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# “Hungarian-Irish Parallels”: The Elevation of Mid-19th Century Nationalist Ireland through Irish-Hungarian Parallels by Young Irelanders

### Summary

Although documented cultural and social contacts between Hungary and Ireland extend back to the Middle Ages, it is through a series of 19th and early-20th century writings that mutual interest by leading figures of Hungarian and Irish public life in the events of their countries is first revealed. These writings have given rise to the notion of “Hungarian-Irish national parallels”, the validity of which, however, has recently been challenged on grounds of historical accuracy. My paper examines mid-19th century works by Irish nationalists that include references to Hungary, some of which have been used so far to demonstrate Hungarian-Irish parallels. While also considering historical accuracy, I will widen the scope of my study by highlighting the ideological aspects of these references. My aim is to show that national parallels are ideological constructions which may reveal an effort of elevating one’s own nation to the level of another European nation that is viewed as a model in a given historical moment.

**Key words:** the Hungarian Reform Age, the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848–49, Young Irelanders, the Young Ireland Insurrection of 1848, language movement, national language, cultural and linguistic nationalism

## “Madžarsko-irske vzporednice”: dvig nacionalistične Irske s sredine 19. stoletja s pomočjo mladih Ircev ter irsko-madžarskih stikov

### Povzetek

Čeprav dokumentirani kulturni in družbeni stiki med Madžarsko in Irsko segajo že v srednji vek, so se medsebojna prepletanja prvič razkrila šele v objavljenih prispevkih vodilnih osebnosti madžarskega in irskega družbenega življenja v 19. in začetku 20. stoletja. Te objave so botrovale ideji o “madžarsko-irskih vzporednicah”, čigar veljavo pa so v zadnjem času spodkopali pomisleki o njeni zgodovinski verodostojnosti. Članek proučuje dela irskih nacionalistov s sredine 19. stoletja, ki se nanašajo na Madžarsko in na katera so se do sedaj deloma sklicevali pri dokazovanju madžarsko-irskih vzporednic. Hkrati z upoštevanjem zgodovinske verodostojnosti razprava odpira prostor vprašanju ideoloških vidikov takšnih sklicevanj. Njen osrednji cilj je dokazati, da so nacionalne vzporednice ideološke konstrukcije, ki razodevajo poskus povzdigovanja svoje nacije na raven druge evropske nacije, ki je podlaga za model v določenem zgodovinskem trenutku.

**Ključne besede:** madžarsko reformno obdobje, madžarska vojna za neodvisnost 1848–1949, Mlada Irška, vstaja Mlade Irske 1848, jezikovno gibanje, nacionalni jezik, kulturni in jezikovni nacionalizem

# “Hungarian-Irish Parallels”: The Elevation of Mid-19th Century Nationalist Ireland through Irish-Hungarian Parallels by Young Irishmen

## 1. Introduction

The first extant references to a Hungarian in Ireland are about Lőrinc Tar, a Hungarian cleric living in the time of Sigismund of Luxemburg (1387–1473), King of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor. Tar paid a visit to St Patrick’s Purgatory in Lough Derg and wrote a medieval account of his journey in Latin, mixing legend with travelogue, real with religious and imaginary experiences (Fügedi 1974, 156–7; Glatz 2000, 155; see also Kabdebo 2001, 19). Religion was also the background of an Irishman fleeing Oliver Cromwell’s troops and heading to Hungary. Walter Lynch, Bishop of Clonfert, stayed in the north-western Hungarian city of Győr from 1655 to 1663, and donated an image of the Holy Virgin to the local cathedral, which was in subsequent centuries revered as the “Virgin that shed tears” on St Patrick’s Day in 1697 (Kabdebo 2001, 19–20). Religious orientation also permeates 17th-century Hungarian chronicles referring to contemporaneous Irish events and commenting upon them in harmony with their own protestant or catholic loyalties which, on the other hand, reflects religious divisions in Hungary at that time (see e.g. Cserei 1661–1711/1983; Rosner 1677).

Then, in the 19th century a series of writings were produced which reveal an upsurge of mutual and genuine interest by leaders of Hungarian and Irish public life in the events of their countries. Written reflections upon the major, sometimes cataclysmic experiences by the two populations inform us about the existence of a certain mental link between Hungary and Ireland, a connection which drew its inspiration from a sense of belonging to politically dependent European nations.

Irish Catholic emancipator and constitutional nationalist Daniel O’Connell’s figure and mass movements attracted remarkable attention among Hungarian intellectuals with a political orientation. The development of Hungarian as a printed language in the first half of the 19th century gave rise to a number of periodicals, some of which, like *Rajzolatok* (“Sketches”) in 1835 and *Atheneum* in 1837, informed the Hungarian reading public about O’Connell’s achievements (Kókay 1979, 458, 509). Lajos Kossuth, future leader of the 1848–49 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence, also showed great admiration for Daniel O’Connell, and the 1843 issues of his *Pesti Hírlap* (“Pest News”) include multiple references to the “Liberator’s” Repeal Movement (Kókay 1979, 675).

In the latter half of the 1830s two of Hungary’s leading nationalist politicians, Bertalan Szemere and Ferenc Pulszky visited Ireland, and in their separately published travelogues they both write about the economic backwardness of the rural Irish and the growing strength of political agitation in Ireland. As his book *Utazás külföldön* or “A journey abroad” (1840) proves, Szemere, also Prime Minister of Hungary’s short-lived sovereign responsible government in 1849, became especially appalled by the poverty and hunger of the Irish countryside, and identified the causes as follows: Ireland’s political and economic “slavery” to Britain, the resultant lack of native industry and commerce, the feudal system of land tenure, payment of tithes to the Church of Ireland, potato being the nearly exclusive food crop for the poor, and rapid population growth among them (Szemere 1840/1983, 352–65). In his social essay *Szegénység Irlandban* or “Poverty in Ireland”

(1840) Baron József Eötvös relied upon the experiences of Szemere and Pulszky, both being friends to him, for his own study of the causes and effects of poverty (Eötvös 1840/1902, 38–108).

The year 1848 was witness to a revolutionary wave in Europe, and the Hungarian social upheaval was transformed into a prolonged fight for the country's liberation from the Habsburg Empire. Hungary's War of Independence was crushed by the overwhelming military might of the combined Russian Tzarist and Habsburg forces, and the defeat was followed by cruel revenge and years of severe oppression on the part of the Habsburg government. Hungary's failure to liberate their country and the ensuing execution, exile and sufferings of those involved in the heroic struggle evoked sympathy in Michael Doheny, John Mitchel and William Smith O'Brien, all of whom had played a leading role in the abortive Young Ireland Insurrection of 1848. Mitchel's reflection upon the suppression of the Hungarian freedom fight during his stay in the Cape of Good Hope in 1850, expresses feelings of shock as well as a clear awareness of events going on in this Central-European "fellow/comrade-nation":

The Austrians are hanging and shooting general officers. Kossuth, the immortal governor, and Bem, the fine old general, are refugees in Turkey, other Hungarians and Poles flying to the US. Justice and right everywhere buried in blood. (Mitchel 1854, 219–21)

## 2. The notion of "Hungarian-Irish National Parallels"

The above phenomena have led Thomas Kabdebo to do research into the tradition of what he identifies as "Hungarian-Irish national parallels". In his book *Ireland and Hungary. A Study in Parallels* (2001), Kabdebo states that the Hungarian idea of drawing a national parallel between the two countries originates from Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II, leader of a prolonged military campaign (1703–11) to gain independence from the Habsburgs. Although the fight for freedom eventually failed in 1711, at the height of his success in 1707, Prince Rákóczi dethroned the Habsburg House in Hungary, and compared this act to Stuart James II's attempt in 1690 to regain the English crown via Ireland (Kabdebo 2001, 21). Rákóczi also argued that Hungary's connection with Austria was constitutionally similar to that of Scotland and England, yet Austria handled Hungary as England treated Ireland, that is, as a "conquered country" without "ever having conquered it" (qtd in Kabdebo 2001, 21).

Without considering the accuracy or inaccuracy of this alleged parallel (in fact, the English crown had conducted more military conquests of Ireland, for instance, in the Anglo-Norman and the Tudor Times, and, on the other hand, the Habsburgs claimed that they had conquered Hungary in the event of the liberation of the country from the Turks in the late-17th century), Kabdebo gives the following definition of what he considers a "valid national parallel":

Historical veracity of parallels [...] does not depend on the minutiae of chronological, social or institutional or even economic details but on the similarity of situations. Parallels are drawn by active agents of the historical process who discover similar agents acting in a similar historical process. In that sense parallels are always discovered against not dissimilar backgrounds, in situations fairly akin, such as: 'method of rule', dependency, 'empire building', 'colonizing' or 'being colonized.' But, perhaps, the most relevant is the correlation of contexts: emerging nationalism, nationalism in its assertive phase, [...] could bring two geographically distant countries into a valid parallel. (Kabdebo 2001, 29)

In his review of Kabdebo's book William O'Reilly (2003) claims that at the core of Kabdebo's effort to construct a narrative thread woven of Hungary's and Ireland's national histories there

is a “persuasive version of historical memory.” O’Reilly argues that this historical memory leads Kabdebo to over-simplifications and inaccuracies. It is, for instance, an over-simplified version of the Hungarian Revolution in 1848 that he uses “to underscore the similarities with the (largely failed) events in Ireland in that same year.” In conclusion O’Reilly encourages continued research into parallels between Hungary and Ireland, though not so much in the field of historical parallels, which he finds strained at best, but rather in the area of literary parallels.

In an approach which I find alternative to Kabdebo’s and O’Reilly’s, I am going to demonstrate that “national parallels” are ideological constructions which reveal an effort of elevating one’s own nation to the level of another European nation that is viewed as a model in a given historical moment.

### **3. An Irish-Hungarian parallel in Thomas Darcy McGee’s Narrative of 1848**

Kabdebó (2001, 23–5) says that Michael Doheny in *The Felon’s Track* (1914) and John Mitchel in his *Jail Journal* (1854) made references to the Hungarian War of Independence. Although the Young Irelander Doheny did not actually write about Hungary in *The Felon’s Track*, he was familiar with the Hungarian events because in 1852, in New York, where he fled and resettled after the Young Ireland insurrection, he welcomed Lajos Kossuth despite the fact that the Hungarian revolutionary’s religious utterances were frowned upon by Catholics, and particularly by Archbishop Hughes of New York, the idol of the poor Irish in that city (O’Donnell 1986). However, the original 1914 edition of Doheny’s book, subtitled *History of the Attempted Outbreak in Ireland Embracing the Leading Events in the Irish Struggle from the Year 1843 to the close of 1848*, included in its Appendices Thomas Darcy McGee’s Narrative of 1848, with some reference to Hungary. McGee was another leading Young Irelander who escaped to the United States. But, unlike Doheny, who actively participated in the organization of the Fenian movement in America, McGee modified his political views and proceeded to Canada, becoming one of the first statesmen of the dominion and a member of the Government, until, in 1868, he was assassinated by an alleged Fenian for his denunciation of the movement.

Arthur Griffith (1914) explains in the Preface the inclusion of McGee’s account of the period between July and September in 1848 by an attempt to improve correctness of information. It is also Arthur Griffith who, over half a century later, reflects upon the failed insurrection as follows: “That it could have been successful, few will believe. But [...] the insurrection if it grew to respectable dimensions might have forced terms from England” (Griffith 1914, 8). McGee’s description also includes an element of regret over wasted opportunities and in justifying his/their choice of the Sligo district for a strategic centre of the uprising, subsequently “abandoned without a blow” (McGee 1914/1920, 128), he constructs the following Irish-Hungarian parallel:

We could not but remember that this was the district chosen by Owen O’Neill after his arrival from Spain in 1645 and that it was here he “nursed up” [...] the army [...] which in Napoleon’s opinion, but for the premature death of Owen, would have checkmated Cromwell. The ground once chosen by a great general for its natural capabilities may safely be chosen again, and usually is, as in Hungary for instance. The very posts and battlefields held and fought by Bem and Dembinski were the same whereon Huniad and Corvinus, four and five hundred years ago, fought against the Turks and Bosmens. Thus we had the sanction of a great example and the stimulus of an inspiring tradition to point to for the choice of ground. (McGee 1914/1920, 128)

In fact it is strategic consideration or given military situation rather than “inspiring tradition” which determines the choice of battlefield. In this sense McGee’s parallel appears forcefully romantic. But his awareness of certain aspects of Hungarian history is worth noting. For instance, in 1442 János Hunyadi defeated the Turks at Nagyszeben, Transylvania (today Sibiu, Romania), and in March 1849 General Bem carried out a successful siege of this same town as part of his campaign liberating Transylvania from the occupying Tzarist and Habsburg forces. Also in Transylvania, at a place then called Kenyérmező (now Cămpul Pâinii, Romania) King Matthias Corvinus’s army, led by Generals Báthory, Kinizsi and Brankovich, and joined by Serbian infantry and cavalry units, defeated a Turkish army in 1479.

With historical accuracy more or less given, let us shift our focus to the purpose for McGee to construct this particular parallel and the reason to select these particular elements of Irish and Hungarian history to explain what his compatriots might have considered a military blunder. In an attempt of self-justification McGee seems to have accomplished an act of elevation: elevating the abortive Young Ireland uprising to the level of what Irish memory cherished as heroic pages of their fights against England, thus integrating it into the canon of Irish national heroism. However, considering the futility of the event as well as the eventual escape of more organizers to America, there remained little chance that the Irish nation, let alone Europe and the world would ever look upon the Young Ireland insurrection as a remarkable act of national heroism. Therefore, McGee tried to elevate it onto a level where it could be associated with national freedom fights attracting European attention. And the Hungarian War of Independence, particularly with its heroic struggle against the Tzarist military force and its severe oppression by the Habsburgs, appeared a most powerful option. All the more so since nationalist Ireland – as is reflected, for instance, in John Mitchel’s *Jail Journal* – was aware of the Hungarian events.

On the other hand, it was not only the Hungarian Independence War of 1849 that McGee used for his parallel but its alleged precedents in Hungarian history: a propagated version of János Hunyadi’s and Matthias Corvinus’s military achievements in defence of Christian Hungary and of Christian Europe centuries earlier. In other words, McGee used a whole block of Hungarian national historiography and constructed a seemingly parallel block of Irish national history in order to elevate the Irish nationalist cause, including the Young Ireland insurrection, to a higher, probably European level.

This parallel fits into the paradigm of efforts to build national ideology, and this act of elevation also includes an act of borrowing. In Enda O’Doherty’s words:

It is another paradox of nationalism that while the notion of distinction is pivotal (this people or nation is essentially different from that one and therefore should run its own affairs), there is nothing more international than the process of forming national identities. The French historian Anne-Marie Thiesse has written of the IKEA system, a kind of kit of essential or desirable items that furnishes national ideologues with everything they need to build their own, of course distinct, identities. (O’Doherty 2012)

## 4. A Hungarian-Irish parallel in Thomas Davis’s *Our National Language*

Another theme where we can find mid-19th century Irish references to Hungary was national language. The “agent” of this parallel was Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-45), the leading intellectual

of the fledgling Young Ireland Movement, who, because of his early death in 1845, could not be witness to the European revolutionary wave of 1848.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century non-sovereign nations and nationalities increasingly began to underscore their demand and right for political autonomy by emphasizing their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. While loosening political as well as economic dependence on the Habsburgs meant the main objectives, cultural and linguistic sovereignty was also on the agenda of the Hungarian Reform Age. The success of the Hungarian language movement was proved by the official recognition of Hungarian as a state language in 1844.

Whereas the revival of the Irish language became a central theme of Irish nationalist ideology at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the recovery of the endangered native tongue was not an issue to nationalist Ireland in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that is, to Daniel O’Connell or to most of the Young Irelanders (Pintér 2008, 189–92). As we know, of all the 1848 leaders Doheny was the only one who could both read and write in Irish (O’Donnell 1986). As an exception, Thomas Davis expressed deep concern over the language loss and proposed a programme for the revival of what he called “Ireland’s national language.” Davis also made references to the status of Hungarian and used the achievements of the Hungarian language movement as an example which could be used by Irish language revivalists. In his *Our National Language* (1846) Davis contrasts a country which, through experiencing language change, becomes a real colony with countries which despite the loss of political freedom have preserved their native vernacular. “To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest – it is the chain on the soul”, says Davis (1846/1998, 175), referring to Ireland’s advanced Irish-English language-shift. Then he continues with regard to Hungary, where there is “sure hope” because the “speech of the alien [that is German] is nearly expelled” (Davis 1846/1998, 176).

The theoretical foundations of Davis’s ideas fit into a pattern of cultural nationalism first articulated by the German philosophers Kant and Herder, John Kelly (1998, 5–7) claims. Some of Johann Gottfried Herder’s (1744–1803) famous statements, like “[h]as a nation anything more precious than the language of its forefathers?” (qtd in Edwards 1985, 24) are echoed by Davis: “A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories – ‘tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river” (Davis 1846/1998, 174–5).

Writing about language and nation Benedict Anderson (1991) makes the observation that print language is what invents nationalism and not a particular language *per se*. In line with this, Declan Kiberd (1996, 137) claims that “Irish, being largely part of an oral culture, was supplanted by English, the logical medium of newspapers, and of those tracts and literary texts in which Ireland would be invented and imagined.” In fact, the importance of the printed version of a national language in shaping national consciousness was already realized by Davis. He emphasised that the absence of at least bilingual, Irish-English newspapers excluded Ireland from an international and European context and made the country a “backwater of England.” Among countries set as examples for Ireland Davis (1846/1998, 182) referred to the multi-ethnic Hungary of the time, where “Magyar, Slavonic and German” all appear in print despite the very fact that Hungarian is the vernacular language of the majority population.

It is stating the obvious to note that the position of Hungarian and that of Irish were remarkably different at the time Davis put his ideas to paper. In the early 1840s Irish had approximately 2 700 000 monoglot speakers (Pintér 2008, 169), that is, less than half of the native population, with the upper and urban middle classes almost thoroughly anglicized. This also means that Irish became

confined to the oral, non-official communication domains of the native rural people, until even these population groups abandoned it, reducing the proportion of monoglot Irish speakers to less than 1% by the turn of the 20th century. By contrast, Hungarian had become a fully recognized European language and its path of development in the 19th century was the exact opposite of what was happening to Irish. Whereas it was the means of daily communication for people born Hungarian in all walks of their lives, following its official recognition large population groups of non-Hungarian origin also switched to Hungarian, making even the ethnically mixed towns of Hungary thoroughly Hungarian speaking in two or three generations (Nádasy 1999).

Regarding all this, the question arises why Davis used this factually invalid comparison between Hungarian and Irish, and applied the label of “national language” to Irish. Obviously, Davis understood the role of linguistic awakening in the formation of modern national consciousness, as well as the importance of national language in emphasizing the cultural-linguistic sovereignty of dependent nations, aspiring to political sovereignty. To this the Hungarian language movement gave a valid model. But, with respect to the linguistic component of constructing a culturally distinct Irish nation, Davis had to face a paradox: English was the majority language of Ireland and the language of their oppressors. Native Irish was distinct from English but its declining status did not actually entitle it to be a national language. To resolve this paradox Davis resorted to the Herderian idea of an organic connection between a people and its native tongue, implying that Irish was the national language of Ireland because of its unique way to express Irish thought and imagination:

The language, which grows up with a people is [...] mingled inseparably with their history and their soil, fitted beyond any other language to express their prevalent thoughts in the most natural and efficient way. (Davis 1846/1998, 173)

Davis’s approach to the language issue was that of the cultural-linguistic nationalist’s, and he viewed the role of language in national development, and a comparison between Irish and Hungarian from this ideological perspective. Anthony Smith (1991, 11–3) grasps the essence of the Irish phenomenon as follows: genealogy and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, customs and traditions play an important role in the formation of a nation even if the ancient language and language revival has failed, as in the case of the Irish. Furthermore, just like with McGee, with Davis I can also associate an effort to elevate the Irish nation. By setting the successful Hungarian language movement as an example for the Irish, Davis conveyed the message that – despite its critical status – the Irish tongue inherently possessed the potential of becoming a distinct national language, and that the accomplishment of this only depended on the decision of the Irish nation.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion I will state that the tradition of Irish-Hungarian national parallels goes back centuries and that it has been cultivated by both Irish and Hungarian “agents”. Therefore, they do offer a challenging research field for social and political scientists. But I have to note that national parallels, like nations or national histories, should be studied as ideological constructions that attempt to elevate one’s own nation by means of internationalization or Europeanization. Consequently, the investigation of international or European tendencies contemporaneous to the construction of the parallels should also be included in the research frame because of their importance as motivating forces for the “agents”. I propose this theoretical frame for further research into Irish-Hungarian parallels, made in the past or in the recent past.

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