

Understand Ireland

IRELAND TODAY.....638

After seven years of crippling recession and a restrictive austerity program, Ireland is clawing its way back...and making headlines again for all the right reasons.

HISTORY640

Celtic tribes, Viking marauders, Norman invaders and the English. You'll find evidence of Ireland's rich history everywhere.

THE IRISH WAY OF LIFE653

Despite the longstanding clichés about an easygoing, friendly people, the Irish are a complex bunch, but even gaining a small insight into what makes them tick is truly rewarding.

MUSIC656

There's music for every occasion and every mood, from celebration to sorrow, from *céilidh* to mega-gigs featuring box-office international stars.

LITERARY IRELAND.....659

The Irish love of language and their great oral tradition has created a rich legacy of world-renowned writers and storytellers.

IRISH LANDSCAPES662

The vibrant greenness of gentle hills, the fearsome violence of jagged coasts and the sombre light of so many cloudy days is an integral part of experiencing Ireland.

SPORTING IRELAND.....666

For many Irish people, sport is akin to religion, and Gaelic games are at the core of Irishness.

Ireland Today

The Republic of Ireland has travelled a long way since the dawn of the new millennium. It has yo-yoed out of recession and back before once again emerging from the economic gloom of the global financial crisis. As the nation continues to shed its conservative skin, it is growing increasingly comfortable with its multicultural, more socially liberated identity and its progressive presence on the global stage.

Best in Print

Dubliners (James Joyce, 1914) A collection of short stories still as poignant and relevant today as when they were written.

Room (Emma Donoghue, 2010) A harrowing but beautiful account of a boy and his mother being held prisoner, told from the boy's perspective.

The Secret Scripture (Sebastian Barry, 2008) The story of a 100-year-old patient of a mental hospital who writes her autobiography; now a 2015 film directed by Jim Sheridan.

The Gathering (Anne Enright, 2007) Powerful account of alcoholism and domestic abuse in an Irish family.

Best on Film

Bloody Sunday (Paul Greengrass, 2002) Unmissable account of events in Derry in 1972.

The Dead (John Huston, 1987) Huston brings James Joyce's story to life in his last film, with powerful performances by Donal McCann and Anjelica Huston.

'71 (Yann Demange, 2014) About a British soldier separated from his unit during a Belfast riot in 1971.

What Richard Did (Lenny Abrahamson, 2012) A privileged youth assaults a romantic rival who dies of his injuries; loosely based on real events that occurred in 2000.

A Social Revolution

On 22 May, 2015, the Republic of Ireland became the first country to legalise gay marriage by popular vote. The margin of victory (62%) was noteworthy given that homosexual activity had only been decriminalised in 1993, and showed just how far Ireland had come in the intervening years. It was, for supporters of same-sex marriage at least, an extraordinary result: on the night of the announcement, Dublin (where the referendum was passed with more than a 70% majority) celebrated with wild abandon. For once in a long time, the reasoning went, Ireland was making headlines for all the right reasons (that night, Hillary Clinton tweeted 'Well done, Ireland!').

Most observers agreed that the result had a deeper significance than just reflecting the majority attitude toward LGBT rights. The Catholic bishops, once the last word on all matters related to morality and social affairs, had maintained a dignified opposition to the motion, but their muted objections were a tacit recognition that the Church's conservative voice no longer carries like it once did, especially for those under 30. The referendum had galvanised huge numbers of Generation Y that had become chronically apathetic in the face of a political system that had – in their experience – delivered nothing but incompetence, disappointment and hard times. The times they are a-changing, a lot of the Irish have chimed, and it's about bloody time.

Back in the Black

The other bit of good news was that in late 2013 the Republic finally exited the restrictive austerity program imposed on it in 2010 by its international creditors