The Clod and the Continent: Irish Identity in the European Union

by Fintan O'Toole

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less..."

(John Donne, Devotions, XII)

1.

In Charles Hepworth Holland's recently published The Geology of Ireland , we learn that the island is almost literally torn between two continents. Four hundred million years ago, Ireland lay at the point where the part of the earth's crust on which North America now sits was sliding underneath the part that supports Europe. Bits of the two continents were pushed together somewhere around the middle of Ireland. In the south and east, the underlying rock belongs to Europe. In the north and west of the island, the ground beneath your feet belongs to the North American Plate. In this, tectonics gives unexpected support to the way most of us experience being Irish at the beginning of the 21st century. We have one foot in Europe, the other in America.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, a new kind of rhetoric about Ireland's place in the world began to be heard from senior Government politicians. A notion that had been consigned to the fringes of political debate for the previous thirty years was now being given a kind of official sanction. The idea that Ireland was somehow ill-fitted to the European Union, that the EU was indeed a threat to the core of our historic identity moved from the margins to the very centre of official thinking.

The Tanaiste and leader of the Progressive Democrats, Mary Harney, spoke of how "Ireland was spiritually closer to Boston than Berlin". The Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands Sile de Valera, in a speech welcomed by the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, complained that "directives and regulations agreed in Brussels can often seriously impinge on our identity, culture and traditions". Mary Harney again, when Ireland's budgetary policies were rebuked by the EU Commission, went on radio to say that "I hope everyone wears the green jersey on this and stands together to defend our economic success", implying that the green jersey, as a symbol of Irish national identity, was a coat of armour against the assaults of the hostile Europeans.

This rhetoric was extremely vague, and it became an embarrassment when the same Government had to go out and urge the electorate to vote for the Nice Treaty. No one seemed able to identify precisely which Brussels directives were undermining our identity, culture and traditions. Yet the very vagueness had its own power. It identified an anxiety that, because it could not be pinned down, seemed to wash over almost everything. They sound we were hearing was a kind of background noise, a subliminal muzak emanating from a hidden speaker that insinuated itself into our brains. The message was clear enough - the authentic Irish culture looks westwards rather than eastwards. It has visceral connections to the United States, but merely pragmatic ones with continental Europe. Imaginatively speaking, Ireland should be at least a thousand miles further out into the Atlantic. The natural pull of our desires is away from tired old Europe and towards the New World. Or, as a character in Sebastian Barry's

play Prayers of Sherkin puts it, "Do you not feel that this island is moored only lightly to the sea-bed, and might be off for the Americas at any moment?"

Coming from such official governmental sources, this rhetoric is new. But it draws on ways of thinking that are deeply rooted in Irish political, social and economic history. Politically, there is a long tradition of seeing everything bad as coming from the east - England, in Wolfe Tone's famous formulation as "the never failing source of all our ills" - and hope arising in the west - America as the place where Irish people could free today and promote Irish freedom for tomorrow. Socially, the vast Irish diaspora in the US has created a set of familial connections far stronger than anything that has ever existed between Ireland and Germany or France. Economically, of course, American capital and American corporations have driven Irish modernisation to an extraordinary degree. Talk of being closer to Boston than to Berlin may be a rhetorical conceit, but it presses all sorts of buttons.

What must not be missed, nevertheless, is that the agenda here is not really about culture and identity. It is about politics - specifically the difference between the centre-left and the centre-right. The point that Mary Harney was really making in the speech about Boston and Berlin was, as she put it herself, that "our economic success owes more to American liberalism than to European leftism." What we

have here is a very clever, and quite subtle, attempt to suggest firstly that cultural identity includes a political and economic ideology, and secondly that the free market ideology of the Right is a much more genuine and authentic expression of our national culture than "European leftism" could ever be. Milton Friedman is one of us; Jacques Delors is a foreign meddler.

The first part of this suggestion - that cultural identity cannot be divorced from economics and politics - is entirely true. The second is a strange and rather strained ideological conceit invented under pressure from two specific problems for the Irish centre-right. One of these problems is the mis-match between on the one hand the rhetoric of nationality that remains important for right-wing parties everywhere and on the other the reality that the economic system they promote - global capitalism - is deeply destructive of both the nation state and the whole notion of cultural distinctiveness. The other is the mis-match between the kind of policies that centre-right parties employ in Ireland and the kind of policies they urge on the EU as a whole.

For transnational corporations, cultural homogenisation is an important aspect of economic globalisation. Tony O'Reilly put it succinctly in a speech a few years ago when he remarked that "the communications revolution and the convergence of cultures have set the stage for truly global marketing." The mass

media's obliteration of the difference between one culture and another also obliterates the differences in taste and aspiration that form a barrier to the global marketing of products: "Television will further homogenise the cultures of the developed world. It will in turn generate the cosmopolitan aspirations best satisfied by global brands. The capacity for transnational production is available… The final step in the process will be mass communication. And the technology of satellite and cable TV will make that possible."

This is the dilemma for the centre-right parties in Ireland. On the one hand, their entire economic strategy is built on facilitating the transnational corporations which openly work to obliterate national and regional cultures. On the other, especially for Fianna Fail, a sense of national distinctiveness is an essential part of its electoral appeal. It presents itself as the representative, not of this or that class or economic interest group, but of, in the title of Charles Haughey's collected speeches, The Spirit of the Nation.

The other contradiction that the centre-right has to deal with is the disjunction between domestic and European policy. As a small economy within Europe, Ireland has traditionally emphasised the need for the rich to help the poor. The very large injections of money from the Structural Funds in the 1980s and 1990s flowed from the success of this appeal - in other words from the very "European leftism" that Mary

Harney decries. There was always a contradiction between this appeal to the European left on the one hand and the pursuit of centre-right policies at home on the other. Being street leftists and house rightists was always just a little awkward. But the benefits were so obvious that the discomfort could be ignored.

In the late 1990s, however, things changed. The Irish boom set the State on the path to becoming a net contributor to rather than a net recipient of EU funds. The "European leftism" for which we were damn grateful a few years earlier when Jacques Delors's vision of a social Europe meant them giving lots of money to us, could now be dispensed with. The old contradiction could now be resolved by adopting essentially the same anti-leftist rhetoric in European affairs as in domestic affairs. What was now needed was a clear sense of distinction between the Irish social and economic model and the European one. But instead of setting the David of Ireland against the Goliath of western Europe, it made more rhetorical sense to recruit an even bigger giant onto our side of the argument. Thus the notion that our authentic social identity is really American.

As a way of trying to get out of the ideological bind of the Irish centre-right, the "Boston not Berlin" rhetoric is quite smart. Only when you try to tease out its implications does its inherent absurdity become clear. What it does is to try to get around the contradiction between national distinctiveness on the one hand and the

culturally homogenising effect of American-led globalisation on the other by suggesting that what is really distinctive about us is that we are, in fact, American. By defining distinctiveness as being a matter of what makes Ireland stand out from the rest of the EU rather than from a blandly homogenised global culture, it makes the intensely Americanised nature of contemporary Irish culture into the most authentic expression of who we are: Yanks'R'Us.

The deepest well-springs of our culture, tradition and identity, it turns out, lie in our affinity with America. Bizarre as this position might seem, it is the only sense in which a statement like Sile de Valera's claim that "directives and regulations agreed in Brussels can often seriously impinge on our identity, culture and traditions" can actually mean anything. They impinge on our identity, culture and traditions because our identity, culture and traditions lie with American liberalism rather than with European leftism.

This is a very strange concept but it is, again, one which fits into a certain kind of historical mindset. The most resonant definitions of identity in Irish history have usually been negative rather than positive. Samuel Beckett's famous joke when asked if he was English - "Au contraire" - in which Irishness is simply the opposite of Englishness had a great deal of history behind it. Equally, the most visceral expression of the other mainstream identity on the island, Ulster Protestantism, has long centred on what it is not:

Catholic. In neither case was it necessary to provide a complex, dynamic expression of identity. All that was needed was to reverse a stereotype of the other side. The whole notion of who one was tied up in a set of interlocking, and mutually re-enforcing, stereotypes: Irish Catholics were spiritual people not in thrall to material things or lazy bastards who wouldn't do a day's work if they could help it. British Protestants were hard-working and hard-headed or joyless bastards without imagination. From whatever perspective, the best way to define "us" was "not them".

One of the reasons why, for all its patent absurdity, the Boston-not-Berlin theory of Irish identity seems to work is that it operates in precisely this well-worn way. It uses our supposed American affinities not as a positive statement but as a purely negative one: we are not like those European leftists. It thus seems, at one and the same time, to both acknowledge the context of economic and cultural globalisation, and to suggest that it is not a problem, since at its heart our own culture already belongs to the newly dominant American nexus. Only when this negative is turned around and examined for its positive content - being authentically Irish means being utterly American - does it appear as the hollow nonsense that it is.

The ultimate irony in all of this, of course, is that being Americanised does not even make Ireland distinctive within a European context. If there is a common European popular culture

now, it is American movies, TV and music. If there is a common EU language from Berlin to Bari and from Stockholm to Seville, it is American English. Rambo and Mickey Mouse, Buffy and The Sopranos, Kurt Cobain and Britney Spears, are, for better and worse, as deeply woven into the fabric of French and Italian and Swedish and Greek as into Irish culture. We may, for historical reasons, be somewhat more American than the rest of them. But America is the common cultural currency of the EU just as surely as the euro is the common monetary currency.

2.

The fear of Europe is sometimes configured as a culture war declared by a shallow urban Ireland on the deeply-rooted rural heartland, in which the job of destroying our distinctiveness is being done by a huge fifth column of self-hating, deluded Irish people. A certain kind of analysis - developed most prominently by Desmond Fennell and John Waters -- generates the sense of resentment on which it depends by seeing the urban majority of actual Irish people as what Waters calls "native settlers" oppressing the natives. He goes as far as proposing in all seriousness that there is systematic racism in Ireland - practiced by modern Ireland against its own traditional culture:

"The most visible forms of racism in Irish society are not even regarded as such, but there is no other explanation for persistent attacks on the Irish language, on nationhood, on particular forms of expression or behaviour, than a deep and abiding racism directed at aspects of ourselves which are unapologetically Irish. This condition is the manifestation of the disease of racism, bequeathed us by centuries of colonisation and abuse."

There are all sorts of absurdity at work here: the way an important term like racism is rendered meaningless; the confusion of criticisms of nationalism with attacks on nationhood; the implication that anyone who is not an Irish-speaking nationalist has to apologise for their Irishness. But the real irony is that this pessimism about the fate of "traditional" Ireland misses entirely something that is genuinely distinctive about Irish culture: the survival of a small landholding class. What people generally have in mind when they think of an old-fashioned, conservative culture is the layer of small land-holders that has all but disappeared in western Europe. One of the peculiarities of Ireland is that this class emerged very late in the day, as a result of the land reforms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Another is that it has adapted very well to modernisation thanks, in no small measure, to the great bogeyman of the traditionalists: the EU.

An important study by Damien Hannan and Patrick Commins drew attention to a fact that does not feature at all in the world-view of those who want to view "traditional" rural Ireland as an oppressed people: the fact that small farmers on the whole adapted cleverly, energetically and with considerable success to the changes brought about by EU membership. As Hannan and Commins point out:

"Over the whole period [1960-1990], not only have smallholders as a class succeeded in retaining their property and relative income position, but they have also succeeded in capturing a significant proportion of local off-farm employment opportunities. They have been more effective than working class families in utilising the education system to gain access to such off-farm opportunities for their children."

One of the main reasons for this success is the very opposite of the racial oppression alleged by John Waters. Rural smallholders in Ireland managed to use their cultural and political centrality to exert a political influence out of proportion to their numbers. They were able to ensure that transnational industry was directed by State grants to rural areas. They were also able to ensure that the State used its political bargaining power in Europe to modify the common agriculture policy with special measures like the declaration of "disadvantaged areas". Instead of the pathetic victims they are supposed to be, the Irish peasantry, if such a word can be used in its old, non-judgemental sense, has, on the whole, been remarkably quick-witted and light on its feet. It has survived by holding what it has and at the same time taking advantage of the new opportunities presented by the modernisation of Ireland since we joined the EU. Unlike the old urban unskilled working-class - the one sub-culture in Ireland that has genuinely lost out - the old rural smallholder has been brilliantly adaptable. The miserable small farmer stooped over a drill of potatoes in Patrick Kavanagh's The Great Hunger probably still has the same stony grey fields. Except now he probably also works in the local multinational factory, gets a cheque in the post every month from Brussels, has a daughter who's a television producer and a son doing a PhD in Trinity.

And this shouldn't be all that surprising to anyone who ever looked closely even at the most extreme and heavily mythologized versions of rural Ireland. For much of the 20th century, if people wanted to draw some kind of baseline of pure authentic Irishness by which to measure the distance that had been travelled, they looked to the Blasket Islands off the coast of Kerry. The extraordinary flowering of literature written in Gaelic by Blasket fishing people - Muiris O Suilleabháin, Tomás O'Crohan and his son Sean, Peig Sayers and her son Micheal O'Guiheen - created a unique first-hand account of life within a very old tradition.

The language in which these books were written was the oldest European vernacular outside of Greek and Latin. The life they described was, in some precise senses, mediaeval. The sense of a living past was astonishing to modern scholars. E.M. Forster called the world of the books "a neolithic civilisation". The classical scholar George Thompson compared it to ancient Greece. Professor Kenneth Jackson called Peig Sayers "a woman from the Middle Ages".

There were very few other places in the world where you could get such a clear and vivid picture of a distinctive culture, drawn, not by outsiders searching for romantic exoticism, but by the people who inhabited it. It was not surprising that their collective narrative haunted, and to a degree still haunts, the Irish imagination. For not only was this literature remarkable in itself, but it was wrapped in a very special shroud. It was written in the knowledge that the life to which it gave expression was on

the brink of extinction. The first of the Blasket books, The Islandman, was published in 1929. By 1953, the last inhabitants had left the island, some for the Kerry Gaeltacht, more for Springfield, Massachusetts.

They left behind, for the rest of us, a peculiar cultural condition. On the one hand there was the sense that an extraordinarily distinctive Irish culture had survived remarkably late into the process of modernisation. On the other, it was gone. It had slipped through our fingers, leaving us with the tantalising feeling that it might, in some vaguely imagined way, be found again. Hanging over the whole question of Irish cultural identity is a hazy sense of guilt, a feeling that if we had worked harder at preserving the Gaelic language, or done more to support life on the off-shore islands, we might not be so confused now. Contemporary anxieties, in other words, are the price of our carelessness.

The problem with this notion, however, is that it cannot really survive any sustained encounter with the Blasket books themselves. For a start, you quickly discover, that the Blasket writers themselves felt that they would not have written at all without the encouragement, support and publishing contacts of people who were very for indeed from any kind of neolithic Ireland. The books are, in fact, both profoundly modern and deeply European. The thing that was needed for their creation - the emergence of a breed of professional linguists and philologists - was a product of modern Europe. The standardised

Gaelic in which the books were published was in large part the creation of German scholars like Kuno Meyer, Ernst Windisch and Heinrich Zimmer and French scholars like Henri Gaidoz and D'arbois de Jubainville. The people who prompted the creation of the Blasket books, and edited and translated them - George Thompson, Moya Llewelyn Davies, Robin Flower - were British. The book that served as a model for Maurice O'Sullivan's apparently naïve but in fact highly sophisticated "Twenty Years A-Growing" was Russian: Gorky's "My Childhood".

There is, moreover, a telling moment in Sean O'Crohan's "A Day of Our Life", in which he looked back on his childhood on the Great Blasket island. The sight of divers in the Blasket Sound, searching for treasure from the shipwrecked Spanish Armada reminds him of an incident long ago:

"I remember and I a child when, leaving after a ramble to a neighbour's house, we would be told we would meet the old woman from Spain on the way home that night. I did not understand too well then who the old woman was, or how the story came about. A lady was found drowned, it seems, on the Island Strand at the time when the Santa Maria de la Rosa foundered. According to old stories about her she was a wealthy woman; she wore many rings and bracelets of gold and was buried at Castle Point where the graveyard is today. She was not buried, strange to say, in the graveyard proper

but outside it. Years ago an old man showed me the spot."

It is striking that of all the people who drowned off the Great Blasket, the one who was mythologized, whose ghost you might still meet on the way home from a ramble, was Spanish. The Santa Maria de la Rosa was wrecked off Dunmore Head in 1588. The woman, if she existed at all, had been dead for nearly four hundred years when the book was written. Yet its author could still have been shown her unmarked grave in the early 20th century. If, in other words, you dug deep into the collective memory of this most distinctively Irish place, what you might find was a Spanish lady. Or, in other words still, the notion of an identity as something pure and untouched by outsiders just doesn't work, even in the very special case of the Blasket Islands.

And of course, the Blaskets were not Ireland. The very urgency with which 20th century Irish culture looked to them, and to other off-shore islands, as a locus of assured identity was itself a dead give-away. The desire to make the microcosm stand for the macrocosm, to make the little island stand as a metaphor for the big one of Ireland as a whole, sprung precisely from the sense that the identity of the big island was far too messy, unstable and complicated.

The truth is that there is not and never has been either a single Irish identity or a clear dividing line between Irish culture and European culture. Go back as far as you like, even to the Irish foundation myth in the Book of Invasions, and what you find is fifty four people making the first voyage from Spain to Ireland: the goddess Cessair, her father Bith, her brother Ladra, the helmsman Fintan, and fifty maidens, one from every nation on the earth. The notion of some kind of continuity with the Continent and with the wider world is embedded even in the earliest stories. Those stories themselves survive only because of two more or less simultaneous cultural imports - Christianity and writing - which created a cast of literate monks with the time and the technology to write them down.

A sense of being European was never, until very recently, seen as contradicting a sense of being Irish. Whether the context was the broad notion of Christendom, or the more specific domain of Roman Catholicism, the secular republicanism of the French revolution or the mystical nationalism of the 19th century, the traumas of the first half of the 20th century or the slowly evolving notion of a European community, very few people would ever have seen Europe as a threat to Irish culture. This, indeed, is one of the things that Ireland does not share with England. The deep strain of English paranoia, superiority and isolationism - "Fog in Channel, Continent Cut Off" as the famous Times headline put it - has always been a factor in the British debate about Europe. Only very recently has anything similar gained much of a hold on public consciousness in Ireland. If it's Irish traditions we're concerned about, then being European is one of them.

This is true, even - perhaps especially - of Irish nationalism. The whole notion of the nation state as the political expression of a distinctive culture is quintessentially a product of 19th century Europe. Arthur Griffith took his economics from the German Frederick List and his politics from the Hungarian nationalists. (The opinion expressed by a character in Ulysses that Griffith got the idea for Sinn Fein from Leopold Bloom, himself the son of a Hungarian Jew, is within the bounds of acceptable licence.) James Connolly and James Larkin founded the trade union movement within both the frameworks of both British and continental European socialism. The Gaelic Athletic Association is a direct response to the Victorian English move to standardise and codify sports. The Irish folklore movement that brought forward the whole idea of a "traditional" culture was part of a much wider continental European phenomenon. The Irish Literary Movement was founded by middle-class intellectuals who sought to escape from English cultural dominance, not by retreating into cultural isolationism, but by following the latest avant-garde trends in French poetry and theatre. Synge and Yeats, for example, met for the first time, not on the Aran Islands or even in Coole Park, but in Paris. The folk tale that is the basis for Synge's first play is not, as he had to claim for political reasons, Irish but French.

In general, there is nothing more European than the search for cultural roots which led to the foundation of a self-consciously distinctive Irish culture. Take, for example, this description of what happened with the Gaelic language in the late nineteenth century:

"The native language had survived only in the remote rural areas (the native elites had been assimilated into the dominant linguistic culture)…During the nineteenth century, linguists and ethnographers collected together and standardised these dialects in the form of a written language with a settled grammar and orthography. Ironically, even if the peasants could have read this 'national language', most of them would have found it hard to understand, since it was usually either based on just one of the dominant dialects or was an artificial construction, a sort of peasant Esperanto, made up from all the different dialects. Nevertheless, this creation of a literary native language, and the publication of a national literature and history written in prose, helped to start the process of nation-building, and made it possible, in future decades, to educate the peasantry in this emergent national culture."

The interesting point about this passage is that it is not in fact a description of the Gaelic Revival, but of the precisely similar and broadly contemporaneous movements in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. What we tend to think of as a quintessentially Irish phenomenon was in fact common to virtually all the smaller or more marginalized European cultures. The huge role, for example, of Cuchulain and the Tain Bo

Culainge in the creation of an Irish national myth is exactly paralleled by the Estonian national epic poem, the Kalevipoeg, the Kalevala in Finland, the Mabinogion in Wales and so on. In each case, as Orlando Figes has put it, *"the urban intelligentsia did not so much observe peasant life as re-invent and mythologize it in their own image."* The peasants themselves, as the Blasket writers were to show in the 20th century, were much more sophisticated, more flexible, more interested in the outside world, and more profoundly shaped by the forces of modernity - the fact of mass emigration, for example - than the intellectuals wanted to recognise.

It simply doesn't make sense, then, either to talk of a fixed Irish "identity, culture and traditions" or to see Europe as a threat to it. Insofar as we have a national culture - stories, poems, a language, a form of music, songs - its existence, survival and revival are all deeply connected to European currents of thought and artistic practice. In any case, what is called "traditional" culture is but one stream of Irish culture. It doesn't have much bearing on the work of James Joyce or Samuel Beckett or Kate O'Brien or even, arguably, of Liam O'Flaherty who actually came from the Aran Islands. It matters a lot for many brilliant contemporary Irish artists and performers, but hardly at all for many others.

The great contemporary laureate of rural Ireland, John McGahern, is vastly more interested in the intensely local - the shape of a specific terrain, the personal and communal inflections of speech, the minute interactions of character and community - than in any notion of a national culture. The great artists currently working within traditional musical forms - Martin Hayes, say, or Iarla O Lionaird - derive their sense of authenticity much more from individual genius as from any puritanical desire to preserve the past. And, of course, the relationship of a large part of the population of the island - Ulster Protestants - to the Gaelic and folk traditions is at best angular and at worst hostile.

3.

Like every culture, in other words, ours is diverse, many-layered, dynamic, open to influences and ideas from every direction, full of conflicts and contradictions, and continually emerging. If the metaphor were not so threatening in these days of renewed worries about Sellafield's MOX plant, it might be compared to a giant re-reprocessor in which diverse elements are combined under great pressure, setting off chain reactions and giving off energies that can be both incredibly powerful and extremely toxic.

It should be obvious to us of all people that the nation state, however vital and necessary, was never going to be either a sufficient or a satisfactory construct in which to contain those energies safely. For one thing, Irish culture had long expanded far beyond the bounds of the island long before the State was founded. Mass emigration changed forever the meaning of the word "Irish". A shortcut to getting a sense of this change might be a quotation from a recent article by Tom Wolfe in The Guardian, describing the changes in the texture of New York life in the last decade:

"As a member of the brass at 1 Police Plaza, Irish himself, put it, "We still recruit Irish cops, but half of them are from the suburbs. These days, if you want a real old-fashioned Irish cop, you hire a Puerto Rican."

That everybody knows exactly what this apparently absurd statement means is a mark of how extraordinarily flexible the existence of a vast Irish diaspora has made the term "Irish". That flexibility is sometimes exhilarating, but sometimes exasperating, involving as it does the possibility that the word "Irish" (or its virtual synonym in the world of marketing, "Celtic") has become so devoid of real content that it means nothing at all. Much of the real anxiety about what it means to be Irish today has its roots in this phenomenon. Since it is a product of mass emigration, especially to the New World, it has virtually nothing to do with Europe. Blaming the EU simply misses the point. A return to the old-fashioned nation-state wouldn't help, since, by definition, a diaspora culture is not contained within the nation-state. And a re-assertion of our own essential Americanness is hardly convincing as a solution to the problem of what happens to a cultural frame of reference when there are more Irish-Americans than Irish.

The nation-state is very obviously insufficient in another way, too. The whole frightful history of the National Question in the 20th century illustrates this truth. The basic premise of the 19th century cultural nationalism from which both the Republic and (by default) Northern Ireland emerged was that nations are founded on a common ethnic identity rooted in a pure, authentic past. This was problematic everywhere, but especially so in Ireland, where there were, rather obviously at least two sets of political, religious, and ethnic mythologies. Partition made

this division literal, but still left flies in the ointment of a monolithic national identity: Northern Catholics, Southern Protestants. And that was before taking account of any of the internal complexities of each tribe - rich and poor, men and women, country and city.

To these two obvious problems with the notion of a nation state founded on a national cultural identity is now added a third: the rapid growth of ethnic and racial diversity. The point here is not that the nation-state cannot offer a comfortable home to immigrants - it can if it wants to - but that immigrant identity inevitably remains complex. Again, we should know this better than anyone. We are not surprised to find that someone growing up in Chicago with grandparents who left Ireland in the 1920s might still feel Irish as well as American, so why should we find it odd that someone growing up in Dublin with Nigerian parents, might feel both Irish and Nigerian. In a global society, not only is nationality itself just one of the ways in which people identify themselves, but national identity itself is, for many people, multiple.

Already, under the Belfast Agreement, the link between nation and state has been officially broken in Ireland: the right of people to identify themselves as Irish while living within a British-governed state has been formally enshrined in law. In the future, that link is going to have to be more supple and flexible in all sorts of other situations. And this is not a weakening of our identity. It is our identity.

For very long time now, being Irish has meant negotiating between lots of different allegiances, experiences and contexts. One of the genuinely distinctive things about us, indeed, is that this kind of multiple identity, which for others is at the cutting edge of 21st century experience, is for us rather familiar. In a long view, the one period that would stand out as peculiar, indeed, is that between 1922 and 1998, when there was a sustained pretence that there could be an easy match between culture and politics, between a fixed notion of identity and a set of political structures. And that attempt, as the Belfast Agreement implicitly acknowledged, failed.

If it is true, then, that Irish culture does not entirely fit the nation-state, that is complex, many-layered and continually evolving, the set of political structures that would best reflect it would also have all of those characteristics. The nearest thing we are ever likely to get to that ideal set of political structures is a place within an open, democratic, responsive European Union. Such an EU, which does not yet exist but which is a real possibility, is, of its nature, more hospitable to minority cultures because it makes everyone a minority. Liam Ryan has put it well:

"It has often been suggested that, in establishing the EU, Europe might be reverting to a mediaeval pattern, an empire with its regions, and that the modern nation state has become too small or too large for most modern purposes: that it was too small for economic survival, for defence, for

energy, even for fighting crime, and too large for purposes of true community and democratic decision-making. However, within the EU, the nation state has not surrendered its place in the sun nor is it likely to do so. What has happened is that with the EU, by very definition, every nation, every culture and language have become minority nations and cultures and languages. And this has been especially beneficial to the smaller nations."

In this sense, one of the greatest weaknesses of the EU - that it has no common culture on which to build - is also one of its greatest strengths. Common cultures, as we know from the American popular culture of which we are a part, tend towards the obliteration of the differences, nuances and subtleties that give local life its savour. The EU, with its ever-expanding kaleidoscope of languages, nationalities, and local identities, is simply incapable of constructing a single cultural monolith. For the foreseeable future, it will remain a richly textured patchwork held together by the tolerance, inclusiveness and openness of the European leftism that our leaders so despise. Given the choice between a place in that patchwork and a final embrace of our destiny as the 51st State of the Union, it is not so hard to see where we belong.
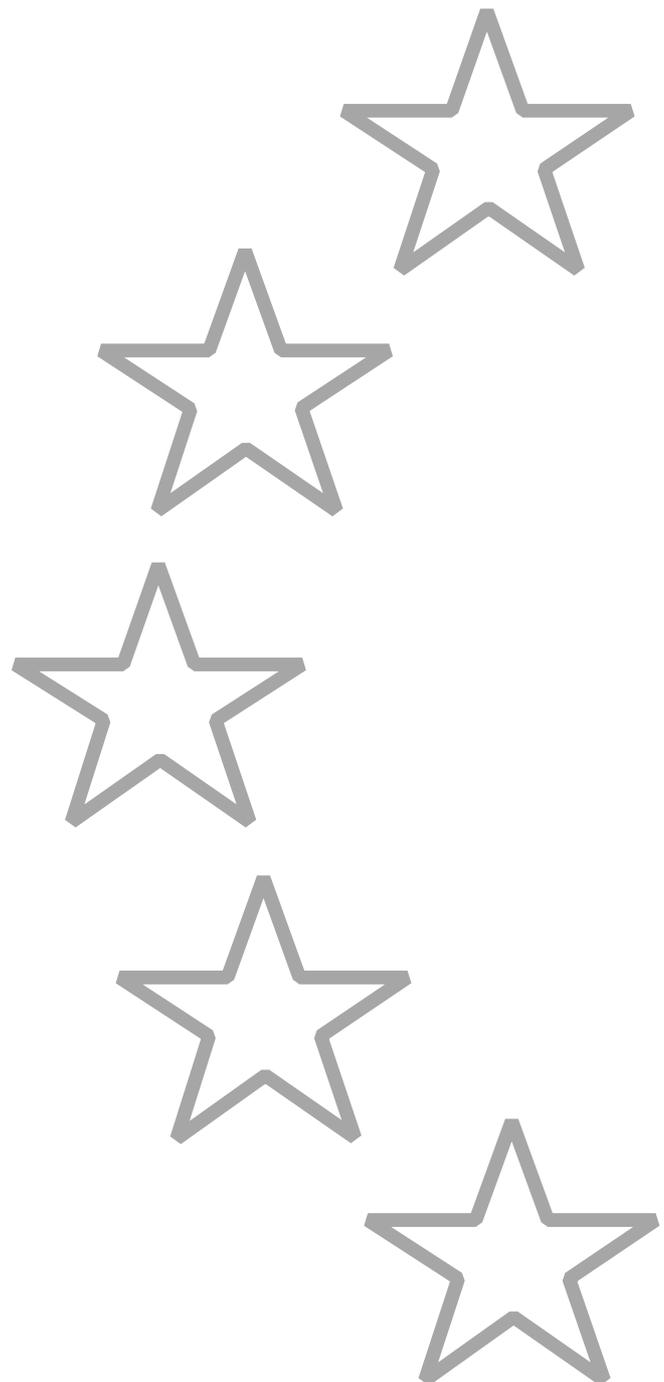
FINTAN O'TOOLE is one of Ireland's leading political and cultural commentators. Born in Dublin in 1958, he has been drama critic of In Dublin magazine, The Sunday Tribune, the New York Daily News, and The Irish Times and Literary Adviser to the Abbey Theatre. He edited Magill magazine and since 1988, has been a columnist with the Irish Times. His work has appeared in many international newspapers and magazines, including The New Yorker, the New York Review of Books, Granta, The Guardian, the New York Times and the Washington Post. Awards include the AT Cross Award for Supreme Contribution to Irish Journalism (1993), the Justice Award of the Incorporated Law Society (1994) and the Millennium Social Inclusion Award (2000). He has also broadcast extensively in Ireland the UK, including a period as presenter of BBC's The Late Show. Books include The Irish Times Book of the Century (1999); A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1997); The Lie of the Land: Selected Essays (1997); The Ex-Isle of Erin (1996); Black Hole, Green Card (1994); Meanwhile Back at the Ranch (1995); A Mass for Jesse James (1990) and The Politics of Magic (1987).

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The Clod and the Continent: Irish Identity in the European Union

by Fintan O'Toole

Continental or mainland Europe is the contiguous continent of Europe, excluding its surrounding islands. It can also be referred to ambiguously as the European continent â€" which can conversely mean the whole of Europe â€" and by some, simply the Continent. The most common definition of continental Europe excludes continental islands, encompassing the Greek Islands, Cyprus, Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, the Balearic Islands, Great Britain and Ireland and surrounding islands, Novaya Zemlya and the 1. The Union recognises the rights, freedoms and principles set out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union of 7 December 2000, as adapted at Strasbourg, on 12 December 2007, which shall have the same legal value as the Treaties. The provisions of the Charter shall not extend in any way the competences of the Union as defined in the Treaties.