

...Ireland

meetings. To many Irishmen the language question is just as significant to the nation as is the situation in the North.

Once, of course, the Irish language — Gaelic — was the spoken tongue of Ireland. With the British take-over of Ireland 400 years ago, English began seeping in.

In the last century English finally became the working language of most Irish people. Today, Irish is only spoken as a day-to-day tongue among a few thousand rustics isolated along the west coast.

The Irish language was an important rallying point in the struggle for independence and its restoration was the especial project of the grand old father of modern Ireland, Eamon de Valera (now blind and in his 90s, he is the President of the republic, a purely symbolic office.)

De Valera vowed that his government would restore the Irish language to complete strength in Ireland. Not bilingualism, but a completely Irish-speaking Ireland was the goal. But the results have been rather unsuccessful.

A great amount of time, money and effort is being spent on the restoration of the language, but the government and its agencies are the only bodies that make a concerted effort to use the language on a daily basis. Schools spend a great amount of time in instruction in Irish and most Irishmen under 30 have a good knowledge of the difficult language. But their day-to-day language is English.

The followers of the Language Freedom Movement feel that the government has been fooling itself, that the restoration of the language is a hopeless endeavor, and Gaelic should be treated as a cultural language only.

They protest all the money spent on promoting the language and the time devoted in schools to it. They say that results of a Gaelic-speaking Ireland would only cut the nation off more from the rest of the world. It would seriously harm a shaky national economy, they claim.

The debate rages on. Many Irishmen think of the language as synonymous with nationalism and the fight for independence and 400,000 signed a petition entitled 'Let the Language Live', a backlash to the demands of the Language Freedom Movement.

Economy improving

For Ireland, the 60s were a period of long-awaited economic progress. The Irish economy has always been in a bad way but in the past decade it changed towards the better.

The high rate of emigration from Ireland (the highest rate in Europe) began to slow down and finally a few years ago the population actually stopped declining as it has steadily for years (in 1840 the population was about 8 million, today it is 5 million, North and South combined.)

The Irish economy in the past existed as a shaky relationship between the small farmers and manufacturers. Today it exists as a fairly stable relationship between foreign capital and the small farmer.

For years the backbone of the Irish economy was the small and usually inefficient small farmer. The economy slowly disintegrated. In 1957 the desperate government started a new economic policy aimed at luring foreign investment into the nation. Firms from many foreign countries have set up branches in Ireland, induced by the generous grants from the government, tax concessions and the cheap Irish labor.

The economy is relatively stable now, although it does rely heavily on exports to Britain and there is still a dire need for more jobs and industry. The 70s will be crucial for the Irish economy as it faces direct European competition.



Itinerant mother and child.

The most tragic problem in the republic is the grim poverty that is still there. Ireland has always been a poor nation, especially since the 1850s after famines ravaged the nation, but now with a new affluent middle-class emerging in Ireland, the question of poverty in the nation has come to the fore.

Poverty-stricken itinerants

There are many poverty-stricken groups in Ireland. There are the thousands of inadequately-paid workers, small farmers, the old, and the usually depressed groups like deserted wives, unmarried mothers, and vagrants. But the most obvious group and the group in the most shocking state of absolute poverty are the itinerants, or 'tinkers', of Ireland.

Indeed, the itinerants of Ireland are one of the poorest social groups in modern Europe and their lot has not improved at all in the century of their existence.

The itinerants are homeless people who began their wanderings when they were thrown off the small farms they worked during the famines. The famines forced over one million Irishmen to emigrate in 10 years.

Destitution during the Great Famine forced the starving peasants to do one of two things. They could try to make enough money to emigrate which usually meant waiting until the worst of the famine was over so they could sell an animal to get money for the passage. The other solution was to take to the road.

If a peasant had a simple skill it was possible to travel about the less stricken areas of the country exacting a meagre living selling the trade. This meant losing his tenure on rented land and usually ensured a life on the road.

In the 1860s there were at least 500,000 itinerants in Ireland. Today there are between 10,000 and 12,000.

They fall roughly into four categories. The first contains 40 to 60 families. They are the most prosperous. They deal in second-hand goods and livestock and can make a fairly decent living.

The second group includes about 400 families. They deal in scrap and depend on begging for a large part of their income.

The third group has around 500 families who earn their entire income from begging. These three groups live in caravans and have at least one horse each.

The fourth group is the most deprived social group in Ireland. They are often the offspring of the other groups who married young and didn't have enough money to afford a caravan. They live in tents and derive their entire income from begging.

Needless to say, their income is far below subsistence level. They suffer from severe malnutrition and have an infant mortality rate of about 30 per cent in the first two years.

The government published a report on itinerancy not long ago which shocked many Irishmen who found it difficult to comprehend that such conditions existed in their country. The report showed that only one in four itinerants lives until 30 and that only one in 60 reaches the age of 60. They are almost all illiterate.

But the heartening discovery was made in the report that seven out of eight itinerant families expressed a desire to settle in one place and be assimilated. The government now faces the problem of breaking through the prejudice against itinerants that afflicts many Irishmen.

For the itinerants are virtually the Blacks of the Republic of Ireland. There is an immense amount of hostility towards them; the police constantly move them off campsites because farmers claim the itinerants steal their crops and local residents don't like them around.

On a bitter cold day this December, I was in a grocery store in a small town south of Cork when an itinerant woman wrapped in a blanket came in with a ragged little boy, with only some bits of leather tied to his feet for shoes.

She asked the clerk for the scraps of bacon fat and the clerk called the manager who threatened to call the garda (police) if the itinerant didn't leave the store at once.

Such attitudes are common. The woman will be very fortunate if her son reaches the age of 12. Schemes to house itinerants in council houses usually always meet with outcries of protest from the other residents in the area who feel that the itinerants are unfit neighbors and a degenerating influence upon the community. The government continually promises to tackle the itinerant problem but progress is painstakingly slow.

Irish society is going through a number of changes now. Progress has always been slow and painful in Ireland where tradition and the Roman Catholic Church have meant so much. But the Church is relaxing its iron grip on the country. Censorship has been moderated and novels with mild sex scenes in them are now sold on the newstands. Contraception is still illegal but thousands of Irish women are on the pill and nobody is doing anything about it.

Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien, the noted intellectual, has won a seat in the Dail (Parliament) and the local parish priest is no longer the ruling figure in rural areas. And when author Samuel Beckett won the Nobel Prize last year Irishmen remembered where he was from and were proud to call him one of theirs.

For all the problems facing Ireland it is still a haven; a refuge from the often mindless onslaught of the 20th century. The bug of materialism hasn't bitten too deeply. The people have a tendency to be human in spite of it all and there is a good, peaceful feeling in the air. The rains and mists that shroud the land are perhaps not as deceptive as they may seem.

By

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