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Island race that outgrew its insularity

Today is our day - our national day. But we are so widely spread across the globe that we Irish belong in many places beyond this small island, writes Richard Kearney.

WHAT IS the difference between the stories the Irish told themselves yesterday and today? If narratives are the way a nation explains itself to itself and to others, how have these changed as we enter the third millennium?

No longer an insular island economy guided by the church and protected by a nationalist state, the island has undergone profound metamorphosis. In a new four-part series for RTÉ television entitled *The Importance of Being Irish*, film director Alan Gilson records these shifting stories. Ireland has gone global and will never be the same. For better or for worse.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote.

When I recently returned to Ireland from Boston for Christmas, I went to a car rental office at the airport. I had reserved a car some weeks earlier at a reasonable rate only to discover that this had been tripled for some reason.

When I asked why, the young Estonian woman behind the counter with whom I had agreed the original price, said this decision was taken by her Irish superior. Extremely kind and embarrassed, she apologised that there was nothing she could do. So I asked to speak to the manager.

When he arrived, he completely ignored his young immigrant employee, announcing that he was the one to decide rates. He informed me that all the other car rentals were now fully booked and that if I wished to make the trip to Cork to meet my family for Christmas, this was the best deal on offer. I accepted, whispering, "welcome to the Celtic Tiger".

What struck me about this incident was that it was my compatriot, the manager, who proved so unwelcoming and the young immigrant so welcoming. I felt a stranger in my own home except for the hospitable kindness of a stranger to my home. *Céad míle fáilte* was now more likely to be heard in Estonian than in my native tongue.

This is, hopefully, not a typical story but it does reflect the degree to which the whole relationship of native and stranger is changing in Ireland. The fact that Ireland is now one of the wealthiest countries of the European community, rather than one of the poorest when it first entered, speaks for itself.

The demographic reversal from emigration to immigration is visible today in every town and village in the country. And the massive traffic at our international ports and airports, not to mention our congested roads, indicates the extent to which Ireland has become a place of extraordinary mobility, inwards and outwards, situated as it is between the giant cultures of North America to the West and the EU to the East.

Moreover, the fact that the Irish diaspora now counts more than 75 million (who claim Irish identity) in contrast to the five million inhabiting our island, reminds us of just how open our once insular borders have become, in mind as well as in fact.

The "extended Irish family" invoked in the New Ireland Forum has become very extensive indeed. And even those who chose to stay home rather than live abroad have daily access to the most sophisticated communications systems to surf, dream and consume on the world wide web. Psychic travel supplements physical travel. "Ourselves alone" is no longer an option. From now on, the shortest route from self to self is through the other.

All this implies a deep shift in our understanding of sovereignty. Traditionally, going back to Rousseau, national sovereignty was "one and indivisible". This was so of territory as well as of people. The fact is that this never worked in Ireland for we were a divided people and laid claim to different identities, Irish and British.

To make matters worse, two different governments were making exclusive sovereignty claims on the same territory of north Ireland. One claimed a United Kingdom, the other a United Ireland. And two into one doesn't go. So there followed decades of conflict.

Until Good Friday 1998 when both governments agreed that the citizens of northern Ireland could be "British or Irish or both". And that little word "both" was the final antidote to the sovereignty neurosis. We had entered a post-nationalist and post-unionist Ireland. Mortal enemies could at last share power, the English national anthem could be sung in Croke Park; and the border became, happily, a porous line in the sand.

Gilsenan's work examines the major events involved in this decisive transition from an insular to a global culture. It shows how and why the water surrounding our island ceased to serve as a cordon sanitaire keeping natives pure and foreigners out, and became again what it was in ages passed - namely, an open waterway connecting us to the wider world.

Thus Global Ireland may be said to retrieve, in postmodern guise, an ancient understanding of voyaging going back to the old Irish monks. Between the 8th and 12th centuries there was a revered tradition of migration known in Latin as *circumnavigatio*. It meant setting sail from the mainland to travel out to foreign worlds. If one was lucky one had a "green" navigation: one found land and returned home with one's soul enlarged and enriched. The alternative was "white" navigation: one disappeared into the waves never to return. But it was worth the risk.

The 30 men and women featured in Gilsenan's series are green navigators. They hail from a new generation of Irish citizens who claim a dual belonging: to Ireland and to the world. They have no difficulty subscribing to an identity model of concentric circles: their native county, their province, their nation, their special relationship with the peoples of the Irish-British archipelago, their belonging to the expanding European community, and finally, their cosmopolitan belonging to the world as a whole. "Mundanus sum", might well be their motto now as it was the motto of Ireland's most ancient migrant scholars.

This sense of multiple belonging is witnessed, in this film, by a number of Irish minds who travelled through the world in order to come home. By work, if not design, they are "hibernicising" the world and globalising Ireland. To cite but a few examples, we see Tom Arnold, chief executive of Concern, bringing Irish aid and intervention to Africa and Asia. We hear Rory McGowan, structural engineer of key buildings for the Beijing Olympics, confess that for him the quickest way back to Connemara is through China. We hear David O'Reilly, chairman of the Chevron Corporation in the US, recount how the gifts of an Irish education enabled him and thousands of others to navigate the global economic and informational cultures that prevail in our third millennium. We see how artists like Dorothy Cross and Sean Scully manage to combine international and local idioms in bold innovative styles which are as enthusiastically received in Venice and New York as in Cork or Belfast.

Gilsenan also features interviews with an impressive number of Irish scientists currently making ground-breaking contributions to physics, pharmacology, biochemistry and genetics. His point is that in addition to our great literary figures there are many unsung heroes working in other less spectacular fields. "We are the music makers, we are the dreamer of dreams", yes, but, as this series shows, we are also the makers of extraordinary discoveries in the worlds of science, engineering, academia and technology.

It is not, of course, an either/or. The Irish mind is both artistic and scientific. But it is perhaps salutary to redress the balance and sing from two hymn sheets at once. As Joyce rightly knew, the Irish are at their best when they have "two thinks at a time". The Importance of Being Irish is a fine example, I think, of such double thinking.

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