



How to Win Friends, and Influence People

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I have recently started introducing myself as Irish. But I am not really Irish. Or rather, I am really half-Irish. My mother was born in the west. One of ten. Educated by nuns. Family tragedies. Which is to say, she is really Irish. Except her maiden name is Jones (Welsh). And her grandfather was Grossman (German). He was likely Jewish (disputed in the family). So I am only half as much as less than wholly Irish. I am more

straightforwardly half-English, and was born and raised there. Most conclusively, when it comes to the ascription of identity in a country fanatically attuned to accent, I sound English.

However, I have recently been living in Athens. I am registered here as an Irish rather than a British citizen, for obvious reasons, so am in legal terms Irish. It has also, for related reasons, recently become (more than usually) embarrassing to be identified as English abroad. So, because it is officially accurate and also to avoid being asked to explain what is going on, I have started introducing myself as Irish.

A remarkable thing happens. People tell you that they knew there was something. That your eyes are Irish (they are my dad's). That you have an Irish face (I have no idea what this means but I don't see it). That you have Irish hair (my mother also claims the hair for her side, in truth, but how bristle-brush brown hair identifies you as Irish is beyond me). One person cited a twinkle (this strikes me as problematic), another the unruliness of my eyebrows (of which I was hitherto unaware), another complimented me on my singing voice (I am tone deaf). As soon as you attach a name to something, people find evidence for its associated qualities. *Nomen est omen*.

Which is all to say that the names we give to a thing go a long way to governing how we receive it, whether it's a work of art or a person. Words more often obscure the world as it really is than reveal it. One of the purposes of art might be to force us to look again at what surrounds us without falling back on the shared concepts that travesty by seeking to simplify it. To momentarily stop treating things as symbols or signifiers and instead to attend to the thing in itself.

Because people are suggestible. Worryingly, I've recently come to suspect that I might unconsciously be adopting the characteristics recently ascribed to me. This is sometimes helpful in explaining things away. Perhaps my peripatetic lifestyle is now typically diasporic. My attachment to the pub something more like a cultural inheritance than a character flaw. And if I need to explain away the impression some people have of me as aloof or emotionally illiterate, I can always tell them that I'm English.

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