

Intro: Mental Health History in Ireland



- ‘Great Confinement’ – nineteenth century District Asylum system
- Grows rapidly, from 3 to 26 in 50 years
- Sharp drop in general population (from 8.2 million in 1845 to 4.4 million in 1901) due to Great Famine and mass migration
- Sharp rise in Asylum inmates in same period (3,000 in 1850 to 17,000 in-patients plus 8,000 ‘lunatics at large’ in 1900) – Why?
- Connaught District Lunatic Asylum (pictured) – from 150 in 1833, to over 2,000 in 1950

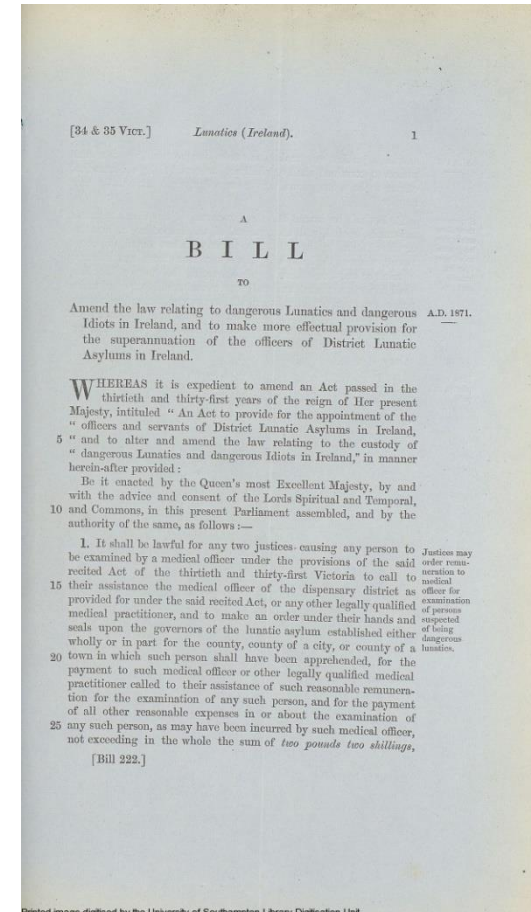
The Great Famine (1845-51) and the District Asylums: a survival strategy, or early conditioning?



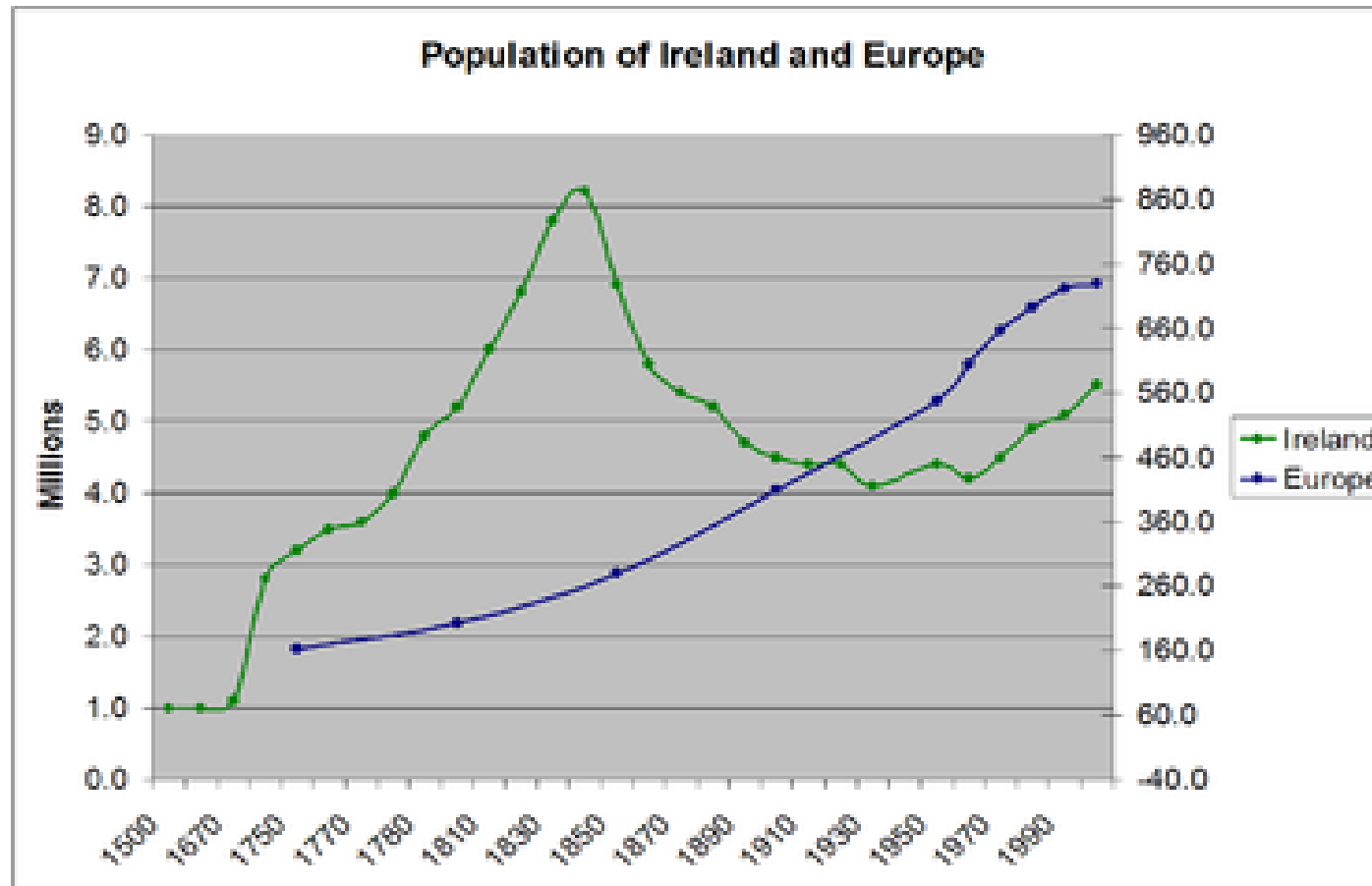
- District Lunatic Asylums were government funded, and supplied with food.
- Starving populations gravitated to towns and cities in search of food and assistance
- Workhouses and Asylums were overwhelmed with admissions.

Why Do the Irish trust Institutional Care?

- Use of the Asylum by local communities
- Rapid transmission of knowledge regarding admission, discharge, rights and responsibilities – used to protect and persecute – workhouse inmates especially
- Role of the Dangerous Lunatics Act (1838)
- Gendered responses to the Asylum – some surprising results
- *Key factors in admission:*
- Search for cure
- Economic Expediency ('Gone to America')
- Respite
- Acceptance of Institutional care
- But! Still not enough to explain the continuing dependence on the system, and the remarkable numbers admitted



Famine Population Depletion: Death and Emigration



Post-Famine Silence



- For a garrulous nation, an ominous silence surrounded the Great Famine
- First large-scale breaking of that silence occurs in the 1930s, with the recordings by the Irish Folklore Commission –note also the significant role of Irish schoolchildren
- Testimony as therapy

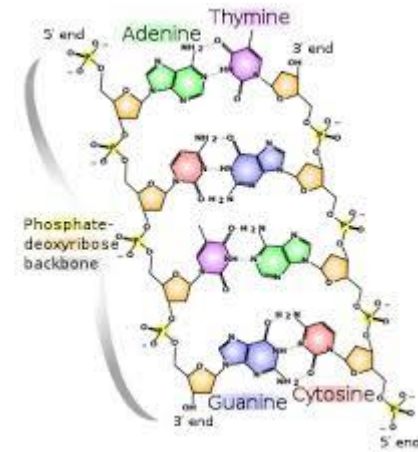
Rise of the Catholic Church

- Social conservatism
- Increase in Professed Religious: in 1851 there were 1,500 nuns of various orders in Ireland, by 1901 this had increased to over 8,000, against a total population that halved to just over 4,000,000 in the same period.
- Importance of Confessional practice in Irish religion and psychiatry – absolution as therapy?



Epigenetics

- Literally 'Above the Genome'
- Does not alter DNA, but causes certain genes to effectively switch on or off, depending upon stressors
- Primes the developing foetus to enter an environment of food shortage, or psychological stress (or in Ireland's case, both)
- Problems arise when the baby is born, or develops, in a very different environment



Can Epigenetic Change help to explain Ireland's unique mental (and physical) Post-Famine health profile?



- The Famine provided the elements necessary to secure epigenetic change:
- A 'natural experiment' involving a large population
- Widespread nutritional deprivation
- Protracted psychological stress



Wijga / rfa, coll. Nederlands fotomuseum

Dutch Hunger Winter (3,300 babies)

The Holocaust and Epigenetics: Resilience through Trauma?



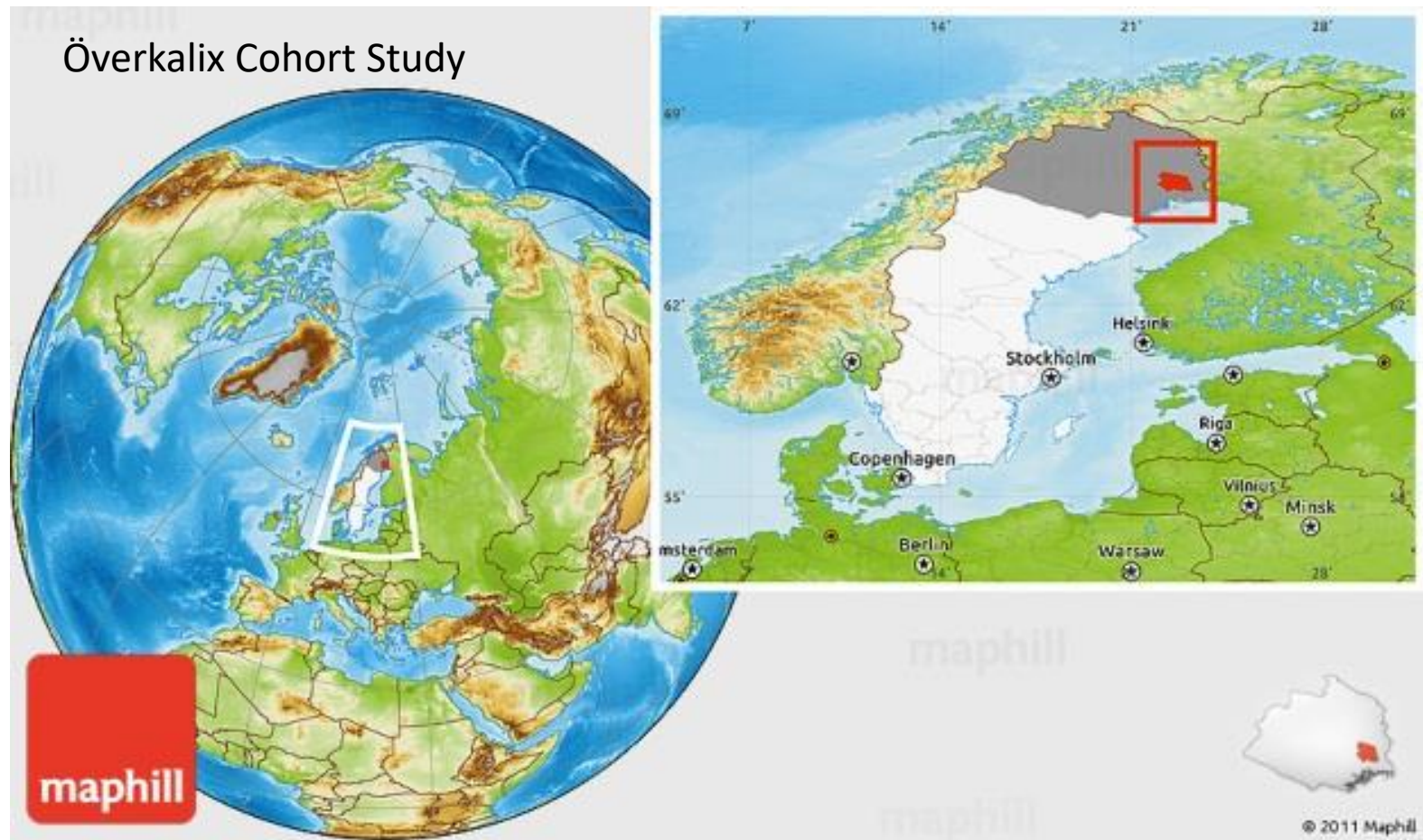


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Stress – Twin Tower Attacks
(1,700 pregnancies)

Överkalix Cohort Study



Does Ireland Differ?

- Ireland's broad health profile is remarkably similar to that of Dutch Hunger Winter and Holocaust survivors
- But! Cases above, and the Twin Tower studies, are 'captive' populations (defined and specific): Irish are not
- Complicated by migration – similar patterns of admission to asylums in host countries: nature or nurture?



The Glasgow Effect

- Underpinned by Irish migration
- Role of Epigenetic Change
- Role of Culture
- Inter-generational Trauma
- Use of historical records and research to influence policy (early intervention; international famine relief; support for traumatised refugees)

