

Part I

**WHERE ARE WE NOW
AND HOW DID WE
GET HERE?**

Chapter 1

Full-On Nation

Ireland has arrived.

We are richer than any of us imagined possible ten years ago. No Irish person has to emigrate, none of us need pay for education and even our universities are free. Unemployment is the lowest in our history. We have more choice than ever, the place is more tolerant and no one can be legally discriminated against. We have more cash in our back pockets than almost anyone in Europe. We are better off than 99% of humanity. We are top of foreigners' lists as places to live. Unlike many of our rich neighbors, in survey after survey we claim to be very happy.¹ We no longer need to beg from others in the EU; in fact, we are giving them cash. We are a success. We have money and time. We can now afford to kick back and take stock, reflect and relax a bit. Why not go for a walk, be frivolous or just stop the clock and slow down? The hard part is over. Or at least that's what you might think. If economists ruled the world they would say that Irish people will react to their newfound elevation by behaving rationally. We would take more days off, spend time with our families and chill out.

But instead of winding down and luxuriating in our newfound wealth, we are accelerating as never before. We have to be there first, have the best, the brightest, the newest and the biggest. We must also be the ones who are most fun, loudest, best *craic* and most off our head.

We are borrowing, spending, shopping, shagging, eating, drinking and taking more drugs than any other nation. We are Europe's hedonists and the most decadent Irish generation ever. Interestingly, this carry-on is ubiquitous. At one end of the scale, Irish teenagers are losing their virginity and taking drugs earlier, while at the other end of the scale, our forty and fiftysomethings are binge drinking, swinging and hoovering cocaine to allow them to stick the pace and have one last drink. We are the full-on nation.

We are eating more than ever, obsessing about food, writing about it, talking about it and savoring it. We are in ingestion heaven. We are getting fatter, quicker. Not so long ago, we were skinny and all our hard men were wiry little fellas who wouldn't have been out of place on the set of *Trainspotting*. Of all the characters in Irving Welsh's novel about four young Edinburgh skangers, Begbie was the most realistic and the scariest, the quintessential psychopath, the hardest hard chaw on the estate, a man who would glass you as soon as he'd shake your hand. In the follow-up film, Robert Carlyle expertly played Begbie. And Carlyle's Begbie 'hadn't a pick on him'. When I read *Trainspotting*, my Begbie was scrawny, wiry, contorted, unstable and extremely violent. Most of all, he was skinny.

Growing up in Dún Laoghaire in the 1980s, I remember all the hard men were sinewy, scrawny lads, hence the local description 'more meat on a seagull'. The reason was simple: they were undernourished. Perched on the church wall in the town were skinny, arseless lads, spitting and smoking Majors. The young wans, despite a couple of babies, were more or less the same, pinched, flat-chested and drawn. Today, Dún Laoghaire's hard men are fat. Rolls of flab strain the Liverpool away strip. Double chins are *de rigueur* and little piggy eyes are squeezed into sockets among the flab. Gravity has also got the better of the young wans, as their corpulent bums, like two puppies in a bag, make unsightly bids for freedom over their entirely ill-advised ultra low-rise jeans.

According to the national task force on obesity, 30% of Irish women are overweight and a further 12% are obese, while nearly half of Irish adult males are overweight and 14% are obese.² We are gorging ourselves into an almost certain diabetes epidemic. Even our babies are coming out bigger. We are turning into a race of Sumo wrestlers with 20% of our infants weighing more than ten pounds when they are delivered—up

400% from the same figure in 1990.³ Is this any surprise when we spend more on crisps than on pharmaceutical drugs? According to the latest household budget survey,⁴ our spending on chip shops and takeaways went up by over 70% in the past seven years. We also increased spending on sweets by just over 50%, while we spent 42% more on sugary soft drinks. We spent €721 million on teeth-rotting fizzy drinks last year, almost twice as much as we do on calcium-rich milk. Is it any wonder that diabetes is the fastest growing disease in the country when our Kit Kat and Snickers bill alone per year dwarfs our total spending on organic food? And it is the poor who are becoming fatter quickest. Only 8% of university graduates are obese, whereas close to one in five of those who left school before the Junior Cert are waddling around in sports wear, getting sores between the thighs as their blubbery legs rub up against each other. In the past, fatness was a sign of wealth, education and privilege. In contrast, the poor were skinny. These days, the rich and smart are thin.

But just in case you believed the spin of *Loaded* and *Cosmo* and thought that only thin people have vigorous, varied and interesting sex lives, think again. The blubbery Paddies are going at it like rabbits. We are having sex on average 105 times a year—that puts us way above the abstemious Japanese who only cop-off 47 times a year, but far below the amorous French and Greeks who get it 137 and 133 times respectively.⁵ Irish women love talking about sex and in a recent survey Irish women said that they were happiest when they were talking about sex to each other. Carrie, Miranda and the other two, please step forward. When it comes to talk, however, in typical Irish fashion we are saying one thing and doing something completely different. For example, according to a Durex worldwide survey,⁶ just over half of us claimed, responsibly, that we were worried about contracting HIV, yet 52% of Irish people have had unprotected sex. We are also having lots of sex younger; typically we start at seventeen and have on average eleven sexual partners. Irish teen mags are getting much more explicit. One I just picked up in Eason's which was stuffed with sex tips, adult chat lines and phone sex numbers came with a free—wait for it—packet of children's sweets! I wonder what age group is its target market.

Meanwhile back in bed, in a break with our full-on hectic lifestyle, Irish men take their time. We are the third most generous, thoughtful and

slow lovers in the world, spending on average 21.8 minutes on foreplay, but this seems to be wasted time because only an underwhelming 17% of Irish women orgasm during sex. Clearly lots of spade-work but not much technique from the Paddies. But not to worry, you'd never know it because four in ten Irish women have faked orgasms in the past twelve months. So the lads can avoid the wet patch and roll over happy. This may also go some way to explaining why 36% of Irish women claim to own a vibrator.

We are also becoming more adventurous. Nearly half of us use blindfolds or handcuffs, while close to one in three like to dress up. 48% of Irish lovers watch porn together, while the camcorder is quite busy, with 23% liking to video each other. This voyeurism is exceptional and much more evident here than in other countries. And a kinky 31% of Irish lovers are into spanking—way above the global average of 19%. So the suburbs are considerably more interesting places than the pebble dash would suggest, and behind our lace curtains, anything goes. We are considerably more expressive in the scratcher than we'd like to admit openly. We suggest innocently that the two sexiest attributes in our partners are eyes and a sense of humor—God bless the patent leather obsessed nuns, you did a good job. This innocent response contrasts with the up-front Brazilians who put boobs and ass as the two sexiest features. But spare a thought for all those new millionaires knocking around thinking they are big swingers: We rank wealth as being entirely immaterial when it comes to sexiness. So put your Kompressor away, it doesn't do it for her. Just to prove that democracy is alive and well, in the full-on nation you can be poor and very sexy.

Mad-For-It Nation

If there is one thing that the full-on nation is not demure about it is our boozing which is now off the scales. We are heroic drinkers and Ireland is the only place on earth where mature family men boast like students about necking ten pints the night before. Drinking is an Irish badge of honor. It knows no class barriers. Rich and poor—we are all guzzlers. In fact it is fair to say that many of us are suspicious of

nondrinkers, particularly if they are *not* recovering alcoholics. Immigrants, many of whom now work behind our bars, are shocked by the sight of teenagers vomiting in the loos, wiping themselves, putting on a bit of lippy, marching back to the bar and ordering another double Vodka and Red Bull. Twenty-five years ago we spent €3.4 billion on booze but that figure has almost doubled and now the nation is spending an astonishing €6.5 billion annually on the demon drink. And it is not just stout and whiskey, although the stout figures are startling. We spent €1.6 billion on stout which not only is 20% of the entire global market, but is some €400 million more than the total Department of Education budget for all primary school education in this country. Wine drinking has skyrocketed. We now drink more beer than the Germans, far more alcohol than the supposedly alcoholic Russians. We are on a national bender; we spend more in restaurants, more in off-licenses and at the bar than anyone else.

When it comes to drink and drugs we are Keith Richards, Axl Rose and Brendan Behan all rolled into one explosive mix. Young Irish women drink not twice or three times but ten times more than their Italian equivalents. Four out of five of our young men are regular drinkers compared to 34% of the EU average. We drink more pure alcohol than anyone else in the world at 25.3 pints on average per person per year. That is three times more pure distilled alcohol than we have blood in our veins. It's a wonder we are still alive. Contrary to popular myth, we have not always been the mad-out-of-it nation. Back in the early 1960s, Ireland's boozing was the fifth lowest in the OECD with eight countries guzzling more than us. Now we are on a national binge, buying rounds, shorts, bottles of wine, snakebites, pints, glasses, naggins, small ones and quick sharpeners, with the result that we are the drinking champions of the world. We drink more than any other nation. Interestingly, there was a spike in boozing in the mid-1990s and we have been drinking copiously since then. So the correlation between drinking and money is quite marked—as we have got wealthier, we have got drunker.

We admit to drinking on average 262 pints of beer each a year which is the second highest in the world after the Czechs. We are the world's number one cider drinkers. We spend more on booze than anyone else, forking out €1,584 per head on drink every year⁷—that's more than we do on health insurance. Lucozade, a proven hangover healer which

does not sell well at all in the UK, is the biggest selling pharmaceutical product on the market, while Solpadeine, a strong headache relief tablet, is also a huge seller every morning of the week. This is interesting because there are many people addicted to soluble Solpadeine and the high incidence of Solpadeine sold here reflects both hungover drunkards and over-the-counter addicts.

The expression a 'water cooler moment' means something quite different in Ireland to anywhere else in the world. Everywhere else it is used to describe the office event that takes place when employees natter away beside the water cooler. It is associated with the buzz of gossip. In Ireland, water coolers are silent. They are essential, life-saving rehydration stations for hungover employees, twentysomethings experiencing menopausal hot flashes that can only be banished by buckets of water. No one speaks at Irish water coolers.

And one of the most significant developments is that we drink considerably more than anyone else despite alcohol being very expensive here and, as prices have gone up, we have drunk more! So not for the first time, the laws of economics are turned on their heads in Ireland. Our sociability gets the better of us always. We love going out. Four drinks out of five are sunk in the pub and, remarkably, when we don't go out we don't tend to drink heavily at home. This contrasts with the rest of the world where people drink mainly in the privacy of their own home. We are exhibitionists. We like getting locked in public. In beer-guzzling Germany, for example, only one third of all booze is drunk in bars. The Irish are desperately addicted to company as well as alcohol. We can't stand being on our own.

When it comes to Irish teenagers, the full-on nation becomes even more apparent. This will not surprise anyone; I have yet to meet someone who did not start drinking early in bus shelters, fields, half-built estates, on the streets or in back gardens. That is what we do. In another study⁸ of 35 nations, the Irish came out top of the delinquent league for underage boozing. We have the highest level of teen binge drinking. One in three of our sixteen-year-old girls has been drunk more than ten times in the past year. Along with the Danes, Irish boys binge drink, get plastered and then typically lose their virginity to people as hammered as they are. While Danish boys might be up there with our boys, Irish girls are peerless when it comes to boozing. But they seem to be just about able

to get the rubbers on because we are not having any more teenage mums than we had ten years ago, so we are slightly more responsible than you'd expect after five Alco pops.

But just in case you thought we weren't messy enough, we are necking Es like Smarties. The UN claims that the Irish are the second biggest users of Ecstasy in the world after the Aussies.⁹ The price of Ecstasy has dropped dramatically and it is the drug of choice for the new generation. When Ecstasy first arrived on the scene it cost £20 a tab. It now costs €5 (or a dozen for €50), which is considerably cheaper than a gin and tonic in most bars. But it's not limited to teenagers. The middle youth generation, who simply won't grow up, are at it big time. Many 40th birthday parties have been kept rocking due to liberal amounts of Ecstasy being munched by respectable professionals. Biology suggests that forty-year-olds rarely last till dawn unless of course they are powdering their noses. Again the price of cocaine has dropped precipitously and a recent RTÉ 'Prime Time' documentary indicated that 80% of suburban loos had traces of chopped lines on their surfaces.

Drug use in Ireland knows neither class nor region. Provincial Ireland rather than Dublin is the ES epicentre of Europe and back in Dublin 4, crisp €50 notes are being rolled perfectly every night as society hostesses Hoover up cocaine just before the canapés are served by Filipino radiographers in dinner jackets. The Irish drug scene is a recreational affair mainly. Fuelling this are parties. We are having more parties than ever before: 18ths, 21sts, 30ths, 40ths, 50ths, weddings, 2nd weddings. We are engaging professional party organizers and keeping an entire industry of garden marquee sellers in business. And we want more. In a recent survey,¹⁰ when asked what we would do with more money 57% of us said that we 'would enjoy ourselves more' as opposed to only 25% who said they would support a good cause. Similarly, when asked what we'd do with more time, 50% said we'd enjoy ourselves more.

We eat more chips than the British. We eat more chocolate than the Belgians—in fact we are third in Europe for chocolate munching. And, remarkably, we spend more on snacks than prescribed medicines. And for a nation that proudly claims to read more newspapers than any other, we actually spend more in the bookies than we do on newspapers. The punter nation is now gambling 24/7. Horseracing is the fastest growing sport in the country and its handmaiden, gambling, is booming. We

are betting, squaring, laying, accumulating, forecasting, spread betting, calculating, winning and losing fortunes every day. Shares in Paddy Power the bookmaker are trading at twenty times earnings which implies that even the stock market sees massive growth in this business over the coming years.

Any objective chronicler would deduce that if we are being so hedonistic we must also be indolent, lazy and work-shy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Miraculously, the Irish are the most productive workforce in the world.

So when we are not betting, drinking, snorting, eating and generally good-timing, we are working, commuting, taking work home, working weekends or changing jobs. We aspire to have full diaries. No more hanging about for the Irish; we have rejected the stereotype of good partyers, bad workers. As Mick Wallace might say, the full-on nation plays hard and works even harder. We want to be busy, hardworking and sorted. Have you noticed that 'how are you?' has been usurped by 'are you . . . *busy*?' This suggests a subliminal preoccupation. In China, the expression used most often is 'hello, how are you, have you eaten?' which describes the fact that in a country with so many famines, being hungry is a state of being. In Ireland that condition is busy. To be busy is now regarded as a state of grace and to be not busy is to admit failure.

A recent survey¹¹ by O2 of the Irish self-employed found that we are workaholics: 60% of bosses are working more than 40 hours a week and 13% of them work more than 63 hours a week. Just under half miss special family occasions such as weddings, anniversaries, birthdays or communions because of work. Four out of five work weekends and 43% do not take their full annual leave entitlement. Half of Irish bosses claim that their way of relaxing is the healthy activity of vegging in front of the TV, while one in three go drinking in the pub and a quarter go shopping. Irish workers are also slaving. The average worker puts in more hours per week than any other Europeans apart from the Brits. One in twelve has at least two jobs, which is well above the EU average, and because we spend twice as long commuting, the work experience, particularly for commuters, is typically eating up about ten to twelve hours of our day. Many workers leave before seven and get home after seven.

When we are not working, we are changing jobs. Over 100,000 of us will sell ourselves, doctor our CVs, inflate our past experience and lie about our achievements next year. This is because one in every twenty of us will change jobs and practically all of us will be moving upwards. Our papers bulge with ads luring us to other challenges that always offer breadth, depth, complexity, always demand high performance and always promise substantial rewards for the right candidate who is always accomplished, a good team player and flexible. These recruitment ads sound more like a lonely hearts column than a job spec. Interestingly, after property ads, they generate more money for newspapers than any other category.

Although we are all working harder in the full-on nation, it is Irish women who are working much harder than ever. Since the late 1980s the number of women working has more than doubled (116%), while the number of men has gone up but only by 43%. Women are obsessively front-loading their careers which means they are working extremely hard in their twenties to try and scurry up the corporate ladder and are postponing having children until much later. The average age of an Irish mother giving birth this year is thirty and seven months—the oldest in the EU.¹² Even before the kids arrive, we are sleeping less and drinking more Red Bull—last year, we spent over €100 million on energy drinks¹³—to keep us awake.

Over-Hyped, Over-Spent and Over-Drawn

According to one *Irish Times* report, the arrival of the Hermes handbag store in Brown Thomas was welcomed by someone enthusing that ‘it was a great day for the country’! It is clear that Ireland is a shopaholic nation with an insatiable appetite for newness. This year we will spend €70 billion consuming.¹⁴ That is over €20,000 or close to three quarters of the average industrial wage for every man, woman and child in the country! And when we are not actually out elbowing competitors aside in superstores or boutiques, we are talking about shopping, reading about shopping and thinking about shopping. The range of what tickles our fancy is quite astonishing. For example, we must have some very pampered dogs out there as we spent €125 million on pet food last year.

We forked out €50 million on Chinese savory sauces, €18 million on hair dye and €23 million on Mars bars. We spend five times more on Hula Hoops than we do purchasing textbooks for children from needy backgrounds and we splash out more on Coca Cola (€115 million) than we do on the entire school transport bill which carried 130,000 children to and from school every day. (And this year we have seen the tragic result of this perverted priority.) We spent more on our mobile phones in the first three months of the year than the entire annual budget for overseas development aid. We spend more on the rather adolescently pungent Lynx than we donate to Trócaire!

And we are spending when we are travelling. As recently as 2000, Ireland had a healthy surplus when it came to tourist spending. Tourists here spent much more than we did when we went on our holliers. By 2003, that had reversed. We now spend €4.2 billion on our holliers, while tourists here in this, the most expensive country in Europe, are spending €4.1 billion. We are spending more in total, even though we are travelling to countries that are much cheaper than Ireland—some achievement!

And how are we financing this? Through debt, of course. This year Ireland's total personal debt surpassed our income for the first time ever. And it is rising rapidly. By the end of 2005, it will be in the region of 130%. In the ten years to 2004, credit card use doubled to 33% and cash card use has increased from 40% to 60% of the population.¹⁵ And as a recent central bank report noted, using credit cards allows us to juggle bills, paying a bit off here and a bit off there. Bill juggling is a new development. When you think that the older population will not be using credit cards as much, you can see that our most productive generation—those between 20 and 40—are moving rapidly into levels of debt that would concern outsiders looking in. But us, we don't care, because we believe our own propaganda that this time it's different. So borrowing continues apace. We borrowed 25% more in 2005 than we did in 2004. And we are spending this cash on flashy items. In the past four years, the market share of BMWs and Mercs has doubled, from 3.6% to 6.2%. We are Europe's bling nation. Per head, there now are more Mercs sold here than in Germany. The two big banks—our principal moneylenders—are, as a result of our splurge, the most profitable in Europe, making around €350 profit per customer.

If we are not being full-on, we are doing more yoga to relax. This is one of the delicious paradoxes of modern Ireland. While we seem intent on obliterating our livers, kidneys and hearts by drinking and carousing, we are also in the grip of a health kick. We are fussier about what we eat, flocking to nutritionists and homeopathic practitioners, taking more echinacea, devouring advice on healthy options, taking more Prozac and spending €21 million on L'Oreal skin cream. The same people who are snorting coke and drinking a couple of bottles of Chablis each on Friday nights are fretting about food additives and won't take an Anadin for their headaches. We will drink seven gins but won't touch tap water. We will feed our hangovers with carbohydrates but then, when fully rehydrated and sober, regard mashed potatoes as the Devil's spawn. We sit in our cars from early morning, eating an amazing 17% of all our food at the dashboard¹⁶—most new cars now come with pull-out dining trays. We then slouch at our desks all day, order in lunch, careful to avoid any physical activity at all. We leave work, catch our reflection in the tinted windows of our BMW X series SUV and then fret about being overweight, unhealthy or not beautiful. So we drive to the gym or the health club. Instead of going for a regular stroll every evening, we get a personal trainer at the appropriately named 'Curves' gym for one manic morning a week. The Golden Pages has over 2,000 entries under health clubs and centers.

The full-on nation is burning the candle at both ends.

