

## Exit through the Gift Shop

I learned an important lesson a decade ago when I brought my nephew Jack to Dublinia, the Viking-themed museum in Dublin. At first, all went smoothly as Jack raced through every floor of the museum with tremendous enthusiasm, trying on costumes and helmets, examining everything and roaring like a proper Scandinavian warrior. I was congratulating myself on a visit well managed when we entered the gift shop. It was at this point that I made a rookie error. I'd been warned by my brother not to spend a fortune on Jack, but instead of telling him that he could have one thing from the shop – as long as it wasn't expensive – I told him he had €5 to spend. With an older child, that might have been a reasonable approach, but there was a problem: Jack was only five. He had no concept of money and could not understand the price tags on any of the items. But he was a conscientious and considerate child who took my warning seriously, and within thirty seconds he had picked out a small Viking figurine that cost €3.99. 'How much is this?' he asked. It

was at this point I made my second mistake: I told him it was €3.99. 'How much do I have left to spend?' said Jack anxiously. I told him he had one euro more. 'You can pick something else,' I said, like a fool, 'as long as it's only a euro.' Many readers will have little trouble in imagining the apocalypse that ensued, but for those who haven't put themselves in this absurd situation, I will be brief: we spent the next twenty minutes going round the gift shop while Jack pointed to things and asked how much they were. There was, of course, nothing to be had for €1, but on his journey Jack soon identified some fifteen other items he would dearly love to have. Eventually, through an exhaustive (and exhausting) process of negotiation, during which Al decided to take a strong interest in the archaeology books, Jack whittled his heart's desire down to two items: the Viking figurine and a plastic axe (also €3.99). I told him he could have one or the other. Jack looked at the Viking. He looked at the axe. He looked at the Viking again. Then he sat down on the middle of the floor and burst into tears. 'It's tearing me apart!' he cried.

Despite that scarring experience, on my more recent museum visits I often started, as well as ended, at the gift shop, for a quick glance at the wares usually provides a very clear idea about who the museum or site is aimed at. At places focussed on the one-time tourist, the international visitor who is simply passing through, the shops tend to be full of generic Irish gifts: shelves of sheep in various guises (slippers, backpacks, cuddly toys); plastic leprechauns with pots of gold, ceramic cottages, tea towels with soda-bread recipes and coasters with hokum Irish sayings. In many of these shops there is no connection at

all between the museum and the merchandise – it's as if an outlet of Carroll's Irish Gifts has been airlifted in and dumped at the exit. Then there are the aspirational shops, those that sell items that people might actually want to receive, rather than greeting yet another pair of sheep socks with a rictus grin. These sites, like the National Gallery in Dublin and Nano Nagle Place in Cork, make a self-conscious attempt to establish the shop as a boutique retail destination for local consumers, preferably in conjunction with a café that sells expensive but delicious home-made cakes and artisan coffee. Other sites try to combine the generic souvenir with some that relate to the site, so visitors to Spike Island can pick up plastic unicorns alongside a Spike Island-branded hat and pen, while in Crumlin Road Gaol green bobble hats and Guinness coasters sit alongside cat-o'-nine-tails and plastic truncheons.

Dark-tourism sites are places where questions of taste inevitably come to the fore. It's one thing to end your tour of the Guinness Storehouse with a commemorative pint glass etched with your name, or to emerge from Seamus Heaney HomePlace clutching a book of poetry; it's quite another to walk out of Titanic Belfast with a ship-shaped bath toy that 'even has a squeak inside for those hazardous "iceberg" moments'.

On my journey around Ireland I've drunk more cups of tea and eaten more scones in museum coffee shops than I can count, and I've collected many, many souvenirs. I love mooching around museum shops, and while I justify all my souvenir shopping as 'research', the truth is I'd probably buy the trinkets anyway. For me, they serve as an immediate, often visceral,

reminder of when and where I bought them, of the day itself, rather than what the object commemorates. I keep them in my cabinet of curiosities, my own secular reliquary, where a glow-in-the-dark Mary from Knock sits happily alongside a unicorn from Spike Island and a little zip-lock bag that contains a tiny fragment of brick and a piece of paper on which is typed 'Chip off the old school wall'. On the front of the bag is a line drawing of a school and a boy sitting at a desk. The boy is Frank McCourt, and the chip, purchased from the now-closed Frank McCourt Museum in Limerick, is a reminder of his school days. But pride of place in my cabinet (at the moment, for I am very fickle) is reserved for 'Billy', a besuited Lego Orangeman, complete with bowler hat and orange sash, who hails from the Museum of Orange Heritage in Belfast. I only have one, but for the full experience I should collect a whole Orange Lodge to put on display every marching season. Although, as Doagh Famine Village taught me, in the interests of fairness and balance, I would of course have to combine it with a Lego Republican Safe House.

Our tendency to commodify the past has long been parodied and satirized by artists. In 2000, just two years after the Good Friday Agreement and years before the British Army's border observation posts were dismantled, the artist John Byrne opened his Border Interpretive Centre on the invisible line where counties Louth and Armagh meet. A blue neon sign on the roof attracted passers-by and a plaque on the wall commemorated the imaginary twinning of the Irish border with the one between North and South Korea. Inside Byrne's 'pop-up' shop visitors

could purchase ceramic miniature army watchtowers, soil from the border and border sticks of rock.

In a similar vein, to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, artist Rita Duffy opened the Souvenir Shop on North Great Georges Street in Dublin, a political, artistic and commercial venture where visitors could (literally and figuratively) pick up the satirical messages. Duffy mocked many of the clichés that have come to surround both the Easter Rising and much of Irish history. Customers could purchase Birth of a Nation Salve, Free State Jam, Carson's Ulster Marmalade and Padraig Pearse Pasta Sauce. For the green-fingered, a range of Seeds of Revolution were available, including Romantic Nationalism of the 'gone wild variety'. The flowers would, presumably, thrive in the sods of border soil Byrne had sold at his interpretive centre.

Duffy and Byrne may have been poking fun at capitalism's ham-fisted attempts to disguise itself as commemoration, but it's entirely possible that everything they sold in their shops would have passed without much critical comment, had it been found on the shelves of any Irish gift shop, or indeed in the shops of some museums. If there's profit to be made, there is almost nothing too tasteless to be sold, from the glow-in-the dark condoms for sale at Chernobyl, to a Robben Island chess set with Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk as the kings. In Normandy, after visiting the beaches, visitors can pick up that great capitalist game – Monopoly – in a D-Day version where beaches are valued as real estate – Omaha deemed the most valuable, Gold the least.

Ireland has not been immune from this feast of 'commemoration' kitsch, and this was most apparent during the Easter

Rising centenary in 2016, when it was difficult to find anything that hadn't been clumsily and incongruously tagged to the blood sacrifice of the rebels. My favourite item was the chocolate bar wrapped in paper bearing the text of the 1916 Proclamation and images of all seven signatories – a bargain at €2.99. There were models of the GPO, commemorative plates and candles and socks, hip flasks, shot glasses, notepads and pens. In hardware stores, souvenir hunters could pick up a 1916 commemorative manhole cover showing the Irish Volunteer Éamon Bulfin raising the 'Irish Republic' flag on the GPO. And shopfronts got in on the action. One café blended religious and republican symbolism by placing three large statues of the Virgin Mary in the window alongside the Proclamation and images of the leaders of the Rising. One gift and clothes shop, House of Ireland, used the Proclamation as the backdrop for its window display. Models decked out in the finest Irish wool and tweed lounged in front of the Proclamation while collections of jewellery, pottery and blankets were artistically arranged in blends of green, white and orange. Had the shops been there during the Rising, they would surely have been looted. Johnston, Mooney and O'Brien, one of Ireland's oldest bakeries, clearly put out that Boland's flour mills had been requisitioned by the rebels in 1916, piggy-backed on the centenary with a large billboard advertisement that showed a beautiful golden loaf fresh from the oven above the tag-line: 'The Rising. History in the Baking'. Everywhere I looked, the blood sacrifice of the 1916 rebels was used as a kind of quality assurance, as if the core brand values of the food-and-drink industry dovetailed perfectly with the values outlined in the

Proclamation. It's not hard to imagine what the rebels – many of whom were socialists – would have made of the commercial exploitation of their fight.

Alcohol and commemoration are particularly enthusiastic collaborators. If there's a significant historic event to be commemorated, you may be certain there's a drink out there waiting to be used to toast it. If you feel the need to raise a glass to those transported from Ireland, then there's Spike Island Rum. The rum comes from Bermuda, where thousands of convicts on Spike Island were transported in the mid-nineteenth century. 19 Crimes is an Australian wine brand that uses the mugshots of several transported Fenian prisoners on its labels. The wine 'celebrates the rules they broke and the culture they built', though since most of the Fenians featured on their labels fled to the United States as soon as they could, the 'culture they built' was several thousand miles away from Australia. For the technologically minded, these mugshots can even be brought to life. Install an app and wave your phone at a bottle of Shiraz to hear James Kiely, a Fenian, speak: 'They call me the informer. Well, forgive me for caring more about myself than the cause' – an unexpected deviation from the traditional republican narrative.

To honour those who fought in 1916 you can drink 1916 Proclamation Porter, which, according to Arthurstown Brewing Company, is 'an old-school Irish stout, such as those brave men and women of Wexford would have known, brewed from our own native grain, grown in the very soil they pledged to liberate, with Chocolate and Dark Crystal malts for a velvety finish, with notes of chocolate and coffee'. It would almost bring a tear to

your eye, albeit a tear that contained velvety notes of ridicule. While I've complained in these pages that my great-grandfather and those he fought alongside in Wexford in 1916 have been largely ignored, I'm not sure this is the sort of attention I was hoping for.

But my personal award for most shameless exploitation of the Rising goes to the Shelbourne Hotel. Ever since it first opened its doors in 1824 it has catered to the well-heeled visitor. All manner of the good, the not-so-good and the great have passed through its revolving doors and, during the Rising, the hotel saw no reason why the armed rebellion taking place outside should disturb its guests. On Easter Monday 1916, after opening its doors to British soldiers, who used the roof of the hotel to fire on rebel positions on St Stephen's Green, 'Afternoon Tea carried on as normal, until a stray bullet clipped the petals of a very surprised lady's bonnet.' To commemorate the centenary of the damaged hat (and, by extension, the Rising), the hotel commissioned a bespoke whiskey glass complete with bullet embedded in it. The perfect whiskey to drink in this glass is, of course, Hyde, which brought out a commemorative 1916 blend (a smoky blend, no doubt, complete with notes of cordite and the iron tang of blood). Should you prefer to drink it on the rocks, you could always add an ice cube in the shape of the *Titanic*, thereby commemorating both the Rising and the sinking of the *Titanic* in one undulating wave of pleasure.

The commodification of tragedies for profit was brought home to me particularly in the shops associated with the *Titanic*. At

both the Titanic Experience in Cobh and Titanic Belfast, an enormous array of branded souvenirs is available, from Christmas-tree baubles to thimbles, pens and pencils, mugs and hip flasks, T-shirts and teddy bears. The souvenirs are further complicated by the cheerful blend of fact and fiction. I suspect that many visitors (particularly the ones pretending to be Jack and Rose) see the *Titanic* story through James Cameron's film, and the fictional tragic love story of Rose and Jack appears more real to them than the lives of 1,517 largely anonymous passengers who drowned. In both museums, visitors can buy replicas of the 'Heart of the Ocean' blue diamond necklace created for the film.

In all this, there is a real danger of making light of tragedies rather than remembering and respecting them. Of all the souvenirs I saw on my travels, the one I'm most uncomfortable with is the *Titanic* snow globe, where a model of the ship sits inside a glass sphere, for ever under water. A shake of the globe cascades glistening silver foil around the *Titanic*, like shards of ice. An almost literal memorial to the dead is marketed as a cute, festive trinket. If the demand wasn't there, the *Titanic* snow globe wouldn't be for sale, but that doesn't mean it should be. I'm just grateful that a trip to a famine museum is not accompanied by the option to purchase seed potatoes or tins of Soyer's Famine Soup. At least, not yet.

As I write this, I am surrounded by the faint smell of burning turf, turf I bought in a museum shop. Tiny pieces (each one smaller than a €1 coin) are packed in a paper box shaped to look like a thatched cottage. Inside is a small stone plate on which to

place and burn the pinch of turf (for that's really all it is). The smell promises to bring back memories of turf fires and a care-free past. A promise to give the gift of home. And it does smell like a turf fire (very briefly), but I'm slightly mortified as I burn it, thinking of my grandad cutting turf, but more of Nana, who would doubtless tut and exclaim that it was 'nothing but some aul codology' and I'd been fooled into throwing my money away. And perhaps she'd be right, but while it's embarrassing to have purchased this, I enjoy the very clear vision of her that it conjures up. I can hear her mocking me as plainly as if she were sitting across from me in front of the fire in her own back room. I put the pen down, close my cabinet of curiosity, turn out the light and walk away to put the kettle on.

## Your Feedback is Important to Us

In 1805, the educator Joseph Lancaster wrote a letter to John Foster, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Ireland: 'The feelings of the Irish Nation are strong,' he wrote, 'and their passions sometimes dangerous in the extreme. It is by informing the minds . . . of the people that Ireland will attain its proper dignity.' Like other members of the British establishment, Lancaster believed that a population could be taught to be loyal and responsible subjects and that, in Ireland, where the loyalty of the population was suspect, it was especially important to impart the right sort of education. Inspired by Lancaster, Dublin businessmen, including Samuel Bewley and William Guinness, established the Society for the Education of the Poor in Ireland (better known as the Kildare Place Society) in 1811. In 1831, a national school system was established, complete with textbooks that put the Empire at the heart of lessons. The *Second Reading Book*, aimed at children aged seven, informed pupils that 'on the east of Ireland is England, where the Queen lives.