

# IRELAND AS A MICROCOSM



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What with yesterday being St. Patrick's day and Conor McGregor visiting the White House, thoughts of the homeland were on my mind. You may be surprised that this paper arose out of this thought:

## **Why has Ireland never replanted its forests?**

Yes, I am never thinking what I am supposed to be thinking, or what anyone else might be thinking. I am always flying away on some tangent. But that is in fact what entered my mind as I was drifting off to sleep last night. You see I have been to Ireland, so I know firsthand that Ireland was cut almost bare more than a century ago by the English invaders and is still almost bare to this day. It is called the Emerald Isle, but that is for its grasses, fed by the plentiful rain from the Gulfstream, not from its forests.

The same is true of Scotland, which was down to 5% forests by 1900 and was still only 17% by 2000, but Ireland is worse. Being originally 80% forests, it fell to around 1% by 1900 and is now about 10%. And of the new trees, most are spruces planted to be quickly harvested. Ireland still has near-zero old growth forests or trees.

You can blame most of the hacking on the British, who used Ireland to feed their furnaces and machines, but you can't blame them for the lack of replanting. The Irish could have replanted any time in the past century, but they have been too busy drinking Guinness and playing fiddles for that, I guess.

The land is still magical. I felt that when I was there: no place I have been crackled with mystery and "luck" like Ireland.\* But the current Irish are mostly dead asleep to it, having among the least initiative in a world with very little anywhere. People just can't be bothered to do things right anymore, and the

Irish lead in this category and almost no other. And I remind you, I say that as an Irishman who loves Ireland.

I had thought of moving there in 2007, after spending three years in Bruges, Belgium. I stayed five weeks in an inn in Galway, looking for a house to rent, but the houses were so poorly constructed and overpriced I finally gave up and left. Having gotten used to the charms of Bruges—where I rented a 300-year-old three-level, three-bedroom flat for almost nothing—I had dreamed of finding a small but charming old country home in Ireland, but what was available in my price was new pressboard houses that had been thrown up by drunks who apparently couldn't even use a T-square, since nothing fit and gaps were everywhere. The town had very little old architecture, which surprised me: it had the feel of a place that had been burned to the ground in the last century and rebuilt on the quick.

I had heard that Galway was an art town but saw no evidence of it. There were a couple of low-end galleries, but they were full of mediocre work, again very overpriced. Other than the street music, I found nothing to really recommend the town, and the Irish weren't even particularly friendly. They acted like grumps coming off a bender, because, for the most part, they were.

Don't mistake me, the Belgians were no better, and my fellow Americans may be even worse in most categories, though not quite as lacking in initiative. But I mention it because in this way Ireland is a microcosm of the modern malaise, and one of the most perfect examples of it in the white first-world. The place had a third-world feel to it in 2007, and we even had to boil the water when I was there due to city-wide plumbing problems. I had never experienced a brown-out or black-out until I lived in Ireland for a while. No doubt it is worse now. And the whole first world is moving in that direction, as I can tell you from California. California is much much richer than Ireland, but feels more like Ireland every year, with blackouts, brownouts, fires started by neglect, and a steep incline in every other human shortcoming.

It didn't and doesn't have to be that way, as we can see with the problem of Irish forests. Some modern problems may seem complex and intractable, but planting new forests is relatively simple. Any Johnny Appleseed can do it. Seeds and acorns and pinecones don't have to be manufactured. Trees produce them for free, you know. All you have to do is collect them and throw them on the ground where you want trees to grow. Yes, once you allow your forests to drop to 1%, you have the added problem of having to import seeds, but they aren't expensive. Again because all you have to do is gather them. The government should underwrite all that.

Ireland is probably knocking itself out to spend 5% of GDP on weapons like the rest of the EU, but they would be better off taking that money and spending it on useful real projects, like planting trees. And not trees for harvest. Trees to create old forests, which will create more oxygen to breathe. Maybe the extra oxygen will restart everyone's brains, along with their initiative.

Because it isn't just the forests that need replanting. Art history needs replanting. Physics and the rest of the sciences need replanting. The media needs replanting. All of government and politics needs replanting. While the military and “Intelligence” needs to be completely dug up, the fields being re-assigned to more productive and nutritious crops.

\*I have a story to show why I think that. Since I grew up on a golf course with no short par 3's, and haven't played much since highschool (since I couldn't afford to), I had never had a hole-in-one, despite being a scratch

golfer by 16. But my luck changed in Ireland, at age 43. I was riding the bus from one town in Galway county to another when the bus passed a par-3 course on the side of the road. Having nothing better to do, I pulled the cord, got off, and walked back. For those who don't know, all the holes on a par-3 course are about 100 yards and you only have two clubs, a wedge and a putter. This course was only 9 holes. I paid the man five euros and he gave me two of the crumbiest old bats I have ever seen, with worn grips that were too small. They may have been leftovers from WWII. I started off slowly, three-putting the first green, which had plenty of grass on it but looked like it had been cut with hedge clippers. But by the time I got around to number seven I had gotten the feel of it. I hit a towering wedge to the 105-yard hole, where it bounced once and rolled right into the hole. A group of kids driving by on the highway saw it go in and honked and yelled, but the guy at the counter was watching TV. I also aced the 9<sup>th</sup> hole, but no one saw that one except me and the rabbits. Of course when I told the guy at the counter he rolled his eyes and said, "Sure you did, sport. Two holes-in-one in one round—happens all the time".