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for cultural, economic and social relations

**Ireland: A False Construct**

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My aim is to persuade you that the idea of Ireland as a self-sufficient entity is a false construct; that instead Ireland shares in the life of the whole British Isles; that continental Europe is on the fringes of most Irish minds; and that beyond the British Isles we all relate most closely to America. Ireland is not, and cannot be, a free-standing cultural entity. These suggestions may be platitudinous, but they are denied by official Ireland and by most Dublin-oriented writers.

In day to day terms our imaginations take these connections for granted. The television moguls knew what they were about when they presented us with Ballykissangel, Father Ted, Rab C. Nesbitt or The Last of the Summer Wine. We already have mental pictures of Avoca, Glasgow or Yorkshire and enjoy fantasy versions. Similarly, while something stops many of us from watching Coronation Street or Neighbours, millions of people in Ireland have no problem. We can all enjoy a dazzling American comedy tradition in Cheers, Northern Exposure or Frasier. Nothing from continental Europe appeals to us so intimately as material from the English speaking world.

We share in this world whenever we read or contribute to national newspapers or periodicals. We may argue with the other participants. Very often we reject their opinions or despise their attitudes. But the British Isles, with its special tensions and its special pleasures, is the world in which we happen to live. To cut ourselves off from it would be to perform a cultural amputation.

This amputation is what Irish separatism has inflicted on Ireland. We recognise the scale of the resulting disaster when we see the ingrowing cronyism and corruption of Dublin politics. We see collective delusions whenever Ireland is conceived in European rather than Anglo-American terms, or when Ireland is believed to be a post-colonial society. On the face of it the attraction of Irish co-cultural separatism is mysterious.

The explanation for Dublin's stress on cultural separatism seems to be that Irish economic grievances had been met before independence was gained. Hence the rationale for separatism from Britain was originally based on loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church and priority for the Irish language. If both were dominant, British secularism and modernity could be excluded. There would be a self-standing 26 county nation.

This form of Irish self-image once had a solid basis in Church and State. Today neither rationale is effective. Catholic church attendance in the Republic has fallen sharply and ordinations have fallen catastrophically. No apologist for Irish separatism now relies on Catholicism. The Gaelic movement has also failed. The sympathetic



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study by Ken Hindley reckons there may be only 11,000 native speakers. TG4 has been unable to attract its desired minimum of viewers. The insistence on Gaelic qualifications has mostly had to be dropped in education and the public services.

In default of these powerful justifications for separatism there have been two ideological responses. First Europe. Official Ireland is intensely Communautaire. This strategy recalls the Plaid Cymru slogan of "Wales in Europe" or the SNF's "Scotland in Europe". Scots and Welsh nationalists do it to leapfrog London and so does the Republic. Talk of The Auld Alliance, submerged nations like Catalonia and Scotland, the Welsh Breton connection, the Irish Wild Geese, is to be heavily discounted. The Community does not replace national states. Yet the Republic has actually been prepared to adopt the Euro, with all its worrying consequences. For the Republic, to be European is a way to be acceptably not British.

The second response to the Republic's need to replace its Catholic and Gaelic identity cards has been to present itself as a post-colonial society. It takes courage (in Sir Humphrey Appleby's sense) to see a resemblance between the relative prosperity of pre-Independence Ireland and conditions in Asian or African colonies, or to make an analogy, say, between the relations of Algeria with France and the relations of Ireland with Britain.

However, the principal argument is that Ireland was a British colony. This gives Ireland post-colonial company - Edward Said for one - and puts England in its proper place. Thousands, perhaps millions of words have been written in support of this theory. It is however without modern foundation. 19th century Ireland was fully represented at Westminster. It had much cultural autonomy. Irish people took an active part in the British imperial expansion. From around the 1830's Ireland was governed with exceptional fairness and sensitivity. Irish independence resulted from a secessionist movement, like Belgium's from Holland, or as Scotland's from the United Kingdom might be.

A side effect of post-colonial convictions is that Ulster Unionists - and very likely Irish Protestants in general - are subliminally seen as colonists. There is rarely a suggestion that part of Ireland is genuinely British and that Unionists are part of British society. At best Unionists are seen as separated and discreditable Irish brethren. Thus Declan Kiberd denounces the Stormont regime, with no regard for its actual history, but suggests slyly that Unionists may in time join the Irish nation, because now that Catholicism is collapsing, they are free to listen to the siren call of money in Dublin, an attraction increased by the supposed appeal of the Gaelic language to Unionists. In this way the realities of British unionism are wished out of existence.



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These are the fantasies on which Irish separatism rest today. Their insecure basis explains the stridency and extravagance which are common among Irish ideologues. There is the historian who denies the meaningful existence of the British Isles and for whom the Famine was an Irish version of the Holocaust. There is the historian who thinks that Irish intellectual failure stems from its use of the English language and who looks forward to bi-lingualism. There is the philosopher who believes there is an Irish Mind with better access to truth than what he sees as the logocentric tradition of European thought. They all assume an absolute cultural distinction between Ireland and England and wish to re-enforce it by modern means. We may smile when we learn that a distinguished literary critic claims to be able to recognise an Ulster Protestant on sight or cannot listen to oratorios because they are mostly by Protestants. But the truth is that hatred fear and insecurity are endemic in Irish cultural separatism.

It has been reasonably argued that in Northern Ireland political problems are compounded because both communities have the attitudes of beleaguered minorities - Catholics in Northern Ireland, Protestants in Ireland as a whole. The much greater minority tradition is that of Irish separatism itself, endlessly insistent on moribund differences, constantly threatened by broader loyalties and bigger battalions, all its traditional allegiance put in question by modernity.

Since the rationale of the Irish state depends on assertions of cultural difference it is natural that the state machine should support the established national ideology and that Irish opinion formers are inhibited from following the sceptical argument where it leads: which is to the point where they recognise that we live under an empty sky from which all the Irish gods have departed: whether Orange or Republican gods, Protestant or Catholic gods, or Gaelic speaking gods. For unionists it is not so traumatic to join the globalised world, because we have far less at stake, but for cultural rationalists the shock can evidently be unbearable. Hence the wish to build a tremendous cultural laager behind which the playboys of the western world can be secure.

This task is made more plausible by the sympathy felt for it outside Ireland, by opinion formers with other agendas. In the United Kingdom the will to maintain the state in its entirety is quite weak. Instead of arguing a case for the Kingdom based on its wonderful political mechanism for change and adjustment, a mechanism which Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, or any system of the English regions could never parallel, the Government is willing to disaggregate the state. There is an instinct in favour of Irish separatism, a sense that Scottish separatism may be inevitable and a conscious Conservative policy to treat England as the Heartland. Political





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correctness can sometimes reach a point where one may not praise the United Kingdom, but where it is perfectly permissible to praise Scottish, Welsh or Irish nationalism - racist and chauvinist though they must be.

Irish separatism is now, and has always been, encouraged from America. Everyone knows there cannot possibly be 40 million pureblooded Irish people in America. But there are 40 million people who wish to be so described. Their reasons must have something to do with American identity being originally anti-British. President Clinton epitomises these instincts. Without any actual family evidence he says "I am Irish. I feel Irish", and (for whatever reason) he did not finish his Oxford degree. Like other Americans he gives Ireland some sort of fool's pardon as the land of lovable children and drunks. He has taken both these lines as alibis for US difficulties in the Belfast talks.

These British and American attitudes are helpful to the Irish state and they make it easier for Irish cultural nationalists to reassure themselves about the validity of their opinions. But if one is Irish it is a much greater priority to adopt a point of view that leads to self respect. It gives perspective to look at what populist nationalism really amounts to in Scotland, Wales and England. No one doubts that Scottish and Welsh nationalism is fuelled by loathing of England and English people. Jeremy Paxman reports a Scottish friend following the Euro 96 football championship in a bar in Stranraer. He told Paxman that when the game against Germany ended England's championship dreams the bar erupted. "There was an old man sitting in the corner. I'd never seen him before in my life. And we kissed each other. That's how bad we wanted the English to be beat". A similar anti-English feeling exists in Wales and very unsavoury it is too.

Within England itself there are many group tensions; north and south, black and white, Yorkshire and Lancashire, and some reciprocal hostility to Scots, Welsh and Irish. I knew a Yorkshire engineer who had worked in Manchester. He told me how much Lancastrian toasts to the Queen and the Duke of Lancaster had annoyed him. "Who is this bloody Duke of Lancaster anyway?" he said. I explained that the Duke was the Queen herself.

An important question in Ireland is how far intelligent people should submit to the categories imposed on them. In Northern Ireland it is right to object to the enforced caste system of the Fair Employment legislation, exaggerating as it does outdated Catholic and Protestant social categories. Here the United Kingdom government at a stroke reversed history's progressive movement from status to contract. A major issue in the Republic should be whether to go along with the cultural nationalism endorsed by the Irish state.



To illustrate the Irish state thinking that is so questionable I refer you to Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*. This is an enormous and fascinating book and I could have no sensible comments on most of its detail. However its general theme is invalid. It is a classic of what Liam Kennedy calls the Most Oppressed People Ever syndrome (MOPE). It also adopts and elaborates the mistaken post-colonial view of Ireland.

Kiberd dismisses Roy Foster's revisionist history as *nouveau roman* and Joseph Lee's *History of Modern Ireland* as a jeremiad. Kiberd himself, like a modern De Valera, looks into himself, reads a few texts, and knows what the Irish people were thinking at any desired period. This may be magical realism but it is not history. The book endorses traditional nationalist themes. It is a sophisticated Irish version of the drunks in the Stranraer bar. So it is constructed round Ireland contra mundum, meaning Ireland against England. There is a whiff of DP Moran in its fanaticism. I will quote from Kiberd's concluding pages.

"In more recent years.....the newspaper market has been flooded by cheap British tabloids, which sold widely and did much to coarsen public taste, while the better broadsheets were forced to imitate English rivals, which constantly undercut them on the basis of their superior economies of scale. There was little enough reason for Unionists to fear cultural assimilation: rather the danger was that both unionists and nationalists were being co-opted by the global media network in the English language".

A few lines later he is comforted by observing local publishing companies which "like local radio stations, have reflected the traditions of their immediate hinterland in ways which help people to resist the globalisation of English language culture" (p651). I read this as meaning that in his view Holy Ireland is still being corrupted by London and that while Declan Kiberd does not openly admit the merits of the London broadsheets, he does concede their success, but only because of overweening power.

Besides, if by globalisation is meant the concentrated presence in our minds and our lives of the USA, Britain and the rest of the English speaking world why on earth should any sane person object? Immediate hinterlands or diverse cultural traditions in Ulster are all very well in their place, but they have a touch of what Marx called "rural idiocy".

In Kiberd's final sentences, which must have been very carefully considered, he says "No one element should subordinate or assimilate the other. Irish or English, rural or urban, Gaelic or Anglo, each has its part in the pattern" (653). That sentence would



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have been more appropriate in 1914, though you will notice that Irish elements which are British, Protestant or Catholic do not appear.

But where, in today's Irish world are his categories of Irish or English, rural or urban, Gaelic or Anglo? I suggest that they do not exist in distinct forms. A Gaelic speaking friend visited a Gaeltacht bar during the heyday of the television serial "Dallas". He was hoping for indigenous cultural refreshment. What he heard was two men debating (in Gaelic) who had shot JR. If there is a pattern today it is that there are two nations in Ireland and that everyone in the British Isles is an honorary American.

Where then is a self respecting Irish point of view to be found? My suggestion is that anything based on interpretations of Irish history and literature is likely to be too subjective. As so often a conceptual answer may come from America. In Karl Deutsch's Nationalism and Social Communication he traces the empirical chains of understanding in a nation, as they link the village to the town, the town to the region and the region to the capital. Individuals may halt at any one of these levels. In turn the capital gathers together the collective impulses that may or may not be strong enough to become codified in political competition.

In terms of Karl Deutsch's model we might say that there is today complete social communication within the British Isles, and hence the basis for a single nation. The fact that the Republic and the United Kingdom are separate has therefore required a deliberate Irish blocking off of the real connections and affinities between Dublin and London. In compensation a number of divisive fantasies have had to be created. These are necessary for the survival of the Irish state.

If we apply this reductionist tone to Ulster Unionism we will find that Unionists value their participation in the United Kingdom, because they have no need to blot out the implications of perfect social communication within it. Their enthusiasm is increased by threats from the Dublin state.

It is reasonable to suppose that the United Kingdom and the Republic will share the island for the indefinite future. On the other hand there are transnational changes which happen imperceptibly all the time. In terms of social communication there is wide overlap between the television channels available throughout the British Isles. More important for serious public attitudes is the circulation of the London press in Ireland. We may expect that it will become dominant on its merits.

Pace Declan Kiberd it is difficult to picture an educated person in Ireland who could sensibly deprive themselves of the London quality newspapers. Of course thousands do so deprive themselves, but this is their loss. For similar reasons, when in Northern Ireland, I always read The Sunday Independent. But while it improves my



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view of Dublin and of humanity in general, it is very thin by comparison with the London broadsheets and so are the rest of the Dublin papers.

This de facto unionism increases all the time. Organised society - scientific, economic, professional or social - has strong family resemblances, and serious institutional links, throughout the British Isles. How could an Irish Catholic not be more inspired by the late Cardinal Hume than by the nonentities at Armagh? How could an Irish Presbyterian not be influenced by the intellectual force, but also, I fear, the political correctness of the Scottish church? How could any of us deny that today it is from America that the strongest new social impulses come? In the British Isles we live in a globalised American world within which states and local ideologies become less important. Scotland has far more material than Ireland with which to create a modern cultural nationalism, but under modern conditions it is impossible to visualise a Scottish Kulturkampf on Irish lines.

The ending of ideology affects the Republic much more than the United Kingdom, because the United Kingdom is just a permanent mechanism which satisfies its inhabitants and delivers effective government. It needs to make no cultural claim except that it is what it practically is.

Perhaps it is counter-productive for an Ulster Unionist to preach at Irish separatists. We do have different and mutually exclusive sets of values. But the Irish Association was set up to improve communication and comprehension in Ireland. So I would like to end by trying to convey the unionist sense that the British Isles is made up of closely related communities, none of which need to be foreign to each other.

Wherever we travel in the British Isles unionists find connections and associations. The result is that we do not feel empathy with local nationalists like Alistair Gray for Scotland, or Gwyn William for Wales, or with all the self worshipping, self deceivers of Irish literature and politics. If we ask who or what has influenced us culturally it will be the choices we make from the staples of English and American literature seen not as alien, but as our own. Classically that might mean Shakespeare or the Authorised Version of the Bible, but there are thousands of others, some of them Irish.

There is also the enormous world of science in the English language. At a more philosophical level, speaking as just one of the millions of possible common readers, it might be the British empirical tradition which appeals, whether in David Hume or John Stuart Mill or JM Keynes. Then again it might be Cardinal Newman or Reinhold N Couhr, or in more recent times, Americans like Milton Friedman or JK Galbraith or





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Camille Paglia. For a Unionist it is as natural as breathing to belong to the Anglo-American world, in all its diversity. It is a world which belongs to everyone in Ireland whenever they wish to discover it. Only a mistaken construct of Ireland stands in the way.