

LEST WE FORGET

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We've all experienced it. The fury. The indignation. The contempt for that poor, unknowing outsider. You know, the one who fails to make the distinction. The one whose innocence, although completely obvious, cannot save them from the ensuing rage of an Irish person who has just been branded as British.

For 800 years, the Irish have successfully managed to maintain a strong sense of distinction between 'Eire' and the rest of the world, with a particular distaste for confusion with our nearest neighbours. But what is it that makes us so different? With globalisation, our country is moving closer and closer to the rest of the world: the difference between us and them would seem to be narrowing at a rapid rate. We are English speaking. Our capital city is bearing an increasing resemblance to other European capital cities. Our economy is growing less and less dependent on agriculture while our international technological influence is soaring.

So what, I hear you ask, makes us Irish, in this day and age? Well, I think I can answer that in one word: history. Our past is the very foundation of our civilisation- it is the only thing that distinguishes us from everyone else. As a country, we have been colonised, oppressed and suffered great poverty and starvation. We have fought rebellions, world wars, and even civil wars. It is not a simple, clean-cut story, but a difficult one- and it is in knowing this that we can best appreciate our culture and its roots in our past.

Probably the most valuable gift that our past provides us with is empathy. Our history is both troubled and varied. Our ancestors were sufferers. Undoubtedly, the event that holds the strongest impression on Irish people is the Great Irish Famine. The impact of the Famine on Ireland is hugely significant. The famine caused the deaths of one million Irish people, and forced a further million to leave their home country forever, beginning a trend of emigration that continues to this day. The laissez-faire approach adopted by the British Government allowed Irish crops to be shipped out of the country, while its own people starved. This fact has made a societal imprint on us Irish- and so it should. We have first-hand experience of what happens when suffering is ignored by those with power.

In today's world, I believe that knowing and understanding our history is more important than ever. The past is always relevant. It shapes us and who we are: it *is* our culture. As a young Irish person, what I love most about being Irish is the very fact of our being different. Our culture is unique, but our past is not. It is imperative that we do not forget it.

Today, the tables have turned for the Irish. We are no longer an impoverished, underdeveloped country, but a first-world one, sitting among the most affluent nations in the world. Our forefathers' experiences allow us to relate to the sufferings of others. It is crucial that we maintain the ability to identify with those who suffer. We must remember our ancestors and the hardships they suffered. We must remember them when we see news reports on refugees- whether they are Syrian, Afghan or Rohingya. We must see them in the pictures of starving children in Yemen. We must find them in the families left broken and displaced by war and famine. We must remember them. We must never forget.

As the late American poet, Maya Angelou, once said : 'History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again'.