

In a List: Obscure Elements of Northern Irishness

Emily Lynch

This list was inspired by a series of conversations and disagreements about “Irishness.” One part of this dialog centered on the Troubles, the long-term sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, and the way the North is often cast as a place mired in deadly, age-old rivalries. What is known is that this region has been precariously positioned between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Especially since 1969, we have heard stories about the Catholic nationalists who seek to unite the North with the Irish Republic, and who are opposed to the Protestant loyalists who remain faithful to England and British rule. In the 1980s and ‘90s, stories about Northern Ireland focused on paramilitary groups and bombers, strife and distress. Peace and reconciliation groups seeking to “fix” the conflict have taken the two communities as the object of countless efforts to quell hostilities and bridge differences. One such reconciliation center, in Kilperary,¹ Northern Ireland, serves as the setting for the vignettes that follow, which happened in 2006. The reconciliation center brings people together. At times, and contrary to what a superficial impression of reconciliation activists might suggest, it is also a place where perspectives are polarized and relationships are contingent.

In recent years, conflict has also encompassed newcomers to the region in the form of discrimination and escalating violence directed at asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in Northern Ireland. As a result, many organizations aimed at Catholic-Protestant reconciliation, including the center in Kilperary, have also begun programming to facilitate good relations between newcomers and established residents. The people at this country farm circle around discursive agendas of peace and tolerance, multiculturalism and environmentalism. These discourses swirl around each other, sometimes getting knotted up and other times intertwining in easy agreement. In this place, narratives are often ideological. But sometimes, ideology loosens its grip on personal experience, and in the resulting slippage the purpose of the organization seems less convincing. The following stories are about the crossover between belief and ambivalence.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Immigration, Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict, Auto-ethnography

First, in Kilperary

1) The Girl and the Loyalist Prisoners in the Garden

Someone once asked the new girl to gauge exactly how mean the Loyalist boys who came out to the house were. She said, “What?” She was reminded of a previous conversation in which she had relayed what the boys were in for by describing their official offenses: “Grievous Bodily Harm,” “Attempted Manslaughter,” “Second Degree Murder,” she remembered. The woman thought the boys were dangerous. The girl’s description of their charges intensified that belief. Were they dangerous? The girl supposed so. Any more than herself? Any more than the others?

The girl watched the woman’s car drive away. Thankfully the woman had only stayed a minute. The girl looked across the dark soil, into the boys’ faces. She could tell they were snickering. The girl smiled sheepishly. They knew the visiting woman was callous and that the girl was uncomfortable.

Paul called out, “So what are yeh doing all day? Chasing chips up yer nose? Asking the lord to save yeh?”

They told the best jokes of anyone she had met in a long time. Cowboy jokes. Football jokes. Political jokes. Religious jokes. The boys had a well-developed repertoire of joke making and joke material. She never quite figured out how it was they performed so well. It was more than their comportment and more than the attentiveness and focus they put forward when they verged on a punch line. It was about finding ways of collaborating. They each helped out the others when they stepped up front and center at joke-telling time.

The group snuck behind the barn, the lot of ‘em and the girl. They leaned against the unpainted sliding doors with wellie boots squeaking and noses dripping. They smoked, laughing at the jokes of the day, making light of their positions at this place. The snotty women bossed the boys and the girl, and they all joked about their shortcomings.

2) The Town

Now, the jokes about the town were vicious and endearing, funny and mean. People called Kilperary “that poor place.” At first, the jokes didn’t make sense. Then, slowly, she began piecing these idiosyncrasies together and got the silliness. They asked her:

“Oh, god, KILPERARY?”

“What’d yeh do to get sent there?”

“How much more time do yeh gotta do to get out?”

“Why did you choose this place?”

“Yer sure you’re not a prisoner ye self?”

“What’d yeh say again?”

3) The Jack

“Going into town,” he’d say. “Why?” she’d ask. “Just going.”

The town is cemented over with grey concrete. Vast space surrounds the shopping area of stores, building fronts, pedestrians, and a few sparse benches. Above the town square, the Union Jack flies high.

4) The Peaceniks

Even the Friends would have called them crunchy folks. Not bothered by the past decade or two of critical inquiry, these people reflected ideals of the 1960s and ‘70s. They liked to say they loved everybody, and they believed in things like democracy, voting rights and liberation. In less flashy ways, they reinforced a particular set of values in their daily lives by reusing plastic grocery bags, turning off their car engines while idling for more than 10 minutes, and using every last splash of soapy dish water before emptying the basin. In more and less profound ways, these people disregarded self-criticism. This is what frustrated others in their company.

About twenty or so folks originally founded this center, out in the country in Kilperary in the 1980s. They wanted to gather in a safe space, away from the urban battlefields: they went out in the real country. Their farm in Kilperary was intended to provide respite from the atrocities of the everyday. They took care in finding a space without news and without the circuits of gossip present in their real homes. Believing in their own utopia, they created projects geared toward self-sufficiency: recycling, gardens, composting toilets, animals, homemade quilts, tents, fresh milk, daily soups, free love, uncensored talk. They prided themselves on being one of the few locations in Northern Ireland that was open to all people in all ways.

Later on, after being established, they started bringing people from Belfast and Derry out to Kilperary, often “across the communities.” They searched for miniature epiphanies that would indicate that the differences in the North were growing smaller. Their work was recognized for being “noble,” “daring,” and “just.” Their critics called them “fickle,” “dangerous” and “self-congratulatory.” Or they would just say it was nothing more than “PEACE AND SILLY RECREATION.” It was difficult to tell how important their achievements actually were.

Nowadays, they found themselves wondering how effective they’d been. Did they really make the difference they wished for? What would that have looked like? Could they undo all the atrocities and the deaths from the years gone by, the violence and the grinding poverty? This was too sentimental and idyllic anyway. Some of them felt that they must move on from their old reconciliation work. Others found that they had less of a choice about moving on or not, as the funding patterns within the European Union were pushing forward a new agenda for Northern Ireland. Prepared or not, they found themselves trying to design organizational programming to fit their new objectives.

“How far we’ve traveled,” they loved to reflect to one another. Who could have believed that when they started this community, the purpose seemed so urgent, so pressing? So much time had passed since then, they thought, who could have guessed this was where they’d land?

5) The Upper-Class Protestant Women

“They don’t deserve any time of ours,” the human hens muttered to each other. Focused on self-interest, their sides of the stories always seemed a little suspicious. You could not pinpoint why, except that these activist ladies, mostly in their fifties and sixties, now seemed a little too confident. When you spoke, you always felt as though they were watching for you to make a mistake, to turn a misplaced word that would reveal your own truly ugly self and re-affirm your lower position in relation to them. These ladies were folks who at distance you wished yourself a part of. They would coo and sigh at other volunteers, and attend to the beauties. But upon closer inspection,

you easily discovered the venom of their words and the desperation in their furtive glances.

6) The Strange Smell in the House

It felt damp in there. The smell was of mold disguised with bleach and other cleaners. The chill of the nearly constant 55 degree thermostat setting kept you wondering about which bacteria might be able to grow in such conditions.

7) The Farm Animals Out Back

She counted five chickens and two roosters. People who know anything about farming or animals know that two roosters together is a bad combination. The roosters fought with each other, and to defend their turf they were aggressive with people who came close to them. The girl approached them in the early morning with cracked corn in her bucket. She prepared to throw the kernels out to the flock. Released from her clutching hand, the yellow, dusty food littered the ground. But not before the rooster attacked her leg. He flew into her shins, flapping his wings, bobbling his head and making funny noises.

There were other animals: the goat, the cats, and the dog in his lonely house. There were guinea pigs and rabbits. Most of these animals were just accessories for the house's bizarre farm aesthetic. Pinky, the pig who died before the girl's arrival, was the ultimate jewel, making the peaceniks feel like they lived truly—"so real!"—on a farm. They thought, we waste nothing. Even our beloved farm friend we will eat through the winter!

8) The Cold Winds

She felt the wind most in nighttime when she tried to sleep. Her blanket seemed too thin. Even when she added another duvet to her bed, she shivered underneath a stack of covers.

9) The Potholes up the Driveway

For a long time at the center in Kilperary, the workers were without a farm vehicle. They shared the cars of people who stopped in or took taxis to town. Adele, a young German volunteer, one day traveled hastily up the road with a carton of animal feed in the back and a sack of garden seeds in the front. She anticipated dirty looks from the fella whose truck she borrowed. He was an old-school, self-described peacenik and was certainly angry she was late.

Adele hurried up the drive. By the end of the road, she had knocked loose the seed bags, punctured the feed sacks in the back, and created a new knocking noise in the gear shaft. Serves him right, she said later.

10) The Fluidity of Declan's Laugh

She couldn't believe he was leaving the farmhouse for good just a week after she arrived. How different her work there might have been otherwise.

Declan, a true farmer, was tired of the bizarre place in Kilperary. He was interested in tending his own farm—a real cattle and dairy outfit close by. He said to the girl after his going away party, where they dined on Pinky in a mushroom leek and cream sauce, “You’ll be all right here.” It was believable, yet his cascading laugh undermined his advice. She thought months later, “I shoulda left then.”

11) The Terrible Abandon of Daily Routines

People complain about the routines they find themselves in—a friend of the girl’s had once said to her, “Sometimes, I start getting my days mixed up with my months, then that slides into years confused and blurred with each other.” This statement applied to the farm in Kilperary. Although she did not stay there long, she found herself sympathetic to the grinding reality of their routinized world. She knew it couldn’t last. She would give in and leave. Before that was possible, though, there were her efforts to comply, to get up in the early twilight—those moments when people are waking or failing to wake—and make her coffee. She stammered under the garments: sweaters, shawls, slippers, multiple pairs of socks, and the scarf. She started skipping daily showers to avoid the horrible chill that set in after she left the steamy room and went throughout the rest of the house, where her hair failed to dry. It stayed damp for hours, compounding an already welcoming environment for illness and colds.

The rest of the wannabe farmers, the prisoners, and the office staff would arrive an hour later, around eight. She sighed, putting on the kettle, pulling out the tin of biscuits. Morning tea was followed by an hour of gossip and talk. Late morning tea soon followed, during which people discussed their plans and objectives for the day. After this was established, they would then prepare lunch and eat it. Afterwards, dinner tea was served, accompanied by more biscuits. The group then went out to work. Soon, time passed and everyone reconvened for the afternoon tea. Big talk was passed around about what exactly had been accomplished: “The stakes were driven into the fence line,” “The mailbox was painted,” “The signpost was dismantled.” Big plans, big talk, big agendas. Late tea was prepared and consumed. In the nighttime, when the day-comers left, the rest often sat silently. The phone became a small jewel, gently and eagerly passed around. They called out but the night still passed slowly.

12) The “Research” She Did (i.e., The Immigrants, But Not)

She said, there’s so much going on there, but is my research really one of those things?

There is humor to describing in official terms how, when and where we spend our time, and we always feel as though our efforts need to be justified. She felt this when she was hired to do programming for a population of immigrants in Kilperary.

13) The Sensation of Conjuring (i.e., Did She Really Do That?)

To her, the truth in what she did lay in sharp contrast with what really happened at this farm, in this little town. At first she felt her cheeks grow hot and her stomach tense whenever anyone asked her about this job. Many times she still had this response even when she stopped feeling dishonest, yet she still knew it was a lie. She hadn't really conducted research—she went to meetings, listened to people, watched kids, helped with dinner. She listened. She tried to listen even more carefully. To look.

Months passed and she found herself still fielding this question: what did you do there, what did you research? She started to smile and while nodding to the lie that became truth, she dove in with the gumption of a well-practiced storyteller and took them there—and they believed her.

14) The Implications of This (i.e., Is It Believable?)

She hasn't really been caught yet. To those who know the place, she signals discretely what really happened, but in a way that does not reveal the ugly reality. They smile back at her, believing in the bits. This reveals they too conjure their own lives and stories.

15) That Goat and Its Milk

It was too raw and gamey. They ate the goat cheese on special occasions when board members or other people they wanted to impress came through town. Our goat. Our cheese. It was always served. The cheese would stick to the roof of your mouth and the back of your teeth. She caught people trying to delicately scrape the gooeyness from these places while still being polite. Truthfully, she knew they wished they'd never picked it up. After the director of the center bragged about how productive the goat had been (not the workers), she'd pass the plate again. She watched as the fancy folks tried to piece together crackers in sets of threes and fours to undermine the ratio of goat cheese to cracker. During these meetings, they always drank double the amount of tea, trying to wash it all down and out.

16) Pinky (How Good She Was)

Her favorite activity in the pantry was to rearrange the upright freezer. In homemade, vacuum-sealed packages sat Pinky. In order to be eco-friendly, the farmers insisted on keeping the freezer at the highest possible temperature while still preserving the goods. This meant that the vacuum packs didn't entirely frost over and she could see through them. Pulling on her gloves, she peered at the insides of each package. She guessed about which part of Pinky lay in her hands. She made out brittle hairs, shaved off, pressed up into the plastic—a haphazard butchering process, someone had been in a hurry. She took all the packs out and rearranged them, wondering about the cut of each piece, wondering about the process of Pinky's slaughter. Animals are meant

to be eaten. She wasn't sentimental about Pinky's nearly human relationship to the people on the farm and she enjoyed eating her.

17) The Organizational Expectations for Working There

She chuckled when they told her what her daily grind was going to look like. Prior to arrival, the conditions of the position were negotiated and she agreed to develop programming and support, direct trainings for volunteers, and do research. She wanted to put her skills to use.

18) The Expectations, the Failures

Her expectations were taken lightly. The match at first seemed perfect, but became unhinged. They invited her to wash the floors, change the sheets, greet the guests, do the laundry, make the tea, get the groceries.

19) The Expectations of Her Boss

Philomena said, "We thought this might happen. People like you don't usually come through here."

20) The Project of Cheryl's

In an attempt at reconciliation with the girl, at a center that supposedly specialized in this process, Philomena gave her a splinter of a research project from Cheryl's pilot work. Cheryl believed in the peace process in Northern Ireland and in the process of multicultural sensitivity training. Born in Australia of parents from Beijing, Cheryl insisted on applying her own perspective as a multicultural subject herself. Australia, she said, "didn't do race well." She thought in Northern Ireland, in the town of Kilperary, she could do better.

21) The Perspective Professed on Race, on Multiculturalism

Cheryl said everyone was born equal. She liked to quote Martin Luther King Jr. "I'm dedicated to the good fight. I want to get it right for this community—to set the record straight on who needs what, and on who came from where. In Northern Ireland, rights and cultural difference have always been the cogs in the wheel of violence. There are such terrible stories that have come as a result."

The worker girl smirked.

She paused. "So, this week, I'm designing program materials for the session with P4 students. I'm going to instruct on Chinese New Year celebrations."

She continued as the girl raised her brow. "And I'd like you to say something about the culture in America, while I can say something about the culture in Australia. Then we can eat won-ton soup that we'll prepare today—did you get the groceries for that?"

22) The Meetings with the PSNI

Cheryl became progressively more adamant in her programming. They ate won-ton soup, made origami birds, tried to learn songs in Mandarin, and pointed to the major cities in China on the map. The weeks went by. The girl couldn't tell what day it had become or even where she was going with this. The children from the schools came to the farm. They were asked to fill out surveys about their interest in recycling, environmentalism, diversity, race, and multiculturalism. These were things the students had never heard of and did not care about.

Her favorite glimpse was a group of 14-year-old boys at the center for one of these trips. After the surveys were distributed, these boys snuck out the back.

Standing in a pool of dirty duck water, they declared their disgust for this fieldtrip. "Ack, I told me Ma this mornin' tis was goin' to be daft!"

23) The Stories about Kiperary

He shouted, "What were you thinking there you wee gal? Why'd you fly across that great big pond to go there?"

NOTES

1 The names of the town and individuals have been changed.



Emily Lynch, M.A.
Program in Social Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
University of Texas at Austin
elynych@mail.utexas.edu