

FERGUS ALLEN



To guard against sentimentality and self-serving intuitions, I'll respond to the question by first turning it on its head. Would my written work have been significantly different if, given the same parents, the first third of my life had been spent in England and the remainder in Ireland, instead of the other way round? Of course if that had been the case I should not be the person I am now, though genes and parental influence might have had their say. In time I might have turned myself into the simulacrum of an Irishman, but I should be someone on whose childhood and early adulthood Irish people and society and townscapes and landscapes and weather had made no mark. It's this early imprinting that gives the real sense of nationality and identity, and if in my case it had taken place in, say, Surrey rather than in Dublin and Waterford, the deep memories from which, consciously or not, one draws the images that breathe a spark into one's better work would have been very different.

Early impressions are said to surface again later in life, and if I look at recent pieces of mine, I notice that more of them are about or have to do with Ireland than used to be the case. And while it may not be apparent to the reader, the tones and cadences of the language (English) as I heard it spoken in my youth, and as I hear it now in my mind's ear, run in my head as I attempt to write (though I don't write in "an accent"). I like to think I have carried it off successfully now and then, but find it hard to meet commissions to write on specifically "English", as distinct from here-and-now or more exotic, topics. If it has to be done, it calls for more than the usual amount of work with the forebrain, and unless this is perfused with stuff that gushes up from earlier strata, such poems can lie dead on the page.

I doubt the existence of *Homo sapiens var. Hiberniae*, but equally I do not believe that anyone who has not spent his or her formative years in Ireland can claim to be an Irish writer, however "Irish" their *déraciné* parents may insist they are. And, of course, *mutatis mutandis*. Everyone has been labelled in marking ink by the time they are twenty-five.