Being Irish . . . a case of “mistaken identity”

This was possibly one of the most difficult essays I have ever tried to write. It was only after several attempts that I finally understood why. The fact is, I have no idea what it is like to be Irish because I am not.

Ask a Canadian what it is like “being American” or a Portuguese what it is like “being Spanish” to see the reaction. Some may laugh, recognising an honest case of “mistaken identity”. Some may see it as cultural imperialism and inflate their own sense of identity in defence, while others may simply correct the mistake, aware that the issue of identity is one of the most sensitive, most complex and possibly most divisive questions facing modern society.

International examples such as these serve to illustrate the mistaken assumption that everyone who lives in Northern Ireland knows what it is like to be Irish. The assumption is based on geographical fact. Yet geography may have little influence on cultural identity. From my own experience, I would contend that politics, religion, education and social circumstance have a far greater influence on cultural identity than physical geography.

Let me explain. I was born in Northern Ireland — a country on the edge of the European continent sandwiched between two great cultural identities — British and Irish. Both have spent many years attempting to woo me into their own “identity zone”. Neither has managed to succeed.

I spent my teenage years living with violence, hatred and bigotry and I could not accept it. If this was my culture, I wanted none of it. My country and its people were tearing themselves apart. The only thing left to love was the landscape. Unable to identify with this “culture of intolerance”, I chose to disengage, and start searching for a new culture which would accept me for who I am, not what I am.

The result is a “hybrid”, absorbing those parts of the British/Irish culture I respect, disowning those I reject and continually embracing new influences with which I can identify. When asked, I say that I live in Northern Ireland, hold British citizenship and describe myself as Northern Irish and European.

There is no doubt that my early identity was shaped more by British influence than any other. Carnaby Street, Shakespeare, the Beatles, Margaret Thatcher and fish and chips had a far greater effect on my life than Grafton Street, James Joyce, the Boombtown Rats, Charles Haughey or corned beef and cabbage. Holidays in Donegal allowed me to experience Irish culture at first hand but, when I needed a job, London, the capital, was where I looked.
In my later years, I developed a fascination for all things foreign, indulged my passion by learning to speak French, Spanish and German so I could read their literature, sing their songs and understand their people. I chose “European Studies” as my degree course. Obviously, with hindsight, I was preparing my escape.

I left home in 1977 and spent ten years travelling and working abroad. During a year in New York, I flirted with the “American dream”, but only momentarily. The culture shock was electrifying. The “anything goes” attitude gave me a confidence I could never have mustered in the dark, dour, “fear of failure” society back home. I met more Irish there than I ever met in Donegal.

I moved to Brussels and followed the “European ideal” with interest. I appreciated the opportunity it offered to give me a new identity to which I could relate. Unlike the pressure I felt back home, I felt no pressure to become a European. It was a mantle I chose for myself. My own identity was enriched by contact with different cultures and I learned to respect people who were different.

I also learned that there is very little real difference between the peoples of the US and Europe and even less between the people of Britain and Ireland. We may have different flags and different allegiances but we have the same love for democracy and hatred of fascism. We may have different traditions but we share a similar desire for our rights to be upheld and respected by others. We may speak different languages but we know we need to communicate. We may have different religions but we share the same God.

My travels also taught me that it is impossible, no matter how hard the circumstances, to forget our “roots”. That is undoubtedly why I returned to Northern Ireland to settle, bring up my family and help contribute to a change in society in the hope that it will eventually lead to a new “culture of tolerance”. It is also why I will always describe Belfast as my birthplace, Van Morrison as my favourite musician and Northern Ireland as my home.
What does “Being Irish” mean to me? Now there is a question. How much time have you got? Well to start at the beginning, or at least my beginning, the events following my birth on 11 July 1955, and the trauma over what to name me, somewhat typifies “Being Irish”.

My mother Chris was expecting another boy when she was carrying me. She was going to name me “John Coleman” after some famous Fenian in the family history (known locally as “The Galtree Boy”). So when I came along, a dilemma presented itself. If she was to follow the path of naming me after an Irish hero, you could now be reading about Countess Markeviez Roche, or maybe not! So to get over this problem, my mother took refuge in that other great Irish pastime, religion. She had been reading about the only English Pope, Pope Adrian, and so what did she do? She dropped the “-an” and replaced it with “-enne” — Adrienne. The family doctor proclaimed, “Ah, she’ll never be short of a job with a Protestant name like that!”

Somewhere along the way, I became Adi, my sister Helen became “Len” and my brothers became Duck (Dónall), and “Con” (Conchubhar).

So, I have covered nationalism and religion, two subjects which, when talking about “being Irish”, simply cannot be ignored. What about language, I hear you ask? In my family, the Irish language was big on the agenda. My parents, brothers and sister all speak very good Irish/Gaeilge, as does my husband Seán. My Father, the other Seán in my life, still speaks fluent Gaeilge and still sings many of the Irish songs that he sang years ago at feiseanna, despite the fact that he is now in the twilight world of Alzheimer’s Disease. I still love to hear him sing in his quivery voice. But I am sorry to say that I struggle with my “cúpla focal”. The words are there buried somewhere in the back of my head, but when faced with an Irish conversation, I seem to panic, lack confidence, and make some excuse like, “I had it in school, but it is all forgotten now” or “Níl aon ach cúpla focal agam”. My husband Sean . . . gabh mo leiscéil — Seán (the fada over the “a” is vital). Without the fada it means “old” and I suppose it is not good to be referred to as such, especially when, as in the case of my husband, it is not true! Anyway, where was I . . . Seán wears a fáinne, a pin that tells others that he is willing to converse with them in Irish. In how many other countries do people wear a “label” to show that they speak the native language?

I left Clonmel at age 17 and went to Dublin, “the big smoke”. It was such an exciting time for me, 1972 — discos, fashion, boys, my first job, the thrill of being “on the tear” and being a part of it all. Those were somewhat carefree times, and I wouldn’t change them for anything. It wasn’t until 1978, however, that my “awakening” took place.
My brother Dónall was living in Pennsylvania near the Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant and told me of the great dangers of nuclear power — radiation, CANCER etc. I emphasise CANCER, because it struck a deep note with me. At age 16, my dearest childhood friend Anne had died from leukemia. The thought of this “source of energy” cutting short the life of even one more human being spurred me into action. The Irish Government at the time were proposing to build a nuclear power plant in Carnsore Point in County Wexford. I got stuck into the campaign to prevent this happening, and I haven’t stopped since.

I believe my work with the Chernobyl Children’s Project gives me a great understanding of what “being Irish” means. I believe the spirit of giving to others worldwide, which so many Irish practise today, relates back to our ancestors who suffered so much in famine times. It reminds me of a story told to me by Don Mullin about a group of Choctaw Indians in Oklahoma at the time of the Irish Famine. Despite having very little themselves, hearing of the Irish plight, they sent a consignment of grain to Ireland.

The people who influence me are varied, but to me are Irish in the sense that they are my brothers and sisters. My parents, my brothers and sister, my “comrades” from Carnsore, Petra Kelly, Christy Moore, Nelson Mandela, Maureen Kim Sing, Martin Luther King, Joan Baez, Bruce Kent, Irish CND, Greenpeace, etc. — these are the people who shaped me, who shaped my “Irishness”. Up Clonmel, Up Tipp, Up Cork, Ireland Abú! Like the Choctaw Indians, I believe my brothers and sisters are everywhere, and no land border will ever tell me that these people are not my “Irish” brothers and sisters.
Being Irish today is, for a historian intrigued by issues of identity, like living in a participatory laboratory. The Irish are at one of the periodic hinge moments in their history when they are reinventing themselves. Remaking always involves a degree of refaking, which requires in turn a capacity for both unctuous self-righteousness and massive self-deception, both in ample supply.

The significance of this remaking extends far beyond the experience of the five or more million people on the island. At one level, one might ask, what does Ireland matter anyway, for that five million is a drop in the global ocean of six billion. But Ireland has often punched above its weight in world history. Four features which seem to me to mark out the Irish experience today as worthy of wider notice are the peace process, the changing sense of British identity, the Celtic Tiger and globalisation.

The peace process deals directly with only a tiny area. But if the scale is local, the issues of principle are universal. The history of the area that became Northern Ireland under the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 has taken many a twist and turn over the centuries. Who knows what further twists may be in store? History did not end with the Good Friday Agreement.

To get agreement at all required one of the great works of necessary creative fiction of modern diplomacy. As the Agreement is based on fundamentally incompatible assumptions among the various participants, some must be disappointed with its fruits in due course, unless the process itself changes their sense of self. How it works out will be partly influenced by the fact that the sense of British identity is changing more rapidly in Britain itself than for several centuries. It would be ironic if the last bastion of British identity in the "British" Isles were to be the unionist parts of Northern Ireland!

Further south, the Celtic Tiger is a truly striking phenomenon, as much for its psychological as for its economic consequences. It makes unionists work even harder at sustaining the image of axiomatic Catholic inferiority — and it is no consolation to that mindset that the Catholicism is itself changing rapidly, indeed in some respects declining.

The generation of the 1990s is the first to have been reared on expectations of constant success. But can they cope with success? The Celtic Tiger is nothing if not eager to be global. It is not that Ireland is new to globalisation. It underwent one of the earliest versions of it. It was then called anglicisation. It was resisted politically and, partly, culturally, because it came in the gun carriage of the conqueror. Globalisation, now meaning cultural conquest by the strongest media power, infiltrating with no such obvious political baggage, rouses little resistance.
The perception of Ireland as Little America — or at least of Dublin as Little New York — is already familiar. “If you take a stroll down Grafton Street,” Niall O’Dowd observes from New York, “it is like any American shopping mall nowadays. In the rush to conform to the latest fashions, Irish kids are indistinguishable from an American high school class. None of the traditional individualism of the Irish is immediately apparent . . .” The sceptic might wonder if the only real question is whether it is London or New York that is the cultural capital of Ireland, through its proxy, Dublin? Patrick West makes his pitch for London in the Sunday Independent, on the grounds that “We are all tea-drinking, pub-going, Anglo, Manchester-United supporting, EastEnders-watching peoples together.” Can we preserve a little Anglo-Hibernian time warp? So much for Romantic Ireland — or even Romantic England! Was Yeats right after all — just a bit previous?

A pluralist Ireland can enrich Irish culture. But where pluralism is really a fraudulent ploy for the destruction of everything distinctively Irish, then it becomes simply an agent for global homogeneity, contributing more to conformity than to diversity. That is why so much of what passes as cosmopolitanism in Ireland is so redolent of provincialism, with globalisation in place accompanied by provincialism in time, fostering an obsession to rubbish the dead in order to enhance the self-importance of the living. So tiny a country must always be a taker to a great extent. But what it takes, and how it takes, determines largely who it is, and what it can give back. And if it cannot make those choices on the basis of something distinctive to itself, then there is no particular reason for it to exist at all. Being Irish becomes simply a convenience networking for careerists rather than a commitment of conviction.

It is an exciting time to be Irish. The opportunities opened up by the peace process and by the Celtic Tiger are immense. There is still a marvellous vivacity about many young people, whatever the pressure to conformity. If identity increasingly depends on imagination rather than inheritance, how the inheritance is used is crucial to the nature of the creativity. A new Irish identity is still all to play for.
The English Catholic martyr, St Edmund Campion, lived in Dublin for a while in 1569 and here is what he wrote about the Irish:

"The people are thus inclined: religious, franke, amorous, irefull, sufferable of paines infinite, very glorious, many sorcerers, excellent horsemen, delighted with warres, great almes-givers, passing in hospitalitie: the leuuer sort both clarke and laymen are sensuall and loose to leachery above measure. The same being vertuously bred up or reformed are such mirrours of holiness and austeritie that other nations retaine but a shewe or shadow of devotion in comparison with them."

If you’re Irish you’re searching for yourself in Campion’s wide-ranging assessment. Are you religious one minute, “sensuall and loose to leachery” the next? Amorous, but still a mirror of holiness?

Much depends on where and when you grew up. If, like me, you were raised in mid-century Ireland you had to think twice before engaging in sensuality and lechery and if you did there was nothing for it but confession on Saturday. My Ireland was known the world over as “poor and priest-ridden”. The Irish were marrying so infrequently and emigrating at such a rate that an alarmed American priest wrote a book entitled The Vanishing Irish.

We were poor. We were priest-ridden.

And De Valera-ridden.

These were the ingredients of our lives in the lanes of Limerick and, I’m sure, in lanes in every town and city in Ireland.

But especially in Limerick, because this was the one major city in Ireland without a university, a community of independent thinkers and scholars. Dublin, Cork, Galway, Belfast — all enjoyed the social and intellectual benefits of higher education, but not Limerick. There was an intellectual (and spiritual) vacuum — and the church filled it.

There was no political vacuum: De Valera had already filled that with his various obsessions, his dreams of a Gaelic-speaking people digging joyously in the fields by day, dancing in the dusk at the crossroads, Irish dancing only, leaping lads ready to die for creed and country, dimpled maidens so chaste they put the lie to Campion’s sensuality and “leachery”.

Why go on about this? It’s old stuff and haven’t the Irish writers, from Joyce to McGahern, exhausted this vein? No, you can’t exhaust it because that Ireland with its tricolour, its crucifix, its various blood sacrifices, has affected generations of Irish even unto seven times the seventh generation.

And the irony is that even Irish-Americans may have been affected by the psychological climate of mid-century Ireland. If you live in the United States, especially in the great urban areas, you are literally nagged into reflecting on
your ethnicity. It's one thing if you're Irish from Ireland. That's easy to spot: there's the accent. When they say, "Gee what a cute brogue," you have to respond, to adjust. You're in America and you've been labelled "Irish". You didn't have to think about that in Ireland, but you're in the States now, pal.

And when you think about being Irish, what comes to mind? If you're a cub of the Celtic Tiger, will you go along with St Edmund Campion and admit that you are, indeed, amorous and ireful. Whoopee and musical beds and there is Mother Church in the corner, her head hung, weeping.

Irish-American? That's another story. Here is virgin territory for the social historian: not the history of the Irish-Americans, but their relationship with the folks back home. Of course, we brought baggage from Ireland, We brought our stories, our songs, our hymns, our sense of place. We barged into the Brahmin enclaves of Boston and never took no for an answer. Daniel O'Connell had told us, Organise, organise, and if we were slow to act in Ireland we seized the day in the United States. We dominated politics and the church and set up an education system of parochial schools and universities, which seems to have escaped the attention of our historians. Simply put, we saw power and took it.

All along, we looked back over the years and across the ocean and deferred to the history, the tradition, the land. Look at the richness of Ireland's culture, all that history, all that suffering, and a song for every event, every battle, every lost love, every sailing away, every drop to ease the pain. At any party in the States, the Irish would sing loudly, merrily, endlessly while their Irish-American brothers and sisters served the drinks and in their ignorance of their own achievements wished they'd been hurt into that kind of music.

Then something happened. Damn! Who is this Michael Flatley, this Seamus Egan, this Eileen Ivers, this Joanie Madden and her Cherished Ladies? And who do they think they are, coming to Ireland and, not only sweeping the competition but, talented, pushing their way into the culture of their ancestors. Who is this Mick Moloney, a Limerickman at Villanova University, who gives equal time and grace to the musical traditions of the narrowbacks?

The Atlantic has become a puddle which poets and musicians leap without a second thought. Irish-Americans are discovering their own turbulent and rowdy history and the songs that go with it. They're throwing the overalls in Mrs Murphy's chowder and splashing Finnegan with whiskey to wake him, Michael Patrick McDonald takes us on a heartbreaking tour of his South Boston family while William Kennedy guides us through the heart and soul of an Irish, an American Albany.

So... what is it to be Irish nowadays?

It is to live on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, or anywhere else, and to be able to say, You've come a long way, Michael or Maggie. You've come singing and dancing and, remembering St Edmund Campion, you may be "mirrors of holiness", "great almes-givers", and "passing in hospitalitie".
Martin Collins

Martin Collins is a 34-year-old Irish Traveller, working with Pavee Point Travellers Centre. He was a member of the Taskforce on the Traveller Community and has spent 15 years campaigning to improve the quality of life for the Traveller Community.

The very first time I became conscious of my Traveller identity was when I started attending primary school in the mid-seventies. My brother and I were the only two Travellers in the whole school and it was also the first time I had any real contact with the majority population.

When I say this was the first time I became conscious of my Traveller identity, it was not because there was an intercultural curriculum in the school which valued and respected different cultures. In fact and unfortunately we did not and never had an intercultural curriculum, but rather I was reminded I was different in negative ways — by way of discrimination, prejudice and harassment, not just from other pupils but also from members of staff. Unfortunately, discrimination and prejudice is still a big issue for Travellers, both in school and in the wider society.

We Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority group who have been part of Irish society for centuries. We have our own value system, language, customs and traditions, which makes us identifiable to both ourselves and others. It saddens me to say that the approach this society has taken to Travellers is one of assimilation and rehabilitation. We are perceived as a problem; our cultural identity has been and continues to be rejected and devalued. As a Traveller myself, I feel offended when I am labelled as a problem or someone in need of rehabilitation.

It is important to recognise that Irish society is not mono-cultural; in other words it is not only composed of white settled Catholic people. In fact, this was never the situation. We have always had other distinct cultural, religious and linguistic groups and now we have even more with the arrival of refugees and asylum-seekers and this poses a challenge to us. How do we create a more inclusive anti-racist society, where all cultures and identities are respected and protected?

When asked to introduce myself or describe myself I would always respond by saying I'm an Irish Traveller, because being Irish is also important to me as this is the place where I was born, grew up and now live. It's part of my lived experience. I, like other Travellers, take immense pride in being Irish and this manifests itself in many ways, particularly when other Irish people achieve and have success, whether it's in sport, singing and music, acting, politics, the corporate world and so on. Travellers do rejoice and celebrate in their success. One example that comes to mind was when Ireland played in the 1990 and 1994 World Cups. Every Traveller trailer and house had Irish flags and bunting on it, despite the fact that Travellers could not get into the pubs to watch the matches because of the discrimination and prejudice we have to endure. But this did not discourage us from supporting and celebrating in our country's success.
I am of the opinion that you can have dual or multiple identities; for example, you have Irish Jews, Irish Travellers, Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants and there are many more. It’s for the groups themselves to decide what is their primary identity, but for me, first and foremost is being a Traveller. That is my primary identity and while I felt immense pride when Ireland competed in the World Cup and Steve Collins won his world boxing title, it did not come close to how I felt when Francie Barrett led out the Irish Olympic team in Atlanta or when the first Traveller was awarded her degree from Trinity College Dublin. These were very special moments for me, moments I will never forget. I would hope and like to believe that the majority population can celebrate in our success and achievements, just like we do in theirs.

So it is my view there are many ways of being Irish; there is no one way and the sooner people learn that, the better off we all would be. Culture and identity is always difficult to define and pin down but in doing so we must be careful not to look at it through rose-tinted glasses. Rather we must take an honest look at what is positive and negative about our cultural identities, because not everything in our cultural identity is positive and this applies to all nationalities and ethnic groups universally.

It is also important in my view to recognise that cultures and identities are fluid; they change and evolve and adapt, and rightly so. As a Traveller, when I meet settled people they have the preconceived notion that to be Traveller you must be living in a colourful barrel-top wagon and be a great singer or musician and storyteller. This is dangerous because it is stereotyping and we must avoid this. Travellers don’t live in barrel-top wagons and sing songs at the campfire any more, just as settled people no longer live in thatched cottages with turf fires or dance at the crossroads.

In the Ireland of today we have a lot more people from different cultures and ethnic groups and this should be welcomed as a positive development rather than seen as a threat. The Irish are perceived worldwide as friendly, hospitable and welcoming people. But it is only a myth, because I have not seen this friendliness or hospitality extended to minority groups in this society.

It’s very much like the song: if your name is Timothy or Pat, then there is a welcome on the mat, but if your name is Demeter or Stankiewicz, there is no welcome on the mat for you.

Of course, this is not true of all Irish but it is true of a significant number of us. I do believe that all cultures and identities can peacefully co-exist. What other options do we have? Domination? Conflict? Genocide? It doesn’t bear thinking about.
Moosajee Bhamjee

Dr Moosajee Bhamjee is a consultant psychiatrist in Our Lady’s Hospital, Ennis, County Clare. Born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, he moved to Ireland in 1965. He represented Clare as a Labour TD from 1992 to 1997.

I am writing these words to give a personal account of how I feel about being Irish in the year 2000.

I moved to Ireland in 1965 as a medical student and upon marriage took up permanent residence. I am a naturalised Irish citizen since 1978, having sworn my loyalty to the State in a court of law. This certificate allowed me to stand for election to Dáil Éireann. Thus I was elected as the first Labour TD for Clare since the early 1950s, and became known as the first “Indian” in the Dáil. Though I was born in South Africa, my parental ancestry is Indian.

From being a relatively unknown student and doctor it can be surprising to be recognised in all the villages of Ireland and to be called “Bhamjee”, a name I personally adopted when answering the phone or introducing myself to people. I seem to have lost my first name since becoming a TD, but I am proud to have retained my original name and not adjusted or changed it.

Today one can buy the spices to cook a curry in any supermarket and to see people eating “curry and rice” regularly at home shows how the staple diet has changed; pastas, spaghetti and chow mein are also cooked in many homes. But one must love burgers and fish fingers, and the Sunday roast is still the most important meal of the week when all the family are together.

I am proud to have read Irish history, Irish folklore and Irish literature but I still have not been able to grasp the Irish language, nor have I been able to pronounce any phrases in Irish; my wife Clare was able to help the children with their Irish homework. I have a good interest in sport and like to read about the national team and the major sporting heroes and attend as many GAA matches as possible. Presently I am coaching the local under-16 girls’ football team. To be passionate for County Clare comes naturally to me and I can be heard roaring at all their matches. Whenever Ireland play against South Africa, the land of my birth, I find my loyalty is to Ireland. My children speak fluent Irish and, being born in Ireland, do not feel different in any way, and they think and feel Irish. But I feel guilty about not increasing their knowledge of my ancestry and teaching them my language.

I find it hard not to be honest and straightforward and to speak openly and frankly about my feelings over certain issues, be it in a group or at official meetings. Thus I find it hard to meet people who will be critical over a decision pre- and post-meeting but will never express their views at the meeting, when it matters most. There is still a lot of “plámas” at meetings, which can be annoying. The person who speaks openly is seen as being odd or strange. Also, meetings rarely start on time and this can be frustrating as other appointments might be scheduled and people left waiting, or other appointments cancelled; to accept this as “normality” I find difficult to accommodate. To comply with
modern bureaucratic needs, people are still long-winded and irrelevant rather than being succinct, to the point, getting the message across in the minimal of words.

I love reading my Irish Times, as it contains analysis, factual information and international news, but there is no substance to the Sunday newspapers, even though they have a lot of print. So I have lost interest in the Sunday papers, which I loved reading and looked forward to in the 1960s and 1970s.

Driving a big fast car seems to be the fashion at present, but I still enjoy driving a small car with a low horsepower, which motors along at a steady pace. Unfortunately, the Sunday drive is not as popular as it used to be.

Being Irish can be worrying with regards to drinking and drug abuse, as both are occurring at a young age and people do not seem to be able to control themselves when drinking. I am also concerned with the increased number of racist attacks and vandalism throughout the country.

It is good to see magazines writing on “taboo subjects” like mental illness, divorce, euthanasia, and now people are willing to discuss these topics. I am pleased to have helped bring divorce into Ireland, as people now have a second chance and a new beginning.

I find it difficult to make people see ahead or a different viewpoint. Thus the thinking is still confined, narrow and indoctrinated. I enjoy meeting the person who is different, as society does not cater for them; being eccentric seems like an abnormality now and the “village character” is gone. It is all about conforming.

**Fee Ching Leong**

Fee Ching Leong was born in West Malaysia and has lived in Northern Ireland for twenty-five years, where she has two daughters. She has edited and written six books on racial equality and anti-racism training. She enjoys drumming and dancing.

If you were to enter the living room in the home of my childhood days, you would have been confronted by an elaborately carved table displaying statues of Buddha, “Goon Yum” (the Goddess of Fertility), the Earth God and the Monkey God. There was also a specific tabernacle with fresh fruits being constantly offered to my ancestors and their blessings would have channelled into us via the fruits as we consumed them. Joss sticks were lit morning and evening — these were stuck into porcelain pots two-thirds filled with light brown ashes.

On the first and fifteenth day of every Chinese lunar month, I would have been obliged to participate in praying to the Gods and to my ancestors. Clasping smoking joss-sticks in my hands, I would have waved them gently up and down before I stuck them, three at a time, into the ash-filled containers. I was
instructed by my parents and elders to ask for good health and the ability to perform well in my school examinations. I would also have engaged in going on my knees and kow-towing — with hands sprawled in front of me, I brought my head to meet the ground three times.

I was brought up in a Buddhist-cum-Taoist home environment in a town called Ipoh in West Malaysia. The Irish influence on my life began at the very beginning of my school days and has lasted right through to this day. The principal of the convent school I attended was an Irishwoman; Sister Fidelma was strict but other Irish nuns were less so. They had different roles in the school. A few were teaching staff whilst others cared for the children living in an orphanage attached to the school. There were French nuns too and together with their Irish compatriots, they helped to instil within me a deep sense of compassion and an aspiration to real humility — qualities which were more artificially expressed by those who constituted my more worldly upper-middle-class upbringing.

And yet, my ending up living in Northern Ireland for the last 25 years was not exactly what I would have desired two and a half decades ago. The lights of London and other cities in England were more appealing to the younger me, but my parents chose Belfast for me because I already had cousins studying there at the time — also, what would Belfast have to offer socially to a teenager? Whilst the bombs presented a life threat, my parents were more concerned that I had as little opportunity as possible to avail of what they consider unnecessarily distracting social activities.

Armed with instructions to achieve academically and a threat of being disowned if I married anyone outside of the Chinese “race”, I promised myself to excel in my studies but within a month of arrival on the island, I knew the charms of Irish men would be difficult to resist and it would be in my destiny to rebel. I was swamped with dates and was courted with fervour. My weakness for tall men greatly influenced the choice of my first husband. He was a working class Protestant and an only son, which, in Northern Ireland, is a combination that typically still spells an interdependence that paralyses the offspring’s ability to plan and act accordingly. I became a wife who replaced the mother to whom he then promptly returned when we separated.

For ten years, I listened to but was not persuaded by the unionist viewpoint, wondered about the negative stereotypes of Catholic people and strived to feel fulfilled as the wife of a white man. I became, as a Chinese friend confided one day, “a white woman in a yellow skin”. Whilst my first rebellion had been about following my heart, my second rebellion, a decade later, resulted from allowing the real me to emerge.

As I subsequently engaged in working with community groups and representations from a range of organisations to challenge their own assumptions
and prejudices, I found that attitudes were only slowly moving from the percep-
tions of other "races" as "foreigners" who should "return to where they have
come from", despite the fact that there are many in Ireland today who, like my
daughters, are born in the country and hold Irish and/or British citizenships.

We have, however, not allowed snide remarks — made in ignorance or other-
wise — to dissuade us from wanting to belong, to be Irish. We try to under-
stand the confusion that is in many a person's mind that Ireland is and,
perhaps, should remain white, its culture has remained static, and inclusivity
refers to simply enabling better relations between the two predominant re-
ligio-political communities. The diversities of backgrounds must surely lend a
richness to an island too long divided by suspicion, conflict and violence. The
Paddy jokes should no longer apply, not only because they reinforce the
stereotypes of Irish people, but also because they lead to the continuing denial
of Ireland as a multidimensional and multiethnic society.

In the meantime, I shall continue to dream, to dream of the day when I can
be, first of all, an individual, rather than a second or third class citizen of Ire-
land.

Julia Neuberger

Rabbi Julia Neuberger is Chief Executive of the King's
Fund, an independent healthcare charity seeking
improvements in health and social care. She lectures on
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and dying well, the title of her latest book. She be-
came a Rabbi in 1977.

I'm not Irish, though I hope that one of the (much less important than other)
results of a final peace agreement in the North will mean that people like me
can hold dual citizenship. After all, all my grandparents were German Jews,
and all acquired UK citizenship. My father fought on the British side in World
War II, but my maternal grandfather fought on the German side in World War
I; my paternal grandparents were that now often-sneered-at group, economic
migrants — though they might not have been sneered at too much, because
they were comfortably off. My mother was a refugee from Nazi Germany, who
found a warm welcome in Britain, first in Birmingham and then in London. So
I am British, and grateful and proud to be so.

So why Ireland for my second country, my adopted home? The connection
is far from obvious, because there is none by blood or belonging. Ireland is my
other home by choice. I'm a "blow-in", one who has tried to make a contribu-
tion — I owe the Irish that for the warm welcome we have received — but a
"blow-in" nevertheless. We came for a holiday many years ago, and we have
never quite left since.

So what is it? At first it was the charm, the humour, the literary quality of
everyday talk, the celebration of the land, the sea, the beauty. I was beguiled.
And then I began to be more involved and less easily won over. The strong
sense of belonging that all Irish Americans feel could also exclude people like
me. The attitude to state support for denominational education in the North — strongly held to be an essential by Nationalist and Protestant alike, despite the clear popularity of integrated education — makes me feel an outsider. One summer, our children attended the Protestant school in Ballydehob, very briefly, by the great generosity of the authorities, because the Catholic school would not accept our Jewish children, however temporarily. Protestants and Jews together — the also-rans? That can make me feel uncomfortable too.

And yet the use of memory, the recording of the Famine in literature and now in museums, the sense of peoplehood, the restoration of the language, the pride in Irish food, clothes, glass and design — these are things I warm to, I even love. Increasingly, my clothes are Irish, made by people I know, or sold to me by those who know them. I have had few more pleasurable moments as Chancellor of the University of Ulster than giving honorary degrees to fashion designers and racing magnates. I have loved the celebration of Irish cheeses in the United States, and rejoiced in the successes of Irish theatre in England and the US, and the Irish novel worldwide.

So much for the love affair. It may not always be reciprocated, and I have certainly had my share of unpleasantness in Ireland — over integrated education in the North, and over my support for and pleas for generosity towards asylum seekers, when I have cited the generous welcome I and my family have received. But what I feel deep down is something beyond the attractive, the warm, the cosy, the charm. For there can be begrudgery, hatred, land battles and long held feuds, and there are many unpleasant stories to tell. What I feel most strongly is what I learned from that formidable professor of Irish Studies at Boston College, Adele Dalsimer, whose recent death is so lamented. It was she who made me see a parallel between Jews and Irish, a passion for memory, a passion for learning, a way with words, a love of the law (!), and an understanding, albeit often unexplored, of what religion can really be about. Adele was a Jew, and an honorary American Irish person. She it was who set up the Irish-Jewish Passover Seder, remembering the Exodus from Egypt, the Famine, the Holocaust, the emigrations, celebrating longing for return, and praying for liberation for everybody.

For me, Ireland at best is the new confident and accepting face of Europe. And the Irish are able to welcome, to succeed in all they do, teach, learn, and create a new series of overlapping identities that can include all of us who want to be a part.

That means that we can be Irish by birth or Irish by ancestry; Irish by choice or Irish by accident; Irish with strong British links, or Irish with a link across the Atlantic, or even a bit of both; Irish by association or Irish by nationality; Irish in looks or Irish in voice, or neither of these, but Irish by choice. It’s a more inclusive notion of Irishness than used to be the case, but as Ireland’s confidence grows and as Irish people are successful the world over, there’s no reason why it should not be the norm. Much of the time, it already is. And I hope, and pray, that it will become the universal view — and that the new Ireland will include us all, and make us its own.
without at least a little sympathy. I cannot do without it, and it does not abound in that. I cannot do without it, and it does not abound in that.

In short, today, because I did not learn it yesterday, and because it does not abound in that, I cannot do without it, and it does not abound in that. I cannot do without it, and it does not abound in that.

Our Englishman, Controversy, and the Social World

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and was n't possible for his govern-