



IRELAND is a metaphor for modern society. It is not a place, but rather an idea that is born of the displacement of people from their home territory.

Ireland's identity has as much to do with places like Boston (USA) and Birmingham (UK) as with the island off the coast of Europe, a culture with no spatial borders.

A sovereign nation, yes, but not sovereign at all, dependent on others for its existence, most readily seen in its economy. In 1996 the Republic produced more wealth per head of population than the UK. Cause for celebration? The achievement is a lie recognised for the charade that it is by one of Ireland's most talented journalists, Fintan O'Toole, who is currently in New York as drama critic of the *Daily News*. In the introduction to a collection of his essays he notes:

"Ministers may have gotten to spend the billions of pounds flowing in from the EU's regional and social funds, but the public knew that it had people outside the State - mostly German taxpayers - to thank for them. Ministers may have gotten to announce huge industrial investments like IBM's 3,000-job project for Dublin or Intel's \$1.5 billion investment in Leixlip, but the public knew that the real decisions had been taken on the far side of the Atlantic".

Ireland is a state of dependency. Three-quarters of its exports are owned by foreign corporations. What price sovereignty? How were the people of this island moulded into the first virtual reality nation, for which 28 people are bombed to death in the high street of a small market town on a summer's day, followed by an apology from the bombers that they didn't mean it.

In the North people govern their lives on the strength of the past. In the South they live in a future utopia. Economic subsidies from the East, cultural myths from the West.

Ireland, transit station in the global wealth production machine rather than integrated society, profits repatriated to tax havens, impoverishing the fabric of society of the resources that would otherwise enrich everyone's life. Ireland's most valuable export remains its children.

NO MYSTERY about the history. The colonial power dispossessed the people of their land, and political independence was a sham: the people were not re-integrated into the landscape. They were not allowed to reclaim their birthright.

Instead, they sought meanings for their lives through the myths of the Wild West, where Irish gunslingers dreamt of the green valleys back home even as they displaced the Indians from their territories...And the landless peasants of the West of Ireland dreamt of the riches that awaited them across the ocean.

Today, notes O'Toole, the American

Myths, Murder & the pursuit of virtual happiness

Paolo Bellarossi

THE LIE OF THE LAND IRISH IDENTITIES

by Fintan O'Toole
Verso, £15

Indian and the Negro features in the mythology of Dublin youth who struggle with the pathology of their historical displacement, which has bequeathed to them a schizophrenic culture.

They retreat into the big screen myths created by Sam Shepherd who uses the American badlands as a metaphor for the social amnesia which was necessary for a people who could not confront the reality: liberation from Westminster did not liberate them from the institutionalised process of exploitation.

O'Toole's essays are an eloquent testimony to that pathological condition. In the America of the early 19th century the Irish were regarded as little better than the barbarous Indians who had to be displaced so that property rights could be consolidated. In fact, once the Indians had been driven back, they were replaced by the Irish from Belfast who, as backwoodsmen "blacked and disguised like Indians" fought for a place in the sun against the prejudices of the English settlers. To sur-

vive in the urban ghettos of Chicago and New York the Irish had to create their equivalent of the Mafia - Tammany Hall, the political machine that brushed aside democracy and the imperative of the market to trade favours for votes.

The celluloid image became the substitute for the psychoanalysis. John Ford and John Wayne provided the therapy, helping the folk on the emerald isle to construct a mythology which substituted for a real identity. O'Toole analyses the interaction beautifully, noting that "in this paradoxical manipulation of images the American West becomes the West of Ireland, Ireland becomes the rich promised land of the American West. The dynamics of memory and exile are not denied, they are reversed".

WHEN will reality intrude? The bereaving parents of the five children who died in Omagh would like to know.

But while the subsidies keep slushing in from Brussels, Ireland will exploit the images which icons like J.F. Kennedy were happy to illuminate in their quest for power. The juxtaposition of America and Ireland is not, as O'Toole points out, simply a clash between a traditional and a modern culture, but a more complex interaction "in which America's cultural sense of itself is partly an Irish creation and Ireland's sense of itself is partly an American creation". The connections are nurtured by nostalgia and myth. Why should Dubliners who have been enriched by the boom in house prices heed O'Toole: "We need to get out from under that myth. We need to turn the mirrors into windows"?

The moguls of cyberspace have fortunes invested in the technology that helps to preserve the myths which dull the senses. O'Toole thinks that "the Indian metaphor has been taken on by contemporary Irish culture as a device which frees it from the burden of identity and lets it loose to play games with the world". But aren't we all just a little attracted by the Indian metaphor? Don't we all conspire to play games with the world as a ruse to avoid the realities of our identities? There is precious little for any nation to be proud about in the 20th century. The flickering images on video provide quick-fix escapism, even for the President in the White House who thinks he can virtually distance himself from reality by "telling the truth" to a camera instead of eye contact with a grand jury.

But while we may manipulate the cultural maps so that they tell convenient lies, ultimately the truth will emerge. It is delineated in the landscape. Honest identities are hewn out of the land, and in the 21st century, if mankind is to retrieve its full sense of reality, it will have to swear a new oath with nature. It is not the lie of the land, but the lie of the people on the land that needs to be eliminated.



■ Fintan O'Toole