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Learning ‘The Customs of their Fathers’: Irish Villages in Chicago’s Columbian Exposition, 1893

Shahmima Akhtar*

ABSTRACT

This article examines how a transnational vision of Ireland was created in the United States by two philanthropic women in Chicago’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. Lady Aberdeen and Alice Hart each used accessible images of Ireland and the bodies of white exhibited women to authenticate their narrative of dying rural industries that needed to be revived. Their specific visions of Irish development and survival were located against the backdrop of significant Irish migration to the United States and capitalized on feelings of nostalgia popular among the newly settled Irish-American population. By trading on discourse of an Irish whiteness, a Scotswoman and Englishwoman foregrounded Ireland’s place in the imagined hierarchy of civilizations popular in the nineteenth century. They materially, physically and performatively manufactured Ireland as being at the apex of civilization narratives – positioned as the Irish Villages were at the start of the Midway Plaisance. If the Irish only laboured enough, produced enough, and consumed enough, their symbolic place in the fairground would ascend to the main arena of industry, technology, and capitalism – ensuring the survival of Ireland’s people and land. Through interrogating the multiple ways in which women’s bodies, rural industries, and commerce interacted in the space of the Fair, the article contributes to studies of Irish identities in Ireland, England, and the United States at the interface of race, gender, and class.

KEYWORDS: Irish, villages, exhibition, gender, race, Chicago Fair

Heralding the United States as the ‘Land of our hope!’, the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 contained a cornucopia of both material objects and embodied displays.¹ From industrial treasures, to arts and crafts, from emblems of mechanized progress to cultural artefacts and people – all celebrated aspects of the West were lauded in visual form. Visitor numbers reached enormous figures: 27 million attended from its opening to the public on 1 May 1893 to 30 October 1893. The Chicago Fair displayed the virtues and potentially transformative powers of civilization spanning 600 acres, demonstrating industry, architecture, and culture. Crucially, an in-between place operated in the form of the Midway Plaisance, acting as the visual and physical bridge between progress and development.

The Midway Plaisance was a mile-long, 600-foot-wide strip of land linking Washington Park to Jackson Park.² Placed at the far end of the fairground the Midway acted as a barometer for the world’s progress and development. Embodying a ‘torch of civilization’ it contained everything from a Japanese Bazaar; a Javanese, as well as a German village; a Brazilian Concert Hall; and an entire Street in Cairo. It was completed by a ‘Wild East Show’, by the

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¹ K. Tynan, ‘An Ode for the Opening of the Irish Village at Chicago’, *Guide to the Irish Industrial Village and Blarney Castle. The Exhibit of the Irish Industries Association* (Chicago, IL: Columbian Guide Co, 1893), p. 29.

² C. M. Rosenberg, *America at the Fair: Chicago’s 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition* (San Francisco, CA: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), p. 254.

Ottoman's Arab Camp, and Sitting Bull's Log Cabin.³ In this presentation visitors could see the development of humanity, beginning with the 'white' Irish, closest to the fair's White City and then descending according to perceived civilizational status away from this focal point. Nineteenth-century discourse on civilization relied on an essentialist idea of race which held that being of a particular racial group shaped one's behaviours, culture, and identity. These ideas were biologically fixed and typically conferred the highest civilizational attributes to white races.⁴ For instance, markers of advanced civilization included western notions of industry, art, and infrastructure. In the Midway, visitors witnessed varying stages of mechanization such as railway systems, irrigation networks and military achievements.⁵ According to such understandings of racial groups in the nineteenth century, the Irish were petitioning for a higher civilizational advancement that would enable them to share space with the English and American sections of the Fair – metaphorically in the fairground and symbolically outside of it. In this melange of the world's peoples, Irish people, curiously, featured twice for the affordable price of 25 cents. An Irish Village, including Donegal Castle by Alice Hart, stood near Lady Aberdeen's Irish Industrial Village and Blarney Castle – both displays will be inter-rogated in this article.

International fairs such as this had become common by the Victorian era as grand spectacles that showcased varied countries' arts, histories and communities for millions to consume. Historians, anthropologists, geographers, and museum studies professionals have extensively researched exhibitions over the past few decades. This burgeoning scholarship identifies the importance of display for international markets, the development of science, and identity formation. Recently, exhibition literature has challenged ideas of the unity, hegemony and utopian comprehensiveness of exhibitions to instead consider fracture, discontent, and concessions within display.⁶ It is prudent to recognize that exhibitions were not centrally co-ordinated events and often the discourse of political coherence functioned as a deceptive fiction managed by exhibition planners and investors.⁷ The fairs were unpredictable and unstable, as I will show.

Extending this literature, I examine how Irish contemporaries laboured to construct their own national and international stories, becoming active agents who selected the goods on show, the specific industries performed, and the companies advertised. Uniquely, this was imagined through white Irish women whose bodies and labours were put on display for the consumption of fair goers. My research highlights the dissonance typical of Irish exhibitions. For instance, rurality and authenticity were juxtaposed with industry and modernity within the 1893 Fair. Despite both being important narratives for Ireland's trade, they functioned in direct opposition. This article will investigate how reliance on recognizable stereotypes of

³ J. J. Flinn, *Official Guide to the Midway Plaisance. Otherwise known as 'The Highway Through The Nations'* (Chicago, IL: Columbian Guide Co, 1893), p. 1.

⁴ See K. Kenny, 'Race, Violence and Anti-Irish Sentiment in the Nineteenth Century', in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, ed. by J. J. Lee and M. R. Cassey (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2006), pp. 364–80.

⁵ M. Armstrong, 'A Jumble of Foreignness: The Sublime Musayums of Nineteenth-Century Fairs and Expositions', *Cultural Critique*, 23 (1992–1993), 199–250. See also Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996).

⁶ N. Cardon, *A Dream of the Future: Race, Empire, and Modernity at the Atlanta and Nashville World's Fairs, 1895–1897* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); S. Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); A. C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-De-Siècle Europe* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁷ P. Kramer, 'Making Concessions: Race and Empire Revisited at the Philippine Exposition, St. Louis, 1901–1905', *Radical History Review*, 73 (1999), 75–114.

Ireland's rural industries created an accessible narrative, despite the contradictions inherent in focusing on the past within constructions of an Irish modernity in the future that was profitably based on industry and technology.

Moreover, adverts of the Chicago display stressed the authenticity of Ireland's display in the fairground – equating it to an Irish reality. For example, *Picturesque World's Fair. An Elaborate Collection of Colored Views* (1893) wrote how visitors could observe the 'practical features of village [life] with turf fires in the cottages', 'potato-pots hanging over them, and other characteristics of Irish home-life as strictly observed'.⁸ Yet, actual events in nineteenth-century Ireland did not feature in the presentations of the country and its people. For example, by the late 1900s, the Irish land question had developed into calls for Home Rule, which subsumed economic discontent into a larger debate on Irish nationalism. Groups such as the Fenian Brotherhood and the Ladies Land League, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Clan na Gael, were founded and grew in popularity – they all broadly held that Ireland suffered because of England and vied for varying degrees of Irish independence.⁹ This mass politicization of Irish social and political hardship was nowhere to be found in the Chicago Fair. My analysis reveals the tensions between the internal display and its external surroundings instead of assuming a congruence between the two. This article interrogates how transnational visions of Ireland were created in the United States in the 1893 Columbian Exposition and to what effect. It investigates how traditional motifs of an Irish land interacted with the bodily performance of white Irishmen and especially white Irish women to offer a convincing portrayal of displayed Irishness. My analysis speaks to larger arguments about the contested nature of Irish identity abroad, and how migration interacted with popular female philanthropy and nostalgia to create an attractive image of white Irish selfhood in the ephemeral space of the fairground.

An important aspect of the exhibition was the role played by two women in formulating and executing the displays. Alice Hart (1848–1931), an Englishwoman committed to helping Donegal's poor, was the owner of the Irish Village including Donegal Castle, and Lady Ishbel Aberdeen (1857–1939), an aristocratic Scottish woman famed for her charitable projects, was owner of the Irish Industrial Village and Blarney Castle. Both sought to remedy Irish poverty through a revival of rural industries. Both recognized that women's work often supplemented the male householder's income in times of extreme poverty. Labouring men typically took part in seasonal work, which was weather dependent and inevitably led to financial difficulties during winter.¹⁰ Concurrently, Hart and Aberdeen saw the solution as the restoration of traditional rural industries of spinning, sewing and weaving. In this context, exhibitions became an important way to bolster sales, raise awareness and, most importantly, create trade and profit for the destitute in Ireland, as this article will investigate.

Differences in class between aristocratic and bourgeois spheres caused tensions, given Aberdeen's position in the 'inner [circle] of British rule' and Hart's middle-class status which left her with less political prestige.¹¹ Whilst both recognized the advertising potential of display to stimulate trade, their ongoing classed hostilities meant they could not work together and so organized separate exhibits in Chicago. Even within the same rural revival movement

⁸ *Picturesque World's Fair. An Elaborate Collection of Colored Views* (Chicago, IL: 1893).

⁹ K. A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), see especially pp. 441–46.

¹⁰ D. Fitzpatrick, 'A Curious Middle Place: The Irish in Britain, 1871–1921', in *The Irish in Britain 1815–1939*, ed. by R. Swift and S. Gilley (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989), pp. 10–59 (pp. 16–19).

¹¹ W. T. Stead, *Lord and Lady Aberdeen: A Character Sketch* (London: 1893), p. 42.

the two women's divergent class politics materialized in their distinctive creations of Irishness in Chicago. How these two female philanthropists constructed visions of Irish identity abroad amidst debates about Home Rule to ensure rural survival is the subject of this article.

Aberdeen's and Hart's Irish Villages were part of an Irish diasporic culture that thrived in the overseas communities, and was particularly important in funding the growing Irish independence movement, especially in the 1880s and from 1910 to 1922.¹² Aberdeen held a more moderate position within the broader Home Rule movement compared to Hart's more 'extreme' outlook, and both used the popular platform of display to champion their different Irish political agendas. By highlighting the divergent opinions within the independent Ireland debate (as conducted by women), my research extends previous works on female philanthropy and the Home Rule period notably by Hart's biographer, Janice Helland, Maria Luddy and Lindsey Earner-Byrne to demonstrate the wide spectrum of political affiliations that existed at any one time.¹³ As we will see, my analysis intersects in the realms of the cultural and social by demonstrating how two philanthropists created a narrative of Ireland that offered a politicized yet accessible and commercially profitable construction of white Irishness across the transatlantic ocean.

Printed material that ranges from catalogues, guidebooks, maps, and descriptive listings reveals the machinations of fair organizers, offering a creative, multifaceted textual and visual topography of historical formations of Irishness. I analyse these sources in conjunction with the periodicals, editorials, and articles printed in newspapers to complement the exhibition's display. This genre of sources exposes productive avenues to read visitors' responses and criticisms, and the legacies of the displays. I also use visual materials to illustrate the significance of symbols of Ireland in the form of postcards and photographs. Decisions related to building proposals offer a further layered interpretation of organization and reception that is useful in my analysis. Together, these sources afford a composite account of the production of Irishness at a crucial turning point in Irish nationalist politics with Ireland's relationship with England being hotly debated in the form of Home Rule both in parliament and in the wider public sphere.¹⁴

The paper traces the emergence of a distinctive image of Irishness rooted in the diasporic realm of nineteenth-century Irish America in three sections. The first discusses how Aberdeen and Hart came to invest financial and physical labour in this project by exploring their charitable motivations. The second section explores the symbols of Ireland that were cultivated in the fairground. Irish symbols were reinforced by exhibited white Irish women who worked for several months at a time and took part in the various industries displayed, posed for photographs, waited, served, and generally made real the fiction of a displayed Ireland.¹⁵ To better understand these constructions, the third section links the construction of Irishness abroad with the context of migration and nostalgia in the US. Finally, I conclude by assessing the success of the campaign to portray Ireland in 1890s Chicago.

¹² D. N. Doyle, 'The Remaking of Irish-America, 1845–1880', in *A New History of Ireland. Vol VI. Ireland Under the Union, II, 1870–1921*, ed. by W. E. Vaughan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 725–63 (pp. 725–26).

¹³ Janice Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries, 1880–1914. Marketing Craft, Making Fashion* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

¹⁴ D. Harkness, 'Ireland', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol V. Historiography*, ed. by R. W. Winks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 114–33.

¹⁵ See Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale (eds), *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State University Press 2018).

This article treats whiteness as a discourse of racialized privilege that does not equate in any straightforward manner with any particular social group. The category is socially constructed and politically contested, with only an ideological connection to those who possess 'white' skin.¹⁶ In terms of whiteness scholarship and histories of Irishness, Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995) has been the most influential. He argues Irish Americans established themselves as superior workers and citizens to African Americans in the eighteenth century by emphasizing their separation from black communities in labour, religion and culture despite being part of a similar workforce.¹⁷ Further, historians Mary Hickman and Bronwen Walter argue in 'Deconstructing Whiteness: Irish Women in Britain' (1995) that the colonial racism stemming from Anglo-Irish relations and the construction of the Irish (Catholic) as a historically significant Other of the English/British (Protestant) has been under-analysed. Anti-Irish racism in Britain and abroad has comprised both elements of racism: colonial and cultural; that is, the Irish have been constructed as inferior and as alien (in British representations of Irishness in world's fairs for example).¹⁸ This article takes the case study of world's fairs to demonstrate that skin colour interacted with gender and class to mark Irish inclusion to the British imperial state in the nineteenth century. It reveals how efforts to create an authentic Irishness interacted with whiteness in the Chicago Fair of 1893.

My transnational perspective interrogates the specific motifs of Irishness that had global currency at the end of the Victorian period. The focus on white feminized bodies centres the role of performativity in authenticating an attractive portrait of Ireland at home and abroad. Further, Chicago offers a unique case study in excavating how a specific nostalgia that straddled the temporal spheres of past and future was visually manipulated to soothe the effects of migration. Overall, the article originally investigates how crucial white women were in creating visions of Irishness that popularly circulated for decades after the Chicago Fair. Studying the heterogeneous mix of Irish identities created by Aberdeen's and Hart's displays uncovers the female labour behind Irish identity formation and its intricacies along classed and gendered boundaries.

1. 'LINEN, LACE, CROCHET [AND] HANDKERCHIEFS': LADY ABERDEEN'S AND ALICE HART'S PHILANTHROPIC ENTERPRISE

Lady Ishbel Aberdeen was an aristocratic Scot who served as viceregal consort in Canada from 1893 to 1898. She also enjoyed the political prestige from her husband John Aberdeen's appointment as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1886 and again in 1906 until 1915.¹⁹ Alice Hart was a middle-class English woman who dedicated her life to reversing the effects of poverty in the west of Ireland and helping prevent future famines.²⁰ Both women wanted Home Rule for Ireland in the form of a devolved union with Britain. However, Hart had more radical views than Aberdeen on Irish independence, as she believed England to be responsible for past Irish suffering. The two women existed within the well-established tradition of local, national and international philanthropy of the nineteenth century, which was typically organized by gentry women who set up schools or offered instruction in peasants' cottages.²¹ Particularly for Irish philanthropy, charitable concerns intersected with the terse political debates of the time. The most extreme of these advocated for a

¹⁶ P. Jackson, 'Constructions of "Whiteness" in the Geographical Imagination', *Area*, 30 (1998), 99–106 (p. 100).

¹⁷ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*.

¹⁸ M. J. Hickman and B. Walter, 'Deconstructing Whiteness: Irish Women in Britain', *Feminist Review*, 50 (1995), 5–19 (p. 9).

¹⁹ D. F. Shackleton, *Ishbel and the Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1996), p. 17.

²⁰ Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, p. 26.

²¹ C. Breathnach, *Congested Districts Board, 1891–1923* (Cork: Four Courts Press, 2005), p. 11.

separatist mode of Home Rule, with the creation of an Irish parliament in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and this polarized context explains the two women's eventual falling out.

Lady Aberdeen founded the Irish Industries Association (IIA) in the late 1880s. It aimed '[t]o organise the Home, Cottage, and other Industries of Ireland, and to bring the various centres of these industries into communication with one another.'²² The IIA was the institutional body of the Royal Dublin Society, which triennially organized exhibitions in Ireland to stimulate agriculture and industry. The IIA sought to facilitate arrangements: 'whereby good designs may be brought within the reach of workers in all parts of Ireland; [find] suitable markets for Irish work; promote the establishment of local centres and committees [and] offer advice'; promote and advertise the use of Irish goods; collect donations to bolster the trade and ultimately to make profitable again rural industries in Ireland for the benefit of the poor. Like Lady Aberdeen, Alice Hart identified rural crafts as vital to Irish modernity. She sought to 'revive the old cottage industries and to develop the ancient arts of spinning, weaving, knitting, sewing, and embroidery' amongst peasants by setting up the Donegal Industrial Fund (DIF) after visiting the county in March 1883.²³ It was set up with a modest sum of £50, the Harts added £5000 over the next few years, and friends donated a further £1500.²⁴ She built a network of technical schools in Donegal and 'f[ound] new markets for the goods'. A 'carefully devised system of village technical training' skilled in the 'making of homespuns of a kind and quality never before attempted in Ireland' was Hart's goal. Hart set up a permanent depot for the sale of her industries at 43 Donegal House, Wigmore Street, London, where Kells embroideries, hand-knit and hand-woven hosiery and gloves, hand-sewn under-linen, lace, crochet, embroidered handkerchiefs, and Irish linens could be purchased or ordered by post.²⁵ Helland has neatly summarized Hart's venture as creating a 'cultural biography of [Irish] things' to rescue a struggling Ireland, which relied on the most familiar images of Irish land, people and object to encourage and sustain the consumption of Irish-made products.²⁶

Hart's project is best understood in the context of the Irish Revival of the late nineteenth century. The Celtic Revival began in the 1880s and was mainly literary and bound up with Irish national politics. For example, organizations were established that dealt with prominent aspects of Irish culture, such as the Gaelic Athletics Association, established in 1884 to revive ancient games and sports in Ireland, the National Literary Society in 1892, and the Gaelic League in 1893. The League encouraged Irish language and culture and held a festival each year, the Oireachtas, with literary prizes and competitions for Irish songs and dancing.²⁷ Paul Larmour explains that 'managed on sound economic principles though

²² *Guide to the Irish Industrial Village*, p. 17.

²³ Janice Helland, 'Working Bodies, Celtic Textiles, and the Donegal Industrial Fund 1883–1890', *Textile*, 2:2 (2004), pp. 134–155.

²⁴ Paul Larmour, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland* (London: Friar's Bush Press, 1992), p. 19. Two Donegal men were selected to be teachers and were settled in Gweedore to study dyeing and weaving, and a technical teacher was brought over from Lancashire to instruct them in drafting, designing, patterns, textile calculations, and the working of Wych and Jacquard looms. Two Donegal girls were also sent to England to learn Torchon lace making. They later held daily classes for Torchon lace in Knockostolar, Bunbeg, and Derrybeg. Further classes for sprigging and hem stitching were also held in Milford, Termon, Dore, Barnesmore and Bridge End; Larmour, *Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 20.

²⁵ A. Hart, 'Mrs Ernest Hart and Donegal Cottage Industries', *Londonderry Sentinel*, 14 June 1889.

²⁶ Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, p. 34. See also, Janice Helland, 'The Craft and Design of Dressmaking, 1880–1900' in ed., Penny Sparke and Fiona Fisher, *The Routledge Companion to Design Studies* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016), pp. 89–99.

²⁷ See also, Nicola Gordon Bowe and Elizabeth Cumming, *The Arts and Crafts Movements in Dublin and Edinburgh, 1885–1925* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998).

philanthropic in aim, with all profits being devoted to the furtherance of technical teaching, Alice Hart's cottage industries were one of the great successes of the Irish Revival.²⁸ Further, Éimear O'Connor explains that the revival of cottage industries rested on an acceptance of the plight of the poor, coupled with a belief that developing philanthropic activities to sustain forms of labour for the poor would resolve their chronic poverty through personal hard work.²⁹ For example, Aberdeen insisted that 'God had created a hierarchical society and that it was the duty of the wealthy to protect, guide and help the lower ranks, maintaining a firm moral superintendence.'³⁰ Her social benevolence enlisted the upper classes into IAA membership. The membership fees were used to facilitate classes in lacemaking and other home industries, as well as to sell the products of home industries. Horace Plunkett (1854–1932) joined the IIA in 1886. In a similar vein, the Congested Districts Board (1891) financed multiple Irish cottage industries programmes, popular among migrant communities in England and the United States.³¹ Plunkett founded the Irish Agricultural Organisations Society (IAOS), an ecumenical endeavour focused on creating agricultural co-operation among Ireland's farmers.³² Yet Hart's philanthropy recognized its limits and she insisted on 'quality and finish' in all work in order to compete with the mass-produced machine-made goods that dominated the market.

Aberdeen and Hart shared many similarities – in essence, they sought to advertise Irish products to Irish Americans in the US. They both wanted to revive Irish industries and demonstrate Irish ingenuity in the face of dominant negative prejudices about the country's underdevelopment, the people's laziness and apathy, and the waste of the land that circulated in the 1890s. Yet both were outsiders to the Irish project; they both understood the history of England's exploitation of Ireland but they also succumbed to the reductive desire to romanticize the Irish folk and the peasantry. By 1880, 1.8 million Irish men and women had emigrated and 1.2 million (67%) of them were in the same US states, creating large communities of Irish-born migrants with a distinct culture, language and religion.³³ The early 1890s was an ideal time for their exhibitions, given that successive waves of Irish emigration continued unabated, increasing the significant numbers of second- and third-generation Irish men and women who had previously settled in the United States. Irish men were often employed in skilled labour districts as mechanics, boilermakers, smiths, and fitters, and Irish women were engaged in a variety of low-paid professional occupations, including social work and nursing.³⁴

Cheap transportation and inexpensive tickets made the Chicago Fair accessible for these workers, not only for the middling and the elite of Irish, American and British society. On a dual level, the steady professionalization and politicization of the Irish immigrant class in Chicago created a further expansive community of Irish men and women to target for the

²⁸ Larmour, *Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 24.

²⁹ Éimear O'Connor, *Art, Ireland, and the Irish Diaspora: Chicago, Dublin, New York 1893–1939. Culture, Connections, and Controversies* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2020), p. 2.

³⁰ Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, p. 5.

³¹ Dinah Maria Mulock, 'Work for Idle Hands', reprinted from the Cornhill Magazine, July 1886, in a pamphlet analysing the DIF, and Donegal House, 1886.

³² Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: Celtic Revival, 1830–1930* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1980), p. 148.

³³ Doyle, 'Remaking of Irish-America', p. 740.

³⁴ R. Swift and S. Campbell, 'The Irish in Britain', in *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*, ed. by E. F. Biagini and M. E. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 515–33 (p. 518).

exhibition project. Hart and Aberdeen relied on the financial and political support of Irish immigrants in the United States. Indeed, millions of Irish Americans participated enthusiastically in the fantasy of Ireland in the 1893 exhibition that celebrated Irishness abroad. Chicago's Irish population (almost a fifth of the city's total populace) responded particularly positively to Ireland's display in 1893 and were keen to spend money on charity for their homeland. O'Connor describes Ireland's display in world fairs as 'shop windows designed to appeal to expatriate communities abroad.'³⁵ Ishbel and Alice thereby profitably capitalized on the readiness of America's Irish immigrant community to feel sympathy for their homeland and expend financial and emotional labour to commit funds and sustain rural industry in Ireland.

What became important for visitors was witnessing an Irish past and an Irish history rooted in rural industries and tradition. This reveals the type of Irish modernity imagined. Marguérite Corporaal explains that as post-famine Ireland was gradually advancing to a state of modernity, 'social change and upheaval' gave rise to nostalgia, the mobilization of an idealized, stable epoch whereby 'conflicts are elided and social solidarity promoted.'³⁶ Aberdeen's and Hart's conviction of a stable epoch meant a revival of rural industries which would save Ireland – this put them at odds with most other countries in the nineteenth century (including those represented at the Chicago Fair) which typically vied for increasing urban industrialization in the form of technological mechanization and modern architecture. The two women traded on a romanticized version of an Irish past that prioritized female labour as a source for good and a saviour to the Irish nation. Clearly, an Irish modernity that was on the brink of industrialization became concomitant with 'saving Ireland' for these elite women. Ireland's potential for development through rural industries translated into hope for the country's future. This had the effect of reinforcing both the imperial networks that sustained Irish poverty as well as the hierarchies within labour that reinforced unequal production and consumption. Despite this, the Irish-American public enjoyed the tranquil Celtic Ireland depicted on the fairground.

Hart and Lady Aberdeen also tapped into notions of regionalism and local colour that were popular in the United States at the time, in art, literature, and heritage making.³⁷ We cannot be sure whether they were readers of regionalist writers popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but they were certainly feeding into and reproducing tropes of regionalism that were part of the discourse at the time.³⁸ Regionalist writers were interested in features of the physical landscape, and focused on the relationship between the natural world and human consciousness.³⁹ Similarly, echoing post-famine literature, diaspora fiction of the late nineteenth century stressed that Ireland's rural identity was rooted to its pastoral landscape and a unity existed between the inhabitants and the land. This idea of the loss of Edenic Ireland was popular in novels and stories, and a pastoral landscape of idyllic countryside,

³⁵ O'Connor, *Art, Ireland, and the Irish Diaspora*, p. 3.

³⁶ Marguérite Corporaal, *Relocated Memories of the Great Irish Famine in Irish and Diaspora Fiction, 1846–70* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017), p. 11.

³⁷ See also Josephine Donovan, *European Local-Color Literature: National Tales, Dorfgeschichten, Romans Champêtres* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

³⁸ See also Nuñez Seixas, Xosé Manoel, and Eric Storm, 'Introduction: Region, Nation and History', in *Regionalism and Modern Europe. Identity Construction and Movements from 1890 to the Present Day*, ed. by Nuñez Seixas, Xosé Manoel, and Eric Storm (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 1–24.

³⁹ Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women and American Literary Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 4.

arcadian scenes, and rural culture was envisaged as the expression of a unique Irish identity.⁴⁰ Corporaal understands this body of literature as foregrounding the physical and spiritual connection of the people to the land.⁴¹ Further, these pastoral landscapes transformed into sites of Irishness in the transatlantic processes of identity formation. The fairground became the closest thing to an Edenic Irish landscape in 1890s Chicago in lieu of being able to return to Ireland.⁴² Corporaal explains that narratives of a re-migration to an idyllic Ireland unspoiled by the miseries of famine or the threat of industrialization were attractive and this was what Aberdeen and Hart offered in the fairground.⁴³ In a similar fashion, Oona Frawley explains that in revival literature, nature became a frequent site for nostalgia – a site from which to express the longing for lost culture.⁴⁴ Specifically, for many involved in Ireland's cultural Revival, the value of Irish culture lay in the past.⁴⁵ And the past is what the Chicago Fair offered through rolling green fields, thatched cottages, and beautiful Irish women spinning and weaving.

The exhibitions resonated strongly with the context of the broader Irish revival in the late nineteenth century; for instance, revival writing was not just concerned with the salvation of a pre-modern past but also with the production of an idealized ethnicity.⁴⁶ In 1894, Douglas Hyde's essay on the 'The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland' argued against the 'folly of neglecting what is Irish, and hastening to adopt, pell-mell, and indiscriminately, everything that is English, simply because it is English.'⁴⁷ Hyde argued against Anglicization and appealed for Nationalist and Unionists, Protestant and Catholic alike to 'help the Irish race to develop in future upon Irish Lines' in matters of books, literature, music, games, fashions, and ideas.⁴⁸ Patrick Bixby and Gregory Castle show in their collection that Irish literature and art helped redefine the idea of national belonging, and the exhibitions also sit within this framework. 'In the nineteenth century, as the English enhanced their national image through explicit comparisons with the backwardness and barbarity of the Irish, writers in Ireland began turning to the legends and heroes of the ancient past to advance an oppositional vision of Irish nobility and vitality.'⁴⁹ This romanticized past was centre stage in the Irish villages in 1893.

2. 'HOPE AND INDUSTRY IN THE PLACE OF DESPAIR AND IDLENESS': IRELAND IN THE MIDWAY PLAISANCE

Symbols were essential to convince Irish, American, British and international visitors of the vitality and prosperity of Ireland on the fairground. A visual politics centred on quaint Irish images of the land and people suitably exploited Irish-American feelings of dislocation engendered by migration. These motifs became integral to the process of settling into a new overseas community, representing the transferable, fluid boundaries of Irish symbolism. Recent

⁴⁰ Corporaal, *Relocated Memories*, p. 123.

⁴¹ See also Oona Frawley, *Irish Pastoral* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005) and Barbara Bender, *Landscapes, Politics and Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴² Corporaal, *Relocated Memories*, p. 148.

⁴³ See, Fintan Cullen, *Ireland on Show: Art, Union and Nationhood* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁴ Frawley, *Irish Pastoral*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Frawley, *Irish Pastoral*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Patrick Bixby and Gregory Castle, in *Irish Modernism: From Emergence to Emergency: A History of Irish Modernism*, ed. by Patrick Bixby and Gregory Castle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–24 (p. 6).

⁴⁷ *The Revival of Irish Literature: Addresses by Sr Charles Gavan Duffy, KCMG, Dr. George Sigerson, and Dr Douglas Hyde* (London: 1904), Project Gutenberg, pp. 117–61 (p. 117).

⁴⁸ *The Revival of Irish Literature*, p. 161.

⁴⁹ Bixby and Castle, *Irish Modernism*, p. 16.

and more established Irish migrants in the United States could identify with the picturesque Ireland they were seeing on the fairground that recreated their home country as a lost utopia ready to be saved from destitution. By visiting the fairgrounds, buying souvenirs and generally celebrating a forgotten rural Ireland, enthusiastic participants in the Irish American project sustained the fiction of the Fair. Aberdeen and Hart laboriously created authentic allegorical narratives of Ireland for mass consumption. Bruce Nelson invokes the concept of a 'disaporic imagination' to explain the common symbols, ideologies, and rituals prevalent in specific Irish-American groups.⁵⁰ The two women productively tapped into this diasporic imagination to generate interest and investment in their charitable projects. Crucially, pastoral sites played a significant role in the negotiation of displaced diaspora identities – Matthew Frye Jacobson described this reimagination of identity as inevitable after crisis and how it involves 'extolling certain virtues, condemning certain vices, celebrating certain kinds of deeds, and advancing certain versions of the heroic, fabricated and enshrined . . . national character.'⁵¹ This Ireland may never have existed in reality but through a form of retrospective as well as prospective nostalgia, it offered 'anchorage for ethnic identity construction in exile'. Thereby, mythic versions of an Erin landscape existed within the liminal heterotopic space of the fairground in its culturally hybrid forms of longing and remembrance.

Despite plans for Ishbel and Alice to work together on a single Irish village in Chicago the final display had two Irish villages. The two activists fell out over the material conditions of their respective exhibits and their ideological justifications as well as methods of improving the Irish lot. Disaffection between the two women was emphatically underscored by a competing difference in class within aristocratic and bourgeois spheres. For instance, Aberdeen exercised her power by seeking to influence the wealthy and elite to sympathize with Ireland's plight; however, Hart's activism revolved around the high street and the encouragement of a popular mass market appeal of Irish goods amongst the rapidly growing middle class.

Moreover, Aberdeen vehemently believed that the entrepreneurial capacity to promote Irish industry should continue unabated in the domestic and public sphere. She was an ardent advocate of advertising Irish clothing and design through her own body. She frequently wore Irish-made clothing, encouraged her peers to do the same and regularly performed an imagined Irishness. For instance, Aberdeen held a garden party at the Vice-Regal Lodge in Dublin in the summer of 1886 with a dress code of 'Irish manufacture as far as possible.'⁵² The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* was not alone in expounding that 'a gayer, brighter and pleasanter scene has not been witnessed for many years', with the party's nearly 2000 costumed guests.⁵³ Irish materials abounded; Lord Aberdeen wore an 'electric suit of silvery grey poplin cloth and white hat' and their children wore 'Irish costumes modelled in conformity with authentic designs taken from the Royal Irish Academy.'⁵⁴ Aberdeen's connection to Ireland saw her take an Irish name. For instance, Jeanne Sheehy explains that when the Aberdeens left Ireland in 1915 Lord Aberdeen was offered a marquisate, and to commemorate their stay he and his wife chose the additional title of Tara. Tara was a 'name, [that referred to] the ancient seat of

⁵⁰ B. Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 11.

⁵¹ M. F. Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 97.

⁵² 'Lady Aberdeen and Irish Industries', *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 21 November 1903. See also Sheehy, *Rediscovery of Ireland's Past*, pp. 103–4.

⁵³ 'Aberdeen's Garden Party', *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 7 June 1886.

⁵⁴ See Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, pp. 84–85.

the High Kings of Ireland, [and so] sacred to Irishman' which caused some disapproval. They eventually compromised, and adopted Aberdeen and Temair, an approximation of the Irish spelling of Tara, Teamhair.⁵⁵

In contrast, Hart had less involvement in the public sphere and focused her attention on public lectures. Her lectures also included striking photographs of poverty in Ireland taken during short visits to the country – reaffirming constantly the connection between philanthropy and the visual in the rural revival project. In a sign of growing discord, Hart resisted merging the DIF under the umbrella organization of the IIA in 1886 perhaps because it had a rigid bureaucratic structure composed mainly of lordly men and women. Sheehy notes that Lady Londonderry was part of the IIA and Lady Cadogan was President of the IIA.⁵⁶ While the IIA prided itself on drawing together, on neutral ground, the various Irish factions – 'Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers . . . as well as Nationalists and Unionists of all sections' – it was still divided by class.⁵⁷

Consequently, a confrontation of sorts materializes between the two women in the archival records – a very polite, particular sort of disagreement is exposed. Aberdeen and her husband were staunch supporters of a continued devolved union with Britain in the form of Home Rule. They admired the Irish character and praised Irish land and industry, but Aberdeen still advocated for an English monarchy and aristocracy within the composition of nineteenth-century society. However, Hart considered the English aristocracy largely responsible for the ills of Ireland and vied against Lady Aberdeen's power and prestige. Their differences became visible to the public during the 1893 Exposition. Aberdeen wrote, 'The idea of a village had first been evolved by [Alice] Hart, in connection with her [DIF], but we persuaded her that it would be better for all concerned if the [IIA] and the [DIF] combined for a joint effort, each taking shares of the expenses and profits'. Nonetheless, according to Aberdeen's memoir, 'differences arose between the two sections' and 'we had just to make the best of it'.⁵⁸

Fair organizers granted Hart a separate commission for a second Irish village in a bid to boost profits, albeit on the same plot and only a few metres away from Aberdeen's village with similar ambitions and materials on display. Specifically, Hart was more invested in the Celtic Revival project than Aberdeen. Hart largely sought to resolve the imbalances of mechanized industry and proudly advertised 'genuine specimens of the work of the Irish people', namely Donegal peasant women. They perfected Kells embroidery designs 'worked in flax on flax' that had popular appeal in England, Ireland and the United States. 'Kells Embroidery' consisted of dyed and polished threads of flax worked on Irish linen after designs chiefly taken from early Irish manuscripts such as the Book of Kells.⁵⁹ Hart believed that such 'self-acting and self-sustaining' work would lead to the 'salvation of Ireland' and she employed up to '800 cottagers [proficient in] spinning, weaving, and dyeing' at any one time to 'rescu[e] thousands from destitution, [by] planting in large districts hope and industry in the place of despair and idleness'.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Sheehy, *Rediscovery of Ireland's Past*, p. 104.

⁵⁶ Sheehy, *Rediscovery of Ireland's Past*, p. 147.

⁵⁷ *Guide to the Irish Industrial Village*, p. 19.

⁵⁸ J. C. G. Aberdeen and Temair (1st Marquis Of), I. G. Aberdeen and Temair (Marchioness Of), *'We Twa': Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen*, 2 vols (London: W. Collins sons, 1925), I&II, 323–24. See also, Marjorie Pentland, *A Bonnie Fetcher* (London: Batsford, 1952), written by their daughter, about Lady Aberdeen.

⁵⁹ Larmour, *Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 19.

⁶⁰ A. Hart, 'Letter to the Ladies. Irish Industries', *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1 January 1887.

Approximately 70,000 square feet at the Midway Plaisance entrance was dedicated to the two Irish villages and their buildings of industry, shops, entertainments and greenery (Figure 1). Exhibition literature claimed that in the Midway:

Mankind saw unseen brothers . . . They came from the night some North and the splendid South, from the wasty [sic] West and the effete East, bringing only their manners, customs, dress, religions, legends, amusements, that we might know them the better . . . man, woman and child and they lent life and colour to the evanescent panorama . . . We must not forget however that in the midst of peoples so new and strange to us there were others nearer akin.

To many Americans, 'Old Vienna,' the 'German Village' and the 'Irish Villages' gave information of the customs of their fathers.⁶¹ The positionality of Irish individuals in the 1893 Exposition highlighted their socio-cultural location within the political context of the late nineteenth-century United States. The strict Social Darwinist logic of the Midway located Ireland within the earlier stages of perceived civilization in the racialized organization of the broader Chicago Fair. It operated in a dual space inviting wonder and shock towards countries outside of Europe and Britain but further reaffirming and admiring the ostensible triumphs of white societies. The presence of the Viennese, German and Irish villages in particular was suggestive of an ancestry inclined towards industrial development and offered a template for future progress to the perceived lesser industrialized nations such as the Javanese.

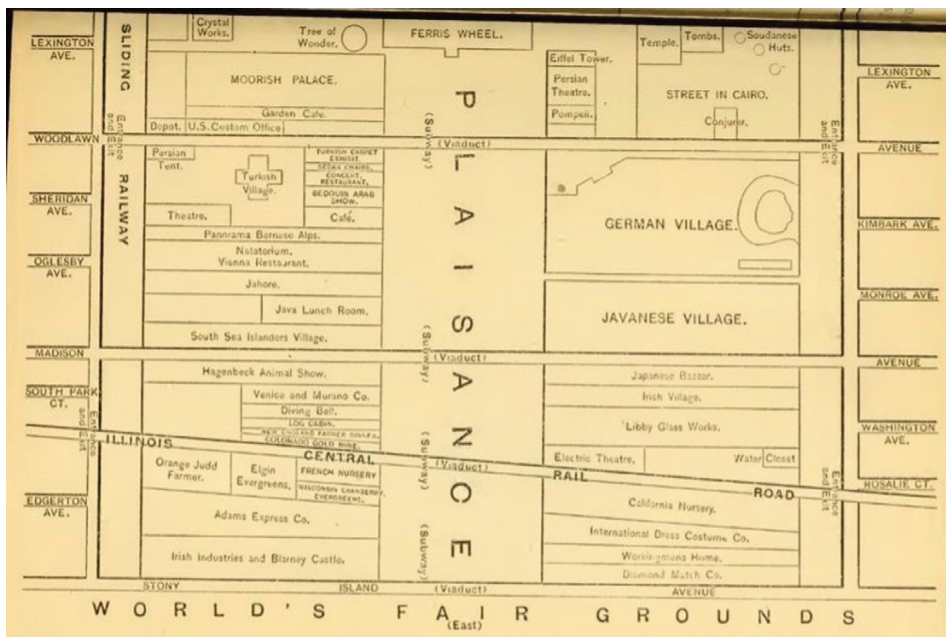


Figure 1. 'Key to the Midway Plaisance', J. J. Flinn, *Official Guide to the Midway Plaisance*. Otherwise known as *The Highway Through The Nations* (Chicago, IL: Columbian Guide Co, 1893), p. 25.

⁶¹ *Oriental and Occidental Northern and Southern Portraits of the Midway: A Collection of Photographs of Individual Types of Various Nations from All Parts of the World* (Chicago, IL: 1894).

The Irish villages stood amid the spectacle of what Meg Armstrong has described as a 'jumble of foreignness'. Armstrong explains that an aesthetic ideology existed on the Midway of 'exotic [as] chaos, a jumble, a sublimely grotesque and bawdy array of colours, sights, scents, and sounds'.⁶² Clearly, on the spectrum of cultures displayed, Ireland represented the apex of civilizational narratives, equal to Germany and Austria. Positioned at the front of the Plaisance, the Irish villages depicted the penultimate achievement of human progress before entering the 'civilized' space of the fair's 'White City'.⁶³ Ireland was on the fringes of white civilization, *en route* to the industrious excellence that would warrant it a ticket to the main fairground that housed the machinery, electrical, technical and cultural achievements of the United States, Britain and the other world powers of the nineteenth century. Figure 1 shows both Irish sites in a section largely given over to industry, or US/European rural life. In this 'jumble', the logics used to divide groups sometimes broke down as the Midway was designed to evoke 'vivid remembrances of the doings and ways of men and nations' in an immersive and entertaining spectacle, whereas the 'great buildings' outside of the Plaisance represented a more serious affair to showcase 'new [technologies] of the West'.⁶⁴ Evidently 'brilliant hues and gorgeous displays of more ostentatious spectacles' distinguished the inhabitants of the Plaisance as rudimentary and underdeveloped compared to the rest of the fairground.⁶⁵

Ireland's capacity for industrial civilization was the narrative that Aberdeen and Hart worked to promote in their activism. They championed the potential of white Irish people and made it their life's work to unlock that potential through the development of rural industry for immediate survival and eventually for the good of the country as a whole. On the Midway, Irish groups performed a particular modernity through industrial labour engaging in the mechanisms of product and production physically, and in part as a response to racialized international concerns of perceived Irish backwardness and idleness. Therefore, a hopeful narrative for future progress and development existed within reductive stereotypes of Irish labour practices that supposedly led to rural industries expiring in the first place. The corrective to an imagined history of the country's underdevelopment and weakness due to the Irish character was visualized through the literal performance of rural (female) labour by the exhibited Irish to popular reception.

Irish American visitors' immediate sensory exposure to rural Ireland on the fairground heightened the valuable opportunity to monetarily capitalize on feelings of guilt from migration, as well as exploiting the emotions of loss and pride taken in native Irish goods. In the context of the Irish Revival's cultural project which invigorated popular Irish economic nationalism in the nineteenth century, the visual metaphors of Irish productivity signalled a collective feeling of hope in the future.⁶⁶ Heralded as a final opportunity for the country the solution seemed obvious, easy even. Thus, it made sense for the Irish villages to feature on the Midway – here was the entry point for their future prosperity, and if contemporaries

⁶² Armstrong, 'Jumble of Foreignness', p. 201.

⁶³ Scientists, anthropologists, and ethnographers conceived whiteness as superior in the nineteenth century. For example, John Beddoe's *The Races of Britain: A Contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe* (1862) was popularly circulated in Victorian Britain. Beddoe outlined racial categories in the British Isles using skull measurements and hair/eye colour combinations and these differences equated to personal, ethnic, and national characteristics according to Beddoe and his followers, with white races emerging as the most physically and mentally endowed species compared to their counterparts.

⁶⁴ Ishbell Aberdeen, 'Ireland at the World's Fair', *North American Review* (1893), p. 20.

⁶⁵ Aberdeen, 'Ireland at the World's Fair'.

⁶⁶ J. Strachan and C. Nally, *Advertising, Literature and Print Culture in Ireland, 1891–1922* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 37–38.

sold enough, visited enough, and bought enough, Ireland could be as profitable as her neighbouring countries.

Alice Hart's Village was made up of 'typical Irish residences', entered through a replica of the St Lawrence Gate in Drogheda. The 'scene [wa]s quaint, picturesque, and uniquely Irish' with a reproduction of Donegal castle and a tall Round Tower (Figure 2).⁶⁷ A series of white-washed cottages where 'homespuns [we]re made by hand' complimented the medieval feel of the display situated amid trees and foliage. The sketch reveals the different heights of the various buildings that were designed to create a sense of the wholesome nature of the displayed Irishness as a composite vision of an Irish past. Irish art and industry took centre stage with demonstrations of spinning, weaving, embroidered hangings, coverlets, curtains, lace, and hosiery exhibited in the Village Hall. An Irish history was evoked with a wishing chair 'exactly reproduced to scale and measurement' from the Giant's Causeway 'standing on Irish soil, brought from Ireland in crates', where Mr Sweeney, a village piper who 'proudly' claimed 'direct descent from the McSwines of Donegal', played daily. Visitors could also witness the dancing of the Irish jig on the village green in an immersive Irish paradise.

Newspapers and magazines in the United States, Britain and Ireland reported positively on the village. The *English Dover Express* expounded that Donegal Village was 'one of the most quaint and picturesque of [the] presentments [on the Midway]'.⁶⁸ However, the Plaisance was anything but peaceful and whimsical, being home to dozens of stalls, mock villages, pavilions, and a whole host of entertainment spectacles. Such newspaper reporting responded directly to the needs of an emigrant Irish population in the United States to see their homeland as unspoiled and prosperous. Visiting the Chicago Village thereby became a sensible business decision to revive once-flourishing rural industries that combined patriotism and profit in a transatlantic forum.

The Midway's bazaars, cottages and villages complemented one another. Aberdeen's Irish Village was entered through a replica of the 'north doorway to the chapel built by Cormac, the bishop king of Munster, in the twelfth century'. The photograph (Figure 3) depicts besuited men and women and indicates the social spectacle of the Fair as a place where visitors wanted to be seen, with its coded messages of edification and prosperity. The image, later reproduced

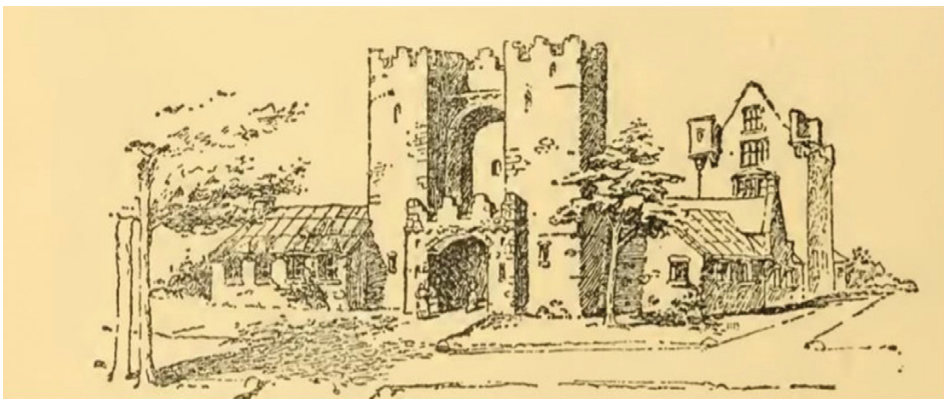


Figure 2. 'Donegal Castle. The Irish Village, Midway Plaisance', in Flinn, *Official Guide to the Midway Plaisance*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Flinn, *Official Guide*.

⁶⁸ 'The Donegal Village at the World's Fair', *Dover Express*, 7 April 1893.



Figure 3. 'Irish Village, Midway Plaisance'. Postcard. Author's collection.

as a popular postcard, reveals signs of Irish industries and the 'hundred thousand welcomes' on offer, with visitors walking and observing at leisure.

Aberdeen's village contained a replica of the ruins of Muckcross Abbey and several cottages 'where the inhabitants of this busy little community ply their industries' beside turf fires. On opening day, 20,000 visitors paid the 25 cents entrance fee.⁶⁹ Visitors could see lace and crochet work, homespuns, hosiery, and bog oak carving. They could also observe Celtic jewellery in the making as well as finished pieces, replicas of the Tara brooch, and various antiquities. The model of the ancient Celtic cross completed the historic portrayal of the country, reflecting the 'early civilization and art of Ireland'. The hand-carved 27-foot-high cross was made from Irish limestone, with interlaced carvings from designs by Mr Thomas Drew, President of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. It is clear that nationalist identity in Ireland was 'white' first and foremost as well as 'distinctive[ly] Celtic'.⁷⁰ Jeanne Sheehy explains that Irish cultural life in the nineteenth century was marked by a growing sense of national identity, linked to the Celtic past. There was an interest in the discovery of ancient Irish culture in music, customs, and storytelling. For example, imitation of models from Ireland's Golden Age, which produced the Book of Kells, the 'Tara' Brooch and Cormac's Chapel were in popular circulation. Emblems used to express Irishness, such as shamrocks, harps, and Irish round towers, proliferated.⁷¹ In keeping with the Celtic Revival, Aberdeen's village was less explicitly Celtic than Hart's, as she did not object to England as much as her peer, but both traded on ideas of a Celtic Irish whiteness that was productive and valuable. In this way, the exhibition constituted another compelling battlefield for disputes about Ireland's relationship to England.

⁶⁹ Sheehy, *Rediscovery of Ireland's Past*, p. 147.

⁷⁰ S. Rohs, *Eccentric Nation: Irish Performance in Nineteenth Century New York City* (Cranbury: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p. 188.

⁷¹ Sheehy, *Rediscovery of Ireland's Past*, p. 1.

Public ways and strategically placed yards allowed visitors to circulate freely. Aberdeen's Irish village replicated Blarney Castle (Figure 4) – a gargantuan symbol of recognizable Irishness. The ground floor plan of Aberdeen's Village shows the vast green space in the centre amid numerous buildings. Visitors congregated in the middle of the village green and sequentially worked their way through, observing the various exhibits on show. Here, trees simulated the effect of a village, and shops in strategic positions enabled the purchase of countless souvenirs. Guests were able to kiss the 'magic stone' at Blarney Castle for 10 cents as well as get 'a view of all Ireland' from the battlements. Aberdeen's replica signified the gradual consumerization of stereotypical Irishness for profit and play. Visitors could wend their way from music to woodcarving, and even a dairy over a relatively short distance.

Personified symbolism of Ireland consistently materialized within the Chicago exhibition and beyond. In the same way that Aberdeen's garden party guests took their bodies as synonymous with the rural revival movement, both women saw the bodily action of Irish women as central to their activism. Hart mused during her tour of Donegal, 'People are wild for work', and these Irish people were prominently displayed in the village.⁷² At an exhibition held at the Royal School of Art Needlework in 1885, Hart not only exhibited 'Several pieces of hand-spun tweeds, hand-knitted hosiery, and hand-woven and hand-worked handkerchiefs' but further 'photographs of the workers at these industries [we]re hung about the show'.⁷³ Moreover, in Hart's 1893 village her 'colleens' were prettily dressed 'in Connemara red petticoats, fishwife skirts and blouses, and scarlet cloaks'. These popular demonstrations reveal the valued performance of white female labour, with beauty and youth closely tied to convincing visitors that such rural industry in Ireland was worth protecting.

Significantly, only the colonial villages in the Midway were depicted labouring, in contrast to the self-governing countries on show in the main White City. Aberdeen held female labour as sacred, and this is made clear in the way she picked 'colleens' to work in the village. She undertook a tour of the industries in western Ireland in the 1890s to select women to perform in Chicago, accompanied by seven of the IIA's Committee, visiting Clones, Carrickmacross, Limerick, Cork, Skibereen, Youghal, Kinsale, and finally New Ross. Aberdeen picked only the 'fittest colleens' – skilled in their trade and eager to develop their trade. Interestingly, remarks on the women's beauty and youth informed the selection process with Aberdeen frequently complimenting the 'bevy of pretty, fresh-looking Irish colleens'.⁷⁴ The men and women chosen to live and trade at Lady Aberdeen's Irish Village sailed on board the *Britannica* from Queenstown, Cork, on 14 April 1893.⁷⁵ Evidently, 'working' and 'acting' for the good of Ireland was a sensible economic opportunity for many women. They were employed at moments of difficulty only to return home when the six-month exhibition was over, or the winter months ended. In instances where the women were taken from factories, their new roles required them to perform work on the smaller scale of an exhibition village: a disorientating project of acting one's lived reality in the shadow of their displayed photographs. For example, Aberdeen repeatedly stressed the importance of the 'actual dwellers and workers in the village' as she described them – the 'newly imported lads and lasses show their origin plainly enough, with their rosy cheeks' in order to 'represent a quiet and peaceful cottage life in the

⁷² A. Hart, *The Cottage Industries of Ireland, With an Account of the Work of the Donegal Industrial Fund* (London: 1887), p. 11.

⁷³ Hart, *Cottage Industries*.

⁷⁴ *Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen*, p. 328.

⁷⁵ O'Connor, *Art, Ireland, and the Irish Diaspora*, p. 20.

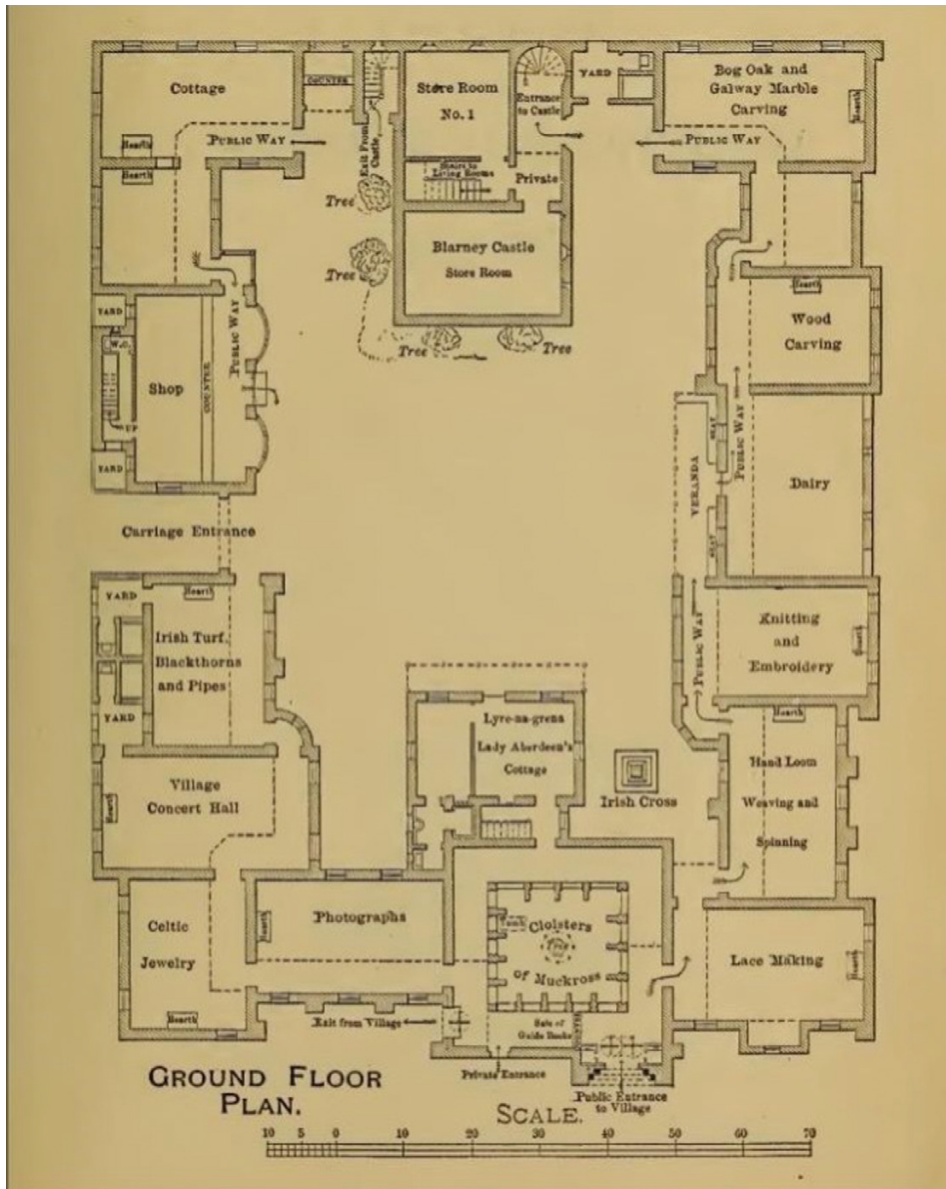


Figure 4. 'Aberdeen's Irish Industrial Village', *Guide to the Irish Industrial Village and Blarney Castle. The Exhibit of the Irish Industries Association* (Chicago, IL: Irish Village Book Store, 1893), no page number. Library of Congress.

wilds of Ireland in a place where thousands of visitors pass daily.⁷⁶ The Irish stood in contrast to 'the huts of the Soudanese, enlivened by the tom-toms of the comely black musicians, or . . . the jesters and the jugglers of the East' which heightened their performed whiteness. The Irish village was different to 'the brilliant coloring and gay wares shown by the Chinese

⁷⁶ Aberdeen, 'Ireland at the World's Fair', p. 20.

and Japanese,' stood out against the 'quaint little Esquimaux and Laplanders' and the 'savage tribes of the South Sea Islands' in a 'faithful and truthful representation' of 'every-day [Irish] life'.⁷⁷

Lady Aberdeen stayed in a cottage on the Midway with her husband during the fair, and they both gave frequent press interviews on the value of home industries.⁷⁸ The room itself was decorated to present a romantic vision of Ireland's past and present: 'The floor is covered with a handloom carpet from Weaver Square, Dublin, and the walls are frescoed in a peculiar shade of green with a frieze of shamrocks. There are prints of Daniel O'Connell, Alexander Pope, Isaac Barre and Jonathan Swift . . . the furniture is made of Irish oak and is of the kind peculiar to Irish homes. In one corner is a three-cornered cabinet which was at one time the property of William O'Brien . . . the cabinet is filled with a set of Belleek china. In [another] corner are [Lady Aberdeen's] chair and spinning wheel. The chair is of Irish oak, richly carved, and covered with tapestry made in Ireland long ago'.⁷⁹ In keeping with the transnational appeal of the village, the flags flying over the cottages were 'the star-spangled banner of the US . . . and the ancient sunburst flag of Ireland'.⁸⁰

The 'bright worker' in the photograph (Figure 5) is smiling and dressed in traditional Irish garb. Stood in front of a slightly worn Irish cottage with peeling paint and a general overgrown feel, the image of rusticity and authenticity is artfully composed to celebrate the industry of these fair women. With crossed hands in front of her chest, the viewer could feel confident in the ability of this 'colleen' in particular, and the countless Irish women she represented. The woman photographed is portrayed as happy in her labour and its production. The whiteness of the women is taken as granted, and associated beautiful white Irish women with the country of Ireland. The revival of rural industries relied on a comely image of Irishness presented as skilled, quaint, and inviting – ripe for investment and trade, and its success depended on the normative male gaze of the fairgoer. Rural female labour was personified in the village with opportunities to observe the 'making of many of the different kinds of lace and crochet-work manufactured in Ireland'.⁸¹ For instance, the *Official Guide to the Midway Plaisance* published several accounts of the different trades daily performed. Here Irish industry was individualized, humanized and so made accessible:

Kate Kennedy illustrates the making of applique lace as it is done in the cottage homes of Carrickmacross, and Mary Flynn [makes the] much admired fine crochet work . . . [in] County Monaghan, and which is already much appreciated in America; . . . Bridget McGinley works at her old fashioned wheel in the next cottage . . . delightful homespuns whose merits have been found out of late years by the fashionable world; . . . Maggie Dennehy, who talks real Irish, also sits nearby and shows how . . . to earn [a] livelihood by knitting.⁸²

⁷⁷ Aberdeen, 'Ireland at the World's Fair', p. 20.

⁷⁸ Aberdeen, 'Ireland at the World's Fair', p. 22.

⁷⁹ Janice Helland, 'Isbell Aberdeen's "Irish" Dresses: Embroidery, Display and Meaning, 1886-1909', *Journal of Design History*, 26 (2012), pp. 152–167. Cited in O'Connor, *Art, Ireland, and the Irish Diaspora*, p. 23.

⁸⁰ 'The Irish Exhibition', *The Times*, 4 June 1888, p. 1 and 104.

⁸¹ Flinn, *Official Guide*, p. 45.

⁸² Flinn, *Official Guide*, p. 45.



Figure 5. 'A Bright Worker', *Guide to the Irish Industrial Village and Blarney Castle. The Exhibit of the Irish Industries Association* (Chicago, IL: Irish Village Book Store, 1893), no page number. Library of Congress.

The text combined with the visual spectacle of the village artfully conjures attractive images of rustic labour for visitors' pleasure. Authentic female labour had financially profitable appeal in both Ireland and the United States. Images of female industry particularly appealed to Irish Americans, who were encouraged to think of their past lives in Ireland, envisioning their mothers, grandmothers or great-grandmothers participating in such work. A romantic image of an Irish past rooted in the domesticized body of feminized rural industry was thereby cultivated by prompting – or perhaps inventing – memories, or at the very least some kind of nostalgic remembering, of an Irishness experienced, heard or read about.

Gendered conceptions of Irish progress were ultimately rooted in traditional rural industry, tethered to the future, labouring in the present. The clear difference between the Irish villages and the images of a technological future on display in the White City was negotiated by the two women's attachment to a rustic Ireland which they could save. The refusal to let

an imagined historic Ireland expire sustained their rural revival project within the wider arts and crafts revival movement. Their ideological understanding of Ireland championed a dying industry and emulated the tenets of colonialism that sought to transform colonized countries from the outside – from an external perspective of what needed to be done for the good of the people as opposed to attempting to engage with the cycles of industrialized modernity of the broader nineteenth century. Preserving the rural aesthetics of Ireland for elite consumption became equal to ‘saving Ireland’ within the well-established hierarchies of colonial rule in the nineteenth century.

An intimate symbiosis between the exhibited Irish women and the Irish land was crucial in convincing visitors that things were in fact exactly like this in Ireland and were worth investing in. The interior of the Blarney Castle contained living and sleeping rooms for the 105 village workers. The exhibition space epitomized the voyeuristic display of female bodies in an international setting as visitors could linger, observe, interact or converse in English or Irish with the female workers. Tens of thousands of season tickets were sold, and it is interesting to reflect on whether those who repeatedly visited the exhibition had certain favourite exhibits or actors. It is not unlikely that the women forged relationships with those who came to visit them as a one-off or periodically. Within the fair, women were consigned to the fictional home for the consumption of the public and particularly aristocratic consumers in Aberdeen's case.

It is probable that these Irish women had been hired from the west of Ireland as this was the most romanticized of all Ireland's regions. The west of the country had the greatest number of emigrating families, evangelism, boycotting, souperism, and evictions.⁸³ In the nineteenth century, Glenn Hooper argues, the west of Ireland became a region associated with an acaridan innocence, a place that offered the possibility of renewal and regeneration.⁸⁴ Moreover, Catherine Nash argues that the west ‘came to stand for Ireland in general, to be representative of true Irishness. It could be seen as a way of access into the Irish past through its language, folklore, antiquities, and way of life, yet also be conceived of as outside time, separated from normal temporal development.’⁸⁵ Clearly Hart and Aberdeen's revival project sought to recreate the pastoral idyll and innocence of the west of Ireland in particular.

The popularity of the Irish exhibitions in 1893 Chicago came from the perceived sense of an authentic Irishness – evidenced through the mass consumption of numerous official guides, descriptive catalogues, reports of exhibits and countless maps and information leaflets. The villages further reinforced Catholic ideals of Home Rule with their Scottish and English organizers. For the most part, Irish Americans participated enthusiastically with the perceived authentic Ireland in the fairground (Figure 6), whatever the specificities of their political affiliation. The birds-eye-view of Aberdeen's village revealed the draw of Blarney Castle and the general interest of visitors in the display of Ireland at the Columbian Exposition. The village did not reside in any countryside, but the sketch contained individuals as well as groups admiring and pointing to the village amidst a backdrop of trees and greenery.

There were tall buildings and pavilions in the distance and the congenial atmosphere reflected ‘the triumphant success’ of Aberdeen's fiction. However, the fact that Aberdeen wanted to continue a partial alliance with Britain (within a devolved Home Rule) caused tension for

⁸³ Leon Litvack and Glenn Hooper, in *Ireland in the Nineteenth Century: Regional Identity, Introduction* ed. by Leon Litvack and Glenn Hooper (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 1–15.

⁸⁴ Glenn Hooper, in *The Tourist Gaze: Travellers to Ireland, 1800-2000*, Preface, ed. by Glenn Hooper (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), pp. xiii–xxx.

⁸⁵ C. Nash, ‘Embodying the Nation – The West of Ireland Landscape and Irish Identity’, in *Tourism in Ireland: A Critical Analysis*, ed. by B. O'Connor and M. Cronin (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), pp. 86–109.

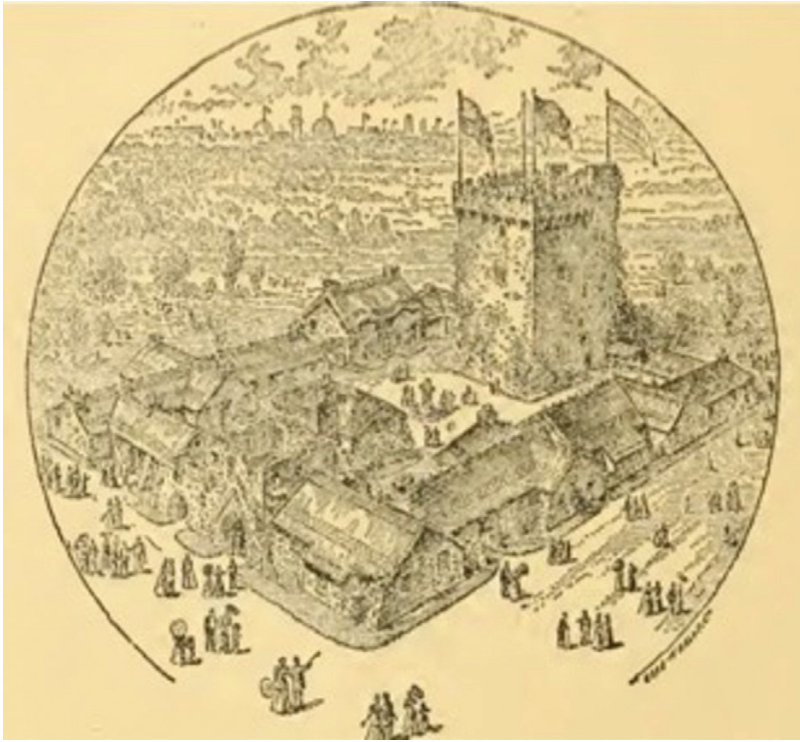


Figure 6. 'Birds-eye view', J.J. Flinn, *Official Guide to the Midway Plaisance. Otherwise known as 'The Highway Through The Nations'* (Chicago, IL: Columbian Guide Co, 1893), p. 46.

some – demonstrating the divisive nature of Irish-British relations in late-nineteenth-century US. Early in the autumn of 1893, 'A very serious disturbance arose at Lady Aberdeen's Irish Village' when a group of Irishmen attempted 'to pull down the British flag which was floating from the tower of Blarney Castle in honour of the visit of the Governor General of Canada.'⁸⁶ The flags are visible in the Figure 6, and the men 'made an attempt to tear down the flag, because they did not think it ought to be unfurled there'. Employees and guards 'drove the offenders into the Plaisance' but before they could be arrested 'thousands [sic] . . . congregated around the [police] wagon' sympathizing with the men's attempts; eventually, 'the ringleaders were taken prisoners after a conflict with the guards and police'.

The protests and arrests illustrate the fractious workings of a display sponsored by aristocratic men and women as well as the fragility of the support for Home Rule in the United States, while also highlighting the popularity of more extreme Irish nationalist movements. Perhaps a British flag was appropriate to an English or Scottish audience, but this was certainly not the case for Irish Chicagoans. Whilst some Irish-Americans accepted a form of devolved Home Rule as an ideal political gain, others wanted a complete separation from England in the creation of a Republic. This brings into question the ability of these displays, notwithstanding their many similarities, to paper over significant fault lines concerning Irish identity in the context of Home Rule and nationalist debates. Further, it raises queries as to who the intended audience for the village was – certainly, some Irish in America did not

⁸⁶ Flinn, *Official Guide*, p. 45.

adhere to Aberdeen's politics and were avowedly nationalist, and so it is curious to consider whether the village was more for American or British visitors, not necessarily Irish men and women. Clearly, a sympathy for Home Rule was expounded and encouraged while only occasionally bristled against.

3. 'LONGING FOR A "BYGONE TIME": NOSTALGIA AND IRISH-AMERICANS

Whilst over the sea, Irish communities had become city-like and urban; in their homeland rural and cottage-based industries remained the valued (if depleting) norm. Therefore, the exhibition in 1893 was operating within a dual influence of aspirational rural revival industry as well as a lost past for Irish diasporic groups. Jeffery K. Olick and Joyce Robbins have argued that historical memory allows us to 'celebrate even what we did not directly experience, keeping the given past alive for us'.⁸⁷ Building on this, international exhibitions were memory sites and practices that functioned as central loci for identity formation. Exhibitionary narratives of Ireland operated within wistful remembering and interacted with attractive Irish symbolism to salve the discord of migration for Irish diasporic citizens. Clearly, the past organically produces itself in the present and is thus malleable – offering fertile ground for multiple constructions of Irishness on the fairground in a productive cacophony of Irish images that soothed, attracted and enlivened experiences of being Irish in America.

Nostalgia in the nineteenth century, and in the case of Ireland, refers broadly to a fluid, vague, collective longing for a 'bygone time rather than an individual desire to return to a particular place'.⁸⁸ Nostalgia animated Hart's and Aberdeen's exhibits. A new collective transatlantic historical consciousness emerged, rooted in a sense of exclusivity and conciliation or aversion to white Britons. This might help to explain the disorder in Aberdeen's Irish Village – the similarities to a foreign interloper creating a utopian version of Irishness hinted suggestively at the ongoing power of colonialism in the nineteenth century. In the fairgrounds, we can see in operation the type of nostalgia that Svetlana Boym has discussed: one that involves a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'.⁸⁹ The rural industries displayed in the 1893 exhibition relied on the renewed mechanization of traditional crafts, the creation of new global markets and the publicity of unique handmade Irish goods. The industry was in decline at the highpoint of Irish migration to the US in the mid-nineteenth century, and so the Chicago display enabled a connection with an expiring history possibly experienced in childhood if only through stories passed down through generations. Boym considers nostalgia as a 'romance with one's own fantasy' possessing a utopian dimension directed toward the future. Further, as Oona Frawley explains, the nostalgic mode in Ireland can be called the Irish pastoral. For example, this type of nostalgia functions to remind individuals, generations, and entire cultures, of times which, because of their distance from the unsettled present, seem safer and more stable. The creation of a continuous identity for Ireland acted as a preservative, stabilizing the sense of the present (particularly the present for Irish migrants in America). Overall, fantasies of the past emerged out of the harsh conditions and needs of the present and thereby instinctively shaped the imagined realities of the future. The display of Ireland

⁸⁷ J. K. Olick and J. Robbins, 'Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), 105–40 (p. 111).

⁸⁸ P. Fritzsche, 'Spectres of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity', *The American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 1587–618 (p. 1591).

⁸⁹ S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (London: Basic books, 2001), p. xiii.

in 1893 makes it clear that nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective in the sense that it held the potential to display what a future Ireland could look like.

Fairgoers and fair organizers relied on the revival of rural industries to save Ireland's present and future. A fiction of a destiny that profited from rural female labour for the harmonious working of Irish society as a whole, was presented, a future devoid of poverty and hardship and allied constitutionally (if partially) with Britain for the prosperity of all. Chicago's Irish Villages visualized and furthered a relationship between home and migration by encouraging Irish Americans to experience their homeland through the exhibits of Ireland in 1893. It became a celebration of Irishness for recent Irish immigrants and American descendants of immigrants. The *Guide* contained sensory invitations to experience Ireland; from the sights to the smells of the fair, and the taste of Irish goods – there was even a restaurant to take refreshment 'under the shade of trees' in an immersive Irish paradise.⁹⁰ Numerous postcards from the exhibition to family members in Ireland, England and the US circulated; however, they mainly contained basic details regarding the weather and their general enjoyment of the village.

Moreover, the politics of a historic Ireland permeated not only the objects on display but also the ephemera available for purchase. 'Souvenirs of bog oak', Irish jewellery and illustrated books were popularly sold in the village's shops, evoking interest in Irish connectedness to the land. If visitors wished to continue the fantasy of Ireland beyond the fairground, a few cents would allow them to 'carry [a] bit of "Ould Ireland" in the New World!'.⁹¹ This transfiguration of a native Ireland onto portable paraphernalia enabled Irishness to transcend geographical and material boundaries and circulate within the imaginary and lived spheres of Irish migrants. Souvenirs allowed the transference of politics to continue through the boundaries of a six-month display.

4. CONCLUSION: HART AND ABERDEEN'S LEGACY

Aberdeen's Irish village made a profit of £50,000 with half of that taken by the exhibition authorities and £20,000 paid to the workers in Ireland.⁹² I have been unable to discover figures for Hart's sales in 1893 but the influence of the DIF peaked in the 1880s and the 1890s, and Dun Emer, part of the Celtic Revival movement, replaced it in the early twentieth century.⁹³ As this article has demonstrated, Lady Aberdeen and Alice Hart were crucial to the rural revival project and were integral in creating transnational conceptions of white Irishness under the rubric of benevolent colonialism in the late nineteenth century, which continued to thrive. The Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland was founded in 1894, with the object of fostering artistic industries in Ireland, promoting artistic culture by means of lectures and the supply of designs, and holding exhibitions of Irish arts and crafts.⁹⁴ The Dun Emer Guild, founded in

⁹⁰ Flinn, *Official Guide*, p. 16.

⁹¹ *Guide to the Irish Industrial Village*, p. 15. See Maggie Williams, 'Private Memories, Public Display: Jewellery, Souvenirs and Tattoos as Icons of Irishness', in Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), pp. 88–100.

⁹² *Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen*, p. 333.

⁹³ Larmour explains that around 1896 the Harts retired to the country, to Totteridge in Hertfordshire, and the DIF appears to have ceased operating. Donegal House continued as a depot for Irish industries for a couple of years but it finally closed in 1897; *Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 24.

⁹⁴ Larmour, *Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 152.

1902, sought 'to find work for Irish hands in the making of beautiful things'. As far as possible they used Irish materials, Irish paper for the books, Irish linen to embroider on, Irish wool for tapestry and carpets – designs were of the spirit and tradition of country.⁹⁵ Doris French Shackleton has documented how Aberdeen engaged with a range of 'Irish [Home Rule], projects both practical and symbolic', which spanned from 'introducing the Irish jig at Dublin Castle' to personal acts such as 'dressing her small children in Paddy green coats' to more economic activism like 'lobbying for the sale of Irish laces in the world markets'.⁹⁶ The exhibition of Irish goods displayed under the IIA continued with an aristocratic audience until the final exhibition in 1900 in Windsor, which promoted lavish tweed and lace. The IIA set up a prestigious London depot at 20 Motcomb Street and by 1907, they had raised over £140,000 in England alone by organizing 34 exhibitions and sales in London and in big provincial cities.⁹⁷

Both women were driven by a passion for Ireland and a desire to help the country's poor, underscoring the logic of imperialism. Hart in 1889 at the Edinburgh meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Art and its Applications to Industry expounded that: 'in a land where there were no arts, where despair and poverty reigned, a better day is dawning, and we look forward to the time, not we trust far distant, when in the hand loom, the tambour frame, the carpenter's shop, and the dye vat, the Irish peasant who chooses to live on the shores of the wild Atlantic, and who still preserves the, to us, lost treasure of leisure, may produce beautiful and original work'.⁹⁸ Evidently, the cultural expressions produced in and for Irish transatlantic immigrants relied on a nostalgic yearning for a distant Edenic Irish landscape as part of their diasporic consciousness. This wistful portrayal of the Irish land sustained a shared Irish North American cultural identity on display in the fairground.

Everything Irish was made available to the visitor – bog oak carving, Galway marble carving, wood carving, a dairy, knitting and embroidery, handloom weaving and spinning, lace marking, Celtic jewellery – to create a white ethnic Irish-American solidarity. Irish workers performed a modernity that was achievable, timely and profitable against British criticisms of Irish men and women as backwards, stagnant and at times hopeless. Importantly, the exhibition platform bought these two conflicting positions together and allowed a fictionalized reconciliation to occur – whatever past stereotypes of Irish groups existed, their display of industry and peoples represented the possibility of a hopeful future, irrespective of their present condition. Due to the sources available, this article has focused on organizations and organizers, however, I am keenly aware that the work was done by rural Irish men and women, and the labour of those engaged in cottage industries should not be lost. Generally, campaigns to buy Irish goods made by the Irish poor continued into the early twentieth century following in the wake of Aberdeen and Hart.

Examining the respective Irish villages has shown how the two women constructed a threatened land and people while spearheading a movement to save rural industries in Ireland for the benefit of the poorest. This is significant in understanding the commodification of Irishness overseas by women involved in the debates around Irish nationalism. I have demonstrated in detail how they used accessible Irish symbols and exhibited white Irish women to make real their story. Specifically, their split and the eventual presentation of two Irish

⁹⁵ Larmour, *Arts and Crafts Movement*, p. 158.

⁹⁶ Shackleton, *Ishbel and the Empire*, p. 9.

⁹⁷ Bowe and Cumming, *The Arts and Crafts Movements*, p. 88.

⁹⁸ anon. From 'Art and Technical Teaching of the DIF', in *Transactions of the National Association for the Advancement of Arts and its Applications to Industry, Edinburgh Meeting, 1889* (London: 1890), pp. 435–38.

villages reveal distinct pluralities in visions of Irishness alongside questions of Home Rule. For example, Aberdeen extolled in the 1890s: 'What has been [Ireland's] curse, apart from (although in great measure owing to) England's misgovernment? Those of us who are Home Rulers . . . believe that Ireland's full development can only come [about] under a complete system of self-government.'⁹⁹ Yet their individual visions of Irish identity espoused their political and classed differences during a turbulent historic moment in Irish-British relations.

The article therefore reveals that Ireland in the 1893 Columbian Exhibition embodied a nostalgic rural nation that had vast potential for development, initially with cottage industries and later with broader mechanization and trade opportunities. As we have seen, the advertising of Ireland tugged on the heartstrings in a clever, profitable way – visitors could buy a trinket or souvenir and simultaneously feel like they were helping further Irish industry embodied by the exhibited women. The article productively reveals how creative senses of Irishness were curated by diverse individuals with multiple politicized interests in nineteenth-century US. Overall, I have demonstrated that Irish identity in 1890s Chicago was profitably aligned along raced, gendered and classed intersections to popular Irish-American appeal.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

⁹⁹ Cited in Bowe and Cumming, *The Arts and Crafts Movements*, p. 88.