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Research Note

The Irish International Exhibition of 1907: Ireland's World's Fair

Patricia J. Fanning

The recent popularity and critical acclaim garnered by Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City*, which chronicles the building of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, brings to mind a lesser known enterprise mounted a century ago. The Irish International Exhibition was held in Dublin from May to November, 1907. The Fair's organizers had hoped it would be the largest and most successful of its kind. Planned as an exposition of art, science, industry and inventions, the exhibits consisted of crafts, goods, art, and machinery from around the world. As in Chicago, and Paris before it, lavish buildings were erected especially for the event. In Dublin these mammoth structures included a Grand Central Palace, Palaces of Mechanical Arts, Fine Arts, and Industries, a Concert Hall, a Japanese Tea Room, and a Somali Village, complete with native villagers working at their crafts. It was to be a glorious exhibition, capable of handling 80,000 visitors a day and attracting travelers from the British Isles, the Colonies, America, and beyond. A closer look at this exposition uncovers an intriguing bit of history, one which helps to document a cultural awakening and emerging nationalism.

While under the control and rule of Great Britain, Ireland had been the site of several general exhibitions to promote products of English and Irish manufacture in the 19th century. Most of these exhibitions were organized by the Royal Dublin Society, a group primarily made up of English-born professionals, clergy and liberal landlords. An exhibition was even held in 1847 despite a deep economic depression and famine caused by the failure of the potato crop in preceding years. Six years later, the Royal Dublin Society's 1853 exhibition was the largest to date and inspired the establishment of the National Gallery of Ireland, still standing today.

By 1882, however, these exhibits took a decidedly partisan turn when an "Artisan's Exhibition" to promote strictly *Ireland* and the *Irish* was mounted. Exhibit categories included raw material produced in Ireland,

articles manufactured in Ireland, machinery made in Ireland for Irish concerns, home and cottage industries, and painting, sculpture and works of art produced by residents of Ireland. This nationalistic attitude was also reflected in the closing ceremony when "God Save Ireland" was played for the first time. The Cork Exhibition of 1902 followed in this same vein. There were exhibits on historic arts, crafts and Celtic design, and the opening ceremony featured Celtic odes, both indications of an increased awareness of Celtic heritage. This exposition sought to balance industrial development with handcrafts and heritage, and organizers were rewarded with attendance six times as great and receipts three times as large as the 1882 enterprise.

Coming only five years after this highly successful Cork Exhibition, it might be expected that the Irish International Exhibition of 1907 would continue to highlight Celtic heritage and crafts along with economic advancements; it seemed to be a successful formula. But, the organizers had other ideas. The Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the 1907 exhibition, the committee which essentially ran the show, was William Martin Murphy, the owner of the *Irish Daily Independent*, a publication widely read by the Catholic middle class. Murphy was a moderate nationalist who believed that Ireland's future depended on its ability to modernize and industrialize. To this end, Murphy steered the exhibition into waters which were much more "International" than "Irish," more "industrial" than "artisan." He aimed to demonstrate Ireland's strength and potential by showcasing not only foreign products but products made by modern industrialized production methods. This decision caused considerable controversy and may even have helped to galvanize the radical separatist movement which emerged with some force in Ireland between the Second Boer War (1899–1902) and World War One (1914–1918). The Irish International Exhibition of 1907 fell squarely in



the middle of this radicalization process and the intense debate and factionalism surrounding it indicates the instability of Irish labor, culture, and politics as the country lurched towards revolution.

First, Irish labor was rather stagnant at that point. There was no real industrial movement in Ireland; what industry did exist was essentially small-scale and tied to the needs of a chiefly agricultural economy. There were a few small craft unions but, since unemployment was nearly 20 percent, any attempts at labor organization were hampered by the easy availability of non-union Irish labor. In 1907, however, the National Union of Dock Laborers sent one of their best organizers, James Larkin, to foster union sentiment in various Irish ports just in time for the mounting of the exhibition.

Second, the level of cultural awareness within Ireland was changing rapidly. Eoin McNeill and Douglas Hyde had founded the Gaelic League in 1893, and its membership had boomed during the Boer War. The goals of the League were to revive the use of the Irish language and to “de-Anglicize” the Irish people. League sentiments included not only the idealization of the rural Irish lifestyle, including artisanship, but also an accompanying anti-modernism (often a code word for anti-British)—a sense that handcrafted items were superior to manufactured products. These beliefs would eventually lead to a suspicion of, if not outright opposition to, an exposition whose goals were to promote foreign and manufactured goods.

Third, the radicalization of both labor and cultural populations was further ensured by the rise of political nationalist groups. In 1900, Arthur Griffith founded *Cumann na nGaedheal* to advance the cause of Ireland’s national independence. To advance this end, the organization encouraged the dissemination of the language, art, music, literature, and history of Ireland. In April of 1907, one month before the opening of the exhibition, *Cumann na nGaedheal* became the *Sinn Fein* League, and, a little more than a year later, merged with the National Council to become *Sinn Fein*, whose purpose was the reestablishment of an independent Ireland. It was into this cultural and political maelstrom that Murphy moved his “international” exhibition, and, not surprisingly, he paid the price.

In February of 1907, the Hotel and Tourist Association complained that the exhibition’s catering contract had been awarded to a London establishment rather than to Irish firms. The debate spilled into the press. Although the organizers assured the public that the exhibition would employ as many native Irish as possible, by April word had spread that capable Irish service people had been let go and foreigners brought in to wait tables at the exposition. Later that same month, it was proposed that goods being shipped to the exhibition be allowed to enter Ireland without port dues and that Irish carrying companies transport them free of charge. There can be



little doubt that the contentiousness surrounding the use of Irish labor, free port duties, and carriage charges were exacerbated by the union activities and labor agitation of Larkin and others. But, labor disputes were not the only problem facing the exhibition organizers; there were administrative problems as well. As opening day—May 4, 1907—approached, several of the pavilions were not ready and there were rumors of infectious disease in the Somali Village!

More disturbing, word had spread as far as the Irish American enclave in Butte, Montana that the exposition was not very popular. The *Butte Evening News* reported that although the exhibition purported to be Irish, it was composed largely of goods of foreign manufacture, with England, Scotland, Wales, Canada, and several European nations having larger representations than Ireland itself. Readers were told that the Irish were not attending and those considering a trip were advised to stay away. To further complicate matters, thousands of union organizers, Gaelic League, and *Sinn Fein* members arrived in Dublin at the end of May for a nationalist conference. At that convention, the Irish

International Exposition was widely denounced by the Gaelic League and *Sinn Fein*, both of whom advocated a boycott of the exhibition.

Most of this negative publicity was gleefully reported in *The Leader*, a weekly Dublin review founded by D. P. Moran. Moran was a Waterford native who had become a London journalist. He had returned to his homeland to encourage the Irish language revival and Irish independence. Above all, he embraced voluntary protectionism and thereby urged his readers to buy only Irish goods whenever possible. To Moran, the Irish International Exhibition was a travesty. Its organizers had hired foreigners in place of Irish workers, and were asking the Irish to buy goods manufactured elsewhere. He used *The Leader* as a bully pulpit to criticize the enterprise in general and William Martin Murphy in particular. By the close of the exhibition, the *Leader* was calling the effort “a disaster,” blaming Murphy and the *Independent* for the “costly failure.”

We will never really know if that characterization was an accurate one but it does appear that the exhibition suffered greatly from the pronouncements of the Gaelic League and *Sinn Fein* and the condemnation of *The Leader*. Newspaper coverage, which had been lavish and steady at the outset, became less extensive and sporadic as the summer wore on. By August the exhibition



was forced to close its gates on Sundays due to a lack of attendance, a clear indication that its success had been compromised.

The Irish International Exhibition of 1907 held its closing ceremony on Saturday, November 9, 1907 and was rapidly forgotten. Within a decade, at the Easter Uprising of 1916, the Irish were making news of a more dramatic sort. There has never been another exposition in Ireland. A century later, with independence secured and the Celtic Tiger roaring, perhaps it is time to try again.

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