



# Looking Outward

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Columnist

## The Irish are worried

*The whole object of travel is not to set foot on a foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land.*

— G.K. Chesterton

My wife and I are truly blessed. Since we retired we have had an opportunity to pursue our favorite hobby — travel. Our last trip, in May and early June, took us to Ireland for three weeks. If you have heard good things about Ireland double them, it is fabulous.

We leased a car and drove extensively throughout the country. In three weeks you can cover a lot of territory in a country about a third the size of Oregon and

with a similar population. I have to say, though, driving in Ireland is like a chain of near-death experiences. In a day or two you get used to driving on the left side of the road with the steering wheel on the right and the shift on the left. What I never got used to was the narrowness of the roads. A typical Sisters driveway is much wider and does not have stone walls on either side! Many of these 10-foot-wide roads have a speed limit of 100/kph. I think that speed is aspirational.

We survived it. While the landscape was varied and absolutely beautiful, the people were the best part of the trip. They are incredibly friendly and helpful and wonderfully engaging. They initiate conversations everywhere — pubs, restaurants, shopping, hiking trails and on the street. They are very inquisitive and open. We had numerous conversations everywhere. It seemed, though, that after they got to know us they all asked (hesitantly) about our presidential election and wanted to know what was going on.

I guess it stands to reason. As the expression goes, when the United States sneezes the world gets a cold. There is a universal recognition that, at this point, there is only one

superpower and we affect lives all over the globe. For example, when the U.S. economy slid into recession in 2008 it hit Ireland very hard, harder than here. They are still recovering, more slowly than we are. They recognize their relative position to us. There is also a great affinity to our country as we have 35 million citizens of Irish descent. Almost all have a relative of some kind here.

Our election process frankly really worries them, particularly this time. The piece that scared them the most is, frankly, Donald Trump. To all we spoke to, he is considered a loose cannon at best and a lunatic at worst. One benefit (or detriment) of being in an English-speaking country is the fact that all the conversations you overhear you understand. The talk about Donald Trump ranges from deep concern to incredible worry. They follow it closely.

Of all the things they are concerned about — his lack of qualifications, narcissistic nature, inexperience in many areas, failed businesses, etc. the one thing all seemed to be concerned about the most was that his rhetoric and

positions were highly divisive. They see him as playing whites against Mexicans, Hispanics, women and Muslims. In their view, he is being provocative by putting a wedge between groups and fomenting anger and mistrust. They seemed particularly disturbed by this quality and it was not clear to me until later in the trip.

We ended our trip in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and is not part of the Republic of Ireland. The currency is the pound and the driving is still precarious. Northern Ireland to us was a different experience than Ireland. While Ireland effuses a mellow atmosphere, Northern Ireland seemed to have an “edge” to it.

What still looms large in Northern Ireland is what they call “The Troubles” or the sectarian violence which went on from 1968-1998. Some look at it as war between Protestants and Catholics; at its heart it was a conflict over who should govern the country. Those, mostly Protestants, who wanted to stay in the U.K. fought those (mostly Catholics) who wanted to be

part of Ireland. The struggle was costly: almost 4,000 killed and 20,000 wounded.

The remnants of the war still remain. For example, there is still a 40-foot fence between neighborhoods and a gate which closes at 4 p.m. Kids still cannot play with kids on the other side. The violence is over, but the legacy lives on and they are trying to move beyond it as fast as possible. Whereas no one would have toured Belfast 20 years ago now it is thriving with many hotels up and running and many more under construction. It's a nice city.

Looking at that fence I realized why divisiveness was the chief concern they saw in Donald Trump. For them “The Troubles” defined a generation, and the memory is ingrained, particularly in my generation. The wounds of that struggle are hard to heal. They know what happens when groups get pitted against each other so it seems they speak with some authority when talking of our presumed Republican candidate.

Let's not forget that when we go to the polls, we elect not only a president but a world leader, in some ways a leader of all nations.

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