

BELARUS AND IRELAND. CONTACTS. CULTURAL AND HUMANITARIAN RELATIONS

*Mitskevich M.M.,
Senior Lecturer of Minsk
Institute of Management*

*Mitskevich V.V.,
Belarusian State University,
Sociology Department*

Summary. The article deals with the contacts and historical connections between Belarus and Ireland, contains much interesting material on the life of the Irish Earls O'Rourkes in Belarus, describes why Belarusian and Irish culture and literature are similar, reveals modern relations between these two countries in cultural and humanitarian spheres, outlines the work of the Society "Belarus – Ireland" (Belarusian Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries).

Резюме. В статье рассматриваются связи и исторические взаимоотношения между Беларусью и Ирландией и содержится много интересного материала о жизни ирландских графов О'Рурков в Беларуси. Раскрываются причины сходства белорусской и ирландской культуры и литературы, а также отношения между двумя этими странами в культурной и гуманитарной сферах на современном этапе. В статье также описывается работа общества «Беларусь – Ирландия» (Белорусского общества дружбы и культурных отношений с зарубежными странами).

The Republic of Ireland takes up the larger part of the island of Ireland which lies in the Atlantic Ocean, to the west of Great Britain and maybe that is why its name Ireland or Eire in ancient Irish means the «Western Land». Ireland is a country which is situated very far from Belarus. What can be in common between these two countries?

First of all they are very similar in their history. Their right to exist and to have their own independent state was questioned in the past and is questioned even today by more powerful neighbours.

Let us have a look at the symbols of these two countries. There are three symbols of Ireland, they are the book, the cross and the harp. And what are the spiritual symbols of Belarus? Aren't they the Skaryna's books, the Saint Euphrasina Polotskaya's cross? Of course the third symbol doesn't seem to be similar to the Irish one because the musical symbol of Belarus is a pipe. But the Belarusian cymbals have strings as the Irish harp and pipe is very popular in Ireland. [1, 2].

Grass grows well in Ireland and in the 17th century natural forests covered most of the country. The «greenness» of the landscape makes «the green» the national colour of the country. No wonder that another symbol of Ireland is a green shamrock, a small clover bearing three leaves on one stem. Belarus is known for its green landscapes and forests too. And our another symbol is «vasiliok», also a small field flower.

The two countries have a lot in common. For example people in both countries like potato and depend on the crop as their staple food. The failure of the crop two centuries ago in Ireland led to the death of one third of the population, no doubt that if the same happened in Belarus the consequences would be the same too.

In the XX century a great number of Belarusian and Irish people emigrated from their own countries. The activity of Irish emigrants for the benefit of their country served as an example for Belarusian emigrants in the USA. It is known about good relations between Irish and Belarusian committees in Chicago. [3].

In the XX century no one nation in the world but Belarus and Ireland lost so much of their language resources. In the nineteenth century the Irish language was almost completely wiped out by the English.

First Contacts

The first mention about Belarus refers to the XIV century. But recently a manuscript of the XIII century was discovered in the library of Trinity College in Dublin. In this manuscript there is an article in which we can find a description of the lands. This description was made by an Irish monk and preacher, who was expounding Christianity among Baltic pagans and who as early as in the XIII century managed to reach Belarus. He was the first man who called our lands the «White Russia» and the first man who mentioned our country in his work in the XIII century.

«Descriptions of the Lands», contained in the Dublin manuscript, is an evidence of longstanding Belarusian-Irish relations. [4].

The Irish Earls O'Rourkes in Belarus

One would wonder what Irish Earls have to do with Belarus? The thing is that those O'Rourkes are frequently mentioned among the landowners of the Minsk province. They owned the estate of Usielub

in Navahrudak region. Isn't it interesting to find out why, when and how those people from a far island happened to settle there?

It turns out that the kin of O'Rourke, the descendants of Arthur, a son of Rourke, is as ancient as the dynasty of the Polatsk princes, the descendants of Rahvalod and Iziaslau. Iziaslau's mother Rahnedra was forced to marry Kiev prince Uladzimir, the wife of Tyrone O'Rourke, who was the king of Breffni principality, was stolen by the king of the Leinster province, MacDermott. According to the chronicles, it was the reason for a feudal war. It is known for sure that beginning with X–XI cc., the O'Rourkes were the lords of the county Leitrim. At the end of the XVI c. Brian, Earl O'Rourke was one of the leaders of the uprising against English oppression in Ireland. When in 1595 the rebels offered to sign a truce with Queen Elizabeth, one of its demands was the «forgiveness» of Brian. The uprising, though, continued but after it was defeated Brian had to leave his country and move to France.

Eventually Brian O'Rourke happened to be in France in 1688 from where the further journey of the family towards the East started. In 1760 Brian's grandsons, John and Cornelius were hired to serve the Russian Empress, Elisabeth. Earl Cornelius O'Rourke and his wife, who was the descendant of the Earl family of Stuarts, moved to Russia. This Irish-French immigrant managed to make a good career in the Russian Army, retiring as a Major-General. His son Joseph had even more success, he made a wonderful career in the army to the extent that he achieved the very high rank of Cavalry General.

In 1819, however, in the peak of his military career, General O'Rourke retired to settle in Navahrudak region of Minsk province. He was quite a prominent landowner, possessing around 20.000 acres of land, a small town of Usielub, and the villages of Trastsianka, Slochva, Kramushouka, Mezhniki and Heniushy.

Joseph O'Rourke died in 1849 as a respectful and glorified citizen. But before his death he petitioned to His Majesty to allow him and all his family to retain the title of Irish Earls. The response edict, signed by the Emperor of the Whole Russia on November 24, 1848, reads as follows: «and so be it».

According to the archive documents, in December 1896, Minsk Nobles' Deputy Assemble received a petition from the Earls O'Rourkes landowners of Navahrudak region. They were striving for the same thing as their grandfather Joseph half a century earlier, to be called the «Irish Earls». The petition had all the necessary documents, so it was complied, on December 15, 1897.

The last well-known offspring of the Irish Earls of Navahrudak was one of the brothers-petitioners, Edward Alexander Uladzislau Michailavich, who was born in 1876. Since an early age he showed an inclination for social activity. In Riga he was the leader of the Polish Students' society «Arkonia». After 1917 he was a member of the Liquidation Committee for the Affairs of the Polish Kingdom, and a member of the Polish Council of the Minsk lands. But church activity occupied a primary position in his life. Earl O'Rourke made an outstanding church career. He was a bishop in Vilna, Minsk, Riga. [1].

Contacts in the beginning of the 20th Century

Ireland, being the colony of the British Empire with its old traditions of English Parliamentarism, municipal and rural government and relatively wide political freedom, had already had rich and varied experience in the struggle for liberty. But by the beginning of the 20th century the previous aims and methods of the struggle to a certain extent had become obsolete. And thus in 1903 the Irish deputies, loyal to the colonizers, were going to greet in Dublin the English King, a group of patriotically inspired intellectuals and the youth dissatisfied by the policy of compromise formed an organization of opposition – National Council. At its Congress in 1905 the adherents worked out the following programme: to restore the Irish Constitution of 1782 (that had given Ireland the right to have its own independent Parliament); to cancel the union of 1800 (according to which the Irish parliament had been liquidated); to assist the development of Irish industry and trade navigation; instead of English educational system to make up their own network of schools.

The proposal of a young but experienced participant of the movement, famous journalist Arthur Griffith (1872–1922) was accepted in the Congress. He suggested that the elected Irish deputies should refuse to work in the British Parliament and to create an Irish Parliament. They wanted to rule their country themselves, that is why their movement received the name «Sinn Fein». It is in Irish. In English it sounds like «we are by ourselves».

At the same time at the beginning of the 20th century a national movement for liberty in Belarus also rose to a gradually new level. In the winter of 1902–1903 on the base of students and youth cultural communities the first national political party was formed – the Belarusian Social Community. Its leaders were Ivan and Anton Lutskevich, Vatslau Ivanousky, Ales Burbis and others. The BSC discussed the

following matters (issues) the dethronement of Russian autocracy and the establishment of a Federative Democratic Republic with a free self-determined Belarusian nation and the cancellation of the capitalist regime and the transition of the land – the means of production and communications – into national property.

The similarity of conditions in which both Irish Sinn Feiners and Belarusian socialists had to act, the closeness (although not identity) of their matters all made for the awakening of the mutual interest of one party in another. Thus there was certain historical logic in such event that shortly after the foundation of Sinn Fein and the BSC, the circumstances made for the meeting of the representatives of these two parties. In Finland at the meeting I. Lutskevich met the Irish representatives. Being faithful sons of their nation that itself had suffered a lot from foreign pressure, they showed their sincere sympathy with the Belarusian fighters for freedom and sent the Belarusian people their regards and the symbol of Ireland – green shamrock.

The article was found an article «Belarusian and Irish People» in the newspaper «Nash stiah» which belonged to Anton Lutskevich. In this article he mentioned that the symbol of Ireland – green shamrock-which was brought from Finland by I. Lutskevich was placed in the museum of the Belarusian scientific community named after I Lutskevich in Vilnya. [1].

Cultural Relations.

Belarus and Ireland are connected with each other long ago thanks to different cultural contacts.

The Slavonic tribes are considered to be the base of the Belarusian ethnic community. The Celtic tribes are the base of the Irish ethnic community. The remains of Celtic material culture were found by our archaeologists in Belarus: adornments, coins, items of domestic and family life. It is unknown whether the Celtic tribes passed through the territory of Belarus or whether the memorials of their culture were found in Belarus as the result of the international contacts and the cultural contacts between people.

The fact that the teaching of the Celtic ethnic community and the knight's novels are incorporated into the programme of the middle-level schools of Belarus as part of the course of Belarusian literature is an indication of the importance attached to the Celtic Influence on Belarusian culture. The Irish saga «The Birth of Cuchalain» was translated into Belarusian by L. Barshchevsky in 1994.

The literature of Ireland as well as the literature of Belarus took place at the crossroads of educational and human traditions which had been left and extended over a period of many centuries. On the one hand, a great role was given to the

folklore. But on the other the educational range in the national literary process in our country was connected with the extension of Christianity. Besides it was connected with different literary works written in Latin or in Old Slavonic. This way «Tavdal's Ghosts» is a work which was born in Ireland and was written in Latin. It becomes not only the example of the Belarusian interpretative literature, but the proof of the typological similarity with subjects and images of our national culture. Irish sagas have become examples of folklore, written and finished by Irish monks. Celtic epos is reviewed in the scientific literature in the context of people's epic literature, which has developed on different lands and has its own memorials in Belarus. Belarusian tales become similar to Irish sagas.

During the formation and development of the national cultures of our people the main role belonged naturally to the anonymous founders of this culture: to bards in Ireland and musicians in Belarus. The image of a national poet whose creative work represents the soul of our people, delivers inextinguishable trust in strength and immortality of the national genius the and, is one of the most important in our cultures.

On the one hand in Belarusian literature such poetry arises as a common image of a poet (is supposed as a name and the contents of such collections as «The Belarusian Pipe» and «The Belarusian Bow» written by F. Bahushevich and «Pipes» written by Y. Kupala), but on the other hand it is a personal artistic image («Burial Mound» and «Simon, the Musician» written by Y. Kolas). The image of a poet-musician, created in Belarusian literature, has become one of the most important attainments with which our culture entered the world. It occupies a special place in the literature of romanticism which extended both in Belarus and in Ireland. [5].

It is possible to find the common typological character of the patriotic poetry of Ales Harun and William Butler Yeats, those representatives of Belarusian and Irish Renaissance. They wrote their poems in a similar way and they had similar feminine symbols. These symbols unite the romantic dream about freedom, love and the woman's beauty at the same time.

Our literatures «have also given» the world «authors of the most great scale», which have become the representatives of national cultures. This way the writers who have entered English literature (J. Swift, R. Sheridan, O. Goldsmith, L. Stern, T. Moore, B. Shaw) were mainly the Irish by birth or by upbringing. Irish by birth James Joyce whose novel named «Ulyssess» is translated into Belarusian and published abroad Belarus, decides to leave for

Europe. Adam Mitskevich whose birthplace is in Navagrudak also leaves his motherland about which he wrote so much in his works. He went to Russia and then to Paris. A great number of famous people who were born or just lived in Belarus, while being abroad are becoming the pride of other countries and cultures: S. Polatsky, Elisa Azheshka, St. Manyushka, M. Ahinsky and others.

James Joyce was a contemporary of the Classic of Belarusian Literature: Maxim Bahdanovich, Yanka Kupala, Yakub Kolas, Maxim Garetski and Kuzma Chorny who created the new Belarusian prose and poetic traditions. It is interesting to note that James Joyce was born in the same year as Y. Kupala, Y. Kolas, U. Galubok (1882) and that he died in 1941. (Y. Kupala died in 1942).

Like so many Belarusian writers, James Joyce began to write the poems and traditional Irish sagas as these reflected the real Ireland.

The most important aspect, however, is that our writers as well as the Irish writers, Yeats (1865–1909), Synge (1871–1909) and Joyce (1882–1941) were the ideologists of the Belarusian and Irish Renaissance at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their aims were to renew the national cultures that were under the threat of disappearance as a result of assimilation; to preserve the national language, culture and national monuments; anthologize folklore.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked the birth of new trends in Belarusian and Irish literature. Thanks to the works of Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Bahdanovich, Kupala, Kolas, those trends became widely known. The most successful envoy of the Celtic National Movement was Douglas Hyde (1860–1946), a historian, poet, folk explorer, the first President of the Republic of Ireland. The envoys of the national ideas of Belarus were the writers Vazlau Lastouski (1883–1938) and Tsishka Hartni (1887–1937), the first prime-ministers of the Belarusian government.

Like in Belarus many poets wrote in Russian many of the most outstanding Irish poets and writers wrote in English.

The works by James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, Sean O'Casey, Frank O'Connor, Mave Maron, Walter Makin, Thomas Moore, Sean O'Faolain were translated into the Belarusian language and published in our books, newspapers and magazines.

Irish culture is of great interest for many Belarusian scientists, writers, students. Not only scientific works are devoted to this country. «Ireland» – is the name of the poem of a well known Belarusian writer Leanid Dranko-Majsiuk. And the poem «Man Walking the Stairs» of Irish poet Tom Paulin is

inspired by the work of Belarusian artist Chaim Soutin. [6]. We can also find a lot of similar elements in traditional folk music, dancing and songs.

Humanitarian Contacts.

The Chernobyl disaster which happened on the 26th of April, 1986, at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in the Ukraine caused a great damage, especially to Belarus. Chernobyl nuclear power station explosion may be considered the biggest disaster of the XX century. to the dont to lots of people.

The accident that scientists were so convinced could never happen has reflected the lives of millions. This disaster still caused damage to many people, especially those who live in Belarus, because over 70 per cent of the radioactive substances fell over the territory of Belarus.

Many Irish organizations do a lot to help our people. They bring convoys with humanitarian aid to our country and take Belarusian children from orphanages and contaminated areas to Ireland to spend their summer holidays in Irish families.

Adi Roche, executive director of Irish organization «The Chernobyl Children's Project», wrote that «we all live under the shadow of the mushroom cloud as radiation levels affect us all regardless of sex, culture or class and that we have to unite together to protect the earth from disaster». She wrote a book about children of Chernobyl. The book is dedicated to Evgeniya Nesterenko who died aged seven in the Mercy Hospital in 1995. Adi Roche was awarded the Medal of F. Skaryna in application of the generous and kind efforts in providing humanitarian aid and great support for the children of Belarus. [7].

William O'Meara, director of Irish organization «Barren Chernobyl Project» organized the convoys of humanitarian aid and the work of Irish volunteers in Belarusian orphanages. His book «Fallout. Children of Belarus and the people of Ireland after Chernobyl» (Dublin, 2003) is an extraordinary and inspiring story of the involvement of the group of people from Co Clare in Ireland in the affairs of handicapped children in Belarus.

Society «Belarus – Ireland» and Its Work

On the Day of St. Patrick March 17th, 1998 in the building of the Belarusian Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in Minsk was solemnly created the Friendship Society «BELARUS – IRELAND».

President of the newly formed Society, Dr. Mikhail Mitskevich (Professor of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences) is a son of a famous Belarusian poet Yakub Kolas, one of the founders of the Belarusian national literature.

The Society considers its objective as establishing and strengthening all kinds of friendly and mutual

relations between the people of Belarus and Ireland, links of cooperation and assistance in various spheres of human activities like culture, sports, science, tourism, education etc.

The Society has close links with Irish charities which for a number of years have been concerned with Chernobyl radiation relief, orphans and handicapped children. Cultural programmes of the Society «Belarus – Ireland» are something that can be provided for Irish people in return for their financial assistance for Belarusian children. In March 1999 the first celebration of Irish national holiday – St. Patrick's Day was organized in Belarus. It included St. Patrick's Day Parade in which Irish people, representatives of the Society «Belarus – Ireland» and Belarusian students took part. Also there was held the scientific seminar «Belarusian – Irish Historical and Cultural Links» in which well known Belarusian philologists, historians, economists, scientific workers from the Belarusian Academy of Sciences participated.

In 2000 as a part of the aim to encourage cultural and scientific exchanges between Belarus and Ireland the Society «Belarus – Ireland» ran a successful programme «The Irish Days in Belarus».

The programme included official meetings, a scientific conference, a «round table» on humanitarian relations, cultural events and St. Patrick's Day Parade. In March in the building of the Belarusian Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in Minsk the presentation of the book «Belarusian – Irish Historical and Cultural Links» was organized. About 60 Irish people took part in these events. The information about «The Irish Days» was published in several newspapers and presented on Belarusian TV.

The Society «Belarus – Ireland» received the following Message from President of Ireland Mary McAleese:

«It is a sign of the strong links and friendship that have grown up between our two peoples, that on this important day for Ireland, and for all friends of Ireland throughout the world, the people of Minsk and Belarus will celebrate St. Patrick's Day with us. My thanks in particular to the Belarus – Eire Society, and its President, Dr. Mikhail Mitskevich, who have worked so hard to build these important ties. . . »

The Society is open to all people of good will who want to participate in its activities.

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