

# Irish Joke

*by*

**Landeg White**

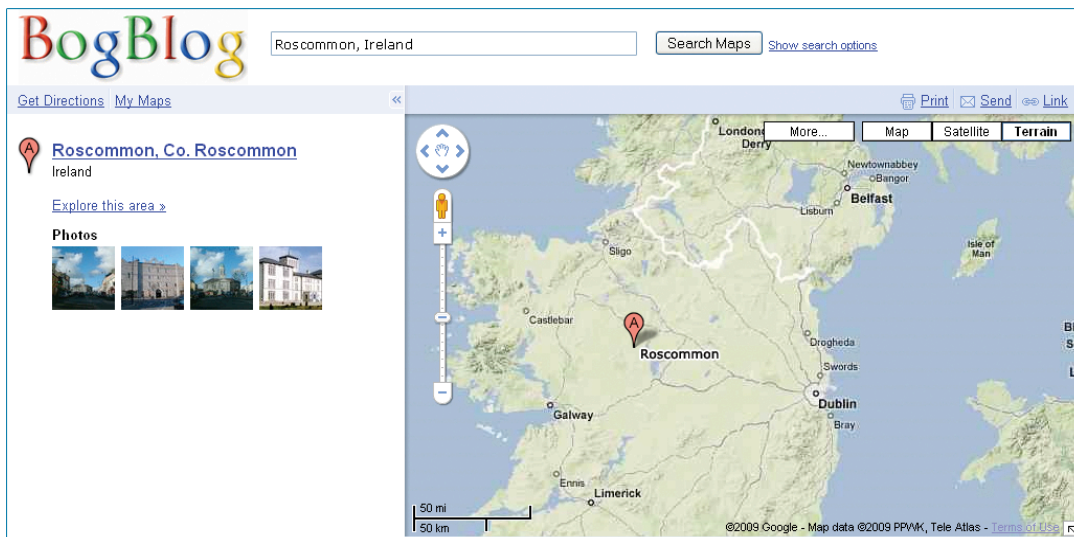
**Tourist: Can you tell me the best way to Dublin?**

**Irishman: Well if I was going to Dublin, I wouldn't start from here.**



## Chapter 1

My best guess is that it all began two years back on the night of the August new moon. That's the night when all along the western fringe of Europe, from Sligo to Portugal's Cape St Vincent, astronomers and lovers gather on the cliff tops to watch out for shooting stars. Months afterwards, when reporters like myself were trying to establish how the great drift began, some of those who had kept watch in Galway, on that sultry, cloudless night, claimed to have seen a bigger star than usual burning up in the heavens beyond Blacksod bay – or was it the Arran Islands?



Two nights later, there was a minor earthquake. It was too small to excite researchers at the seismic unit at Edinburgh University, who recorded only that the epicentre was in Roscommon. But it was felt by Fergus O'Malley, out poaching in Gregory's Wood. All the dogs and cockerels in Ireland began barking and crowing at him in unison and gave him the fright of his life. It was felt by his sister, Bridget O'Toole, who was born in Fermanagh, with a little burst of girlish optimism. For the first time in seventeen years, after bearing him nine children, she felt the earth move as her husband climbed on board her ample body. Then the rattling of the crockery on the dresser brought her to her senses. It was just another bomb. 'God bless the Provos', she sighed, forgetting about the Peace Process, and went back to sleep while he finished.

The earth never moved for Mrs O'Toole again. She was widowed nineteen months later when her husband, on a coach trip with the St Mary Oblates, tried to jump the gap between Ireland and France. His body was never recovered so, back in Fermanagh and still girlishly optimistic, she keeps a candle in the window facing Normandy to light his way home.

But Fergus O'Malley, if he'd the wit or the will, could have been famous as the first man in the world to realize something very fishy was going on. This is my metaphor, not his, for by day he hunted legally as an inshore fisherman and his tiny boat *Kitty O'Shea* was his first love. Every summer when the Atlantic swell subsided sufficiently to allow him to lay lobster pots in the lea of the cliffs on Achill Island, he would try his luck. Two weeks after his fright in Gregory's Wood, though he didn't make the connection, he was hauling up his pots when he noticed something very odd.

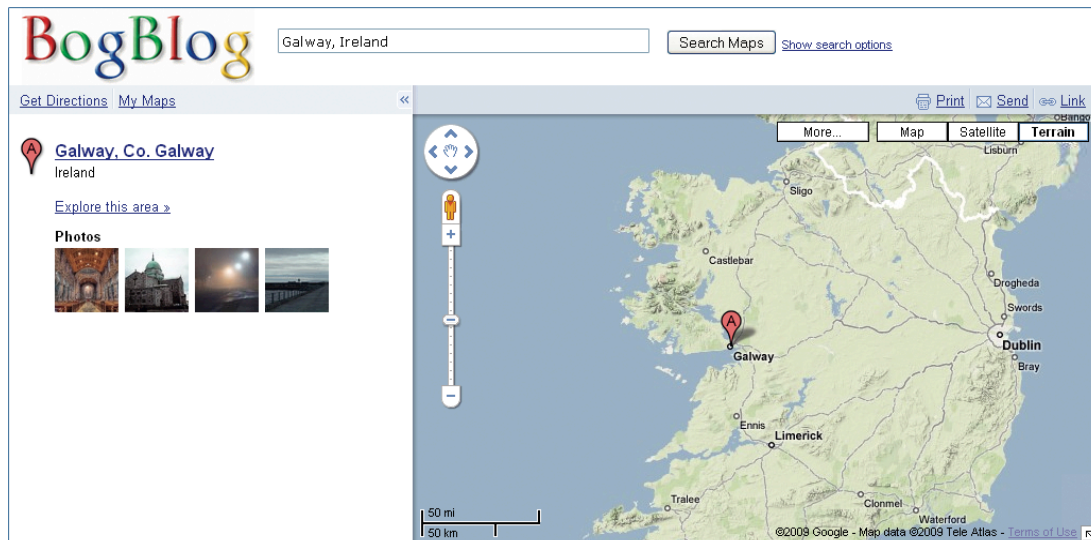
'How about that, now?' he said, he said very slowly. He said it again three times then added, 'That's a very peculiar thing'.

The swell threatened to fling his tiny boat against the cliff and he was too busy with his boathook to investigate thoroughly. But each time the waves retreated and his boat dropped like a lift between floors, he could see a narrow ledge about five metres below the surface. He re-set his lobster pots which were all empty. And chugged back to the bay.

Fergus O'Malley was a discreet man. He knew about Seamus the Famous because that Swedish Nobel business had been all over the local papers, and if someone had quoted him the line 'Whatever you say, say nothing', he would have embraced it like a religion. He checked his lobster pots again next day, not expecting to catch any but to confirm what he had seen. But even when, a fortnight later, the ledge was six feet wide and beginning to be eroded at the outer edge, and when he knew perfectly well other fishermen drinking their stout in *The Ballycross Arms* were aware something strange was going on, he kept his counsel. Whatever you say, say nothing.

In the last days of October, a gale blew up from the west. It was the fag end of hurricane Hilary which had torn up Cuba and flattered the coast of Florida before

tracking the Gulf Stream to the north east. For three days, it screamed across the cliff top, keeping even poachers like Fergus O'Malley cowering in their cottages while the smoke from their peat fires billowed down their chimneys, making their eyes stream. When it blew itself out, the underwater shelf extending seawards was fully twelve metres across.



By mid-November, even quite small boats had to anchor offshore close to the trawlers. The cockle pickers in Galway Bay had to wade an extra twenty metres to find soft sand and could never be sure of their footing, English ornithologists who came to observe the annual migrations of grey lag geese commented the birds were feeding further out to sea than in recent years.

Everywhere along the coast, it was the same. Where it was rock, it was five metres below sea level and smooth as marble, though rounded and gullied at the edge. Where it was sand, it was ribbed and eroded at roughly the same depth.

It was Sean O'Toole, a vigorous father of nine and not yet lost between Ireland and France, who questioned Father O'Glan in the snugery of *The Ballymore Arms*.

‘Was it Dublin you were at this Tuesday, father? Or was it Cork?’

Part of the problem was that nothing seemed to be happening elsewhere in Ireland. Only along the west coast were they getting their platform. Or terrace, or whatever it was.

‘It was Dublin, my son. And afterwards it was Cork’.

‘And how was it in these parts?’

‘Very settled’, said Father O’Glagan.

A sigh went round the snuggerly

‘Very stable and sinful’.

Attendance at mass that Sunday was larger than usual, just to be on the safe side. They heard Father O’Glagan preach on the works of God and the works of the Devil. The works of Man could be obedient to the natural law of God, or they could be against the natural law, making him Satan’s ally. Most Sundays, when Father O’Glagan went on about natural law, they thought about the condoms in the bedside cabinet and dozed off. Today, he dropped hints about the rich and their pleasure craft.

Was what was happened connected with the rumoured marina at Tralee?

Then something really worrying occurred. Five men in dark suits arrived in a sleek Audi. They had travelled round the coast from Cork. One of them from his theodolite was a surveyor. They peered through binoculars from the cliff top and they paced along the beach, giving the spectators with their pints of stout gut-felt pleasure when one of them got caught by a wave, soaking his city shoes and turn-ups. They commandeered Fergus’s boat, not paying him a cent, and toured the bay, prodding underwater with his boathook at intervals. Then they drove off to the north.

At last, the talking began.

‘It’s a breakwater’, said O’Toole.

‘A breakwater? The length of Ireland. Who would be after building such a thing?’

‘It’s not only Ireland. It’s a European matter. I bet you it’s happening all the way down. France, Spain, Portugal. The whole coast. Donegal to Gibraltar. To stop the Atlantic causing all this commotion.’

‘What’s good for Spain is no blessing for Ireland’

Donal Collins, a student down for the vacation from the University of Limerick, was felt to have scored with this. Spanish trawlers were not popular in Ireland.

‘Just Ireland, then’, O’Toole conceded.

‘In the name of God, for what purpose?’

‘Tourism’.

‘And aren’t we getting all the tourists any sane Irishman would desire? The best thing the boys ever did was drive away the tourists.’

O’Toole was not to be diverted by this attack on the provos.

‘We get Yankees looking for their great-grandfather’s potato patch. We get English professors with their summer schools about that man who slandered us our women walked around in nightshirts, John Synge or whatever. And conferences about that protestant Yeats. What about good Irish catholics? What about families that have children. Where can they go? They all go to Marbella and the Costa del Sol. It’s too wild for them here. With the breakwater, now, they’ll be camping on the beaches and the kiddies, bless ‘em, can play safe’.

No one believed a word of this. But it was felt to be ingenious. It was also felt someone should cap it.

‘BulHe was a distant nephew of Gregory the former landowner, and he had lived in the United States.

‘Bullshit, saving your grace, father. What it is, it’s a motorway.’

‘A motorway? Underwater?’

‘That’s just the foundations, just the foundations, like. It’ll be up on stilts like the roads they have in Boston when it’s all completed.’

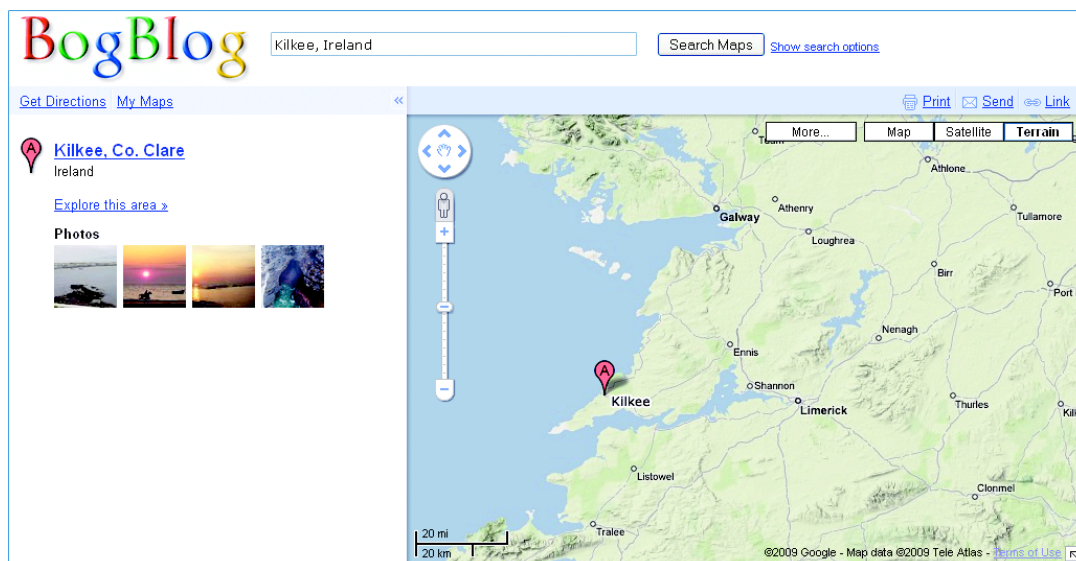
There was a pause in the drinking as everyone contemplated an overhead motorway all along the west coast. They didn’t like what they saw.

‘I don’t like it either’, said Gregory. ‘But that’s progress. An outer-ring road, that’s what they call them. And it doesn’t use up any land. Any greenbelt. So it’s environmentally sound.’

‘What about greenbelt sea?’

‘Greenbelt sea’, scoffed Gregory. ‘There’s no such animal.’

That night, fog rolled in from the west. The dark was impenetrable and morning brought clouds hugging the earth so close that hedges were invisible at ten paces. It lasted a week, with only occasional glimpses of a watery sun, so much longer than usual that it displaced all talk about what was happening off the coast. Then an icy wind set in from the north, blowing away the fog and sending long grey rollers in uniform lines smashing against the cliffs. One night, in mid-December, they heard ships signalling with their mournful sirens and the talk in *The Ballymore Arms* was of oil pollution and of the handsome compensation they would get from Brussels for the spoiling of the fishing.



Afterwards, there were the two stories that got into the newspapers, though the first only in the Irish press so that, once again, it was difficult to make connections. Throughout Ireland, the so-called miracle of the Dunmullin well had everyone gossiping. The well was in the garden of a cottage on the road to Kilkee and it hadn't been used for twenty-three years since Duncan O'Shea died. He left the property to be divided between his own sister, who still lived there, and his daughter who was married to a policeman and lived in Cork. The problem was the line dividing the property ran straight through the middle of the well, and the two ladies couldn't agree on the coast of repairing the parapet and the winding gear. Miss O'Shea said the cost should be shared since they each owned half the well. He niece in Cork, or some said it was the policeman, declared she only drank piped

water these days. One day, when the cottage was hers, she would see it was connected to the mains in Kilkee.

This comment made Miss O’Shea very cross – unreasonably since she was already sixty-eight years old and her niece a mere twenty-nine. But for twenty-three years she stubbornly took her water from the village stand-pipe and the well deteriorated further.

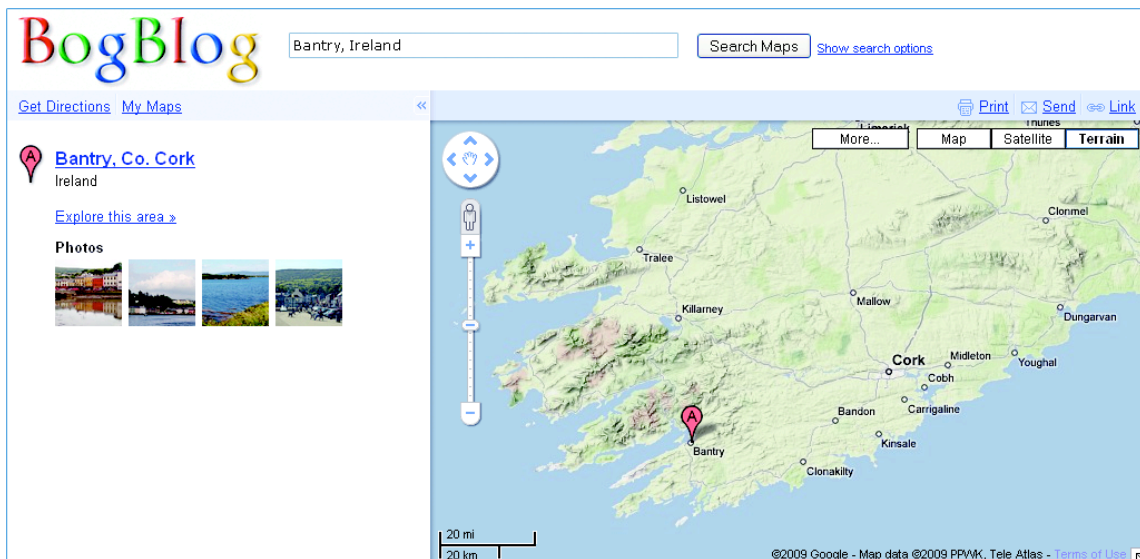
On New Year’s eve, two toddlers called Jamie and Kitty MacGowan climbed the broken parapet and fell inside well while their mother was offering ancient Miss O’Shea the compliments of the season.

It was some time before anyone realised this because the children had simply disappeared. Miss O’Shea said over and over again ‘No, it couldn’t be the well, it couldn’t be. I haven’t had water from it these twenty-three years.’ As though that meant no one could fall down it. By the time the fire brigade arrived from Milltown, the crowd in Miss O’Shea’s garden included the priest, the doctor and a lawyer on holiday from Belfast, musing on a possible suit for negligence. But when the fireman was lowered into the dark, he found the toddlers completely unharmed, playing on some soft peat some five metres down.

‘A miracle’, declared the priest.

‘It’s silted up,’ said the lawyer.

Hugging her babies, Mrs MacGowan agreed with the priest. And that was the story in the *Kilkee Bugle*, and next day in the *Irish Times*.



No one connected it with the human remains washed up two weeks later in Bantry Bay. In point of fact, people were too puzzled as to how a skeleton in half-armour could be suddenly washed up by the tide to make any connections. The bones lay there on the sand, with the legs missing, the ribs enclosed by a breastplate and the skull leering through a visor while the bones of the right hand held the rusted hilt of a sword. Historians from Galway University identified the armour as Spanish, and even the *New York Times* covered the story as well as the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. In 1588, they all agreed, the surviving galleons of the Spanish Armada were driven around the north of Scotland, and many were wrecked in the Orkneys and along the west coast of Ireland.

It was a timely reminder, said the *Mail* and the *Express*, of what happened last time foreigners tried to dragoon England into joining a united Europe. You can see the unfortunate *conquistador* in a special display cabinet in the Dublin Museum.

With all this excitement, it was early February when Fergus O'Malley next took out his little boat and was rewarded with a catch of sea bass and codling. Checking the underwater ledge, he found it much the same as before. It was still four to five metres across and smooth as marble, though the seaward side was fluted and eaten away.

Whatever was happening seemed to have stopped.

True, mad Eddy burst into The Ballymore Arms on Saturday night, claiming to have walked waist deep all the way to Eigh Island and back at low tide without once missing his footing. But that was mad Eddy all over. No one would have been surprised if he'd married a mermaid half way across.

Whatever was happening had happened.

## Chapter 2

It was the Sinn Féin member for East Antrim, the small but vocal Brendan O'Casey, who first made the great drift a political matter. I don't know if you've ever been to Stormont, home of the Northern Ireland Assembly? It's a vast building with many echoes, and for visitors and reporters the debates are not easy to follow. I mention this because the story broke very strangely. I wasn't there myself on the day, but I know what it's like for reporters, how easily you can lose concentration in those endless exchanges of the same old insults. So I'm not surprised matters got confused.

O'Casey was complaining the country was adrift. He didn't like the direction Northern Ireland was taking. Every day that passed, Stormont was getting closer to Westminster. It wasn't just politics, and it wasn't just Northern Ireland that was affected. The whole of Ireland was on the move. The Irish Sea was being abolished, and Irish independence was suffering its gravest threat since 1920.

Of course, all this was taken as metaphor, and increasingly dreary metaphor at that. When he slipped in the claim that he knew for a fact Ireland was fifty meters closer to England than it had been a month ago, it might have passed unnoticed had not First minister Ian Paisley snorted aloud and slapped his thigh in amusement. This got O'Casey agitated.

'No Irishman will stand by while the Irish Sea is drained like a duck pond. The sea is our protector against British perfidy. We fought long and hard, and we will fight again!'

This produced uproar, and the reporters woke up to the fact that Sinn Féin was threatening to return to its campaign of violence. So that was the story that broke next day. 'PEACE PROCESS DEAD', screamed the *Express*. 'FORGET THE BALLOT; BACK TO THE BULLET', roared the *Mail*. The *Daily Telegraph* reckoned Sinn Féin had exposed it was indeed the political wing of a still intact IRA.

Gerry Adams was quick to respond. At a hastily summoned press conference, he insisted the Peace Process was on course. The IRA no longer

existed. The weapons had been de-commissioned. There would be no return to violence. As for Brendan O'Casey, he understood his old friend had already issued a statement clarifying that he had been misunderstood. His words had been taken out of context.

'You can't be serious, Mr Adams', said the *Guardian* reporter.

'I truly am', said Gerry.

Then, a little irritated that the *Guardian* of all papers should doubt his credentials, he remarked, 'You'll all miss what Brenda really said.'

Which was?

'We're fifty metres closer to England than we were last month'.

This time, nobody laughed.

'We've known for a while something very odd is happening. But how and why and who's responsible, we don't know.'

He refused to take further questions.

So the story was out. Later that day, the Irish Taoiseach gave an off-the-record briefing to selected reporters. Yes, the government of the Republic was aware something very odd was happening. Ireland, the whole of Ireland, seemed to be mysteriously on the move.

'It started', said the Taoiseach, 'when pilots landing at Dublin airport complained their landing instructions were bringing them in a few feet off course. The runways weren't where they were supposed to be. But when the control tower checked with the GPS, they couldn't confirm it. If the airport had shifted, it was well within the GPS margin of error. All we knew for sure was that something was wrong'

'What's a GPS?' asked the man from the *Irish Times*.

'You check that out for yourself', said the Taoiseach, scornfully. 'I'm not your science teacher'.

'But then', he continued, 'we got a report from Arcon International that disturbed me. Arcon have that new zinc mine at Galmoy, along with other

investments. Mining's been one of our boom industries over the past twenty years, one of the keys to our economic success. So any complaint from that sector we take very seriously.'

'The peculiar thing was, the mine itself was perfectly okay. It was the entrance that kept shifting. Not by much, but enough to make them wonder what the devil was going on. Their drilling was also affected. You know, they're constantly exploring fresh seams – two years back, we extended their rights because the results were so promising. But now they found if they hit something one week, drilling in the same spot a month later there was nothing there.'

'Do you mean,' said the man from *An Phoblacht* slowly, 'it's only the surface that's shifting?'

'That seems to be the case', said the Taoiseach. 'Now, look, two things. First, there's absolutely no reason to be alarmist. The movements are small, in global terms, and so far everything's under control. If they continue, we'll have certain problems with matters like sewage and water supplies. But we've got matters in hand.

'Secondly, I don't believe there's anything remotely political about this. It's not something the British or the DUP could possibly be plotting. As for Mr O'Casey's armed struggle, if the IRA do still have caches of weapons, they're going to have the devil's own job locating them.

'No, this is a natural phenomenon of limited impact that we simply don't understand. If you want a political angle, you could say that for once all Ireland's proceeding in the same direction.'

'What direction is that?'

'Very, *very* slightly to the east. But I see no significance in that.'

'Most Irishmen would prefer to be heading west', said the man from *An Phoblacht*.

'What? Cross the Atlantic and become the fifty-first American state? Now you're really dreaming.'

‘Inexplicable’, said the *Guardian* next morning.

‘Unaccountable’, said the *Times*.

‘Irish Madness’, said the *Sun*.

These weren’t good headlines and the piece was buried away in the lesser pages. That’s how I first came to hear of the great drift, as a sort of silly-season story out of season. I was a sub-editor on the Liverpool Echo (*Have you had a decko / At the Liverpool Echo?*), and the stuff appeared on my desk as a story without an angle.

Politics? Only a goon like Brendan O’Casey could believe such any such thing. As the Taoiseach said, all Ireland was in the same boat on this issue.

Curious facts? My granddad was an addict of Ripley’s *Believe It or Not!*, a syndicated comic strip with stories like ‘Jay Barr of Cape Coral, Florida, makes a 150 mile flight 10 times a year to Kissimmee just to buy hamburgers!’, or ‘Researchers from mid-Sweden University used electronically conductive inks and printable speakers to create paper that talks!’. He used to read them out to me when I was little, exclamation marks and all!

But the trouble with these ‘sunshine from cucumbers’ stories is that, these days, they’ll all too likely to be true.

I rang the Geology Department at Liverpool University to ask about plate tectonics and continental drift. They agreed the earth’s great land masses have moved around, and are still moving. But not at the rate of fifty metres a month and not in fifteen foot slices. Scientifically, this was as the *Sun* said, some sort of Irish caper.

So I ended up like my illustrious colleagues on the broadsheets, calling it ‘Bizarre’.

Months later, when I started looking further into the matter, I found the Irish press had taken the Taoiseach’s briefing much more seriously. It was those remarks about mining and about water and sewerage that got them thinking. Not that they concerned themselves much about the engineering. Sewage problems would be reported if and where the stink began.

Roy Foster in the *Irish Times* caught the mood beautifully. How much of modern Ireland, he asked, was more than five meters deep? What about the ancient mines of Ireland, of gold and silver, iron, zinc and alum and lead, some of them, like the copper mines of County Kerry, dating back to the Bronze Age two thousands years BC, making them the oldest mines in northwestern Europe?

What about the peat bogs, with their preserved evidence in that timeless vegetal world of our Neolithic past – the 5000 year old farm preserved in peat at Ceide Fields in County Mayo, and those bog mummies with their record of primeval violence?

How deep went the Giants' Causeway, how deep the source from which the River Liffy sprang?

How could modern, secular, European Ireland slide away so easily and lightly from its roots?

The historian's angle. The philosopher's.

I wish I'd thought of it, though it was hardly copy for the *Liverpool Echo*.

But I was the first reporter to spot a trend that became ever more evident over the coming weeks. For some inexplicable, unaccountable, bizarre reason, the greater the publicity, the faster Ireland moved. There was some mysterious correlation between public awareness and the speed of the great drift.

### Chapter 3

As proved to be the case when television began to take an interest.

Being a provincial hack, I admit I'm a bit resentful of television. They have this dogma that news is image, the slap-in-the-face image that says more than a thousand words. Oh yes, I know, thirty seconds on *Sky News* is worth fifty issues of the *Liverpool Echo*.

But there are stories that need more than images. Global warming, for example, the most important story of our time. But until television could show us pictures of melting glaciers and collapsing ice floes, it wasn't interested. The issue came up through the brief, boring science columns of the press.

*TG4*, the Irish language station took a look at the Arcon zinc mine at Galmoy, the one mentioned by the Taoiseach, and interviewed a baffled engineer pointing to the mine entrance and then to the actual mine fifty metres off. The reporter walked down the temporary sloping shaft that connected the two, and he had his twenty seconds of footage. *RTÉ One*, the national station, repeated the story that evening on its English language, and from there it made *Sky News* and *CNN*.

But then *TG4* lost the plot. They sent a reporter to check out the so-called miracle of the Dunmullin well. But neither Mrs MacGowan, nor Miss O'Shea, nor the priest, were prepared to admit the great drift could be involved. The story they filmed was the near-riot when the reporter seemed to be denying any miracle. Which was stupid, because a miracle was the story's very essence.

As *CNN* knew, targeting those forty million Americans who claim to be Irish by descent. They sent a reporter to Wexford Bay in the south-east, asking people a simple question.

*How long will a five metre slice of Ireland remain attached when it's a hundred metres out to sea?*

*Or two hundred metres? Or a mile?*

*Like a biscuit dunked in a cup of tea?*

The question took a little while to elucidate for people who weren't aware anything unusual was going on. But the results were gratifying, a case of the news being its own news.

That night the Municipal Buildings were burned down by an angry mob.

'There being obviously fuck all we can do, pardon my Gaelic', said the Taoiseach at an emergency cabinet meeting, 'we have to create the appearance of doing something. I'm open to suggestions.'

He looked down the table at the eleven men and two women who made up his government. They in turn without exception stared at the blotting pad in front of them.

'Who's going to show leadership?'

They were not negligible figures, but they knew from experience whoever spoke first would be ridiculed.

The Transport Minister took the plunge.

'We could try to curtail some of the rumours', he ventured.

'Curtail rumours? In Ireland? Ireland invented the rumour. It's still the basis of our culture.'

Nervous titters round the table.

'If I banned all media, press and television, rumours would do their job just as well. More inventively, in fact. And when I say fact, I mean fact. Keep your finger on the pulse of rumour and the facts will take care of themselves.'

Afterwards, this circulated as one of his better *bons mots*.

The Taoiseach sat back in his chair, relenting.

'Tell me some rumours', he said.

'There's one,' said the Minister for Gaeltacht Affairs, 'that says everyone has to migrate west. So that when more than half the country's out over the Irish Sea, it won't over-balance like a seesaw, and tip us all into Liverpool Bay.'

'Let them be,' said the Taoiseach. 'We could do with more voters in Mayo and Galway'.

‘How do you know they’ll vote for us?’

‘If they’re stupid enough to believe such a rumour, they’re stupid enough to be ours’.

‘There’s a story’, said the Health Minister, ‘that they’re pumping raw sewage into the Liffy and the Guinness isn’t fit to drink.’

‘That old chestnut! When did they last make Guinness from Liffy water? Leave that to Grand Metropolitan, or whoever owns Guinness these days.’

‘One of my secretaries’, said the Minister for Natural Resources, causing a snigger because he was known for his ‘secretaries’, ‘reckons it’s all to do with the new gas pipelines.’

‘Oh, Jesus, not the Corrib business again. I thought that was sorted out.’

‘No, no, Taoiseach, not the Atlantic line to County Mayo. I mean the 5,000 kilometre pipeline from Siberia. The rumour is that’s what’s tugging us closer to Russia. Every cubic metre of natural gas we import, we slide a millimetre further east.’

‘Now I call that a rumour’, said the Taoiseach with a connoisseur’s satisfaction. ‘Feet firmly on the ground, going straight to the heart of our current problems. Don’t try denying that one. It’ll only remind people we don’t have an energy policy.’

More nervous titters.

‘Come on,’ said the Taoiseach. ‘Nothing about global warning? Rising ocean levels? Melting icecaps? The gulf stream? The El Nino effect?’

‘I’ve heard all those’, said the Finance Minister. ‘Maybe they’re right.’

‘Who knows,’ said the Taoiseach. ‘What about Opus Dei?’

There was a collective intake of breath. Opus Dei was one of the Taoiseach’s pet hates, not least because he could never establish how many ministers sitting round his cabinet table were secret members. It was even rumoured he was himself a member, which was why, by way of cover up, he habitually spoke of the order with such scorn.

‘Our Lady of Knock wants to be closer to Lourdes and Fatima? Restore Catholic Europe? Not a bad rumour now I think of it. At least it puts Proddy conspirators in their place.’

He rewarded his cabinet with a broad smile.

‘Since there’s nothing we can do, we’d all better be as active as possible. I want you all out there in public, visiting things to do with your departments, showing concern, keeping your press secretaries busy.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Doing nothing. But doing it actively. Now get on. The meeting’s dissolved.’

Within the hour, a similar meeting between was taking place at the First minister’s office at Stormont.

After all the years of mutual insult and ostracism, the leaders of the devolved government found they got along pretty well. Despite all the talk about Union, the last thing the First minister wanted was to be part of the United Kingdom. When it came to the crunch, the Protestant Irish were more Irish than Protestant. He’d have quite liked the United Kingdom to be part of northern Ireland, but he could recognise a hopeless case. Where would the pension money come from, for a start?

As for his Sinn Fein deputy, he could understand and respect idiot obstructionism, bogus historicism, the capacity to rant for hours without employing a single qualifying clause. He had graduated from the same school, though on parallel syllabuses. He even suspected the old man might be able to teach him a trick or two.

So now, over coffee, they got straight to the point.

‘About Brendan O’Casey’, said the First minister.

‘That’s of no concern to our side. Even by Irish standards, that was beyond the curling line.’

‘Do you not believe in the faith that can move mountains?’

‘If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you! But shifting five metres of topsoil nationwide, I can’t see that as political.’

‘You realise where it would end. I mean, in O’Casey’s projection. Not joining the UK. Northern Ireland already has that status. It would be becoming part of Scotland.’

‘Scotland?’

‘That’s our nearest point of contact. You know, when my ancestors first settled here, they used to row back every Sunday to attend a proper Wee Free church. Then back again that afternoon. From the Mull of Kintyre to Ballycastle is only ten miles.’

‘When was that then?’

‘Oh, long before Cromwell. The point is I didn’t go into politics to end up being ruled by the Scottish Nationalists.’

‘Nor I to be closer to Lourdes and Fatima’

‘How’s that?’

It’s what the Taoiseach reckons. It’s Our Lady of Knock’s desire to be closer to Nossa Senhora de Fatima. He’s Opus Dei, you know’

‘So we’re together on this?’

‘It’s what my party’s name means, *sinn feín*, ‘us together’.

The First minister enjoyed that one. When he repeated the joke, it was to cost him.

## Chapter 4

It was a blog, posted on the internet in early March, first labelled what was happening ‘the great drift’. The blogger signed himself *Superficially Irish*, after Roy Foster’s column in the *Irish Times*, and others appeared quickly. *Laputa* was named after the flying island in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, but the most astringently informative was called simply *Bog Blog*.

*Bog Blog* has the brilliant idea of getting the Tyrone-based computer dealer AvidaOnline to offer Global Positioning kits at 20% discount. Fellow bloggers could get the Acer e 305 travel companion for in-car use for a mere 119.95 euros or the more versatile Memory Map Adventurer 7000 HP (recreation al) for 419.95 euros, both offers including VAT. The plan was that people should keep checking their position in tally with any decent maps, to establish what no politician or government scientists was prepared to publicly, namely the speed and direction of the great drift.

‘We’ll crack it the way those Plane Spotters cracked Extraordinary Rendition’, boasted *Bog Blog*. ‘The power of the internet, people’s democracy’.

*Laputa*, who turned out to be based in Colorado, was incandescent with rage and scorn.

‘Do you know who controls this information?’ he posted. ‘It’s the US Department of Defence. It’s the US military put the satellites in orbit, twenty-four of the fucking things to spy on us twenty-four hours a day. The master control is right here in Colorado, at the Schriever Air Base’.

‘It’s not a spying network’, *Bog Blog* countered. ‘It’s a navigation aid.’

‘Bullshit’, screamed *Laputa*. ‘Do you think the military industrial complex exists to provide useful information? Every square metre of the earth’s surface is visible to between five and eight of these satellites at any given moment. All reporting down to the tracking stations and back to master control.’

*Superficially Irish* seemed determined to live up to his name.

‘Cool it, you guys’, it said. ‘Sure, it’s a military thing, but they found civilian uses for it, so sold the patent. You might as well object to non-stick frying pans because Teflon was invented by NASA.’

*Laputa* wasn’t finished. ‘They haven’t given us the military version’, he wrote. ‘The military version’s accurate to twenty-metres in the horizontal. The version they’ve licensed for us is only accurate to a hundred metres in the horizontal, and one hundred and fifty-six in the vertical. And that assumes everything’s working properly – no user foul-ups, no receiver or control section errors. If they don’t want you to know something, they’ve a hundred ways of stopping you’.

This spat didn’t stop the bloggers trying. Their GPS systems were supposed to be three-dimensional, measuring position, velocity and time. *Bog Blog*’s instructions were to ignore velocity, but be careful to note precise horizontal positions and the exact time of the observation. The readings should then be compared with the best maps available, the Ordnance Survey maps of Ireland.

The scheme got off to a bad start when someone recorded Ben Bulbin a mile west and three miles higher than it should have been. But discarding that, and other evident errors, *Bog Blog* began to put together the first reliable data on the great drift. He took them along to the Museum Building at Trinity College, Dublin, which houses the Department of Geography.

Then, on St Patrick’s Day, *Bog Blog* announced his findings. They were sensational. The whole of Ireland was out of position by 923 metres. The drift was not actually eastwards but three degrees north of south-east. If Ireland continued on this course, it would not actually touch the west coast of Scotland. The Antrim Hills between Ballycastle and Larne would scrape along the Mull of Galloway, leaving Ballycastle just across from Port Patrick, with a narrow channel between.

The first actual collision would be with the Isle of Man.

Odd as it may seem, the *Liverpool Echo* circulates pretty well in the Isle of Man. Not sells, exactly, just circulates. It’s their nearest metropolitan newspaper

and – if you ignored rapidly approaching Belfast – the nearest city of any size for a weekend offshore.

But it wasn't from us they learned of the impending collision. The news was everywhere, starting with the two English-language Irish TV stations, spreading to Boston, and from there worldwide. St Patrick's Day was, after all, something special.

The rumours – theories, if you prefer – were cosmopolitan. Global warming was by far the favourite. Ireland was a buoyant economy. How often had they heard that metaphor? What more natural that, with rising ocean levels, she should slip free of her moorings like a Celtic corral.

Academics at the Magee College in the University of Ulster denied Ireland was moving at all. They quoted Jacques Derrida that 'text is self-referential', and Roland Barthes that 'Man does not exist prior to language'. Any reported change in the so-called external realities was merely a function of changing relations of power'

'So who's taking over?

'That we don't know as yet. But when we do, it will be evidently pre-determined.

Obviously, there were astrological explanations. Jupiter, Mars and Venus were aligned, neutralising their influences, and little Pluto, recently demoted as a planet, was exercising his powers. I saw a letter I'm surprised the *Irish Times* published, linking this with the wartime **Pipe Line Under The Ocean**, and suggesting Pluto was getting his revenge.

Was this tongue-in-cheek stuff, Irish humour to make the world look damn silly? Or did they mean it?

The rumour I liked best was a cartoon in the *Boston Globe*. It showed Ireland perched on the back of a giant elephant, itself standing on the back of a giant tortoise that had awakened from its long sleep and was advancing slowly seven degrees south of south-east.

It seemed as good an explanation as any.

That was the week I published in the *Liverpool Echo* my theory that the speed of the great drift was somehow connected to the degree of attention it aroused. It was labelled the ‘oxygen of publicity’ theory, after Margaret Thatcher’s idiot efforts to deny news coverage to Sinn Féin.

By March the 31<sup>st</sup>, the evidence seemed to back me. Ireland was fully one-point-two kilometres out of position, and NASA published pictures taken from space, showing the old and new coastlines super-imposed. The drift was visible to the naked eye.

It was astonishing how daily life went on much as normal. Planes flew in and out of Dublin, Shannon, Belfast and George Best Airports, with slight delays due to extra precautions as pilots landed under manual control, but no major interruptions. Sea traffic was uninterrupted, and cargo actually increased as ports like Cork, Youghal, Dungarvan, Waterford, Rosslare, and Wexford, on the south-east coast, became deep water harbours. The sewage problem never materialised, though it was only long afterwards we learned that the sanitary departments in Dublin and Belfast were pumping their treated sewage down manholes straight into the sea five metres below.

For the rest, working, shopping, drinking and watching television went on as normal.

One warm evening in May, Mrs MacGowan of Dunmullin told her toddlers, Jamie and Kitty, a bedtime story.

*Once upon a time, there was a giant who lived in a big castle. The castle was on the top of some tall cliffs, and the tall cliffs went round in a circle, surrounded on all sides by the sea.*

*So the big castle was on an island, protected on all sides by the tall cliffs.*

*The giant was called Tommy, He lived with his wife Lucy and their son Robin and their baby daughter Abigail.*

‘How old was Robin?’ asked Jamie.

*Robin was six years two months. And baby Abigail was one and a bit.*

*The giant should have been very happy. Every day, a helicopter came and hovered overhead, and let down a basket with fresh bread and meat and fruits and vegetables, and a daily newspaper. Every day Tommy went down to the dungeon and took out a gold coin from the huge treasure he had hidden down there, and he put the coin in the basket to pay for the provisions along with a note saying 'Thank you'.*

*I said the helicopter brought bread and meat and vegetables –*

*- 'and fruits', said Jamie.*

*Yes, and fruits. But it didn't need to bring any fresh fish because Tommy and Robin caught them with long fishing lines from the top of the castle walls.*

*'Did they have television?' asked Jamie.*

*I think so. In fact, I know they did because Robin knew how to use the internet.*

*I said the giant should have been very happy. But Tommy was a frightened man, and what was very strange, he didn't know what he was frightened of. That's why he lived in a castle with high walls on an island with tall cliffs, shut off from the rest of the world. Even then, he would go down to the dungeon two or three times a day, checking that no one was trying to dig a tunnel to get inside.*

*Then one day, the island began to move. They didn't notice anything at first because it was moving very slowly, and in the sea, with all the big waves shifting endlessly, there was nothing to show that it was moving.*

*But after a couple of weeks, when Tommy and Robin were fishing from the castle walls, a fish called out aloud to them.*

*'What kind of fish?' asked Jamie.*

*A mackerel. A big long silvery one. Its head popped out of the water and said 'Where would you be off to, Tommy?'*

*Tommy was amazed. 'What are you talking about?' he said.*

*'You're moving along', said the mackerel. 'Right here in the sea. I can't keep up with you.'*

*Next time the helicopter came and let down the basket with the bread and meat and vegetables –*

*'- and fruits', corrected Jamie.*

*Yes, and fruits. It sent down a note in the basket as well, and the note read 'If you keep moving like this, I won't be able to find you.'*

*Well, this made Tommy even more frightened than before. He didn't know what was happening or how he could stop it.*

*Then Robin had this marvellous idea.*

*'How did we come to the island' he asked his father.*

*'We came on a boat, of course' said Tommy.*

*'Well where's the boat now?'*

*'It's in the dungeon,' said Tommy, 'along with the treasure.'*

*'Well', said Robin, 'we could take off the engine and the propeller, and we could fix them to the island at the bottom of the cliff, and we could fasten the sails to the flag pole, and we could steer the island anywhere we wanted to go'*

*So that's what they did. Robin found the instructions on the internet. And they turned their castle on the island into huge boat like a Cunard liner. and they could cruise wherever they wanted.*

*So Tommy the Giant stopped being frightened, and they lived happily ever after.*

## Chapter 5

At the heart of the British Isles, its geographical epicentre, is an anomaly. The Isle of Man is not part of the United Kingdom, nor a member of the European Union. It is a self-governing dependency (*The Queen rules, OK?*) with the oldest continuous parliament in the world, the famous Tynwald. But defence and something called ‘good-governance’ are subject to Westminster. There’s a ten per cent income tax, rising to eighteen per cent for the super rich, but no capital gains tax, wealth tax, corporation tax, stamp duty, death duty or inheritance tax. Many of the 500 miles of public roads have no speed limit.

From the summit of Snaefell, which you reach by mountain railway, it’s said you can see six kingdoms – those of Mann, Scotland, England, Ireland, Wales and Heaven. The nearest of these is heaven, the second nearest Scotland, and the third Ireland. Less than five per cent of the population, however, is Irish.

To Manx men and women, Ireland bearing down on them was like an asteroid hurtling towards them from outer space. Like the one that wiped the dinosaurs, fifty million years ago, it threatened to destroy everything they held dear.

What to do about it? Well the national symbol, as you probably know, is the famous Three Legs of Man. The question is, are they turning clockwise (running forwards) or anti-clockwise (running away)?

For me, since my childhood, the real symbol of the Isle of Man are the annual TT (Tourist Trophy) motorbike races... Every year, last week of May, I bully my editor into letting me cover the races for the *Liverpool Echo*, and I wasn’t missing out in the year of the Great Drift.

You see it’s now been capitalised? That happened when people realised it was no longer just an Irish phenomenon.

The TT races are the very epitome of life in the fast lane, more than ever with the Irish asteroid approaching.

In 1903, the British government introduced a 20 mph speed limit, simultaneously turning down a request that certain roads should be closed periodically to be used for motor racing. Typically, the Manx government just into

the breach, making the island the Road Racing Capital of the world. It started off with motor racing but, given the state of the roads, motor bikes took over. From 1911, they've used the famous 37.73 mile long mountain circuit, climbing from sea level to 1,400 ft and back. It's a fearsome circuit, and almost every bend seems to have been named for some driver who has died – Birkin's Bend, for instance, after Tim Birkin who collided with a horse and fish cart doing their rounds (in those the roads weren't closed for practice sessions). Or Drinkwater's Bend after Reuben who died in 1949. Or Joey's named for TT legend Joey Dunlop who won 26 races, 13 of which I watched. Actually, he was killed racing in Estonia in 2000, but you get the point.

The winning speed in 1911 was an average of 47.63 mph. But machines got bigger and in 1977, when the record lap time was 112.27 mph, the Grand Prix authorities – not the Manx authorities you note – declared the track was too dangerous for racing. Everyone reckoned that was the end for the TT. Instead, it marked a fresh start. Now labelled officially the most gruelling motor cycle track in the world, it attracts the most dare-devil of professionals and amateurs, over 500 of them in most years, crazy to pitch themselves against the greatest pure road race circuit of them all.

That's how Manxmen and woman like to think of themselves. In fact, of course, they're ordinary, cautious, still very countrified people. But they see themselves as living in the fast lane, not subject to the nanny state Across, as they call the UK, where kids are forced to wear goggles to play conkers and speed cameras spy on you round every corner.

So in the year of the Great Drift, with Ireland hurtling towards them and a widespread sense the world was about to end, the TT races had to be bigger and faster than ever.

I wasn't going to miss them, and I wasn't disappointed. More visitors came than ever – 90,000 of them according to the tourist board. More bikes than ever – 25,000 according to the Steam Packet Company - were ferried from Liverpool to try the circuit on Mad Sunday and get a coveted finisher's award. John McGuinness won the Senior Race yet again, and again broke the lap record with 132.12 mph

from a standing start. Guy Martin confirmed his position as the man who always comes second. Three amateur riders were killed.

Yet every day of the fortnight, the real story was happening elsewhere. I was reporting from Brandywell, the highest point of the circuit at the top of Hailwood Rise, named for the legendary Mike Hailwood. Even with the bikes racing past at 200 mph, half the spectators were turning their binoculars to the west and the approaching coast of Ulster.

The UK is responsible for the Isle of Man's foreign relations, so the Tynwald took their complaints to Westminster. Ireland, they said, was encroaching on their twelve mile coastal limits.

There are rules about these matters. Since the Good Friday agreement, Ireland is regarded as a friendly state, as well as (unlike the Isle of Man) a fellow member of the European Union. So the note of protest was courteously phrased. The encroachment was treated as accidental, as though a coastal protection vessel or military helicopter had strayed out of position.

Ireland responded in tongue-in-cheek kind with mild regrets, and the incident was regarded as closed.

Except that Ireland kept coming.

'It's less than ten kilometres', shouted the President of the Tynwald down the phone.

Normally, what would have followed would be stiffer notes of protest, a summoning of the Irish Ambassador, the withdrawal of the British Ambassador, an ultimatum, and a formal declaration of war.

Taking the matter to Cabinet, the Foreign Secretary accepted that established procedures did not fully meet the case.

'I don't believe they're moving against us on purpose', he declared. 'It's an instance of their not being fully responsible for their actions'.

'That's always been the case with the Irish', said the Prime Minister sourly.

'Quite'.

‘But this time,’ said the Home Secretary, ‘we’re going to have them on our doorstep.’

‘That’s always been the case with the Irish’, repeated the Prime Minister. ‘There’s far more of them here than over there’.

The cabinet was plunged in gloomy silence. The Irish question had brought down governments for over a hundred years.

‘Has anyone,’ said the Minister for Sport, Culture and the Environment, ‘the faintest idea what’s going on?’

‘What’s going on is they’re encroaching on the Isle of Man’, said the Foreign Secretary. ‘How they’re doing it, why they’re doing it, and whether they’re capable of stopping it, who knows?’

‘I spoke to the Taoiseach’, said the Prime Minister.

He paused for reflection.

‘That’s a very sarcastic man. To your questions, he said he didn’t know. It took him fifty words. The other forty-seven you don’t want to hear.’

‘We could,’ said the Foreign Secretary, ‘offer them the chance to rejoin Britain’.

It took several moments for the enormity of this suggestion to sink in. When the Health Minister and the Minister for Pensions began objecting in unison, the Prime Minister waved their protests aside.

‘The Irish would infinitely prefer an Ultimatum’.

‘We do have’, said the Home Secretary very slowly, ‘strict rules on illegal immigration.’

‘You mean lock them up in Detention centres? With vouchers to buy food at Tesco’s?’

‘I mean, don’t let them ashore.’

The Prime Minister laughed.

‘Ireland an off-shore dungeon, like some Dickensian prison hulk? It has the merit of consistency. It’s how we treated them for four hundred years, even when they were part of us! Anyway, we can’t. The EU allows for free movement of labour.’

He rapped the cabinet table sharply.

‘We’re not talking about population movements. We’re talking about – well, about the Great Drift.’

‘Let’s hope the Isle of Man will provide anchorage’, said the Armed Forces Minister, putting on his naval hat.

‘How long before they make landfall?’

‘The latest estimate,’ said the Foreign Secretary, speaking on the authority of Bog Blog, ‘is July 5<sup>th</sup>. That’s the day their Tynwald meets’

‘Do you remember,’ said the Prime Minister, ‘when - was it Brent? – passed a by-law making it illegal to drop a nuclear bomb on the borough? Maybe the Tynwald should try the power of words. ‘Come on, we’re wasting out time. To coin a phrase, the ball’s in the Tynwald’s court. What’s the next item?’

In an interview with *The Times* (London), Richard Fortey, Fellow of the Royal Society and author of *The Earth, an Intimate History*, poured scorn on the idea there was any danger.

‘This isn’t a matter of plate tectonics’, he insisted. ‘There won’t be any earthquakes, as plates rub together. Ireland’s not going to slip underneath Port Erin, or climb on top for that matter. No Himalayas are going to rise up in the Irish Sea. Snaefell is not about to become a volcano.’

‘So what will happen?’

‘We haven’t the faintest idea. Nothing like this has ever occurred before’.

The Isle of Man has no television station so it was Manx Radio first broke the news. Ireland would dock with the Isle of Man on Tynwald Day, July 5<sup>th</sup>.

This was the day when the two branches of the oldest parliament in the world, the elected House of Keys and the appointed Legislative Council, meet as they have done since 1417 to celebrate their existence. Everyone who’s anyone takes part – state officials, leaders of local government, clergymen, the

constabulary. These include my own favourites, the Deemsters, two judges whose oath of office is to administer the laws ‘as in differently as the herring’s backbone doth lie in the fish’.

There’s a great deal of processing in fancy dress between various sites of national importance and carrying, for some strange reason, bouquets of mugwort. It culminates in a slow march over a path strewn with rushes to Tynwald Hill, a circular mound in the village of St John. There, all laws enacted in the two chambers over the previous year are read out to the public, a practice dating from the time the island was ruled from Norway.

Could it possibly be just a coincidence that Ireland was due to crash land that midsummer’s day?

Just *who* was responsible was obvious. It could only be those bloody Irish. But I was a little disappointed when I arrived to cover both events that conspiracy theories were in such short supply. I was two days early, and I needed something to report back to the *Liverpool Echo*. No one drinking in the *Cat With No Tail* in Douglas seemed to have any axe to grind. Normally, they’d have blamed Across, for a huge variety of types of interference, from banning skipping in school playgrounds to making cows wear luminous jackets on country roads. But Across didn’t like the Irish any more than they did, and with suspicions directly unfamiliarly westward everyone seemed barren of ideas.

Then Tom Elliott explained. He’s a large man with a red face whom I’ve bought more drinks over the years than I can remember. My editor probably remembers. Every year he checks my expenses he asks, ‘Does this Tom Elliott exist? Or did you just make up this copy?’

Well he exists, with a wispy beard and a stained brown suit that’s never changed while I’ve know him.

‘What it is, boy’, he said over a pint of Okells, ‘we can’t wait for they bloody comeovers to get here.’

‘That’s right’, said a man to his right.

The barman gave a nod of agreement.

Are you expecting a fight?’ I asked.

‘Nothing like that’, said Tom Elliott. He dropped his voice confidentially, and his neighbour and the barman bent closer. ‘Have you grasped what they’re taking on?’

Very slowly, and over three more pints of Okells, he developed his argument. Ireland was approaching from the north-west, give or take a couple of degrees. There’d been no contact with Scotland, though he’d heard a trawler had been lost with all hands due to the rush of the current through the North Channel.

‘I hadn’t heard that’, I said.

‘It was the Irish Sea going out. With all the pressure’

By ‘out’, I knew he meant west. But I’d heard no reports of this current.

‘But this side they’ll meet their match. ’The Mann may be small, but we box above our weight.’

Gradually, I got the picture. He’d got a clear map in his head, and the part of Ireland that was coming was the long peninsular south-east of Belfast and east of Strangford Lough. The town of Donaghadee would collide with Peel, half way down the Manx coast. The village of Kirkcubbin would take on the Calf of Man, that tiny island at the southern tip.

‘We’ll tower over them’, said Tom Elliott.

‘Indeed so,’ said his neighbour.

‘Peel Castle will loom above Donaghadee. From their farms and their town houses and their little harbours, they’ll stare up at us on our cliff tops. And we’ll laugh down at them and say, ‘Okay, boys, what’s your business here precisely?’

‘I like it,’ said the landlord.

Two days later, Tom Elliott and I and his daughter Sandra who was driving, crossed the island to Peel to take the new view. A muted Tynwald Day had been played out without problems. No asteroid struck the Lord Lieutenant dead. Tynwald Hill did not erupt, spitting molten lava. But it was obvious everyone

wanted to be elsewhere, to witness the expected buckling of the Irish coast against the cliffs of the Isle of Man.

Sandra ran a small travel agency in Douglas, and knew every inch of the island she advertised to her customers. She did good business with the TT races, and other amusements the Isle of man had to offer – beaches, shopping, amusement parks, and so on. But her real love was the scenery, interspersed with winding roads and tiny villages, and the bare hills of the south-west coast with their rich bird life. This she feared for.

As we drove down towards Peel, the beach and fishing boats and pleasure craft were shrouded in mist. But as we parked, and walked the causeway over Fenella beach to St Patrick’s Isle, where Peel Castle stands, the true dimensions of the disaster became plain. From the outer wall, we were staring directly down on the Belfast dormitory suburb of Donaghadee.

‘Well, there’s a Marina’, said Sandra.

She pointed to the natural embrace of the two breakwaters, of Peel and Donaghadee, forming a lake half a mile across, crowded with pleasure boats.

‘But no way in and out!’

It was true. The boats were landlocked. On the Irish side, the streets that had once housed fishermen and port officials, handling the trade to Portpatrick in Scotland, were taken over by craft and antique shops and art galleries.

‘All these Patricks’, said Sandra sourly. ‘We might have known they’d one day come together.’

‘The fishing will be good’, said Tom.

‘What the devil do you mean’, asked his daughter angrily.

‘It’s only the land that’s moved, boy. The sea’s still down there. The bits that surface, like there in your Marina, will be great for casting a line’.

‘Oh God, I hate optimists!’

We returned to the 4-by-4 and headed south, on the road to Patrick and Dalby, but turning right periodically to the cliff tops, stopping at Niarbyl with its westward pointing causeway, and then west of Ballakilpheric. From the cliff tops, we stared down at the little ports and farmlands of Ballywalter and Ballyhalbert,

seemingly marooned below, but showing no signs of capitulation. At times, the two countries nestled together, and at times the cliffs and farmlands retreated to form lagoons Tom Elliott raved over for their fishing prospects.

‘Dad, Dad, Dad,’ said Sandra. ‘Do you want to be just the seventh province? Are you content to be ruled by Ulster?’

Tom was silenced by that. But it was as we descended to Port Erin that Sandra burst into tears. The huge headland south of Ballyhalbert had encroached on Port Erin bay, engulfing it entirely. It was a counter punch, cliffs confronting sandy beaches and a fishing port with a promenade and hotels.

‘Do you realise where we’ll have to go to discover what was here?’

Sandra was wailing.

‘We’ll have to go to Galway and Sligo. All this is finished. Not just for the tourists. For us Manx people as well.’

She couldn’t know how wrong she was. The day would arrive when to discover what was there, tourists would travel to Clacton and Scarborough. But that’s to come.

## Chapter 6

Was that it? Had it stopped?

The question was headlines worldwide.

Had the cliffs of Niarbyl finally anchored the Great Drift? Would the Calf of Man prove to be Ireland's mooring buoy?

There's more Irish and their descendents living throughout the world than ever lived in Ireland. But this wasn't just an Irish story. It tapped into our unease about our foothold on this planet. Earthquakes and tsunamis do much the same, but those events we partly understand. Ireland's drift was baffling, and the world waited with bated breath what the next twenty-four hours would bring.

Bog Blog was again the quickest, though reporting no more than governments in Westminster, Stormont, Dublin, and Douglas already knew but didn't want to admit. Not to mention NASA, the Pentagon, the CIA and the KGB.

The great Drift was continuing unimpeded, with no change in speed or direction. Its course was still 3° north of South East, and the rate 417 metres per day.

But there was a twist – a wholly accurate metaphor as it turned out. The Isle of Man was swivelling slightly in an anti-clockwise direction as it nestled closer to the Irish coast. The effect, as the Point of Ayre, the isle's northern tip, swerved westwards, was to block all entrance to Belfast harbour.

The seventh county option, the possibility of Ulster and the Isle of Man uniting, had already been mooted in Unionist offices at Stormont. The six counties would become seven, adding fifty million new voters to the electorate, most of them protestants. The Vannin party, the local nationalists, would have to be bought over. But they had a common enemy Across, so that should be manageable.

That Manxmen could turn against Ulster in such a drastic manner was a nasty shock. The port of Belfast supported, directly or indirectly, 187,000 jobs, 27% of Northern Ireland's total workforce. Blocking it killed off at a stroke one-

third of the region's total economic value. As the consequences sank in, Unionists began to panic.

Some members of Sinn Féin were ecstatic.

'That'll show the black bastards' crowed Brendan O'Casey, the small but vocal member for East Antrim. This had nothing to do with race. By 'black' he meant 'protestants'.

'1922 is a dead duck!'

He was referring to the division of Ireland. It no longer made economic sense and Westminster was not going to pick up the tab. The six counties would finally have to rejoin Ireland.

His leaders were less sanguine. They had heard about the seventh county proposal and taken it as a betrayal. But Dublin was not going to pick up the tab either. The Republic had its own problems. The zinc mine at Galmoy had been flooded, not by the Atlantic or by the River Shannon but unexpectedly by Lough Derg. Other mines were being sealed in the expectation that, offshore, they would need new technologies to keep them operational.

'Assuming,' said the Taoiseach mordantly, 'they're still in Irish waters. Not belonging to Iceland or somewhere.'

'It'll be back to potatoes', said the Minister for Gaeltracht Affairs.

'Potatoes?' said the Finance Minister in astonishment.

'Potatoes!' said the Minister for Gaeltracht Affairs. 'What else can you produce on a floating island of five metres of topsoil? Your Celtic tiger's got wet feet!'

'Well, at least it's a case of Comparative Advantage,' said the Finance Minister, recovering. 'We do know how to grow the things.'

'A return to our roots', said the Taoiseach. 'Maybe we should invite Cromwell back.'

In the Belfast Orange Lodges, the Apocalypse was even closer. St John the Divine had written:

I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy ... and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns ... And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication ... And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

The Orange men were well used to interpreting this. Who was this ‘mother of all whores’ decked with gold, precious stones and pearls, ‘drunken with the blood of saints?’

Self evidently, the Church of Rome!

But suddenly, a new beast had arisen out of the sea. It had the power to destroy everything, jobs, family, flinging them into the arms of the Babylonian whore. St John the Divine continued:

Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred threescore and six.

What was the meaning of this 666?

It came to the Reverend Buchan MacDiarmid, preparing his Sunday sermon that weekend. The Isle of Man had arisen from the sea, destroying a way of life sanctified down the centuries. Its symbol was the Three Legs of Man, its target the 6 counties of Northern Ireland. Each leg was kicking in turn at Antrim, [Armagh](#), [Down](#), [Fermanagh](#), [Londonderry](#) and [Tyrone](#).

666 threefold! What could be plainer?

But though this interpretation was generally accepted in the Orange Lodges, it wasn't obvious what should be done.

Plant bombs in Douglas?

Re-route the Orange Day marches round the TT race course?

Unionists are nothing if not single-minded. With the IRA apparently not to blame, they were lost.

### *THREE MONTHS TO PREPARE*

ran the headline in the *Western Mail and South Wales Echo*. They'd worked out that south-east Ireland would collide with south-west Wales after 96 days. A succession of maps festooned with red arrows showed Ireland's projected position every fourteen days. Then, on October 9<sup>th</sup>, the port of Rosslare ran full tilt against St David's Head, the most western point of the principality.

Beneath the maps, the paper printed in fine Welsh and exorable English the chorus of Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau, the National Anthem:

*Wales, Wales! Fav'rite land of Wales!  
While sea her wall, may naught befall  
To mar the old language of Wales*

Beneath that, the paper repeated

*NINETY DAYS TO PREPARE.*

The Welsh reacted as always to a crisis. They began a yet another, angst-ridden, navel-gazing debate on Welsh National Identity.

The debate was necessarily bi-lingual, not to accommodate Welsh men and women who don't speak English (none exist!) but because the Welsh language is the first cudgel wielded in any identity debate. It puts the English-speaking Welsh on the defensive. Since they are the majority, and on the whole better educated, this is a useful tactic.

It was also irrelevant. The threat to Welsh had never come from the sea. It had seeped across the border from England. Now with Ireland encroaching fast and the 'sea' no longer 'her wall', Welsh language activists found themselves in the position of Ulster Unionists reluctant to plant bombs in the Isle of Man. The enemy was new and different. Welsh-speakers might have to ally themselves with English-speaking Welshmen – perhaps even with those English living in the retirement homes that survived their bombing campaign.

But what sort of beast was an English-speaking Welshman? Was it enough to have been born in Wales? Or born in Wales of Welsh-speaking parents? Or born in Wales of Welsh-speaking parents and living in Wales?

At the heart of the identity debate were, of course, artists and writers. Mathematicians and plumbers were not that bothered. There was such a thing as Welsh plumbing - the line of pit latrines down the centre of the street in old mining villages. But not even the most fervent nationalist wanted to go back to that. Welsh plumbing? No thank you! As for the politicians, Plaid Cymru was perfectly willing to have English votes without subjecting anyone to a language test.

But Welsh poetry? Written in Welsh, it was obviously Welsh. Even the Welsh editors found their contributors clamouring for English translations, and not just for the bigger audience. Translation brought generous European Union grants to read their poems in exchange programmes with mining towns from Lithuania to Spain. With poetry in English, things got even more complicated. What if the poet lived abroad and wrote about, say, Africa or Portugal? What made his stuff Welsh? What entitled him to grants from the Welsh Academi? Was it enough he had been born in Taffs Well sixty-eight years back?

Shut your eyes and think of Wales. What do you see?

Sheep? Oh, for Christ's sake!

Coal mines? Male-voice choirs? How Green was my Valley? Or Bethesda, Bethany, Nazareth and Capernaum, those red-brick memorial Baptist chapels by the thousand, their preachers raging against Drink and Language?

Or Dylan? Not, Bob, the other Dylan, the Rimbaud of Cumdonkin Drive. Bugger all reversed. At least, a certain humour!

Or rugby? Ah, now you're on to something. Barry John, Gareth Edwards, Phil Bennett, the great JPR Williams! National heroes of the national sport! Memorialised afresh in the national chapel called the Millennium Stadium - though as Phil Bennett complains, rugby's been replaced as the national sport by the sport of talking about what went wrong.

That's how Wales spent its ninety days of preparation. No one said a word about what might happen to Milford Haven.

## Chapter Seven

Milford Haven, Britain's biggest oil terminal and the only harbour capable of taking the largest tankers, lies just south of St David's Head, across St Bride's Bay and beyond St Ann's Head. If Ireland got its revenge by blocking that, the effects would be even worse than for Belfast. The new Liquid Natural Gas terminal, when completed, was scheduled to supply 20% of the United Kingdom's energy supplies.

But would that happen? Ladbroke's were offering different odds on four different scenarios.

At 5 to 1, Ireland would lodge against St David's head and finally stop drifting.

At 10 to 1, Ireland would strike St David's Head before swivelling just as the Isle of Man had done.

At 20 to 1, the swivel would be in a clockwise direction, so that Ulster would nestle in Liverpool Bay and Dublin run aground opposite Aberystwyth.

At 100 to 1, the swivel would be anti-clockwise. In this scenario, Cork on the Irish south coast would bounce off Land's End, and Ireland with the Isle of Man attached would go slowly spinning southwards into the Atlantic. Assuming it merely grazed Corunna in north-west Spain, there would be nothing to stop it until it collided with Recife in Brazil.

This last bet got a lot of punters, attracted by the prospect of finally seeing the back of the place.

Late September, with these bets still open, was the party conference season. These were not occasions for disquiet. The party faithful needed reassuring and all the spins had to be positive. But the hotels had been booked two years previously, and only the Greens meeting in Blackpool were judged to have their eye on the ball.

New Labour felt a long way from the action in Bournemouth, but they put on a brave face. They welcomed the 'new general' direction Ireland was taking, with the prospect of yet 'closer ties'. They promised an 'emergency development programme' for Belfast, with an inter-governmental committee 'to explore all possible options'. They promised to be 'tough on immigration', with a programme of border patrols in preparation to be implemented 'if necessary'. Meanwhile, ID cards 'would be more necessary than ever'. COBRA was already investigating possible terrorist threats.

The Conservatives were equally adrift in Brighton. They promised to be even 'tougher on immigration'. They demanded cast iron assurances that northern Ireland would not be pushed into 'a forced marriage with the Republic'. Speakers from the floor worried about the IRA's arms caches. Did anyone have the faintest idea where these were now located?

As for the Liberal-Democrats in Great Yarmouth, they demanded Ryan Air should cut their fares now journeys were that much shorter.

In stark contrast, delegates to the Greens conference were able to climb Blackpool Tower and, on clear days, see the Irish-cum-Isle of man coast through the telescopes. But they also had the most coherent response to what was going on.

They began by opposing the pipe line from Milford Haven which was routed through the Brecon Beacons. An environmental disaster, made redundant if Milford Haven was destined to be blocked. Ideas took on a momentum of their own as their conference became inspirational brain-storming, reported faithfully each night on Channel 4.

The Great Drift had already destroyed mining in the Republic, de-industrialising the Irish economy and forcing it back on agriculture. It had blocked off the port of Belfast, destroying trade. The Greens knew Free Trade was a rip off, increasing the gap between rich and poor. Now it seemed the oil port of Milford Haven would also be blocked, destroying at a stroke our dependence on fossil fuels.

There was a principle at work here, the Gaia Principle, by which the Earth fought back against the ravages wrought by Man.

Implicit, though unvoiced, in the vote in favour of the Great Drift with which the conference concluded, was the hope that Britain too would soon be on the move.

Sandra Elliott, who was a Green, came over for the Blackpool conference, and I drove over from Liverpool to meet her again. We strolled along the north pier to have a look at the muddy sea, which hardly ever comes near Blackpool itself. There was a pile of twisted wreckage where the helicopter pad had been.

‘If Ladbroke’s are right, my home will end up right here,’ said Sandra. ‘I don’t much enjoy conferences, but I thought I’d pop over and take a look.’

‘How Green are you?’

‘Not that sort of Green’, she said, flicking a thumb towards the conference centre. ‘I run a travel agency. I like people getting around. I even like people buying and selling things. I just don’t like the world falling apart.’

‘By rights it should be Dublin ends up here’, I said.

‘Why Dublin?’

‘The word means black pool, in Gaelic’.

‘I never knew that. Presumably Blackpool means something entirely different.’

As we spoke, half a kilometre away, the lights went on simultaneously along the ten kilometres of Blackpool’s promenade. It was years since I had seen them. I remembered coloured light bulbs, but these were neon and lasers and fibre optics, with search lights stabbing the twilight.

‘Are you impressed?’ I asked.

‘I shouldn’t be. Such a terribly waste of energy. But of course I am. They’re – not beautiful, but they’re grand. Like a firework display.’

‘In Liverpool, we call them the aurora borealis. The northern lights.’

We finished our beers and got up, to walk back along the pier to the promenade. I’d invited Sandra to dine at a restaurant but she said she wanted to eat fish and chips from a newspaper.

‘Preferably *The Sun*,’ she said. ‘Definitely not the *Liverpool Echo*.’

The lights along the Golden Mile kept changing, like some gigantic kaleidoscope. The tower was a cosmic lighthouse, its revolving beams surely by now visible in the Isle of Man.

‘When I was a child,’ said Sandra, ‘the fountains in Douglas had coloured lights that changed every two minutes. I’ve never forgotten. That’s all I needed to enchant me. But everything keeps escalating.’

As we approached the end of the pier, the foul air hit us. It seemed to hang over the town, in a haze of chip oil and vinegar with a dash of onion.

‘Are you sure you want to go ahead with this?’

‘Yes!’ she declared firmly. ‘I have to get used to the banality of my future life.’

We walked south along the promenade past the tower with its aquarium, and then on towards the Central Pier. The promenade was nose-to-tail with cars and coaches come to see the illuminations.

‘Why don’t they close off the road and make people walk?’ said Sandra. ‘They could see things properly, and actually get along faster.’

It was true. Drivers kept pausing to watch some 3D set piece, the bulbs apparently moving of their own volition, while people behind hooted their impatience.

We walked past novelty sex shops selling sticks of Blackpool rock, and Louis Tussard’s waxworks and pubs packed to the door or blocking the pavement with drinkers who wanted to smoke. A Palm Reader advertised “How will you spend your days, With your husband or lover? Step inside”. The grubbiness of everything overwhelmed.

‘What’s it like staying here?. You’re in a hotel?’

‘Ghastly’, said Sandra. ‘I’m in a place that specialises in hen parties, and they come in drunk at three in the morning, vomiting all over the place.’

‘Blackpool’, I said, ‘the town too tatty to be awarded a casino. You must admit it’s a distinction of sorts’.

‘Do you want to walk on?’

The South Pier and the pleasure beach with its Big Dipper and Big Wheel were in sight.

‘No thank you,’ said Sandra. ‘Let’s get our supper’.

We bought two helpings of haddock and chips, turning down the offer of mushy peas, and dodged between the walking pace traffic to a bench pacing where the Irish Sea would be if it ever came near Blackpool.

‘Clean wrapping paper?’ Sandra exclaimed. ‘What about *The Sun*?’

‘Probably some EU regulation’.

‘Oh, I don’t want Douglas to end up here!’

‘I bet £10 at Ladbroke’s you won’t’, I said. ‘I’ll win a cool thousand if Ireland spins off to the south.’

‘Off to Brazil? That would be fabulous.’

‘You just have to keep west of Brittany and Spain and there’ll be nothing to stop you.’

‘Isn’t Madeira down there somewhere?’

‘You gather that up and sweep it along with you, and one or two of the Cape Verde islands. Otherwise, it’s a clear run to Recife.’

‘Revolving slowly into the south Atlantic. How long would it take?’

‘Well, it’s over six thousand kilometres.’

I did a quick calculation.

‘At the rate Ireland’s been moving so far, it would take you best part of four years to get there.’

‘Plenty of time to learn the samba!’

We got up, colliding slightly as we dumped our paper in the waste bin, and I gave her a quick hug.

‘You realise I love you?’

‘I know’, she said, and gave me a quick kiss.

But Ireland missed the boat to the south Atlantic. By the last week of November, its east coast, with the Isle of Man attached, was nestling against

England and Wales from Morecombe Bay to Pembrokeshire. You could walk out along Douglas Pier and jump across the South Pier at Blackpool, every bit as much as Sandra had feared. The port of Liverpool was finally put out of the misery of its long decline since the 1950s, blocked by Castletown in the Isle of Man's south-east tip as effectively as Belfast was blocked to the north. Dublin confronted Aberystwyth, while Rosslare and Fishguard which had once exchanged a ferry service found themselves starting down each others' throats.

Reporters on various papers struggled find the right metaphor for this but *Time Magazine* trumped us all. 'Ancient enemies' is declared 'were locked inseparably together, like wrestlers mutually immobilized'. They ran through the various wrestling holds, the Anaconda choke, the Biceps slicer, the Can opener, the Flying armbar, the Gogo-plata, the Overhook, the Scissor and the Twister, before deciding Double Chickenwing was the appropriate term - Chickenwing because the lock was inescapable, and double because it was unclear which side had won.

'It was the biggest geographical shift in the region', said *Time Magazine*, 'since long before the British Isles were inhabited.' The economic consequences were incalculable. But they were strictly confined to the region itself. Europe was unaffected. Americans would probably find holidaying in London a good bit cheaper. In the long term, it was probably a good thing that the ancient enemies would have to compromise. The Good Friday Agreement was not actually responsible. But the Great Drift was entirely in accordance with its principles.

But there remained one problem. The new landmass, or Ukire as *Time Magazine* called it, was not stable. It was revolving slowly in an anti-clockwise direction exactly as the Isle of Man had done. The epicentre of this revolution was the Isle of Man itself, where I took refuge with Sandra the following January.

## Chapter 8

On 26 November, the government in Westminster announced a major programme of investment in the London Underground. ATO (Automatic Train Operation) and ATC (Automatic Train Control) would be extended to all existing lines, not just those projected. The investment would be accompanied by a major efficiency drive. Drivers and conductors would, in the long term, become unnecessary, making possible redundancies of up to 80%. Ancillary staff would be cut by 50%, though the British Transport Police, responsible for underground safety including prevention of terrorism, would be quadrupled. The costs were estimated at 12 billion pounds sterling.

That evening, the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RTM) announced a seventy-two hour strike of all signal workers, and platform and ticket office workers. Bob Crow, RTM General Secretary, described his members as outraged. The government's plans were a unilateral breach of all existing agreements, fully justifying wild cat action.

He was referring to the illegality of a strike without a ballot of all RTM members. But the government's response was curiously muted, and they did not contest the issue. A spokesman pointed out that ASLEF members, representing train drivers, were not striking. It was well known that Keith Norman, the ASLEF boss, hated Bob Crow's guts.

At 4.30 a.m. on the 27<sup>th</sup>, Bob Crow smelt a rat. Maintenance staff, who had not struck, reported distortions of the track on the Bakerloo line, just after it plunged underground between Queen's Park and Kilburn stations.

'What do mean distortions?' he said, sitting up in bed.

'Both tracks are twisted. All four lines. I've never seen anything like it.'

'Which way are they bending?'

'To the left. I mean, roughly northwards.'

He thought for a moment. He had been a track repairer himself in his early days with London Transport. Then he punched out another number.

‘Is anyone checking the track on Piccadilly, going into Earl’s Court? And on northern going out of Hendon Central? Just the two hundred metres before the tunnels end. Get on to it, and call me. Oh, and you might look at the approach to Arnos Grove’

While he waited, he made himself a cup of instant coffee. Then he made another call...

‘Check the roof on District and Circle. Metropolitan as well.’

By 8.00 o’clock, his worst fears were realised. The track distortions, the cracks in the roof of the subsurface lines – those only some five metres down – indicated two things. First, that the Great Drift had come to London. Secondly, that he and his union had been sold down the river.

‘We’re in the shit’, he told a hastily summoned meeting of the RTM executive. ‘The bastards have got us over a barrel’.

‘But all that investment –’

‘There was no investment programme. The bastards knew the Tube was going to have to be shut down. They made us close it for them. Since we went without a ballot, they don’t owe us any compensation. Only ASLEF will get any benefits’

He watched comprehension sink in slowly round the table.

‘You can’t mean closed for good?’

‘Kaput! As dead as Monty Python’s parrot’.

‘But it’s only the outside commuter lines are affected. Everything else is still intact. Well, I know the Circle Line roof needs fixing. But everything in Zone 1’s still intact.’

‘But who’s going to venture down there? With the lifts jammed and the escalators bugged? Not know whether they’ll ever get out?’

‘So that’s it? Nothing we can do?’

‘We’ll play out the charade they’ve written for us. We’ll say we’ve consulted our members, and a majority are prepared to accept the investment package provided there’s proper redundancy deal. On those grounds, we’re prepared to call off the strike.’

‘And then?’

‘The bastards will call our bluff and say the tube’s shut. Full stop. And they don’t owe us a penny.’

‘Game, set and match. Just like they stitched up Arthur’

The speaker was referring to Arthur Scargill and the 1984 miners’ strike.

‘Worse’, said Bob Crow. ‘Arthur held out for a year. They fucked me in less than twenty-four hours.’

CNN made a big feature of how stoically Londoners reacted to the disappearance of their Tube. They showed pictures of people getting to work on bicycles, tricycles, one-wheelers with no handlebars, scooters, skateboards, and just plain skates. A favourite was of a pin-striped gentleman with a bowler hat riding a penny farthing to the stock exchange.

Wartime images from *Picture Post* showing Londoners reacting to the Blitz were dusted down, and inter cut with one-liners like ‘We’re not going to let it change our way of life’, and ‘We can’t let them beat us, can we?’, and ‘I don’t like it but I’ve got to get to work. I’ve got patients to see to.’

But the carnival didn’t last long, and getting to work became a daily endurance test. There was a lot of sympathy with Bob Crow and his workers. Everyone agreed the government had been very clever, and the *Daily Telegraph* continued to heap praise on a socialist prime minister with a proper sense of Who Ruled Britain. But there was something distasteful about being so clever at the expense of Londoners like themselves. Not even the news that some railway workers were to kept on to maintain the track and rolling stock and tunnel infrastructure against the day the Tube might, just might, re-open, did away with the feeling the government was on the side of the Fat Cats.

Within days, eBay started an on-line trade in Tube memorabilia. Londoners went crazy for anything that reminded them of what they used to complain of every day. Mugs and tea-shirts with that iconic map used to be just for American and Japanese tourists. Now it was Londoners snapping them up. Then more interesting

items began to be posted. A name-plate from Camden Town, guaranteed intact. A complete set of Poems on the Underground – not the CD, the original placards. Little red hammers in glass cases with the instruction Break in Case of Emergency. A guard's uniform and set of flags, circa. 1936. Framed adverts for London shows that had once lined escalators. A Toilet door with the 'i' scratched out, a joke authentically of the 1950s.

Underground fanatics had always been interested in the 'ghost' stations, stations long abandoned as new lines were added, but remaining to be explored like some ancient cave system, with paintings and graffiti intact. British Museum, for example, closed in 1933 when Holborn was expanded to include two Central Line platforms. The station is still down there, and featured in the film Bulldog Jack, in which Ralph Richardson who played the villain is cornered on a disused platform and fights a duel with swords. Or York Road, north of King's Cross on the Piccadilly line, closed in 1932. Or Lords on the Metropolitan line, closed in 1939 when St John's Wood opened on the Bakerloo. Some of these stations could be glimpsed briefly as the train hurtled past, throwing its own light into the darkness.

Now whole tube system was like that, even the grandest stations like Piccadilly and Charing Cross and Tottenham Court Road. Anything that could be salvaged got a good price.

It was some time before the Transport Police cottoned on. Many of them had sympathised with the redundant workers. Now those same workers were systematically looting the whole system.

The Commissioner and Board members of TfL (Transport for London) complained bitterly. But the police were outnumbered a sixteen to one by workers who knew the system intimately, and 10,000 to one by the general public who treated the transactions as though the Tube were passing back into public ownership. Most of the deals were tiny ones concluded on the internet. Why not, if it was all scrap? Why entomb everything like the ancient pyramids?

There was little taste for an investigation, and less prospect of getting convictions. Four dealers were arrested and cautioned, and station security was

tightened. But the market was not unlimited and eventually, the trade shrivelled to a steady trickle.

Rumour has it Bob Crow is the proud owner of the earliest recording of 'Mind the Gap'.

## Chapter 9

Until November's end, Scotland had treated the Great Drift as a bizarre phenomenon that didn't concern it directly. It was weird to watch the Irish coast drifting slowly past the Rhinns of Galloway. For three months, people drove down from Glasgow to Stranraer for the spectacle. There was a lot of interest when Rathlin Island failed to make the cut past Corsewall Point, and was shunted into the mudflats and shingle of Loch Ryan.

Until then, Rathlin, a tiny island shaped roughly like the figure 7, had been eight kilometres north of Ballycastle and twenty-five kilometres west of the Mull of Kintyre. Who owned it, whether Scotland or Ireland, had originally been decided by releasing an adder. Everyone knew that St Patrick had banned all snakes from Ireland, so if the adder survived, Rathlin must be Scottish. The adder died, so Rathlin became Irish.

But it was also where Robert the Bruce, took refuge in a cave after the Battle of Methven in 1306. Defeated by the English, the King of Scotland watched a spider trying and failing and trying again to build a web across the roof of the cave. As generations of Scottish schoolchildren have written, it 'inspired' him to try again, leading to his victory over the English at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314.

As the island approached, Alex Salmon, First minister in the devolved parliament, was photographed standing in the cave's entrance. Remarkably, no one laughed. Even more remarkably, no one mentioned the snake.

Sandra and I drove up to where Rathlin was wedged across Corsewell Point, the foot of the 7 thrust into Loch Ryan. She wanted to see what was likely to happen when Rathlin's colonies of puffins, fulmars and guillemots were suddenly at war with Loch Ryan's ringed-plovers and oyster-catchers. I was just looking for a good story for my paper.

I don't know what drew me to massacre as my theme.

‘It was such a wonderful island,’ said Sandra as we drove north of Stranraer along the east side of Loch Ryan and Rathlin came in sight, looming oddly where it had no business to be.

‘My dad took me there when I was just eight, and showed me the bird colony. All along the cliffs to the north, millions of them nesting, puffins, razorbills, guillemots, kittiwakes. Dad showed me how to tell them apart. That’s when I began to be what I am.’

She took her right hand off the steering wheel, and squeezed my knee.

‘I read about it’, I said. ‘Idyllic, tranquil, life lived at walking pace. Literally, no cars allowed.’

‘But lovely for a child’s holiday’.

‘And like all these places where nothing happens, it’s had a grim history. A Viking massacre in 795. A massacre by Sir Henry Sidney in 1557. A huge massacre of the MacDonnells by Francis Drake in 1575.’

‘Is that what you’re going to write about?’

‘Then there was the famine’, I went on grimly. ‘Two thousand people lived there in 1850. They nearly all left. There’s a story a dog got left behind, howling on the jetty as everyone put to sea.’

‘And the moral of all this?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. How you can’t hide from history? How killing all the people is good for the wildlife?’

‘Now that I buy!’ said Sandra emphatically, as we parked at Glenn App alongside the Loch’s narrow entrance, now totally blocked by the leg of Rathlin.

‘There’s a moral of sorts,’ I said, getting out of the mini. ‘A cruiser called HMS Drake was torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1917, and sank just two hundred metres offshore. What do you make of that?’

‘The place where nothing happens got its own back.’

‘I think you’d better write this piece,’ I said.

We crossed a narrow stretch of shore line, and climbed without difficulty on to eastern side of Rathlin, no longer an island. It took less than half an hour to cross the leg to the redundant ferry terminal at Church Bay, which now looked

directly across to the lighthouse at Corsewall Point. There were a lot of people about, mainly tourists like ourselves, and we had to queue for lunch at McCuaig's which I'd been told was a quiet bar.

'It's great for us', said the barmaid, who was still serving Caffrey's Irish ale. 'We get hundreds coming across from Stranraer every day. There's even people asking about buying plots of land'.

Sandra was pensive as we ate our scampi and chips, and went down to the old terminal to take the minibus to the nature reserve on the north of Rathlin.

'What did you say about people and wildlife?'

Fortunately, the limestone and basalt cliffs were exactly as she had remembered them.

'Not quite as vast they seemed, but just as wonderful'.

There was a viewing point with a rough fence at the cliff edge and I stared down in amazement. My first impression was that everything was in motion. The limestone seemed as fluid as the Atlantic heaving below, and it took me a moment to realise that tens of thousands of birds were circling and screeching and plunging and soaring like some endlessly shifting black and white fabric.

'What are they?'

'Oh, gulls mostly. Five different kinds, maybe more. Nobody really knows how many species of gulls there are. But, look, those are razorbills. And those things doing the diving are black guillemots.'

The guillemots were spectacular, diving from enormous heights and entering the water with scarcely a splash, as streamlines as torpedoes.

'Which ones are puffins?'

'Oh, they spend their winters far out in the Atlantic. They'll be back in April. At least, I hope so, if they haven't given up on Rathlin Island.'

Sandra became pensive again.

'At least these cliffs are still facing north. Not swivelling westwards like the Isle of Man.'

'I'm afraid there's a rumour we are swivelling.'

'What? The whole of Britain?'

‘So it’s said. You have to be at Land’s End or John O’ Groats to detect it.’

She pointed to a tuft of pink flowers, sea-thrift she called them, still surviving in the cold wind.

‘Everything’s going to be spoiled,’ she said. ‘Or different, which for me is the same thing. That plant in that crevice, with hardly any soil. It needs the sun and wind and salt spray from *that* side, not *this*. If north becomes south and east west, every flower will change colour, every fruit will taste different.’

‘There’s another rumour Scotland will break off from England. Maybe not the whole of Scotland, but at least the bit north of the Forth-Clyde valley.’

‘So everything will stay put? There’s no problem?’

‘Not exactly. It’s another version of the south Atlantic voyage. People still dream of sailing south. Glasgow and Edinburgh will end up as Brazilian cities’.

Sandra giggled.

‘So we buy a plot on Rathlin, and live happily ever after in the tropics?’

My heart jumped, but I said nothing. It was the first time she had hinted we had a future together.

‘But the puffins wouldn’t survive that’, she added sadly. ‘They’d die of the heat or be eaten by vultures.’

## Chapter 10

At first glance, Professor MacArbiter's lecture seemed a run-of-the-mill affair, not something to detain us before Sandra crossed Blackpool Pier to her home. But an e-mail from my editor alerted me, so we took in Edinburgh for a couple of nights.

MacArbiter's lecture at the Royal Society of Edinburgh was one of a weekly series at the unfashionable hour of 5.30 p.m. That's how the Scottish National Academy of Science and Letters announce their proceedings, not 17.30 but 5.30 p.m. I have to admit that part of me approves. Such venerable institutions should be slow to modernise.

The title 'Whither Scotland?' seemed equally mind-numbing. I couldn't believe I was being asked to cover something so mundane. It was Sandra got the point, and ordered the last two lecture tickets on-line before drawing a red fingernail under the key part of the e-mail.

Professor MacArbiter is the head of Edinburgh University's Seismic Unit. 'Whither Scotland?' was suddenly a title with sex-appeal.

As was evident from his audience.

Sean Connery was in the front row, in his full rig of kilt, dagger and sporran. Scotland was going nowhere without 007's approval, and his presence alone guaranteed a packed house.

SNP First minister Alex Salmon could hardly afford to be absent. His election promises about nurses' pay, tax cuts, extra police and student fees, were coming home to roost, and blaming Westminster for refusing to finance Scottish rebellion was beginning to look distinctly shifty. He needed allies, and allies more appealing than the homophobic Brian Souter, the boss of Stagecoach, or golf-course magnate Donald Trump.

His SNP executive was still loyal, including president Ian Hudghton, former president Winnie Ewing, various vice presidents, conveners and vice-conveners, a secretary and ten ordinary members.

Only the treasurer was absent. He was roaming corridors in Brussels, trying to put fur and claws on Salmon's vision of Scotland as 'a Celtic lion' and 'Europe's third wealthiest country'.

It soon became clear MacArbiter was a consummate academic performer. Tall and slender with flowing silver hair, he knew all the tricks of his trade. He knew how to overburden his sentences just sufficiently to make them appear globally incontrovertible. He knew how to take a sip of water at strategic moments. And he had brought Ms Yentob, the prettiest of his PhD students, to operate his Powerpoint presentation.

He began with the jargon of his trade, overwhelming his audience with their ignorance while proclaiming roundly that no scientific explanation existed for our current situation.

'And by situation', he said, 'I mean precisely that'.

He snapped his fingers, and Ms Yentob screened the first of a series of map. It showed Ireland drifting three degrees north of south-east, on course for its collision with the Isle of Man and with St David's Head.

This map was shown without comment.

The second showed the whole east coast of Ireland occupying Liverpool bay and pushing against the Wirral and the west coast of Wales.

'So far, no surprises', said Professor MacArbiter ebulliently. 'What you've seen you know already. That's what's we know to have happened.'

He took his first sip of water.

'Before I continue with my predictions, I should like to say a word about my methodology – or, to be strictly accurate, my lack of methodology. No one to my knowledge understands what is happening, or why it is happening, or who or what is making it happen, or how, if someone or something is making it happen, how it is being done.

'Some of my colleagues, and they include Ms Yentob there at the computer, some believe logic dictates that, under the pressure of the Great Drift Scotland, will split away from England, the break occurring either along the national boundary or possibly, though this is a minority view, along the fault line of the Forth-Clyde

valley. Fuelling both arguments is the entirely rational assumption that the Scottish Highlands, that massive agglomeration of the most ancient of rock forms, must be immovable.

‘But we are not dealing here with matters rational. Frankly, the western European continental shelf has gone berserk, which is to say, it is behaving in a manner that defies explanation. Our task, then, is to find scientific method in its madness, as I do in the four images that follow.’

He signalled to Ms Yentob, and the third image was projected. It showed the whole of the United Kingdom with Ireland attached tilting in an anti-clockwise direction. At the epicentre, which appeared to be the Isle of Man, the movement was barely perceptible. But John O’Groats had already shifted two kilometres west, while the whole saucer-shaped coastline from John O’Groats to Cape Wrath was distinctly tilting to the left. The map was dated 13 December, two weeks hence.

The gasps from his audience made Professor MacArbiter smile

‘You note my conclusion that the whole of the Scottish mainland will drift in harmony with the United Kingdom. ‘Is this an ideological, or perhaps a sentimental conclusion? No, it is a scientific one.

‘Every land movement so far, with insignificant exceptions, has been the effect of direct pressure. Ireland pressured the Isle of Man, both in unison pressure south-west Wales, and now the whole accumulated land mass is pressuring the United Kingdom. No Snaefell, no Snowdonia no Scarfell has proved able to resist. No scientific methodology presupposes Ben Nevis will more steadfast, or that different regions of Scotland will move independently.

‘The exceptions have insignificant islands like Innisfree, Innisboffin on the west coast of Ireland, so bound by history and culture to Ireland as to rule out independent destinies, and Rathlin Island which happened to strike the Scottish mainland and was unable to continue on its south-eastern course.’

But he was losing his audience. Winnie Ewing was muttering furiously to John Mowat, her former Orkney agent, and SNP candidate for Orkney at the general election. Alex Salmon was looking back over his shoulder to see what the fuss was about, while SNP President Ian Hudghton was rising to his feet.

MacArbiter held up his right palm to command attention.

‘You note I that invoke history and culture in seeking scientific method in madness. That is why my map shows Orkney and Shetland remaining exactly where they are.’

That got them! His audience leaned forward in their seats, exclaiming to each other. Half of them stood up. It was true. The map showed that, with the tilt to the west, the gap between the Duncansby Head and Tor Ness had narrowed.

But Orkney and Shetland had not drifted.

‘‘I protest’, said Ian Hudghton. ‘This is quite unacceptable.’

‘But why?’ shouted one of the ordinary party members.

‘Why not?’ exclaimed another.

‘History and culture’, intoned Professor MacArbiter. ‘Isn’t it their aspiration to be as independent of you as you wish to be independent of England?’

‘But we’re not becoming independent,’ shouted Alex Salmon. ‘You’ve got us titling with the rest of the land mass.’

‘It’s my prediction, not my doing,’ said the Professor reasonably.

‘Then what’s the basis of your prediction?’

‘That without contiguous pressure, no territory – whether the Isle of Man, Anglesey, Wales, England, Scotland – need join the Great Drift. If any off shore island elects to join, it’s by choice.’

‘The Orkneys are Scottish through and through,’ said Winnie Ewing. ‘And the Shetlands. They’ll stand by us.’

‘Didn’t you yourselves back the Orkney Movement in 1987?’

It was true. At the 1987 general election, the SNP had stood aside to give John Goodlad a free run in campaigning for devolution for Orkney and Shetland.

‘That was devolution from England’, shouted Ian Hudghton. ‘Not devolution from us.’

‘How will they pay for it?’, demanded Alex Salmon.

‘We’ll know soon enough,’ said the Professor silkily. ‘Two weeks will prove me right or wrong. If you only realised, I’m throwing you a lifeline. Meanwhile, there are more maps I’d like to show you.’

But Sean Connery had also risen to his feet.

‘I’ve had enough of this damn tomfoolery’, he declared. ‘Would anyone care to join me for a wee drink?’

The surge to the door became a general stampede and Sandra and I were left alone with the professor and Ms Yentob.

So that was how I got my best scoop ever for the *Liverpool Echo*. The paper ran Professor MacArbiter’s maps, beginning with his projection for 13 December. Under the banner headline, ‘Stop the World! Scotland Wants to Get Off!’ it gave the whole front page to the map, with my account of the Royal Society’s interrupted lecture on page 3.

Next day, we published MacArbiter’s projected map for St Valentine’s Day, 14 February. The whole of the United Kingdom was titling to the left at an angle of 60°. London was shown on the same latitude as Copenhagen. Scotland had gathered up the Hebrides which had divided along the Sound of Harris, the Island of Lewis pressed hard against the north-west mainland, with the Eye peninsular tucked into Enard Bay, and North and South Uist driven against the south-west coast of Skye. Land’s End was just a mile or two off Calais.

Our plan had been to run the story over four days, but it had already moved beyond our control. Any fool could download the image from our on-line edition and, having been given the coordinates, rotate it for himself just as MacArbiter had done. So we rushed out a second edition that same day with two further maps.

The first, dated 31 March, showed the UK having turned 110°, with London opposite Jutland, and the south-west tips of Munster brushing past Boulogne. I have to confess we cheated a little on this. MacArbiter’s map was actually dated 1 April, All Fool’s Day, but that was too much to ask of our readers.

The last and most interesting map was dated 9 May. It showed the United Kingdom as a single land mass with small internal lakes, spun through 140°, and pressing firmly against the whole north coast of France.

Specifically, the Isle of Skye, newly reinforced by Lewis and by North and South Uist, fitted like a fist in a boxing glove into the bay between Trégastel-Primel and Trébeurden on the north coast of Brittany, while Islay, Jura and Kintyre were squashed against the cliffs either side of Pte do Chateau.

That was the extent of the new border between Scotland and France.

Moving east, there was a new inland sea occupied by the Channel Islands, blithely unaffected by the turmoil around them, until Rossan Point at the head of Donegal Bay did to Cherbourg what the Three Legs of man had done to Belfast, blocking the port completely to all future sailings. From that point on, the whole west coast of Ireland, from Blacksod Bay where this all began in August last year to Banfry Bay in the extreme south-west, pressed against the Normandy coast from le Havre to Dieppe. The four peninsulas of south-west Munster prodded like a toasting fork against Calais, Bologne, Dunkirk and Ostend.

The whole south coast of Ireland now ran in a straight line north east straight into the Bristol Channel. London, by some quirk of the rotation, had return to the latitude of Copenhagen.

The northern-most point of the United Kingdom was Dover. The next inhabited territory was Orkney, four hundred miles to the north.

The excitement generated by MacArbiter's projections was world-wide, and my pieces were syndicated from China to Peru and Alaska to New Zealand. MacArbiter had parted with them for what I thought a derisory fee, a mere £5,000. But he had insisted on getting 30% of the subsidiary rights, and I realised he had been smart. Fortunately, Sandra had insisted I stuck out for 10%, so I too made a nice pile which came in handy over the next few weeks.

Of course, within hours the story was way beyond our control. But because the Liverpool Echo had been the first with the maps, people thought we were the paper to write to with their concerns.

Questions poured in from literally all over the world.

Will it still be legitimate for this new place to field five separate national teams in the World and European Cups? I passed that to the sports editor.

Are the people of the UK feeling dizzy? Very much so, I replied, but not yet because we can detect the earth moving under our feet.

Will the UK be vulnerable to nuclear attack now the early warning systems are all facing west? I gave that to the political editor.

Does water still go down the plugholes the same way? Yes, of course, I wrote. We've not yet shifted to Australia.

My grapevine in Glastonbury is on a south facing wall. What will happen when the wall is north facing? Our gardening correspondent, who works part time, wrote a long piece on the changes to gardening practice implied by the Great Drift. He didn't hold out much hope for the vine.

How will racing pigeons cope with the new geography? How the hell do I know, said the sports editor.

Will Wayne Rooney still be on target now the goal posts have shifted? Why the hell not, repeated the sports editor. Are we supposed to think he tunes in to the earth's magnetic field?

Churches are built so their altars face Jerusalem. Will prayer still work, and which way should we be praying? The religious editor went to town on that one. In fact, he wanted to run three columns on successive days, and we had to restrain him.

Will Father Christmas be able to find my chimney? Will my upside down cake taste the same when it's, well, upside down? What will happen to mobile phone roaming charges? What will become of the Scilly Isles? Who will the North Sea oil belong to? Is Europe going to move as well?

How secure the questions were! How free of any real apprehension! As though life was not about to change for ever, and mostly for the worse.

## Chapter 11

Meanwhile in his office in Dublin, the Taioseach was staring incredulously at a rather different map. It was the work of a student in engineering at University College, Dublin, and had been brought to him by the cabinet secretary who had the student, Andy Cullogh, in tow.

The map depicted Ireland leaning hard against the coasts of Brittany and Normandy.

‘But this is the MacArbiter thing. I’ve seen it a dozen times since yesterday. It’s all over the TV.’

‘Not quite, sir. If you look more closely, you’ll see a line stretching from Bantry to Donegal’

‘I see it’.

‘That’s the south coast of England, sir.’

‘Don’t try me too hard.’

Andy Cullogh broke in nervously.

‘It marks where the old coastline will have been when England has shifted. The old coast from Dover to Land’s End. Assuming, of course, Professor’s MacArbiter’s predictions are correct, sir’

‘So?’

‘The bedrock is still down there, sir.’

‘I wish my lord would take me with you. What means my lord?’

The Taioseach was no Falstaff, but there was no character he quoted with more relish.

‘Assuming Professor MacArbiter’s predictions are correct, sir –’

‘Don’t worry, son. Your arse is covered.’

‘Assuming so, and accepting that only the top five metres of land are shifting –’

‘I get you,’ said the Taioseach roundly. ‘England will leave its bedrock behind just as we left our zinc mines somewhere out in the Atlantic.’

He traced a nicotine-stained fingernail along the line from Bantry to Donegal, taking in Beachy Head, Portland Hill and Lizard Point, written across the map of Ireland.

‘I take it everything south of this line is over the English Channel.’

‘Yes, sir’.

‘And everything north. Within our borders, that is.’

‘Everything north,’ said the cabinet secretary, feeling overlooked, will be as solidly founded as before the Great Drift began.’

The Taioseach studied Andy Cullogh’s map with fresh interest.

‘So it’s not just potatoes,’ he muttered.

‘Sir?’

‘Never mind. Have I got you right? We’ll just slide on top it, and everything down there will be ours.’

‘Assuming Professor MacArbiter’s - ‘

‘I said, son, your arse is covered.’

‘Yes, sir. All ours.’

‘So what exactly is down there?’

‘Well, for a start, sir -‘

Cullogh glanced nervously at the cabinet secretary.

‘For a start,’ said the cabinet secretary, ‘there’s the London Underground’.

‘WHAT?’

‘The London Underground Railway.’

‘But isn’t all that already tangled up? Like so much spaghetti? The government did a smart deal to avoid paying millions of compensation.’

‘Only the surface lines were damaged, where they emerge as at Kilburn or Hendon. The rest is intact. Even the shallowest tunnels, like those on the Circle Line, are five metres down. The rest are much deeper.’

‘You mean, it’s all still down there? Intact as the Blessed Virgin?’

‘Except for a small amount of looting.’

‘So England slides away, and we slide in, and just take over?’

‘Well, we need stations, and lifts and escalators. But otherwise, yes.’

The Taoiseach couldn't believe his ears. His fingernail hovered again over Cullogh's map.

'If I've understood you correctly, it should be about here.'

'Yes, sir. Limerick.'

The Taoiseach was proud of his Limerick ancestry.

'You're kidding!'

'No!'

'No, sir,'

'No, seriously, you're pulling my leg.'

'No, sir.'

'No!'

For several minutes, there was complete silence in the cabinet office. The Taoiseach stared at the map. The cabinet secretary stared at the ceiling. Andy Cullogh hovered like a spaniel, panting but not daring to give advice.

The Taoiseach sighed ambiguously.

'So Limerick will have an underground system. Northern Line, Metropolitan Line, Bakerloo Line – no, we must alter the names.'

The cabinet secretary took a bold risk.

'We could change Piccadilly to Tipperary'.

For the first and last time in his career, he succeeded in making his boss guffaw in delight

'Goodbye Piccadilly,' the Taoiseach sang. 'And farewell Leicester Square. No, but we must retain Cockfosters. That's too Irish to throw away.'

'I'm afraid,' coughed the cabinet secretary, 'Cockfosters is a surface station. It'll migrate with London up north.'

'Now isn't that a shame. But we mustn't look a gift horse in the mouth. Cullogh, is it, my son?'

'Andy, sir'.

'Andy, then. What else do you reckon is down there?'

The student shrugged.

‘Mines, quarries, wells, tunnels, grain storage forts, nuclear bunkers – I’m afraid I’m an architect, sir, not a geological engineer.’

‘But you’re in the school of engineering?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Who’s your best professor?’

‘Professor Sean Coulson, sir’.

‘Ah, I used to know his sister. Exceptionally pretty girl. Okay, Andy, that’ll do. Keep your mouth shut and the secretary will be in touch ’

‘Terrorist threats’, said the Prime Minister briskly.

He was chairing a meeting of COBRA, so named because it was always held in Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, and he liked the meetings so be brisk. You didn’t waste time waffling on about terrorism. He also liked them to be interesting, if not positively entertaining. Obviously, he had to know about the latest plots to lace Robertson’s marmalade with anthrax, or release bubonic plague into Birmingham’s sewer system where it would infect the rats and spread beyond control, or blow up jumbo jets by mixing shampoo with aftershave. But you could see his eyes glaze over as the head of MI5 summarised the latest intelligence from the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre. Weren’t any of the bastards doing anything new?

‘I can’t make it more amusing’, the director-general grumbled to his wife. ‘I’m not devising these plots. The terrorists are. It’s not my fault if they’re short on imagination.’

Apart from head of MI5, there were present the home secretary, the chief of the defence staff, the Metropolitan police commissioner, the director of SAS, and the mayor of London.

‘At least the London underground is off our agenda,’ said the PM. ‘No more suicide bombers down there.’

‘Not quite, prime minister,’ said MI5. ‘We’ve had a tip from G2 that the Taoiseach has commissioned a secret survey of the underground network and rolling stock from an expert in New York’

‘Why the devil would he do that?’

‘G2’s a reliable source. They speculate it’s something to do with the MacArbiter maps which show Ireland occupying the home counties,’

‘Does he really reckon on taking over the London underground?’

‘It’ll be directly underneath Limerick. It’s rumoured they’re planning to rename the Piccadilly line Tipperary.’

‘Well, you’ve entertained me’, said the PM, who was well aware of the complaints about him. ‘I take it there’s nothing we can do? Right then, what else is MacArbiter stirring up?’

‘A hornet’s nest’, said MI5. ‘Muslims, BNP, animal rights, Welsh nationalists.’

‘Welsh nationalists? They’re devolved. Only 12% want independence. And according to MacArbiter, they’re going to be completely landlocked.’

‘Not entirely, prime minister. It seems the only decent bit of south-facing coastline is going to be both sides of the Bristol Channel. That and the north-east coast of Scotland. There are a lot of enquiries about retirement homes.’

‘Which the Nats are plotting to blow up’.

‘Exactly.’

‘It takes me back to student days. How repetitive it all is.’

‘Then you’ll like this one. We’ve intercepted e-mails between Tower Hamlets and Finsbury. The project is to pack a small plane with explosives, take off from Hendon Airport, and crash it into the BT Tower.’

‘Why the BT Tower?’

‘They don’t like the revolving restaurant on the 34<sup>th</sup> floor.’

‘Revolving restaurant?’

‘There used to be one,’ said the home secretary. ‘Billy Butlin ran it. It was shut down after the IRA put a bomb in the Gents. Then Butlin’s lease ran out. No one’s eaten there since the 1970s.’

‘So why do they want to target something that doesn’t exist?’

‘In their e-mails,’ said MI5, ‘they don’t like anything that rotates. The London Eye is also mentioned. The problem seems to be that on the MacArbiter map the Tower Hamlets mosque is no longer facing Mecca. Every mosque in Britain will be in the same boat. For all they know, they could be praying five times a day to the North Pole. That’s got up their noses.’

‘If they hang on a week or two it’ll probably fall down anyway. How deep are the foundations?’

‘How I got new for you,’ said the mayor. ‘They go down fifty-three metres.’

‘How the devil do you know that?’

‘I’m just reading it off my Blackberry.’

‘WHAT!’

MI5 was outraged.

‘Give me that’, he demanded, snatching the mobile. ‘Don’t you know this is a secure location?’

He strode to the door and tossed it to one of the guards.

‘Check that out. And then destroy it.’

‘Oh cripes,’ said the mayor, ‘Have I boobed again?’

‘Let them go ahead,’ said the prime minister. ‘If it’s going to collapse, they might as well take the blame’.

‘I don’t think that’s advisable,’ said MI5. ‘We can’t allow them victories, even superfluous ones.’

‘Perhaps not. What’s this about Animal Rights?’

‘They are about to be violated wherever you turn. Eels and salmon seem to be top of the list, denied access to the rivers where they were spawned. There’s a lot of anger about homing pigeons, and all kinds of nesting migrants. Then there’s badgers, seals, and the golden eagle. MacArbiter’s apparently got it in for all of them.’

‘So who’s the enemy? I mean, who will they target?’

‘It’s not yet clear. But the chatter is deafening. There’s some talk about Maybush in Southampton, the Ordnance Survey headquarters.’

‘Well,’ said the prime minister, ‘since there seems to be nothing urgent, I suggest we wind up.’

The Chief of the Defence Staff coughed discreetly. ‘MacArbiter has more serious implications,’ he said.

‘Long term?’

The prime minister made long term sound not his business.

‘Long term,’ the CDS agreed. ‘But serious’.

‘I take it you mean Faslane.’

He was referring to the naval base on the Gare Loch, home of the United Kingdom’s nuclear submarine fleet.

‘Obvious, Faslane will cease to be operational sometime after next April. I’ve already spoken to Obama about this, and the President has agreed to allow us facilities at the New London submarine base in Connecticut until we can arrange a new base, possible at Scapa Flow. I understand the matter is scheduled for the new meeting of the Chiefs of Staff.’

He stared round the table with the air of a performing seal that had just pulled off a neat trick.

‘Anything other business?’

‘There don’t seem,’ said the head of the SAS, ‘to be any surviving nuclear bunkers in Scotland. Nothing for us to take over, that is.’

‘It’s true,’ said the home secretary. ‘Once devolution was on the agenda and the SNP turned anti-nuclear, we rather let things slide. I understand there’s one near Anstruther in Fife. They have their own website. If you’d like to inspect it, I understand there are regular coach trips from St Andrews.’

‘That’s all, then?’ said the prime minister briskly. ‘Keep me informed about these revolving mosques, will you? The meeting is adjourned.’

## Chapter 12

Ominously, the first riots were in York. There were no obvious reasons for tension in York. It was not faced, like Belfast, with a loss of identity coupled with a sudden massive rise in unemployment. York lived by selling its history, and the Japanese and American tourists would still come even if York were relocated in the latitude of the south-west of Ireland – the Japanese in parties of 25 beginning each February, the Americans each April in elderly pairs. Wild fuchsia and the odd palm tree would only add to York's attractions, and the daffodils would still bloom around the city walls. The 1960s university up the hill at Heslington could go on pretending it was an ancient Oxford college, oblivious to wherever York happened to be located.

But York has a history beyond the Romans, the Vikings and the coming of the railways. In 1190, one hundred and fifty Jewish men and women were killed after taking refuge in the stronghold of Clifford's Tower. It was one of medieval Europe's worst pogroms, and as usual had a financial motive. The new Norman landowners were heavily in mortgaged to their victims. In the early 1980s, York City Council erected a small plaque at the entrance to Clifford's Tower, acknowledging the crime. Ever after, on the anniversary of the massacre, York has been targeted by the National Front. It is a dangerous place to be at night at weekends and completely off-limits for anyone non-white, meaning in practice a few African students at the university and a few hundred Pakistanis running small shops.

Why should race should be an issue in a city where the population is 98% white? After the takeaway in Nunnery Lane and two late-night supermarkets in The Groves were torched, with the deaths of five Pakistani children and two mothers, one of those arrested with links to the BNP said he 'didn't like the direction the country was taking'.

Was he quoting Brendan O'Casey? Had he seen the MacArbiter maps?

Next night, fifty Pakistani youths roamed Micklegate after hours, smashing pub windows and terrorising people emerging from nightclubs. Suddenly, the Great Drift was all about York.

Though in fact, it was far more about Ulster and the DUP.

‘Which is it to be then, boss?’ said Gerry Adam, catching the First minister in the corridor at Stormont. ‘England, Scotland, Ireland or France?’

He was brandishing a copy of the *Belfast Telegraph* which claimed the MacArbiter prophesy appeared to be coming true. Northern Ireland was about to become a strip of territory with four national boundaries. To the north was the Lancashire coast, from Liverpool to Morecombe Bay. To the west was the Solway Firth and Galloway. To the south was Cherbourg and the new inland sea containing Guernsey, Jersey and Sark. To the east was the old enemy, Dublin.

‘You make it sound like the rugby’ said the First minister.

‘Oh, it’s not as bad as that, boss.’

The First minister hated to be called boss.

‘The rugby’s six nations these days. They include Italy. Now that would be really something. Northern Ireland applies to be a Papal State!’

‘I’d thank you not to joke about these matters.’

He was facing the endgame. He’d spent his life proclaiming union with the United Kingdom. But that was to assert the independence of the northern counties. He’d no wish to join the Scottish nationalist or, with the economy in ruins, to go cap in hand to London. Catholic France, of course, was out of the question.

His personal inclination was to unite with the south, on the principle that home was where they had to take you in. But he wasn’t yet ready to proclaim that, and he knew he’d never carry the DUP with him.

The two men entered the FM’s office and drank instant coffee from plastic cups.

‘Ugh! What we’re coming to!’

‘You’ve another new neighbour’, said Gerry Adam. ‘Have you thought of joining the Isle of Man?’

‘What? You want me to run TT motorbike races through the Bogside?’

‘They’re status has always intrigued me. Not part of the UK. Not part of the EU. A self-governing dependency.’

The FM reflected, tossing his plastic cup into the waste bin.

‘What does your paper say anyway?’

‘It’s all happening. The Channel Tunnel is closed. The Thames Barrier has been permanently raised. They’re not sure it will work any longer and they can’t take the risk of a spring tide drowning central London. Most of London’s bridges are condemned as unsafe. That includes railway bridges, so you can’t cross from Waterloo to Victoria. Unless you’ve a boat, of course. The river traffic is still okay.’

‘Is the news only about London?’

‘This is news about everywhere. Birmingham, Manchester, Dublin, Belfast. But you know how Irishman like the idea of London collapsing.’

‘What about our bridges? Is Arlene looking after things?’

The FM was referring to Arlene Foster, Environment Minister, whose responsibilities included road safety.

‘I wouldn’t know, boss. Arlene is a loose cannon.’

‘Don’t I know it. But I’d be sorry to see the Albert Bridge go. It collapsed, you know, in 1886. My grandfather used to speak of it.’

That was the moment Gerry Adams knew he’d won. His own life’s work was accomplished. Unionism was doomed. A united Ireland beckoned. But the politics had still to be negotiated. And inevitably a certain amount of violence. But he was hardened to that. His job was to find a roadmap for the DUP.

‘Are you not attracted to the Isle of Man option?’

‘It takes money to be independent. We’re beggars. What are we supposed to do, fish for Morecombe Bay cockles through five metres of topsoil?’

Adams looked away and smiled. A united Ireland, then.

As a journalist, I find it hard to tell whether to take blogs seriously. Some nutter posts a blog warning Pakistanis in York their time is coming. Then five kids and two mothers are murdered in house fires, and you study the blog and say the police should have known what was coming and that it was racist of them not to take the warning seriously. But at the time it was just one of a hundred thousand rants posted by fifty thousand geeks letting off steam.

A blog can be a sure guide to a suspect once a crime has been committed. Until then, it's just some loon with the facility to put his dirty linen on-line.

You could type in emotive names like Ian Paisley, or Drumcree, or Bogside, and get well over three million hits. But what's the story beyond what you already know? Once a name is on-line, it seemed to resonate like the ripples from a stone cast into Sefton Park lake, endlessly repeated as they bounce back from the banks.

If someone posts a blog attacking Northern Ireland Catholics, and you find it's got half a million readers, I agree that's news. But the internet is rarely so simple. When I'm told that a Catholic father of three has been gunned down in front of his wife and children in County Armagh, I find that evidence more compelling.

On the other hand, there's sites like Bogblog, doing a journalist's job and better. Much better, in fact, because of the vast numbers of people collecting the information and the speed of the interaction. Bogblog, though by now there were many others, still led the field in reporting on the mechanics of the Great Drift. It was the first to confirm what six governments, if you include the Isle of Man, were reluctant to admit, that the new Ukire land mass was indeed rotating in line with MacArbiter's predictions, leaving Orkney and Shetland in place.

These thoughts are provoked by what was happening in Liverpool. Ever since 11-year-old Rhys Jones was shot dead outside the Fir Tree pub in Croxteth, I've been tracking Liverpool gangs on the net.

I'd better come clean and admit I'd been expecting any troubles arising from the Great Drift to start in Liverpool. What other city would devote the twentieth century to building two separate cathedrals? If there was a Proddy one,

there had to be a Paddy one too. It's a divided city, not like multicultural London but in the New York manner, with zones it's dangerous for aliens to enter. Even the football was divisive, though Anfield and Goodison Park were within strolling distance. What preserved a veneer of unity was the prosperity of the new container port, and the city's sentimental devotion to the Beatles.

I knew, of course, about the drug trade and the murderous turf wars over drinking and gambling clubs. I'd reported back in 1995 on the David Ungi killing. Ungi's gang from the Dingle had objected to Johnnie Phillip taking over a bar in the Aigburth Road in settlement of a gambling debt. The matter was settled in time-honoured fashion by single combat which Ungi won. Ungi, however, used a knuckle-duster so the 'straightner' was inconclusive. Two days later, Ungi was shot by two West Indians and open warfare began. The Aigburth bar was burned and six houses in Toxteth were sprayed with bullets. One of the suspects in Ungi's killing was shot in Vic's gym in Kensington.

You didn't have to work for the *Echo* to follow this. Every Liverpudlian knew about the dozens of drive-by shootings and nail-bomb assassinations, and about the fact that not a single murderer was convicted.

But was it, to use a buzz word of those days, 'systemic'?

I studied the videos posted on You Tube by the Crocky and Nogzy gangs, from Croxteth and Norris Green. There's no denying they have their scary side – masked kids brandishing shotguns and handguns, graffiti with messages like 'I Am Hard', joy riders wheel-spinning high-powered cars, pit bull terriers deliberately provoked. It's frightening children are into this stuff, but the thing that struck me is that they *are* children. This was playground boasting put on our computer screens, amateurish and strangely innocent. The weaponry, for example. Yes, the guns were displayed, along with a frightening array of kitchen knives and choppers. But the kitchen tools included egg whisks, wooden spoons, a juicer, a spatula, and a blender – hardly weapons of mass destruction. Yes, the dogs made me wince, but they included a small Scottie with sad eyes, lovingly videoed, and obviously a cherished pet. A black cat, too, pictured arching its back and curling up on the mat.

What really got to me were the adult responses, posted on various ‘threads’ as these blogs are called:

What about a mandatory punishment whereby the offender is black bagged and shipped off to another country (Guatemala, Colombia, Kazakhstan) and left to fend for themselves, and having to secure the means by which to fund their way back to England. I suspect it would involve hardships and having to be really nice to natives ...

I’m gonna think outside the box here BUT perhaps Abu Izadeen and his mate Anjam Choudary and a few other nutters could be despatched up there, given the area to establish a small independent Muslim state and introduce Sharia law. That might sort these ghastly pikeys out! A few beheadings, a hand here, a nose there, a mass hanging by crane now and then ...

Here’s an idea for cutting crime. Every week you hold a lottery of prisoners ID numbers, picking three ‘winners’. The winners are then taken into the prison yard and executed, irrespective of the crime for which they were imprisoned. I’m prepared to accept that we could have more than 3 winners.

Scouse humour? I can imagine this stuff said in pubs, with an air of deliberate provocation. On the net, I’m not so sure.

Then the last week of December, the pits of the year, other threats appeared in videos posted on You Tube. Under the title *We Know Who You Are*, they objected to my column about the innocent side of the Crocky-Nogzy and threatened revenge. The second complained about a piece I write on the Pit Bull terriers. Some of these dogs, such as American Bloodhounds and Neapolitan Mastiffs, cost hundreds of pounds, but you can see them on Saturdays in Norris Green Broadway which is supposed to be a poor area. The third *We Know Who You Are* video, and the one I drew to my editor’s attention, objected to my scoop about the MacArbiter maps, which were not just anti-Liverpool but ‘unpatriotic’. All three stories had appeared under my by-line, so no great detective work was involved in targeting me.

All journalists dream of one day being themselves the news and ECHO REPORTER THREATENED was our banner headline next day, with details of the videos and high minded statements about fearless reporting and a free press.

It was the Chief Constable warned the editor to be sensible. Gang threats had to be taken seriously, and he couldn't provide me with 24-hour daily protection. So it was agreed I should take six months' leave of absence on half pay, contributing a weekly local interest column from the Isle of Man.

My last night, Sandra and I went round the corner to *Doctor Duncan's* pub for steak sandwiches and a couple of pints of Cains. She'd come over to help me pack – at least, that's what she called her supervision of what I was allowed to take, which was fair enough given I was moving into her house. My files of newspaper cuttings, for example, were dumped as superfluous.

'Everything's on-line,' she said, which of course I knew perfectly well. But old habits are hard to break.

*Doctor Duncan's* has never quite recovered from the smoking ban. I've tried to persuade Daniel, the barman, that good beer and simple food are what his customers come for, but he goes in for other off-putting attractions. That night, he had a young man with a guitar.

'Oh God,' said Sandra, the moment he appeared. 'The John Lennon effect.'

I'd heard this phrase from her before. The 'effect', as she described it, was that any kid who could strum three simple chords as backing for some mindless lyric would be listened to in reverential silence.

The guitarist was moon-faced and threatened to burst out of a well-worn brown suit. Throughout his performance, he stared at a girl with blonde braided hair and a surprising amount of facial jewellery, who sat at a neighbouring table fingering what looked like a port and lemon.

These were love songs, then. We were made to feel like intruders, though Daniel beamed like a successful impresario.

*'I doan know where you're goin'*, the singer began, adding two strums,

*I doan know where you're goin'*

jing-jing

*'Oh I doan know where you're goin'*

jing-jing

*But ah hope you get there.'*

Sandra's full lips hardened to a straight line. She relieved her feelings by kicking me under the table, almost spilling my beer.

*'An' when you get there',  
jing-jing  
'An' when you get there',  
jing-jing  
'Oh an' when you get there',  
jing-jing  
'Ah hope you like it.'*

Nobody laughed. There was a church-like silence, then genuine applause which the blonde girl took as her due.

'Anthem for Liverpool', said Sandra, outside in the car park. 'Maybe the Kop will take it up instead of 'You'll never walk alone.'

'You're too cruel.'

'No I'm not. This has become a mindless city. Aren't you glad finally to be leaving?'

As usual, she was ahead of me. I hadn't realised this departure was final.

## Chapter 13

She'd devised a website she wanted me to manage for her. The idea was simplicity itself. Given that the Isle of Man was the epicentre of the new revolving landmass of Ireland and the United Kingdom, it was already the place where movement was least detectable.

'Are you tired of feeling dizzy?' asked the site at [www.enterisleofman.com](http://www.enterisleofman.com). 'Come to the Isle of Man to steady your nerves.' The background image was of the Laxey Wheel, the largest working watermill in the world, its seventy-two foot diameter revolving slowly in the town of Laxey in the east of the island. The background music was Tommy Roe's 1969 hit 'I feel dizzy, my head is spinning, like a whirlp'. Normally Sandra's season took off with the Easter bookings. But this year she was fully booked from mid-January, and was looking for more hotel accommodation or cottages to sublet. It wasn't difficult. Rural Manx families are not the richest people in the world, and they began moving in with each for a week or two, reciprocating the deal later in the year, letting their cottages for the windfall cash.

The scheme developed in other ways. Sandra's word 'epicentre' was widely misunderstood. People somehow assumed the Isle of Man was the control centre of the Great Drift, and started demanding to know who we were exactly and what did we think we were up to. That was easily dealt with. We changed 'epicentre' to 'the still centre of a disturbed world', and the calls stopped.

But we were still regarded as some sort of information centre. The e-mails were like those I'd already been fielding at the *Liverpool Echo*. Will satellite TV still work, or will the programmes get scrambled? What will happen to east coast harbours when the breakwaters are all facing the wrong way? All this started with those cheap GPS systems. Shouldn't they be banned? Will my money be safe with the Halifax? What are the politicians doing about it?

Sandra found me one morning, solemnly responding to these messages individually.

'What on earth are you doing?'

‘Managing your website.’

Next morning, she had hired an assistant to field enquiries. She had a new job for me, to set up a proper information centre with answers on everything that was known to date about the Great Drift. She had even hired a facility room at the Chesterhouse Hotel on Loch Promenade equipped with a battery of computers and presentational equipment – mobile projectors and visual presenters and control tools.

‘Who’s going to pay for this?’ I asked.

‘Don’t worry. People will come, and they will have to stay somewhere. It’ll soon pay for itself’.

So I became a sort of cultural attaché to the Great Drift. Not in any sense an expert. I couldn’t explain a damn thing. But I collected what was known, going back to the miracle of the Dunmullin well and the Spanish skeleton. I also got Mrs MacGowan to write out the story of Tommy the Giant when I was interviewing her about the well, and made a little cartoon of it which proved hugely popular with visitors.

Other visual aids were, of course, the MacArbiter maps which I animated so that every stage of Ireland’s and the UK’s drift over the fourteen months from March a year back to next May could be plotted in detail – the first movement three degrees north of south-east, the collision with the Isle of Man, the passage on the same course to St David’s Head, the coming together of Ireland, Wales, north-west England and western Scotland, and finally the rotation of the whole mass until western Ireland was nestling against the north coast of France.

The earliest stages could by now be downloaded in much greater detail from Google Earth, and visitors would spend hours pouring over the small-scale maps showing points of contact.

I reckoned I was well prepared with Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), but there were visitors who stumped me.

‘You don’t really believe we’ll crash into France?’

The questioner was a middle-aged lady with a strong Yorkshire accent.

‘That’s the prevailing theory.’

‘Nah’, she said. ‘Rubbish.’

‘So what’s your idea?’

‘It’s obvious. We’re destined to go on spinning. Like a vinyl record.’

She showed me a brightly coloured chart with figures and geometric patterns which she called a *mandala* and which she said represented the universe. Everything was impermanent, nothing at rest. She herself had experienced levitation at the Buddhist monastery near Malton where she lived.

‘But only for a very brief moment,’ she said modestly. ‘I am a long way from *bodhi* or enlightenment.’

It was strange to hear of such matters from a stocky woman with such a common-sense accent.

‘Let the great world spin forever, down the ringing grooves of change,’ she intoned. ‘You didn’t know Tennyson was a Buddhist?’

‘Indeed, I did not. But I like your revolving theory.’

‘It’s obvious. We shall spin for all eternity. Like a prayer wheel. It’s all here,’ she added, tapping the *mandala*.

‘May I keep this?’

‘Of course. I brought it for you.’

Then there was retired Major-General Harvey who came promptly at 10.00 o’clock every morning from his handsome villa on Douglas Head. Sitting down at one of the smaller computers, he stared for half an hour at the last of the MacArbiter maps before walking off with a brisk ‘Good day to you, sir’.

The third morning, I offered him a printout but he thanked me and declined.

The fourth morning, I deliberately stood behind him, trying to see what engrossed him. He had blown up the map of upper Normandy, between Dieppe and Bologne, no

‘There,’ he said. ‘Saint Valery sur Somme.’

He was pointing to the coastline of Picardy.

‘You’ve never heard of it?’

‘Should I?’

‘It’s where William the Conqueror set sail from. A superbly conducted operation. Six hundred ships. Over seven thousand men. They landed at Pevensey and put up a pre-fabricated wooden castle at Hastings. I think you know the rest.’

‘Not as much as you, evidently.’

‘I can’t get over the disappearance of the Channel. Well, good day to you, sir.’

Next morning, he was back, prompt as ever. He’d moved a few miles eastwards along the coast and was contemplating Dunkirk harbour and the beaches to the east, loomed over by Ireland’s Spanish Point.

‘Another massive embarkation,’ was his only comment.

He kept this up all week, concentrating on the beaches of the Normandy Landings between Cherbourg and Le Havre. I didn’t disturb him, merely noting his concentration on Vers-sur-Mer and Asnelles. I checked these names for myself and found it was where the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division went ashore and constructed the famous Mulberry harbour that enabled supplies to be landed. Now, these beaches were simply the border to Galway.

Next week, he surprised me. He moved inland to the UK and Ireland, zooming in close on the famous battlegrounds of our history – Bannockburn, Pwll Melyn, Flodden Field, Marston Moor, Naseby, the Battle of the Boyne, Culloden Moor, and others. What I couldn’t understand is why he wanted to study these sites on MacArbiter’s map instead of in an ordinary atlas.

In the end my curiosity was too much.

‘I hardly understand it myself,’ he confessed when I challenged him. ‘At first it was the loss of the English Channel disorientated me. It’s been our best defence down so many centuries.’

‘You don’t think we’re going to be attacked?’

‘It seems most unlikely,’ the general conceded. ‘I’m more worried about insurrection. I can’t believe such drastic changes can be encompassed pacifically. I’m trying to get a sense of how the strategic landscape looks when it’s revolved through two hundred and forty degrees.’

‘But these are the battle sites of Scottish and Welsh and Irish nationalism. Are those the conflicts you anticipate?’

‘It seems most unlikely’, he conceded a second time. ‘I fear it will all be much more fragmented. I wish you a good day, sir.’

I didn’t have a good day. He left me very apprehensive.

The Cornish poetess, on the other hand, made me want to laugh. She’d come in response to Sandra’s website, wanting to escape ‘dizziness’ in a place where she would not feel the earth move.

She spent a morning working slowly through the FAQs and taking frequent notes. After lunch in the hotel, she played the map sequence slowly, studying the immense journey Land’s End would make, scraping the coasts of Normandy, Belgium and southern Holland until its final position in the North Sea pointing an unsteady finger across the Dogger Bank towards Wilhelmshaven. Only John O’Groats was destined to make a longer journey.

‘Will we never make contact?’

‘Not according to the expert.’

‘I’ve a walnut tree in my yard. We call them French nuts in Cornwall. Will it survive in the North Sea?’

‘I can tell you who to ask.’

But her real worry was the consequences for language of drifting so far from home.

‘How shall I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’

‘It’ll still be Cornwall,’ I objected.

‘No it won’t. Not when it’s only five metres deep.’

She passed me a copy of her poems and I read the blurb on the back cover.

*Jehane Parish, I read, was born in Truro and lives in Helston with her partner who is a weaver. She writes in a Cornish discourse that reaches down into the bedrock of identity. Her roots go deeper than the tin mines. Her metres are the measure of the Lizard peninsula, her rhythms those of the waves slapping nightly against Land’s End.*

‘Let me show you something,’ I said.

I played her the video of Giant Tommy and his floating island. But she wasn’t impressed. She evidently took her blurb seriously, and the poetry of travel made no sense to her.

‘I see you were born in Truro,’ I remarked. ‘Is that where your father was born?’

‘No. He was from Newcastle. And my mother from Wolverhampton.’

‘Isn’t that how it is for most people these days?’

‘It’s the duty of poets to fight it.’

She fiddled in her handbag and took out a creased envelope.

‘But I have written something since I came here.’

I opened the envelope and read, in a neat sloping hand.

### **Conch Shell**

There is a country at my breast  
drinking me. I am a sea anemone  
waving.

Who is out there? Who doodles  
with a Joan-blunt  
at Alantide?

In Laxey the great wheel  
turns, carrying waters  
it raises from the depths.

Come leats,  
make a tunnel of me,  
make a braggaty conch shell  
echoing the sea.

‘What’s Alantide?’ I asked.

‘All Saint’s Day. What you call Halloween.’

‘And a Joan-blunt?’

‘A woman with a mind of her own.’

‘I know one of those,’

‘You can put it on your website, if you like. Since it’s about being here.’

But when I got home that evening, Sandra was having none of it.

‘Doesn’t the stupid woman know watermills are driven by water? They don’t raise it from the depths.’

‘She said she came here because she didn’t want to feel the earth move.’

Sandra hooted.

‘I promise that’s not a problem you’ll ever have with me.’

## Chapter 14

Most fun of all were the school parties that began to visit the centre, and it was a group of eight-year-olds who brought up what was logically the next question.

They were playing with the MacArbiter maps and, being kids and geniuses with computers, they soon found out a way of speeding things up. Ireland hurtled south-east, grabbed the Isle of Man which spun like a top as the collision with the UK approached, and then everything revolved and crashed into northern France. The whole process took about three seconds.

At which point, they looked at me and said, 'What'll happen next?'

I led them to the big computer and called up Google Earth. First, I showed them the most recent images of what was actually happening with the whole of the UK tilting and Dover already on the latitude of the Hook of Holland.

Several of the kids looked blank.

'Don't you know the map of your own country? Where are you from?'

'Preston Elementary.'

'We came on a day trip.'

'Mrs Elton's our teacher.'

'Where is she?'

'I think she's gone shopping.'

We went back to the MacArbiter maps and I showed them where the UK and Ireland were supposed to be, and where we were now. Then, back on Google Earth, we called up Preston and zoomed in close on the town map.

'That's our school!'

'That's my street!'

'I can see my house. Look, and there's Jamie's.'

They spent some happy minutes navigating round the town, taking in the M6 and Deepdale Stadium where Tom Finney used to play for Preston North End.

'Okay', I said. 'You asked me a question, what'll happen next?'

I beamed down to a general map of the Normandy coast, gave them each a notepad and pencil, and suggested they work it out for themselves.

Being kids, they soon got the hang of it. Underneath France was the Iberian Peninsula with Spain and Portugal. If the map tilted a little, it might close the Straits of Gibraltar. The trouble was France was joined to Germany, and Germany to Austria and Switzerland and Hungary and the Balkans and Turkey and Iran, and from there south through the middle east and Egypt to Africa, or eastwards through India to China.

‘Wow’, they said, contemplating little Ireland pushing against the Alps and the Himalayas and the Great Wall of China.

They didn’t want to give up. They spent half their lives playing computer games where anything could happen. But apart from Gibraltar hitting the Atlas Mountains, the best they could come up with was a narrowing of the Suez canal and the closing of the Bering Strait as Russia joined with Alaska.

‘I hope they’ve behaved themselves’, said Mrs Elton, laden with carrier bags from the Tower House Shopping Centre in Castle Street.

‘I think’, I said with sincere pleasure, ‘they may have learned something.’

‘That’ll be the day,’ said Mrs Elton.

But what about France?

It was obvious at a glance that Cherbourg and le Havre would go the way of Belfast and Liverpool. The closure of the oil and container terminals at Le Havre, together with the submarine shipyards and trans-Atlantic port at Cherbourg, was imminent.

Had anybody noticed? Why weren’t French lorry drivers blocking all access roads insisting the ports stay open? Why weren’t farmers driving their tractors down the Champs-Élysées demanding protection for Normandy cheeses such as Camembert, Boursin and Carré de Bray? Why weren’t students at the Sorbonne rioting to safeguard their pensions in the coming economic recession?

And what about Brussels? Was anyone in the Commission, the EU Parliament or the Council of Ministers paying the slightest attention?

Not so far as Jacques public was concerned.

Then in the third week of January an article appeared in the *European Economy Research Letter* published on-line by the Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN). It was a nervously tentative piece. The author called it a hypothesis erected on a projection that was methodologically unsound about a movement or series of movements that had no scientific explanation.

No one except us in Douglas wanted to be caught taking MacArbiter seriously. However, the academic fudging done, the piece was astonishingly prescient.

The economic motor of this new North Western European Landmass (NWEL) would be the Irish Republic. Ireland would take over much of the role of the former Home Counties, benefiting from its proximity to mainland European via a re-opened Channel Tunnel. Much of the sub-structure of former south-eastern England should be recoverable, including possibly the old London metropolitan railway. The pressures that had formerly led to a steady drift of skilled labour from northern England and Scotland to the south would intensify as the Celtic Tiger seized the advantage of its new geographical location, and as the fields around Limerick became available for house building.

Wales, meanwhile, would inherit the role of the former industrialised Midlands, but with two advantages not formerly enjoyed by Birmingham and Coventry. First, it appeared probable that the oil terminals at Milford Haven would remain open along with the ports of Cardiff and Swansea, albeit accessible only via the North Sea. Secondly, skilled labourers formerly employed in the industrialised Midlands, many of them actually of Welsh origin, would be drawn to the region by motives of patriotism as well as profit. Wales would attract inward investment assured of ample energy, secure trade routes, and a trained and loyal labour force.

Scotland's position looked less promising. Stranded west of Brittany, and deprived of its oil revenues, the Celtic Lion risked becoming little more than a sea-

lion. The nuclear submarine port at Brest would make Scotland's former facilities obsolete. Scotland's economy seemed back to whisky and tartans and the Loch Ness monster, supplemented by artists' colonies. And, of course, the eternal migrants' remittances.

Then there was England. What was there to say of the former imperial giant shipwrecked in North Sea, with Norway its closest neighbour? Would the Thames Barrier, shorn of its foundations, protect London against spring tide surges? Would English workers elect to stay, given the cost of London mortgages and the opportunities further south?

For this author, the great conundrum was North Sea Oil. Would London inherit the revenues? Or would they be shared between Orkney and the Shetlands?

## Chapter 15

‘So who exactly is this man?’ asked the prime minister impatiently.

He was chairing another meeting of COBRA, this time with the addition of the Chancellor, the Governor of the Bank of England, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

The Director-General of MI5 read from his prepared brief. ‘James Elliott Fairchild. Born 1961 in Wellington, Shropshire. Attended Wrekin College as a day boy, 1972-1980 –‘

‘I mean what have we got on him?’

‘Nothing, prime minister. After school, joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment, served in Northern Ireland and Bosnia. Afterwards became Bursar of Richmond Academy and secretary of Twickenham Conservative association. Married the Conservative chairman’s daughter. They have three children.’

‘Hardly suicide bomber material’, said the Chief of the Defence Staff.

‘Then what the devil’s he up to bringing the country to its knees?’

Nobody round the table felt the prime minister was exaggerating.

Fairchild’s offence was that he was refusing to pay his mortgage. More precisely, under his leadership just under two million borrowers were refusing to pay their mortgages.

In late December the Thames Barrier, shorn of its fifty foot foundations in the river bed chalk, had been lowered permanently as a precaution. No one expected it to function effectively and by mid-January the steel gates were beginning to lean. The next storm surge in the North Sea accompanied by a spring tide promised to flood central London.

According to the *Daily Mail*, 420,000 London properties were at risk from the Thames alone. Much worse was likely to be the effect of the flooding of drains and sewers. No comprehensive map of these existed for London, and the consequences of flooding were unknowable.

But one consequence was immediate. House prices in London were already tumbling with the credit crunch. Now they faced a catastrophic fall. No one wanted to buy property in the floodplain, and mortgage lenders complained bitterly that the existing IFMs, or Indicative Floodplain Maps, were hopelessly inadequate. Clients could not be persuaded that even Highgate Hill was safe.

‘What about the drains?’ they complained when salesmen showed them the contour map, and with no map of the sewers available they refused to be reassured.

So far, all this could be put down to market forces. Then James Elliott Fairchild stepped in.

His complaint which he put on You Tube was that his four-bedroom detached house in Twickenham was now worth half his outstanding mortgage. Further, that over the past twelve years he had already paid the bank seven times its present value. Further still, he was being asked to insure it not for its current worth but for his outstanding debt.

‘Not a pound more,’ he vowed, shaking his fist at the camera, and urged other Greater Londoner homeowners to support him.

‘If a million of us refuse to pay, the banks will be helpless. It’ll be like the poll tax over again, but with one big difference. There’s nothing illegal about refusing to pay your mortgage.’

The campaign was a mass hit from the first day, and it quickly spread beyond London to all the main towns along the Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire coast, and across to Liverpool where house prices were being affected by rising levels of unemployment.

By mid-March, when the meeting of COBRA was convened, almost two million borrowers had signed up to the ‘Not a Pound More’ crusade, and the banking system was in crisis.

‘There’s no point targeting Fairchild,’ said the Chancellor authoritatively. ‘The question is who should pick up the bill for falling house prices? The voters? Or the mortgage lenders?’

‘But that’s monstrous,’ said the Governor of the Bank of England. ‘In actuarial terms, Fairchild hasn’t got a leg to stand on. After twelve years, he hasn’t started paying for his house. He’s just been paying off the interest.’

‘Then your only option is repossession,’

‘What? Re-possess two million homes? Of course that’s not an option. In any case, they’re worthless’

‘It would give me a lot of satisfaction to repossess Fairchild’s’, said the prime minister sourly. ‘All right, I know that’s not on.’

‘How deep are the banks in?’ asked the Chief Secretary.

The governor shrugged his shoulders.

‘Multiple billions. It’ll be months before we know. And who’s to say Fairchild will stop at two million refusals. What if every borrower in the country reneges on his mortgage?’

‘Let’s be quite clear on this,’ said the Chancellor firmly. ‘The Bank of England is the lender of last resort’.

‘I’ll lend what I’ve got,’ said the Governor. ‘But the pound’s no longer a gold sovereign. It’s no longer even backed by goods and services. It’s backed by real estate, mortgaged to the commercial banks the length and breadth of Britain. If that real estate is worthless, so is the pound.’

A gloomy silence settled round the table. COBRA was used to tangible threats from identifiable villains with proclaimed causes leaving discernable fingerprints. The apocalypse was not on their agenda.

It was then the Prime Minister showed his metal.

‘Economics is not a science,’ he said briskly. ‘It’s a religion, and voters need their opium. First, they must be told the Bank of England will cover all outstanding debts. Meanwhile, I’ll deal with Brussels and the World Bank. After all, the Great Drift is a temporary phenomenon. If the worst comes to the worst, we can always abandon Trident.’

As the Chief of Defence Staff began to expostulate, the Prime Minister announced unanswerably, ‘the meeting is adjourned.’

By March, lots of things were happening at once and it was difficult to keep track of cause and effect.

The first Muslim revolt was in the Savile Town district of Dewsbury which is 97% Muslim anyway since they flocked there from Pakistan to revive the dying cotton mills.

At Friday's prayers at the huge Markaz mosque at the corner of Warren and South streets, the Imam enlivened his sermon by remarking that instead of facing Mecca his congregation would soon be praying to the Pentagon.

It's unclear whether he intended this as a joke or as a call to arms. But as the young radicals of the Deobandi movement to which the Mosque belongs flowed out between the Victorian terraces, they were not in laughing mood.

Savile Town is all but surrounded by the Calder River which makes a huge U-turn to the north. By barricading the Savile Road bridge to the north, and blocking the junction of Headfield Road with Bratton Street to the south, the protesters could turn their district into a virtually impregnable fortress.

All that Friday afternoon and evening they rioted, through Dewsbury town centre to the north and Thornton Lees to the south. They were quickly joined by youths from the predominantly Muslim Ravensthorpe district to the west, a district not so easily barricaded but linked to their own by the Calder bridge on Thornhill Road, and providing a warren of narrow streets for running battles between the toxic tip and the industrial estate. Their targets were pubs and police stations which had their windows smashed. A few cars were overturned, and Molotov cocktails thrown. Two hostages, the desk clerk and a waiter, were seized from the Heath Cottage Hotel on the Wakefield Road.

This sort of thing had happened before in Oldham and Burnley and quickly died down. On the Saturday morning, however, while the police were still hesitating about removing the barricades, the leaders proclaimed on the internet the formation of a Muslim Commune centred on the Markaz mosque and based on principles of Tabligh-i-Jamaat. We all had to look this up, of course, and found it meant literally 'the Call of the Community', a group originating within the

Deobandi sect of Sunni Muslims. The Tabligh declared Sharia law would prevail throughout Savile Town, and that all attempts at outside interference would be resisted. If the barricades were attacked, the hostages would be beheaded.

Never, in any circumstances, would Muslims pray five times a day to the White House.

They'd timed their announcement well to catch the Sunday tabloids in full cry.

'Islam-Madness', screamed the *Sun*, under a full page cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed throwing a petrol bomb.

'English law suspended. Sharia prevails', shouted the *Express* alongside a picture of a man with both arms cut off at the elbow. (Later, it transpired the photo was from Sierra Leone.)

The *Mirror*'s 'Taliban take over Dewsbury. Home grown terrorists have independent base', seemed mild in comparison.

'Osama bin Laden to wed Britney Spears', chortled the *Sunday Sport*.

By midday, the great and the good were queuing up to comment.

The Prime Minister called for calm, deplored the resort to violence, and praised the police for their courage and devotion to duty.

The Leader of the Opposition praised the police for their devotion to duty and conspicuous courage, deplored the resort to violence and called for calm.

The Commissioner for Race Relations called for calm on all sides, deplored both violent acts and violent language, and ventured that the Muslims felt they had a genuine grievance.

The Archbishop of Canterbury opined that heartfelt prayer would always reach its true destination, whether north, south, east or west, and that no genuine Deity would misread his worshippers' devotion.

The leader of the Liberal Democrats blamed the war in Iraq, but deplored the resort to violence, wondered why the police had not intervened and called for calm.

The Archbishop of Canterbury issued a further statement saying he had been misinterpreted and had not intended to imply that Allah was not a genuine Deity. He had the greatest respect for the Prophet's teaching and for Islam as a religion of peace.

Meanwhile, the revolt was spreading, first to Blackburn where the largely Moslem district of Audley, bisected by the Leeds and Liverpool canal, could be barricaded almost as easily as Savile Town. It was a matter of controlling the bridges at Audley St and Eanam and controlling two roads, namely Audley Range and Bottomgate to where they converged at Accrington Road. Across the canal, north of Barbara Castle Way, lay the other Muslim areas of Whalley Range and Bastwell. Blackburn city centre was under attack from two sides, and that Sunday evening it was indeed burning.

Next was Bolton, with riots spreading to the city centre from the area round the huge Zakariyya Mosque which dominates the streets of terraced houses just off the A579 to the southwest. Preston, Oldham and Burnley quickly followed. The targets were as before, pubs and police stations, and in Oldham two barmen were taken hostage.

The *Express* and the *Daily Telegraph* blamed police indecision for what happened next, though negotiating with hostage-takers was hardly quite the same thing as indecision. What happened was that Black youths in the Chapeltown district of Leeds and the Moss Side area of Manchester saw rioting was something they could probably get away with. By Monday, the London boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth, Hackney, Brent and Lewisham were all under siege. Pubs and police stations were not their targets. They raided shoe shops and electrical goods stores, carrying home boxes of Nikes and Reeboks along with TVs and Hi Fi units, mobile phones, computers and fridges.

The logic of this was normally that Black riots died down quickly when the first frenzy of looting was satisfied and there was nothing left to steal. But this was different. Taking their cue from the Dewsbury Tabligh-i-Jamaat., the Black youths

from Leeds renamed Chapeltown the ‘Morris Bishop Memorial Republic’. I was amazed they’d even heard of the socialist martyr from Grenada – this was from Thatcher and Reagan days – but they went further, naming Bob Marley’s 1973 hit ‘Get Up, Stand Up’ as their National Anthem.

Inevitably the British National Party stepped in.

The London borough of Barking and Dagenham was one of those destined to be flooded during the next storm surge in the North Sea. It had its own flood barrier at the mouth of Warpoles Reach, just past the Beckton Reach sewage works. The borough was already notorious for electing 12 councillors from the BNP, who now deployed the ‘flood’ image as metaphor for the levels of immigration. It was this influx of foreigners caused the ten per cent unemployment rate and left true Caucasian British without homes.

By Tuesday, the BNP were out in force, following Nick Griffin’s dictum that ‘it was more important to control the streets of a city than kits council chambers’. They too were able to deploy the natural barriers of the Thames to the south and the North Circular Road to the east. Barking and Dagenham was declared a ‘Whites Only commune’. It was not a republic but, until England had a monarch who recognised the primacy of English-descent, it would be governed in trust by the party executive. Capital and corporal punishments would be reinstated with immediate effect, together with the national service and the right of every ex-national serviceman to possess an assault rifle. As soon as feasible, Barking and Dagenham would withdraw from the European Union and impose a policy of economic protectionism. Non-white British passport-holders would lose their citizenship but would be permitted to stay on as ‘permanent guests’ unless guilty of criminal offences, past, present and future.

Meanwhile, they seized four Muslim shopkeepers as security for the hostages taken in Dewsbury and Oldham.

Within just six days (‘The Second Six Day War’, Wednesday’s *Sun* dubbed it), England was becoming Balkanised. Not all the no-go areas were political. Liverpool, the last sectarian city, saw the first street fighting between minority Protestants and majority Catholics since 1909. In Manchester, the division was

Black versus White, while in Birmingham it was Black versus Asian. In Brick Lane, in London's Tower Hamlets, the Barelvi Muslims declared they wanted nothing to do with the Tabligh-i-Jamaat. *kaafirs*.

Behind everything were the gangs in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and London, whose leaders with their private armies emerged as war lords. They knew how to claim territory without the need for street barricades. They knew how to exercise control through violence. They knew about primitive distribution, if only in the business of drugs and women, and they knew about taming the police. They threatened, in fact, to be the most dangerous form of alternative government.

Within ten days of the first Muslim insurrection, there were some two hundred and sixteen and a half no-go areas throughout England and Wales. The half was in Worthing where some geriatrics with a sense of humour barricaded a couple of streets with zimmer frames and wheelchairs to protest that instead of living on the south coast they were destined to be facing the Arctic Circle.

The government refused to panic. Surrounding each of the no-go areas with a cordon of police, and continuing to negotiate the release of the eight hostages, they practised what the prime minister told his cabinet would be a new form of siege warfare.

'Cut off supplies of what they most require,' he declared, and waited teasingly.

'You mean water? Electricity?' ventured the home secretary.

'We could prevent shop and supermarkets being re-stocked,' said the transport secretary.

'We're not at war with these people' said the prime minister.

He stared round the cabinet until each member in turn stared down at his blotting pad. Then he rapped the table for attention.

'First we stop their giro cheques,' he said. 'That'll have the special advantage of hitting the BNP hardest. Next we cut their access to satellite and cable TV. I'll get Rupert organise complete media blackouts in their areas,'

He meant Rupert Murdoch, an old ally.

‘With no beer money and no Sky Sports or Oprah Winfrey, we’ll soon see how long they hold out.’

He was right. On the Sunday three weeks later, police were able to move into Savile Town unopposed. All the young insurgents were out of town watching Arsenal versus Manchester United wherever there was a TV accessible.

## Chapter 16

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, two gay poets with admirably straight faces presented a paper at Yr Academi Cymreig or the Welsh Academy. Professionally they were lecturers in the department of European Languages at Prifysgol Aberystwyth or Aberystwyth University and the first target of their joke was entirely departmental. One of their colleagues Professor David Trotter had been awarded a massive £873,669 grant to cover letters I to M of his Anglo-Norman Dictionary, and they were keen to get a slice of the action. But they soon attracted a much bigger audience.

Their purpose was to announce the arrival of a new language group for north western Europe. For centuries, the Welsh language had been isolated from its closest neighbours, Irish in Ireland, Gaelic in Scotland and Breton in northern France. This isolation was partly geographical, but principally a consequence of English power, especially Anglo-Norman power following the invasion of 1066. Now, however, the native tongues of Wales, Ireland, Brittany and the western isles of Scotland were coming together in a new land mass. At its heart would be a new inland sea, a mini-Mediterranean bordered by Donegal, Argyll and Brittany, which would provide a common focus and a profound cultural link.

Welsh was spoken by over six hundred and ten thousand adults, while the comparable figures were half a million for Breton, three hundred and fifty thousand for Irish and ninety-two thousand for Scottish Gaelic, making a total of over a million and a half already fluent in north-European Gaelic while a further million claimed 'competence'.

Admittedly, during their centuries of separation, the four dialects had drifted apart etymologically, syntactically, phonologically and orthographically. But with this new convergence, a standardised north-European Gaelic would quickly evolve. Exchange programmes already existed between Wales and Brittany with twinned towns and shared festivals. It was time to repair links with Ireland and bring Scotland on to the map. It was time to combat the centralising tyranny of Parisian French.

English, meanwhile, was destined to be no more than a minority language on the outer fringes of Europe, ranked with Norwegian or Finnish, and in need of European support if it was to survive. In the United States, experts were already predicting that a century from now the language most widely used would be Spanish.

‘It was an April Fool’, said the two poets afterwards, forgetting that in the academic world there are no April fools and that nothing is too ridiculous to be laughed out of court.

‘Yes,’ said Professor Trotter. ‘I’m well aware this was a joke at my expense. But you’ve launched a bandwagon. Get your proposal in before someone else does. I want this department to survive.’

‘Ossian resurgent’, said BBC Scotland.

‘Fuck Ossian,’ said Alex Salmon.

He was en route, along with a high-powered SNP delegation, from Edinburgh to Kirkwall airport in the Orkneys. It was a longer flight that he was accustomed to, practically the whole length of the United Kingdom, and he was not in a good mood.

The BBC was reporting on the jostling for position between Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Brittany in the aftermath of the Academi event. Wales claimed to have the greatest number of north-European Gaelic speakers. But which version of the language had the greatest literature?

BBC Scotland was referring to *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem ... composed by Ossian*, dating from the third century A.D., and published by James Macpherson in 1762. ‘A blatant forgery’, said BBC Wales. ‘Macpherson invented everything. In any case, Welsh bards were not illiterate barbarians. Taliesen was a man of letters’.

Enjoying the row, BBC London reported that the Ossian legends were probably Irish in origin. Yeats had a version of them called *The Wanderings of Oisín*.

‘Fuck Ossian,’ repeated Alex Salmon. ‘When are they going to show us the in-flight movie?’

It was not, of course, that long a flight, but he was not looking forward to arriving. He had with him Ian Hodgton, his party president, Winnie Ewing, the former president, and Sean Connery for cultural backup. Connery was soberly suited. He had been warned that kilts and sporrans were not regarded as authentically Orkadian. First minister Salmon also had with him Professor MacArbiter, along with Miss Yentob and her laptop computer.

The Orkneys and Shetlands, as MacArbiter’s map predicted, had opted not to join with Scotland in the Great Drift. They remained exactly where they always had been but isolated in the North Sea, just sixty miles closer to Margate than to Bergen.

Salmon was targeting Orkney, on the assumption that where Orkney went the Shetlands would follow. His mission was to persuade the thirty-one member Council of Orkney to opt to remain an integral part of Scotland. That way Scotland would retain a claim to the revenue from North Sea oil.

He reckoned he had three cards he could play, three balls he could juggle with, three strings to his bow. The first was constitutional. Orkney was represented in the Scottish Parliament by the duly elected Liam McArthur. Under both national and international law, the islands were subject to the powers devolved to Scotland under the rule of Westminster.

It didn’t help that Liam MaArthur was a Liberal-Democrat. So, too, was Alistair Carmichael, who represented Orkney and Shetland at Westminster. It helped even less that each of the twenty-one councilors had been elected as an Independent. But what else could be expected of a constituency made up of seventy islands, only twenty of which were inhabited?

His second string was cultural. But Winnie Ewing reckoned Sean Connery wasn’t enough. She wanted Salmon to play the Ossian card now that north-European Gaelic was all the rage.

‘Try it,’ she insisted, and she showed him the kind of lines from Ossian’s *Fingal* he should use.

Early on a May morning when it is time to rise,  
I hear no music on branches, nor lowing on moorland,  
But the screeching of beasts in the English language  
Yelling at dogs to make the deer scatter.

‘But this is English. I should be doing it in Gaelic.’

‘No, Gaelic would give the game away. Ossian is from the western isles. They never spoke Gaelic in Orkney, just some kind of old Norse.’

‘You want me to complain about English cultural oppression in English?’

‘It’s politics,’ insisted Winnie Ewing. ‘You seem to be losing your touch.’

Salmon sighed. The accusation hit hard. He was used to the politics of anti-colonial protest. As First minister, he was tired of going round with a begging bowl.

The Orkney Council chamber in Kirkwall’s School Street is a well-lit, wood-paneled room with a green carpet. Councilors sit at a three-sided hollow square with the mayor and secretary making up the fourth side. For Professor MacArbiter’s presentation, however, the mayoral table was occupied by the SNP delegation, directly beneath the screen on which his maps were being projected, while MacArbiter sat to the left among the councilors. It felt awkwardly confrontational, and Salmon was beginning to have doubts as to which side MacArbiter was on. Nor had he realized all twenty-one councilors were men. Bringing Sean Connery looked like a waste of time.

MacArbiter had promised the SNP a lifeline, the third string to the First minister’s bow. He proceeded to deliver a lecture on UNCLOS, or the UN Convention on the Laws of the Sea.

Ms Yentob projected a modified version of the final map of his earlier presentation, the image of the United Kingdom pressed against Ireland and Ireland pressed against Normandy. This was by now all too familiar. But he had added a detail. Attached to the English coastline from Clacton-on-Sea to Berwick-on-Tweed was an underwater shelf no more than five metres deep, representing the

former subsoil of Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde valley together with most of Ireland.

‘Under UNCLOS, which was agreed as recently as 1994,’ said the professor, ‘England can claim the first twelve miles as her territorial waters, and a further two hundred miles as her EEZ or exclusive economic zone. In addition to that, she can claim under the heading of her Continental Shelf any natural prolongation of her land territory up to a maximum of three hundred and fifty miles.’

He took one of his celebrated sips of water.

‘England,’ he declared, ‘will under the Laws of the Sea have a territorial claim to Orkney and Shetland. Unless –’

He paused, and held out his right palm while the muttering in the council chamber died away,

‘Unless Orkney maintains its constitutional right to remain a constituency of the devolved Scottish parliament.’

‘Well, there you are then,’ burst out Sean Connery, who had been craning his neck awkwardly to look at the map. ‘The matter’s settled’.

But the twenty-one councillors were unimpressed.

‘What happens if we do?’ asked. Alistair Gordon, councillor for the West Mainland ward.

MacArbiter clicked his fingers and Ms Yentob projected a second map. This showed England still firmly in possession of the Irish section of the underwater shelf. But the ex-Scottish section extending north from Dover had been divided exactly in half, on a line midway between Dover and Orkney.

‘My assumption is’ said MacArbiter ‘that the matter would go to arbitration, and the rival English and Scottish claims would be settled much as I have depicted.’

‘We don’t get much, do we,’ said Salmon. ‘England still gets the lion’s share.’

‘But you would retain your rights to a considerable share of North Sea oil.’

He clicked his fingers and Ms Yentob called up a map of the North Sea.

‘These are the principal oil and gas fields licensed by the government of the United Kingdom. First, eighteen offshore fields belonging to the Southern North Sea sector and serviced from ports in Norfolk and Lincolnshire.’

As he identified each region, Ms Yentob produced an enlarged image so the individual fields were plainly visible.

‘Secondly,’ he said, ‘forty-one offshore fields, thirty two of oil and nine of gas, belonging to the Central North Sea sector, and formerly serviced from Aberdeen.’

The barely perceptible stress he placed on the word ‘formerly’ made the SNP delegation stir uneasily.

‘Thirdly, the eight offshore oil fields of the Moray Firth sector, formerly serviced from Aberdeen. Fourthly, the eighteen offshore oil fields belonging to the Northern North Sea sector, including as I’m sure you know the ‘one-legged fire-breathing dragon from Nigg’ as the Seer of Brathan called it. These too were formerly serviced from Aberdeen. Finally, the three offshore oil fields belonging to the West of Shetland sector, also formerly serviced from Aberdeen. Thank you, Ms Yentob. That will be all.’

She switched off the power point presentation, and discreetly left the council chamber.

‘As you know,’ continued MacArbiter, all these fields are exploited by private companies licensed by the Department of Trade and Industry. They operate under a tax and royalty regime, and the proceeds are absorbed into central government revenue.

Scotland’s claim to a substantial portion of that revenue was always based on the contention that most of the fields – all those formerly served from Aberdeen – lay in Scottish territorial waters. The claim was, in short, that this was Scottish oil.’

‘Nothing less than the plain truth’, said Sean Connery. ‘Scotland’s been ripped off for nigh on forty years.’

‘Look at Norway,’ said Winnie Ewing. ‘We should have been in the same position.’

‘Even Denmark and Holland,’ said the First minister, ‘have had better deals.’

‘But what becomes of that claim,’ said the professor silkily, ‘when Scotland is located off the coast of Brittany and all the former oil fields are in English territorial waters?’

At that moment, Alex Salmon knew his suspicions of MacArbiter were justified. It was going to turn on Ossian.

‘Fuck Ossian,’ he muttered under his breath.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said MacArbiter.

‘Orkney being constitutional an integral part of Scotland,’ he said doggedly, ‘our original claim stands. Or if not entirely,’ he conceded, ‘at least in accordance with the map you showed us of the continental shelf divided. That would leave the whole Aberdeen sector in Scottish hands.’

‘It would indeed,’ said MacArbiter. ‘It becomes a matter for Orkney,’

The twenty-one councillors exchanged glances, nodding to each other across the hollow square. They had chosen Ian Johnstone to speak for them, councillor for Stromness and the South Isles, which included the oil terminal at Flotta.

‘First minister Alex Salmon,’ he said, ‘SNP President Ian Hodghton, former SNP President Mrs Winnie Ewing, and Mr Sean Connery, you are very welcome to Orkney and I hope you will be our guests for lunch – or dinner as we call it here – after this council meeting.’

We are not, I’m afraid, members of your party. We are, to a man, Independents, and we find ourselves in a unique situation. We thought we were part of Scotland. How that came about, back in the fifteenth century, is a matter for historical debate. What is not open to debate is that Scotland has deserted us. We gaze south from the summit of Hoy, and we see nothing but open sea.

As I understand it, you wish us to reassert our loyalty to a flag no longer in our sight. You wish us to do this so that you can pursue your claim to the revenues from North Sea Oil. The remaining question is, How will Orkney benefit?’

He turned to his fellow councillors.

‘Have I summed up our position?’

From the murmurs of approval there was no doubt that he had.

‘So we ask you, First minister, how will Orkney benefit from remaining part of an absent Scotland?’

Alex Salmon flapped his hands in despair.

‘What revenues we’ve received from North Sea oil have always been equitably shared with Orkney. I’m sure we could negotiate a higher percentage.’

Ian Johnstone exchanged nods with his fellow councillors.

‘I’m afraid we’ve already had a better offer from England. Oh, and don’t inflict Ossian on us. Here we’ve enough problems with *Beowulf*.’

## Chapter 17

Sandra was becoming an addict of Google Earth which she surfed for half an hour or so daily.

‘I didn’t realize how much living on an island meant to me.’

‘I though you liked being at the still centre of the turning world.’

She pulled a face.

‘Never believe your own website’

‘But I thought the Isle of Man was where you belong?’

‘It is. I do. But it’s no longer an island. It’s become just somewhere on the way to somewhere else.’

So she was looking for another island, and her requirements were strict. It had to be large enough to support a town, close enough to the mainland for easy escape from time to time, and preferably English-speaking though that bit was negotiable. Finally, it had to be somewhere where she could earn her living more or less as she was doing now, and where I would agree to accompany her.

‘That last bit’s no problem’, I assured her. ‘Though I might have qualms about Devil’s Island.’

‘I don’t think they speak English.’

Then, apparently changing the subject but in fact continuing the same theme, she added, ‘Have you noticed the swallows haven’t arrived this year?’

‘Isn’t April too early?’

‘No,’ she said emphatically. ‘April is not too early. I’m wondering if they can’t find their way.’

It was the problem of the puffins on Rathlin Island over again.

‘How do they navigate?’ I asked. ‘Does anyone really know?’

‘Some say by reading the position of the sun and the stars. Some say by tuning in to the earth’s magnetic field. Some say by following signs on the ground. Which ever method they use, they’re not going to find the Isle of Man where we are now.’

‘Can’t they adapt?’

‘It’s an instinct. It’s written into their DNA. It’s not something they can re-learn.’

‘But they must be able to cope with changes on the ground. Take the swallows that end up in London. They seem to cope with Canary Wharf and the London Eye.’

She gave me curious look.

‘Are you making a joke of this?’

‘Not in the least! I’m trying to comfort you.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I suppose what might happen is that we’ll get someone else’s swallows. I mean the ones that normally migrate to Liverpool Bay.’

‘While the ones intended for here fly on endlessly beyond the Arctic Circle until they drop dead from exhaustion.’

I could see the case was hopeless. It did indeed seem very sad.

Another of the visitors to the information centre was Vince Moyo, a Zimbabwean who was doing a doctorate at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He explained his topic was ‘Collapsing States in Africa’, and he called to see if we had any comparative material.

‘Are we a collapsing state?’

‘I think the process may have started.’

This intrigued me so I took him for a drink. Not at the hotel but at *The Cat with No Tail* in Hailwood Court. As I half expected, Tom Elliott was already in mid pint. I introduced my visitor but Vince turned down the offer of an Okells.

‘Tastes like warm pee,’ he said.

He opted for a Stella Artois.

‘Eurofizz’, said Tom contemptuously.

So they were on the same wavelength.

‘Vince thinks we’re a collapsing state.’

‘I may be by this evening,’ said Tom. ‘But at present I can walk a straight line.’

‘No, no. He’s a specialist on collapsing states in Africa, and he reckons we’re going the same way.’

I was half joking but Tom, as I should have anticipated, took this entirely seriously.

‘What are the conditions?’ he asked.

Vince ordered a refill. Over the next half hour, he put away half a dozen refills and I was surprised at his capacity.

‘The first condition doesn’t apply. Britain is a not a feeble, post-colonial state. I’ve just witnessed your government putting down a series of revolts by withholding welfare payments and cutting off the TV. No African government could do that. Not even South Africa.’

I’d taken Vince to be in his twenties, but his eyes looked old. He was a short, wiry man with thick braids.

‘I read last week, ‘ he said, ‘that one of the reasons Mrs Thatcher was able to defeat the miner’s in 1984 was because they all had mortgages. No African government has that kind of control.’

‘Not relevant now,’ I said. ‘There’s a mortgage revolt.’

‘Precisely,’ said Vince. ‘That’s the next condition. That the government fails to deliver economic security.’

‘I spent a year in Malawi,’ said Tom surprisingly, ‘in the 1970s. With the VSO, in a small town called Balaka. The thing that struck me was people didn’t need government. Most people supported themselves working in their farms. The imposed taxes and made them buy party cards and go off and dance for the president. They were better off without it.’

‘I didn’t know you were an anarchist,’ I said.

‘I was in Malawi,’ said Tom. ‘In the Isle of Man it just comes naturally.’

Vince was impatient.

‘Government provides hospitals. It provides schools, to offer ways out of poverty. It builds roads and markets for people to sell their produce. It provides the

security which guarantees their access to land and allows them to grow their crops. If all that goes, you have what you've got now.'

'Bankruptcy?'

'Worse,' said Vince. 'Much worse.'

He ordered another re-fill.

'Look. If a company goes bankrupt, they pool its assets and pay the creditors ten pence in the pound. Countries can't do that. The IMF doesn't come with wheelbarrows and carry the soil off leaving a big hole in the ground where Zaire or Liberia used to be. Those countries are still there. There are people still in them, unable to provide for themselves. Fighting over what remains. You won't believe the things I've seen.'

Tom and I were silenced.

'In the end, it comes down to armies of children, some as young as eight, armed with nothing more than their parents' *pangas*, looting and killing to survive. From Mozambique to Sierra Leone, that's what I've seen.'

'And you think that's coming here?'

Vince sighed heavily.

'No,' he conceded. 'You've got Europe and America to bail you out. It may all turn out happily. Every country's getting what it wants. Ireland wants to be closer to Europe. England wants to keep its distance. Scotland wants independence. Wales just wants to be prosperous. But these street gangs are getting more powerful, and I'm worried about immigrants. I don't think multiculturalism will survive for much longer.'

As I well knew from Liverpool, he was right about the gangs. They were not as containable as the BNP or Deobandi insurrections, and they were spreading to Manchester, Birmingham and south London.

As for multiculturalism, we would see.

I had written up Sandra's concerns about the swallows as my weekly item for the *Liverpool Echo* and invited readers to send comments. Something I hadn't

taken on board as the Isle of Man revolved slowly was how swiftly things were happening at the extremes. Land's End, for example, was sweeping along the Normandy coast at the rate of 4.15 kilometers per day. That was just under four centimeters per second, detectable to the naked eye given a landmark in France, and causing a good deal of erosion on the dozens of beaches from West Cornwall to the Cornish Riviera.

No wonder the swallows were confused. Readers reported they'd arrived in Galway and Limerick, so some were presumably heading our direction.

But people had other heartbreaks. One correspondent was sorry for migrating salmon, trying to return to spawn in the rivers of their birth. 'They locate the rivers by smell,' she wrote, from Paisley, and I assumed she knew what she was talking about.

'They might manage to locate the east coast rivers like the Tay, the Tweed and the Esk, now flowing directly north into the Atlantic, or those north coast rivers, like the Naver, the Halladale and the Thurso which would soon be pointing towards the Azores. But what of the rivers of Dumfries and Galloway, such as the Stinchar, the Bladnoch and the Nith, blocked off by Brittany, and destined to flow south-east into the new inland sea? Where would those poor salmon go?'

Little Holly from Purfleet in the Essex marshes had studied the life cycle of eels at primary school, and was upset that the young eels ('they're called elvers', she wrote proudly) would no longer find their way to the mouth of the Thames.

'The larvae hatch in the Sargasso Sea. Then they float for three years on the Gulf Stream and turn into baby eels. Then they swim two thousand miles to find the Thames and live there for twenty years. Then when they're more than twenty years old they swim four thousand miles back to the Sargasso Sea just to lay their eggs. The Thames is going to be miles away from where the elvers think it is. I think it's rotten.'

Obviously I printed this, and the head of the Environmental Agency for the Thames Region sent her a £10 gift token.

'You seem very concerned about fish,' said my next correspondent, a retired school's inspector from Hastings. 'Spare a thought for the fishermen?'

‘All along the St Ives in the west to Dungeness in the east, the little fishing fleets are going to lose out. I mean what the EU calls ‘artisan fishery’, sturdy boats for inshore fishing, flat-bottomed, clinker-built vessels that haven’t changed shape in hundreds of years, with lute sterns so the surf pushes them ashore and blunt-prows so they don’t dig in as they are winched up the shingle. They’re used exclusively for inshore fishing, taking red and grey mullet, John Dory, trigger fish and red and black bream off Cornwall, along with crabs and lobsters, turning to sole and plaice off Sussex and Kent, along with the winter cod migrating from the North Sea. They’re the most ecologically sound fishermen in the world – and they’re going to end up on the north-east coast of English, facing directly into the North Sea, having to reinvent themselves as deep-sea trawler men, hovering-up industrial quantities of cod and herring. That is, if they’re permitted to fish at all.

I chat with these men daily,’ the former school’s inspector concluded, ‘and they don’t liked what’s in store.’

I showed Sandra these messages.

‘As you see the swallows, somebody’s swallows, are on their way.’

‘I saw one today,’ she said, ‘and what’s more I saw Dr Blake. I’m pregnant.’

‘Pregnant? But that’s wonderful!’

‘Yes,’ she said seriously. ‘Despite the times, I think it is.’

Ever since early January, when Land’s End began its long sweep of the Normandy coast, people had been making the trip to buy wine, spirits and cheap cigarettes. Whole flotillas of little boats had set out on the two miles crossing, first to Cherbourg, then to le Havre, setting out from the southern Cornish beaches of Mounts Bay, Helston, Falmouth, Fowey and Looe. From the beginning of February, when the Land’s End peninsula was pointing directly south at Dieppe, some of the north Cornish beaches also became accessible, such as St Ives, Lambourne and Padstow. It was even possible to sail from Dieppe straight up the Bristol Channel.

Cobra was again in session, the Chancellor grumbling about smuggling as though that was something new to Cornwall, and about the loss of revenue. But, as the home secretary pointed out, the opportunity was very short-lived. By early May, Land's End would be out in the North Sea, and the bonanza would be over. From then it would be a problem for the Irish.

Meanwhile, the Falmouth coastguard had intercepted something more sinister. It was a Sun Tracker Mega Hut 36 power boat, registered in Truro, heading up the channel in the Plymouth direction with a cargo of immigrants, mostly Pakistanis. There were twenty-eight of them in a vessel built to carry fifteen. Below deck were several boxes of hand grenades.

'All twenty-eight', said the Director-General of MI5, 'were equipped with mobile phones. It's clear from their messages, and from the chatter intercepted at GCHQ at Cheltenham, that they were part of a larger contingent. Some may already have succeeded in landing.'

'Who owns the boat?' asked the Chief of Defence Staff.

'A boat hire company. It was rented for the day to a private party who can't now be identified. The owner says he was suspicious but the pay was good.'

'You mean he was paid more than the going rate?'

'You have to understand,' said the Home Secretary, 'we're faced temporarily with a racket we can't control. There are thousands of potential migrants, all flocking from the Calais terminals to Normandy to get an easier ride. There are hundreds of boat owners in all Cornish marinas, willing to make a quick buck. Five short trips a day, five migrants a trip, each paying £200 – that £5,000 for the day.'

'I bet every one of them is a *Daily Express* reader,' said the Prime Minister sourly.

'Can't we stop them at sea?' asked the Chief of Defence Staff.

'We've intercepted a few. But there are hundreds of them and it's only two miles across.'

'It's plainly coordinated,' said the Director-General. 'People are being instructed to assemble at Utah, Omaha, God, Juno and Sword'.

‘Good God,’ said the Chief of Defence Staff. ‘Those were the D-Day beaches!’

‘Whoever is behind this,’ said the Director-General, ‘appears to have a distorted sense of humour.’

‘In two weeks I suppose it’ll be Dunkirk’, said the Prime Minister.

‘The little holiday steamers made an excursion to hell and came back victorious’, quoted the Chief of Defence Staff.

This intervention dumbfounded everyone.

‘Was that Churchill?’ asked the Home Secretary.

‘J.B. Priestley.’

‘It’s a long shot,’ said the Director-General of MI5, thoughtfully, ‘but there might just be a Bradford connection.’

‘Why?’

‘Priestley was from Bradford. His statue stares out across an ocean of tandoori restaurants.’

The Prime Minister was impatient. The meeting was getting nowhere.

‘If we can’t stop them in France, and we can’t stop them at sea, we can at least stop them getting very far from Land’s End. Cornwall’s miles away. It’s Lib-Dem territory. How many roads are there out of Cornwall? It must be possible to stop them getting anywhere where they can do any real damage.

Blockade the whole peninsula. If you need a detention centre,’ this to the Home Secretary, ‘evacuate Dartmoor. Or Parkhurst if that’s more feasible. As for who’s behind this,’ this to the Director General, ‘I want to know all the possible names. Even if it does involve reading J.B. Priestley. The meeting’s adjourned.’

## Chapter 18

Local elections in England and Northern Ireland, but not Scotland or Wales, were scheduled for the day after the projected collision with France. Never had the language of politics drifted so far from the electors' real concerns.

'Conservatives for Change' was the slogan on every billboard in England.. It sounded about as plausible as 'Liberals for Absolutism' or 'Labour for the Bosses'. In any case, what people wanted most was an end to change. They wanted the Great Drift to end, and whether it had or hadn't would be known only after the election.

Everyone wanted law and order to be restored and immigration to be stopped. The only issue dividing the parties were the degrees of euphemism employed, and only the BNP was in favour of a policy of shoot to kill.

Labour and the Lib Dems wanted to remain in Europe, the Tories to quit. It seemed whistling in the wind while the Great Drift was settling the matter.

But the big issue was the mortgage revolt, and on this the differences were real. Labour condemned the mortgage rebellion, but proposed cutting council tax by fifty per cent while the real value of houses, the bands on which council tax was assessed, was re-examined. Meanwhile, all savings in building societies would be guaranteed by the Bank of England. The Tories condemned the mortgage rebellion, but proposed a mortgage moratorium of one year, during which the real current value of houses would be re-assessed. Mortgage payments would then be resumed as a proportion of what had been previously owed. For instance, if you owed £100,000 on a £200,000' house now worth only £50,000, you would still owe your building society £25,000. It looked neat and likely to be popular. But who, asked Labour, would foot the bill?

The Lib Dems supported the mortgage rebellion, which was a bit thick since they also wanted to bring troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan to restore 'the rule of law' in the cities.

The BNP said all immigrants who were refusing to pay their mortgages should be deported, and the houses given to deserving British families. By this it was understood they meant BNP voters.

In the twenty-six councils of Northern Ireland, less was at stake. The strictly sectarian local councils had long since lost any authority over education, housing or planning. All that was up for grabs was waste disposal along with parks and libraries.

Ian Paisley was much ridiculed during the campaign for his Sinn Féin gaff, or 'we're in this together'. 'It doesn't even mean that,' he was told repeatedly. 'It means *We Ourselves*.'

But with the economy in crisis and no solution in sight, it was obvious the electors had nowhere else to retreat to but behind their sectarian barricades. The so-called 'peace walls' would remain intact.

In the republic, the Taoiseach was preparing for what he termed with a ferocious grin the coming *rencontre* with France, the moment when Ireland and Normandy touched. True to his policy of treating the inexplicable as something personally planned, he put the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in charge of the celebrations.

'I want exactly the right tone,' he instructed.

Brilliantly, the minister responded by building the commemoration around the figure of Wolfe Tone, hero of the 1798 uprising against English rule. He knew better than to expect to be congratulated on this. When he broached the idea in cabinet, the Taoiseach treated it as entirely his own.

But there was no doubt Wolfe Tone struck all the right notes.

First, he was born into the Protestant Ascendancy, but in 1791 became leader of the Society of United Irishmen pledged to 'break the connection with England'. Never before had Catholics, Presbyterians, and men of no religion made common cause in such a project.

Secondly, he was inspired in this by the enlightenment and by ideals of the French Revolution. This meant the Catholic hierarchy officially opposed him, something they didn't like being reminded of. The Taoiseach welcomed the chance to remind them again.

Thirdly, he went to Paris and in 1796 persuaded the French Directory to send a fleet of forty-three sail and 14,000 men to invade Ireland. Bad weather prevented a landing at Bantry Bay, giving England, in Wolfe Tone's words, 'its luckiest escape since the Armada'. Smaller invasions in support of the failed 1798 uprising have left that year known as 'the year of the French'.

The Taoiseach saw plenty of speech material in this, and was irritated when the plans started to come adrift.

'What's wrong with Bantry?' he protested. 'That's the obvious place for this. They even have an anchor from one of the French ships in the town square.'

'But it won't be anywhere near France. Bantry Bay will be facing Belgium, roughly off Zeebrugge.'

'What about Brest, where the French sailed from? What part of Ireland are they touching?'

'They're going to be cut off from Ireland by what used to be the north-west of Scotland.'

The Taoiseach sighed. He hadn't got the hang of this new geography.

'So it'll have to be somewhere opposite Normandy?'

The Minister had to tread carefully.

'Most of those beaches are associated with D-Day,' he ventured.

The Taoiseach sighed more deeply. The last thing anyone wanted was to remind the French of Ireland's role in World War 2. De Valera, the first Taoiseach had made a point of visiting the German Embassy in Dublin to sign the book of condolence when Hitler committed suicide.

'Castlebar would have been perfect,' said the minister.

'What happened there?'

‘A thousand French landed under General Humbert and joined up with five thousand United Irish. The English ran away so fast they called it Castlebar Races. Connaught was declared a republic, though it only lasted a couple of weeks.’

‘So?’

‘It’s going to be right opposite Omaha, Gold and Juno. Some English journalist is bound to notice. In any case, the whole area’s crawling with illegal immigrants and suicide bombers.’

‘There must be somewhere with no history,’ the Taoiseach complained. ‘Or with the right sort of history and in the right place.’

‘You’ve always said, sir, Ireland had too much history.’

‘Well, find somewhere without any. Or with something usable. That’s what heritage is all about.’

So the minister went back to his maps and his history books.

In the end, they had to settle for Cahil in Tipperary, a small town far from the coast that even Google had never heard of, but where the first skirmishes of the 1798 Rising had occurred in March. Cahil could plausibly be presented to the French Minister for Culture as the place where it had all started. It was eloquently described as such by the Taoiseach, who performed brilliantly on such occasions, giving the townsfolk a history lesson they had preferred to forget.

But the Taoiseach always regretted Castleford, where he could have invented so much more. If only De Valera hadn’t been so bloody anti-English!

## Chapter 19

On May 9th, the world held its breath. Would tiny Ireland, backed up by the United Kingdom, succeed in shifting the whole Euro-Asian continent?

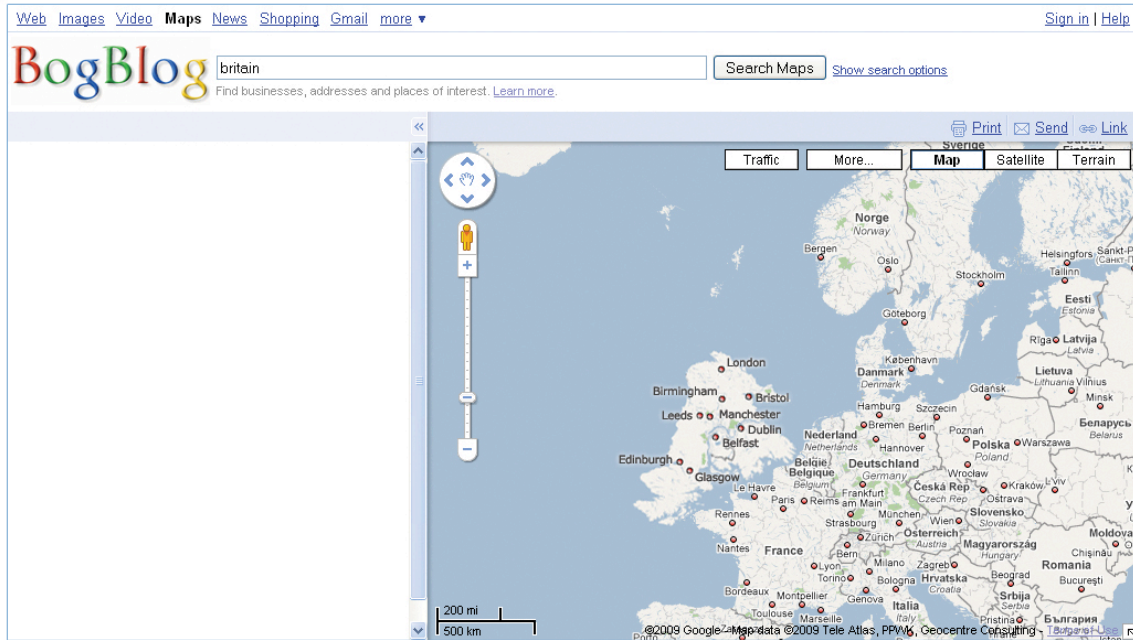
Irish descendents worldwide once again backed the underdog. They reckoned that having disposed of England, Scotland and Wales, not to mention the Isle of Man, France would be a pushover. Despite the extent of their own migrations, they seemed unaware that France was attached to Europe, and Europe to the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

Bog Blog was back with new deals through AvidaOnline for the Acer 305 or the memory Map Adventurer 7000 HP Global Positioning Systems. Bloggers were invited to take a fix on the Eiffel Tower, promising to be the very first to report any movement. Admittedly, the American military, their GPSs five hundred per more accurate, would be the first to know if France was moving. But Bog Blog promised to be the first to go public.

When nothing happened after three days, Bog Blog urged punters not to give up.

‘Given the land mass involved, it stands to reason any potential shift will be much slower. You can’t push the Himalayans along at a rate of four kilometres per day’.

By June 1<sup>st</sup>, however, it was accepted that Ireland along with the UK had finally come rest. The great Drift was over.



It was time to start getting used to the new geography.

A new triangle of territory, its base extending from Land's End to Dover, its two sides roughly twice the size of the base, was resting at an angle of  $45^\circ$  against northern France and part of Belgium. Land's End was pointing at the Hook of Holland. Dover was on the same latitude as Copenhagen, and Aberdeen the same latitude as Paris.

To the north of Dover extended an underwater shelf, five metres deep and extending to just south of the Orkneys. A similar shelf, representing where Ireland had originally been, lay off the old east coast of England. Most of Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire floated precariously above what had once been the Irish Sea. Similarly, Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde valley extended out beyond Brittany over the Atlantic, while Donegal to Sligo floated above what had been the English Channel.

The new inland sea, that mini-Mediterranean conjured by the two gay poets from Aberystwyth, and bordered by Donegal, Argyll and Brittany, was an incontestable fact, with the power to conjure its own imagined northern-European Gaelic-speaking community.

Internally, London was three hundred and forty kilometres north of Liverpool, and Cardiff the same distance north-east of York. Future walkers from Land's End to John O'Groats would follow a path 30° south-west, passing through Dublin and Belfast.

The ports of Belfast, Liverpool, Cherbourg and Le Havre no longer existed. The Channel Tunnel was intact but closed. All airports were working normally.

The terrorist threat never materialised. MI5 claimed to have penetrated a cell of plotters advancing through Devon, using the first page of J.B. Priestley's *Good Companions* in Pashtu translation as the basis of a book code. It turned out they were secretly reading *The Satanic Verses* behind a *Good Companions* wrapper.

The problem of the revolving mosques was resolved quite simply. It took a grant from Saudi Arabia and the American expertise of the International Association of Structural Mover who were used to shifting anything from houses to theatres to bridges and statues of moose. To raise a mosque, secured by brackets and crossbeams, using jacking cribs to crack its link with the original foundation, and then turn it on hydraulic dollies through 180 degrees, turned out to be straightforward. The shifting of the Markaz .Mosque in Dewsbury's Savile Town was photo of the month in November's number of *Structural Mover*, and looks to displace the Shubert Theater, Minneapolis from its place in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the largest building ever moved

No one bothered turning churches round. As the Archbishop of Canterbury had got into trouble for remarking, his God operated with a more sophisticated Global Positioning System, and in any case the churches were empty.

In September, fresh from their summer break, the European Commission in Brussels announced a series of projects. These had evolved with unusual efficiency from the ECFIN report on the North Western European Landmass (NWEL), and

they had the slightly frenzied air of planners who had waited for decades to have a new colony to experiment on.

NWEL's infrastructure was redesigned virtually from scratch. At its centre, literally in the middle, was a massive expansion of Liverpool's John Lennon airport. Its six runways, capable of servicing the Airbus A380 and the Boeing 777 and Dreamliner 787, would make it the biggest in Europe, the natural hub of trans-Atlantic, trans-Asian passenger traffic, and the centre for trans-continental freight. With environmental issues so much to the fore, EU Commissioner Barroso thought it a rather neat trick to shift so many pollution problems out there, where French and German voters wouldn't object. As for Liverpool, it was glad of the jobs.

It was reckoned the Thames Barrier would be redundant, given the underwater shelf would absorb most of the force of any future spring tides. Urgent consideration, however, should be given to constructing a Severn Estuary flood barrier to protect Cardiff and the valleys of the Severn, Wye and Avon from North Sea surges. Aberdeen would become NWEL's principal port for trans-Atlantic passengers and cargo. The port facilities at Plymouth would be re-developed to service North Sea Oil.

Ten kilometres offshore, the two vast areas of underwater shelf between Dover and Orkney and bordering the new west coast of England would be devoted to two massive wind farms, each occupying 75,000 square kilometres. In combination, their half a million turbines would have a capacity 800,000 megawatts, enough to supply one-third of the homes in Europe.

If John Lennon was the new hub, Limerick was to be NWEL's metropole, serviced by a refurbished London tube and a restored Channel Tunnel. This much had for months been an open secret. But certain conditions were attached which, being Eurocrats, they called 'conditionality'.

All the new stations and rail links – the top five metres of the infrastructure – were to be built by thirty thousand workers imported from the defunct port of Belfast. This was Gerry Adams sweetener to new first minister Peter Robinson. The catch was he had to sign a protocol declaring his readiness to sit down to talks about closer union, within the framework of the European Union.

Adams had a further argument. Robinson was, after all, a lifelong social conservative. He believed in Christian marriage as the basis for a Christian community... He didn't like divorce, abortion or homosexuality. In these matters, his real enemy was no longer the Catholic Church. His real enemy was secular liberalism and his best ally the Pope.

'Look at the Protestant right in America,' he contended. 'They're anti-Catholic, but it's Catholic judges they've got elected to the Supreme Court to secure their social agenda.'

As Adams foreknew, Robinson bowed to the inevitable.

On the Republic's side, the chief engineering consultant was Andy Cullogh, newly graduated From University College, Dublin. Rumours were already circulating he was the Taioseach's son.

## Chapter 20

### LIMERICK THE NEW LONDON Neal Acherson reflects on the Great Drift *The Independent .on Sunday*

*Seventeen months ago in a brilliant piece in the Irish Times, Roy Foster queried how much of modern Ireland was more than five meters deep? What, he asked, about its ancient mines of gold and silver, iron, copper, zinc and alum and lead, among the oldest in Europe? What about the peat bogs, with their preserved evidence of our Neolithic past? How deep went the Giants' Causeway? How profound were the wells from which the River Liffy sprang? How could modern, secular, European Ireland dance so lightly from its roots?*

*Now, after a year of turmoil, the Great Drift seems finally to have exhausted itself, we can ask in respect of the four nations what it has all been about. It will be years, perhaps centuries, before anyone knows for sure. But we can attempt some preliminary conclusions.*

*What seems overwhelming about this inexplicable, unanticipated and uncontrolled drift is its aptness as image for the state of Britain. The correspondence between the physical and the moral registers seems uncanny. Our dormant democracy, our celebrity culture, our consumer obesity, our balloon economy with every link broken between production and reward, all find their apt mirror in the metaphor of lonely drift.*

*Had I been asked, two years back, to nominate anywhere in Britain as 'failed cities' in the manner of African failed states, I would have cited without hesitation Liverpool and Belfast. It would, of course, have been only a metaphor. But the Great Drift has delivered as a reality the destruction of those urban illusions, pretending to be cities when they were never more than assemblies of warring factions living on government aid.*

*Or take the housing boom which has fuelled everything else. Did anyone seriously believe a terraced house worth £5,000 in 1980 could be worth £500,000 a generation later? Or that this fantasy could feed a new Victorian-style class*

*division in Britain between those with property and those, in the laughable phrase unable to set foot on the housing ladder? Another illusion exposed by the mortgage revolt in the reality of the Drift.*

*In book three of Gulliver's Travels, Gulliver visits the flying island of Laputa. Spanish was one of Gulliver's languages, so we can read 'la puta' as 'the whore'. Part of Swift's satire here is on England's treatment of Ireland. Laputa hovers above its colony, letting down packthread to receive petitions along with wine and victuals. In cases of rebellion, it cuts off rain and sunlight, or pelts those below with rocks. In serious cases, it lowers itself to using its weight to kill and destroy everything beneath. This option, however, is only a last extreme. Most of Laputa's courtiers have their estates down there, and don't want them destroyed...*

*Ireland, that new flying island, has certainly got her revenge. Elbowing England to one side, she has cemented her ties with the Europe, the source of her flourishing as the Celtic Tiger. I say 'cemented' advisedly since the bridges and roads to Normandy are already under construction. Her position today is that of the former Home Counties. Limerick, once such a long way from Leicester Square, is destined to become the new London. Who says poetry makes nothing happen?*

*England, too, has succeeded in her dearest wish, to be as far from Europe as possible. Her insistence on retaining the pound sterling, supported by the European Bank on par with the Euro, does not bode well for the future. Whether Nick Griffin will ever get to emulate Idi Amin and expel all Asians remains to be seen. Capturing eleven councils in the local elections and coming second in the popular vote makes the BNP the party to be beaten. The recent cult of 'British-ness' seem dead. Our best hope is that England will become like Norway, a tolerant social democracy in steady decline as the stocks of North Sea oil diminish.*

*What about Wales, sidling discreetly into the old English Midlands? A report by the EU's ECFIN last January was upbeat about this development. No longer, it said, would the Welsh need to migrate to Birmingham in search of jobs. But neither Wales nor the Midlands have prospered in recent years. This coming together has all the marks of a failed shotgun marriage. Half the population*

*continues to act in union with England. The other half is captivated by an April Fool joke.*

*Which leaves northern Ireland and Scotland. I make no apology for lumping them together. Their illusions have been identical, to be in Marxist terms simultaneously centre and periphery. The Drift has left them nowhere to go but where they spurned, northern Ireland to the Republic and Scotland hoping distantly for a continued share of the revenues from North Sea oil. A recent Iain Green cartoon in the Scotsman showed Alec Salmon's Celtic lion as a mangy cat crawling with fleas disguised as retirement homes. Where else to go but to break with England, along with Wales, and sign up to the Euro?*

Sandra, heavily pregnant, read this mid-morning still in bed while I ground some fresh coffee. She was suspicious of journalists, even good ones like Neal Acheson – or, she would have added conscientiously, me.

‘My head is spinning. Is he saying it’s all our own fault?’

‘He’s just playing with metaphor’.

‘Don’t you believe in metaphor?’

‘Of course I do. It’s the very basis of thought. Or at least of expression. But you mustn’t let it run away with you. If it’s leading you astray, you must think again and change it.’

‘My head’s spinning even more.’

‘Look, he’s written a nice satiric piece about the state of Britain and Ireland. The Drift gives him his metaphor. But do you really think what is happening to your poor swallows is their own fault? Or those eels that little girl wrote about? Or even the small boat fishermen of the once south coast?’

‘Of course not.’

‘He doesn’t even mention the Isle of Man.’

‘Which reminds me,’ said Sandra. ‘How do you feel about Orkney?’