

Not so foreign foreigners

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It's been exactly one hundred years since a British monarch last visited Ireland. It would be hard to overstate the changes that have taken place since: when Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, George V, accompanied by a fleet of battleships, sailed into what was then Kingstown (now Dún Laoghaire) in 1911, Ireland was part of his vast global realm. Fully independent since 1937, today Ireland is a key member of the European Union, and punches above its weight in the international diplomatic arena, thanks in large part to its fierce neutrality and close relations with the United Kingdom and the United States.

For the last 800 years, Irish history has been overwhelmingly defined by its invading and colonising neighbour. The country has rebelled against British rule, notably in 1789 and 1916, has suffered famine, seen its language and culture suppressed, along with depopulation as millions of Irish men and women sought a better life in the United States.

It has required a huge effort by the generations born after independence to build closer ties that will enable a British monarch to lay a wreath at Dublin's Garden of

Remembrance in honour of "all those who gave their lives in the cause of Irish freedom."

But despite the huge improvements in relations, this highly symbolic visit could not have taken place until a peaceful solution had been found to three decades of violence in Northern Ireland, which has pitted supporters there of a united Ireland against those who want it to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Current Irish President Mary McAleese and her predecessor, Mary Robinson, have played a key role in that search, strengthening trust between the governments of Britain and Ireland over the last two decades.

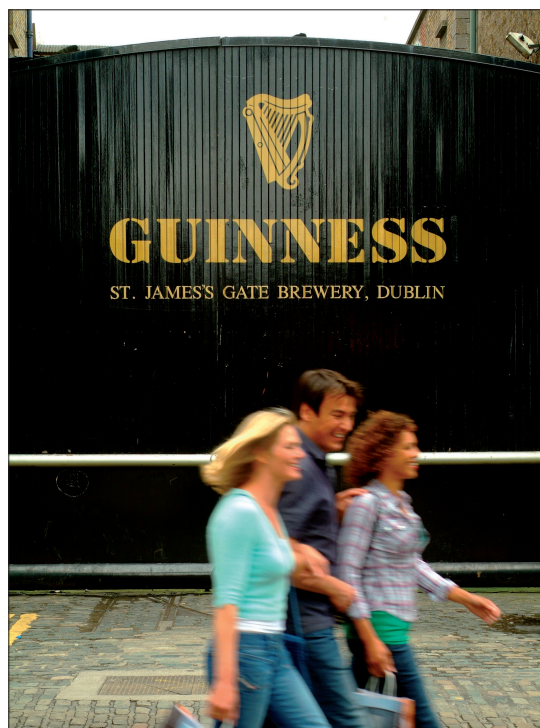
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The culmination of this careful diplomatic groundwork was the 1998 Belfast Agreement, which ended the violence in the north by committing the main parties involved to work peacefully toward their goals within a political framework.

Other developments helped create the environment for the visit, including trips by members of the British royal family, along with the celebrated rugby match between Ireland and England at Croke Park, where, in 1920, British troops had opened fire on the crowd at a Gaelic football match, killing 14 people.

The achievements of the last two decades in healing old wounds are considerable and laudatory. That said, the notion of an Ireland permanently in a state of war with Britain has always been more myth than reality. Both countries share a common language; their trade is four times that between the United Kingdom and China. Much of Ireland's tourism comes from Britain, and the first stop for most Irish migrant workers remains Britain. Nearly a third of all British Members of Parliament have Irish names and hundreds of thousands of soccer loving Irish support English football teams. Equally, the character of some of Britain's greatest cities, among them Liverpool, London, and Manchester, has been significantly defined by their considerable Irish populations. The cross-fertilisation of talent in academia, professional bodies, culture, entertainment, and sport has never been stronger.

The stronger ties between the UK and Ireland can also be attributed to Ireland's sense of self-confidence



An iconic brand – Ireland's best known export

and huge improvement in living standards. The country has gone from a largely agricultural economy for the first forty years of its life to a knowledge economy, focusing on services and high-tech industries and dependent on trade, industry and investment. The result is that in terms of GDP per capita, Ireland is ranked as one of the wealthiest countries in the OECD and the EU-27.

Between 1995 and 2000, the period that Ireland was dubbed the Celtic Tiger, the economy grew dramatically, at around 9.5 per cent a year. During that time, Ireland was transformed from one of Europe's poorer countries into one of its wealthiest, thanks to state-driven economic development that saw social partnership between employers, government, and unions, increased participation in the work force of women; decades of investment in domestic higher education; targeting of foreign direct investment; a low corporation tax rate; an English-speaking workforce, and crucial EU membership – which provided transfer payments and export access to the Single Market.

The Irish economy continued to grow for another five years at around 4.0 per cent, but the global financial crisis that kicked in at the end of 2007 hit an economy hard that had become over-dependent on construction, prompting the Irish Times to comment in early 2009: "We have gone from the Celtic Tiger to an era of financial fear with the suddenness of a Titanic-style shipwreck, thrown from comfort, even luxury, into a cold sea of uncertainty."

In the intervening period, things have improved little. By late 2010, fearful that Ireland would not be able to manage the huge debts of its banks, and that this was threatening the stability of the euro, the EU proposed a \$113 billion rescue package for the country.

The move was a huge blow to Ireland's self-esteem, and forecasts for the Irish economy say that 2011 will be another year of recession. That said, a leaner, more competitive Ireland should be in a position to return as one of the stronger growing Eurozone economies in the longer-term.

Meanwhile, other factors have further cemented closer co-operation between Britain and Ireland, especially on European issues. One of the benefits from EU membership is the normalisation of relations between the two states in the British Isles. Britain and Ireland joined the then-EEC on the same day: 1 January 1973. At that time, Ireland's foreign policy, inevitably given the relative size of the two countries, was overwhelmingly focused on relations with Britain. Again, this is not to say that Dublin was always anti-British; but successive governments were keen to underline the fact of their independence by adopting a foreign policy that was different from their neighbour's.

A consequence of EEC membership was that Ireland developed a balanced foreign policy portfolio, having

to give due weight to its relations with France, Italy, Denmark and so on. As it did so, it found that, more often than not, its interests coincided with London's, whether on fisheries, free movement of people, agricultural exports tax harmonisation or whatever. Almost without noticing it, the two states fell into the habit of voting together.

And when the Irish government needed European financial support, it was the British Chancellor of the Exchequer who spoke of helping a friend in need. Such language would have been unthinkable even 20 years ago.

Both countries have matured in ways that are easier to see and feel than describe. Ireland is still undergoing profound change from the halcyon days of the Celtic tiger. But Ireland compared to the Ireland of the 1960s and 1970s is now, and will remain, a modern, open economy with some of the best business brains around. It is a leader in popular culture and has become a country part of the European mainstream.

Winston Churchill once said that Britain and America were divided by a common language. The United Kingdom and Ireland have often been divided by a common history. But these divisions are narrower than they have ever been, and the bridges wider.

It is because the bridge is now wide that the most symbolic event of all can now take place, the State Visit by the Queen. She is paying her first visit to Ireland of her long reign: a visit that might best be described as to a foreign, though not so foreign, country. **F**



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International Financial Services Centre, Dublin. €1.7 trillion of funds are administered from Ireland