

## **By Reason of Past History**

*Brian Earls*

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There's an Egg in my Soup and Other Adventures of an Irishman in Poland, by Tom Galvin, O'Brien Press, 271 pp, €9.95, ISBN: 978-1847170484

Dublin Moja Polska Karma, by Magdalena Orzeł, Wydawnictwo Skrzat, PLN 17.90, ISBN: 978-8374372596

Sean Lester, Poland and the Nazi Takeover of Danzig, by Paul McNamara, Irish Academic Press, E24.95, ISBN: 978- 0716529699

In the first half of the 1990s, following the end of one-party communist rule, Poland embarked on the painful transition from a command to a market economy. The Irish government wished to be helpful to the new democracy but, as tight controls on public expenditure were in place and the Celtic Tiger was still an unsuspected presence lurking in the undergrowth, little by way of substantial assistance could be given. It was in these circumstances that, with funding from Ireland's development aid budget, the Association for Professional Service Overseas (APSO) dispatched a group of recent graduates to teach English in schools throughout provincial Poland.

One of these enthusiasts was Tom Galvin, who, in summer 1994, found himself in Minsk Mazowiecki, a comfortless town in eastern Poland where, as he discovered on the first morning, not only was it unclear where breakfast was to come from but, although the town had a population of 20,000, it had no entry in the Lonely Planet guide. Galvin stayed the course, discovering a new society while ignoring advice not to bother learning Polish ("too difficult"). The book's final pages find him, after five years, still in Minsk Mazowiecki, by now tired of teaching but richer in experience as he undergoes instruction, with his fiancée, Asha, from the local Catholic priest in preparation for marriage. There's an Egg in my Soup is a cheerful, slangy account of the author's experiences over those years, culminating in a Polish-Irish wedding with 150 guests, 150 bottles of vodka, fifty bottles of wine, a few kegs of beer and endless food including herrings, pork and boiled sausages at four in the morning.

An "Afterword" finds Galvin back in Ireland, where on a Sunday morning in May 2005 he observes the crowds of young Poles gathered before Mass outside Saint Michan's Church near Smithfield. The huge growth in numbers of Poles working in Ireland, following EU accession in May 2004 and Ireland's opening of its labour market to citizens of new member states, has taken place. Outside the church he falls into conversation with a fifty-year-old tiler from Bydgoszcz. "He asks," the author reports, "about me, my wife and whether I have children. When I tell him I've no children because they're too expensive and I needed a house first, he's shocked. Rent a house he says. Family is more important than houses. Maybe, but he doesn't know modern Ireland."

Afterwards the Polish chaplain, Father Andrew Pyka, talks of the constant demands placed on his ministry, with requests from Belfast to Cork for someone to hear confession in the Polish language. The priest complains that facilities in the Polish-Irish Society in Fitzwilliam Square are inadequate. "People were standing all over the place and even to have a cup of tea was impossible. I was hearing confessions in the toilets because there was no room." When Galvin enquires whether there could possibly be such a demand for confession, Father Andrew explains that Poles will not go to communion without going to confession first. Later he muses: "Faith was what helped us to survive for so long. And if you take the faith from the

Polish people they haven't got much."

For anyone who grew up in the Ireland of the 1960s, aspects of contemporary Poland, from the succession of seasonal fruits and vegetables on the market sellers' stalls to the devout crowds of all age groups at Mass, recall Ireland as it was before the great transformation of the last quarter-century. These parallels become even more striking when one turns to the history of the two countries. Ireland and Poland lost their independence to predatory neighbours, who had better organised and more centralised state machines. Following the late eighteenth century partitions Poland, whose history had previously been quite different to that of Ireland, found itself bereft of state institutions and committed to a struggle to reassert the existence of the nation in the face of the powerful counter-will of its new Russian and Prussian masters. In these circumstances Irish analogies inevitably came to the fore, as the Polish nineteenth century, like that of Ireland, was punctuated by insurrectionary outbursts set against a background in which the alternately pursued strategies of constitutionalism and revolutionary violence waxed and waned. For both countries, the long nineteenth century, a period dominated by the rhetoric of denunciation, when nationalism pushed other impulses to the edge, culminated with the First World War and the emergence of a strategy for ending the link with their respective imperial powers. Polish leaders exploited the need of the rival partitioning powers to obtain the support of their Polish subjects, while in Ireland radical nationalists attempted to secure independence by forming an alliance with the Central Powers ("our gallant allies in Europe" in the 1916 proclamation). Both regained sovereignty only with considerable difficulty, in the confused period that followed the ending of the war. As a result, for an Irish person the experience of reading a history of Poland can be unsettling, as one encounters a history that is at once exotic and yet strangely familiar, so that at times it almost seems that if only dates and names were changed the history of one could be that of the other.

The historical analogies we have sketched, however rough and inexact, have their parallels in popular attitudes towards the past. The modest bunches of flowers which appear regularly at Warsaw's monuments to the rising of 1944 speak of a society that, like Ireland until comparatively recently, is given to memorialising and seems determined that meanings derived from the national narrative will not be forgotten. Sitting through the mesmerised and prolonged silence that followed a showing of Andrzej Wajda's *Katyn* in a central Warsaw cinema, or listening in another to the jeers of derision which greeted Stalin's appearance in Vladimir Pietrov's vainglorious *Stalingradskaya Bitva* (*The Battle of Stalingrad*) of 1949, was to receive lessons in the closeness of past and the present.

The palpable sense of the dead and living coming together that is the undeclared but unmistakable meaning of the hundreds of candles flickering in the reassuring darkness of Polish graveyards on All Souls' Night recalls accounts of Samhain given by earlier generations of Irish country people. To which those unimpressed by such a past-centred vision might add that the faults which accompany such perspectives also recur, and that elements of postcommunist Polish discourse recall the introspective Ireland of earlier decades.

Against this background, for Irish people of a certain age, Tom Galvin's conversations at Saint Michan's are likely to possess a certain piquancy. The Poles described by him, with their unproblematic patriotism and religious faith woven into the texture of daily life are (very approximately) at a place where Irish people stood three to four decades ago but from where, for good or ill, they have in large numbers since moved away. Given a relationship of such closeness and divergence, implicit in the situation described in *There's an Egg in my Soup* is the question of what these newcomers make of contemporary Irish society and what

aspects of Irish life they find attractive or disquieting.

The book ends with the author worrying about how well the visitors may be integrating. The Irish, he reports one Polish blogger as complaining, are good to go out to the pub with but are not likely to invite you to their homes. Having chewed the matter over Tom Galvin concludes that this is as it should be. Like immigrants everywhere, the majority of Poles are in Ireland to fulfil a purpose, have no interest in integration and are happy to hang out with their own kind. "Nobody," he adds, "really wants that many new friends. New friends can be a pain in the arse."

To judge by Magdalena Orzeł's *Dublin Moja Polska Karma*, it may be as well that this is so. The book consists of a series of reflections on aspects of life in contemporary Dublin, seen through the eyes of a Polish immigrant. The author, a graduate in Polish studies and philosophy from Warsaw University, is presumably identical with the unnamed observer whose perceptions constitute the text. What results might be seen as an attempt to undermine, or at least correct, a prevailing benign Polish stereotype regarding Ireland, by replacing it with a more realistic account of matters. *Dublin Moja Polska Karma* begins with a dose of strong medicine, as the author walks, on her first weekend in the capital, through the drunkenness and debris that characterises parts of the city centre on Saturday night. Other correctives are somewhat milder; it is reported that not all Irish houses have central heating and that Polish public transport is better than Irish. Somewhat disquietingly, from the point of view of Irish readers, is the division of the world into *My Polacy* (we Poles) and *Oni* (them – the Irish). A certain solipsism results from this rhetorical device, which lies at the centre of the book and constitutes its organising principle. In a characteristic moment, having noted that unlike the situation in previous emigrations, satellite television has created a virtual Poland, so that the immigrant can remain caught up in Poland's domestic debates and scandals, the author offers the reflection: "We leave Poland, but we take with us all our fears and wounds. We constantly scratch old wounds and torment ourselves with reflections, because we, Poles in Dublin, nurse our masochistic patriotism." Well perhaps, but to judge by some Poles I have spoken to, leaving their homeland may have provided a relief from such burdensome stuff.

Tom Galvin and his fellow APSO volunteers were not the first young Irish to travel eastwards on educational business. In 1910, passing through Warsaw, Yeats's future biographer Joseph Hone noted that the city was "one of the few European capitals that the tourist has not yet wooed. A few governesses in high Polish families are practically the only resident British subjects, and these ladies are mostly Irish, because they must be Catholics."<sup>(1)</sup> Among those who found work in early twentieth century Poland was Bessie O'Brien, the convent-educated daughter of a prosperous Limerick farmer. The chapter in *The Farm by Lough Gur* entitled "Bessie Goes to Poland" tells of the astonishment of the O'Brien family when, shortly after the end of her schooldays, a letter arrives from "reverend Mother in France" to announce that "Bessie has the chance of a good position as a governess with a Madame Swinarski in Poland". Although Bessie is only a marginal actor in *The Farm by Lough Gur*, her first letter home, which was included as an appendix, provides a high-spirited, amusing and informative description of her new family. Her account, which takes up eight pages of text, is insightful and nuanced in its depiction of the family members, their relatives and retainers, and amounts to a miniature portrait of the culture, prejudices and idiosyncrasies of an early twentieth century *szlachta* (gentry) family. (The *szlachta* were central actors in Polish history and the shaping of society. An English language translation of the Polish constitution of 1791 rendered the term as "the noble equestrian order" and assigned to the class the duty of defending Poland's liberty.)<sup>(2)</sup>

In Bessie's letter pride of place is given to the real head of the household ("Number two who is really number one"), Madame Swinarski. She writes: "I seldom felt so attracted towards anyone; she is intelligent, well-informed and noble-hearted, above all so patriotic; you cannot imagine the extent to which she carries the love of her country, and so we are well met. She cries sometimes in speaking of the wrongs they all suffer: we compare our stories and what a resemblance we find between the two nations!" A few "homely examples" of similarities between Poland and Ireland concludes: "I could go on for hours proving to you that oppression is the cause of their and our faults, otherwise how could there be such a striking resemblance between the two nations, so far apart, having no communication and of different race?"(3)

One topic, fascinating but little explored, is the role of mothers, aunts and other female relatives in the transmission of religious values, including the religion of patriotism, in nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland. Where Poland was concerned, Bessie's letter suggests that women played an important role as guardians of the national flame. In a particularly striking passage she wrote of Madame Swinarski:

"You should see her when she talks of her country! She always finishes in tears. Her mother died saying, 'My God, I never did anything wrong; I always gave to the poor; I practiced faithfully my duties as a Christian and a good Catholic. I never so much as harmed a fly, but I cannot forgive the enemies of my country! No, never! And I pray in this solemn moment when I go to appear before the great Judge, that the most terrible misfortune may fall on the head of whoever of my children forgets the misfortunes of Poland! To you, my sons, I leave it to avenge her! You, my daughters, never dare to rejoice in your family or in solitude; never be happy – I forbid it to you – till Poland is free!' Her sons, both before and after her death, were in every insurrection of the country. Once, after a battle in the depths of winter, she went over the battlefield with a lantern in her hand looking for the corpses of her husband and two sons; she was accompanied by Madame Swinarski (then only 15 years old). Every body lying there she lifted, peering into the dead face. 'Is it Casimir? Is it Stanislaus? Is that Thaddeus?' What courage, and what a scene for a young girl, especially when she found her brother, 16 years old, dead not from wounds so much as from the cold which penetrated and congealed them. They carried him home between them, and had a rejoicing for the neighbourhood in his honour. 'This is the dearest of my children,' cried his mother, 'he has given me more happiness to-day than all the rest of you put together. I can only say that I hope to see each of you share the same glorious fate! For what is a Polish noble born if not to die when the enemies conquer?' Madame Swinarski is the counterpart of her admirable mother, yet her brothers and sisters say, 'Our Valerie has not a grain of patriotism!' when I heard this I cried out, 'Oh, then, if that is the way, may God defend us from the others!' She assures me that with them it is shame and disgrace to a family that has not lost some member fighting against the Germans or the Russians. The contempt they have for a young man who has never been imprisoned, or lost an eye or an arm, or cannot show that he has taken an active part in the rebellions, is unbearably cutting."(4)

Bessie O'Brien's letter reveals her to have been an amusing and clear-sighted observer. It seems clear that if she had not married a young Serb, who was serving as an officer in a Russian cavalry regiment, and departed with him for Serbia, she had the makings of a gifted journalist or novelist of manners. She might thus be seen as a precursor of better known writers such as Kate O'Brien or Maura Laverty, who found in the experience of working in continental Europe (both as governesses in Spain) an imaginative enlargement and, at a personal level, an opportunity for self-definition and a release from the constraints of a provincial society. With its succession of character sketches, which amount to a group portrait of a Polish household, and brief outline of the essential social background, Bessie's

letter might be seen as a first chapter in a generic Irish novel of exile.

In *The Farm by Lough Gur*, when news arrives that Bessie has received an appointment with the Swinarski household this immediately provokes the question “Where exactly is Poland?” The narrator recalls: “We all spoke at once. Michael went for the Atlas and mother found the place with trembling hands. In the hubbub no one heard me say that Poland is on the way to the isles of Greece!”(5) The uncertainty of the O’Brien family as to the location of Bessie’s new home serves as a reminder of how far, before the age of mass travel, Ireland and Poland were from each other. Pre-nineteenth century contacts seem to have been occasional and miscellaneous.

John Minihan’s recent edition of the poems of Geoffrey O’Donoghue (*Séafra Ó Donnchadha*) provides an extraordinary glimpse of one such contact, as registered in Pádraigín Haicéad’s elegy for the Munster soldier Richard Butler, after his death in 1649. Following the lead of earlier Butlers who had fought in the army of the Polish king, Richard had served in the Smolensk War of 1633-34 and had received a written testimonial to his prowess “from the powerful king of armoured Poland”:

Gurbh fhiadhain súl ar shiubhal an aird-fhir  
é féin dá fhéachain do láthair  
ag Smoilionnsco i bhfionn-Ruis fhásaigh,  
mar thréan-laoch ag léidéireacht lá teith,

lá inar briseadh, inar milleadh, inar bhearnadh,  
le Risdeard an mbuadh, fá ruathar rábach,  
don tsluagh Bhiorrbach ioghantach ádhbhal  
ón Mosco mór, ón treón-Tartáire.

That he was witness to the travels  
of that noble lord, whom he saw present  
at Smolensk in beautiful wild Russia,  
a hero leading on a hot-fought day,

a day when victorious Richard routed,  
smashed and forced with a gallant onslaught,  
the amazing and dreadful step-land army  
from great Moscow, from strong Tartary(6)

In spite of professional wanderers such as Richard Butler, or later Bernard Connor (who served as physician to the Polish king Jan Sobieski and wrote the first English language history of that country), such was the distance between the two countries that Irish and Poles almost certainly met in significant numbers for the first time not in Europe but as immigrants in the great cities of North America.

Such encounters as took place closer to home, although infrequent, seem to have been enthusiastic. One of the best known of these, which occurred in spring 1851, could be seen as emblematic of the form assumed by the Irish-Polish relationship in the nineteenth century, in its combination of broad sympathy with an inevitable lack of nuance, as the parties spoke different languages. The meeting took place when, as a result of a storm, a ship carrying 261 Poles was forced to put in for repairs at a small port on the west coast of Ireland. Following the crushing of the Kossuth insurrection, the Poles, who had taken part in the fighting on the Hungarian side, had sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire. It was while being transported

from a port in the Ottoman lands to Liverpool, that they made their unscheduled Irish visit. Once the visitors had been identified they were feted, with much drinking of toasts, as heroes of liberty by the whole local community.<sup>(7)</sup> It is striking that at this unrehearsed meeting, in spite of linguistic difficulties, the Irish soon established who the Poles were or, more accurately, what they stood for. Having done so they were in no doubt as to the meaning they perceived in their heroic, but defeated, guests.

Bessie O'Brien gives the impression of having discovered for herself, somewhat to her own surprise, the "striking resemblance between the two nations". In fact, unknown to her, it was a familiar commonplace in nineteenth century Irish discourse, in both its rhetorical and more reflective moments. While sympathy for Poland, as the recurring victim of Tsarist repression, was widespread in nineteenth century Europe, in Ireland this assumed an intensity and duration which seems to have been unparalleled elsewhere. At the heart of such feelings lay a recognition by Irish observers, with occasional Polish echoes, of affinities between the political situation of both countries. On the Irish side, a wide range of figures, extending from the free-thinking Thomas Moore in the 1830s to the deeply orthodox John Tobin writing in *The Catholic Bulletin* a century later, were struck by the analogy. Commentators on the Polish side, if somewhat fewer in number, were equally impressive in the quality of their engagement. What resulted might be seen as an Irish-Polish dialogue, or more accurately two parallel monologues which occasionally intersected, based on a shared perception of history and a continuity of feeling over several generations. While the exchange between the two countries had its superficial moments, at its most impressive it touched on matters of deep consequence, including the fate of the nation, the impact of romanticism, and the history of ideas in both countries. If, at its most routine, the Irish-Polish comparison was little more than a familiar commonplace, a well-rehearsed motif within a patriotic discourse, at its most probing it amounted to a reading of one culture in terms of the concerns of another.

Prior to the nineteenth century Poland had not figured, to any significant extent, on the Irish map of Europe. Improved access to information regarding current affairs, resulting from the rise of literacy and the habit of newspaper-reading, probably goes much of the way to explaining the greater knowledge of developments in east-central Europe, which made the emergence of the Irish-Polish comparison possible. Its appearance as a trope in the first half of the nineteenth century provides evidence of the speed and effectiveness with which, in the age of steam, ideas, information and sentiments circulated from one end of the continent to the other. This meeting of Irish and Polish concerns is a now a half-forgotten chapter in Irish intellectual history and is, for this reason alone, surely worth recovering.

When commentators in Dublin, or occasionally Warsaw, turned to the other nation, they must have encountered some corpus of shared experience for the comparison to make sense to themselves and their readers. Those who explored the comparison, while coming from a wide range of backgrounds and diverging sympathies, were in agreement on the nature of the phenomena described. As these nineteenth and early twentieth century voices are insistent in telling us, the fundamental affinity perceived was the loss of independence and the experience of oppression. On the Irish side the Polish example could be seen as an informal, but consistently applied, external control on the native historical self-understanding. This was found to provide a valid analogy from the rising of 1831 to the aftermath of the First World War. While the Irish-Polish elective affinity is probably too loose to prove anything conclusively, it is certainly highly suggestive. One effect is to render the popularly received version of Irish history less singular. Viewed from a Polish perspective, that version, as articulated by figures ranging from Geoffrey Keating to AM Sullivan, yields itself less easily to presentation as an ideological construct serving the

interest of dispossessed Gaelic elites or as a false memory and a made-up story to be glossed by reference to The Morphology of the Folktale. Seen in comparative terms, the Irish attempt to come to terms with the rule of one people by another emerges as analogous to the self-understanding of at least one other European people.

The above is an abbreviated version of Brian Earls's essay on historical links between Ireland and Poland. To read the full version of the essay please [click here to open a PDF document](#).

1. JM Hone and PL Dickinson, *Persia in Revolution*, (Dublin and London), 1910, pp 4-5.
2. *New Constitution of the Government of Poland, Established by the Revolution of the Third of May, 1791*, (London, 1791), Article 2.
3. M Carbery, *The Farm by Lough Gur*, (Cork and Dublin, 1973), pp 276-7.
4. *ibid* p 277.
5. *ibid* p 242.
6. John Minihan, *The Poems of Geoffrey O'Donoghue. Dánta Shéafraidh Uí Dhonnchadha an Gleanna*, (Aubane Historical Society, 2008), pp 200-1.
7. A Zamoyski, *Holy Madness. Romantics, Patriots and Revolutionaries 1776-1871*, (London, 1999), p 379.

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