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Without help, fáilte abhaile rings hollow for returnees

‘Bás in Éirinn.’ Death in Ireland. That was my uncle Jimmy’s toast, his Déise accent untouched by decades in Bristol. He did not get his wish. He died in England, although he was then buried in the graveyard of the church he attended as a boy.

If you ask me to define Irishness, I can’t. I once would have said that it included having distinctive customs around death, a comfort with having a dead aunt in a coffin in the livingroom, as some pray, some kiss the corpse and some drink tea. But that is changing for younger generations, who often are unnerved by death in the same way we once found odd in our UK neighbours.

I would also have said that it had to do with a sense of place, an attachment like an umbilical cord to a landscape, beach, winding street or urban skyline. But umbilical cords get cut.

The one constant for centuries for the Irish is that they migrate. Whether it was monks carrying the Gospel message to the furthest corners of Europe, the earls hoping to stir up support from Spain, or starving people fleeing famine, the Irish left and left and left.

In the 1950s, roughly three out of every five children in Ireland left the country at some point. The 1980s saw another huge exodus, and after the global financial crash – the number of people leaving Ireland more than tripled between 2008 and 2012.

Coming back was far less common. Although the “returned Yank” had an outsize purchase on the Irish imagination, as Prof Sinéad Moynihan’s 2019 book demonstrates, in reality, Irish people tended to return home for good far less often than other nationalities like Germans and Italians.

The question of return has a sharper edge for me now. Three of my four adult children currently live outside Ireland, two in the US and one in Europe.

Bás in Éirinn is far too modest an ambition for me. Having adult children abroad means that there is a constant tug that leaves the heart restless. Everything from a stray sock beneath a bed to an old photo album shouts of the ones no longer here with us. And yes, Zoom and WhatsApp help but cannot replace a hug.

Living for any length of time in a different country affects those who have left, too. First tendrils and then roots bind them to the new place. Coming home can be disorienting.

Safe Home Ireland, founded by Dr Jerry Cowley in Mulranny in 2000, has a particular focus on older people returning home, although they help many different cohorts. Since 2001, eligible older emigrants can be considered for social housing in Ireland while still living overseas. This is unique in Europe.

Safe Home Ireland meets many Irish longing for bás in Éirinn, but instead facilitates them to lead a good life at home.

The organisation has helped 2,363 eligible older Irish people return home to secure permanent accommodation.

While many left in the past because of economic necessity, younger people are now emigrating from a healthy economy because of their hopelessness about ever owning their own home.

While my adult children are legally in the US, many others have been made fearful by the current surreal and volatile political climate. People who overstayed temporary visas for decades are now anxiously wondering about voluntary repatriation.

The decision to return home is weighty and often fraught with unexpected pitfalls. People who have a driving licence where there is no reciprocal arrangement with Ireland, such as every US state and some Canadian provinces, have to start from scratch like a teenager, completing everything from the theory test to mandatory lessons to taking the driving test.

We all know about the backlog for driving tests. Someone could have a clean driving licence for 30 years but it makes no difference. A coalition of Irish and US-based emigrant support groups, Irish-US Driver's License Exchange Campaign, has been lobbying for reciprocal arrangements between Ireland and US states that are already recognised by other EU countries. Although part of the 2025 programme for government, progress has been slow.

Insurance can also be a nightmare because a no-claims bonus may not transfer. While people can drive using their original licence for up to 12 months, insurance cover for that time can be crippling.

Many people want to return home with a non-Irish spouse or de facto partner. According to Crosscare's submission for the new Irish Diaspora Strategy 2025-2030, processing times for de facto partner pre-clearances are about 13 months, with original passports standardly held for the duration, depriving the partner of an important identity card.

Those who need social welfare have to meet habitual residency standards, which can be challenging. All the problems that afflict the Irish at home, like finding childcare, school places or a GP, are even more stressful for returnees.

As a wealthy country, we somehow cannot get these basics right. Until we do, whatever about bás in Éirinn, fáilte abhaile will ring hollow for returnees.
