BREXIT AND THE DECOLONISATION OF IRELAND[1]

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One of the achievements of the great historian Ferdinand Braudel and the Annales school more generally is that they provided a far more sophisticated understanding of the interplay between short-term history and long-term history and how comprehending the present often depends on the way we weave together these two narratives. This is essential for appreciating the extremely complex relationship between Ireland and their erstwhile colonising power, the English/British. As an English ethnographer living for 16 months in a small town I call Cuan, on Ireland's East coast, my very presence meant that this relationship would dominate much of my fieldwork. The project concerned the impact of smartphones on older people, the demographic who had themselves lived through some of the dynamic shifts in this relationship. After a while people often greeted me with phrases such as `Oh, you are the Englishman people are talking about'. The fieldwork coincided with the protracted and unprecedented conflicts within the UK parliamentary system and government that meant for the entire period the prospect for Brexit, or whether there would eventually be a Brexit, were entirely unclear. My work consisted largely of finding opportunities to discuss the topics of my research and participate more generally in Cuan life. I plan to write a book about life purpose as well as one (with Pauline Garvey) on aging with smartphones. But for most of my research participants, I primarily represented an opportunity to discuss the topic that was foremost in their minds at the time, which was Brexit.

The long-term history of colonial relations was evident everywhere. Streets in Cuan are named after heroes of the independence struggle, killed by the particularly thuggish Black and Tans. I attended weekly music sessions at several pubs, where many of the songs were based on this same struggle. All three main political parties, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin have their origins in the independence movement and the subsequent civil war. I was quite surprised that no one had actually blown up a monument in the town created by a particularly rapacious colonial landlord and also that some properties still paid lease rents to English landlords. There was every reason why an Englishman should be treated with suspicion and bitter resentment. Behind these events lay centuries of oppression, the famine and prior to that the destruction wrought by Oliver Cromwell in the 17th Century.

In England I was born at a time when the Irish were mainly seen as construction workers or skivvies. Jokes and insults at their expense were commonplace amongst us as schoolchildren. When I first arrived for my project, I had intended to drop into my conversations, as early on as possible, that while I have no Irish ancestry, at least my descendants were Irish – my daughter is married to an Irish man. In my head, this was going to be my ethnographic security blanket.

I expected hostility and suspicion based on history. But in many ways the attitude was quite the opposite. There is a short-term history as well as the long-term. Most people, when they consider the Irish diaspora, focus on the USA. But the main waves of emigration from Ireland in the 1950s and 1980s were to the UK. The US 2016 census found 125,840 Irish born citizens, but the UK 2001 census found 869,093 Irish born citizens. Today, around 10% of the UK population believe they have Irish ancestry[2]. Many people in Cuan have family in the UK, often married there. In contemporary England, in stark contrast to my childhood, being Irish is cool. There is a positive appreciation of Irish novelists such as Anne Enright and Sally Rooney, a top band for 2019 was Fontaines D. C., Guinness and Irish whisky in pubs are favoured and most people today speak of the Irish as warm, funny and

genuine. In turn, I found in Cuan, that many of the newspapers are local versions of UK papers. One lecturer admitted it was difficult to teach a class unless he could claim allegiance to one of the English premier league football teams. People watched the same TV serials such as Line of Duty and Bodyguard mostly bought the same brands as I did in London. Even with respect to the long-term history this was the region of Ireland with closest ties to England and people generally avoid the topic of who fought on what side and when. A region where historical loyalty to the British crown was probably stronger than in other parts of Ireland.

After a while, the issues I felt needed further investigation was not any opprobrium, but rather that the English were sometimes viewed in a rather more positive light than I could make sense of. The negatives were mostly directed at Northern Ireland. Almost inevitably when some criticism was made of the people of Northern Ireland, the individual would add `the Catholics are just as bad', though that might have been added largely because I was present. I was thoroughly enjoying a current TV series called Derry Girls based on Catholics in that region, but few shared my enthusiasm. What lay behind such remarks seemed to be that in Cuan hardly anyone talked about politics. They were generally comfortable with the largely centrist governments that they had become used to, though there would be complaints about the health services and housing[3]. This apolitical stance was contrasted with Northern Ireland, which was viewed as remaining intensely political. The distinction bolstered the sense that the south was more civilised, a civility that they perhaps shared with the English. I can only speculate, but I also came to feel that it is not simply that colonialism creates antipathy and recent relations are the source of the more positive appraisals. Many studies suggest that colonialism itself tends to create a post-colonial ambivalence[4], which in this case would have incorporated a prior, partly regional, ambivalence. This is then likely to play out in later history, such as in the response to the post-2008 recession. What was not surprising was that my research participants had a very complex view of the English, which included both the ambivalent legacy of this long term colonial history, post-colonial response and the very different impact of the last few decades. Generally, people assumed (incorrectly) that I would share their more positive opinions. People were shocked that I was not especially interested in the British Monarchy as a daily soap opera, and many other aspects of English culture I was not especially au fait with.

Ambivalence about the English often arose through humour. At the end of 16 months I held a farewell party in a pub for around forty of my research participants. During the party one of them came up and said to me `Of course we came to celebrate, we are getting rid of a Brit without wasting a bullet.' As an Englishman I was the butt of various jokes, but my sense was that these jokes expressed affection, a willingness to include me, rather than take aim behind my back. The most consistent negative that people sometimes shared with me was an overall sense that the English could not and should not be trusted. Of relevance here is that the more positive stereotype was respect for the English as people who generally managed to get things done quite effectively. This was the more specific element that was about to change.

The primary evidence for all these claims lay in the views that people took over Brexit. As just noted, Brexit was what most people wanted to discuss with me, time and again during my fieldwork from 2017-2019. This was seen as a far more absorbing topic than Irish politics. It was an asset to the ethnography, allowing me to exchange my opinions on Brexit for theirs on ageing, smartphones and life purpose. People from Cuan had every reason to be extremely concerned about Brexit. An assessment from the Irish Central Bank suggests that the economic consequences for the Irish economy could be as bad as those for the UK[5]. People paid great attention to the complex discussions around how trade would be impacted by Brexit. Around 11% of Irish exports go to the UK and around 23% of Irelands imports come from the UK[6] But perhaps more significantly around

85% of Irish sea freight passes through the UK.[7] The people of Ireland had just passed through a devastating recession, there were tales of suicide in Cuan brought on by that period. They were only just in recovery and the fear of another economic downturn was palpable. It was hard to imagine how on earth Ireland would fare economically in the case of a no-deal Brexit. Concerns were expressed about specific commodities or agricultural produce and their dependency upon exports. They could discuss these in considerable detail.

This wasn't, however, the main cause of anxiety. Cuan is not far from the Northern Irish border, and its population included some families who had settled there to escape from the `troubles'. The possibility that Brexit might lead to a hard border with Northern Ireland was terrifying. Most people felt sure that violence would inevitably follow. This would reverse what has been the very positive emergence of a fluid boundary, where people in Cuan would think nothing of crossing the border to take advantage of the fact that medicines where cheaper there, to give just one reason. As just noted, there were already prejudices about Northern Ireland that played into those fears.

Almost everyone in Cuan saw themselves as having done pretty well out of being within the European Union. It was viewed as contributing considerably to their economic success. Today people in Cuan have generally higher incomes and better welfare than their equivalents in the UK. This is the foundation for a positive sense of themselves as European, as additional, rather than in any way detracting from their identity as Irish. It is likely that a strong European identity also contributes to this release from the prior colonial identification with the British. Simultaneously, many people in Cuan were learning Irish language (though it is never used in casual conversation). The primary sports remain the GAA that is Gaelic Football and Hurling. I often went with friends to listen to Irish traditional music. Most of the Cuan pubs included a weekly trad music session. Being European had become taken for granted as now an integral part of being Irish. The political posters vied in their promise to work for Ireland in Europe. In my research about their use of smartphones[8] it was clear that many people appreciated that it was only through being within Europe, that could they be included in forces powerful enough to make an impact on the major corporations such as Facebook and Google, to limit what many people now regarded as the corporations' overweening power. They simply couldn't use apps on their smartphones without agreeing to terms and conditions that seemed to go well beyond anything justifiable. This could only be contested by Europe. The same would be true of other fields of power such as climate change, which requires agreements made by much stronger global forces that merely the Irish republic.

For all these reasons the Brexit vote appeared as incomprehensible. How was it that the English didn't `get it,' with regard to the benefits of European membership? Why would a country simply shoot itself in the foot? These started as questions as soon as the vote occurred. But this situation was not static. The 16 months of my ethnography coincided with a period when the news broadcasts on a daily basis simply reinforced the sense that the British government, led by Teresa May, was spectacularly inept. But then the failure of the UK's parliament to come together to oppose Brexit seemed just as stupid. Why had the opposition such an ineffectual leader at such an important moment in political history? Similarly, why had most newspapers taken up a stance of self-congratulation around a trajectory, that seemed from Irish perspectives, to be just digging an ever deeper hole. Month after month people watched with jaws wide open, what seemed like farcical political shenanigans. The original reaction thereby developed bit by bit into a general sense that the English seemed both inepter and basically more stupid, than anything or anyone had previously given them dis-credit for. The subsequent denigration was given `more in sorrow than in anger.' Instead of being the object of suspicion, I was the recipient of sympathy. Again and again, I tried to

reassure people that, there was no way Brexit would actually happen and if it did, it would surely be just tokenistic - which was my own mistaken belief.

Of course, there was no absolute homogeneity in opinion. I did meet people who congratulated the English on their perspicacity in this positive rejection of Europe, but this was extremely rare. People I worked with who lived in social housing generally held different views from the core participants of mainly reasonably comfortable retirees. Brexit also meant the return of earlier negatives. The British could not be trusted, as once again they were treating the Irish with a mixture of ignorance and contempt, clear in the many British ministerial pronouncements about the likely impact of Brexit. There seemed no understanding at all in the UK of the genuine fear of violence and recession that was felt in Cuan.

At the end of the 16 months I came to some conclusions. The first was that postcolonial Ireland included an ambivalence about the English that had become still more complex as a result of more recent encounters. But the second, less expected finding, was that I had been present in Ireland at the time when at least one dimension of this, which was a generally positive appraisal of the English as effective and able to get things done, was rapidly going into reverse. Perhaps the one silver lining of Brexit, was that it had been the catalyst for this change in perspective in how the colonised understood the coloniser which may prove an important contribution to the long-term decoloniation of Ireland. Since by the end of the ethnography most people seemed to have come to the conclusion that the British were at least as inept and stupid as any other population they might encounter. Perhaps, after all, colonialism had nothing to do with any particular qualities of the English, but actually had been no more than an exercise of brute force.

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[2] For this point more generally see Hickman, M 2014

[3] People feel that the recent success of Sinn Féin in the last election is misinterpreted abroad as having historical connotations, when it was largely a protest against what was seen as the complacency of the centrist parties.

[4] Fanon is generally viewed as opening up these questions of post-colonial ambivalence, an issues which is much discussed in more `culturalist' perspectives on the emergence of modern Ireland e.g. Howe , Kiberd 1995 or for the short term response to the recent recessions. Free and Scully 2018. Or for another approach see Moane 1994 on Postcolonial Psychology

[5] https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/publications/quarterly-bulletins/quarterly-bulletin-signed-articles/dealing-with-friction-eu-uk-trade-and-the-irish-economy-after-brexit-(conefrey-and-walsh).pdf

[6] https://www.thejournal.ie/amount-ireland-trades-with-the-uk-4745788-Jul2019/

[8] Garvey, P and Miller, D (forthcoming) Ageing with Smartphones in Ireland.