

“NOT YOUR MOTHER’S IRELAND ANYMORE”

Forty years ago today, I arrived in Ireland for the first time.

My family was taking one of those pilgrimages that Irish-American families take, or took at the time. Along with so many Irish people, over the course of 60 years in the 19th Century, my great-grandfather and all known ancestors of six other of my great-grandparents had left Ireland for the United States. My father grew up in a working class city outside of Philly that had an Irish Church, an Italian Church, and a Polish Church – as my relatives tell it, everyone was Catholic – with social halls and other civil society to match. It remained, even in my teenage years, the kind of place where Irish-Americans got jobs as cops. So he was raised and so we were raised investing a lot in that Irish-American identity.

We arrived in Ireland, with the names of distant cousins in hand, to see what this place called Ireland was really like.

I remember three things about that pilgrimage most vividly.

First, the night before we left, we went to the Medieval banquet at the Bunratty Castle, a totally schlocky tourist show, now just 20 minutes up the road from where I live. They’ve been doing the banquets ever since, and have expanded into Victorian culture tourism. I recall they gave you just a knife with which to eat your steak. Maybe I was permitted to drink mead.

My family did visit one of those distant cousins, in a 4-room house where a bunch of kids had been raised. The cousin of the same generation as my parents wanted to get out of the too-small house, so we walked down the street to the local pub at a bend in the road. The pub had a thatched roof. There was a fox

hunt going on, so there were horses tied up outside the pub. I once believed, but was probably wrong, that that pub was just a half hour from where my now-spouse had lived all his life. My spouse and I have spent decades looking for that thatched roof pub, with no success. It provides a nice excuse to keep looking, anyway.

My family departed from Shannon, but we arrived in Dublin and so were in the Capitol on St. Patrick's Day. It was quiet and much was closed on account of the bank holiday. One after another person asked us, with puzzlement, why *anyone* would come from New York to Dublin for St. Patrick's Day, because New York and Chicago were where it was at on St. Patrick's Day.

It's a bigger deal in Ireland now than it was when my family wandered the famous heart of Dublin on a bank holiday so many years ago (but then, so is Halloween, to my spouse's chagrin). We've got parades and everything is lit up green and oh by the way the Irish team won the Six Nations Championship in rugby, again, yesterday.

But so much of what we know as St. Patrick's Day is about celebrating an American identity, the descendants of the Irish diaspora living in big cities with Irish-American political machines. And so much of that – a white, urban, working class identity – was consciously part of constructing race in America. So much of that was constructed as a way to reinforce conflict between freed slaves and cheap immigrant labor, starting in the 19th century, but still very real today.

I'm thinking of that manufactured conflict this year, as Trump tries to ride it back to the White House.

I'm thinking of that manufactured conflict this year, as outsiders seek to stoke the same conflict within Ireland. In the last year, the American far right had close ties to those stoking arson attacks and the Dublin riot, targeting migrants.

Since my spouse and I have moved back, we have a

saying, "It's not your mother's Ireland." For example, I used that line the first time I came back from a local Dunnes store location, the big Irish-owned grocery and department store chain. On one of my earliest visits to my in-laws, years ago, my mother-in-law and I went to the town center to the Dunnes store. I remember thinking it was slightly dingy with very little selection. Since then, Dunnes built a new location on the outside of that town, and Tesco built an even bigger store. Still, for over a year after I moved to Ireland, I avoided Dunnes because of my memory of that dingy, poorly-stocked store I visited with my mother-in-law years ago. So when I came back from the location on the outskirts of Limerick, I couldn't wait to tell my spouse. This was like a Wegmans. Along with a reasonably stocked normal supermarket, it had a health food outlet, a Sheridan's cheese counter, a high end bakery, a high end butcher counter, and a passable fishmonger. To this day, we call that supermarket "Not your mother's Dunnes."

Then there are the freeways, built with EU investment. We routinely drive on the freeway that didn't exist when my father-in-law first took me to his home town outside of Galway and the freeway that didn't exist when my spouse's parents picked us up from Shannon on our first trip after we married, the one that now features a Barack Obama rest stop. Many of the roads in Ireland still suck – narrow lanes that require pull-offs for passing traffic. There aren't a lot of roads I'm comfortable cycling on. But those freeways are totally new since my spouse and I got married, to say nothing of that pilgrimage 40 years ago.

But it's the diversity that has really changed Ireland. Partly that's being part of Europe. I joke, even still, that if I adopted a Czech or Spanish accent I might be recognized as an immigrant rather than perceived as a tourist, since so many recent arrivals came from Spain or Poland; people aren't used to Americans coming to stay. In the last two years, there have been

places in Clare County where I couldn't figure out whether local colors were a Clare flag, or a Ukrainian one. Ireland remains more accessible to outsiders than some other parts of Europe; I hear a lot of Brazilian Portuguese on the streets, often students taking advantage of favorable student visas to learn English. There are immigrants from all over the world working in jobs at tech companies, many of the American multinationals. Most notably, though, are the number of migrants Ireland has welcomed, many (though not all) refugees from one or another war America has fought. Most families in Ireland have family members who've been welcomed in America, whether for a few years to work or, like my family, for six plus generations. It is only natural that Ireland return the favor.

And so, this year, rather than use Ireland's privileged face time with the American President in advance of St. Patrick's Day to discuss peace in Ireland or the fate of Ireland's children in America, the Taoiseach pushed proud Irish-American Joe Biden to do something about his Gaza policy. Even the Irish, who take great pleasure in the long line of American Presidents it can claim, is peeved by America's failures to do more about the Gaza crisis.

This time, Ireland is trying to teach America, not vice versa.

Happy Saint Patrick's Day.

It's not your mother's Ireland anymore.

But if the American far right had its way – those who've fought to exacerbate centuries-old manufactured racism and with it fear – they would return Ireland to what it used to be.