



Bridgewater State University

Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

Communication Studies Faculty Publications

Communication Studies Department

2014

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Irish Potato Famine Apology

Jason A. Edwards

Bridgewater State University, j3edwards@bridgew.edu

Amber Luckie

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/commstud_fac



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Virtual Commons Citation

Edwards, Jason A. and Luckie, Amber (2014). British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Irish Potato Famine Apology. In *Communication Studies Faculty Publications*. Paper 41.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/commstud_fac/41

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

ARTICLE



British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Irish Potato Famine Apology

Jason A. Edwards
 Amber Luckie

Submitted: June 2013
 Accepted: October 2013
 Published: May 2014



Abstract

In June 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair issued a statement expressing remorse for the British government's inaction to assist the Irish during the potato famine of the late 1840s. Blair's contrition was met with praise and criticism, but it proved to be part of the larger narrative in the peace negotiations within Northern Ireland. Although Blair's apology is often cited as an exemplar of political leaders apologizing for historical injustices, little actual scholarly work on this subject has been conducted. To that end, this paper examines Blair's potato famine apology through the theory of collective apology. We argue that collective apologies serve to build, repair, renew, and strengthen bonds between communities harmed by historical wrongdoing. Moreover, collective apologies are meditations in collective memory about the past, present, and future relationship between communities. We assess Blair's apology through this theoretical lens, discussing the potential impact that it had on the Northern Ireland peace process.



Keywords

collective apologies, Tony Blair, Ireland, potato famine, reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

On June 1, 1997, Irish actor Gabriel Byrne read a statement from newly elected British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The statement was presented at a festival in Millstreet, County Cork, Ireland, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Irish Potato Famine (*The Irish Times*, 2 June 1997, p. 1). In that declaration, Prime Minister Blair expressed remorse for Britain's failure to offer greater assistance during the famine where over one million died and hundreds of thousands more were displaced. The Potato Famine is a major event in Anglo-Irish history and a defining episode in constructing Irish identity and Anglo-Irish relations.

Blair's statement was met with wide acclaim. Nicholas Watt called his contrition greatly "significant", which was meant "to heal one of the greatest wounds in Anglo-Irish history" (Watt, 1997, p. 21). Additionally, it was read "as a signal of the government's genuine desire not only to inject fresh momentum into the peace process but also to ensure complete unity with whoever is in office in Dublin" (Wallen, 1997, p. A7). However, Blair was criticized for apologizing for events 150 years in the past where there was historical disagreement regarding British responsibility for the famine (Wallen, 1997, p. A7). According to Blair's critics, the apology created an expectation that more mea culpas may be presented from 10 Downing Street for past British injustices. Ultimately, Blair's apology can be read as a bold political move bringing opportunities and



challenges for British politics, questions regarding citizenship, and the Northern Ireland peace process.

We focused on Tony Blair's apology for three reasons. First, Blair's rhetoric was one of the first examples of a collective apology issued by a post-Cold War era political. It is continually referenced in newspaper accounts of other apologies, but little scholarly work on this statement had been done (for exceptions, see Cunningham, 2004). Thus, we wanted to investigate this oft referenced apology further. Also, it was one of the first times a British Prime Minister had apologized for historical events, setting a precedent that Prime Ministers Brown and Cameron have followed and might be followed by future prime ministers. Understanding this rhetorical precedent can give us insight into how future British leaders might approach public apology. Finally, Blair's apology serves as an entry point to symbolically examine how Anglo-Irish relations improved and helped to jumpstart the Northern Ireland peace process. In this essay, our purpose is to explain the symbolic workings of Blair's apology and how it laid some important groundwork for future reconciliation efforts.

To that end, we begin with a theoretical discussion of what constitutes a political apology (Edwards, 2010). Then, we examine Tony Blair's apology by first laying out the historical and immediate context for such a statement to be presented and then analyzing the prime minister's statement. Next, we briefly assess the reception of Blair's address and expectations that were generated from it. Finally, we discuss the connections and/or questions that this essay conjures up regarding the literature on political apologies and reconciliation.

COLLECTIVE APOLOGIES

Since the end of the Cold War a number of different political leaders have apologized for past transgressions. Scholars in various disciplines have spoken to their symbolic power. For example, in their edited collection on apologies and reconciliation, Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (2006) asserted apologies can help reconstitute relationships harmed by historical wrongdoing. Apologies can create conditions for forgiveness, while also allowing for governments struggling with the past to put painful legacies behind them. Melissa Nobles (2008) described how the power of an apology lay in its ability to not only "ratify certain public interpretations of history, but also to morally judge, assign responsibility, and introduce expectations about what acknowledgment of that history requires" (p. 2). Danielle Celermaier (2009) maintained apologies work to "re-covenant" a nation so it can (re)build its national polity. Similarly, Lisa Villadsen (2012) argued apologies can be an important step in "civic reconstruction" as different groups try to mend relationships and create a common feeling of identity (p. 231).

Surprisingly, rhetorical studies scholars have not inquired deeply to ascertain the generic functions and strategies of this phenomenon. To that end, we synthesized observations from other research on apology, examined various apologies by political leaders, and built on previous published work (see Edwards, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) to create a theory that accounts for the broad functions and rhetorical strategies of this rhetorical genre, collective apologies. These speech acts they function in three broad ways. First, collective apologies seek to reconstitute, rebuild, and strengthen relationships amongst communities harmed by historical wrongdoing perpetuated by one community against another (Edwards, 2010, p. 62). A collective apology serves as a rhetorical first step in redressing old wounds so collectives may begin building a bridge to reconciliation. It is not a panacea and will not heal all wounds caused by past transgressions, but it can lay the groundwork to shift the relational dynamic between victimizer and victim from animosity to one of conciliation and mutual understanding.

Second, collective apologies, as a form of collective memory, function as a revision and reconsideration of past events between communities. Collective memory is a body of beliefs about the past that helps a public or society understand its history, present, and (by implication) its future (Bodnar, 1994, p. 76). It involves an interpretation of history that can be widely ratified by the general public (Browne, 1999; Edy, 1999). By its nature, collective memory is selective, partial, and often carefully managed in certain ways for strategic purposes (Bostdorff & Goldzwig, 2005; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2000). Accordingly, a collective apology serves as a reflection on past, present, and future relationships with the victimized collective. These apologies become lessons about what communities should and should not do in their interactions with each other. As such, they serve as revisions to the dominant perceptions of history, signal a new direction in their interaction with an offended group, and seek to reshape the relationship between victimizer and victim. Speakers who issue collective apologies are attempting to face and understand a nation-state's dark past, while immunizing and inoculating that collective from making the same mistakes (Yamazaki, 2005, p. 128).

Third, collective apologies provide a rhetorical position to reconstruct communal and civic identity. A group's communal and civic identity is, in part, discursively constructed through a variety of means such as national anthems sung, history that is revered, historical heroes celebrated, and many other symbolic activities. Historical transgressions can break these symbolic bonds. They put one group above another. They serve as impediments to all groups believing they are equal in a society. Collective apologies can begin a rebalancing of the obligations different groups have for each other. In one sense, they can bring a collective, who may have been ostracized because of historical transgressions, back into the fold of a



community (Edwards & Luckie, 2011). At the same time, collective apologies may de-leverage power the victimized community may have in receiving concessions and reparations from the victimizers. If an apology is presented and accepted by a victimized community and that community later asks for greater corrective action for historical transgressions committed against them, then it is very possible the apologizer will be reluctant to provide further expression of regret, apology, or reparation of some kind because a collective apology has already provided. Consequently, collective apologies can begin to re-establish a civic balance amongst groups or at the very least give victimized communities an opportunity for greater success within larger societies. At the same time, the power that may come with being a victim of historical injustice may be lost because the society as a whole expects them to participate equally and without preference for one group over another.

The content of a collective apology is composed of three primary strategies. First, speakers acknowledge a wrong has been committed. Aaron Lazare asserted acknowledging wrongdoing was *the* most important aspect of an apology because failure to be forthcoming can render the apology's sentiment suspect (2004, p. 76). In acknowledging wrongdoing, speakers delineate injustices committed against their victims. Girma Negash referred to this accounting of injustices as "reckoning" (2006, p. 8). Reckoning is defined as putting the victimizer's crimes on the historical record in an open and public fashion. By confessing and discussing the atrocities committed, both the injurer and injured can take stock of the event in question. Additionally, rhetors specify the victims of these injustices. Victims of historical wrongdoing are "the ghosts of the past that will not remain in their graves until their stories are told" (Nytagodien & Neal, 2004, p. 468). Recognizing and naming the injured parties gives voice to the "ghosts" of the past and their descendants. These victims' stories are finally being discussed. Their history, in some small part, is being recovered. Instead of being treated as inferior members of the body politic, speakers recognize and give voice to their humanity. In acknowledging another person's humanity, Shriver noted that a speaker "lays the groundwork for both the construction and repair of any human community" (Shriver, 1995, p. 8).

Mortification is the second element rhetors use in a collective apology. According to language theorist Kenneth Burke, all human beings, subsequently all communities, strive to achieve perfection through the social orders they build (Burke, 1961, p.3). These orders offer stability. However, when that order is disturbed or imperfect it becomes a source of pollution or, to use the favored Burkean term, guilt. For Burke, guilt serves as the basis of drama in social relationships and motivates human behavior. Guilt is an undesirable state of affairs that can have a debilitating impact upon an individual or a society (Brummett, 1980, p. 68). Consequently, guilt must be expunged. One

of the ways individuals or communities can expunge guilt is through mortification. Mortification involves a form of self-sacrifice. The individual or community (often through an official representative) makes a symbolic offering to appease society and repair social order. In a collective apology, this symbolic offering is accepting responsibility for society's actions and expressing remorse for the wrongdoing. Through this act, the rhetor purifies the social order, allowing redemption to be attained and stability restored.

Finally, collective apologies contain some form of corrective action. William Benoit (1995) described corrective action as the steps a rhetor will take to make sure problems do not reoccur (p. 78). These actions seek to start the process of repairing relationships between communities. They send a signal that the victimizers will be assisting the victimized. Additionally, these actions position the two communities to forge relationships based on mutual interest and respect.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR'S APOLOGY FOR THE IRISH POTATO FAMINE

Situational Context

The Irish Potato Famine was one of the watershed events in Irish history and Anglo-Irish relations. It changed Ireland in every possible demographic. Originally, the potato was grown in Ireland as a crop for its gentry class. In the middle of the 18th century, however, the crop became a staple for many poor tenant farmers. By the early part of the 19th century, potatoes became a staple food for practically everyone living in Ireland, particularly the poor. To accommodate this new staple crop more and more acreage was dedicated to its farming; thereby, increasing Ireland's reliance on a large potato crop to be harvested. It was not only a major food source, but was a basis of currency farmers could use to pay debts, sell to internal markets, and/or export to various parts of the British Empire or other parts of the world (Dolan 2002).

From 1801, because of the Act of Union, Ireland was directly governed as part of the United Kingdom. Over the next 40 years, British leaders struggled with how to govern Ireland. Irish politicians and its population constantly complained of being treated as second-class citizens within the Empire (Kinealy, 1995). The government was accused of not providing the Irish with enough resources in terms of housing, food, employment, revamping property laws (many Irish farmers did not own their own land), and staples to maintain more than subsistence living (Gray 1995). Accordingly, prior to the famine many Irish people lived in poor conditions, some constantly on the verge of starvation. The famine only exacerbated this dire situation.



In 1845 the potato harvest within Ireland dropped significantly because of potato blight, a fungus affecting the potato plant. Basically, this fungus causes the potato to be rotten from the inside out making it impossible to consume. In 1845, by autumn, nearly 1/3 to 1/2 of the potato crop was affected by the fungus (Donnelly, 2005). By 1846 nearly 75% of the entire potato crop had been destroyed. Because it was a staple food source for many in Ireland the potato blight caused immediate and great hardship. The British government attempted to respond to the famine by obtaining other food stuffs for the island. Prime Minister Robert Peel bought maize and cornmeal to be shipped to Ireland. However, the foodstuffs sent had not been properly processed, causing them to be difficult to eat (Kinealy, 1995). There is also evidence that Ireland produced enough food during the famine to feed its people, but much of that food (pork, beef, wheat, and other crops) was exported to other parts of the British Empire and the United States, further exacerbating the lack of affordable food for the poor (Gallagher, 1987).

Contributing to the crisis was the potato blight put many farmers out of work, which hampered their ability to generate enough income to afford expensive foods, like bread or meat. In view of that, the British government attempted to create a variety of public works jobs that put 500,000 Irishmen to work. However, the jobs were not properly run, there was rampant corruption, and the wages paid for those positions was woefully inadequate for the employed to buy food they could afford (Lyons, 1973, pp. 30-34). In early 1847, Lord John Russell, who replaced Peel as Prime Minister, stopped all public works projects and food aid, leaving thousands in peril. Although relief missions were organized from various parts of the world including British charities, the United States, and the Ottoman Empire over 1 million people died because of the famine and another 1-2 million Irish emigrated to the United States, Canada, Australia, or elsewhere. Simply put, the Irish Potato Famine changed the landscape of Ireland forever and caused severe resentment among many Irish toward the British government.

In the 1980s and mid-1990s, Anglo-Irish relations improved. As Ireland approached the 150th anniversary of the potato famine the Irish opposition leader, soon to be prime minister, Bertie Ahearn formally asked the British government for a formal apology for its role in exacerbating the effects of the potato famine (*The Irish Times*, 2 June 1997, p. 1). British Prime Minister John Major refused to provide an apology, but he had begun to make significant overtures to restarting the Northern Ireland peace negotiations, which had been hampered by Irish Republican Army (IRA) violence and the unwillingness of national and unionist parties to negotiate a settlement. In May 1997, Tony Blair became the first Labor Prime Minister in 18 years. In his autobiography, Prime Minister Blair believed his election provided a new opportunity to achieve peace within

Northern Ireland. He came to 10 Downing Street with a plan to restart negotiations (Blair, 2010, pp. 153-199). The 150th anniversary of the potato famine gave the new prime minister an opportunity to provide a small gesture that could move the dialogue forward. It was a message to the Irish "that he was leading a very modern British government that was keen to deal with Ireland, north and south, in an even-handed manner free from the shackles of the past" (Wintour & Watt, 2012, para. 14). Subsequently, Blair became the first British Prime Minister to express any public contrition for this event (Marks, 1997, p. 2). Blair apologized for the past to begin a better present and future.

Prime Minister Blair's "Apology"

Through the voice of Irish actor Gabriel Byrne, Blair's statement began with the traditional pleasantries toward his audience. Then in his first substantive sentences he reflected on the impact of the Irish Potato Famine. Blair stated, "the Famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and of Britain. It has left deep scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today" (Blair, 1997). These initial sentences constituted Blair's acknowledgement. He noted the Potato Famine was a "defining event" in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. He identified that there were over "one million" victims as part of this historical event. Consequently, the Famine within "the richest and most powerful nation in the world" has left "deep scars" that continued to impede Anglo-Irish relations. Implicitly, Blair's acknowledgement of the Potato Famine sent a signal to the Irish government he wanted to overcome and heal those "deep scars" that would engender deeper ties between Ireland and Britain. Moreover, his rhetoric suggested acknowledging the Potato Famine would symbolically remove an impediment to a deeper Anglo-Irish relationship, which could provide the Irish government impetus to put pressure on the IRA in Northern Ireland to re-start peace negotiations with the British government. Additionally, it gave the impression that Mr. Blair's government would be open to consider the grievances of Ireland and the people of Northern Ireland in attempting to move the peace process forward. Prime Minister Blair's acknowledgement signaled a new era in Anglo-Irish relations and in the continually stalled peace talks in Northern Ireland.

In the next sentence of his statement, Blair employed mortification by stating, "those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event" (Blair, 1997). Note Prime Minister Blair clearly delineated culpability for the Potato Famine rested with "those who governed in London" at the time. He implicitly took responsibility for the results of Ireland's potato crop failure by noting the British



government “failed their people” by “standing by”, doing nothing to assist the Irish, which turned into a “massive human tragedy” for millions of Irishmen. By taking responsibility for London’s inaction, Blair symbolically removed the guilt that continued to pollute relations between the Ireland and Britain. In doing so, Blair rebalanced and repositions Anglo-Irish relations on a more positive footing because this historical transgression was fully being dealt with in the present so it does not impede future ties between the two nations. At the same time, Blair’s rhetoric suggested he would not be a leader that ignored human tragedies, namely the situation within Northern Ireland. Hence, Prime Minister Blair’s tenure marked a new chapter in the history of Ireland and Britain, one built on mutual respect, mutual responsibility, and a future where each nation’s fate was intertwined with the other.

The rest of the Blair’s statement focused on commemorating the efforts of the Irish people in the wake of the Potato Famine. Blair (1997) emphasized:

“It is also right that we should pay tribute to ways in which the Irish people have triumphed in the face of this catastrophe. Britain in particular has benefited immeasurably from the skills and talents of Irish people, not only in areas such as music, the arts and the caring professions but across the whole spectrum of our political, economic and social life. Let us therefore today not only remember those who died but also celebrate the resilience and courage of those men and women who were able to forge another life outside Ireland, and the rich culture and vitality they brought with them. Britain, the U.S. and many Commonwealth countries are richer for their presence”.

Here, Blair was not commemorating the Potato Famine, but the “Irish people” because of their resilience through the “face of this catastrophe.” According to Blair, Irish men and women have enhanced the larger British community across all spectrums of life. They have made communities within Britain, the United States, and other British Commonwealth countries (Australia, New Zealand, and others) “richer for their presence”. Commemorating and remembering the Irish who not only survived this tragedy, but their descendants, in a sense, tells the stories of Irish past and present. Blair’s rhetoric appeared to say to his Irish audience that despite the difficult Anglo-Irish past the Irish deserve equal standing in the history of the British Empire. At the time of the Potato Famine Irish were constructed as second-class citizens. By acknowledging the great work of the Irish in British society Blair suggested he wanted to historically revise Ireland’s place within British history. Instead of second-class citizens, the Irish deserve an exalted place in making the United Kingdom one of the “richest and most powerful nations in the world”. This rhetoric, we assert, constituted Blair’s corrective action. As

noted earlier, corrective action typically entails rhetors outlining specific concrete steps their nation will take to right the past wrongs for survivors of these injustices. However, because the Irish potato famine took place 150 years earlier there were no direct survivors; no specific reparations to be made or laws passed that could correct that wrongdoing. At the same time, the Potato Famine left a legacy of ill will within Anglo-Irish relations. Blair’s tribute to the Irish people, as well as his acknowledgement and mortification concerning the Irish Potato Famine, to rebalance, deepen, and strengthen the Anglo-Irish relationship, also positioned him to leverage this enhanced relationship to make greater progress in the Northern Ireland peace negotiations.

Although Tony Blair’s apology was quite short, and not actually delivered in person, it received considerable attention from Irish, British, and international newspapers. After looking at over 100 articles on Blair’s Potato Famine rhetoric we found specific negative and positive reaction to the prime minister’s statement. British historian Lawrence James argued Blair’s acceptance of responsibility for the Potato Famine was just another buy-in to the myth that Irish nationalists constructed around this seminal event. Rather, he asserted Britain’s inability to assist the Irish was due to its belief at the time in “their passionate belief in free trade and market forces”, which led them to be “unwilling to spend government money on food for the Irish” because they “feared the economic consequences of a dependency culture and state aid was discontinued” (James, 1997, p. 8). The British government’s response was incompetence, not anti-Irish malice. Incompetence, according to James, did not deserve an apology. If that was the case “then every government in the world would be issuing apologies” (James, 1997, p. 8).

British Unionist leaders in Northern Ireland were tougher in reviewing Blair’s discourse. John Taylor and Ian Paisley, Jr., prominent Unionist politicians, forecasted Blair’s apology would result in “a rash of British acts of political contrition to Irish nationalism, scraping apologies and sickening concessions” (Pauley, 1997, p. 8). John Taylor went so far as to claim “the Irish mentality is one of victimhood and to ask for one apology one week and another on a different subject the next” (Wallen, 1997, p. A7). Essentially, those that disagreed with Blair’s rhetoric observed there was no need to apologize for something that occurred over 150 years ago and any apology would only lead to further concessions, which would undercut the reconciliation process not enhance it.

Despite this negativity, the Irish and British public’s reception from 10 Downing Street was generally positive. The Irish government welcomed Blair’s remarks stating, “while the statement confronts the past honestly, it does so in a way that heals for the future. The Prime Minister is to be complimented for the thought and care shown in his statement”. Moreover, the American Irish Political Education Committee commended the British prime minister for



taking responsibility for the Potato Famine. They stated he “deserves enormous credit for taking this step” (Fincuane, 1997, p. 11). Gerry Adams, leader of the Irish Republican Army’s political wing Sinn Fein, begrudgingly accepted Blair’s contrition (*The Australian*, 4 June 1997, p. 10). One reader of the *Irish Times* noted “Tony Blair has taken an important step towards a better relationship between Ireland and Great Britain” (Laird, 1997, p. 15). Ultimately, the *Irish Times* observed the prime minister “deserves bouquets for the famine apology”, while he “added dignity” to the commemoration of the Potato Famine (Holland, 1997, p. 18). Considering Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahearn called for the British to apologize for the potato famine two years earlier, his government and most Irish press accounts praised Blair’s rhetoric we can assume Blair’s contrition made a positive impression on the Irish government and Irish public.

In Britain, the press generally characterized Blair’s apology rhetoric as “significant” and “historic”, which would rebalance Anglo-Irish relations as more equitable and put the Northern Ireland peace process back on track (Watt, 1997, p. 2). Historian Peter Gray asserted Tony Blair’s words, while carefully chosen, should be welcomed (Gray, 1997, p. 19). Anthony Cary, a Counselor for the British Embassy in Washington D.C., argued Tony Blair’s “apology” “is as step towards reconciliation” between Ireland and Britain, while laying the groundwork for more constructive peace talks in Northern Ireland (Cary, 1997, p. A22). Contrary to the nattering nabobs of negativity, the majority of press accounts maintained Blair’s rhetoric would lead to better relations between Great Britain and Ireland, while raising expectations in the Northern Ireland peace process. As such, we can state, as it did in Ireland, it left a positive impression upon the British public and laid important reconciliation groundwork.

Evidence of this last claim can be found in how the press speculated how the apology might influence the Northern Ireland peace talks. Within three months of Blair’s apology Sinn Fein and Ulster Unionist leaders met for the first time at the negotiating table (*Deutsche Press Agentur*, 23 September 1997). Within four months of Blair’s apology, British newspapers began to speculate Prime Minister Blair was going to apologize for Bloody Sunday. Over the course of four more months, the British press on no fewer than four occasions predicted 10 Downing Street would apologize for that event (see Cairns, 1997, p. 1; Eastham, 1998, p. 1; Macleod & Campbell, 1998, p. 2; Millar, 1997, p. 3).

Within these press accounts, Blair’s potato famine apology was cited as the precedent for this apology and marked a turning point in Northern Ireland peace negotiations. As it turned out, Tony Blair appointed a commission, headed by its top judicial official Lord Widgery, to reassess all of the evidence surrounding Bloody Sunday before an official apology would occur. Perhaps, it was this gesture of reconsidering the evidence over Bloody Sunday that eventually led to the Good Friday accords in April 1998, which essentially created a framework for peace within Northern Ireland, led the IRA to issue an apology for its atrocities in 2002, and subsequent apologies by Tony Blair and his successors Gordon Brown and David Cameron over incidents that occurred in Northern Ireland (Cunningham, 2004). It may be difficult to make a specific causal link between Prime Minister Blair’s apology and Northern Ireland reconciliation efforts. However, one can certainly assert his rhetoric raised expectations for an apology for Bloody Sunday (which eventually occurred under Prime Minister Cameron). If nothing else it rhetorically set the tone for relational dynamics to significantly change in Anglo-Irish relations and within the Northern Ireland peace process.

Tony Blair’s apology for the Irish potato famine represented an important moment in rebalancing Anglo-Irish relations, while jumpstarting Northern Ireland peace negotiations. Ultimately, apologies, statements of contrition, regret, reconciliation, forgiveness, and the like, are more likely to become commonplace as more societies transition from one set of circumstances to another, as well as established communities confronting the past so they can maintain, deepen, and strengthen the communal bonds amongst its citizens. As Hannah Arendt (1963) put it, “every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the father as it is blessed by the deeds of the ancestors” (p. 27). Prime Minister Blair’s attempt to deal with one of the sins of its father was not a panacea that wiped away the pain, destruction, and loss caused by the British callous response to the Potato Famine. However, it did function to symbolically realign Anglo-Irish relations, signaled Blair’s willingness to proceed with peace negotiations in Northern Ireland, and created an overall political dynamic that broke through years of animosity. Nation-states that are in transition or already established would do well in following Blair’s example, not necessarily his apology per se, but dealing with the “sins of the father” so “deeds of the ancestors” can truly be shared by all. ■

■ References

“Apology accepted.” *The Australian*, 4 June 1997, p. 10.

ARENDRT, Hannah (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*. New York: Viking Press.

BARKAN, Elazar; KARN, Alexander (2006). *Taking wrongs seriously: apologies and reconciliation*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.



- BENOIT, W.** (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: a theory of image restoration discourse*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- “Blair admits British policy failure turned famine into massive human tragedy”. *The Irish Times*, 2 June 1997, p.1.
- BLAIR, Tony** (1 June 1997). “Statement on the 150th Anniversary of the potato famine at Milltown, County Cork, Ireland”. [Date of consultation: 15 June 2011]. <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlker/famemig.html#Blair><http://www.google.es/>
- BLAIR, Tony** (2010). *A journey. My political life*. New York: Knopf.
- BODNAR, John** (1994). “Public memory in an American city: commemoration in Cleveland”. In: J. GILLI (ed.). *Commemorations: the politics of national identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pp. 64-86.
- BOSTDORFF, Denise; GOLDZWIG, Steven** (2005). “History, collective memory, and the appropriation of Martin Luther King Jr: Reagan’s rhetorical legacy”. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 35, pp. 661-690. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2005.00271.x>
- BROWNE, Stephen** (1999). “Remembering Crispus Attucks: race, rhetoric, and the politics of commemoration”. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 85, pp. 169-187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335639909384252>
- BRUMMETT, Barry** (1980). “Symbolic form, Burkean scapegoating, rhetorical exigency in Alioto’s response to the ‘Zebra’ murders”. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*. Vol. 44, pp. 64-73. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10570318009373987>
- BURKE, Kenneth** (1961). *The rhetoric of religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- CAIRNS, F.** (1997). “Blair planning to say sorry for Bloody Sunday”. *The Evening Standard*, 10 October 1997, p. 1.
- CELERMAJER, Danielle** (2009). *The sins of the nation and the ritual of apologies*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511581502>
- CLARITY, J.** (1997). “New violence casts shadow on Irish talks: peace negotiations resume tomorrow”. *The Gazette* (Montreal), 2 June 1997, p. B1.
- CUNNINGHAM, Michael** (2004). “Apologies in Irish politics: A commentary and critique”. *Contemporary British History*. Vol. 18, pp. 80-92. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13619460412331296919>
- “Does Britain really need to apologise for the Irish famine? An historian takes issue with Tony Blair’s latest initiative” (1997, June 3). *Daily Mail* (London), 3 June 1997, p. 8.
- DOLAN, Edward F.** (2002). *The Irish potato famine: the story of Anglo-Irish immigration*. London: Marshall Cavendish Corporation.
- DONNELLY, J.** (2005). *The great Irish potato famine*. Dublin: Sutton Publishing.
- EASTHAM, P.** (1998). “Blair to say sorry for Bloody Sunday killings.” *Daily Mail* (London), 17 January 1998, p. 1.
- EDWARDS, Jason A.** (2005). “Community-focused apology in international affairs: Japanese prime minister Tomiichi Murayama’s apology”. *The Howard Journal of Communications*. Vol. 16, pp. 317-336. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10646170500326590>
- EDWARDS, Jason A.** (2008a). *Navigating the post-cold war world: President Clinton’s foreign policy rhetoric*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- EDWARDS, Jason A.** (2008b). “The mission of healing: Kofi Annan’s failed apology”. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*. Vol. 16, pp. 88-104. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15456870701840012>
- EDWARDS, Jason A.** (2009). “Community-focused apology in Pope John Paul II’s year of jubilee discourse”. In: J.R. BLANEY; J.P. ZOMPETTI (eds.). *The rhetoric of Pope John Paul II*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. 81-100.
- EDWARDS, Jason A.** (2010). “Apologizing for the past for a better future: Collective apologies in the United States, Australia, and Canada.” *Southern Communication Journal*, vol.73, pp. 57-75. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10417940902802605>
- EDWARDS, Jason A.; CALHOUN, Lindsay R.** (2011). “Redress for old wounds: Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s apology for the Chinese head tax”. *Chinese Journal of Communication*. Vol. 4, pp. 73-89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2011.544084>
- EDWARDS, Jason A.; LUCKIE, Amber** (2011). “British Prime Minister David Cameron’s apology for Bloody Sunday”. A paper presented at the Rhetoric in Society III Conference. Antwerp, Belgium.
- EDY, Jill** (1999). “Journalistic uses of collective memory.” *Journal of Communication*. Vol. 49, pp. 71-85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02794.x>



- FINCUANE, Tony** (1997). "Tony Blair's famine statement." *The Irish Times*, 9 June 1997, p. 11.
- GALLAGHER, Thomas** (1987). *Paddy's lament, Ireland 1846-1847: prelude to hatred*. New York: Mariner.
- GRAY, Peter** (1995). *The Irish famine*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- GRAY, Peter** (1997). "Irish famine lessons still to be learnt." *The Independent* (London), 5 June 1997, p. 19.
- HOLLAND, Mary** (1997). "Why Blair deserves bouquets for famine apology." *The Irish Times*, 5 June 1997, p. 16.
- HUNT, William** (1997). "Tony Blair's famine statement." *The Irish Times*, 21 June 1997, p. 11.
- JAMES, Lynn** (1997). "Does Britain really need to apologise for the Irish famine." *Daily Mail* (London), 3 June 1997, page 8.
- KINEALY, Christine** (1995). *The great calamity: The Irish famine, 1845-1852*. London: Gill & MacMillan.
- LAIRD, John** (1997). "Tony Blair's famine statement." *The Irish Times*, 12 June 1997, p. 15.
- LAZARE, Aaron** (2004). *On apology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- LIND, Jennifer** (2008). *Sorry states: Apologies in international politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- LYALL, S.** (1997). "Past as prologue: Blair faults Britain in potato blight." *The New York Times*, 3 June 1997, p. A3.
- LYONS, F. S. L.** (1973). *Ireland since the famine*. New York: Fontana.
- MACLEOD, Colin; CAMPBELL, Douglas** (1998). "Blair wants truth about killings; go-ahead for Bloody Sunday inquiry." *The Herald* (Glasgow), 29 January 1998, p. 2.
- MARKS, Kathy** (1997). "Blair issues apology for the potato famine." *The Independent* (London), 2 June 1997, p. 2.
- MILLAR, Frank** (1997). "Britain to delay Bloody Sunday statement; date may coincide with 26th anniversary of Derry killings." *The Irish Times*, 10 November 1997, p. 3.
- NEGASH, Girma** (2006). *Apologia politica: states and their apologies by proxy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- NOBLES, Melissa** (2008). *The politics of official apologies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511756252>
- NYTAGODIEN, R.; NEAL, A.** (2004). "Collective apologies, trauma, and the politics of memory." *Journal of Human Rights*. Vol. 3, pp. 465-475.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1475483042000299714>
- PARRY-GILES, Shawn; PARRY-GILES, Trevor** (2000). "Collective memory, political nostalgia, and the rhetorical presidency: Bill Clinton's commemoration of the march on Washington, August 28, 1998." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 86, pp. 417-437.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335630009384308>
- PAULEY, Marcus** (1997). "Blair walks into mire of controversy over famine." *Belfast News Letter*, 9 June 1997, p. 8.
- SHRIVER, Donald** (1995). *An ethic for enemies: forgiveness in politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- "Sinn Fein and unionists together in Northern Ireland talks." *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 23 September 1997.
- TAVUCHIS, Nicholas** (1991). *Mea culpa: a sociology of apologies and reconciliation*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- THOMPSON, Janna** (2002). *Taking responsibility for the past: reparation and historical justice*. Cambridge: Polity.
- TROUILLOT, Michel** (2001). "Abortive rituals: historical apologies and the global era." *Interventions: The International Journal of Post-Colonial Studies*. Vol. 2, pp. 171-186.
- VILLADSEN, Lisa Storm** (2008). "Speaking on behalf of others: rhetorical agency and epideictic functions of official apologies." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. Vol. 38, pp. 25-45.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02773940701779769>
- VILLADSEN, Lisa Storm** (2012). "Beyond the spectacle of apologia: Reading official apologies as proto-deliberative rhetoric and instantiations of rhetorical citizenship." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 90, pp. 230-247.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2012.663501>
- WALLEN, D.** (1997). "Blair apologizes for potato famine comments mark step toward better relations with Ireland; Some unionists apprehensive." *The Globe and Mail*, 3 June 1997, p. A7



<http://journal-of-conflictology.uoc.edu>

Jason A. Edwards and Amber Luckie British Prime Minister Tony Blair's... ■

WATT, Nicholas (1997). "Blair blames Britain for Irish famine deaths". *The London Times*, 2 June 1997, p. 21.

WEINER, Brian (2005). *Sins of the father: the politics of national apologies in the United States*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

WINTOUR, Anthony; WATT, Nicholas (2012). "Jeremy Paxman: wrong to criticise Tony Blair over Irish po-

tato famine". *The London Guardian*, 21 February 2012 [viewed 12 July 2012].

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/wintour-and-watt/2012/feb/21/tonyblair-jeremy-paxman>

YAMAZAKI, Jane (2005). *Japanese apologies after World War II*. New York: Routledge.

■ Recommended citation

EDWARDS, Jason A.; LUCKIE, Amber (2014). "British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Irish Potato Famine Apology" [online article]. *Journal of Conflictology*. Vol. 5, Iss. 1, pp. 43-51. Campus for Peace, UOC. [Consulted: dd/mm/yy].

<http://www.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/journal-of-conflictology/article/view/vol5iss1-edwards-luckie/vol5iss1-edwards-luckie-en>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/joc.v5i1.1863>

ISSN 2013-8857



The texts published in this journal are – unless indicated otherwise – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 3.0 licence. You may copy, distribute, transmit and adapt the work, provided you attribute it (authorship, journal name, publisher) in the manner specified by the author(s) or licensor(s). The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/es/deed.en>.

■ About the authors

Jason A. Edwards
jasonedwards57@hotmail.com

Jason A. Edwards is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Bridgewater State University.

Amber Luckie
luckie_parks@yahoo.com

Amber Luckie is a Doctoral Candidate at St. Mary's University of Minnesota.



**CAMPUS
FOR PEACE**

