

VITALI'S IRELAND

by Vitali Vitaliev

SAMPLE CHAPTER:

Chapter 1: Irish for a Day

'Other people have a nationality. The Irish have a psychosis,' said Brendan Behan. From what little I knew about Ireland — a small, long-suffering country with a huge Diaspora, a history of extreme poverty and disproportionate artistic achievement, I dared to assume that being Irish was neither a 'nationality' nor a 'psychosis', but a destiny.

'Stereotypes about the Irish and those of Irish heritage are so pervasive that sometimes they are not even recognised as generalisations or considered offensive, as they would be if they were directed at racial minority groups,' writes Pat Friend in his excellent website www.allaboutirish.com. He then gives an example: 'The other day I tripped over my shillelagh as I was watching a leprechaun swing at a fairy because he was drunk and fighting, having had too much Guinness on his way to find his pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.'

All those US-bred modern clichés, alongside their British precursors (e.g. 'The Irish *when* good are perfect' — Lord Byron), are but outrageous trivialisations of the important concept they are trying to represent. 'Cultural identities . . . were never monolithic and are becoming much less so,' in the words of Professor Paul Gifford, Director of the Institute of European and Cultural Identity Studies at St Andrews University.

Nonetheless, the Irish seem to be as preoccupied with pinning down their elusive national identity as the Australians, or, say, the Scots. And whereas the former keep fluctuating from declaring themselves European one day and Asian (or Aboriginal) the next, the latter still tend to define their identity first as 'un-English' and only then as Scottish — the trend that can be found in Ireland (particularly in the South), too.

So what is 'Irishness', after all?

'A logical place to start the exploration of the Irish question is in a dictionary,' according to Pat Friend. Let's follow his advice and consult my London-published 1990's *Collins Concise Dictionary*: 'Irish — 1. Relating to, or characteristic of Ireland, its people, their Celtic language, or their dialect of English. 2. *Inf. offens.* Ludicrous or illogical'.

'*Inf.offens.*' bits aside, the dictionary's first definition of 'Irish' seems to be 'covering' only one part of the forcefully divided nation and has little to do with the Irish in the country's North, for whom, according to Edward Moxon Browne's *National Identity in Northern Ireland*:

‘British national identity can be regarded as a primordial umbrella. In Northern Ireland’, continues he, ‘. . . national identity is an exclusive and divisive concept (isn’t this true about any other country of the globe?) . . . It is rooted in the colonisation of Ulster by Protestants; and, consequently, by opposing views of the legitimacy of the state and its boundaries.’

Indeed, how can we talk about one monolithic Irish identity when the nation itself is split between two different sovereign states that until recently were effectively at war with each other? The concept of ‘an open national identity’, suggested by Rutherford Mayne and Gerald MacNamara in the 2004 Spring-Summer issue of ‘The Journal of Irish Studies’, makes much more sense to me.

Before starting my journeys around Ireland, North and South, I thought it would be helpful to try and understand what ‘Irishness’ as such was about. Intrigued by the promise of a ‘Be Irish for a Day’ experience at Causey Farm near Kells (I had found the ad on the Internet), I went to the Royal County of Meath in search of an answer.

‘More elbow grease!’ Lily, the lively mother of the Murtagh family of ten, was commanding as I mixed flour, soda, salt, eggs and my own elbow grease in an attempt to make a loaf of Irish bread.

It was 11 a.m., and I already felt at home at the friendly family farm. And, indeed, more ‘Irish’ than ever before.

My frantic bread making was followed by a short ceilí dancing lesson in the former cowshed. For someone who had always had two left feet (possibly even three), it felt like a succession of pole vaults without a pole. Then came my turn at bodhrán-playing, which was similar to eating a bowl of Miso soup with one chopstick (at least, that was how it felt to me — both in terms of hand movements and of the sounds I managed to extract from my uncomplaining bodhrán).

Both classes were conducted by the delightful Deirdre Murtagh (learning to spell Irish names — first and last — could also be a part of the ‘Irish for a Day’ experience), one of Lily’s seven daughters.

The family’s ‘Irish for a Day’ venture, started in 2001, was booming. Bookings were coming from all over the world, from Finland to Saudi Arabia, and the feedback from the visitors was nothing short of ecstatic.

Among other typically ‘Irish’ activities, offered by the Murtaghs, were hurling, turf-cutting, rope-making and milking a cow. I was momentarily tempted to do the latter, but thought better of it, having remembered that while trying (unsuccessfully) to milk a cow for the first and last time in my life in Australia, the newspaper I was then writing for was taken over by Conrad Black. It seemed like a bad omen.

‘We are trying to bring people together through Irishness,’ Deirdre told me as I munched through the freshly baked loaf of soda bread that I myself made (well, almost).

‘But what is Irishness?’ I asked her eagerly.

Just like myself, she found this concept difficult to define.

I had to carry on searching.

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'Almost all the Irish speak English, though they have a language of their own . . .'
(*'NEAR HOME OR EUROPE DESCRIBED'*, LONDON, 1910)

'Irish timing,' Olivia Duff, the helpful manager of the Headfort Arms Hotel in Kells — my pied-à-terre on my one-day quest for Irishness — muttered sardonically, looking at her watch. My next contact, Tomás Ó Maonaile, was running late. As it turned out, he had got stuck in traffic. So dense was the traffic through the town that a bus recently even hit the town's famous market cross.

No one enjoys sitting in a traffic jam and breathing petrol fumes, but Tomás had reasons particularly to hate this unhealthy 'Irish' experience. A native Irish speaker and an aspiring property developer, he had two passions in his life: preservation of the Irish language and protection of the environment. His hope was to try and combine both in his new project — an eco-friendly housing estate, populated exclusively by Gaelic speakers. This might sound like a rather drastic requirement, but Tomás believed that the dire state of Ireland's long-suffering native tongue justified it.

'There are not enough Irish schools in the country, and very few textbooks,' he was saying as we drove to Brugh na Mí — his prospective housing development four miles away from Kells.

A solitary 'show cottage' stood on the would-be estate, in the shadow of the historic Funghan Hill, but Tomás said that thirty families, willing to participate in his 'Irish for life' (as opposed to 'Irish for a day') experience, had already expressed interest in buying houses there.

'Here, there will be an organic vegetable garden and an Irish-language learning centre, and there — in the middle of the compound — a children's playground . . .'

Tomás was pointing to empty patches of land and could be easily dismissed as yet another airy-fairy Irish dreamer, but his determination was such that I knew he was going to succeed.

'He who loses his language — loses his land,' runs an old Cornish proverb. And his identity too, I could add. A language dies somewhere in the world every week, according to UNESCO, and the ancient Irish — expressive, poetic and melodious — should not be allowed to become one of them. For with it the very concept of 'Irishness' would disappear too.

The wind was rustling through the grass, as if whispering something gently in Irish . . .

* * *

'If it [the Irish language] keeps itself free from the intrusion of that plague of things Irish, politics, as it claims to do, its influence will have far-reaching effects in brightening the homes and enriching the lives of the peasantry . . .'
(*'A HANDBOOK FOR TRAVELLERS IN IRELAND'*, MURRAY, 1912)

As part of my search for Irishness, Tomás took me to Ráth Cairn — a predominantly Irish-speaking settlement, or Gaeltacht, founded in 1935. Almost all signs in the town were in Gaelic only. It was there that I learned (under duress) my first two Irish words: *mná* and *fir* — when looking for a toilet inside the local community centre. What can I say? There's no better way of mastering a foreign language than when confronted with everyday basic needs. To my great relief (in more than one sense), however, there was a lady's silhouette above the mysterious *mná* sign (there was none above the *fir* one, mind you).

In Ráth Cairn I met Nadya Genserovskaya — a nineteen-year-old Russian and a fluent speaker of Irish. Moscow-born Nadya had come to the town ten years previously with her Russian mother who had married an Irishman. She went to an English school, but — being linguistically alert — picked up Irish soon.

'At home we speak either Russian or Irish, but not English,' she told me with a smile. A student of German at Trinity College, this young polyglot assured me that she felt more at home in Ráth Cairn than in Moscow.

'Ireland is a kind country,' she said simply when I asked her what she thought 'Irishness' was about.

* * *

'Kells . . . is most famous for what is not here.'

(THE 'ROUGH GUIDE TO IRELAND', 2004)

Reluctant to leave Ráth Cairn, I was late for my next appointment. Or was I simply getting 'Irish-ised' and, without realising it, adjusting to 'Irish timing'?

Having missed Brian Curran, the chairman of Kells town council, in his town hall offices, I was directed to his shop, called 'Shamrock'.

At first glance, 'Shamrock' looked like an ordinary souvenir shop-cum-hardware store: kettles, irons and kitchen utensils were displayed on the shelves alongside green-clad 'Irish' dolls and 'Irish Humour' socks (the humour of the latter item was totally lost on me). A toy 'singing monkey' called Charlie greeted customers at the entrance. If touched, Charlie would start twitching and chanting in high-pitch falsetto: 'Yippy-yah-yah, yippy-yippy-yah!'

It took me a while to spot the sign above the counter, behind which the owner himself — bespectacled and redheaded — was standing in state: BRIAN CURRAN. FUNERAL DIRECTOR. PERSONAL SERVICE. COMPLETE FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS.

Numb with surprise, I noticed a couple of funeral wreaths discreetly tucked into a far corner, and all the regulation questions I was meaning to ask Mr Curran (about the composition of the town council, the redevelopment of Kells and so on) became irrelevant.

'Is this some sort of a joke?' was the only thing I could utter.

'Yes and no,' was the reply. 'I think every funeral director must have a gift shop as a façade . . .'

He took me to a side room, where half-a-dozen ready-to-use coffins were neatly stacked.

At least, they were not exhibited in the shop-window, next to the singing monkey and the mysterious 'Irish Humour' socks. From my reading of Pete McCarthy's book *McCarthy's Bar*, I knew it was not that unusual for an Irish country pub to sell bicycles as well as pints of Guinness, but I was still thoroughly unprepared for this funeral director's office, conveniently situated at one of Ireland's craziest road-crossings, complete with no fewer than nine approach roads, doubling as an unpretentious and down-to-earth (forgive my unintended pun) souvenir shop. I suddenly felt that I had come a step closer to understanding the true meaning of 'Irishness'.

'Say bye to Charlie,' suggested Mr Curran as I was leaving.

And so I did.

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