

Sally Rooney Forgot to Remember



In a Dublin Park, Light and Shade by Walter Osborne, 1895

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (January 2022)

The trouble,” GK Chesterton said, “is that the English never remember and the Irish never forget.”

“Really,” say I! I am not sure Chesterson was altogether right.

Sally Rooney is a thirty year old rising Irish novelist, and

screenplay writer. She has published three novels, two of which have been translated into Hebrew. The most recent (whose name is not terribly important) has been withheld by the author from being translated into Hebrew as a statement of solidarity with the BDS movement that supports an economic and cultural boycott of Israel for its alleged mistreatment of Arabs. This has only increased the young author's fame, or what we should really call her notoriety.

Friends of Israel around the world have pointed out Ms. Rooney's hypocrisy. Israel is the only democracy in the middle east. The Palestinians have their own (mandated) state and homeland in the fictitious Kingdom of Jordan. The Arabs in and around the land of Israel have been fighting a Jihad or Holy War against the Jews of the Land of Israel for more than one hundred years.

Their "National Movement" in the 1930s and 1940s was solidly and unashamedly pro-Nazi. Many Arabs of Mandated Palestine fought with the Nazis in the Balkans. (They have never apologized). Their war against the Jews changes names and faces according to ideological fashion but is basically the same over time-the destruction of an independent Jewish state.

There are states whose moral failures are infinitely worse than any thing Israel may be accused of. We must remember that the Israelis are under constant existential threat and they experience periodic terrorist attacks, subtly and often financially aided and abetted by the European Union and member states, like Ireland.

Ms. Rooney, if consistent, should not let her novels be translated into Chinese as well. Look what they have done to the poor Buddhists of Tibet and the Muslim Uighurs of Western China whose organs are harvested by the Communist Party of China! Certainly, worth a boycott. Any Russian translation should be similarly vetted.

Perhaps Rooney's failure is psychologically far, far deeper. Perhaps, it is rooted in a unique form of historical and linguistic forgetfulness that it is curiously contrasted with the modern Israeli experience. Just what could that consist of?

Well, first of all the literary language which Sally Rooney chooses as her own is English, the language of the oppressors and colonizers of the Irish. English is not her language. Her national language is Gaelic.

In 2004 an Arab scholar, Inayat Shah, of Sohar University in the Muslim Sultanate of Oman, published a fascinating article on the failure of modern, independent Ireland to get the majority of its citizens (people like the young Rooney) to use Gaelic as a daily, living and literary language.

Here is a brief summary of Shah's much longer article:

As a case of language maintenance Irish is seen by many as a failing attempt to survive an indigenous language. Irish is not a language which lacks poor support from the authorities; on the contrary Irish has the official status in Ireland. Since the commencement of the home rule movement there has been much effort invested to revive the Irish language; yet there is little chance that Irish would be able to maintain a status as the linguistic capital for Irish people. The fact of the situation is that for many Irish speakers, Irish is viewed as a useless language. This process is broad and complex, but one major factor is negative attitudes to a language, both in government policy and local communities. The paper briefly traces the history of the Irish language and discusses the linguistic behaviour or attitude of Irish people being responsible for the failure in language maintenance and revival efforts and consequently resulting in slow and gradual decline of the Irish language. The paper also presents few facts, figures and the reasons that highlight the fact that people's language attitude has negative impact on the Irish

language's revitalization efforts. The present study also offers few suggestions on the change of attitude and the consequent possibility for the Irish language to be alive again in the rapidly changing situations.

It would seem that Professor Shah is showing us a side of the Irish that they do not like to share with the rest of the world, a disdain for their own language and their inability to reclaim their own authentic culture after four hundred years of British Imperialism. Even the great 20th century Irish novelist, James Joyce wrote about being Irish in English. Can the Irish then still blame the English for their deep cultural failure after a century of independence? Evidence from Israel suggests otherwise.

Bearing all of this in mind the average young Irish person may very well ask, "Why did our grandparents fight a brutal war against the colonizing English followed by a civil war, if one hundred years later, with a century of political and cultural independence behind us we cannot, with all the means that a state has at its disposal, revive our own national tongue, especially among our young novelists?"

For those readers who are uninformed of the tragic and fascinating history of the Irish who when at their best are a gregarious, playful, poetic, musical and family oriented culture, their history was first that of a largely Catholic enclave of Gaelic speakers, with their own feudal medieval society of lords and peasants who were then conquered by the English five hundred years ago.

The English imported their own elites and they became the landowners and professional class, an Anglican and Protestant conquering minority who lorded it over the Catholic and largely impoverished Gaelic speaking Irish. Unlike the Greeks, who at the same time were suffering under four hundred years of Turkish oppression all the while speaking and teaching Greek to their children, until Greek once again became the

national language, when they successfully revolted against the Turks in 1841, the Irish/Gaelic language only survived in the remotest parts of Western Ireland as a living language.

When the Irish finally got their independence from the English in the 1920s, and despite a national effort to revitalize Gaelic, English was and still is their daily and official language. In the language of their colonizers, they still rage against their unjust treatment of over 400 years. And so, it goes.

Sadly, although treated as second class citizens by the English, the Irish Catholic Church chose to scapegoat an even smaller minority living in their midst. I am referring to the boycott of the Jews of Ireland before Irish independence!

Rooney's recent boycott of the Jewish people has deep roots among the people of the Republic of Ireland. I doubt she knows the full story about the notorious Limerick boycott of the Jews in 20th century Ireland by her countrymen and ancestors.

As Wiki pedia pithily summarizes it:

In 1904 Father [John Creagh](#), a [Redemptorist](#), gave a sermon attacking Jews. He repeated many [antisemitic conspiracy theories](#), including that of [ritual murder](#), and said that the Jews had come to Limerick "to fasten themselves on us like leeches and to draw our blood". [Dermot Keogh](#) describes what happened after Creagh delivered his lecture calling for a boycott on 11 January of 1904...The Limerick boycott, also known as the Limerick pogrom, was an economic [boycott](#) waged against the small [Jewish](#) community in [Limerick](#), Ireland, between 1904 and 1906. It was accompanied by assaults, stone throwing and intimidation, which caused many Jews to leave the city...According to a report by the [Royal Irish Constabulary](#), five Jewish families left Limerick "owing directly to the agitation" while another 26 families remained.

Let us contrast the Irish nation with the Jewish nation, the indigenous people of the land of Israel, whose parents have taught their children Hebrew for over two thousand years. Although it became largely a liturgical language, it was also the language of Jewish intellectuals throughout the ages. And so, in the early 20th century it was not too difficult for the Hebrew scholar Eliezer Ben Yehuda, a Zionist living in the land of Israel during the time of the British Mandate (1920-1948), to successfully lay the foundations for the rebirth of modern Hebrew.

Today, more than six million Israeli Jews speak, read and write Hebrew as their mother tongue. It is used in politics, the army, the schools etc. It is a living language whose world famous novelists such as Amos Oz, positively revel in its expressive range and emotive power. This does not stop Israelis from translating about 50,000 foreign books into Hebrew each year, avidly read, discussed privately and in the national media, in addition to the masses of fiction and non-fiction produced by Israeli writers of Hebrew.

As a Canadian Jew who was born and raised in North America after WWII, during my teenage years I was fascinated by the rebirth of Hebrew. I started reading Israeli novelists in English translation, then studied Hebrew as an agricultural volunteer in the seventies, and then later lived and married in Israel where I worked for many years.

I taught college in Hebrew, did not live in an "English speakers ghetto" and socialized with my wife's Hebrew speaking extended family and friends who number in the hundreds, as so many of them have lived in the land of Israel for more than a century. At a certain point I watched Israeli comedies (and laughed) and finally dreamt in Hebrew.

I have no fear for the future of the Hebrew language. It is just one of Israel's many "success stories." I suspect that living within their own language with all its Biblical

associations every time you drive by a city or ancient landscape is exhilarating. Walking the streets of Jerusalem and hearing the Old Testament in Hebrew in your head is something every Israeli does, but few talk about it. It is an open national secret.

For example, every time I enter one of the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem I recall the following quote from the prophet Nehemiah.

(Nehemiah 2:13-15)

...I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.

But let us return to Sally Rooney. There is nothing really special about her. She is just one of over 1000 Irish "creative types" who want to publicly boycott Israel. This has happened in the past in Ireland. It is not new or news. In the same vein no Irish government has ever officially apologized or done a "mea culpa" for their country's neutrality during WWII or, for one of their most esteemed leaders (Eamon De Valera) sending condolences to the German government after the death of Adolph Hitler with whom he had sympathized. These are just a few of the things that Sally Rooney has forgotten to remember, including writing in her native language. Instead, she rants against the Jews in the language of her colonial oppressors.

For the last ten years, thousands upon thousands of young Irish men and women have been leaving the Republic. The cost of living there skyrockets, unemployment is high and the government is unable to provide an "enabling environment" for

tomorrow's youth. That is to say the government of Ireland is mismanaging the economy and losing its best and brightest. Ireland is failing.

In contrast, the majority of the world's Jews now live in the state and land of Israel. They are economically upbeat, the "start up nation," and they know how to defend themselves. They speak, live, love and defend their country in their ancestral language, Hebrew. They do not boycott anyone and due to the Trump inspired Abraham Accords, they now have better relations with the Gulf Arab states than they do with Ireland. The UN ranks Israel close to the top of their international "happiness" index and the UN is no friend of the Jewish state.

The absence of Sally Rooney's novel amidst the close to 50,000 books that will be translated into Hebrew this year is no great loss. I have already forgotten about it.

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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