

The marketing of roots-tourism and its social implications in Ireland*

Caroline Legrand

In the age of multiculturalism, the making of family-trees has become a way to express simultaneously what makes people different (and/or similar) from each other and what makes their family histories fit (or shed) specific historical moments. In the United States of America, this whole process has gained considerable visibility since the media coverage of *Roots* (1976). Afro-American Alex Haley who wrote this saga served as a model for thousands of Americans after he had traced his family background, starting from oral accounts he collected for almost twelve years both in America and in Gambia. As he traced successfully (but in a very questionable way) the connection that he and his family had with the experience of slavery, he demonstrated the overlapping of family and collective histories. In doing so, Alex Haley showed that this activity could be used as a process for manufacturing a long history for oneself and as a means for asserting one's individuality and positive identity.

As regards other ethnic groups existing in America, the history of European emigration sometimes symbolises a cut in familial paths. According to people of Irish extraction who live in America, it could represent the stated origin of what they feel they are: uprooted people. Reading their past and establishing their genealogy in the light of this migration history has consequently become a way for them to better understand the reason why they feel this way. Genealogical investigations might provide them a sense of who they are by locating their origin in the past and in a foreign country. In fact, people of Irish descent who self-identify as

*This paper relies on ethnographic data that I have collected in Ireland since 1998 and that I have analysed in a thesis dissertation [Legrand, 2004]. I wish to thank Dr. Visnja Cogan, Dr. Glowczewski and Dr. Langton for reading over the first version of this paper and for suggesting me further arguments.

up-rooted persons use their kinship and their ancestral homeland in order to publicly define who they are.

This paper is based on ethnographical data that I have collected in the Republic of Ireland over the past six years. It suggests that the symbolical value these Irish people abroad grant to their homeland and their family ties are a matter of instrumentation for other human and political groups. This rings true especially in Ireland where politicians have used individual concerns about shaping identities as a way to boost national economy. While critically exploring the way genealogy and tourism have been brought together, I explore the messages that have been strategically sent to Irish people abroad in order to make them come to Ireland. I argue that these messages should be understood as means for producing an attractive representation of Ireland. In section two, I explain that not only the government of Ireland entered in a very seductive phase in order to transform people of Irish ancestry into tourists but that it established biographical database in order to satisfy the needs of genealogists and to facilitate the connectedness both between them and the Irish population. Additionally, I demonstrate that these processes (which make the marketing of genealogy more obvious) are not always well-perceived by Irish natives. In fact, I assert that the open invitation for establishing one's roots in Ireland challenges local representation of Irishness as well as it redefines roles traditionally held by some Irish institutions.

1. Roots-tourism to Ireland: an economic stake

In the early 1980s, Ireland faced a period of economic recession. The effects of it were a rise in the unemployment rate and a growth in emigration. To deal with this situation, Garret FitzGerald's and Charles Haughey's respective governments looked alternatively at a solution

to give Ireland new economic guidelines through which jobs could be created and Ireland's foreign debt could be sponged. Amongst other things, these politicians believed that they could put the search for identity at the service of the economy. They thought that they could use genealogy to support tourism expansion. They developed what has been called since then the "roots-tourism" industry, being aware that genealogy had recently gained considerable popularity in western countries like Germany, Greece, Poland, Netherlands or Scandinavian regions which have experienced high flow of emigration in the past (Legrand 2006). This does not mean that politicians created roots-tourism. Roots-tourism is produced by people who feel a need to visit their homeland. This means that politicians have fallen roots-tourism within national economic concern and that they defined directive policies to enclose the development of this activity.

Given the history and the extent of Irish emigration and given the fact that national economy should be boosted, the Irish government (1985:27) considered that:

...over 50 million of people living abroad [...] are of Irish descent. This is a vast and well disposed potential reservoir business in what might be termed heritage tour. It needs concentrated efforts to develop it. While people of Irish descent have some predisposition to visit Ireland, experience has shown that it requires extensive marketing efforts to convert this into actual holidays here.

In 1987, Irish government founded the *Irish Genealogical Project* and set up a company in charge of managing and marketing the latter in 1989. With the aim of drawing financial benefit from this disseminated population, organizers and sponsors of *IGP* consult each others. According to governmental guidelines, they especially have to determine which process to use in order to prompt the Irish population abroad to visit its motherland. Many messages have been addressed to Irish communities abroad (in Canada, in Australia, in New Zealand, or elsewhere in the world) afterward in order to make those feel to be strongly connected by blood to Ireland visit this country.

Following the *IGP*, Bord Fáilte (The National Tourism Development Authority) has commissioned investigators in North America in order to realize a market research. They have to discover what people “wanted to see and hear, which stories and pictures are acceptable and saleable and which are not” (Byron 1998: 34). They have also published increasing number of pamphlets and advertising papers to attract the attention of this population searching for roots. Most of these are relayed by *Ireland of the Welcomes* which is a Bord Fáilte publication. *Ireland of the Welcomes* echoes the activity programme of several Irish genealogical societies. It also publishes abstracts of the history of Irish family names written by the famous Irish genealogist John Grenham (1994). *Ireland of the Welcomes* also includes the *Shopping your Irish treasure* column with classified advertisements originating from either professional genealogists or commercial firms who specialize in the manufacturing and selling of coats of arms. Visual advertisements published in the journal indicates that the search for roots and all that go with it (the sense of history, place and belonging, genealogical knowledge) have been transformed into Irish-made and authentic products. This suggests that genealogy and heraldry do not differ significantly from the local craft industry. They are viewed as valuable goods that governmental institutions and private firms can commercialize. For example, Dublin’s shopping centres often comprise genealogical rooms where people can buy blank family-trees, manuals for new performers in genealogy and books providing a short-history of different Irish surnames or places. The concept of homeland as a whole has become marketable too. Pieces of rocks, extracts of soil and shamrock plants have been Irish labelled and sold in Irish Tourist Offices as if to show to roots-tourists that they can export bits of their homeland after they visited it.

There are other examples of how Bord Fáilte acts to prompt the Irish populations abroad to visit Ireland. Besides *Ireland of the Welcome* journal, Bord Fáilte directs *Tracing your Irish Ancestor in Ireland*, an Irish genealogy handbook. The manual, which is often given for free to family historians who join genealogical meetings, gives the addresses of the main places genealogists should visit in order to progress in their quest. It provides an open invitation to visit Irish landscape as it claims:

Once you have found your roots on paper, the next step is the homecoming... In addition to checking out your ancestral location, you should also explore the surrounding countryside and local neighbouring villages and towns, and thereby capture and savour the culture and history of the entire area (Bord Fáilte: 16).

Visual signs are also used in that booklet to encourage travelling Ireland. On the front cover are an old green Irish passport and what seems to be a manuscript letter. Both these reproductions give the genealogist the possibility to visualize elements of the past. This is also the case with the image of the statues representing Annie Moore and her two brothers, the first Irish migrants to officially land on Ellis Island, United States of America.¹ Additionally, this last image indicates that migration should not be understood anymore as an individual affair. Instead, emigration is viewed as a familial and collective concern that links Ireland to Irish communities abroad forever. Moreover, emigration is represented as an Irish tradition. Since the 1990s, several elites and politicians have been interpreting emigration in these terms: Philosopher Richard Kearney, *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole and former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson. These people have developed the idea that the Irish nation extends beyond the geographical borders of the island since it includes the "Irish Diaspora worldwide". Besides this visual performance of the past, *Tracing your Irish Ancestors* contains several photos of tourist sites. These images are reproduced all over the manual to suggest that not only does Ireland have a long and inclusive history, but nice and "authentic"

¹ These statues are usually exhibited in front of Cobh Queenstown Museum (Co. Cork)

places to visit and friendly inhabitants to meet. All the visual ingredients seem joined together to decide people of Irish descent to come on their ancestor homeland.

The Irish government thought such chemistry would not work well without the help of the local population. In the early 1990s, Irish inhabitants were asked to send postcards to distant relatives living abroad. *Án Post* (The National Post Office) launched this *Write and Invite* campaign. At the same time, it printed thousands of stamps representing the theme of migration. In other words, An Post used the Irish inhabitants not only to strengthen connectedness between the Irish population at home and the Irish people abroad but also to promote Ireland's hospitality abroad.² One might question whether such hospitality is offered to migrants (whether permanent or temporary ones; whether Irish related or not) but this operation is successful, according to *Bord Fáilte* reports. Figures show that more and more people have been visiting Ireland in order to trace back their family history and to redefine who they are. According to Bord Fáilte (1994) roots-tourism concerned 39,000 persons in 1989, 58,000 in 1993 and 117.000 roots-tourists were expected for the year 2000. In 1994, the Activity report also suggested that root-tourists travelling to Ireland could be profiled as follows: 45 years-old aged and North-American residents (57%). These persons usually travel to Ireland with their spouse, during the summer period (47%) and spend more money than other tourists do during that time.

2. The making of biographical databases: processes and controversies

In Ireland, the development of roots-tourism has coincided with the building of heritage institutions across the island. In these places, roots-tourists (either Irish-related or not) can

² Promotion of hospitality and Ireland welcoming is relayed by Airline companies like *Air Lingus* which stipulates that "Irish hospitality begins in the air" (Kneafsey, 1998: 111).

visualise standard performance of Irish history. They can also meet skilled genealogists and access to biographical databases insofar as these institutions have proceeded to the indexation and the capture of Ireland's main archives (Church and civil records, census returns, graveyard inscriptions...). These transformations were originally urged by Irish genealogists three years before the *IGP* process started. In 1984, several Irish-based genealogists denounced the standard condition of genealogical research in their country. They deplored the fact that archives have been increasingly deteriorated by those who used them. Subsequently, these genealogists set up a society (*The Irish Family History Society*) in order to urge the local authorities to preserve Irish records, guarantors of memory³. While they used the society framework to encourage the public study of Irish genealogy and heraldry, to promote the interests of Irish family historians at home and abroad⁴ and to facilitate exchanges between them by producing a journal and organizing conferences, they progressively suggested that computers and data processing be used to revolutionize biographical data filing as well as genealogical activity. In other words, new technologies are understood as a means for facilitating the protection and the consultation of biographical data.

While setting up the *IGP*, the Irish government considered using these recommendations to provide roots-tourists concrete satisfactions as regards their personal research. The representatives of Heritage Centres and Family History Centres were asked to join the *IGP* and to computerize regional archivistic data. Reactions to this proposal were various and some of these organisations decided not to be part of this project. On the contrary, others agreed to be connected with it and to work closely under *Foras Aiseanna Saothair* (Ireland's

³ Similar organisations were set up previously as the *Irish Genealogical Research Society* (1936) whose representatives published the same year an article entitled "Rescue the Records" (*Irish Times*, October 1936, 17). They referred to the destruction of the Public Records Office in 1922 and stressed the need to collect manuscripts of genealogical value and to produce copy of these materials, so that they could satisfy the needs of future genealogists.

⁴ 334 people were members of this society the year following its creation, and only 35 Irish natives ranked among them.

national training and employment authority) scheme. *Foras Aiseanna Saothair* has recruited data capture trainees to complete the indexation of archivistic data. This job is supervised by historians holding academic and permanent positions in Heritage Centres or in Family History Centres. In the county of Cork where I completed my fieldwork, several stages are commonly identified with this process. Firstly, inventorying and copying-out archivistic data on hard-bound cards. This implies that the trainee could decipher the information wrote on the archive regardless language (Irish, Latin or English) and illegibly questions (antiquity or deterioration of the manuscript). This stage determines the reliability of the database (too many errors would make it unusable) and this is why it is considered as critical. Secondly, historians checked twice the work has been well done before proceeding to the capturing data on computer. This task which is undertaken by the trainee under the control of the historian represents the third stage of the process. Finally, the document is printed before the historian checks that the information reproduced on register, the handwritten copy and the typed version agree with one another. Both the supervision of trainees by well-known historians and the multiplication of the stages related to this mission are presently seen as ways of improving the quality of the work accomplished. Additionally, both these processes are considered as a way for counterbalancing Irish criticisms towards *IGP*.

Since the creation of genealogical services and up to the present, Heritage and Family History Centres have undergone several critics as regards their genealogical services. Qualified genealogists denounce failures in the indexation and the capture of archivistic data and regret that unqualified people have been employed for this job.⁵ Consequently, they fear the quality of genealogical activity as a whole could be called in question through the marketing of this

⁵ Conversely, they refer to the fact that non *IGP*-centres achieved the same work perfectly well in order to call the political instrumentation of genealogy into questions. For example, they often mentioned the Enterprise Ulster project which has digitised a substantial database of emigrant letters, ship's passenger lists and other data for the Ulster American Folk Park on Omagh (Northern Ireland).

industry. The Irish government reacted to this criticism by asking The Heritage Council to review the system of genealogical resources in Ireland. Through the writing of a report for the Minister of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands,⁶ politicians have acted to revalue the IGP and defend the marketing of genealogy. Some family-history societies also have adjudicated upon this criticism. Through the Internet, they stressed the need for publicly revealing these malfunctions so that they could independently advertise worldwide existing skilled-advises in matter of Irish genealogical research⁷.

Additionally, the process of accessing biographical data-bases has been critically questioned too. In fact, visitors of Heritage and Family History Centres judge this service too costly for results that are either unreliable or inexistent. It is noteworthy that, many genealogists I interviewed thought that they could locate easily their origins in Ireland and that they could trace back their family ties far in time⁸. They are not systematically aware that Civil Census did not exist prior to 1864. The tracing back of their family over hundreds of year still remains a fantastic reality as *IGP* does not bring people to archives that do not exist. Yet, further messages have often suggested the opposite. For example, former Prime Minister Charles Haughey declared that:

The whole world is tracing its roots, but while most of it is stumbling around in the dark, we in this country, have something unique... [We] can trace our continuity over five thousands years, and that's of phenomenal interest" (*Western People* May, 26 1993, cited by Moya Kneafsey, 1995: 147).

⁶ See Teehan., 2000.

⁷ By inviting people to inform other genealogists of their personal investigations and to publish their own request on the Internet, these societies also contribute to facilitate the global connectedness among people claiming Irish ancestry.

⁸ Both the fact that genealogy was a matter of importance during pre-Norman period and that 12th records are still held by contemporary institutions make some people think that genealogies could be traced easily in Ireland.

As for *lucky*⁹ genealogists who find relevant information in these databases, their reaction is often described as *quite overwhelming and emotional at times, such is their joy at being able to identify their ancestral home*¹⁰. Yet, many people I interviewed regret that they could not touch the original document which contains it so as to appropriate its contents sensuously which is an important process for shaping identities.

I argue that these critics should not only be understood in relation to indexation mistakes or to budget policies. I suggest that negative attitudes towards *IGP* also make sense as regards local and trans-national relationships. In other words, I consider that the marketing of genealogy (and consequently the *IGP*) enlightens existing tensions. One of these tensions concerns the property and the managing of archives in Ireland. Before starting to index the files, *IGP* managers had to convince the authorities of the church to lend them the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials. On the one hand, some bishops interpreted these requests as usurpation attempts. They thought that they might lose their exclusive rights in matter of controlling the divulgence of the data they recorded and informing people about their ancestor's lives. Additionally they believed that they could also loose the gift economy associated with these activities (food, drink or money). On the other hands, other church authorities fear the indexation length. They fear to be dispossessed from their records during a long time. These tensions may be understood in relation to the value that social groups grant to the files and memory supports. In facts, the property of these materials is all the more debated (and prone to conflicts) that they represent products which value differs as regards the kind of network (church authorities, genealogists and roots-tourists, government agencies) which try to appropriate these files. Furthermore, these tensions have contributed to manufacture locally a

⁹ The term is used by genealogists themselves. Nonetheless, professional genealogists who I met in Ireland consider that "chance favours the prepared mind" alone, suggesting that methodical approach, patience, and personal aptitude for criticising sources are necessary to genealogists.

¹⁰ This opinion is held on Clare Heritage and Genealogical Centre website: <http://clare.irish-roots.net/comments.htm>

negative image of the *IGP*. According to the Irish press for example, clerical protests appeared as non-senses at a time the Irish economy needs to expand.¹¹ As for genealogists themselves, they consider the reaction of these bishops all the more unjustifiable that copies of birth, marriage and burials registers are already available in Mormons' Churches and in the National Library of Ireland. A second critical point concerns the reticence of Irish-born person towards genealogists and towards foreign roots-tourists particularly. By promoting roots-tourism industry, Irish politicians have indeed created a kind of equivalence between the genealogical practice and the tourist experience. Even though genealogy has been used for long time in Ireland¹², Irish-born persons mistrust contemporary genealogists since these two activities have been brought together. This mistrust is translated in two ways. Firstly, some Irish-born persons do not accept to be assimilated with foreigners, while they are tracing back their family history too. This is translated into several social practices. For example, while some Irish born person do not publicly reveal the interest they have for locating their roots, other justify the fact they do not know family-historians living in Ireland by saying that *genealogy is for tourists*. Secondly, Irish inhabitants are concerned about the impact of massive arrival of foreign relatives on their ways of life. They fear the reciprocal relationship of obligation and exchange that the revelation of family ties would induce. For example, a Corkman who I interviewed told me that:

I do not answer every letters that I received from America. A man sent me a latter from the United States of America. He said to be a fourth-cousin of mine. Imagine that I write him back, I would have to lodge him afterwards" [in case this American man, who may claim an Irish ancestry and his kin-relatedness to this informant, travels to Ireland].

It is noteworthy that these anxieties reveal the collective dimension of genealogy. In fact, tracing of one's family history has consequences not only for the genealogist him or herself but also for people he or she might discover as relatives. These latest feel the need to respond

¹¹ "Bishop's register 'ban' at odds with jobs pledges", *Cork Examiner* 1992, 26 August; "Cork parish registers row delays 66 jobs", *Cork Examiner* 1992, 27 August.

¹² O'Corrain, 1991; Hood, 2002.

either positively or negatively to genealogists' expectations. Their opinions are all the more requested today as the Internet provides genealogists worldwide the possibilities to access biographical databases on-line and to inform people about their searches for identity and Irish kin connections.

Conclusion

There exists a collective dimension of the genealogy which resonance sounds particular in Ireland because political authorities have developed different strategies of communication in order to encourage people of Irish descent to trace their roots in and to Ireland. Messages that Irish institutions intended to the latter Irish politicians foster the idea that the Irish population abroad is not only included in the Irish nation but also very welcomed in Ireland. Yet, the Irish population at home may sometimes cynically criticize its *closeness* to people of Irish descent. This means that natives are concerned by the marketing of genealogy and roots-tourism (an industry which use the search for roots and identity to master the economic future of Ireland) in their country. This is why this industry should not only be analysed as facilitating genealogical research among people claiming Irish identities. Because debates related to the property of records and the public understanding of Irishness take shape around the marketing of genealogy and roots-tourism, this industry also appears as a means for analyzing the distinctions and the interactions between the representations of Ireland and genealogy that various networks of people and institutions (tourism and heritage agencies, natives and family historians) produce.

References

Bord Fáilte, n.d, *Tracing your Ancestors*: 16.

Bord Fáilte, 1994, *Perspectives on Irish Tourism Activities 1989-1993*, Dublin, Bord Fáilte Publication.

Byron, Reginald. 1998. "Ethnicity and generation. On 'feeling Irish' in Contemporary America". *Ethnologia Europaea*. 1: 27-36.

Government, 1985, *White Paper on Tourism Policy*, Dublin: Stationary Office: 27.

Grenham John, 1994, *Clans and Families of Ireland: The Heritage and Heraldry of Irish Clans and Families*, Dublin, Book Sales Publisher.

Haley Alex, 1976, *Roots*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday.

Hood, Susan. 2002. *Royal Roots, Republican Inheritance. The survival of the Office of Arms*, Dublin: The Woodfield Press.

Kneafsey, Moya. 1995. "A Landscape of Memories. Heritage and Tourism in Mayo". In *Landscape, Heritage and Identity: Case Studies in Irish ethnography*. Ullrich Kockel ed. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 135-153.

O'Corrain, Donnchadh. 1991. "Irish Origin Legends and Genealogy: Recurrent Actiologies, History and Heroic Tale. A symposium. Proceedings of the 8th IS, organized by the Centre for the study of vernacular literature in the Middle-Age Ireland. Tore Nyberg ed., Odense, Denmark, Odense University Press, 51-91.

Legrand Caroline, 2006, *La quête de parenté. Pratiques et enjeux de la généalogie en Irlande*. Québec, Presses de l'université Laval.

Legrand Caroline, 2006, Tourisme des racines et confrontations identitaires dans l'Irlande des migrations, *Diasporas*, 8 : 162-171.

Teehan Virginia, 2000, *The Provision of Genealogical Services in Ireland*, Kilkenny, The Heritage Council, Towards Policies for Ireland's Heritage.