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**To cite this article:** Ciaran O'Neill (10 Apr 2025): Complex solidarities: the public history of Irish and Native American allyship, Settler Colonial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/2201473X.2025.2484936](https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2025.2484936)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2025.2484936>



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Published online: 10 Apr 2025.



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# Complex solidarities: the public history of Irish and Native American allyship

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## ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Irish people have donated over \$2.5 million to a relief fund supporting residents of the Navajo and Hopi reservations in northeastern Arizona. Many donors believed their contributions helped 'repay a debt' owed by the Irish to Native Americans—specifically, the Choctaw Nation, which sent aid to Ireland during the 1847 Famine. This article examines how Irish people understand their historical links to settler colonialism and how valid or common it is for them to express solidarity with other colonized peoples, particularly Indigenous groups. Focusing on the relationship between the Irish and Native Americans, especially the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma since the 1990s, the article explores this expression of solidarity. It considers the historical rationale offered by Irish donors to the Navajo and Hopi between 2020 and 2024 via GoFundMe, framing it as repayment for the Choctaw's 1847 gift. Using Charles Mills' concept of white ignorance, the article critiques how these acts of solidarity can obscure Ireland's own role in settler colonialism—from treaty negotiations that displaced Indigenous peoples to participation in land dispossession. By selectively remembering shared suffering while ignoring complicity in colonialism, Irish narratives reveal a more complex and sometimes problematic form of solidarity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 July 2024

Accepted 23 March 2025

## KEYWORDS

Solidarity; settler colonialism; Allyship; white ignorance; Choctaw gift; Irish diaspora; historical memory

Two ancient peoples. A modern-day connection. Nothing divides the Choctaw people from the Irish except for the ocean. Both the Choctaw Nation and Ireland were, in effect, colonized by outside powers. Their ancient tongues almost became extinct, and have been rescued from oblivion and made into working languages again through concerted effort and sophisticated approaches. Both peoples have successfully preserved their cultures and traditions.<sup>1</sup>

Choctaw Nation

Since 2020 Irish people have donated more than \$2.5 m to a relief fund set up to aid people living in the Navajo and Hopi reservations in north-eastern Arizona. They have done so in the apparent belief that a small personal donation will help to 'repay a

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debt' owed by Irish people to Native Americans. The debt that these Irish donors imagine themselves to be repaying is owed – somewhat confusingly – to the Choctaw nation. That this payment is not conceived of in any way as reparative will require some explanation, as will the fact that a large sum of money has by now been donated by Irish people to the 'wrong' Indigenous nation. Such unravelling will also raise more questions than it might answer. How do Irish people historicise their links to settler colonialism? How common or valid is it for Irish people to express solidarity with colonised people, and to compare the Irish experience of colonisation with that of Indigenous peoples? To answer these questions, I will draw on just one such instance of publicly expressed Irish solidarity: that between the Irish and Native Americans. In particular, I will sketch the most developed contemporary relationship: that of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the Irish, since the early 1990s. By doing so I hope to demonstrate that the evident ability of Irish people to dissociate themselves from any responsibility for the exploitation and erasure of Indigenous people in the European settler empire is a key issue in contemporary public historical discourse in Ireland.

How many Irish people donated to the Navajo and Hopi COVID relief fund and why? Almost 30,000 Irish residents have donated, representing about 23% of the total number of donors. Of the overall figure of \$8 m raised by the summer of 2024, more than a quarter came from Irish residents, and many more donations came from the Irish diaspora in settler colonial states such as the United States, Canada and Australia.<sup>2</sup> The relief fund was set up in 2020 with the aim to help alleviate the devastation of Navajo and Hopi communities by the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective was to help members of those nations who struggled for adequate supplies and water to over 46,000 households, and to mitigate the death rate in the Navajo and Hopi nations, which suffered from the highest rate of infection per capita in the entire United States. This was a product of how remote many Navajo people were from the services and hospital care they so badly needed during the pandemic, but also – at a systemic level – it was yet more evidence of the structural discrimination these communities have faced following centuries of settler colonial aggression or neglect.

That such a sizable proportion of the donations came from Ireland – a small, wealthy, European country very distant from the Navajo and Hopi in terms of geography, culture and heritage – was something that generated a great deal of global media attention at the time.<sup>3</sup> All of this coverage was understandably positive, given the novelty of the story and the fact that the scale of the donations from Ireland seemed generous. This article is interested in the public historical significance of these donations, many of which appear to have been made on the basis of a particular reading of just one historical event, not related in any way to the Navajo and Hopi nations – the donation of \$710/\$170 by the Choctaw Nation to Irish famine relief in 1847.<sup>4</sup> The donations were made in 'solidarity' by individual Irish citizens, without any institutional or state-led initiative cajoling them to do so. Rather the initial impetus came from a viral social media post by an Irish journalist, Naomi O'Leary.<sup>5</sup>



O'Leary's tweet was non-specific about the source of Famine relief. It did not indicate that the donation to the Irish had come from a different Indigenous group but rather collapsed these distinctions, presumably for the sake of brevity. The historical rationale for donating a large sum of money to a completely different Native American nation appears somewhat thin. After all, the Navajo and Hopi nations did not donate money to Ireland during the famine of the 1840s, the Choctaw did, as did the Cherokee, though neither have benefited to the extent from reciprocal charitable donations from Ireland to the extent that the Navajo and Hopi tribes have. But leaving aside the fact that Irish contributions to this fund have recompensed the 'wrong' North American nation, how consistent has Irish support for the Choctaw been across time and space? Where does the modern and widespread knowledge of the Choctaw Famine Gift come from, and how and why has the memory of this gift been maintained across several generations? How should we understand this Irish solidarity?

### White ignorance and the meaning(s) of Irish Allyship and aid

Ireland has been a net contributor to 'foreign aid' only since its accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1970s. The rhetoric of Irish aid often builds on Irish Christian missionary tradition in the medieval period, but the modern story of Irish aid is not one that is continuous in any way. It is, in fact, much more recent. One of the main driving forces for the Irish state becoming a net provider rather than a net beneficiary of aid was its desire to enter the EEC, thus marking its transition from a European territory long linked with economic underperformance and poverty to one associated with wealth.<sup>6</sup> Irish aid is a marker of its membership of what is often referred to as the Global North, and thus its escalation marked the transition of Ireland from a developing

economy to a developed one in the eyes of the world economy. Ireland is presently one of the wealthiest small economies in the world – in part because of its status as a tax haven – and regularly ranks as among the top ten wealthiest nations globally.<sup>7</sup> This economic turnaround was a slow-paced one, but dramatically accelerated in the 'Celtic Tiger' period of economic prosperity (1995–2007), but even before then Irish narratives around humanitarian aid had what Kevin O'Sullivan has termed something of 'a self-congratulatory tone.'

Growing up here in the 1980s and 1990s, it was difficult to escape the self-congratulatory tone that accompanied any discussion of Ireland's role abroad (see Bono, Bob Geldof, Mary Robinson, Irish peacekeepers, missionary orders and NGOs like Trócaire and Concern).

Ireland was held up as a 'bridge' between Europe and the Global South – an argument based largely on the country's own experiences of colonialism – but with little or no critical analysis of the power dynamics involved.<sup>8</sup>

O'Sullivan identifies a postcolonial 'deafness' in Ireland to the underlying dynamics of what aid might be given from Irish people, to whom, and for what reasons. Likewise, Cólín Parsons expresses a healthy scepticism at the idea that the Irish can feel free to express what Kader Asmal called an 'instinctive solidarity' with other postcolonial, colonised, or oppressed groups, or the idea that Ireland can characterise itself – in the words of Luke Gibbons – as a 'first world country, but with a third world memory.'<sup>9</sup> The reticence of Irish people to regard themselves as 'settlers' as well as (or rather than) migrants in settler colonial contexts has been noted by a minority of scholars of the Irish diaspora.<sup>10</sup> Mary Mullen has noted that although Irish people so 'actively participated' in settler colonial formations by 'fighting in the Indian Wars' and 'settling on Indian land,' a naïve politics of empathy has not led to Irish people to either 'renounce settler privileges or question the settler structures of government.'<sup>11</sup> At its zenith in the long nineteenth century, Britain and Ireland contributed some 22 m settlers out of a European total of 55–60 m settlers. 7.5 m or so of those settlers were Irish, the majority of whom were in that period at least, Catholic and poor.<sup>12</sup> The land these Irish settlers helped to settle was once that of Indigenous Americans or Indigenous Australians. Yet Ireland takes enormous pride in its Irish American diaspora, and much of its economic, tourist and foreign policy is formulated with Irish America at its very centre.

Claiming affinity can thus become a way of effacing or collapsing an asymmetric power hierarchy, rendering Irish participation in settler colonialism less visible by equating the Irish experience of colonisation with the genocide of Native Americans and excusing Irish presence in the white settler empire as an inescapable outcome of equivalent persecution at home. Such forgetting can seem structural and enabling. Charles Mills has famously termed this a form of 'white ignorance,' which he saw as a deliberate non-knowing, in which race – white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications – plays a crucial causal role. It's not merely a lack of knowledge; it's an ignorance that is actively produced and maintained by social structures and power relations. It is 'not contingent' but reproduced. At his most basic Mills is arguing that for one group to be deemed privileged it must be in comparison with a group that is handicapped.<sup>13</sup> If those differences are collapsed, then any sense of white privilege is lost. This disconnect is at the core of Irish 'forgetting' of their part in the colonisation of lands that once belonged to the Indigenous peoples of what we now call North America.

Mills distinguishes between two types of white ignorance: one stemming directly from racist motivation, the other arising indirectly from a social structure that systematically suppresses or distorts information about race.<sup>14</sup> A racist individual may hold false beliefs about people of colour due to prejudice, but a non-racist individual may also unknowingly hold false beliefs due to the ways in which knowledge about race is shaped by white supremacy. Mills emphasises that white ignorance is a structural phenomenon, and I want to argue that the concept of white ignorance is particularly applicable to the exact positionality that a majority of Irish people find themselves in relative to postcolonial identity politics: that is the role of the colonised coloniser from Europe. Ireland is not at all exceptional in this. The historic Irish positionality as an economic semi-periphery, non-dominant European kingdom/colony who nonetheless contributed in an outsized proportion to European settler colonialism is shared with – among others, several Nordic regions, modern day Italians and several Eastern and Central European regions. Rather than considering these groups of ostensibly disadvantaged European settler colonials as simply settlers of last resort, reframing them within a world of racial hierarchies and spectrums that would place them much closer to the top than almost any population of colour. An Irish ignorance of membership of a white supremacy, or an Irish ignorance of gains at the expense of others, then, can have, I am arguing, a deleterious or negative outcome whether intentional or not at an individual level. Conceptions of race matter a great deal in this.<sup>15</sup>

The experience of Irish settlers corresponds with the experience of Finnish settlers in North America in the late nineteenth century. The total number of Finns in this period is miniscule compared to the Irish or the Italians, at about 200,000 or so settlers. The historiography of the Finnish Diaspora focuses on the experiences of individuals and families, and more broadly on the history and experiences of certain Finnish communities and organisations. It is their survival against the odds that is valorised in what is largely, like Irish diaspora histories, a contribution history. Furthermore, Finnish historians have argued that Finns had an exceptional relationship with Indigenous peoples: Finns were compassionate towards the Natives, and even similar to them, somehow naturally predisposed as a colonised nation, to sympathise with and understand the Natives. Finns, according to this myth, were benevolent colonisers, if they were colonisers at all.

Finns, just like the Irish, were active in the 'transimperial processes of conquest, far-settlement, elimination of Natives and capture of terrestrial spaces; in the characteristic processes of settler colonialism.'<sup>16</sup> They dispossessed Natives from their homelands and replaced them. In doing so, they were part of what historian James Belich has called 'settler revolutions.'<sup>17</sup> A similar pattern of denial and erasure characterises the histories of Czechoslovak peoples, Polish and other Eastern European populations, none of whom ever had the opportunity to colonise people and places under their own national or ethnolinguistic banner but nevertheless enjoyed many of the advantages enjoyed by any other European and white population had relative to any person of colour at the height of white supremacy and European hegemonic power. As Mark et al have argued in a recent book 'Eastern Europe is not simply a racially denigrated victim of ideological projects developed elsewhere: claims to whiteness – only conditionally accepted in the West – were essential in the development of the region's nation-states.'<sup>18</sup> Claims of racial 'innocence' for Europe's East rest on its *disconnection* from Western European colonialism and from the transatlantic slave trade. Implicit or explicit claims of innocence

abound in Irish historiography. Similarly, the most recent survey of the Irish diaspora claims that 'in a world of racial hierarchies and ruthless territorial expansion, the migrant Irish must be recognised as both victims and, inescapably, oppressors.'<sup>19</sup>

Expressions of allyship and solidarity carry many meanings in an Irish context, as they do elsewhere. Scholars make a distinction between what we might call *organic* solidarity – the idea that two or more groups may share an experience of suffering and thus naturally feel empathy with those similarly afflicted – and *political* solidarity. The latter type of solidarity is one that requires some sort of action, but it is also somewhat arguably more distant and complex, as Leah Hunt Hendrix has argued.<sup>20</sup> When a person or a group expresses solidarity with a group whose experiences differ significantly from their own then a series of other questions come into focus beyond a simple act of generosity or empathy. It is a form of elective affinity, and there may be benefits or shared strategic goals that emerge from such consciously signalled expressions. Scholtz argues that political solidarity is distinguished by the way it aims to 'bring about social change by uniting individuals in their response to particular situations of injustice, oppression, or tyranny.'<sup>21</sup> Natural disasters, she argues, might inspire widespread feelings of solidarity and an outpouring of money and empathy, but they do not translate to a programme of political action or activism. At first glance then, the Irish donations to the Navajo in their time of need may simply seem to belong to a culture of giving to societies in need of emergency assistance. Ireland donated heavily to Haiti in the wake of the devastating earthquake in 2010, for example, but much of the €30.5 m was donated through the state and various aid organisations.<sup>22</sup> What distinguishes the Navajo and Hopi donations is that *individuals* collectively decided to donate, and that their most-cited reason for doing so was historically rationalised. This means a political reading of the Irish past effectively translated into many charitable donations to a group in need.

In Ireland, expressions of political solidarity have sometimes been understood, for example, as both a genuine attempt to find common cause with others and as a proxy for local tensions between politically opposed groups in society.<sup>23</sup> For example, Irish nationalist expressions of solidarity with Palestinians have been a persistent feature of symbolic allyship in Ireland in recent decades, but very far from a consistent political response prior to the 1980s. The partition and later settlement of Palestine led to sharp change in public sentiment north and south such that the Republic of Ireland only recognised the *de jure* existence of Israel as late as 1963, and waited another thirty years before granting Israel an embassy.<sup>24</sup> It nevertheless stopped short of full bilateral diplomatic relations with Palestine until 2024, demonstrating the limits of official Irish allyship. These expressions of solidarity for Palestine have been mirrored with a corresponding – if slightly weaker – support for Israel that is particularly visible in the Unionist community and its symbolic armoury since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> The result is an occasionally quite shallow surface-level support for one side or another. It can amount to both a genuinely held political conviction, and, simultaneously, a proximate means of continuing a local struggle for power and control by connecting either side to a more global conversation about politics and freedom.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of Irish expressions of solidarity for Native Americans, there is also a striking degree of reciprocity and exchange. In other words, it has been a profoundly political and symbolic solidarity.<sup>27</sup> Kelly Delaney has recently surveyed the long relationship between the American Indian Movement (AIM) and Irish nationalists, which developed as a result of



AIM's direct action at Wounded Knee in 1973.<sup>28</sup> This reciprocal support then accelerated during the IRA Hunger strikes of 1981, but Irish-Native American solidarity has been an occasional aspect of pan-Indian diplomacy since at least the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Europe-facing diplomacy had accelerated in the 1920s, when the Iroquois leader Deskaheh petitioned the League of Nations in Geneva during the 'Six Nations' movement for recognition and statehood, and famously Éamon de Valera's 1919 meeting with the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe (Ojibwe) belonged to this era of proto diplomacy. The modern era of more formal diplomacy coincided with the civil rights movements, global student activism and Cold War development policies.<sup>30</sup> Out of this period of intensive organisation came the AIM, which had developed several targeted and European alliances since its foundation in the late 1960s, notably with Welsh nationalists, adding to its wide bilateral and diplomatic ties to anti-colonial movements (broadly defined) worldwide.<sup>31</sup> AIM developed specific relationships with the Republican movement in Northern Ireland from the 1970s through to the 1990s, partly because it strategically suited both sides to profess allyship at a time when the Troubles in Northern Ireland was consistently in the news and at the same time as the Red Power movement was growing. Visits to Ireland by senior AIM figures such as Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt, Gilbert Thunder Hawk and Floyd 'Red Crow' Westerman added to the sense of a reciprocal interest in a 'common struggle' with Ireland.<sup>32</sup> To this, we can add the multiple alliances that responded in a more organic way to moments of crisis or specific campaigns, Navajo and Hopi nations' 'Big Mountain' campaign of 1986, right up to protests in solidarity with Standing Rock activism in Dakota in 2016/2017.

In recent years activists and academics alike have called for a more widespread questioning of solidarity, especially those that emerge from people who identify as descending from white settler groups, or from the countries that first exported them. Divergent worldviews, interests and identity, historical legacies and relations of power all combine to 'complicate notions of allyship and solidarity for common cause', and thus a movement to 'decolonise solidarity,' is increasingly voluble in the academic literature.<sup>33</sup> There are, of course, arguably, some material benefits to be derived by oppressed groups from the allyship of more privileged others. Williams and Sharif have argued that while 'allies are people who recognise the unearned privilege they receive from society's patterns of injustice and take action to change it,' this positionality can be juxtaposed with that of the putative 'white saviour,' whose allyship is 'performative,' 'paternalistic,' and ultimately an exercise in being seen to help others as a means of gaining credit and capital that will ultimately deliver benefit to themselves.<sup>34</sup> Lilie Chouliraki has argued that this turns those offering solidarity into what she terms an 'ironic spectator,' which she defines as 'an impure or ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as sceptical towards any moral appeal to solidary action and, yet, open to doing something about those who suffer.' This condition allows the privileged 'to stage human vulnerability as an object of [their] empathy as well as of critical reflection and deliberation.'<sup>35</sup>

### Embedding the memory of the Choctaw gift

The identification of the Irish people with the history of Native American struggles has been revitalised in the past three decades. There have, in fact, been two 'peaks' in this visible allyship. The first came in the 1990s and the second has come much more recently,



since about 2015, and could be seen to have probably peaked with the Navajo and Hopi donations in 2020-23, though time will tell. Prior to the 1990s there was a very limited awareness of Choctaw connections to Irish culture and history, and knowledge of the gift to the Irish during the Famine was rarely raised in popular culture, although it was hardly unknown, and was in fact briefly referenced in the bestselling 1962 popular history of the Famine by Cecil Woodham Smith.<sup>36</sup> Since then historians and other scholars have read the relationship in a variety of ways, but nearly always positively.<sup>37</sup> Lynée Lewis Gaillet sees 'the continuing partnership between Choctaw and Irish peoples' as a 'case study of multi-generational remembrance and healing born of empathy' and characterises the relationship as an ongoing one spanning more than 176 years, and a 'multidirectional, benevolent relationship' that 'affords opportunities for longitudinal examinations of rhetorical acts of kindness.'<sup>38</sup>

A more nuanced account of the aid relationship between Native Americans and the Irish at the time of the Great Famine can be found in Anelise Hanson Shrout's *Aiding Ireland* (2024), which aims to historicise and contextualise the Choctaw and Cherokee donations, placing them alongside other unlikely donors such as abolitionists, Plantation owners in the South, enslaved people, etc. For the Native American donors, Shrout's argument is essential that their donations constituted an act of resistance against the dehumanising rhetoric of settler colonialism, and that their charity and philanthropy to the Irish was as much an articulation of agency and independence in a local context as it was a profound act of solidarity towards a group of white Europeans.<sup>39</sup>

This process of raising popular awareness of the donation and a shared history began when Don Mullan – an activist and leader of Action from Ireland – invited Choctaw Chief Hollis Roberts to lead the 3rd Great Famine Walk in Ireland in 1990.<sup>40</sup> The walk was covered by media globally, and this led to a series of more official engagements all happening in the context of Irish sesquicentennial commemoration of the key event in Irish modern history: the Famine of the 1840s. The famine sesquicentenary was controversial, and there had been heightened tensions both in academic discourse and the various official commemorations of the event, all heightened by the strain in Anglo-Irish relations in the early 1990s while Northern Ireland was still in a phase of active warfare known nationally and internationally as the 'Troubles.'<sup>41</sup> The Famine commemorations raised up perhaps the single most divisive event in Anglo-Irish history and it did so just prior to eventual ceasefire in 1995 and the long process of negotiating Good Friday Agreement in 1998. In 1992 the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Sean Kenny, unveiled a plaque in Dublin's Mansion House, commemorating the generosity of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and noting both their forced removal from Mississippi and the compassion and kindness shown by members of all First Nations people in North America to the Irish during the Great Hunger in the 1840s.<sup>42</sup> This too was the product of Mullan's interactions with the Choctaw nation in the early 1990s.

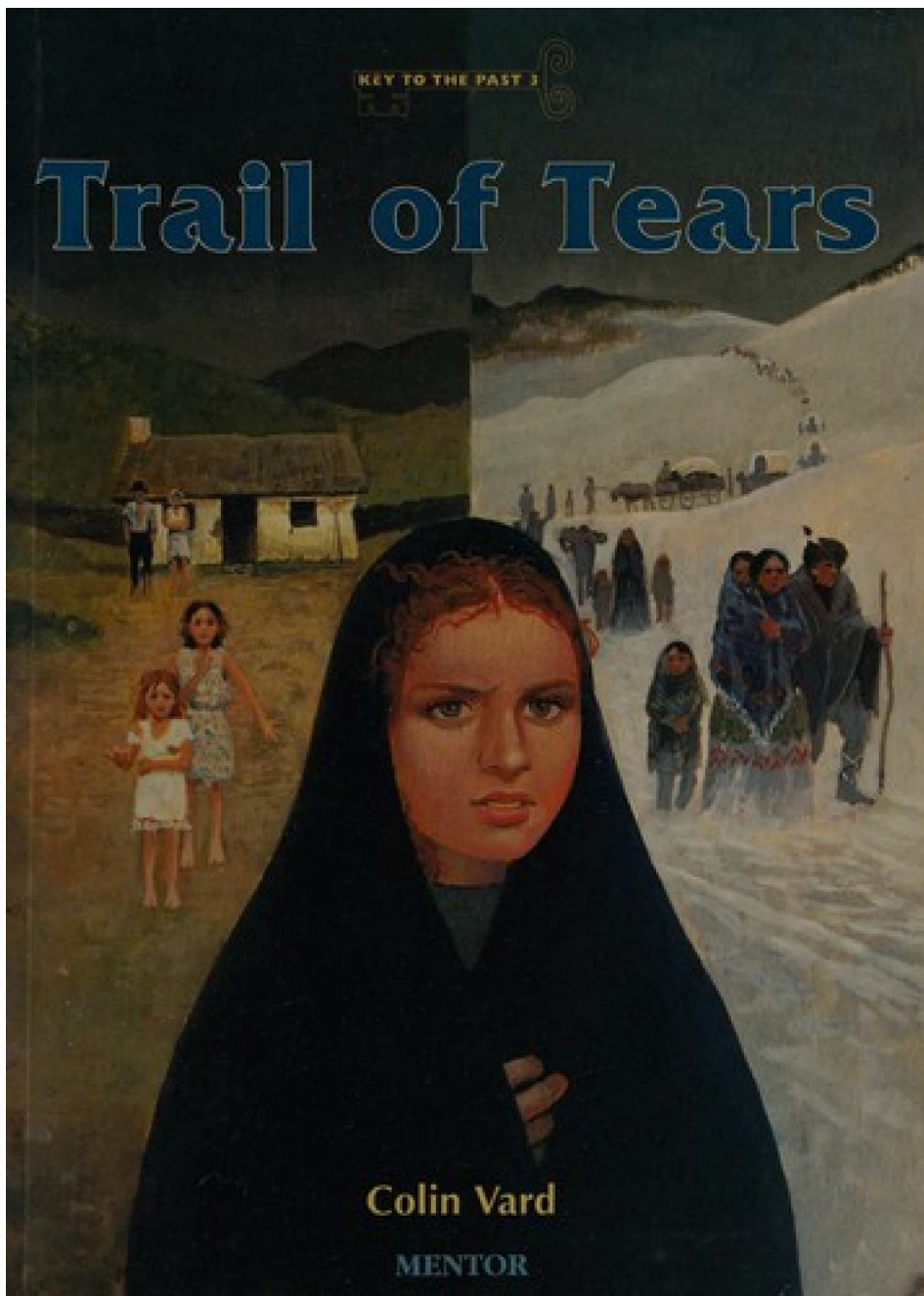
It is perhaps a measure of the spread in awareness of the Choctaw gift that when the President of Ireland Mary Robinson was interviewed by reporters in Somalia about Irish donations to the region – then in severe humanitarian crisis – she referenced the story of the Choctaw donation as having contributed to Irish folk memories of the famine and the need for reciprocal charity in times of crisis.<sup>43</sup> She was to become an energetic proponent of that story. In June 1995 President Robinson visited the Choctaw in Oklahoma and was made an honorary chief.<sup>44</sup> Her visit came at a propitious moment and

thus emphasised a rare 'good' news story in Irish Famine history as well as offering both sides a chance to commemorate something relatively positive. This also emphasises that in some ways the memory of the Choctaw gift has been preserved because it has several useful functions to the Irish, rather than the Choctaw.<sup>45</sup> It is, after all, a way to denote solidarity with another colonised group, as well as a way to show that even while Ireland was at the centre of the world's richest empire in 1847, peripheral groups such as the Sultan of Turkey and the Cherokee and Choctaw nations were willing to donate to it; a fact which might be used to indicate just how abused the Irish were under Union with Great Britain. This tendency elides the particular and often quite local or political intentions of the donor and donation. The Sultan of Turkey, for example, was so keen to establish the Ottoman Empire as part of what Celik argues was an emerging global humanitarianism, that he was donating money and sending ships of grain to Europe despite a chronic shortage of food in his own territory. The aid that was given to Ireland during the famine was given in the context of food riots in Thessalonica. Turkish aid to starving Irish people came at a severe cost to their starving Turkish peers.<sup>46</sup> A fine example of this tendency to accentuate the politics of international humanitarianism during the famine can be seen in a speech given by Trevor Sargent, TD, to Dáil Éireann (the Irish Parliament) in a debate about the 150th commemorations of the Famine in Ireland:

During the Famine, many people outside the country engaged in high profile fund raising events ... For example, the Sultan of Turkey gave £1,000, Pope Pius IX gave £1,000, Saint Petersburg City gave £3,000, the former slaves in Jamaica, only a few years free from slavery, gave £2,000, the often remembered Choctaw Indians who suffered so greatly in 1831, gave £170. Arthur Guinness – perhaps he could have afforded more – gave £60. Queen Victoria is sometimes maligned and some untrue stories are told about her involvement. However, she is reputed to have given £2,000 and her husband, Prince Albert, gave £500.<sup>47</sup>

This gesture accountancy is a frequent rhetorical device within Irish nationalist discourse, and it helps to explain why Irish people find it easy to collapse and confuse various Native Americans into one heterogenous group: it is because they are often simply instrumentalised as a proxy for the real target of Irish ire: Britain.

The Robinson visit increased awareness of the Choctaw gift in Ireland still further and in 1997 Colin Vard published *Trail of Tears*, (Figure 1) a novella which compared the suffering of the Irish in the Famine with the suffering of the Native Americans on the Trail of Tears.<sup>48</sup> In 1998 Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick co-published an impressive children's novel in collaboration with Gary White Deer – a member of the Choctaw nation then resident in Ireland – that indicated the way in which the gift was being actively remembered. *The Long March: The Choctaw's Gift to Irish Famine Relief* revolves around a young Choctaw character, Choona, who becomes aware for the first time of the displacement of the Choctaw in the 1830s and their forced removal to the 'New Lands.' His anger at this news is prompted by the request of the Irish for aid, to which his elders have readily agreed. European settler colonialism is referenced in this children's novel but deftly delimited to 'the Spanish, the French, the English,' a device that allows the Irish to become acceptable beneficiaries of Choctaw generosity.<sup>49</sup> Scholars have critiqued the somewhat flimsy foundations of this allyship, especially in literature where works by influential Irish poets such as Paul Muldoon, and novelists like Sebastian Barry have been alternately praised and critiqued for the comparisons drawn by them between Irish and 'Indian' experience.<sup>50</sup>



**Figure 1.** Cover of Colin Vard's *Trail of Tears* (1997) denoting an equivalency between the Famine and the Trail of Tears, but centering a young Irish girl called Grainne.

Since the mid 1990s Gary White Deer had been the driving force behind a new organisation Celts and American Indians Together (CAIT). Others involved in this initiative from 1996–1998 seem to have been Don Mullan and Kathleen Deignan. It was a charitable

foundation, raising money for poverty relief projects worldwide and early fundraising appeals raised considerable sums from Irish schools.<sup>51</sup> For a time its address was at Iona College (now University) in New York but the organisation seems not to have lasted much beyond 1998 and there is no record of it ever having reached its stated goal of raising \$1.7 m, widely reported in the Irish media.<sup>52</sup>

Solidarity and allyship were centred in all of these 1990s engagements and interactions and it is clear that they help to provide a language and framework for the 2020 Covid donations. Coverage of these early interactions around the Choctaw gift often made a direct comparison between the plight of the Choctaw people on the 'Trail of Tears' and the plight of the Irish during and immediately after the Great Famine, as had the original activism of the early 1990s. If anything, the 1990s coverage was even less nuanced. The *Cork Examiner* read the Louisburgh walk as 'a gesture of solidarity,' by the Irish, and *Western People* saw 'many parallels' between the Irish and the Choctaw, who had both endured broken treaties, forced removal and stolen land.<sup>53</sup> The *Irish Press* thought that 'just as the Indians came to aid of the starving Irish in the 1840s the Louisburg walk signifies Ireland's concern with the undernourished and oppressed of today's third world.'<sup>54</sup> On occasion, the coverage of these commonalities can be just plain tone-deaf and borderline offensive. In 2005 the Connacht Tribune carried a story about a community group in rural County Galway who had raised €50 to send to the Choctaw following Hurricane Katrina. The newspaper noted (incorrectly) that the threat of displacement to the Choctaw in Mississippi was especially resonant because of their removal from the area in the '1930s.'<sup>55</sup>

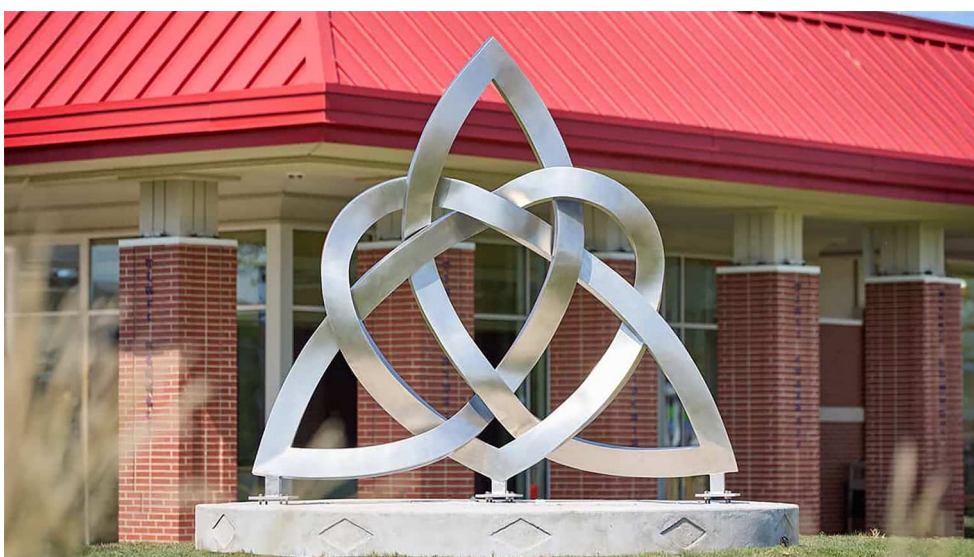
In the decade leading up to the COVID-19 donations to the Navajo and Hopi, there were some sustained initiatives to continue to embed the memory of the Choctaw Gift. In 2015 a sculpture by Alex Pentek was erected in Midleton, Co. Cork, that directly referenced the gift. Commissioned by Midleton Town Council it was officially unveiled two years later by Chief Gary Batton, then Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.<sup>56</sup> (Figure 2) The artist explained that the idea behind its visual form was that by creating 'an empty bowl symbolic of the Great Irish Famine formed from the seemingly fragile and rounded shaped eagle feathers used in Choctaw ceremonial dress,' he aimed to 'communicate the tenderness and warmth of the Choctaw Nation who provided food to the hungry when they themselves were still recovering from their own tragic recent past.' For the artist, the key idea was that the Choctaw and Irish Nations would be 'forever more kindred spirits.' Reactions to the sculpture have been positive and in August 2024 the Government of Ireland and the Chahta Foundation unveiled their joint-funded sculpture *Eternal Heart* built by Choctaw Nation tribal member Samuel Stitt and installed at the Choctaw Capitol grounds in Tuskahoma. An 8 ft tall sculpture, it combines a Celtic trinity shape intertwined with a heart and is specifically placed facing towards Ireland (Figure 3).

In 2018 the Prime Minister of Ireland, An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, visited the Choctaw nation at Durant, Oklahoma, in 2018 in order to, as the Department of Foreign Affairs declared, 'formally recognise the solidarity and compassion demonstrated by the Choctaw people 171 years ago during our country's darkest hour.' Chief Batton of the Choctaw nation acknowledged a shared history of tragedy, courage, and strength.<sup>57</sup> Waylon Gary White Deer – a Choctaw artist and activist – has been a prominent figure in Donegal, where he lived and worked for more than a decade, and his advocacy has raised awareness of the Choctaw gift, as has a commemorative volume of essays by





**Figure 2.** Alex Pentek, *Kindred Spirits* (2017), Midleton, Ireland (Image courtesy of Gavin Sheridan, CC BY-SA 4.0).



**Figure 3.** Samuel Stitt, *Eternal Heart* (2024), Tuskahoma, Oklahoma (Image courtesy of the Government of Ireland).

Padraig Kirwan and LeAnne Howe, *Famine Pots: The Choctaw-Irish Gift Exchange 1847 – Present* (2020). In what is largely a celebratory tome, just two of the eighteen chapters or contributions point to elements of a darker history than is generally presented in the fawning media coverage of the Choctaw-Irish relationship.

## An alternative history of the Irish and the Choctaw

Historians interested in the relationships that have developed between Native Americans and the Irish have often emphasised the commonalities rather than the differences, finding evidence of cooperation and mutual support as the United States expanded westwards.<sup>58</sup> Conor Donnan has recently argued that the displacement of Native Americans corresponded with an ‘Anglo colonisation of Ireland’ that ‘helped prompt millions of Irish to immigrate to the United States,’ where they became ‘unwitting foot soldiers for expansion, engaging in bloody assaults on Indigenous North Americans.’ Donnan argues that these groups nonetheless found common ground in ‘shared colonial experience.’ Together, he sees their allyship as a challenge to a Protestant, capitalist, hegemony.<sup>59</sup> This point of view is traceable in much of the historiography on Irish relationships with Indigenous Americans. Early modern scholars have shown how English puritans drew comparisons between Roman Catholics and Native Americans early in the colonial project.<sup>60</sup> It is a cornerstone of the work of David Emmons, who goes so far as to argue that the Irish at the Western frontier could be considered the ‘savage twins’ of the Indigenous people they encountered, using their Catholicism in a Protestant empire as a way of justifying the collapse of what might otherwise seem a chasmic difference between resourced white settlers and the people they helped to displace.<sup>61</sup> This view requires the historian to draw a key distinction between a prior wave of Ulster-Scots settlers from Ireland, and the (largely Catholic) waves of nineteenth century Irish settlers that succeeded them.<sup>62</sup> It also requires the historian to accept that the anti-Catholicism experienced by those later migrants meant that their participation in the settler colonial project is excusable, inevitable, or ‘unwitting.’

Choctaw-Irish interaction in the past has been characterised by a relentless exploitation of vulnerable Indigenous communities by a settler population, by both classic Ulster Scots Irish and their descendants, and by successive generations Catholic post-Famine Irish settlers. It is, if anything, typical of a common pattern of the Irish settler colonial diaspora. The last major land cession signed by the Choctaw was the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (1830). It was also the first major treaty signed under the Indian Removal Act, signed into law by the Irish-American President Andrew Jackson the previous year. The net result for the Choctaw was the loss of 11 m acres of their territory in what is now called Mississippi, in exchange for 15 m acres of poor-quality land in the ‘Indian Territory’ contained in what is now called the state of Oklahoma. Rather than becoming equal citizens in the United States, their legal status was from then on essentially that of a domestic dependent nation and – at an individual level – wards of the nation rather than citizens of it.<sup>63</sup> Irish settlers faced no similar legal discrimination. A large quantity of this poor-quality land – bad as it was – would be taken in increments from the Choctaw later in the century regardless of their legal rights. Alongside the Chickasaw Nation, the Choctaw gradually formed – by necessity – a formidable political bloc that delivered protection to the disparate groups affected and presented them to

outsiders as in some senses unified. Estimates vary as to the number of Choctaw deaths caused by the conditions of their removal, but somewhere between 1500 and 4000 perished. Nevertheless, those that remained soon established a self-sufficiency. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Choctaw took a full part in the market economy of the Union, with the Choctaw owning large plantations worked by enslaved people and demonstrating a commitment to the culture and economy of the Southern States that would find fuller expression when the Choctaw fought for the Confederate side in the American Civil War, one of the many historical ironies of that period.<sup>64</sup> The very fact of Choctaw slave-ownership – the tribe had enslaved black people since at least the 1720s – reminds us of the complex layers of history and is an indication of how thoroughly we ought to mine the Irish-Choctaw relationship.<sup>65</sup>

What of the gift itself? The Choctaw gift to the Irish was one made under controversial circumstances. Collected by Agent William Armstrong the historical evidence for the donation itself is paper-thin, though it is instructive that the leading historian of the General Relief Committee to whom the gift was given, is circumspect about the exact details of the handover via Armstrong in Arkansas, and records the figure *received* by the acceptance committee as \$170, whatever the evidence that much more was taken at the point of donation.<sup>66</sup> It seems that no memory of the exchange was retained on the Choctaw end in the decades succeeding the donation, and the manner in which it is actually remembered – whether in nineteenth century America or modern Ireland – ‘performs a certain kind of work in colonial narrative making.’ It is, as Jacki Thompson Rand has argued, a ‘romantic version’ that is being perpetuated by the media, by the Irish and Choctaw governments and its effect is to erase ‘a prior century of relations between Irish settlers and south-eastern Indian occupants, much of it detrimental to the Indians.’<sup>67</sup>

Irish exploitation of Indigenous Americans was a constant of early colonial contact in the Americas, but it also continued into modernity.<sup>68</sup> The Irish were not known for their compassion towards the Indigenous, and there is no compelling evidence anywhere that they did not murder, rape and dispossess them to any lesser degree than any other settler population. Indeed, Irish land grabbing and settler colonial violence can be evidenced across various European empires. The Oklahoma territory eventually granted to the displaced Choctaw was under Spanish control prior to its sale to the US Government by the French. The brutal military figure who restored order in 1768/69 in *Provincia de la Luisiana* was the Irish-born Governor of Louisiana for Spain, Alejandro O'Reilly – born in Co. Meath to a Catholic gentry family. By the time the displaced Choctaw made it to this land, the Irish had already been economically exploiting it for generations. During the 1830s, when the Choctaw were travelling to Oklahoma from Mississippi along the trail of tears, 25% of the US Army that had persecuted and massacred so many of their number in the Creek Wars and in the Indian removals of the early to mid-nineteenth century were Irish. Of the 55-60 m Europeans who arrived as settlers in North America in the long nineteenth century the Irish accounted for at least 7.5 m, or one in every eight settlers, and thus the Irish – more than any other European nation – peopled the American empire that so enthusiastically cleared its frontiers of Indigenous people.

The main treaties that were negotiated against the interests of the Choctaw were in fact negotiated either by Irish people or people of Irish descent, on behalf of a second-generation Irish-American President, Andrew Jackson. The 1816 Treaty with the



Choctaw was negotiated with three agents of the US Government. The first was John Rhea – born in Londonderry. The second was John McKee, born in Virginia, but an enslaver in Alabama. His plantation house, built 1812, was called ‘Hill of Howth’: a very obvious reference to a famous Irish headland in North Dublin and a probable indication of a strong American Irish identity, though Scottish ancestry was likely as well. The last was John Coffee: who was third-generation Irish and was also born in Virginia to an Irish settler family. Coffee had made his fortune selling cotton, enslaved people and salt-pork to the New Orleans market in the early nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (1830) was negotiated primarily with these same agents, and in this way, it was predominantly Irish and diasporic Irish that dispossessed the Choctaw by signing treaties in bad faith.<sup>70</sup> The political alliance of this trio with President James Madison and later President Andrew Jackson meant that they were all appointed surveyors for the Mississippi lands that were forfeited by the Choctaw in the Treaty of 1830. This system was widely understood to be corrupt even at the moment of its inception. The secession of Chickasaw land a decade earlier had already made a fortune for Andrew Jackson, John Coffee and Monaghan-born James Jackson, whose Greek Revival plantation house in Northwest Alabama was situated on land that was coercively negotiated from Native Americans in what was by then a bitterly familiar pattern.<sup>71</sup> Coffee’s sense of the rights of the Indigenous can be seen in a letter to President Jackson earlier that year where – speaking of the Cherokee – he advised:

Deprive the chiefs of the power they now possess, take from them their own code of laws, and reduce them to plain citizenship. . . and they will soon determine to move, and then there will be no difficulty in getting the poor Indians to give their consent.<sup>72</sup>

Not only was there a strong Irish and Irish-American element to the dispossession of the Choctaw by treaty, but Irish people subsequently encroached on and later settled on lands assigned to the Choctaw in those same treaties.<sup>73</sup> Far from a tale of common or shared ‘struggle,’ the history of the Irish and the Choctaw entanglement is one of near-continuous settler colonial exploitation. In Mississippi Irish settlers joined German and American counterparts to settle the 11 m acres that were taken from the Choctaw, expanding the existing diasporic Irish population which was already resident around Natchez and had already been a feature of the Spanish imperial presence there.<sup>74</sup> Mississippi residents self-identify as of Irish ancestry in considerable numbers all the way to the present. In 2000 between 9 and 14 per cent of the inhabitants of many counties in the state self-reported as of Irish origin, including 14 per cent of those residing in Choctaw County.<sup>75</sup>

When large parts of the ‘unassigned lands’ in Indian Territory were requisitioned in the late nineteenth century, Irish people lined up on the border of the new state for the Land Runs of 1889-1893, same as all the other settlers did. This process was famously depicted in a film seen by a large proportion of Irish people in the 1990s, the 1992 box office success and critical failure *Far and Away* (1992), directed by Ron Howard. Indeed, this feature film centrally depicted an Irish settler of land in Oklahoma, albeit one acted and (famously) accented poorly by Tom Cruise. The movie was partly shot on location in Ireland and topped the box office both in Britain and Ireland. Irish critics were much more forgiving of this movie than were the global audiences. The Irish reviews mostly focused on the incoherence of the plot and the dreadful accents of the actors playing

Irish people.<sup>76</sup> None interrogated the centrality of the Irish as colonisers of Oklahoma and dispossessors of Native American land as especially problematic.

By 1910 there were about 1800 Irish-born settlers in the new territory of Oklahoma, and 4509 people who had at least one Irish-born parent.<sup>77</sup> This meant that of the foreign-born population, or second-generation settlers the Irish were among the most prominent of the various national groups in Oklahoma. Only Germans, Russians and Austrians outnumbered them, and there were more Irish settlers than there were English or Scottish.<sup>78</sup> The area that the Choctaw Nation now occupies in Oklahoma amounts to just over 11,000 square miles spread across more than ten counties. The territory they have lost to the United States of America was roughly the size of the state of Mississippi, and about 6000 people speak the Choctaw language daily.<sup>79</sup> Their loss is profound, and the movement and land-hunger of the settler Irish were central to it. There is no neat division, for that matter, between Ulster Scots Irish and Catholic Irish in this regard. Both types of Irish people took land wherever possible.

How then, do Irish people process such historical phenomena? We can learn a great deal about Irish professions of solidarity and allyship from an analysis of the reasons given for donating by a wide range of individual donors on the dedicated GoFundMe for the charity. We will also, of necessity, dwell on the historical rationale behind the donations at an individual level by analysing the statements made by Irish donors to the GoFundMe page set up for Navajo and Hopi relief, and then we will end by considering what can be learned about professions of solidarity from Irish people. Donors to a GoFundMe page do not, of course, always have the privilege of studying history for an extended period in their lives, so it is understandable that the detail in such comments will sometimes feature inaccuracy and mythology. Their comments will also typically display empathy and a genuine desire to do some good for others, and it is certainly worth taking such data very seriously.<sup>80</sup> It matters a great deal what popular perceptions of historical relationships are, and in this case, such perceptions have led to a positive and helpful donation to a group who were in immediate need.

### **Irish donations to the Navajo & Hopi families COVID-19 relief fund in context**

How many Irish people donated to the Navajo and Hopi relief fund and why did they do so? By May 2023 the relief fund had raised more than \$8 m for the ongoing work of rebuilding the lives of the two tribes most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. By September 2022, 1893 Navajo members had died, with more than 31,000 cases confirmed. Proportionately then, the Navajo had the highest number of infections across the entire United States.<sup>81</sup> This status in part contributed to such heightened awareness of the plight of the Indigenous nations in Ireland and elsewhere, but the response from Ireland was disproportionate to anywhere else in Europe or indeed the world. The relief fund was launched on 15 May 2020, just as much of the world entered lockdown, and quickly gained momentum. Irish journalist Naomi O'Leary had put an appeal out on her social media channel seeking aid and linking to the appeal and there followed a cascade of charitable donations from Irish citizens.<sup>82</sup> It led to an avalanche of donations, spread simply by word of mouth or on social media, but the appeal immediately had resonance in Ireland where knowledge of the historic Choctaw gift – if not the particulars of it

– was obviously widespread. By November of that year ‘at least \$2.5m’ had been donated from Ireland alone, including a reported \$100k from the Irish musician, Larry Mullen, but a majority of donations came in from private individuals at the more modest sums ranging from \$20-\$100 or so.<sup>83</sup>

There are 129101 individual donations in the dataset, and comments have been left by 15489 of those donating. Mining comments from a crowdfunding platform such as GoFundMe is a relatively common methodology in the social sciences.<sup>84</sup> In order to identify common themes and tropes among the many thousands of comments left by Irish people a methodology called abductive analysis was applied to the dataset.<sup>85</sup> More than half of those who left any comment on the GoFundMe page (8684) referenced either their Irish identity or their Irish heritage. One-fifth (3386) of those who commented referenced the Choctaw gift as a justification for their donation, more than any other single reason given by some distance. 2573 people referenced the Irish Famine as part of their rationale for donating. 2301 people referenced Irish generosity and 2333 referenced solidarity with Indigenous people. 762 people left a blessing in the Irish language, and 1565 people referenced their Irish ancestors.

What reasons do Irish people give for donating? Tim Fitzpatrick donated \$50 in late 2022 and his rationale is fairly typical of those who leave comments:

In 1847 the Choctaw people sent \$170 to help the Irish people during the potato famine. The US government sent nothing to help the Irish. The US government is still doing nothing to help the Choctaw people. Shame on you Biden. We are all brothers. Love and thanks from Portlaoise, Ireland

Very often Irish donors include a sentence in the Irish language: itself a site of postcolonial contest and (often, but not always) a way of signalling a political nationalism in an Irish context. Common phrases include ‘Ní neart go cur le chéile,’ ‘Go n-éirí an bothar libh go leir,’ and ‘Béir bua agus beannacht!’<sup>86</sup> Irish donors often accentuate the (unlikely) refrain that the ‘Irish never forget,’ or express a solidarity based on a relatable or equivalent experience oppression. The repayment of a historic debt and the idea of reciprocity stand out as persistent themes over all the donations given. Damien Hannon notes that ‘our two nations have so much in common,’ presumably meaning Ireland and the Navajo. There is a clear confusion in many of the comments which may indicate a total lack of understanding of the divergent histories of Navajo, Hopi and Choctaw people, or their relative exposure to and interactions with the Irish and other white settlers over time. Sean O’Ceallaigh donated \$50 in late 2021 and thanked the Hopi directly for their donation to famine relief in Ireland in 1847, noting that ‘The Hopi “played [sic] it forward” with their help to Ireland back in time. Its our turn to reciprocate.’ Kathleen D Pancoast notes that ‘the nation that helped Ireland needs help,’ which was at least half-correct. Sometimes the comments are fantastically inaccurate. Breandán Mac Sitric argued that:

Entering the 1840s the Irish population was estimated to be anywhere from 5M to some estimates as high as 12M. By the 1850s it had hit a low of 2M. It is one of the most tragic stories that has never been fully told.

Comments like these centre the Irish experience first, even in the service of a donation to a pandemic-stricken population in the present. Others made the case more accurately and

eloquently, but the spectre still remained of Irish donors explaining what colonisation and famine looked like to a group of people who were in considerable distress in 2020 and suffering from an altogether more contemporary pandemic.

Some donate an amount that reflects the Choctaw Gift of 1847, such as Liam MacLochlainn, who donated in June 2023 commenting 'Just paying back our National debt. \$170.'<sup>87</sup> This is more historically accurate, at least in terms of the amount involved, though still misdirected. Some thank the Choctaw directly in their comments. Other donors recognise the difference between the Choctaw, Navajo and Hopi nations and but donate anyway. Richard Spangler writes:

'My Irish ancestors received aid in their time of need from the Choctaw Nation. Nothing divides if we see each other's humanity. I donate to the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Reservation in the same spirit the Choctaw Nation aided my Irish ancestors. To give aid in a time of need. Be well.

Other donors represent an Irish diasporic perspective, such as Hugh O'Donnell, who donated \$100 and identified as being 'from the Canadian branch of the Irish Famine diaspora. Glad to be able to help in my own little way.' Donations from Irish-Americans, Irish Canadians and Irish-Australians all indicate the same idea of a shared reciprocal and diasporic debt. In purely historical terms this becomes even more difficult to comprehend. These donations are, after all, given from other parts of the White Settler Empire heavily populated by Irish settlers at the expense of First Nation and Indigenous peoples. Patrick O'Leary – a '4th generation Irish Australian,' insists on the historic longevity of shared solidarity – 'know that when peoples express solidarity with each other it means so much even hundreds of years later.' The collapsing of Irish colonial victimhood with that of the Native American takes on another – even more complex – variation in a comment left by Robert Adams, who imagines that as an Irish – Australian he 'may have benefited from your peoples' amazing kindness 173 years ago during the famine.' According to Adams 'one lot' of his ancestors 'managed to emigrate themselves, and the other lot were shipped out to Australia in chains for six months in the hold of a stinking boat, for a petty crime, stealing to feed their family. A common story here!' This of course may be true, though it is unlikely that there would be any correlation between these events, and the sentiment expressed here presupposes the existence of a 'new world' or 'virgin land' awaiting Irish settlers or migrants. Places devoid of any indigenous inhabitants.

In an interesting interaction across both the diaspora and the GoFundMe platform Peter Graves commented 'With thanks to those donors in Ireland who provide an English translation of their Irish best wishes. I was not taught Irish in the Australian education system. Your comments are too valuable not to be understood.'<sup>88</sup> This raises a tension of sorts between perspectives from the Irish diaspora and the Irish-domiciled donors. At various points, the diasporic Irish can be more literate in terms of structural discrimination, colonial legacies and other present-day inequalities that continue to be endured by First Nation and Indigenous peoples. This may well be because of a greater literacy in these issues in the former White Settler empire. A good example of this more sensitive diasporic perspective is that of Catrina McDonald, who writes that she is 'Australian of, primarily, Irish descent. I'm also of Irish American descent – and I'm so sorry that white bureaucracy is still actively working against you.'<sup>89</sup>

All in all, the Great Irish famine is mentioned by 2573 of those donating and who left a comment of any sort: a considerable percentage of the total. Ireland is mentioned by 6102 (39%) of donors who left a comment. The word solidarity occurs 1008 times altogether in the comments and in 706 of those that also reference Ireland or Irish Heritage. Words such as 'repay,' 'reciprocal,' or 'reciprocate' occur frequently. Many people refer to their own ancestors and connect the pandemic to the Irish famine via this frame of understanding. Tom Quinn exemplifies this trend in his comment 'Without the generosity of Native American people my ancestors might not have survived the famine in Ireland. Míle buíochas.'<sup>90</sup>

Many of the Irish donors insist that 'the Irish never forget.' This becomes something of a mantra in the comments and joins other equally assertive and dominant formulations such as 'I am proud as an Irishman to give back in your time of need.'<sup>91</sup> Pride features in many Irish or American Irish comments. Kirsten Battles-Burden commented that she 'loved reading this story. A part of history I had never learned. This American is proud to be of Irish descent!!.'<sup>92</sup> A comment left by Ursula Crosbie is even more strident and emphasises race and bloodline. 'Erin Go Brah, Ireland forever. Proud to be of Irish blood. Praying for all indigenous peoples everywhere.'<sup>93</sup>

On 20 May 2020 Sacha Husband made an extraordinary intervention – never to be repeated in the comments. He noted that he made his donation on two grounds. The first was familiar, as a grateful person of Irish descent and 'to try to repay a generational debt to a people who owed us nothing.' The second was more complicated. The donor noted that his own parents had come to Canada 'to create a life from themselves, exercising a privilege as white English speakers to come take what they were told was theirs.

An affect of globalization and the mass migration of populations is the loss of culture, and the displacement of indigenous peoples, something that many immigrants like my parents have done unwittingly. As much as I didn't choose to be born to this land, this is my home, and sadly my country mandates that I have more claim to personhood and belonging than the First Nations peoples who came before me. As an Irish descendant, that is something to which I will no longer abide.'<sup>94</sup>

This sort of nuance was near-unique. The far more dominant sentiment was a shallow solidarity based on the presumption of a shared and relatable history of colonial oppression and erasure. This is perfectly encapsulated in a comment left behind by Donal Shine

I donated because I'm Irish & I have a great affinity for the plight & suffering of the native American people's. I read the book called bury my heart at wounded knee by dee Brown & it's was eye opening & heart breaking. I love their culture & proud history & the way the stood up against all odds against the wave of white mans oppression & at times had great success. From one proud people in Ireland to all the native American tribes. May some day you have your rights to yer land restored.'<sup>95</sup>

Donal's comment demonstrates the complete lack of awareness and sense of culpability among Irish and diasporic Irish for indigenous dispossession. It adds to the minimisation of Indigenous cultures and does nothing at all for key issues for first nations and indigenous peoples. One of the most repetitive tropes among the thousands of donor comments was 'Ireland remembers!' The other was 'Ireland will never forget!' But what, exactly, does Ireland remember?

## Conclusion

In one sense the Irish donations to the Navajo and Hopi nations are simply one example of what evolutionary biologists call the principle of 'indirect reciprocity'. Simply expressed this means that I help you and somebody else helps me. Such examples of indirect reciprocity lead to 'reputation building, morality judgement and complex social interactions,' something scientists believe may have been fundamental to how humans evolved over time.<sup>96</sup> The idea that Irish experiences of colonisation can equate to or engender solidarity with groups associated with economic deprivation, or battling historic discrimination and the enduring effects of settler colonialism is a complex one. The Great Irish Famine was a critical event in Irish history and of course, it betrayed the subaltern and colonial relationship at the heart of British domination of Irish land, people and resources. It would be senseless to undermine this widely held reading of Irish history, and it is not my intention to do so. It is rather my intention to undermine the idea that this experience does not neatly mean that Irish people can always claim an easy affinity with other groups of people who experienced the terrible effects of colonial and racial logic elsewhere. To do so helps to erase the significant part played by Irish people and their descendants in the European settler colonial project.

Thompson Rand argues, very convincingly, that the original Choctaw gift reflects not a common struggle under colonialism, but rather signifies an acknowledged strength of the Choctaw – their public diplomacy.<sup>97</sup> We will never know their exact motivation for sending the gift. It may have had little to do with their love of Irish people who were just one more iteration of white settlers who had only ever exploited them, stolen from them, settled their land in Mississippi and Oklahoma, and then had the temerity to express a guileless and uncritical solidarity several generations later. The Choctaw decision to donate to the Irish in 1847 was likely as contingent on more local questions of identity, reputation and shared memory as the Irish donations to the Navajo have been since 2020. In both cases small sums of money have travelled vast distances based on a vague sense of solidarity, revealing something of the complexity of power relations under settler colonialism and the ways in which we selectively remember and forget them.

## Notes

1. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 'Choctaw and Irish History.' <https://www.choctawnation.com/about/history/irish-connection/>. (accessed 21 February 2025).
2. These figures were supplied to me by the Director of the Navajo and Hopi Covid-19 Fund, Cassandra Begay, and Lisa Cao at GoFundMe, to whom I am profoundly grateful.
3. 'Returning an Old Favor, Irish Communities Help Native Americans During COVID,' *NBC News Broadcast*, 12 October 2020; 'Irish People Donate €2.5m to Native American Tribe Devastated by Coronavirus,' *Irish Times*, 20 November 2020; "'The Favour Is Returned': 173 Years On, Irish Donors Thank Native Americans,' *RTE News Broadcast*, 5 May 2020; 'The Irish Are Repaying a Favor from 173 Years Ago in Native Americans' Fight Against Coronavirus,' *Washington Post*, 13 May 2020.
4. The actual amount is disputed, but most often given as \$170 or \$172. Recent research has tended to go with the \$710 figure mentioned in contemporary coverage in the *Arkansas Intelligencer*, but most historians go with the lower amount. See Padraig Kirwan and LeAnne Howe, *Famine Pots: The Choctaw-Irish Gift Exchange 1847–Present* (Cork University Press,



- 2020), xxvii for a discussion of this. For much needed historical context see Anelise Hanson Shrout, *Aiding Ireland: The Great Famine and the Rise of Transnational Philanthropy* (New York University Press, 2024), 156–76.
5. Naomi O'Leary, *Twitter Post*, May 2, 2020. Reproduced with the permission of the author.
  6. Kevin O'Sullivan, *Ireland, Africa and the End of Empire: Small State Identity in the Cold War, 1955–75* (Manchester, 2012), 16–8; Kevin O'Sullivan, "'Ah, Ireland, the Caring Nation': Foreign Aid and Irish State Identity in the Long 1970s," *Irish Historical Studies*, 38/151 (2013), 476–91. Alice Feldman, 'Re/Entangling Irish and Nigerian Diasporas: Colonial Amnesias, Decolonial Aesthetics and Archive-Assemblage Praxis,' *Cultural Dynamics* 30, no. 3 (2018): 173–98; Aoife O'Leary McNeice, "'A Painful and Tender Sympathy Pervaded Every Class of Society'" Consensus, Class, and Coercion in Global Giving During the Great Irish Famine,' *Radical History Review*, 143 (2022), 165–76.
  7. 'Irish people second richest in the EU,' *Irish Independent*, 23 March 2022; 'Ireland Is One of the Richest Countries on Earth,' *Business Post*, 15 September 2022. For more detail on Irish aid see Oonagh B Breen and James Carroll, 'Giving in Ireland: A nation of givers in a largely unregulated arena,' in Pamele Wiepking and Femida Handy, *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Philanthropy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 190–210.
  8. Matthew Hilton, Emily Baughan, Eleanor Davey, Bronwen Everill, Kevin O'Sullivan, Tehila Sasson, 'History and Humanitarianism: A Conversation,' *Past & Present*, 241/1 (2018), 1–38. For a discussion of Irish diplomatic thinking on foreign aid see Kenneth L. Shonk, "'Help, Given in a Disinterested Manner": Emerging Global Nationhood and Extraversion in Ireland,' *Radical History Review* 143 (2022), 50–63.
  9. Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 3. Quoted in Cóilín Parsons, 'Asymmetries: South Africa, Ireland, and Postcolonial Comparison,' *Interventions* 23/1 (2021): 1–18.
  10. For recent collections that have sought to complicate the Irish encounter with Indigenous peoples see Graeme Morton and David A. Wilson, *Irish and Scottish Encounters with Indigenous Peoples: Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia* (McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2013).
  11. Mary L. Mullen, 'How the Irish Became Settlers: Metaphors of Indigeneity and the Erasure of Indigenous Peoples,' *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 20/3 (2016), 81–96. Coleman also argued for a complex reading of the differences between Irish experiences and those of Native Americans, while emphasizing similarities. Michael C. Coleman, *American Indians, the Irish, and Government Schooling: A Comparative Study* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 3–4.
  12. Ciaran O'Neill, *Power and Powerlessness in Union Ireland: Life in a Palliative State* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 201–28. See also S. Karly Kehoe and Ciaran O'Neill, "'A Colony to Themselves': Scottish Highland Settler Colonialism in British North America, 1770–1804," *Journal of British Studies*, 63/3 (2024), 588–605.
  13. Charles Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 51.
  14. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, 57–8.
  15. For recent and excellent considerations of race in Irish Studies see Mary M. Burke, *Race, Politics, and Irish America: A Gothic History* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Patrick R O'Malley, *The Irish and the Imagination of Race: White Supremacy Across the Atlantic in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Virginia Press, 2023); Malcolm Sen and Julie McCormick Weng, eds., *Race in Irish Literature and Culture*. Cambridge University Press, 2024.
  16. Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti, eds., *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America: Rethinking Finnish Experiences in Transnational Spaces* (Helsinki University Press, 2022), 3–4.
  17. James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–25.
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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available at Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: [<https://www.gofundme.com/f/nhfcrf>].

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