

Ireland Studies as Promoting Cross-cultural Understanding

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Abstract

For Japanese students, their sole experience of Ireland in their academic life is a brief mention of the Famine and the subsequent emigration, in their high school history textbooks. Perhaps, they may go to an Irish pub (a ubiquitous Irish export) or hear traditional Irish music used as background music in a television documentary or movie soundtrack in their daily life. However, Ireland has a rich cultural heritage and strong sense of identity, which often parallels Japan's own but at times is completely divergent. In the series of lectures I give, I aim to paint to broad picture of the culture and history of Ireland and to show how events, outside forces and the people themselves have made Ireland what it is today and also how Ireland and its people have influenced the world.

Race and color are often discussed in terms of prejudice and discrimination. However, the role of religion in Ireland, although difficult both to teach and understand, can provide the students with a fresh experience of these themes.

Finally, Ireland can offer something unique. This is a chance for the students to examine an on-going process of political, cultural and personal reconciliation.

Introduction

Recently in Japan, Cross-cultural Understanding has been increasingly required as part of a comprehensive English education, spanning elementary school to university. This is how I came to give this lecture at university level. It is relatively more difficult, here, to find information about Ireland when compared to the USA or even Canada or Australia. I hope to close some of the information gaps with my lecture. A close examination of Ireland can offer an

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interesting and rewarding experience to students who are unfamiliar with the country in question, its history and its problems. The students who take part in the course provided by the university are given the opportunity to study other cultures based predominately on race. In Ireland, the major influence on the culture has not only been race but also religion and nationalism. For the most part, the students have little if any prior knowledge of the differences between the various branches of the Christian religion or even religion generally. Thus by studying Ireland they can gain insight into current conflicts in the world which are increasingly, at least nominally about religion, for example the continuing Israeli / Palestinian conflict.

The series of classes which I deliver is basically divided into four parts. The first part is a general introduction to Ireland, its geography, culture, people, language and food. This is followed by a quick foray through early Irish history laying the groundwork for more current events. The second class ends with an examination of the Great Famine. The third class is primarily concerned with the events leading up to and subsequent to the partition of Ireland into what became known as the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. The final class deals with some events in recent Northern Irish history, including the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960's, the start of the Troubles and finishing with the ceasefires and peace agreement in the 1990's. The starting and finishing point for the series of lectures is always a single photograph. I offer the students the chance to get an A+ if they can tell me at the start of the lectures who the three people in the photograph are and why it is so politically, culturally and historically significant. So far no students have taken the challenge. My aim is that by the end of the four classes, all the students will be able to answer these two questions.

Chapter 1 - Ireland - An introduction

Ireland is a beautiful country with a deep and rich cultural heritage and I believe it is easy for the students to identify some elements familiar to them. Using clips from Japanese travel programs, I set out to show the landscape and scenes of Ireland. The students taking the class come from a wide range of disciplines so I try to show something for everyone including Irish music, dance and sports including hurling and Gaelic football. The fierceness and toughness of these two sports often impresses the students and they are often mentioned in their reports. I also include information about the Book of Kells, The Giant's Causeway and St Patrick. The latter is sometimes familiar to some of the students who have seen or taken part in St Patrick's Day parades in the United States or Canada. Even Tokyo has a small St Patrick's Day parade.

A final thing that I set out to do in the first class, is teach the students some basic Irish words and phrases. Language is an important part of any culture and I find it helps them to bond faster with me, an unfamiliar teacher. At this point, the English majors are on the same level as the other students, Irish is new to them all. The Irish language, when written down

somewhat resembles English but the pronunciation is very different. As an incentive to study and speak, students can also taste freshly baked traditional Irish bread, on condition that they introduce themselves to me in Irish. The more they speak, the more bread they can eat. This part of the course too has a big impact on the students, as it is a popular topic for them to talk about in their reports.

Chapter 2 - Irish history 1604 - 1900

With the students now having some tangible ideas of Irish / Celtic culture, it is then possible in the second class to examine the origins of this culture. I begin with a very quick dash through just over 300 years of European history. The reason for this is to establish the relationship that the English Crown and England had with Ireland and its people and also to show how this relationship was influenced by the power struggle going on in Europe during this time. The main catalyst for European conflict was, of course, religion with the emergence and rise of the Protestant religion and its challenge to the power of the Vatican and Roman Catholicism. Ireland, known as the Land of Saints and Scholars was devoutly Catholic and the Roman Catholic Church through its priests dominated all facets of life. Some people would even say this is still true today. At this time, Ireland was claimed by the English monarchy, who saw Ireland's land and natural resources as a source of wealth. What better ally for the Catholic superpowers of France and Spain? Who better to provide a distraction and drain on the resources of England, than a Catholic Ireland looking for independence? I try to draw out similarities between this time of conflict and the Cold War after the Second World War. It's an over-simplification but Ireland could be considered similar to Afghanistan, where local freedom fighters backed by the Americans became a thorn in the side of the USSR. However the main points that are emphasized here are the numerous rebellions, the establishment of the plantation system and the conflict between William of Orange and James the Second which culminated in the Battle of the Boyne. These events had and continue to have great significance and impact on Irish culture.

A series of plantations, similar to the ones used to establish the early English colonies in the Americas, were implemented in Ireland as a method to control the country. Land was seized from the native Irish, after they had rebelled against English rule and the settlers from mainland Britain were encouraged to move there and establish farms. This meant that pockets of 'loyal' Protestant subjects were embedded into the landscape of Catholic Ireland. This was to forever change the cultural face of certain parts of Ireland especially in the North East, which today is Northern Ireland. This period really deserves much deeper consideration but due to the time limits of the presentation it is not possible. There are several key events that I discuss with the students. One of these is the 1641 Rising which was a Catholic rebellion in which around 4000 Protestant planters were killed. From this point onwards the Protestant planters see the native Catholics as hostile and not to be trusted.

Later in the decade, when Oliver Cromwell came to Ireland and brutally restored order and English rule, native Catholics were given further reasons to hate the English. The siege at Drogheda and the slaughter of the garrison and civilian population of the town are still remembered to this day, as is the name of Oliver Cromwell.

Then, we look at the events surrounding the succession and brief reign of James II. James was a Catholic king in a predominately Protestant country. He was overthrown in the “Glorious Revolution”, which brought William of Orange, a Dutch Protestant, to the throne of England. However, James did not give up so easily and with the help of Spain, sought to regain his crown by first pursuing a military campaign in Ireland. He hoped to use the Irish Catholics to form the basis of an army. However his Catholic army was no match for the army of William and he was finally defeated at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. This event too has left an indelible mark on the history and culture of Ireland.

In the final part of this class, the causes, effects and repercussions of the Great Hunger are examined. This is done in a workshop style rather than a more formal lecture. In groups, the students are given boxes which contain various items including a potato, a ticket to America, a series of newspaper articles and sketches from the 1840s. They then have to examine each item in turn, formulate their theory about what happened in Ireland in the middle of the 19th Century and then explain it to me.

This group work gives the students a bit of breathing space to catch up to the pace of the lesson and also works to their stronger English reading ability. Most students come to realize the importance of the potato crop to the Irish people. Before the Famine, the Irish poor were often in better physical condition than the poor of other European countries. Then there were the catastrophic failures of the potato crop, year on year, that led not only to many deaths but also to mass emigration to the Americas and other destinations like England and Australia. The whole topic of the Great Hunger is still a cause of great debate especially regarding the actions of the British government in London to the famine. It is also still a cause of much resentment among some sections of the Irish population at home and abroad, who would use the word genocide when talking about the Famine. However, due to the complexity of the analysis and the lack of time, I endeavor to present a quite factual case to the students. The best modern examination of this harrowing event is the book “The Great Famine: Ireland’s Agony 1845-1852” by Ciaran O Murchadha. Dr Murchadha is based at the Department of History at the National University of Ireland, Galway. The main talking points of the book are about the massive depopulation of Ireland, both through death and emigration and with it the cultural devastation that it caused. It also discusses the inaction of the London government and the role of the Poor Laws, which were inadequate to cope with the enormity of the problem and finally the influence that the emigrating Irish had on the wider world. The popular social attitudes of that time were influenced by *laissez faire* and the idea of self help was also important. There was little enthusiasm on the part of the British government or people to assist

the Irish. During this time, the Irish people were often viewed as lazy and unwilling to work. One of the forms of welfare assistance enacted by the English government was public works. In return for their labor, participants would receive food. However many of these people were weakened by a lack of food and or were sick. It was therefore not laziness but an inability to work. This was similar to the discrimination and racism faced by blacks.

An example of this racism towards the Irish is shown in a cartoon from the Harpers Weekly magazine published in 1850 under the title of “Scientific Racism”. It shows how the Irish have similar facial features to Africans, not Anglo-Saxons and, as such were an inferior race. To quote Jimmy Rabbit in the Alan Parker’s 1991 film “The Commitments”

“The Irish are the blacks of Europe. And Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland. And the Northside Dubliners are the blacks of Dublin. So say it once and say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud.”

Chapter 3 - The Easter Rising of 1916 and the partition of Ireland

The third class is primarily concerned with the Easter Rising of 1916, the emergence of Ulster Unionism and the partition of Ireland. This class is mostly taught in a workshop style. After a brief scene setting exposition of world events around 1914 and the Home Rule movement, students are given two tasks about the 1916 Easter Rising. For each task the students are given a scenario and then three envelopes. Printed on the front of each envelope is a possible solution to the scenario. They must discuss the problem in their group and try to choose the best course of action. The first decision the students must make is their immediate response to the rebel action in Dublin. They take on the role of Lloyd George and the English Cabinet. The choices they are given are listed below.

A - Talk to the rebels and find a peaceful solution

B - Use your soldiers but wait for the Irish to give up

C - Send in the soldiers to crush the rebels

After choosing their response, the students can open the envelope and see the likely outcome of their decision. A sample answer is shown on the next page.

A

Talk to the rebels and find a peaceful solution.

The rebels want freedom and you give it to them. As a result about 200,000 Irish soldiers stop fighting and return to Ireland.

You lose WWI.

The Unionists in the north of Ireland do not want to be ruled by the Catholics in the south.

There is a civil war in Ireland.

This did not happen choose again.

The peaceful solution is always the most popular choice with most groups. Perhaps, this also shows a further cultural difference. In this role play the wrong answer is better than the right answer as the students must examine the event in more detail.

In the second role-play the students take on the role of Major-General Sir John Maxwell. He was the British military officer charged with putting down the rebellion and restoring peace to Ireland. Again, the students are given a scenario and three option envelopes. This time however there isn't really a correct answer or solution. The British were in a no-win situation and the Irish problem was set to continue indefinitely. Some of the students are quite frustrated that there is no correct answer.

With the role-plays completed, we review the events of the 1916 Easter Rising by watching some very short clips from the 1996 film "Michael Collins" which was written and directed by Neil Jordan. This is a very valuable resource. While being a piece of entertainment, it does give the students a good idea not only what Dublin and its people were like at the time but also an emotional sense of the Rising itself. They can witness how the British army crushed the rebels by using heavy artillery, at close range, in the city center. They can also experience the subsequent executions of the leaders. This also helps to show why the reactions of the Irish people themselves changed from being solidly against the rebels to showing support and sympathy to them, a villains to martyrs transformation. Also around this time the first newsreels were being produced and some archive footage is available and reinforces the destruction wrecked on the city center of Dublin.

In the final section of the class, I focus on Michael Collins himself, and try to examine the War of Independence, the resulting agreement and partition of Ireland from his point of view. In history, Michael Collins has the almost unique honor of defeating the British and forcing them to negotiate. This feat has made him a legend in Ireland. Today however, looking back at the brutal campaign of terror that he masterminded, he would be no doubt decried as a murderous terrorist, along the lines of Osama Bin Laden. Also in this part of the class, the early knowledge about the plantation of Ireland comes into play. The sole reason for the partition of the country dates back to the plantations of the 18th Century. The partition was decided along religious lines, the Protestants, descended from the planters and who lived

mainly in the northeast of Ireland wanted to remain part of the UK and so the state of Northern Ireland came into being. The partition of Ireland was rejected by the Irish Nationalists and this led to a civil war in the south of Ireland. Right up until December 1999, the constitution of the Irish Republic still claimed the right of sovereignty over Northern Ireland.

Chapter 4 - Modern Northern Ireland from 1968 to the present

The final class introduces the students to the recent history of Northern Ireland starting from the late 1960's to right up until the present day. This part of the course is perhaps the most difficult for students to grasp and also quite dark subject matter. I don't believe, however, that this difficulty is any fault of the students. The actions of certain parts of the Northern Ireland population are even a mystery to people from other parts of the UK. My first aim is to get the idea of division and separate identity into the heads of the students. I do this by simply asking them to choose an Irish name for themselves from a list that I display on the screen in

Declan*	Elizabeth
Seamus*	Roisin*
Patrick*	Catherine
John	Fiona*
David	Siobhan*
Liam*	Jane
Sean*	Nuala*

the classroom. These names are listed in the table on the left, male names on the left and female names on the right. This activity, on the face of it, seems quite innocent but actually this is far from the truth. The students who choose a name marked with a * are given a green Post-it note and the remaining students are given an orange Post-it note. While distributing the Post-it notes, I also make a remark to the students "Taig" for the green students and "Hun" for the orange students. What I

then explain is that I have classified them by their religion, by simply knowing their name and also I have referred to them by derogatory and insulting names. The colors refer back to the history of Ireland and the events around 1690 when William of Orange defeated James II. Orange is the representative color for Protestants, and green for Catholics. I then go further to explain the religious and cultural differences between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, using myself as an example. All the examples of sports, music and language the students saw in the very first class are alien to me as a Northern Protestant and my culture owes more to mainland Britain than to Ireland. I never spoke Irish or studied it in school. I never played Gaelic football or hurling, instead I played rugby, soccer and cricket, all English sports.

In the light of this religious and cultural segregation, I then set out to explain the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, which was similar to that of the one in the USA around the same time period. Although, this movement was not initially Nationalist in

ideology, it was viewed as a threat to the dominance of the Protestant majority and, was dealt with harshly by the establishment. Attacks on Catholics by Protestants led to a downwards spiral of sectarian violence. This violence led to the direct intervention of the British government and the deployment of the British Army on the streets of Northern Ireland. Their original purpose was to protect Catholics and Catholic areas from attacks by Protestants. One crucial event of this period is Bloody Sunday, which happened in Londonderry/Derry on 20th January 1972. During a civil rights march in the city, British soldiers opened fire on the marchers. Twenty-six people were shot and fourteen died. The soldiers claimed they had been shot at first and were returning fire. Other witnesses, who were present, stated that the soldiers were first to fire. This incident is not only important because of the loss of civilian life and the actions of the British soldiers but it also helped to change the views of Catholics towards the British Army, which was now seen as a tool of the Protestants to repress them. This also convinced the IRA to pursue a more violent course. The repercussions of Bloody Sunday are still felt even today. The Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday was started in 1998 by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair and it finally published its findings in 2010. The report laid the blame for the civilian deaths clearly on the British soldiers in the city on that day. This contradicted the official report, the Widgery Tribunal, into the incident, which had cleared the soldiers and the British government of any wrongdoing. The publication of the Saville Inquiry findings led to a formal apology by the Prime Minister David Cameron. While this period of Northern Irish history is particularly dark, there is something unique about it. That is the peace process that started with the Good Friday agreement in 1998. This was followed by several ceasefires, and finally, the IRA declared an end to the war in July 2005. This was of course a political solution to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Local communities who had been on the frontline of the Troubles, especially in Belfast, still have a long way to go before they are fully reconciled. It's like the same problems still exist they have just changed venue, from a national to local arena. Deaths have decreased but lower intensity violence still continues. To try to illustrate this point I make use of some Youtube clips showing a 12th July parade and a documentary made by the BBC called "Petrol Bombs and Peace: Welcome to Belfast". The BBC documentary follows a Loyalist band during the marching season, and clearly expresses the feelings of both Protestant and Catholics. Even in the first few minutes, one of the Protestants interviewed states

"They are just trying to stop our culture. And they'll not be happy until it does stop."

The other side of the argument is expressed by a young Catholic woman. As she watches the parade, she comments

"It's a territorial thing, really, here. That's their land and this is our land"

This is a documentary I highly recommend to all the students if they want to get a clear and balanced view of the cultural divides, which still exist in Northern Ireland today. I also try to show and explain about the Peace Lines in Belfast which are actual physical walls which were built to keep the two communities apart during the violent times and many of which still remain in place today, even after the official end of the violence.

Not all students choose to write about this last class, but those that do are very saddened and surprised that religion can have such an influence on the daily and political life of a country. They also often express that they have no such religious influence in their own lives or country. At this point, I refer back to the photograph that I showed to the students at the very start of the classes. In the photo, Queen Elizabeth is shaking hands with Martin McGuinness who was a leading member of the Provisional IRA and was present in Londonderry on Bloody Sunday, and at his side is Peter Robinson, the leader of the main Protestant political party. Together these men served as the duly elected leaders of Northern Ireland, something that even 15 years earlier would have been a fantasy. I also remind the students of the flag of the Irish Republic, which incorporates the green of Nationalist Ireland and the orange of Protestant Ireland and between them white, symbolizing peace. The class closes on what I hope is a positive up-beat note of reconciliation and peace.

Conclusion

I am sure that the students find my classes challenging with many new and difficult things for them to learn. The mix of history, religion, culture and politics I think makes Ireland unique and worth studying. Also since the Great Famine, there has been an exodus of people from Ireland and they have had a great impact on the wider world. This can most clearly be seen in the United States, in the powerful Kennedy family with their Irish roots. Even the current president takes the time to have a beer on St. Patrick's Day.

“English civilization, while it may suit the English people, could only be alien to us”
Michael Collins - *A Path to Freedom*

This quote could be also true of the Irish to the Ulster planters. I hope Ireland is less alien to my students after taking the class.

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