

MORE FACTS ABOUT IRISH

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Coiste na hÉireann den Bhiúró Eorpach do
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Baile Átha Cliath

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Foreword by Helen Ó Murchú

This handbook has been prepared by Helen Ó Murchú, at the request of the Member State Committee for Ireland of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages whose constant encouragement and persistence will not be forgotten. Helen is a former President of the European Bureau and former Chairperson of the Irish Committee.

The collaboration of Máirtín Ó Murchú in writing Section 1, in critically reviewing the corpus planning section of the work and in sympathetically reading the remainder is acknowledged with love.

The never failing advice and friendship throughout the endeavour of Deirdre Davitt, *Foras na Gaeilge*, is gratefully remembered. Without the support of *An Foras* as major funder and of *Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge* in marketing and distribution, this work would have remained in typescript form only. *Is mór mo chomaoin acu*. She also acknowledges her debt to her teacher, Seán Ó Tuama, who led the way with his *Facts about Irish* (1964).

All the information given in the sections following Section 1 is available in the public domain. The author has consulted reports and official websites, as well as media sources in both Irish and English. She is very grateful to the many bodies and organisations, official and voluntary, both North and South, and to the individuals in them, who answered her questions or supplied information in other ways including illustrative material. Any occasional lapses into opinion are her fault entirely, arising mainly from her long and varied experience at the coalface.

This is by no means an exhaustive or scholarly account of the Irish language. It offers no more than some facts to illustrate the current situation of Irish. It gives some condensed contextual or historical background only where relevant to an understanding of the present. It concentrates largely but not exclusively on the present position of the language. While much care has been taken, nevertheless dates, figures, names, all have an unfortunate tendency to attract gremlins. To obviate this, very few names are mentioned. Dates and figures have been rechecked to the extent that sense has been replaced by an unhelpful blurring and glazing on the part of the author. For (any?) mistakes which have occurred, pardon is craved in advance.

A publication such as this can never be completely up to date. It can only provide a snapshot of where the fortunes of the Irish language had reached at a particular point in time. Years may pass without anything of significance taking place to be followed by a single year of continuous activity. The years 2000 to 2007 have witnessed continuous and crucial change in matters linguistic, the real impact of which we can hardly yet comprehend or imagine.

For ease of accessibility to the material, the publication outlines the main areas covered while the accompanying CD-Rom repeats that content but gives more detail and goes into more depth on some of the topics covered. The CD also provides the opportunity to insert later developments (up to end 2007). Since readers may wish to consult a particular theme with relevance to more than one section, there is some slight repetition in one or two areas. Tables are given at the end of sections and numbered by section, Table 2.1 being the first table in Section 2.

The material attempts to deal with affairs of the language in Ireland, North and South, since Irish is an integral part of the total joint experience of the island. Where the Northern experience differs is given in a separate section, using the same general headings.

There are undoubtedly *lacunae* which readers are invited to fill for themselves—*ní lia duine ná tuairim agus ní lia léitheoir ná locht...* Such lapses as occur may be attributed, in part at least, to the hastening onset of old age, brought on by a totally mistaken belief in the early stages that the subject matter was relatively straightforward.

INTRODUCTION

IRELAND: LAND, LANGUAGE, PEOPLE

In a sober publication devoted solely to facts about Irish, there is one fact that hardly appears at all in the following pages. The most inescapable, incontrovertible fact is that one cannot really get away either from Ireland – land, language or people – or from ancestral memory, however fragmented. It is the very indigenesness of the language that stands out in Ireland itself and, in a global context, the very pervasiveness of the identity and customs of its people. For its size, Ireland has had an extraordinary effect on the world.

HISTORY AND ACHIEVEMENT

NO LAND IS WITHOUT ITS HISTORY

The Irish, it is said, never forget their history. Over hundreds of years, the history of colonialism, the history of the fight for independence, the history of emigration, the history of missionary work around the globe, the history of recent economic recovery and the Celtic Tiger, all resonate... there is hardly a place on earth, from the continent of India to the small island of Montserrat (also known as the Emerald Isle); from China and Japan to North and South America; from Australia and New Zealand to Africa, that does not have some past or present memory relating to Ireland: military, political, educational, economic. DNA research shows that, in the distant past, the Irish were among the first settlers of Iceland around the year 800. Whether they were sailors, wives of Viking invaders of Ireland, or slaves is not known. The monks of Ireland spread their civilising influence across Europe for centuries as centres such as Bobbio and St. Gaul attest. In later times, the Irish Colleges were established. Some of the history of Ireland – religious, literary, military – is found, among other places, in Salamanca, Valladolid, Paris or Louvain (Leuven).

Everywhere there occurred a struggle, the Irish of all persuasions are found. From the Isle of Skye in Scotland where Michael Davitt had a strong influence on the local land struggle in the late 1800s to the continent of India where Irish politics influenced the movement towards political freedom in the early 1900s. The biography of the current (2007) president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, reveals the influence on him of the Irish revolutionary Robert Emmet, particularly Emmet's famous speech from the dock before being hanged in Dublin in 1803. Daniel O'Leary of Cork City, trusted *aide-de-camp* of Bolivar, Liberator of Venezuela, wrote the history of that country's war of liberation around 1850. Bernardo O'Higgins, known as Liberator of Chile in the early 1800s, was of Irish descent. In Brazil, a popular modern soap opera, *Eterna Magia*, is fiction based on fact, the Irish who fled to South America in the 1600s – O'Neill is not an unusual name in Brazil. Hugo O'Neill of Portugal, who considers himself 54th in direct line from Niall Naingiallach (Niall of the Nine Hostages), founder of the O'Neill dynasty, visited in September 2007 the spot from which his ancestor, the Chieftain *Aodh Ó Néill* (Hugh O'Neill) left Ireland in 1607, four hundred years before. [During 2008, Switzerland will celebrate the journey made by the Earls through the Alps on their way to Rome.](#) Eliza Lynch from County Cork was the consort of Francisco Solano López, who became Dictator of Paraguay in 1862. Ernesto 'Che' Guevara of Argentina was descended from Patrick Lynch who fled Galway in 1847 during the famine. Admiral William Brown, from Foxford in County Mayo, who died in 1857, helped the people of Buenos Aires in their efforts to defeat the forces of Spain and won the naval war against Brazil for Argentina. The Argentine three masted tall ship, *Fragata Libertad*, visited Ireland for the third time in June 2007 in his honour. The *Father of the American Navy* was an Irishman, John Barry, born in 1745, the son of a small tenant farmer from County Wexford. John Philip Holland, a former Christian Brother and teacher at the North Monastery in Cork in the mid 1800s, invented the prototype of the modern submarine after emigrating to the United States.

During the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s, the dispossessed Choctaw Indians of America donated \$710 dollars (estimated at \$8,000 today) to a relief fund. This generous gesture is still recalled through reciprocal visits, and in particular through Irish participation in the 500 mile walk from Mississippi to Oklahoma, to mark the 150th commemoration of both the donation and *The Long March* of the enforced relocation of the Choctaw tribe. The same sum, \$8,000, was presented in November 2007 by the Choctaw artist, Whitedeer, to the Mayo group protesting at some of the results of oil drilling in their area.

Irish soldiers fought on all sides in the USA and in Canada. Irish names abound in politics in Britain, America, Canada, New Zealand, Australia. [While the largest exodus of poor Catholic Irish occurred in the years around the famines of the 1840s, descendants of Scottish settlers in the planted lands of Ulster had sought their fortune in the New World in the previous century.](#) Seventeen presidents of the USA were of Scots-Irish Presbyterian background. They included Ulysses S. Grant, Truman, Roosevelt, the Bushes, Clinton. Ronald Reagan is remembered in Ballyporeen, County Tipperary. John F. Kennedy was of Catholic Irish descent. It is said that the music of the blind harpist, Turlough O'Carolan (*Toirdhealbhach Ó Cearbhalláin*, 1670–1738), who spent his life travelling Ireland from one patron to another, playing and composing music, inspired the American anthem, the *Star Spangled Banner*. Some of the more noted Civil War memorials in New York, Boston and Chicago as well as the famous statue, *The Pilgrim*, or *Founding Father*, in Springfield, Massachusetts,

(a part of America well known to Irish emigrants), were sculpted by the famous Augustus Saint-Gaudens, born in Dublin of a French shoemaker and an Irish mother who emigrated to America. He was also responsible for the statue of Charles Stewart Parnell in Dublin city centre. The model for Liberty—symbol of America—on American coins, commissioned of Saint-Gaudens by Theodore Roosevelt in the early 1900s, was a young Irish emigrant, Mary Cunningham from County Donegal, some of whose descendants today run a specialist book shop in Dublin, Cathach Books. The founder of the North West Mounted Police, the *Mounties* of Canada, was George French, born in County Roscommon in 1841.

Those who left Ireland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to fight the wars of others are found, with their descendants, on the honours lists of several countries of Europe. The *Wild Geese* included many from Limerick after the Treaty of Limerick in 1691. The Brownes, Ulysses and later his son Maximilian and grandson Philip, served Austria with distinction throughout the 1700s, as did other Irishmen. Patrice de Mac-Mahon, Duke of Magenta, was first Governor-General of Algeria and then President of France from 1873 to 1879. The Lynch vineyards of France clearly have an Irish connection. On the other hand, a lady from Limerick, known as Lola Montez, under whose spell King Ludwig of Bavaria fell, caused political upheaval in Munich between king and cabinet around 1846.

The pioneering work in Celtic Studies of the Bavarian-born scholar, Zeuss (1806–1856), in his famous *Grammatica Celtica* of 1853, published not long before his death in 1856, led to the continuing interest of other scholars in the Celtic languages, including Irish. The German scholar Franz Bopp (1791–1867), born in Mainz, had already published on aspects of Celtic morphology in 1838. An exhibition during Spring/Summer 2007 in the Royal Irish Academy commemorated several noted Celticists from German-speaking regions of Europe, including Zeuss. Among the others were: Wilhelm Oscar Windisch (1844–1918), born in Dresden, who provided an Irish transcription of *Táin Bó Cualgne* (Cattle-Raid of Cooley) in 1905; Heinrich Zimmer (1851–1910), born at Mozel, Germany; Kuno Meyer (1858–1919), born in Hamburg, a student of Windisch at Leipzig and who followed Zimmer as Chair of Celtic Philology at the University of Berlin; Rudolf Thurneysen (1857–1940), born in Switzerland, student of both Windisch at Leipzig and of Zimmer at Berlin, who succeeded to the Chair of Comparative Philology at Freiburg in 1887; Julius Pokorny (1887–1970), born in Prague, who taught in both Germany and in Switzerland. Scholars from abroad studied Modern Irish with the Blasket Islanders: the Norwegian Carl Marstrand, who visited there first in 1907, as well as Robin Flower (*Bláithín*), George Thompson (*Seoirse Mac Thomáis*) and Kenneth Jackson.

Many leaders of African states have received their education from Irish religious orders as have many citizens of Asian countries. An Irish nun recently received the highest honour ever given to a non-national from the Government of India for her work in education among the poor. The missionary Margaret Noble, born in Dungannon in 1867, featured on a stamp in India. A member of the royal family in Japan was educated in a school there run by Irish nuns. A fairly recent President of Israel was an Irish Jew, son of a rabbi, Chaim Herzog. The founder of the new (2006) political party in Sierra Leone (People's Movement for Democratic Change) received both his second and third level education in Dublin. [Benazir Bhutto \(assassinated 27 December, 2007\) was educated in kindergarten, primary and high schools run by Irish nuns in Pakistan before she went to Harvard and Oxford.](#)

The Irish helped to build the railways of America and the motorways of Britain. Nowadays, they provide architects for the Olympic building in Beijing or develop parts of London, Chicago, Cape Town, Hong Kong, anywhere you care to name, when they are not buying and selling property for Irish investors. One of the significant architects of the twentieth century was Juan O’Gorman of Mexico, son of an Irishman.

Ireland has participated in space exploration. It has found a cure for leprosy.

Ireland has the youngest population of Europe. In the 2007 finals in Seoul of the world software competitions for third level students, two teams from Ireland were among the top winners from 100,000 students from more than 100 countries. The German news revue, *Der Spiegel*, considers the capital, Dublin, to be among Europe’s *coolest* cities, particularly for the young. A survey by the tourist body, *Fáilte* Ireland, found that Irish people made the difference for visitors. The *Lonely Planet BlueList* 2008 places Ireland at number one in the world for friendliness and sense of humour, even in diversity.

Ireland has taken on the presidency of the European Union in its turn with style, aplomb and real results. The Corruption Perceptions Index (2007) of the organisation Transparency International puts Ireland at number seventeen of the least corrupt countries in a list of 180. The IPA (Institute of Public Administration, 1957) published in November 2007 a set of intriguing scenarios towards public service in 2022, *Towards One Hundred Years of Self-Government*. In just over eighty years of political freedom, Ireland has reached the top end of the ranking scale for developed economies, has helped to ensure new political arrangements in Northern Ireland that are regarded as a model of conflict resolution and has changed the once fraught nature of the relationship with the former oppressor neighbour. A new conflict resolution unit attached to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs will have a fund of €25m per year.

Bank of Ireland Private Banking reports on the nation's wealth. In mid 2006, it found that Ireland was the second wealthiest country in the world after Japan; however, the wealthiest 1% held over one third of the State's net financial wealth. Whether one considers it a sign of progress or not, by mid 2007 a study by the Bank found that Ireland had 33,000 millionaires (excluding the value of the home) and that the country had one of the fastest growth rates of the eight leading nations in the OECD. Interestingly, charity donations by ordinary savers increased significantly on maturation of a recent Government savings scheme although the country's growth rate is now stabilising.

For a country that is tiny on the global scale, with a population far less than many modern cities, all this achievement is, in its way, extraordinary. Other countries, even if having fairly similar histories, do not appear to have impinged in the same way on the global imagination.

NO PEOPLE IS WITHOUT ITS MYTHS AND PARTICULAR CULTURE

Ireland's National Day, 17 March, is celebrated all over the world. In the USA from Fifth Avenue, New York to Chicago where the Chicago River is dyed green and to California; in Trafalgar Square, London and other cities of the UK; in Canada and in South America where one of the largest celebrations is held in Buenos Aires; in the Russian Federation from Moscow to St. Petersburg and Minsk; in China from Beijing to Shanghai to Hong Kong; in Tokyo and in other cities of Japan; across Europe; in Ireland North and South, from Belfast, where City Hall funds the parade and Ulster-Scots culture is included, to *An Daingean* (Dingle) where the first band parades at six o'clock in the morning.

Ireland's patron saint, son of the Roman Calpurnius, captured in Britain by Irish raiders and brought to Ireland to be sold as a slave, Saint Patrick, is hardly less well known than his feast day, the National Day, although modern scholars may write of the existence of more than one Patrick. How genuine much of this celebration is may be debated. Its pervasiveness is, however, quite real. Exactly what is being celebrated may be something of an unknown quantity although the newspaper *Lá Nua* views it as a global celebration of Irishness. Other media commentators offer an opposing view. The more global the Irish identity becomes, the more the National Day is celebrated; the more diverse the population, the more the day takes precedence over the saint and all that he represents.

With the appointment in October 2007 of a new Irish cardinal, Ireland now has three living cardinals, although only one may vote in a papal election. For its population, this is unusual.

The many summer schools in Ireland are of high standard and attract large followings, whether they deal with traditional music, literature, aspects of history or contemporary issues. Two ancient pilgrimages test the stamina of participants: climbing to the summit of *Cruach Phádraig* (Croagh Patrick) in Mayo on the last Sunday of July; abstaining from food and sleep and performing the penitential exercises (walking barefoot on rough stones) over the three days of St. Patrick's Purgatory on the island devoted to the pilgrimage during the summer months. Three ancient fairs are still going strong: Muff (*Magh*), County Donegal, which began in the twelfth century, held on the 12th of August; Puck Fair in Killorglin (*Cill Orglan*), County Kerry, received its charter to collect tolls from King James the First but its roots are much deeper as one might expect from an event presided over by a white male goat brought in from the mountains and crowned by a young virgin; the annual August Auld (old) Lammas Fair has been held in Ballycastle, County Antrim, for almost four hundred years as a genuine market fair. The annual *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* (Music Festival/Feast of Ireland), now running for 56 years, attracts exponents of Irish traditional music from all over the world. Up to a quarter of a million people attend. In 2007, it was worth €7 million to the local economy of the midland town of Tullamore, a fact appreciated no

doubt by the Minister for Finance, who opened the event.

Ireland has produced Nobel laureates in physics (Ernest T. S. Walton, 1951, with Cockcroft); in Anglo-Irish, or perhaps Hiberno-English, literature (W. B. Yeats 1923; G. B. Shaw 1925; Seamus Heaney 1995); in English and French literature (Samuel Beckett 1969); in peace (Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, 1976; John Hume and David Trimble, 1998). It has beaten Pakistan at cricket (once at least, 2007) and England at rugby (2007). Its national games, hurling and football, have clubs wherever there are Irish expatriates. The Asian Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) Board was established to cater for the fast growing interest in these amateur sports. The Gaelic Games held in Singapore in 2007 included over 600 participant players from China (Beijing, Shenzhen), Dubai, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Shanghai, Taiwan, Vietnam. Police Gaelic Football had its second international tournament in London in 2007 with teams from America (NYPD), London (The Met), Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Republic (*An Garda*).

Ireland's traditional music and dance are recognised in many corners of the globe including the various instruments and individual or regional styles: slow and fast; dancing from the waist or with the whole body, performing alone or in group fashion. The highest folk music honour in America, the National Heritage Award for Excellence in Folk Arts, was given to the *sean-nós* singer, *Seosamh Ó hÉanaí* (Joe Éinniú) of Connemara, who died in Seattle in 1984. The Blasket Islands tune, *Port na bPúcaí* (Tune of the Pookahs or Trolls), said to have arisen from the cries of humpback whales, is well known to pipers everywhere. The icons of Ireland's modern pop culture are world figures, taking on political roles on World Aid. It has produced memorable actors and films. Its ballet dancers are accepted in Russia; its opera singers are found in many famous companies. The musician John Field, who settled in St. Petersburg early in the nineteenth century, is remembered in Russia and in the National Concert Hall in Dublin. He is credited with establishing the Russian style of piano playing. Roderic O'Connor, directly descended from the last High Kings of Ireland, was a celebrated painter of the Brittany school of the late nineteenth century. An Irish sculptor was winner of the Selvaag/Peer Gynt international competition in 2007. Ireland's native architectural heritage ranges from the intricately carved medieval high crosses to the almost equally intricate patterning of traditional stone walls.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Ireland abounds in ancient myth and modern folklore. Irish people seem to remember much of it, however vaguely. Three goddesses of ancient Ireland were recently removed from the gates of the Houses of the *Oireachtas* (Parliament) – Leinster House, incidentally and ironically former city seat of the Duke of Leinster – recalling ancient history in their protest against the M3 motorway excavations near the ancient sites of the Hill of Tara and the Boyne Valley. These goddesses were known as *Ériu*, *Banba* and *Fodhla* and gave their names to the land. They are still around... *Ériu* and *Banba* are found on shop fronts in Dublin city. *Ériu* has become *Éire* in Modern Irish. In Scotland, the town of Atholl is derived from *Ath-Fhodhla* (new Ireland). Among the many popular names still in use from the ancient sagas are *Aengus*, *Fionn* and *Oisín*, *Eithne* (modern Ulster version *Enya*); *Deirdre* and the star crossed lover *Diarmaid*; *Medhbh* (Maeve) of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (Raid of the Bull of Cooley); *Niamh Cinn Óir* (golden-haired Niamh) and *Ciara* (with the dark tresses; sometimes anglicised Keira). Early Christianity brought many saints who are still celebrated although never formally canonised by Rome. *Brid*, *Damnait*, *Pádraig* himself (Patrick) of Armagh, *Caoimhín* (Kevin) of Glendalough, the list is legion. On the Central Statistics Office list, published yearly, of the most popular names given to children, Irish names are high. In the top ten, recently, *Seán* was number one and *Cian* number eight. Other names for boys included *Oisín*, *Fionn*, *Ciarán*, *Cathal*, *Cormac*. On the girls' list, *Aoife* was fourth and *Ciara* tenth.

Many surnames are evocative of the political and legal arrangements of earlier times: *Mac an Taoisigh* (anglicised 'Mackintosh'; son of the chieftain); *Mac an Easpaig* or *Mac an tSagairt* (anglicised 'Macanespie' and 'Macantaggart'); son of the bishop and of the priest. The surname *Ó hUiginn* (anglicised Higgins) incorporates the Irish form of 'viking'.

Every townland, practically every field, has an Irish name redolent of the physical, cultural or folklore landscape, or changing political and social context, many of distant Celtic origin found also in parts of Europe, some anglicised beyond meaning. *Achadh* (field), *Áth* (ford), *Baile* (town), *Bealach* (way), *Bóthar* (road), *Caisleán* (castle), *Carraig* (rock), *Ceann* (head), *Cill* (church), *Cluain* (grazing

place near water), *Cnoc* (hill), *Droichead* (bridge), *Dún* (fortress), *Gleann* (glen), *Gort* (cultured field), *Loch* (lake), *Machaire* (plain), *Maigh* (plain), *Muileann* (mill), *Mullach* (summit), *Beann/Binn* (hill or mountain peak), *Ráth* (ring-fort), *Sráid* (street), *Teach/Tigh* (house), *Teampall* (temple/church), *Tobar* (well), *Trá* (beach), *Ceathrú* (quarter), *Trián* (third) – portions of the land measure ‘ploughland’. A recent letter to the press correcting a misinterpretation of a placename in the Dublin suburbs patiently explained that the element *Cnucha*, in the placename *Caisleán Cnucha* (anglicised Castleknock), was in fact the name of the wife of a *Fir Bholg* chieftain, (possibly to be identified with the Belgi known to the Romans), thus recalling ancient legends of the invasions of Ireland. The *Fir Bholg* were reputed to have been defeated by the later invaders, the *Tuatha Dé Danann* (people of the goddess *Danu*), at the famous battle of *Mag Tured* or *Magh Tuireadh*. It is said that this battle followed a violent hurling match between them the previous day in a place still known as ‘The Field of the Hurlers’ where the Moytura (County Mayo) club still play. Placenames related to the otherworld, *Sí* (fairies) and *Lios* (ring-fort, their dwelling places), abound. Shakespeare’s town of Stratford is on the Avon, *abhainn*, the Celtic word for *river*, a term still in use in Modern Irish. Dublin is based on the Irish words *dubh* (black) and *linn* (pool); originally the name of the mooring place, it became the Viking and internationally known name for the town, Latinised *Dublinsiensis*. The older native name is *Baile Átha Cliath*, town of the ford of the wattles. A fence or a path, from wattles woven together, made passage easier across the ford.

The two main political parties have taken their names from ancient Ireland. *Fianna Fáil* (Soldiers of Destiny) recall the sagas about *Fionn Mac Cumhaill* and his men, the *Fianna*, as well as the *Lia Fáil* (Stone of Destiny, brought by the *Tuatha Dé Danann*) upon which the High Kings of Tara were installed. In fact, the words *Fianna Fáil* are in the very first line of the Irish language version of *Amhrán na bhFiann* (The Soldier’s Song), official national anthem since 1926, although the work was written and composed (in English) in 1907 by Peadar Kearney and Patrick Heeney. *Fine Gael* means *people of the Gael* (Irish), *fine* being an old and venerable word for *kin, family, people*. One of the new administrative areas created when Dublin County Council was divided is known as Fingal, in the north of the county, *Fine Gall*, *people of the strangers/incomers*, the opposite of *Fine Gael*.

CELTIC ORIGINS

Like St. Patrick, the Celts have come in for some revisionism in recent years. Whether one accepts the arrival of the peoples which led to the spread of a Celtic language in Ireland as *invasionism* or *diffusionism* or *pure invention*, the fact remains that a modern form of that language is now still spoken in Ireland, having survived and incorporated as necessary terms from the Latin of Christianity, the Scandinavian of the Vikings, the French of the Normans, and the English of Britain. Related facts that may be accepted or rejected are the co-existence in the same region, and possible relationship, of proto-Celtic and Basque as well as the DNA associated with Celtic tribes found not only in Ireland but in the desert region of north west China. The genealogies of the dynasties of ancient Ireland considered the common ancestor to be *Míl Espáine* (Milesius of Spain). That many Galicians still consider themselves closely related culturally to the Irish attests to this belief in a possible Iberian connection.

Two ancient Celtic festivals are still in the folk memory: *Beltene*, beginning of summer six months, (*Bealtaine*, now the Irish form for month of May), and *Samhain* (from *samh*, summer, and *fuin*, end), beginning of winter six months, 1 November, when communication with the spirits of the otherworld became possible, nowadays a time for remembering the dead. The three month intervals midway were *Imbolg*, 1 February, and *Lughnasadh*, 1 August (*Lúnasa*, now the Irish form for the month of August).

THE IRISH

Those who call themselves Irish are wonderfully diverse in origin. Taking surnames as an indication, they may vary from those associated with clans of Irish chieftains or learned families to those associated with invasions or plantations: Norse, Norman-French, English. Nowadays, immigration is adding a new mix. For many Irish-born, citizenship – of countries outside of Ireland – is not an issue. They will always be Irish, they say. And anyway, coming and going *home* is relatively easy nowadays. Indeed, the question is asked whether Ireland – new or old – is a state of mind or a place although the phrase, *the ould sod*, is used interchangeably to refer to *home/country/nation*. Similarly, the characteristics

of being Irish seem to be related to personality as much as to territory, in the opinion of non-Irish people.

In Ireland, it is said that all politics are intensely local, the parish pump being the usual analogy used. This is borne out in two ways: the very distinctive system of proportional representation/single transferable vote (PR) used in elections, reportedly used in only two other places, Malta and Tasmania; the extremely high level of contact between representatives of political parties and the electorate, both between elections and in canvassing for elections.

The link between language and identity is either accepted or becomes problematic in regions where two languages co-exist. In Ireland, Irish is the ancestral if now lesser used language, language of *dúchas* (affinity); English, a world language nowadays, the useful recent addition. To be bilingual is a bonus. Yet the difference becomes pointed in translation: the English term *Irish* may be rendered as *Éireannach* (of Ireland) or *Gaelach* (of a particular cultural context; *gaeldom* in Scotland). The issue of identity and the Irish language is discussed by writers especially. As the most representative characteristic of difference in a global context, that Irish remains spoken by at least some of the population is as important to non-speakers as to speakers.

Whether the Irish do possess *the gift of the gab* is not necessarily true, although constant repetition of the saying appears to have led to a belief in this trait, in some quarters at least. What is true, however, is the existence of storytelling and unaccompanied song – two art forms well known and practised in Ireland, particularly in Irish. The Irish, despite being sometimes accused nowadays of having become less religious (but not less spiritual) and more materially self-centred, nevertheless in all surveys report levels of happiness and well-being higher than other nations, both as adults and teenagers. They are optimistic about health, not allowing physical complaints to affect quality of life, an optimism not always shared by their doctors perhaps.

SYMBOLS OF THE STATE

Three emblems appear to have long been inextricably associated with Ireland: the colour green (Emerald Isle); the plant shamrock; the musical instrument, the harp. They have, in various ways, been incorporated into State symbols even in the days of *Saorstát Éireann* (Irish Free State, 6 December 1922). In the 1937 Constitution, Article 4, the name of the State is laid down as *Éire* (Ireland, in the English language). The Act of 1949, *Poblacht na hÉireann* (Republic of Ireland), provides a description of the State, not a new name. It signifies leaving both the British Commonwealth of Nations and the common citizenship with Great Britain.

The number *three* itself has interesting characteristics in Irish quite apart from and pre-dating the belief that St. Patrick used the three-leaved shamrock to explain the mystery of the Trinity to the pagan population. The three forms of music associated with the *Tuatha Dé Danann* were *goltraí*, *suantraí*, *geantraí* (sad music, lullaby, merry music). The defining traits of the warriors of the Fianna were three: *Neart ár ngéag, glaine ár gcroí agus beart de réir ár mbriathair* (The strength of our limbs, the cleanliness of our hearts and keeping our word – literally, deed according to our word). *Tréanna* (triads) constitute a significant part of folk wisdom or gnomic literature in Irish. *Na trí rith is mó: rith uisce, rith tine, rith éithigh* (The three greatest runs – the run of water, of fire, of a lie). *Trí nithe a chuaigh d'Arastatail a thuiscint: intinn na mban, obair na mbeach, agus teacht is imeacht na taoide* (Three things that even Aristotle did not fathom: woman's mind, bees' work and the coming and going of the tide). *Na trí ní is mó giodam: piscín cait, meannán gabhair, nó baintreach óg mhná* (The three most restless things: a kitten, a goat kid, or a young widow).

The colour green and the harp emblem had been used by some Irish soldiers in foreign armies after the 1600s. The contemporary flag of Ireland dates from the Young Ireland movement of the late 1840s but did not gain importance until the 1916 Rising and its later inclusion in the Constitution. The green (which is properly flown next to the flagstaff) stands for the traditional Gaelic element (including Anglo-Norman, who became more Irish than the Irish themselves, *Hiberniores Hibernis ipsis*). The orange stands for the supporters of William of Orange. The white in between is considered a token of brotherhood between the two strands of the population. It is suggested, then, that the Irish tune, *Tabhair dom do lámh* (Give me your hand), might be an appropriate anthem for the future. What may be described as the first popular anthem is the ballad *God Save Ireland* written in 1867. In 1907, Peadar Kearney with Patrick Heeney wrote *Amhrán na bhFiann* (The Soldier's Song) which gained popularity after the 1916 Rising and was formally declared the official national anthem in 1924 in its Irish language version. Kearney's classes in Irish were attended by the

playwright, Seán O'Casey, and his nephews were the writers, Brendan and Dominic Behan.

The fourteenth century harp known as the *Brian Ború* harp is the exemplar for that now used for the flag of the President (on a blue or azure background, not green), for the presidential seal and on governmental or official documents, particularly distinctive on the back of a white official envelope. It also figures on Irish currency.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF IRISH

Some of the distinctive traits of Irish are:

- Irish, as Japanese, is a VSO (verb – subject – object) language, where English is SVO (subject – verb – object): *Bhuail Seán an liathróid*, Hit Seán the ball.
- Irish is inflected for nouns (case and declension) and any accompanying adjectives; for verbs (tenses and conjugations).
- Irish in the substantive verb (to be), distinguishes between: present punctual, *Tá sé ann* (He is there) and present habitual (which has influenced Hiberno-English), *Bíonn sé ann gach lá* (He *do be* there every day).
- Irish has a system of inflected prepositional pronouns.

This is the language students come to learn at classes in Ireland every Summer from all over the world. They cite a variety of reasons. Many become fluent. Some remain to work, often in the media. Irish words have found their way into the English language: 'galore' (*go leor*) – plenty; do you *dig* (*tuig*, in the form with eclipsis, *an dtuigeann*) – understand. A recent publication from America would include 'snazzy' (*snasta*) – polished and even 'jazz' (*teas*) – heat, passion (although to some ensuing argument).

NO LANGUAGE IS WITHOUT ITS HEROES

Whichever way one looks at it, there is no doubt but that the Irish language has had a wonderfully awful history, as the recital of facts below will show. On any reckoning, instead of providing material for this and so many other publications, the Irish language should have been consigned to the sunset before now and have dutifully departed from the long wake held for it by the doubtful. Instead, it is now at that tantalising point, not only sexy and chic, but has long been dancing at its own wake and more than livening up the festivities. The poet, *Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill*, has referred to Irish as *The corpse that sits up and talks back*. The critic, Declan Kiberd, remarks that *In Ireland, the dead seem to never know that they are dead*. No wonder *Cathal Ó Searcaigh*, the poet from the Donegal *Gaeltacht*, is struck by the fact that it appears, that far from being dead or dying, *Irish had become dashingly cool and daringly hip*.

Newspaper columnists refer to the *cúpla focal's* (couple of words) conquest or ask, tongue in cheek, whether acquiring Irish means becoming beautiful also (in a reference to presenters on Irish language television). The economist, David McWilliams, writes of the HiCos, the HibernianCosmopolitans, able to explore their own culture in a confident economy. Contemporary popular novels more and more throw words and phrases in Irish into the dialogue of characters, as a natural gesture. Newspapers, any day in any paper, will include, in a natural way, an Irish expression in a column or report on any subject: *garsún* (boy – from the Norman-French), *méar fhada* (on the long finger), *flaithiúlach* (generous), *cúpla focal* (few words), 'galore' now in General English (*go leor* – enough), *ciotóg* (left-handed person), *sin sin* (that's it), *meas* (respect), *plámás* (flattery), *grá* (love, affection), *an béal bocht* (the poor mouth). The yellow noxious weed, ragwort, is more popularly known as *buachallán buí*, but sometimes erroneously or facetiously rendered as *buachaillí buí* (yellow boys/fellows/lads). The implements for reaping, *speal* (scythe), and for turf cutting, *sleán* (turf spade), are still in use in English in some areas of the country. Notices on births and deaths are normalising the occasional use of appropriate Irish phrases. Irish is much more visible in the environment generally, the naming of new housing developments being a typical example, and is associated with high flyers, with success, with development. At the August 2007 concert of the Rolling Stones at Slane in County Meath, the singer and instrumentalist Mick Jagger spoke a few words in Irish, delighting the crowd with his good pronunciation. The singer Sting did likewise at his concert in Croke Park in October. A degree of largely unplanned spontaneous normalisation is undoubtedly taking place.

The eminent American sociolinguist Joshua Fishman, in his 1991 book on Reversing Language Shift (RLS), had this to say about Irish.

Many threatened languages in Europe and elsewhere would consider themselves fortunate to achieve during the coming century the level of RLS that Irish has achieved during the past century.

What the revivalists have accomplished against great odds, and their current levels of devotion, achievement and involvement, all border on the miraculous,
though he does warn that future policies
may require separate approaches and standards of evaluation for different segments of Irish society.

The *Euromosaic* (1996) study of lesser used languages in the EU, commissioned by the European Commission, considered Irish *a language on the verge of vitality*.

Ten years later, 2006–2007, as the unvarnished facts of today recount in the following pages, there is much evidence of new planning approaches, as envisaged by Fishman, and of new vitality, as foreshadowed in *Euromosaic*.
