

Elizabeth Brinsden

Senior lecturer at the economics faculty at the Jana Evangelisty University, Czech Republic.

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A WASP's* defence of the Irish Catholic

[September 10, 2012](#) [Uncategorized](#) [Elizabeth](#)

“When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I managed to survive at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood”

These compelling words come from the author Frank McCourt describing his own childhood which was the subject of his best selling novel *Angel's Ashes*.

Let it be said from the outset that this article doesn't intend to trivialize the havoc wreaked on families by the Irish propensity towards the abuse of alcohol throughout the ages, or to sanitize the enormity of such a harrowing childhood in any way, but rather just hopes to point to another possible way of interpreting the phenomenon *Irish Catholic* per se.

Throughout the novel some of the trappings of the prevailing Zeitgeist of the Anglo-Saxon world, whether intended or otherwise by the author, inevitably surface, in particular the Catholic-bashing with

which one is constantly confronted. This author would merely like to throw a different perspective on the matter.

I would argue that it is this very Irish Catholic background which not only Frank McCourt but countless other such people exhibit that endows them with their refreshing individuality, coupled with the talent to express this so well, which results in the creativity that others find so fascinating.

It is possible to extend this line of thought with the prediction that the same blandness of being which afflicts the rest of the technologically advanced and thereby affluent world will eventually affect Ireland as a result of the inevitable outcome of a definition of reality forged vicariously through the prism of virtual reality and/or media outlets in general. In an interview, and also in the book itself, Mr McCourt says with tacit approbation that the 1930's opened a window in Ireland to the influences of Hollywood. The metaphor of the window is indeed an appropriate one, the implication being that the cultural structure of the remainder of the building was at this time still standing and by definition this implies – the Catholic Church. Since that time however, this very cultural edifice has been increasingly under relentless erosion permeating the Irish culture by way of osmosis originating from that dominating the technologically innovating country – the USA. Thus all aspects surrounding the identity of the *Irish Catholic* must ultimately succumb to the pressures of uniformity.

My own particular slant on this arises from having grown up in central Western Australia in the gold mining town of Kalgoorlie as a result of which I am only too aware of how much we are indebted to this very group – that of the Irish Catholic.

Although I had the good fortune of having been able to study music under some fine teachers in both Vienna and Paris, by far the most outstanding one I ever had was an Irish Catholic from the godforsaken town of Boulder. Her name was Olive Ruane and she lived in a run-down, makeshift house which at some stage had served as a local store. At the other end of this same street was St. Joseph's Convent where she herself had received her music training from a mysterious nun who had purportedly studied in Germany and been a concert pianist before ending up in Boulder – one could well ask how such a person ends up in a place like that.

What seems to have been a characteristic feature of the Irish Catholics is that they would venture into these extremely inhospitable areas located in the middle of nowhere – a charitable description of these towns in the first half of the 20th century – bringing with them their considerable accomplishments and then set out to impart their knowledge to the otherwise geographically disadvantaged youth of the areas.

Perhaps a more poignant case in point could be that of Ray Hartley who grew up in the West Australian farming town equivalent of the godforsaken Boulder by the name of Kellerberrin and who subsequently went on to have a remarkable career as a jazz pianist in New York. WASP as he also is, Ray would be the first to acknowledge his indebtedness to the primarily ethnic Irish nuns of a local convent where he received most of his education; at this institution he had the good fortune to have also had an extraordinary music teacher.

Lest these be perfunctorily dismissed as anecdotal evidence, the phenomenon has been the subject of some extensive historical research, for example by Norma King in her book “The Daughters of Midas”.

Such stories could be repeated in the rest of Australia, the USA and Canada..

Ireland is now riding on the crest of a wave of success the like of which hasn't been experienced since the Middle Ages. Irish culture has gained international recognition and the economy has been soaring ahead for some time now. Frank McCourt can look to these developments with pleasure but deep down he must be aware of how much he owes to his Irish heritage and thus to his being in the position to describe himself as “blessed among men”.

Many of us non-Irish would do well to join ranks and deliver a resounding *three cheers* for the *Irish Catholic*.

* White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

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