

James Joyce “Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages” (1907)

Nations have their ego, just like individuals. The case of a people who like to attribute to themselves qualities and glories foreign to other people has not been entirely unknown in history, from the time of our ancestors, who called themselves Aryans and nobles, or that of the Greeks, who called all those who lived outside the sacrosanct land of Hellas barbarians. The Irish, with a pride that is perhaps less easy to explain, love to refer to their country as the island of saints and sages.

This exalted title was not invented yesterday or the day before. It goes back to the most ancient times, when the island was a true, focus of sanctity and intellect, spreading throughout the continent a culture and a vitalizing energy. It would be easy to make a list of the Irishmen who carried the torch of knowledge from country, to country as pilgrims and hermits, as scholars and wisemen. Their traces are still seen today in abandoned altars, in traditions and legends where even the name of the hero is scarcely recognizable or in poetic allusions, such as the passage in Dante's *Inferno* where his mentor points to one of the Celtic magicians tormented by infernal pains and says:

*Quel'altro, che ne' fianchi è
così poco,
Michele Scotto, fu, che
veramente
Delle magiche frode seppe
il gioco.*

-Canto XX, 115-17

Trans.: 'The other one was
so meagre in the flanks /
Was Michael Scott, who
really knew the tricks / Of
false magic.'

In truth, it would take the learning and patience of a leisurely Bollandist to relate the acts of these saints and sages. We at least remember the notorious opponent of St. Thomas, John Duns Scotus (called the Subtle Doctor to distinguish him from St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor, and from Bonaventura, the Seraphic Doctor) who

was the militant champion of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and, as the chronicles of that period tell us, an unbeatable dialectician. It seems undeniable that Ireland at that time was an immense seminary, where scholars gathered from the different countries of Europe, so great was its renown for mastery of spiritual matters. Although assertions of this kind must be taken with great reservations, it is more than likely (in view of the religious fervour that still prevails in Ireland, of which you, who have been nourished on the food of scepticism in recent years, can hardly form a correct idea) that this glorious past is not a fiction based on the spirit of self-glorification.

If you really wish to be convinced, there are always the dusty archives of the Germans. Ferrero now tells us that the discoveries of these good professors of Germany, so far as they deal with the ancient history of the Roman republic and the Roman empire, are wrong from the beginning - almost completely wrong. It may be so. But, whether or not this is so, no one can deny that, just as these learned Germans were the first to present Shakespeare as a poet of world significance to the warped eyes of his compatriots (who up to that time had considered William a figure of secondary importance, a fine fellow with a pleasant vein of lyric poetry, but perhaps too fond of English beer), these very Germans were the only ones in Europe to concern themselves with Celtic languages and the history of the five Celtic nations. The only Irish grammars and dictionaries that existed in Europe up until a few years ago. when the Gaelic League was founded in Dublin, were the works of Germans.

The Irish language, although of the Indo-European family, as the language spoken in differs from English almost as much as the language spoken in Rome differs from that spoken in Teheran. It has an alphabet of special characters, and a history almost three thousand years old. Ten years ago, it was spoken only by the peasants in the western provinces on the coast of the Atlantic and a few in the south, and on the little islands that stand like pickets of the vanguard of Europe, on the front of the eastern hemisphere. Now the Gaelic League has revived its use. Every Irish newspaper, with the exception of the Unionist organs, has at least one special headline printed in Irish. The correspondence of the principal cities is written

in Irish, the Irish language is taught in most of the primary and secondary schools, and, in the universities, it has been set on a level with the other modern languages, such as French, German, Italian, and Spanish. In Dublin, the names of the streets are printed in both languages. The League organizes concerts, debates, and socials at which the speaker of *beurla* (that is, English) feels like a fish out of water, confused in the midst of a crowd that chatters in a harsh and guttural tongue. In the streets, you often see groups of young people pass by speaking Irish, perhaps a little more emphatically than is necessary. The members of the League write to each other in Irish, and often the poor postman, unable to read the address, must turn to his superior to untie the knot.

This language is oriental in origin, and has been identified by many philologists with the ancient language of the Phoenicians, the originators of trade and navigation, according to historians. This adventurous people, who had a monopoly of the sea, established in Ireland a civilization that had decayed and almost disappeared before the first Greek historian took his pen in hand. It jealously preserved the secrets of its knowledge, and the first mention of the island of Ireland in foreign literature is found in a Greek poem of the fifth century before Christ, where the historian repeats the Phoenician tradition. The language that the Latin writer of comedy, Plautus, put in the mouth of Phoenicians in his comedy *Poenulus* is almost the same language that the Irish peasants speak today, according to the critic Vallancey. The religion and civilization of this ancient people, later known by the name of Druidism, were Egyptian. The Druid priests had their temples in the open, and worshipped the sun and moon in groves of oak trees. In the crude state of knowledge of those times, the Irish priests were considered very learned, and when Plutarch mentions Ireland, he says that it was the dwelling place of holy men. Festus Avienus in the fourth century was the first to give Ireland the title of *Insula Sacra*; and later, after having undergone the invasions of the Spanish and Gaelic tribes, it was converted to Christianity by St. Patrick and his followers, and again earned the title of "Holy Isle".

I do not propose to give a complete history of the Irish church in the first centuries of the Christian era. To do so would be beyond the

scope of this lecture, and, in addition, not overly interesting. But it is necessary to give you some explanation of my title "Island of Saints and Sages", and to show you its historical basis. Leaving aside the names of the innumerable churchmen whose work was exclusively national, I beg you to follow me for a few minutes while I expose to your view the traces that the numerous Celtic apostles in almost every country have left behind them. It is necessary to recount briefly events that today seem trivial to the lay mind, because in the centuries in which they occurred and in all the succeeding Middle Ages, not only history itself, but the sciences and the various arts were all completely religious in character, under the guardianship of a more than maternal church. And, in fact, what were the Italian scientists and artists before the Renaissance if not obedient handmaids of God, erudite commentators of sacred writings, or illustrators in verse or painting of the Christian fable?

It will seem strange that an island as remote as Ireland from the centre of culture could excel as a school for apostles, but even a superficial consideration will show us that the Irish nation's insistence on developing its own culture by itself is not so much the demand of a young nation that wants to make good in the European concert as the demand of a very old nation to renew under new forms the glories of a past civilization. Even in the first century of the Christian era, under the apostleship of St. Peter, we find the Irishman Mansuetus, who was later canonized, serving as a missionary in Lorraine, where he founded a church and preached for half a century. Cataldus had a cathedral and two hundred theologians at Geneva, and was later made bishop of Taranto. The great heresiarch Pelagius, a traveller and tireless propagandist, if not an Irishman, as many contend, was certainly either Irish or Scottish, as was his right hand, Caelestius. Sedulius traversed a great part of the world, and finally settled at Rome, where he composed the beauties of almost five hundred theological tracts, and many sacred hymns that are used even today in Catholic ritual. Fridolinus Viator, that is, the Voyager, of royal Irish stock, was a missionary among the Germans, and died at Seckingen in Germany, where he is buried. Fiery Columbanus had the task of reforming the French church, and, after having, started a civil war in Burgundy by his preaching, went to Italy, where he became the

apostle of the Lombards and founded the monastery at Bobbio. Frigidian, son of the king of northern Ireland, occupied the bishopric of Lucca. St. Gall, who at first was the student and companion of Columbanus, lived among the Grisons in Switzerland as a hermit, hunting, and fishing, and cultivating his fields by himself. He refused the bishopric of the city of Constance, which was offered to him, and died at the age of ninety-five. On the site of his hermitage an abbey rose, and its abbot became prince of the canton by the grace of God, and greatly enriched the Benedictine library, whose ruins are still shown to those who visit the ancient town of St. Gall.

Finnian, called the Learned, founded a school of theology on the banks of the river Boyne in Ireland, where he taught Catholic doctrine to thousands of students from Great Britain, France, Armorica, and Germany, giving them all (O happy time!) not only their books and instruction but also free room and board. However, it seems that some of them neglected to fill their study lamps, and one student whose lamp went out suddenly had to invoke the divine grace, which made his fingers shine miraculously in such a way that by running his luminous fingers through the pages, he was able to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. St. Fiacre, for whom there is a commemorative plaque in the church of St. Mathurin in Paris, preached to the French and conducted extravagant funerals at the expense of the court. Fursey founded monasteries in five countries, and his feast day is still celebrated at Peronne, the place where he died in Picardy.

Arbogast built sanctuaries and chapels in Alsace and Lorraine, and ruled the bishop's see at Strasbourg for five years until, feeling that he was near his end (according to his Dauphin) he went to live in a hut at the place where criminals were put to death and where later the great cathedral of the city was built. St. Verus became champion of the cult of the Virgin Mary in France, and Disibod, bishop of Dublin, travelled here and there through all of Germany for more than forty years, and finally founded a Benedictine monastery named Mount Disibod, now called Disenberg. Rumold became bishop of Mechlin in France, and the martyr Albinus, with Charlemagne's help, founded an institute of science at Paris and another which he directed for many years in ancient Ticinum

(now Pavia). Kilian, the apostle of Franconia, was consecrated bishop of Warzburg, in Germany, but, trying to play the part of John the Baptist between Duke Gozbert and his mistress, he was killed by cut-throats. Sedulius the younger was chosen by Gregory II for the mission of settling the quarrels of the clergy in Spain, but when he arrived there, the Spanish priests refused to listen to him, on the grounds that he was a foreigner. To this Sedulius replied that since he was an Irishman of the ancient race of Milesius, he was in fact a native Spaniard. This argument so thoroughly convinced his opponents that they allowed him to be installed in the bishop's palace at Oretó.

In sum, the period that ended in Ireland with the invasion of the Scandinavian tribes in the eighth century is nothing but an unbroken record of apostleships, and missions, and martyrdoms. King Alfred, who visited the country and left us his impressions of it in the verses called 'The Royal Journey', tells us in the first stanza:

*found when, I was in exile
In Ireland the beautiful
Many ladies, a serious
people,
Laymen and priests in
abundance*

and it must be admitted that in twelve centuries the picture has not changed much; although, if the good Alfred, who found an abundance of laymen and priests in Ireland at that time, were to go there now, he would find more of the latter than the former.

Anyone who reads the history of the three centuries that precede the coming of the English must have a strong stomach, because the internecine strife, and the conflicts with the Danes and the Norwegians, the black foreigners and the white foreigners, as they were called, follow each other so continuously and ferociously that they make this entire era a veritable slaughterhouse. The Danes occupied all the principal ports on the east coast of the island and established a kingdom at Dublin, now the capital of Ireland, which has been a great city for about twenty centuries. Then the native kings killed each other off, taking well-earned rests from time to time in games of chess. Finally, the bloody victory of the usurper Brian Boru over the nordic hordes on the sand

dunes outside the walls of Dublin put an end to the Scandinavian raids. The Scandinavians, however, did not leave the country, but were gradually assimilated into the community, a fact, that we must keep in mind if we want to understand the curious character of the modern Irishman.

During this period, the culture necessarily languished, but Ireland had the honour of producing the three great heresiarchs John Duns Scotus, Macarius, and Vergilius Solivagus. Vergilius was appointed by the French king to the abbey at Salzburg and later was made bishop of that diocese, where he built a cathedral. He was a philosopher, mathematician, and translator of the writings of Ptolemy. In his tract on geography, he held the theory, which was subversive at that time, that the earth was round, and for such audacity was declared a sower of heresy by Popes Boniface and Zacharias. Macarius lived in France, and the monastery of St. Eligius still preserves his tract *De Anima*, in which he taught the doctrine later known as Averroism, of which Ernest Renan, himself a Breton Celt, has left us a masterful examination. Scotus Erigena, Rector of the University of Paris, was a mystical pantheist, who translated from the Greek the books of mystical theology of Dionysius, the pseudo-Areopagite, patron saint of the French nation. (See note 1). This translation presented to Europe for the first time, the transcendental philosophy of the Orient, which had as much influence on the course of European religious thought as later the translations of Plato, made in the time of Pico della Mirandola, had on the development of the profane Italian civilization. It goes without saying that such an innovation (which seemed like a lifegiving breath resurrecting the dead bones of orthodox theology piled up in an inviolable churchyard, a field of Ardath) did not have the sanction of the Pope, who invited Charles the Bald to send both the book and the author to Rome under escort, probably because he wanted to have them taste the delights of papal courtesy. However, it seems that Scotus had kept a grain of good sense in his exalted brain, because he pretended not to hear this courteous invitation and departed in haste for his native land.

From the time of the English invasion to our time, there is an interval of almost eight centuries, and if I have dwelt rather at length on

the preceding period in order to make you understand the roots of the Irish temperament, I do not intend to detain you by recounting the vicissitudes of Ireland under the foreign occupation. I especially will not do so because at that time Ireland ceased to be an intellectual force in Europe. The decorative arts, at which the ancient Irish excelled, were abandoned, and the sacred and profane culture fell into disuse.

Two or three illustrious names shine here like the last few stars of a radiant night that wanes as dawn arrives. According to legend, John Duns Scotus, of whom I have spoken before, the founder of the school of Scotists, listened to the arguments of all the Doctors of the University of Paris for three whole days, then rose and, speaking from memory, refuted them one by one; Joannes de Sacrobosco, who was the last great supporter of the geographical and astronomical theories of Ptolemy, and Petrus Hibernus, the theologian who had the supreme task of educating the mind of the author of the scholastic apology *Summa contra Gentile*, St. Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the keenest and most lucid, mind known to human history.

But while these last stars still reminded the European nations of Ireland's past glory, a new Celtic race was arising, compounded of the old Celtic stock and the Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman races. Another national temperament rose on the foundation of the old one, with the various elements mingling and renewing the ancient body. The ancient enemies made common cause against the English aggression, with the Protestant inhabitants (who had become *Hibernis Hiberniores*, more Irish than the Irish themselves) urging on the Irish Catholics in their opposition to the Calvinist and Lutheran fanatics from across the sea, and the descendants of the Danish and Norman and Anglo-Saxon settlers championing the cause of the new Irish nation against the British tyranny.

Recently, when an Irish member of parliament was making a speech to the voters on the night before an election, he boasted that he was one of the ancient race and rebuked his opponent for being the descendant of a Cromwellian settler. His rebuke provoked a general laugh in the press, for, to tell the truth, to exclude from the present nation all who are descended from foreign families would be impossible, and to deny the name of patriot to all those who are not

of Irish stock would be to deny it to almost all the heroes of the modern movement - Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, Theobald Wolfe Tone and Napper Tandy, leaders of the uprising of 1798, Thomas Davis and John Mitchel, leaders of the Young Ireland movement, Isaac Butt, Joseph Biggar, the inventor of parliamentary obstructionism, many of the anticlerical Fenians, and, finally, Charles Stewart Parnell, who was perhaps the most formidable man that ever led the Irish, but in whose veins there was not even a drop of Celtic blood.

In the national calendar, two days, according to the patriots, must be marked as ill-omened - that of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman invasion, and that, a century ago, of the union of the two parliaments. Now, at this point, it is important to recall two piquant and significant facts. Ireland prides itself on being faithful body and soul to its national tradition as well as to the Holy See. The majority of the Irish consider fidelity to these two traditions their cardinal article of faith. But the fact is that the English came to Ireland at the repeated requests of a native king, without, needless to say, any great desire on their part, and without the consent of their own king, but armed with the papal bull of Adrian IV and a papal letter of Alexander. They landed on the east coast with seven hundred men, a band of adventurers against a nation; they were received by some native tribes, and in less than a year, the English King Henry II celebrated Christmas with gusto in the city of Dublin. In addition, there is the fact that parliamentary union was not legislated at Westminster but at Dublin, by a parliament elected by the vote of the people of Ireland, a parliament corrupted and undermined with the greatest ingenuity by the agents of the English prime minister, but an Irish parliament nevertheless. From my point of view, these two facts must be thoroughly explained before the country in which they occurred has the most rudimentary right to persuade one of her sons to change his position from that of an unprejudiced observer to that of a convinced nationalist.

On the other hand, impartiality can easily be confused with a convenient disregard of facts, and if an observer, fully convinced that at the time of Henry II Ireland was a body torn by fierce strife and at the time of William Pitt was a venal and wicked mess of corruption, draws

from these facts the conclusion that England does not have many crimes to expiate in Ireland, now and in the future, he is very much mistaken. When a victorious country tyrannizes over another, it cannot logically be considered wrong for that other to rebel. Men are made this way, and no one who is not deceived by self-interest or ingenuousness will believe, in this day and age, that a colonial country is motivated by purely Christian motives. These are forgotten when foreign shores are invaded, even if the missionary and the pocket Bible precede, by a few months, as a routine matter, the arrival of the soldiers and the uplifters. If the Irishmen at home have not been able to do what their brothers have done in America, it does not mean that they never will, nor is it logical on the part of English historians to salute the memory of George Washington and profess themselves well content with the progress of an independent, almost socialist, republic in Australia while they treat the Irish separatists as madmen.

A moral separation already exists between the two countries. I do not remember ever having heard the English hymn "God Save the King" sung in public without a storm of hisses, shouts, and shushes that made the solemn and majestic music absolutely inaudible. But to be convinced of this separation, one should have been in the streets when Queen Victoria entered the Irish capital the year before her death. Above all, it is necessary to notice that when an English monarch wants to go to Ireland, for political reasons, there is always a lively flurry to persuade the mayor to receive him at the gates of the city. But, in fact, the last monarch who entered had to be content with an informal reception by the sheriff, since the mayor had refused the honour. (I note here merely as a curiosity that the present mayor of Dublin is an Italian, Mr. Nannetti.)

Queen Victoria had been in Ireland only once, fifty years before, [nine years] after her marriage. At that time, the Irish (who had not completely forgotten their fidelity to the unfortunate Stuarts, nor the name of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, nor the legendary fugitive, Bonnie Prince Charlie) had the wicked idea of mocking the Queen's consort as though he were an abdicated German prince, amusing themselves by imitating the way he was said to lisp English, and greeting him exuberantly with

a cabbage stalk just at the moment when he set foot on Irish soil.

The Irish attitude and the Irish character were antipathetic to the queen, who was fed on the aristocratic and imperialistic theories of Benjamin Disraeli, her favourite minister, and showed little or no interest in the lot of the Irish people, except for disparaging remarks, to which they naturally responded in a lively way. Once, it is true, when there was a horrible disaster in county Kerry which left most of the county without food or shelter, the queen, who held on tightly to her millions, sent the relief committee, which had already collected thousands of pounds from benefactors of all social classes, a royal grant in the total amount of ten pounds. As soon as the committee noticed the arrival of such a gift, they put it in an envelope and sent it back to the donor by return mail, together with their card of thanks. From these little incidents, it would appear that there was little love lost between Victoria and her Irish subjects, and if she decided to visit them in the twilight of her years, such a visit was most certainly motivated by politics.

The truth is that she did not come; she was sent by her advisers. At that time, the English debacle in South Africa in the war against the Boers had made the English army an object of scorn in the European press, and if it took the genius of the two commanders-in-chief, Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener (both of them Irishmen, born in Ireland) to redeem its threatened prestige (just as in 1815 it took the genius of another Irish soldier to overcome the renewed might of Napoleon at Waterloo), it also took Irish recruits and volunteers to demonstrate their renowned valour on the field of battle. In recognition of this fact, when the war was over, the English government allowed the Irish regiments to wear the shamrock, the patriotic emblem, on St. Patrick's Day. In fact, the Queen came over for the purpose of capturing the easy-going sympathies of the country, and adding to the lists of the recruiting sergeants.

I have said that to understand the gulf that still separates the two nations, one should have been present at her entry into Dublin. Along the way were arrayed the little English soldiers (because, since the time of James Stephens' Fenian revolt, the government had never sent Irish regiments to Ireland), and behind this barrier stood the

crowd of citizens. In the decorated balconies were the officials and their wives, the unionist employees and their wives, the tourists and their wives. When the procession appeared, the people in the balconies began to shout greetings and wave their handkerchiefs. The Queen's carriage passed, carefully protected on all sides by an impressive body of guards with bared sabres, and within was seen a tiny lady, almost a dwarf, tossed and jolted by the movements of the carriage, dressed in mourning, and wearing horn-rimmed glasses on a livid and empty face. Now and then she bowed fitfully, in reply to some isolated shout of greeting, like one who has learned her lesson badly. She bowed to left and right, with a vague and mechanical movement. The English soldiers stood respectfully at attention while their patroness passed, and behind them, the crowd of citizens looked at the ostentatious procession and the pathetic central figure with curious eyes and almost with pity; and when the carriage passed, they followed it with ambiguous glances. This time there were no bombs or cabbage stalks, but the old Queen of England entered the Irish capital in the midst of a silent people.

The reasons for this difference in temperament, which has now become a commonplace of the phrase-makers of Fleet Street, are in part racial and in part historical. Our civilization is a vast fabric, in which the most diverse elements are mingled, in which nordic aggressiveness and Roman law, the new bourgeois conventions and the remnant of a Syriae religion are reconciled. In such a fabric, it is useless to look for a thread that may have remained pure and virgin without having undergone the influence of a neighbouring thread. What race, or what language (if we except the few whom a playful will seems to have preserved in ice, like the people of Iceland) can boast of being pure today? And no race has less right to utter such a boast than the race now living in Ireland. Nationality (if it really is not a convenient fiction like so many others to which the scalpels of present-day scientists have given the coup de grâce) must find its reason for being rooted in something that surpasses and transcends and informs changing things like blood and the human word. The mystic theologian who says somewhere, 'God has disposed the limits of nations according to his angels', and this probably is not a purely mystical concept. Do we not see that in Ireland the Danes, the

Firbolgs, the Milesians from Spain, the Norman invaders, and the Anglo-Saxon settlers have united to form a new entity, one might say under the influence of a local deity? And, although the present race in Ireland is backward and inferior, it is worth taking into account the fact that it is the only race of the entire Celtic family that has not been willing to sell its birthright for a mess of pottage.

I find it rather naïve to heap insults on England for her misdeeds in Ireland. A conqueror cannot be casual, and for so many centuries the Englishman has done in Ireland only what the Belgian is doing today in the Congo Free State, and what the Nipponese dwarf will do tomorrow in other lands. She enkindled its factions and took over its treasury. By the introduction of a new system of agriculture, she reduced the power of the native leaders and gave great estates to her soldiers. She persecuted the Roman church when it was rebellious and stopped when it became an effective instrument of subjugation. Her principal preoccupation was to keep the country divided, and if a Liberal English government that enjoyed the full confidence of the English voters were to grant a measure of autonomy to Ireland tomorrow, the conservative press of England would immediately begin to incite the province of Ulster against the authority in Dublin.

She was as cruel as she was cunning. Her weapons were, and still are, the battering-ram, the club, and the rope; and if Parnell was a thorn in the English side, it was primarily because when he was a boy in Wicklow he heard stories of the English ferocity from his nurse. A story that he himself told was about a peasant who had broken the penal laws and was seized at the order of a colonel, stripped, bound to a cart, and whipped by the troops. By the colonel's orders, the whipping was administered on his abdomen in such a way that the miserable man died in atrocious pain, his intestines falling out onto the roadway.

The English now disparage the Irish because they are Catholic, poor, and ignorant; however, it will not be so easy to justify such disparagement to some people. Ireland is poor because English laws ruined the country's industries, especially the wool industry, because the neglect of the English government in the years of the potato famine allowed the best of

the population to die from hunger, and because under the present administration, while Ireland is losing its population and crimes are almost non-existent, the judges receive the salary of a king, and governing officials and those in public service receive huge sums for doing little or nothing. In Dublin alone, to take an example, the Lord Lieutenant receives a half-million francs a year. For each policeman, the Dublin citizens pay 3,500 francs a year (twice as much, I suppose, as a high school teacher receives in Italy), and the poor fellow who performs the duties of chief clerk of the city is forced to get along as well as he can on a miserable salary of 6 pounds sterling a day. The English critic is right, then, Ireland is poor, and moreover it is politically backward. For the Irish, the dates of Luther's Reformation and the French Revolution mean nothing. The feudal struggles of the nobles against the king, known in England as the Barons' War, had their counterpart in Ireland. If the English barons knew how to slaughter their neighbours in a noble manner, the Irish barons did, too. At that time in Ireland, there was no lack of ferocious deeds, the fruit of aristocratic blood. The Irish prince, Shane O'Neill, was so strongly blessed by nature that they had to bury him up to his neck in his mother earth every so often, when he had a desire for carnal pleasure. But the Irish barons, cunningly divided by the foreign politician, were never able to act in a common plan. They indulged in childish civil disputes among themselves, and wasted the vitality of the country in wars, while their brothers across St. George's Channel forced King John to sign the Magna Charta (the first chapter of modern liberty) on the field of Runnymede.

The wave of democracy that shook England at the time of Simon de Montfort, founder of the House of Commons, and later, at the time of Cromwell's protectorate, was spent when it reached the shores of Ireland; so that now Ireland (a country destined by God to be the everlasting caricature of the serious world) is an aristocratic country without an aristocracy. Descendants of the ancient kings (who are addressed by their family names alone, without a prefix) are seen in the halls of the courts of justice, with wig and affidavits, invoking in favour of some defendant the laws that have suppressed their royal titles. Poor fallen kings, recognizable even in their decline as impractical Irishmen. They have never thought of following

the example of their English brothers in a similar plight who go to wonderful America to ask the hand of the daughter of some other king, even though he may be a Varnish King or a Sausage King.

Nor is it any harder to understand why the Irish citizen is a reactionary and a Catholic, and why he mingles the names of Cromwell and Satan when he curses. For him, the great Protector of civil rights is a savage beast who came to Ireland to propagate his faith by fire and sword. He does not forget the sack of Drogheda and Waterford, nor the bands of men and women hunted down in the furthest islands by the Puritan, who said that they would go "into the ocean or into hell", nor the false oath that the English swore on the broken stone of Limerick. How could he forget? Can the back of a slave forget the rod? The truth is that the English government increased the moral value of Catholicism when they banished it.

Now, thanks partly to the endless speeches and partly to Fenian violence, the reign of terror is over. The penal laws have been revoked. Today, a Catholic in Ireland can vote, can become a government employee, can practise a trade or profession, can teach in a public school, can sit in parliament, can own his own land for longer than thirty years, can keep in his stalls a horse worth more than 5 pounds sterling, and can attend a Catholic mass, without running the risk of being hanged, drawn, and quartered by the common hangman. But these laws have been revoked such a short time ago that a Nationalist member of parliament who is still living was actually sentenced by an English jury to be hanged, drawn, and quartered for the crime of high treason by the common hangman (who is a mercenary in England, chosen by the sheriff from among his mercenary colleagues for conspicuous merit in diligence or industry.)

The Irish populace, which is ninety per cent Catholic, no longer contributes to the maintenance of the Protestant church, which exists only for the well-being of a few thousand settlers. It is enough to say that the English treasury has suffered some loss, and that the Roman church has one more daughter. With regard to the educational system, it allows a few streams of modern thought to filter slowly into the and soil. In time, perhaps there will be a gradual reawakening of the Irish conscience,

and perhaps four or five centuries after the Diet of Worms, we will see an Irish monk throw away his frock, run off with some nun, and proclaim in a loud voice the end of the coherent absurdity that was Catholicism and the beginning of the incoherent absurdity that is Protestantism.

But a Protestant Ireland is almost unthinkable. Without any doubt, Ireland has been up to now the most faithful daughter of the Catholic church. It is perhaps the only country that received the first Christian missionaries with courtesy and was converted to the new doctrine without spilling a drop of blood. And, in fact, the ecclesiastical history of Ireland completely lacks a martyrology, as the Bishop of Cashel had occasion to boast in a reply to the mocker, Giraldus Cambrensis. For six or eight centuries it was the spiritual focus of Christianity. It sent its sons to every country in the world to preach the gospel, and its Doctors to interpret and renew the holy writings.

Its faith was never once shaken seriously, if we except a certain doctrinal tendency of Nestorius in the fifth century concerning the hypostatic union of the two natures in Jesus Christ, some negligible differences in ritual noticeable at the same time, such as the kind of clerical tonsure and the time of celebrating Easter, and finally, the defection of some priests at the urging of the reform emissaries of Edward VII. But at the first intimation that the church was running into danger, a veritable swarm of Irish envoys left at once for all the coasts of Europe, where they attempted to stir up a strong general movement among the Catholic powers against the heretics.

Well, the Holy See has repaid this fidelity in its own way. First, by means of a papal bull and a ring, it gave Ireland to Henry II of England, and later, in the papacy of Gregory XIII, when the Protestant heresy raised its head, it repented having given faithful Ireland to the English heretics, and to redeem the error, it named a bastard of the papal court' as supreme ruler of Ireland. He naturally remained a king *in partibus infidelium*, but the pope's intention was none the less courteous because of this. On the other hand, Ireland's compliance is so complete that it would hardly murmur if tomorrow the pope, having already turned it over to an Englishman and an Italian, were to turn their island over to some Aidalgo of the court of

Alphonso who found himself momentarily unemployed, because of some unforeseen complication in Europe. But the Holy See was more chary of its ecclesiastical honours, and although Ireland in the past has enriched the hagiographic archives in the manner that we have seen, this was scarcely recognized in the councils of the Vatican, and more than fourteen hundred years passed before the holy father thought of elevating an Irish bishop to a cardinal.

Now, what has Ireland gained by its fidelity to the papacy and its infidelity to the British crown? It has gained a great deal, but not for itself. Among the Irish writers who adopted the English language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and almost forgot their native land, are found the names of Berkeley, the idealist philosopher, Oliver Goldsmith, author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, two famous playwrights, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and William Congreve, whose comic masterpieces are admired even today on the sterile stages of modern England, Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, which shares with Rabelais the place of the best satire in world literature, and Edmund Burke, whom the English themselves called the modern Demosthenes and considered the most profound orator who had ever spoken in the House of Commons.

Even today, despite her heavy obstacles, Ireland is making her contribution to English art and thought. That the Irish are really the unbalanced, helpless idiots about whom we read in the lead articles of the *Standard* and the *Morning Post* is denied by the names of the three greatest translators in English literature FitzGerald, translator of the *Rubaiyat* of the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, Burton, translator of the Arabian masterpieces, and Cary, the classic translator of the *Divine Comedy*. It is also denied by the names of other Irishmen - Arthur Sullivan, the dean of modern English music, Edward O'Connor, founder of Chartism, the novelist George Moore, an intellectual oasis in the Sahara of the false spiritualistic, Messianic, and detective writings whose name is legion in England, by the names of two Dubliners, the paradoxical and iconoclastic writer of comedy, George Bernard Shaw, and the too well known Oscar Wilde, son of a revolutionary poetess.

Finally, in the field of practical affairs this pejorative conception of Ireland is given the lie by the fact that when the Irishman is found outside of Ireland in another environment, he very often becomes a respected man. The economic and intellectual conditions that prevail in his own country do not permit the development of individuality. The soul of the country is weakened by centuries of useless struggle and broken treaties, and individual initiative is paralysed by the influence and admonitions of the church, while its body is manacled by the police, the tax office, and the garrison. No one who has any self-respect stays in Ireland, but flees afar as though from a country that has undergone the visitation of an angered Jove.

From the time of the Treaty of Limerick, or rather, from the time that it was broken by the English in bad faith, millions of Irishmen have left their native land. These fugitives, as they were centuries ago, are called the wild geese. They enlisted in all the foreign brigades of the powers of Europe - France, Holland, and Spain, to be exact - and won on many battlefields the laurel of victory for their adopted masters. In America, they found another native land. In the ranks of the American rebels was heard the old Irish language, and Lord Mountjoy himself said in 1784, "We have lost America through the Irish emigrants." Today, these Irish emigrants in the United States number sixteen million, a rich, powerful, and industrious settlement. Maybe this does not prove that the Irish dream of a revival is not entirely an illusion!

If Ireland has been able to give to the service of others men like Tyndall, one of the few scientists whose name has spread beyond his own field, like the Marquess of Dufferin, Governor of Canada and Viceroy of India, like Charles Gavin Duffy, and Hennessey, colonial governors, like the Duke de Tetuan, the recent Spanish minister, like Bryan, candidate for president of the United States, like Marshal MacMahon, president of the French Republic, like Lord Charles Beresford, virtual head of the English navy, just recently placed in command of the Channel Fleet, like the three most renowned generals of the English army - Lord Wolseley, the commander-in-chief, Lord Kitchener, victor of the Sudan campaign and at present commanding general of the army in India, and Lord Roberts, victor of the war in

Afghanistan and South Africa - if Ireland has been able to give all this practical talent to the service of others, it means that there must be something inimical, unpropitious, and despotic in its own present conditions, since her sons cannot give their efforts to their own native land.

Because, even today, the flight of the wild geese continues. Every year, Ireland, decimated as she already is, loses 60,000 of her sons. From 1850 to the present day, more than 5,000,000 emigrants have left for America, and every post brings to Ireland their inviting letters to friends and relatives at home. The old men, the corrupt, the children, and the poor stay at home, where the double yoke wears another groove in the tamed neck; and around the death bed where the poor, anaemic, almost lifeless, body lies in agony, the rulers give orders and the priests administer last rites.

Is this country destined to resume its ancient position as the Hellas of the north some day? Is the Celtic mind, like the Slavic mind which it resembles in many ways, destined to enrich the civil conscience with new discoveries and new insights in the future? Or must the Celtic world, the five Celtic nations, driven by stronger nations to the edge of the continent, to the outermost islands of Europe, finally be cast into the ocean after a struggle of centuries? Alas, we dilettante sociologists are only second-class augurers. We look and peer into the innards of the human animal, and, after all, confess that we see nothing there. Only our supermen know how to write the history of the future.

It would be interesting, but beyond the scope I have set myself tonight, to see what might be the effects on our civilization of a revival of this race. The economic effects of the appearance of a rival island near England, a bilingual, republican, self-centred, and enterprising island with its own commercial fleet, and its own consuls in every port of the world. And the moral effects of the appearance in old Europe of the Irish artist and thinker - those strange spirits, frigid enthusiasts, sexually and artistically untaught, full of idealism and unable to yield to it, childish spirits, ingenuous and satirical, "the loveless Irishmen", as they are called. But in anticipation of such a revival, I confess that I do not see what good it does to fulminate against the English tyranny while the Roman tyranny

occupies the palace of the soul.

I do not see the purpose of the bitter invectives against the English despoiler, the disdain for the vast Anglo-Saxon civilization, even though it is almost entirely a materialistic civilization, nor the empty boasts that the art of miniature in the ancient Irish books, such as the *Book of Kells*, the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, the *Book of the Dun Cow*, which date back to a time when England was an uncivilized country, is almost as old as the Chinese. and that Ireland made and exported to Europe its own fabrics for several generations before the first Fleming arrived in London to teach the English how to make bread. If an appeal to the past in this manner were valid, the fellahin of Cairo would have all the right in the world to disdain to act as porters for English tourists. Ancient Ireland is dead just as ancient Egypt is dead. Its death chant has been sung, and on its gravestone has been placed the seal. The old national soul that spoke during the centuries through the mouths of fabulous seers, wandering minstrels, and Jacobite [173] poets disappeared from the world with the death of James Clarence Mangan. With him, the long tradition of the triple order of the old Celtic bards ended; and today other bards, animated by other ideals, have the cry.

One thing alone seems clear to me. It is well past time for Ireland to have done once and for all with failure. If she is truly capable of reviving, let her awake, or let her cover up her head and lie down decently in her grave forever. 'We Irishmen', said Oscar Wilde one day to a friend of mine, 'have done nothing, but we are the greatest talkers since the time of the Greeks.' But though the Irish are eloquent, a revolution is not made of human breath and compromises. Ireland has already had enough equivocations and misunderstandings. If she wants to put on the play that we have waited for so long, this time let it be whole, and complete, and definitive. But our advice to the Irish producers is the same as that our fathers gave them not so long ago - hurry up! I am sure that I, at least, will never see that curtain go up, because I will have already gone home on the last train. [End.]

Note

(1) Joyce is confusing Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite (Dionysius of Athens) with St. Denis, or Dionysius, of Paris, the patron saint of France.

Source: Originally as “Irlanda, Isola dei Santi e dei Savi”, lecture of 27 April 1907; rep. in *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, ed. Ellsworth Mason & Richard Ellmann (NY: Viking Press 1964, 1966 [35nd printing]), pp.154-174 [intro. notice, p.153].