



I B R G

LAMBETH

IRISH IN BRITAIN REPRESENTATION GROUP

THE IRISH JOKE.

FACT SHEET 6.

On the radio or the TV. In your newspaper, your comic or your book. At work or school. In the pub, club or social. Wherever you go and whatever you do, sooner or later you will hear the Irish joke. It's as British as Fish 'n' Chips or Coronation St and the image regularly created of incurably thick 'Paddy' is a tried and trusted one. Monkey nose, long projecting upper lip, shallow lower jaw and a character as flexible as the occasion requires. The Irishman who, when not drinking, fighting or displaying murderous tendencies, is fairly good natured and brave. A typical stereotype and, like all stereotypes, totally inaccurate.

But, for any Irish person foolish enough to complain that such a stereotype is racist and should be strongly opposed, the answers are also tried and trusted. It's only a bit of fun and harms no-one, you should have a sense of humour about such things, if you can't laugh at yourself who can you laugh at? And anyway, don't the Irish tell jokes about Kerry men? People all over the world tell jokes about the stranger in their midst. The often uneducated, inexperienced and 'different' immigrant is the target for humour the world over so why should the Irish be any different or be the exception?

The answers are so credible and overpowering that it is often difficult to argue against them and yet there is a very real and deeprooted difference between the 'immigrant' type humour and the anti-Irish joke. Anti-Irishism is such an old and long running theme throughout generations of British people that you need to have an understanding of history as well as of humour to appreciate it. Incredibly it is over 800 years old !

The whole concept of the stupid, barbaric Irish was deliberately created, as far back as the 12th century, not as a mockery of immigrants but as an excuse for the invasion, by Henry II, of an independant Ireland. To invade such a christian country, famous all over Europe for its learning and piety, required substantial justification. The Irish were teaching in continental universities, they were founding monasteries in most countries and manuscripts, such as the Book of Kells, were being revered as works of exceptional beauty. Not only that but the British people themselves held the Irish civilisation in high regard. Both they and the Pope had to be convinced that an invasion was beneficial and was not just for greed or territory.

A daunting task but Henry II was not to be put off. He searched for and found a writer of exceptional talent and no shortage of imagination, Giraldus Cambrensis, who was prepared to write a report showing that, in fact, the holy land of Ireland had completely reverted to barbarism and was no longer christian. Giraldus took to the task with relish, "The Irish are indeed a most filthy race. A race sunk in vice. A race more ignorant than all the other nations of the Faith. They frequent not the church of God with proper reverence. Nay, what is most detestable and not only contrary to the gospel but to everything that is right, in any part of Ireland brothers seduce and debauch each others wives and have incestuous intercourse with them." The year was 1187, the evidence was overwhelming and the invasion took place.

But if that had been the end of it then Henry II, Giraldus and his book would have become nothing more than distant history. Unfortunately however the book had proved such a potent weapon in the war that subsequent historians used its 'facts' again and again to support the continued armed intervention in Ireland. The Irish fought back but, if British reports are to be believed, not from any feeling for their culture or religion but because of their barbarian and evil nature. And the British invaders - those who had fallen from grace at court, the black sheep of families, young adventurers and pure troublemakers - were hardly likely to admit that Ireland was anything other than uncivilised and unchristian. As with the administrators and civil servants it was in their interest to maintain and strengthen the invasion force. That way led to money, property, power and fame.

And so it continued. The Irish continued to fight. The British continued to bombard them with words as well as with weapons. And masters such as Milton, Shakespeare and

Webster used their literary skills to maintain the 'official' view of the Irish. A whole race were branded as wicked and stupid and this prejudiced view continued and strengthened down through the centuries. Through writers such as Kingsley, Carlisle, Thackeray and even George Orwell the anti-Irish bias continued. And today, British children are directed to these writers as being masters of the literary art.

The Irish found it difficult to counter this propaganda. For centuries they neither wrote nor spoke English so that whatever they did say failed to reach the British public. Only occasionally did an Irish writer, such as 17th century Geoffrey Keating, get his protests translated and published in England. In the main however the jokes and slanders continued.

In 1590 you could have bought a 'gag' book intended to supply the reader with Irish 'bog' witticisms and in 1775 one writer made so many objectionable comments and distortions in his best selling book 'A tour through Ireland' that he got his picture painted on the bottom of chamber pots produced in Dublin.

At the beginning of the 18th century professional travel writers began to visit Ireland to describe in detail the gothic ruins, the beautiful scenery and the English estates. Some also described the folklore and antiquities but the majority concentrated on finding comical stories to tell of Irish blunders and stupidity. Once in a while a fairminded Englishman would attempt to correct the false image of the Irish people. Arthur Young, an agriculturalist, wrote in 1780 a book entitled, 'A tour of Ireland', "Some persons have given very gross misrepresentations of the Irish nation. Many strokes in their character can be ascribed to the extreme oppression under which they live. There are no people that might be better than they are found and none that have virtues which deserve attention at least as much as their failings." Unfortunately he was a voice crying in the wilderness.

In 1800 the Act of Union was passed and the Irish Parliament abolished. The crude distortions of anti-Irishism, and the picture created, had already justified an invasion and now, 600 years later, it allowed the demotion of the Irish capital with the minimum of opposition in Britain.

Shortly afterward came emigration and the Irish crossed the Channel in their thousands to become servants, actors, soldiers and footmen. The popular image of 'Paddy' was crystallised in the theatre where he was portrayed as stupid and comic with a shillelagh and a pig and usually drinking or brawling.

The real conditions for the majority of Irish however surpassed even the most miserable of conditions to be found anywhere in Europe (after nearly 700 years of British domination). In the 1840's the famine struck Ireland and once again the distortions of anti-Irishism dulled the senses of the British to the real conditions in Ireland. Millions died. Britain exported food by the boatload out of Ireland and Carlisle wrote of the famine struck immigrants as they arrived in the industrial cities of England, "The miserable Irish darken all our towns. In his raging and laughing savagery he is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back. The uncivilised Irish drive the native Saxon out, take possession of his rooms, in his squalor, in his falsity and drunken violence."

This image had a massive effect on the British public and cartoonists captured the idea by portraying the Irish immigrant as a primeval ape. Brutal distortion of Irish features had appeared in former times and now the image was re-inforced by respected writers such as the Rev. Kingsley (author of 'The Waterbabies').

The idea of the subhuman Irish co-incided with Darwins theories on the origin of the species and some eminent thinkers of the day expanded on this by comparing the differences between the Anglo-Saxon and the Celt. One Oxford professor of history wrote, "Regarding the Irish in the annals of ten centuries there is not a character, male or female, with sufficient firmness of character to be carved into dramatic outline. The perception of taste which belongs to the higher orders of understanding are as completely absent as truthfulness of spirit is absent or cleanliness of person and habit."

Once the idea of apeman 'Paddy' was established it grew and strengthened rapidly. A new chimpanzee was brought to London zoo and nicknamed 'Paddy'. And weekly penny comics regularly printed anti-Irish jokes and stories on this theme. One magazine for example stated, "we have noticed with pleasure the return of several sub-gorillas through the office windows of this magazine. We were puzzled and saddened by their

absence but it has been suggested to us that they have been away in Ireland visiting their relatives - the O'Donohues." Or the Punch magazine, "Irish vaccination - Professor Gangee says that hydr phobia in man is on the increase in Ireland. Now it is probable that many a dog cure might be affected by a mad dog biting a rabid Irishman."

Punch was probably a good indicator of Victorian attitudes to Ireland and their humour altered from one of complete antagonism to complete patronisation according to the political situation. They employed some of the best cartoonists in the country to draw the apelike caricature and then added their own words, "The missing link - a creature manifested between the gorilla and the negro and can be met with in some of the lowest districts in London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It belongs to a tribe of Irish savages. When conversing with its kind it talks a sort of gibberish. It is moreover a climbing animal and may sometimes be seen ascending a ladder laden with a hod of bricks."

But while Britain was indulging in large scale anti-Irishism on the one hand it was displaying strong signs of schizophrenia on the other. Irishmen such as Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw were being hailed as masters of theatre, wit and comedy and no-one appeared to recognise the contradiction.

And in Ireland writers such as W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge were attempting to regain some national pride by the founding of the Abbey Theatre and with it serious Irish acting. Slowly but surely Irish people were questioning and attempting to overturn the anti-Irish stereotyping which time, tradition and an invader 800 years previously had given them.

Anti-Irishism was a carefully organised political weapon which served its purpose well, not only when it was first conceived, but down through eight centuries of a sad and pathetic past. Today's 'joke' is the modern equivalent of the hostile commentary first invented by Giraldus Cambrensis and its persistent existence ensures that the relationship between Britain and Ireland, and the British and Irish peoples, is one of permanent unease.

It cannot be laughed at. It cannot be ignored. It is deeply rooted in British culture and, associated with it, come all the fears, prejudices, guilts and feelings of racial superiority which alienate and separate countries and peoples.

For the sake of the future it must be stopped.