

Culture and Identity

Lecture at the Catholic University of Leuven

4 May 2011

Thank you for inviting me to speak in this series of Ambassadors' lectures. I understand you have had some excellent previous speakers. I hope I can live up to the high standards already set.

Just after I accepted the invitation, one of the distinguished academics at this University, half jokingly, said that he hoped I was now very nervous.

The more I thought about the subject I had chosen, "Culture and Identity" the more nervous I became. In fact I am now terrified and wonder if I have made a terrible mistake but I will struggle on and hope what follows will intrigue and entertain you and perhaps provide some food for reflection.

At the outset I must make a confession. While the subject I have chosen falls squarely into the humanities field, I, by profession, am an engineer.

I have had, therefore, little training in the complex theoretical background underpinning the concepts of culture and identity. By nature I am analytical and pragmatic with little patience for dealing with the often abstruse and ephemeral intellectual history associated with the development of thinking on identity and culture.

So this lecture will take a rather blunt and straightforward approach which I hope does not disappoint, or even horrify, those of you steeped in cultural and identity studies.

I chose the issue of culture and identity because it is of particular relevance to the economic, political and social history of modern Ireland where we have

struggled for generations to reconcile deep and bitter conflicts arising from clashes of culture and identity.

The complex nature of modern Irish identity, and its historic development, has had a profound impact on the development of Irish culture, particularly in literature and theatre where some of the greatest masterpieces derive much of their power from efforts by authors to deal with issues of culture and identity in an Irish context.

I am also conscious, of course, that issues of culture and identity have a particular resonance here in Belgium. They are perhaps more prominent than ever at the moment in the light of the lengthy political impasse in the formation of a new Government. Of course, I do not, in any way, propose to comment on the situation here, but some of what I say about culture and identity in Ireland may have some resonance in the Belgian context.

When I began to think about what I might say today, I thought that I should look up a definition of culture: I found:

“culture is an endowment of a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of events in the world with meaning and significance from the standpoint of human beings.” Or alternatively: “overlapping maps of criss-crossing discursive meaning which form zones of temporary coherence as shared but always contested significance in a social space”.

These rather daunting definitions of culture, remind me of what a famous judge said when he was asked to define pornography. “I can’t define it but I know it when I see it”.

The terms vague, changing, unstable, unpredictable are often used in abstract discussions about culture.

Culture is also often confused with ethnicity. When people say “my culture” they often mean “my ethnicity” and the two become interchangeable.

Similarly with identity where one definition I read referred to: “nodal points of the cultural process such as ethnicity, gender or race.”

In summary the concepts of both culture and identity are complex, difficult to define, deserving of lectures in their own right and not for me to deal in depth with here.

Before delving in depth into modern Irish culture and identity, I would like to give you some essential background information. First of all let us look at a map of Ireland (IMAGE NO.1). Ireland consists of four Provinces: Ulster, Leinster, Connacht and Munster and thirty-two counties.

The Province of Ulster is made up of nine counties, six of which form Northern Ireland, an integral part of the United Kingdom, while three are located in southern Ireland.

All of the Provinces and counties of Ireland have deep historical roots. There have also been historic tensions between the Provinces and even between counties, which, in a mild form, persist to this day and now most frequently take the form of sporting rivalries whose passion should not be underestimated.

In general Irish people tend to have a deep and abiding sense of identification with and commitment to their county, and even their individual town or village. One of the first questions Irish people meeting one another for the first time will ask is: “where are you from” and the future of the new relationship can depend on the answer. Irish people are thus strongly rooted in their local communities and this sense of rootedness persists even when people emigrate and live their adult lives on the other side of the world from Ireland.

Thus we have the phenomenon of US or Australian citizens, often of a second or third generation, coming to Ireland to seek out their roots in small rural communities and retaining a connection with the town land of their ancestors.

In Ireland, just as in most other countries, there is also a rural urban divide with so it is said, Dubliners looking down on rural folk and calling them by the insulting collective noun “culchies” while rural people regard Dubliners as arrogant, not truly Irish and referring to them by the equally insulting term “Jackeens”. In truth, many Dubliners come from rural Ireland and the divide between the capital and the rest of the country is not as deep or as pervasive as we tend to believe.

Now let us have a quick look at the location of Ireland on the European continent (IMAGE NO.2.)

As you can see Ireland is perched on the far Western shores of Europe, the last European outpost before the Atlantic Ocean and the USA. It is also hidden behind the far larger and imposing presence of Great Britain which tends to shield Ireland from main land Europe. The sense of peripherality, of being located far from the centre and away from the mainstream, has been a strong element of Ireland’s identity in the past though it is far less so now.

Similarly the looming presence of Great Britain has inevitably had a huge impact on Irish culture and identity and it is only in recent times that we have begun to come to terms with the legacy of our centuries long entanglement with our closest neighbour.

Finally I think it useful for you to have a quick snapshot of some key events in Irish history which continue to shape our culture and identity to this day:

History

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| Mid 5 ^h century | Saint Patrick brings Christianity to Ireland |
| 8 th -9 th centuries | Irish monasticism, Ireland's "Golden Age" (IMAGE NO:3) |
| 1171 | Henry II of England arrived with an army in Ireland |
| 1607 | Flight of the Earls (IMAGE NO: 4) |
| 16 th -17 centuries | The Plantations, particularly the Ulster Plantation |
| 1649-1652 | The Cromwellian Conquest, Penal laws |
| 1690 | Battle of the Boyne James II vs William of Orange Even more penal laws |
| 1798 | Rebellion |
| 1801 | Act of Union |
| 1829 | Catholic Emancipation (IMAGE NO:5) |
| 1845-1849 | Famine (1 million die, 1 million left, emigration) |
| 1914-1918 | First World War (IMAGE NO:6) |
| 1916 | Easter rebellion |
| 1922 | Independence, partition and civil war |
| 1973 | Ireland joins the EEC |
| 1986 | Anglo-Irish Agreement (IMAGE NO:7) |
| 1996 | Good Friday Agreement (IMAGE NO: 8) |

I must emphasise that this is a mere snapshot of the tortured history of Ireland and any true historian would include a myriad of other dates. It is indeed a black and white history and leaves out all of the grey and complicated bits.

Some trends

Firstly the early years of Irish history, before the tenth century, were rather brilliant. Ireland had developed a strong monastic tradition, had strong links with other centres of study and learning in Europe and was seen as one of the great centres of monastic and artistic activity in Europe. Many of the treasures created during this period were ultimately destroyed or pillaged during the Viking invasions, but some of those that remain can be seen in the National Museum in Dublin and in Trinity College. This period is, rightly or wrongly, fondly regarded as Ireland's Golden Age and tends still to be viewed as a halcyon time when Ireland was united and still had a very strong indigenous Gaelic culture.

From the 10th century onwards, our history overall is rather grim. There is a litany of invasions, failed rebellions, vicious repression, poverty and war. In Ireland the acronym MOPE is often, half jokingly, used to refer to the Irish nation. It stands for the Most Oppressed People Ever.

Unlike many of our European neighbours, Ireland does not have an imperial history but, in common with many countries in the developing world, has had a lengthy experience of colonisation. And ultimately more than just colonisation but actual integration and unification with what was widely seen by many as an oppressor. The UK at one time was the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland.

I do not have the time here to go in-depth into Ireland's long history of entanglement with Britain. One must be careful to stress, however, that while undoubtedly this had a major impact on our national identity, and that while many would have, to say the least, mixed views on our colonial past; it was not a completely negative experience. For better or worse Ireland became an English speaking country and perhaps even surpassed the colonial master in our mastery of the English language. Dublin became the second city of the British

Empire and many of our most splendid civic buildings date from this era
(IMAGE No: 9)

So out of this grim recital of events, we might fish out colonisation as a historic event that has left its imprint on modern Irish culture and identity. We can return to this.

Secondly a key turning point in Irish history and one which continues to have an influence over 150 years later, was the Irish famine. Before the first famine in 1847, the population of Ireland was over eight million people. Within fifty years it had dropped to four million. The Great Famine when one million people starved to death in a western European country was an unmitigated disaster, a tragedy and an obscenity that has left a deep psychic imprint on our national identity. It initiated the process of emigration, at that time principally to the United States, which we can identify as the second element underpinning modern Ireland's sense of identity. Again we can return to this.

In 1922 when Ireland became independent, we had a civil war. It is interesting to observe that throughout the 20th century, in many countries that obtained independence from former colonial masters, the achievement of independence was overshadowed by vicious internal strife. The Irish civil war was an early example of this trend. Our civil war was essentially between those who supported the signing of a Treaty with the British which brought a measure of independence but left the six counties of Northern Ireland under British sovereignty and those who thought no Treaty should be signed until a united thirty two county Ireland could be secured.

The Irish civil war was brutal, vicious and split families and, as in all civil wars, has left a long lasting imprint on our national identity and on our national politics. It is, perhaps, only in the last decade that the legacy of the civil war has begun to fade.

Other determinants of our national identity which I might mention include:

- religion and the long history of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Ireland;
- The opening up to Europe and our accession to the EEC in 1973. An extremely important event which played a crucial role in helping Ireland to develop a more normal relationship with Great Britain;
- And finally the peace agreements ranging from the Anglo-Irish Agreement to the Good Friday Agreement, which help underpin a modern sense of identity in which we seek to reconcile our clashes of identity in a framework based on consensus and cooperation.

But now let me return to the issue of colonisation and examine its impact on modern Irish identity in a little more depth.

British involvement in Ireland goes back for more than eight hundred years and is by now an important ingredient in our national identity. In this long history, I would like to single out firstly the so called Plantations as a key event. The British Crown used plantation, which was when land was forcibly seized from its native owners and given to British occupiers, usually people close to the Crown and often to repay a favour. While various parts of Ireland were planted, it was in the North of Ireland that Plantation was implemented most vigorously and had the longest lasting impact. The native Irish were driven off large tracts of land which were then given to planters usually, but not exclusively, of Scottish origin that were loyal to the Crown, The planters had to defend their land from attacks from the natives and in time helped created a stable settled presence.

The roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland can be traced to the legacy of plantation when a mostly Protestant planter class supplanted a mostly Catholic native class through the forcible seizure of territory. Of course four hundred

years later both planters and natives have, by now become intermingled. However the creation in Northern Ireland of a majority loyal to the British Crown and a minority nursing a sense of historic grievance and who happened to be Catholic created the ingredients for a complex and difficult clash of identity.

This clash of identity was not helped either by systematic discrimination against Catholics or, in more recent times, by a vicious terrorist campaign carried out by the IRA who often murdered innocent Protestants in purely sectarian attacks.

However, it is far too simple to see the legacy of colonisation in the North of Ireland as having resulted in a Protestant or Loyalist class who want to remain British and a Catholic or Nationalist class who want to have a united Ireland.

The Loyalists are by no means monolithic and can be confused about their national identity. Many Loyalists have no great affinity with England or the English and, in fact, tend to distrust English politicians. For many their primary loyalty is to the British Crown rather than to Great Britain. They tend to see the British Crown as the ultimate guarantor of their individual liberties and their rights as Protestants. For much of the 20th century, when Loyalist looked South over the border at Ireland, they saw a State in which the Catholic Church had a predominant role, whose position was guaranteed in the Irish constitution, a constitution which laid claim to the six counties of Northern Ireland. They also saw a steep decline in the numbers of Protestants in the South.

By and large Loyalists set great store to their individual rights of conscience and the freedom to practise their religion. This is why they continue to celebrate the victory in 1690 of the Protestant William of Orange over the Catholic King James II of England in the battle of the Boyne on 12 July each year. (IMAGE No:10)

While these Orange parades have their origin in the celebration of the liberal Protestant ethic they have, particularly in recent years, become, at times, sectarian expressions of supremacy, overtly sectarian and an incitement to violence. There is, however, a strong effort on the part of the Protestant Orange Order leadership to return the parades to their original less inflammatory form and to encourage nationalists to see them as part of the island's cultural and religious heritage.

If you ask a Loyalist where he or she is from you may get a confusing answer. People may say they are British but they do not identify all that closely with the British State. They would probably be reluctant to say they are Irish but privately many would accept that being Irish is part of their identity and some would say they are Northern Irish, perhaps the designation with which many are most comfortable.

Similarly the Catholics or Nationalists are not a monolithic block. Opinion polls suggest that up to 25% of Catholics would not vote in favour of a united Ireland but are comfortable remaining part of the UK. At the other extreme are Nationalists who reject the current peace agreement and remain committed to achieving a united Ireland through violence. These are small in number but remain capable of mounting terrorist attacks and have murdered policemen and soldiers over the past year. However most Catholics or Nationalists would answer Irish to a question about nationality.

The confused and complicated nature of identity in Northern Ireland is particularly highlighted in sporting events. There is an all island rugby team with players drawn from both North and South. This team plays annually in the Six Nations Cup against teams from Scotland, Wales, England, France and Italy. But it is the game of Ireland versus England that tends to command most

public attention with the supporters from both North and South, Loyalist and Nationalist alike, supporting the all Ireland team.

The peace agreements seek to reconcile these conflicting and confused identities by recognising them , by stressing the principle of majority consent namely there can be no change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom without the consent of a majority of its people, by providing structures for the sharing of power between the two communities in Northern Ireland and for developing the relationship between Northern Ireland and Ireland and between Ireland and Britain.

The peace agreements are based on an effort to accommodate conflicting identities in a modern framework. Loyalists or Protestants, through their participation in the power sharing and other cooperation structures established, are, in effect, being asked to accept that their Nationalist neighbours have a legitimate aspiration to a united Ireland and also, at a deeper level, that both Nationalists and Loyalists share a common home, a common history, common human rights and common challenges.

Similarly the Catholics or Nationalists have to accept that a majority in Northern Ireland cannot be forced into a united Ireland against their will, that the British identity of this majority must be accepted and recognised and that a united Ireland, if it is ever achieved, can only be achieved through consent.

In many respects what had been a vicious terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland has now been transformed into a simmering cultural war carried out within the structures created by the peace agreement. Nationalists want greater recognition of the Irish language in Northern Ireland, including the passing of an Irish language act which would place the status of Irish on a statutory footing. Loyalists want greater recognition for Ulster Scots, a hybrid language with roots in English and Scots Gaelic.

One important area where accommodation has been achieved is in the commemoration of Ireland's losses during the first World War. For many years the Irish State found it difficult to acknowledge that over 30,000 Irish men from all over the island lost their lives in the service of the British army during World War I. many of them died here in Belgium.

In Northern Ireland on the other hand the commemoration of this sacrifice became an iconic fixture on the calendar of Loyalists many of whom publicly wore the poppy (IMAGE No: 11). Nationalists never wore the poppy but many would sport the Easter lily (IMAGE NO;12) in commemoration of the Easter rising of 1916 and the revolt against British rule.

It is only in recent years that the Irish government and State have recognised the World War I sacrifice. A key stage in this journey towards acceptance was the opening in 1998 of the island of Ireland peace park in Mesen by the President of Ireland, the Queen of England and the King Of Belgium.

Even today the issue of flags and emblems can provoke bitter dispute in the North. Visitors are sometimes mystified to see the Israeli flag fluttering in Loyalists areas while Nationalist areas sport the Palestinian flag. Loyalists tend to identify more with the Israelis seeing them as a people under attack from terrorists. While Nationalists identify with Palestinians seeing them as an oppressed minority in their own country.

There remain key unresolved issues in Northern Ireland which will have to be addressed if society is to follow a normal development path. These include the development of policies and structures aimed at reconciling communities, building trust and developing a shared future. They also include addressing the dark periods of Northern Ireland's past when savage sectarian attacks were carried out by both sides which have left deep scars in small town and villages, scars which in many cases have yet to heal.

But overall Northern Ireland, and in consequence the whole island of Ireland is now in a much better place than twenty years ago. The clashes of identity are being resolved and accommodated although they are not yet completely at ease.

The accommodation between Green and Orange is the ambition set out in the Irish flag (IMAGE No; 13) where you the white field of peace separating green and orange.

A key event in sealing the historic peace settlement in Ireland will take place next month when the Queen of England will pay a State visit to Ireland, the first such State visit by the British Monarch since 1911, a hundred years ago, when Ireland will still part of the UK.

And what of the rest of the island and its identity and culture. Firstly, and despite the centuries of colonisation, I should highlight the fact that Ireland remains fiercely Irish. There is an overwhelming commitment to the institutions, particularly the Presidency, of the Irish State. Irish culture, including music and sport, and language have never been more popular and overall people are comfortable with being Irish. The current economic crisis has called into question the efficacy of some of the State's institutions and how we run ourselves but it has not called into question the foundations of the Irish State or of Irish identity.

Let us delve a little more deeply into some aspects of Irish identity. I will begin with language.

The first official language of Ireland is the Irish language, not English. It is the Irish version of the laws which are the preeminent legal texts. Government offices must publish all their public information documents in Irish and English. Street signs are in both languages (IMAGE No;14).

Up until the mid nineteenth century Irish was the dominant spoken language of the country although the administration worked through English. The rapid decline of Irish as the spoken language of the country has been attributed, on the one hand, to the establishment by the British administration of a national school system and, on the other, to the impact of emigration.

The national school system established in the 1830s operated solely through English and the teaching of Irish was prohibited. Parents were anxious that their children should acquire a good knowledge of English both to obtain employment in the administration in Ireland and also because the two main destinations of emigrants, the USA and Britain, were English speaking. Irish tended increasingly to be seen as a peasant language and one that did not open up opportunities for the future. Throughout the 19th century the number of people speaking Irish on a daily basis rapidly declined and English became the most widely spoken language in the country.

Today Irish is spoken on a daily basis by small communities largely located on the west coast. These communities, called the Gaeltacht area, enjoy a special status and receive Government support. (IMAGE No:15)

Census returns suggest that over one million Irish people claim to speak Irish. However many people would only have a superficial knowledge and would not speak the language regularly. About 30,000-40,000 people in the Gaeltacht area would use Irish daily. Another 70,000 people or so around the country would also use Irish regularly. The use of Irish in the cities is growing largely through the success of so called Gaelscoileanna, or schools that teach all subjects entirely through Irish. These schools enjoy a strong academic record and middle class parents, who hitherto might not have paid much attention to the Irish language, are often keen to enrol their children in a Gaelscoil.

Overall the policies of the Irish Government towards the revival of the Irish language have oscillated between encouragement and compulsion. Irish remains an obligatory subject for all children at all levels in the school system. At one point passing Irish in the final school exams was necessary to pass the whole examination. That is if you failed Irish and passed in every other subject, you still failed the whole exam. Such compulsion did not help promote the popularity of Irish among students.

In addition the school curriculum in Irish tended to be old fashioned and dealt with the lives of people in remote rural communities far removed, for example, from the day to day experience of an urban teenager. In recent years much work has been done to encourage young people to speak Irish and there is some evidence that this is now paying off. There is a national TV channel, TV4, which is entirely through Irish with subtitles in English. Its programmes are popular and often geared towards teenagers and young adults. (IMAGE NO: 16)

Our national efforts to revive and protect the language, which of course must take into account the huge global dominance of English, have often looked enviously at the success of Flanders in protecting spoken Flemish, and its dialects, in the face of competition from another major world language, namely French. Despite the pressures on Flemish, some of which resemble the pressures placed on Irish, Flanders has successfully developed a multilingual society and preserved the native language.

One can speculate about the impact of the decline of the national language on Irish identity and on Ireland's relationship with the English language. The fact that the majority of people in Ireland speak English can give rise to the question what is it then that makes us Irish. The decline in spoken Irish has undoubtedly opened up questions about the nature of Irish identity given the key role of language in shaping a national identity. One might wonder, for example, what

would have happened if Flanders had succumbed and become entirely French speaking and yet still felt itself to be distinctively Flemish.

Ireland's relationship with English is also worthy of an entire lecture in itself. Personally I have always thought that the Irish have less respect for English than the English and have, therefore, been more inclined to stretch the boundaries of English in literature and theatre. Because the language did not grow organically in Ireland, the Irish perhaps feel less constrained in twisting and turning English into new forms.

Irish people have won four Nobel prizes for literature, an astonishing number for a small island nation writing in a language that was acquired from a colonial power. (IMAGE No; 17) Ireland also produced James Joyce, who never won the Nobel Prize but whom many regard as one of the most influential writers, if not the most influential writer, in the English language in the 20th century.

Two of Ireland's Nobel Prize winners, WB Yeats and Seamus Heaney, are poets. Some of their most important work derives from Ireland's historic experience. In Yeats case his poetry had to deal with the momentous and cruel events of the Irish revolt of 1916 against British power and the Irish Civil War. Yeats moved between the worlds of Gaelic cultural Ireland and upper class London society.

Heaney born into a working class family in the Northern Irish town of Derry witnessed the civil rights struggle in the North, the terrorist campaign and atrocities committed by all sides. Yet both Yeats and Heaney have managed to transform what could be very parochial issues of relevance only to Ireland into poetry of universal relevance using language that is romantic, precise, strong and distinctively Irish.

The other Nobel Prize winners, George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett, have, in their own right, become figures of world literature and no longer

belong entirely to Ireland. Beckett was a close friend of Joyce and wrote many of his key works firstly in French translating them into English himself. His use of language is revolutionary and yet also distinctively Irish. Shaw also had a quirky relationship with the English language often using his own form of spelling where he felt English was illogical and an eccentric system of punctuation.

Joyce (Image NO 18) wrote obsessively about his native city of Dublin while spending almost all of his adult life in exile from Ireland. Displaying insouciance about the correct use of English that it is difficult to see any British writer of that era adopting, he tried to mould English to reflect the rhythms of thought and consciousness of his characters. He also mixed English up with several other languages in his writing and adored creating complex puzzles and allusions which required a deep understanding of English, the classics and other languages to understand. And yet much of Joyce's writing, in line with his Irish peers, is highly lyrical and poetic. While his subject matter might be narrowly focussed, Joyce's work also attains a universal quality that transcends Irishness and becomes European if not global in relevance.

The Irish mastery of written English remains a huge cultural strength to this day with Ireland currently undergoing something of a literary renaissance just as our economy plumbs the depth of recession. Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* (IMAGE NO: 19) won the National Book Critics Award in the USA last year, Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright and John Banville have each won the prestigious MAN Booker Prize in recent years, Colm Toibin has won numerous British and European literature awards. Other writers such as Emma Donoghue, Claire Keegan, Eugene McCabe, Neil Jordan and Paul Murray are all widely translated and hugely popular in the UK and USA.

The playwrights Conor Mc Phearson , Martin Mc Donagh and Enda Walsh have followed in the footsteps of Sean O Casey, John Millington Synge, Hugh Leonard and Brian Friel producing work that is both highly artistic and with broad popular appeal. They have taken London and Broadway by storm and won all of the major theatre awards.

Irish film has also advanced greatly in recent years with directors such as Neil Jordan becoming internationally recognised. The Irish film *In Bruges*, scripted and directed by the playwright Martin McDonagh and filmed in Brugge was a notorious international hit, not least here in Belgium.

While all of these modern authors and playwrights are very different and have different voices, their international range is noticeable and in keeping with the historic engagement Ireland has had with a broader international audience. For example, Colum McCann lives in the United States. His novels have a range which extends far beyond Ireland with his most successful previous novel, *Dancer*, dealing with the life of Rudolf Nureyev. Emma Donoghue lives in Canada and her most recent novel, *Room*, was inspired, if that is the word, by the shocking Fritzl child abuse case in Austria. Colm Toibin has a personal affection for Barcelona and Catalonia where many of his stories are set.

One hugely interesting figure in the Irish literary landscape and one that is relevant to any discussion on culture and identity is Oscar Wilde (IMAGE NO;20). Wilde was born in Dublin into the Anglo Irish aristocracy with his father Sir Willaim Wilde a noted eye doctor, including the Swedish royal family among his clients.

Despite his subsequent enormous success and ultimately notoriety in London society, Wilde always described himself as Irish and imbibed much of his mother's support for Irish nationalism.

Wilde was a complex character and, in many respects, far ahead of the times into which he was born. His Irishness, to an extent, gave him an outsider's perspective on England which was compounded by his secret homosexuality. Many of his best known plays deal with the issue of identity with principal characters concealing their true identities or being unsure of who they really are. Wilde also played with the English language creating a litany of aphorisms and witticisms that can be both shocking and extremely funny at the same time.

Wilde also, in common with several of the other great writers Ireland produced, ended up as neither Irish or British but a truly European figure, beloved not just in Britain and Ireland, and is fully seen now as a great and serious artist exploring complex themes through the vehicle of seemingly light comedies. His grave in Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris remains to this day an iconic place for visitors from around the world.

Talking of writers such as Wilde, Joyce and Beckett brings us to the second of the defining themes of Irish identity namely emigration.

From the mid nineteenth century onwards Ireland experienced waves of emigration which had a major demographic impact on the island but also produced enormous, and in time enormously influential, Irish communities in the US, Britain, Australia and Canada.

Emigration became a way of life, particularly for younger sons who would not inherit the family farm or young women who had no hope of obtaining any employment in Ireland. Emigration was also extremely painful for families as in those days there were no cheap flights or Skype to link emigrants with their families. Once you were gone you were gone but your remittances helped those left behind cope with often grinding poverty.

Emigration has been in many respects a huge disaster for Ireland robbing the country of many of its brightest and most dynamic young people. Almost every

family in the country will have relatives somewhere in the English speaking world. The fact of emigration has crept into many of the works of writers and playwrights over the years. Irish music is full of songs bewailing the loss of Ireland's young or, when sung by emigrants, bewailing the loss of home town and country which have been forsaken for a foreign land.

Paradoxically emigration has also ensured that Ireland, despite its small size and peripherality, is acutely aware of the rest of the world and has developed extremely close relations with all of the countries which have sizeable Irish ethnic populations. It has been estimated, for example, that over 40 million Americans can claim Irish descent. In fact this month President Obama will visit Ireland where his itinerary includes a visit to the village, Moneygall, from whence his great great great grandfather emigrated to New York in 1850.(IMAGE NO: 21) (IMAGE NO 22)

In the past Irish emigrants have had something approaching a love hate relationship with Ireland. On the one hand there has been bitterness and resentment at the fact that their own country was not able to give them employment and, in effect, they were forced by economic circumstances to leave. On the other emigrants, after long years of absence, often developed a highly romanticised and inaccurate vision of Ireland emphasising the greenness, the beauty of the landscape, the peace and the calm ignoring the changes that had been brought about through economic development. This became something of a problem when elements of the Irish American community, often through mistaken beliefs, began financially to support the IRA terrorist campaign.

The United States, however, because of the huge interest in Irish issues among ethnic Irish members of the US House of Congress, played a major role in securing agreement to end the conflict in Northern Ireland. President Clinton,

in particular, was involved personally in these negotiations and also through his special envoy, Senator George Mitchell who chaired most of the interparty negotiations for many years.(IMAGE NO: 23) Senator Mitchell is now as you probably know the US President's Special envoy in the Middle East.

Being Irish, therefore, also entails membership of a broad international Irish community of many millions of people. There are now Irish Irish, Irish American, Irish Canadian and so on. In Latin America, where Argentina and Chile were, for a while, major destinations for Irish emigrants, there remain vibrant Irish communities. The Irish born Admiral William Brown, for example, was the founder of the Argentinean navy and a national hero in that country.

The Irish Government is now trying to capitalise on this huge global network of Irish and Irish related people through the creation of the Global Irish Network which embraces influential people in business, science, the arts and popular culture around the world and to harness their good will in support of our national efforts at recovery.

Emigration was undoubtedly a huge drain on Ireland, underpinning a strong sense that the now independent nation was failing its young and failing to live up to the high ideals of its founders.

Not all emigrants were motivated by economic necessity. Many writers left Ireland as they could not tolerate the highly conservative nature of Irish society which was dominated by a Catholic Church in thrall to Jansenism. For many years the Irish State practised pervasive censorship not permitting any works deemed by the censorship Board to be immoral. There was also little tolerance of any sort of behaviour which strayed beyond the relatively narrow confines of extremely orthodox Catholicism. Thus Joyce left and Beckett left, each never to return but each also tied mentally and emotionally to a city, Dublin, and a

country which haunted their thoughts. Joyce is buried in Fluntern cemetery in Zurich while Beckett is buried in Paris.

And of course in more recent years many people left Ireland because they wanted to broaden their horizons, gain new skills, see the world and perhaps then return.

It is only in the past year or so that the shadow of enforced emigration through lack of economic opportunity has returned to haunt Ireland. Our new emigrants are, compared to their predecessors, highly educated and eminently employable. We hope that their departure will be temporary and when recovery kicks in many will return with new skills to contribute to our recovery. But nonetheless Ireland, once again, has to confront the dreadful spectre of emigration.

Mention of Joyce and Beckett and their current status as European writers rather than purely Irish, brings me to a third event which has helped develop modern Irish identity namely our accession to the then European Economic Community in 1973.

As I mentioned at the outset, Ireland's geographic location on the westernmost fringe of Europe and the intense turbulent relationship with our powerful and influential neighbour Britain has tended to shield us from the European mainstream.

I think one characteristic of all countries that have had a colonial experience is a sense of inferiority and insecurity in the newly independent State. This can express itself initially as a form of intense nationalism and a desire of self sufficiency, as it did in Ireland and many developing countries. Even though Ireland gained its independence in 1922, there remained a strong link with Britain not least through trade, as Britain took almost all of our exports. Britain and Ireland shared a common customs union and a common travel area which tended further to lock Ireland into Britain's economic sphere.

From 1922 up until the late 1950s Ireland practiced a form of self sufficiency with a very closed economy protected behind high tariff barriers and not open to foreign investment. This disastrous policy only began to change after a visionary prime Minister, encouraged by forward thinking civil servants, pushed strongly for the opening of the economy.

In addition, until 1979, the Irish currency was pegged one for one to the pound Sterling meaning that our monetary policy was effectively set by the Bank of England.

In such a suffocating relationship, it was difficult for Ireland to develop close relations with our European partners as Irish eyes tended inevitably to look towards London.

Entry into the EEC helped transform our relationship with Britain . It also contributed to a maturing of Ireland's European identity. Within the EEC and then EU Ireland was a co-equal partner with all of the other European countries around the table, including Britain. We could, at last see ourselves as a truly independent State with an independent voice that was taken seriously and views and policies which, at time agreed with, but other times disagreed with, those of Britain. Over time our EU membership helped both Britain and Ireland to see each other as close neighbours with many common interests but also some differences which could be managed within the framework of the EU's Institutional machinery.

It was I think no accident that real peace negotiations and a truly close partnership between London and Dublin could only finally emerge after a period in which both countries had been fully engaged in the EU for a decade or more. It was also very helpful that the EU strongly supported the British Irish efforts to achieve a peace agreement and helped underwrite this agreement with generous financial support.

Since our accession in 1973, Ireland has been a pro European country and has not developed the same strongly Eurosceptic political approach that has characterised much of British policy since Mrs Thatcher onwards. Of course Ireland was a major net beneficiary of the EU budget and EU structural and cohesion funds were put to good use in developing our national infrastructure. But, I think, it was never EU money alone that contributed to the strongly pro European public opinion. It was the sense that within the EU Ireland had finally succeeded in finding our true voice in the international community and was expressing our hard won national sovereignty in a positive way.

From the mid 1990s onwards when the Irish economy began to grow strongly, through to the unsustainable boom of 2004 onwards, when growth was largely fuelled by a property bubble, Ireland began to take Europe for granted. An unfortunate arrogance crept into our relations with Europe, accompanied by a deepening suspicion at the direction of European integration. Thus Irish voters first voted No and then Yes to the Nice Treaty. And then voted No and subsequently Yes to the Lisbon Treaty. (IMAGE No:24) (IMAGE NO;25)

I don't think these Treaty rejections can, however, be accurately attributed to increasing Irish Euroscepticism. There was genuine concern about the impact of EU Directives and Regulations' on Irish life, about the direction of European security and defence policy and about the creeping involvement of the EU in all aspects of life including, some people mistakenly feared, in sensitive issues of personal morality such as abortion.

Despite these Treaty rejections opinion polls suggested that overall Irish people remained strongly pro Europe and were acutely conscious of the importance of EU membership to the protection and promotion of our national interests in a globalising world.

In our current economic situation, the public attitude towards Europe is mixed. On the one hand there is recognition that our economy, and particularly our banks, are heavily reliant on EU support, particularly liquidity support from the European Central Bank. There is also recognition of the support of our partners in helping us deal with our fiscal crisis through loans from the European Financial Stability Facility.

On the other hand, while many accept that much of our current problems were home grown and included lax regulation and poor policy making, there is also a strong view that there was a problem in the Eurozone which was a common problem. When the Irish economy was booming interest rates were kept very low by the ECB to facilitate German recovery after a prolonged spell of poor growth. This resulted in a wave of cheap money, much of it from French, German and, yes, Belgian banks coming into Ireland.

I think there is a view in Ireland at present that our problems are part of a wider European problem and a hope that this will be properly recognised and taken into account when it comes to dealing with Ireland and other countries in difficulty.

Our new Government which has a strong majority and which is committed to reengaging with our European partners in as positive a way as possible. We want, once again, to participate actively in European debates and discussions and are already preparing for our EU Presidency in the first half of 2013. The Government is also moving fast to tackle the economic situation and has assured Europe and the IMF that we will abide by our commitments in our stability programme, including onerous budgetary commitments. We have already undertaken budgetary adjustments amounting to 14% of GDP, an unprecedented amount for a developed economy. People are aware the further difficult adjustments will have to be made. There are very positive signs in the

export sector where Ireland has the second highest trade surplus in the EU after Germany and will move into current account surplus this year.

The current crisis and the relatively intense national debates over Europe during the last decade mark an evolution in our relationship with Europe. Perhaps we are moving from what was an overly simplistic approach focussed narrowly on a few areas of EU policy of relevance to Ireland to a more sophisticated and pragmatic approach which takes full account of our broad national interest across a range of areas.

Our approach will, I think, always be underpinned by an understanding of the continuing importance of the EU to us economically but also as a means of expressing positively our nationhood and our commitment to the broad ideals of the EU including social solidarity, human dignity and the promotion of human rights.

I have tried during the course of this lecture to give you some understanding of the development of modern Irish identity and culture. If we had more time I could include further remarks on the importance of religion to our identity. There was a time when, for some, being Irish was synonymous with being Catholic. That is no longer the case for a variety of reasons including the colossal scandal relating to child abuse over decades that has touched not only the Church but also the State authorities.

I should also perhaps mention that the history of our involvement with Britain has given the Irish people a natural inclination to identify with the underdog and the oppressed internationally. Ireland was, in 1916 declared to be a Republic and remains strongly Republican to this day.

Despite our economic difficulties we also maintain a highly professional programme of development assistance focussed on a small number of key partners in Africa. We are also a neutral country, a strong supporter of the role

of the United Nations in resolving conflict and the peaceful settlement of disputes. In Ireland there are strong and vocal lobbies in support of the oppressed in countries such as Burma, and in Gaza and the Occupied Territories.

Ireland and Irish identity in 2011 are very different from the Ireland of even 1950s. There are some underlying continuities such as an enduring love of traditional Irish culture and sport. But Ireland today is a more open, tolerant and engaged European country than the State that joined the EU in 1973. Nonetheless our national identity and culture remain marked by our historic experience, particularly colonisation, emigration, the loss of language and the opening up to Europe.

Finally I should stress that what I have given you is probably an over simplistic account which overlooks many complexities. But I hope you have gained some understanding of modern Ireland.

May I leave you with a final image. This is Inis Oirr, one of the three Aran islands sitting in the Atlantic ocean off the west coast of Ireland. Go there sometime if you want to escape modern Europe with all of its trials and tribulations and discover what it feels like to be in another time and another age. It will also help deepen your understanding of Ireland's complex identity.
(IMAGE NO: 26)

Thank you.

