

A CASE OF SEMANTICS

"You've heard it said we're a violent people. The Fightin' Irish, I believe, was minted by your people in New York, who gave us an army division of our own - The Fighting 69th, if I'm not in error. The English, on the other hand, look at us with contempt.

"Oh," they say. "a lil' bit o' 'eaven fell outta the sky one day and became Ireland. The only thing is that when God met the Irish He got on His wings and flew back. We must therefore go there and teach'em to behave.' And so they came.

"And many o'us were forced to leave. And ev'rywhere we went, there were stories. Ne'er the true ones, mind you. But they were there nevertheless."

"Take the six counties, for example. We'll leave you alone, the English said. But first you must vote to see if 'tis independence you want. Ne'er mind we'd been tellin'em to get out for centuries. And so they created the demarcation lines and the votin' rules. And now we still have the six counties to deal with, while the English refuse to go home. Naturally, in the world's eyes we're still the rebels, the assassins, the bullies...

"'tis always that way. When the poor demand their rights, the rich, instead of meetin' them, hire someone to put the demanders in their place. If that fails, they then run into safety zones where they can find solace from their own. No one, it seems, wants to be the good people in a bad neighborhood.

"We Irish, ironically, are the bad people in a good neighborhood. Unfortunately the neighborhood is ours - except that no one wants us to have it completely to ourselves. The result is that we have spent a nation's history reminding those who would improve the neighborhood that we don't want their help, only to discover they just don't seem to hear us. I tell you. The bloodshed you occasionally see in the six counties now-a-days will be nothin' when we finally tell'em they must get out. The English, however, don't seem to care. For some reason, their inability to admit wrong blinds them of the truth that before they came here we already had a life of our own. Too bad you don't know Gaelic, my friend. There's an ol' poem - we Irish can't help being poets, it seems..."

Callaghan stopped talking and, as he had done several times that afternoon, wiped a spot off the bar that only he seemed to see.

He then looked towards the pub's window into the open air.

Although it was still early afternoon, the sunlight had been obliterated by a misty and cloudy sky.

"It's gonna rain," he said. "One can't hear the birds."

No one reminded him that the birds had never been heard from inside when the doors and windows were closed. "One can always tell when it's gonna rain. Even the gulls disappear, as if they were the calm before the storm."

"Don't gulls become rather noisy before it storms?" Father Fitzgerald asked.

"They do. But only to announce the comin' anger. Or to complain about their hunger for bein'unable to pick what the tides left ashore when the seas were calm. Somewhat like the symptoms of a fever. When they come, a body just wants to bed down and let the fever take its toll one way, or the other."

"You were talking about a Gaelic poem," the young priest reminded the publican.

"And I ain't forgot it, either."

Callaghan paused once again. "'tis very short, you know?"

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"If we sail a fine boat
and settle any place...
If we live there long,
then the any place is ours.
To live elsewhere a long time
is making the elsewhere our own."

"If you carry that to its limit," the priest said, "then you're only giving the English legitimacy here. Aren't you? And, if so, are the same English, then, entitled to belong to the neighborhood, as you call it?"

"True. Except that the English ain't been here. Their bodies have. And so have their lords and generals. But that is all. To be here is to join us as we are - or as we adapt to change. The English ev'rywhere

ne'er adapt to change. It's their way or nothin'. 'tis tea time at four whether or not you're thirsty. And where they can impose the rule, it stays, or else. Somehow I don't feel this country will ever be free until we can drink tea at whatever time we please - or not drink tea at all. You as an American will ne'er understand that. Americans don't understand the Irish."

"Now, wait a minute, Callaghan. There are probably more Irish in America than in all Ireland, north and south. How can you claim we don't understand you?"

"But you don't, Father. For all I know there may be more Irishmen in Canada, or in Australia than we have here. Trouble is, it doesn't take long for Irishness to die wherever it goes - particularly 'mong the Irish who make it elsewhere. Someday, believe it or not, even your country may have an Irish president - a true Irish, in blood, name and looks. Not one who just had some Irish predecessor somewhere up the line. And you know somethin'? Your Irish president, who will also be a Catholic, will speak with a British-oriented accent. Even you, Father, had you decided to become president, or a senator, or a professor of literature, instead of just a simple man of the cloth, would probably be twistin' your diction to gain that legitimacy that would in time cover your Irishness. To not understand us, therefore, is not unusual. In fact, in many instances it's to reach the American dream. Ain't it strange, Father, that in your country most of the minstrels are probably of Irish parentage and yet, in order to succeed, they must hide behind black faces?"

"In Australia," said the man with the unlit pipe and the half full beer mug. He had been sitting quietly at the opposite end of the bar where Callaghan and Father Fitzgerald stood. "In Australia they call that burying the convict image. Just go down there someday, Father. You'll notice that the most vociferous defenders of the crown have Irish names. We all know how they got there, of course. But if you talk to them you'll hear'em defend the king with the honor of a loyalist ready to give his life for his cause. We Irish, Father, were born to be buried elsewhere but in Ireland, but never to be understood anywhere.

Callaghan's grandfather, so he says, even knew of a Latin American president, or some sort of liberator, who fought against Spain and who's venerated where neither Gaelic nor English is spoken. Go down there and mention O'Higgins the right way and, in spite of the veneration, no one knows his name - unless it's pronounced their way."

The man paused. In the meantime, the dusky afternoon light continued to fade so rapidly that one could barely discern the faces of the men who sat at the corner booth, a few feet away from the pub's only window. Those who sat around the three wooden tables that along with mismatched chairs and benches made up the rest of the furnishings became invisible, except for the lighted tips of their cigarettes.

It had begun to rain.

"You know," the priest finally said after taking a gulp from his pint. "For a people as isolated as you, it's a wonder you seem to know as much of the world as you claim. Naturally, as an Irishman, after all I was conceived here, I should be proud. But, let's face it, fellows. A Latin American liberator with an Irish name? Come on."

"I suppose we're a people with many secrets, Father. Perhaps God put us on this island because that's just where we deserve to be," the man with the unlit pipe replied. "Call it our destiny, if you will. The result is that the secrets, in a way, die with us, although while dying the word passes around from mouth to mouth, in time becoming part of the Irish myth. For example, I only heard tell of that Latinamerican liberator with an Irish name, and I'm only tellin' you what I heard. You, on the other hand, having lived in a place where information is more readily available, still had to come to Ireland to hear that bit, whether 'tis true, or false. Callaghan, on the other hand, could probably tell you a lot more, 'bout our world. He's the only one 'mong us to have spent most of his life smellin' the soap and shit mix of an English jail."

Callaghan reached towards the wooden shelf along the wall where several dusty unopened bottles of Irish and Scotch whiskies stood. He found the large matchbox that lay near the bottom of one of the bottles and opened it. He then took out a match which he struck on the box' sandy side, creating a flame that killed the pub's darkness. Callaghan brought it towards the kerosene lamp hanging from a pulley attached to the ceiling. He then lifted the lamp's glass globe, and brought the match to the wick sticking out through a metal opening on the lamp's round liquid container. As the flame met the wick, it became larger. He then pulled the match away and tossed it into a sandy ash and cigarette bowl on the pub's hard earthen floor. He lowered the glass globe over the lit wick, illuminating the pub's surface and changing the shadows of its occupants into recognizable human faces and forms once again. He then pulled on the pulley cord, lifting the lamp to where it could be of even greater benefit to him and his patrons.

Callaghan's hair was brown, greying at the temples. He was slightly over six feet tall, pale complexioned with a pinkish tone to his skin. He was around fifty, although no one knew exactly how old he was. He had not been baptized at St. Margaret's. In fact, except for when he appeared shortly after the republic had been born, no one in town had ever met him. He was not married. At least, no one had ever heard him refer to a wife anywhere. "A pity," some of the locals would often say, "a man alone in a house where a family once smiled. And a fine house at that, too. If only the Fitzgeralds had not gone to America before O'Connell died. Now, with even their son back, the house still looks like a lonely place."

"And yet Callaghan, if the occasion presented itself," the man with the unlit pipe continued. "would probably - after having spent most of his life smelling the soap and shit mix of an English jail," he reiterated, "would probably still have the decency to praise an English king if the chance presented itself. You see, Father, if tomorrow mornin', the English king managed to convince the French to give up Corsica, letting it go its own way, Callaghan would be among the first on this island to call attention to the king's statesmanship, forgettin' all along that the bloody English are still occupyin' the six counties."

"I'd be no different from any newspaper editor on this land!" Callaghan replied.

"True,' agreed the man. "You'd be no different, and neither would I. That, therefore, is part of our secret. No one 'mongst us ever talks of our needs when good deeds are bestowed on someone else.

Why, we're probably the only people this side of the Atlantic who, although the poorest of the lot, contribute to Peter's Pence. Yet, if tomorrow mornin' a bomb went off in Belfast, the Pope would be amongst those admonishing us for bein' violent. And if the Holy Father got a letter from the English king in the process, delivered personally by the proper delegate, he'd admonish us even more for demandin' what's ours."

"I wouldn't call that a secret," Father Fitzgerald interjected. "I'd call it a paradox."

"Call it what you will, Father. I call it the Irish curse," Callaghan replied.

"Strange," the man with the unlit pipe interrupted. "And I'd always thought a paradox was the smell of English soap and shit at the same time. Or America givin' us a priest after we'd taught her religion.

"Strange. Ain't it, Callaghan?"

The bartender did not reply. Outside, the rain continued to fall, beating loudly against the window.

Manuel L. Ponte

St. Louis, Missouri.