

## THE ENGLISH AND THE IRISH <sup>1</sup>

by

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...London is a place – but not a good place in which to study Englishmen. The English character in London is involved in too many Empire employments, which kill off its spontaneity. The quintessential English traits are best seen out of London, in the country, as the English poets always knew, and as English novelists eventually discovered.

Possibly these English traits may also be clearly seen by contrasting them with what is generally known of the traits of their perpetual neighbors, and ancient foes, the Irish.

Psychologically considered – or should I say nervously? - the world divides itself into two groups, the sentimental and the emotional. The English are sentimental. The Irish are emotional. And that is a clue to their differences and antipathies more valuable than you will discover by examining the skulls of their prehistoric ancestors.

Emotion which is the Irish expression of feeling, explodes and dissipates in short order. Sentiment, which is the English expression of the same, simmers and lingers on. The Irish “adore you” in brief splurges. The English are “fond of you” over protracted intervals. The volume of love received is ultimately about the same in either case. The Irish pour it on with a pitcher. The English sprinkle it through a fine hose.

The Irish are intense, positive, assertive, with an infinite capacity for hatred. The English are restrained, reticent, evasive, with an infinite capacity for contempt. The Irish have a hatred for the English, just as the English have a contempt for the Irish hatred. Each nation thinks its to be the virtue, and the other’s the vice. The Irish are, or imagine they are, a people of great pride. The English are, or fancy they are, a people of great modesty. But we shall see more about that as we go on.

The Irish make splendid soldiers; the English make splendid soldiers; the former by having inferior foes, the latter by having superior officers. An Irishman feels most like a soldier when he is shooting at an enemy. An Englishman feels most like a soldier when he is obeying a command. The Irish go forth to “die for their country” in a brief battle. The English enlist to “serve their country” for the duration of the war. The English usually win their wars, with the assistance of other nations. The Irish usually lose theirs with the assistance of no one. The Irish “knocked the stuffings” out of the Black and Tans, and yet could not shake themselves free of England. The English managed “to

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Feeney, *London is a Place*, Boston, The Ravengate Press, 1951.

relieve Mafeking” and thereby put an end to the uprising of the Boers. The English accuse the Irish of making continual fools of themselves in repeated rebellions known as “The Irish Cause.” The Irish accuse the English of making perpetual fools of themselves in a sustained siege known as “The British Empire.”

The Irish are a race of realists fighting for an ideal Ireland. The English are a race of idealists fighting for the England of the moment. The Irish want their country compact and undivided in one small island. The English want theirs multiplied and spread over the whole earth. The Irish want Ireland to be little – but that is modesty! The English want England to be large – but that is pride! And a few paragraphs ago weren't we putting it the other way?

When an Englishman leaves England he refers to it as “going abroad.” When an Irishman leaves Ireland he refers to it as “leaving home.” The Irish have no king but could use one. The English have a king, but cannot find much for him to do.

The Irish defy anybody else to be Irish, and yet are capable in a particular case, of completely adopting as their own a full or partial stranger. The English insist that everyone else must be English, and yet are always annoyed by the households acquire by these forced naturalizations. DeValera is never a Spaniard to the Irish. But Lloyd George is always a Welshman to the English.

The Irish are born dogmatists; they want things proved, and are thoroughly intolerant. The English are born diplomats; they want things discussed, and are thoroughly inconsistent. The Irish like their whiskey straight, get drunk, and then take the pledge for life. The English like their whiskey diffused in soda water, overindulge, and then make a New Year's resolution. An Englishman looks most intoxicated before he has had anything to drink. An Irishman looks most sober when he has passed out of the picture.

The English, for centuries a ruling class, produce their best specimens in the form of servants – the English butler. The Irish, for centuries a servant class, produce their best specimens in the form of masters – the Irish squire. The English make splendid servants because they attach a sentiment to the function. The Irish make miserable servants because they attach none. The only time an Englishman ceases to be a good servant is when he becomes intimate with the family. The only time an Irishman ceases to be a bad servant is when he follows the same procedure.

If you want the English oozing out their sentiment in art, I offer James Hilton's *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, the story of a pedantic little sissy, gurgling with gulps, whom every Irishman must find thoroughly insipid. If you want the Irish fuming forth their emotion in art, I offer Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer*, the story of a raw-boned ruffian, blustering with oaths, whom every Englishman must find thoroughly revolting.

The Irish have a trick which drives me mad. It is their habit of saying a serious thing in a humorous way, and a humorous thing in a serious way. The English have a

trick which exasperates me. It is their habit of saying an equally humorous or equally serious thing with exactly the same expression of face and tone of voice.

How these two races, the English and the Irish, ever managed to sprout on adjacent islands, for the life of me, I cannot understand. The event may be taken as history's most flagrant example of a practical joke. Taken as groups the English and the Irish are one hundred per cent incompatible. Yet taken as individuals – so strange are the complimentary requisites for romance – that they can and do fall in love. Robert Emmet protested boldly that never was there a happy English-Irish political alliance. The late Cardinal Bourne declared that he had never known of an unhappy English-Irish marriage. It was such a marriage that gave Robert Emmet to Ireland, and such a marriage that gave Cardinal Bourne to England.

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