

"St Patrick's Day Down Under"

by John Wright<john@emigrant.ie>

In Australia, the Land of the Long Weekend, we readily include St Patrick's Day in our busy round of unofficial engagements that take us away from work.

We probably do it all wrong; just as the Irish themselves might have the wrong idea about us. So first, let me get rid of the misconception that all Australian men are like "Crocodile Dundee". In fact, most Aussie men are offended by this suggestion - that character is much more talkative than most Australians and if anything is a bit effeminate.

Just as the average Irishman might sit down in the evening with his wife, your typical Aussie, yes, will spend most evenings either wrestling a croc, or get a buffalo to lie down by pointing their index and little fingers at them. But they do this only to relax, because by day their routine is considerably more arduous and involves activities such as working in banks, supermarkets and so on.

But, back to St Patrick's Day. Put it this way: when one of my daughters' pen-pals, Eimear, in Cork wrote and told them the way St Patrick's Day is celebrated in Ireland, none of it rang a bell. Generally, Aussies are quite happy not knowing correct procedure; that way you can make it up as you go along. And that's why I assumed that lobbing potatoes into a crate was an old Irish custom.

It was when I talked to that rare species that frequents 'Irish' pubs down under (people actually born in Ireland) that I discovered that, even in Australia, there could be deeper little frictions about what it's supposed to be about.

Mairtin Macmathuna was founder of the Irish Association in Tasmania (the island of Tasmania being $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of Ireland). "It pisses us off when people put green colouring in the food," he says non-committally. He's also incensed by the latest Irish Association flyer announcing there'll be an Irish joke-telling competition this year. He says it's bad enough when the non-Irish suggest it. He presumably hasn't been called a two-headed Tasmanian yet!

I asked him about the Guinness and he said: "it's not as good as in Ireland, despite a big marketing campaign by Guinness Australia saying it was. It's more bitter and not as smooth." To me, it tastes perfect; so the Guinness in Ireland must be quite a drink. "Have you ever done anything on St Patrick's Day you regretted?" I asked him, and I could hear a woman in the background start laughing and him asking her what she was laughing about.

Mairtin's St Patrick's Day generally starts at 6am at Hobart's New Sydney Hotel (apparently the most 'true blue' of the local 'Irish' pubs) with breakfast. "It's a fry-up with black pudding, Irish soda bread, potato bread," he says, "washed down with a little shot of whiskey and a pint of Guinness (first one free). That's how we start the day, and it goes downhill after that."

I asked the owner, Gary Lawrence, what his customers were like on this special day. "They're all over the place," he says, "and most of them aren't Irish." He seems unaware of a report in the local paper, "The Mercury" a year or two ago, quoting one of his barmaids (on a working holiday from Ireland) as saying that people who weren't born in Ireland shouldn't be celebrating St Patrick's Day anyway. The reporter said how he'd tried to hide the shamrock on his T-shirt he'd bought on a recent trip.

Of course, when it falls on a Sunday, there are always the sad few who forget, and find themselves sneaking from the pub back into work around eleven, and wondering where everyone is. An ideal time to tell your boss where he can stick his job; when you're a bit full and you can't find him.

After morning Mass (Mairtin says it shouldn't be in a Catholic church because it shows bias), John McArdle, the current President of the Irish Association, says they "then 'go on a tear' around the pubs, wave the flag, have a liquid lunch. Then it's traditional Irish music with musicians wandering in off the street and a concert in the evening."

George Callaghan, Irish-born artist, who lives in Hobart and exhibits his astonishing paintings in Ireland, says there can be a hidden agenda to these harmless events that the public isn't aware of. When he emigrated down under in the sixties, he says he was "happy to assimilate" and describes himself as "a citizen of the world." In more recent years, he hasn't liked being told to 'act Irish' all the time, "but I do think people should be allowed to tell Irish jokes," George says.

Like most people in Australia, I, myself, stumbled into St Patrick's Day by accident. Unlike most of the capital cities, where they have parades, in Hobart they don't. For us, it's usually lunch time; you park your car and hear a DJ and loud Irish music coming across from Irish Murphy's, where they also celebrate "Half Way to St Patrick's Day" in September. A few blocks up is Bridie O'Reilly's. "These pubs are chains, like McDonalds," says Mairtin.

The DJ's calling out on the mike for people to come and read something Irish on stage. Our 13 year-old in the back says: "I learnt an Irish poem."

"You did?" I ask nervously. And she's off, with me as chaperone.

Bold as brass, she stands there and says it and gets thunderous applause in the smoky interior. She wins a beautiful Guinness pint glass that she's too young to use. With a big grin, she hands it to me and I've had to drink out of it ever since. Next on was an Indian bloke with a very Indian accent, who put on what he thought was a great Irish accent to tell an Irish joke. It was one of those long ones, and the audience was in fits. It wasn't the joke that was funny. They couldn't understand a word he was saying.

The next year it was the potato-throwing. You had to try and lob a spud into a crate about 5 metres away. A mob of drinkers and hecklers gathered to take part, egged on by Dave Noonan. "The crate, not me!" he'd shout to keep some in order.

One bloke who did win was shouting to a camera crew: "would you like to film the winner?" People in the crowd laughed and shouted back: "Loser!" At the end of it, the

man with the bag of spuds looked at my wife with the kids, and said to her: "would you like some spuds? Looks like you need it." We even won some CD's. This year we plan to win a CD player.

Then Dave the DJ got some reluctant-looking people to do some Irish dancing. Comments came, like: "No, you don't lift your arms!" and "Michael Flatley, eat your heart out!" Dave tried to lure an Irish dancing teacher to perform, but she wouldn't. He started pleading mournfully with her to come back, as she walked away. She turned to smile an embarrassed 'no', but his pleas got louder and louder, and more people turned to look. "It's like calling for my lover to return!" he confided to the crowd. By now, she was two streets away and still turning to laugh.

The great thing about St Patrick's Day in Australia, of course, is the opportunity to meet real Irish people. Last year we were sheltering from the rain in a locked doorway next to the pub's proper (and almost identical) entrance, and a big elderly Irish woman in a caftan and walking with a walking-frame came along.

Clearly, this woman had special needs; an incredible thirst, for a start, because when she arrived at our doorway (there was plenty of room for her), she almost threw herself on top of us. Thinking she might need a hand negotiating the steps at the real entrance, we said: "is it the pub you're after?" "What do you think I'm doing here?" she snapped.

It's little multicultural moments like these that bring us all that little bit closer.