18 *Closing Time*

"An Irish tourist who drunkenly mistook the Romanian parliament for his hotel has been arrested in Bucharest. The unnamed Irish national was said to be a little worse for wear as he searched for his hotel in the city's Old Town. But rather than his chosen accommodation he instead entered Romania's Palace of the Parliament. Interrogation of the suspect was delayed due to his excessively drunken state."

"Ireland's first ever academic seminar on the age-old problem of hangovers has taken place in Donegal."

The Irish News on 20 November and 30 December 2021



Meanwhile in Belfast the bands keep playing, feet keep marching and community camaraderie perseveres © Sabine Troendle, 2019

The last six years have been a rich journey through political, societal, cultural and many more landscapes on this island. Most of my time I've dedicated attempting to understand and making sense of the rich and complicated history of Ireland. The struggles and conflicts that have shaped the country. The consequences of colonisation and imperialism. I'd like to believe to be more informed than when I first got here and my love for this place keeps growing, although sometimes I wonder why. It sure isn't the weather, neither is it the free health care system. Nature and beauty are stunning but so it is in my country. It must be the people.

The people who shout and fight when having a conversation and never come up with a straight answer but tinker seven stories into one. In Switzerland I'm told that I sound Irish but I don't understand the Belfast brogue. After all this time I often laugh along cluelessly. So what is it that keeps me here?

It's the generations of people unshakeably resolved to fight injustice, forming an enduring legacy of resistance and resilience. And the people and their determination and stubbornness to protest against the eyesore of a temporary corrugated tin wall at the Malone Road Chinese consulate. Against the height of the finished brick wall. Against the floodlights shining over the finished brick wall and the colour of the mail box after the construction of the brick wall – the wrong red. The spirit to stand up against perceived wrongdoing.

It's the people who welcome you into their everyday life without asking questions. They let you in on family birthdays, weddings and wakes. You're welcome to stay overnight and instead of bearing a grudge after you've broken a precious statue, they serve you a fry. There's only one rule: you don't ask questions.

It's the women. The strong Irish women I wish not to end up arguing with. Their telling you off in no ambiguous way and yet so vulnerable in their societal role and legacy. Women in conflict and women after conflict – that's a chapter missing. It's missing because it's dear to me and it needs more from me.

While I'm not short on material, and it's been my intention from the start to dedicate a chapter to the question of a united Ireland, a new Ireland, I find myself overwhelmed with the topicality of it all. You can't say 'New Ireland' without stumbling over the DUP saying NO to anything but unionist supremacy, Brexit and ultimately partition and colonialism. It takes a fine mind to pack this into a *Reliable News* chapter. I cracked after the unionists' desire for a centenary stone at Stormont.

More topics should have been discussed here. Punk should have been a chapter. The importance of the punk movement during the Troubles, how it brought divided communities together. The local bands still performing. Stiff Little Fingers, The Undertones (minus Feargal Sharkey), The Outcasts, The Saberjets, The Dead Handsomes, and Terri Hooley, the godfather of Belfast punk. There are various books and documentaries by very informed voices recounting the story. The Belfast punk saga has been told in the best ever way, namely by the musicians and regular punters themselves, the people who actually ARE the story.

Before I moved to Belfast, my natural sympathies would have lain with the once oppressed people and the idea of one Ireland. I grew up during the time of the Troubles and the news that made it over to my country was mainly stories about the IRA's terror campaign or the Irish rebel's freedom fight respectively. My teenage mind was busy creating a romantic image of the struggle and Irish rebellion and I guess it's fair to say that I wasn't exactly neutral in regard of Northern Irish politics when I moved here. While not changing my views on civil rights and constitutional aspirations, living here has definitely raised my awareness for romanticised narratives and political complexities.

It was easy and straight forward to immerse into everyday life of nationalist and republican communities. The unionist and loyalist general public wasn't that forthcoming. It's not for lack of trying but I believe my undisguised political views made it difficult for those people I have approached to engage with me and my project. One unionist community worker turned me down on the basis that I was far too republican. He feared that any connection to me could end the support from his community for his projects. I don't see myself as a republican or nationalist or anything other than a foreigner with a left leaning political conscious and a strong opinion on civil rights.

But there are no meaningful left- and right-wing politics in the North of Ireland. The constitutional question whether to join a united Ireland or to stay in the United Kingdom overshadows everything and leads liberal unionists to vote for the strongest unionist party, the conservative right-wing DUP and centralist nationalists for left-wing Sinn Féin, the biggest nationalist party. That's how unionists defend themselves against a united Ireland and nationalists against unionist supremacy. And that's how easily you're being labeled as one or the other and the smaller parties and non-constitutional topics are being left behind. I don't know if the people of this island will ever be able to live as a united people, but I certainly hope they – we – will one day.