

“Progress”: Ireland as Experienced in 1982 and 2013

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During the fall semester, 1982, I was on sabbatical study leave from SUNY Potsdam and was researching the roles of “contemporary global studies” in the secondary school curriculums of the West German state of Hesse, of the Netherlands, and of England and Wales.

I had a comparative education base on which to build. Previously, in the 1971—72 academic year, my family (wife, very young daughter, and infant son) lived at Chester, England, where I was a full-time faculty member of the Education Department of then Chester College (now the University at Chester, with 16,000 students and doctoral programs). It is in the lovely, ancient, medieval, and “dream-come true” city of Chester – for an American student/teacher/scholar of European history, a treasure.

At the end of my research program in ‘82, I enjoyed the hospitality of English and Welsh college faculty friends at Chester, my “home-away-from home”. The opportunity arose for me to spend a week with “a friend of a friend” who had been Masters students together. When asked, “Ron, how would you like to visit Ireland?” My initial thought was “of course”. Then I thought of “The Troubles” – and the dangers that I might encounter. But, my reply slipped out: “When?” “Well, let’s find out.” Ken phoned his college friend in Northern Ireland. The single phone call was sufficient: dates and times were set; directions for traveling by train within the Irish Republic to the border with Northern Ireland were shared, including “make sure that you descend at the last stop in the Republic – where I’ll meet you – don’t cross the border on the train – there was ‘an incident’ there a couple of weeks ago – I’ll tell you about it, after you’ve arrived”.

Next question: whether to tell my family, safe in the U.S., about what I was about to do – or, to wait until later, about what I had done?

Suddenly, in my mind, Germany, the Netherlands, England, and Wales seemed, “sedate”, comfortable, and unchallenging. How to pass up experiencing Ireland as the guest of an Irish academic, to have lodging in his

and his family's home, and to experience daily life in a country I had not yet visited?

The travel was varied: BritRail train from Chester across North Wales to Holyhead; by ferry across the rough Irish Sea to Dun Laoghaire; suburban train into Dublin; by train, north, "just to the border"; and with my new Irish friend, by car across the border and back into the United Kingdom, namely the Northern Ireland part of the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland".

"Kevin" was a lecturer (or "professor", in American usage, but not in British or Irish, where a professor is someone holding an endowed chair – or equivalent status) at the leading university in Northern Ireland. He lived with his mother and sisters. When they were younger, they had lived on a farm in The North, but at the border with The South (*i.e.*, the Republic of Ireland). It was at the height of The Troubles.

One evening, his father was asked to store explosives, presumably gelignite, in the milk house; he refused, explaining that he had a young family and couldn't get involved. A short time later, the questioner returned -- and killed (or "executed") Kevin's father on site.

The farm could not be maintained without him, so the family sold it and moved into town. Some years passed.

At dinner that first evening for me in Ireland ("Ireland" can refer to the whole island) were Kevin, one of his visiting "sister sisters" (a.k.a., nuns), and I. I thought it strange that the mother was not eating with us, but was told that she was busy in the kitchen. Throughout the meal, she served us – and was silently curious about me. Later, I learned that it wasn't because I was an American, but that I was the first Protestant ever to stay in their home, that of a Catholic family.

"The Troubles" was the common name for the economic and political conflict in Northern Ireland that was related to denominational differences – and that was an extension of the centuries' old attempt (to the 17th century) by some Irish and by the British to retain the island for the U.K. -- and the attempt by most Irish to have the island be "free". It followed decades of various movements for "home rule" in Ireland and became fierce again in the 1960s with bombings of churches, civic buildings, military facilities, trains, private homes, shops/stores, and elsewhere – mainly in Northern Ireland, but

also in the Republic and in England. “Savage” is a word frequently used to refer to the cruelty, the unpredictableness, and the maiming and killing of innocents. The Troubles was a period of organized urban and rural warfare versus the British Army and the Northern Ireland police force. For the next thirty-plus years, over 50,000 persons were casualties, including 3,530 killed outright and 47,000 injured, including by kneecapping.

The Troubles are sometimes characterized as being denominational: Roman Catholic versus Presbyterians, Baptists, Anglicans, and other Protestant groups or persons.

Sometimes the characterization is ethnic: the Irish whose roots had been in Ireland for centuries *cf.* the Irish whose ancestors had come from Scotland beginning in the 17th century.

Perhaps a more apt characterization is socio-economic: large landowners versus tenant farmers; owners and managers of industries and businesses versus factory, shipyard, and other workers; secondary school educated persons versus the under-educated. One example, among many, was the horrific, Great Famine, 1845--1852, with one million have-nots starving and another million emigrating from Ireland -- by absentee English and Scottish landlords, with grains being exported and “the Irish economy ‘maintained’”.

In Belfast and Derry (or Londonderry), it was urban neighborhoods versus adjoining neighborhoods.

One day, at Kevin’s university, I was offered as a guide a “mature student” (a British and Irish term meaning someone usually over thirty) who was a city native and who could drive me through some of the warring neighborhoods. One parent was Catholic and one was Protestant. There was one condition: if, or rather, when, we were stopped by the military, the police, or other combatants, I was to do the talking. “Your American accent will keep both of you from danger. Everyone here has an Uncle Michael in Boston or an Aunt Mary in New York!”

We saw a group of five or six young teen-age boys being chased down side streets by running and bent-over British soldiers with their fingers on their guns’ triggers. We were passed “over the line” repeatedly by armed persons, familiar with the process – and the criteria. We saw – and sometimes heard – armed persons on rooftops. We passed burned-out homes and other buildings. In short, they were modern, urban war zones.

Another day, I was the “guest from America” in an upper elementary school. The building was new, *i.e.*, post-World War II, and was built on a large, gently upward-sloping mound surrounded by a wide “moat” of grass, completely encircling the building. It was a “state school”, *i.e.*, a school not run by a denomination, but by the government. The “visiting American” is a role that I have enjoyed, whether it be in India, Macedonia, the Netherlands, Guatemala, or elsewhere. Everyone learns.

During the Q & A in one classroom, with all the pupils wearing some semblance of the school uniform, there were some of the usual questions, until one of the smaller boys raised his hand, stood-up beside his desk, and politely said, with his beautiful accent (to my ears), “Sir, how do American children deal with all the violence they see on American telly [television]?” I stood there wondering what to say? From where did the question come? What was the real question? How to promote, not degrade, international – or, at least, intercultural -- relations? What to say in truth, and with kindness?

Here I am, in Northern Ireland only a few days, and overcome with my thirst to see and analyze, while at same time dealing with my own emotions.

My hesitation was noticed by the classroom teacher – and I was saved by her. I do not remember the contents of what she said. I do remember being grateful to her for having understood the boy’s question -- and how best to respond to it – which I could not.

At the end of one day at the university, Kevin told me that we were going home by a way of a friend’s house and family. I thought, cheerfully, “oh, good, some more real life experiences.” We drove through the suburban neighborhood with brick “semi-detached” after “semi-detached” houses. We parked the car and rang the doorbell. The father of the young family answered the door – from his wheelchair. Soon, his wife and their young children were engulfing us: Kevin and the American guest. We were offered “tea”, which is less about tea and more about a meal late on an afternoon. We enjoyed carefully prepared, homemade sandwiches, cold meats, cakes – and good, Irish (pardon the redundancy!) beer. The young father shared the family account:

A year or two previously, he, wife, and children were at his in-laws’ home for Sunday afternoon, tea, and the early evening – a very Irish practice, of inter-generational families, to the delight of all concerned. The front doorbell rang – and he being the most fit and/or closest, went to the door, opened it,

and was greeted by masked men who shot bullets through both of his kneecaps. He had major surgery, but is wheelchair-bound, for, he was told, the rest of his life.

A few days later, there was another ringing of the doorbell. His father-in-law answered it, only to be told, “We’re sorry. The other day, some of our ‘boys’ had the wrong address. We’re terribly sorry.”

So, decades later: summer 2013. A forced change in my plans. Where to go? A guided tour of some place in Europe, which I’ve visited or where I’ve lived on eighteen different trips? I’ve always been the one “giving” the tours, not taking them. But, it would be nice to visit Ireland again, under the assumption, “I understand that it’s changed.” Retrospectively, good decision!

Two weeks. Twenty-three other Americans and Canadians. One excellent, informative, diplomatic, humorous Irish guide. One miracle-performing Irish bus driver and a new 48-passanger German luxury coach (*i.e.*, bus). Nice local hotels. Emphasis on mingling with the natives. Irish food that is unavailable in many North American “Irish” pubs and restaurants. Music: Irish bagpipes, voices, tin whistles, drums, harps, legends, loves, tragedies. . . . Landscapes of – and for – poetry.

The city of Derry/Londonderry (with signposts showing both names), once horribly “divided”, now peaceful and welcoming the tourists – as is and does Belfast. Crossing the national borders by car, one really does not know where the national lines are – and the only evidence being the change in the color of the centerlines. Free exchange of goods. Free movements of persons. The “all-Irish” national rugby union team at a World Cup recently not wanting to sing both national anthems (the Republic’s “Amhrán na bhFiann”/“A Soldier’s Song” and the N.I./U.K.’s “God Save the Queen”) and deciding to sing, instead, “The Rose of Tralee”. The Republic and The North (through the U.K.) both being members of the European Union. The Republic choosing to use the Euro as its currency.

Today the Republic is an independent, self-governing country. Northern Ireland is one of the four parts of the U.K. It is a “solution” that does not satisfy everyone, but there is no bloodshed.

Why do I share this? Because, as a social studies teacher and teacher educator, much of the content of my subject centers on disputes, differences, wars, and “the hard realities of history”. Yet, perhaps we should focus on what

brings, results in, or contributes to justice and peace. We teach too much about war-making and not enough about peace-making.

In the Irish example, it was persistence by mothers (more than fathers) tired of losing their sons – and daughters – and grandchildren – to the point of becoming angry, organizing, protesting, marching, picketing, and birthing a more civil world.

There was a significant American contribution in the person of former U.S. Senator (Maine) George J. Mitchell, too unheralded in the U.S. Tirelessly – and smartly, creatively – he worked with other individuals, organizations, churches, politicians, and others in Ireland – and with Irish Americans in the U.S., a not insignificant factor. The result was the “Good Friday Agreement” that was approved in 1998 by voters in the North and separately by voters in the Republic. Among its provisions: 1) Ireland will become a united country of the whole island if and when a majority of the voters in Northern Ireland and separately a majority in the Republic wish it; 2) the British and Irish governments will implement those wishes at that time; 3) until then, the internal government of Northern Ireland is “shared” or, by another term, is a “coalition” of different and differing political parties, with the need for agreement among political parties before action can be taken – thereby requiring “widening the circles”; 4) and a North—South Council and a U.K.—Ireland Council, for dialogue and growth.

Since 1998, conditions have improved and the agreements have been updated to reflect those improvements and to continue in directions of peacefully obtained social, economic, and political growth.

Thus, it was with joy that I walked the streets of Belfast in August 2013, alone and without fear. But, beyond the removal of a negative, are other consequential gains: a young generation for whom The Troubles are stories told by their elders -- some stories that now seem unbelievable – with somewhat the same amazement that I see in my own SUNY Potsdam students when we discuss the ethnic/racial inequities in America and the 1960s’ and 1970s’ civil rights movements and gains. “How could you have been so stupid?” is a question that any new generation can ask – and in asking manifests “progress” for us.

One of the many beauties of the isle of Ireland, in addition to its landscapes and seascapes, its friendly, incredibly hospitable, and emotive people, its music and literature and dance, its calming “in-touch-with-life-ness”,

and its quality academic scholarship, is its modeling for us of how to traverse from war to justice and peace. When considering Israel and Palestine, or Iraq, or Afghanistan, or dozens of other places, I wish for more Mitchell-like Americans. To study and to teach how to create peace with justice, ultimately, at a minimum, is as important as is studying war, be it in inter-personal or international levels. The schools have a vital role in the endeavor.

April 21, 2014.