

Adam Zamoyski

States of Mind

On the Myths of National Identity



THE POLES ARE OFTEN compared with the Irish—their history, culture, and national characters are deemed to share so many features that they are generally lumped together in the British mind. On the face of it, this is a rather preposterous notion. One of the largest nations in Europe, with 800 years of sovereign status behind it—a nation

that has known the experience of conquering others and ruling over them before being overcome itself—what can this nation truly have in common with a small island people which has never sought to impose its rule or influence over others, whose dominant experience is one of being conquered, downtrodden, and starved? The historian could sensibly rule out the whole proposition, and dismiss the cliché of common attributes—romantic self-destructiveness, excessive fondness for the bottle, inveterate hopelessness—with the contempt it deserves. But one cannot simply argue away the notion, for the cliché obscures some fundamental and intriguing truths.

These are not at all obvious, even to the intelligent observer. During a recent visit to Galway, I realised how easy it would be to come back to London and write the sort of interesting and competent “insight” piece that gets it all hopelessly wrong. I often find myself gently fuming as I read reports by journalists who have just returned from Warsaw; and many readers will have experienced the same sensation when reading, say, an analysis of the English class structure written by an American sociologist.

Most societies behave and utter in code, and unless one happens to have a smattering of that code, one is quite literally missing the point. It is tempting to fancy that one is beginning to crack the Irish code after reading James Joyce, Sean O’Faolain, Conor Cruise O’Brien, and others. But Roy Foster’s wonderful new *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*¹ made me increasingly aware that they told one as much about the

Irish as reading Adam Mickiewicz or Czeslaw Milosz reveals about the Poles—which is, frankly, not very much. Great writers too often create new myths and new codes in the process of delving into the old. As Roy Foster’s book bears out, and as I have discovered in writing a history of Poland, one has to go back much further and dig far deeper.

When dealing with the history of their own country, people relish the diversity, the subtlety, the complexity; they seek to understand, infer, and extrapolate. When dealing with that of other peoples, they quite understandably look for a swift and satisfactory synthesis that can give them a working framework for writing about those countries in a more general context. Hence the clichés.

We know most countries through their state history, and our image of them is often a highly corporate one; in 1789 “the French” did this, and in 1914 “the Germans” did that. But in the case of countries like Ireland or Poland—where the state was, in one sense or another, non-existent for long periods—we have no such view: every Pole and every Irishman was doing his own thing. This, of course, makes the writing of an honest history hideously difficult, but the pleasure to be had from studying such societies is correspondingly immense. One spends more time looking at people than at events, and at social phenomena rather than at political programmes.

Roy Foster clearly revels in this, and his enjoyment is contagious—I for the first time began to understand aspects of Ireland that had been a closed book to me. I also, to my delight, discovered a great many similarities and parallels with my own subject; Poland. Not similarities of character or culture of the “two of a kind” theory, but parallels of predicament and similarities of reaction.

THE MOST OBVIOUS thing the two nations have in common is the outsider’s view of them. Roy Foster cleverly traces the reactions of English travellers “who made it their business to be appalled” by what they saw in Ireland, and from the outset, skewed their own ability to understand.

“These were the attitudes that presented English observers with a constant conundrum [writes Foster]. How could the Irish be both savage and subtle? Both warlike and lazy? At once evidently ‘inferior’, yet possessed of an

¹ *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. By R. F. FOSTER. Allen Lane, £18.85.

ungovernable pride? Cowardly, yet of legendary fortitude in the face of death? Socially primitive, yet capable of complex litigation? They were dirty, lazy, dishonest and violent. Their laws were unethical and inequitable. Yet these 'corrupt customs' had invariably fascinated and drawn in the English who settled in Ireland, 'degenerating' them."

The same is true of French 18th-century travellers in Poland, who recounted with a frisson of horror tales of the "gothic" government and "oriental" manners of the wild people they had ventured among. Like English observers in Ireland, they "rapidly took refuge in the analysis of barbarism".

It is no less true of 19th-century German attitudes, which were also coloured by the fact that countless orderly and thrifty middle-class German functionaries, sent out to "civilise" areas of Poland absorbed into Germany, were themselves inexorably sucked into "Polishness". Obsessed with the idea of uniformity, the administrators "could not stomach this complex, intuitive and protean way of life", while the colonisers all too often gave in to it. The English policy of Plantation in Ireland was as slowly but surely defeated and turned on its head by native cunning as were the ingeniously unimaginative schemes for colonisation in Poznania dreamt up by Bismarck and viciously enforced by the shaven-necked Junkers of the *Deutscher Ostmark Verein*.

NATIVE RESPONSE to the attitudes of outsiders was predictably similar—a certain amused contempt for the "clever" fools who came to impose their own order, but were so trussed up in their cultural and intellectual superiority that they could not cope with the life-forces around them. Spiritual self-defence mechanisms in both cases followed an almost identical pattern. From the 17th century onwards, the historiography and poetry of both the Polish and the Irish nations represent them as Israelites, persecuted but chosen, overwhelmed by insuperable odds yet triumphing in the wider, spiritual, context. If you do not want to face up to defeat, you can always claim a victory.

But such victories carry a heavy cost, and the fallen assume unique importance. The dead of the Boyne, the heroes of Easter 1916, the victims of Katyn, or the doomed insurgents of Warsaw in 1944 are remembered and revered a thousand times more urgently than the British casualties of Waterloo or Alamein. They continue to exert, in Foster's felicitous phrase, "a tyranny of the dead" over the living.

In Ireland, this tyranny came to dominate attitudes early on. Patrick Henry Pearse's "Life springs from death, and from the graves of patriotic men and women spring living nations", and O'Donovan Rossa's "Without the shedding of blood there is no redemption" flow directly from this mausoleum mentality. But if the Irish turned it into a shibboleth of political life, the Polish poets of the 19th century turned it into a religion. Their version of the nation's messianic role suggested that its very suffering and

immolation were to be cherished, for they represented a crucifixion through which the world would be redeemed. When reality becomes unacceptable, people create another reality.

This life beyond reality is neatly reflected in the physical parallel of nations living outside their own country. In both cases, part of the nation's life has gone on through the doings of political émigrés in France or elsewhere, of soldiers serving in other armies but always fighting for Ireland in the Low Countries during the Thirty Years War, or for Poland in Spain during the Napoleonic Wars and in Britain in 1940. In times of revolt or insurrection, however, the mother country waits in vain for this outside help, which never quite materialises; and there remains in a very real sense an Ireland outside Ireland, a Poland outside Poland.

This "external country" took on deeper significance in the 19th century, when mass emigration set up expatriate populations of such magnitude that they began to have an economic and sociological influence on the communities at home. By 1890, there were some three million Irish people abroad—representing 39% of all those born in Ireland who were alive at the time. Although the proportions were not nearly as dramatic, well over that number of Poles were also living abroad, and the consequences for the mother country were just as weighty.

Putting it bluntly, emigration stems development. In Poland as in Ireland, emigration was mostly born of the need to preserve the small family farm, which could only survive if younger sons and daughters gave up their claim and went away; these emigrants then sent cash to help the family back home. The scale of such remittances is staggering. Roy Foster estimates that some £34 million was sent to Ireland from the United States between 1848 and 1867. During the early 1900s, an estimated \$50 million was annually flowing into Galicia from its emigrants in the Chicago canneries or the rubber-plantations of the Amazon. These remittances put off the need for agricultural modernisation, and the family farm remained in exactly the same mess it had been in a century earlier.

At the same time, emigration siphoned off the most vital and disruptive element in the rural community, thereby reinforcing—or at least preserving—the rural ethos, conservatism, and religious conformity. By removing the element which would otherwise have gone to work in factories, indeed would have created the conditions and the need for factories, emigration slowed down the process of industrialisation. In very tangible ways it permitted those left behind to perpetuate archaic patterns of life, while the remittances helped to create a continuing sense of dependence on outside help. There are certainly lessons here for Third-World countries today. Such help allows populations to survive, but does not enrich countries; subsidies of this sort, however large, should never be confused with investment.

IN LESS TANGIBLE WAYS, the phenomenon of emigration exerts a powerful influence on the way the nation as a whole sees itself. If those left behind find themselves escaping

from reality into messianic notions and visions of deliverance from outside, those who have emigrated tend to reverse the process. Stranded in an alien environment, surrounded by rival communities of emigrants from other countries, and usually transplanted from an agrarian culture into a heavily industrialised urban jungle such as Cleveland or Detroit, they dream of escape. And escape takes the form of identification with a hazy idea of the purity, the imagined idyll, of "life in the old country". This vision of the "ideal" nature of life back home, which is completely at variance with the physical conditions, filters back to create a nebulous myth of spiritual perfection that floats uneasily but persistently over the dismal reality.

The phenomenon had a marked effect on the attitudes which created modern Ireland. Nostalgic longings of the emigrants were reflected in and fuelled the Gaelic revivalism at home that was itself a Romantic rejection of reality: the muddled ideal of the thatched cottage sprang as much from anti-materialistic feelings bred on the streets of New York as from the cultural Anglophobia burgeoning in Dublin. And this was as important to the emigrant seeking to define his identity in the new world as it was to the Irish intelligentsia in "the old country" in the 1890s. In Poland—a notoriously "noble" culture, if gauged by the aspirations of even its most humble denizens—the thatched cottage is replaced by "the little white manor-house", repository of all bucolic virtues and Polish values. The dream of every Pole made good in the new world still revolves round such a dwelling, with its homely but noble columns, porch and pediment. And it is still the emigrant who reinforces Polish cultural Russo- and Germanophobia, often misunderstanding the real problems faced by those at home.

THE EFFECT OF image and myth on nations and their leaders can be immense, and is seldom beneficial. It often produces comic situations, but it can also lead to tragedy. The most obvious example is pre-War Germany, where a distasteful stew of half-cooked myths, laced with "scientific" gravy, produced a spasm of irrational aggression; Europe has still not recovered from its effects half a century later. Nothing quite so apocalyptic has ever attended Irish national dreams. They have nevertheless been highly destructive and continue to weigh on the country, impeding its evolution and condemning it to endlessly rehearse the canons of its own inadequacy. This may sound excessively harsh, but I believe it to be true, as it is in some ways of Poland.

"One would think", noted a French traveller in the 18th century, "on so small an island, an Irishman would be an Irishman: yet it is not so." One of the most fascinating and attractive things about Ireland is the rich diversity created by layer upon layer of new arrivals, criss-crossed by cultural, religious, and later political furrows. Yet those who fought to create the modern Irish state have been remarkably unwilling to accept this diversity. And it is largely this unwillingness that lies at the root of the island's problems.

In the 18th century, even the latest tier of English inter-

lopers—the Ascendancy—regarded themselves as colonials; and they produced their own brand of Irish patriotism. It was the Presbyterian tradition of libertarian republicanism, emanating principally from Belfast, that took the lead in creating links with revolutionary America and France. Both Dublin and Belfast were pro-American in the 1770s, and pro-French in the 1790s. The image of "the green bough" that grew in America, budded in France, and was to be planted in "the crown of Great Britain" by way of Ireland, was a vision of a political and cultural mission worthy of the hybrid nation, with its multifarious links to the outside world.

Reading of this period, one has a harrowing feeling of opportunities lost and promise betrayed. For, by the end of the century, the United Irishmen had managed to argue the Irish question into a corner: in Wolfe Tone's view, all ills could be traced back to the English connection. Geopolitically, Ireland turned from a crossroads into a dead end as internationalist liberals became nationalist bigots. The cornerstone of their faith—that England was the root cause of all evil—as well as being a shaky proposition, virtually condemned the country to civil war in the long run.

A false premise such as this has a tendency to ramify in the political arena, where violence rather than compromise is the usual way out of a blind alley. During the 19th century, Irish nationalists continued to level their guns at British administrations which were becoming increasingly sympathetic to their cause. They thereby distracted attention from, and failed to address, the real problem facing them—which was still that of Ireland's diversity.

As the Young Ireland movement struggled to define "Irishness", it clutched at increasingly mythical notions of *volk*. By leaning more and more heavily on perceptions of the Gaelic and Catholic nature of "the true Ireland", they managed to unite one segment of the population by giving it a largely spurious identity, alienating in the process those Irishmen who were neither Gaelic nor Catholic in origin. By the 1890s, these, who made up the majority of the population of Ulster, were made to feel that those who were striving to create the new Ireland did not consider them to be true Irishmen. This only confirmed them in their worst prejudices and consolidated their resistance to the creation of a state in which they would be, in one sense at least, non-citizens. The nationalists relentlessly ignored this aspect of the matter. The inevitable consequence was that while a liberal government at Westminster longed to give Home Rule to Ireland, the Irish of Ulster did everything in their power to block it. When the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in 1921, the Irish of Ulster insisted on remaining part of Britain, a country which did not disown them. The catastrophic and absurd result was partition.

NOBODY COULD PRETEND that the Ulstermen were victims in this process, or that the issue was as simple as this, or that the British Government did not make a frightful mess of things. And nobody would blame the Irish nationalists for taking the course they did. The fact remains that a jumble of folkloric myth, sectarian bigotry, and political reliance on anti-British feeling to forge the national con-

sciousness, keep the national identity alive, and promote solidarity, produced a failure to recognise the real enemy.

This was not, in 1912 or 1921 any more than it is today, the British Army, but the state of mind of the people of Ulster. And the nastiest aspects of that state of mind evolved in reaction to the largely pointless rhetoric coming from the nationalists.

Irishmen from both sides of the border might benefit from a look at certain aspects of Polish history. The Polish Commonwealth of the 16th century was even more diverse than Ireland, containing people of Polish, Ruthene, Lithuanian, Jewish, Tartar, Armenian, German, Baltic, and Italian stock—not to mention the largest expatriate community of Scots in the world. These people brought with them half-a-dozen different religions, which fragmented into another half-a-dozen sects between which there was a significant degree of movement. All considered themselves (and were considered, within the limitations imposed by the social structures of the day) to be Polish citizens.

Yet in the 17th century the idea was fostered, mainly by the Jesuits, that to be Polish was to be Catholic. The idea caught on, excluding those whose ethnic origins tied them to a different faith from the community of Polishness. A Tartar who became a Catholic was a Pole, but a Ruthene who stuck to Orthodoxy became a foreigner. Exclusion bred resentment; resentment bred a siege mentality; and 200 years later the Poles were astonished to discover that the Ruthenes of Malopolska wanted to have their own Ukrainian state rather than live in a Polish one. The struggles between Poles and Ukrainians over Lwow in 1919, and the uneasy peace punctuated by terrorist acts over the next 20 years bear a sometimes uncanny resemblance to events in Ulster.

The Polish experience was more complex, in that the Poles knew oppression from both sides. When they were downtrodden they could think back to a time when they were the rulers. This dictated a less strident approach to the question of allegiance, which was in itself more clear-cut. In Ireland the intentions of “the oppressor” were fundamentally benevolent after the 17th century; in Poland they were brutally malevolent. Brutality attended the maintenance in Ireland of an order which may not have been sympathetic, or even acceptable to most of the population, but which was not actually designed to extirpate, let alone exterminate them. Russian and German policies in Poland oscillated between (at best) the nastier sort of thing the English did in Ireland, and (at worst) cultural and physical annihilation.

Thus there was never any need to instruct the Polish people in the fact that the Germans were an enemy to be resisted—the accent was on survival, and on fostering essential qualities which differentiated the Poles from their oppressors. The struggle for nationhood was less political than in Ireland; it was both more physical and more ideological, and therefore more flexible and more generous. While a Catholic Irish landowner working for constitutional reform could be branded as a collaborator and have his house burnt down, the Polish nobility, even when they did nothing for the cause, benefited from the fact that they too were theoretically oppressed, and were included within

the bounds of national solidarity. What makes so much of Irish history so bloody is the fact that most of the wars and disturbances that punctuate it were in effect civil wars, and these always engender cruelty on a particularly intimate scale.

This does not mean that the Poles did not indulge in some equally silly mythologising. They too were overcome by vapours of xenophobia, emanating from spurious theories of what it was to be Polish. They too slogged their way through a bog of genius-of-the-nation folksiness. The whole of the 19th century sometimes seems to be one long argument about the nature of Polishness. But in this area the different national characters are very much in evidence.

The Polish argument was carried on with hardly any internal bloodletting. It seems remarkably polite next to the rhetoric of vengeance that characterises the Irish disputes, and the occasional eruption of half-hearted and soon forgotten vehemence contrasts with what Roy Foster calls “the pornography of violence” over which Irish nationalists liked to masturbate. The Galician *jacquerie* of 1846—which could easily be explained away as an incubus of Metternich’s system, and seems unremarkable by Irish standards—mesmerised Polish society by its bloodiness for generations. Even in the darkened basement in which they planned their next assassination or train-robbery, the men of Josef Pilsudski’s fighting squads or those of the Home Army’s sabotage units never forgot for long the constitutional niceties of the parliamentary system which, five centuries earlier, their ancestors had created and lived by.

This, however, did not help them much when the promised land was finally theirs. For peoples who have dreamt of it for centuries, the day of liberation is bound to be a disappointment. Roy Foster quotes an Irish bishop who observed that “Our version of history has tended to make us think of freedom as an end in itself and of independent government—like marriage in a fairy-story—as the solution of all ills.” Poland had, of course, known marriage before, but the experience was not helpful. Its children still left home—suggesting not only that poverty continued, but, what was worse, that the family atmosphere was stifling. The “Babylonian exile” theory of why people emigrated in their millions, traditionally blaming everything on the oppressor, crumbled. Many other social ills naively attributed to oppression continued unabated. People continued to suffer. The panacea of liberty was revealed to be mendacious.

COMING TO TERMS with reality is not easy. In the case of people with a rich and complex historical baggage of escapist culture, it is also a moment of facing up to oneself, a coming of age, almost a spiritual crisis. Honesty does not come easily at moments such as these, and nations are reluctant to jettison the myths and artifices which served them so well in the struggle for independence.

Ireland and Poland were both unlucky in that they achieved this moment just after the Great War. They had to build a state apparatus and an economy, a constitutional system and a political culture, at a time when Europe was

going through possibly the greatest economic, social, and ideological upheaval in modern history. These fledgling countries had to learn to run themselves in a climate of slumps and depressions, of mass movements such as Communism and Fascism, of religious and social decay, and of a general sense of doom. (Israel, an obvious comparison, had it much easier by being born after World War II.)

While Ireland, like Poland, coped remarkably well in the circumstances, it did not evolve in a way commensurate with its remarkable position. It looked after the physical needs of its citizens but failed to give the country a sense of direction. Neutrality in World War II marginalised Ireland, and deepened the rift separating Ulster from the Irish Republic. Although the Republic managed to make its presence felt—through, for instance, the United Nations—it did not assume a strong international personality beyond that of the tourist posters. Membership of the European Community has brought wealth, but whether this has done more good than the remittances of the previous century is arguable. The tourist industry, such a godsend in many ways, has certainly done much harm in creating an image of bland friendliness, lovable inefficiency, and cheeky roguishness, while the advertising industry, as Foster points out, “sold Ireland as energetically and unrealistically as any 17th-century plantation promoter”.

When visiting Ireland, one wonders whether bits of the mask have not stuck to the face; the image certainly seems to have affected, and trivialised, the way in which many Irish people look at themselves. Irish historians since the 1940s have, as Foster says, been at pains to re-evaluate and to ask difficult questions, but this has hardly affected the popular version of Irish history clung to by the public mind. Here, amnesia is cultivated on a staggering scale, allowing the persistence of a negative and sectarian consensus. True consensus, as the case of Poland has so powerfully demonstrated, comes from facing up to the most unpleasant questions.

The respective situations of Poland and Ireland are now more different than ever, and nobody could be blamed for maintaining that there is no useful purpose to be served by comparing them. I am not so sure. The similarities of experience through which both peoples have been put have left a lasting psychological mark, and will continue to have an influence on the way they think. The dusty old baggage of struggle was built to last; it is full of notions conceived to provide solace and escape, which remain very tempting to anyone faced by an intractable problem. The Irishmen I have met do not like talking about Ulster; if one

broaches the matter, they sheepishly take refuge in platitudes, and explanations which they know to be untrue. It is not just that some of the truth about Ulster is uncomfortable to both sides, but that any serious discussion of the problem involves a re-evaluation of their whole view of Irish history—and, with it, their view of themselves.

The Poles, too, are burdened with their old baggage, into which they like to delve in moments of anxiety. But if a great deal more soul-searching will have to go on before Polish society can divest itself of this habit, the shocks it has received since 1939 have at least shattered any complacency. The last ten years have seen a remarkable effort by the intelligentsia to address painful topics, to question the righteousness of Polish doings in the past, the relationship with the Ukrainians and the Jews, and the rigidities which frame the accepted patriotic view. Society as a whole has shown an almost obsessive interest in examining the past and finding out what really happened.

EVERY PAGE OF Roy Foster’s book on Ireland brings to mind analogies not just with Poland, but with all nations which feel obliged in one way or another to justify their own existence. What these nations ultimately have in common is a protracted crisis of confidence, the result of a confused consciousness. Poles are constantly asking themselves what a Pole is, what Poland is: a concept, a nation, a state of mind, or just a myth?

The same questions are never far from the Irish subconscious. One theme recurs through Foster’s book:

“. . . the concept of being ‘more’ or ‘less’ Irish than one’s neighbour; Irishness as a scale or spectrum rather than a simple national, or residential, qualification; at worst, Irishness as a matter of aggressively displayed credentials.”

As 1992 approaches, when the barriers within “Europe” are to fall, the Irish must face up to the fact that partition will cease to exist in physical terms, and that it is up to them as a society whether it continues in effect. The simultaneous cracking up of the Soviet order in Central Europe faces the Poles with the (very distant) possibility of being allowed to re-enter the free world; and it is equally up to them as a society whether they can see themselves and behave as free people, and shed the need for blaming everything on history. In both cases, the absolute crux of the matter, and the only firm basis for a better future, lies in honest re-evaluations of the past.

Peter Porter

Wish We Were There

It would be our garden of scents and Spitfires,
it would be our yard for exercise,
it would go on forever (and ever),
it would, of course, be Paradise.

And be fitted like a German kitchen,
every pleasantness at eye-level,
the cats on their curly yellow cat-mat
unequivocally of the Devil.

Mother and Father in frayed straw hats
and swathes of angelic flannelette,
the nimbus of childhood spreading wider,
the milkman trying to place a bet.

Getting old would be growing younger
as the CDs turn at 78
and Haydn's No. 97
provides a coda for Beethoven's Eighth.

The pet dogs buried by the roses
should rise from the limed and clayey soil
and the Council steam-roller driver
bring belated tears to the boil.

The post come twice a day from Youville
with letters of triumphant love—
you and Joseph on the river,
you with Fyodor by the stove.

And there too Indestructible Man
would keep death lurking by each bush,
clipping and pruning tirelessly,
the old lawn-mower hard to push.

The voice of friendship calling up,
can you come down today to play
so time shall not move round the dial
and after-breakfast last all day.

The macaronic air refresh us,
taking pity on a poor linguist
till it's Pentecost, and Schubert's Miller
takes his withered flowers for grist.

The end is nigh but will not happen
as tea appears on the lawn—
the synchronicity of Heaven
is owed to us for being born.