

Geography

Ireland is situated in the Atlantic Ocean and separated from Great Britain by the Irish Sea. It occupies the entire island except for the six counties that make up Northern Ireland. Ireland resembles a basin—a central plain rimmed with mountains, except in the Dublin region. The mountains are low, with the highest peak, Carrantuohill in County Kerry, rising to 3,415 ft (1,041 m). The principal river is the Shannon, which begins in the north-central area, flows south and southwest for about 240 mi (386 km), and empties into the Atlantic..

History

In the Stone and Bronze Ages, Ireland was inhabited by Picts in the north and a people called the Erainn in the south, the same stock, apparently, as in all the isles before the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain. About the 4th century B.C., tall, red-haired Celts arrived from Gaul or Galicia. They subdued and assimilated the inhabitants and established a Gaelic civilization. By the beginning of the Christian Era, Ireland was divided into five kingdoms—Ulster, Connacht, Leinster, Meath, and Munster. Saint Patrick introduced Christianity in 432, and the country developed into a center of Gaelic and Latin learning. Irish monasteries, the equivalent of universities, attracted intellectuals as well as the pious and sent out missionaries to many parts of Europe and, some believe, to North America.

Norse depredations along the coasts, starting in 795, ended in 1014 with Norse defeat at the Battle of Clontarf by forces under Brian Boru. In the 12th century, the pope gave all of Ireland to the English Crown as a papal fief. In 1171, Henry II of England was acknowledged “Lord of Ireland,” but local sectional rule continued for centuries, and English control over the whole island was not reasonably absolute until the 17th century. In the Battle of the Boyne (1690), the Catholic King James II and his French supporters were defeated by the Protestant King William III (of Orange). An era of Protestant political and economic supremacy began.

By the Act of Union (1801), Great Britain and Ireland became the “United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.” A steady decline in the Irish economy followed in the next decades. The population had reached 8.25 million when the great potato famine of 1846–1848 took many lives and drove more than 2 million people to immigrate to North America.

In the meantime, anti-British agitation continued along with demands for Irish home rule. The advent of World War I delayed the institution of home rule and resulted in the Easter Rebellion in Dublin (April 24–29, 1916), in which Irish nationalists unsuccessfully attempted to throw off British rule. Guerrilla warfare against British forces followed proclamation of a republic by the rebels in 1919. The Irish Free State was established as a dominion on Dec. 6, 1922, with six northern counties remaining as part of the United Kingdom. A civil war ensued

between those supporting the Anglo-Irish Treaty that established the Irish Free State and those repudiating it because it led to the partitioning of the island. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), led by Eamon de Valera, fought against the partition but lost. De Valera joined the government in 1927 and became prime minister in 1932. In 1937 a new constitution changed the nation's name to Éire. Ireland remained neutral in World War II.

In 1948, De Valera was defeated by John A. Costello, who demanded final independence from Britain. The Republic of Ireland was proclaimed on April 18, 1949, and withdrew from the Commonwealth. From the 1960s onward two antagonistic currents dominated Irish politics. One sought to bind the wounds of the rebellion and civil war. The other was the effort of the outlawed Irish Republican Army and more moderate groups to bring Northern Ireland into the republic. The “troubles”—the violence and terrorist acts between Republicans and Unionists in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland—would plague the island for the remainder of the century and beyond.

Under the First Programme for Economic Expansion (1958–1963), economic protection was dismantled and foreign investment encouraged. This prosperity brought profound social and cultural changes to what had been one of the poorest and least technologically advanced countries in Europe. Ireland joined the European Economic Community (now the EU) in 1973. In the 1990 presidential election, Mary Robinson was elected the republic's first woman president. The election of a candidate with socialist and feminist sympathies was regarded as a watershed in Irish political life, reflecting the changes taking place in Irish society. Irish voters approved the Maastricht Treaty, which paved the way for the establishment of the EU, by a large majority in a referendum held in 1992. In 1993, the Irish and British governments signed a joint peace initiative (the Downing Street Declaration), which affirmed Northern Ireland's right to self-determination. A referendum on allowing divorce under certain conditions—hitherto constitutionally forbidden—was narrowly passed in Nov. 1995.

In 1998 hope for a solution to the troubles in Northern Ireland seemed palpable. A landmark settlement, the Good Friday Agreement of April 10, 1998, called for Protestants to share political power with the minority Catholics and gave the Republic of Ireland a voice in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The resounding commitment to the settlement was demonstrated in a dual referendum on May 22: the North approved the accord by a vote of 71% to 29%, and in the Irish Republic 94% favored it. After numerous stops and starts, the new government in Northern Ireland was formed on Dec. 2, 2000, but it has been suspended four times since then (and has remained suspended since Oct. 2002) primarily because of Sinn Fein's reluctance to disarm its military wing, the IRA. In 2005, however, the IRA renounced armed struggle, and peace again seemed possible.

Despite a number of recent corruption and bribery scandals, most of which involved the centrist Fianna Fáil Party of Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, the party

won 81 of 166 seats in May 2002. Ahern became the first Irish prime minister in 33 years to be elected to a second successive term.

Once a country plagued with high unemployment, high inflation, slow growth, and a large public debt, Ireland has undergone an extraordinary economic transformation in the last 15 years. Formerly an agriculture-based economy, the "Celtic Tiger" has become a leader in high-tech industries. In some recent years its economy has grown as much as 10%.

On April 2, 2008, in the midst of corruption accusations, Prime Minister Bertie Ahern announced his resignation, effective as of May 6, 2008.

On May 7, 2008, the former finance minister, Brian Cowen, was elected the new prime minister by an 88 to 76 parliamentary vote. Upon election, Cowen announced the appointment of new finance, justice, and foreign affairs ministers.

National name: Éire

President: Mary McAleese (1997)

Taoiseach (Prime Minister): Brian Cowen (2008)

Land area: 26,598 sq mi (68,889 sq km); total area: 27,135 sq mi (70,280 sq km)

Population (2008 est.): 4,156,119 (growth rate: 1.1%); birth rate: 14.3/1000; infant mortality rate: 5.1/1000; life expectancy: 78.0; density per sq mi: 60

Capital (2003 est.): Dublin, 1,018,500

Other large cities: Cork, 193,400; Limerick, 84,900; Galway, 67,200

Monetary units: Euro (formerly Irish pound [punt])

Languages: English, Irish (Gaelic) (both official)

Religions: Roman Catholic 88%, Church of Ireland 3%, other Christian 2%, none 4%

National Holiday: Saint Patrick's Day, March 17

Literacy rate: 99% (2003 est.)

Irish Symbols

The Leprechaun

The Leprechaun is an Irish fairy. He looks like a small, old man (about 2 feet tall), often dressed like a shoemaker, with a cocked hat and a leather apron. According to legend, leprechauns are aloof and unfriendly, live alone, and pass the time making shoes. They also possess a hidden pot of gold. Treasure hunters can often track down a leprechaun by the sound of his shoemaker's hammer. If caught, he can be forced (with the threat of bodily violence) to reveal the whereabouts of his treasure, but the captor must keep their eyes on him every second. If the captor's eyes leave the leprechaun (and he often tricks them into looking away), he vanishes and all hopes of finding the treasure are lost.

The Shamrock

The Shamrock, at one time called the "Seamroy", symbolizes the cross and blessed trinity. Before the Christian era it was a sacred plant of the Druids of Ireland because its leaves formed a triad.

The well known legend of the Shamrock connects it definitely to St. Patrick and his teaching. Preaching in the open air on the doctrine of the trinity, he is said to have illustrated the existence of the Three in One by plucking a shamrock from the grass growing at his feet and showing it to his congregation. The legend of the shamrock is also connected with that of the banishment of the serpent tribe from Ireland by a tradition that snakes are never seen on trefoil and that it is a remedy against the stings of snakes and scorpions.

Culture

Music is an integral part of Irish culture and has been as potent a force in the lives of the Irish people. The ancient Celts had an oral culture, where religion, legend, and history were passed from one generation to the next by way of epic poems, stories and songs.

And it was the Dublin punk scene that produced one of the best known and most beloved of Irish musical exports—U2. The Cranberries and the Corrs have also had huge international success with their gentler pop music.

Several groups have achieved success by combining traditional elements with modern styles to revitalize Irish music and introduce it to new audiences. Glam rock's Thin Lizzy first found success came with a metal version of the standard "Whisky in the Jar," and the London-based Pogues, made up of 1st-generation and immigrant musicians arranged traditional songs in a punk style that garnered huge popularity. New age musicians have also found inspiration in Ireland's traditions, notably Enya, who is the most successful female artist in Irish history.

The Irish Flag

Rarely has a flag possessed such lasting relevance as that of the "Tricolour," the national flag of the Republic of Ireland. Its three equal stripes illustrate the Irish political landscape as accurately today as in 1848, the year the flag was first unfurled.

- orange — standing for Irish Protestants
- green — signifying Irish Catholics and the republican cause
- white — representing the hope for peace between them

Why Orange?

The colour orange is associated with Northern Irish Protestants because of William of Orange (William III), the King of England, Scotland, and Ireland who in 1690 defeated the deposed King James II, a Roman Catholic, in the fateful Battle of the Boyne near Dublin. William III's victory secured Protestant dominance over the island, to the enormous benefit of the 17th-century colonizers of Northern Ireland — the English (mainly Anglicans) and Scots (mostly Presbyterians). Sometimes called Orangemen, Protestants in Northern Ireland celebrate the anniversary of the battle each July 12th.

Green for the Emerald Isle?

Green as the colour standing for the Irish Catholic nationalists of the south may have something to do with shamrocks and verdant landscapes, but more importantly, green symbolizes revolution. An earlier, unofficial Irish flag —the gold harp on a green background— served from 1798 until the early twentieth century as a symbol of nationalism. As the revolutionary James Connolly wrote, just weeks before he participated in the quixotic Easter Rebellion (1916) that led to his execution by firing squad:

*For centuries the green flag of Ireland was a thing accurst and hated by the English garrison in Ireland, as it is still in their inmost hearts...
...the green flag of Ireland will be solemnly hoisted over Liberty Hall as a symbol of our faith in freedom, and as a token to all the world that the working class of Dublin stands for the cause of Ireland, and the cause of Ireland is the cause of a separate and distinct nationality.*

—*Worker's Republic*, April 8, 1916

A Lasting Truce between Orange and Green?

Although it was not adopted as the national flag of Ireland until independence from Britain on December 6, 1921, the Tricolour was first unfurled in public on March 7, 1848, by the militant nationalist Thomas Francis Meagher, (the stripes, however, were arranged differently at that time). Explaining the significance of the Tricolour, Meagher expressed a hope for his country that is unfortunately still unrealized today:

The white in the center signifies a lasting truce between the "Orange" and the "Green," and I trust that beneath its folds the hands of the Irish Protestant and the Irish Catholic may be clasped in generous and heroic brotherhood.

Religion

The Roman Catholic Church, officially known as the Catholic Church, is the world's largest Christian Church representing over half of all Christians and one-sixth of the world's population. It comprises 2,782 dioceses grouped into 23 particular rites—the Latin Rite and 22 smaller Eastern rites. The pope, currently Benedict XVI, is the Church's highest earthly authority in matters of faith, morality and Church governance. The community is made up of an ordained ministry and the laity; members of either group may belong to organized religious communities.

The Catholic Church defines its mission as spreading the message of Jesus Christ, administering the sacraments and exercising charity. It operates social programs and institutions throughout the world, including schools, universities, hospitals, missions and shelters, as well as organisations such as Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Internationalis and Catholic Charities that help the poor, families, the elderly and the sick.

With a history spanning almost two thousand years, the Church is one of the world's oldest institutions, and has played a prominent role in the history of Western civilization since at least the 4th century. In the 11th century, a major

split (the Great Schism) occurred between Eastern and Western Christianity. This division had been a few centuries in the making, and was largely the result of disagreements over doctrine (the filioque clause) and papal primacy. What had previously been a single entity divided into what became labeled the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Despite the split, a handful of Eastern Churches remained in (or later re-established) communion with the Pope of Rome, forming the Eastern Catholic Churches. Later, in the 16th century, partly in response to the Protestant Reformation, the Church engaged in a substantial process of reform and renewal, known as the Counter-Reformation.

Baptism

Just as parents pass on to their child a name, a culture, a nationality, they want to pass on to their child their faith. In the Sacrament of Baptism the parents and godparents are asked, 'What do you ask of God's Church?' The response is 'Faith'. For the child and for all the baptised, Baptism is the source of new life in Christ. It is the door to all of the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from Original Sin and reborn as Children of God.

Jesus began his public life after having been baptised in the river Jordan by John. After his resurrection, Christ gives this mission to his apostles: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.' (CCC 1223)

The meaning of the sacrament of Baptism is communicated through the rites and the symbols used. The sign of the Cross is marked on the forehead of the person being baptised. This signifies that the person now belongs to Christ who has already won for him or her on the cross the grace of redemption. Water is poured on the child's head, signifying death to sin and resurrection to new life. The child is anointed with the Oil of Chrism, a sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The newly baptised is wrapped in a white garment, a sign that he or she has put on Christ. A candle is presented as a sign of the light of Christ.

The role of the sponsor or godparent is to support the parents in their handing on of the faith to the newly baptised and to accompany the child on his or her faith journey.

Confirmation:

A sacrament in which the Holy Ghost is given to those already baptized in order to make them strong and perfect Christians and soldiers of Jesus Christ.

In the Western Church the sacrament is usually administered by the bishop. At the beginning of the ceremony there is a general imposition of hands, the bishop meantime praying that the Holy Ghost may come down upon those who have already been regenerated: "send forth upon them thy sevenfold Spirit the Holy Paraclete." He then anoints the forehead of each with chrism saying: "I sign thee with the sign of the cross and confirm thee with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Finally, he gives each a slight blow on the cheek saying: "peace be with thee". A prayer is added that the Holy Spirit may dwell in the hearts of those who have been confirmed, and the rite closes with the bishop's blessing.

The Eastern Church omits the imposition of hands and the prayer at the beginning, and accompanies the anointing with the words: "the sign [or seal] of the gift of the Holy Ghost." These several actions symbolize the nature and purpose of the sacrament: the anointing signifies the strength given for the spiritual conflict; the balsam contained in the chrism, the fragrance of virtue and the good odor of Christ; the sign of the cross on the forehead, the courage to confess Christ, before all men; the imposition of hands and the blow on the cheek, enrollment in the service of Christ which brings

First Communion:

First Communion is considered one of the holiest and most important occasions in a Roman Catholic's life. It means that person has received the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Most Catholic children receive their First Communion when they're seven or eight years of age because this is considered the age of reason. Others can receive communion for the first time whenever they've met all the Church's requirements.

In order for anyone to receive communion, that person must be without sin and in a state of grace. Traditionally, young Catholic children will make their first confession, or the Sacrament of Penance, a week before receiving their First Communion. At confession, the child will detail sins and misdeeds to a priest and receive a penance in exchange. The penance is usually several prayers to be recited immediately upon exiting the confessional. Once the child is absolved of sin, she's ready to make her First Communion.

Confession isn't the only requirement for receiving the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist. The Sacrament of Baptism must have been received as well. A child, or any person, who is not baptized cannot receive communion. If the child is baptized, she generally begins studying for First Communion in first grade. Those children who don't attend Catholic school go to religious instruction classes after school or on weekends. In most cases for young children, at least two years of

religious education must be undertaken before they can receive communion for the first time.

There's more to a child's first communion than a pretty white dress and a family party. While it is a cause for celebration, that's not what the occasion is about. The event means that the children have studied and understood, to the best of their abilities, the mystery of transubstantiation, the changing of the substance of ordinary bread and wine into the substance of Christ's body and blood. A child should also be able to tell the difference between Eucharistic bread and regular food.

On the day of one's First Communion, and whenever receiving communion thereafter, those partaking must, out of respect for the body and blood of Christ, observe another rule: At least one hour before reception of the sacrament, they must fast, which means they may not eat any food. Taking water and medicine, however, are exceptions. After First Communion, young Catholics must attend church every Sunday, and they are encouraged to receive communion frequently, even weekly. If one has missed Sunday mass without good reason or has committed a mortal sin, that person is expected to go to confession before receiving communion again. Most Catholics go to confession at least once a year, usually during Lent.

First Communion is a very important and holy day for Catholic children because they are receiving, for the first time, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. By continuing to receive Holy Communion for the rest of their lives, Catholics become one with Christ and believe they will share in His eternal life.