

History

VENI, VIDI, VICI

If there is one historical theme most Irish have an opinion about, it is being conquered, and it matters not a jot that to many the facts are a little hazy. ‘Eight hundred years’ has long been the rallying call of Irish nationalists, these years being roughly the period of time dear old Britannia ruled the Irish roost. And while Ireland’s fractious relationship with its sister island across the Irish Sea casts an overwhelming shadow over Ireland’s history of conquest and domination, it’s not just the English that conquered and even when they did, their relationship with their new subjects was fraught with complexities and contradictions rather than being the simple narrative of conquest and rebellion that some nationalists would have us believe.

The island has been the subject of a series of conquests since the 8th century BC, when the fearsome Celtic warrior tribes began making steady attacks on the island – the last of these tribes, commonly known as the Gaels (which in the local language came to mean ‘foreigner’), came ashore in the 3rd century BC and proceeded to divide the island into at least five kingdoms. They also set about creating the basics of what we now term ‘Irish’ culture: they devised a sophisticated code of law called the Brehon Law that remained in use until the early 17th century and their swirling, mazelike design style, evident on artefacts nearly 2000 years old, is considered the epitome of Irish design.

Yet the Celts weren’t ‘Irish’ in any nationalistic sense. The kingdoms were constantly at war with each other, and even though they all nominally paid allegiance to a high king who sat at Tara, in County Meath, their support was fraught and fluid, given when it suited and withdrawn just as quickly when it didn’t. It was this lack of unity that allowed the Vikings to make such easy forays into Ireland, targeting the rich monastic settlements that had grown up as a result of the steady Christianisation of the Celts beginning in the end of the 4th century AD. Even the Battle of Clontarf (1014), taught to every Irish schoolkid as the ultimate showdown between the native ‘Irish’ lead by the High King Brian Ború and the Viking invaders, wasn’t quite as straightforward as that: fighting alongside the Vikings was the king of Leinster, Máelmorda mac Murchada, who was looking to use the Vikings in a bid to oust Ború and take the throne for himself (both mac Murchada and Ború lost their lives, but Ború’s armies won the day). Like the Celts before them, the Vikings eventually settled, giving up the rape-rob-and-run policy in favour of integration and assimilation: by intermarrying with the Celtic tribes they introduced red hair and freckles to the Irish gene pool.

The ‘800 years’ of English rule in Ireland nominally began in 1169, when an army of English barons (actually Cambro-Norman, being a mix of Welsh and

For a concise, 10-minute read on who the Celts were see www.ibiblio.org/gaelic/celts.html.

The Course of Irish History by TW Moody and FX Martin is a hefty volume by two Trinity College professors who trace much of Ireland’s history to its land and its proximity to England.

TIMELINE

10,000–8000 BC

After the last Ice Age ends, humans arrive in Ireland during the Mesolithic Era, originally crossing a land bridge between Scotland and Ireland. Few archaeological traces remain of this group.

4500 BC

The first Neolithic farmers arrive in Ireland by boat from as far afield as the Iberian peninsula, bringing cattle, sheep, and crops, marking the beginnings of a settled agricultural economy.

700–300 BC

Iron technology gradually replaces bronze. The Celtic culture and language arrives, ushering in 1000 years of cultural and political dominance.

Norman nobles) landed in Wexford and quickly captured the two Hiberno-Viking ports of Wexford and Waterford. But their arrival was not nearly as neat as *veni, vidi, vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered). The Norman invasion of Ireland was originally a tactical alliance between the barons – led by Richard Fitz-Gilbert de Clare, earl of Pembroke (1130–1176; aka Strongbow) – and Dermot MacMurrough (d 1171; Diarmait mac Murchada), the king of Leinster (yes, only this one was ironically a direct descendant of Brian Ború), who had been ousted from his throne by an alliance of Irish chieftains spurred on by the High King himself, Turlough O'Connor (1088–1156; Tairrdelbach mac Ruaidri Ua Conchobair). In return for help in defeating his enemies (and capturing the crown of the high king for himself) MacMurrough promised Strongbow the hand in marriage of his daughter Aoife as well as the kingdom of Leinster, and Strongbow duly obliged by capturing Dublin in 1171 and then marrying Aoife the very next day. MacMurrough's plans all went a little awry, though, and he was hardly to guess on his deathbed later that year that he'd determined the course of the next 800 years and cemented his place at the top of the list of great Irish traitors.

In truth, while MacMurrough may have provided the catalyst for the Norman invasion, Henry II had been plotting to get his hands on Ireland since 1155, when the English Pope Adrian IV issued him the Bull *Laudabiliter*, granting him the right to bring rebel Christian missionaries in Ireland to heel. Armed with the blessing of the pope and uneasy about Strongbow's growing power and independence of mind, Henry sent a huge naval force in 1171, landed at Waterford and declared it a royal city. He assumed a semblance of control, but the Norman lords continued to do pretty much as they pleased. Barons such as de Courcy and de Lacy set up independent power bases.

Although the gradual assimilation of the Anglo-Norman nobles and their hirelings into Irish society – which provoked the oft-quoted phrase *Hibernioes Hibernis ipsis*, or 'more Irish than the Irish themselves' – can easily be viewed as a form of internal conquest, as their feudal control over the land and the people who worked that land became near total, it wasn't until 1534 that the English crown, occupied by Henry VIII, saw fit to once more send armies across the water. Henry's actions, however, were entirely motivated by his break with the Catholic Church over the pope's failure to grant him dispensation to divorce: the Anglo-Irish were a little iffy about Henry's decision to go it alone and Silken Thomas' abortive uprising gave Henry the excuse he needed to cement his absolute authority in Ireland. Within seven years, Henry had confiscated the lands of the most rebellious lords, eliminated the power of the Irish church and had himself declared King of Ireland.

Elizabeth I further consolidated English power in Ireland, establishing jurisdiction in Connaught and Munster, despite rebellions by the local ruling families. Ulster remained the last outpost of the Irish chiefs. Hugh O'Neill,

The expression 'beyond the Pale' came into use when the Pale was the English-controlled part of Ireland. To the British elite, the rest of Ireland was considered uncivilised.

earl of Tyrone, led the last serious assault on English power in Ireland for centuries. O'Neill – who supposedly ordered lead from England to re-roof his castle, but instead used it for bullets – instigated open conflict with the English, and so began the Nine Years' War (1594–1603). He proved a courageous and crafty foe, and the English forces met with little success against him in the first seven years of fighting.

The Battle of Kinsale, in 1601, spelled the end for O'Neill and for Ulster. Although O'Neill survived the battle, his power was broken and he surrendered to the English crown. In 1607, O'Neill and 90 other Ulster chiefs sailed to Europe, leaving Ireland forever. This was known as the Flight of the Earls, and it left Ulster open to English rule.

With the native chiefs gone, Elizabeth and her successor, James I, could pursue their policy of Plantation with impunity, and while confiscations took place all over the country, Ulster was most affected because of its wealthy farmlands and as punishment for being home to the primary fomenters of rebellion. It is here that Ulster's often tragic fate was first begun. The Plantations also marked the final collapse of the Gaelic social and political superstructure and the total conquest of Ireland by the English.

Oliver Cromwell's invasion following the Irish rebellion of 1641 – an attempted coup d'état by the Irish Catholic gentry driven by fears that the anti-Royalist Protestant forces were about to invade – served to re-establish total English rule, but it also ushered in the most punitive period of social legislation in Irish history. The main intended effect of the Penal Laws was to facilitate the dispossession of the landed Catholic population. In 1641 Catholics had owned 60% of land in Ireland and by 1776 Catholic land ownership in Ireland stood at only 5%. Six hundred years after Strongbow first landed in Wexford, the conquest of Ireland was complete.

THE SLOW BIRTH OF A NATION

The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 saw the end of the War of Independence and the establishment of an Irish state – albeit a truncated one, due to the terms of the treaty that allowed six Ulster counties to remain part of the United Kingdom – for the first time in history. In the immediate aftermath of WWI, which was ostensibly fought to protect the rights of small nations, the new Irish state was but the logical and expected result of an 800-year struggle by the Irish to free themselves from the yoke of foreign rule.

Yet the concept of the Irish nation is, in historical terms, a relatively recent one, owing much of its ideological impetus to the republican fervour that gripped Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Although the English crown had held Ireland in its grip since the end of the 12th century, the subjugated inhabitants of the island did develop a general identity borne out of common misfortune but were united in little else.

Cromwell: An Honourable Enemy by Tom Reilly advances the unpopular view that perhaps the destruction of Cromwell's campaign is grossly exaggerated. You're no doubt familiar with the common view; here's the contrary position. (Yes, Reilly is Irish.)

For articles exploring the Irish struggle, check out <http://larkspirit.com>.

300 BC–AD 800

Ireland is divided into five provinces: Leinster, Meath, Connaught, Ulster and Munster. Meath later merges with Leinster.

AD 431–32

According to medieval chronicles, Pope Celestine I sends Bishop Palladius to Ireland to minister to those 'already believing in Christ'; St Patrick arrives the following year to continue the mission.

550–800

The flowering of early monasticism in Ireland. The great monastic teachers begin exporting their knowledge across Europe, ushering in Ireland's 'Golden Age'.

795–841

Vikings begin to plunder Irish monasteries; their raping and pillaging urges sated, they establish settlements throughout the country, including Dublin, and soon turn it into a centre of economic power.

1014

The Battle of Clontarf takes place on Good Friday (April 23) between the forces of the High King, Brian Boru, and the forces led by the King of Leinster, Máelmorda macMurchada.

1166

King of Leinster, Dermot MacMurrough, is ousted; he escapes to England where he pleads with Henry II for help. Henry directs him toward a host of barons led by Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, aka Strongbow.

Paradoxically, it was the privileged few that led the majority of rebellions against the English crown, beginning in the 1590s with the Nine Years' War and Hugh O'Neill's failed rebellion against Elizabeth I, considered to be the first quasi-nationalist rebellion against English rule.

The next significant movement came in the wake of the Irish rebellion of 1641, when a group of Gaelic and Anglo-Norman Catholic lords set up a de facto independent Irish state known as the Confederation of Kilkenny (after its capital) that had nominal control over two-thirds of the island (the area outside the so-called Pale, roughly the extent of Leinster and the limit of direct English rule). They demanded autonomy for the Irish parliament and full rights for Catholics, including an end to the Plantations, all the while reasserting their loyalty to the English crown, thereby pitting themselves squarely against Cromwell's parliamentary forces. It all came to a bloody and ignominious end with Cromwell's Irish campaign of 1649–53: not only was the Confederation destroyed, but all of the lands previously owned by the Old Irish gentry were permanently dispossessed.

Another attempt to resist the British in the spirit of the Confederation of Kilkenny was the Jacobite Rebellion of the late 17th century, where Irish Catholic monarchists rallied behind James II after his deposition in the Glorious Revolution. James' defeat at the Battle of the Boyne ensured the complete victory of the English Protestant Ascendancy. The punitive conditions of the Penal Laws and the consciousness of defeat and dispossession served to create a powerful religious and ethnic identity – Gaelic and Roman Catholic – that would eventually become the basis of Irish nationalism.

In the interim, however, with Roman Catholics rendered utterly powerless, the seeds of rebellion against autocracy were planted by a handful of liberal Protestants inspired by the ideologies of the Enlightenment and the unrest provoked by the American War of Independence and then the French Revolution.

The first of these liberal leaders was a young Dublin Protestant, Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763–98), who was the most prominent leader of a Belfast organisation called the United Irishmen. They had high ideals of bringing together men of all creeds to reform and reduce Britain's power in Ireland, but their attempts to gain power through straightforward politics proved fruitless, and they went underground, committed to bringing change by any means. The tragic failure of the French to land an army of succour in 1796 left the organisation exposed to retribution and the men met their bloody end in the Battle of Vinegar Hill in 1798.

The Act of Union, passed in 1801, was the British government's vain attempt to put an end to any aspirations toward Irish independence, but the nationalist genie was well out of the bottle and two distinct forms of nationalist expression began to develop. The first was a breed of radical republicanism, which advocated use of force to found a secular, egalitarian Irish republic;

the second was a more moderate movement, which advocated nonviolent and legal action to force the government into granting concessions.

The most important moderate was a Kerry-born Catholic called Daniel O'Connell (1775–1847). In 1823 O'Connell founded the Catholic Association with the aim of achieving political equality for Catholics. The association soon became a vehicle for peaceful mass protest and action: in the 1826 general election it supported Protestant candidates who favoured Catholic emancipation. Two years later, O'Connell himself went one better and successfully stood for a seat in County Clare. Being a Catholic, he couldn't actually take his seat, so the British government was in a quandary. To staunch the possibility of an uprising, the government passed the 1829 Act of Catholic Emancipation, allowing some well-off Catholics voting rights and the right to be elected as MPs.

O'Connell continued to pursue his reform campaign, turning his attention toward the repeal of the Act of Union. His main weapon was the monster rally, which attracted hundreds of thousands of people eager to hear the 'Liberator' (as he was now known) speak. But O'Connell was unwilling to go outside the law, and when the government ordered the cancellation of one of his rallies, he meekly stood down and thereby gave up his most potent weapon of resistance.

O'Connell's failure to defy the British was seen as a terrible capitulation as the country was in the midst of the Potato Famine, and the lack of urgency on the part of the authorities in dealing with the crisis served to bolster the ambitions of the more radical wing of the nationalist movement, led in the 1840s by the Young Irelanders, who attempted a failed rebellion in 1848, and later by the Fenians, architects of yet another uprising in 1867. The Irish may have been bitterly angry at the treatment meted out by the British, but they weren't quite ready to take up arms en masse against them.

Instead, the nationalist cause found itself driven by arguably the most important feature of the Irish struggle against foreign rule: land ownership. Championed by the extraordinary Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–91), the Land League initiated widespread agitation for reduced rents and improved working conditions. The conflict heated up and there was violence on both sides. Parnell instigated the strategy of 'boycotting' tenants, agents and landlords who didn't adhere to the Land League's aims: these people were treated like lepers by the local population. The Land War, as it became known, lasted from 1879 to 1882 and was momentous. For the first time, tenants were defying their landlords en masse. The Land Act of 1881 improved life immeasurably for tenants, creating fair rents and the possibility of tenants owning their land.

The other element of his two-pronged assault on the British was at Westminster where, as leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) he led the fight for Home Rule, a limited form of autonomy for Ireland. Parliamentary

In 1870, after the Great Famine and ongoing emigration, more than one-third of all native-born Irish lived outside of Ireland.

For the Cause of Liberty: A Thousand Years of Ireland's Heroes by Terry Golway vividly describes the struggles of Irish Nationalism.

The Great Hunger by Cecil Woodham-Smith is the classic study of the Great Famine of 1845–51.

1169

Henry's Welsh and Norman barons land in Wexford and capture Waterford and Wexford with MacMurrough's help. Although no one knows it at the time, this is the beginning of an 800-year occupation by Britain.

1172

King Henry II invades Ireland, using the 1155 Bull Laudabiliter issued to him by Pope Adrian IV to claim sovereignty, forcing the Cambro-Norman warlords and some of the Gaelic Irish kings to accept him as their overlord.

1350–1530

The Anglo-Norman barons establish power bases independent of the English crown. Over the following two centuries, English control gradually recedes to an area around Dublin known as 'the Pale'.

1366

The English crown enacts the Statutes of Kilkenny, outlawing intermarriage, the Irish language and other Irish customs to stop the Anglo-Normans from assimilating too much with the Irish. It doesn't work.

1534–41

Henry VIII declares war on the property of the Irish church, as part of his break with the Catholic Church. In 1541 he arranges for the Irish parliament to declare him King of Ireland.

1585

Potatoes from South America are introduced to Ireland, where they eventually become a staple on nearly every table in the country.

THE GREAT FAMINE

As a result of the Great Famine of 1845–51, a staggering three million people died or were forced to emigrate from Ireland. This great tragedy is all the more inconceivable given that the scale of suffering was attributable to selfishness as much as natural causes. Potatoes were the staple food of a rapidly growing, desperately poor population, and when a blight hit the crop, prices soared. The repressive Penal Laws ensured that farmers, already crippled with high rents, could ill afford the little subsistence potatoes provided. Inevitably, most tenants fell into arrears with little or no concession given by mostly indifferent landlords, and were evicted or sent to the dire conditions of the workhouses.

Shamefully, during this time there were abundant harvests of wheat and dairy produce – the country was producing more than enough grain to feed the entire population and it's said that more cattle were sold abroad than there were people on the island. But while millions of its citizens were starving, Ireland was forced to export its food to Britain and overseas.

The Poor Laws in place at the height of the Famine deemed landlords responsible for the maintenance of their poor and encouraged many to 'remove' tenants from their estates by paying their way to America. Many Irish were sent unwittingly to their deaths on board the notorious 'coffin ships'. British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel made well-intentioned but inadequate gestures at famine relief, and some – but far too few – landlords did their best for their tenants.

Mass emigration continued to reduce the population during the next 100 years and huge numbers of Irish emigrants who found their way abroad, particularly to the USA, carried with them a lasting bitterness.

mathematics meant that the Liberal Party, led by William Gladstone, was reliant on the members of the IPP to maintain a majority over the Conservatives and Parnell pressed home his advantage by forcing Gladstone to introduce a series of Home Rule bills – in 1886 and 1892 – which passed the Commons but were defeated in the House of Lords. Parnell's ascendancy, however, came to a sudden end in 1890 when he was embroiled in a divorce scandal – not acceptable to prurient Irish society. The 'uncrowned king of Ireland' was no longer welcome. Parnell's health deteriorated rapidly and he died less than a year later.

As the 20th century dawned, Ireland was overwhelmingly committed to achieving Home Rule. A new Liberal government under Prime Minister Asquith had removed the House of Lords' power to veto bills and began to put another Home-Rule-for-Ireland bill through Parliament. The bill was passed (but not enacted) in 1912 against strident Unionist opposition, epitomised by the mass rallies organised by the recently founded Protestant vigilante group, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

The outbreak of WWI in July 1914 merely delayed Irish ambitions as a majority of the Irish Volunteers – founded by academic Eoin MacNeill as a nationalist answer to the UVF – heeded the call to arms and enlisted in the

The term 'boycott' comes from Charles C Boycott, a County Mayo land agent who was, yes, boycotted by Parnell's Land League in 1880.

British army. It was felt that just as England had promised Home Rule to Ireland, so the Irish owed it to England to help her in her hour of need.

A few, however, did not. Two small groups – a section of the Irish Volunteers under Pádraig Pearse and the Irish Citizens' Army led by James Connolly – conspired in a rebellion that took the country by surprise. A depleted Volunteer group marched into Dublin on Easter Monday 1916, and took over a number of key positions in the city, claiming the General Post Office on O'Connell St as headquarters. From its steps, Pearse read out to passers-by a declaration that Ireland was now a republic and that his band was the provisional government. Less than a week of fighting ensued before the rebels surrendered to the superior British forces. The rebels weren't popular and had to be protected from angry Dubliners as they were marched to jail.

The Easter Rising would probably have had little impact on the Irish situation had the British not made martyrs of the rebel leaders. Of the 77 given death sentences, 15 were executed, including the injured Connolly, who was shot while strapped to a chair. This brought about a sea change in public attitudes, and support for the republicans rose dramatically.

By the end of the war, Home Rule was far too little, far too late. In the 1918 general election, the republicans stood under the banner of Sinn Féin and won a large majority of the Irish seats. Ignoring London's Parliament, where technically they were supposed to sit, the newly elected Sinn Féin deputies – many of them veterans of the 1916 Easter Rising – declared Ireland independent and formed the first Dáil Éireann (Irish assembly or lower house), which sat in Dublin's Mansion House under the leadership of Eamon de Valera. The Irish Volunteers became the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Dáil authorised it to wage war on British troops in Ireland.

A lot more blood would soon seep into Irish soil, but the Civil War would lead – inevitably – to independence and freedom, albeit costly, for the country was partitioned and six Ulster provinces were allowed remain part of the UK, sowing the seeds of division and bloodshed that tormented the provinces half a century later.

A MATTER OF FAITH

In 2007, a joint survey by a Catholic and a Protestant organisation revealed that only 52% of young people knew the names of the four Evangelists... and that only 38% knew that there were four of them (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, just so you know). Only 10% knew that the Immaculate Conception referred to Mary and less than half could name the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit (or Ghost) as the three persons of the Trinity.

A sharp decline in religious practice is a Europe-wide phenomenon, particularly among Christians, but Ireland is a special case, for religion is a central feature of Irish history and the centuries-old fight for identity and independence has been intimately intertwined with the struggle for

The events leading up to the Anglo-Irish War and their effect on ordinary people are movingly and powerfully related in JG Farrell's novel *Troubles*, first published in 1970.

1594

Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, orders lead from England to re-roof his castle, but instead uses it for bullets – instigating open conflict with the English in what would eventually be termed the Nine Years' War.

1601

The Battle of Kinsale is fought between Elizabeth's armies and the combined rebel forces led by Hugh O'Neill. O'Neill surrenders and the back of the Irish rebellion against the crown is broken.

1607

O'Neill and 90 other Ulster chiefs sail to Europe, leaving Ireland forever. This is known as the Flight of the Earls, and it leaves Ulster open to English rule and the policy of Plantation.

1641

The English Civil Wars have severe repercussions. The native Irish and Anglo-Norman Catholics support Charles I against the Protestant parliamentarians in the hope of restoring Catholic power in Ireland.

1649–53

Cromwell lays waste throughout Ireland after the Irish support Charles I in the English Civil Wars; this includes the mass slaughtering of Catholic Irish and the confiscation of two million hectares of land.

1688–1690

Following the deposition of King James II, James' Catholic army fights William's Protestant forces, resulting in William's victory at the Battle of the Boyne, 12 July 1690.

recognition and supremacy between the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. There are few European countries where religion has played such a key role and continues to exert huge influence – not least in the fact that the island remains roughly divided along religious lines – to the point that for many outside observers Ireland is somewhat akin to a Christian Middle East, a complex and confusing muddle that lends itself to oversimplified generalisations by those who don't have two lifetimes to figure it all out. Like us, for instance, in this short essay.

The relative ease with which the first Christian missionaries in the 5th and 6th centuries AD converted the local pagan tribes and their strong tradition of druidism was in part due to the clever fusing of traditional pagan rituals with the new Christian teaching, which created an exciting hybrid known as Celtic, or Insular Christianity – the presence on some early Christian churches of such decorative elements as Sheila-na-Gigs, a lewd female fertility symbol, is but one example.

Irish Christian scholars excelled in the study of Latin and Greek learning and Christian theology in the monasteries that flourished at, among other places, Clonmacnoise in County Offaly, Glendalough in County Wicklow and Lismore in County Waterford. It was the golden age, and the arts of manuscript illumination, metalworking and sculpture flourished, producing such treasures as the Book of Kells, ornate jewellery, and the many carved stone crosses that dot the island 'of saints and scholars'.

The nature of Christianity in Ireland was one of marked independence from Rome, especially in the areas of monastic rule and penitential practice, which emphasised private confession to a priest followed by penances levied by the priest in reparation – which is the spirit and letter of the practice of confession that exists to this day. The Irish were also exporting these teachings abroad, setting up monasteries across Europe such as the ones in Luxeuil in France and Bobbio in Italy, both founded by St Columbanus (AD 543–615).

The Golden Age ended with the invasion of Ireland by Henry II in 1170, for which Henry had the blessing of Pope Adrian IV and his papal audibler, a document that granted the English king dominion over Ireland under the overlordship of the pope. Ireland's monastic independence was unacceptable in the new political climate brought on by the Gregorian reform movement of 1050–80, which sought to consolidate the ultimate authority of the papacy in all ecclesiastical, moral and social matters at the expense of the widespread monastic network. The influence of the major Irish monasteries began to wane in favour of the Norman bishops who oversaw the construction of the great cathedrals, most notably in Armagh and Dublin.

The second and more damaging reform of the Irish church occurred in the middle of the 16th century, and once again an English monarch was at the

heart of it. The break with the Roman Catholic Church that followed Henry VIII's inability to secure papal blessing for his divorce of Catherine of Aragon in 1534 saw the establishment in Ireland (as in England) of a new Protestant church, with Henry as its supreme head. The Irish, however, were not ready to change their allegiances and remained largely loyal to Rome, which set off the religious wars that would dominate Irish affairs for the next 200 years and cast a huge shadow over the country that has not quite faded yet.

Henry was concerned that his new-found enemies on the continent would use Ireland as a base from which to invade England, so he decided to bring Ireland fully under his control, a policy that was continued by his daughter Elizabeth I. Their combined failure to convert Ireland to the new religion resulted in the crown ordering the pacification of the country by whatever methods possible, but the resultant brutality merely served to solidify Irish resentment and their commitment to Roman Catholicism.

The resistance had its most glorious moment in the Nine Years' War (1594–1603), when a combined alliance of Irish chieftains led by Hugh O'Neill fought the English armies to a standstill before eventually surrendering in 1603. The 'flight of the earls' in 1607, which saw O'Neill and his allies leave Ireland forever, marked the end of organised Irish rebellion and the full implementation of the policy of Plantation, whereby the confiscated lands of Catholic nobles were redistributed to 'planted' settlers of exclusively Protestant stock. This policy was most effective in Ulster, which was seen by the English as the hotbed of Irish resistance to English rule.

Alongside the policy of Plantation, the English also passed a series of Penal Laws in Ireland, which had the effect of almost totally disenfranchising all Catholics and, later, Presbyterians. The Jacobite Wars of the late 17th century, which pitted the Catholic James II against his son-in-law, the Protestant William of Orange, saw the Irish take sides along strictly religious lines: the disenfranchised Catholic majority supported James while the recently planted Protestant landowning minority lent their considerable support to William. It was William who won the day, and 12 July 1690 – when James was defeated at the Battle of the Boyne – has been celebrated ever since by Ulster Protestants with marches throughout the province.

Until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, Irish Roman Catholics were almost totally impeded from worshipping freely. Clerics and bishops couldn't preach, with only lay priests allowed to operate, so long as they were registered with the government. The construction of churches was heavily regulated, and when allowed, they could only be built in barely durable wood. The most effective of the anti-Catholic laws, however, was the Popery Act of 1703, which sought to 'prevent the further growth of Popery' by requiring that all Catholics divide their lands equally among their sons, in effect diminishing Catholic land holdings. When the emancipation act was passed,

Neil Jordan's motion picture *Michael Collins*, starring Liam Neeson as the revolutionary, depicts the Easter Rising, the founding of the Free State and Collins' violent demise.

To gain some insight into the mind of Michael Collins, read *In His Own Words*, a collection of Collins' writings and speeches.

1695

Penal laws (aka the 'popery code') prohibit Catholics from owning a horse, marrying outside of their religion, building churches out of anything but wood, and from buying or inheriting property.

1795

Concerned at the attempts of the Society of United Irishmen to secure equal rights for non-Establishment Protestants and Catholics, a group of Protestants create an organisation – the Orange Institution.

1798

The flogging and killings of potential rebels sparks a rising led by the United Irishmen and their leader, Wolfe Tone. Wolfe Tone is captured and taken to Dublin, where he commits suicide.

1801

The Act of Union unites Ireland politically with Britain. The Irish Parliament votes itself out of existence following a campaign of bribery. Around 100 Members of Parliament move to the House of Commons in London.

1828–29

Daniel O'Connell exploits a loophole in the law to win a seat in Parliament but is unable to take it because he is Catholic. The prime minister passes the Catholic Emancipation Act giving limited rights to Catholics.

1845–51

A mould ravages the potato harvest. The British government adopts a laissez faire attitude, resulting in the deaths of between 500,000 and one million, and the emigration of up to two million others.

it only granted limited rights to Catholics who owned a set area of land; the apartheid that preceded it ensured that they were few in number.

Hardly surprising then that the Catholic Church was heavily involved in the struggle for Irish freedom, although the traditionally conservative church was careful to only lend its support to lawful means of protest, such as Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Movement and, later, Parnell's Home Rule fight. When Parnell became embroiled in the divorce scandal in 1890, the church condemned him with all its might, thereby ending his career. It also condemned any rebel notion that smacked of illegality or socialism – the Easter Rising was roundly denounced from the pulpit for its bloodletting and its vaguely leftist proclamation.

If the Roman Catholic Church was shackled for much of the English occupation, it more than made up for it when the Free State came into being in 1922. The church's overwhelmingly conservative influence on the new state was felt everywhere, not least in the state's schools and hospitals and over virtually every aspect of social policy. Divorce, contraception, abortion and all manner of 'scurrilous literature' were obvious no-nos, but the church even managed to say no to a variety of welfare plans that would, for instance, provide government assistance to young mothers in need.

The Free State, and the Republic of Ireland that followed it in 1948, was 96% Catholic. Although 7.5% of the Free State population in 1922 was Protestant, their numbers had halved by the 1960s, with a disproportionately high rate of emigration among Protestants who felt threatened or unwelcome in the new Catholic state. The Catholic Church compounded the matter by emphasising the 1907 Ne Temere decree, which insisted that the children of mixed marriage be raised as Catholic under penalty of excommunication.

The dramatic decline in the influence of the church over the last two decades is primarily the result of global trends and greater prosperity in Ireland, but the devastating revelations of clerical abuse of boys and girls in the care of the Church over the last half century have defined an almost vitriolic reaction against the Church, particularly among the younger generation. The Church's reluctance to confront its own responsibilities in these shocking scandals, which include knowing about paedophilic priests and consequently shuffling them from parish to parish, has heightened a sense of deep betrayal among many of the faithful.

A STATE APART: NORTHERN IRELAND

On 8 May 2007, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the devolved legislature of the province, finally meets again for the first time since October 2002. The First Minister, the Rev Ian Paisley, smiles, shakes hands and poses for photos with the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness.

This is no straightforward meeting. Even if you've only kept one lazy eye on Irish affairs these last 30 years, you'll know that the sight of a Loyalist

firebrand like Paisley – who has a history of deep-rooted, often vicious enmity toward Irish nationalism and republicanism – and an ex-IRA commander like McGuinness shaking hands is nothing short of highly improbable. Needless to say, this historic agreement is the culmination of a painstakingly long road of domination, fighting, negotiation, concession and political posturing that began...

Well, it began in the 16th century, with the first Plantations of Ireland by the English crown, whereby the confiscated lands of the Gaelic and Hiberno-Norman gentry were awarded to English and Scottish settlers of good Protestant stock. The policy was most effective in Ulster, where the newly arrived Protestants were given an extra leg-up by the Penal Laws, which successfully reduced the now landless Catholic population to second-class citizens with little or no rights. Interestingly, from 1707 the Penal Laws also applied to Presbyterians (of which Paisley is one, albeit the founder of his own Free Presbyterian Church), who were considered not much better than Catholics.

But let us fast-forward to 1921, when the notion of independent Ireland moved from aspiration to actuality. The Anglo-Irish Treaty resolved the thorny issue of Ulster's Protestant majority – represented by an armed and defiant Ulster Volunteer Force – by roughly partitioning the country and establishing a Boundary Commission that would decide on the final frontiers between north and south. A series of inflammatory press leaks meant that the findings of the commission – basically redividing the frontier so as to include more nationalists in the Free State – were never instituted and to this day Northern Ireland's borders are as they were in 1921.

On 22 June 1921 the Northern Ireland parliament came into being, with James Craig as the first prime minister. His Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was to rule the new state until 1972, with the minority Catholic population (roughly 40%) stripped of any real power or representative strength by a parliament that favoured the Unionists through economic subsidy, bias in housing allocations and gerrymandering: Derry's electoral boundaries were redrawn so as to guarantee a Protestant council, even though the city was two-thirds Catholic. To keep everyone in line, the overwhelmingly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary and their militia, the B-Specials, made no effort to mask their blatantly sectarian bias. To all intents and purposes, Northern Ireland was an apartheid state.

The first challenge to the Unionist hegemony came with the long-dormant IRA's border campaign in the 1950s, but it was quickly quashed and its leaders imprisoned. A decade later, however, the authorities met with a far more defiant foe, in the shape of the Civil Rights Movement, founded in 1967 and heavily influenced by its US counterpart as it sought to redress the blatant sectarianism in Derry. In October 1968 a mainly Catholic march in Derry was violently broken up by the RUC amid rumours that the IRA

The Irish in America by Michael Coffey takes up the history of the Famine where many histories leave off: the turbulent experiences of Irish immigrants in the USA.

Ireland Since the Famine by FSL Lyons is a standard history for all students of modern Ireland.

1879–82

The Land War, led by the Land League, sees tenant farmers defying their landlords en masse to force the passing of the Land Act in 1881, which allows for fair rent, fixity of tenure and free sale.

1912

Sir Edward Carson, a Dublin lawyer, forms the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) to create organised resistance against the passing of the Home Rule Bill, which would grant limited autonomy to Ireland.

1916

The Easter Rising: a group of republicans take Dublin's General Post Office and announce the formation of an Irish Republic. After less than a week of fighting, the rebels surrender to the superior British forces.

1919–21

Irish War of Independence, aka the Black and Tan War on account of British irregulars wearing mixed police (black) and army khaki uniforms, begins in January 1919.

1921

Two years and 1400 casualties later, the war ends in a truce on 11 July 1921 that leads to peace talks. After negotiations in London, the Irish delegation signs the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December.

1921–22

The treaty gives 26 counties of Ireland independence and allows six largely Protestant Ulster counties the choice of opting out. The Irish Free State is founded in 1922.

had provided 'security' for the marchers. Nobody knew it at the time, but the Troubles had begun.

In January 1969 another civil rights movement, called People's Democracy, organised a march from Belfast to Derry. As the marchers neared their destination they were attacked by a Protestant mob. The police first stood to one side and then compounded the problem with a sweep through the predominantly Catholic Bogside district. Further marches, protests and violence followed, and far from keeping the two sides apart, the police were clearly part of the problem. In August British troops went to Derry and then Belfast to maintain law and order. The British army was initially welcomed in some Catholic quarters, but soon it too came to be seen as a tool of the Protestant majority. Overreaction by the army actually fuelled recruitment into the long-dormant IRA. IRA numbers especially increased after Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972), when British troops killed 13 civilians in Derry.

Northern Ireland's Parliament was abolished in 1972, although substantial progress had been made towards civil rights. A new power-sharing arrangement, worked out in the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement, was killed stone dead by the massive and overwhelmingly Protestant Ulster Workers' Strike of 1974.

While continuing to target people in Northern Ireland, the IRA moved its campaign of bombing to mainland Britain. Its activities were increasingly condemned by citizens and parties on all sides of the political spectrum. Meanwhile, Loyalist paramilitaries began a sectarian murder campaign against Catholics. Passions reached fever pitch in 1981 when republican prisoners in the North went on a hunger strike, demanding the right to be recognised as political prisoners. Ten of them fasted to death, the best known being an elected MP, Bobby Sands.

The waters were further muddied by an incredible variety of parties splintering into subgroups with different agendas. The IRA had split into 'official' and 'provisional' wings, from which sprang more extreme republican organisations such as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). Myriad Protestant, Loyalist paramilitary organisations sprang up in opposition to the IRA, and violence was typically met with violence.

In the 1990s external circumstances started to alter the picture. Membership of the EU, economic progress in Ireland and the declining importance of the Catholic Church in the South started to reduce differences between the North and South. Also, American interest added an international dimension to the situation.

A series of negotiated statements between the Unionists, nationalists and the British and Irish governments eventually resulted in the historic Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The new assembly, led by First Minister David Trimble of the UUP and Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon of the nationalist Social Democratic and Liberal Party (SDLP) was beset by sectarian

divisions from the outset, which resulted in no less than four suspensions, the last from October 2002 until May 2007.

During this period, the politics of Northern Ireland polarised dramatically, resulting in the falling away of the more moderate UUP and the emergence of the hardline Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), led by Ian Paisley; and, on the nationalist side, the emergence of the IRA's political wing, Sinn Féin, as the main torch-bearer of nationalist aspirations, under the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness.

The hardening of political opinion was almost inevitable. While both sides were eager to maintain an end to the violence, neither side wanted to be accused of having a soft underbelly, especially if both sides' aspirations could not, despite what was promised, be realised by purely political means. Consequently, the DUP and Sinn Féin dug their heels in, with the main sticking points being decommissioning of IRA weapons and the identity and composition of the new police force ushered in to replace the RUC. Paisley and the Unionists made increasingly difficult demands of the decommissioning bodies (photographic evidence, Unionist witnesses etc) as they blatantly refused to accept anything less than an open and complete surrender of the IRA, while Sinn Féin refused to join the police board that monitored the affairs of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), effectively refusing to change their policy of total noncooperation with the security forces. In the background, now inactive members of the paramilitary groups on both sides were revealed to be involved in all kinds of murky dealings such as drug dealing and turf wars – the most spectacular moment of all came in December 2004 when a £26.5m bank robbery saw the finger of blame pointed directly at republicans.

But Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern were not about to see their political legacy ruined by northern stubbornness. They continued to turn the screws on both sides, urging them to continue negotiating just as everyone else had begun to despair of ever seeing a resolution. In an effective bit of strong-arming, they set a deadline for resolution and made vague threats to both sides about the consequences of not meeting the deadline. But in a typically Irish bit of face-saving, the Unionists balked at the deadline of 26 March, 2007 and, in a deal agreed with Sinn Féin, announced that they would take their seats in the assembly on 8 May. It was a classic case of 'we'll do it, but we'll do it our way'.

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

The poignant image of starving emigrants, forced to leave the land of their birth for far-flung fields because to stay would be to die, is one of Irish history's more emotional issues, especially as emigration has played a singularly important role in the country's social, economic and political life. A whole century's worth of sad songs intone the emigrant's plight and places the

Brendan O'Brien's popular *A Pocket History of the IRA* summarises a lot of complex history in a mere 150 pages, but it's a good introduction.

A History of Ireland by Mike Cronin summarises all of Ireland's history in less than 300 pages. It's an easy read, but doesn't offer much in the way of analysis.

1922–23

Unwilling to accept the terms of the treaty, forces led by Éamon de Valera take up arms against their former comrades, led by Michael Collins. A brief but bloody civil war ensues, resulting in the death of Collins.

1932

After 10 years in the political wilderness, de Valera leads his Fianna Fáil party into government and goes about weakening the ties between the Free State and Britain.

1948

Fianna Fáil loses the 1948 general election to Fine Gael in coalition with the new republican Clann an Poblachta. The new government declares the Free State to be a republic at last.

1949

Ireland leaves the British Commonwealth, and in so doing the South cuts its final links to the North.

1969

Marches by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association are disrupted by Loyalist attacks and police action, resulting in rioting. It culminates in the 'Battle of the Bogside' and is the beginning of the Troubles.

1972

The Republic (and Northern Ireland) become members of the EEC. On Bloody Sunday, 13 civilians are killed by British troops; Westminster suspends the Stormont government and introduces direct rule.

AMERICAN CONNECTIONS

Today, more than 40 million Americans have Irish ancestry, a legacy of successive waves of emigration spurred by events from the Potato Famine of the 1840s to the Depression of the 1930s. Many of the legendary figures of American history, from Davy Crockett to John Steinbeck, and 16 out of the 42 US presidents to date are of Irish descent.

Here's a list of places covered in this guide that have links to past US presidents or deal with the experience of Irish emigrants to the USA:

- Andrew Jackson Centre (p673), County Antrim
- Arthur Cottage (p675), County Antrim
- Dunbrody Heritage Ship (p180), County Wexford
- Grant Ancestral Homestead (p693), County Tyrone
- Kennedy Homestead (p181), County Wexford
- Queenstown Story Heritage Centre (p214), County Cork
- Ulster American Folk Park (p690), County Tyrone

blame for it squarely at someone else's door, namely the Anglo-Irish lords and the English.

Yet the issue is not nearly as straightforward as that. Ireland's emigrant patterns have followed two basic models: the 'push' model, where people left because they were evicted, faced poverty or religious persecution; and the 'pull' model, where emigrants were attracted to foreign lands by the promise of a significantly better life – 600-acre plots in the US Midwest for next-to-nothing were quite an enticing prospect in the mid-19th-century.

The tragic image of the Irish emigrant was born as a result of the Great Famine of 1845–51, the watershed of Irish emigration. But the Irish had been leaving Ireland long before then, primarily as a result of the collapse of cereal-crop and linen prices (Ireland's two most important exports) in the post-Napoleonic era after 1815. It is estimated that between one and 1.5 million people emigrated in the years leading up to 1845. Nevertheless, the severe crisis provoked by the repeated failures of potato harvests led to a dramatic increase in the numbers leaving Ireland: it is estimated that 1.25 million left the country between 1845 and 1851, with the majority departing from the west of the country – a population loss from which that part of Ireland has never fully recovered. In 1841, the population of the Ireland was 6.5 million (excluding 1.6 million living in what eventually became Northern Ireland); 20 years later, it had fallen to 4.4 million.

The deep-rooted scar caused by the Famine and its socioeconomic aftermath has given rise to the enduring myth that entire families were forced to

emigrate, conjuring up the emotive idea of the old, sickly parents huddled together on the ship. Statistics show that in the main it was young people who left. Indeed, going abroad to seek one's fortune became a rite of passage for many Irish right up to the 1980s. Parents and older relatives generally stayed behind, and the remittances sent home by their emigrant sons and daughters (£1.4 million yearly in 1851) became an important supplement to income.

What is certain, however, is that emigration was to prove a major drain of Irish resources for more than a century thereafter. Between 1871 and 1961, the average annual net emigration from Ireland consistently exceeded the natural increase in the Irish population, which shrank from about 4.4 million in 1861 (excluding the 1.3 million living in what eventually became Northern Ireland) to 2.8 million in 1961. Ireland's lagging economic development meant that emigration was especially acute during the so-called Age of Mass Migration (1871–1926), when all manner of Europeans were emigrating to the new worlds in their millions, and in the post-WWII era (1951–61), when the European economies were in recession.

Although the Irish population began growing again in the 1960s – the lack of contraception or abortion, coupled with a major push on the part of the authorities to encourage a high birth rate, was especially helpful – net migration remained negative (departures exceeding arrivals) until the 1990s except for a brief flurry in the 1970s. An estimated 3 million Irish citizens currently live abroad, of whom 1.2 million were born in Ireland. The majority live in the US and the UK.

The turning point came in 1996, when Ireland officially became a country of net immigration – the last EU nation to do so. Rapid economic growth and an unprecedented demand for labour not only saw unemployment tumble from 15.9% in 1993 to a historic low of 4.2% in 2005 but the number of arrivals grow from about 18,000 in 1987 to more than 68,000 per annum in 2002. The growth in Irish immigration has been driven increasingly by non-Irish migrants, with more than half of all non-Irish arriving in Ireland since 2000 having been born outside the EU. According to the 2006 census, 10% of the population is now foreign born. The dramatic shift in Ireland's migration is best understood when compared to the rest of Europe, for in one short decade the country went from being the only EU member with negative net migration to having the second-highest migration rate after Luxembourg. For 150 years Ireland was a country to escape from; nowadays, people can't get into it fast enough.

Not quite. A surprising fact, hidden among the statistics that show Ireland as a country of immigration, is that the Republic is still at the top of the European emigration charts, losing a higher percentage of its native born than any other country in Europe – roughly about 25,000 a year. These numbers, however, have been largely offset by the phenomenon

Many films depict events related to the Troubles, including *Bloody Sunday* (2002), *The Boxer* (1997; starring Daniel Day-Lewis) and *In the Name of the Father* (1994; also starring Day-Lewis).

1974

1981

1993

mid-1990s

1994

1998

The Sunningdale Agreement results in a new Northern Ireland Assembly. Unionists oppose the agreement and the Ulster Workers' Council calls a strike that paralyses the province and brings an end to the Assembly.

Ten Republican prisoners die as the result of a hunger strike. The first hunger striker to die, Bobby Sands is elected to Parliament on an Anti-H-Block ticket. Over 100,000 people attend Sands' funeral.

Downing Street Declaration is signed by British PM John Major and Irish PM Albert Reynolds. It states that Britain has no 'selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland'.

Low corporate tax, restraint in government spending, transfer payments from the EU and a low-cost labour market result in the 'Celtic Tiger' boom, transforming Ireland into one of Europe's wealthiest countries.

Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, announces a 'cessation of violence' on behalf of the IRA on 31 August. In October, the Combined Loyalist Military Command also announces a ceasefire.

On 10 April, negotiations culminate in the Good Friday Agreement, under which the new Northern Ireland Assembly is given full legislative and executive authority.

of the 'returning Irish', who account for roughly the same on a yearly basis.

Economics are unquestionably an important underlying factor for all emigration and immigration, but in Ireland, societal mores that impinge on the freedoms it allows its citizens is another key driver. Ireland's relative poverty undoubtedly resulted in millions seeking opportunities elsewhere, but in recent times the restrictive attitudes of Irish society – particular in the post-WWII era, when conservative mores dictated that the baby-boomer generation would not have the same rights and freedoms as found elsewhere – pushed many young people to make new lives abroad. Although Irish society has changed dramatically in the last 20 years, rural emigration – to Dublin and beyond – remains a fact of life in Ireland.

Nevertheless, a buoyant and prosperous economy with bountiful employment, coupled with an increasingly liberalised society richly flavoured by multicultural influences, has set Ireland on a path it has never been on before. The overwhelming hopelessness of Irish poverty and the suffocating stranglehold of the conservative Church on the nation's morality are very much a thing of the past, and while important questions about the future of the country and its population remain unanswered and subject to a host of widely divergent predictions, it is clear that this small, relatively young nation has finally come of age.

A History of Ulster by Jonathon Bardon is a serious and far-reaching attempt to come to grips with Northern Ireland's saga.

1998

The 'Real IRA' detonate a bomb in Omagh, killing 29 people and injuring 200. It is the worst single atrocity in the history of the Troubles, but public outrage and swift action by politicians prevent a Loyalist backlash.

2005

The IRA issues a statement, ordering its units not to engage in 'any other activities' apart from assisting 'the development of purely political and democratic programmes through exclusively peaceful means'.

2007

The NI Assembly resumes after a five-year break when talks between Unionists and Republicans remain in stalemate. They resolve their primary issues.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

The Irish are justifiably renowned for their easy-going, affable nature. They're famous for being warm and friendly, which is just another way of saying that the Irish love a bit of a chat, whether it be with friends or strangers. They will entertain with their humour, alarm you with their willingness to get stuck in to a good debate and will cut you down with their razor-sharp wit. Slagging – the Irish version of teasing – is an art form, which may seem caustic to unfamiliar ears but is quickly revealed as intrinsic element of how the Irish relate to one another; it is commonly assumed that the mettle of friendship is proven by how well you can take a joke rather than the payment of a cheap compliment.

The Irish aren't big on talking themselves up; self-deprecation is a much-admired art form in Ireland, but it is generally accepted that the more you talk yourself down, the higher your reality is likely to be. The other trait the Irish have is begrudgery – although it's something only recognised by them and generally kept within the wider family. It's kind of amusing, though, to note that someone like Bono is subject to more intense criticism in Ireland than anywhere else in the world.

Beneath all of the garrulous sociability and self-deprecating twaddle lurks a dark secret, which is that, at heart, the Irish are low on self-esteem. They're therefore very suspicious of praise and tend not to believe anything nice that's said about them. The Irish wallow in false modesty like a sport.

This goes some way toward explaining the peculiar relationship Ireland has with alcohol. The country regularly tops the list of the world's biggest binge drinkers, and while there is an increasing awareness of and alarm at the devastation caused by alcohol to Irish society (especially young people), drinking remains the country's most popular social pastime with no sign of letting up; spend a weekend night walking around any town in the country and you'll get a first-hand feel of the influence and effect of the booze.

Some experts put Ireland's binge-drinking antics down to the dramatic rise in the country's economic fortunes. Whatever the truth of it, there is no denying that the Celtic Tiger has transformed Irish society in ways no one could foresee, with this generation of under-30s utterly unaware of life before the untrammelled possibilities of the current age, when unemployment, emigration and a cap on ambition were basic facts of life.

Prosperity has served the country well, and while a huge question mark still remains over the equitable distribution of the wealth accrued during the last decade, there is no doubt that the island has seen some dramatic shifts in traditional attitudes. Not so long ago, Roman Catholicism was a central pillar of everyday life in Ireland; today, the Church's grip on society has slackened to the point that a recent survey revealed that one-third of Irish youth didn't know where Jesus was born or what was celebrated at Easter.

LIFESTYLE

The Irish may like to grumble – about work, the weather, the government and those feckin' cejits on reality TV shows – but if pressed will tell you that they live in the best country on earth. There's loads *wrong* with the place, but isn't it the same way everywhere else?

Traditional Ireland – of the large family, closely linked to church and community – is quickly disappearing as the increased urbanisation of Ireland continues to break up the social fabric of community interdependence

The most popular names in Ireland are Jack and Emma.

that was a necessary element of relative poverty. Contemporary Ireland is therefore not altogether different from any other European country, and you have to travel further to the margins of the country – the islands and the isolated rural communities – to find an older version of society.

Ireland has long been a pretty homogenous country, but the arrival of thousands of immigrants from all over the world – 10% of the population is non-Irish – has challenged the mores of racial tolerance and integration. To a large extent it has been successful, although if you scratch beneath the surface, racial tensions can be exposed. So long as the new arrivals take on the jobs that many Irish wouldn't bother doing anymore, everything is relatively hunky dory; it's when the second generation of immigrants begin competing for the middle class jobs that Ireland's tolerant credentials will truly be tested.

POPULATION

The total population of Ireland is around 5.9 million: 4.2 million in the Republic and 1.7 million in Northern Ireland. There has been a steady increase in population since 1961, but the figures have a way to go before they reach their pre-Famine levels: before the tragedy of 1841–51 the population was in excess of eight million. Death and emigration reduced the population to around five million, and emigration continued at a high level for the next 100 years.

Although the effects of emigration have been tempered by a slow-down in the rate and an increase in the rate of immigrant arrivals – 10% of the population is now foreign-born – Ireland still loses proportionally more of its native children to emigration than any other European country; in 2005 more than 20,500 left the country to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Dublin is the largest city and the capital of the Republic, with around 1.2 million people (about 40% of the population) living within commuting distance of the city centre. The Republic's next largest cities are Cork, Galway and Limerick. Ireland's population is predominantly young: 41% is aged under 25 and in fact Ireland has the highest population of 15- to 24-year-olds and second highest of under 15-year-olds in Europe.

GAY-FRIENDLY IRELAND

The best things that ever happened to gay Ireland were the taming of the dictating church and the enactment of protective legislation against any kind of sexual discrimination. According to Brian Merriman, the Artistic Director of the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival, the collapse of church authority and the shocking revelations of priestly abuse, coupled with the liberalisation of the divorce law, helped Ireland come to terms with its own sexual and social honesty:

'Ireland is no longer talking about 'them' when referring to anyone who is vaguely unconventional; they're talking about 'us', and that every family has the potential to be different,' he says with great conviction, 'it's not just 'them' who have the gay in the closet. They're everywhere!'

But it's not all good. There is a huge difference still between attitudes in urban and rural Ireland, he says, and while legislation and liberalisation have been very important, there is still a legacy of internalised homophobia.

'Our enemies are no longer as clearly visible, so it's hard to know sometimes who exactly thinks what.'

He believes, however, that gays and lesbians need to be more visible in Irish society, if only to continue the struggle for parity of esteem and respect. Merriman says that 'the fight will not stop until the constitutional ban on gays getting married is lifted and that there are no second-class citizens in 21st century Ireland.'

The average number of children per family has fallen to 1.4, the lowest in Irish history.

In Northern Ireland, Belfast is the principal city, with a population of around 277,000. It has the youngest population in the UK, with 25% aged under 16.

These figures (and population counts throughout the book) are based on the last census of 2002.

SPORT

Ireland, by and large, is a nation of sports enthusiasts. Whether it's shouting the team on from the sideline or from a bar stool, the Irish have always taken their sport seriously.

Gaelic Football & Hurling

Gaelic games are at the core of Irishness; they are enmeshed in the fabric of Irish life and hold a unique place in the heart of its culture. Their resurgence towards the end of the 19th century was entwined with the whole Gaelic revival and the march towards Irish independence. The beating heart of Gaelic sports is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), set up in 1884, 'for the preservation and cultivation of National pastimes'. The GAA is still responsible for fostering these amateur games and it warms our hearts to see that after all this time – and amid the onslaught of globalisation and the general commercialisation of sport – they are still far and away the most popular sports in Ireland.

Gaelic games are fast, furious and not for the faint-hearted. Challenges are fierce, and contact between players is extremely aggressive. Both games are played by two teams of 15 players whose aim is to get the ball through what resembles a rugby goal: two long vertical posts joined by a horizontal bar, below which is a soccer-style goal, protected by a goalkeeper. Goals (below the crossbar) are worth three points, whereas a ball placed over the bar between the posts is worth one point. Scores are shown thus: 1–12, meaning one goal and 12 points, giving a total of 15 points.

Gaelic football is played with a round, soccer-size ball, and players are allowed to kick it or hand-pass it, like Aussie Rules. Hurling, which is

Females outnumber males in Dublin by 20,000.

AN IMMIGRANT TALE

Zaituna Aieiken is a 29-year-old Uyghur born in East Turkistan but raised in Kazakhstan, who arrived in Ireland in 2004. She settled first in Carrick-on-Suir, County Waterford before moving to Dublin six months later, where she began studying Health Care with a view toward beginning a new career as a Care Assistant; for now, though, she pays the rent as a domestic cleaner.

Her take on the importance of the pub in Irish society is surprising: 'If you want to find a good job in Ireland,' she says, 'you need to drink in an Irish pub, because that's where all the best opportunities come up!'

The pub is also the best place to hook up with members of the opposite sex, although she has little faith in Irish men's commitment to long-term relationships, especially with foreigners. 'Irish guys only want to have fun,' she says with a smile.

Although she feels quite welcome and has never been a victim of racism, she thinks that the older generation are kinder and friendlier than young people, who tend to be a little more intolerant and impatient with foreigners who are struggling to assimilate.

She has plenty of Irish acquaintances, but she socialises mostly within the so-called Russian community, made up mostly of non-Russian citizens of the former USSR, where she feels completely accepted as a Muslim woman.

'During Ramadan my Russian Orthodox friends come for sundown meals, and during Easter I go to their houses to celebrate. Everyone is the same and we all enjoy each other's company.' A great lesson indeed.

considered by far the more beautiful game, is played with a flat ashen stick or bat known as a hurley or *camán*. The small leather ball, called a *sliothar*, is hit or carried on the hurley; hand-passing is also allowed. Both games are played over 70 action-filled minutes.

Both sports are county-based games. The dream of every club player is to represent his county, with the hope of perhaps playing in an All-Ireland final in September at Croke Park in Dublin, the climax of a knockout championship that is played first at a provincial and then interprovincial level.

Rugby & Football

Rugby and football (soccer) enjoy considerable support all over the country, particularly around Dublin; football is very popular in Northern Ireland.

Although traditionally the preserve of Ireland's middle classes, rugby captures the mood of the whole island in February and March during the annual Six Nations Championships, because the Irish team is drawn from both sides of the border and is supported by both nationalists and unionists. In recognition of this, the Irish national anthem is no longer played at internationals, replaced by the slightly dodgy but thoroughly inoffensive *Ireland's Call*, a song written especially for the purpose. See p110 and www.irishrugby.ie for more details.

There is huge support in Ireland for the 'world game', although fans are much more enthusiastic about the likes of Manchester United, Liverpool and the two Glasgow clubs (Rangers and Celtic) than the struggling pros and part-timers that make up the **National League** (www.fai.ie) in the Republic, and the **Irish League** (www.irishfa.com) in Northern Ireland. It's just too difficult for domestic teams to compete with the multimillionaire glitz and glamour of the English Premiership, which has always drawn off the cream of Irish talent. The current crop of local lads playing in England include Robbie Keane (Spurs), Damien Duff (Newcastle), Aiden McGeady (Celtic) and David Healy (Leeds).

At an international level, the Republic and Northern Ireland field separate teams; in 2007 Northern Ireland was on its best run of form for years thanks to the inspirational manager Lawrie Sanchez (who then left to take over at English premiership team Fulham) while the Republic wasn't doing much of anything. International matches are played at Croke Park, Dublin (until 2009 at least) and **Windsor Park** (☎ 9024 4198; off Lisburn Rd), Belfast.

Horse Racing & Greyhound Racing

A passion for horse racing is deeply entrenched in Irish life and comes without the snobbery of its English counterpart. If you fancy a flutter on the gee-gees you can watch racing from around Ireland and England on the TV in bookmakers shops every day. No money ever seems to change hands in the betting, however, and every Irish punter will tell you they 'broke even'.

Ireland has a reputation for producing world-class horses for racing and other equestrian events like showjumping, also very popular albeit in a much less egalitarian kind of way. Major annual races include the Irish Grand National (Fairyrhouse, April), Irish Derby (the Curragh, June) and Irish Leger (the Curragh, September). For more information on events contact **Horse Racing Ireland** (☎ 045-842 800; www.hri.ie; Thoroughbred County House, Kill, Co Kildare).

Traditionally the poor-man's punt, greyhound racing ('the dogs'), has been smartened up in recent years and partly turned into a corporate outing. It offers a cheaper, more accessible and more local alternative to horse racing. There are 20 tracks across the country, administered by the **Irish Greyhound Board** (☎ 061-316 788; www.igb.ie; 104 Henry St, Limerick).

Golf

Golf is enormously popular in Ireland and there are many fine golf courses. The annual Irish Open takes place in June or July and the Irish Women's Open in September. For details of venues, contact the **Golfing Union of Ireland** (☎ 01-269 4111; www.gui.ie; 81 Eglinton Rd, Donnybrook, Dublin 4). Ireland's best include Darren Clarke, Paul McGinley and, of course, 2007 Open champion winner Pádraig Harrington – the first Irish player to win a major since Fred Daly in 1947. Keep an eye out for teen sensation Rory McIlroy, who completed an Irish double in 2007 when he won the Silver Medal at the Open for best amateur.

Cycling

Cycling is a popular spectator sport and major annual events include the gruelling **FBD Insurance Rás** (www.fbdinsuranceras.com), formerly known as the Milk Rás; an eight-day stage race held in May which sometimes approaches 1120km (700 miles) in length, and the Tour of Ulster, a three-day stage race held at the end of April. For more information on events see www.irishcycling.com.

Athletics

Athletics is popular and the Republic has produced a few international stars, particularly in middle- and long-distance events. Cork athlete Sonia O'Sullivan consistently leads in women's long-distance track events worldwide, and Catherina McKiernan is one of the world's top marathon runners. In Ireland, the main athletic meets are held at Morton Stadium, Dublin. The **Belfast Marathon** (www.belfastcitymarathon.com) on the first Monday in May and the **Dublin Marathon** (www.dublincitymarathon.ie) is run on the last Monday in October.

Boxing

Boxing has traditionally had a strong working-class following. Irish boxers have often won Olympic medals or world championships. Barry McGuigan and Steve Collins, both now retired, were world champions in their day; the best of the current crop is Dublin boxer Bernard Dunne, who, at the time of writing, was the European Super Bantamweight champion.

Road Bowling

The object of this sport is to throw a cast-iron ball along a public road (normally one with little traffic) for a designated distance, usually 1km or 2km. The person who does it in the least number of throws is the winner. The main centres are Cork and Armagh and competitions take place throughout the year, attracting considerable crowds. The sport has been taken up in various countries around the world, including the USA, Germany and the Netherlands, and a world championship competition has been set up (see www.irishroadbowling.ie).

Handball

Handball is another Irish sport with ancient origins and, like Gaelic football and hurling, is governed by the GAA. It is different from Olympic handball in that it is played by two individuals or two pairs who use their hands to strike a ball against a forecourt wall, rather like squash.

MEDIA Newspapers

Five national dailies, six national Sundays, stacks of Irish editions of British publications, hundreds of magazines, more than a dozen radio stations, four

You can find out more about the history and rules of Gaelic sports on the Gaelic Athletic Association website at www.gaa.ie.

Visit www.mediaalive.ie for everything you wanted to know about Irish media but were afraid to ask.

terrestrial TV stations and more digital channels than you could shake the remote control at...Ireland just doesn't run out of subjects to discuss.

The dominant local player is Independent News & Media, owned by Ireland's primo businessman, Tony O'Reilly. Its newspapers – the *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent* and *Evening Herald* – are by far the biggest sellers in each market.

The massive overspill of British media here, particularly in relation to the saturated Sunday market, is the biggest challenge facing the Irish media. Rupert Murdoch's News International recognised the importance of the Irish market early, established an office in Dublin and set about an assault of the newspaper racks with its main titles, the *Irish Sun*, *News of the World* and *Sunday Times*. Every UK tabloid paper now has an Irish edition, leading to accusations by media speculators that Irish culture is being coarsened by the widespread availability of even more tasteless tabloid tat. The traditions of the UK tabloids, who have built circulation on the back of celebrity buy-ups and salacious stories about sex and crime, have inevitably been exported and are beginning to have an influence on the editorial position of the Irish titles, particularly on Sunday.

What this means, of course, is that local papers lacking Murdoch's mammoth resources will struggle even more than they already do; the country's best newspaper, the *Irish Times*, nearly went under in 2002 and is constantly worried about circulation. All of this goes a way toward explaining how all the English newspapers cost less than a euro, whilst the three Irish national dailies all cost €1.60.

In the north the three main papers are the *Belfast Telegraph*, with the highest circulation, followed by the pro-Unionist *Newsletter* – Europe's oldest surviving newspaper having begun publication in 1737 – and the equally popular pro-Nationalist *Irish News*.

TV & Radio

Irish TV is small fry, it always has been. It lacks the funding and the audience available to behemoths like the BBC. But – and this is a huge but – compared to that of most other European countries it is actually good. However, the national broadcaster, RTE, gets its fair share of abuse for being narrow-minded, conservative, boring, short-sighted and way behind the times – and that's just for turning down the chance to produce the enormously successful comedy drama series *Father Ted* (a gentle and hilarious poke at conservative Ireland, which was then commissioned by Britain's Channel 4).

There are four terrestrial TV channels in Ireland. RTE's strength is in its widespread sports coverage and news and current affairs programming – it's thorough, insightful and often hard-hitting. Programmes like *Today Tonight*, *Questions and Answers* and *Prime Time* are as good, or better, as anything you'll see elsewhere in the world; the reporting treats the audience like mature responsible adults who don't need issues dumbed down or simplified. But let's not forget the Angelus, Ireland's very own call to prayer: 18 sombre hits of a church bell heard at 6pm on RTE1 (and at noon on radio). Undoubtedly out of step with a fast-paced and secular society, it is a daily reminder of the state-encouraged piety of not so long ago.

The purely commercial TV3 has a lightweight programming philosophy, with second-string US fluff to compliment its diet of reality TV shows and celebrity nonsense. The Irish-language station TG4 has the most diverse and challenging output, combining great movies (in English) with an interesting selection of dramas and documentaries *as gaeilge* (but with English subtitles). The main British TV stations – BBC, ITV and Channel 4 – are also available in most Irish homes, through cable.

Yeats is Dead, edited by Joseph O'Connor and penned by 15 Irish authors from populist Marian Keyes to heavyweight Anthony Cronin and plenty in between, is a screwball comedic caper about a petty criminal who gets his hands on Joyce's last manuscript.

The big players in the digital TV business are the homegrown NTL and the behemoth that is Sky, who continue to make solid progress in bringing the multichannel revolution into Irish homes.

In the radio market RTE is also the dominant player, with three stations: Radio 1 & 2 and Lyric FM. However, it's position is being challenged by a combination of independent national stations (Today FM and Newstalk 106-108) and a plethora of local and regional stations.

RELIGION

About 3.7 million residents in the Republic call themselves Roman Catholic, followed by 3% Protestant, 0.5% Muslim and the rest an assortment of other beliefs including none at all. In the North the breakdown is about 60% Protestant and 40% Catholic. Most Irish Protestants are members of the Church of Ireland, an offshoot of the Church of England, and the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches.

Statistics don't tell the whole story though, and the influence of the Catholic Church has waned dramatically in the last decade. Most young people see the church as irrelevant and out-of-step with the major social issues of the day, including divorce, contraception, abortion, homosexuality and cohabitation. The terrible revelations of widespread abuse of children by parish priests, and the untidy efforts of the church authorities to sweep the truth under the carpet, have provoked a seething rage among many Irish at the church's gross insensitivity to the care of their flock, while many older believers feel an acute sense of betrayal that has led them to question a lifetime's devotion to their local parishes.

And then there's money: increased prosperity means that the Irish have become used to being rewarded in *this* life, and so many have replaced God with mammon as a focus of worship. But old habits die hard, and Sunday Mass is still a feature of the weekly calendar, especially in rural communities. Oddly enough, the primates of both the Roman Catholic Church (Archbishop Sean Brady) and the Church of Ireland (Archbishop Robert Eames) sit in Armagh, Northern Ireland, the traditional religious capital of St Patrick. The country's religious history clearly overrides its current divisions.

ARTS

Literature

Of all their national traits, characteristics and cultural expressions it's perhaps the way the Irish speak and write that best distinguishes them. Their love of language and their great oral tradition have contributed to Ireland's legacy of world-renowned writers and storytellers. And all this in a language imposed on them by a foreign invader; the Irish responded to this act of cultural piracy by mastering a magnificent hybrid: English in every respect but flavoured and enriched by the rhythms, pronunciation patterns and grammatical peculiarities of Irish.

Before there was anything like modern literature there was the Ulaid (Ulster) Cycle, Ireland's version of the Homeric epic, written down from oral tradition between the 8th and 12th centuries. The chief story is the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Cattle Raid of Cooley), about a battle between Queen Maeve of Connaught and Cúchulainn, the principal hero of Irish mythology. Cúchulainn appears in the work of Irish writers right up to the present day, from Samuel Beckett to Frank McCourt.

Zip forward 1000 years, past the genius of Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) and his *Gulliver's Travels*; stopping to acknowledge acclaimed dramatist Oscar Wilde (1854–1900); *Dracula* creator Bram Stoker (1847–1912) – the name of the count may have come from the Irish *droch fhola* (bad blood);

Circle of Friends by the queen of Irish popular fiction, Maeve Binchy, ably captures the often hilarious peculiarities of the lives of two hapless country girls in the 1940s who come to Dublin in search of romance.

The Booker Prize-winning novel *The Sea* by John Banville is an engrossing meditation on mortality, grief, death, childhood and memory.

and the literary giant that was James Joyce (1882–1941), whose name and books elicit enormous pride in Ireland but we've yet to meet five people who have read all of *Ulysses*!

The majority of Joyce's literary output came when he had left Ireland for the artistic hotbed that was Paris, which was also true for another great experimenter of language and style, Samuel Beckett (1906–89). Influenced by the Italian poet Dante and French philosopher Descartes, his work centres on fundamental existential questions about the human condition and the nature of self. He is probably best known for his play *Waiting for Godot* but his unassailable reputation is based on a series of stark novels and plays.

Of the dozens of 20th century Irish authors to have achieved published renown, some names to look out for include playwright and novelist Brendan Behan (1923–64), who weaved tragedy, wit and a turbulent life into his best work, including *Borstal Boy*, *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*. Inevitably, Behan died young of alcoholism.

Belfast-born CS Lewis (1898–1963) died a year earlier, but he left us *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of allegorical children's stories (one made into a 2005 film). Other Northern writers have, not surprisingly, featured the Troubles in their work: Bernard McLaverty's *Cal* (also made into a film) and his more recent *The Anatomy School* are both wonderful.

Contemporary writers are plentiful, including superstar Roddy Doyle (1958–), author of the Barrytown trilogy *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van* as well as a host of more serious books; the Booker-prize winning John Banville (1945–), who nabbed the prestigious award with *The Sea*; and the wonderful Colm Tóibín (1955–), whose *The Master* (2004), about Henry James, won the Los Angeles Times' Novel of the Year award.

Ireland has produced its fair share of female writers. The 'come here and I'll tell you a story' style of Maeve Binchy (1940–) has seen her outsell many of the greats of Irish literature, including Beckett and Behan, and her long list of bestsellers includes *Light a Penny Candle* (1982) and *Circle of Friends* (1990); both have been made into successful films.

Nuala O'Faolain, former opinion columnist for the *Irish Times*, 'accidentally' wrote an autobiography when a small publisher asked her to write an introduction to a collection of her columns. Her irreverent, humorous and touching prose struck a chord with readers and the essay was re-published as *Are You Somebody?* (1996), followed by *Almost There – the Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman* (2003), which both became international bestsellers.

Ireland can boast four winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature: George Bernard Shaw in 1925, WB Yeats in 1938, Samuel Beckett in 1969 and Seamus Heaney in 1995. The prestigious annual IMPAC awards, administered by Dublin City Public Libraries, accept nominations from public libraries around the world for works of high literary merit and offer a €100,000 award to the winning novelist. Previous winners have included David Malouf (Australian) and Nicola Barker (English).

Poetry

WB Yeats (1865–1939) was both playwright and poet, but it's his poetry that has the greatest appeal. His *Love Poems*, edited by Norman Jeffares, makes a suitable introduction for anyone new to his writing.

Pádraig Pearse (1879–1916) used the Irish language as his medium and was one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. *Mise Éire* typifies his style and passion.

Patrick Kavanagh (1905–67), one of Ireland's most respected poets, was born in Inniskeen, County Monaghan. *The Great Hunger* and *Tarry Flynn* evoke the atmosphere and often grim reality of life for the poor farming

The adventure only begins when youngster Tony accidentally bumps off his girlfriend and tries to bury the evidence in Robert Quinn's stylish and accomplished debut thriller *Dead Bodies* (2003).

Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* is a brilliant, gruesome tragicomedy about an orphaned Monaghan boy's descent into madness, by one of Ireland's most imaginative authors. It has received several awards and was made into a successful film.

John McGahern's simple, economical prose *Amongst Women* centres on well drawn, complex yet familiar characters, in this case a west-of-Ireland family in the social aftermath of the War of Independence.

community. You'll find a bronze statue of him in Dublin, sitting beside his beloved Grand Canal (see p340).

Seamus Heaney (1939–) won the Whitbread Book of the Year to add to his accolades for *The Spirit Level*. His translation of the 8th-century Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* has been widely praised. Some of his poems reflect the hope, disappointment and disillusionment of the peace process.

Paul Durcan (1944–) boldly tackles awkward issues such as the oppressive nature of Catholicism and Republican activity in his trademark unconventional style.

Cork-born Irish-language poet Louis de Paor has twice won Ireland's prestigious Sean O'Riordan Prize with collections of his poetry. Tom Paulin (1949–) writes memorable poetry about the North (try *The Strange Museum*) as does Ciaran Carson (1948–). Many of Paula Meehan's (1955–) magical, evocative poems speak of cherished relationships.

For a taste of modern Irish poetry try *Contemporary Irish Poetry* edited by Fallon and Mahon. *A Rage for Order*, edited by Frank Ormsby, is a vibrant collection of the poetry of the North.

Cinema

Ireland's film-making tradition is pretty poor, largely because the British cinema industry drained much of its talent and creative energies and the Irish government pleaded poverty any time a film-maker came looking for some development cash. The last decade has seen a change in the Irish government's attitudes, but what has long been true is that the country has contributed more than its fair share of glorious moments to the silver screen, as well as a disproportionate number of its biggest stars.

Hot on the heels of such luminaries as Gabriel Byrne (*Miller's Crossing*, *The Usual Suspects*), Stephen Rea (*The Crying Game*, *The End of the Affair*) and the Oscar-winning Liam Neeson (for *Schindler's List*), Daniel Day-Lewis and Brenda Fricker (both for *My Left Foot*), are the late-arriving but always excellent Brendan Gleeson, who has had supporting roles in literally dozen of films; the very handsome Cillian Murphy (*Breakfast on Pluto*, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* among several others) and the bad-boy Brando-wannabe himself, Colin Farrell, whose work has been, well, less than...anybody see *Alexander*? Northern Ireland's James Nesbitt has become almost ubiquitous on British TV after achieving fame in the series *Cold Feet* and *Murphy's Law*, and made the transition to the big screen in 2005 with a small part in Woody Allen's *Match Point*.

The re-establishment of the Irish Film Board in 1993 was part of the government's two-pronged effort to stimulate the local film industry. Big international productions (*Braveheart*, *Saving Private Ryan* etc) were tempted here with generous tax incentives in order to spread expertise among Irish crews, while money was pumped into the local film industry – with mixed critical results.

Ireland has been working hard to cast off its 'Oirland' identity – that sappy we're-poor-but-happy version so loved by Hollywood's plastic Paddys – but the local film industry is under phenomenal pressure to come up with the goods. And in film, the 'goods' means a commercial success. Exit the creative space to make really insightful films about a host of Irish subjects, enter the themed film designed to make a commercial splash in Britain and the US. Favourite themes include Mad 'n' Quirky – *The Butcher Boy*, *Disco Pigs* and *Breakfast on Pluto*; Smart-arse Gangsters – *I Went Down* and *Intermission*; and Cutesy Formulaic Love Story – *When Brendan Met Trudy*. Never mind the Irish Welles or Fellini, where's the local equivalent of Loach, Leigh or Winterbottom?

The Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt tells the relentlessly bleak autobiographical story of the author's poverty-stricken Limerick childhood in the Depression of the 1930s, and has been made into a major film by Alan Parker.

In June 2006, Colm Tóibín became the first Irish author to win the prestigious IMPAC prize for his novel *The Master*, about Henry James.

John Crowley's pacey, well-scripted drama *Intermission* (2003) follows a host of eccentric characters in pursuit of love, starring Colin Farrell, Colm Meaney and Ger Ryan.

Well, say the film board, they're called Jim Sheridan (*In the Name of the Father, My Left Foot*) and Neil Jordan. The latter is undoubtedly Ireland's greatest director: *The Company of Wolves, Mona Lisa, The Crying Game* and *Michael Collins* are but four examples of his rich film biography.

New directors include the impossibly young-but-well-connected Kristen Sheridan (1977–), daughter of Jim and director of *Disco Pigs*. Another bright talent is Damien O'Donnell, who debuted with *East is East* (1999) and went from strength to strength with *Heartlands* (2002) and the outstanding Irish film of 2004, *Inside I'm Dancing*. That same year saw the release of *Adam & Paul*, written by Mark O'Halloran and directed by Lenny Abrahamson, a half-decent portrayal of two Dublin junkies and their quixotic quest for a fix. It was a roaring success at the Irish box office.

See p706 to find out when film festivals are held throughout the year.

Music

TRADITIONAL & FOLK

Irish music (known here as traditional music, or just trad) has retained a vibrancy not found in other traditional European forms, which have lost out to the overbearing influence of pop music. This is probably because, although Irish music has retained many of its traditional aspects, it has itself influenced many forms of music, most notably US country and western – a fusion of Mississippi Delta blues and Irish traditional tunes that, combined with other influences like Gospel, is at the root of rock and roll. Other reasons for its current success include the willingness of its exponents to update the way it's played (in ensembles rather than the customary *céilidh* – communal dance – bands), the habit of pub sessions (introduced by returning migrants) and the economic good times that encouraged the Irish to celebrate their culture rather than trying to replicate international trends. And then, of course, there's *Riverdance*, which made Irish dancing sexy and became a worldwide phenomenon, despite the fact that most aficionados of traditional music are seriously underwhelmed by its musical worth. Good stage show, crap music.

Traditionally, music was performed as a background to dancing, and while this has been true ever since Celtic times, the many thousands of tunes that fill up the repertoire aren't nearly as ancient as that; most aren't much older than a couple of hundred years. Because much of Irish music is handed down orally and aurally, there are myriads of variations in the way a single tune is played, depending on the time and place of its playing. The blind itinerant harpist Turlough O'Carolan (1680–1738) wrote more than 200 tunes – it's difficult to know how many versions their repeated learning has spawned.

For most, traditional music is intimately associated with the pub session, but records show that the very first pub session was held in 1947... in London, featuring emigrant Irish musicians who wouldn't have been allowed to play in pubs at home. But this all changed soon thereafter, thanks to the folk explosion in the US and the superlative efforts of Seán O'Riada (1931–71), the single most influential figure in the traditional renaissance. In 1961 he formed Ceoltóirí Chualann, a band featuring a fiddle, flute, accordion, bodhrán and uilleann pipes, and began to perform music to listen to rather than for dancing. When his band performed at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin, it gave a whole new credibility to traditional music. Members of the band went on to form the Chieftains, who still play an important role in bringing Irish music to an international audience.

With added vocals come bands such as the Dubliners with their notorious drinking songs; the Wolfe Tones, who've been described as 'the rabble end of the rebel song tradition'; and the Fureys. Younger groups such as Clannad,

Altan, Dervish and Nomos espouse a quieter, more mystical style of singing, while Kíla and the Afro-Celt Foundation stretches the boundaries by combining traditional music with reggae, Eastern and New-Age influences.

Christy Moore is the most prominent of the contemporary singer-songwriters playing in a broadly traditional idiom. He has been performing since the 1960s, and although a pivotal member of the influential bands Planxty and Moving Hearts, he's probably best known for his solo albums.

See p706 for details on when traditional music festivals are held.

POPULAR MUSIC

It may have begun with the showbands, who toured the country in the 1960s playing Top 40 hits, but it really took off with Van Morrison, whose blues-infused genius really put Irish music on the map. On his heels came Phil Lynott and Thin Lizzy, who made their breakthrough with *Jailbreak* (1975). Other great 1970s rockers included Horslips, who played an infectious trad-infused style known as Celtic rock; the Undertones, whose biggest hit, *Teenage Kicks*, was John Peel's favourite song of all time; Stiff Little Fingers, aka SLF, who to our minds are as good a punk band as any that ever was; and the Boomtown Rats, fronted by Bob 'fuck off, I'm trying to save the world' Geldof.

Just as the Rats were celebrating the virtues of sex, drugs and rock and roll, a young drummer pinned a note on his school notice board looking for fellow pupils who were interested in forming a band. By late 1976 Larry Mullen had his band, and it took them four years to release their first album. When they did, *Boy* (1980) stood out from the rest for Bono's impassioned vocals, Edge's unique guitar style and Adam's I-just-learnt-the-bass strumming. Behind them, Larry used his years of military-style drumming to keep a steady beat.

U2 went on to produce a string of brilliant albums before becoming the world's biggest rock act in the aftermath of the truly wonderful *The Joshua Tree* (1987). They've remained supernovas in the pop firmament through thick and thicker; their last album, *U218* (2006), was a long-awaited singles collection that barely does justice to their high-quality output. And, just to show that even in their mid-40s the band hadn't quite put on the shawl of sad old rockers, in 2007 they were back in the recording studio working on material for a new album.

Of all the Irish acts that followed in U2's wake during the 1980s and early 1990s, a few managed to comfortably avoid being tarred with 'the next U2' burden. London-based Irish rabble-rousers The Pogues played a compelling blend of punk and Irish folk, made all the better by the singular figure of Shane McGowan, whose empathetic and lucid song-writing talent was eventually overshadowed by his chronic alcoholism. Still, McGowan is credited with writing Ireland's favourite song, *A Fairytale of New York*, sung with emotional fervour by everyone around Christmas. Sinead O'Connor thrived

John Boorman's film *The General* (1998) about Dublin's most notorious crime boss is both horrific and uneasily funny in its portrayal of the mindless brutality and childlike humour of Martin Cahill.

Paddy Breathnach's hilarious road movie *I Went Down* (1998) follows the capers of two unlikely petty criminals sent on a mission by a low-rent loan shark.

Jim Sheridan's authentic drama *The Boxer* (1998) is a film about a former IRA member's emergence and readjustment from a Belfast prison, to discover everyone, including his girlfriend, has moved on.

The haunting and beautiful novel *The Story of Lucy Gault* by William Trevor, dubbed the Irish Chekhov, tells of a young girl who, believed by her family to be dead, is brought up by a caretaker at the end of the Ascendancy years.

Reading in the Dark by Seamus Deane is thoughtful prose (the Guardian Fiction Prize winner) and recounts a young boy's struggles to unravel the truth of his own history growing up in the Troubles of Belfast.

Hot Press (www.hotpress.com) is a fortnightly magazine featuring local and international music interviews and listings.

TOP TRAD ALBUMS

- *The Quiet Glen* (Tommy Peoples)
- *Paddy Keenan* (Paddy Keenan)
- *Compendium: The Best of Patrick Street* (Various)
- *The Chieftains 6: Bonaparte's Retreat* (The Chieftains)
- *Old Hag You Have Killed Me* (The Bothy Band)

THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST

Ireland has the dubious honour of being the most successful country ever to participate in the cheese-fest that is the Eurovision Song Contest, which has been held yearly since 1956. The first success came in 1970, when a fresh-faced, 16-year-old from Derry called Dana sang 'All Kinds of Everything'; 10 years later, Johnny Logan took home the big prize with 'What's Another Year?' and then did it again in 1987 with 'Hold Me Now'. Ireland won the competition three times in a row from 1992-94 and again in 1996. As the winner gets to host it the following year, the joke in Ireland was that the rest of Europe was voting for them so as to leave them footing the hosting bill. Seven titles and four second-places wasn't bad, but Ireland hasn't won it in over 10 years and in 2007 came dead last for the first time: only Albania gave it *cinq points*, leaving the media to gnash their teeth and wonder where it all went wrong.

by acting like a U2 antidote – whatever they were into she was not – and by having a damn fine voice; the raw emotion on *The Lion and the Cobra* (1987) makes it a great offering. And then there was *My Bloody Valentine*, the pioneers of late 1980s guitar-distorted shoegazer rock: their 1991 album *Loveless* is one of the best Irish albums of all time.

The 1990s were largely dominated by DJs, dance music and a whole new spin on an old notion, the boy band. Behind Ireland's most successful groups (Boyzone and Westlife) is the Svengali of Saccharine, impresario Louie Walsh, whose musical sensibilities seem mired in '60s showband schmaltz. Commercially mega-successful but utterly without musical merit, the boy band (and girl band) phenomenon was a compelling reminder that in the world of pop, millions of people *can* be wrong, and we have long since believed that former Boyzone frontman Ronan Keating does indeed say it best when he *says nothing at all*.

Non-boy band stand-out acts include Paddy Casey (listen to his multi-platinum album *Living*; his new album, *Addicted to Company*, was released in late 2007), Damien Rice (he followed up his multi-million selling *O* with the disappointing *9*) and a pair of new arrivals, the supremely talented Fionn Regan (his debut *The End of History* has impressed everyone) and the Belfast-born Duke Special, whose left-of-centre *Songs from the Deep Forest* has also earned plenty of critical acclaim. Other performers to look out for are Julie Feeney – her debut, *13 Songs*, scooped the top prize at the 2006 Choice Music Prize, Ireland's answer to Britain's Mercury Award – and soul-folk-rockers the Frames, who have a phenomenally loyal following earned over more than 15 years of releasing albums and touring.

After years of techno and finger-picked acoustic guitar tracks, the amped-up rock band has finally made a comeback. Bell X1 (their best albums are *Music in Mouth* and *Flock*), Cork-based Republic of Loose (2006's *Aaagh* was a big local hit) and the blockbuster sound of Snow Patrol – who had international success with *Final Straw* (2003) and *Eyes Open* (2006) – are but three of a whole host of bands looking to make some noise.

Other successful debut albums of recent years include *Future Kings of Spain* by the indie rock band of the same name, and the also-eponymous *Hal*, a feast of cheerful and melodic pop that's guaranteed to put a smile on anyone's face. London-based baroque pop act the Divine Comedy, fronted by Derry-born composer and lyricist Neil Hannon, blends jazz, classical and pop influences with tongue-in-cheek lyrics. Their 2006 album *Victory for the Comic Muse* topped the poll at the 2007 Choice Music Prize and proved that there was still room in these over-earnest times for a bit of irony.

See p706 for details on when music festivals are held.

Foggy Notions is a visually striking, subversive magazine catering to eclectic music tastes.

OUR 10 BEST IRISH ALBUMS

- *Loveless* (My Bloody Valentine) – utterly intoxicating indie classic that just piles on the layers of sound and melody.
- *Boy* (U2) – best debut album of all time? We think so.
- *The End of History* (Fionn Regan) – too early to say if it's a classic, but it's bloody good.
- *Live & Dangerous* (Thin Lizzy) – released in 1978, it remains one of the greatest live albums ever recorded.
- *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* (Sinead O'Connor) – try listening to the Prince-penned 'Nothing Compares to U' and not feel her pain.
- *St Dominic's Preview* (Van Morrison) – everyone knows *Astral Weeks*, but this 1972 album is every bit as good.
- *O* (Damien Rice) – with millions of record sales, we're not going to argue with its merit.
- *Inflammable Material* (Stiff Little Fingers) – forget the Sex Pistols; this album about the life in the Troubles gets our vote for best punk album ever.
- *The Book of Invasion* (Horslips) – this totally catchy album is Celtic rock at its best.
- *13 Songs* (Julie Feeney) – Choice Prize winner in 2006 for her excellent debut.

Architecture

Ireland is packed with prehistoric graves, ruined monasteries, crumbling fortresses and many other solid reminders of its long, often dramatic, history. The principal surviving structures from Stone Age times are the graves and monuments people built for the dead, usually grouped under the heading of megalithic (great stone) tombs. Among the most easily recognisable megalithic tombs are dolmens, massive three-legged structures rather like giant stone stools, most of which are 4000 to 5000 years old. Good examples are the Poulnabrone Dolmen (p397) in the Burren and Browne's Hill Dolmen (p352) near Carlow town.

Passage graves such as Newgrange and Knowth (p544) in Meath are huge mounds with narrow stone-walled passages leading to burial chambers. These chambers are enriched with spiral and chevron symbols and have an opening through which the rising sun penetrates on the winter or summer solstice, thus acting as a giant celestial calendar.

The Irish names for forts – *dun*, *rath*, *caiseal/cashel* and *caher* – have ended up in the names of countless towns and villages. The Irish countryside is peppered with the remains of over 30,000 of them. The earliest known examples date from the Bronze Age, most commonly the ring fort, with circular earth-and-stone banks, topped by a wooden palisade fence to keep out intruders, and surrounded on the outside by a moatlike ditch. Outside Clonakilty in County Cork, the ring fort at Lisnagun (Lios na gCon) has been reconstructed to give some idea of its original appearance (see p224).

Some forts were constructed entirely of stone; the Iron Age fort of Dún Aengus (p418; the largest of the Aran Islands) on Inishmór is a superb example.

After Christianity arrived in Ireland in the 5th century, the first monasteries were built. The early stone churches were often very simple, some roofed with timber, such as the 6th-century Teampall Bheanáin (Church of St Benen) on Inishmór of the Aran Islands, or built completely of stone, such as the 8th-century Gallarus Oratory (p296) on the Dingle Peninsula. Early hermitages include the small beehive huts and buildings on the summit of Skellig Michael (p263) off County Kerry.

As the monasteries grew in size and stature, so did the architecture. The 12th-century cathedral (p153) at Glendalough and the 10th- to 15th-century cathedral (p364) at Clonmacnoise are good examples, although they're tiny compared with European medieval cathedrals.

Round towers have become symbols of Ireland. These tall, stone, needle-like structures were built largely as lookout posts and refuges in the event of Viking attacks in the late 9th or early 10th centuries. Of the 120 thought to have originally existed, around 20 survive intact; the best examples can be seen at Cashel (p311), Glendalough (p153) and Devenish Island (p683).

With the Normans' arrival in Ireland in 1169, came the Gothic style of architecture, characterised by tall vaulted windows and soaring V-shaped arches. Fine examples of this can be seen in the 1172 Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin (see p100) and the 13th-century St Canice's Cathedral in Kilkenny (see p327).

Authentic, traditional Irish thatched cottages were built of limestone or clay to suit the elements, but weren't durable and have become rare, the tradition dying out around the middle of the 20th century.

In Georgian times, Dublin became one of the architectural glories of Europe, with simple, beautifully built Georgian terraces of red brick, with delicate glass fanlights over large, elegant, curved doorways. From the 1960s Dublin's Georgian heritage suffered badly but you can still see fine examples around Merrion Square (p99).

The Anglo-Irish Ascendancy built country houses such as the 1722 Castle-town House (p343) near Celbridge, the 1741 Russborough House (p157) near Blessington and Castle Coole (p682), which are all excellent examples of the Palladian style, with their regularity and classical correctness. Prolific German architect Richard Cassels (also known as Richard Castle) came to Ireland in 1728 and designed many landmark buildings including Powerscourt House (p148) in County Wicklow and Leinster House (p97; home to Dáil Éireann, the Irish government) in Dublin.

Ireland has little modern architecture of note. For much of the 20th century the pace of change was slow, and it wasn't until the construction of Dublin's Busáras Station in the 1950s that modernity began to really express itself. It was designed by Michael Scott, who was to have an influence on architects in Ireland for the next two decades. The poorly regulated building boom of the 1960s and 1970s, however, paid little attention to the country's architectural heritage and destroyed more than it created. From that period Paul Koralek's 1967 brutalist-style Berkeley Library in Trinity College, Dublin, has been hailed as Ireland's best example of modern architecture.

Since the 1980s more care has been given to architectural heritage and context, the best example of which has been the redevelopment of Dublin's previously near-derelict Temple Bar area (p94). Ireland's recent boom at the turn of the last century spawned a huge growth of building work around Dublin of mixed quality. Some good examples in the Docklands area include the imposing Financial Services Centre and Custom House Square; further downriver in the Grand Canal Docks, the centrepiece of the whole area will be a 2000-seat Performing Arts Centre designed by the world's hottest architect, Daniel Libeskind.

Probably the most controversial piece of modern architecture to be unveiled in recent years has been the Monument of Light (p104; re-christened simply The Spire) on Dublin's O'Connell St. At seven times the height of the GPO (120m in total), the brushed steel hollow cone was always going to face opposition, but since its unveiling in spring 2003, the awe-inspiring structure and beautifully reflective surface have won over all but a few hardened cynics.

Racy London-based Edna O'Brien bases her sensationalist 1997 novel *Down by the River* on the controversial true story of a 14-year-old Dublin girl who was raped and went to England for an abortion.

Visual Arts

Ireland's painting doesn't receive the kind of recognition that its literature and music do. Nevertheless, painting in Ireland has a long tradition dating back to the illuminated manuscripts of the early Christian period, most notably the Book of Kells.

The National Gallery (p96) has an extensive Irish School collection, much of it chronicling the people and pursuits of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy.

Like other European artists of the 18th century, Roderic O'Connor featured portraits and landscapes in his work. His post-impressionist style stood out for its vivid use of colour and sturdy brush strokes. James Malton captured 18th-century Dublin in a series of line drawings and paintings.

In the 19th century there was still no hint of Ireland's political and social problems in the work of its major artists. The most prominent landscape painter was James Arthur O'Connor, while Belfast-born Sir John Lavery became one of London's most celebrated portrait artists.

Just as WB Yeats played a seminal role in the Celtic literary revival, his younger brother, Jack Butler Yeats (1871–1957), inspired an artistic surge of creativity in the early 20th century, taking Celtic mythology and Irish life as his subjects. (Their father, John Butler Yeats, had also been a noted portrait painter.) William John Leech (1881–1961) was fascinated by changing light, an affection reflected in his expressionistic landscapes and flower paintings. Born to English parents in Dublin, Francis Bacon (1909–92) emerged as one of the most powerful figurative artists of the 20th century with his violent depictions of distorted human bodies.

The stained-glass work of Harry Clarke (1889–1931) is also worth a mention in the canon of modern Irish art: heavily influenced by contemporary styles including Art Nouveau and Symbolism, Clarke's work was primarily for church windows (see p381 and p487).

The pioneering work of Irish cubist painter Mainie Jellett (1897–1944) and her friend, modernist stained-glass artist Evie Hone (1894–1955), had an influence on later modernists Barrie Cooke (1931–) and Camille Souter (1929–). Together with Louis Le Brocqy (1916–), Jellett and Hone set up the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1943 to foster the work of nonacademic artists. Estella Solomons (1882–1968) trained under William Orpen and Walter Osborne in Dublin and was a noted portrait and landscape painter. The rural idyll of the west of Ireland was also a theme of Paul Henry's (1876–1958) landscapes. In the 1950s and 1960s, a school of naive artists including James Dixon appeared on Tory Island, off Donegal.

Contemporary artists to watch out for include Nick Miller, New York-based Sean Scully and Fionnuala Ni Chiosain.

Experimental photographer Clare Langan's work has gained international recognition with her trademark ethereal images of elemental landscapes.

Murals have been an important way of documenting Ireland's more recent political history. Powerful political murals (p589) can be seen in West Belfast and Derry (see the boxed text, p646).

Theatre

Dublin and Belfast are the main centres, but most sizable towns, such as Cork, Derry, Donegal, Limerick and Galway, have their own theatres. Ireland has a theatrical history almost as long as its literary one. Dublin's first theatre was founded in Werburgh St in 1637, although it was closed only four years later by the Puritans. Another theatre, named the Smock Alley Playhouse or Theatre Royal, opened in 1661 and continued to stage plays for more than a century. The literary revival of the late 19th century resulted in the establishment of Dublin's Abbey Theatre (p137), now Ireland's national

The Irish countryside is peppered with the remains of over 30,000 forts.

Double Drink Story by Caitlin Thomas (nee MacNamara), who subjugated her impulse to write under the weight of husband Dylan's celebrity and her own addictions, is an eloquent, self-deprecating account of their debaucherous life, love-hate relationship and the burden of creativity, making a brilliant literary memoir.

theatre. Its role is to present works by historical greats such as WB Yeats, George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), JM Synge (1871–1909) and Sean O’Casey (1880–1964), as well as to promote modern Irish dramatists. Also in Dublin, the Gate Theatre (p137) produces classics and comedies, while the Gaiety and Olympia Theatres (p138) present a range of productions, as does the Grand Opera House (p583) in Belfast. Dublin’s Project Arts Centre (p138) offers a more experimental programme.

One of the most outstanding playwrights of the last two decades is Frank McGuinness (1956–), who has had a prolific output since the 1970s. His plays, such as *The Carthaginians*, explore the consequences of 1972’s Bloody Sunday on the people of Derry. Young London-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh (1971–) uses the darker side of a romantic rural Irish idyll as his inspiration. Among his work, *The Leenane Trilogy* has been performed by Britain’s National Theatre and on Broadway, where he has won a number of Tony Awards. *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel (1929–) was a great success on Broadway and in London and has been made into a film.

Other talented young playwrights to watch out for include Dubliner Conor McPherson (whose acclaimed play *The Weir* was commissioned by the Royal Court).

The work of playwright and poet Damian Gorman (1962–) has received considerable praise. *Broken Nails*, his first play, received four Ulster Theatre awards. Mark O’Rowe (who also wrote the film script *Intermission*) received commendable reviews for his graphically violent and controversial play *Crestfall* in 2003 at the Gate.

See p706 for details on when various arts and theatre festivals are held.

Dance

The most important form of dance in Ireland is traditional Irish dancing, performed communally at céilidhs, often in an impromptu format and always accompanied by a traditional Irish band. Dances include the hornpipe, jig and reel. Irish dancing has received international attention and success through shows such as *Riverdance* and its offshoots, and while this glamorised style of dance is only loosely based on traditional dancing, it has popularised the real art and given a new lease of life to the moribund Irish dancing schools around the country.

Ireland doesn’t have a national dance school, but there are a number of schools and companies around the country teaching and performing ballet and modern dance. The Dance Theatre of Ireland and the Irish Modern Dance Theatre are based in Dublin, while the Firkin Crane Centre in Cork is Ireland’s only venue devoted solely to dance.

See p706 for information on when dance festivals are held.

Food & Drink

Generations of travellers who visited these shores during bleaker times typically mused that Irish food is great until it's cooked. They advised getting drunk before eating, or complained that a meal was more a flavourless penance rather than a pleasurable repast. Those days are long gone; visitors are now coming to Ireland *for* the food, rather than in spite of it.

A culinary renaissance has taken place, and the Irish are now enjoying the fine cuisine that they have long deserved. The island has always been blessed with a wealth of staples and specialities, with meat, seafood and dairy produce the envy of the world. At the twilight of the 20th century a new wave of cooks began producing what is sometimes promoted as 'New Irish Cuisine'.

In truth, the new cuisine is more a confident return to the traditional practice of combining simple cooking techniques with the finest local ingredients. Many of the new chefs merely strive to offer their patrons the sort of meals that have always been taken for granted on well-run Irish farms. Whatever you want to call it, it has aroused the nation's taste buds (p270).

But gastronomes have more than rediscovered traditions to thank. The Irish diners of today – generally a more affluent and worldly bunch than their forebears – have become more discerning and adventurous. To meet their demands, restaurants are continually springing up on city streets and in old country homes with menus spruced up with all sorts of international touches. Luckily, excellent food isn't reserved for urbanites and the rich – there's a real appreciation for quality food all over the country, which means you'll find creative dishes in the smallest café in the remotest part of the island.

Of course, you can still find leathery meat, shrivelled fish and overcooked vegetables, if that's what you're looking for. But why punish yourself, when hearty fare that will make your palate sing is so readily available?

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Potatoes

It's a wonder the Irish retain their good humour amid the perpetual potato-baiting they endure. But, despite the stereotyping, and however much we'd like to disprove it, potatoes are still paramount here and you'll see lots of them on your travels. The mashed potato dishes colcannon and champ (with cabbage and spring onion respectively) are two of the tastiest recipes in the country.

Meat & Seafood

Irish meals are usually meat-based, with beef, lamb and pork common options. Seafood, long neglected, is finding a place on the table in Irish homes. It's widely available in restaurants and is often excellent, especially in the west. Oysters, trout and salmon are delicious, particularly if they're direct from the sea or a river rather than a fish farm. The famous Dublin Bay Prawn isn't actually a prawn, but a lobster. At its best, the Dublin Bay Prawn is superlative, but it's priced accordingly. If you're going to splurge, do so here – but make sure you choose live Dublin Bay Prawns because once these fellas die, they quickly lose their flavour.

Bread

The most famous Irish bread, and one of the signature tastes of Ireland, is soda bread. Irish flour is soft and doesn't take well to yeast as a

Visit www.ravensgard.org/prdunham/irishfood.html for a highly readable and complete history of Irish cuisine, with fascinating chapters such as 'The Most Widely Used Cooking Methods in Pre-Potato Ireland' and 'Collecting of Blood for Pudding Making'.

The renowned Georgina Campbell guides (www.ireland-guide.com) are annual publications with over 900 recommendations for munching, supping and snoozing on the Emerald Isle.

Over 10,000 oysters are consumed each year at the exuberant Galway Oyster International Festival (www.galwayoysterfest.com; p409).

TOP FIVE IRISH CHEESES

- Ardrahan – Flavourful farmhouse creation with a rich, nutty taste
- Corleggy – Subtle, pasteurised goats cheese from County Cavan (p481)
- Durrus – Fine-food fans will fall for this creamy, fruity cheese (p236)
- Cashel blue – Creamy blue cheese from Tipperary
- Cooleeney – Award-winning Camembert-style cheese

If you want to know your natural-rind goats cheese from your semi-soft washed-rind cows cheese, you'll find enlightenment, and a complete list of Irish cheesemakers, at www.irishcheese.ie.

Visit www.foodisland.com, a site run by state food board Bord Bia, for recipes, a short culinary history of Ireland and links to producers of Irish food, from whom you can purchase that prized truckle of farmhouse cheese or whiskey-flavoured fruit cake.

The Book of Guinness Advertising by Jim Davies. My Goodness! A collection of Guinness' finest posters from the 1920s to the end of the 20th century.

raising agent, so Irish bakers of the 19th century leavened their bread with bicarbonate of soda. Combined with buttermilk, it makes a superbly light-textured and tasty bread, and is often on the breakfast menus at B&Bs.

The Fry

Perhaps the most feared Irish speciality is the fry – the heart attack on a plate that is the second part of so many B&B deals. In spite of the hysterical health fears, the fry is still one of the most common traditional meals in the country. Who can say no to a plate of fried bacon, sausages, black pudding, white pudding, eggs and tomatoes? For the famous Ulster fry, common throughout the North, simply add fadge (potato bread).

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

TEA

The Irish drink more tea, per capita, than any other nation in the world and you'll be offered a cup as soon as you cross the threshold of any Irish home. It's a leveller and an icebreaker, and an appreciation for 'at least a cup in your hand' is your passport to conviviality here. Preferred blends are very strong, and nothing like the namby-pamby versions that pass for Irish breakfast tea elsewhere.

RED LEMONADE

This product, basically a regular glass of lemonade with colouring, has been produced in Ireland since the end of the 19th century and is still made to virtually the same recipe today. Always more popular in the Republic than the North, it's a favourite for adults and children alike. It's commonly used as a mixer with brandy and whiskey.

Alcoholic Drinks

Drinking in Ireland is no mere social activity: it's the foundation on which Irish culture is built. Along with its wonderful drinks, this fact helps to explain why through centuries of poverty and oppression the Irish always retained their reputation for unrivalled hospitality and good humour.

STOUT

Of all Ireland's drinks, the 'black stuff' is the most celebrated. While Guinness has become synonymous with stout the world over, few outside Ireland realise that there are two other major producers competing for the favour of the Irish drinker: Murphy's and Beamish & Crawford, both based in Cork city. More exciting still is the recent re-emergence of independent Irish brewers (Guinness, Murphy's and Beamish & Crawford are no longer Irish-owned) – turn to p275 to whet your appetite.

OTHER IRISH BEERS

Beamish Red Ale This traditional-style red ale, brewed in Cork city by Beamish & Crawford (p205), is sweet and palatable.

Caffrey's Irish Ale One of the most exciting additions to Ireland's beer map, this creamy ale has only been around since 1994. It's a robust cross between a stout and an ale, brewed in County Antrim.

Kaliber This nonalcoholic lager was made popular by famous Irish athlete Eamon O'Coughlan. Even in the name of research we couldn't be bothered trying it but it seems to have some credibility among the more clean-living publicans.

McCardles Traditional Ale This wholesome, dark, nutty ale is hard to come by, but worthy of an exploration.

Smithwicks Smithwicks is a lovely, refreshing full scoop with a charming history. It's brewed in Kilkenny (see p329), on the site of the 14th-century St Francis Abbey in what is Ireland's oldest working brewery.

WHISKEY

While whiskey shares only equal billing with stout as the national drink of Ireland, in the home it is paramount. At last count, there were almost 100 different types of Irish whiskey, brewed by only three distilleries – Jameson's, Bushmills and Cooley's. A visit to Ireland reveals a depth of excellence that will make the connoisseur's palate spin, while winning over many new friends to what the Irish call *uisce beatha* (the 'water of life').

IRISH COFFEE

Stories about the origin of Irish coffee abound but the most common one credits Joe Sheridan, a barman at Shannon airport, with the creation in the 1940s. All travellers arriving in Ireland from the USA would stop over in Shannon for an hour or two before heading on to their final destination. Landing in the bracing cold, shivering passengers used to approach Sheridan looking for an alcoholic drink and something that might heat them up. He hit upon the winning blend of Irish whiskey and piping hot coffee, topped with rich cream. It was just the trick then, and still is today.

POITÍN

Making *poitín* (illicit whiskey), has a folkloric respect in Ireland. Those responsible came to be regarded as heroes of the people, rather than outlaws of the land as the authorities tried to brand them. In tourist and duty-free

A SNIFTER OF WHISKEY HISTORY

Nobody really knows whether whiskey was first made in Scotland or Ireland, but for the purpose of this book we'll just go along with the Irish version of the story. Whiskey has been made here since the 10th century, when monks brought the art of distillation back from their ecclesiastical jaunts to the Middle East. In Arabia, the technique had been used to distil perfume from flowers, but the monks evidently saw a very different use for it. As the legend maintains, they soon developed a method of distilling whiskey from barley. The monks then fiercely protected their secret for several centuries.

Incidentally, Irish monks did have a solid reputation as hard drinkers. Monastic protocol limited monks to a mere gallon (5L) of ale a day. Another rule insisted that they be able to chant the Psalms clearly, so we might reasonably assume the monks managed to build up a sturdy tolerance in order to walk this fine line.

Had the monks not been so secretive, their claim to being the inventors of whiskey might not be disputed today. The Scots make an equally valid, if much later claim, dating to the 15th century. By the way, Scotch whisky is not only spelled differently, it is distilled twice rather than the three times preferred by the Irish. American Bourbon is distilled but once.

Guinness Is Guinness: The Colourful Story of a Black and White Brand by Mark Griffiths delves into the origins and eventual worldwide dispersion of the great stout. Guinness devotees will find it colourful and insightful.

Established in 1608, Bushmills in County Antrim is the world's oldest legal distillery (see p661). By the time of Bushmills' official opening, whiskey was already exceedingly popular among the common people of Ireland.

shops you'll see a commercial brand of *poitín* which is strictly a gimmick for tourists. Don't bother; it's just an inferior spirit with little to credit it. There are still *poitín* makers plying their trade in the quieter corners of Ireland. It is not uncommon in Donegal, the *poitín* capital, for deals to be sealed or favours repaid with a drop of the 'cratur'. In the quiet, desolate, peaty bogs of Connemara a plume of smoke rising into the sky may not just be a warming fire. Or in West Cork, one of the most fiercely patriotic and traditional pockets of Ireland, a friend of a friend may know something about it.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

It's easy to eat well in the cities and you'll be able to find any kind of cuisine your taste buds desire, from Irish seafood to foreign fusion. Along the west coast, you'll be spoiled for choice when it comes to seafood and local produce.

If you ask a local for 'somewhere to eat', you'll probably be directed to his or her favourite pub because, outside the cities, the best place for a feed, particularly lunch, is often the pub. Virtually every drinking house will offer the simple fare of soup, potatoes, vegetables, steaks and chicken. Some extend themselves and have separate dining rooms where you can get fresh soda breads, and hearty meals like shepherd's pie, casseroles and seafood dishes.

For breakfast, you're most likely to be eating at your accommodation, as most lodgings in Ireland offer B&B.

Standard restaurant hours in Ireland are from noon to around 10.30pm with many places closed one day of the week, usually Monday, or sometimes Sunday.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Oh boy, you're a long way from home now. Ireland provides so few vegetarian options that your convictions might be tested. In the cities and bigger towns there will be enough dedicated eateries to keep your spirits up, but once you head out into rural Ireland you enter the vegetarian's wilderness. Take heart, though, as modern restaurants are opening up in old country homes throughout Ireland, and many of them have surprisingly sophisticated menus.

We trust vegans have brought packed lunches; Ireland really won't be your cup of black tea. Save yourself time and heartache and buy the most up-to-date restaurant guide as soon as your plane touches down. And get used to the incredulous question, 'What, you don't eat any dairy produce!?!'

EATING WITH KIDS

You can bring *na páiste* (the children) to just about any Irish eatery, including the pub. However, after 7pm, the kids are banished from most boozers and the smarter restaurants. You will sometimes see children's menus but normally small portions of the adult fare will do. For more information on travelling with children, see p702.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

How the Irish Eat

The Irish have hefty appetites and eat almost 150% of the recommended daily calorie intake according to the EU. This probably has as much to do with their penchant for snacks as the size of their meals (which *are* big).

When Ireland was predominantly agricultural, breakfast was a leisurely and communal meal shared with family and workers around midmorning, a few hours after rising. As with most of the developed world, it's now a fairly rushed and bleary-eyed affair involving toast and cereals. The traditional fry is a weekend indulgence, while the contracted version of bacon and eggs is still

popular whenever time allows. The day's first cup of tea comes with breakfast and most people will admit to not being themselves until they've had it.

Elevens is the next pit stop and involves tea and snacks to tide over appetites until the next main meal. Afternoon tea takes the same form and serves the same function, also breaking up the afternoon.

Lunch is traditionally the biggest meal of the day, which is probably a throwback to farming Ireland, when the workers would return home ravenous after a morning's work. However, the timing of the main meal today is one of the most visible rural/urban divides. Outside the cities, lunch is still usually the most substantial meal every day of the week, while the workers in urban areas have succumbed to the nine-to-five drudgery and usually eat lunch on the run. However, on weekends, everybody has dinner mid-afternoon, usually around 4pm on Saturday and before 2pm Sunday. They might call it 'lunch' but don't be deceived – it's the most substantial meal of the week.

'Supper' is increasingly becoming the main meal for urbanites, and it takes place as soon as the last working parent gets home.

Etiquette

Conviviality is the most important condiment at the Irish table. Meal times are about taking the load off your feet, relaxing and enjoying the company of your fellow diners. There is very little prescribed or restrictive etiquette. In fact, the only behaviour likely to cause offence could be your own haughtiness. The Irish will happily dismiss any faux pas but if they think you have ideas above your station, they're quick to bring you back down to earth.

COOKING COURSES

Cooking has regained its sex appeal in Ireland and plenty of schools are finding their classes increasingly popular. The teaching is usually relaxed and sociable, and takes place in beautiful settings; a stint at one of these cookery schools could quite easily be the highlight of your trip:

Ballymaloe (p216; ☎ 464 6785; www.cookingisfun.ie; Ballycotton, Co Cork) From half-day sessions to 12-week certificate courses. Classes are held in an old apple-storage house, and there are cottages in the grounds for overnight students.

Belle Isle School of Cookery (p682; ☎ 6638 7231; www.irish-cookery-school.com; Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh) A range of cookery and wine courses lasting from one day to four weeks. Luxurious accommodation in Belle Isle Castle and its estate cottages.

Berry Lodge (p385; ☎ 708 7022; www.berrylodge.com; Annagh, Co Clare) Offering in-depth instruction, often over more than one day. Packages including classes, accommodation and meals are available.

Castle Leslie (p486; ☎ 88109; www.castleslie.com; Glaslough, Co Monaghan) Offering a programme of year-round courses with master chef Noel McMeel. Themed courses cover everything from 'Irish cooking by seasons' to 'death by chocolate' and 'food and erotica'.

Fiacrí Country House Restaurant (p320; ☎ 43017; www.fiacríhouse.com; Roscrea, Co Tipperary) Course are run year-round, from one day to five weeks.

Ghan House (p575; ☎ 937 3682; www.ghanhouse.com; Carlingford, Co Louth) Offers hands-on cooking classes and cooking demonstrations. Accommodation is also available.

Good Things Café (p235; ☎ 61426; www.thegoodthingscafe.com; Durrus, Co Cork) Runs cookery courses year-round, including a two-day 'miracle' programme for beginners.

Pangur Ban (p434; ☎ 41243; www.pangurban.com; Connemara, Co Galway) Two-day weekend courses, covering specific themes such as 'bread and cakes'.

MARKETS

There are few better ways to eat well in Ireland than to fill your shopping basket with local, seasonal produce at a farmers' market. The markets have

The Bridgestone guides (www.bestofbridgestone.com) by John and Sally McKenna are a well-respected series of Irish food guides written by a husband-and-wife team. Books include the *Vegetarian Guide to Ireland*, *Food Lover's Guide to Northern Ireland*, and the annual *100 Best Restaurants*.

Café Paradiso Cookbook and *Paradiso Seasons* are creative and modern vegetarian cookbooks with ne'er a brown lentil stew in sight; from the eponymous Cork restaurant (p208).

Slowfood Ireland (www.slowfoodireland.com) is an organisation committed to local and artisan food production. It runs various sociable events through the country, from bangers 'n' mash parties to cheese and wine evenings.

The Ballymaloe series of cookbooks by various members of Ireland's first family of cooking, the Allens, have an extraordinary reputation in Ireland and abroad. The emphasis is on using top-quality ingredients simply and with love.

seen a real resurgence in recent years and most Irish towns now host one at least once a week. Check out www.irelandmarkets.com for a definitive list.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Food Glossary

bacon and cabbage – slices of boiled bacon or gammon with boiled cabbage on the side served with boiled potatoes

barm brack – spicy, cakelike bread, traditionally served at Halloween with a ring hidden inside (be careful not to choke on it!)

blaa – soft and floury bread roll

black and white pudding – black pudding is traditionally made from pig's blood, pork skin and seasonings, shaped like a big sausage and cut into discs and fried; white pudding is the same without the blood

boxty – potato pancake, becoming rarer on menus

carrigeen – seaweed dish

champ – Northern Irish dish of potatoes mashed with spring onions (scallions)

coddle – Dublin dish of semi-thick stew made with sausages, bacon, onions and potatoes

colcannon – mashed potato, cabbage and onion fried in butter and milk

crubeens – dish of pigs' trotters from Cork

drisheen – another Cork dish of intestines stuffed with sheep or pigs' blood and bitter tansy, boiled in milk

dulse – dried seaweed that's sold salted and ready to eat, mainly found in Ballycastle, County Antrim

fadge – Northern Irish potato bread

farl – general name for triangular baking

Guinness cake – popular fruitcake flavoured with Guinness

Irish stew – quintessential stew of mutton (preferably lamb), potatoes and onions, flavoured with parsley and thyme and simmered slowly

potato bread – thin bread made out of spuds

soda bread – wonderful bread, white or brown, sweet or savoury, made from very soft Irish flour and buttermilk

yellowman – hard, chewy toffee made in County Antrim

The *Avoca Café Cookbooks*, by Hugo Arnold, contain hearty, wholesome recipes from the family-run Avoca Handweaver restaurants originally based in Wicklow (see p139) and now with 10 establishments across the Republic.

Environment

THE LAND

It is clear, from the literature, songs and paintings of Ireland, that the Irish landscape exerts a powerful sway on the people who have lived in it. The Irish who left, especially, have always spread this notion that the old sod was something worth pining for, and visitors still anticipate experiencing this land's subtle influence on perception and mood. Once you've travelled the country, you can't help but agree that the vibrant greenness of gentle hills, the fearsome violence of jagged coasts and the sombre light of so many cloudy days is an integral part of experiencing Ireland.

The entire island stretches a mere 486km north to south, and 275km east to west, so Ireland's impressive topographical variety may come as a surprise. The countryside does indeed have an abundance of the expected greenery. Grass grows nearly everywhere in Ireland, but there are notable exceptions, particularly around the dramatic coasts.

Massive rocky outcrops like the Burren (p388), in County Clare, are for the most part inhospitable to grass, and although even there the green stuff does sprout up in enough patches for sheep and goats to graze on, these vast, otherworldly landscapes are mostly grey and bleak. Nearby, the dramatic Cliffs of Moher (p388) are a sheer drop into the thundering surf below. Similarly, there is no preparing for the extraordinary hexagonal stone columns of the Giant's Causeway (p662) in County Antrim, or the rugged drop of County Donegal's Slieve League (p514), Europe's highest sea cliffs. Sand dunes buffer many of the more gentle stretches of coast.

The boglands, which once covered one-fifth of the island, are more of a whiskey hue than green – that's the brown of heather and sphagnum moss, which cover uncut bogs. Travellers will likely encounter a bog in County Kildare's Bog of Allen (p344) or while driving through much of the western counties – much of the Mayo coast is covered by bog, and huge swaths also cover Donegal. The rural farms of the west coast have a rugged, hard-earned look to them, due mostly to the rock that lies so close to the surface. Much of this rock has been dug up, to create tillable soil, and converted into stone walls that divide tiny paddocks. The Aran Islands (p415) stand out for their spectacular networks of stone walls.

Smaller islands dot the shores of Ireland, many of them barren rock piles supporting unique ecosystems – Skellig Michael (p263) is a breathtakingly jagged island just off the Kerry coast. The west of Ireland is also the country's most mountainous area. Much of the west coast is a bulwark of cliffs, hills and mountains. The highest mountains are in the southwest; the tallest mountain in Ireland is Carrantuohil (1039m) in County Kerry's Macgillycuddy's Reeks (p255).

But topography in Ireland always leads back to the green. The Irish frequently lament the loss of their woodlands, much of which were cleared by the British (during the reign of Elizabeth I) to build ships for the Royal Navy. Little of the island's once plentiful oak forests survive today, and much of what you'll see is the result of relatively recent planting. Instead, the countryside is largely comprised of green fields divided by hedgerows and stone walls. Use of this land is divided between cultivated fields and pasture for cattle and sheep.

Of the nine counties that originally comprised the province of Ulster, six are now part of Northern Ireland while three are part of the Republic.

In 1821, the body of an Iron-Age man was found in a bog in Galway with his cape, shoes and beard still intact.

WILDLIFE

Ireland's flora and fauna is, by and large, shy and subtle, but as in any island environment, travellers who set out on foot will discover an Ireland that is resplendent with interesting species.

Animals

Apart from the fox and badger, which tend to shy away from humans and are rarely seen, the wild mammals of Ireland are mostly of the ankle-high 'critter' category, such as rabbits, hedgehogs and shrews. Hikers often spot the Irish hare, or at least glimpse the blazing-fast blur of one running away. Red deer roam the hillsides in many of the wilder parts of the country, particularly the Wicklow Mountains, and in Killarney National Park, which holds the country's largest herd.

For most visitors, the most commonly sighted mammals are those inhabiting the sea and waterways. The otter, rarely seen elsewhere in Europe, is thriving in Ireland. Seals are a common sight in rivers and along the shore, as are dolphins, which follow the warm waters of the Gulf Stream towards Ireland. Some colonise the coast of Ireland year-round, frequently swimming into the bays and inlets off the western coast.

Many travellers visit Ireland specifically for the birding. Ireland's westerly location on the fringe of Europe makes it an ideal stopover point for birds migrating from North America and the Arctic. In autumn, the southern counties become a temporary home to the American waders (mainly sandpipers and plovers) and warblers. Migrants from Africa, such as shearwaters, petrels and auks, begin to arrive in spring in the southwestern counties.

The reasonably rare corncrake, which migrates from Africa, can be found in the western counties, in Donegal and around the Shannon Callows, and on islands such as Inishbofin in Galway. In late spring and early summer, the rugged coastlines, particularly cliff areas and islands, become a haven for breeding seabirds, mainly gannet, kittiwake, Manx shearwater, fulmar, cormorant and heron. Puffins, resembling penguins with their tuxedo colour scheme, nest in large colonies on coastal cliffs.

The lakes and low-lying wetlands attract large numbers of Arctic and northern European waterfowl and waders such as whooper swans, lapwing, barnacle geese, white-fronted geese and golden plover. The important Wexford Wildfowl Reserve (p173) holds half the world's population of Greenland white-fronted geese, and little tern breed on the beach there, protected by the dunes. Also found during the winter are teal, redshank and curlew. The main migration periods are April to May and September to October.

The magnificent peregrine falcon has been making something of a recovery and can be found nesting on cliffs in Wicklow and elsewhere. In 2001, 46 golden eagle chicks from Scotland were released into Glenveagh National Park in Donegal in an effort to reintroduce the species. By 2005, several pairs began breeding, but none has successfully hatched an egg yet. This may well change in the next year or two, as the birds fully mature sexually. Some of the eagles have expanded their range well beyond the park – frequent sightings have been reported in Counties Mayo and Antrim.

Plants

Although Ireland is sparsely wooded, the range of surviving plant species is larger here than in many other European countries, thanks in part to the comparatively late arrival of agriculture.

There are remnants of the original oak forest in Killarney National Park and in southern Wicklow near Shillelagh. Far more common are pine plantations, which are growing steadily. Hedgerows, planted to divide fields

The illustrated pocket guide *The Animals of Ireland* by Gordon D'Arcy is a handy, inexpensive introduction.

See the excellent Birds of Ireland News Service website at www.birdsireland.com/pages/birding_in_ireland.html.

Irish Birds by David Cabot is a pocket guide describing birds and their habitats, and outlines the best places for serious bird-watching.

CONNEMARA PONIES

Ireland's best-known native animal is the Connemara pony – the largest of the pony breeds. The Connemara's ancestors, possibly introduced to Ireland by the Celts, developed the sturdiness and agility for which they are known while roaming the wilds of Connemara. According to legend, the breed also inherited some Spanish blood from the Spanish Armada's stallions, who swam ashore from the wreckage of 1588 to mate with local mares.

The compact and powerful Connemara pony was highly valued by farmers, who tamed wild mares and used them to plough fields and haul rock from the fields. Breeding did not become selective until 1923, when the Connemara Pony Breeders' Society was founded by a group based in Clifden. The Connemara pony, it seems, had been weakened by life in the stables and by indiscriminate breeding. Since then, it has been developed and refined, transforming the old work horse into a show horse. Connemara ponies are known for their gentle disposition and are great riding horses – adults and children alike can mount them.

and delineate land boundaries throughout Ireland, actually host many of the native plant species that once thrived in the oak forests – it's an intriguing example of nature adapting and reasserting itself. The Burren in County Clare is home to a remarkable mixture of Mediterranean, alpine and arctic species.

The bogs of Ireland are home to a unique flora adapted to wet, acidic, nutrient-poor conditions and whose survival is threatened by the depletion of bogs for energy use. Sphagnum moss is the key bog plant and is joined by plants such as bog rosemary, bog cotton, black-beaked sedge (whose spindly stem grows up to 30cm high) and various types of heather and lichen. Carnivorous plants also thrive, such as the sundew, whose sticky tentacles trap insects, and bladderwort whose tiny explosive bladders trap aquatic animals in bog pools.

NATIONAL PARKS

Ireland has six national parks: the Burren (p388), Connemara (p424), Glenveagh (p530), Killarney (p253), Wicklow Mountains (p148) and Ballycroy National Park (p456). These have been developed to protect, preserve and make accessible areas of significant natural heritage. The newest park, Ballycroy National Park, was not fully up and running at the time of research, but likely will be during the lifetime of this edition. The other parks are all open year-round and have information offices.

Forests & Forest Parks

Coillte Teoranta (Irish Forestry Board; ☎ 01-661 5666; www.coillte.ie; Leeson La, Dublin) administers about 3500 sq km of forested land, which includes designated picnic areas and 12 forest parks. This constitutes about 70 percent of the Republic's forest land. These parks open year-round and have a range of wildlife and habitats. Some also have chalets and/or caravan parks, shops, cafés and play areas for children.

National Nature Reserves

There are 66 state-owned and 10 privately owned National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in the Republic, represented by Dúchas (the government department in charge of parks, monuments and gardens). In Northern Ireland there are over 40 NNRs, which are leased or owned by the Department of the Environment. These reserves are defined as areas of importance for their special flora, fauna or geology and include the Giant's Causeway (p662) and Glenariff (p671) in Antrim, and North Strangford Lough

For information on parks, gardens, monuments and inland waterways see www.heritageireland.ie.

Look for *Reading the Irish Landscape* by Frank Mitchell and Michael Ryan for info on Ireland's geology, archaeology, urban growth, agriculture and afforestation.

(p620) in County Down. More information is available from the **Environment & Heritage Service** (☎ 028-9054 6533; www.ehsni.gov.uk).

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Ireland does not rate among the world's biggest offenders when it comes to polluting the environment, but the country's recent economic growth has led to an increase in industry and consumerism, which in turn generate more pollution and waste. While the population density is among Europe's lowest, the population is rising. More people are settling in new suburban developments, especially in Counties Meath and Killarney, which are both within commuting distance of Dublin. As more people drive cars and fly in planes, Ireland grows more dependent on nonrenewable sources of energy. The amount of waste has risen substantially since the early 1990s.

Surprisingly, water quality has been a problem for communities deriving their tap water from Lough Corrib, in the west. In March 2007, Galway City, Tuam and Headford were put on Boil Notice, due to the presence of *Cryptosporidium* in the water. Human and animal waste was assumed to be the cause. The problem was quickly resolved, but served as notice that economic progress can have averse affects on quality of life.

CLIMATE CHANGE & OTHER LOOMING CONCERNS

It remains to be seen what's in store for Ireland as the earth's oceans and atmosphere warm up, but scientists have offered a long list of likely scenarios. The gentlest of forecasts has the weather of Northern Ireland resembling the current conditions in County Cork, while Cork turns into Ireland's version of the Côte d'Azur.

By mid-century, winter temperatures are expected to rise by 1°C on average, while rainfall is predicted to increase, especially in the already wet northwest. Flooding may pose more of a problem in the Shannon River Basin. Summer temperatures may rise by as much as 2.5°C on average, while rainfall is likely to drop significantly during these months. Seasonal drought may become a problem, wildfires may be a growing concern, and due to new irrigation costs the potato may cease to be a viable cash crop in much of Ireland.

The rise in sea level will have a direct effect on Ireland's coasts. Gently sloped beaches along the west coast will disappear as higher waves erode sand and tides extend further inland. Already, climatologists are advising against development within 100m of flat coastlines. Many cities, including Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway, will be at increased risk of inundation in the event of storm surges unless seawalls are built.

The impact on biodiversity is a huge question mark, since it is difficult to estimate how well various plant and animal species will adapt to climate change and related side effects. Heath and peatlands, of which Ireland has a large proportion, are considered sensitive to extended periods of dryness. Ireland is currently at the southern extent of the range of salmon, which may stay further north (and be difficult to farm) if the island's streams warm too much for their breeding. New bird species may migrate to Ireland as their habitats elsewhere change or shrink, which will likely have a dramatic effect on delicate ecosystems.

One hotly debated question is the effect of global warming on the North Atlantic Drift, also known as the Gulf Stream, which carries warm waters north from the Gulf of Mexico and the west coast of Africa. Some scientists argue the Gulf Stream is already losing strength, and may stop circulating altogether within the next few decades. If that happens, Arctic waters may exert a greater influence on Ireland, dramatically cooling things off – at least until global warming brings up the temperature of the Arctic region. In that scenario, Ireland can forget about a Mediterranean climate – Scandinavian would be more like it. The weakening of the Gulf Stream is not universally accepted, and its possible effects are questioned. But, needless to say, folks will be talking a lot about the weather in the near future.

The Greenbox (www.greenbox.ie) offers a range of eco-friendly activities and tours in northwest Ireland.

At the same time, concern for the environment is growing and the government has taken some measures to offset the damage that thriving economies can cause. Recycling programmes do much to reduce the amount of rubbish generated from consumer packaging. In 2002 the much-publicised plastic bag tax, dubbed the 'plastax', resulted in a 90% drop in bag waste. In 2005, a group called Sustainable Projects Ireland Ltd purchased a 67-acre lot next to the village of Cloughjordan, in North Tipperary, and announced plans to develop the site as a sustainable community. **The Village** (www.thevillage.ie) project will involve efficient water service, orientation of homes to maximise exposure to the sun, and an emphasis on wooded walkways over motorways. Meanwhile, the Republic has established 35 wind farms in an effort to reduce the country's reliance on fossil fuels.

While these are positive signs, they don't really put Ireland at the vanguard of the environmental movement. Polls seem to indicate the Irish are slightly less concerned about the environment than are the citizens of most other European countries, and the country is a long way from meeting its Kyoto Protocol requirement for reduced emissions. The government isn't pushing the environmental agenda much beyond ratifying EU agreements, although it must be said these have established fairly ambitious goals for reduced air pollution and tighter management of water quality.

The annual number of tourists in Ireland far exceeds the number of residents (by a ratio of about 1.5 to one), so travellers can have a huge impact on the local environment. Tourism is frequently cited as potentially beneficial to the environment – that is, responsible visitor spending can help stimulate eco-friendly sectors of the economy. Eco-tourism is not really burgeoning in a formalised way, although an organisation called The Greenbox has established standards for eco-tourism on the island and promotes tour companies that comply to these standards. The rising popularity of outdoor activities such as diving, surfing and fishing create economic incentives for maintaining the cleanliness of Ireland's coasts and inland waters, but increased activity in these environments can be harmful if not managed carefully.

Ireland's comprehensive and efficient bus network makes it easy to avoid the use of a car, and the country is well suited to cycling and walking holidays. Many hotels, guesthouses and hostels tout green credentials, and organic ingredients are frequently promoted on restaurant menus. It's not difficult for travellers to minimise their imprint while in Ireland. See p21 for more information on travelling sustainably.

To see a growing list of low-impact holiday options in Ireland (and elsewhere), visit www.responsibletravel.com.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'