

Identity in Ireland: Self-Description & Significance

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The first identifiable tradition in Irish history is that of the Gaelic with only perhaps substratal traces of pre-Celtic to be found in it. For over two thousand years, Ireland has experienced Gaelic culture and language to one extent or another. The initial addition to the Gaelic ethos was Nordic from the 8th through to the early 11th century, to one degree or another, in the shape of the Vikings. They left lasting marks, evident in some cultural remains, ethnic characteristics (e.g. red hair) and especially town-building (often signaled by the suffix in nomenclature of 'ford'). But one cannot say that there is currently a pervasive Nordic phenomenon of a cultural and noticeable nature in Ireland.

Next, came the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th century. While often spoken of simply as 'the English', they were frequently (at least the commanders) notable as much for their French as their Anglo-Saxon speech, and influenced the Gaelic language to a degree (e.g. 'boy' – 'garçon' [Fr], 'garsún' [G]). Gradually, many of them were Gaelicised and came to be described as 'more Irish than the Irish'. However, that did not necessarily lead to a switch in political allegiance. A further complication was introduced in this group with the onset of the Reformation, leading some of them to convert to Protestantism, while others remained Roman Catholic.

In the wake of the eventual completion of the conquest of Ireland under the Tudors, the 16th century witnessed the start of significant migration into the island from the Britain of that time. The Confederation of Kilkenny (1642-49) saw those adhering to Roman Catholicism among the original Gaels and the Anglo-Normans and their descendants becoming broadly integrated ethnically, religiously and politically (albeit not linguistically) in resistance to British Protestant hegemony. But, the Confederation was defeated by Cromwell and a new wave of land confiscation followed.

In the case of Ulster, unofficial and subsequent official 'plantation', as it was called, involved Protestant dispossession of the Catholic natives. There were plantations elsewhere in Ireland, but these did not endure, while those in Ulster did. The end result is that, today, there are two broad political traditions in Ireland, namely unionist and nationalist, as well as two jurisdictions, namely Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

There has been a tendency on occasion to go on to speak of *two identities* in Ireland as well as the *two traditions* just referred to. Research, however, has shown that, in Northern Ireland alone, there have been at least five expressions of identity over the years, which can of course be overlapping to one extent or another. These are: British, Irish, Ulster, Ulster-Scots, and Northern Irish. In the Irish Republic, most people refer to themselves simply as Irish, but anthropologically one could break this down analytically into Gaelic and Hibernic. We introduce the latter neologism in order to cover those who are not imbued with the Gaelic language and its particular culture, but nonetheless categorize themselves as Irish along with their fellow citizens who are so imbued. *A Gaelic-Hibernic breakdown would appear to be evident among nationalists in Northern Ireland as well.

Then there is the question of the socio-cultural content of some or all of these categories. One might approach this in terms of *everyday culture* and *political culture*. In the first instance, if one looks at the daily lives of people in respect of elementary customs and speech, there is not much if any difference across the communities in Northern Ireland. Even in English speech, there are distinctive traces everywhere of Ulster-Scots.

It is with regard to political culture that differences become evident concerning flags, emblems, songs, historical memories and self-descriptions. In the last case, the situation is complicated. At the same time, nationalists, while, additionally to the designation 'Irish', perhaps accepting 'Ulster' and 'Northern Irish', are unlikely to endorse the classification 'British'. And some unionists, while not excluding 'Irish' and 'Northern Irish', and perhaps preferring or adding 'Ulster' or 'Ulster Scots', would usually only do so in the context of also being 'British'.

The situation in regard to the Irish language is also becoming involved. While the preponderant attitude among Unionists is indifferent or hostile concerning that language, there is of course the phenomenon of some unionists beginning to take a cultural interest in it. Of course, some nationalists see an expression of their nationality in the language and demand rights for it accordingly. Unfortunately, this has been perceived by some as a 'weaponising' of the language. It is important, therefore, for Irish language speakers to continually make clear the distinction between rights and imposition, as the latter should not arise in any instance.

It is against this background that one seeks to realize peace and harmony in Northern Ireland. However, this task has to be set in the context of the constitutional position. Following the Good Friday agreement, this can be stated as settled in recognizing that Northern Ireland is currently a part of the United Kingdom, which accords with the wish of unionists, while it is accepted that, should a majority in a border poll opt for a United Ireland, that will then be brought about in some form or other.

That means that there should be in place structures, laws, policies and practices which are suitable for the conduct of everyday life in the immediate future. The basic structures are there in the shape of the Legislative Assembly and the Executive. The laws have also been significantly amended to ensure the necessary equality. Policies flowing from these arrangements must now be agreed by both unionists and nationalists. Practices in the public sphere have to be monitored officially to be consistent with the foregoing.

There is then the question of individual practice, behaviour and attitudes among people in general. This is where the maximal amount of understanding and tolerance are required.

*We do not use 'Hibernian' because of its association with the likes of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

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