

NAMING IRELAND OR HOW NOT TO PUT YOUR FOOT IN IT

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I was born in Dublin, the capital city of Ireland. Ireland is an independent republic and has been fully independent since 1949. Ireland has its own constitution, its own diplomatic service, its own army, its own postal service, its own stamps and its own airlines. Ireland has been independent for 56 years. Ireland has been a member of the European Union since 1972. Ireland is a neutral country and one of the few European Union countries that are not members of NATO. But despite all this, I find there is a lot of confusion about Ireland in this country.

When people here see me they immediately realise that I am a foreigner. But on learning that I am from Ireland, they immediately put their foot in it by treating me as a) English, b) British or c) from the United Kingdom.

The aim of this talk is to help people not to put their foot in it when talking to Irish people. If we look at a map, we will see that Britain or Great Britain is a geographical area consisting of a large island, which is divided into England, Scotland and Wales. The English are British, the Scots are British and the Welsh are British. They all carry a British passport. However, only the English are English. The name Great Britain was first used in a political sense after the second Act of Union, between Scotland and England and Wales, in 1707.

The United Kingdom is the short form of the longer name United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. It is not a geographical term; it is a political term. The name was first used in a political sense after the third Act of Union in 1801 when the Irish parliament was joined with the parliament for England, Scotland and Wales in London and the whole of the Britain and Ireland became a single state. However, since the independence of the Republic of Ireland in 1949, the term United Kingdom refers to the political state that includes the countries of England, Scotland, Wales and also Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom does not include the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man. These islands are dependencies of the British Crown and they have their own parliaments, their own laws and their own tax system.

The British Isles are all the islands that belong to Great Britain, including the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Hebrides, the Isle of Wight, the Scilly Islands and many others. Ireland is independent, it is not part of Great Britain, and so therefore it is not one of the British Isles.

Finally, the Commonwealth is an association of 53 independent nations and dependencies of the British Crown, set up in 1931. Most of the member states of the Commonwealth used to be part of the British Empire. All the member states recognise the British monarch as head of the Commonwealth and have special links with the United Kingdom and with each other. Some of the 53 member states are: Australia, Canada, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malta, Jamaica, Kenya, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, South Africa etc. Ireland is not a member of the Commonwealth.

Ireland is a divided country. The southern part is an independent republic and its official name is the Republic of Ireland. The capital is Dublin. The northern part is called Northern Ireland and is usually (but not at the moment) an autonomous region of the United Kingdom. The capital is Belfast.

Let's focus on Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has always been different from the south. To understand this we will have take a look at the history of Ireland. From the eleventh century onwards, the Norman kings of England were interested in invading Ireland. The first of the Anglo-Normans crossed over in the middle of the 12th century

but only managed to establish their power in Dublin and the surrounding area. Little by little, these Anglo-Normans integrated with the native Irish population and despite many attempts by the English kings, the English influence never went much beyond Dublin. This only happened in the middle of the sixteenth century under King Henry VIII, who had a more ambitious policy to control Ireland (after the Reformation). Henry made deals with the native Irish chieftains but he did not send settlers over to live in the country. When Queen Elizabeth I (1558 - 1603) came to the throne, however, this policy changed and English adventurers arrived to exploit Ireland's resources. Small English colonies were established in the provinces of Leinster and Munster (not Connaught as it was considered too poor, not Ulster because it was too mountainous, too rugged and too wild).

The first attempts to colonise Ulster failed miserably. It was under the Stuart dynasty in the first half of the seventeenth century that this changed and Ulster was colonised by sending over English and Scottish "planters". These new planters were Protestant, they were given land in Ulster and they came in large numbers. This was the point when the character of Ulster began to change. The native people lost their land, there was much bitterness and there was no integration between the planters and the native population. This then is the origin of the two communities in Northern Ireland. It is important to realise that this happened four hundred years ago. It is not a modern phenomenon, as many people here believe.

After the plantation of Ulster, more repression followed all over the country, especially around the time of the English Civil War in the 1640s. Atrocities were committed and by the middle of the seventeenth century, Ireland had been subjugated to English rule. Very severe laws were passed to repress the Catholic population. However, the Irish identity was not crushed and the culture continued to flourish.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were many insurrections and rebellions, and different attempts to achieve constitutional independence for Ireland, by both violent and peaceful means. However, the situation remained basically the same, that of a divided people, a minority Protestant ruling class and a politically powerless Catholic majority.

In the twentieth century, things began to change. During the Easter Rising of 1916, Republican forces took over important buildings in Dublin and proclaimed the birth of the Irish Republic. The rebellion was crushed after about a week, the leaders surrendered and were executed. At this point it all starts to get very complicated, but eventually the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed by Michael Collins in 1921. Ireland was to be divided in two: the twenty-six southern counties were to become the Irish Free State and the six northern counties were to remain closely linked to the British crown. There followed a terrible Civil War between those who accepted the Treaty and those who did not. The side that supported the Treaty eventually won the Civil War. Ireland has remained divided ever since.

Northern Ireland was created as such in 1922 and when the south became a full republic in 1949, Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has had a troubled history as a result of deep cultural and religious divisions within the population. The majority of the population (about 60%) are from the Protestant tradition who are descended from English and Scottish settlers who first arrived in the seventeenth century. This is important. We are talking about a cultural group that has been living in the area for four hundred years. The other main cultural group are from the Catholic tradition and make up about 40% of the population of Northern Ireland. Note that I talk about "cultural groups" and "the Protestant tradition" and "the Catholic tradition". Obviously, the problems between the two communities are not so much religious as cultural (or maybe we could even say ethnic). There are two distinct communities in Northern Ireland, Protestant and Catholic, and two sets of

traditions. These two sets of traditions may seem very similar to people here in Catalonia, but to the people of Northern Ireland the differences are real.

The citizens of Northern Ireland have the right to dual nationality. They can carry a British passport or they can carry an Irish passport. This gives rise to strange situations. People from Northern Ireland can stand for election in Great Britain (the most famous example is Bernadette Devlin in the late sixties but there have been many others). People from Northern Ireland can also stand for election in the republic and at the moment the president of the Republic of Ireland, Mrs Mary McAleese, is from Northern Ireland. Another famous person from Northern Ireland is the Nobel prize-winning poet, Seamus Heaney, who also carries an Irish passport.

Ulster is not the same as Northern Ireland. You see references to “Ulster” in the newspapers, you hear it on the television and the radio, and people talk about the “Ulster problem”. But this is incorrect. Ulster is a geographical area and Northern Ireland is a part of Ulster. In the whole of Ireland, there are four provinces: Leinster in the east, Munster in the south, Connaught in the west and Ulster in the north. There are 9 counties in Ulster. Of these nine counties, six are in Northern Ireland (Derry, Antrim, Fermanagh, Down, Tyrone and Armagh) and 3 (Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal) are in the Republic of Ireland. So it is incorrect to refer to Ulster when we mean Northern Ireland. We can talk about Ulster to refer to the accent, the vocabulary, the sense of humour, the traditions, the gastronomy of Ulster, but not as a political term.

What is Northern Ireland? It's not a state. It's not a country. It's not a nation. It is not a province, because as we have seen, one third of the province is on the other side of the border. We are left with the rather unsatisfactory word “region”. It is interesting that there is no proper word. Northern Ireland has not yet defined itself.

Now that we are on the subject of Northern Ireland, let's talk about Derry. If you say “Londonderry”, you are probably putting your foot in it. Derry is the second largest city in Northern Ireland. The name comes from the Irish word “*doire*” which means “oak grove” (“*roureda*” in Catalan). The first reference to a city called Derry dates from the sixth century. The city was first called Londonderry in the early seventeenth century when a large number of English Protestants settled on the north coast of Ireland. The Catholic community in Ireland, north and south, never accepted the name Londonderry and they have always said Derry. In 1984, the name was officially changed back to Derry.

Now let's go on to another subject where people often put their foot in it when speaking to the Irish.

What is the difference between “Gaelic” and “Irish”? “Gaelic” is a word that is often mis-used here in Catalonia. Catalans are obviously very interested in the other minority languages of Europe and I am frequently asked about the subject. The languages spoken in Ireland are English and Irish. We don't say the word “Gaelic” when we are talking about the Irish language, we say “Irish”. When we say “Gaelic” we refer to Scots Gaelic, the language of Scotland.

I have to admit that I do not speak Irish, despite the fact that Irish is the one of the official languages of Ireland. Everything official is written in English and Irish, the street signs, the names on the buses, the passports, the government publications. Children learn Irish in schools. I myself learned Irish in school for one hour a day every day for ten years, but I do not speak Irish, even though I was a good student. How is this possible?

Irish was spoken all over Ireland until the middle of the nineteenth century. It was not encouraged by the English administration but it was spoken by the people. However, by the end of the 1860s the English language was taking over the whole country. In the

mid-nineteenth century there was a terrible famine, from 1845 to 1848. In the space of one decade, the population of Ireland was reduced by two million. It is said that one million people died, and another million people emigrated to England, America, Canada, and Australia. Irish people now looked abroad for hope and for the future. The Irish language was seen as a handicap... if you were going to end up emigrating, it seemed wise to learn English and to teach the children English. Irish was associated with poverty and lack of opportunities. Irish started to die in the middle of the nineteenth century, that is 150 years ago.

So the situation is not at all comparable to anything in this country. You cannot compare Irish with Basque for example, because Irish started to die out a very long time ago. After Ireland became independent, the Irish language was reintroduced into Irish schools but for many people, it was too late and for them, Irish was a dead language. For many people, it was a bit like learning Latin.

Irish is still spoken in small areas along the western coast of the country. However, at the moment, there is a new interest in the Irish language in the cities. It is not very widespread, but there are quite a few Irish speaking schools starting up for a variety of reasons in Dublin and other cities. Some educated people, who are interested in their own language and culture, choose this type of school while other people look for a better quality education for their children with smaller classes and more dedicated teachers.

Many Irish people also have a sentimental, romantic approach to the Irish language. We know it is a very important part of our national cultural heritage. We respect Irish and we respect people who speak Irish. In the national psyche, there is a tendency, right or wrong, to consider Irish speakers as the “real” Irish, as somehow more Irish than the people who do not speak Irish. But many Irish people do not actually speak Irish.