

# Chapter 1

## No Man Is an Ireland

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Listing what makes up Ireland
  - ▶ Figuring out the big issues
  - ▶ Identifying Ireland's place in the world
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**M**ost of us know bits and pieces of Irish history. When we drink green beer or go parading on 17 March for example, most of us know the celebration is about St Patrick, and has something to do with snakes and the shamrock. But how much do we know about the ways in which this day became so important to Ireland and the Irish around the world? And what about the troubles in Northern Ireland? We know that the troubles involve Catholics and Protestants, and that the IRA (Irish Republican Army) has been in the middle of it all, but how did the troubles actually come about? And there's some fourteen centuries of history between the arrival of St Patrick and the troubles!

Then there's the people. Most of us can name a few famous Irish people – Brian Boru, for example, or Michael Collins – but Irish history goes beyond these well-known names. In fact, Irish history has a cast of millions, a nearly endless list of characters who have inhabited the island over the centuries. Ireland has given the world some of the smartest people in the arts and literature, some great musicians and dancers as well as a host of committed politicians and religious leaders. These people have been joined by various invaders and visitors as well, making things even more interesting.



Irish history is not just the story of the great and powerful. The story also includes the people who died over the centuries from famine and disease, the millions who sailed off and settled in new homes across the globe, the workmen who built canals, roads, and railways in Britain, America, Canada, and elsewhere and the priests and nuns who did missionary work in the developing world. We don't know many of these people as they never got to be well-known, but they're all part of this story.

## *I'm Irish – But Who Isn't?*

Probably like lots of you reading this book I have Irish ancestors (but don't worry if you haven't got any, it's not compulsory). The remarkable thing about the Irish is how successful they have been getting around the world. There's a long history of comings and goings in Ireland, and understanding these patterns of arrival and departure help explain why everyone seems have some Irish in them.

### *Arrivals*

As you'll see when you start reading the other chapters, Ireland was a favourite place for various different peoples to invade. These invasions had a real effect on who the Irish were as everyone eventually got on so well they started mingling and mixing. The following sections discuss who these new arrivals were.

#### *Celts*

Although not the first to arrive, the Celts were the original major influx of foreigners. The Celts brought a new language to Ireland, as well as the most up to date forms of metal work and, by contemporary standards, a network of trading connections that spread onto the continent. The last wave of the Celts were Gaelic people, and it was they, especially in language terms, that made the people in Ireland distinctly Irish. You can read more about the Celts in Chapter 2.

#### *Vikings*

Coming from Norway and other places in Scandinavia, the Vikings had a big impact on Ireland. They set up trading routes with fellow Vikings in Europe, and although not much loved by the Irish, whom they kept attacking and killing, the Vikings did establish many of Ireland's main towns and cities.

The Vikings, also known as the Norse, did what all the invaders did – they started mixing with and marrying the Irish. Rather than forcing their culture on Ireland, or eventually going home, the Vikings got integrated into Irish society. Historians talk about the Hiberno-Norse tribes of Ireland. These were a mix of the Irish (Hiberno) and Viking (Norse). Such interactions meant that the Irish kept getting diluted and changed over the centuries. For more about the Viking influence in Ireland, sail to Chapter 5.

### *Normans*

Arriving at the end of the twelfth century the Normans made the most critical intervention in Irish history. They had taken over England after winning the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and, by contemporary standards, had fairly clear ideas about how things should be run. They were initially invited into Ireland to help settle a local squabble, but liked it so much they stayed! They also followed the tradition of inter-marrying and adapting Irish habits (and, after they adapted to Ireland, became known as the Irish-Normans) so that as the years went by their fellow Normans sometimes struggled to recognise them. By deciding to stay, the Normans linked together the histories of Ireland and England for centuries to come. You'll find out more about them in Chapter 7.

### *English*

When did the Normans become English? Well, without a long detour into the history of England and the early Middle Ages, the simple answer (and a bit of a fudge) is sometime in the thirteenth century. What is important is that the English, and particularly their monarchs, started thinking of themselves as distinct from their Norman (or more specifically French) origins. In fact they really started hating the French and began fighting with them constantly. In Ireland the emergence of a clearly defined and distinct England, as opposed to something that was still Norman, meant that the English just struggled to recognise anyone in the Emerald Isle. The Irish had always been a bit of a mystery, but the Irish-Norman crossbreeds were equally alien. English kings, such as Henry II, Richard the Lionheart and King John, eventually sent armies to Ireland, and started an influx of English people to Ireland. For more about the English involvement with Ireland, have a look at Chapter 9.

### *Planters*

After the Reformation (see Chapter 11) there was a need to make Ireland loyal to the new religion of Protestantism. The Irish, being Catholic, had resisted the whole idea. Rather than spend any more time trying to convince them of the virtues of the new product, Elizabeth I decided to send in her own people. A process of plantation began. What this meant was that the Crown gave big chunks of land to any Protestants who were prepared to go and settle Catholic Ireland and sort it out. It was a brave move. It resulted in a new breed of English (and Scottish) migrants to Ireland. They were devout Protestants and saw their job in Ireland as a religious mission. Plant yourself in Chapter 13 to find out more.

### *Spaniards and Frenchmen*

Tales have always been told about dark-haired and dark-skinned Irish people who were the descendants of ship-wrecked Spanish sailors, but these stories seem a bit far fetched. The Spanish got involved in Ireland during

the English-Spanish Wars of the Elizabethan era, and clearly bits of the Armada did end up crashing into Ireland. Some of these sailors probably did decide to settle and inter-marry but it's doubtful that their genes were so powerful that their features are still showing up in children today. As well as the Spanish, the French also got involved in Irish politics at various times after their own revolution in 1789. A few French fleets and invading forces arrived in Ireland (always unsuccessfully) but the fact is that they landed (see Chapter 15).

### *New Irish*

Ireland had always been seen as a place, certainly since the eighteenth century, that you left. However, in recent decades, what with wars in other parts of the world, and the booming Irish economy, more and more people have decided to make Ireland their home. Since the 1990s Ireland has witnessed an influx of new people. So when you're in Ireland don't be surprised when your barman or waitress is from China, Eastern Europe, Australia, or South Africa. The new Irish are making the whole country, and especially Dublin, a multi-cultural place.

## *Departures*

One of the most important stories in Irish history isn't really about Ireland at all. It's about the people who left. By the end of the twentieth century between 70 and 90 million people around the world were estimated to be able to claim an Irish ancestry. For an island that doesn't even house six million people, that's an impressive diaspora.

Irish people started leaving early on. Some of the first emigrants were traveling monks, and they were followed by people who joined the British army and helped establish the British Empire and a host of people who travelled across the Irish Sea in search of work.

### **The Irish in Britain**

For all the antagonism between Britain and Ireland, the Irish were a key component in the success of the British. The Irish provided workers for British factories during the industrial revolution, and built the country's canals and railways. They were soldiers in the British armies that went to the four corners of the

world, and also travelled the Empire as teachers, civil servants, missionaries, and engineers. In both the World Wars of the twentieth century the Irish joined up in huge numbers, sacrificed their lives, and were a key component in ensuring victory.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was famine that drove people out of Ireland. Also, the world had got bigger, and places as far away as America and Australia were open for business and ready to receive the Irish. In the second half of the nineteenth century the population of Ireland leaked like a sieve, with hundreds of thousands of them packing their bags and leaving. In the twentieth century it was little better. Economic downturns in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s convinced whole new generations to try their luck someplace else. The fighting in Northern Ireland from the 1960s also persuaded many people that their future lay out of Ireland.



The Irish that left remained very loyal to their homeland. Over the centuries many of them would return, or would encourage their descendants to do so. The rate of return has been especially marked since the boom of the 1990s and the availability of highly-skilled jobs in information technology and finance. Also, many companies that have located their businesses in Ireland have directors and executives with an Irish heritage. While their decisions to locate their companies in Ireland undoubtedly had a solid business rationale, one also has to reckon that their choice was also driven by a romantic attachment to the old country.

The story of emigration is, at one level, thoroughly depressing. People left their homes because of poverty, and often died in transit. Once in their new homes many were forced to do awful jobs, found solace at the bottom of a glass, or else died in the kind of poverty that they were supposed to be escaping. It's the stuff that fills the song books of many an Irish singer, but the story of emigration was also one of great success. Without the Irish the world would have been very different. They played a key role in making countries such as America and Australia successful, they proved themselves very good at business and politics, created some of the world's greatest art, literature, and music of their time, and sent money back to Ireland to keep people afloat there.

## *So Much History in Such a Small Place*

Ireland's not a big place. Cut it out of the pages of an atlas and place it on somewhere like America, Australia, or Canada, and it just gets swallowed up. Yet, as the old saying goes, size isn't everything. For a small place, Ireland has had a huge impact on the world, and a lot of things have happened on the island. The following sections discuss the main themes of Irish history, each of which had a large hand in the historical events throughout the ages and in shaping the Ireland of today.

## *Ireland and the land across the Irish Sea*

Britain and Ireland, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, are inseparable. Clearly the history of Ireland can't be split off from the history of Britain. The events in Ireland and Britain constantly have an impact on each other. Sometimes it was for the good but, more often than not, someone suffered. Britain involved itself politically with the affairs of Ireland from the twelfth century. Economically the two places were closely linked, and it was Irish immigrants to Britain that became a central part of the workforce during the industrial revolution. In the early twentieth century the British and Irish fought a war over whether Ireland should be independent, and since the 1960s the British have been involved in the troubles in Northern Ireland.

## *Religion*

Often blamed for everything, the impact of religion on Ireland has been huge. From the arrival of St Patrick and the advent of Christianity, the Irish have been a very religious people. The picture was made more complex with the invention of Protestantism and its difficult relationship with Catholicism. Lots of murders and martyrs came out of that battle. Despite all the other aspects of its history that have been important, the impact of religion on the island has been most long lasting. Whether it was the suppression of old religions such as Druidism, the introduction of Christianity, the struggles over the reformation or the religious component of the troubles in Northern Ireland, religion has been central to the story of Ireland.

The two religions had an important bearing on the kinds of countries that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland became in the twentieth century, and still are today.



Today both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have laws that protect the free observance of any religion as desired by the individual. Clearly though, the two states have favoured Catholicism and Protestantism respectively. In the Republic, the teachings of the Church were very powerful, and laws relating to social issues such as divorce, abortion, and contraception have been political hot potatoes in recent decades. Officially the Church and State are separate in both the Republic and the North, but as most people still have strong religious affiliations, many laws are still more in tune with Church teachings than they would be elsewhere in Europe.

## *Land*

In the John B. Keane play, *The Field* (there was a film of the same title), a man kills another over the ownership of a small patch of land. It's a powerful play,

and captures well one of the dominant themes in Irish history – who owns the land?

Ireland was, until well into the late twentieth century, an agricultural and rural country. People traditionally made their living from the land. The problem was that other people (landlords) owned it, and the ordinary Irish farmer couldn't afford to buy it. The Irish were removed from the ownership of the land in the centuries before the late 1800s, and this was deliberately done so that the Irish could not have access to power or wealth. The control of land, as we'll see, was an important way of controlling the power balance in Ireland and also an attempt to enforce Protestant beliefs on an unwilling Irish population.

You'll see this issue crop up time and time again in the book, so remember – while the Englishman's home might be his castle, for the Irishman it's a nice green field he can call his own.

## *Famine*

Irish history is littered with episodes of famine when bad weather and disease led to near total crop failures. Over the centuries millions died, and famine appears constantly as one of the great tragedies of Irish history.

Out of all these famines, one of the greatest tragedies of Irish history was the Great Famine of 1845–51. If the famines had been numbered like Hollywood sequels, it may well have been 'Famine 28: the Return of the Hunger'. Nevertheless, this famine was important for a number of reasons:

- ✓ It led to the mass emigration of the Irish around the world.
- ✓ The famine was blamed on the British, and this led to resentment towards them.
- ✓ The deaths of so many people illustrated how the Irish economy and infrastructure was in a terrible state.
- ✓ It led, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to demands for land reforms and eventually to the widespread support for Irish independence.

## *Emigration*

In response to famine, as well as a lack of economic opportunity and political upheaval, the Irish emigrated like no one else in history. But the mid-nineteenth century emigration was nothing new. People from Ireland were instrumental in the early settlement of America. Even earlier, and in response to political defeats, Irish nobles had left Ireland for Europe in the early seventeenth century. Irish missionaries had also been central in the spread

of Christianity across Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries. So, as you can see, the Irish have always been travelers, and that's why we find their descendants across the globe.

## *Self-determination*

A constant recurring theme of Irish History is the wish of the Irish just to be left alone (unless they needed external help against the British at which point they often turned to the French or Spanish). They desired, campaigned for, and fought wars in support of the ideal that everybody else would scarp and leave them to run their own country the way they wanted to. Prior to the nineteenth century the Irish were most concerned with preserving their Catholic religion and the control of the land. This is why they so opposed the British who they believed wanted to take over the land and force Protestantism on them. In the late nineteenth century this tradition of resistance manifested itself as a nationalism that took up arms in the cause of an independent Ireland.

The idea of self-determination has lots of different expressions, and over the centuries various leaders have emerged with different ideas of how it can be achieved. Leaders include:

- ✔ Brian Boru (see Chapter 5) was a great Irish leader. Credited with throwing the Vikings out of Ireland, he's a good example of the early Irish leader. His main aim was to keep invaders away from Ireland.
- ✔ Hugh O'Neill (see Chapter 12) wasn't very fond of Queen Elizabeth I and her rule over Ireland. He encouraged a rebellion across Ireland and managed to get the Spanish involved too. His aim was to drive the English out of Ireland, and he nearly managed it. He lost in the end though, but he demonstrates well the spirit of successive Irish nobles who tried to take on the English.
- ✔ Daniel O'Connell (see Chapter 16) is seen as one of the great Irish leaders. He was a firm believer in combining constitutional politics with mass popular support. He mobilised the Irish people in a campaign against anti-Catholic legislation and was successful. He considered Ireland as a Catholic nation, and one that should have had a level of independence from Britain.
- ✔ Eamon de Valera (see Chapter 22) rebelled against the British in 1916, and was one of the main figureheads of the period of revolution. He firmly believed that Ireland should be an independent Republic, but had to settle for less. He encapsulates the ideology of political independence that dominated Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century.



## Culture

Where would the world be without the Irish contribution to culture? And when I say culture, I don't simply mean the clever stuff such as Samuel Beckett plays, I mean all culture: dance, song, music, sport, literature, drama, language, singing, and so on. Without the Irish there'd be no Riverdance, no traditional Irish jigs, no U2, no Bloomsday, no hurling, and no *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin and educated at Trinity College, Dublin).

Remember, despite all these modern manifestations of Irish culture, the tradition of skill, artistry, and innovation goes way back. The National Museum in Dublin is full of stunning Celtic metal work and jewellery, while Trinity College houses the world's finest collection of illuminated manuscripts that were created by highly skilled monks in Irish monasteries. Ireland also has a rich oral tradition, and an amazing language. But it's not all insular: Irish culture is also the product of external forces. The successive raiders and invaders, be they Viking or Norman, all contributed their own cultures, and this made Ireland ever more innovative.

## Living History

Molly Malone wheeled her wheelbarrow through the streets wide and narrow trying to sell dodgy shellfish to an unsuspecting Dublin public. Whether anyone got sick off of her wares isn't clear, but she is forever immortalised in bronze on Nassau Street, Dublin. Every day I walk past her, and every day poor old Molly is being climbed over and photographed. What Molly does prove is that Irish history is everywhere. From the famine memorials in far flung places like Boston, to the statue of Carson on the drive up to Northern Ireland's parliament at Stormont, Irish history has been commemorated in paint, stone, and bronze. Battle sites are still there to see, ancient buildings have been preserved, pints of Guinness can be drunk anywhere in the world, and St Patrick's Day is celebrated annually from Lagos to Limerick. Irish history, and its legacy, is alive and well and appearing somewhere near you.

Throughout the book there are details of the ways in which Irish history has been commemorated. You'll find these useful in explaining various statues and commemorative events, but hopefully they will also get you thinking. As you walk round your neighbourhood, or when you visit Ireland, take a look at what's around you. Wherever you are you'll always find a little bit of Irish history that someone has remembered and commemorated. And if you think you live in a town where there is no Irish history, no statues, Guinness, or Paddy's Day parade, then simply pick up the phone book. Look under O, and

you'll find an O'Kelly or an O'Sullivan: in your town – they're the living legacy of Irish history. They may not realise it themselves, but without Ireland and its history, they wouldn't be there.

## *Ireland Today*

Ireland is an island set off the west coast of Britain, and sits in the Atlantic as the last stop between Europe and America. It's home to some 5.7 million people. But it's not one country, but two. Of the 32 counties that make up Ireland, the six in the north-east are Northern Ireland, which is formally part of the United Kingdom (so it's British). The other 26 counties form the Republic of Ireland, which is a separate state ruled from a parliament (the Dáil) in Dublin. Northern Ireland's population is 1.7 million, while some 4 million live in the Republic.

Both parts of Ireland are members of the European Union, but only Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, is a member of NATO. The Republic of Ireland has a traditional policy of neutrality. There are two working languages in Ireland: English and Irish. According to a recent survey, 1.5 million people in Ireland declared themselves as Irish speakers, of which 340,000 used Irish every day. Officially the Republic of Ireland is a bi-lingual state so all signposts and official documents have to be in both Irish and English. In the Gaeltacht areas (those where Irish is the first language), all place names and road signs are in Irish only. From January 2007 Irish will be recognised as an official language of the European Union.

There are two main religious denominations in Ireland: Catholicism and Protestantism. In Northern Ireland 86 per cent of the population sees itself as having a religion. Of these 53 per cent were Protestant and 44 per cent Catholic. In the Republic of Ireland 92 per cent of the population belongs to the Roman Catholic Church and only 5 per cent are Protestant. Both parts of Ireland have seen an increase in the number of people from other religions largely as a result of inward migration since the 1990s.

And for the record, the people in the Irish Republic do their shopping with euros, while those in Northern Ireland spend British pounds. The flag of the Republic is the Irish tricolour and in Northern Ireland it's the Union Jack. In the former they all stand to attention for the national anthem, *Amhrán na bhFiann* (*A Soldier's Song*) and in the latter it's for *God Save the Queen*.