

PERSPECTIVE

WANDERERS ON THE WAY HOME



Many still think of Ireland as an emerald isle reclining invitingly off western Europe – quaintly Celtic, uncompromisingly religious and uniquely uncontaminated by industrial pollution. Ireland of the hundred thousand welcomes. Ireland of the poets and priests, mystics and musicians. Ireland of saints, scholars and schizophrenics. But do such images realistically relate to Irish life today? And what are the challenges facing this island as it moves into a more integrated Europe?

Ireland now stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, there is the felt need to preserve inherited traditions, customs, memories; on the other, there is a growing desire to embrace the prospect of a more cosmopolitan international order – 1992, the date for entry to a larger integrated Europe, may well be as decisive a landmark for 20th-century Ireland as 1916, the date of the Easter Rising which dramatically proclaimed an independent Irish nation.

Much has happened in the intervening 75 years. While the first 50 years of this century witnessed a war of independence against Britain and the eventual establishment of an independent republic in the southern 26 counties, the second half has seen the entry of Britain and the Irish Republic to the European Community; the historic signing of an internationally binding Anglo-Irish Agreement; and, more recently, the ratification by both states of a Single European Act committing all 12 members of the community to a pooling of national sovereignty. In Ireland talk is less of colonial dependence or national independence than of European interdependence.

This sharing of sovereignties has, quite obviously, radical implications for Northern Ireland – for so long a conflict zone for the opposing territorial claims of Britain and the Republic. After all, if Mitterrand and Kohl have managed to overcome the historic national rivalries which opposed France and Germany in two world wars this century, then why not the nationalists and unionists of Ulster? And surely it is significant that Ian Paisley and John Hume, arch rivals within terms of the nationalist-unionist conflict, become staunch allies as soon as they step on the plane for Strasbourg to vote together, as Ulster MEPs, on

issues of common local concern.

But there are other reasons – besides such political movements towards greater transitional co-operation – for the emergence of a more international awareness in contemporary Ireland. At a cultural level, there is the inestimable impact of the communications revolution in television, video and popular culture which ensures that Ireland today is intimately interconnected with a wide diversity of cultures.

Moreover, the awareness of an extended Irish community abroad created by past emigrations (with over 70 million people of Irish descent now living outside of Ireland) is being rekindled by the new emigrants of the 1980s. Over 40 thousand of the republic's almost four million population are leaving the country each year. "Ourselves Alone" – the literal meaning of the Gaelic expression *Sinn Féin* – has now become a catch-ery of the past.

All this has a bearing on Ireland's understanding of itself as an island nation. Being surrounded by water can be seen either as an insulating device against alien influences or as an open exchange with other peoples and places. Ireland's famous maritime tales have always celebrated comings and goings between Ireland and the wider world. The Gaelic voyage tales, called *Immram*, record the migrations of Irish quest heroes such as Mael Duinn or Saint Brendan in search of the isles of the Blessed. And Irish cultural memory is also deeply informed by the multiple journeyings of its great writers and thinkers – Erigena, Columbanus, Berkeley, Joyce and Beckett.

Many contemporary Irish poets and playwrights spend as much time in Continental, British and American campuses as they do in their own native cities and towns. Henny, Montague, Kinsella, Muldoon, Murphy and Mahon are just some of the most obvious names.

The young generation of popular artists have been articulate exponents of this migratory imagination. Bono, of Ireland's top rock music group, U2, writes: "Maybe we Irish are misfits . . . travellers, never really at home, but always talking about it . . . We're like salmon: it's upriver all the time, against the odds, the river doesn't want us . . . yet we want a way home". And Neil Jordan, one of Ireland's most

talented young film directors whose work includes *Angel*, *Company of Wolves*, *Mona Lisa* and *The Miracle*, also voices the resolute spirit of the emerging Irish generation.

"The great stupidity of Irish history," he observes, "has been the pretence to be a self-enclosed and unconfused nation . . . Our mistake was to believe that we could be at home in a single nation . . . We thus forget that we can never be at home anywhere. Perhaps it is the function of the artist to remind the nation of this: to expose the old ideologies. To feel in exile abroad and also when one returns home."

The obsession with an exclusive national identity is being cast aside by many young Irish people. They are rediscovering a more inclusive sense of self awareness in their open exchanges with other cultures. The migrant psyche of the new Irish generation is jettisoning the fanaticism of narrow tribal nationalism – be it republican or unionist. Instead it celebrates the fact that our island is a waterways connecting us with others and reminding us that the journey to alien lands is the secret to a genuine hometcoming. As Joyce accurately anticipated, the Irish imagination is nourished by the interchange of foreign with familiar. Its task, "to hybridise Europe and Europeanise Ireland".

Such a blend of indigenous and cosmopolitan culture typifies some of the best art in contemporary Ireland. Irish musicians such as Van Morrison, Sinéad O'Connor, Enya and the Pogues have managed to draw from local sources while communicating to the wider world. And a new crop of Irish film makers including Jordan, Pat Murphy, Pat O'Connor and Jim Sheridan demonstrate how images drawn from one's own native society can be appreciated internationally.

Roy Foster, spokesperson of the younger generation of Irish intellectuals – whose recent history of *Modern Ireland* was in the Irish

bestseller charts for over a year – argues for a pluralist definition of national culture. He questions the traditional notion of indivisible sovereignty. Cultural self-assurance, he claims, can exist without being voked to a predetermined ideology of nation-statehood. The Ireland of the 1990s is working towards such an inclusive model of identity – one which promotes the varieties of its Irishness and positively repossesses its rich cultural heritages of Celt, Viking, Saxon, Norman, Scot.

"We do not want uniformity of culture", as the poet AE remarked, "but the balancing of our diversities in a wide tolerance. The moment we had complete uniformity our national life would be stagnant". Ireland has no single monolithic identity. Its very virtue in its internal differences, comprising the legacies of Planter and Gael, of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Admittedly, it is often these very differences which are smoothed over for foreign consumption. The more simplistic the image the more palatable the commodity.

The interpenetration of Irish and European cultures applies not only at the level of art but also at the level of the media. Ireland's increasing participation in the transnational satellite communication system is a decisive instance of this. Movement towards a more interconnected audiovisual culture in Europe is well under way. The recent launching of two European Satellite Stations – LA SEIT by the French and SAT 3 by the Germans – to promote cultural unity-in-diversity is already having a significant impact on co-production across national boundaries; while the European Space Agency Satellites link information centres throughout the EC and beyond.

Whether these advances in communications technology produce a society of "inter-misunderstanding minds" (to borrow Joyce's phrase) or "inter-understanding minds", re-

mains to be seen. But one thing is clear: Shem and Penman (the Joycean man of letters) can no longer be separated from Shaun the Postman (the man of communications). The Europeanisation of Irish culture also entails its *mediatisation* – for better or for worse. The challenge is, of course, to make it better.

But is there not perhaps a danger in all this? Is there not a legitimate fear that the distinctive features of Irish culture might be swallowed up in some kind of lowest common-denominator Eurovision? This is why the accelerating movement in Ireland towards a more global understanding of cultural community needs to be counterbalanced by a simultaneous movement to a more local sense of community. Ireland's commitment to a new internationalism needs to be complemented by an equal commitment to regionalism. Indeed, the idea of a transnational culture is positively dangerous without the counterpart of a participatory local culture. If the cultivation of the regional sense of identity were to be abandoned, there is a real threat that Ireland in the 1990s would merely be replacing its former colonisation by the British Empire with a future colonisation by a European Empire.

The European community into which Ireland is to become integrated after 1992 may well be a European Federation of Regions. That is to say, not a Europe-Empire bureaucratically administered from Brussels but a decentralised European confederation of locally governed regions. Although Ireland remains, with Britain, one of the European nations most dominated by central government, it is surely telling that the influential *Report on Regional Policy* (unanimously approved by the European Parliament in October 1987) was presented by a Northern Irish MEP, John Hume.

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In Irish academic life, the joke goes, one qualification outweighs all others as the key to success. It is the degree of BTA, Been To America. In coming years, however, it might be possible for ambitious Irish émigrés to make their names without following the traditional Irish expatriate routes to Britain and North America.

Ireland is already, according to the opinion polls, the most Europhilic nation in the European Community. Large areas of its economy, including its higher education system, have been transformed by EC membership. And in the next few years, the pace of events is likely to quicken as the Irish join in European monetary and political union.

The attraction of Europe for the Irish arises partly from Ireland's economic and political situation and partly from its geography. A minute population (now about 3.6 million) and a poor economy, with a mean income at 68 per cent of the EC average, prefigures that there are never enough resources available for any form of investment.

Ireland is also politically small, with most power in the hands of the national government, so that Brussels and Strasbourg are novel and welcome as rival poles of influence. And they are all the more useful to Ireland because they offer new priorities to replace the orientation towards Britain which characterised most Irish thinking until EC accession in 1973.

An early Euro-enthusiast in Irish academic life is Brigid Laffan, a politics lecturer at University College, Dublin, who does not welcome a BTA. Instead, she did the near mandatory Irish-spell exercises in Belgium. Dr Laffan says that Ireland's six-month presidency of the EC last year was of immense psychological importance.

Dr Laffan says that Irish enthusiasm for European union far outweighs any reservations there might be about the loss of sovereignty which would accompany it. "Most people think that participating in the EC is something the Irish are good at, and regard it as being far preferable to the dependence upon Britain which preceded it. In some ways it adds a welcome new layer to the Irish body politic rather than taking anything away."

The only exception to this European enthusiasm is the Irish insistence on military neutrality, which Dr Laffan terms "an important national characteristic which people are keen to retain". The problem of dealing with an EC with growing military and security ambitions is already here, she says. Irish public opinion is not ready for it. As she puts it: "People were told the EC was about farm boats and they are now starting to realise that it is about defence as well."

A small power with a ragged economy, Ireland is laying the foundations for a richer future, Martin Ince writes

EUROPEAN HANDSHAKE BREAKS BRITISH LINKS



One sign of Irish integration into the EC is the continent's growing importance as an emigre destination. The US and Britain are likely to continue to be the destinations of choice for Irish emigrants. However, changes in the structure of the emigrant workforce, which now contains many graduates and other qualified people as well as unskilled workers, have been accompanied by changes in their destinations. Many now go to the continent. Dublin mythology has it that the research laboratories of Philips in the Netherlands and Siemens in Germany, two of the EC's main electronics firms, run on Irish brainpower.

Dr Laffan says that emigrants like these are not necessarily lost to the Irish economy in the way that unskilled workers leaving en masse for the US were in the past. There could be a "California effect" whereby they come back to the old country, like Koreans and Taiwanese from the US west coast, with cash and ideas to allow them to invigorate the home economy.

Indeed, one sign of the growing internationalisation of Irish thought is the fact that emigrants are no longer regarded as a complete drain on national resources. A recent report for

the National Economic and Social Council suggests that emigration should be acknowledged as a permanent feature of Irish life.

Rory O'Donnell, a researcher on the Irish economy at Dublin's Economic and Social Research Institute, says that "emigration used to be considered a national tragedy because of the age gaps it left in rural society".

Dr O'Donnell contends that Ireland's enthusiasm for all things European grew up after Ireland joined the European Monetary System in 1979. The effect was to uncouple Ireland from its long-standing connection to the British economy. It missed out on the deep recession of the early 1980s which it would otherwise have experienced. Now Ireland has brought its inflation down to German levels, and the economy is reviving slowly after difficult times in the mid to late 1980s. The experience has been so successful, he says, that people are very keen on the idea of further European integration.

However, Dr O'Donnell stresses that the economic revival now under way is bypassing significant areas of the country in which long-term unemployment has led to serious deprivation.

"The new jobs which have come along since 1987 have gone mainly to new entrants to the labour market," he says, "not to people in estates in Dublin, Cork, Dundalk or Drogheda, where old industries closed with nothing to replace them."

Unemployment is now around 17 per cent of the workforce, or 250,000 people. Instead, the fastest growth is in areas like Galway, where there were no old industries to destroy, and which are now dynamic culturally and economically.

Dr O'Donnell adds that the internationalisation of Ireland has two distinctive aspects which proceed almost independently of each other. Growing enthusiasm for the EC is accompanied by foreign direct investment in the Irish economy, a significant force in financial terms and psychologically.

The Industrial Development Authority, whose remit is to bring in overseas investment, sells Ireland in large measures on the quality of its workforce. Half of the population is aged 28 or less, and a walk through the streets of any Irish town reveals a panorama of young faces unmatched in British city centres.

From the point of view of foreign investors, the Irish workforce is young and numerous (the country will not suffer the falling numbers of young people expected in most European nations), English-speaking, well-educated – and cheaper to employ than anyone else in northern Europe.

The IDA's policy is to make the most of these assets by using them to tempt in industries like pharmaceuticals, healthcare, electronics, computer

software and even financial services. A large area of downtown Dublin is being turned into the financial services centre where it is hoped that activities like the treasury departments of multinational companies will now take root – perfect for Ireland because they require no raw materials beyond people and telecommunications.

Ireland's telecommunications (re-built in style, like much else in the country, with European money) have also allowed the IDA to tempt in array of US insurance companies which employ staff to process claims by online links to computers in the US. Because they are several time zones away, the computers are used when they would otherwise be idle, and by far less costly operators.

Richard Hendron, an IDA manager who looks after overseas electronics firms investing in Ireland, says: "There are now several firms in the country which do research here as well as manufacturing." One, US computer firm Digital, set up with 50 people in 1971 and now has 1,400.

Foreign firms, mainly ones brought in by the IDA, employ over 87,000 people out of an Irish labour force of 1.3 million, but have an importance beyond even these numbers. In some areas, the IDA has been so successful that it now arouses public objection. In Cork, the sheer number and size of the foreign chemical and pharmaceutical firms brought in by the IDA have caused local residents' groups to spring up to oppose new ones.

Ask anyone in Ireland about the country's top political and economic issues, and there are long odds against their citing any topic other than Europe, emigration or civil rights, in terms of the state's laws on abortion, divorce and contraception.

One symptom of changing times in Ireland is that almost nobody would mention the north, despite the Brooke talks. With some prodding, they might eventually express the view that the gradual process of European unification is bound to make even that problem easier to solve. A more drastic sign of the prevalence of new ideas, in a country which is still deeply traditional in many ways, would be hard to imagine.



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Ireland and Britain have much, perhaps most, to gain from the development of regional democracy in Europe. Why? Because the border dispute between these two national sovereignties in Ulster has witnessed more bloodshed in the past 20 years than any other conflict between nation states. The lifting of the frontiers between the 12 members of the European Community will also, of course, mean a lifting of the border between Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The challenge is to ensure that the transcending of national boundaries does not lead to neo-imperialism, at the transnational level, or neo-trialism at the subnational level.

What is required, in fact, is a felicitous *menage-a-trois*: one where the three levels of European, national and regional communities may be conjoined.

For the moment, the missing ingredient in the European project is a proper attention to regional democracy. We have had a Europe of Empires. We have had a Europe of nations. What we have not yet had is a Europe of equal Regions. The political advantages to Ireland's participation in a Europe of the Regions are obvious; it could offer the most likely solution to the Anglo-Irish conflict. It could also open the

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possibility, for the first time in Irish history, of local participatory democracy: communities discovering that they can be the creators of their own society. But what are the cultural possibilities of such a commitment?

In conclusion, let me give just two examples from modern Irish literature. The Northern Irish poets – John Hewitt and Seamus Heaney – have responded to the cultural traumas of their native province by devoting their imaginative energies to a sense of region that is at once specific and universal.

Already in the 1940s, Hewitt, a native of Ulster and curator of the Ulster Museum, acknowledged regionalism as a way of resolving and responding to the ostensibly intractable conflict of identities in Northern Ireland. In *The Bitter Gourd* he wrote with customary precipience: "To return for only a moment to this question of 'rootedness'. I do not mean that a writer ought to live and die in the house of his fathers. What I do mean is that he ought to feel that he belongs to a recognisable focus in

place and time. How he assures himself of that feeling is his own affair. But I believe he must have it. And with it, he must have ancestors. Not just of the blood, but of the emotions, of the quality and slant of mind. He must know where he comes from and where he is; otherwise how can he tell where he wishes to go?"

Some years later in a publication entitled *Regionalism: The Last Chance*, Hewitt turns his attention to some of the larger political implications of such regional identity. And most significantly, he fully recognises the necessity for regional fidelities to remain open to a more universal or European dimension. "Ulster considered as a Region," he writes here, "and not as the symbol of any particular creed, can command the loyalty of every one of its inhabitants. For regional identity does not preclude rather it requires, membership of a larger association. And whatever that association be... there should emerge a culture and an attitude individual and dis-

tinctive, a fine contribution to the European inheritance and no mere echo of the thought and imagination of another people or another land."

Seamus Heaney elaborates on the idea of regional identity in an essay entitled "The Sense of Place". Taking his tune from Patrick Kavanagh's poem "Epic", which compares a local skirmish between farmers – the Duffy's and McCabes – with the "bother" caused by the *Pusch* in Munich, Heaney explains how in this poem, as presumably in most good poetry, "the local idiom extends beyond the locale itself".

More exactly: "Munich, the European theatre, is translated into the local speech to become bother, and once it is bother, it has become knowable, and no more splendid than the bother at home. Language, as well as gods, makes its own importance – the sense of place issues in a point of view, a phrase that Kavanagh set great store by and used always as a positive. He cherished the ordinary, the actual, the known, the unimportant." So does Heaney. And one feels he is, cited partial to Kavanagh's view, also later in the essay, that "parochialism is universal".

But Heaney is also aware that 40 odd years have passed between Kavanagh's poem and his own essay. The sense of belonging to a more enlarged space is incontrovertible,

even if it does not diminish the search for one's own place. "We are no longer innocent," he concludes, "we are no longer just parishioners of the local. We go to Paris at Easter instead of rolling eggs on the hill at the gable. Yet those primary laws of our nature are still operative. We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories."

The fact that Hewitt hails from Protestant Planter stock and Heaney from Catholic nationalist, is revealing to the extent that they both find common ground in an Ulster regional identity – Hewitt's Antrim, Heaney's Derry – interconnected with the larger world. In both cases, we see how the parish and the cosmopolis can become allies of the poetic imagination.

Empowering the local culture of regions is, arguably, the best contribution Ireland can make to the global culture of Europe. The task is to strike a balance between local and global so that we may have a Europe without frontiers not without differences. To express the rich varieties of Irishness, while transcending tribal and national boundaries, is a major challenge for Ireland in the 1990s.

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