

# Jane Morrice

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## **Being Irish . . . a case of “mistaken identity”**

**T**his was possibly one of the most difficult essays I have ever tried to write. It was only after several attempts that I finally understood why. The fact is, I have no idea what it is like to be Irish because I am not.

Ask a Canadian what it is like “being American” or a Portuguese what it is like “being Spanish” to see the reaction. Some may laugh, recognising an honest case of “mistaken identity”. Some may see it as cultural imperialism and inflate their own sense of identity in defence, while others may simply correct the mistake, aware that the issue of identity is one of the most sensitive, most complex and possibly most divisive questions facing modern society.

International examples such as these serve to illustrate the mistaken assumption that everyone who lives in Northern Ireland knows what it is like to be Irish. The assumption is based on geographical fact. Yet geography may have little influence on cultural identity. From my own experience, I would contend that politics, religion, education and social circumstance have a far greater influence on cultural identity than physical geography.

Let me explain. I was born in Northern Ireland — a country on the edge of the European continent sandwiched between two great cultural identities — British and Irish. Both have spent many years attempting to woo me into their own “identity zone”. Neither has managed to succeed.

I spent my teenage years living with violence, hatred and bigotry and I could not accept it. If this was my culture, I wanted none of it. My country and its people were tearing themselves apart. The only thing left to love was the landscape. Unable to identify with this “culture of intolerance”, I chose to disengage, and start searching for a new culture which would accept me for who I am, not what I am.

The result is a “hybrid”, absorbing those parts of the British/Irish culture I respect, disowning those I reject and continually embracing new influences with which I can identify. When asked, I say that I live in Northern Ireland, hold British citizenship and describe myself as Northern Irish and European.

There is no doubt that my early identity was shaped more by British influence than any other. Carnaby Street, Shakespeare, the Beatles, Margaret Thatcher and fish and chips had a far greater effect on my life than Grafton Street, James Joyce, the Boomtown Rats, Charles Haughey or corned beef and cabbage. Holidays in Donegal allowed me to experience Irish culture at first hand but, when I needed a job, London, the capital, was where I looked.

In my later years, I developed a fascination for all things foreign, indulged my passion by learning to speak French, Spanish and German so I could read their literature, sing their songs and understand their people. I chose "European Studies" as my degree course. Obviously, with hindsight, I was preparing my escape.

I left home in 1977 and spent ten years travelling and working abroad. During a year in New York, I flirted with the "American dream", but only momentarily. The culture shock was electrifying. The "anything goes" attitude gave me a confidence I could never have mustered in the dark, dour, "fear of failure" society back home. I met more Irish there than I ever met in Donegal.

I moved to Brussels and followed the "European ideal" with interest. I appreciated the opportunity it offered to give me a new identity to which I could relate. Unlike the pressure I felt back home, I felt no pressure to become a European. It was a mantle I chose for myself. My own identity was enriched by contact with different cultures and I learned to respect people who were different.

I also learned that there is very little real difference between the peoples of the US and Europe and even less between the people of Britain and Ireland. We may have different flags and different allegiances but we have the same love for democracy and hatred of fascism. We may have different traditions but we share a similar desire for our rights to be upheld and respected by others. We may speak different languages but we know we need to communicate. We may have different religions but we share the same God.

My travels also taught me that it is impossible, no matter how hard the circumstances, to forget our "roots". That is undoubtedly why I returned to Northern Ireland to settle, bring up my family and help contribute to a change in society in the hope that it will eventually lead to a new "culture of tolerance". It is also why I will always describe Belfast as my birthplace, Van Morrison as my favourite musician and Northern Ireland as my home.





## Adi Roche

*Adi Roche is Executive Director of the Chernobyl Children's Project, which helps children suffering from the radioactive fall-out from the Chernobyl reactor explosion in 1986. She was Irish Person of the Year in 1994 and was nominated by the Labour Party in the Irish Presidential election of 1997.*

What does “Being Irish” mean to me?? Now there is a question. How much time have you got? Well to start at the beginning, or at least my beginning, the events following my birth on 11 July 1955, and the trauma over what to name me, somewhat typifies “Being Irish”.

My mother Chris was expecting another boy when she was carrying me. She was going to name me “John Coleman” after some famous Fenian in the family history (known locally as “The Galtee Boy”!). So when I came along, a dilemma presented itself. If she was to follow the path of naming me after an Irish hero, you could now be reading about Countess Markevicz Roche, or maybe not! So to get over this problem, my mother took refuge in that other great Irish pastime, religion. She had been reading about the only English Pope, Pope Adrian, and so what did she do? She dropped the “-an” and replaced it with “-enne” — Adrienne. The family doctor proclaimed, “Ah, she’ll never be short of a job with a Protestant name like that!”

Somewhere along the way, I became Adi, my sister Helen became “Len” and my brothers became Duck (Dónall), and “Con” (Conchubhar).

So, I have covered nationalism and religion, two subjects which, when talking about “being Irish”, simply cannot be ignored. What about language, I hear you ask! In my family, the Irish language was big on the agenda. My parents, brothers and sister all speak very good Irish/Gaeilge, as does my husband Seán. My Father, the other Seán in my life, still speaks fluent Gaeilge and still sings many of the Irish songs that he sang years ago at *feiseanna*, despite the fact that he is now in the twilight world of Alzheimer’s Disease. I still love to hear him sing in his quivery voice. But I am sorry to say that I struggle with my “*cúpla focal*”. The words are there buried somewhere in the back of my head, but when faced with an Irish conversation, I seem to panic, lack confidence, and make some excuse like, “I had it in school, but it is all forgotten now” or “*Níl aon ach cúpla focal agam*”. My husband Sean . . . *gabh mo leiscéil* — Seán (the *fada* over the “a” is vital). Without the *fada* it means “old” and I suppose it is not good to be referred to as such, especially when, as in the case of my husband, it is not true! Anyway, where was I . . . Seán wears a *fáinne*, a pin that tells others that he is willing to converse with them in Irish. In how many other countries do people wear a “label” to show that they speak the native language?

I left Clonmel at age 17 and went to Dublin, “the big smoke”. It was such an exciting time for me, 1972 — discos, fashion, boys, my first job, the thrill of being “on the tear” and being a part of it all. Those were somewhat carefree times, and I wouldn’t change them for anything. It wasn’t until 1978, however, that my “awakening” took place.

My brother Dónall was living in Pennsylvania near the Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant and told me of the great dangers of nuclear power — radiation, CANCER etc. I emphasise CANCER, because it struck a deep note with me. At age 16, my dearest childhood friend Anne had died from leukemia. The thought of this “source of energy” cutting short the life of even one more human being spurred me into action. The Irish Government at the time were proposing to build a nuclear power plant in Carnsore Point in County Wexford. I got stuck into the campaign to prevent this happening, and I haven't stopped since.

I believe my work with the Chernobyl Children's Project gives me a great understanding of what “being Irish” means. I believe the spirit of giving to others worldwide, which so many Irish practise today, relates back to our ancestors who suffered so much in famine times. It reminds me of a story told to me by Don Mullin about a group of Choctaw Indians in Oklahoma at the time of the Irish Famine. Despite having very little themselves, hearing of the Irish plight, they sent a consignment of grain to Ireland.

The people who influence me are varied, but to me are Irish in the sense that they are my brothers and sisters. My parents, my brothers and sister, my “comrades” from Carnsore, Petra Kelly, Christy Moore, Nelson Mandela, Maureen Kim Sing, Martin Luther King, Joan Baez, Bruce Kent, Irish CND, Greenpeace, etc. — these are the people who shaped me, who shaped my “Irishness”. Up Clonmel, Up Tipp, Up Cork, Ireland Abú! Like the Choctaw Indians, I believe my brothers and sisters are everywhere, and no land border will ever tell me that these people are not my “Irish” brothers and sisters.



# Joe Lee

*Joe Lee is Professor of Irish History at University College Cork. He is the author of Ireland: 1912–1985, Politics and Society.*



Photo: John Sheehan

Being Irish today is, for a historian intrigued by issues of identity, like living in a participatory laboratory. The Irish are at one of the periodic hinge moments in their history when they are reinventing themselves. Remaking always involves a degree of refaking, which requires in turn a capacity for both unctuous self-righteousness and massive self-deception, both in ample supply.

The significance of this remaking extends far beyond the experience of the five or more million people on the island. At one level, one might ask, what does Ireland matter anyway, for that five million is a drop in the global ocean of six billion. But Ireland has often punched above its weight in world history. Four features which seem to me to mark out the Irish experience today as worthy of wider notice are the peace process, the changing sense of British identity, the Celtic Tiger and globalisation.

The peace process deals directly with only a tiny area. But if the scale is local, the issues of principle are universal. The history of the area that became Northern Ireland under the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 has taken many a twist and turn over the centuries. Who knows what further twists may be in store? History did not end with the Good Friday Agreement.

To get agreement at all required one of the great works of necessary creative fiction of modern diplomacy. As the Agreement is based on fundamentally incompatible assumptions among the various participants, some must be disappointed with its fruits in due course, unless the process itself changes their sense of self. How it works out will be partly influenced by the fact that the sense of British identity is changing more rapidly in Britain itself than for several centuries. It would be ironic if the last bastion of British identity in the "British" Isles were to be the unionist parts of Northern Ireland!

Further south, the Celtic Tiger is a truly striking phenomenon, as much for its psychological as for its economic consequences. It makes unionists work even harder at sustaining the image of axiomatic Catholic inferiority — and it is no consolation to that mindset that the Catholicism is itself changing rapidly, indeed in some respects declining.

The generation of the 1990s is the first to have been reared on expectations of constant success. But can they cope with success? The Celtic Tiger is nothing if not eager to be global. It is not that Ireland is new to globalisation. It underwent one of the earliest versions of it. It was then called anglicisation. It was resisted politically and, partly, culturally, because it came in the gun carriage of the conqueror. Globalisation, now meaning cultural conquest by the strongest media power, infiltrating with no such obvious political baggage, rouses little resistance.

The perception of Ireland as Little America — or at least of Dublin as Little New York — is already familiar. “If you take a stroll down Grafton Street,” Niall O’Dowd observes from New York, “it is like any American shopping mall nowadays. In the rush to conform to the latest fashions, Irish kids are indistinguishable from an American high school class. None of the traditional individualism of the Irish is immediately apparent . . .” The sceptic might wonder if the only real question is whether it is London or New York that is the cultural capital of Ireland, through its proxy, Dublin? Patrick West makes his pitch for London in the *Sunday Independent*, on the grounds that “We are all tea-drinking, pub-going, Anglo, Manchester-United supporting, *EastEnders*-watching peoples together.” Can we preserve a little Anglo-Hibernian time warp? So much for Romantic Ireland — or even Romantic England! Was Yeats right after all — just a bit previous?

A pluralist Ireland can enrich Irish culture. But where pluralism is really a fraudulent ploy for the destruction of everything distinctively Irish, then it becomes simply an agent for global homogeneity, contributing more to conformity than to diversity. That is why so much of what passes as cosmopolitanism in Ireland is so redolent of provincialism, with globalisation in place accompanied by provincialism in time, fostering an obsession to rubbish the dead in order to enhance the self-importance of the living. So tiny a country must always be a taker to a great extent. But what it takes, and how it takes, determines largely who it is, and what it can give back. And if it cannot make those choices on the basis of something distinctive to itself, then there is no particular reason for it to exist at all. Being Irish becomes simply a convenience networking for careerists rather than a commitment of conviction.

It is an exciting time to be Irish. The opportunities opened up by the peace process and by the Celtic Tiger are immense. There is still a marvellous vivacity about many young people, whatever the pressure to conformity. If identity increasingly depends on imagination rather than inheritance, how the inheritance is used is crucial to the nature of the creativity. A new Irish identity is still all to play for.



# Frank McCourt\*

Frank McCourt is the bestselling author of Angela's Ashes and 'Tis.



Photo: Irish America

The English Catholic martyr, St Edmund Campion, lived in Dublin for a while in 1569 and here is what he wrote about the Irish:

*"The people are thus inclined: religious, franke, amorous, irefull, sufferable of paines infinite, very glorious, many sorcerers, excellent horsemen, delighted with warres, great almes-givers, passing in hospitalitie: the lewder sort both clarkes and laymen are sensuall and loose to leachery above measure. The same being vertuously bred up or reformed are such mirroures of holiness and austeritie that other nations retaine but a shewe or shadow of devotion in comparison with them."*

If you're Irish you're searching for yourself in Campion's wide-ranging assessment. Are you religious one minute, "sensuall and loose to leachery" the next? Amorous, but still a mirror of holiness?

Much depends on where and when you grew up. If, like me, you were raised in mid-century Ireland you had to think twice before engaging in sensuality and lechery and if you did there was nothing for it but confession on Saturday. My Ireland was known the world over as "poor and priest-ridden". The

Irish were marrying so infrequently and emigrating at such a rate that an alarmed American priest wrote a book entitled *The Vanishing Irish*.

We were poor. We were priest-ridden.

And De Valera-ridden.

These were the ingredients of our lives in the lanes of Limerick and, I'm sure, in lanes in every town and city in Ireland.

But especially in Limerick, because this was the one major city in Ireland without a university, a community of independent thinkers and scholars. Dublin, Cork, Galway, Belfast — all enjoyed the social and intellectual benefits of higher education, but not Limerick. There was an intellectual (and spiritual) vacuum — and the church filled it.

There was no political vacuum: De Valera had already filled that with his various obsessions, his dreams of a Gaelic-speaking people digging joyously in the fields by day, dancing in the dusk at the crossroads, Irish dancing only, leaping lads ready to die for creed and country, dimpled maidens so chaste they put the lie to Campion's sensuality and "lechery".

Why go on about this? It's old stuff and haven't the Irish writers, from Joyce to McGahern, exhausted this vein? No, you can't exhaust it because that Ireland with its tricolour, its crucifix, its various blood sacrifices, has affected generations of Irish even unto seven times the seventh generation.

And the irony is that even Irish-Americans may have been affected by the psychological climate of mid-century Ireland. If you live in the United States, especially in the great urban areas, you are literally nagged into reflecting on

your ethnicity. It's one thing if you're Irish from Ireland. That's easy to spot: there's the accent. When they say, "Gee what a cute brogue," you have to respond, to adjust. You're in America and you've been labelled "Irish". You didn't have to think about that in Ireland, but you're in the States now, pal.

And when you think about being Irish, what comes to mind? If you're a cub of the Celtic Tiger, will you go along with St Edmund Campion and admit that you are, indeed, amorous and ireful. Whoopee and musical beds and there is Mother Church in the corner, her head hung, weeping.

Irish-American? That's another story. Here is virgin territory for the social historian: not the *history* of the Irish-Americans, but their relationship with

the folks back home. Of course, we brought baggage from Ireland, We brought our stories, our songs, our hymns, our sense of place. We barged into the Brahmin enclaves of Boston and never took no for an answer. Daniel O'Connell had told us, *Organise, organise*, and if we were slow to act in Ireland we seized the day in the United States. We dominated politics and the church and set up an education system of parochial schools and universities, which seems to have escaped the attention of our historians. Simply put, we saw power and took it.

All along, we looked back over the years and across the ocean and deferred to the history, the tradition, the land. Look at the richness of Ireland's culture, all that history, all that suffering, and a song for every event, every battle, every lost love, every sailing away, every drop to ease the pain. At any party in the States, the Irish would sing loudly, merrily, endlessly while their Irish-American brothers and sisters served the drinks and in their ignorance of their own achievements wished they'd been hurt into that kind of music.

Then something happened. Damn! Who is this Michael Flatley, this Seamus Egan, this Eileen Ivers, this Joanie Madden and her Cherished Ladies? And who do they think they are, coming to Ireland and, not only sweeping the competition but, talented, pushing their way into the culture of their ancestors. Who is this Mick Moloney, a Limerickman at Villanova University, who gives equal time and grace to the musical traditions of the narrowbacks?

The Atlantic has become a puddle which poets and musicians leap without a second thought. Irish-Americans are discovering their own turbulent and rowdy history and the songs that go with it. They're throwing the overalls in Mrs Murphy's chowder and splashing Finnegan with whiskey to wake him, Michael Patrick McDonald takes us on a heartbreaking tour of his South Boston family while William Kennedy guides us through the heart and soul of an Irish, an American Albany.

So . . . what is it to be Irish nowadays?

It is to live on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, or anywhere else, and to be able to say, *You've come a long way, Michael or Maggie*. You've come singing and dancing and, remembering St Edmund Campion, you may be "mirrours of holiness", "great almes-givers", and "passing in hospitalitie".



# Martin Collins

*Martin Collins is a 34-year-old Irish Traveller, working with Pavee Point Travellers Centre. He was a member of the Taskforce on the Traveller Community and has spent 15 years campaigning to improve the quality of life for the Traveller Community.*



The very first time I became conscious of my Traveller identity was when I started attending primary school in the mid-seventies. My brother and I were the only two Travellers in the whole school and it was also the first time I had any real contact with the majority population.

When I say this was the first time I became conscious of my Traveller identity, it was not because there was an intercultural curriculum in the school which valued and respected different cultures. In fact and unfortunately we did not and never had an intercultural curriculum, but rather I was reminded I was different in negative ways — by way of discrimination, prejudice and harassment, not just from other pupils but also from members of staff. Unfortunately, discrimination and prejudice is still a big issue for Travellers, both in school and in the wider society.

We Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority group who have been part of Irish society for centuries. We have our own value system, language, customs and traditions, which makes us identifiable to both ourselves and others. It saddens me to say that the approach this society has taken to Travellers is one of assimilation and rehabilitation. We are perceived as a problem; our cultural identity has been and continues to be rejected and devalued. As a Traveller myself, I feel offended when I am labelled as a problem or someone in need of rehabilitation.

It is important to recognise that Irish society is not mono-cultural; in other words it is not only composed of white settled Catholic people. In fact, this was never the situation. We have always had other distinct cultural, religious and linguistic groups and now we have even more with the arrival of refugees and asylum-seekers and this poses a challenge to us. How do we create a more inclusive anti-racist society, where all cultures and identities are respected and protected?

When asked to introduce myself or describe myself I would always respond by saying I'm an Irish Traveller, because being Irish is also important to me as this is the place where I was born, grew up and now live. It's part of my lived experience. I, like other Travellers, take immense pride in being Irish and this manifests itself in many ways, particularly when other Irish people achieve and have success, whether it's in sport, singing and music, acting, politics, the corporate world and so on. Travellers do rejoice and celebrate in their success. One example that comes to mind was when Ireland played in the 1990 and 1994 World Cups. Every Traveller trailer and house had Irish flags and bunting on it, despite the fact that Travellers could not get into the pubs to watch the matches because of the discrimination and prejudice we have to endure. But this did not discourage us from supporting and celebrating in our country's success.

I am of the opinion that you can have dual or multiple identities; for example, you have Irish Jews, Irish Travellers, Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants and there are many more. It's for the groups themselves to decide what is their primary identity, but for me, first and foremost is being a Traveller. That is my primary identity and while I felt immense pride when Ireland competed in the World Cup and Steve Collins won his world boxing title, it did not come close to how I felt when Francie Barrett led out the Irish Olympic team in Atlanta or when the first Traveller was awarded her degree from Trinity College Dublin. These were very special moments for me, moments I will never forget. I would hope and like to believe that the majority population can celebrate in our success and achievements, just like we do in theirs.

So it is my view there are many ways of being Irish; there is no one way and the sooner people learn that, the better off we all would be. Culture and identity is always difficult to define and pin down but in doing so we must be careful not to look at it through rose-tinted glasses. Rather we must take an honest look at what is positive and negative about our cultural identities, because not everything in our cultural identity is positive and this applies to all nationalities and ethnic groups universally.

It is also important in my view to recognise that cultures and identities are fluid; they change and evolve and adapt, and rightly so. As a Traveller, when I meet settled people they have the preconceived notion that to be Traveller you must be living in a colourful barrel-top wagon and be a great singer or musician and storyteller. This is dangerous because it is stereotyping and we must avoid this. Travellers don't live in barrel-top wagons and sing songs at the campfire any more, just as settled people no longer live in thatched cottages with turf fires or dance at the crossroads.

In the Ireland of today we have a lot more people from different cultures and ethnic groups and this should be welcomed as a positive development rather than seen as a threat. The Irish are perceived worldwide as friendly, hospitable and welcoming people. But it is only a myth, because I have not seen this friendliness or hospitality extended to minority groups in this society.

It's very much like the song: if your name is Timothy or Pat, then there is a welcome on the mat, but if your name is Demeter or Stankiewicz, there is no welcome on the mat for you.

Of course, this is not true of all Irish but it is true of a significant number of us. I do believe that all cultures and identities can peacefully co-exist. What other options do we have? Domination? Conflict? Genocide? It doesn't bear thinking about.



# Moosajee Bhamjee

*Dr Moosajee Bhamjee is a consultant psychiatrist in Our Lady's Hospital, Ennis, County Clare. Born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, he moved to Ireland in 1965. He represented Clare as a Labour TD from 1992 to 1997.*



**I** am writing these words to give a personal account of how I feel about being Irish in the year 2000.

I moved to Ireland in 1965 as a medical student and upon marriage took up permanent residence. I am a naturalised Irish citizen since 1978, having sworn my loyalty to the State in a court of law. This certificate allowed me to stand for election to Dáil Éireann. Thus I was elected as the first Labour TD for Clare since the early 1950s, and became known as the first "Indian" in the Dáil. Though I was born in South Africa, my parental ancestry is Indian.

From being a relatively unknown student and doctor it can be surprising to be recognised in all the villages of Ireland and to be called "Bhamjee", a name I personally adopted when answering the phone or introducing myself to people. I seem to have lost my first name since becoming a TD, but I am proud to have retained my original name and not adjusted or changed it.

Today one can buy the spices to cook a curry in any supermarket and to see people eating "curry and rice" regularly at home shows how the staple diet has changed; pastas, spaghetti and chow mein are also cooked in many homes. But one must love burgers and fish fingers, and the Sunday roast is still the most important meal of the week when all the family are together.

I am proud to have read Irish history, Irish folklore and Irish literature but I still have not been able to grasp the Irish language, nor have I been able to pronounce any phrases in Irish; my wife Clare was able to help the children with their Irish homework. I have a good interest in sport and like to read about the national team and the major sporting heroes and attend as many GAA matches as possible. Presently I am coaching the local under-16 girls' football team. To be passionate for County Clare comes naturally to me and I can be heard roaring at all their matches. Whenever Ireland play against South Africa, the land of my birth, I find my loyalty is to Ireland. My children speak fluent Irish and, being born in Ireland, do not feel different in any way, and they think and feel Irish. But I feel guilty about not increasing their knowledge of my ancestry and teaching them my language.

I find it hard not to be honest and straightforward and to speak openly and frankly about my feelings over certain issues, be it in a group or at official meetings. Thus I find it hard to meet people who will be critical over a decision pre- and post-meeting but will never express their views at the meeting, when it matters most. There is still a lot of "plámás" at meetings, which can be annoying. The person who speaks openly is seen as being odd or strange. Also, meetings rarely start on time and this can be frustrating as other appointments might be scheduled and people left waiting, or other appointments cancelled; to accept this as "normality" I find difficult to accommodate. To comply with

modern bureaucratic needs, people are still long-winded and irrelevant rather than being succinct, to the point, getting the message across in the minimal of words.

I love reading my *Irish Times*, as it contains analysis, factual information and international news, but there is no substance to the Sunday newspapers, even though they have a lot of print. So I have lost interest in the Sunday papers, which I loved reading and looked forward to in the 1960s and 1970s.

Driving a big fast car seems to be the fashion at present, but I still enjoy driving a small car with a low horsepower, which motors along at a steady pace. Unfortunately, the Sunday drive is not as popular as it used to be.

Being Irish can be worrying with regards to drinking and drug abuse, as both are occurring at a young age and people do not seem to be able to control themselves when drinking. I am also concerned with the increased number of racist attacks and vandalism throughout the country.

It is good to see magazines writing on "taboo subjects" like mental illness, divorce, euthanasia, and now people are willing to discuss these topics. I am pleased to have helped bring divorce into Ireland, as people now have a second chance and a new beginning.

I find it difficult to make people see ahead or a different viewpoint. Thus the thinking is still confined, narrow and indoctrinated. I enjoy meeting the person who is different, as society does not cater for them; being eccentric seems like an abnormality now and the "village character" is gone. It is all about conforming.

## *Fee Ching Leong*

*Fee Ching Leong was born in West Malaysia and has lived in Northern Ireland for twenty-five years, where she has two daughters. She has edited and written six books on racial equality and anti-racism training. She enjoys drumming and dancing.*



**I**f you were to enter the living room in the home of my childhood days, you would have been confronted by an elaborately carved table displaying statues of Buddha, "Goon Yum" (the Goddess of Fertility), the Earth God and the Monkey God. There was also a specific tabernacle with fresh fruits being constantly offered to my ancestors and their blessings would have channelled into us via the fruits as we consumed them. Joss sticks were lit morning and evening — these were stuck into porcelain pots two-thirds filled with light brown ashes.

On the first and fifteenth day of every Chinese lunar month, I would have been obliged to participate in praying to the Gods and to my ancestors. Clasp- ing smoking joss-sticks in my hands, I would have waved them gently up and down before I stuck them, three at a time, into the ash-filled containers. I was



instructed by my parents and elders to ask for good health and the ability to perform well in my school examinations. I would also have engaged in going on my knees and kow-towing — with hands sprawled in front of me, I brought my head to meet the ground three times.

I was brought up in a Buddhist-cum-Taoist home environment in a town called Ipoh in West Malaysia. The Irish influence on my life began at the very beginning of my school days and has lasted right through to this day. The principal of the convent school I attended was an Irishwoman; Sister Fidelma was strict but other Irish nuns were less so. They had different roles in the school. A few were teaching staff whilst others cared for the children living in an orphanage attached to the school. There were French nuns too and together with their Irish compatriots, they helped to instil within me a deep sense of compassion and an aspiration to real humility — qualities which were more artificially expressed by those who constituted my more worldly upper-middle-class upbringing.

And yet, my ending up living in Northern Ireland for the last 25 years was not exactly what I would have desired two and a half decades ago. The lights of London and other cities in England were more appealing to the younger me, but my parents chose Belfast for me because I already had cousins studying there at the time — also, what would Belfast have to offer socially to a teenager? Whilst the bombs presented a life threat, my parents were more concerned that I had as little opportunity as possible to avail of what they consider unnecessarily distracting social activities.

Armed with instructions to achieve academically and a threat of being disowned if I married anyone outside of the Chinese “race”, I promised myself to excel in my studies but within a month of arrival on the island, I knew the charms of Irish men would be difficult to resist and it would be in my destiny to rebel. I was swamped with dates and was courted with fervour. My weakness for tall men greatly influenced the choice of my first husband. He was a working class Protestant and an only son, which, in Northern Ireland, is a combination that typically still spells an interdependence that paralyses the offspring’s ability to plan and act accordingly. I became a wife who replaced the mother to whom he then promptly returned when we separated.

For ten years, I listened to but was not persuaded by the unionist viewpoint, wondered about the negative stereotypes of Catholic people and strived to feel fulfilled as the wife of a white man. I became, as a Chinese friend confided one day, “a white woman in a yellow skin”. Whilst my first rebellion had been about following my heart, my second rebellion, a decade later, resulted from allowing the real me to emerge.

As I subsequently engaged in working with community groups and representations from a range of organisations to challenge their own assumptions

and prejudices, I found that attitudes were only slowly moving from the perceptions of other “races” as “foreigners” who should “return to where they have come from”, despite the fact that there are many in Ireland today who, like my daughters, are born in the country and hold Irish and/or British citizenships.

We have, however, not allowed snide remarks — made in ignorance or otherwise — to dissuade us from wanting to belong, to be Irish. We try to understand the confusion that is in many a person’s mind that Ireland is and, perhaps, should remain white, its culture has remained static, and inclusivity refers to simply enabling better relations between the two predominant religio-political communities. The diversities of backgrounds must surely lend a richness to an island too long divided by suspicion, conflict and violence. The Paddy jokes should no longer apply, not only because they reinforce the stereotypes of Irish people, but also because they lead to the continuing denial of Ireland as a multidimensional and multiethnic society.

In the meantime, I shall continue to dream, to dream of the day when I can be, first of all, an individual, rather than a second or third class citizen of Ireland.

## *Julia Neuberger*

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Photo: Derek Tamea

I’m not Irish, though I hope that one of the (much less important than other) results of a final peace agreement in the North will mean that people like me can hold dual citizenship. After all, all my grandparents were German Jews, and all acquired UK citizenship. My father fought on the British side in World War II, but my maternal grandfather fought on the German side in World War I; my paternal grandparents were that now often-sneered-at group, economic migrants — though they might not have been sneered at too much, because they were comfortably off. My mother was a refugee from Nazi Germany, who found a warm welcome in Britain, first in Birmingham and then in London. So I am British, and grateful and proud to be so.

So why Ireland for my second country, my adopted home? The connection is far from obvious, because there is none by blood or belonging. Ireland is my other home by choice. I’m a “blow-in”, one who has tried to make a contribution — I owe the Irish that for the warm welcome we have received — but a “blow-in” nevertheless. We came for a holiday many years ago, and we have never quite left since.

So what is it? At first it was the charm, the humour, the literary quality of everyday talk, the celebration of the land, the sea, the beauty. I was beguiled. And then I began to be more involved and less easily won over. The strong sense of belonging that all Irish Americans feel could also exclude people like



me. The attitude to state support for denominational education in the North — strongly held to be an essential by Nationalist and Protestant alike, despite the clear popularity of integrated education — makes me feel an outsider. One summer, our children attended the Protestant school in Ballydehob, very briefly, by the great generosity of the authorities, because the Catholic school would not accept our Jewish children, however temporarily. Protestants and Jews together — the also-rans? That can make me feel uncomfortable too.

And yet the use of memory, the recording of the Famine in literature and now in museums, the sense of peoplehood, the restoration of the language, the pride in Irish food, clothes, glass and design — these are things I warm to, I even love. Increasingly, my clothes are Irish, made by people I know, or sold to me by those who know them. I have had few more pleasurable moments as Chancellor of the University of Ulster than giving honorary degrees to fashion designers and racing magnates. I have loved the celebration of Irish cheeses in the United States, and rejoiced in the successes of Irish theatre in England and the US, and the Irish novel worldwide.

So much for the love affair. It may not always be reciprocated, and I have certainly had my share of unpleasantness in Ireland — over integrated education in the North, and over my support for and pleas for generosity towards asylum seekers, when I have cited the generous welcome I and my family have received. But what I feel deep down is something beyond the attractive, the warm, the cosy, the charm. For there can be begrudgery, hatred, land battles and long held feuds, and there are many unpleasant stories to tell. What I feel most strongly is what I learned from that formidable professor of Irish Studies at Boston College, Adele Dalsimer, whose recent death is so lamented. It was she who made me see a parallel between Jews and Irish, a passion for memory, a passion for learning, a way with words, a love of the law (!), and an understanding, albeit often unexplored, of what religion can really be about. Adele was a Jew, and an honorary American Irish person. She it was who set up the Irish-Jewish Passover Seder, remembering the Exodus from Egypt, the Famine, the Holocaust, the emigrations, celebrating longing for return, and praying for liberation for everybody.

For me, Ireland at best is the new confident and accepting face of Europe. And the Irish are able to welcome, to succeed in all they do, teach, learn, and create a new series of overlapping identities that can include all of us who want to be a part.

That means that we can be Irish by birth or Irish by ancestry; Irish by choice or Irish by accident; Irish with strong British links, or Irish with a link across the Atlantic, or even a bit of both; Irish by association or Irish by nationality; Irish in looks or Irish in voice, or neither of these, but Irish by choice. It's a more inclusive notion of Irishness than used to be the case, but as Ireland's confidence grows and as Irish people are successful the world over, there's no reason why it should not be the norm. Much of the time, it already is. And I hope, and pray, that it will become the universal view — and that the new Ireland will include us all, and make us its own.



# Bernard Shaw

*an excerpt from ...*

Preface for Politicians<sup>1</sup>  
(To the First Edition in 1906)

## What Is An Irishman?

When I say that I am an Irishman I mean that I was born in Ireland, and that my native language is the English of Swift and not the unspeakable jargon of the mid-XIX century London newspapers. My extraction is the extraction of most Englishmen: that is, I have no trace in me of the commercially imported North Spanish strain which passes for aboriginal Irish: I am a genuine typical Irishman of the Danish, Norman, Cromwellian, and (of course) Scotch invasions. I am violently and arrogantly Protestant by family tradition; but let no English Government therefore count on my allegiance: I am English enough to be inveterate Republican and Home Ruler. It is true that one of my grandfathers was an Orangeman<sup>2</sup>, but then his sister was an abbess; and his uncle, I am proud to say, was hanged as a rebel. When I look round me on the hybrid cosmopolitans, slum poisoned or square pampered, who call themselves Englishmen today, and see them bullied by the Irish Protestant garrison as no Bengalee now lets himself be bullied by an Englishman; when I see the Irishman everywhere standing clearheaded, sane, hardly callous to the boyish sentimentalities, susceptibilities, and cre-

<sup>2</sup>: Protestant, loyalist sympathizer; hence, like Shaw's other contrasts here, opposed to a Catholic abbess or Republican rebel [Editor].

dulities that make the Englishman the dupe of every charlatan and the idolater of every numskull, I perceive that Ireland is the only spot on earth which still produces the ideal Englishman of history. Blackguard, bully, drunkard, liar, foulmouth, flatterer, beggar, backbiter, venal functionary, corrupt judge, envious friend, vindictive opponent, unparal- leled political traitor: all these your Irishman may easily be, just as he may be a gentleman (a species extinct in England, and nobody a penny the worse); but he is never quite the hysterical nonsense-crammed, fact- proof, truth-terrified, unballasted sport of all the bogey panics and all the silly enthusiasms that now calls itself "God's Englishman." England cannot do without its Irish and its Scots today, because it cannot do without at least a little sanity.

## The Protestant Garrison

The more Protestant an Irishman is—the more English he is, if it flatters you to have it put that way, the more intolerable he finds it to be rilled by English instead of Irish folly. A "loyal" Irishman is an abhorrent phenomenon, because it is an unnatural one. No doubt English rule is vigorously exploited in the interests of the property, power, and promotion of the Irish classes as against the Irish masses. Our delicacy is part of a keen sense of reality which makes us a very practical, and even, on occasion, a very coarse people. The Irish soldier takes the King's shilling and drinks the King's health; and the Irish squire takes the title deeds of the English settlement and rises uncovered to the strains of the English national anthem. But do not mistake this cupboard loyalty for anything deeper. It gains a broad base from the normal attachment of every reasonable man to the established government as long as it is bearable; for we all, after a certain age, prefer peace to revolution and order to chaos, other things being equal. Such considerations produce loyal Irishmen as they produce loyal Poles and Fins, loyal Hindus, loyal Filipinos, and faithful slaves. But there is nothing more in it than that. If there is an entire lack of gall in the feeling of the Irish gentry towards the English, it is because the Englishman is always gaping admiringly at the Irishman as at some clever child prodigy. He overrates him with a generosity born of a traditional conviction of his own superiority in the deeper aspects of human character. As the Irish gentleman, tracing his pedigree to the conquest or one of the invasions, is equally convinced that if this superiority really exists, he is the genuine true blue heir to it, and as he is easily able to hold his own in all the superficial social accomplishments, he finds English society agreeable, and English houses very comfortable, Irish establishments being generally straitened by an attempt to keep a park and a stable on an income which would not justify an Englishman inventing upon a wholly detached villa.

## Our Temperaments Contrasted

But however pleasant the relations between the Protestant garrison and the English gentry may be, they are always essentially of the nature of an *entente cordiale* between foreigners. Personally I like Englishmen much better than Irishmen (no doubt because they make more of me) just as many Englishmen like Frenchmen better than Englishmen, and never go on board a Peninsular and Oriental steamer when one of the ships of the Messageries Maritimes is available. But I never think of an Englishman as my countryman. I should as soon think of applying that term to a German. And the Englishman has the same feeling. When a Frenchman fails to make the distinction, we both feel a certain dis- agreement involved in the misapprehension. Macaulay, seeing that the Irish had in Swift an author worth stealing, tried to annex him by con- tending that he must be classed as an Englishman because he was not an aboriginal Celt. He might as well have refused the name of Briton to Addison because he did not stain himself blue and attach scythes to the poles of his sedan chair.<sup>3</sup> In spite of all such trifling with facts, the actual



distinction between the idolatrous Englishman and the fact-facing Irishman, of the same extraction though they be, remains to explode those two hollowest of fictions, the Irish and English "races." There is no Irish race any more than there is an English race or a Yankee race. There is an Irish climate, which will stamp an immigrant more deeply and durably in two years, apparently, than the English climate will in two hundred. It is reinforced by an artificial economic climate which does some of the work attributed to the natural geographic one; but the geographic climate is eternal and irresistible, making a mankind and a womankind that Kent, Middlesex, and East Anglia cannot produce and do not want to imitate.

How can I sketch the broad lines of the contrast as they strike me? Roughly I should say that the Englishman is wholly at the mercy of his imagination, having no sense of reality to check it. The Irishman, with a far subtler and more fastidious imagination, has one eye always on things as they are. If you compare [Thomas] Moore's visionary "Minstrel

3. Thomas Babbington Macaulay (1800–59), MP, writer, colonial administrator of India; Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), Dubliner by birth, career, and

burial; Joseph Addison (1672–1719), impeccably English essayist who twice served as aide to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland [Editor].

Boy" with Mr. Rudyard Kipling's quasi-realistic "Soldiers Three," you may yawn over Moore or gush over him, but you will not suspect him of having had any illusions about the contemporary British private; whilst as to Mr. Kipling, you will see that he has not, and unless he settles in Ireland for a few years will always remain constitutionally and congenitally incapable of having, the faintest inkling of the reality which he idolizes as Tommy Atkins. Perhaps you have never thought of illustrating the contrast between English and Irish by Moore and Mr. Kipling, or even by Parnell and Gladstone. Sir Boyle Roche and Shakespeare may seem more to your point. Let me find you a more dramatic instance. Think of the famous meeting between the Duke of Wellington, that intensely Irish Irishman, and Nelson, that intensely English Englishman.<sup>4</sup> Wellington's contemptuous disgust at Nelson's theatrically as a professed hero, patriot, and rhapsody, a theatricality which in an Irishman would have been an insufferably vulgar affectation, was quite natural and inevitable. Wellington's formula for that kind of thing was a well-known Irish one: "Sir: dont be a damned fool." It is the formula of all Irishmen for all Englishmen to this day. It is the formula of Larry Doyle for Tom Broadbent in my play, in spite of Doyle's affection for Tom. Nelson's genius, instead of producing intellectual keenness and scrupulousness, produced mere delirium. He was drunk with glory, exalted by his fervent faith in the sound British patriotism of the Almighty, nerved by the vulgarst anti-foreign prejudice, and apparently unchastened by any reflections on the fact that he had never had to fight a technically capable and properly equipped enemy except on land, where he had never been successful. Compare Wellington, who had to fight Napoleon's armies, Napoleon's marshals, and finally Napoleon himself, without one moment of illusions as to the human material he had to command, without one gush of the "Kiss me, Hardy" emotion which enabled Nelson to idolize his crews and his staff, without forgetting even

in his dreams that the normal British officer of that time was an incapable amateur (as he still is) and the normal British soldier a never-dowell (he is now a depressed and respectable young man). No wonder Wellington became an accomplished comedian in the art of anti-climax, scandalizing the unfortunate Croker,<sup>5</sup> responding to the demand

4. Again, Irish figures of British careers contrasted with English: Parliamentarians Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–91) and William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98); rhetoricians Sir Boyle Roche (1743–1807), said to have perpetrated the inflated, senseless "Irish Bull," and Shakespeare; military commander the duke of Wellington (1769–1852) and

Viscount Nelson (1758–1805) [Editor].  
5. John Wilson Croker (1780–1857), a comical literary figure who published his own papers, including letters from Wellington: "Kiss me, Hardy" above, are said to have been Nelson's last words [Editor].

for glorious sentiments by the most disenchanting touches of realism, and, generally, pricking the English windbag at its most explosive crises of distention. Nelson, intensely nervous and theatrical, made an enormous fuss about victories so cheap that he would have deserved shooting if he had lost them, and, not content with lavishing splendid fighting on helpless adversaries like the heroic De Bruyns or Villeneuve (who had not even the illusion of heroism when he went like a lamb to the slaughter), got himself killed by his passion for exposing himself to death in that sublime defiance of it which was perhaps the supreme tribute of the exquisite coward to the King of Terrors (for, believe me, you cannot be a hero without being a coward: superdense cuts both ways), the result being a tremendous effect on the gallery. Wellington, most capable of captains, was neither a hero nor a patriot: perhaps not even a coward; and had it not been for the Nelsonic anecdotes invented for him—"Up guards, and at em" and so forth—and the fact that the antagonist with whom he finally closed was such a master of theatrical effect that Wellington could not fight him without getting into his limelight, nor overthrow him (most unfortunately for us all) without drawing the eyes of the whole world to the catastrophe, the Iron Duke would have been almost forgotten by this time. Now that contrast is English against Irish all over, and is the more delicious because the real Irishman in it is the Englishman of tradition, whilst the real Englishman is the traditional theatrical foreigner.

The value of the illustration lies in the fact that Nelson and Wellington were both in the highest degree efficient, and both in the highest degree incompatible with one another on any other footing than one of independence. The government of Nelson by Wellington or of Wellington by Nelson is felt at once to be a dishonorable outrage to the governed and a finally impossible task for the governor.