

“Trust in the Luck of the Irish”

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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

Trusting in the luck of the Irish is a bold action, indeed.

The Irish, you see, seem to lose nearly as many fights as they get into. That's not the kind of luck you'd wish on anyone you care about.

But the Irish are playing the long game in global history. The strategy seems to be to simply outlive whichever flavor of occupier currently lives in the cities, but not the towns and villages. Because invaders tend to stay in urban areas. It goes to the economy of scale. If they can oppress a million people in a city, or a few thousand in the countryside, well, the cities make sense.

But Irish culture is based in small communities – families, clans, villages. Urban areas are the exception, rather than the rule, and seem to be where visitors and invaders alike tend to stop their exploration.

The Irish, have been invaded by every major empire to rise on the European continent, save perhaps the Turks or the Ottomans.

The Romans came to Ireland in the 1st century. They didn't win, but they came and they tried.

The Vikings were next, for another 500 years,

Normans – 12th century

Scots – 14th century

English – 15th century

Tudors – 16th century

The Spanish, then Oliver Cromwell in the 17th Century.

France – cusp of the 19th century

Germany – “Operation Green” plans drawn up during WWII, but never implemented.

1800s – England imposed inheritance laws that broke up family farms, which were awarded to English immigrants, to break the culture of Ireland.

In the 1980s, the Irish Tourism Bureau created an advertisement for American markets, listing all of the various nations and empires that have invaded Ireland over the years, and described how each loved what they found in Ireland. The tag line was “we’re sure you’ll love Ireland, too. And you’ll be the first of the lot we’ve invited.”

Perhaps the most lasting mark made by invaders is the presence of the Roman Catholic Church. Remember that the Romans – the Holy Roman Empire – invaded and stayed for the first five centuries AD. The missionaries established hundreds of churches in small towns, appropriating all manner of Irish culture to make the foreign religion palatable to the Irish people. It was, and remains the lasting stamp – a cultural tattoo, or perhaps scar – documenting that early invasion. The Romans left, but their church remained.

The Irish went from nature-based, empowered, matriarchal mysticism to patriarchal, top-down religious rule. The damage done by the Catholic Church to the people and culture of Ireland is beyond measure. The oppression has become part of the Irish identity – yeah, everyone invades, and takes our good stuff, but somehow we manage to keep the old ways, though hidden, and dwindling as the centuries roll past.

In the last few decades, some of the darkest, most sinister secrets of the Church have been exposed, and Ireland has struggled with how to deal with them. At convents and monasteries have been found unmarked mass graves of children and infants. Hundreds, thousands, of babies and children, either killed or died of neglect, for which the Church was responsible, and whom the church denied.

Sexual abuse by Catholic priests was as rampant in Ireland as it was anywhere in the world. Rampant, understood, and denied.

The poisonous version of patriarchy that the church imposed upon the Irish people meant that women who were difficult – outspoken, empowered, resistant to their own oppression – were placed by their husbands or families in convent asylums, where the nuns exercised a measure of sadism that cannot be described in church on a Sunday morning. Women who became pregnant before they were married were sent to what were called “Magdalene Houses,” where they worked long hours with no pay cleaning laundry for the profit of the church. When their babies were born, the children were taken away, and either adopted out to affluent families, raised in orphanages every bit as cruel as the Magdalene Houses, or if they died, were tossed into buried cisterns, or unconnected septic tanks, and never spoken of again. Their deaths were recorded in the parish census, but listed as being due to illness.

A friend of mine in Ellsworth, Maine, grew up in one of the Magdalene orphanages. The stories she tells of ritual and sadistic humiliation, physical and emotional abuse, forced labor, and starvation diets that she and her other inmates endured go beyond understanding.

And yet, she remains one of the most cheerful people I have ever known.

It is this cheerful fatalism that marks the Irish character.

Former US Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan is credited as saying “to be Irish is to know that the world will break your heart.”

We know sadness.

We know loss.

We know starvation, occupation, and resistance.

The Irish are as cheerfully fatalistic as a group of people can be.

Yep, it's terrible.

Yep, it's been terrible before.

Yep, it's goin' ta' be terrible again in the future.

Yep, we know how to handle it.

And we know nobody is coming to help us.

So we tell the world to piss off and get on with it ourselves.

If ever there was a national identity with all the marks of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, it is Ireland.

The Irish have trusted and been betrayed, time after time, year after year, century after century.

Ireland is a beautiful place, everyone seems to agree on that. Its history is riddled with myth and magic, ancient, matriarchal family legends, druids and faeries and wee folk.

Ireland has also been arguing with its neighbors ever since those neighbors began invading, which seems to date back to the beginning of time. The ability and willingness to fight – and survive to fight again – is central to Irish identity.

In the music video we saw a moment ago -- **Orrow shay da vah-hah vwahl-yah** celebrates the ancient matriarchal warrior pirate Grannie Mahol, who sailed the North Sea and the Baltic, raiding and taking vengeance upon those who would attack Ireland.

The lyrics, re-written in the 20th Century by Padraic Pearse, beautifully describe the struggle that is central to Ireland's identity.

Oh-ro You're welcome home,
Oh-ro You're welcome home,
Oh-ro You're welcome home...
Now that summer's coming!

Welcome oh woman who was so afflicted,
It was our ruin that you were in bondage,
Our fine land in the possession of thieves...
And you sold to the foreigners!

Grainne Mhaol is coming over the sea,
Armed warriors along with her as her guard,
They are Irishmen, not foreigners nor Spanish...
And they will rout the foreigners!

May it please the God of Miracles that we may see,
Although we only live a week after it,
Grainne Mhaol and a thousand warriors...
Dispersing the foreigners!

Sinead O'Connor was a controversial figure in the US music scene in the 1980s and 90s, and again in more recent decades. Her popularity peaked around the turn of this century, and then faded as her battles with bipolar disorder became more and more apparent and interfered with her ability to work.

Her song "Famine," which she wrote in 1994, tells just a snippet of Irish history that a lot of folks do not know. Because, well, history is written by the victors, not the ones who were starved to death.

As the years rolled past, the world came to know how right she was, even as the church tried to silence her like thousands of "unmanageable women" before her.

I grew up knowing that my family arrived here as a result of one of the two major potato famines in Ireland. I did not hear about the real history of England's role in that mass starvation and exodus until I was an adult. It may have been best that I did not learn these truths as a teenager, for I am sure I would have done something radical or violent enough to get me in serious hot water.

As it was, "the Troubles" in the mid-20th Century, were front of mind in my childhood memories.

I remember the adults in my world being anxious and sad about the bombings in Ireland, about the British occupation of the North, and the lack of concern from European neighbors. The only ones who seemed willing to support Ireland in its resistance were the Irish gangsters of Boston, most notably James "Whitey" Bulger and his Winter Hill Gang. Whitey Bulger was one of those mythical creatures that everyone acknowledged was an absolute psychopath, but he was OUR psychopath, and so nobody turned him in. That, and of course, those who did talk to the police always seemed to end up dead.

Whitey Bulger was known to have smuggled rifles and larger arms to the Irish Revolutionary Army, using New England fishing boats working the outer edges of Georges Bank in the Atlantic.

He visited his mother regularly, sponsored public betterment projects in Southie, and was generally feared but unhindered in his business. He was "a good Irish boy" who had some scrapes with the law.

I mean, he did visit his mother on the regular ...

In my little town about an hour north of Boston, we didn't think much about him, other than what we read in the papers. But the Irish identity of the community in my town was as solid as any other among the diaspora.

Let me share a story for a moment.

When I was aged four and five, I attended Mrs. Doyle's private nursery school and kindergarten, on Fruit Street in Newburyport. There was not yet

public kindergarten, and I was a bit rambunctious for my grandmother to manage every day, so off to pre-school I went.

One day, we were doing an exercise about colors and shapes and such, and Mrs. Doyle told us to color the square on our worksheet orange, and the triangle next to it green.

This caused no small amount of consternation in my little brain. I knew that this was a bad thing, but she had told us what to do, and I was supposed to follow instructions.

In what I hoped might be a passable compromise, I colored the square with my red crayon, but colored it lightly, not full, dark, strong strokes like I did with the green in the triangle. I figured maybe light red would be close enough to orange to sneak past.

This was most definitely not the case. Mrs. Doyle – people were not concerned about children’s self-image back then – said “DC! That’s wrong! Why did you do that?”

I confidently responded, at age five, remember, “because you should never put the orange and the green together.”

The orange and green on the Irish flag represent the Catholic and Protestant populations of Ireland, and they are separated by a wide band of white, meant to represent the peace between them.

Mrs. Doyle was not amused.

My grandmother was mortified.

My aunt thought it was adorable and cute.

And the friend of my aunt who taught me this bit of wisdom, Elaine Larson, was very, very proud of me.

At the tender age of five, I had strong opinions about England’s occupation of Ireland, and how offensive it was.

The Luck of the Irish is not so much a blessing as a cautionary tale.

The luck of the Irish is the luck that the Irish made for themselves, in the face of every kind of imaginable opposition.

Invasion, occupation, starvation, oppression, cultural genocide, all of it, has been visited upon Ireland and still the Irish persist.

It is a lesson for us in this time, of course. Everything seems to be.

But it is a lesson in understanding that luck is what we make it, that resistance is honorable and holy and it binds a people together.

We need that lesson today.

May we create for ourselves the luck of the Irish, and be willing and strong enough to resist and persist, to survive, and to thrive.

May it be so.

Blessed be and amen.