

THE GREAT CITIES / **DUBLIN**



DUBLIN

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and the Editors of Time-Life Books

With Photographs by John McDermott
and Laurie Lewis

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Cover: Atop a lamp-post, the wrought-iron tendrils of a shamrock, Ireland's national emblem, frame an ivy-clad façade in Dublin's Merrion Square. The houses around the square were built in the 18th Century for the Anglo-Irish aristocrats who then dominated the city's affairs—and who remained the ruling élite until after the First World War.

First end paper: Gleaming like candles on an altar, brass beer pump handles in one of Dublin's five hundred or so pubs offer promise of the city's most famous refreshment—a foam-capped "jar" of locally brewed Guinness.

Last end paper: Drawn by a pair of spritely stags, Diana the Huntress adorns a ceiling at Belvedere House, one of the 18th-Century mansions that gave Dublin its reputation for architectural splendour. The house was later converted into a Jesuit boys' school, and it was here that the young James Joyce won first prize for English composition.

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The Chameleon City

Seen from the sea, Dublin keeps you guessing up to the last moment. There is a lighthouse, a factory chimney, an office block, and the squat cylinder of the city's main gas-storage tank. The rest, until you are close, is a long, low line of shadow, like an unpromising mirage. To the left rise the green and purple mountains of County Wicklow; on the right stands the complacent hump of the northern promontory, Howth Head. You could not be expected to guess, if you did not already know, that between these two bosomy outgrowths of rock is spread Ireland's capital city, 45 square miles of asphalt, stone and brick containing some 750,000 souls—nearly a third of the Republic's population and a similar proportion of its man-made grandeur. None of this is evident from the sea lanes. Judging from all the outward signs she displays, Dublin might not be at home today.

She is at home, as you see once you disembark—at home, and trying on an outfit from her roomy wardrobe, matching her appearance to the season and the colour of the sky. There are days of bluster and cold drizzle, when the streets glower in a mantle of black and grey. There are days of blue and gold, when the great public buildings of the 18th Century luxuriate in their mellowed splendour, and miles of more modest houses warm to intimacy as their fabric breathes in the sunlight. And there are days in between, when Dublin changes a dozen times to match successive, subtle gradings of the atmosphere. Like many of her inhabitants, Celtic and mercurial, she is a bit of a chameleon.

It is the variety of costume, and the many facets of her citizens, that make me nervous in approaching the subject. The printing process will in due course efface the tremolo of my handwriting, but it will not alter the apprehension I feel on trying to convert a capital city—a complex amalgam of past, present, people, passion, peace, war, pedantry and *badinage*—into a few thousand words of print. The problem applies to any city but to Dublin, I think, more than most. For one thing, the bars and garrets of Dublin are crowded with writers, each with a ready portrait of his native town, each primed to snap like a trap on literary trespassers. And there are other snares. Compared with London, Paris or New York (each of which has a population at least ten times greater), Dublin is small, compact, and neatly circumscribed: by sea to the east, mountains to the south, and pastures to north and west. Smallness being easily taken for simplicity, Dublin invites dogmatic statement and generalization. It seems on first sight to be a nice, assimilable, pocket-size town that behaves, like a model railway, exactly as one thought it would. Any package theory about

Silhouetted in the sunlight of a bright December day, Christmas shoppers crowd Grafton Street, where many of Dublin's most fashionable stores and shops are located. Dubliners enjoy frequent interludes in their jaunts to the area—exchanging gossip over coffee in Bewley's Café, the tall building to the right of the bus, or over something stronger in the many nearby bars.

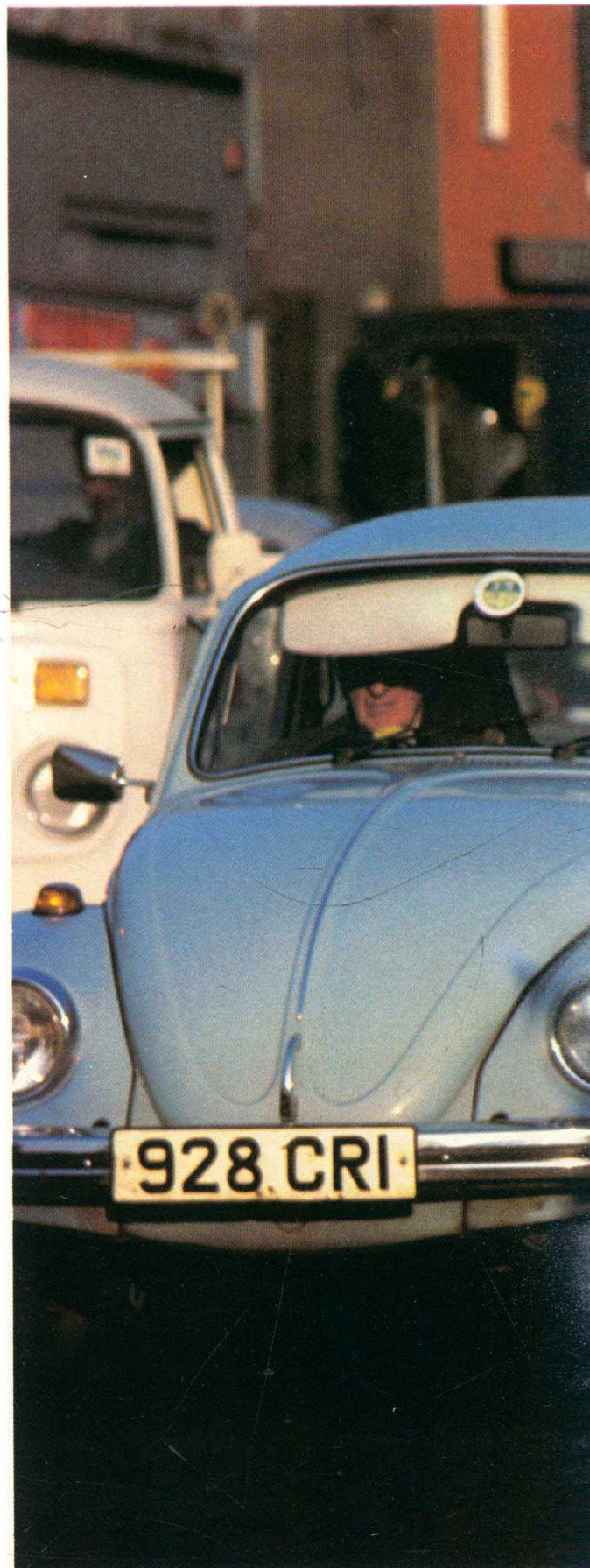
it can be supported by evidence on the ground. Any visitor will find his picture of the city fits neatly into the nutshell of reality, and he may well go away unaware that this particular nutshell happens to contain an infinite number of kernels.

Of one thing there is no doubt: Dublin's greatness is a palpable quality, not subject to the whims or bias of the observer. No one would deny that the city has been a nursery of great literature, nourishing some of the most distinguished and influential writers in the Western world: the poet William Butler Yeats, holding reality up to the myriad facets of his tirelessly analytical mind; the novelist James Joyce, subjecting Dublin—and through it mankind—to the cynical lens of his mental microscope; the playwrights Richard Brinsley Sheridan, John Millington Synge, Sean O'Casey, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde; the clerical satirist Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*; Bram Stoker, creator of *Dracula*; Brendan Behan, in his short life almost a walking definition of Irish blarney; and scores more.

The accomplishments of Dublin's writers are rivalled by those of her architects. Buildings as grand as any in Europe break the skyline on either side of the River Liffey. In its eastward flow through the city, the river passes within half a mile of almost all of them. Kilmainham Royal Hospital, four-square and stately, dominates the western approaches of Dublin as it has since 1684. Closer to the centre, on the north-bank quays, stands the massive 18th-Century Four Courts building, Ireland's judicial headquarters, with its four chambers radiating from the central lantern-dome.

On the other side of the river, and on high ground, is Christ Church Cathedral, the oldest building in Dublin, dating from the 12th Century and—thanks to 19th-Century restoration—a still-sound Gothic colossus flaunting its pinnacles and flying buttresses. A second cathedral, St. Patrick's, rises a quarter of a mile south of Christ Church, and presents a less florid, more endearing profile, though it was begun 20 years after its elevated sister. Down river, and again on the south side, is the baroque dome of the City Hall, distinguished more for size than beauty; and behind it are the rambling courtyards of Dublin Castle, built by successive British viceroys in an assortment of styles, so that bald medieval stone towers abut on the mannered redbrick of the 18th Century.

Half a mile downstream, the broad artery of O'Connell Street leads north from the river, to end at the curved colonnade of the Rotunda—18th-Century assembly rooms that now contain a theatre auditorium and a cinema. Opposite, on the river's south side, but hidden from it by workaday buildings on the quays, are two of Dublin's prime monuments. The Bank of Ireland, originally built to house Ireland's parliament, presents a dramatic sweep of columns, bone-white from their first cleaning in 1977, and leads the eye to the focal thoroughfare of College Green; opposite, the long grey façade of Trinity College hides two spacious quadrangles and a treasury of architecture and sculpture. Then, before





Trapped in a changing world, a cart-driver tries to manoeuvre through a Dublin traffic jam. Horse-drawn carts were commonplace in the city until the 1960s.

the river flows through nondescript docks and outskirts to the sea, there rises on the north the crowning glory of the Custom House, massively domed like the Four Courts, but in a lighter, more feminine form.

Like many women of the Irish countryside, Dublin is a great beauty wrapped in a tattered shawl. Between the peaks of her grander buildings, alongside green parks and exquisitely proportioned rows of houses, are troughs of slumland, bleak wastes disfigured by huge advertising billboards hiding half-fallen or demolished buildings that nobody has the will or money to replace. Most of the grandeur dates from long before 1921, when the Irish won their independence after more than seven hundred years of English rule. The care in erecting buildings, in framing vistas, in conjuring settings to please the eye was the achievement of English settlers and their descendants, a foreign plant that is now dying as the iron of its hothouse rusts and the glass falls and breaks.

Modern Dublin sometimes seems blind to its heritage. Eighteenth-Century buildings, which in England or almost anywhere in Western Europe would be swathed with notices advertising their history and times of opening, here remain tattered, patched, crudely adapted to new functions. All over the city, 18th-Century façades are obscured, or their proportions mangled, by neon-lit plastic signs. Even the columned quadrant of the Rotunda is partly obliterated by brash advertisements for the films being shown within.

Over front doors, plaster saints or images of Pope John and President Kennedy (both of whom would be sainted instantly if it were left to an Irish vote) look out from semi-elliptical or rectangular fanlights whose designers would have deplored such visual clutter, let alone the religious sentiments. Old men in raincoats snore on iron seats skilfully wrought by Victorian craftsmen. Beneath converted Victorian gas lamps, beside huge cast-iron post-boxes still bearing the letters VR, initials of the Queen under whose dominion they were erected, above cobbles and antique granite pavings—some of them chipped away, flake by flake, by masons to accommodate decorative coal-hole covers—Dublin passes unheeding. To the despair of aesthetic purists, Dublin refuses to turn herself into a museum. She is more heart than head, and antiquarians can go hang.

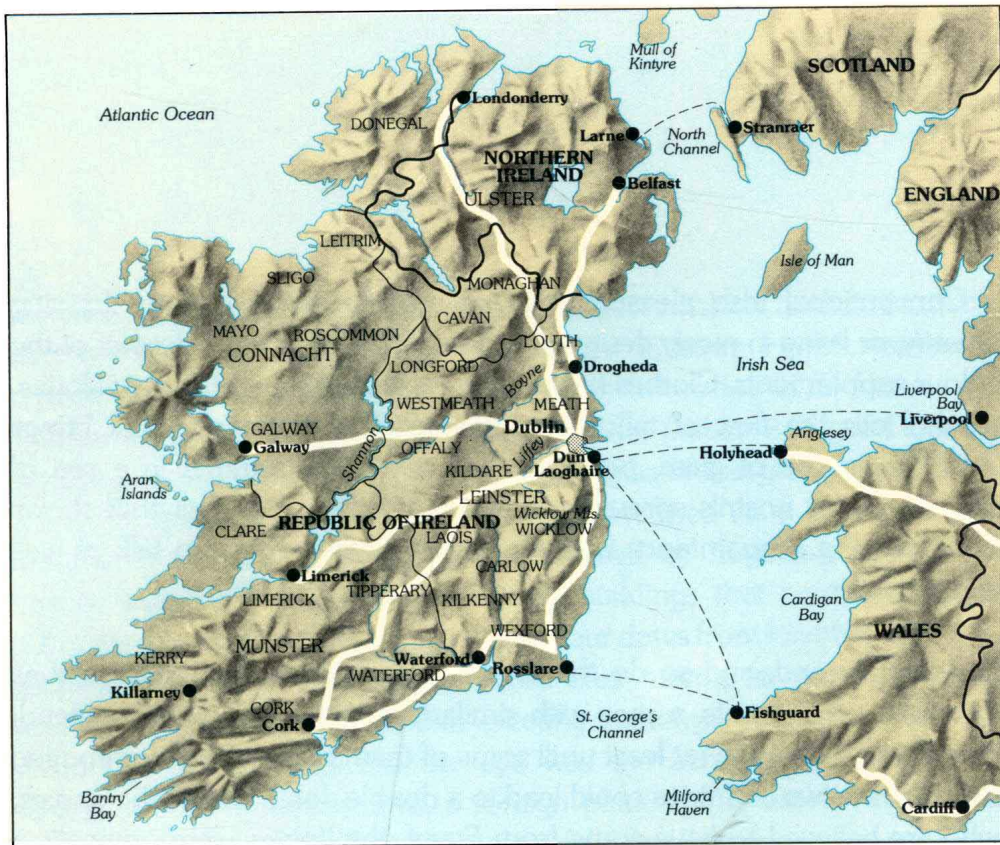
But there is a perverse and unintended taste in the tastelessness of the place. Dublin's lack of style is in itself a style. Certain sights and smells seem to be eternal, incontrovertible, essential to the city's character: the reek of stale beer emanating from pubs and of urine from under bridges and decrepit gateways; the tetchy moodiness of winds that rise suddenly from torpor and blow papers and bags and discarded cigarette packets across open spaces, around corners, or up into the aerial suspension of invisible whirlpools; a pervasive untidiness and a universal leavening of dirt, noted by travellers for centuries. The phrase "dear, dirty Dublin", first coined by a literary hostess of the 1830s, has stuck.

Conventional Irish pleasures do not include eating well or dressing smartly, or living in nicely designed rooms. The Irish are the despair of the colour supplements. Clothes keep out the weather, food replaces calories, alcohol oils the flow of talk, no matter whether the vessel that brings it to the lips be of glass, pewter or tin. A mouth islanded in a sea of stubble, under nostrils sprouting tufts of bristle, under hair that shows but a passing acquaintance with the comb—that mouth can talk as well as any other.

Beggars abound, and so do the tinkers, also known euphemistically as travellers or itinerants, a race with similarities to the gipsies of England, but cut off from them (at least until some of them realized that commuting between the two countries could lead to a double dole). Unlike the gipsies, who are believed to have come from Egypt, the tinkers were originally a wandering people of the Irish countryside, and their language, Shelta, developed from Gaelic, the ancient language of Ireland. There are about 200 tinker families in Dublin, and more than half are on-the-road, sly, weather-beaten roughs with a sullen manner of pleading; “chancers and tramps,” an Irish writer, Ulick O’Connor, called them, “who’d lift the froth off your pint if you didn’t keep your nose well in over the edge of the glass”.

Yet, in my middle-class and heartless way, I find them colourful—as I do the other members of the Dublin scene: the drunks and monks, the madmen and evangelists, the pompous new gentry and the visiting priests from faraway lands whose worried looks reflect the difficulty they have in squaring squalor, filth and a pervading unkemptitude with their image of a holy city. England has no town that offers such a range of personal curiosities, though it must have had many in Chaucer’s or Hogarth’s or Dickens’ days. Dublin is usually a little behind the times.

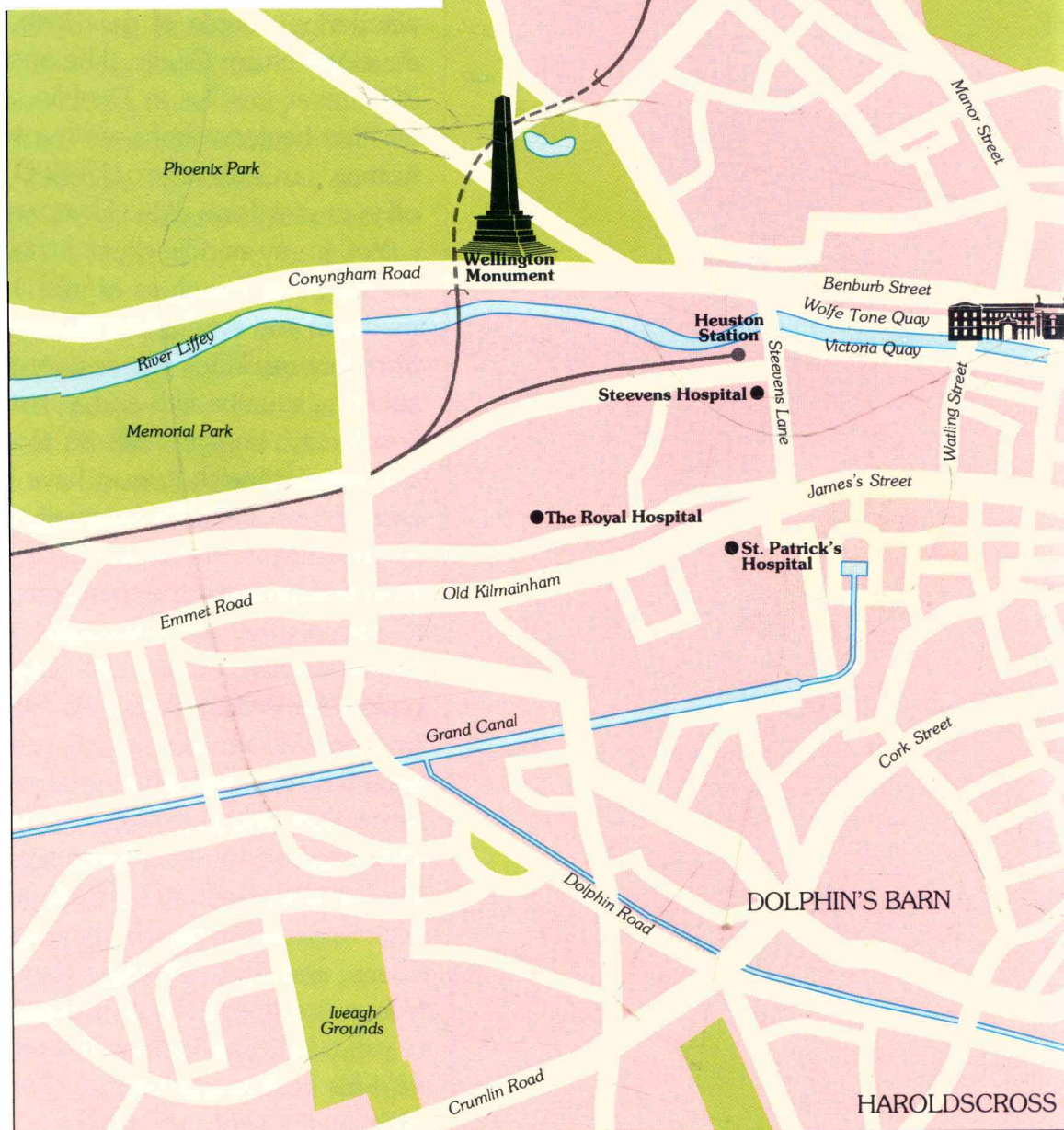
Any of those artists would have made much of Dublin, though today, from boardrooms and municipal offices, a brave new world is threatening to sweep away the nonconformities of the place. Eccentrics, for which Dublin is justly famous, are not quite what they were. There is no one to replace Sir William Wilde, the father of Oscar, most brilliant of Dublin-born wits. Sir William was an eye specialist who succeeded in worsening the squint of Bernard Shaw’s father and rummaged in cemeteries for his researches into phrenology; it was said of him that his nails were always dirty because he was always scratching himself. There were others, too, like the 18th-Century Lord Montagu, who to please his mistress spent his mature years aping the imagined conduct and style of an emperor of China; and Buck Whaley, a dandy of the same period, who once jumped from a first-floor window into his carriage seat and travelled to Jerusalem to win a bet; and George Robert Fitzgerald, who on his estate in Galway kept his obstreperous father chained to a pet bear, and hunted rabbits at night by the light of torches.

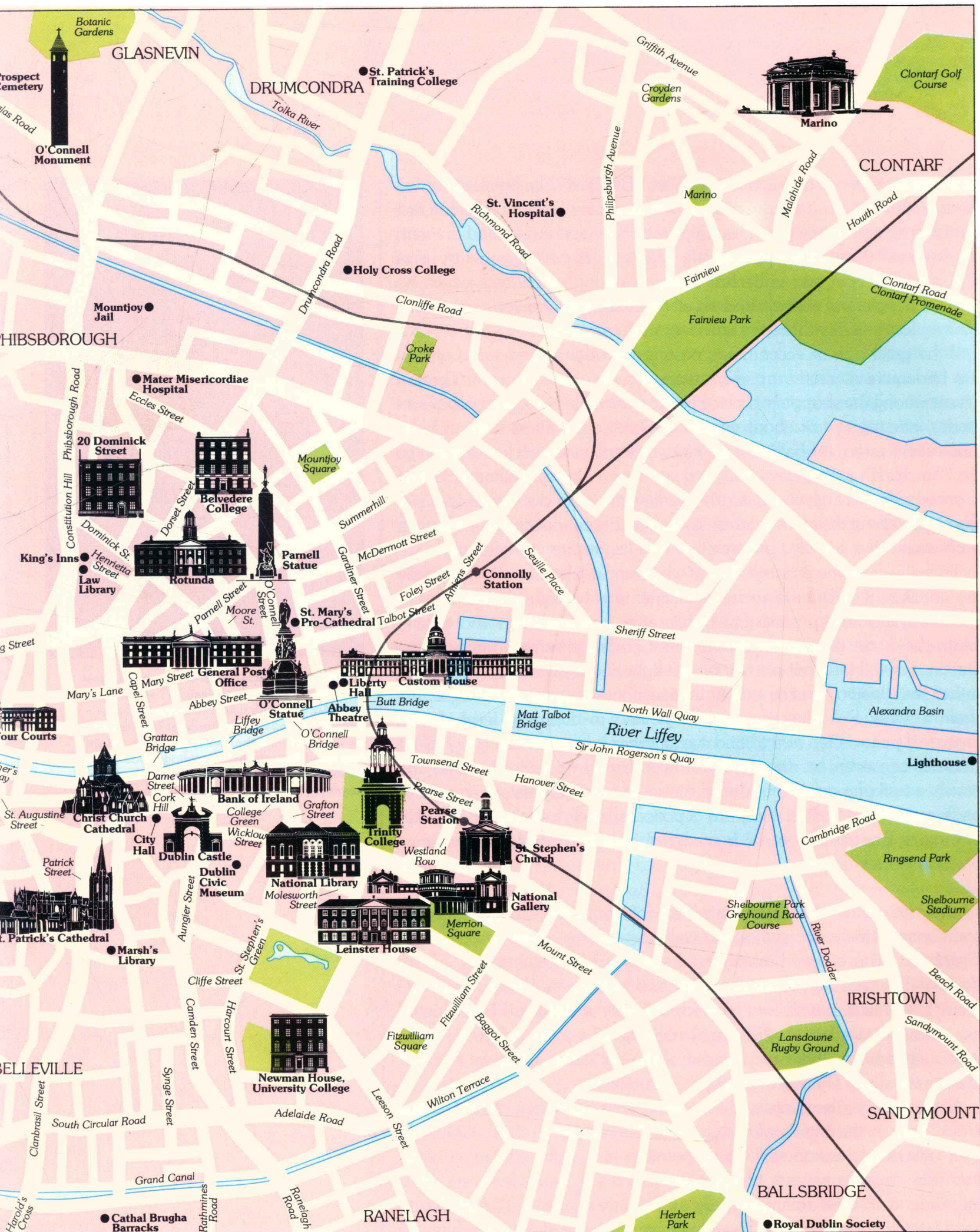


A Pocket-Sized Capital

Dublin, capital of the Republic of Ireland, is situated just 60 miles across the Irish Sea from Great Britain (inset map above), at the mouth of the River Liffey. Founded as a garrison and trading-post by Norse invaders in the 9th Century, Dublin fell to another set of invaders—the Anglo-Normans—in 1170, and for the next 700 years it was the centre of English power in Ireland. In spite of threats from neighbouring Irish chieftains, the new settlers quickly consolidated their hold, and by the 18th Century Dublin ranked as the second city of the British Empire. It was during this period that Dublin acquired its wide streets, splendid squares and grand public buildings (large map).

Although the modern city has expanded to some 45 square miles, it retains much of its original charm and intimacy. Rivers and canals (blue), once used for transporting goods inland, still trace their way through the city, and public parks (green) offer Dubliners a variety of delightful breathing spaces.





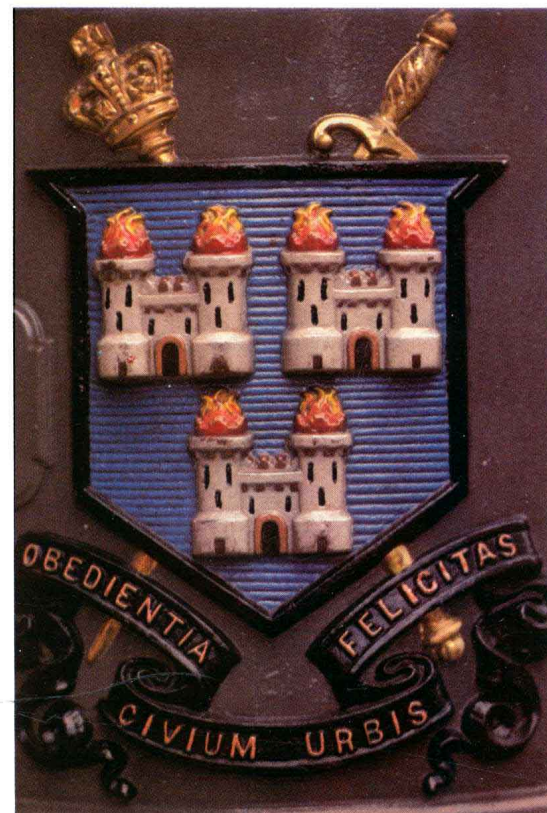
Some lived in our own century, such as “The Bird” Flanagan, as he was always known, who once pretended to steal a ham (which he had in fact paid for) to experience the thrill of a police chase and arrest; and the man known as Endymion, who paced the streets in his white flannel trousers and black tail coat and undersize bowler, carrying sabres with which he saluted people and statues, and an alarm clock and compass with which he frequently verified that the sun rises in the east.

If the great age of eccentrics is past, lesser oddities remain in plenty: the harlequin character, no more than 30, who loafs about in Grafton Street among the shoppers, his face painted with multi-coloured cubes and circles, offering to talk about singularly high-brow matters with anybody who cares to stop; the bald 60-year-old who sits on a bench in the green by St. Patrick’s and on a frosty morning exposes a cheery smile and naked bronzed torso to any who pass; the gentleman in an over-large grey suit who walks about the city’s south side, animatedly conducting some private orchestra with a sensitive outstretched fore-finger, humming loudly.

True, these are the pickings, figures who stand out because the multitude are not like them. But the average Dubliner is not a natural conformist. It was the coincidence of a visit to Dublin after a stay in clean and orderly Switzerland that showed me the welcome, common-sense anarchy of the Dublin crowd. Here, people rely on eyesight and agility to cross the road rather than waiting beside empty intersections until the traffic lights tell them to walk. Publicans are not always strict in observing legal closing time; and police often turn a blind eye to minor infringements. A prevalent disorder can even be discerned in the everyday noises of Dublin—the banshee wail of a newly introduced model of bus, the insistent screech of badly maintained brakes, the sirens of police, ambulances and fire brigades that make one suspect there is no emergency but merely an excess of bravado in their drivers.

I have not written so far in much fear of contradiction. These sights, sounds and smells are sufficiently well accepted to satisfy Dickens’ Mr. Gradgrind, who believed in facts and statistics and nothing else. I have perhaps betrayed my affection for the city in the way I have presented them; and that is as well, for I have loved Dublin as long as I have known her, and that is a fact too. But my Dublin is not yours, and yours is not your neighbour’s. Under the façades of the palpable Dublin we see and feel are the many Dublins of illusion and imagination.

At the airports, the quays and the railway stations, microcosmic Dublins arrive daily in the minds of visitors. The English fortify their notions of their own Anglo-Saxon stolidity by pointing out, with told-you-so nods, the more feckless aspects of the natives and the handsome, enduring monuments to what was principally an English regime in Dublin during the 18th Century. The French see holiness writ large in the churches and



Dublin’s coat of arms, seen here on a lamppost, dates from the reign of Elizabeth I and is a reminder of British rule. The castle shown in triplicate is believed to represent Dublin Castle, built in 1204, and the flames above the towers may recall fires started by raiding tribesmen in the Middle Ages. The motto reads: “The city’s happiness depends on the people’s loyalty.”

the proliferation of ecclesiastical collars, monks and nuns. Liberal Germans sigh longingly at the apparent viability of a race of happy natural individualists so notably in contrast with the efficiency of the teutonic homeland. Americans find the fun, wit, charm, generosity and blarney their guidebooks have predisposed them to find.

There are those of any nation who, brought up on literary fancies and tales of Liffey water—often falsely described as the secret in Ireland's famous creamy dark stout—come prepared for a kind of Nordic lotusland on the banks of the River Guinness. They are here, in a sense, to see an allegory, a symbol of some innocently hedonistic corner of their minds. Others expect smiling eyes and loquacious good cheer, a better wit than Limehouse or Brooklyn fosters, pretty girls with green eyes and russet hair, and heart-stirring dirges wafting from bar doorways. They will find them. The seller of shoe-laces will say, "That'll be eight pence, if you have it"—as if it doesn't matter if you don't—and the memory will eclipse all less favourable impressions. "Tea?" says the grocer, who also sells tobacco, paperback thrillers, apples and Catholic literature. "Tea? And it gettin' cheaper by the hour. You're on a winner there." The Guinness will go to their heads, and they will unload the cargo of their minds to some bar-propper who will nod with the same rapt attention he would pay to the prophecies of John the Baptist. And in the afterglow—for them—all Dublin will be bathed in the light of that memory. Some will come looking for a kind of 18th-Century sanctuary, for stucco ornaments, fan-lights, wing staircases and everything to admire in a Palladian paradise. The physical refinement of the Age of Enlightenment is there to be seen, and if you choose to, you can blot shoddier products out of your mind. Still others will be hunting the Celt, the procrastinating, begorra-ing, impish, yarn-spinning stage-Irishman; and he too, in spite of vehement denial by serious nationalists, is ubiquitous.

I am reminded of that relaxed Irish aphorism, "Sure, the man who made time made plenty of it"; and of the bus driver who recently arrived an hour late to take a group of us to some seminar in the country. He was balding, but such hair as was prepared to grow floated in waves to his shoulders. He dismounted and stooped before us in abject penitence. Then, with both arms, he made the most eloquent gesture I have ever seen. Not a word did he say, but you could read that gesture like a book. It said: I am emptied, good people, drained of the energy to tell you of it all, of the trials and tribulations I've had to face getting here, the traffic-jams, accidents, road-works, hold-ups, hijacks, the hail and blizzards, the earthquake here and the tidal wave there. Accept my word, my contrition. Sure to God, nothing but His divine intervention would have got me here at all.

The driver had not opened his mouth, and the June day was dull and uneventful. Yet I swear we all felt, as we climbed into the bus, an ineffable pity for the man who, his gesture convinced us, had been to hell and back

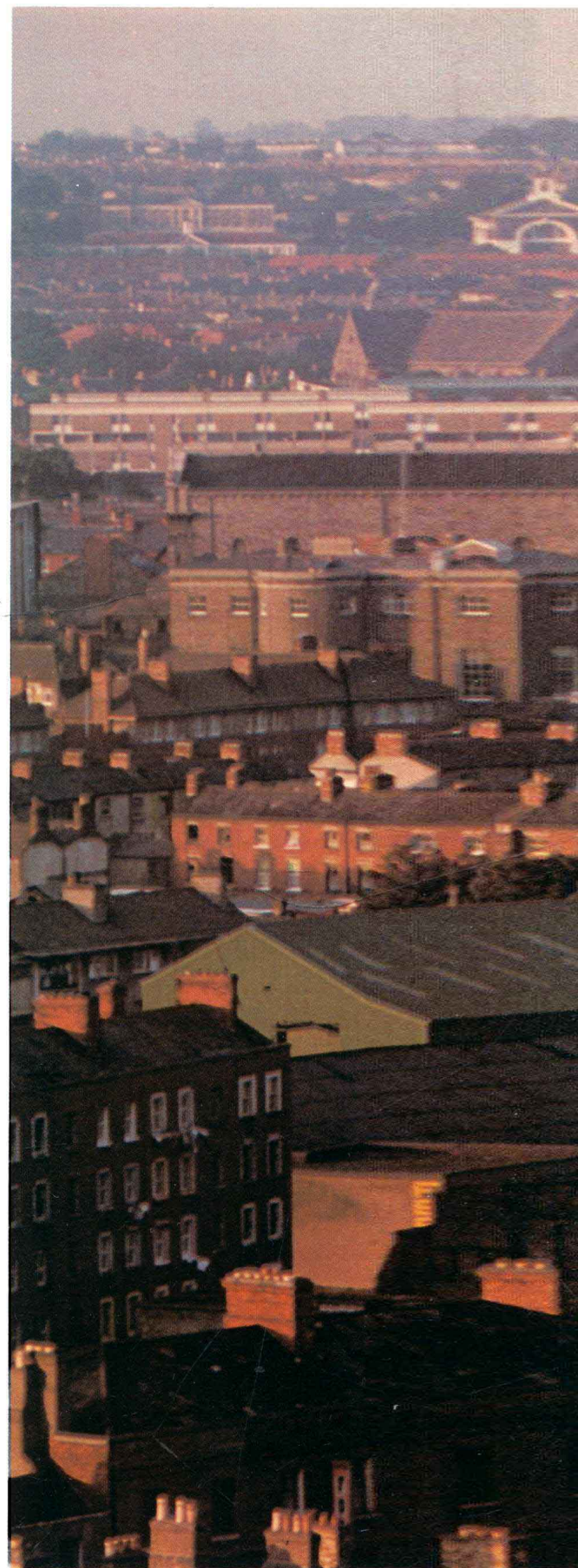
for our service. If such characters—and they abound—are stage-Irishmen, then Dublin is a theatre.

My own first acquaintance with Dublin was attended by illusions of another kind, though I suppose I have felt, in my time, each of those referred to. Indeed, I doubt if anyone has so earnestly tried to fit the square of his imagination into the round hole of Dublin as much as I. My blood is all Irish, but I was born and bred in England, and from these circumstances I derive a mild schizophrenia. Part of my childhood was passed in north London, where my Catholic Irish father taught in a school run by Jesuits, St. Ignatius' College. My world then was partially formed by priests with Irish accents—my father's colleagues—and boys with Irish names. In a sense the school was part of the Dublin Diaspora, a piece of Ireland adrift in an ocean of English suburbs. I pictured the real Dublin as the Holy City, and peopled it with the kind of pipe-puffing Jesuit I knew—stern, aromatically patriarchal, dustily flesh-denying. Many wore spectacles with thin, dark, round frames, and they spoke with quiet modulations savouring, so it seemed to me, of sadism and sanctimony, which I took to be the ingredients of holiness, and an important part of the Dublin mix.

These were early and somewhat vague impressions, although no less strong for being so. Then something more important came to shape my expectations of Dublin. When I was 13, luck and a precocious enthusiasm for Samuel Johnson (that loquacious 18th-Century essayist who, as it happens, despised the Irish: “a very fair nation—they never speak well of one another”) got me a scholarship to Eton, a rather grand boarding-school for what is left of the English aristocracy and those who aspire to it, certainly not for the likes of me.

My primary concern there quickly became a matter of hiding my origins. North London's redbrick avenues were no match for the manors and mansions of my schoolmates. I learned a little cunning, and Dublin—and the Lehané clan's ancient homeland in County Cork—adopted new roles in my life. I spun tales of a ruined family castle (having little idea at the time that one actually existed) and descent from the 11th-Century Celtic High King Brian Boru (quite groundless). I picked up a little Irish history and sniped at my colleagues with snippets of English colonial oppression. There was no fear of contradiction, since the English have never voluntarily paid attention to Ireland, and most know nothing about it whatever. If, as sometimes happened, they became angry, so much the better for me. I was raised from the status of an underprivileged compatriot to the equality of an alien.

My knowledge of the virtues of the Irish grew, since these were useful weapons. Their weaknesses I ignored. Confronted with hackneyed English jibes at the Irish—that they were an illiterate rabble, prone to drink and brawling—I learned to counter, correctly, that of the half-dozen most distinguished “English” dramatists of the last two centuries, at least four





Viewed north-eastwards from the city centre, Dublin stretches towards Fairview Park. The city is expanding to meet a population growth of nearly 10,000 a year.

were Irish; that of the 10 most distinguished generals anyone could think of in English history, more than half were likely to be Irish-born, including the Duke of Wellington, Lord Kitchener, and more recently Field-Marshal Montgomery of Alamein and Alexander of Tunis; and that in ancient times Ireland had helped to keep Christianity alive when her neighbours were overrun by barbarians—a time when many of my high-born companions' ancestors were drunken freebooters, snoring on skins in the frigid caves of Scandinavia.

Dublin, in other words, was becoming an escape, none too firmly based on any reality I knew. My earliest visits were short enough to preserve the image intact. My first prolonged adult visit put it more to the test, and there were days when I seemed to see only dirt, poverty and a smugly bourgeois self-satisfaction. Dublin was holy, to be sure—if holiness is to be judged by the real estate occupied by churches, monasteries, church schools, seminaries and mission headquarters. It contained a higher proportion of nuns, priests and monks to laymen than any place I knew or know; but many of these were so rubicund and portly that they suggested links with Boccaccio more than St. Antony. There were other disillusionments. Some people had charm, were late for things, smiled and often embroidered street directions with winsome similes: a street might be “long as a hare’s leg”, so long in fact that “ye’ll wear out a couple o’ pairs o’ shoes on that one”. But many of these Dubliners used their qualities to evil purpose, like the landlord of one flat I occupied. He belonged to the Knights of Columbanus (a Catholic fraternity named after a 7th-Century Irish missionary) and was thus a pillar of society. Nevertheless, he produced every ruse and hyperbole from the manual of stage-Irishry to deflect my complaints about vermin: he extolled the merits, agility and cunning of fleas so insistently and effectively that I became a flea-admirer and wrote a book about them.

I soon began to discover the constricting qualities that had driven many of Dublin’s natives, including some of her greatest writers—James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw—into voluntary exile. I heard residents venting their own frustrations. Dublin was a totalitarian state, under the tyranny of her archbishop or of a smug and obscurantist prime minister. Dublin was still run by British imperialism, under the disguise of a lick-spittle Irish government; or, on the other hand, Dublin had been misgoverned by a corrupt and vengeful caucus ever since the Irish took over government from their old masters in 1921.

The Irish seemed greatly to enjoy malicious gossip. No Irishman, somebody has observed, will say anything about you to your face that he would not prefer to say behind your back. The novelist Honor Tracy wrote that members of the race “are great ones for rescuing those they have previously drowned”. “If a Dubliner,” a resident historian has claimed, “is told any city in the world is as malicious as his, he is seriously put out.”