twist, *The Dubliners* even incorporated elements of British songs like *The British Grenadiers* and *Rule, Britannia!* into the ballad, mockingly suggesting that Nelson belongs in London’s Trafalgar Square, not in Ireland<sup>48</sup>.

Humor is evident in other political ballads, not just *Nelson’s Farewell*. Notably humorous are *The Old Alarm Clock*, *Master McGrath*, *Johnston’s Motor Car*, *Off to Dublin in the Green (The Merry Ploughboy)*, *The Old Orange Flute*, and *O’Connell’s Steam Engine*. In *The Old Alarm Clock*, an Irishman in London is deemed dangerous simply for carrying an old alarm clock and wearing a green shirt, leading to a ten-year prison sentence. Even Master McGrath<sup>49</sup>, a greyhound famous for winning races in Northern Ireland in 1869, is portrayed as politically aware, raising the patriotic cry “Long live the Republic” after his victory.

The IRA members in *Johnston’s Motor Car* seize a doctor’s vehicle, promising it will be returned once Ireland gains independence. Similarly, in *Off to Dublin in the Green*, a young man happily working in the field joins the IRA because he cannot stand that Anglo-Saxons stole his homeland. Once Ireland is free, he plans to return to the land he loves, marry Mary, and continue plowing.

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<sup>46</sup> Piórko, *Historia Irlandii Północnej*, 52–53.

<sup>47</sup> The Dubliners, *Second World Song*.

<sup>48</sup> Drew, *Ronnie*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> This dog is a historical figure, having lived from 1866 to 1873. See: Geoffrey Cobb, "Master McGrath was superstar greyhound," acc. November 27, 2023, <https://www.irishecho.com/2022/7/master-mcgrath-was-superstar-greyhound>.

Love of a woman who changes her partner's political loyalty is explored in *The Old Orange Flute*. Here, a Protestant weaver's Catholic wife converts him to "papism," signified by his rosary recitations in church. Yet his Orange flute remains loyal to the Protestant cause, continuing to play songs of Protestant victories and the defeat of the 1798 revolution.

From the British state's perspective, the Irish serve well as cheap labor for the army and industrial workforce, a theme humorously addressed in *O'Connell's Steam Engine*. This song depicts a Dublin steam engine "mass-producing" Irish children, while lamenting that no one cares about their plight.

Economic exploitation appears in other *Dubliners* songs about Irish life abroad, particularly in Britain and the United States. Songs such as *McAlpine's Fusiliers*, *Building Up and Tearing England Down*, *My Little Son*, *The Blantyre Explosion*, *The Molly Maguires*, *Joe Hill*, *Working Man*, and *School Days Over* highlight the hardships of Irish construction workers and miners. Driven by profit and the notion that Catholicism must be opposed by any Protestant, they either rebel—sometimes violently—or endure their fate in silence, feeling voiceless.

The above ballads are dedicated to Irish laborers (mainly those working on highways and the London Underground) and to those who have worked hard from a young age in the mines. They are exploited for profit, but also in reference to their Catholicism, which is presented as something every Protestant should seek to combat by all means. Some rebel, even through armed struggle<sup>50</sup>, while others endure their fate in humility, knowing that as beggars, they have nothing to say<sup>51</sup>. Two songs are often regarded as "anthems" of the working-class world: *Joe Hill* and *Working Man*. The protagonist of the first is an activist who engages in the fight for the rights of American mine and factory workers. The second tells the story of miners who work hard in the mines for their entire lives, despite having sworn not to return if they ever have the opportunity.

Life abroad brings a slow path to stability for emigrants and their descendants. Yet there is a deep-seated longing for Ireland, idealized as a land of beauty and joy. This love is passed on to children and grandchildren, who are urged to reclaim Ireland from English hands, avenging past wrongs. This sentiment resonates in songs like *Song for Ireland*, *Spencil Hill*, and *Skibbereen*<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> The Dubliners, *The Molly Maguires*.

<sup>51</sup> The Dubliners, *My Little Son*.

<sup>52</sup> The Dubliners, *Four Green Fields*.

Two songs from the early 1970s—*Free the People* and *The Rebel*—reflect the context of Northern Ireland's troubles. *Free the People* offers comfort from a mother to her children, reassuring them that their imprisoned father, a good man, will return when the Irish achieve freedom. *The Rebel*, based on a poem by Patrick Pearse, portrays an oppressed Irishman who, along with his people, suffers but holds on to hope, relying on divine justice and warning oppressors of inevitable punishment.

## Conclusion

For half a century, especially in its first two decades, *The Dubliners* left a profound mark on not only Irish artistic life but also on the spirit of the average Irish person. With their growing international fame, the band embraced Irishness in its straightforward, proletarian voice, helping free their compatriots from the inferiority complex that came with British and American influence. At the same time, they reminded the Irish of the important events of their past, teaching that they should never surrender to threats. Much has been achieved, yet much remains to be done, especially regarding Northern Ireland. Their political themes, centered on national issues, were often accompanied by a unique humor mastered by Ronnie Drew, a humor often mixed with bitter tears as their songs recounted Ireland's painful and troubled history. To this day, many Irish artists credit *The Dubliners* as instrumental to their musical education.

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