

The Irish Identity from 5000 Miles Away

An Appel Project by Tara Mehra



Special thanks to Professor Christine Crockett, Professor Chloe Martinez, and the Appel family.

Introduction

For Summer 2020, I intended to travel throughout Ireland and visit pubs, investigating what the pub meant to the Irish community. Due to COVID-19, I was unable to travel, and was confronted with creating a writing project about the Irish Identity from my home in Seattle.

While my writing project might not look how I anticipated, I certainly learned a lot in the process. Through attending workshops, I got to practice writing in new styles and get feedback from incredibly talented people. I spent a lot longer researching than writing this project, and through that, gained a deep appreciation for Ireland's history. I also got to spend time learning about the lives of my grandparents on the phone—I can't believe that I didn't know that they met at one of the Irish dances in Brooklyn!

There were days when I really struggled to engage with this project, though. The world around me seemed to be crumbling. Every day was more bad news, and remember that I was supposed to be traveling through Ireland and having this once-in-a-lifetime experience made that hopelessness worse.

But as I look back on the summer, I feel that I really gained something. And it is more than just the workshops I attended each week and the research I did. I can say that I feel more in touch with my Irish identity, and I long to embrace it more than ever.

That said, I consider this project "in-progress." I know that as soon as I can, I will visit Ireland, talk to the people, and do the kind of in-person learning that I have wanted to. But I also hope that the investigation I did from home yields some value.

This zine is a snapshot of Irish identity.

1847

The Great Famine was one of the deadliest events in Ireland's history. Caused by a disease in the crop that Ireland relied on, the famine lasted around 4 years.

Blight

One day

God pulls on the veins of a crop

And unravels a nation

Once green leaves

Surrender their structure and shade

To disease,

Crumble and collapse into a brown that

Feels like falling

People keel over--

In hunger, prayer, both--

Cover the earth in

The mosaic of a failing history

They hear the universe compressing

Or is it echoes of voices

Succumb to the

Intercosmetic unknown

The soft breeze

In the same key as sadness

They are not dying Irish

They are dying hungry

1950

In history, we speak of emigration quantitatively. We consider how many people left their home countries and the impact that such movement had on economics and business and politics. We hear less about how being an immigrant impacts someone.

I cannot imagine what it would have been like to be an Irish immigrant to America in the 1950s. You leave on a ship and endure a tumultuous journey. You can't just text your family when you miss them or hop on a plane if something happens. And being Irish in America was different then; there was a strong prejudice against Irish people.

After reading primary source documentations, watching films, and reading books, I have attempted to capture in this piece how it might have felt to be an Irish immigrant in America in the 1950s.

Immigrant to America

Each day is the same question. Each day, over and over. Each day is wondering, what if I hadn't been ready for inspection at the port; no rouge or mascara or nice dress, had I hunched instead of stood tall, had I not polished my shoes, had I looked nervous or been crass. Each day is wishing I'd have coughed, then falling to the floor reciting Our Father for even having wished that and from that position spotting rat droppings resting in the dusty corner of my boarding house room. Each day is my tongue toggling between two dialects as I pray, the muscle never knowing how to find home.

Each day, I am here; numbers and records and equations fetishized for their elusiveness, financial statements a guarded secret held by those obsessed with the superiority and exclusivity of their skill, "sorry," they'll tell a woman losing her home without the gears that incessantly turn in their minds stopping for a second. Each day is them skimming Financial Times articles about the American Dream. Each day is skinny fingers punching buttons and my failure with dependent clauses. Each day is crying during a show at the theatre. Each day is a physical desire to jump and yell and call home. Each day is needing to know if the kiss I blew my sister from the edge of the ship ever reached her.

Each day is rain whispering through the trafficked streets and threatening disruption, glistening silver like the light reflecting on the numbers in the phone booth where I really should be dialing my mother at home but can't, it is as if I've swallowed a rock, grey like the rain and the clouds and the world.

Each day the creeping hand of the clock is the loudest sound at supper. Each day is wondering if the wallpaper is as sad as it looks. Each day I need a glass of something. Each day is pondering if he would have noticed me had I worn my blue dress at the swing, that Irish fella, because maybe we'd have been able to see the loneliness in each other, like birds that lost their flock but fly blindy together.

Each day is counting how many times I could have called and didn't. Each day I check the paper just to witness the life cycle of the news to feel mortality. Each day I hear the church bells ring at the hour and imagine the world fracturing around them and falling apart and realize that in the end I'd be still missing the rosary beads that Mother gave me. Each day is a wilting calla lily. Each day is re-counting the meters between home and me, meters that kept me away from her last breath that held the voice that I can no longer call. Each day is my body and soul in different places.

1972

The struggle for Independence overtook Ireland in the 20th Century. During a protest in England-Derry, part of Northern Ireland, British Soldiers shot Irish citizens in what came to be known as Ireland's Bloody Sunday.

Bloody Sunday

The bullet in my heart
doesn't match my blood

That day
British stomped on our
Civil rights
With the bloody soles of their army boots

Our history lives here

Throat raw in calling for
What is ours;
Feet willing themselves to find home
In the next step,
Seeing eons in
Vengeance in your eyes;

Darkness in Finnoula's Fish N'Chips;
Muddied gold cross bent into
The broken road

Irish flags sitting atop storefronts
Refusing to sway with the
Tyrannical wind that whispers to me
Run

Modern Day, a Changing Ireland, and Identity

As I spoke to my grandparents on the phone, one thing was clear: the Ireland they now live in is not like the one they grew up in. They cite recent elections, cultural influences, and most important, immigration as reasons for this change.

In the following section, I will both investigate the quantitative validity of a changing Ireland through an exploration of census data and provide snapshots of a more modern Ireland. For example, first-generation Americans are often disconnected from their parents' culture, despite that culture being their parents home. How does this impact the child and their parent?

Census Research

The theory of a changing Ireland during the Celtic Tiger era is supported by census data. Between 1986 and 2006, there are statistically significant changes in population, estimated net migration, and birthplace of Irish residents. These changes illustrate the extent of change that the Celtic Tiger era brought, and contextualize the conservative legal response, including implementing merit-based immigration policies.

Relevant Findings from the 1991 Census Report

The data from the 1991 census report both provide a point of contrast for data in the following years and show the initial changes of the looming economic boom. Table 27A of the “Usual Residence, Migration, and Birthplace” section indicates that a vast majority of Ireland’s residents are of Irish origin. Of the 3,525,719 persons estimated to reside in Ireland at the time, 3,296,994 were Irish-born. Thus, approximately 93.51% of Irish residents were Irish-born. The next highest birthplace classification was England and Wales; the data reports that 126,487, or approximately 3.59%, of the population derived from England and Wales. The extremely large Irish-born population suggests a strong national identity and an unfamiliarity with immigration and foreigners.

Estimated population changes and net migration patterns before and near the beginning of the Celtic Tiger era provide a framework for comparison. Table 3 of the “Population Classified by Area” section reports the actual and percentage changes in population between 1986 and 1991. The data show that between 1986 and 1991, there was an actual decrease of 14,924 persons residing in Ireland. This amounts to a 0.4% decrease in total population. Additionally, data from the “Commentary” section of the 1991 report estimates that 134,000 more persons migrated from Ireland than migrated to Ireland in the intercensal period. Further, according to year-by-year net migration estimates, there is a sharp decrease in net migration entering the new decade. Between the 1986/1987 and 1989/1990 periods, the average net migration (outward more than inward) was -33,000 persons. However, in the 1990/1991 period, net migration was estimated to be -2000 persons, marking a stark change from recent history. Because these figures estimate net migration, the decrease may be due to (a) an increase of immigration to Ireland, (b) a decrease of emigration from Ireland, or (c) a combination of both (a) and (b).

Relevant Findings From the 1996 Census Report

The data from the 1996 census begin to show the impact of the economic boom in Ireland’s Celtic Tiger era on population. According to the chart titled “Population Usually Resident and Present in their Usual Residence (Number) by Place of Usual Residents, Sex, Birthplace, and Census Year,” the proportion of Irish residents that are Irish-born declined slightly from 93.51% to 92.24%. The increase in residents of Ireland that are foreign-born foreshadows a continued demographic change and ensuing legal response.

Additionally, the population and migration pattern in Ireland changed significantly in this period. The data show that between 1991 and 1996 there was an actual increase of 100,368 persons residing in Ireland, making the total Irish population 3,626,087 persons. This amounts to a 2.8% increase in total population, a contrast to the 0.4% decrease that the prior intercensal period showed. More striking, the “estimated net migration since the previous census” section showed that net migration equaled +8,302. In the last census period, the average net migration was approximately -26,800. Thus, there was a significant shift from mostly outward migration

to mostly inward migration during 1991-1996 in Ireland. The drastic shift in net migration supports the idea that Ireland's economic boom impacted migration decisions for individuals, and greatly contributed to a changing Ireland.

Relevant Findings From the 2002 Census Report

The data from the 2002 census show the impact of the economic boom on population and immigration more fully realized, again supporting the correlation between the economic boom and inward migration.

Once again, the proportion of Irish-born citizens to non Irish-born citizens increased slightly. In 2002, 3,458,479 of the 3,917,336 residents in Ireland were Irish born. This amounts to approximately 88.29% of Ireland's population being native, and is 3.95% lower than the previous percentage of Irish natives residing in Ireland. 281,316 of these residents were from the EU 15, meaning that a majority of those in Ireland who were not natives came from neighboring EU nations.

Continuing the trend from the previous intercensal era, both population and inward migration increased by 2002. The census data show that between 1996 and 2002, there was an actual increase of 291,245 persons residing in Ireland. This amounts to a positive 8.03% increase in population from the previous intercensal period, and the 2002 increase in population is nearly four times the 1996 increase in population. Additionally, the estimated net migration (inward less outward) in 2002 was 153,067 persons. For the first time in Ireland, net immigration exceeded the natural increase, which was 138,182 persons. Further, all counties in Ireland enjoyed net inward immigration. This drastic increase in immigration to Ireland is historical.

Relevant Findings From the 2006 Census Report

The data from the 2006 census again supports the correlation between Ireland's economic boom, ensuing policy changes, and increased inward migration. In this section, it is important to note that the EU added 10 member nations, all of which Ireland granted work visa opportunities to.

In 2002, according to the "Population Usually Resident and Present in the State (Number) by Sex, Birthplace, and Census Year" section showed that approximately 84.05% of Irish residents were native, marking a 4.24% decline in Irish natives residing in Ireland from 2002 and an 8.9% decline from 1996. The proportion of non-native residents that were members of the EU increased, with 438,000 non-native residents identifying as being born in one of the EU 25.

Most notably, this period saw a record growth in population. The census data show that between 2002 and 2006, there was an actual increase of 317,722 persons, leading to an actual population total of 4,234,925 persons. This amounts to a total percentage change of 8.11%, and an average annual increase of 2%. The average annual increase is a record high, and is 0.7% greater than the average annual increase in the previous intercensal period. The approximate net

migration statistic also increased from the previous intercensal period, with an estimate of 186,000 more persons immigrating to Ireland than emigrating from Ireland. Like in the previous period, the net migration was greater than the natural increase in population.

Conclusion

In each intercensal period, population and net immigration increased while the proportion of Irish residents that were native to Ireland decreased. Between 1996 and 2002, net migration exceeded natural increase in population for the first recorded time. Between 2002 and 2006, Ireland saw a record average annual increase in population. The drastic changes in population and immigration suggest that external events are correlated with this change. Altogether, census data give quantitative evidence that this period was historic.

Ireland from a Foreigner's Eyes

The last time I saw my Grand Uncle was four years ago. I poured myself and my samsonite suitcase into an unfriendly cab at Shannon airport and asked a wrinkled man who smelled like tobacco to drive me to Spencer Avenue in Castlebar, County Mayo. The cabbie grunted, seeming displeased with my dialect, and rolled off the curb onto the wrong side of the road.

My Grandmum instructed me to see my Grand Uncle right when I touched down in *Eireann*, as he was apparently headed even further into the country later today to do something or the other on a farm. I didn't quite understand why my Grandmum insisted that I visit him in the first place, but Mom said that in an Irish town everyone is a family, so your blood family is considered that much closer. To me, though, my Grand Uncle Kevin is just a signature on a tardy birthday card and a 20 Euro bill. Why he doesn't send me American dollars, I don't understand.

As the cab bounced along unpaved roads, I stared at the monotonous scenery. Endless green, the kind of green that feels like forgetting, was juxtaposed by a grey sky that looked drunk on Guinness. Each field we passed was speckled with cows or goats or horses. I had forgotten how rural Ireland was. But it did the farm-land more beautifully and professionally than America did; you could see the heart and the history in the rolling hills.

"You know, ma'am," grunted my elderly cabbie-- definitely a smoker-- "there's a tale that among the donkey, there's a zebra in these hills." Except he said "zeb-ra" instead of "zee-bra" and I had to stifle a laugh.

"Oh, um, that's really cool." I was suddenly hyper-aware of the nasally nature of my voice and improperness of my vocabulary. The cabbie huffed and didn't speak until he demanded the 28 euros that I owed to him.

Grand Uncle Kevin's cottage looked like all the others on the block: popcorn-textured, one-dimensional white walls with tiny windows positioned like eyes and a seamless black roof resting atop the structure. I had hardly hit the door knocker to the wood when Grand Uncle Kevin let me in. He had a hunch, but would probably be around six feet if he could stand tall. He boasted deep wrinkles on his translucent, freckled skin and wore faded chino slacks with a worn red quarter zip.

I'm not Irish

The Catholic in me isn't.
Neither is the "u" in my color and endeavor
Or my inability to run the washer
Without it stuffed.

I'm not Irish and neither is the corn beef and trifle I eat for dinner;
The funny way I pronounce garage,
The freckles that dance on my cheeks when I show them the sun.

My love for Riverdance, the home I found in that red velvety seat,
Is not Irish.
Neither is my
automatic eye roll
at "protestants!"
Or my name.

As much as I am not a part of Ireland, she is not a part of me.

Castlebar

In Castlebar
Green stretches as long as God's fingers will reach
And is drunk on whiskey
Gavin is cold and his soft serve is too in the right kind of way
Girls with honey-colored hair roll their skirts up before stepping through
the iron gates of the convent
A boy falls off his bike, the wheel catching on the stone edges of the main street
Father Tom walks on Spencer Street, knocking on each door,
Travelers walk through Tesco's with swag; high teased hair swaying
Donkeys huddle close when the anthem of rainfall hits
Like the disappointment in job after job lost
And the building in town that exceeds three stories

Here is monotony in its most beautiful form

How to make Mashed Potatoes with your Irish Mother

Step 1: Spin slow; watch a russet ribbon unravel through cracked white fingers and settle into a circle; silent rhythm of the jig I never danced.

Step 2: Obey a muffled order by yanking open the wrong drawer, again and over again, *slam*, a U2 song on a broken record machine. Know this is no longer your home.

Step 3: Sharp silver splitting off-white. I never meant to leave for so long. Repeated clangs fill empty air. Splashes fly from your wet potatoes and land on my cheek, in my hair. Mastery of an art I have neglected.

Step 4: Bubbling water and the air is warm and we must wait and stare. You didn't give me your frosty blue eyes.

Step 5: Liquid sings its way down the drainpipe. I still say my Hail Mary every night.

Step 6: Summon strength and press, harder and heavier than my heart, watch rock become cream through metal. A chemical reaction cannot be undone.

Step 7: Salt, smile, and serve with Kerrygold Butter and a pint of Guinness. I undermashed, each bite sticking to my throat needs to be washed down with a sip and small talk. My flight is tomorrow; say grace one last time.

Conclusion (For Now)

I hope that you enjoyed reading this collection of poetry, flash fiction, and research that gives a snapshot of Irish identity. I want to emphasize, though, that I consider this project unfinished. I still have hope that I will be able to travel to Ireland and gain the rich experience that will inspire more writing.

I also want to note that while the writing in this document is my work from the summer relevant to my topic, I also had the opportunity to produce writing on different topics for the Workshop series. I am so grateful to have gotten to learn from such incredible people. On that note, I also want to extend my gratitude to Professor Martinez, Professor Crockett, and the Appel family.

I look forward to resuming this project when the world allows for it. But for now, I'm grateful for the new appreciation I've gained for my family's history and identity.