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THE REPUTATION OF IRELAND IN FRANCE: ARE OLD *CLICHES* WITHERING AWAY AMONG YOUNG FRENCH PEOPLE?¹

Julien Guillaumond

Introduction

Among other issues, Ireland's international reputation seems to have become a key component of the Irish government's global vision and strategy as one of its latest publications can attest². "Ireland's international reputation", it says, "takes time to build, but can be easily damaged. Irish representatives work hard to project and maintain a positive image of Ireland as a good place in which to live, to do business, to invest, to study or to visit"³. Then follows a list of actors and organisations which are central to Ireland's positive global footprint.

History together with commercial and cultural exchanges⁴ and the arts⁵ (travel writings from the early 17th century⁶, literary works, films and festivals) have contributed to shape the image French people have of Ireland, and *vice versa*. More recently, in the 1960s particularly, with the development of international tourism, the promotional campaigns of *Bord Fáilte* have very much shaped French people's views of Ireland, giving it a positive image as a country immersed in traditions and rurality⁷. Such campaigns, argued Dumortier in 1992, reinforced a positive vision of Ireland among French people⁸ as well as a romantic view of Ireland, seen more as

¹ This present work is part of a progress report for the GIS EIRE diaspora group commissioned by the Irish Embassy in Paris.

² Department of the Taoiseach, *Global Ireland. Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025*, Dublin, Government Publications, 2018.

³ Department of the Taoiseach, *Global Ireland. Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴ See Denis Dumortier, "Les Relations économiques franco-irlandaises", in *Études Irlandaises*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1987, pp. 117-126.

⁵ Such an approach or a vision of the country has very much been shaped as well by literary works which often depict an imagined island of Ireland, with elements not devoid of a form of freedom to write one's novel but at the same time trying to make it as much as possible understandable by a French readership. See Kathleen O'Flaherty, "Regards français sur l'Irlande", in *Études Irlandaises*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1988, pp. 31-43.

⁶ See Grace Neville, "Into the West": The West of Ireland in the Writings of French Travellers, in *Études Irlandaises*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2015, pp. 259-271.

⁷ Denis Dumortier, "L'Image de l'Irlande en France à travers la publicité de Bord Fáilte", in *Hommes et Terres du Nord*, 1992, vol. 2, pp. 86-88.

⁸ D. Dumortier, "L'Image de l'Irlande en France à travers la publicité de Bord Fáilte", *op. cit.*, pp. 86-88.

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an island of the past⁹ using three main characteristics of the country: the magnificent scenery of the west of Ireland, the pace of life and its people¹⁰. The rural aspect has also been promoted together with various pictures of an Irish landscape, while a second image presented Irish people as welcoming and communicative hosts¹¹. In the Irish case, according to B. Dumortier writing in the early 1990s, the countryside has been one key promotional tool of a tourism strategy to counter the negative effects of the weather or the cost of living¹². Considering the *Imaginaire Irlandais* festival and recent French tourists' images of Ireland, Sheridan and O'Leary (2007) argued that French people still have a positive image of Ireland, but suggested that the tourism strategy should be updated following the transformation of Irish society and should take into account the longing for less traditional types of images among 21st century tourists¹³. Seen from a French perspective, a case study on some pubs and businesses selling Irish products in the Auvergne region in 2014-15 has shown that their marketing and commercial strategies still hung on to old *clichés* about Ireland, and strengthened those same old images. They are thus contributing to maintain some distant 'invented tradition' providing an experience to their customers¹⁴ based on what they expect, reinforcing existing stereotypes. In such a context where reputation does matter, what are the views young French people have of Ireland? What do they know about Ireland, and what shapes young French people's views of Ireland in 2020?

Methodology

This report is based on an online survey conducted between 13 to 20 January 2020 among 1st year Applied Foreign Languages undergraduates at Clermont Auvergne University¹⁵, in the Auvergne region (central France). The survey was conducted in French to avoid any possible confusions on

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Geraldine Sheridan and Sinéad O'Leary, "French Tourist Images of Ireland and *L'Imaginaire Irlandais*", in *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 151-162, p. 151.

¹¹ D. Dumortier, "L'Image de l'Irlande en France à travers la publicité de Bord Fáilte », *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

¹² Brigitte Dumortier, "Les Clés de l'essor touristique irlandais », in *Hommes et Terres du Nord*, 1992, vol. 2, pp. 79-85, p. 79.

¹³ G. and S. O'Leary, "French Tourist Images of Ireland and *L'Imaginaire Irlandais*", *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹⁴ Julien Guillaumond, "Marketing Irishness Today: A Study on Authenticity in French Businesses", in Frank Healy and Brigitte Bastiat, (eds), *Voyages between France and Ireland. Culture, Tourism and Sport*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2017.

¹⁵ A BA in Applied Foreign Languages is a three-year degree where students specialize in 2 languages (English and a second foreign language) and also study economics, law and marketing among the main subjects as well as international business.

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terms and to allow students to express themselves as much as possible in their native language. It was anonymous and respondents could fill in the survey at University or at home¹⁶.

Students graduating with a BA in Applied Foreign Languages from Clermont Auvergne University will have studied equally foreign languages to the same level as well as economics, marketing and human resources. They will be proficient in both languages and will be able to work for businesses abroad. From the very beginning, undergraduate students are told that such a 3-year degree also comes with internships in France or abroad, and a whole semester of studies in a partner university abroad in their last few months. At the time of undergoing that survey, first-year undergraduates had not yet had any classes on Ireland as part of their present curriculum. That does not mean that they had not been to Ireland or that they had not studied some aspects of Irish history or Irish culture previously (at secondary schools or high schools for instance)¹⁷.

The survey was divided into 5 sections offering the possibility to narrow down to a certain number of elements the profile of our respondents and identify more precisely their views about Ireland¹⁸. The first section identified the profile of respondents while the second was devoted to finding out what respondents knew about Ireland. For that, students had to associate words/ideas with “Ireland”. Note here that no definition of what Ireland was, politically or geographically, was given to students. That section allowed a ranking of the most often-quoted words related to Ireland (word-occurrence system) to be established. Section 3 was a complement to section 1 (profile) while it also offered the possibility of nuancing what was answered by respondents. Section 4 aimed at identifying some common knowledge about Ireland in association with students’ previous knowledge, singling out an author, a music group and/or a film. The final section acted as a concluding part in which respondents could offer some extra comments, and say whether they were likely to visit Ireland in the near future.

When the survey was closed, 154 students had responded which represents an 84% response rate based on all students enrolled in the first-year of the academic year 2019-2020. A first filter was applied to find out if all surveys were complete, if information was correct or if they were all genuine first-

¹⁶ In addition, students were briefly introduced to the survey when it was presented to them at the end of a class led by another lecturer hours before it was launched, and they received emails reminding them of this on-going survey twice during this period in January.

¹⁷ Their first lecture on Ireland was planned following the end of the survey.

¹⁸ Survey structure and questions are displayed in appendix 2.

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year undergraduates¹⁹. In the end, the cohort was made up of 122 students (98 women, 24 men) aged from 18 to 21. 48% came from the Puy-de-Dôme department, while others came from neighbouring areas, the second largest being Allier, followed by Haute-Loire.

Findings and analysis

Most common ideas about Ireland

A ranking based on word occurrences was established. To that end, a broad categorization of key words was defined as expressed by respondents when asked about three ideas coming to their minds when thinking about Ireland (*Quelles sont les trois premières choses que vous associez à l'Irlande ?*). The first big category was “folklore and festive days”, containing 34 hits relating to Saint Patrick, or Saint Patrick’s day, and leprechauns (see appendix 3). The second biggest category was geography/capital city with 17 hits (among them, 14 hits for Dublin, 1 for Belfast), then drinks with 15 answers associating Ireland with beer (11 hits), Guinness, pubs and bars²⁰. The “historical events” and “symbols” categories followed. Then came the sport category (10 hits) with 8 hits for rugby, 1 for Gaelic football and one mention of MMA fighter Conor McGregor. On second and third counts (see appendix 3), elements corresponding to the same top categories previously identified were also given by respondents which suggest that there remains a rather strong correlation among respondents between the “Ireland” they imagine and ideas referring to its patron saint, its feast day and festive events together with the drinks, the symbols and the landscape. Is this representation of Ireland different if students had visited Ireland? There does not seem to be conclusive evidence on that particular point, and our sample of students who have already travelled to the island of Ireland (school trips or family holidays) is too small (less than 1%).

Literature, music and films associated with Ireland

What about cultural markers? Are young undergraduate students able to identify some cultural elements about Ireland in the three following domains: literature, music and the cinema? Is James Joyce one of the most often quoted traditional Irish writers among the list? 45 respondents (out of

¹⁹ See appendix 1 for cohort size and successive filters.

²⁰ Interestingly, there appears to be a slight gender bias here as our survey reveals that among all answers associating Ireland with drinks, two-thirds of those answers came from female students surprisingly. The week before the survey took place, I think the Ulster team played ASM Clermont in Clermont.

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122, around 37%) gave an Irish author's name but two-thirds mentioned Oscar Wilde as an Irish author, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or the *Canterville Ghost* among the main literary works. Then came Samuel Beckett, Joseph O'Connor, Bram Stoker and Eoin Colfer. Such findings have to be considered in the light of respondents' previous syllabi in high school²¹. In terms of films, only 15 replies were received with a selection of old and more recent films such as a biopic, *Michael Collins*, or a drama, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, fantasy cartoons such as *Brendan and the Secret of Kells*, or the *Renegade*. To the question *Pourriez-vous me donner le nom d'un groupe de musique irlandais ?*, more than half of respondents offered at least one music group²²: U2 (44 times), followed by the Cranberries (32) and others such as Niall Horan, Sinéad O'Connor, rather more modestly Realtá, the Dubliners, the Pogues, the Corrs, Hozier or Ed Sheeran. Their main source of information on Ireland appears to be strongly correlated with their education since a great majority (80% of respondents) were taught about Ireland at secondary and/or at high schools (see appendix 4).

Likelihood to visit Ireland

The survey ended on a final question: “*souhaiteriez-vous visiter l'Irlande dans les prochaines années ?*” or would you like to visit Ireland in the coming years, and if so, could you briefly explain why? 111 out of 122 respondents replied positively (among them, 8 people who had already been to Ireland – see previous question). The often quoted reason was to discover the country, though it is not officially named or defined as such, its culture and the language. What is interesting though is that respondents tend to move away from traditional stereotypes regarding the Irish as being welcoming and nice people, focusing more on the landscapes and the culture as key determining factors for of a visit to Ireland in the future. In more than half of the answers, one can find the words “culture” and “landscape” as reasons to visit Ireland. One might say that it could be associated with the specific profile of students, Applied Foreign Languages students, in other words students who might be more inclined towards a more international perspective of their future careers and of course who are possibly attracted by the idea of working abroad. Quite often, respondents gave as the main reasons the idea of discovering the world, visiting an English-speaking country and improving linguistic skills, but the core of the answers remained culture and landscape. At the same time, such a question was purely indicative as they may change their minds.

²¹ That might have to do with the baccalaureate diploma as well.

²² The question there was slightly off the mark as I asked for groups while I should have asked about groups/individual musicians.

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However, there are some specific adjectives which still refer to the Irish as welcoming people, friendly, impressive landscape, an intriguing culture, landscape looking fantastic. Even in the open final comments section, the words landscape and a welcoming people, -a nice country and one added the filming of *Games of Thrones*, traditions, local products and Guinness come up again. It would be interesting to measure more precisely how they have learnt about Ireland. Interestingly, there does not seem to be huge differences on ideas about Ireland between students who have been to Ireland (school trips or family holidays) and those who have not, once they are back in France. When asked about the most visited places²³, those students did not follow a particular pattern, some visiting both parts of the island, others staying in the South: Dublin, the city and some of its museums, the Wicklow mountains for one, the National Leprechaun Museum for another, Glendalough, the Guinness museum, the West with Galway, the Cliffs of Moher and Connemara, Belfast, the Titanic Museum and “*la place [sic] où s’est produit le Bloody Sunday*”, said one respondent.

Limitations and concluding remarks

While categories used to identify trends among young respondents’ ideas about Ireland could be questioned because there could be a personal bias (for instance the word “castle” was put in the “history” category because of the context of the answer and not into “landscape”), most of these categories have also been used by other studies looking at tourist images of Ireland among the French²⁴. However, it should be noted that the purpose of that study was also to establish more clearly what young undergraduates enrolled in their BA in Applied Foreign Languages knew about Ireland²⁵.

²³ The question was not put to respondents, unless they said they had been to Ireland before. The idea was to avoid the type of answers that would be influenced too much by tourism brochures, thus the focus was much more on basic knowledge.

²⁴ See in particular Geraldine Sheridan and Sinéad O’Leary, “French Tourist Images of Ireland and *L’Imaginaire Irlandais*”, in *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 151-162.

²⁵ To our knowledge, this is the first time such a study was conducted on a large scale. Previously, a short questionnaire was done during the first lecture and students could interact with the lecturer during the first session, and such a survey gave way to a short session in which the lecturer tried to offer some answers to most common stereotypes on Ireland among French students. In that sense, the objective of previous short surveys was a teaching objective: identify some common held stereotypes which could be used for the structure of the different lectures during the 3 years the students would be taught about Irish society. In that sense, the idea was to find out about their knowledge of Ireland in order to tailor the different classes they are going to have in the course of their BA in Applied Foreign Languages to their knowledge of Irish society, north or south.

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Our analysis suggests that young French students see Ireland very positively. Its reputation among young French undergraduates is safe and strong: it is an attractive destination for many of them. However, old *clichés* remain strong among those young French adults. Even though our sample is not representative of all French students, whether in terms of geographic profiles, academic curricula or professional aspirations, Ireland remains a place they associate with its Patron Saint, its festive character, its pubs and drink culture, and its landscape. However, for such a generation born between 2000 and 2002, the first generation born after the development of the Internet and also future tourists, they seem to be stuck into a rather old perception of what Ireland is. The way those 18-year olds see Ireland could of course be explained by their age, but it is all the more interesting to see that hardly any respondent talked about Northern Ireland or scarcely mentioned elements which could be associated with it (apart from some mentions of Belfast and others to be found in the “history” category) at a time when Brexit has taken so much space in the media in relation to the border between the North and South. In other words, they have no interest in the geographical or political definition of Ireland. What they have in mind remains an imagined Ireland with some elements of historical truth mingled with it.

Further studies could be conducted to find out whether such elements form part of a wider background or knowledge background of each and every French person. Such a conclusion is all the more valid today as the survey results suggest that there exists a view of Ireland which, though positive, remains static among the French public, and that old visions of Ireland seems to have passed through to the young. Another question could be whether or not a geographic dimension shaping commonly held stereotypes about Ireland exists since the Auvergne region does not have any real Celtic connection or association with Ireland compared to Brittany. Are there specificities of people from the Auvergne region regarding knowledge about Ireland? At the same time, could a gender dimension be isolated to look at Ireland’s reputation abroad and as an addition to the age segmentation used by the tourism agency?

In their research paper, Sheridan and O’Leary (2007) wondered whether time had come to review the marketing policy and publicity of Ireland following its latest economic development and update its presentation when environmental issues as well as transport issues for instance have become more pressing issues²⁶? What our study suggests a few years later is that if such a change has happened, there has not been any obvious trickle-down

²⁶ G. Sheridan and S. O’Leary, « French Tourist Images of Ireland and *L’Imaginaire Irlandais*», *op. cit.*, p. 152.

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effects yet. Some respondents explained that they learnt about Ireland through the web and videos. Will the movie industry (films and series on video on demand platforms) act as new agents spreading updated images of Ireland or will it reinforce previous stereotypes? At a time where film induced tourism has become a valuable product of the tourism industry²⁷, should Irish tourism authorities watch out over ideas that could be used in their future marketing campaign to avoid that other stereotypes held in films do not become ideas associated with Ireland for the new generation?

²⁷ See Visit Scotland, *Insight Department: The Outlander Effect and Tourism*, Edinburgh, 2020, retrieved <https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/research-papers-2/outlander-effect-2019-updated-february-2020.pdf> on 2 March 2020.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Table: Cohort size and gender together with successive filters

Filter	Respondents details		
	Total	Men	Women
	154	32	122
1) Incomplete survey	150	31	119
2) Geographic origin missing or inappropriate*	142	28	113
3) First-year only**	122	24	98

* First year students who studied outside metropolitan France (or who did not properly answered the question regarding their previous school year location).

** Respondents were excluded either because they were repeating students or coming for a previous year in another college or diploma.

Appendix 2

Survey structure and questions (in *French*)

Section 1 : Profil

Sexe

Age

Quelle est votre année de naissance ?

Quel est votre couple de langues ?

Dans quel département avez-vous effectué vos années lycée
(Première et Terminale) ?

Est-ce votre première année dans l'enseignement
supérieur ?

Section 2 : Association idées Irlande²⁸

Quelles sont les trois premières choses que vous associez à
l'Irlande ?

Si d'autres choses vous viennent en tête, pouvez-vous les
rajouter ci-dessous ?

Section 3 : Informations complémentaires profil

Etes-vous déjà allé(e) en Irlande ?

Si oui, pouvez-vous m'indiquer les raisons (voyage scolaire,
vacances, etc.), l'année et la durée de votre séjour ?

Pouvez-vous me dire les lieux ou attractions que vous avez
visités ?

Si vous n'êtes jamais allé(e) en Irlande, pourriez-vous
m'expliquer pourquoi ?

Section 4 : Connaissances diverses sur l'Irlande

Citez-moi au moins une chose (ou plusieurs) sur l'histoire
de l'Irlande.

Où avez-vous appris ces choses sur l'histoire de l'Irlande ?
(*exemples : lycée, lecture, site web ; voyage ; merci de
préciser*)

Pourriez-vous me citer un auteur ou un livre irlandais ?

Si oui, merci d'indiquer ci-dessous le nom de cet auteur, de
ce livre (*plusieurs éléments sont possibles*)

Pourriez-vous m'indiquer le titre d'un film irlandais ?

Si oui, vous pouvez inscrire votre/vos film(s) ci-dessous :

Pourriez-vous me donner le nom d'un groupe de musique

²⁸ Next year, a question will try to find out if respondents know where Ireland is. In the late 1960s, a study done in France showed that French people did not know where exactly Ireland stood geographically, and that people had difficulties between North and South (at a time of the Troubles though). See D. Dumortier, "L'Image de l'Irlande", *op. cit.*, p. 86.

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irlandais ?

Si oui, Vous pouvez inscrire votre/vos groupe(s) ou
chanteur(s) ci-dessous :

Section 5 : Conclusion

Enfin, souhaiteriez-vous visiter l'Irlande dans les
prochaines années ?

Si oui, pourriez-vous m'expliquer brièvement les raisons
pour lesquelles vous souhaiteriez visiter l'Irlande ?

Si vous souhaitez ajouter quelque chose d'autre, vous
pouvez le faire ci-dessous :

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Appendix 3

Ranks	Category 1	Main occurrence	Category 2	Main occurrence	Category 3	Main occurrence
1	Saints/Folklore, the festive and traditions	Saint Patrick, or Saint Patrick's day (25/34)	Saints/Folklore, the festive and traditions	Saint Patrick, or Saint Patrick's day (10/25), leprechauns (6/25)	Saints/Folklore, the festive and traditions	Saint Patrick, or Saint Patrick's day (13/23)
2	Geography/Capital city	Dublin (14/17), Belfast (1/17)	Drinks	12/19 for beer, and 2/19 explicitly on Guinness	Landscape	9/17 hits on landscape, and 3 Connemara lake/area
3	Drinks	Beer (11/15) + extra 1 Guinness	General remarks	2/15 each for sheep and weather	Drinks	11/17 for beer
4	History	(12 hits) but no real conclusive occurrence of a specific term	Symbols	12/15 on shamrock/clover, 2 on flag	Symbols	14/15 on shamrock/clover
5	Symbols	11 hits, 10/11 on clover	Geography/Capital city	7/12 for Dublin	General remarks	13 hits
6	Sports	Rugby (8/10), 1 Gaelic Football and 1 McGregor	History	4/12 on potato famine/blight	Sports	6/10 on rugby, 3/10 on McGregor
7	Landscape	4/8 min.	Landscape	11 hits with plane, landscape with or no hills, and 1 Connemara lake	Geography/Capital city	9/9 on Dublin
7	The Green colour	Green (4/5) but no specificity	The Green colour	Green 6/6	History	3/5 potato blight

Appendix 4

Figure 1: Source of knowledge – (by reply preference)

