

THE EMERALD TIGER AND DAME EDNA



It's probably safe to say it now. Just about. As the late, great Ian Dury (he of the Blockheads) might say: 'It was all bollo, wannit?' All that scaremongering stuff. Eventually, the dreaded Y2K came and went with but a whimper. As my old Latin master might have put it: '*Ars longa, vita brevis*', or 'Big arse, short life'.¹ Which was all rather sad in my book.

A long time ago, a heartless soccer coach described one of my legendary on-field performances as 'banging on a window with a sponge' – and that sums up the passing of the old millennium and the arrival of the new one. This disappointed the wife of a friend of

¹ It's a long time since those Latin lessons. I may have this translation a bit wrong. But I'm sure you get the picture.



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mine enormously as she had laid in endless tins of Spam, gallons of bottled water, about a ton of kindling wood, ten surgical dressings and a not unimpressive Gatling gun.²

Personally, I was hoping a couple of things would implode and disappear forever at the passing of midnight on 31 December 1999 – namely Sting and all the world's taxation databases. 'Twas not to be.

We have, however, now had the chance to have a look at the New Century, and you could easily come to the conclusion that it has a face like a welder's bench. Osama BL, of course, has grabbed the early-century headlines, bursting into America's very own kitchen and rattling the whole worlds of religion, politics and business. I was almost deafened by the thunder of sphincters clicking open and shut in the boardrooms of the world, although (as ever) the enlightened found an opportunity in the darkness. I'm referring, of course, to those ailing and failing organizations who were suddenly given a glorious excuse to lay off thousands and explain away crappola performances.

Clinton's gone, of course. The word Clinton comes from the Cantonese *Ton Clin* – which means (literally) He Who Cries With One Eye – but it is a bit sad to see the daft sod now splashing about in life's shallow end. He almost ruined everything, of course, with some crazy last-day-in-office activities – but I suppose we must accept he was terribly concerned about his 'legacy'. He needn't worry. He will be forever known as Shagger.

In politics the left-wingers have continued their move to the centre, and those who occupied the centre have moved to the right – with a lot of nationalist rhetoric masking tawdry protectionism, isolationism and racism. The anti-globalists gathered topspin and continued to confuse the *bollo* off the overclasses where an average employed Western family now, by the way, has no children and 2.7 four-wheel-drive sports utility vehicles.

² These items are now for sale at VERY advantageous prices.





Elsewhere, the early years of the new millennium have confirmed what we should have known all along – that Warren Buffet was right. The dotcom and telecommunications worlds imploded, and wonderful inventions such as ‘Operating Profits Before E-Commerce’ found their correct place in history (i.e. next to ‘Lite’ beer). Corporate governance continued its downhill quality trend – with Enron rewriting the science, and their auditors Arthur Andersen (yes, their *auditors* for Chrissakes) looking as though they wouldn’t be out of place refereeing pro wrestling (‘Whaddya mean, he came into the ring and hit you with a tin chair while I was looking the other way ...’)

Let’s take a quick look at Planet Business at the start of the New Age.

First stop – the Emerald Tiger. I’m writing this bit half-looking at a lovely building on the banks of the river Shannon in Limerick, Ireland. The building dates back well into the nineteenth century when it was a barracks for the British army. It is still called the Strand Barracks building, and it is where my father was born in 1905. Today, it has been converted into luxury apartments to house a few of the country’s new executive elite – and I am sure my dad is amused by the whole idea, perched as he is on a cloud somewhere, smiling.

As the Land of My Father, Ireland is a country that is dear to me. I am one of the few people on earth who can cry listening to a Pogues album, but I admit I am no nearer working out the country’s crazy paradoxes than anybody else. It is very easy to hate Ireland with every fibre of your being on account of Michael Flatley and *Riverdance*, but that would be unfair. Ireland (the country) recently completed another year as Europe’s fastest growing economy. The double digit annual growth rates of the turn of the millennium have slowed down a bit, but property prices have trebled in three years, taxes are being cut, unemployment is low and the place STINKS of prosperity. You cannot go out in the street without tripping over a European subsidy for something.

The Irish economic and business worlds are not the only ones giving off signs of better times emanating from this long-troubled isle.





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My father delightfully summed up the problem we Brits had with 'The Irish Question'. It was that every time we thought we had an answer, the Irish secretly changed the question. It may be, however, that an endgame is at last in sight to the political nightmare of the past 40 years. The Republic has – at least officially – withdrawn its constitutional claim to the north. In the north, an Assembly has been voted in by the people for the people. Catholics and Protestants share power in it – power which has been devolved to that Assembly from London. The IRA agreed to explore the idea about talking about a possible meeting to discuss a process that might end in another meeting to discuss decommissioning their weaponry – somehow, sometime, someplace. Then they amazed everybody by starting the process.

Times are good. Ireland looks a bit like a lavatory attendant who has won the lottery.

The country also fascinates me in the context of the changing ideas about branding. There is a school of thought that says that branding has moved away from being product-led – where it was firmly rooted for over a century. It is still about getting distinction in cluttered competitive markets, but that distinction is now less about WHAT you do and more about HOW you do it. You have three variables to deal with – price, specification and the relationship you have with the buyer of your product or service – and it is the latter that is growing in importance in the mix.

It is as though Ireland and the Irish understood this way before the likes of Branson. Compare Ireland, for example, with Wales. As noted above, my father was from the former. My wife is from the latter – and I feel I know both well. The countries, that is. There are many similarities. They both have rugged mountains, picture-book hills, verdant valleys and a beautiful coastline. They both have a powerful literary and musical heritage. Wales, of course, never had The Famine³ but is no stranger to hard times. In other words, WHAT

³ I've always thought this an odd claim to fame. How the hell can a million potato-less people starve when the rivers and seas are TEEMING with fish?





they do is quite similar – but HOW they deliver their offering to the world ‘market’ could hardly be more different. The gap between their respective effectiveness and efficiency in the ‘marketplace’ is astonishing. Wherever you are in the world, the Irish ‘brand’ is present – either through an ‘Irish bar’ or spiritually through some would-be ex-pats.

Although I yell the opposite at the companies I work with, it is still possible to sustain a brand on bullshit for an astonishingly long time. The grand masters, of course, are the Swiss Army, from whom we may shortly expect a range of hardwood dining furniture and a wine collection. The Irish must have studied them diligently. St Patrick’s Day is now almost a worldwide event – but there is no evidence that there ever was such a guy (although an alternative school of thought suggests that there may have been two of them). Guinness is the national drink – but it is now mainly brewed in west London. The Irish ‘brand’ emblem is a shamrock – which also doesn’t exist. The whole thing consists largely of smoke and mirrors.

Ireland’s ‘brand awareness’ must be up there with the likes of Coke and McDonald’s – whereas nobody has ever heard of Wales. Which is just fine with my wife – but a bummer for some of the inhabitants who could use an economic goosing.

There are undoubted barriers within the whole island – not the least of which will be the internecine struggles within the north itself, but I have every finger crossed. The Irish, when they avoid the temptations of self-parody, and they *don’t* think of themselves as some sort of international brand concept, are delightful. Just delightful. They deserve a golden age.

There are early signs that a federated Europe might just get its act together and overtake the US as the world’s prime superpower by the end of the new millennium’s first century. Some of the issues that will need to be addressed are already popping over the parapet. Early in the new millennium, in Germany, the mighty Mannesman company were unhappy about the successful takeover bid for them





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submitted by (the British) Vodafone.⁴ So was the German government. During the bid process, both of them scrambled through the German and European company law statutes to find a reason to declare it illegal. The bid, you see, was unsolicited – or ‘hostile’. The Germans, apparently, don’t like hostile takeovers.

Now, do me a favour and read that last sentence back to yourself – slowly. That’s it, the one that says *Germans do not like hostile takeovers*. That should go down well in Poland and France. Also in St Petersburg. I know that we live in irony-free zones today – but does anything strike you as humbug-ish in Berlin’s adopted position on this?

Now, let’s pan the New Age camera WAY down south – to Australia. I grew up with a very stereotyped view of this nation, which is seemingly untouched by culture or subtlety. One of the funniest crowd chants I ever heard was from a small bunch of visiting Brits (a.k.a. ‘Poms’) at a cricket match between Australia and England in Brisbane. We Poms were having a hard time at the hands of their team and crowd, but after a few beers our guys launched into a chorus of ‘If your Granddad was deported clap your hands’.

This tiny nation – crowded in the bottom right-hand corner of the country – suddenly seems as well placed as many ‘bigger’ names to face the New Age. Their wines are as good as any. In sport, it is difficult for the US reader to understand, but the other 95% of the world’s population don’t really give a puck about ice hockey, grid-iron football, basketball or baseball. In the sports the other six billion people play, in the first years of the new millennium, Australia won (genuine) world championships at tennis, cricket and rugby. They also reached the final of the under-17 soccer World Cup, which they narrowly lost to the more likely Brazil. They have a swimmer, Ian ‘The Torpedo’ Thorpe, who is unbeatable (seemingly) over any dis-

⁴ This was in the heady days before Vodafone and much of the international telecoms industry tanked as it turned out everyone on earth didn’t need THREE mobile phones or 24/7 long-distance Internet access.





tance using any stroke if he chooses to take part. Digger Murdoch's empire dominates the media world. An Aussie, Douglas Daft, has taken over from the beleaguered Doug Ivester at Coca-Cola. Sydney hosted the 2000 Olympic Games, and improved profoundly on Atlanta's one-eyed, tawdry performance. All impressive stuff.

Perhaps Australia's finest current export, however, is Dame Edna Everage. If you go to see 'her', take a small piece of advice from me. Don't sit in the front two rows. She has some glorious 'put down' lines. Asking someone in the audience if they believe in reincarnation, she doesn't wait for a reply but fires in the follow-up: 'Well, you look as though you might have been something once.'

Strangely, on the night I was there, the 'victim' looked nothing like Rod Stewart.

