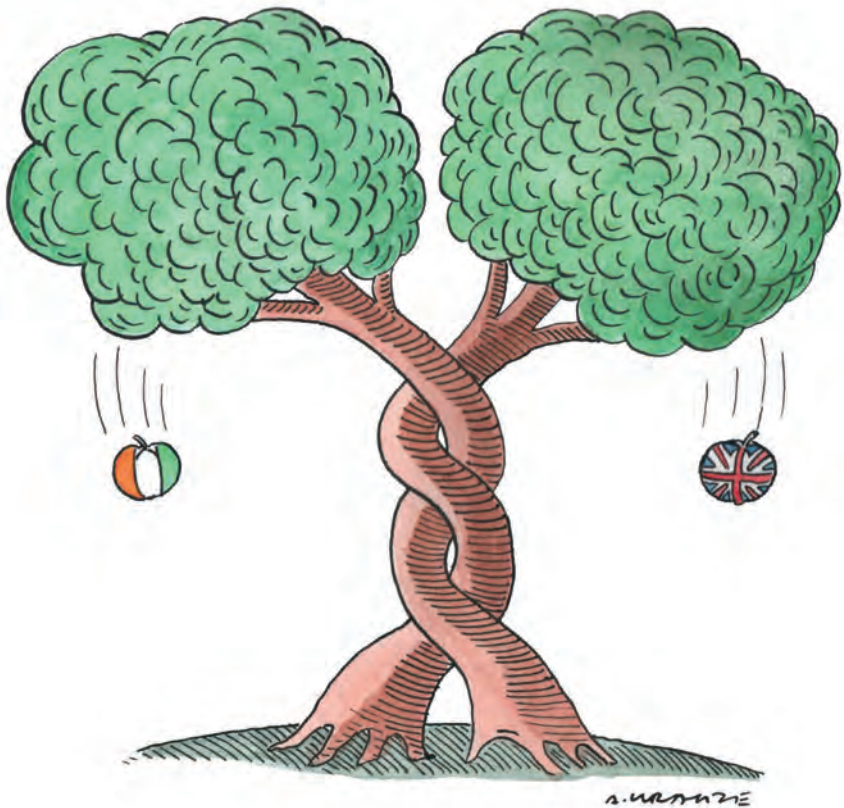


# Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined



# Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined

## Acknowledgements

Thanks go to all who have worked on and contributed to *Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined*, in particular:

Rosemary Bechler for commissioning, organising and editing the essays that make up the book

John Coakley and Patricia McCarron at the Institute for British-Irish Studies for their advice and input

Anne Sweetmore for proofreading and copy-editing services

Andrzej Krause, political cartoonist, for his illustration

Abigail Davis at River Path Associates for typesetting and design services

Purely Print for printing the book

© British Council Ireland, 2005

## Contents

Preface Bertie Ahern, T.D. Taoiseach	4
Preface Rt Hon. Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister	6
Introduction Tony Reilly, Director, British Council Ireland	9
The Normalisation of the British–Irish Relationship Dr Garret FitzGerald	19
Britain and Ireland – Lives Entwined Piaras Mac Éinrí	33
Cross-Talk and Mermaid-Speak Patricia Palmer	47
My Secret Life Eoghan Harris	65
I am but I am not? A View of/from Britain Mary J. Hickman	83
One Small Promise Trevor Ringland	101
No Passports Edna Longley	119
The Crazy Knot Maurice Hayes	137

## Preface

Bertie Ahern, T.D. Taoiseach

For centuries, our islands have been closely intertwined. Our histories have been intricately linked through geography, trade and migration. There can be no doubt that in many ways this relationship has greatly enriched both of our countries. Despite the conflict and tensions of the past, a strong bond of trust and friendship has been built up over many years and a new era of co-operation now exists between Ireland and our closest neighbours. As Taoiseach, it has been my privilege to see this bond strengthened and deepened as we endeavour to find a final and lasting peace on the island of Ireland.

It has also been a great privilege for me to work closely with Prime Minister Tony Blair and our colleagues in government, and with the Northern Ireland parties, in seeking a long-term solution to these difficulties. Notwithstanding ongoing difficulties, we have, together, made enormous progress. The Good Friday Agreement remains the foundation on which progress can be advanced on and between these islands. The Agreement has been a milestone in normalising the British-Irish relationship, as has our shared membership of the European Union.

I am therefore delighted to welcome warmly this initiative of the British Council in Ireland. The essays that follow show just how far we have gone down the road of "normalisation". The relationship between two neighbours will never be completely free of tension; but it is gratifying to know that so many people on this island have put behind them a lot of antagonism that has had so negative an influence in the past.

This publication reflects the quality of the new relationship between Ireland and Britain, and it will also help to enhance further Irish people's appreciation of the complexities of our culture.

But I hope that it will also contribute to a new appreciation by British readers of the way in which communication and movement across the Irish Sea has had an impact on the lives and perceptions of Irish people. I congratulate the British Council on their invaluable work on improving relations between the two islands

and in helping people on both islands to deal with our shared, but in the past often divisive, historical heritage.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bertie Ahern". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "B".

*Bertie Ahern, T.D.  
Taoiseach*

## Preface

Rt Hon. Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister

Seven years ago, the Taoiseach and I were present as Northern Ireland's leaders pieced together the Good Friday Agreement. Today, as we work to further the cause of peace in Northern Ireland, we draw on the same deep wellspring of hope that invigorated us in the Easter of 1998.

I feel privileged to be Prime Minister at a time of opportunity and renewal, not only for the people of Northern Ireland, but also for the relationship between the United Kingdom and its nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland.

The blurring and re-drawing of boundaries – physical, political and cultural – between our countries has taken place many times over the centuries. Frequently, these shifts have produced tension, division and hardship. That a unique bond exists between Britain and Ireland is perhaps a result of – not in spite of – our turbulent shared history.

To understand the true nature of that bond, we need to explore the relations that exist, not between governments, but between peoples. I, like so many of my fellow citizens, have Ireland in my blood. My mother was born in Ballyshannon and my family returned to Donegal for summer holidays throughout my childhood. I remember the shock we all felt as the Troubles began to scar and twist so many lives.

Last year, the British Council began to explore how young Irish people saw the United Kingdom. *Through Irish Eyes* painted a picture of a generation that felt that Britain was 'just another foreign country', and no longer had an overbearing influence on Ireland's development. But healthy cultural and economic ties are flourishing, as young Irish people discover what today's Britain means to them.

I join with Bertie Ahern in welcoming the work the British Council in Ireland is doing to deepen and develop this work. I hope the readers of this book will be struck, as I have been, by the range of perspectives and experiences *Lives Entwined* contains.

These essays celebrate the unique quality of the relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland, but they do not shy away from exploring its complexity and intricacy. They form an important record of a period that history will surely judge to have been pivotal for both countries.

Our shared heritage is finding new forms of expression. I look forward, with confidence, to the transformation to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Blair". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'T'.

*Rt Hon. Tony Blair MP  
Prime Minister*



Tony Reilly  
Director, British Council Ireland

*Tony Reilly is currently Director of the British Council Ireland. He took up this post in July 2002 after previous postings with the British Council in South Africa, Turkey, Kuwait and Oman. He commissioned Through Irish Eyes in 2003 - a piece of extensive quantitative and qualitative research carried out by Behaviour & Attitudes, to investigate changing Irish attitudes towards the UK among the Irish successor generation. With an Irish father, English mother, Irish wife and 3 children born respectively in Greece, Oman and Turkey, the issues of hybridity and national identity are never far from home. He has a first degree in Sociology and English, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from Goldsmith's College London and an RSA Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.*

## Introduction

Tony Reilly

The idea for this volume of essays first dawned at the launch and discussion of the report *Through Irish Eyes* (British Council Ireland, 2003) at the Mansion House in Dublin in February 2004. The results of this extensive piece of opinion and attitude research, commissioned jointly by the British Council and the British Embassy, suggested, as many of the contributors to this collection of essays agree, that a post-colonial recalibration in British–Irish relations is in the process of working itself out. Alongside this apparent, and for the most part benign, shift, a unique web of relationships is emerging between the two countries. It can trace some part of its energy to the moment explored in this volume by Mary Hickman and Trevor Ringland, when the phrase ‘British–Irish’ entered the Good Friday Agreement; but there are other significant movements in the tectonic plates of the archipelago we refer to as Britain and Ireland.

These two contributors were joined by Piaras Mac Éinrí for the final panel discussion of that February day on ‘multiple identities within and between these islands’, a debate which gave everyone present an intriguing picture of extraordinarily complex, interwoven and often contradictory relationships, as they play themselves out. The session was skilfully chaired by another well known writer and commentator on British–Irish relations, Olivia O’Leary, who posed to the speakers the following deceptively simple question:

‘Is it possible to be British and Irish or Irish and British?’

Piaras, beginning his response, seemed unprepared for the stream of consciousness which this combination of overlapping identities would elicit from him. He began with a straightforward enough declaration of his republican credentials, background and history, in order to emphasise, as he reiterates in these pages, that this was no ‘past phenomenon’ but linked to ‘the unfinished business on this island’. However, towards the end of a brief *tour de horizon* around certain British trends and institutions of which he nevertheless approved – a loyal political opposition, the BBC, real progress in the integration of ethnic minorities – he suddenly stumbled across what he referred to as ‘a sense of his own Britishness’. Olivia tried to tease more out of him during the session. Together

with my colleague Martin Rose, Director of Counterpoint (the British Council's internal cultural relations think-tank), we made a second attempt to excavate the idea with Piaras and others over supper. After a few glasses of good cabernet sauvignon, he was invited to expand his thoughts for a collection of essays on *What is British*, part of a series marking the British Council's 70th anniversary (1934-2004).

That essay, 'Britain and Ireland – Lives Entwined', is the title piece for this volume. In it, the author has become impressively clear about the nuance and complexity of national and linguistic identity, the fact that it can change, and that the past and the present are never neat and tidy. His conclusion – that there is a bit of the British in the Irish and Irish in the British – is what this current book is all about.

As its partner essays have made their appearance, we have been delighted to note that this was no one-off 'Piaras effect'. These are pieces brimming with poetry. Edna Longley points us towards Mark Ford's announcement in *The Guardian* this February of a new 'golden age' in Northern Irish poetry. Perhaps the rich and varied seam we have tapped here can claim to have touched the hem of this zeitgeist. It is one thing to know that British-Irish relations have entered a phase more at ease with each side's ambivalent attitudes towards the other party: quite another to be able to distinguish how this works in different relationships, how it may fluctuate, what could build on that ease, and what might most easily undermine it. In this volume you will find numerous thoughts on all these questions.

Nor was Piaras alone in offering us personal disclosure. Patricia Palmer opens her polemical essay with the moment just after the publication of her book, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland*, when a friend turned to her to say, 'All research is autobiographical'. Something like this realisation is directly responsible for numerous high points in *Lives Entwined*. Thinking of Linda Colley's influential account of British Empire, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1937* (Yale University Press, 1992), which I only wish had not omitted a substantive treatment of Ireland, we can see that historians today have rediscovered the strengths of complex story-telling through exemplary lives. These are not just chronicles of experience – fascinating as these are in their own right – but ways

of explaining phenomena that otherwise would not cross our radar; and, most important of all, ways of explaining why we care.

Former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald, in his lucid historical overview, offers the statesmanlike perspective borne out of his own professional life in politics that we might expect. But in the process, we glimpse his maternal ancestors moving from Scotland to settle in County Down and Antrim. Bearing in mind what another great statesman, Nelson Mandela, once called 'the power of sport to unite or divide', we invited international sportsman Trevor Ringland to explore the journey from one highly contested terrain, the rugby field, to another, mainstream political life in Northern Ireland. An unexpected bonus in his contribution is the moving account of a father-son relationship, a refrain throughout his memoir. It is part of a broader theme about young men and the people they look up to which he shares with Eoghan Harris, again a remarkable, eloquent personal testimony, this time to the love of things British that until recently 'dared not speak its name'. More indirectly, Patricia, fluent Irish speaker and Irish academic, intrigues us with her recent decision to live and work in York. The reverse time-lag that she describes, as she leaves the concrete cranes of the Celtic Tiger behind her and arrives in the ancient medieval town which is her new home, is full of her fresh observation.

Maurice Hayes and Trevor, in very different ways, are both keen to explore what it was in their backgrounds that allowed them 'to move round the island' with ease between communities in conflict. Equally instructively, Mary Hickman is not only an expert in the lives of the Irish diaspora, who has long worked with the Commission for Racial Equality to establish the issue of discrimination against the Irish in Britain as a key and neglected area of concern. She is second-generation Irish herself, and has her own deeply personal perspective. This is part of how we know what we know. We all have these credentials. As Edna says, it is not just that these authors' stories offer a chance to contradict powerful national narratives, but that they positively revel in surprising contradictions of all kinds. Here is Eoghan ticking off 'post-colonial theorists' for underestimating the extent to which heroic British imperial narratives could be ransacked by men and schoolboys alike for republican role models; or explaining in three sentences how renowned Black and Tan soldier George Nathan could be an arch villain one minute, and a hero the next. Here is Garret pondering the 'twist'

in history that made the IRA the unintentional midwife of a new closeness in British-Irish relations. On the whole, writers in this volume are more comfortable settling for accounts which are not resolved in all respects: they note ambivalence, leave loose ends, formulate questions, and move on – reconciled to the possibility that neat and tidy conclusions do not exist.

The most dramatic disclosure must be Eoghan ‘coming out of the closet’ to announce that, if it is politically incorrect to speak fondly of British military men in Ireland, and Britain for that matter – his ‘genial ghosts’ – he is going to do so anyway. He is not alone in reconsidering this aspect of the legacy. Piaras, while professing some discomfort at the role of the military in British culture, also takes time to revisit such unlikely conundrums as his grandfather, a policeman in the Royal Irish Constabulary, wearing the British uniform while he runs errands for Michael Collins and the IRA. These pages are full of beautifully observed tiny moments, where some act of human recognition wins out over the political order of the day. It may be a moment of communication that works, such as Eoghan’s spotty young Irish Volunteer, effectively silenced by the British Major; or one that doesn’t – an encounter with a British officer who prides himself on having a copy of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey’s life story in his pocket. Trevor’s essay, in drawing our attention to the ‘One Small Step’ campaign, perhaps makes the most explicit tribute to those peace-making initiatives that can be taken by any ordinary person, for example just by reading ‘the other side’s newspaper’ one day. But the small steps abound throughout.

There are the human moments, and then there are the larger processes: Garret charting the way Irish neutrality scarred relations long after the second world war, and the larger impact of a subsequent healing process; Edna musing on the significance of President Mary McAleese and the Queen paying joint tribute to the Irish war dead at the Messine memorial, in a country where graveyards are often neglected and the wearing of poppies in November indicates which side of the divide one comes from. These are big gestures and they mark a significant moving on. More than one contributor brings us right up to date in this remarkable evolution, by telling us of the tragic death last year of Lance Corporal Ian Malone, a Dubliner from Ballyfermot who served in an Irish regiment of the British army and was killed in Basra. At his funeral, comrades from his regiment, the Irish guards, came to carry his coffin – the first time British soldiers

have been seen in uniform on the streets of Dublin since 1922. Members of those other Irish guards – the Garda Síochána/Irish police force – saluted as the cortege passed by.

Perhaps this is a good time to help people debunk some of those false, fossilised images of Britishness and Irishness, cultivated, as Maurice puts it, by communities who have become ‘detached from the rootstock’, and who cherish images long ago discarded by the parent societies. Maybe, without falling into the trap of suggesting that we are all now part of some large, amorphous, undifferentiated, happy-clappy comfort zone, we can begin to explore, acknowledge and openly accept some of these deeper dynamics.

But the ‘friends forever’ that Eoghan has in view? Our authors have very different views on this. Edna opens her piece by asking if ‘entwined’ is an overoptimistic choice of wording. You could use other language, she points out, to describe the nature of the relationship: ‘entangled’, for example. Choosing the cover image for this volume with the fine *Guardian* illustrator Andrzej Krauze, we arrived at an image not unrelated to Maurice’s ‘rootstock’. In the course of selecting this image, the following, slightly worried feedback was circulated: ‘Could the trees be made to appear a bit more comfortably entwined: they look as if they’re strangling each other?’ Readers will have to judge for themselves. Nevertheless, on the whole, from Garret’s authoritative opening essay onwards, there are enough references throughout the book to the unprecedented degree and warmth of current communication across the spectrum – from the highest levels of government, to UK theatre audiences revelling in a flowering of Irish plays – to conclude that, yes, the current era is a more relaxed and positive entwining.

Overall this is the prevailing impression, despite the fact that many of our contributors are concerned lest this wished-for romance, as Edna puts it, between ‘the old Lion and the young Tiger ... sweeps too much ... under the carpet’. Those most concerned are invariably thinking of ‘the Northern question’. *Through Irish Eyes* revealed a marked lack of interest, even a ‘switching off and turning away’ from the problems of the North amongst young people in the Republic. Edna’s point is well taken, however, that it was neglect of the North in former years that incubated the Troubles. She does not stop at warning noises. Her regional survey of what Belfast and Liverpool share makes a triumphant case for how appealing, in a looser knot sort of way, the new sense of Irishness is that emerges from

such comparison. But she is not alone amongst the contributors in this collection in suggesting, perhaps particularly to the 'successor generation', that they can ill afford to ignore this past, as it is intimately linked to the future of the island. Look closely at the Good Friday Agreement, as Maurice invites us to do, and the possibilities it opens up in the North of being Irish-and-British or British-and-Irish in innovative ways – and whatever faith, or none, to which you subscribe, you will want to echo Eoghan's prayer that the 'grace' of that Good Friday Agreement will prevail. Indeed, it is the continued commitment by Ireland's Taoiseach and the UK Prime Minister to this task of finding a lasting political settlement in Northern Ireland, that substantiates so much of the new-found affirmation uncovered in our research.

What else, you may reasonably ask, explains the new mood? Readers will find several recurrent themes. I am particularly struck by the concept of 'relative psychological equality' that Garret is the first to articulate. The European Union, he points out, is the crucial architect in this development, encouraging Ireland to equip itself with a new prospectus, opening up both countries to a larger canvas, and on the economic front, as Maurice confirms, enabling Ireland to flourish economically as she does today, boasting a higher GDP than the UK and indeed many other European countries. Another factor is the ability of the Irish to leave the demons of an inferiority complex far behind them, thus breaking a chain of dependency between Britain and Ireland which was very much to the latter's disadvantage over the decades. Eoghan bids a delighted farewell to a syndrome he calls MOPE (most oppressed people ever), a trait of victimhood which he, like Sean Lemass, believed ran deep in the Irish psyche.

Today, we have renewed hopes of a genuinely two-way regard, less trapped in the old negative stereotypes, whether associated with discrimination against Irish immigrants in the bad old days of 'No Blacks or Irish', or with the perpetrators of terrorism. But if the Good Friday Agreement, the ceasefires and the peace process have played a part in dispelling such images, in the process of improving life for Irish people living in England, Wales and Scotland, it is still early days in this transformation. There is much 'unfinished business' to occupy our minds, as Mary shows us in her vigorous account. She points to an abiding asymmetry in the neglect and ignorance of Ireland and things Irish which persists in the UK, a disregard evident in the all-too-common errors that the UK media make on a

regular basis when it comes to coverage of changing attitudes in Ireland towards the church, secularism or homophobia.

The Celtic Tiger has managed to reverse the direction of its people-flow in recent years. Nevertheless, any satisfaction we may derive from Piaras's appreciation of the multicultural diversity of today's Britain at its best has to answer to Mary's account of a joint and ongoing failure to recognise the realities and the aspirations of those with hybrid identities – the British–Irish and the Irish–British. Mary's is an important if lone voice in pointing out that the Irish diaspora is also a significant constituency whose voices must be heard. We are not talking here just about the many 60- or 70-year-old Irish people still living in Britain who could never afford to return home to enjoy the economic upswing. There are younger generations who have also fallen between the two stools, and whose sense of place and identity has hitherto been unrecognised.

Nor is this the only cloud on the horizon of 'relative psychological equality'. While Mary explores the hazards confronting an island race belatedly yielding up its monopoly of 'coastal integrity', Maurice makes rueful reference to the linked question of Britain's 'ongoing and sometimes agonising reappraisal of the nature of Britishness itself' as it tries to redefine its post-colonial role in the world. As last year's *Through Irish Eyes* research confirmed, those with hangovers of negativity about the British often cited the potential for superiority and arrogance to resurface. They do not trust a sea-change, particularly in attitudes associated with the lingering effects of an empire-building process which manifested the 'peculiar propensity on the part of the English to assimilate other cultures and races' that Mary describes as 'underpinning the claim of superiority'. Today, British people still make these mistakes on a trivial scale – easy enough to do, given the degree of cultural crossover that exists. But when the British cavalierly co-opt Noel Gallagher, Seamus Heaney, Bono or Sir Bob Geldof as their own cultural ambassadors, without reflection, or indeed without asking, it rankles as a reminder of earlier, more lethal and deliberate expropriations. Hence Edna's pointed question about a 'literary free trade area'. She is right to remind us of Seamus Heaney's famous verse-letter referring to the colour of his passport. These are thoughtless acts, denying credit, value and achievement where it is due: a behaviour which is the polar opposite of that 'mutuality' which, we within the British Council are the first to acknowledge, is the essence of effective cultural relations.



No-one could argue, either, with the statistics on the deaths of languages all around the world cited by Patricia. There is little respite in her disturbing story of an act of destruction which began in the Elizabethan period, and which has continued, without let-up, to the modern day when all Irish people, if she is right, Joyce and Beckett included, find themselves talking with a grafted-on tongue. Is there any redress for this, other than sensitivity to these ongoing language issues? Eoghan, it must be said, taking issue with Brian Friel's play *Translations*, has a very different story to tell about the enormous efforts made by at least one English Ordnance Surveyor who dealt with the intercultural challenges of his task by diligently studying Irish to preserve what he could of the Irish placenames. Again, interestingly, it may come down to a question of hybridity. Where Piaras relishes his discovery in the 1980s of the 'children who spoke perfect Connemara Irish and broad Cockney English', Patricia sees one language plundering the other. She is inconsolable, despite the fact that her own haunting account of what it is to lose a language is couched in the most luminescent English prose. As she says herself, 'all my most fluent words were English.'

It is important to have such different views lying side by side in this anthology. These are robust and creative arguments, and they will yield new settlements. It is fitting, therefore, that we close for now on Maurice's insight into the Good Friday Agreement: it is innovative because it is about uniting people rather than territory – removing 'the causes of division in the minds and hearts of people'. People today, reflecting on the peace process in Northern Ireland, often claim that the jaw-jaw which has characterised this process in recent years is infinitely preferable to the war-war that preceded the Agreement. This is what cultural relations is all about: at the risk of some misunderstanding, no doubt, creating safe spaces for conversations and arguments such as those espoused in this enjoyable and sometimes moving collection of essays.

We also close with the prospect of Europe offering both states a gateway to a more open and inclusive discourse around identities, nationalities, boundaries and sovereignty. How much, Maurice points out, has changed in the short 30 years since he slogged away on an unfruitful 'Irish Dimension'. Mutual respect, progress in the North, what Garret calls the 'normalisation' of relations against a European backdrop – these are solid gains, with geopolitical momentum to back them up. It is here that the two-way learning process Garret refers to offers

distinct opportunities. He describes a 'frequency and intimacy of communications' that has come to 'surpass ... anything previously seen in the bilateral relations between European states'. Ireland won plaudits from around the world during its last EU presidency for successfully negotiating the new Constitution, and not least from its closest European partner, Britain, as it applies itself to its own preparations for the EU Presidency this summer. None of these essays touches on the other major relationship that places both countries bracingly against a larger canvas – the respective relationships of Britain and Ireland with the USA. Both have their 'special relationships', and the impact of these on EU-US relations in general would also be worth investigating in the future. But that further chapter in lives entwined is for another day.

## Dr Garret FitzGerald

*Dr Garret FitzGerald spent 12 years with Aer Lingus, finally as its Research & Schedule Manager; before becoming an economic consultant, a journalist, and moving to the Department of Political Economy in University College, Dublin, as a lecturer. In 1965 he was elected to the Irish Senate and, four years later, to Dail Éireann. From 1973 to 1977 he was Irish Foreign Minister and, in the latter year, became Leader of the Fine Gael Party in Opposition. Between June 1981 and March 1987, and again between December 1982 and March 1987, he was Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and, in the second half of 1985, President of the European Council. In 1983 he established the New Ireland Forum as a preliminary to the negotiation of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. He is currently Chancellor of the National University of Ireland which comprises seven universities, and presides over its Senate.*

## The Normalisation of the British–Irish Relationship

Dr Garret FitzGerald

The Irish–British Relationship is usually seen in exclusively politico-cultural terms. This approach ignores the existence of a fundamental economic imbalance between the islands.

In my view the emergence of a normal relationship between Ireland and Britain required the elimination of historic economic inequalities between the two peoples. And, for reasons that I shall explain, this could not have been achieved without a combination of two developments. First, Irish political independence, the objective case for which was not – as it has often been presented – merely politico-cultural, but also economic. And second, participation of both Ireland and Britain in a wider European single market within which Ireland could achieve a more balanced and equal relationship with the neighbouring island, and catch up with it in economic terms. The 50-year period from 1922 to 1972 demonstrated that the first without the second provided an inadequate basis for such a normalisation.

In addition to the elimination of economic inequality, a further crucial factor in this process had to be a settlement, involving both the two states and the two communities in Northern Ireland, of the problem posed by the conflicting identities of these two communities.

Had Irish independence not been preceded by a partition of the island, the first two preconditions would still have applied. However, by intensifying the post-independence Irish–British tensions inherent in an ongoing unbalanced economic relationship, partition seriously exacerbated what was, in fact, a fundamental problem between Ireland and Britain that led eventually to bitter conflict.

The preparation of what seems likely to become a widely accepted political settlement of the Northern Ireland problem before long has been facilitated by common Irish and British membership of the EU. However, a basic problem remains in relation to the domestic economy of Northern Ireland to which a solution has yet to be found: the debilitating character of its continued very high degree of economic dependence on Britain. But that is a separate issue.

## The need for Irish political independence

The validity of my argument concerning the first two preconditions for normalisation of the British–Irish relationship clearly relies on establishing the existence of what can be characterised as an objective Irish need for political independence. And, further, on demonstrating that political independence alone provided an inadequate basis for a normalised Anglo–Irish relationship, unless accompanied by the ending of economic dependence – an outcome which could be secured only through membership of a European single market by both states. Finally, my thesis depends on demonstrating that the achievement of economic parity with neighbouring Britain was necessary for the normalisation of Irish–British relations – a less tangible, and essentially psychological, point.

Before considering the underlying economic issues, it is necessary to refer briefly to what eventually became a hugely complicating factor in the whole Anglo–Irish relationship – the Ulster settlement element of the gradual conquest of Ireland by England, which climaxed in the 17th century. Unlike the contemporaneous conquest of North America, that of Ireland was necessarily incomplete. In North America, a combination of the technological superiority of the conquerors, and the genetic vulnerability of the indigenous population, led to the almost complete disappearance of the latter. But in Ireland the indigenous and settler populations had, historically, shared a common epidemiological experience, having survived similar European infections over preceding millennia. For that reason, and despite a certain technological advantage enjoyed by the conquerors, in the Irish case the whole indigenous Irish population survived conquest. This was true even where, as in the north-east of Ireland, conquest was accompanied by extensive settlement.

In the remainder of the island the indigenous population was not displaced: conquest there took the form of transfer of land ownership, rather than an actual settlement. The problem thereby created in the larger part of the island was thus capable of eventual resolution by land reform – a process accomplished at considerable cost by the British government in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, in the northern province of Ulster, most good land was taken during the course of the 17th century by Scots or English – among them my own maternal ancestors from Scotland, who settled in Down and Antrim.

The Union of 1801 led to a century-long perverse flow of resources from Ireland to Britain of, perhaps, between 2 and 5% of Irish GDP annually. This arose from the fact that until the 20th century, government spending of taxes drawn from the whole of these islands was expended almost exclusively centrally on administration and defence of a growing empire: there were then no transfers to local level for education, health, housing, social welfare or local administration. The disappearance in 1800 of an Irish government, however narrowly based it may have been socially or religiously, thus imposed a debilitating drain on what had always been a much poorer economy than that of Britain.

This problem of perverse financial transfers was resolved during the first decade of the 20th century by a combination of Tory transfers from Britain to foster economic activity with a view to discouraging demand for Home Rule, or worse still from Britain's viewpoint, independence; and the subsequent Liberal government's introduction of old-age pensions and unemployment insurance. As a result by 1911, for the first time in history, England was subsidising rather than exploiting Ireland. (Was the disappearance of this traditional nationalist grievance, which had the potential to diminish support for independence as against Home Rule, perhaps subconsciously a factor in the minds of some of those who organised the 1916 Rising?)

At this distance in time (and in the light of Northern Ireland's recent experience of the negative economic consequences of over-dependence on financial transfers from Britain which, within the past half-century, has reduced that region's share of total Irish output from 37.5 to 23.5% of the island total), we can see that this development made more urgent than ever the achievement of Irish independence. For had the greater part of Ireland not become independent in the 1920s, the emergence of the welfare state in the UK in subsequent decades could have left what is now the Irish state dependent on Britain to the tune of 10–15% of its national income.

That scale of financial dependence could have made a move to political independence by Ireland too costly, in the short term, for the Irish people to risk. And without the power to develop its own economy, as the Irish state eventually proved capable of doing by deploying control of its own taxation and economic policies successfully towards that end, Ireland might never have been able to become a viable and prosperous state with a GNP per head virtually

equal to that of Great Britain. This is an aspect of Irish independence that has been totally ignored by our political historians.

#### Access to markets other than Britain

In an article concerned primarily with the normalisation of the Anglo-Irish relationship, something must be said briefly about the impact on the British-Irish economic relationship of joint Irish and British membership of the European Community, now the European Union. Although this was not understood at the time Ireland became independent, after the 1890s Britain had become the slowest-growing economy in Europe, and this was to continue to be the case until about 1980. This sluggish market was the only European market open to Irish exports for half a century after independence.

Moreover, for the great bulk of Irish agricultural exports – which, even as late as 1972, constituted almost half the country's export trade – Britain was the worst market in the world, because it had been opened to food imports from all over the world since 1846 in a successful attempt to keep down prices, and thus wages, to give Britain an advantage in world trade.

Irish political independence thus failed to change the unfavourable economic situation in which Ireland had found itself as a result of British policies over the centuries, and the Irish economy remained depressed throughout almost all the first post-independence half-century. Only the opening of continental European markets to Irish agricultural and industrial products could boost the Irish economy by offering remunerative prices for farm products, and by providing an opportunity to attract industrial investment by foreign – especially US – firms interested in servicing the continental European market. So, to the political grievance of partition was added the reality of a debilitating relationship of almost total economic dependence on the former colonial power, Britain.

At the end of the 1950s, the hope of breaking out of this situation by joining the newly established European Community (later to become the European Union) – a development that, in the event, was postponed until 1973 – led to a dramatic outward re-orientation of the Irish economy, which enabled Ireland for the first time to achieve a growth rate comparable with that of its continental neighbours. Emigration fell – and was indeed temporarily replaced by net immigration in the

1970s – and for the first time in 120 years the population rose quite rapidly as the young generation, now remaining at home instead of emigrating, married and had children.

Until the mid-1980s this population growth absorbed so much of increased Irish output that it was only in the 1990s that the level of Irish output and incomes actually began to catch up with those of the rest of the EU, raising Irish GNP per head from 60 to 100% of the 15-member EU average within the short period of a single decade. That is the fastest catch-up by any country in European history.

Membership of the EU helped to transform the Irish economy. This in turn had a positive impact on the Irish–British relationship in a number of different ways. First, it gave Irish agriculture, still accounting in 1972 for 18% of GDP, a major, if temporary, boost that helped greatly to offset short-term negative effects of the transition from industrial protection to free trade. This was because British membership of the European Community required it to abandon the more-than-a-century-old ‘cheap food’ policy that had debilitated the Irish economy – the negative impact of which had been intensified by the introduction of direct subsidies to British farmers at the end of the 1940s.

Second, alone among the northern European beneficiaries of the EU Common Agricultural Policy, Ireland also benefited greatly from the EU Structural Funds which were designed to help develop the infrastructure of less-developed parts of the Community. Between 1974 and 1996 transfers to Ireland from these two schemes through the Community Budget added an average of 4% to its GNP annually.

Third, and most important, the opening of the continental European market to Irish industrial products enabled Ireland, for the first time, to attract large-scale foreign industrial investment as a result of a combination of its natural advantages – an English-speaking labour force, political stability and low social costs – and of its policies of low corporation tax, sophisticated industrial promotion and free education to university level. In conjunction with exceptional flows into the Irish labour market, this enabled the Irish economy to expand by 8.5% a year during the seven years from 1993 to 2000.



These developments ended Irish economic dependence on the UK, to which it now sends less than 16% of its exports.

### The impact of the Northern Ireland problem

The partition of the island had, of course, a serious negative impact on the Irish–British relationship.

#### 1921

In the 1921 Treaty that created an independent Irish state, an opt-out by Northern Ireland from this state within a month of its formal establishment was agreed – on the basis that the boundary of Northern Ireland would be determined by a Commission ‘in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions’. The Irish negotiators, ignoring the qualifying sub-clause, seem to have thought this would involve large-scale transfers of parts of Northern Ireland that would make its survival politically impossible. However, in 1925 the South African Chairman of the Commission interpreted the economic and geographic sub-clause as limiting boundary changes to ones that would not interfere with the economic hinterlands of local towns. Moreover his adjudication, while adding very few parts of Northern Ireland to the Irish State, would, quite unexpectedly, have put parts of the Irish State into Northern Ireland. In the event the two governments decided to leave the boundary unchanged.

#### 1925–1969

Following the failure of the Boundary Commission in 1925 to yield the kind of major changes to the North–South frontier that had been hoped for, that and subsequent Irish governments seem to have mentally switched off the Northern Ireland issue, thereafter failing to pursue with sufficient vigour discrimination by Northern Unionist politicians against the Catholic nationalist minority. In the Irish State, partition itself was demoted to a domestic political football at election times – becoming the subject merely of inflammatory irredentist rhetoric.

Right up to the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland in 1969, British governments were inhibited from carrying out their responsibilities there because

of fears of being dragged back into Irish affairs as a result of a Northern Government resigning in protest against British intervention to restrain abuses – as had indeed been threatened at an early stage of the existence of the new Northern Ireland polity. These British fears also no doubt contributed to the extraordinary, and very dangerous, decision to rule out any parliamentary questions in the House of Commons on Northern Ireland affairs.

1932–1972

Let me turn now to the political relationship between Britain and an independent Ireland. During the 1920s Ireland participated in, and then came to lead successfully, a movement to secure unfettered sovereignty for the Dominions of the British Commonwealth – laying the foundations for the later gradual, and somewhat tortuous, emergence of Ireland as a Republic outside the Commonwealth in 1949. But from the moment when *de facto* (although not yet *de jure*) Ireland left the Commonwealth – that is, after the Ottawa Conference of 1932 – until, together with Britain, it joined the EU in 1973, the relationship between the two Irish and British states was both tenuous and often tetchy. During the second world war there were, of course, contacts at ministerial, civil service, army and secret service level, as Ireland, despite nominal neutrality, worked closely with Britain (and, separately, but only at secret service level, with the USA). However in peace time there were a surprisingly limited number of occasions when members of the two governments met each other – usually to negotiate improved trade arrangements, as in 1938, 1948 and 1965 (although it has to be said that the first of these negotiations involved more than trade – the return of the naval bases Britain had retained when the 1921 Anglo-Irish Agreement conceded political independence to Ireland).

But in between these occasional negotiations, there was extraordinarily little contact between the two governments. Such contacts seem to have been confined to informal meetings between Ministers for Agriculture, Health and Labour, respectively, at annual Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization and International Labour Organization conferences, and perhaps also casual contacts between Ministers for Foreign Affairs, meeting at the United Nations in the years after Ireland was admitted to that organisation in 1955.

1939–1945

It has to be said also that Irish wartime neutrality had a long-lasting negative impact on British political and public opinion. This was despite recognition by the British Chiefs of Staff of the advantage of not having to extend the protection of British forces to the neighbouring island, and of avoiding the risk that Irish entry on the side of the Allies would have sparked off unrest, or even a renewed civil war, in Ireland – a development from which only the Germans could have benefited.

Given the close co-operation of the Irish security authorities with their British opposite numbers, including the assistance of one key Irish expert with the breaking of German codes, Irish neutrality at the operational level was seen quite positively by both British and US officials – but not by most of their politicians. And I believe that until the 1990s the shadow of Irish wartime neutrality remained a negative factor in the political, as in the popular, relationship between the two countries.

It was only with the emergence in Britain in the 1990s of two prime ministers, John Major and Tony Blair – members of a generation that had no negative memories of Ireland's wartime neutrality – that a serious psychological barrier on the British side to a normalised relationship between the two states finally disappeared.

1969–1972

The longer-term consequences of persistent British failure to tackle the problem of discrimination in Northern Ireland were the emergence in the late 1960s of the civil rights movement; the subsequent breakdown of order in Northern Ireland; the introduction of the British Army in partial replacement of a discredited and demoralised Royal Ulster Constabulary; and, eventually, the emergence of the Provisional IRA.

In the Republic these events produced total confusion. No-one in politics or the civil service, except a couple of senior civil servants, particularly T. K. Whitaker (who, however, had moved from the post of Secretary to the Department of Finance to the Governorship of the Central Bank six months before the violence

of August 1969), had ever given any serious thought to the Northern Ireland problem. Moreover, unhappily, in 1969 and early 1970 the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, did not command the loyalty or respect of two ambitious ministers who took it on themselves to help split the Northern, extreme nationalist, wing of the IRA away from its left-wing leadership – to the philosophy of which these ministers were ideologically antipathetic – and then backed the breakaway Provisional IRA group with money and attempted arms imports. When this plot was exposed by the Opposition Leader, Liam Cosgrave, the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, was forced to act by sacking the ministers in question. The government and the State survived this alarming crisis.

Several years were to elapse, however, before the political system in the Republic came firmly to grips with the Northern situation, starting to work with the British government towards establishing a power-sharing government in the North, as well as confronting the IRA and its supporters in the USA as they were already doing at home. Meanwhile, although reforms were introduced in the North, and in March 1972 the Unionist government was replaced by direct rule, the handling of the emergency in Northern Ireland by the British army and local security forces left a good deal to be desired, especially in terms of the relationship that developed from 1970 onwards between the British army and the minority community. In this matter the British Ministry of Defence seems to have exercised a *de facto* veto on any restraining action on the army, which might have prevented the dangerous strengthening of the IRA through the resulting increased tolerance of, and in some measure support for, that terrorist body on the part of a growing proportion of the nationalist population. This British army problem was not finally and fully brought under control until the advent of the Labour government in 1997.

### 1973–1981

The years from 1973 to 1981 saw several failed attempts to find a political solution, but the short-lived Joint Government of 1973 was brought down by unionist extremists whose workers' strike was not confronted in time by a nervous British government, apparently unsure of its command of army loyalty. In 1980–81 a new and insensitive Tory government failed to head off, and then handled ineptly, two IRA hunger strikes. These hunger strikes, for the first time, won the IRA sufficient political support amongst the nationalist community to encourage

its political party, Sinn Fein, to adopt an 'armalite and ballot box' policy – putting forward candidates for election while continuing with a campaign of violence that eventually cost the lives of some 3500 people, only a small minority of whom were members of the British security forces.

#### 1981–1985

In early 1983, faced with a rise in electoral support for the IRA in Northern Ireland which might, in time, have encouraged that terrorist organisation to escalate its violence to civil war level, and increasingly unhelpful of any positive political movement by deeply split Unionist politicians, I was moved as Taoiseach to establish a New Ireland Forum. This was designed to seek some common political ground in the Republic as a basis for a negotiation with the British government that desired to modify counter-productive British security policies in Northern Ireland and introduce an element of Irish government involvement within Northern Ireland. A combination of these elements would, I hoped, swing nationalist support back from Sinn Fein/IRA to the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) on a sufficient scale to make the IRA rethink its policy of violence.

Through this process, after 15 years of a strained Anglo–Irish relationship, the common interests of the two governments in securing the peace and stability of a Northern Ireland that would remain within the UK unless and until a majority of its population decided otherwise, led eventually to a meeting of minds by the British and Irish governments in 1985, which produced the Anglo–Irish Agreement.

As foreseen, that Agreement led to a decline in nationalist support for and tolerance of the IRA, and some years later, after much debate within Sinn Fein/IRA, to that organisation's 1993 decision to abandon its stale-mated campaign.

#### 1998 and its aftermath

Five years later, the Belfast Agreement was signed. This Agreement involved fudge and ambiguity around the issue of the decommissioning of IRA arms and explosives, and the ending of all violence by the IRA. Whether because of problems within their own ranks, or because of their doubts about the capacity of a deeply divided Unionist leadership to deliver on the re-establishment of the new power-sharing Executive that had been briefly established under the Belfast

Agreement of 1998, the leaders of Sinn Féin/IRA, Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, have been unwilling to announce unambiguously abandonment of all violence, including criminal activity.

The two governments have both shown exemplary patience with the apparently eternal political wrangling within and between the Northern Ireland political parties, and have been working closely together to restart the stalled political process. But the major Belfast bank raid of December 2004 has set this process back, and a final settlement now depends on an unambiguous abandonment of all criminal activity by the IRA.

How and why the Irish–British relationship has radically improved

Factors relating to Northern Ireland that have aided the normalisation of Irish–British relations include the following:

- By the 1990s, gradual acceptance by the security forces in Northern Ireland, and especially the British army, that while they could contain the IRA threat in Northern Ireland, they could neither defeat the IRA nor prevent attacks by it on targets in Britain. This led to recognition on the part of the British government that a political solution should be pursued if possible.
- Greater involvement in the Northern Ireland problem by the Foreign & Commonwealth and Cabinet Offices, balancing the narrow, and often very short-term and security-oriented, approaches of the Ministry of Defence and of the Northern Ireland Office of the British government.
- Acceptance by Margaret Thatcher in 1985 of the seriousness in its approach to this issue of the Irish government of 1982–87, which I led, together with the subsequent emergence of two British Prime Ministers who, in contrast to their predecessors, had no negative memories of Irish wartime neutrality and were prepared to treat Irish governments as equal partners. (I believe this to have been a development of crucial importance – albeit one largely unrecognised by a generation for whom that war is now history.)

On the Irish side, positive factors include the following:

- In the context of European Union membership, the gradual disappearance of the traditional inferiority complex *vis a vis* Britain which, in the past, had inhibited some Irish governments from negotiating self-confidently with British governments.
- In the face of the violence of the IRA, an evolution of Irish opinion away from traditional irredentist nationalism. This gave Irish governments increased room for manoeuvre in seeking a Northern Ireland settlement, so that in 1993 even an Irish Prime Minister of the more nationalist Fianna Fail party felt able explicitly to abandon the traditional Irish claim on the territory of Northern Ireland which had long since been dropped by the other two main parties.
- Early realistic recognition by Irish governments of the seriousness of the IRA decision of 1993, arising from John Hume's initiatives, to seek a resolution of the problem on a basis that would involve *de facto*, if not explicitly *de jure*, acceptance of the principle that Irish reunification could take place only with the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland.

More generally, of great importance was the fact that, while during the 1970s and 1980s there had been many tensions between the two governments on issues relating to the handling of security in Northern Ireland, British ministers and officials eventually came to realise and accept that Irish concerns were motivated neither by irredentism nor Anglophobia, nor by atavistic support for Northern nationalism. Instead they came to understand that, in the face of the appalling tragedy of Northern Ireland violence, and the risks this posed to the Irish state itself, Irish governments had reformulated their position in terms of a dual commitment: first, to rectifying the many justified grievances of the Northern minority; and second, to protecting the security of the island of Ireland, which was threatened by the growing strength of the IRA, especially in the period after the hunger strikes.

The key objective of Irish policy could thus be seen by British governments to have become the achievement of peace and stability in a Northern Ireland that

would remain within the United Kingdom until such time as a majority of its population expressed a wish to unite with the rest of the island.

In the years from 1993 onwards, the two governments sought to build on these new, positive factors by addressing together the IRA's change of stance on violence. Inevitably there were times when their different perspectives on the precise approach to be taken to unionist and nationalist protagonists gave rise to temporary tensions. But as time went on, increased mutual understanding, respect, and trust gradually developed between the two governments, to the point where the frequency and intimacy of communications between them has come to surpass, right up to Prime Minister level, anything previously seen in bilateral relations between European states.

It should be said that it is unlikely that this outcome could have been secured had not the members of successive Irish and British governments come to know and work closely with each other in the context of European Ministerial Councils. Even though on many specific EU issues Irish and British governments have found themselves on opposite sides, the positive impact of the involvement of the two states in the European Union system upon the quality of Anglo-Irish intergovernmental relationships at the personal level must not be underestimated.

Behind all this lies a huge paradox that has yet to be recognised by public opinion in either country. The unique, and seminal, achievement of the IRA has been to bring Ireland and Britain, and particularly their governments, closer together than had ever seemed possible in the past – in a common search for a solution that would end IRA and reactive Loyalist violence, and give peace and stability to Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom until and unless its people decide otherwise. Northern Ireland, which throughout the entire history of Irish independence had bedevilled the relationship between the two neighbouring states, thus became in the end the catalyst for a positive transformation of the Irish–British relationship – history sometimes develops very surprising turns and twists.



## Piarras Mac Éinrí

*Piarras Mac Éinrí is Director of the Irish Centre for Migration Studies (ICMS), at University College Cork, which over the years has done invaluable research on migration and asylum issues for academic, government, EU, non-governmental (NGO) and other organisations. He designed the ICMS website (<http://migration.ucc.ie>) – the premier source of information on Irish migration issues on the web (approximately 33,000 visitors a year), widely used by academics, NGOs, policy officials and the general public. Mac Éinrí served in the Irish Foreign Service from 1976–87, to return to academe in 1987. Since then he has led many research projects, designed training programmes, taught courses and lectured within and outside University College Cork on antiracism, interculturalism, immigration and related issues.*

## Britain and Ireland – Lives Entwined

### Piaras Mac Éinrí

Like many Irish people of a certain age, I grew up in a strongly republican household. To my parents' generation, independence was hard-won and recent. They, and their parents before them, had been involved in different ways in the project of nation building – they remained deeply committed to and intensely proud of it.

Independence may have been hard-won but it was not simple and involved a certain amount of manipulation of our memories myths and narratives of the past. A black-and-white view of Britishness and Irishness was part of the new official Ireland's self-image; the struggle for freedom became the central myth of nationhood. As a boy of almost 12 years of age my proudest moment in 1966, the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising against British Rule, was to read out, in Irish (although it had, of course, been written in English), the proclamation of the Republic, the founding text of the State, over a tinny public address system to the massed crowds of our local parish.

Some weeks earlier, on 8 March 1966, the IRA had blown up Nelson's Pillar, one of the iconic representations of British rule in Ireland, and the best-known public monument in Dublin's main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street. Although our family was politically mainstream, I remember our reaction was one of a certain exultation – another blow against the 'old enemy'. As a West of Ireland family, which formed part of an internal diaspora in a fast-changing, rough and ready capital city of unfinished suburbs, our identification with the capital was partial in any case. Georgian Dublin was 'theirs', not ours.

This Manichean division extended to many aspects of our lives and identities, including accent and religion. *The Irish Times's* 2003 obituary for broadcaster and novelist Brian Cleeve recorded that he was dropped as a presenter on national television in 1966, the year of the aforementioned commemoration of the Rising, because 'his "Ascendancy" accent was considered unsuitable for broadcasting'. In those days we would have called it, disparagingly, a 'west Brit' accent. Similarly, the Remembrance Garden in Dublin for those Irish who fought in the First World War was for decades allowed to fall into a state of neglect. On

the other hand, there were many who despised the young and unformed new State. Their newspaper of choice was *The Irish Times*, which is nowadays, ironically, often seen as the voice of establishment Ireland, a constituency sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'Dublin 4', the postal code of an affluent suburb.

As a child I was not a total stranger to Northern Ireland/the Six Counties, or Occupied Ireland – my father's preferred description. I was brought north to marvel at red letter boxes, police in strange dark-green uniforms and the ubiquitous Union Jacks flying from buildings and lamp posts. It was extraordinary to me that our own flag was banned by law from being flown there, but my interest was also focused on Opal Fruits, a kind of sweet which could not then be bought in the south, and on the trolleybuses of Belfast, now long gone. Beyond that, it was always obvious when one had crossed the Border better roads and tidier gardens than were to be seen in the shambolic South.

Over time, my views became a little more nuanced. For one thing, my father, irony of ironies, worked for the British Ministry of Defence. Leopardstown Park Hospital, in south Dublin, was a British military hospital for First World War veterans from such regiments as the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. I have a clear memory of visiting, as a young child, old men in their hospital beds, people for whom life had stood still since 1916 and 1917. Invalided and bedridden since then, some of them had little concept of the modern state outside their window. My father and mother had a few friends with strange English names like Batts and Sienkowitz, except that later I found out that Sienkowitz wasn't exactly an English name either.

I have no memory of my parents ever having attempted to inculcate any kind of personal animosity towards the British in us. On the contrary, differences were invariably seen as merely political and it would have been unconscionably rude to express any kind of personal hostility to someone on such grounds. Yet, in retrospect, my abiding impression is that of an unconfident state and people, for whom progress, modernity, Britishness, sex, scandal, atheism and immorality were rolled up in one. It was out there, waiting to corrupt us, but we would remain proud, isolated, unsullied and different. Stereotypes and generalisations about the British abounded in Ireland; as a child I thought them strange and alien. The finer points of English, Scottish and Welsh identities were lost on us, even if we did watch Scottish musician Andy Stewart's *White Heather Club* avidly

on television, capturing the Ulster Television signal from the North on high antennae in the Dublin foothills.

It gradually came home to me that the divide was not so neat. Perhaps this is best illustrated, in my own case, by my grandfather's story. Sergeant Eddie Henry, from Kilmovee, Co. Mayo, served in the Royal Irish Constabulary or RIC, a police force that was later vilified by some republicans and nationalists as pro-British, although it also contained a fair number of rural Irish recruits for whom a life in policing was a respectable and honest career. I am one of the relatively few people, compared to the legions who used to assert it, who can say with confidence that my grandfather spent Easter Week 1916 in the General Post Office with Connolly, Pearse and their forces. That said, the factors that led to his presence were rather complex. He was wearing a British uniform, as he was at the time on loan to the Dublin Fusiliers to teach them marksmanship. His precise motives are still something of a family mystery, although we know that he roomed with Harry Boland, militant nationalist and later government minister, and may have been driven by solidarity or curiosity to become involved (another version simply says that Boland feared for his friend as the rebellion broke out and invited him into the GPO for his own protection). In the GPO, as a trained medical orderly, he assisted the grievously wounded Scottish-born socialist leader James Connolly, who was later executed while tied to a chair. *The Freeman's Journal* records that my grandfather and a few others who had been detained by the insurgents as 'prisoners of war' were released towards the end of the week. His career in the RIC continued after the Rising, but he also worked for Michael Collins, passing information about impending Black and Tan raids to the IRA. His house, as an RIC sergeant's house, was never raided, making it an excellent safe house and location for IRA arms. My grandmother never spoke of these times in her long life.

So far, so usual – ordinary people, extraordinary lives. But why did this part-loyal, part-rebel policeman (himself the son of a father who had once been charged with Fenianism) baptise my father, born a few years later, with the rather royalist names George Edward, while bringing him up as a nationalist? I am only partly convinced by my parents' explanation that George was a family name on the Butler side (his mother's) and also reflected a long-standing admiration for George Washington. Perhaps it was also symptomatic of a deeper mystery.

Postcolonial nationalism is a strange phenomenon. Brought up to despise everything British (as Jonathan Swift put it two centuries earlier, 'burn everything English except their coal'), we were also imbued with a sneaking suspicion that British was somehow better. In the bleak 1950s Irish authors had little chance of success unless they had a British publisher to back them, while many households switched over to the BBC when Radio Éireann's limited service closed in the mid-morning and mid-afternoon. The best steel was from Sheffield, the best cars were British-made and the best television (in spite of the 'immoral' programmes that were starting to be broadcast by BBC2 in the 1960s) was also British. In fact, in the 1960s, there were campaigns all over the country for access to 'multichannel', that is, British television.

With the advent of the Troubles in 1968, matters became more complicated. After Bloody Sunday in 1972 (when 13 nationalists were killed by the British Army), I was one of the 100,000 protesters who marched on the British Embassy. Some of the crowd torched it with petrol bombs, the first public burning in living memory of an embassy in western Europe. During that period I was also in Newry, at a mass protest, listening as a British Army helicopter droned overhead and a voice in a plummy accent warned us through a loudspeaker that we were participating in an illegal demonstration and that consequently we were 'all under arrest'. The crowd cheered. At subsequent civil rights and protest marches I would occasionally meet well-intentioned British Army officers and soldiers; one fished a tattered copy of *The Price of My Soul*, a ghost-written account of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey's political life, out of his pocket, and told me that he felt he now 'understood a little of the Irish situation'. He, of course, was above it and outside it. I am sure that in my own superior way I snorted to myself, but silently. Shi'a Muslims call this *taqiye*, if your adversary's position is one of overwhelming strength, it is acceptable to dissemble. All subaltern peoples practise it, just as they tend to adopt guerrilla fighting tactics such as those of the 17th century Irish, who chose not to face an overwhelmingly technically superior English army in the field but were then reviled for not 'playing fair'. Nowadays such tactics are usually labelled terrorism by those who rule the world, and while I would not deny that the term is often a valid descriptor, it is rarely applied to the violent excesses of the mighty.

In the early 1970s I worked for a time in London, my first and rather brutal encounter with the heart of former Empire. Idi Amin had just expelled the

Ugandan Asian community, and at the time it seemed to me that most of them were in the same food factory where I was working, in Hammersmith. I had no previous direct experience of racism and racial difference (apart from our own unstated and inchoate anti-Britishness) and it was a shock to find a racial hierarchy in the factory, with English and Welsh on top, the Irish in the middle and an oppressed category of Black and minority individuals, native-born and immigrant, at the bottom. My memories now are of lectures from patronising if well meaning, white-coated staff, standing on tables and literally talking down to us about personal hygiene. I remember cold, early morning bus stops where all those waiting, like myself, were foreigners. As in global cities everywhere, there is an iterative daily geography, but also a timetable, of difference. I recall the sheer alienation of living for the first time in a megalopolis, the occasional and shocking experience of explicit racial hostility and a strange quality of Englishness that seemed to me to be both extraordinarily tolerant and apparently callous. But I remember, too, the shabby but friendly solidarity of a London that was down on its luck, perhaps, but fun, and the egalitarianism of Citizens Advice Bureaux, which gave impartial help to all comers. It was all a huge contrast to an Ireland where everyone seemed to know everyone else, where welfare benefits were virtually a state secret and were in any event regarded by the middle classes as little more than a sop to the indigent. Nearly two decades later at the end of the 1980s, it was a shock to return to a post-Thatcher London shiny with new buildings in steel and glass and notable for the numbers of homeless and poor searching the city's rubbish bins for sustenance. It was claimed that there was no longer such a thing as society, but it had existed once.

I got to know a little more about English life when close friends of mine settled in a small English town outside London. They christened their two neighbours 'Pete the car' and 'Pete the house', so called for their obsessive weekend car washing and DIY dedication. To me, this was part of a series of peculiarly English rituals such as winemaking and a concern with self-sufficiency. Personally, I prefer to leave winemaking to the professionals. But I do empathise with the resilience and self-reliance of a generation of many English people, tending their own allotments and holding their own against all comers. Unfortunately this spirit of independence can also deteriorate into self-caricature; the UK Independence Party's farrago of Euro-scepticism is as unattractive as it is xenophobic.

In 1976 I joined the Irish Foreign Service – the Department of Foreign Affairs. Looking back now, my memory of my first posting to Brussels in 1978 is that I expected to find my British counterparts to be somehow more plausible, smoother, and smarter than I was. I am not proud of this, but I believe that many of us in those days subliminally thought something similar. It was a shock, then, to find that we were as good as anyone else and better than some, that our natural counterparts were as likely to be Danish or Dutch as British and that the British had their own difficulties in adjusting to the business of being a middle-sized, post-Empire state off the north-west coast of Europe.

For all our newfound and sometimes self-congratulatory Europeaness, some things did not change. I remember the civil servant in another government department in Dublin, less exposed at the time to the realities of Europe, whose reaction to my telephone call about an upcoming draft EU directive was 'I'll get back to you – I'll just phone my opposite number in London'. I can also recall being told by a senior British official in Brussels, in advance of a new arrival, that 'you'll like our new chap – he's RC, you know'. In retrospect (speaking as an agnostic) I found his attitudes towards the Irish and Catholicism, theirs and ours, both quaint and amusing. In spite of being 'RC', Sir Michael Butler went on to a brilliant career at the highest levels of the British system. He was also possessed of that peculiarly British talent for self-deprecation. As envoy to Iceland during the earlier British-Icelandic Cod Wars, legend had it that he, not a tall man, had climbed on a chair during a visit to the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs to make a protest at the 'highest level'.

At that time, France, for me and many other Irish people, especially in the urban middle classes, represented a way out of the British/Irish Manichean duality. It was as if our Francophilia enabled us to transcend geography; the Irish Ferries ship from Ireland to France became a metaphor. It was initially reassuring, on being asked in France '*est-ce que vous êtes britannique?*' to note the obvious and positive change of tone when the reply was '*non, irlandais*'. It took a while before I realised that there were sometimes darker undertones to this, such as an atavistic and childish French anti-Britishness. Mersel-Kebir notwithstanding, the British contribution to the liberation of France and the defeat of Nazism was and remains their finest hour. Worse, there was in some French right-wing quarters a positively racist and sectarian conviction about Ireland, which saw

the country and its people as the last bastion of a vanishing white, Catholic Europe. Later, this French connection was exploited in a particularly tendentious way by disgraced Irish political leader Charles Haughey, an individual who corrupted Irish politics for a generation and who cast his style of leadership in the manner of Napoleon.

That said, my own exposure to French identity, language, politics and cultures, including the partly francophone cultures of Belgium and Lebanon, has marked me deeply. I found republicanism French style to be an attractive ideology for all its sometimes modern secular intolerance. I appreciated the concept of a public domain that belonged to all, compared with a British acceptance of privilege and hierarchy, and Irish cronyism and clientelism. To this day I feel as much of a French republican as an Irish nationalist, having no time for the atavistic ethnicity of traditional nationalisms, Irish or English (as distinct nowadays from 'British', a genuinely more inclusive term, to judge by the reaction of many Black and Muslim people who can live with 'British' but feel excluded as 'English').

Beirut in the early 1980s brought me different experiences. Some of these had a certain piquancy, such as the occasion when I hosted an EU co-ordination meeting during an Irish Presidency and received my British counterpart, senior to me and older, who arrived surrounded by heavily armed bodyguards, all of whom had served their time in Northern Ireland and some of whom I would not like to have met on a dark night. The Lebanese were also a little bemused at the spectacle of an Irish Ambassador (my immediate superior) who faithfully attended Anglican services on Sundays, whereas his British counterpart was a regular attendee at the Roman Catholic church on Rue Hamra. One of my most interesting encounters was with a fellow countryman, George Simms, an elderly man who had served in the British Army and the British merchant marine for most of his life. He proudly informed me that he was a 'North Kerry Protestant Unionist'. As a young soldier invalided home in the Royal Munster Fusiliers during the First World War, he had been a member of a military guard party assembled in case of subversion or revolt when Roger Casement (former British Consul and dedicated human rights activist turned Irish nationalist) was arrested on Banna Strand, having come ashore from a German U-boat, and been detained by the RIC in Tralee Barracks. Simms had a photographic memory of those present and could name them all. Yet like many elderly people with a fading grasp of reality



he could not easily come to terms with the present day. I once brought an Irish Army UN colleague to meet him. As military men will, they got on like a house on fire, but he seemed quite unable to grasp what uniform this man wore or what army and nation he served. He wasn't very sure who I was either.

All of the above notwithstanding, Britishness remained something of a mystery to me, permeated by subtleties of class, accent, mystique and ritual; Land of Hope and Glory on the last night of the Proms holds no appeal. A friend's experience as a distinguished academic guest at a Cambridge college dinner seemed to sum it up: having declined a glass of after-dinner port, she was consternated to find that the other diners felt constrained to decline in turn. How was one supposed to know? An English friend who married into an Irish and Irish-speaking family (he learned to speak Irish with an impeccable Home Counties accent) remarked, after a lively and typically argumentative Dublin dinner party, that 'in England, you get to finish your sentence before another person speaks'.

Another question that I had difficulty in understanding is the role of the military in British culture. For all of our own respect for our UN peacekeeping role and our pride in our Army, I was struck by a recent observation of Olivia O'Leary, a journalist who knows Ireland and Britain well and has broadcast in both countries, that the British relationship with its Army is not unlike that which Catholic Irish people used to have with their Church: it is seen as central, secretive and almost beyond criticism. But I readily concede that, compared with the excesses and sheer ignorance of US forces in Iraq, the British in Basra and other places have shown at least some understanding of the ambiguous role in which they have been cast.

As Ireland itself began to change and old moulds were broken, I only gradually realised that my own views of Britishness were not the whole story, even as seen from a narrowly Irish perspective. There were many Britains and many kinds of Britishness and my own identity and culture was far more influenced by them than I had ever realised or admitted. It was time to think again.

For one thing, there was the matter of class and diaspora. The nationalism of the middle classes who controlled Irish society after independence had little enough to offer the poor and the marginalised. Some of the smug moralists who

were such strong supporters of Irish independence were also glad to see the back of these same poor and unemployed who emigrated, if only because, had they stayed, it would have posed a potentially revolutionary situation.<sup>1</sup> In reality those with few prospects left for the neighbouring island in a constant flood for most of the 20th century. The reception they got may not have always been the warmest, but as one elderly returned migrant put it to me in Connemara, '*marach f...ing Sasana, ní bhéadh f...ing tada a'aini*' ('if it wasn't for f...ing England we'd have f...ing nothing'). Such migrants did not have the luxury of unalloyed nationalist politics, or at least they were aware of the hypocrisies and doublethink that could arise. The complexity of national and linguistic identity was brought home to me when we became regular visitors to the Irish-speaking heartland of South Connemara in the late 1980s. We met children who spoke perfect Connemara Irish and broad Cockney English, and adults who sang *sean-nós*<sup>2</sup> and read English tabloids. This hybridity is, of course, mirrored in turn by generations of Irish in Britain, yet unlike Irish-Americans, they do not even seem to have a name.

Over time, I found other congenial aspects to British culture. In particular, I admired the very British tradition of a 'loyal opposition', compared with our own shiftily false consensus and sometimes windy words. Although I come from the nationalist tradition and have some grasp of the political discourse of Gerry Adams, I have no difficulty in understanding why some find his phrases so perversely flexible. By contrast with Ireland, there seems to be a genuine commitment in Britain to the notion of an ethical opposition, even and perhaps especially within the same party. The form this may take varies, from an extraordinary tolerance for eccentricity and dissent, to a resolute defence of independent media voices such as that of the BBC, to the maverick and courageous stance of former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook over the Iraq crisis. The debate on Iraq in the British Parliament, whichever side one took, was principled and passionate. However, I do not want to idealise this aspect of British culture. While Ireland featured a Taoiseach (Prime Minister) who managed to be for and against the invasion of Iraq at the same time – a not untypical achievement for a member of that particular party – British people protested massively in the streets against the war but a messianic and obsessional Prime Minister still forced the country to take part. Yet that same Prime Minister, whose mother was born in Donegal and who spent his young summers there for many years, persevered for longer and harder than any previous British politician to

bring about a new positive phase in relations between Britain and Ireland. It must also be said that the attitude of mainstream Irish politicians of all parties was also principled and constructive.

One of the more attractive forms that oppositionalism can take is the British capability, in spite of a sometimes ossified and moribund tradition, to reinvent itself. Ethnicity is a case in point. It seems to me that the UK has made the transition from the 1960s 'tolerance' of difference, to quote Roy Jenkins' famous definition of that time,<sup>3</sup> to a more radical inclusion. Embodied in a new multi-stranded notion of ethnicity, this has changed the very concept of Britishness, bringing it well beyond John Major's tepid world of warm beer and cricket. There remain, undoubtedly, hierarchies of power and difference in British society. Moreover such change has been much contested from Enoch Powell to the present-day debates about multiculturalism and social cohesion and, in particular, about the place of the State. But Britain today has been transformed by the wonderful and exuberant injection of diversity and otherness that it received from the *Windrush* onwards, as well as the generations of Irish, Jews and other Europeans who came for centuries before that.

Not the least of the changes that has infected British life and identity, is that which has affected the British Council. The British Council of old is that of Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy*; a world, it seemed to me (probably quite unfairly), of lesser gentry, semi-failed intellectuals, artists and academics, floating in a sea of class, privilege, whimsy and alcohol. Today's British Council is engaged with governance as well as literature and culture and its staff and ethos reflect a new, more open Britain, one that is multi-ethnic and varied. I am sure that this was not achieved without stress and that divisions still remain, but the process at least indicates that something new is happening. This healthy and self-deprecating, even subversive, selfquestioning, is exemplified by Counterpoint, the British Council's own internal think tank, whose main purpose would appear to be to scrutinise the British Council's own mission, often from new and possibly eccentric viewpoints.

As nations our histories and even identities have always been entwined, making for complex, hybrid patterns. What has changed in the recent past, perhaps, is a greater openness to admitting these facts, after the difficult and sensitive years of early independence and the trauma of the Troubles. This was very

evident in the results of a recent survey commissioned by the British Embassy and the British Council of Irish views of Britain and British people, *Through Irish Eyes*, which revealed a surprisingly positive overall picture (it would be fair to say that the survey was not fully reflective of all strands of Irish social opinion). Yet the rawness is still not very far away either, at least for my generation. I was struck by the reaction in Ireland last year to the death in action of Private Ian Malone, a Dubliner in the Royal Irish Regiment, a British Army unit, in Basra. The facts were widely reported in the Irish media and revisionist propagandists of the 'let's rejoin the Commonwealth' variety made much of his having 'died to make the world a safer place'. In fact, as had been made clear in a fascinating Irish television documentary about Irish soldiers in the British Army, he was clearly a likeable young man who had joined the British Army from a sense of adventure and might equally have joined the Irish one if they had been recruiting at the time. And yet . . . some part of me still has a difficulty with Irish soldiers in British uniforms, although I know that historically the Irish have frequently been over-represented in Britain's armed forces and have joined many other armies as circumstances dictated. Apart from the fact that my own grandfather wore a British uniform, if briefly, I cannot ignore, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, the contribution made by all those who wore British uniforms, and their allies of other countries, to the liberation of Europe. There is nothing tidy about past or present.

It is not just Irish cultural gatekeepers (remember Brian Cleeve's 'Ascendancy' accent) who policed a certain rigid idea of culture and acceptable identity in Ireland. 'Regional' accents, especially Celtic ones, were also once rare in the British media. Today this has changed; only consider such Irish examples as Frank Delaney, Terry Wogan, Graham Norton, Gillian Ní Cheallaigh, Fergal Keane, Henry Kelly and many others. In turn English accents, and not just Irish 'Ascendancy' ones, are no longer rare in Ireland. It would be folly to deny that prejudice and discrimination have occurred in both jurisdictions towards the people of the other, but I would like to think that this does embody a new level of mutual respect and appreciation.

Indeed, if the support in Britain for Irish soccer performances and Eurovision entries is anything to go by, the feeling is stronger on the British side; Irish pub supporters of the same events often seem to operate on the ABB (anyone but Britain) principle. As for BBC2 and its allegedly 'immoral' programmes of the

1960s, these days one can see much raunchier material on Ireland's TG4 Irish-language channel, which has a Friday night film spot dedicated to foreign films (usually French), generally subtitled in English and thus popular with Ireland's new migrants from a variety of countries.

Our differences have not disappeared; sometimes small social rituals reveal most. Some years ago an English colleague here in Cork was startled when, on the death of a parent, a number of us proposed to go over for the funeral. Funerals in England, it seems, are occasions of private family grief, although this may vary in different ethnic communities and in Scotland and Wales. In Ireland, by contrast, they are large-scale public events, expressions of communal grief and occasions that no aspirant politician can afford to miss.

Samuel Beckett is famously said to have replied, on being asked if he was English, 'au contraire'. Too often in the past, the British were the 'not' of our identity; being Irish was sometimes collapsed to a mere 'not Britishness'. They were the Outside to our Inside, a reductionist and truncated view of identity that was probably commoner on this side of the Irish Sea than the other one. Confident nations do not need to assert their identity at the expense of others and especially at the expense of the other within themselves. There is more than a little British in the Irish and something of the Irish in the British as well.

Yet nationhood is always in process as well. Britain has not figured out how to reconcile itself to a European future rather than a role as world power. Change in Ireland in recent years has been so rapid that a new sense of anomie and loss of identity threatens to set in. Atavism is never far away, as shown in the casual racism which has become regrettably common in Ireland and in the frequent excesses of the British tabloid press.

I respect and admire many aspects of British life and culture, as often as not for those things that make us different rather than the ways in which we resemble one another. I have no particular wish to rejoin the Commonwealth or to return to a relationship of unequal tutelage with an imperial power. Moreover, we still have unfinished business on this island. But with our increasingly intertwined futures in Europe, even if we see these futures in differently nuanced ways, and our attempts to work towards more inclusive and diverse arrangements for our increasingly mixed societies, we have much to learn from each other.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> There is a legendary story concerning a meeting between veteran socialist and populist Peadar O'Donnell and Eamon de Valera. To de Valera's remonstrance that, under a socialist people's republic, millions would still have emigrated from Ireland, O'Donnell is supposed to have replied: 'Ah yes, Dev, but they wouldn't have been the same people'.
- <sup>2</sup> A formal, elaborate style of unaccompanied singing still practised in the Irish language.
- <sup>3</sup> As British Home Secretary in the mid-1960s, Jenkins said that integration should be seen as 'not a flattening process of assimilation, but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.

## Patricia Palmer

*Patricia Palmer grew up in Kerry and studied English among other things in University College Cork and Oxford. She taught for several years in the University of Limerick before moving to the Department of English and Related Literatures in the University of York in 2000. Her book, Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland was published by Cambridge University Press in 2001.*

## Cross-Talk and Mermaid-Speak Patricia Palmer

### I

One late-September night, I was having a glass of wine with a friend in Galway. From her balcony, we were watching the harvest moon turn the bay silvery blue; Aran Mór basked just out of sight, in the mind's eye. I'd sent off the manuscript of my book, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland*<sup>1</sup>, that morning and now the conversation swung back and forth between those two potent symbols, the Celtic-Tiger, waterfront apartment (we never use the word 'flat' any more; it reminds us of thatched cottages and bedsits in Kilburn High Road) and Synge's Aran Islands finally slipping out of national consciousness. Eventually, my friend turned to me, her smile teasing in the moonlight: 'So, is that what your book is about? All research is autobiographical, didn't you know that?' I didn't know that, or didn't until then.

### II

Two days later, I drove eastwards across Ireland, against the drift of Joyce's great songline that tracks the snow's westward journey at the end of *The Dead* past 'the dark mutinous Shannon waves', past the Bog of Allen, the treeless hills and the dark central plain. I was leaving Ireland to take up a teaching post in the University of York. That longer journey would throw my friend's observation into even sharper relief. *Language and Conquest*<sup>2</sup> is, essentially, a story of linguistic colonisation. Its focus is the clash of languages set in motion by the Elizabethan (re)conquest of Ireland and the plantations associated with it. But, strangely, I hadn't set out to write a historical work. I was addressing – or so I imagined – an entirely contemporary predicament. The work was rooted in a desire to understand Irish people's ambivalent relationship with English, an ambivalence that, I believe, runs deep in the national psyche. Always dazzled by words (and all my most fluent words were English), I felt, nonetheless, at a remove from English. Its words had an oddly hand-me-down feel and they didn't always fit. Breathily aspirants softened the edges of English words in my mouth; the phonetics of the Irish language (on which Irish speakers of English draw, even if they know no Irish) had no place for the lisping *ceceo* of the English /th/; and the rise-and-



fall inflections of south Munster carried my words far away from the norms of my English cousins. Every summer, they came 'home' for the holidays from their smart London schools, speaking – as all their Irish aunts and uncles declared in admiration – 'beautifully'. No wonder they felt the need to teach us how to pronounce 'theatre' *properly* – 'For Heaven's sake: it's not 'teatre' – look, just put your tongue where I'm putting mine'. They sought to save us from drinking 'minerals' and putting Tings<sup>2</sup> in 'presses', and struggled to stop us from 'giving out stink' and calling them 'eejits' and 'looderamauns'. After all, they pointed out (unanswerably, we had to concede), '*we* are the ones that speak proper English'.

But it wasn't simply a question of accent. (Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians might all have similar stories to tell.) We lived in a landscape of strange and obdurate names. My grandmother came from Cumeenduassig, my grandfather from Tureenafersh. Years later, I would be bewitched by the transparency of English placenames: Juniper Hill, Milton-under-Wychwood, Woodstock; you knew, at one level at least, where you were. But to grow up in Kerry was to be at play in a landscape where names guarded their secrets closely. We swam in Coumeenoolle, climbed Beenkeragh and sailed out to Ilauntannig from Scraggane Pier in the Maharees. In one sense, these places meant everything. But in another, they drew a veil over our world, locating us in a landscape of sound effects rather than sense. Of course, if we picked away at the Ordinance Surveyors' haphazard 19th century anglicisations and reconstructed the original Irish name, we could lift the veil for a moment. My grandmother would come not from mesmeric but meaningless 'Cumeenduassig', but from *Coimín dú easaigh*, 'the dark little coomb of the waterfalls'.

The poet John Montague speaks of a similar disorientation growing up in South Tyrone: 'The whole landscape a manuscript / we had lost the skill to read'<sup>3</sup>. What is lost when a placename becomes detached from meaning, and becomes just a sound, is the connection between a place and its history: space is set adrift from time. Irish history and mythology are written onto the face of Ireland to a degree that is unusual elsewhere in Europe. (You have to read the journals of Captain Vancouver, splattering the names of midshipmen and misadventures – Puget Sound, Deception Pass – all over the intimately named haunts of the Salish and Kwakiutl people on the Canadian Pacific to get a similar sense of place sacralised through naming – and a similar sense of loss.) Slieve Mish, which I

look out on as I write, is not only a mist-covered hill, but a repository of memory. It was there, the 9th-century *Book of Invasions* tells us, that the Milesian invaders met Banba, a queen of the Tuatha De Danann, and her druids. And when the Milesians braved the magic mist of her tribe and wrested the land of Ireland from them, it was in that epic battle that Mis, a Milesian princess, fell, on the bare mountainside that still bears her name. To live in a landscape where rich, time-layered meanings swim in and out of view, at the mercy of placenames that block access and sound like melodic nonsense words, is to be made acutely aware of language. You learn that English alone cannot fully explain your world; and you are left haunted by the sense of a missing language.

For those growing up now, the predicament must feel very different. As I drove across Ireland towards the Irish Sea and York, I was struck by how very new the country I was leaving looked. 'A time lag', Elizabeth Bowen wrote in 1947, 'separates Ireland from England more effectively than any sea.'<sup>4</sup> It still does, but the valence of the lag has shifted: to go to England now can seem like travelling not forward but back in time. Still-medieval York feels, at its most vibrant, like 1950s England. The pulse slows; the Hot-Pot Café on the street I was moving into would serve weak tea with the milk already in. The Ireland I was leaving looked as though a second Columbus had discovered it about 20 years previously and intense colonisation, *à la vingt-et-unième-siècle*, was hitting its stride. One-third of the housing stock of the Republic was built in the past 15 years: this may be an ancient landscape, but you'd be forgiven for mistaking it for an island-wide building site. Ireland has left Cumeenduassig far behind. The giant reflectorised billboards for 'Chelmsford Manor Drive' and 'Tudor Heights' that I was driving past are markers of displacement. The new names offer the illusion of sense (we know what the words mean), but their aspirational geography (Home Counties-sur-Portlaoise) maps out the rootlessness of our new commuter-belt diaspora.

As the architectural *bricolage* of Concrete-Tiger Ireland suggests – neocolonial porticos, mock-Georgian frontages, faux-Victorian gateposts – the disorientation that a language change brings affects time as well as place. The past is half-lost in translation and must be reinvented. My grandfather used to recall playing on summer evenings while his own father sat on a mossy outcrop of rocks behind their farm, talking to an elderly neighbour in a language my grandfather – a boy in 1900 – did not understand. (He learnt his own – bookish – Irish only in 1923,

in Caherdaniel, when the fledgling state sent its teachers back to summer school to learn the new First Language). The voices of the men on the rock, rising and falling with the rhythms of a dying language, and the puzzlement of a small boy hearing their bursts of inexplicable laughter, capture the moment when *Túirín na fuirste*, 'the turret of the harrowing', turns into the sonorous blank of 'Tureenafersh'. A screen comes down, cutting the present off from the past. This rupture, this rend in the narrative, is the untold – perhaps untellable – story of 19th century Ireland. What was happening in my grand-father's Ivreagh – 90 per cent Irish-speaking on the eve of the Famine (and the Famine is, of course, central to this story and its silences); 70 per cent English-speaking by 1926, and soon after almost exclusively so – was repeated all over Ireland.

But just how translatable is a culture? Can its chipped and battered Lares and Penates set up shop in another language? We can translate everything, we are told, except the poetry. 'It's good that everything's gone, except their language, / which is everything', says Derek Walcott, with rich ambivalence, in his meditation on English colonisation in the Caribbean and in his own native Saint Lucia<sup>5</sup>. Everything and nothing: herein lies the paradox of translation; it can carry over everything – except the essence. We know that part of what gets lost, especially for an oral culture (as Irish largely was by the 19th century), is an irreplaceable cache of stories, poems, oral history and proverbial wisdom. '*Mairean lorg an phinn, ach ní mhaireann an beál a chari*: the trace of the pen endures, but not the mouth that sang. But, most irreparably, a language itself is lost. The way a language conjugates time through its tense system, the patterns of metaphor and word association it encourages, the way it adjudicates between concrete and abstract expression, the particular cast it gives to beauty and loneliness and anger – all these are unique. '*Mo bhrón ar an bhfarrage! Is í atá mór*: nothing can replicate the exact curlew-call of loneliness in those words. I still remember the cold shiver of awe I felt in an airy, wainscoted Leaving-Cert. classroom when I realised that no other language could deliver precisely the arrogant, steely heartbreak of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's closing lines:

Stadfadsa feasta 's is gar dom éag gan mhoill,  
 Ó treascradh dragain Leamhain, Léin is Laoi,  
 Rachadsa a haithle searc na laoch don chill  
 Na flatha fá raibh mo shean roimh éag do Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Its untranslatability is apposite: it speaks of the death of a culture. Ó Rathaille had lived to see the Gaelic world that he served collapse and fall silent. In 1726, on his deathbed, he vows to follow to the grave the lords his people have served since before the time of Christ.

For speakers of a world language to imagine that *other* people's languages can become obsolete and discarded without loss is to assume an extraordinary complacency about one of the least spoken-of human and ecological tragedies of our time. Some linguists expect 90 per cent of the world's estimated 6900 languages to be extinct or close to extinction by the end of this century. The most optimistic put the figure at 50 per cent: one human language dying every month. In Australia alone there were 51 Aboriginal languages with just one speaker in 1999; some of those have since slipped away. These are not primitive languages; there is no such thing. Each has a suppleness of form, a line in beauty, a residue of wisdom whose loss should appal and galvanise us.

### III

Irish and the fragility of its place in the world fundamentally shaped the way I encountered other cultures. In the end it was, as much as anything else, an old man in San Pedro de La Laguna, in Guatemala, that propelled me into writing about English linguistic colonisation. I was staying on the shore of the volcanic Lake Atitlán, in a little reed-thatched *choza* which the old man rented out for a few *quetzales*. He spoke a variety of Tzutojil used only in that village. His language passed out of range even when he went the small distance by boat to the neighbouring village of Santiago de Atitlán. His son was home from the city. I'd hear them talking as they chopped wood in the evenings, the father in the urgent, glottal-stopped sounds of Tzutojil, the son, insistently, in fractured Spanish. 'He never talks to us any more in Tzutojil', the father told me with a kind of sad pride; 'you see, he's getting on in the city.' Some afternoons, touched by my odd interest in a language used only by the shrinking pool of older villagers, the old man would gesture to my notebook and, intent on conveying something of the complex beauty of his receding mother tongue, start a shy, impassioned language lesson.

Travel with an open notebook and an interest in language and you can have such moments all over Latin America. Four per cent of the world's languages –

the giants being Mandarin, English, Spanish, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian and Japanese – are spoken by 96 per cent of the world's population. At the other end of the scale, one quarter of the world's languages have fewer than 1000 speakers each. English is spoken, as a first language, by almost 400 million people – and rising. Travelling through Central America, I became preoccupied by *glottophagy*: by the way a language, almost any random language, once it is backed by power and empire, can gobble up other human tongues. 'Language', the Spanish grammarian Nebrija<sup>7</sup> wrote in the climacteric year of 1492, 'was ever the *compañera* – the handmaid – of empire'. But what did that really mean in practice? I'd witnessed the consequences of Spanish colonisation in the New World. But to follow up this question, I knew I was going to have to bring my exploration back to Ireland. Not to 19th century Ireland, the century of silence, as Thomas Kinsella calls it, but to the 16th century and the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. There, I had a hunch, our predicament began.

The defeat at Kinsale and the subsequent Flight of the Earls in 1607 is often seen as the nail in the coffin of an autonomous Gaelic Ireland. Although a simplification, there is no doubt that, as far as language goes, remarkable things were afoot during the reign of Elizabeth I. English had been a vibrant community language in parts of Ireland since the 13th century. But it was very much a minority language; even in the Pale, the leading Old English families were comfortably bilingual. It's now automatically assumed that the language of Shakespeare's England was boisterously self-assured and poised for expansion. In fact it was, as the poet Samuel Daniel put it, almost a 'speech unknown'. Edmund Spenser's schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, lamented that English was 'of small reach, it stretcheth no further than this Island of ours, nay not there over all'. But it would have its first experience of 'reach' and 'stretch' in Ireland. I wanted to see what would happen then.

We go back to origins in search of explanation. We sift through the past for an understanding of the present. The language encounter of 16th century Ireland set down patterns of conversation and misunderstanding that are still with us. Henry VIII's assumption of the title 'King of Ireland' in 1541 marked a new stage in relations between Ireland and England. As the century progressed, London grew ever less inclined to leave its nominal sister island to its own devices. Reform gradually gave way to increasing military intervention, to plantation, in Munster and Leix, and eventually to outright war. By the end of the Nine Years'

War in 1603, the great lordships that sustained Gaelic cultural life were no more. A famine-ravaged, depopulated land was left, as Lord Mountjoy announced with satisfaction, 'as a payre of cleane tables, wherein the state might write lawes at pleasure'. Ireland was ripe for translation. A silence was beginning to fall, and the bardic poet Eóghan Ruadh mac an Bhaird picks up an intimation of it in his poem, '*Anocht as uaigneach Éiré*', 'Ireland is lonely tonight'. No word, he says is heard from Ireland: '*labhra uaidhe ní héistioí*'.

There had been nothing silent about the Ireland which the Elizabethans came to 'reform'. The State Papers are, in many ways, reports from a noisy island. 'These rebellious People', Lord Mountjoy's secretary wrote in vexation, 'are by Nature clamorous' and masters of 'colourable evasions'. The poet Edmund Spenser, who worked as a colonial administrator in Munster from 1579–98, deplored the 'subtleties and sly shifts' of the 'sharpe witted' natives. Exasperated by the protestations of affably insincere chieftains; mistrustful of duplicitous interpreters and propagandising bards, the English came to equate Irish with dissidence. Mathew de Renzy, one of the few planters to learn Irish (but then, he was German), fretted that Irish speakers 'will ever be shrewder and more suttler than the English that comes out of England' as long as they speak Irish because //could prove 'the black crow to be white'.

The English saw Irish as a rebel tongue and a popish one. The consequences for policy were obvious. Already, in 1537, the 'Act for the English Order, Habite, and Language' had decreed:

that the said English tongue, habite and order, may be from henceforth continually ... used by all men that will knowledge themselves ... to be his Highness true and faithfull subjects.

As the century progressed, the aspirations of the 1537 Act began to acquire real force. When Gaelic lords submitted – either under the policy of 'Surrender and Regrant' or in the wake of defeat – the terms of their indentures almost invariably required them 'to bring up their children in the use of the English tongue'. To make sure this happened, the eldest sons of the leading Gaelic families were fostered – or raised as hostages – in the English-speaking Pale or in England. Hugh O'Neill, surrendering at Mellifont in English, captures the profound shift in language use by the end of Elizabeth's reign.

Silencing Irish was, of course, inseparable from promoting English. Late 16th century Ireland brings us to a turning point in the fortunes of the English language. Mulcaster, who had bemoaned the narrow geographical range of English, mused that 'it would stretch to the furthest ... if we were conquerors'<sup>8</sup>. It is remarkable how many of the leading poets and translators of Elizabethan England did a tour of duty in Ireland. Edmund Spenser, Sir John Davies, Sir John Harington, Barnabe Googe and a score of minor luminaries argued tirelessly that conquest would 'augment our tongue'. 'Matters of war', argued Mulcaster trenchantly, 'make a tung of account'. And just as Mountjoy was stepping in to bring the Nine Years' War to its climax, Samuel Daniel dedicated his poem, 'Musophilus', to him. In it, Daniel jubilantly proclaims the imperial destiny of English:

And who in time knowes whither we may vent  
The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores  
This gaine of our best glorie shall be sent,  
T'inrich unknowing Nations with our stores?  
What worlds in th' yet unformed Occident  
May come refin'd with th'accents that are ours?

Men like Walter Raleigh and Humphrey Gilbert, who had cut their teeth in the savage repression of the Munster Rebellion, were on hand to make that happen when they moved on to North America, carrying with them a pattern of linguistic imperialism honed in Ireland. Anyone familiar with the story of language in Elizabethan Ireland can only feel impatience – if not despair – at the latter-day triumphalism of works like Melvyn Bragg's best-selling *The Adventure of English*. It retells an old tale about the unique fitness of 'Shakespeare's English' to become a world language – a story which ignores the bitter fact that it is military might, not linguistic merit, that makes 'a tongue of account'. Daniel, poet of empire that he was, had no time for such romanticising: all empires, he acknowledged robustly, 'may thanke their sword that made their tongues ... famous and universall'.

Sir John Davies, sonneteer turned Solicitor General, came to Ireland in 1603 to prepare the legal ground for the Plantation of Ulster. His hope was:

that the next generation will in tongue & heart, and every way else  
becom *English*, so as there will bee no difference or distinction but  
the Irish Sea between us.

But the notion that a shared language would lead to shared understandings would prove illusory. Even by the end of the Elizabethan period, a remarkable difference was opening up between the way Irish and English speakers used their ostensibly common language. The English defined themselves as measured and verbally continent. Mountjoy, his secretary tells us approvingly, disliked 'a free Speaker' and was himself 'sparing in Speech'; he 'will never discourse at table; eates in silence'. The Irish, on the other hand, were 'wily', 'dissembling', 'hyperbolic' and – *plus ça change* – contested English definitions vigorously: 'these outlawes are not by them termed Rebels, but men in Action'.<sup>9</sup> Outmanoeuvred by the 'guileful eloquence' of Hugh O'Neill and his ilk, English negotiators felt the smart of having their language turned against them. Late-Elizabethan playhouses fill up with ludicrously loquacious stage-Irishmen; but it is Caliban who actually seems to speak with an Irish accent:

'You taught me language and my profit on't  
Is, I know how to curse'.

#### IV

Paradoxically, the English ascribe eloquence to the Irish – while the Irish are haunted by a sense of inarticulacy. (The two often amount to the same thing: the English equation of reticence with rationality relegates eloquence to the margins, to the *banlieue* of art – and blarney.)

John Montague's *The Rough Field*, first published in 1972 in the dark early days of the Troubles, captures the Hiberno-English speaker's sense of being tonguetied by English:

Dumb,  
bloodied, the severed  
head now chokes to  
speak another tongue.

Montague travels back imaginatively to the late 16th century and the 'disappearance and death / of a world' to gain a purchase on the pain of losing a language and having its replacement imposed through violence. He takes as his starting point an old rhyme that states the predicament starkly:



And who ever heard  
Such a sight unsung  
As a severed head  
With a grafted tongue?

The sense that one is speaking with a grafted tongue runs deep in the Irish sensibility. Stephen Dedalus, arguing with the English Dean of Studies in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, gives the predicament its classic expression:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.

An 'acquired speech' always has a self-conscious feel to it. We are aware of its materiality; the grafted tongue moves jerkily in the mouth. This, it seems to me, is the great difference in the way English and Irish people use their shared language. A national language slides effortlessly into seeming like a *natural* language. Its words are the right words; they fit. I'm always struck by my York students' unquestioning confidence in the solidity of their language. For them, it is a safe home, secure in its meanings and incontrovertibly theirs. I often teach W. S. Merwin's poem 'Losing a Language'. It is – patently – about the loss of Native American languages:

A breath leaves the sentence and does not come back ...

Many of the things the words were about  
no longer exist

the noun for standing in mist by a haunted tree  
the verb for I.

But I've never yet had an English student, intense and smart as they certainly are, recognise that that is what the poem is primarily about. They engage with it as an abstraction, imagining it to be about communication barriers, about

misunderstandings between generations. Though they have all studied another language, they cannot fully imagine themselves outside the native element of their own. When I taught the same poem in Ireland, my students immediately identified – and identified with – its evocation of being linguistically unhoused.

The estrangement that comes when one's mother tongue doesn't have the natural inevitability of a 'national' language pushed Joyce, Flann O'Brien and Beckett towards modernist experimentation; English writers still feel more at home with the realist novel – a genre, after all, for those who *are* at home. It is precisely that feeling of continuity and groundedness that is snapped by a language shift. The postcolonial condition is always marked by discontinuity and a sense of living along the fault lines of a fractured tradition.

Nowhere is the difference between Ireland and England greater than in the way we relate to history. A language shift entails a catastrophic break in the transmission of a whole world of traditions and stories. Amnesia follows. History is a blank. But far from making us indentured to 'history', as the English so often imagine, the absence and loss at our backs drives us away from the past, in a break-neck rush towards the future. For the English, however, history is Heritage. The past is consecrated, memorialised and preserved. Irish visitors to England now exclaim, as Americans visiting Ireland did 20 years ago, about 'how old it all looks'. But unlike the marvelling Americans, there's a moue of disapproval in the comment: the Irish don't like Old. Old gets pulled down, concreted over, driven through. I visited the state-owned Parknasilla golf club last summer with my father. He'd played there as a young man but couldn't quite get his bearings. Looking down towards an old curtain wall by the sea, he asked the club secretary where the castle had gone. 'Yerrah, that old castle was falling down', the man replied, 'and 'twas in the way of the cars, so we pulled it down altogether.' Asphalt, white-lined for latest-reg. Lexuses and four-wheel drives, marks the spot.

Many of the now moribund Aboriginal languages make a distinction, not available in English, between 'we'-inclusive (you *and* me) and 'we'-exclusive (us but *not* you). To be Irish in England is to feel keenly, at times, the need for such a distinction. The Irish have a far stronger sense of being distinct from the English – of being foreign – than the English seem able to grant. The English include us in their communal 'we' in ways *we* cannot subscribe to. That is why we bristle at the English usage of the word 'mainland' with its amorphous but predatory

notion of Britishness. The mild-mannered formula 'these islands' may not set the teeth on edge in quite the way that 'British Isles' does but it still, too often, performs the same alienating 'act of union'.

Ironically, the blithe English assumption of communality can be sustained only by remaining essentially ignorant about Ireland. In a spirit of political right-on-ness, *The Guardian* can go along with the notion that 'three of Ulster's nine counties [are] in Éire', all unaware that 'Éire' is simply the Irish for ... Ireland (all four provinces of it) and not some quaint acronym for the 26 Counties. Elizabeth I's Secretary of State confessed that he 'understood less Ireland than any other country'. History continues to provide him with bedfellows. Ireland's radical social and economic transformation seems, at times, to have made scarcely a dint on English stereotypes of Irishness. Hermione Lee, reviewing Colm Toibin's *Blackwater Lightship* on Radio 3, spoke in hushed tones about 'how very brave' it is for an Irish novelist to write about being gay. (I think of my gay American friend who moved from Cork to York. 'It must have been *so* difficult, being gay in Ireland', an English colleague murmurs sympathetically. His eyes widen in disbelief: 'Compared to York, Cork is Babylon'.) The *Irish Times* reports on England under 'European News'; *The Guardian* covers Ireland - 'Air of Dissent as Cork Fears a Cultural Damp Squib' - under 'National News'. It's the old, familiar impulse to domesticate Ireland while knowing almost nothing about it. Mark Lawson, writing in *The Guardian* of Robert Redford's declared intention to leave the USA for Ireland after Bush's election, sneers that, if he did, he would just 'find himself in a theocracy'<sup>10</sup>. It's a poor theocracy that manages to see just one priest ordained for the diocese of Dublin (population 1.4 million) in 2004. And it is poor journalism that does not keep abreast of that.

## V

Joyce is stung into his epiphany about language by coming up against the English Dean of Studies. Talking to the English brings us up sharp against our language anxieties. (By 'the English', we almost invariably mean the English upper-middle classes. It is their accents we take off when voicing discomfort about English attitudes to 'Ah-land'. I remember leaving a seminar room in Cork where a young English lecturer had just given a talk on working-class literature, in a glottal-stopped, adenoidal Estuary accent. The students in front of me were mimicking his accent, as they had heard it: 'Oh, I do say ... jolly good, old stock

... there's a good chap'.) An Irish voice sounds differently in the ears of its speaker when delivered into the acoustic world of 'the English'. Our always latent sense of estrangement from English is activated when vowels and turns of phrase that sit at the core of our being suddenly sound strange even to ourselves. (I remember a dinner party in Cork, hosted to entertain a visiting English professor. 'Could you pass the milk, please?' asked an Irish postcolonialist. 'Oh, do say "milk" again', pleaded the professor excitedly, 'I do think that Ah-rish light 'I' is extraordinary'.) Delivered into the echo-chamber of Received Pronunciation, our ordinary speech turns into performance and we into actors.

'Irish Men in England', wrote an English planter in Ireland in 1608, 'act as it were a part in a Play; they are never themselves but in their own Countrey'<sup>11</sup>. Elizabeth Bowen, herself half denized in the Irish Sea, writes of the crossing from Cork to Fishguard in *The House in Paris*. An English woman, Karen, is joined at table by a bumptious Irish woman in a yellow hat. 'I guess you think we're all mad', prompts the Irish woman expectantly. (This is one of our fondest tenets: we know how to enjoy ourselves; the English just get drunk. To consecrate this, we have recently taken to spelling 'crack' – an English word with the same root as 'corncrake' – in cod Irish orthography as *craic*. By such slender threads, linguistic and behavioural, does our identity hang.) Karen sizes up Yellow Hat:

She could not help acting Irish even at Karen: once in England what a time she would have! The relation between the two races remains a mixture of showing off and suspicion, nearly as bad as sex. Where would the Irish be without someone to be Irish at?

One wonders what Yellow Hat made of the English. Though they may not be 'acting English', their conduct can, nonetheless, seem like a performance to Irish spectators. The accents of 'the English', for example, seem wildly improbable. I still half-imagine them slipping into something more comfortable – softer consonants, dressed-down vowels – when they get home. English directness and a fondness for the imperative – 'Come along now!', 'Oh do shut up' – strike us as rude and eye-poppingly bossy. And even Yellow Hat could not but be struck by the shrunken domain of public chat. In Ireland, repartee – at shop counters, at bus stops, with strangers and people one only knows to see – is the great intoxicant. I rang a wrong number the other day. 'Is that such-and-such a hairdresser's?' A strong Kerry accent answered me: 'I get ashked that so

often, I'm going to buy a scissors myself'. These chance glees are denied us in England. Public conversation is formulaic; transgression – by uninvited spontaneity – is embarrassing. An Irish friend visiting me in Oxford was behind two pleasant, middle-aged women in a queue at the Post Office. They were discussing one of her favourite books. 'I can't help overhearing you ...', she ventured enthusiastically. The two stared at her. 'I'm terribly sorry', one replied witheringly, 'were we disturbing you?' English conversations, picking fussily over unimportant details, puzzle us. The Anglo-Irish Lady Naylor, in Bowen's *The Last September*; wickedly caricatures them:

if one stops talking, they tell one the most extraordinary things, about their husbands, their money affairs, their insides. They don't seem discouraged by not being asked. Of course, they are very definite and practical but it is a pity they talk so much about what they are doing.

This dogged literal mindedness is closely related to their confidence in the solidity of language. A spade *is* a spade. To know, as the Irish do, that alongside the absolute clarity and cut-and-driedness of 'Yes' and 'No' there is no Irish word for either yes or no is to inhabit an uncertain space. In the realm of '*n'fheadaí*', the great indeterminate West Kerry reply to most questions – 'there's no knowing' – there is far more room for irony, scepticism and a doubleness of vision than in the black-and-white world of yes and no. The dry wit and pervasive irony of English conversation mocks, but never fundamentally challenges, this propensity to believe in words. Maybe this explains the willingness of a significant proportion of the English public, so out of line with the rest of Western Europe, to believe the 45-minute warning and the Blair government's rickety justifications for invading Iraq.

When I worked in the University of Limerick, proposals for bureaucratising departmental procedures would occasionally make their way from central administration. All that ever needed to be said at Faculty Board was 'if we're not careful, we'll end up like England'. I had to move to York to realise just how potent that warning was. I found a system in thrall to literalism. The leaden hand that is squeezing the life out of all public-service institutions in England is born of an impulse to describe and make explicit. Only the word – mountains of futile acronyms and jargon – can make flesh the government's promised 'reforms'. In

the process, excellence can turn to dust. Since coming to York, I've seen modules 're-described' and, by being pinned down and prescribed to vanishing point, lose their flexibility and flair. The department has just finished a year-long paper-trail audit: all that was hitherto done with inventiveness and goodwill is now reduced to hollow protocols and forms in triplicate. There is, I suspect, something deeply Protestant about this trust in accountability and willed perfectibility – as, indeed, there is about believing in the literalness of the word. The response of my English colleagues to the rolling programme of 'reforms' that are calcifying and demoralising the universities is instructive: they ironise, they cavil, they rail – and they implement, meticulously and to the letter.

## VI

But the pitfalls of literalism cannot be taken as confirming the superiority of the Irish strategy of having things both ways, of nods and winks that cancel out the official meaning. The English commitment to transparency, though it can lead to stupefying regulation and conformity, is also the keystone of civil society, a concept that Ireland flirts with only fitfully. Public discourse in Ireland eschews literalism and transparency. Whether in the 'cute-hoor' obscurantism of some of our leaders or Sinn Féin's accomplished detachment of language from meaning, direct dealing – truth-telling – is not the currency of Irish public life. Regulations give expression to our highest aspirations; the sanctioned breaching of them saves us from having to live up to our ideal selves. Planning laws forbid building between the road and the sea, but an inexorable palisade of joined-up 'one-off' houses is turning our sea views into one long, bungalowid 'Sea View'. We rebrand the Emerald Isle as 'green' and environmentally friendly by banning plastic bags, but we drive roads through wetlands and national monuments: there are no more ragged plastic bags flapping from our ditches, but that's because there are so few ditches left. The landscape which 'we had lost the skill to read' is now being read in a new way, as a privatised terrain of 'plots' and planning permission signs. The lost language is being replaced by the dialects of prosperity. The DART-accented speech of AA-Roadwatch threatens to become the new vernacular. As the trickle-down 'duckspeak'<sup>12</sup> of the business schools takes hold (one-fifth of all our third-level students are pursuing commerce degrees), prefabricated phrases – 'proactive scenarios going forward' – and the stentorian discourse of the market bid to drown out all other voices.

In her 1998 collection, *Cead Aighnis*, the poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill has a sequence entitled '*Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh*', 'The Mermaids who Dried Out'. The figure of mermaids who have come out of their element onto dry land, who have cast off their songs in order to prosper, allows Ni Dhomhnaill to meditate on losing a language. The mermaids have forgotten the confusion of the currents and the whale choirs of the deep; their scales dry out and flake off. One mermaid, in therapy, struggles to find words to convey the full intensity of what the word *uisce* – 'water' – means for her. But is it not just Ni Dhomhnaill's mermaids who are on that headland: we, too, are poised between siren voices calling to us in Anglo-American and the promptings of the deep.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Patricia Palmer, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> The Irish sounds falls midway between /t/ and //.
- <sup>3</sup> John Montague, *The Rough Field*, Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1972.
- <sup>4</sup> Hermione Lee, ed. , *Mulberry Tree*, London: Vintage, 1999, p. 101.
- <sup>5</sup> Derek Walcott, *North and South, Collected Poems 1948-84*, Faber 1992.
- <sup>6</sup> Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, 'An File ar Leaba a Bháis'.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted in Aldrete Bernardo: 'Del origen y principio de la lengua Castellana' Vol.2, Madrid, 1972. (Antonio de Nebrija was the author of the first grammar of a romance language: *Gramática de la lengua Castellana*, published in 1492, the date of Columbus's first voyage to America.)
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Mulcaster, *Elementarie*, London, 1582.
- <sup>9</sup> Fynes Moryson, *Shakespeare's Europe*, ed. Charles Hughes, London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1903.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Guardian*, 'Red Faces at Blue Peter over Red Hand', 22 January 2005; *The Guardian*, 22 January 2005, p.2; *The Guardian*, 6 November 2004.
- <sup>11</sup> Sir Parre Lane's Character of the Irish', Bodleian Ms.Tanner 458.
- <sup>12</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983, p. 265.



## Eoghan Harris

*Eoghan Harris's political evolution over 30 years has taken him from the Irish nationalist end of the Anglo-Irish political spectrum to the unionist end and then, as he sees it, to an equilibrium between the two traditions. In 1966, at a secret meeting of republicans and activists in Maghera, Co. Londonderry, he was delegated by the Dublin WolfeTone Society, a republican think tank, to read out the blueprint for a Civil Rights campaign which radically changed the political landscape of Northern Ireland. By 1972 he was a leading ideologue of Official Sinn Fein (later the Workers Party) and strongly supported the 1972 Official IRA ceasefire. By 1996 he had left the Workers Party, acted as a southern advisor to Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble, and helped write his Nobel Prize speech. Along the way, he wrote the Sharpe series for Carlton Television.*

## My Secret Life

Eoghan Harris

Like Frank Harris, the notorious Victorian pornographer, with whom I share a surname, I have been driven to call my short memoir *My Secret Life*. Mine was a love that until recently dared not speak its name in Ireland. Thanks to the survey *Through Irish Eyes* (British Council Ireland, 2003) I finally feel it is safe to come out of the closet and admit not only that I am a practising anglophiliac, but that since boyhood I have been besotted by an imagined England as well as an imagined Ireland.

Let me confess to a slight worry lest the phrase 'imagined Ireland' convey the impression that I am about to become airborne on one of those abstract academic flights of fancy about Irish and British identity so popular with the wannabe Eagletons who wander the corridors, if not the libraries, of Irish third-level institutes. To adapt Burke, 'I do not enter into these metaphysical distinctions: I hate the very sound of them.'

And with good reason. Far too often the theorists of post-colonialism are simply peddling the malign myth (by which I mean stories that are neither factual nor true) of Irish 'exceptionalism'. Exceptionalism is the delusion that Ireland, compared with the other peoples of the world, experienced exceptional suffering at the hands of British imperialism – a self-pitying syndrome for which the Irish historian Liam Kennedy coined the mordant acronym MOPE (Most Oppressed People Ever).

Although I do not want to come across like one of those tribal academics, I do want to cut across them. Possibly this may have influenced my choice of theme. Because this essay is a memorial service for a group of genial ghosts, some fictional, some historical, who are the source of what I call 'benign myths' (by which I mean stories that may not be fully factual but are fully truthful), the good myths that bring English and Irish people closer together with Northern Ireland within that warm embrace.

The problem is that most of the men I wish to memorialise wore British military or naval uniforms, and many of them were imperialists of one sort or another.

Naturally I am aware that men in British uniform are currently out of favour with 'post-colonial' theorists, either in Britain or Ireland. Paradoxically, I am more likely to receive a tolerant hearing in the Irish Republic than among the British groves of academe, whose denizens seem to be suffering from the kind of post-imperial stress disorder that causes them to dismiss the morally justified intervention in Iraq as 'just another imperial adventure'.

My confidence in my own people comes from the *Through Irish Eyes* survey, which showed that most Irish people now feel well disposed towards the English (a word we prefer to 'British', which carries historical baggage). Of course it is possible that an essay about men in redcoats may well still be a bridge too far.

But I must at least go as far as that bridge because beneath it flow the clear waters of what the Irish writer Maeve Brennan in another context called the 'springs of affection', the benign mythic streams that mingle to form the riverrun of Anglo-Irish affection. Paradoxically, it is the purity of my republican pedigree that gives me the confidence to attempt the crossing.

### Family ghosts

For four generations my family have been physical force republicans. My great-grandfather, Old Pat Harris, was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), an anti-clerical republican who refused Roman Catholic rites and was buried in a field near Inniscarra cemetery wrapped in the 'sunburst' flag of the Fenians, gold sun blazing on a blue background.

In 1916 we were probably the only family in Ireland with four blood relations under arms: my grandfather Patrick, his two brothers, Tommy and Mikey Harris, and their young nephew Dick Forbes. After the Irish Volunteers surrendered their arms, Paddy was court-martialled at Victoria Barracks Cork, sentenced to death, had the sentence commuted, was sent to the internment camp at Frongoch in Wales and, after his release, returned to the struggle as an intelligence officer of the Old IRA during the War of Independence.

But even my grim grandfather would grin as he recalled the reaction of the first genial ghost I want to summon to my side, the nameless British major wearing an eye patch (he had been invalided home from France) who found himself

facing my grandfather's bumptious nephew, Dick 'Cardy' Forbes, a spotty-faced 16-year-old officer of Fianna Eireann, the youth branch of the Irish Volunteers.

Forbes was the last to be court-martialled, and by then a mood of camaraderie had grown in the big gym where the reprieved (and much relieved) Irish volunteers stood chatting to their Cork-born British soldier captors, watching with amusement as Forbes, dressed in dark green full fig uniform and slouch hat, stepped up to the blanket-covered table and smartly saluted.

The British major, who knew he had an appreciative audience in the gym, kept a straight face, 'What have you to say for yourself Mr Forbes?' The young man's reply was to take from his tunic a thick typescript which he had carefully composed for just this occasion. He began a speech from the dock that would go down in Irish history, until a raised finger stopped him in mid-flow.

The British Major stared at him from his one good eye and delivered a line that brought the house down. 'Mr Forbes, I have survived the Western front, but I doubt I shall survive your speech. If you desist from reading that document, I shall set you free. But if you say one more word, I'll have you shot at dawn!' Forbes shut up.

My grandfather had a good war, but my father, Thomas Harris seemed trapped in his father's time warp. Looking back, I can now see my poor father caught in a groundhog day, endlessly going back over 1916 and the Anglo-Irish War of Independence, when as a child in 1920 he had seen my grandfather, by then an intelligence officer of the Old IRA, betrayed by an informer during a flying visit to his family, being taken away from his red-brick terraced house at 11 Nesson Street by a lorry-load of British troops from South Staffordshire.

Growing up in the grim 1950s I sensed that my father, frustrated by his own failure to fight in the Spanish Civil War (his mother begged him on bended knees not to go), had found solace in his father's fight during the war of independence 1919-21, which we called the Four Glorious Years. He wanted to pass on his politics to me, and as a boy I carried Irish nationalism around my neck like an albatross.

That albatross was a burden to my father too, but he bore it for want of anything

better. He had a fine mind, but, like most men of the post-independence generation, had few outlets for his talents, and they soon turned into obsessions. He compensated for a crushed life by retreating into a republican necropolis where England was always the enemy. Especially on Sunday.

Sunday morning, my father would buy the *Sunday Press* which each week carried a colourful episode of the War of Independence against the English enemy – earning itself the epithet: ‘Bloody Sunday, every bloody Sunday’. Sunday afternoon we went for a spin to the battle sites of the West Cork Flying Column: Rosscarbery, Kilmichael, Crossbarry. Sunday evening, helped by a few bottles of stout, he would recall how as a boy he saw the British coffins coming down the Western Road after the ambush at Kilmichael, ending with the bloodthirsty mantra: ‘The Boers put them into khaki but Tom Barry put them into coffins.’

But if my father was a Cork Jacobin, my mother was a rural Roscommon Jacobite. A republican at home, he was a socialist abroad, whereas she was a Redmondite at home and a monarchist abroad. He, a rhetorical republican from the clerky class, craved lower middle-class respectability, while she was a real rural radical from the dirt-poor cottier class, and as such was his heart’s delight.

My mother loved England as the home of *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury* which she knew by heart. Although she had only rudimentary national school education, she had speeches from Shakespeare to suit all occasions. Hence her habit, when I would go to her purse, of saying in a conversational tone, ‘He who steals my purse, steals trash.’ It was only when I was older I realised the line came from *Othello*...

Born on 20 acres of bogland beneath the estate walls of an now extinct Irish Catholic landlord family, the OConnor Dons, my mother’s family had no experience of oppression by England, but were eloquent about exploitation by local Catholic and nationalist strong farmers and by landlords like the OConnor Dons.

The stories she told me as a child were the foundation of my later revisionism, a word that in Ireland is a shorthand term of abuse among academic (I almost said armchair) nationalists. It means someone who does not subscribe to Sinn Fein’s victim-version of Irish history, which treats the Penal Laws and the Great Irish Famine as British colonial ethnic cleansing and colonial genocide, respectively.

My mother had no time for that nonsense. Her own great-grandmother and grandmother had passed down plenty of folklore about Catholic strong farmers who had done well during the erratically enforced Penal Laws, made fortunes from the Napoleonic Wars, and defended their turnip fields with shotguns against the starving spalpeens during the Great Irish Famine.

Like the writer William Carleton, mother saw the famine as a natural disaster which, equally naturally, allowed the Catholic strong farmers to shunt the cottier class off to America and consolidate their holdings. But the notion that England caused the Great Hunger, needing an apology from Tony Blair, would have amazed and indeed amused her.

Where my father saw Anglo-Irish relations as ideology, my mother saw them as inherited and therefore human. To him, the Black and Tans were ideological instruments of British Imperialism. To my mother, they were a bunch of poor devils, driven half mad by the Western front from which they had recently returned, and trying to make a few bob in Ireland.

She formed this view as a young girl when her father, Owen Beirne, drunk after a fair in Boyle, challenged a Black and Tan patrol to a fist-fight. As people cowered in shops, waiting for the shots, the Black and Tans simply threw him in a stream to sober him up, gave her a bag of bullseyes and went their way laughing. These good apples in a bad barrel are also genial ghosts.

Later, my mother left Roscommon to work as a barmaid in a pub near Collins Barracks in Cork. One of her best mimes, and my next genial ghost, was that of an old Munster Fusilier at closing time, surrounded by Sinn Fein supporters, but drunk enough to be defiant. Lifting an imaginary glass, and swaying on her pretty feet, my mother would peer around an imagined pub and then brazenly intone: 'George the Fifth, King of Great Britain and Ireland, and of the British Dominions beyond the seas.' She would then simulate the roar from the republicans, the scurry of the old Munster from the pub, the return of order and then in the silence the shout from the street, all the worse for being accurate: 'If it wasn't for John Bull ye'd all starve!' and the final triumphal battle-cry, 'Up the Munsters!'

It was my mother too who introduced me to the genial ghost of General Sir John Moore, who had behaved with humanity to the Rebels of 1798, and who later

fell at Corunna. She would regularly recite from memory *The Burial of Sir John Moore*, written by Charles Wolfe, an Irish clergyman from County Wexford. To this day I can declaim the full of it from memory with a feeling I doubt is felt by anyone in England any more:

Slowly and sadly we laid him down  
From the field of his fame, fresh and gory.  
We carved not a line, and we raised not a stone,  
But we left him alone, with his glory.

Haunting my youth

But my first big encounter with England as an imagined entity, that is an England imagined by Victorian writers, and then re-imagined by me, came in those long, pre-television winters of the 1950s. As a precocious reader with few distractions, I devoured the small collection of old books which my father had bought for a few bob at Buckley's auction, and which had somehow survived the Bishop's waste-paper campaign to build seven churches in Cork.

By the time I was 15 I had read runs of Edmund Burke's *Annual Register*, Macaulay's *History of England*, Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, the *Boys' Own Paper* and *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Reading Macaulay's stirring account of the Siege of Derry gave me the germ of an insight into the mind of Northern Protestants that would profoundly affect my politics in later years.

Confusingly to an academic, but not to a boy, at the same time as my father was encouraging my empathy with Tom Barry's West Cork Flying Column in its fight against the English, my mother was extending my empathy to cover the brave English schoolboy in Sir Henry Newbolt's *Vital Lampada*. Although I attended Douglas National School by day, in the afternoons, as I listened to my mother, I would mentally lift my muddy face from the field at Rugby as the stirring lines rolled over me:

The river of death has brimmed its banks,  
And England's far and Honour's a name  
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the rank  
Play up! play up! and play the game!

As she stood, back to the rainy window, reciting, I saw behind her, not our small suburban garden, but a blazing desert, a boyish officer with drawn sword beneath a bravely flying Union Jack and the defiant square of redcoats dying hard. As her rich Roscommon voice rang out, 'And England's far and Honour's a name', the tears pricked my eyes, for that brave English boy, for my mother, for me, honour and heroism and all we hold dear.

Complicating matters further, it turned out that my father and indeed grandfather had had their own covert flings with the *Boys' Own Paper*; and Frank Richards' Billy Bunter stories in the *Magnet* and *Gem* which extolled the values of duty and service in Britain's ever-expanding Empire.

Post-colonial theorists today, who argue that these stories were simply ideological texts to bolster up the British Empire, miss the point: my grandfather and father clearly filtered out the imperial message, since they remained republicans; but the sense of duty needed selflessly to serve a great empire exactly conformed to the spirit of self-sacrifice it took to serve the Irish republican cause. These school stories contained a protean code of conduct that could be adapted to any circumstances. They were profoundly appealing to any idealistic boy, be he Irish or British. My grandfather's generation, Irish and British alike, subscribed to a public school code of conduct which had percolated through all classes of society. No wonder the great IRA guerrilla leader, General Sean MacEoin, did not shoot wounded Auxiliary prisoners, but bound up their wounds and sent them safely back to barracks. Without some such code, I doubt that any society can long survive.

But in 1958, when I was 15, I had a more fateful encounter with books. My grandfather died. A group of his ageing Old IRA comrades, who looked just like the men who gather at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday, fired a volley over his tricoloured coffin from equally aged Lee Enfields.

The next day, my father took me with great solemnity to the house of his father's two spinster sisters, Nellie and Molly Harris, at 56 Tower Street. He carried a lump hammer and crowbar. Nellie directed him to a spot on the wall, and after a few blows, and a powder of masonry, a huge hidden hoard of books and newspapers lay open to our gaze.



Matthew Arnold once spoke metaphorically about 'the buried life' of Ireland's past. I was now literally looking at that buried past. It took a day to take it home, and weeks to sort it all out: Gaelic League primers, books from the Cuala Press, minutes of the Celtic Literary Society, membership rolls of the Irish volunteers, and complete runs of republican newspapers from 1911 to 1922 including Arthur Griffith's *Sinn Fein* paper, the IRB's *Irish Volunteer* and, above all, the *Workers Republic*, the well written paper of James Connolly and the Citizen Army.

For a whole winter, day in, day out, I devoured these newspapers as if they were daily papers. Day by day I was drawn inexorably into the steady evolution of the Sinn Fein idea, from dual monarchy to physical force republicanism. Finally, I came to the Holy Grail, the heady homoerotic works of P.H. Pearse, which I began to learn by heart. To this day I can recite long passages from Pearse, including the powerful oration at the grave of O'Donovan Rossa with its prophetic lines:

'but the fools, the fools, the fools! – they have left us our Fenian dead,  
and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be  
at peace.'

The literal content of the words meant little. It was the sound of them, the sentimental, noble nonsense of them, that left no room for reason. But still the genial British ghosts broke in to circumvent my nationalist dogmatism. Because when I spoke to my father about socialism, he filled me in on the folklore about a Major George Nathan who, as a Black and Tan in Cork, had hunted down his father, but who had redeemed himself by his bravery in the Spanish Civil War.

Nathan was the first British Jew to be commissioned in the Brigade of Guards. He fought with distinction in France and later enlisted with the Black and Tans in the Anglo-Irish War. Nathan – notorious for covert operations against the IRA in Cork and Limerick, which included flushing out intelligence officers like my grandfather – was high on the IRA's death list, as he was widely believed to have tortured and summarily executed captured IRA men.

Fifteen years later, in 1936, when Nathan was in his third war as an officer of the International Brigade in Spain, he suddenly found himself commanding men of the Irish Brigade, some of whom knew his record in Ireland and were inclined

to settle scores. But Nathan was a superb officer who led from the front, and his bravery soon put that reflex on the back burner.

Later, in a book of memoirs called *Survivors*<sup>1</sup>, I read what Frank Edwards, a tough Irish communist who found himself fighting under Nathan, had to say about him. Frank had reason to hate Nathan. The Black and Tans had evicted his parents from their family home in Waterford because Frank's older brothers were active in the Anglo-Irish War of Independence. But looking back in old age, Edwards has nothing but praise for Nathan's cool courage as he prepared the Irish Brigade to fight the battle of Las Rozas, 10 miles outside Madrid:

'George Nathan came up and removed his helmet. Pointing at a hole in it, he said: "You know this is not much good. A stone did that. Still", fixing it back on, "I suppose it is better than nothing. Spread out now," said he. "We have lost two men already"... Nathan was a brave soldier, no matter what is said or may be suspected of him. He was killed, still rallying his men in that devil-may-care manner of his, in the Brunette salient north of Madrid, in July 1937.'

Looking back I believe that, listening to my father speak about Nathan's courage, I took my first serious steps towards socialism – a move that in the long run led me away from nationalism, and after that away from socialism itself, indeed away from all ideologies that believe in perfecting man whether he wants it or not.

### Suffering spirits

But all that was hidden in the future. Back in 1960, when I went up to University College Cork, I was a committed republican socialist – that pathetic pantomime horse in which the republican rear shunts the soft socialist head aside when push comes to shove. That was also the year, however, when I came across two tragic British ghosts, Belcher and Hawkins, the doomed British soldiers in Frank O'Connor's classic anti-war story *Guests of the Nation*.

By 1966 I had moved closer to the new Marxist thinking in Sinn Fein. Like Cathal Goulding, the leader of this pre-split Sinn Fein, I saw the Civil Rights Movement not as a step towards a United Ireland, but towards a united working class. Foolishly or not, we felt a disciplined campaign would not frighten Protestant

workers. We might have done it, too, given a fine day. But the Provisional IRA wrecked all that.

In 1972, Bloody Sunday in Derry and the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin saw the apotheosis of my anti-British anger. But I was not part of that mob. A few years before I had wanted to join the Official IRA, but Goulding, by the grace of God, told me not to be a bloody fool, that armed struggle was a dead end, and that I should concentrate on the education front, helping him to persuade the party to support a ceasefire.

I say grace of God because, in the same year, something happened that was to change me forever. I went to Derry to conduct an education class for Official Sinn Fein, aimed at weakening the ideological grip of a faction of the Derry Official IRA who had fallen under the spell of far-left fantasies. That same weekend they shot Ranger Best, a young local lad, home on leave from the British Army. The last line of Frank O'Connor's *Guests of the Nation* summed up my sickness of heart as I went home, 'And anything that ever happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.'

From then on I worked day and night to transform Official Sinn Fein into a Workers Party that would tackle nationalism and terrorism. Jim Connell, the Irish author of the *Red Flag*, sums up what I wanted to say in his second, seldom-sung verse – not surprisingly because it attacked both armchair generals and republican socialists:

Despise all the talk of these fat agitators  
Who rave about Ireland or freedom or woes  
Waste not your ready blows.  
Seek not the foreign foes.  
Your bitterest enemy treads your own soil.

In May 1977 another tragic British hero, Captain Robert Nairac, took me further away from Irish nationalism. A Roman Catholic, and a romantic, Nairac had been seconded to the SAS to gather intelligence in South Armagh. One night he was snatched from the Three Step Inn in South Armagh, driven across the border into the Irish Republic, savagely tortured, shot dead, and his body fed into a mincing machine. When I heard that his captors confirmed that he had born the

brutal beatings with stoic courage, the lines I recalled in my mother's recitation of W.E. Henley's *Invictus* took on a lethal literal meaning:

In the fell clutch of circumstance,  
I have not winced nor cried aloud:  
Under the bludgeoning of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

In 1980, two more British officers opened my mind: Lieutenant Yolland of the Ordnance Survey in Brian Friel's play *Translations*, and his historical counterpart, Lieutenant Larcom of the Ordnance Survey as it really, truly was. Although a great admirer of Friel's plays, I felt that *Translations*, despite being hailed by left-wing London critics and Irish nationalists alike, had twisted the historical facts so badly that it came close to being nationalist propaganda. For *Translations* conflated two distinct historical events: the mapping of Ireland by the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s, and the introduction of the English language into the Irish school system. The play left the impression that British imperialism had set out to wipe out the Irish language and replace Irish language place names with English doggerel.

Both these impressions were a tribal travesty of the truth. First, most Irish speakers like myself know that it was the Roman Catholic Church, strongly supported by Roman Catholic parents, who demanded that English be emphasised in the National Schools. Second, far from the British using the Ordnance Survey to obliterate Irish place names, the man in charge of the mapping exercise, a former British officer called Lieutenant Larcom, went to great lengths to preserve the Irish links. He first attempted to learn the Irish language, and later employed the eminent Irish scholar John O'Donovan, asking him to come up with versions that came closest to the original Irish form of the name. They succeeded so well that, to this day, most Irish speakers can easily essay a guess from the English name as to the original Irish name. As the great Trinity College Dublin geographer J.H. Andrews justly remarks in his study of the Ordnance Survey, *A Paper Landscape*, 'This was an attractive compromise between the empirical and the antiquarian.'

Five years later I wrote my own play about another British officer in Ireland. *Souper Sullivan* was the true story of Major Hugh Parker who with his new bride,

took up the post of Relieving Officer for the hard-hit West Cork area during the Great Irish Famine 1845–47. Parker was hardly prepared for the grim horrors that greeted him. His first reaction must have been to resign. After all, the two engineers before him had ‘cut and run’. But if Parker ran, the spalpeens, the day labourers who worked on the relief schemes, would have no work, and they and their families would perish. Parker did not run. He died at his post, doing his duty, struck down by famine fever at the age of 36. Amazingly, in spite of famine fever, some 5000 starving wretches followed his coffin on foot to Creagh Church on the bank of the River Ilan – an unprecedented tribute to a British officer. A few years ago I got a spade, dug around in Creagh churchyard and finally found his grave. The faded inscription lacked nothing except the reminder that Major Hugh Parker died for Ireland.

Then came 1993, the watershed year of Warrington. For the first time, tens and thousands of Irish people took to the streets to protest at an IRA bombing in Britain. As Warrington also made a space for revisionists like me to challenge the conventional republican wisdom on colonial Irish history, what had I come to believe by then about ‘British colonialism in Ireland’? This is a good place to provide a sudden-death synopsis...

### Credo

I am still anxious to avoid the jargon-laden, post-modern meditations so popular with professors of post-colonial studies. In preparing this essay, I revisited some of their published effusions and was reminded of Macaulay’s remark on Nares’ *Burleigh and His Times*: ‘Compared with the labour of reading through these volumes, all other labour, the labour of thieves on a treadmill, of children in factories, of Negroes in sugar plantations, is an agreeable recreation.’

So here’s the sudden-death synopsis. Sean Lemass said that if the Irish people had a fault, it was a tendency to feel sorry for themselves. This is a profound insight into the Irish psyche. Multiply that by a million and you have the mind-set of Irish nationalism.

By and large, I believe that Irish nationalism is a narcissistic exercise in self-pity; that most dogmas of Irish victimhood are ideological implants, inserted into the Irish body politic in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by a band of

brilliant propagandists; that the feverish note of holy hate is largely the legacy of two men with profoundly disturbed personalities, one an Irish Protestant and the other half English: John Mitchel and Patrick Pearse. Above all, most Irish nationalists entertain the fiction of Irish exceptionalism, the false conviction that Ireland suffered more under British colonialism than any other comparable people.

A sardonic insight into such self-deception comes from the character in Roddy Doyle's novel *The Commitments* who says 'The Irish are the niggers of Europe...'. Liam Kennedy's mordant dissection of this delusion in his classic study *Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* demonstrates that the doctrine of Irish exceptionalism cannot survive serious historical scrutiny, especially when compared with the experience of other European and third world peoples.

This self-pitying side of Irish nationalism is not merely a malign myth, it is also (to borrow a phrase from the American writer Marilynne Robinson in her meditation 'Hearing Silence: Western Myth Reconsidered') a 'mean little myth'. Although Robinson is writing about a personal approach to victimhood, what she says applies aptly to Irish nationalism's victim-version of Irish history:

'One is born and in passage through childhood suffers some harm. Subsequent good fortune is meaningless because of this injury, while subsequent misfortune is highly significant as the consequence of this injury. The work of one's life is to discover and name the harm one has suffered.'

Let me be clear. I am not saying that something nasty did not happen in the Irish historical woodshed. What I am saying is that what happened was neither as nasty as we believe, nor did it last as long as we believe, nor was it all the work of some beastly British soldier passing by. In fact, much of our nationalist memory comes under the heading of false memory syndrome. It has been 'recovered' for us by Irish nationalist ideologues. To say this is not to absolve Britain of blame. Before John Major and Tony Blair took things firmly in hand, the two main British political parties in modern times could have been charged with chronic inattention and indifference. And that is not all. The Tories tend not to listen to the right people in Ireland – that is, to constitutional Irish nationalism – until it is too late. The Labour Party tends to listen too much to the wrong people in

Ireland – that is, to the Irish republican socialists – and are avid consumers of MOPE theory.

Of the two, I believe that since the Troubles broke out in Northern Ireland the Labour left line has done more lethal and lasting damage than Tory table-thumping. This left pandered both to Irish nationalist self-pity as well as to their firm conviction that Unionists were suffering from a form of false consciousness whereby, deep down, they wanted Irish unity, so that if you shot enough of them they would remember they were really republicans.

To close this comment on Anglo-Irish history, let me confirm that I do not believe Ireland can be considered a British colony in modern times in the same sense that India was a colony... and answer those academics who ask the John Cleese question: what did the British Empire ever do for Ireland?

To answer that I only have to look out the window over the village of Baltimore where I am writing these words. Apart from the big national things, like administration, education, and law and order, there are little local things. In living memory, orphan boys were taught useful skills at the old Fisheries School on the hill (now a hotel) built by Angela Coutts and her friend Queen Victoria. The fishing fleet still uses the pier first built by the Congested Districts Board. The harbour is sounded for safety by crews from the British hydrographic survey. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution looks after those in peril on the sea. And so on.

Baltimore and the sea summon to mind another Englishman, the brilliant Patrick O'Brian, creator of a fictional history for himself and also of two of the most benign ghosts who move around my mind: Captain Jack Aubrey and his close friend, the half-Irish ship's surgeon Dr Stephen Maturin.

Peter Weir's splendid film *Master and Commander* caught the action of the novels but missed the nuances. Stephen Maturin acts as an agent of the British government because he hates the tyrant Napoleon. But he is also an Irish patriot and sympathetic to the United Irishmen – who hope for help from Napoleon.

How Maturin handles these conflicts adds tension to the tales. But he never forgets the danger of ideology displacing decency. In *Master and Commander*,

he comes out with his credo: 'Man as a part of a movement or crowd is indifferent to me. He is inhuman. And I have nothing to do with nations or nationalism.'

A benign myth for the future

Before I bring on my last genial ghost, let me say a word of warning and a word of hope. The warning is that bigotry is no longer found in the back lanes of our cities, but among the educated barbarians who market their tribal wares as post-colonial studies, or women's studies, or ethnic studies. But ideological Irishness, no less than ideological blackness or ideological feminism, degrades and diminishes, petrifies and makes partial, the full complexity of what it is to be Irish, or black, or a woman.

The word of hope is that the Belfast Agreement is the best benign myth in Irish history. At the time of writing it is difficult to determine whether it will survive. But whether it does or not, the idea behind it will not die. As I said at the time, the Agreement is an 'amazing grace' and, even if it goes, will leave that grace behind.

Let me now turn to my last ghost: Lance Corporal Ian Malone of the Irish Guards, who died in an ambush on the streets of Basra in April 2003 beside his best friend, Christopher Muzvuru from Zimbabwe, the first black piper in the illustrious Irish regiment. Ian's body was brought home to Ballyfermot. Comrades from the Irish Guards came to carry his coffin – the first time British soldiers have been seen in uniform on the streets of Dublin since 1922. As the cortege passed by, members of the Garda Síochána saluted.

On his gravestone in Palmerstown cemetery is carved a Latin phrase, which is both the regimental motto of the Irish Guards and a rhetorical question that England and Ireland must ask each other: *Quis separabit?* Who shall separate us?

Who indeed? If a noble man such as Nelson Mandela can say 'I have not discarded the influence which Britain and British history and culture exercised on us' – who in Ireland or England would be arrogant enough to exclude even the smallest part of our common heritage history in the name of some mean little myth?



This generation should give thanks. Hatred has lost its hold. God and geography made England and Ireland neighbours. God and good history can help make us friends. Forever.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Uinseann Mac Eoin. *Survivors: the story of Ireland's struggle as told through some of her outstanding living people recalling events from the days of Davitt through James Connolly, Brugha, Collins, Liam Mellows and Rory O'Connor to the present day*; Dublin: Argenta Publications, 1980.

## Mary J. Hickman

*Mary J. Hickman is Professor of Irish Studies and Sociology at London Metropolitan University. She established the Irish Studies Centre at the University in 1986 and is now Director of the Institute for the Study of European Transformations. Her research into Irish migration and diaspora focuses on uneven processes of integration and their consequences for identities. She has been visiting professor at New York University, Columbia University and Victoria University, Melbourne. Her publications include Religion, Class and Identity, co-editing Thinking Identities: Ethnicity, Racism and Culture and Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization, and co-authoring Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain for the Commission for Racial Equality. In 1995, she organised the first conference in Britain at which all political parties in Northern Ireland agreed to speak: 'Northern Ireland. What Next?'; and was a member of the Irish Government's Task Force on policy regarding emigrants in 2001-02.*

## I am but I am not? A View of/from Britain

Mary J. Hickman

The histories of Britain and Ireland cannot be understood one without the other, however they are interpreted. Much of what happens in Ireland is still predicated on reaching over to the island to the East: be it for access to abortions, or to an easy-entry property market for surplus Euros generated in a fast-growing Irish economy. In the past, economic development in Britain depended upon Irish agricultural products, especially dairy and meat produce, and Ireland has continued to be a significant market for British manufactured goods. But the relationship has changed significantly, as Garret FitzGerald succinctly analyses elsewhere in this volume.

At the level of political governance and institutional practices, there has been a more one-way process; there is no doubt that British modalities have informed the burgeoning of the Irish State. There were profound continuities in official policy across a range of policy areas and governance issues between the pre- and post-independence southern state. In Britain, for example, there has been a long history of deporting/transporting unwanted people back to Ireland: from the Poor Law of 1834 to the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act (in the first few years of using deportation powers under this Act, the rate of Irish deportations ran at more than twice the rate for the next highest group, West Indians), and then under the Prevention of Terrorism Act from 1974 onwards. In Ireland, it was common practice for magistrates' courts in the 1950s and 1960s to agree that a custodial sentence could be waived if the offender was removed to Britain. This official shuffling of unwanted populations between the two islands has characterised both states: the Common Travel Area is, in part, its legal incarnation.

So histories entwined, yes; economies entwined, certainly until very recently; practices of governance doubly so, but not equally, imbricated, yes – but lives entwined? The standard answer to this question would also be in the affirmative, and would refer to the level of interconnection that exists between 'the two islands', or more rarely between 'these two nations', at the level of family ties, cultural similarities and identities. There is much truth in this, but I am not sure how far it takes us.

I think it is likely that an open-minded Irish man or woman would assent far more readily to this notion than his or her British equivalent. British people do not think much about Ireland, and that is an ongoing difference. 10 years ago, in an editorial headed 'Turning a blind eye to Ireland', *The Guardian* (8 August 1994) used the publication of the report of the Hamilton Inquiry into the Irish beef processing industry, which it likened to the Scott Inquiry into Britain's arms-to-Iraq affair, as an occasion to comment on the ignorance of the British about their closest neighbours, and how this underlined:

'... the otherness of Ireland, which is all too readily ignored in islands which share much of the same weather, speak mostly the same language, watch many of the same television programmes and bet on most of the same horse races. Even politically educated British people probably know more about French, German or nowadays Italian politics than they do about the Irish. How many of us could name the leader of Ireland's main opposition party – or perhaps even the party itself? Next time we start berating Ireland over this, that or the other failing over its counter-terrorism policy, just pause to reflect that this is a very near-by country of which most of us still know far too little to pass intelligent comment.'

The editorial was written barely 15 months after a visit of President Mary Robinson to Britain that included a meeting at Buckingham Palace with the British sovereign. This first such meeting for 56 years had received unprecedented publicity, most of it favourable. But still the British did not know much about the Irish.

I

It is hard not to engage with Britain at some level or another if you live in Ireland. For example, the airspace between Dublin and London is now the busiest in the world. It is used for business, returning to work, visiting relatives, but also for on-flights. London is Ireland's gateway to the world and, indeed, many other people's route into Ireland. In contrast, the impact of Ireland on their lives probably occurs to many British people only in the context of the threat from the IRA. Only five years prior to the *Guardian* editorial, *The Sunday Telegraph*, under the headline 'When Irish eyes are suspect' (29 October 1989), carried an article about the unreasonableness of expecting the police to apply the

presumption of innocence to the Irish population in Britain when so many are guilty of making up the hinterland of support and sympathy without which terrorists could not do their deadly deeds. Where the Irish in Britain were concerned, a fulsome knowledge of their inherent untrustworthiness was repeatedly declared in particular quarters. Do these examples depict lives entwined at the level of consciousness in Britain? Yes, in terms of a conception of an 'enemy within'. But no, in the sense wished for by this current publication.

A decade on, this ignorance is not so profound, the suspicion more latent, but have things changed fundamentally? Young British people seeking a language barrier-free and fashionable venue for a stag party or a weekend away in Euroland will often have Dublin as their first choice. This denotes a significant change from the recent past. But just as countless holidays in France and Spain have not necessarily dispelled xenophobic attitudes towards 'frogs' and 'Spanish tummy', binge drinking (a British speciality, as the British press ambiguously tells us) in Dublin may, ironically enough, do little to dent a stereotype about 'the Irish'.

It is not that Ireland has no place in the national consciousness in Britain, but that we have to ask, what is that place? In different eras, amongst different parts of the elite in Britain and amongst the people at large, attitudes to Ireland and the Irish have fluctuated to a great degree. It is possible to trace predominant elite attitudes in different periods of history, but much harder to know fully, for example, how Irish migrants looking for work were received in the 18th or 19th centuries. For the 20th century we are luckier, with an accumulating body of oral history evidence from Irish migrants and their children.

Attempts to interview British people about their attitudes to the Irish have been infrequent at best. In contrast, we are able to draw some conclusions about changing Irish attitudes to the British, thanks to the recent survey *Through Irish Eyes* (British Council Ireland, 2003), largely based on the views of a young urban, professional generation in Ireland. This report reveals that many of this particular group of Irish people, as a result of living there or visiting friends and family, know Britain well. Attitudes towards Britain are largely favourable, but are more complex and contradictory than attitudes to other countries. The historical relationship between Ireland and Britain is still influential in some respects, for example in a general sense of alignment together with Scotland and Wales

against England, or in broad but very nebulous support for a United Ireland. A distinctive finding of the survey is the ignorance about Northern Ireland that exists, much greater than about Britain. Individuals were far more likely to have visited London than to have crossed the border to the North. Generally the survey revealed a sense of Britain as a faded power, although one still managing to punch above its weight, but a Britain increasingly tangential to Ireland, politically and economically, thanks largely to Ireland's successful membership of the European Union. However, a strong sense of shared culture and interests persists in this generation, especially in sport and music. These young, successful Irish people see Britain as a multicultural society, although with ongoing 'race relations' problems, a qualification that appears to fuel trepidation about both incipient multiculturalism in Ireland, and the openness of Irish borders due to the Common Travel Area.

The only equivalent survey, giving an indication of British attitudes to the Irish, was carried out 10 years ago by the University of Bradford (full results were published in *The Irish Post*, December 1994). This is a snapshot prior to the peace process becoming embedded and before any general recognition of an economic turnaround in Ireland. The survey provides evidence of substantial Irish-British interconnection, although not quite of the order of the 'everyone has an Irish grandmother' refrain beloved of those who seek happy-ever-after endings. In fact, five per cent of those surveyed by the University of Bradford had an Irish grandmother. The survey concluded that one in five people in Britain have some relatives of Irish origin or connections through intermarriage (more true of England and Scotland than of Wales), and that three in five Britons had a friend, acquaintance or colleague who was Irish (far more common amongst 18-24 year olds than among the over-65s).

Attitudes here towards the Irish were revealed to be contradictory. The respondents were asked which group they felt closest to in a series of pairs, for example, between the Irish and the English, the Irish and the Scots, etc., and the results were processed for each grouping (that is for the English, Welsh and Scots). They found that various degrees of closeness emerge from the answers. Each group feels closest to its own members, but in each case a minority, occasionally substantial as in the case of the English, refuse to differentiate between the ethnic groups. Indeed the English emerge as the most British group. Those

English who made a choice put the Scots first and placed the Irish and Welsh together, but more than half felt equally close to all three Celtic groups. The Scots and the Welsh who made a choice put the Irish ahead of the English, but about half refused to separate the groups.

What the survey indicates is that a majority of Britons are broadly of the view that the Irish belong 'with home country peoples'. This is certainly a recognition of entwined histories. When asked whether they believed that, on balance, Irish immigration has been a good or a bad thing for Britain, overall 32 per cent of respondents said 'a good thing' (28 per cent in England; 36 and 44 per cent, respectively, in Scotland and Wales). The surveyors concluded that two-thirds of the overall sample did not see that the Irish have contributed considerably to Britain. In fact, 11 per cent overall (and in England 14 per cent) stated that Irish immigration has been a bad thing for Britain. This is significant given that, when asked directly about hostility, people are more likely to underestimate than overestimate their feelings.

The research team identified a persistent pattern of two groups of people answering questions very consistently, although very differently. One group was very positive about the Irish; the other group very negative. The positive group included those in the sample who were of Irish descent, the vast majority of whom were Catholics. The negative group viewed the Irish as foreigners, considered Irish immigration a bad thing, and their hostility was further intensified by IRA bombings in Britain.

In the 10 years since this survey was carried out, the fractures and frissons that characterise Britain's long adjustment to a post-empire role, its less than full-hearted membership of the EU, and its contemporary multiculturalism and devolution have all become more apparent. All these changes are attended by fears, especially in England, that Britain is dissolving itself. Where might a sense of entwined lives with Irish people sit within such an aggregation of tendencies? Britain's recent attempts at rebranding have been less successful than have Ireland's. The 'Third Way' and 'Cool Britannia' are already history. The attempt to reify the notion of a special relationship with the USA, as well as engaging in military action in order to return to something of the 'glories' of the past, is heavily contested. The most successful attempt has been to capitalise on London as a world city where the message is 'diversity not only works but is the basis



of a thriving economy'. As we see, even in the administration led by the Mayor, Ken Livingstone, a form of local chauvinism infuses pronouncements to the effect that London has got right what other cities, both in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, have struggled over. This strategy for attracting the wide range of immigrant labour required in the capital still seems to suggest that there can be no belonging, even to a world city, without the ancient dualities of 'us' and 'them'. One salient difference, to be sure, is that the 'us' in this case is cosmopolitan. Yet aside from the particularities of London, adaptation to the reality that Britain is a modest, post-imperial, early 21st century European country of second rank does not come easily. Perhaps it comes hardest of all in England.

## II

There is, of course, a more complex tale to tell. This is about the shifting hegemonies and hierarchies that make up Britain. When we refer to Britain or the British, it is not really to a nation or a people as such. Britain is the name of part of a state, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which encompasses four ethno-national entities: England (with 85 per cent of the population), Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A state is a set of institutions which a nation or group of nations may set up or subscribe to as the structure of its government and administration. Britain refers in most usages to England, Scotland and Wales, but 'British' is the name of the national identity associated with being a subject of the United Kingdom. Despite the diversity inherent in the formation of the British multinational state, it was tightly centralised until the recent significant widening of devolutionary powers. As one consequence, it is extremely difficult to disentangle what constitutes Britishness from what defines Englishness.

While this is, in part, attributable to the fact that Britain's constitutional system is based on the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy and the English constitutional settlement of 1688–89, the relationship between the two identities is rather more complex than the intricacies of constitutional settlements would suggest. British identity, especially in the 19th and much of the 20th century, always contained a strong element of ethnic particularity, based on its English core. This may explain why a MORI poll in 1999 showed that more than 80 per cent of Scots and over 70 per cent of the Welsh no longer think of themselves as primarily British.

Bernard Crick has observed that many old English Tories had a clear and politic sense of the diversity of the United Kingdom and took for granted that the main business of domestic politics was holding the United Kingdom together.<sup>1</sup> These Tories were ruthless in maintaining English political dominance. On one hand, they tolerated national cultural identities as long as state power was not challenged; on the other, they were happy to share out the spoils of empire among them, confident that advantages of numbers, wealth and territory would ensure English dominance within the United Kingdom and her colonies. Historically, the building of the British state was fundamentally an English expansionist project.

There have been many re-examinations of this project in recent years by historians and cultural theorists. For some the 'British' project of building the Great Arch of the State was a device for subsuming the Celtic nations within an Anglophone archipelago ruled by English sea power. Others emphasise how the Reformation established England as the independent entity on which the modern nation state was built. From this point onwards, they argue, the English were taught by government to give absolute allegiance to one sole authority, namely the monarch, a loyalty that inevitably, along with fear of conquest by Spain and the power of France, resulted in xenophobia towards the Pope and Catholic countries in Europe. Part of the same project involved the pursuit of supremacy over other nation-states and the attempted imposition of political, and ultimately cultural and religious, uniformity.

Phil Cohen has written that it required an enormous effort to 'naturalise the link between physical and political geography in the British Isles and central to this process was the fictive narrative of the island race.'<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, the scandal of the Catholic claim to their own island home rule consists in a United Ireland demanding for itself the same fictive accord between national identity and coastal integrity that the English had monopolised, precisely for the purposes of their own internal colonisation of the larger of the two islands of the archipelago. The English constructed themselves, therefore, as the backbone of a more inclusive sense of British nationhood that was able to assimilate all differences within an overriding principle of identity. It was this peculiar propensity on the part of the English to assimilate other cultures and races that underpinned the claim of superiority.

Mixing, however, does not necessarily produce propinquity; indeed, it involves a risk because it carries the potential to undermine mythic certainties. It is therefore not surprising that the diasporic aspects of the 'Celtic fringe' are rarely recognised in discussions of English national identity. It is as if, when Irish, Scottish or Welsh people migrate to England, they are subliminally perceived as migrating to the centre of that which they are assumed to know well: Britain/England. So they are simultaneously accorded a particular status, and no status at all. Moreover, in the case of the Irish there has arguably been little change in this attitude since part of the country became independent.

To bring my examples up to the recent past, let us examine *The Guardian's* disquisition on the subject of Englishness in 1993. In an editorial, the English are lauded for being able to live side-by-side with 'people who are different'. Ireland and the Balkans are singled out for negative comparison, places where people cannot live together side-by-side. Despite the editorial's caution against English self-congratulation, they are nonetheless applauded for their ability to 'never, for a second think of the Irish as different'. The editorial is not about the English being able to recognise difference and to live side-by-side happily with those marked by difference; it is about congratulating the English for viewing the Irish 'as the same'. So the ability to live with the Irish, who are not able to live with each other, is actually based on a denial of difference, a difference which is being invoked in the editorial in order to establish a laudable attribute of the English in contrast to others!

In 1995, a rumour circulated that Oasis would be asked to record a song for the England football team in the 1996 European Championship. The response of Noel Gallagher, the band's songwriter, who was born and brought up in Manchester, was 'Over my dead body ... we're Irish'. This did not prevent the *New Musical Express* from referring to Oasis as being 'as English as Yorkshire pud'.<sup>3</sup> Innumerable other examples could be offered of commentators ascribing Englishness to individuals who are of Irish descent, regardless of their own self-identification: from John Lennon through Johnny Rotten to The Smiths and Oasis.

This happens especially when they are being celebrated for sporting or cultural achievements. Both the Irish-born (usually described as British) and those of Irish descent (described as English unless known to be born in Scotland) are

the subjects of the absorbing and incorporating practices that have long been practised by those seeking to uphold Englishness as Britishness. Just today, before I sat down to embark on this essay, I heard a reporter on Radio 4's *Today* programme being asked had 'the Brits' had any success at the previous evening's 2005 Grammy awards in the United States? He responded, 'No, not really, apart from one award for Rod Stewart, blushes had only been spared by U2 receiving four awards.'

### III

But this denial of differences in some spheres often goes hand-in-hand with sharp differentiation in others. Although there has been a change in public perceptions about Ireland in the past decade, this does not mean that there is necessarily an across-the-board transformation in attitudes towards the Irish in Britain. The Irish, for example, are in certain contexts differentiated as drunks, navvies, scroungers and violent. These negative stereotypes were the dominant public representations of Irishness until very recently. The place where the Irish are most 'integrated' into the population – at work – is also the site of most reported experiences of harassment and discrimination.

Since the turn of the millennium, evidence has surfaced of the life still remaining in a number of previously common practices, such as 'Operation Pre-empt' on Humberside in 2000, when the police were told to pass on all dealings with anyone of Irish origin, descent or background to the Special Branch as a precaution against any bombing offensive; or the highly respected, multicultural primary school in Edinburgh that, in 2001, thought it was acceptable to display a large poster labelled 'Irish office timetable' (with the tirade that followed implying that the Irish were stupid, lazy, drunken people). Then there was the leader of the Conservative Party on Peterborough City Council, Neville Sanders, who in 2003 rejected a request from Carrickfergus Borough Council to support a call for an inquiry into the death of a Royal Irish Regiment trooper who had committed suicide, leaving notes that he had been abused by other soldiers. Sanders said that it should be accepted that soldiers die – 'that is what they are paid for' – but he wanted an apology from Ireland for the British soldiers killed by the IRA – 'We are quite happy for Northern Ireland to fuck off and run its own affairs. If you have a dispute do not involve us. ... I am fed up paying taxes to

cover lazy bastards in Ireland'<sup>4</sup>. Needless to say, Conservative Central Office distanced itself from his comments.

Conversely, one could cite the world of sport, always a source of interesting modes of stereotyping. Take rugby. Until recently, the Irish were rarely praised for traits such as preparation or technical mastery of the game. They were 'great/brave-hearted', 'fearless' – note the Matthew Arnold phraseology – 'unthinking' and 'passionate'. This has now changed. The next captain of the 'British' Lions may well be Brian O'Driscoll, and the current Irish team (comprising players from Northern Ireland and Ireland) is generally regarded as one of the two best of the six 'nations'. These sorts of change reflect increasing recognition that Ireland is a nation state in its own right, perhaps best exemplified by its pro-EU stance, and the recent ban on smoking in public places which has received widespread publicity and comment.

But where Britishness might be thought to allow for dual identifications (albeit within a tightly ascribed hierarchy), Englishness does not. In multi-ethnic Britain, 'Englishness' is under pressure not only from the claims of minority ethnic groups, but also because of devolution and the integrationist trajectory of the EU. Ironically, the people who are most likely to want to subscribe to the term 'British' these days are those groups positioned as marginal in various ways, but for whom a central aspect of their identity is being able to reflect at least dual allegiances: Black British, Black Asian, Ulster Unionist and Irish-British (although unlike the other terms, this last is not officially recognised). These are all groups about whom, when it comes to belonging, the English harbour reservations. This is not an issue of citizenship rights. Rather, in each case, one aspect or another of the group's positioning impels the English to disavow, disown or disdain them.

For the Black British or Black Asian, the situation is often 'no-win'. There has been a considerable degree of social mobility among some of the groups. Born and educated in Britain, but still visibly identifiable, no amount of social mobility can protect them from summary assumptions on the street that they are either immigrants, drug pushers or, if they 'look Asian', potential terrorists. On any of these grounds their diasporic connections are taken to nullify any obligation to recognise assertions of their Britishness.

For Ulster Unionists the situation can be equally galling. Their reception differs

markedly between Scotland and England. Born and educated in the United Kingdom and proud to be British as they may be, there is no reciprocal affection towards them in much of England. Contaminated equally by association with the public image of Ian Paisley as religious bigot, or simply with being 'Irish' where this is inextricably bound to a violent conflict, there has been no wish among the majority of Britons to be associated with the unionist or loyalist struggle in Northern Ireland. British politicians are carefully neutral on the subject. Indeed, if they are unlikely to be as sanguine about losing Scotland, this is largely because 'Project UK' would thereby be destroyed. The detachment of Northern Ireland does not constitute the same order of threat.

#### IV

I want now to turn my attention to the final group mentioned above: the Irish-British or British-Irish, a term which, as we are beginning to learn ('British-Irish' appears throughout the Good Friday Agreement), once it has been thrown into the pot, can certainly be expected to stir things up. Representing a renaming of relations between the two countries (all previous treaties between Britain and Ireland have been named Anglo-Irish), the term 'British-Irish' is an acknowledgement of what are deemed, by the two governments, to be the two major nation-state identities not only in Northern Ireland but also in the British Isles. Moreover, the term holds out the possibility, but not the certainty, of multiple belongings in both Britain and Ireland. This was addressed in Northern Ireland, but was thought not to require consideration in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, there has never been a way to be Irish-British or British-Irish in England, Wales or Scotland which is remotely comparable with the way in which it is perfectly acceptable for people to claim to be Irish-American, for example.

Indeed, one might expect there to be ready recognition of the potential for British and Irish identities to be entwined, through the children and grandchildren of Irish migrants to Britain. But in point of fact, both in England and in Ireland, there is pressure to categorise people of Irish descent in England as English. In England, the second-generation Irish are constantly positioned as having to defend charges of inauthenticity from those pressuring them to be English; while in Ireland, they face pressure of a different sort from those denying their Irish

identifications. Ireland and Britain represent hegemonic domains. Both intersect in the lives of children of Irish-born parents living in England, with material and psychological consequences for this second generation.

I have researched this subject for many years, and there is no doubt that one reason is because I was born in England to an Irish-born mother and a second-generation Irish father (quite a common scenario) and experienced many contradictory pressures growing up. Personally, I have never identified as English or as simply Irish. Instead, I was always aware of difference, of being in a minority. In the 1960s, for example, what I experienced as entwined was Irishness and Catholicism, both in family life and in the – mostly negative – perceptions of others. Friends' parents who did not want me in their house because of my Irish Catholicism impressed me deeply. It was this specificity of being an Irish Catholic in England which was formative. My schooling ensured I never experienced identifications as a simple affair. The Catholic schools I went to were run by Irish nuns and teachers who rarely mentioned Ireland, but tried to drum into us that we were as English as anyone else (of course we caught the defensive note). The interdenominational school I attended in my teenage years ensured that, as the law required, Catholics were separate for purposes of morning assembly. In all these state schools the overwhelming number of Catholics were second-generation Irish. Many people, of course, argue that what we were experiencing was the dying embers of anti-Catholicism on the one hand, and of defensive Catholicity on the other. This is true in some respects (though to argue that anti-Catholicism has evaporated altogether in England is stepping beyond the evidence), but it takes no account of the context at the time of a very large immigration into England from Ireland and the widespread negative reactions this evoked. We all found our (often different) ways in this context.

Recently, with other scholars, I was able to carry out a study based in five cities in England and Scotland of people who have at least one parent born in Ireland (north or south).<sup>5</sup> Here I want to relay some of what we found in England, in particular. Given the age bulge of the second-generation Irish, most of the people involved in the research had grown up in the 1970s and 1980s. There is no doubt not only that people of Irish descent identify themselves in a variety of ways, but that how they identify themselves can frequently change over time, and in different situations. People who as a child experienced negative reactions

to being seen to derive from an Irish family or having an Irish name, for example, or individuals who witnessed hostility towards their parents on the bus and in other public places, might respond to these events very differently. What was overwhelmingly clear across the board was the importance of childhood experiences, particularly in the family and also at school (the two most significant locations), but also when out and about on trips or visiting friends. For many people, early experiences at work often determined how they subsequently presented themselves as well.

Incidents from when they were growing up were repeatedly cited to explain adult propensities towards identifying in particular ways. Many people described how they became aware of difference by visiting their friends' homes, or noticing things in their immediate neighbourhood. The following extracts are from one of the discussion groups we held. This one was in Manchester (all names have been changed).

Liam: I became really aware of how different I was from some middle-class English people, I was only about six. My best friend at school I went to his house, he lived in Stretford, he wasn't a poncey middle class at all, but he was English. I was struck by how different the environment felt in his house to mine. I remember flags and emblems and things. It felt really weird to me. His mum was very well spoken, and it was odd for me. The dad was a very colonel character. Although I was only six I thought this is very different, you start to realise you are different.

Eilish: One thing I noticed where my mum lives, we were the only ones that went out on a Sunday morning by car to mass. Everyone else was washing their cars, we were the only ones that went to mass. So completely different, and they didn't see mass as an issue because it's not to them. ... If you go to an Irish house, and I didn't notice until I went to an English person's house, it is so different. If I went to your [other people in the discussion group] house, I would stay to dinner because that is what happens. If you went to a friend's house or relatives' you'd get sandwiches, cake and tea. If you stay for half an hour you get biscuits and a cup of tea. If you went to somebody else's house, you'd be waiting for the drink.



This man and woman are not describing segregated lives. But they are describing lives characterised in their eyes by different cultural practices and by contact with different institutions. In this discussion group, people struggled for terms in which they could express what is to many the self-evident 'truth' of being, in Liam's words, 'a separate identity from Irish from Ireland, and British'. People struggling with proportionality generally spoke from a position of the relevance of 'British' as a civic identity, thereby acknowledging their status as citizens and the benefits they accrued from the education system and the welfare state. A member of another discussion group, this time in Banbury, also expressed his hybrid identity. What he and others wished for most was for recognition to be accorded the second generation.

James: It is recognition though. That is the main thing. I have found this tonight to be really interesting. The only other opportunity I get is if I am talking to cousins, who like me were born here. Then when you sit down and start talking to them about it, they understand. They know what you are talking about. When you say about the duality of am I this, am I that. I am, but I am not.

We were doing this interviewing and holding discussion groups on either side of the 2001 Census which included 'Irish' as a category in the 'White' section of the ethnic origin question, counterposing it to 'British' or 'Other'. Given a free choice of ethnic self-description, we found that a clear majority of people with one or two Irish-born parents gave themselves some form of 'mixed' label in preference to choosing a single ethnic background. A maximum of about a quarter of the respondents, who probably included a larger than average number of those with a strong interest in their Irish heritage, described themselves as more definitively 'Irish', and a smaller proportion selected 'British' or 'English'. So in one sense the term 'British-Irish', had it been included in the Census's ethnic categories, would represent a step forward in the eyes of many Irish in Britain. The advantage is that it recognises dual identities: the disadvantage, that it reifies two nation-state identities and still does not allow for complex hybridisation.

However, it is not included in the Census, and a denial of their hybridised identities is what such individuals usually encounter. Ireland rejects these 'hybrids' as not Irish – as, in fact, English. England cannot countenance any weakening of the

hegemonic national subject, that is, cannot include an acceptance of internal difference at the level of cultural belongingness, and thus also insists on their Englishness. The contesting of their identities by others surfaced in all the discussion groups. Most prevalent was a sense that, in England, nothing is done to encourage a sense of Irish identity, and that if a white individual with an English accent articulates an Irish identification, they meet resistance, often to the point of argument and estrangement.

This was mirrored by the perception that, in Ireland, claims by people born in England to be 'Irish' are treated more often than not as risible. Claims of Irishness made by people with English accents on holiday in Ireland are swiftly disavowed; while assertions of an Irish identity on the part of second-generation Irish who have gone to live and work in Ireland during the past decade are frequently greeted with hostility.

In Banbury, Kieran gave an example of the pressure to conform to 'being English' in the workplace. His own identification is as English and British, but here he explains the fallout at work when someone is identified as second-generation Irish.

Kieran: ... at work it came up in the last six months, ... They probe for one's weak point – they are PE teachers. Delia Cronin is in the office, and she bites all of the time, and I tell her, please Delia don't bite. They found out that Delia is second-generation Irish and they go on and on about, 'You are English'. I got involved in that in explaining to them, actually I'm in the same situation. 'Oh OK. What do you say you are?' 'I'm British'. So in some ways it made it worse. It has raised an awareness about cultural backgrounds amongst the people there, and now they're talking about Irish, and Scottish and the rest of it.

Delia's 'bite' is something to be controlled. Kieran, sensitive – as someone of an Irish background who identifies as English might be – tries to control her impact himself, in fact sees this aspect of her as symbolising his distance from Irishness. She is what he is not. However, he gets caught up in the fallout from the discovery that she is second-generation Irish. Her colleagues' constant insistence to Delia that she is English is an unpropitious attempt to regain the secure landscape of homogenous white Englishness.

Sometimes what I am outlining here is described as being 'caught between two cultures'. But this implies being locked in position between an inability to achieve full assimilation in England and an inability to achieve full membership in Ireland. The participants in these discussions and interviews were more concerned with expressing and gaining recognition for the complexity of the identifications and positionings of the second generation. Their desire was for recognition of this hybridity, rather than for the key to a successful trajectory along either assimilatory path. These simultaneous, compatible loyalties make sense if you are second-generation Irish in England. But they also do serve to differentiate and position those individuals in the eyes of others.

## V

My conclusions are far from definitive, but there are a number of them. Irishness, however defined, is not as visible or important to the British/English as Englishness/Britishness is to the Irish. Historical attitudes about the relationships between Britain and Ireland still persist in both countries. There are many Britains and even many Englands, not simply the contrast between London and the rest. A central trope for many English people is the disappearance or challenging of old certainties regarding Britain and the wider world. All of the above notwithstanding, I think there is accumulating evidence of an increasing acceptance that Ireland is a nation state in its own right, and that it is different in various ways from Britain.

That said, these two nation states and their 'narratives of differentiation' as well as the drama of their historical relationship frame the identities and positionings of the second-generation Irish population in England in constraining ways. Neither nation is ready to acknowledge the degree of hybridisation or entwining of identities that exists, or the changed relationship to the nation that this very fact signifies. Ironically, both English hostility when faced with the spectre of Irish identities, and Irish denials of the authenticity of those same identities, utilise the pejorative term 'Plastic Paddy'. The message from each is that the second-generation Irish are 'really English'. It is a message many of the second generation themselves resist.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Crick, B. (ed.) (1991) *National Identities: The Constitution of the United Kingdom*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- <sup>2</sup> Cohen, P. (1999) *The Last Island*. London: Centre for New Ethnicities Research, University of East London.
- <sup>3</sup> Sean Campbell (1998) Race of angels: the critical reception of second generation Irish Musicians. *Irish Studies Review* 6(2): 165–174.
- <sup>4</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 June 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> An ESRC-funded research project: 'The Second-Generation Irish: A Hidden Population in Multi-Ethnic Britain' (reference number: R00023836). See: Hickman, M.J., Morgan, S., Walter, B. and Bradley, J. (2005) The limitations of whiteness and the boundaries of Englishness: second-generation Irish identifications and positionings in Multi-ethnic Britain. *Ethnicities* 5(2): in press.

## Trevor Ringland

*Trevor Ringland is a partner in a firm of Belfast solicitors, having studied law at Queen's University Belfast. He is married to Colleen with three children. Trevor was born in Belfast in 1959 and returned there after living in Glenarm and Larne. He played rugby for Queen's University Belfast, Ballymena, Ulster, Ireland and the British Lions. He is a member of the British Irish Association and a founder member of the pro-Union group Re-Union, set up to promote a positive vision of Unionism. He is also Vice Chairman of East Belfast Ulster Unionist Party, Co-Chairman of the One Small Step Campaign, director of the Ireland Funds and Mediation Network, a trustee of the RUC George Cross Foundation and a non-executive director of Independent News & Media (NI) Ltd. In 2003, he co-authored the pamphlet A Long Peace: The future of Unionism in Northern Ireland 'with Mick Fealty and David Steven.*

## One Small Promise

### Trevor Ringland

In the hope that it might assist in our wider search for a better understanding of who we really are, I will start, unusually, where I have eventually finished up. John Hewitt, the Ulster Poet, in a debate on Irish Identity in *The Irish Times* (4 July 1974), once stated:

'I'm an Ulsterman, of planter stock. I was born on the island of Ireland, so secondarily I'm an Irishman. I was born in the British archipelago and English is my native tongue, so I am British. The British archipelago are offshore to the continent of Europe, so I'm European. This is my hierarchy of values and as far as I'm concerned anyone who omits one step in that sequence of value is falsifying the situation.'

However it was my friend Jim McDonald, currently Chair of the RUC (George Cross) Foundation, who came up with what I see as a variant that can encompass all the people of Northern Ireland, a version capable of adaptation to include all those now living here, no matter what their religion, race or creed:

'I am a Belfast Man, I am an Ulsterman, I am an Irishman and I am British, and those last two are interchangeable, and I am European and anyone who demeans any one part of me demeans me as a person.'

Surely those few, simple words can embrace the complexity of the different influences that have an impact on and shape all of us? It reminds us that our characters are not only comprised of Protestant/Catholic, Nationalist/Unionist or loyalist/republican. I would also like to think, as we evolve into an increasingly diverse society - that the words Indian, Chinese, Pakistani, Lithuanian or other can be added in.

Yet the formula itself - and indeed, arriving at the point where I can acknowledge such a definition of who I am - would mean far less to me, were it not for the sense of a journey taken to get here.

My first memories of childhood are of living in Finaghy Road North in West Belfast. Nowadays, many people would exclaim at the idea that a policeman's family could have lived in the heart of West Belfast in the 1960s. Yet we did. Our neighbours were just that, neighbours: it was irrelevant whether they were Protestant or Catholic. The day we learnt that one of our friend's children was going into the priesthood, my family were delighted for him and his family.

At that time, my father was a constable in Springfield Road Station in Belfast. I well remember visiting him there, going into Jackie Vernon's butchers across the road, and purchasing my first watch in another shop close by. Amongst my most enjoyable early memories was a holiday together with a number of other police families, in Arklow in the Republic of Ireland. I was young. They were good times: and there was no indication of what lay ahead for that community.

Maybe I was too unaware of the tensions lying just underneath the surface, that were to explode so tragically only a short time later, driving a wedge through the people who lived in that area. In some ways, in those days, while we had less we also had more. We children walked around the streets even at night-time without our parents fearing for our safety.

In 1968, my father was promoted to sergeant and transferred to the village of Glenarm in the Glens of Antrim. Here was my first taste of the 'Ulster-Scots language', with all of us struggling to understand what many of the local people were saying. The police station was split in two, one half providing for the family's living quarters. We were part of the community and I was known locally as the Sergeant's Son. In those days a sergeant really was in charge of his own fiefdom.

However, even in that small village, an ominous fault line ran straight through our community. There were insufficient children of primary school age to make up one school. Yet the village had not just one, but two: one Catholic, one Protestant. The 'Protestant' school was also 'the state school'. Often in those country areas, there were bonds that managed to prevent relationships breaking down to the extent that they did in other parts of Northern Ireland. But when we moved to the local town, Larne, where I attended Larne Grammar School,

the segregation of education surfaced again, and only a small number of Catholics attended the school at that time.

Many young Protestant and Catholic children do not socialise with their counterparts until they are over the age of 18, by which time their prejudices are already fixed and difficult to overcome without a struggle. Some manage this better than others. Why should we be surprised that we have conflict when we separate our children at such a young age and, in doing so, also keep their parents apart? Other countries recognise the negative potential consequences of separatist education and set in place laws to ensure that it does not happen. The failure to deal with this single issue probably says more about the quality of leadership in our society than anything else.

Throughout my teenage years I had limited contact with those from a Catholic or nationalist background. But I probably had more exposure than most. Anyone I was close to was nothing other than friendly. Indeed, if all Catholics and nationalists in Ireland had the same attitude to their neighbours as those I knew in Larne, we may well have had a United Ireland years ago.

But it was during our time at Glenarm that 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland broke out...

Up to that point, the most daunting problem my father would have to confront in Glenarm was the new coast road that was washed away one stormy night, obliging him and his men to stand on either side of the gaping holes that suddenly pockmarked the road, in order to warn unsuspecting approaching drivers. There were poachers on the local estates to reckon with, sheep-dipping forms to distribute to farmers, and there was a general requirement to support the community. My grandfather, one of the first batch of recruits into the newly formed RUC in 1922, told stories of earlier duties. He would regale us with tales of illicit whiskey seizures (poteen), reminisce about the US soldiers he met during the war years, and explain how he used to earn more competing in the Catholic parish sports at the weekend than he did as a policeman during the rest of the week.

But after 1969, of necessity, the nature of policing was transformed. For long periods my father was away from home, at riots in Belfast or Londonderry. Police families such as ours, who were living in police stations, faced a new threat. One



night while my father was on duty at some rioting going on in Londonderry, my grandfather had to drive 80 miles from Kilkeel in the small hours to collect my mother, my two brothers and me, after information came through warning her of an imminent attack on the station. Or so I am told. I would like to say the experience had a traumatic effect on me, but it did not. I cannot remember a thing. And yet, a lot of my story revolves in one way or another around my father's experiences during those difficult years. It has influenced the way I have responded to the very different opportunities that have come my way ever since.

For the next 30 years, police officers and their families were to remain under a constant 24-hour threat. At some times that threat was greater than at others. But every time they opened their front doors or started their cars, it could have been the last time. And tragically, for many officers it was. Many had to move house, suddenly. The husband would phone to say that the removal van would be there within the hour and that he didn't know where the new home was, but he would see them there later. Police families constituted what was in effect a 'third community' in Northern Ireland, the buffer between the other two. Some might like to dispute it, but the reality is that without such a buffer, a civil war would have broken out, with all its tragic consequences.

My mother recently told me about an occasion which provides a taste of this uncomfortable position: for during this period, as during the Ulster Worker's Council strike, the threat came from loyalists. One night, while my father was working as an inspector in Glenravel Street in Belfast, he telephoned my mother at around midnight to say that he was on his way home, a 30-minute journey at most. As he left the police station, it was attacked by the IRA and a gun battle ensued which resulted in my father and one of his men having to spend the next couple of hours lying under an army Land Rover in the station car park. While this was going on, my mother received a phone call from Larne Police Station warning her that a number of policemen's houses in Larne had been attacked by loyalists. My father did not normally telephone to say that he would be on his way home, so you can imagine what it was like waiting for him to arrive on that night.

The Troubles escalated throughout the 1970s. While my father was stationed in various different parts of Northern Ireland, and was put in charge of Andersonstown Police Station in the mid-to-late 1970s, we grew up in Larne. In

those days he quite often worked a 16-hour day, and I saw relatively little of him. I recall, when I was about 14, coming across the inquest photographs of one of the worst atrocities; on this occasion carried out by loyalists. Those images still remain with me. My father had to be at the mortuary whenever various members of the family arrived. It fell to him to decide which of the relatives would be strong enough to identify the body of their loved one. When he thinks back to those vigils, as he tells it, the smell still lingers, even to this day. We in our community had somehow permitted the extremes to determine the relationships between the rest of us. At the time, those pictures brought home to me the high cost of that failure. I realised it was far too high a cost, a conviction that has remained with me ever since.

My mother, while she was always there for my father, shielded her three sons from the worst effects of the Troubles in a way which, I have no doubt, allowed us to keep a certain balance in our attitudes. For my part, in many respects life continued as normal, although one close friend of mine did become entrammelled in a loyalist organisation. I have often reflected on why things were different for him and me: simply the fact that I lived on the edge of the estate, while he lived in the middle of it; and that I had the influence of people like my father around me, while he did not.

Now that we are finally coming to terms with the understanding that the Troubles should never have happened, we must also bear in mind that many people did things that they would never have done in a normal society. How do we reconcile those people and society? It is a long-term process, regrettably impeded by the continued existence of the paramilitaries. We are not required to accept that what they did was justified, let alone right. But we do have to acknowledge that our society broke down: that together we have undergone a peculiar trauma. We tend, for example, to forget that as recently as 1968, Scotland Yard had to be brought in to investigate a murder in Northern Ireland, because the RUC had neither the experience nor the expertise.

From Larne Grammar I went on to study Law at Queen's University in Belfast, for the first time living with people of different religious, racial and political backgrounds. In retrospect, I think we managed this rather successfully, without any major fracas. But these were tense times. As we took our exams, the IRA tried to kill one of the mature students in the Law Faculty who was an RUC officer.

Fortunately, he survived that attack. It left me wondering who had given the IRA the information to enable them to target him. Was it someone I knew? When the university voted to support the hunger strikers – a vote that was subsequently overturned – it raised a question in my mind which remains unanswered: why do nationalists or republicans vote for those who not only kill Protestants as a way of uniting the people of Ireland, but also in the process kill many Catholics and nationalists? Whatever the provocation, there is still no question in my mind that the violence that emanated from the republican movement was totally disproportionate to the real or perceived wrongs suffered by the nationalist community.

At the same time, I did appreciate the experience of many nationalists in Northern Ireland. If at all possible, soldiers should not be used in a civil environment. That much was clear from my perspective. Later on, as a lover of history, I came to understand that there was discrimination in Northern Ireland before 1969, and a singular failure by the unionist community to realise the sense of disappointment that must have reverberated in the wider nationalist community when they found themselves a minority inside Northern Ireland. I have also come to accept that the Civil Rights protests were absolutely justified. But thinking back, any earlier glimpse I had of the nationalist predicament was probably also due to my father's experiences as a police officer in West Belfast, prior to the Troubles. It was here that he made many friendships that he has managed to keep even to this day. Here that he got to know his great friend Paddy Devlin, a man who, no matter what his political or constitutional perspective, cared about the people.

The best story my father told about Paddy took place while he was in charge of Andersonstown Police Station. Sadly, Paddy's mother died. When my father indicated that he would go to the funeral, Paddy told him bluntly that he could not do so because he would be shot. My father insisted and on the day of the funeral walked with the cortege up the Andersonstown Road and into Milltown Cemetery to pay his respects to Paddy and his family at the graveside. He then went back across the road and into Andersonstown Police Station, feeling very brave. Some months later he was out with Paddy and after a few drinks began to boast about his resolve. Paddy eventually, fed up with listening to him, turned to him and said, 'I don't know why you're feeling so brave. Sure I arranged for you to have a 24-hour pass.'

Even during the worst of times, such solid relationships were built and sustained. What both men understood was that whilst they differed politically, each wanted what was best for all the people of the community. It was a basis for some kind of recognition: a sense of common humanity. This is why I say, bearing in mind that we must share this place, let us ensure that in the future children from both communities meet while they can still understand something of the other's feelings, with a firm emphasis on respect and the acceptance of difference.

I would like to say I took an active role in politics in Queen's University, but I did not. I was one of the 95 per cent of students who were not particularly interested, just worried about obtaining a reasonable degree and enjoying university life to the full. I did join the Rugby Club and made it to the first 15. We travelled the length and breadth of Ireland, playing against other universities. I wish many more people from a unionist background could experience the good will we met wherever we travelled, forging relationships which persist to this day. I went on to play for Irish Universities, which – if I needed convincing – finally persuaded me that it is possible to work together for mutual benefit, even in the face of political differences. This is an insight neatly enshrined for me in the words of one Irish captain, who turned to his team before they ran out to play against England at Twickenham and said:

'Lads, when you get out onto the pitch I want you to spread out but stick together.'

It was generally a successful period for sport at Queen's, with rugby, hockey and gaelic football all doing well. I was conscious that each success brought honour to us all, and thankfully, able to acknowledge it. My own friendships from that time included a student involved in the Gaelic Club who often extended an invitation to me to attend the All-Ireland Final. I said I could do this only when Rule 21, which prohibited the RUC and others in the security forces from playing gaelic sports, was abolished. When the ban was finally removed in 2001, he rang me the next day to renew the invitation. After negotiating transport, a meal and as much as I could drink, I graciously accepted. That day when Armagh beat Kerry was a good day for friendship, as I knew it would be. Moreover, being a unionist in a bar near Croke Park, I wasn't required to put my hand in my pocket

once, which undoubtedly appealed to the Scottish side of my ancestry. As I write, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is about to debate a change to Rule 42, which would allow rugby and football to be played in the home of gaelic sports - another example of the incremental changes that are slowly but surely transforming our society.

Back in 1990, when a young rugby player was seriously injured at my rugby club, Ballygalget GAA Club offered us a fundraising night: one half gaelic football, the other a form of rugby. These were sportspeople helping a fellow player. That is the true spirit of sport. We would be better off on this island if it prevailed more widely, for it is one of the strengths of sport that you learn to compete without destroying relationships. Play for Ulster against the three other provinces of Ireland – Munster, Leinster and Connacht – and no quarter is given. Yet after a rugby match, you are expected to socialise with your opposite number. Good thing too, because in no time you could find yourselves playing together on the same team.

That is not to say that there was no disagreement amongst the players. Indeed, disagreement is essential for a team's success. We continually challenged ourselves. Were we using the right tactics? What were our strengths and weaknesses? Differences were mostly constructive, and the keener the debate, the better our understanding of how we could improve. But the most successful teams I have played on, whether at club, provincial or international level, were those where the individuals played for each other.

In 1981, I was picked to play for Ireland against Australia. It was a great honour to represent all the people on the island. My father travelled down to watch the game, for once occupying the excellent seat I had procured for him. On all subsequent occasions, the necessary security precautions prevailed. Of course, I soon found myself, as a unionist, standing for 'The Soldier's Song'. Too few people understand that when the Irish rugby team plays in Dublin, 'The Soldier's Song', the national anthem of the Republic of Ireland, is played. Conversely, when Ireland plays in Belfast it's the turn of 'God Save the Queen'. I welcome this. It shows an ability to reach accommodation and respect difference. And indeed, the reaction of most people was positive and supportive. But my mother does recount being stopped on the street shortly after that first match by a woman who said, 'I saw your son playing rugby for Ireland on Saturday. You must be

very proud of him. And tell him from me that he didn't stand too straight for that oul' song of theirs.' My mother nodded and, walking on, was shortly stopped by another woman who said exactly the same thing except, 'Tell him from me that he stood far too straight for that oul' song of theirs.'

All in all, it was a good period for Irish rugby. In 1982 we won the Triple Crown; then, in 1983, the Championship; and again, in 1985, the Triple Crown. In 1983 I toured New Zealand with the British Lions, soon to be rechristened the British and Irish Lions in proper recognition of the significant number of Irish players. In 1986 there was more politics of a different kind when the Lions' tour to South Africa was called off due to the row over apartheid. Meanwhile, policemen such as Jimmy McCoy playing on the team required 24-hour security, and we knew the Garda would do whatever was necessary. My time on the team coincided with some of the darkest hours of the Troubles, but somehow, we stayed above politics and its destructive influences. We loved our sport, and recognised the benefit of maintaining decent relationships on the island.

In 1987, however, problems hit close to home. As we were travelling to Dublin on a Saturday morning to a training session before the 1987 World Cup, three friends, David Irwin, Nigel Carr and Philip Rainey, were caught up in an explosion which tragically killed Lord Justice Gibson and his wife. The IRA members who detonated that bomb did not know who the occupants of that car were, children or adult, nationalist or unionist. They did not care. The injuries he sustained were to finish Nigel Carr's international rugby career. The support we received came not only from our fellow team members, but from almost everyone in Ireland.

In the same year, we needed a team anthem for the first Rugby World Cup in New Zealand. As we stood, about to do battle with Wales, our faces turned against the wet and windy Wellington day, out of the tannoy system came the worst version of 'The Rose of Tralee' I have ever heard. It was no wonder we lost the match. A newspaper reporter, Con Houlihan, wrote that perhaps before the next match we should play 'God Save the Rose of Tralee'. Eventually 'Ireland's

Call', emphasising the four provinces working together to succeed, hit the right note.

The year after that World Cup, I played my final season for the Irish Team. I was

dropped after an English winger, Chris Oti, scored three tries against me at Twickenham. Personally, I did not feel I was to blame for all three, but the rest of the world did. I remember returning, disconsolate, to the hotel room which I shared with Keith Crossan and deciding to ring my mother. No matter what, I knew she would think I had played well. My young brother Jonathan answered the call, greeting me with the words, 'What the hell did you go and do that for? Do you realise I can't go out tonight because of you?'

However, any concerns I had about my rugby career were quickly extinguished when I turned on the television to catch the evening news. There, for the rest of the world to see, were my people behaving like animals. Two corporals, Woods and Howe, had been slaughtered by the Republican Movement, who acted as their judge, jury and executioner. It certainly put rugby into perspective.

Yet time moves on. Something good even came out of that black day, as I realised years later, when I attended the West Belfast Festival and found myself talking to one of the organisers. A few of them had thought twice about what such actions were turning their people into. Their efforts, beginning with the festival, grew into a year-round programme of community work. It has had a positive influence in that community. I sensed their growing confidence for myself, when I was there. Perhaps, what they have to realise now is the need to reach outwards and help the confidence of the other people they share Northern Ireland with.

I like to think that if I have inherited anything from my father, it is his ability to talk to anyone, no matter who they are. Perhaps this has been easier for me than for most because sport is such a great promoter of unexpected alliances. Talking at different times to people formerly imprisoned in the Maze, I have been amused to discover at least one loyalist and one republican who cheered the same try scored by Ginger McLaughlin against England at Twickenham in 1982. On another occasion, a former republican prisoner who was telling me how well Ireland had played in a match against Australia the previous Saturday, broke off

to confess that he was a devoted Arsenal supporter. No doubt, Jim McDonald has it right: there are so many different influences that help to shape us, all we need do is concentrate that wee bit more on the things that we share. After all, both that republican and I hate Manchester United!

This ability to talk to everyone became particularly important to me from May 1996 onwards. Throughout the 1980s I maintained an active interest in politics. Having been fortunate enough to travel the world, I appreciated what a beautiful place Northern Ireland was. I also understood that, when you pressed certain buttons in our midst, you received a good response. Only recently, over a million pounds was placed into a wooden barrel outside St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast in support of the tsunami appeal for the people of Indonesia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. That, I believe, is the true character of the Northern Ireland people. However, when you press the wrong buttons you end up with Drumcree and the two corporals' murders, as well as all the other horrors of the past 30 years.

I determined to become involved in the problems of Northern Ireland and at least to contribute to the debate. Having a family of my own has helped. My mother had always impressed upon me the importance of trying to see things from another's perspective, but now my wife, Colleen, whom I married in 1986, took up that mantle, remaining a moderating influence and a persuasive voice of common sense to this day. Once, an ill-advised moment of satisfaction on my part at the death of a group of armed republicans had her rounding on me with the unanswerable reproach: 'those are somebody's brothers, somebody's father, somebody's son.' She was right, then as now. We had a baby in 1988. When my father had his first grandchild placed into his arms, I was struck to see a weight clearly lifted off his shoulders. It was as if he had spent too much of his time staring into the very worst of our society. Suddenly, this package of innocence arrived and he realised there was another side to life.

It made me think back to what it was like for him to be on duty on Bloody Friday, and imagine the panic in the police officers' minds as they tried to direct the population of Belfast to somewhere safe as bombs were going off all around them. I remembered coming home to East Belfast to find him sitting in my house visibly distressed, when he was a divisional commander in Cookstown. The IRA had carried out an attack in his area, killing two people. One of them had been decapitated, and the police had to search the fields for that person's head. As



was so often the case, those who pulled the trigger or pressed the button simply ran off, without having to face the results of their actions. By contrast, it was been a dirty war for police officers, who so often had to deal with the consequences.

And as a result their families had to act as counsellors. Many marriages suffered. A visit to the RUC George Cross Foundation Memorial Garden at Police Headquarters in Knock in East Belfast brings home the reality of policing in a society in conflict. Police officers were one group who would have no difficulty with peace. Later on, when the RUC became the Police Service of Northern Ireland (incorporating the RUC), the men and women who had served in it were awarded the George Cross. It is sometimes forgotten this was also awarded to their families. That made sense too.

So the time had come to give something back, but what? As my understanding of the history of Northern Ireland grew, I had begun to develop a deep sense of frustration with the unionist community. They had rejected the initiatives of Terence O'Neill and Brian Faulkner and, as a result, narrowed the whole concept, taking it down a path that led to nowhere but Protestant nationalism. They had failed to understand that simply by concentrating on the great strengths of their argument and promoting a sharing of this society, they could have done so much to alleviate the cause of conflict. I believed strongly that my Britishness also included my Irishness. What is Britishness, after all, without its main constituent elements – Scottish, English, Welsh and Northern Irish – with, no doubt, other influences to come? Time and again the unionist community had missed opportunities to work with those nationalists who also cared about our society. By giving a little, they could have gained so much.

Yet, of course, I speak these words now with the luxury of hindsight and have to remind myself to appreciate the many who stayed involved in politics, trying to work constructively in the most difficult of circumstances when many others opted out.

So what happened to me in May 1996? There had been so many hopes that the 1990s would lead Northern Ireland into a more peaceful future. However in 1996, the IRA ceasefire broke down. My good friend Hugo McNeill, who also played full-back for Ireland, contacted me to suggest that we arrange a rugby

match in Dublin to give people an opportunity to show their support for peace. And it worked. Those were the days just before rugby became a professional sport. Yet not one of the international team of players from around the world charged for their services when asked to play for the Barbarians against this Irish Fifteen. Francois Pienaar and David Campese travelled thousands of miles, even though they were unable to play, to cheer on Rory Underwood, Phillippe Sella, Will Greenwood and others against an Irish team that included David Humphries, Richard Wallace and Jeremy Davidson.

On the day, Hugo was a tower of organising strength. We wanted to do more than just make a simple statement about peace. In fact, we had invited some of the many individuals whose lives had been devastated by the Troubles to come out with us onto the pitch, bearing witness to the consequences of a societal breakdown like ours, and its effect on nationalists and unionists alike. For me, the build-up to that game had been an emotional rollercoaster. Over the preceding weeks I had had so many discussions with people affected by our Troubles. Deciding to try to get to the root of the problem, I had determined to talk to everybody. I soon found that doors were indeed open to me on all sides. I could talk to Irish republicans because I had represented the Irish people. Loyalists respected my sporting background, because I had represented Ulster. I gave numerous interviews to a supportive media. There was the day I mentioned one particular atrocity in a newspaper and found myself picking up the phone to the victim's mother, who said, 'Mr Ringland there is no peace in my house.' Her son had been killed by the IRA in the centre of Belfast: her husband, she explained, had died some two years later of a broken heart. As movingly, I also talked to so many people who, often unrecognised, were working away trying to deal with deep divisions and tragedy.

Many times before I walked out to the crowd at Lansdowne Road with a degree of trepidation. But that day was altogether different. Hugo and I were joined by some young people: a friend of Tim Parry, who was killed in the Warrington bomb, and a young lad, Darren Baird, who lost his mother, father and sister in the Shankill bomb, and who had come along with a friend and a young student involved in cross-border interactions. Also with us was Thomas Mullan, whose brother was shot dead at Greysteele, an atrocity carried out in retaliation for that Shankill bomb. I was to walk out onto the pitch with Darren and Thomas's

hands in mine, and stood on the edge, filled with dread. We had prepared a careful speech. Everything was ready to go. But I knew I would break down. I could see my tough image as a rugby player, cultivated over some years, crumbling to dust in the next few minutes.

The faulty tannoy system saved the day, rendering our speech redundant and me furious in one fell swoop. Nevertheless something had changed for me. I am a unionist, but since that day my politics has been driven by a belief that we have wasted enough lives in our country over narrow concerns. More than that, we have to reach the stage where our leaders hold onto the hands of both those children and care about them equally, or be exposed for their failure to do so.

I now see much more clearly that, whether I am watching Drumcree unfold or the riots in Cluan Place, East Belfast, one common factor is the role played by certain politicians. Not only do these individuals fail to care about the people from what they call 'the other community', but there is scant evidence that they have much regard for those from their own. They manipulate us like puppets on a string. They play on our fears, all for the pursuit of power. Yet people are still voting for the politics of the extremes. I wonder, do they really think about the consequences of doing so? After all, follow someone who is likely to get you into a fight, and how can you complain when you find yourself engulfed?

A share of my anger has been reserved for the churches and their emphasis on their particular institution, rather than the Christian message as a whole. As always there are good people. The Reverend William Bingham convinced me that by concentrating on the simple Christian message, answers can be found to our problems. By telling the Orange Order to walk away from protesting at the ban on Drumcree, he did exactly what his Christianity obliged him to do. In contrast to a society overly concerned with people's rights, one that recognises our obligations as individuals will enable us to work together best. There are lessons here for both unionism and for nationalism.

In 1998 I assisted in the campaign for a yes vote, and was much relieved to see the referendum of the people on this island destroy the cause of those who wish to use violence to further their aims. In that vote, we placed unity of the people

above unity of the two parts of the island: surely the greater prize. At the same time, the principle of consent (which enshrined the unionist veto into the agreement) has given us a way of arguing politics for the future. This positive method can hopefully be used in pursuit of further goals in what is essentially a battle for hearts and minds.

I joined the Ulster Unionist Party after helping to set up Re-Union. A friend, Graham Montgomery, recognising that confidence in the unionist community was at a low point, brought me together with Lady Sylvia Hermon, Paul Bew and others in this project, which has set itself the task of defining a more positive vision of unionism, one that is inclusive, that can help create a society for all. We want to urge unionists, in looking to the future, to revisit our basic principles. We should build relationships inside Northern Ireland with others who are committed to democratic politics and North/South as well as East/West. A narrow vision will only undermine the Union, as will any violence emanating from the loyalist paramilitaries. There is much work to be done to deal with the economic and social problems we face, and it is high time we turned our attention to them. The argument is laid out in a pamphlet I co-authored: *A Long Peace? The Future of Unionism in Northern Ireland*<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing, I am also privileged to be Co-Chair of the One Small Step Campaign. This cross-community group from all sections of society, including sport, business, trade unions and education, came together to actively promote a shared society. We represent the majority of the people of Northern Ireland, as we try to highlight the work of those many, many indefatigable people and organisations who strive tirelessly to heal the divisions in our community, challenging everyone living in Northern Ireland to do the same. Our group also highlights the ongoing problems of sectarianism and racism that our society faces.

I have often likened the extremes in Northern Ireland to the two scrum halves on a rugby pitch. They are usually the smallest of the players, but also the most cantankerous. Invariably, it is they who start the fights. They then drag the rest of us into the fray while somehow never taking a visible part themselves. We now have an opportunity to build a peaceful and stable Ireland, where people are at ease with each other. For all of us, there is one small step that we can take to ensure that the Troubles never return. It is at the same time the least

that we can do for those who suffered so much, and the greatest tribute we could ever pay them. Of course, it requires leadership. But the leaders that are needed are to be found at all levels of our society, whether at home, at work, in sport or in politics. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that 'the future is about how our children will live.' At Lansdowne Road in 1996, holding the hands of Darren Baird and Thomas Mullan, I made 'one small promise'. I would like to urge others to embrace the Irishness and Britishness of Jim McDonald's words, and do the same.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Fealty, M., Ringland, T. & Steven, D., *A Long Peace: The Future of Unionism in Northern Ireland*, Slugger O'Toole & River Path Associates, 2003.

## Edna Longley

*Edna Longley, literary critic and cultural commentator, is an emerita professor in the School of English, Queen's University Belfast. She is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. Her main interests are modern poetry, Irish literature, and Irish cultural politics. For 15 years she was co-editor of the interdisciplinary, cross-Border journal the Irish Review, and she reviews for many periodicals. Her publications include: editions of the poetry and prose of Edward Thomas, Poetry in the Wars (1986), Louis MacNeice: A Study (1989), The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland (1994) and Poetry & Posterity (2000). She is editor of The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry from Britain and Ireland (2000).*

## No Passports

Edna Longley

### I Don't mention Northern Ireland

'Entwine' is a benign metaphor. Among its synonyms are 'braid', 'interlace', 'embrace', 'plait' and 'weave': words that evoke feminine crafts or gentle contact, words remote from the workings of power. 'Lives Entwined', like the former propaganda image of Britannia with her protective arm around Hibernia, softens the blows of history. Even so, the metaphor may be less a euphemism than a measure of what can now be said. Independent Ireland is no longer consumed by the ideological or rhetorical need to maximise its differences from the British state. Taboos instituted in 1922, the year of secession, are being broken. The British Council's very presence in Dublin lays the ghost of Dublin Castle, once the seat of British rule. Political relations between the Republic and the UK have reached a stage where it has become less controversial in the former, more important in the latter, to highlight what the survey *Through Irish Eyes* (British Council Ireland, 2003) calls 'considerable societal overlap' and 'shared cultural reference points'. Paradoxically, however, this rapprochement has been impelled mainly by the Northern Irish crisis: by circumstances in which Britain and Ireland entangle or snarl, rather than entwine. Indeed, it can seem as if Northern Ireland is spoiling a romance between the old Lion and the young Tiger.

Yet Northern Ireland, where I live, is not really a place apart. Our snarled-up peace process, with its North-South and East-West strands, implicates all the historical tangles. Northern Ireland also requires (or should require) writers on 'Ireland' and 'Britain' to face a curious difficulty: that neither word has a single meaning. As names for islands or nations, states or states of mind, they reflect peculiar intimacy and blurred boundaries. But, by the same token, and despite broken taboos, relations are still often fudged, unarticulated, hidden like cross-border smuggling. As for the border: a Polish friend who crossed it in the 1980s was amazed to find no passport needed there or at any other Irish-British frontier. We forget how remarkable this is – even despite the suspicion of Irishmen travelling to Britain during the Troubles, airline protocols since 9/11, and current immigration controls in both jurisdictions.



Not everything people do should be keenly monitored or dragged into the political foreground. The absence of passports symbolises many kinds of free passage that survived from the old UK and predated the EU. But should we take quite so much for granted? Mutual consciousness-raising, as in the work of the British–Irish think-tank ‘Encounter’, lays deeper foundations for peace. It also matters to the cultural and intellectual life of ‘our islands’ – as the historian Hugh Kearney likes to call them. Here, too, thinkers are at work. Witness the growth of Irish studies, Irish–British studies and Irish–Scottish studies. This essay touches on debates that have developed – and sometimes raged – inside and outside the academy during the past 35 years. Northern Ireland is central to those debates, and to the differing ways in which the participants conceive the archipelago’s culture, history and politics.

Autobiography, a place where lives entwine, influences and enters the arguments. This collection of essays proves that. Even academics now try to explain where they ‘are coming from’. Modern Irish autobiography, a prolific and increasingly studied genre, is often shaped by a sense that its author’s story contradicts a powerful national narrative. One factor is certainly the hazy zone between Irishness and Britishness: criss-crossed by countless family histories. Irish experience in the World Wars is a case in point. Historians, biographers, autobiographers, novelists, poets and dramatists have explored its facets so insistently as to affect the politics of Irish commemoration. Here, something once hidden, or only partially visible, has reached public articulation. That it took so long to complete the war memorial at Islandbridge in Co. Dublin might represent other time lags.

The way in which different groups read events between 1912 and 1922 is bound up with the way in which they read events since 1969. So it was hugely symbolic when the Queen and President Mary McAleese co-inaugurated the Messines memorial to the Irish dead. This may have helped the peace process. It undoubtedly helped Irish Catholics, North and South, to celebrate relatives who fought or died in the world wars. Poppies are still unlikely to be worn in west Belfast, and not every Unionist or Nationalist politician wants to make joint trips to the Somme. Yet quite a few (including politicians from the Republic) have visited the battlefields and cemeteries. For example, a recent TV programme featured a pilgrimage by Tom Hartley of Sinn Féin and David Ervine of the Progressive Unionist Party.

In the symposium *Being Irish*, three other politicians illustrate how national identity can simplify personal identities. Tony Blair, a surprise contributor, tells us that his 'mother was born in the flat above her grandmother's hardware shop in the main street of Ballyshannon in Donegal', and says: 'Ireland is in my blood.' Meanwhile, Gregory Campbell, a Democratic Unionist politician from across the border in Derry, says nothing of the kind. For Campbell, to 'be Irish' is not to live on the island but to sign up for the nation. Ulster Unionists, he warns, will resist 'any attempt to remove [their] unique British cultural outlook and identity.' A third contributor is Martin Mansergh, formerly special advisor on Northern Ireland to the Republic's government, now a Fianna Fail senator. Mansergh, whose parents came from England to Ireland, says: 'All second-generation Irish...have a potential dual identity. Religious differences, and on top of that the notorious ambivalence around the Anglo-Irish tradition, were, in a South of Ireland context, further complications in my own case.' Mansergh describes himself as deciding to 'be Irish' when he took out an Irish passport after Bloody Sunday. Yet he reappears in the companion volume *Being Scottish?* to add: 'While I cannot count myself Scottish, I am proud of my wife's and my own more distant Scottish heritage.'

Blair, Campbell and Mansergh have made ultimately political choices from among close calls of domicile, 'blood' and 'heritage'. Another political factor is that they are writing in the context of the peace process. Campbell's uncompromising unionism segregates Ireland and Britain ('unique'). Mansergh affirms plural ties without compromising his Irish nationalism. Blair woos the Republic by proclaiming, if vaguely: 'we see the influence of the Irish people in every facet of British life.' (It would still be impolitic for Bertie Ahern to state the reverse.) Blair's reference to 'the Irish people' rather than 'Irish people', and the examples he or his scriptwriter actually names (U2, the Corrs, Boyzone), confine 'Irishness' to southern Ireland. This seems less a nod to unionism than a limited sense of what 'being Irish' might involve. Taken together, these snapshots, like the incompletely resolved role of the world wars in Irish memory, show how bits of 'Ireland' and 'Britain' get relegated to the political unconscious. I sometimes see Northern Ireland as the archipelago's unconscious: the repository of awkward history it wants to forget.

Of course, for practical as well as ideological reasons – because we live where we do – we lose or suppress elements in our background. Or we may deliberately recover them to assert a particular identity. The so-called ‘Irish in Britain’, with their variables of generation, class, religion and region, occupy every shade of the spectrum from what is termed ‘ethnic fade’ (assimilation into the host culture) to ethnic assertion. Individual shades fluctuate too: one person might run through the spectrum in a day. The liberating concept of ‘overlapping identities’ is as relevant here as in Northern Ireland. Not every expatriate or descendant of emigrants wants to be tagged to a distinct ethnic group; and perhaps no political structure in either country could represent intricacies that go beyond ‘dual identity’ (to quote Mansergh). The Belfast Agreement itself simplifies shades of identity by assuming a permanent dualism of Orange and Green. When liberals object, they are told that there is no political alternative. Yet complexity needs a voice (this also applies to newer emigrant groups on both islands). Politics and autobiography, politics and culture, can drift too far apart. Gaps in the public discourse of the UK and the Republic allow ethnic assertion to punch above its weight.

Living in Belfast, that pandemonium of ethnic assertion, I sometimes feel Irish in Britain, sometimes British in Ireland, usually neither. This seems fine – although it also means I inhabit a political limbo. A little autobiography may explain why I support devolution all round; why I am sensitive to gaps between lived culture and ‘national’ politics; and why another of my images for the North is as a corridor (with innumerable doors) between Ireland and Britain. I came to Belfast (in 1963) from Dublin, a city whose British links are manifested in a very different way. The poet Louis MacNeice salutes Dublin as: ‘Fort of the Dane, / Garrison of the Saxon, / Augustan capital / Of a Gaelic nation, / Appropriating all / The alien brought ...’ ‘Dublin’ (1939). A refrain in the poem dwells on Dublin’s Augustan architectural heritage: ‘grey brick upon brick’. Yet I feel at home in redbrick Belfast, despite lingering culture shock, because the city’s tangled affiliations match my own. My father, a Catholic from Cork who taught at Trinity College Dublin, left the church because the then Archbishop of Dublin pronounced it a mortal sin to attend that historically Anglican institution. As a result, my sister and I attended a Protestant school (where we wore poppies in November), although my father’s anticlericalism kept religion out of the house. No doubt I also absorbed his belief that Ireland should not have stayed neutral in 1939, and his preference for the

BBC over RTE. He remarked that, whatever was happening around the globe, RTE radio news always began with the doings of some Catholic prelate. In fact, my father was influential in reconciling Trinity with Eamon de Valera and the Irish state. But, for some people then, his attitudes would have defined and condemned him as a 'West Briton'.

My mother was a 'North Briton': a Presbyterian from Glasgow. Both families resented and delayed my parents' 'mixed marriage'. Owing to this prenatal brush with sectarianism (another premonition of Belfast), I never see it as only a Northern Irish or Protestant disease. Sectarianism was integral to post-Reformation relations between Britain and Ireland and to the islands' role in Europe's religious wars. The Rangers and Celtic fans on the Belfast–Stranraer boat are not only interested in football, nor are their Glasgow peers. Bertie Ahern inadvertently sided against the Reformation when, on an official visit to Glasgow, he declared himself a Celtic fan. In the early 20th century, large-scale Irish Catholic emigration to the west of Scotland sparked off Protestant bigotry and tribal clashes. Both have diminished, but the Scottish Executive is currently trying to eradicate their subtle and not-so-subtle traces. The secularisation of society in the archipelago, if uneven across time and space, is surely underrated as a force in Irish–British rapprochement. There was a time (still not entirely over) when Catholic Ireland refused to liberalise legislation in areas such as reproduction and divorce, and exported problems to Britain. There was a time when the (Anglican) Church of Ireland wondered whether its members should leave the country. There was a time when the Church of Scotland complained that Irish Catholic immigration was threatening Scottish ethnicity. I should have wondered why my father never accompanied us on holidays to Scotland.

As a child, I knew Belfast only as the place to where you took a train to catch the Scottish boat. The North was literally a corridor then. My husband, born in Belfast to parents who had migrated from London, entered the corridor at the other end. His mother was half-Jewish. Given our children's genealogical mix, I like the fact that Belfast, up to a point, lets you live in three places at once: Northern Ireland, Britain, the Republic. As local and Irish–British media intermingle, you can move, mentally at least, to another public domain when a particular set of voices becomes too annoying. This is what it means to inhabit a European borderland, even if not every citizen reads every newspaper or has the inclination

or freedom to culture-surf. The downside is that you can be politically depressed in three places at once.

But when Dublin or London metropolitans think of 'Britain' and 'Ireland', they rarely have Belfast's mixed messages in mind. They picture 'England', even southern England. They picture southern or western Ireland. It took time before the 'Anglo-Irish' Agreement of 1986 was renamed 'British-Irish': the hyphenation that now covers all intergovernmental dealings, if not the Irish-Britishness of Northern Ireland itself. People in the Republic are as liable as the English to substitute 'England' for 'Britain'. In *Through Irish Eyes* someone says of Northern Ireland: 'It's very English though. It's been under English rule for so long that I'd say they're more English than Irish.' That's bad news not only for those Protestants who call themselves 'Ulster Scots' (see below) or 'Irish Unionists', but also for northern Nationalists. Such misperceptions have several sources: the Republic's memory of the Anglo-Irish 'ascendancy' class; Anglo-centrism in the UK itself; the locations and dominant accents of the sovereign governments; the fact that Irish emigration to England has been more noticed than Irish emigration to Scotland (much of the latter came from Ulster); the historical bias of Anglicanism and Catholicism against nonconformist northerly regions. Confusion between Britain-as-island and Britain-as-state does not help. In Ireland it's not always clear that 'British culture' means different things to Gregory Campbell and to the British Council.

Ireland versus England is a seductive antithesis. It produces creativity and comedy – it's a form of entwining – but it also reproduces stereotype. Even when English stereotypes of the Irish are criticised from a post-colonial angle, each term of the antithesis magnetises the other. For instance, Declan Kiberd begins his well received book *Inventing Ireland*<sup>3</sup> by saying: 'If Ireland had never existed, the English would have invented it.' Delighting in such 'Anglo-Irish' paradoxes, and oblivious to 'Britain', Kiberd does not so much condemn as continue the notion of England and Ireland as each other's 'Other'. This notion derives from 19th century race theory. Matthew Arnold was one of the theorists who notoriously portrayed the 'Saxon' as energetic, worldly, phlegmatic and successful; the 'Celt' as poetic, spiritual, mercurial and melancholy. These qualities actually attracted him, as they did other authors who promoted the complex of ideas known as 'Celticism'. George Bernard Shaw laughed at all this in *John Bull's Other Island*

(1904), as when Larry Doyle tells the Englishman Broadbent: 'When people talk about the Celtic race, I feel as if I could burn down London ... Do you suppose a man need be a Celt to feel melancholy in Rosscullen?' More solemnly, post-colonial criticism has argued that Celticism was complicit with Unionism, since Arnold's 'ineffectual Celt' was clearly incapable of self-government. The jury is still out as to whether race theory really affected politics, but its ethnic assumptions were themselves shaped by European power relations. Imperial-industrial Britain was then a success story (to which, of course, the Irish, Scots and Welsh contributed). The French, defeated by Germany in 1871, were seen as a bunch of Celtic losers. To come up to date: it has taken the Republic's economic boom to turn the Celtic twilight into the Celtic tiger.

Yet the Celtic twilight still affects images of Ireland and Britain – not always to Ireland's disempowerment. It seems that Celts can gain the world without losing their soul. MacNeice asks in *Autumn Journal*<sup>4</sup>, 'Why do we like being Irish?' and his answer remains apt: 'Partly because / It gives us a hold on the sentimental English / As members of a world that never was, / Baptised with fairy water'. Despite Shaw's efforts, English Hibernophilia is a neglected topic that should have its place alongside English Hibernophobia. The Celt is sexier than the Saxon. In a New Age orchestrated by Enya, it does not benefit Ulster Unionists to boast their 'Saxon-Scot' heritage as they once did. Indeed, Scottish tourism is now cashing in on Celtic mystique. Similarly, the editors of the anthology *Across the Water: Irishness in Modern Scottish Writing*<sup>5</sup> see 'Irish' qualities in Celtic terms: 'a come all ye swagger and an elegiac sombreness.' In a contrasting anthology, *The Wee Book of Calviii*<sup>6</sup>, the Scottish poet Bill Duncan attacks neo-Celticism. Satirically proposing to rehabilitate the bleak Calvinist ethos of north-east Scotland, Duncan deplores 'the Axis of Evil, the unholy amalgam of Zen, Californian, chilled-out, ethnic, post-Hippie, laid-back, Celtic and New Age.' His anthology both calls up a long cultural history, and makes a contemporary point about the power of deep-laid ethnic ideas.

Historians also find that powerful assumptions about 'the English', 'the Irish', etc., are hard to dent. Yet they persevere with their empirical studies, as when micro-history exposes the varied textures of 'entwining'. The regional geography of the 'Irish in Britain' (as of 'the British in Ireland') is now being minutely and comparatively mapped. Donald MacRaild's *Culture, Conflict and Migration: the*

*Irish in Victorian Cumbria*<sup>7</sup> is a micro-study that comes to broader conclusions. MacRaild criticises historians who fail to appreciate how Irish immigration, including the neglected phenomenon of Irish Protestant immigration, has affected British life structurally. He questions excessive stress on the 'ethnic fade' pole because, in the 19th century at least, Irishness was not 'an expatriate identity easily broken down and subordinated to the socio-economic and political imperatives of the wider working class.' He continues: 'The idea that Irishness – whether the bullish ultra-loyalism of the Orange brigade or the militant defiance of the Catholic nationalists – might be passed from one generation of migrants to the next, is seen unconsciously ... as an affront to the mythical homogeneity of British life.'

Irish ethnicity, not always in tandem with the Irish question, has influenced British politics. For instance, in the 20th century, the Labour Party became the preferred party of Irish Catholic immigrants. Several strands entwined, with historical irony, when John Reid, from the Scottish quarter of that hinterland, became Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. In 2002 Reid made a speech designed to allay Unionist fears that Northern Ireland was becoming 'a cold house for Protestants'. In response, the cultural critic John Wilson Foster charged Reid and Tony Blair not only with failing to assure Protestants of their continuing Britishness, but also with failing to understand that Britishness itself – 'a complex community of past and present experience' – does not exist 'only on the mainland': 'What British politicians don't get is this: all the fundamentals and many of the incidentals, and most of the history, of *their* culture constitute *unionist* culture.'

For MacRaild, obvious immigrant centres such as Liverpool are far from the whole story. Yet consider a tale of two cities, Liverpool and Belfast. These cities are complementary in their British–Irishness and Irish–Britishness, in the mutations and conflicts produced by unusually intense interpenetration, even in the impacted phonetics of their accents. The Liverpool voice has been called 'a mix of Welsh, Irish and catarrh'; the Belfast voice (by Philip Larkin): 'a Glaswegian after two weeks in the United States, screaming for mercy'. Nineteenth century Belfast, too, was an immigrant city. Catholics and Protestants arrived from rural Ulster (with faction-fights in their baggage) when Belfast, originally a modest Presbyterian town, began its exponential growth amid the industrial–commercial bustle of Lagan, Clyde and Mersey. Liverpool and Belfast once boasted their

entrepreneurial, outward-looking profile as 'Atlantic cities'. This, together with their religious make-up, has fed the notion that they are anomalous in their respective contexts, semi-detached from England or Ireland. In *Through Irish Eyes* one speaker surmises that 'most people in Liverpool are hated by the English' – and Tory MP Boris Johnson's attack on the city's 'victim culture' certainly carried traces of anti-Irishness. But Irish immigration to northern England also spanned Cumbria and Northumbria, and Liverpool is 'English' in the very fact that it was shaped by conflict between English anti-Catholicism and post-famine Irish immigration. Liverpool Tories played the Orange card until municipal politics became less sectarian after World War Two.

The feeling that Liverpool and Belfast are in the wrong place really stems from what MacRaild calls 'mythical homogeneity'. This mind set, which equally afflicts nationalist Ireland and metropolitan Britain, wants to deny the fact of interpenetration. For example, Belfast is mostly absent from two kinds of study where it belongs: comparative studies of the Irish in British Victorian cities, and wider historical studies of those cities themselves, such as Tristram Hunt's *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City*<sup>8</sup>. In the 1960s, Belfast and Liverpool coincided in post-industrial, post-imperial decline. They also coincided in a small piece of cultural compensation when they became the sites of unexpected poetic movements. Individual talents apart, it's possible to distinguish between the collective aesthetic tilt of the Liverpool poets (Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten) and of the Belfast poets (Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley). The Liverpool poets were immersed in urban popular culture, allied to the Beats and the Beatles. The Belfast poets stressed formalism and high art; their poetic landscapes were at once urban and rural; they preferred classical music, jazz or traditional Irish music to rock. But the two groups shared some of the same influences, and they were alike in being consciously part of a regional resurgence in 'British poetry'. This mainly northern revolt against metropolitan arbiters also took various shapes in other Victorian redbrick-university cities: Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle. And in 1960s Belfast, regional literary self-assertion challenged the authority of Dublin as well as London.



## II Poetry as example: Lines Entwined

As poetry is language at its most concentrated, it is also 'entwining' at its most finely textured. It is a form of micro-study. So 'Northern Irish' poetry – a term that some would dispute – epitomises the problem of marking where Ireland ends and Britain begins.

This does not just mean that poets come from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. Nor does it mean that poets or poems have never taken political stances. To say that literary boundaries are blurred is simply to notice the range of cultural materials that poets exploit in their work. These materials include poetic structure. Seamus Heaney has written: 'Ulster was British, but with no rights on / The English lyric'<sup>9</sup>. By playing on 'British' and 'English', Heaney distinguishes between 'Britishness' as a jurisdiction or as Unionism, and the free circulation of English language poetry. There is a sense in which poets from Northern Ireland have collectively remade the 'English lyric' – although following in the footsteps of another modern Irish poet who did so, W.B. Yeats. Here Louis MacNeice was a bridging figure. MacNeice's poetry moves between the islands, between the 1930s poetic movement in Britain and the impact of Yeats. Northern Irish poetry since the 1960s belongs to the same archipelagic orbit in that it picks and mixes from Irish and British traditions – although not only from these. For example, Heaney's early pastoral landscape has absorbed the imagined Monaghan of Patrick Kavanagh, the imagined Yorkshire of Ted Hughes, and the imagined New England of Robert Frost. His response to such influences was itself influenced by the complications on his Co. Derry doorstep. A darker example of the 'English lyric' mutating in the context of Northern Ireland is that poets have also remade the 'war poem'.

If Northern Irish poetry since 1960 is collectively important – Mark Ford in the *Guardian* recently spoke of 'a golden age'<sup>10</sup> – this has something to do with the immediacy of difference in the society. Difference should not always be understood antithetically or as competing identities (Ireland versus England). One way in which poets find their own aesthetic (their identity as an artist) is through being alert to affinity and strangeness in other poets' work. The mix of overlap and distance between the Northern Irish communities has stimulated poets both to define their artistic ground and to extend its horizons.

Take language. The language question may be conceived in relation to Gaelic, in which some poets write, which some poets translate, and which lurks behind English language poems by Ciaran Carson and others. Or it may be conceived in relation to the Gaelic and Scots idioms that make northern Hiberno-English an unusually rich 'variety of English' – a variety with internal variations. Thus all poets are liable to deviate from 'standard English'. But no real poem is really written in standard English, and poets from Scotland and northern England also tune into regional dialects and phonetics. (Northern) Irish poets may indeed take greater linguistic liberties because they feel at once inside and outside English. Such feelings are sometimes ascribed to the loss or consciousness of Gaelic. Yet not all Irish poets are haunted by Gaelic, and it may be more significant that English itself has acquired new contexts, associations, shades and possibilities. (Yeats, who had no Gaelic, saw his Hiberno-English idiom as distinct from the inferior language available to English poets.) In Ulster, for instance, the proximity of Catholicism to several brands of Protestantism has affected the metaphysics of word and image in an almost 17th century manner. Finally, at every linguistic level the poetry involves intercultural conversations. This occurs both within and between poems.

Language questions tend to be complex in poems, simpler in raging debates about culture and politics. Similarly, although there are 'no rights on the English lyric', literature may be co-opted for political purposes, including nationalistic purposes (the British Council cannot escape a tinge of suspicion here). Yet literature may also threaten a nation's 'mythical homogeneity'. The Irish Revival was attacked by those nationalists who looked to Gaelic, rather than to literature in English. It is one measure of change that linguistically based Irish cultural nationalism, a partly rhetorical form of self-differentiation from Britain, has lost ground. Literary pluralism prevails. Yet this makes careful protocols all the more necessary in the English language sphere. Consider the titles of poetry anthologies. Heaney made a celebrated protest when his work was included for the third time in an anthology with 'British' in its title: *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982). Heaney wrote a verse-letter that included this rebuke: 'The passport's green. / No glass of ours was ever raised / To toast the Queen'.

Yet Heaney's passport did not really draw a line in the sand. The main result of his intervention – a good result – is a crop of contemporary anthologies with

'British and Irish' or 'Britain and Ireland' in their titles. I myself edited *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Poetry from Britain and Ireland* (2000). My title refers to islands, not jurisdictions, and it does not imply that every poem belongs decisively on one or other side of the Irish Sea. When compiling the anthology, I read across the islands as well as the century. I found myself comparing varieties of pastoral and varieties of city poem, tracking the mutations of war poetry, observing how religious backgrounds shape poetic vision. There are both likenesses between, and differences within, the poetry of both islands. (To appreciate all the regional permutations requires a historical anthology, one that includes the Celtic languages as well as Scots.) Of course, 'national' anthologies would provide different contexts for the poems I chose. The value of the 'from Britain and Ireland' anthology is that it reveals poetic qualities and meanings less visible in the national anthology – or the international 'modern' anthology. One result, indeed, is to highlight national distinctiveness where it genuinely exists.

### III 'Our islands'

If poetry epitomises 'entwining', compiling an anthology epitomises the problem of how to think about 'Britain and Ireland'. In recent years, historians have been discussing the merits of 'archipelagic history', 'Atlantic history', or the 'new British history': that is, history written from multiple perspectives rather than from a single national viewpoint. In his influential *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*<sup>11</sup>, Hugh Kearney argues: 'To concentrate upon a single "national" history, which is based upon the political arrangements of the present, is to run the risk of being imprisoned within a cage of partial assumptions, which lead to the perpetuation of ethno-centric myths and ideologies.' Even today nations are not necessarily homogeneous – the Scottish critic Cairns Craig maintains that all nations are 'suspended civil wars'. Archipelagic history attends to regions and subnational units, to migrations and diaspora: an approach that happens to illuminate Ulster's role at various crossroads of British–Irish history. The historian Jane Dawson has said that, in 17th century studies, Ulster 'helps to shift traditional mental and geographical maps.'

The same principles apply to literary history. If national narratives of Irish or Scottish literature fail to tell the whole story, one reason is that they exclude works that are – in whatever sense – Anglo–Irish or Anglo–Scottish. As Cairns

Craig notes, this allows 'the English literary tradition' to seem more coherent, and the literature of the other countries more fragmented, than is actually the case. Craig argues: 'We need to escape from the bloated digestive tract of a conception of English studies and "British" history that falsifies both itself and its related cultures in an effort to see them as branches on a single rooted tree'. Irish-Scottish studies have become one means of escape, as they offer an alternative axis. Yet part of the Irish-Scottish enterprise must be to compare experiences in the 'digestive tract'.

A third way of understanding British-Irish relations is in 'post-colonial' terms. Insofar as post-colonial thinking focuses on power, it might be a corrective to 'entwining' (like 'digestive tract'). But insofar as it ignores the specifics of archipelagic history, it might be a blunt instrument. In fact, there is a difference between post-colonial thinking that is cultural nationalism by other means, and post-colonial thinking that questions nationalism along with empire. The latter is closer to an archipelagic framework in that it focuses on interaction, mutation and hybridity. In *Ireland and Empire*<sup>12</sup>, Stephen Howe criticises post-colonial critics who draw analogies with the third world. He places Irish history in the context of internal European colonialism and nationalism, and concludes: 'A colonial past, then, yes; though one that took unique hybrid forms, involving extensive integration and consensual partnership as well as exploitation and coercion.'

Post- or anti-colonialism is also a state of mind. One reason why Irish (and Scottish) intellectuals are attracted to this form of thinking is because, as Cairns Craig implies, power in their own sphere of operation has been so weighted towards the metropolis and the English academy. Perhaps it's more an issue of *province* and metropolis than of *colony* and metropolis. Ireland's size means that Dublin can never become wholly independent of London media. To cite literature again: if Ireland and Britain comprise a literary free trade area – with Heaney and Muldoon holding the Oxford Chair of Poetry, with Irish novelists eligible for the Booker prize – it should also be remembered that London publishers, editors and reviewers have more clout than their counterparts in Ireland or Scotland. It does not always change things if the former are expatriate Irish or Scots.

To place Irish-British relations in a European context is not necessarily to make them easier – although it reinforces the argument that the EU is crucial to their

resolution. To quote Howe: 'we can perhaps see the conflict in Northern Ireland not so much as a belated anti-colonialist struggle on the Afro-Asian model, but rather as a precursor of the renewed battles over identity and sovereignty which have since 1989 disfigured more and more of Europe's south-east and east.' Northern Ireland is the reason why post-colonial thinking, in the Irish context, merges with cultural nationalism. Perhaps all debates come down to a choice between seeing Northern Ireland (and Irish-British relations) as either very simple – the workings of colonial power, a zero-sum 'battle over identity' – or very complex. Poets from Northern Ireland obsessively juxtapose images of simple duality and images of multiplicity. For instance, Paul Muldoon's recent poem 'Whitethorns'<sup>13</sup> a hopeful parable of the peace process, contrasts 'paling posts' hammered into the ground to separate two fields 'more than thirty years ago', with what the posts have now become: 'maxed-out, multi-layered whitethorns, affording us a broader, deeper shade / than ever we decently hoped to know'.

A decade before the Good Friday Agreement, poetry influenced what was called the 'cultural traditions' (later 'cultural diversity') concept. Although government-sponsored, and thus suspect to some, the concept interested many constituencies at a time when politicians were not really speaking. And it produced many tangible outcomes such as the Irish language body *Útch* Trust and cultural programmes initiated by district councils. The spirit of that time can be gauged from the proceedings of conferences such as 'Varieties of Irishness' (1989), 'Varieties of Britishness' (1990) and 'All Europeans Now?' (1991)<sup>14</sup>. But the problem with debating culture in lieu of politics is that politics take it back. Whitethorns become paling posts again. While Northern Ireland's complex strands have indeed been exposed and explored, some politicians now use 'tradition' as a weapon of cultural cold war. Take language again. *Útch* Trust struggles against Sinn Féin's politicisation of Gaelic; attention to the Scots elements in Ulster speech has renewed the Unionist ethnic ideology of the 'Saxon-Scot' or 'Ulster Scot'. This polarisation denies Protestants' historical involvement with the Irish language. It denies that the speech of Catholics may be inflected with Scots.

The Unionist claim to Scottishness, like Sinn Féin's version of Irishness, is an ingrown product of the Northern Irish culture war. It ignores contemporary Scotland, together with the fact that historical criss-crossings between Ulster

and Scotland cut two religious and linguistic ways. Scotland contains Celtic fans and Gaelic-speaking Presbyterians, and, in its devolutionary mode, is far more attracted to the Irish Republic than to the sectarian history it shares with Northern Ireland. At the same time, there is much traffic between Northern Ireland and Scotland, and a new migration of Ulster Protestants into Scottish universities. One reason why Unionists reach for the Scottish strands in the Anglo-Scottish patchwork of British settlement in Ulster is because Presbyterianism (also numerically larger than Anglicanism) serves to distance them from the Republic where most Protestants are Anglicans. But the Ulster Scots phenomenon also belongs to a broader context: the scenario that Tom Nairn dubbed 'the break-up of Britain'. The increasing literature on this theme mostly agrees that the old Britishness has collapsed, and that only the English and Ulster Protestants cling to its wreckage. Certainly, the metropolitan centre and the contested frontier are most vulnerable to the collapse of any ideology that binds a multinational state. A more dubious proposition is that, having relied (for different reasons) on Britishness as an overarching identity, the English and Ulster Protestants now need to work on their own ethnic or cultural credibility. The death of 'Britain' may be exaggerated. And to assert an English or Ulster-Scottish ethnicity would be another dead end – given the entwined, entangled strands that make up England and Northern Ireland, let alone 'our islands'.

In fact, the more entwining the better. Debates about diversity are no longer confined to Northern Ireland. When people in Britain and the Republic confront newer issues of ethnic or religious identity, perhaps their thinking should be informed by the Northern Irish debates; by British-Irish history; and by awareness of how political interests can freeze identities.

About 40 years ago the Republic of Ireland emerged from an identity-fixated deep freeze. As Tom Garvin puts it in *Preventing the Future*<sup>15</sup>, nationalist Ireland tried to 'build up the country behind tariff barriers and cultural barriers.' One problem with *Through Irish Eyes* is its concept of the Republic's 'successor generation': economically confident and thus able to face Britain without hang-ups. There have been at least two-and-a-half successor generations since the founding of the Irish state, and I am a slightly jaundiced member of one of them. Perhaps the love story of the lion and the tiger sweeps too much history under the carpet, or into Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, the Irish and British governments

know that their new relationship must make up for the lost time that allowed the Northern Irish crisis to incubate.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Logue, P., ed, *Being Irish*, Oak Tree Press, 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> Devine, T. & Logue, P., eds, *Being Scottish*, Edinburgh University Press, 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, Jonathan Cape, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, Faber, 1939.
- <sup>5</sup> McGonigal et al., eds, *Across the Water: Irishness in Modern Scottish Writing*, Argyll Publishing, 2000.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Wee Book of Calvin*, Penguin, 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> Donald MacRaid, *Culture, Conflict and Migration: the Irish in Victorian Cumbria*, Liverpool University Press, 1998.
- <sup>8</sup> Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City*, Orion, 2004.
- <sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Ministry of Fear' from the sequence, 'Singing School' in *North*, Faber, 1975.
- <sup>10</sup> Mark Ford reviewing *To a Fault* (Faber) by Nick Laird, a young poet from Northern Ireland, *The Guardian*, 12 February 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- <sup>12</sup> Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- <sup>13</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, Faber, 2002.
- <sup>14</sup> Conferences organised by the Cultural Traditions Group of the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland.
- <sup>15</sup> Tom Garvin, *Preventing the Future*, Gill & Macmillan, 2004.



## Maurice Hayes

*Maurice Hayes, born in 1927 in a fishing village on the County Down coast, the son of a Waterford father (who had served in the British Army in Mesopotamia) and a Kerry mother (of Fenian stock), grew up in County Down and was educated by the De La Salle Brothers before going to Queen's University, Belfast. Deeply immersed in gaelic games and the Irish language, after teaching, he entered public service as Town Clerk of Downpatrick. In the post-O'Neill era, he joined the NI Civil Service as Assistant Secretary in the post-Sunningdale power-sharing Executive, resigning in protest at the Bloody Sunday killings. A founding chairman of the Community Relations Commission, he now became Advisor to the Chair of the Constitutional Convention, Head of Personnel, NICS, and Permanent Secretary, DHS(NI), before serving as Ombudsman. In retirement, he was a member of the Patten Commission on Policing. He currently chairs the National Forum on Europe, is a non-executive director of Independent News and Media in Ireland and the UK, and writes a weekly column of political analysis and comment in the Irish Independent.*

## The Crazy Knot

### Maurice Hayes

#### I A sideways look at the Irish Dimension

Just after the fall of the power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland, 30 years ago, I was engaged in preparing a chapter of a draft green paper which would explain the beautiful simplicity of the 'Irish Dimension' in language accessible to all. This was in preparation for a Constitutional Convention, which the then Labour government had conjured up under the pretence of doing something while not having a policy. Many held the 'Irish Dimension' of any future government of Northern Ireland primarily responsible for provoking widespread unionist opposition to Sunningdale, an opposition which, in stimulating and supporting the Ulster Workers' Council action, had brought the new-found institutions tumbling in disarray. No doubt the objective of producing a green paper was to get behind the mantra, to try to show that it did not really threaten Unionist interests while cheering up Nationalists, and to do so in terms that did not frighten the horses. Incidentally, as often happens in these circles, the paper (for reasons entirely unconnected with the contents) was never published. It remains in the public records, to be found by the annual truffle hunters after its 30 years in purdah.

In the North you had two competing groups: one professing to be British, the other claiming Irishness. As a preferred alternative to making the best of the situation in which they found themselves together, each looked outward for support to supposed parent groups, the Unionists to London, Nationalists to Dublin. Both manifested many of the characteristics of fossilised fragment societies detached from the rootstock, in holding on grimly to values and attitudes which the parent societies have long since discarded. Unionists, clinging to a Kiplingesque version of pre-World War 1 Britishness, would scarcely feel at home on the King's Road on a Saturday night, while Nationalists still dreamt of a land of simple verities, with a catholic gaelic ethos that, in Dublin, was rapidly disappearing as society modernised and became more cosmopolitan.

I found it ironic that the competing groups in Northern Ireland, had they stopped to take stock, would have realised that they had more in common with each

other than the societies they aspired to join. For me personally, the Declaration of the Republic in 1949 was a turning point. I was attending a Congress of the Gaelic Athletic Association on Easter Sunday when the Declaration was confirmed with fanfares and fireworks. I remember going sadly back to my hotel, early and alone, and sitting there, convinced that as Northern Catholics and Nationalists we were now on our own, and had best find a way to make what we could of it.

One of the reasons why I got the 'Irish Dimension' job was that, in the short life of the Executive, I had been responsible for keeping an eye on developments in the Republic and preparing a weekly commentary and analysis of political developments there. Personally, as the child of a Kerry mother and a Waterford father, one of Fenian, the other of parliamentary stock, brought up in but not quite of the nationalist community in the North, in a mixed area and with a background in gaelic games, I had always found it easy to move round the island and to find myself at home there. It was a fact, too, that a few of us, senior members of the Executive secretariat, had not much to do once ministers had cleared their desks and straightened the files. We were wandering the marbled and ornate corridors of Stormont, an administration in internal exile, Jacobites (if not all Jacobins) awaiting the return of their king over the water. Idle hands were soon found work, and as well this task as any other.

The king did make the crossing, in the form of a Secretary of State with a seat in the Cabinet and Direct Rule for the next quarter of a century, another king and another story. Ironically, one of my jobs during the mayfly existence of the Executive had been to identify a range of functions that might appropriately be exercised by a Council of Ireland. I concluded that the Council as proposed was a paper tiger, with not much potential to threaten anybody's constitutional certainties. The fact of political life was that ministers North and South, even SDLP ministers (perhaps particularly some of them), had not fought for power in order to give it away to some supranational body. Bureaucrats in the South were not any better than those in the embattled North at giving up functions or turf. Neither was it likely that officials in the South who were resisting being sent to Athlone or Castlebar (remember this was 30 years ago – *plus ça change*) would welcome transfer to Armagh. And so a trawl of departments, North and South, seeking suitable functions for transfer to the Council, produced a sorry raggle-taggle of sacrificial lambs, well removed from core functions, which were

to be thrown to the wolves for the common good, and in defence of vested interests.

This time, however, the attempt to define the Irish Dimension went a bit further. What emerged to complicate matters was not a linear relationship on a North–South axis in Ireland, but a series of crossed lines and relationships which ran at different angles and different widths, and sometimes in different time frames, not only up and down, but East and West between the islands, across the sea and back. There was not, it would seem, and never had been, a single turnpike road from North to South, but a spaghetti junction of exits and entrances, bridges and underpasses, on many planes and in many directions, all rather poorly signposted and not very well understood, even by those who were using it.

Even before both countries joined the EEC, there was a quite remarkable freedom of movement between the UK and the Republic: no travel restrictions, no identity documents, and no passports. Citizens of the Republic enjoyed most of the privileges of British subjects (despite some restrictions on the right to work and to vote in Northern Ireland). The tendency for people from both parts of Ireland to emigrate to Britain has generally been more marked than any movement within Ireland between North and South. Nevertheless, short of dual citizenship (which many Nationalists in the North exercised without difficulty), British and Irish nationals enjoyed many mutual benefits. The 1949 Ireland Act, providing the guarantee of the status of Northern Ireland, which was later included in the 1973 Constitution Act, declared:

Notwithstanding that the Republic of Ireland is not part of His majesty's dominions, [it] is not a foreign country for the purposes of any law in force in any part of the United Kingdom.

Under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1956:

Where the Government are satisfied that under the law of any country ... Irish citizens enjoy in that country some or all of the privileges of a citizen of that country [it] may ... declare that the citizens of that country shall enjoy in the state similar citizenship rights and privileges to those enjoyed by Irish citizens in that country.

On the other hand, Article 2 of the 1937 Constitution declared that the national territory included the whole island of Ireland, its islands and territorial seas. Although the practical application of this claim was abrogated by Article 3, 'pending the reintegration of the national territory', amounting to almost *de facto* recognition of the status of Northern Ireland, these articles remained as an affront, reinforcing a siege mentality amongst many Unionists, and a very considerable barrier to friendly cross-border relations.

There were numerous historic linkages between North and South in Ireland, but also deep divisions, ignorance and mutual antipathy. The main churches straddled the island, as did most sports bodies (although these were divided by class in the South and religion in the North). So too did the banks, and the currencies were interchangeable; newspapers circulated across the island, and the airwaves were free. But the main links were East–West, in travel, in trade, in newspaper readership, and in the link to sterling. The level of economic activity in both parts of the island was determined by the health of the British economy. There were almost one million people of Irish birth in Britain, three-quarters of them from the Republic, and a further million with at least one parent born in Ireland. Some of the finest literature in English was the work of Irish writers from both traditions. The courts, the common law, public administration and parliaments all came from a common rootstock. There can be few examples of neighbouring states, however friendly, which assumed the same degree of cultural interpenetration and economic interdependence. It could indeed be argued that there was little in Irish culture, North or South, which was not explicable as a regional variant of a common British Isles culture.

The elusive Irish Dimension, therefore, disappeared into a web of complexity, as something almost incapable of precise definition. There was always the refuge of the island dimension, the concept that there were many things which it would make sense to organise on an all-Ireland basis, as if the Border did not exist. But that would be to oversimplify, indeed to impoverish the richness and potential of the relationships, and to pluck both parts of the island out of the context which had provided a formative matrix for so much of what went on there. On this analysis, the Irish Dimension, to the extent that it expressed a commonality of cultural expression to the various traditions on the island, needed to turn itself into a scaffold which could support all of these sometimes competing

identities and allow them to express their singularity while working constructively together. But it was an ironic truth that people from Northern Ireland were more likely to meet Southern Irish people in Birmingham or London (where they were all regarded as paddies) than in Dublin or Belfast. On this basis, the Irish Dimension could not be contained within the island. It could only be postulated as an untidy rhomboidal figure with a base stretching from Dublin to Dagenham.

In retrospect, one interesting feature of the 1975 document is how little mention there was of Europe. This was partly because the Wilson government was engaged in renegotiating the British terms of entry; partly, perhaps, from fear of agitating Unionists for whom the thought of an Irish Dimension was enough of a threat, without the added complexity of perceived loss of sovereignty to a body whose founding text was the Treaty of Rome. But the real potential of EEC membership had not begun to be realised. This must have been the main factor. The Executive, it is true, had established an office in Brussels, somewhat to the resentment of the UK Permanent Representation to the EU, before the British had begun to find their way round its corridors. But Northern Ireland was dealing with European affairs at one remove, and through the variously distorting lenses of Whitehall. Many of the British civil servants I came across then were poor Europeans, sceptical about membership and entanglement with lesser breeds. Theirs was a very *non-communitaire* desire to defend the island fortress, to score points, to put others in their place and keep them there.

In fact Northern Ireland had shown more enthusiasm for membership than any other part of the UK in the referendum. Many of us voted for EU membership because it seemed to be one way out of the straitjacket of constitutional relationships which had frozen northern communities in conflict since the start. If Britain and Ireland were to be contained within some larger polity, then old animosities might become blurred, new permutations of relationships could be created, and common purpose established on a variety of issues across existing boundaries. John Hume, in particular, was seized from the beginning by the potential of Community structures and methods which had enabled a rapprochement between traditional enemies such as France and Germany, as a model for conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. This, he thought, was an appropriate use for institutions modelled on those of the Community.

Europe also offered a solution for the more scrupulous to the problem of competing British and Irish identities, and which passport to carry. One could simply be European with a European passport, no longer green or blue, but in the purple.

## II Only 30 years later

A similar essay today would paint a radically different picture, and yet one in some aspects disappointingly the same. The dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone still rise above the Northern landscape, the integrity of their struggle unresolved. On the other hand, the roles and comparative weight of the other players have changed: the world has shrunk through technology, communications and globalisation. There have been changes in Europe, within Britain and across the islands. A new generation has grown up, more secular, more hedonistic, more materialistic, in many ways less politicised, but certainly more travelled and cosmopolitan. One effect of this is to bring both parts of Ireland further into the mainstream of European and world affairs. Sadly it has not necessarily brought the two parts of the island, or the two communities in the North closer, as might have been expected.

Despite the heroic efforts of a small and devoted band of peacemakers, in many ways, through movement of population as a result of terror, retaliation and counter-terror, the building of so-called peace walls, residential segregation and hostility, these communities are more clearly divided and differentiated than before. The main contributing factors have been the murderous campaign of the IRA, loyalist killings, and the state's reaction to both. In particular, the campaign of republican violence, when the emphasis moved from the city to the country and the border areas, focusing on security force members who were mainly Protestant, took on aspects of ethnic cleansing which left deep scars in the community. If the objective was to achieve a United Ireland, the methods used and the ferocity employed put back indefinitely the date on which it might be accomplished. This effected not only the alienation of Unionists in the North, but the disenchantment of a Southern electorate who wanted less and less involvement. They wished the North would go away, if it couldn't achieve a degree of settlement according Catholics fair play and enabling the communities there to live together in peace, leaving them to get on with the serious business of building an economy which could compete in the global market place.

But the main changes to Anglo-Irish relations in the intervening years have resulted from growing prosperity. In recent years the Irish economy has outperformed not only the British, but also most others in Europe. Irish GDP per capita is now higher than in the UK, so that Ireland has access to the wider world without having to go through Britain. From a position where 92 per cent of exports went to Britain, now, while 80 per cent of production is exported, more than half goes elsewhere. A great deal of this is linked to EEC membership. Perhaps the single most important effect of EU membership on the relationship between the two countries has been the psychological boost of this spectacular economic turnaround. Ireland, it may be argued, by giving up a little sovereignty to Europe, found itself as a nation, and was thereby able to overcome an inherited colonial attitude, an inferiority complex when faced with the economic strength and diplomatic clout of the former metropolitan power. The debilitating tide of emigration has been reversed, with investment in education laying the base for a knowledge-based economy. Ireland, as an English-speaking bridgehead to Europe with a young, educated workforce and an independent, favourable tax regime, has become an attractive base for inward investment. The Irish decision to break with sterling (although these things are never clean cut) and go with the Euro was an indicator of this new-found economic and national self-confidence.

All this took time – a decade and a half, probably. What was of immediate benefit was that Ireland was sitting at the same table as Britain, as equal partners in the European enterprise. A successful Presidency early on, and a couple more since, confirmed an ability to operate at this level, and for the Irish public service to box above its weight. There were times, too, when Britain needed the Irish vote, and others when Ireland needed to recruit the UK in a common cause. All this experience of working together helped to open new lines of communication, to lay the ghosts of ancient suspicions and animosities, and to develop mutual respect between cadres of civil servants and ministers. This was a vital ingredient in developing at least a synchronised approach to the problem of Northern Ireland, the last, great, unresolved issue in the tangled and, at times, painful interaction between the UK and Ireland over the centuries.

It is as if time has distilled off all the other combustible elements, leaving this as an undigested must in the alembic of politics, still to be sublimated in one way or another, or left to simmer on a back burner, sending out splashes of



corrosive activity from time to time. Even before the development of a common European response to the threat of terrorism, common membership of the Community and subsequently the Union imposed its own obligation to work together to contain and resolve the Northern Ireland conflict. Without such a boost to the relationship, neither the Anglo–Irish Agreement, or the later Good Friday Agreement, could ever have been achieved.

There were specific areas, currency apart, where a special British–Irish relationship remained, most notably in the common travel area. If Britain did not adopt the Schengen arrangements, then neither did Ireland. If Britain adopts an identity card, then so too will Ireland. The traditional ease of movement to and fro across the Irish Sea has become so natural to Irish people that it has been the objective of successive governments to preserve it.

Meanwhile, parallel to these changes in Ireland, there were important changes in Britain too, quite independent of Europe, which also had the potential of affecting fundamental changes in the way the British people regarded themselves, and on the nature, quality and context of Anglo–Irish relations. There was the ongoing and sometimes agonising reappraisal of the nature of Britishness itself. It can be argued that Britishness was a function of Empire, and since Empire has to all intents and purposes gone, Britishness has rather lost its point. Without the external unifying focus, the elements of the UK will revert to being Scots and English, Welsh (and even Irish). This can be detected not only in the trend towards devolution (if not yet nationalism) in Scotland and Wales, but in a more general rearticulation of power as the Scots and the Welsh flex their muscles, and the English, particularly in the south-east, begin to wonder why they should be subsidising the rest. In this scenario, it is England which is the difficulty. Short of a return to the Saxon heptarchy, there are few identifiable regional units, and despite government efforts, the north-east of England has just declined to be regionalised. Nevertheless, there are signs that tectonic plates are shifting within the archipelago, which make it possible to contemplate a different political geometry, and variable sets of relationships.

Here it should also be noted that, while the proposed European Constitutional Treaty is firmly based on the notion that it is a Union of nation states, there is an underlying dynamic across Europe which locates enhanced economic activity and civic vitality in cities and regions (some of them crossing national boundaries).

In the end this might be the more effective means of blunting the hard edge of conflicting nationalisms which has been the curse of Europe (and Ireland no less) for most of the past two centuries.

What then of the North in these years? Here, the changes were even more palpable. Some made the border more permeable; some reinforced division, putting up the shutters both within Northern Ireland and, for some, between North and South. The most visible change, again, was in the economy. In 1974 Irish GDP per capita had been 80 per cent of that in the North, which itself lagged 20 per cent behind Britain. Now, while the Republic outperforms the UK in terms of earnings per head, Northern Ireland remains stuck at the same proportion of the British average. The southern economy drives ahead at growth rates at times approaching double digits: the North, although performing well as a region within the UK, is tied to the more sluggish British economy. More seriously for future growth potential, Northern Ireland remains an economy dominated by the public sector and dependent on it for employment. Seventy per cent of jobs in the North are linked to the public sector, which also accounts for 60 per cent of GDP. There are differences in infrastructure too. Thirty years ago, northerners knew when they had crossed the border: the roads were so much worse. Today the reverse is true (give or take the odd pot-hole) – the roads are much better in the South. While targeted use of European structural funds has enabled substantial investment in the South in transport, energy, communications and other infrastructural projects, in the North, the infrastructure of roads, water and sewerage is tottering into decay through sustained underinvestment during Direct Rule. The North has suffered (although also a Category One area in European terms) through the reluctance of the Treasury to concede the additionality of European regional funds.

Add to this the difficulty of remoteness, of lack of direct access, of other UK priorities, and of business with the European institutions having to be conducted at arm's length, through London, and to the drumbeat of Whitehall departments. Northern Ireland's civil servants have envied the easy access of their Southern counterparts to the corridors of the Berlaymont, and have often used them for advice and as a route to decision-makers, rather than going via less engaged UK channels.

As a site for inward investment, the North was often in competition, not just with

other regions in Britain which had their own problems and more political clout at Westminster, but crucially too with the South, without being able to deploy one of the most potent weapons in the Southern armoury, a benign rate of corporation profits tax. During this time, too, the industrial base was collapsing. Shipbuilding, which had employed 30 000 men at the end of the war, and 8000 even at the beginning of the 1970s, has gone. So, too, has much of the engineering, textiles and man-made fibres industries, and employment in agriculture has been on a downward spiral for years. Since heavy industry and craft-based industries were primary sources of employment for Protestants, that community has been particularly heavily hit. The South, in this context, may be regarded as comparatively lucky in having been less industrialised and in not having to clear the landscape of the ruins of a previous industrial economy before finding growth and prosperity on the back of the new knowledge-based industries.

At the same time, the border has virtually disappeared, shrunken to a line on the map, of significance only to the political geographer, the constitutional lawyer and the law enforcement officer. There is free movement of people and labour; qualifications, by and large, are mutually recognised; there is free movement of capital, despite the difference in currency. Indeed, some parts of the North are virtually a dual-currency zone: most of the shops in the North, including Belfast, will accept Euros. Some of the main banks are owned from the South (and none now from within Northern Ireland), as are substantial sections of the media, including the main Unionist newspaper. Southern companies own much of the food-processing industry. Conversely, northern media interests have substantial holdings south of the border; Northern Ireland Electricity is an increasingly important competitor in the southern market; and large retail outlets in Newry, Lisburn and Belfast now aim to draw customers from across the northern half of the Republic, including Dublin. There is, as yet, little cross-penetration of newspaper markets – southern papers sell comparatively few copies in the North, and there are few sales of northern papers in the South. In contrast, there has been increased penetration of the Irish market, North and South, by English titles, both tabloid and *soi-disant* broadsheet, and the omnipresence of multichannel television offering increased homogeneity in the guise of diversity.

Perhaps most significantly, in contrast with 1974, one of the worst years for killings, bombings and other atrocities, the IRA guns have been silent for the

best part of a decade. Loyalist violence erupts from time to time on a lesser scale than formerly, more often expressed in terms of internecine strife. The problem now is largely one of criminality; drugs, extortion, smuggling and racketeering.

### III Beyond the numbers game

It was in the varying geometry of this matrix that the Good Friday Agreement (or its variant title, the Belfast Agreement) was moulded. This was the highest example yet of the relaxed state of relationships between Britain and Ireland, and the willingness of both governments to maintain a sustained effort over several years to address jointly what is seen to be a problem affecting both states. Leaving aside for a moment the arrangements for governing Northern Ireland, which continue to stutter and stumble, there is a radical change in the articulation of the main political and constitutional relationships between the two sovereign states. The twin pillars of Sunningdale and of policy since then – power-sharing and the Irish Dimension – are retained and restated. But the Irish Dimension has been contextualised and defined in a way which has rendered that facet of the Agreement less unacceptable to Unionists than the Sunningdale version (described by one SDLP politician at the time as the vehicle which would trundle them into a United Ireland). This was done by specifying a modest range of functions which it made sense to handle on a cross-border basis, and by making it clear that responsibility lay ultimately with the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and not some supranational body which might mutate by stealth into an all-Ireland parliament.

More important in the long run is the enshrinement in legislation and in the political culture of what had for long been an implicit element of policy, the principle of consent – that there could be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of the electorate there (a reassurance to Unionists) and an undertaking by the British to facilitate such a change when the majority called for it (a guarantee to Nationalists). This involved, too, the amendment by referendum of the territorial claim in the Irish Constitution to an aspiration to unity by consent of the voters in Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement crucially recognised the overlap of nationality by providing that people in Northern Ireland could regard themselves as British or

Irish, or both, and that all traditions were entitled to equal respect. For the first time, it recognised that nation and state could be separate entities, that national self-identification could run across borders and did not necessarily require a coterminous state to defend it, and that the symbols of each group and their values should have equal respect and protection. It was recognised, too, that there was an East–West axis as well as a North–South one, the development of this part of the model being made easier as a result of devolution within the UK.

One of the difficulties of an agreement like this is that Unionists tend to see it as an end point, while Nationalists see it as process, a staging-post en route to a united Ireland that Unionists do not want. In part, this reflects a clash in theological backgrounds. For evangelical Protestants, salvation is a single salvific event: for Catholics it is a pilgrimage with stopping-off points on the way. One requires stasis and finality; the other movement and potential.

There are those who believe that demography, or more precisely Catholic fecundity, will solve the problem. On this hypothesis, higher Catholic birth rates combined with increased Protestant emigration will bring about the blessed numbers. This is a variant of what I once described as the Three-F theory of conflict resolution: if we can't outfight them or outfox them, by God we'll outbreed them.

The flaw in this argument is the convergence of Catholic and Protestant fertility rates, linked mainly to increased affluence, which will slow down the process, together with the fact that not all Catholics will necessarily vote for a united Ireland on the terms offered – especially without a very clear idea of what that entails. Moreover, although the British government has undertaken to facilitate change at the relevant time, it is not very clear how the population of the Republic will be asked to signify its approval.

There are some who believe that unity will be achieved as if by magic once the majority in favour reaches 50.1 per cent. This, however, would produce only the mirror image of the present problem, with a substantial recalcitrant minority being forced to accept Dublin rule. This indeed is one of the difficulties of power-sharing based on numerical ratios and determined by the sacred mysteries of the d'Hondt system. It can work perfectly well for a time while the groups remain in a fixed ratio, but when, through demographic change,

differential population growth or emigration, the proportions go out of kilter (as happened in the Lebanon), or when one side becomes economically more dominant (as happened in Cyprus), then what was a suitable arrangement becomes a straitjacket in which one group feels increasingly stifled as the other wishes to expand and flex its muscles. There obviously cannot be a situation where even the smallest proportion of dissenting voices can forever prevent a change which the vast majority desire. But there is also a limit to the amount of dissent that a polity can endure without breaking down. What one can say is that the essence of the principle of consent is that assent should be freely given. The essence of a secure and stable democracy is that all must be able to feel part of the whole, to share in a common identity without undue sacrifice of individuality, either as persons or communities, and where the melding of traditions produces the added value of richness in diversity rather than a clash of civilisations.

Surely, a modern democratic society is more than a mere counting of heads. An electoral majority is a form of convenience in arriving at decisions, not a licence to oppress. The history of Northern Ireland illustrates the dangers of an oppressive majority which disregards a sizeable minority, except when it is necessary to put it in its place. The modern trend is towards consociational democracies, where government is by consultation and consensus. In increasingly multicultural and pluralistic societies, the pattern is likely to be of mutating majorities as various interest groups coalesce and disperse depending on the dominant issue. And all the better for it.

A situation which brought into a united Ireland the best part of a million reluctant and possibly disaffected Unionists, who still value their British heritage, would be a recipe for continuing unrest, if not immediate disaster, and would be unlikely to be welcomed by the citizens of the Republic who would have to find not only the increased costs of security, but the cost of replacing the transfer from the British Treasury which underpins social services in Northern Ireland. It could also provoke a level of conflict and violence which would envelop the whole island, soon inhibiting its tourism and inward investment. The corollary to the principle of consent is not a licence to dominate those who do not consent.

There are those proponents of change on the basis of minimal consent who

urge the retention of the existing devolved institutions in the North (assuming they are up and running), simply substituting Dublin for London as the metropolitan centre, with representation in the Dail and Seanad rather than at Westminster. But this is hugely to underestimate not only the constitutional and other complexities, but also the essential importance to Unionists of their Britishness as an integral element in their identity, and their wish to retain that link.

A further problem with an all-change approach when the needle touches 50 per cent plus  $x$  is that it leads to destabilisation, as one side counts the days to takeover and the other sees its worst fears being realised. There is a strong sense of inevitability in the demographic trends, and concentration on numbers is likely to reinforce the link between ethnicity, if not religion, and voting patterns. Unionists may well view this, as Carson expressed it in an earlier generation, as a sentence of death with a stay of execution.

#### IV Multiple destinations

If the essence of the exercise is, as John Hume has often argued, the uniting of people rather than territory, it is more important to get rid of the causes of division in the minds and hearts of people. If the object is to ensure, as far as possible, that people of different traditions can live together on the island in reasonable harmony, then the particular constitutional envelope in which they do so becomes less important. What matters is that it should leave room for innovative forms of governance as time mellows attitudes, as immigration makes societies more diverse, and as the external environment changes. The Good Friday Agreement, in recognising that national and group identities could flow across boundaries, and that the hard edges of nationalisms could be dulled, is a useful point of departure.

The main cause of conflict in the North for over a century now has been the insecurity of both groups arising from the lack of certainty for one group and too much for the other. There has also been the concept of the double minority – of Unionists, a majority in the North fearful of becoming a minority in a united Ireland; and of Nationalists, a minority in the North hopeful of joining a national majority. Recent events have accentuated fears. Unionists see the tide running against them, while Nationalists have the growing self-confidence of those who

think they are winning. One of the difficulties of Unionists seeing the Agreement as terminus, while Nationalists see it simply as a stop somewhere short of the end of the line, is that neither considers the real possibilities of a state of transition on the one hand, or a lengthy period of preparation on the other. In addition, on both sides, there are bitter memories and the scars of 30 years of conflict, which will take a generation or more to heal.

One approach might be to put the constitutional issue in baulk for a period, while people, getting on with the ordinary business of living and managing the place together learn to accommodate each other and to trust. This will require a degree of vision and patience from those who happen to be in the numerical majority, as was anticipated by the then Taoiseach in the 1993 Downing Street Declaration when he said that 'stability and wellbeing will not be found under any political system which is refused allegiance or rejected on grounds of identity by a significant minority of those governed by it.' This approach would not predicate or prescribe a particular set of constitutional relationships at the end of the day, but would accept whatever outcome evolved as the natural and sensible thing to do. The United Ireland which emerged in this way might be quite different from what the traditionalists envisage, and it might involve different relationships across the archipelago and within the EU.

In this way, people could use the structures of the Agreement constructively and with imagination, developing North-South links organically to cater for the expanding range of functions which should be managed on an all-island basis, as economies of scale will surely dictate. People would not only develop the capacity to work together in the North, but would benefit from the added value of links across an increasingly irrelevant border. And this, too, in an Ireland, North and South, which is increasingly being enriched, reinvigorated and diversified by emigrants and their children returning with skills garnered and honed elsewhere, alongside immigrant skills from the EU and beyond. At the same time, the East-West link would develop and strengthen, with the rearticulation of the UK into regional units opening up the prospect, already there in embryo in the British-Irish Council, of a regional subgrouping within Europe along the lines of the Nordic Council.

Once people cease to be fixated on a single destination, the possibilities become infinite for organic growth at a rate to which all the constituent elements can



adjust and accommodate themselves. What the Northern Ireland conflict needs is to be taken out of the pressure cooker of immediacy, which creates stress all round. It might take a generation or two, but it would be time well spent. And, meanwhile, creative energies could be diverted into building up the economy and social structures in the North: more time well spent.

## Coda

I was lucky enough to grow up in a small town in a mixed area in County Down where people generally got on well together. The three main streets, English Street, Irish Street and Scotch Street, met in the centre at the Townhall corner (a local poet once remarked that the Welsh, having St Patrick, needed no street). This confluence always symbolised the origins of our differences, the strength that each gave to the whole, and the possibility of convergence. Today, one would have to add a Chinese strand, an Estonian, Latvian, Polish and Bulgarian route, as new people come in to enrich the mix with their own energy, initiative and cultural heritage.

John Hewitt, in typifying the mix of bloodlines, identities and traditions in the North of Ireland in his poem called 'Ulsterman', invokes the metaphor of a knotted ball of twine:

Kelt, Briton, Saxon, Norman, Dane and Scot,  
Time and this island ties a crazy knot.<sup>1</sup>

The way to unloose a knot is not to pull it tighter, but to ease the tension so that it may be unravelled, the single strands teased out and disentangled until all breaks free. After which, of course, the threads are not lost, but can be rewoven and reassembled in a more complete and coherent pattern.

In this way, might it be possible to recover from the legacy of competing nationalisms that have bedevilled Europe since the 19th century and before, and left deep scars on the Irish psyche? The EU in the present draft Constitutional Treaty is a union of nation states, but it is more than that and may develop into something unique. In recent years we have seen trends towards decentralisation in what were highly centralised states such as France and Spain. The same is happening more slowly in the UK. Great cities are becoming dynamic poles of

growth, and regions are asserting their individuality. It may be that, as economic regimes become larger, political entities will become smaller with people seeking a sense of place, of community. In this creative tension between the supranational and the local, new structures may emerge which will accommodate a different and richer concept of unity in these islands.

This could go far further to recognise the complexity and the richness created by history and geography, the interaction of peoples in peace and war over centuries, than existing models which, harking back to the 20th century rather than forward into this, attempt to put all their eggs within one single undifferentiated framework of governance, or base themselves on erasing or sustaining lines on maps, while leaving unchallenged the divisions in the minds of men.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Ulsterman' appears as an uncollected poem in the appendix to Frank Ormsby's *Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1991).

*"But as time went on, increased mutual understanding, respect, and trust gradually developed between the two governments, to the point where the frequency and intimacy of communications between them has come, right up to Prime Minister level, to surpass anything previously seen in the bilateral relations between European states."*

Dr Garret FitzGerald

*"There is more than a little British in the Irish and something of the Irish in the British as well."*

Piaras Mac Éinrí

*"That is why we bristle at the English usage of the word 'mainland' with its amorphous but predatory notion of Britishness. The mild-mannered formula 'these islands' may not set the teeth on edge in quite the way that 'British Isles' does but it still, too often, performs the same alienating 'act of union.'"*

Patricia Palmer

*"If a noble man such as Nelson Mandela can say 'I have not discarded the influence which Britain and British history and culture exercised on us' – who in Ireland or England would be arrogant enough to exclude even the smallest part of our common heritage history, in the name of some mean little myth?"*

Eoghan Harris

*"Irishness however defined is not as visible or important to the British/English as Englishness/Britishness is to the Irish. Historical attitudes about the relationships between Britain and Ireland still persist in both countries."*

Mary J. Hickman

*"My Britishness, I felt deeply, was one which included my Irishness. What is Britishness after all, without its main constituent elements – Scottish, English, Welsh and Northern Irish – with no doubt other influences to come?"*

Trevor Ringland

*"Perhaps the love-story of the lion and the tiger sweeps too much history under the carpet, or into Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, the Irish and British governments know that their new relationship must make up for the lost time that allowed the Northern Irish crisis to incubate."*

Edna Longley

*"Europe also offered a solution for the more scrupulous to the problem of competing British and Irish identities and which passport to carry. One could simply be European with a European passport, no longer green or blue, but in the purple."*

Maurice Hayes

British Council Ireland  
Newmount House, 22/24 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

Tel: +353 1 676 4088 Fax: +353 1 676 6945  
[www.britishcouncil.org/ireland](http://www.britishcouncil.org/ireland)

[www.britainandireland.org](http://www.britainandireland.org)