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## THE LUCK OF THE IRISH?

March 17, 1999



In the third and final part of the interview, Mr. McCourt discusses "Irish chic" and reflects upon St. Patrick's Day.

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*A conversation with Frank McCourt.*

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Brian Lamb of C-

MR. SMITH: The--I'm interested in, in the phenomenon, these days, of what you could call "Irish chic." Suddenly, it's very in to be Irish. There are plays, there are films, there's music. River Dance is a huge success. It's flowering in the arts, and you've, you've contributed to it. I wonder what you think about the sudden chicness of Irishness and how it contrasts with what it was like when you first came here in 1950.

MR. MCCOURT: It's completely--the Ireland that we have now is completely different, because we have--we had a very repressive, inhibited Ireland. Poor Ireland. That this, there was good stuff going on. The storytelling. The language was still paramount. We didn't have television, radio, and the rest of it. So we resorted to the mouth. The mouth was the main organ in Ireland and the population was decreasing. So now, now things have changed. I think it's travel and music and communications, including television, and the, the church has lost its, has lost its grip, completely. That now, now there's this free expression. When I was a kid, there was censorship of movies. There still is but it's not practiced that heavily. Everything was censored. Hemingway was banned. Frank O'Connor, an Irish writer, was banned. Joyce was banned. And you couldn't--if you wanted to read the good stuff, find out what was banned in Ireland. But now it's changed. The young people are traveling. They'll come over here. They'll go out to Long Island. They'll clip hedges and bus tables, and they're --they're not going to go back and be told what to do by the--by these priests. They, --the priests are--some of them who've devoted themselves to charity and God, and the rest of it, were all--are now out of touch. They can't tell the young what to do anymore. Now they have--you know, Ireland, have a divorce law. Ten year--if you had told me 10 years ago Ireland would have a divorce law, I would have bet you a thousand dollars that wasn't gonna happen, well to--well into the next century. Now they have it. People are traveling. People are reading. People are watching satellite television, so--

MR. SMITH: So do you think it's that new openness in Ireland that has made things Irish suddenly so fashionable

SPAN talks with McCourt about his first book abroad, including here?

AnnOnline hosts a RealAudio interview with the author

MR. McCOURT: Well, it, it was a, a 100 years ago, there was an Irish literary renaissance led by Yates, and Lady Gregory, later on Sean O'Casey. But that--also, there's the traffic between the two countries. The Irish and the Irish-American. Their relationship has not always been serene, because there was a--there was a tendency for the Irish to look down on Irish-Americans. They'd go over there with their loud ties and their cameras, and say, "Yeah, but--well, where is this farm that I--my father was born in?" And there was a lot of sneering. We sneered at them, and their music. We sneered at Harrigan and Hart [ph] and who throw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder. We did admire the Fighting 69th. We did admire Notre Dame, you know, the Four Horsemen--we did admire, because the Irish did everything that needed to be done in this country. And then when we put a man in the White House--my God--that was the peak of achievement for the Irish and the Irish-Americans. But now the Irish-Americans are beginning to discover their own value, their own worth. You know, for a poetic people, we've had no Irish-Americans poets. One or two major Irish--there was Eugene O'Neill as a dramatic, James T. Farrell as a novelist, and now there's a new wave of--yeah--Jimmy Breslin and Pete Hamill. They're the old. There's a new wave behind them.

MR. SMITH: And William Kennedy and Frank McCourt.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah, Kennedy. Yeah. Well, me, I'm not a novelist. I wish I were. But all, all--this, this traffic now--and Michael Flatley goes from Chicago over to Ireland and wins every possible dance contest, and the younger musicians are going over there, and all of this is facilitated by the English language. You don't have this going on between Germans and German-Americans, or Italians. They're inhibited by the language. So we have, we have to thank the English for giving us the language, in the long run.

[Laughter.]

### **ST. Patrick's Day.**

MR. SMITH: Final thought. St. Patrick's Day. It's, it's different--

[Laughter.]

MR. SMITH: Why do you laugh?

MR. McCOURT: Well, I laugh. This--the whole business of St. Patrick's Day. This is a foreigner who imposed, a--an alien, an alien religion on us. But I suppose he brought us civilization and culture. The former governor of New York, Hugh Carey, said of the St. Patrick's Day parade, that we--"the Irish march up Fifth and stagger down Third." That was the stereotype for years till they got

worried, and had to cut out all this drinking on the side streets. But the, the parade in New York is very rigid. I'm not--I've been to the parade in Chicago, which is Fellini, -- not the one downtown near the--where they turn the river green, but on the South Side. And when I was a kid in Ireland, there were--there was nothing. There was a holy day of obligation. You went to mass and the pubs were closed. It was pretty grim. Now they've got all these young American high school students, girls with their short skirts, and it's disgraceful!

[Laughter.]

MR. SMITH: And you love it

MR. McCOURT: Oh, I love it! We all love it! They've lightened it up. It's, it's -- moving away, in a sense, from the origins--like Christmas. St. Patrick bringing the religion to Ireland. This is what we should celebrate. This is what we did when we were kids, and we, we would wear sprigs of real shamrock on that day, and remember what it was, and sing, "Hail, Glorious St. Patrick, dear saint of our isle, on us, thy dear children, look down with a smile." We did that, and the, the rest of it was a holy day, but now it's -- it's turning into a 4th of July, practically.

MR. SMITH: I've heard you say, and half-seriously, that St. Patrick ruined Ireland.

MR. McCOURT: I used to think that, in a way, but he, he -- when I realized it was the church that was our window on Europe, our cultural window, because it was through the church we, we gained some knowledge of the music of the -- the Gregorian chant, the architecture, the art. I mean, if you were an Italian Catholic and you went to church, geez, you were surrounded by glorious art, the architecture, the painting.

MR. SMITH: Sure; yeah

MR. McCOURT: The mu--we didn't have that. We, we-- we had--we had our folk music. We had no window on Europe. So all windows were provided by Rome and Hollywood. So we--we saw America and we saw, we saw Europe, and that--that was our culture. And then, now, this, this culture that's now this so-called Celtic revival, the boom was beginning when I was a kid, I think. A pride in the music. We, we dismissed the music. We wanted to listen to--I wanted to listen to Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday.

MR. SMITH: And now the greatest irony is that it's chic. It's in

MR. McCOURT: Oh, it's in. Now we're chic; we're in. We have to be careful. You have to be careful when you're in, 'cause you, you could get lost in there.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Give a final thing, give us a sense of when we'll see the film of "Angela's Ashes" and the book, the new book

MR. McCOURT: Ah, the book that I'm finishing is coming out on September 21st, and "Angela's Ashes", film is, is coming out on November 24th. And if I--from what I know, what I've seen, it, it's going to--it's going to make a big impression, because this Emily Watson is sublime. And Robert Caroline [ph] who plays my father is, is--he has that edgy character that my father had so--and Alan Parker who directed "The Commitments," he said to me in Dublin, "We'll--we'll be true to you."

MR. SMITH: Frank, thanks very much

MR. McCOURT: Thank you.

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