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**Buttering up the British: Irish exports  
and the tourist gaze**

—  
**Mary Ann Bolger**

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**Undisciplined Disciplines**

# Buttering up the British: Irish exports and the tourist gaze — Mary Ann Bolger

**“Ah sure, we export all our best stuff.”  
Kerrygold TV advert, Irish International, 2009**

## **Introduction**

**This paper argues that the advertising of Irish exports in the 1960s provided for their consumers a form of ‘tourism without travel’. (1) This concept is borrowed from Mark McGovern, who uses it to describe the experience of the consumer of the ‘Irish pub experience’ in his article “‘The cracked pint glass of the servant’: the Irish pub, Irish identity and the tourist eye’ in Michael Cronin and Barbara O’Connor (eds) *Irish tourism: image, culture, and identity*. Clevedon; Buffalo, N.Y.: Channel View Publications, 2003 In particular, Kerrygold butter acted as an especially authentic souvenir of Ireland because it was, as the ads still claim today, ‘made of Ireland’.**

## **Branding Butter**

**The origins of the Kerrygold brand are to be found in a 1952 report entitled ‘An appraisal of Ireland’s industrial potentials’ produced by the New York-based IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation) Technical Services Corporation. (2) IBEC Technical Services Corporation (text by Stacy May) ‘An appraisal of Ireland’s industrial potentials.’ Dublin: Stationery Office, 1952. Tom Garvin, *Judging Lemass*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2009, p. 188 The IBEC report was a key source for Sean Lemass’s First Programme for Economic Development, instituted in 1959 on his becoming Taoiseach**

and widely regarded as the primary catalyst for Irish modernisation. (3) Garvin calls the IBEC report the Old Testament to T.K. Whitaker's New Testament in reference to Whitaker's blueprint for Lemass's reforms, his report 'Economic Development' of June 1958, also known as 'the grey book'. Ibid p.188 & 194 Chief among the report's recommendations was the immediate exploitation of Ireland's agricultural industry through increased export of foodstuffs. The recommendations were followed up in the wake of the Programme for Economic Development in the form of an Advisory Committee on Marketing of Agricultural Produce in 1959. One of the outcomes of this was the passing of the Dairy Produce Marketing Act and the establishment of the semi-state body, An Bord Baine, or the Irish Dairy Board. (4) Patricia Lysaght, *Taste Kerrygold, Experience Ireland: An Ethnological Perspective on Food Marketing* *Béaloideas*, Vol. 72 (2004), p. 69

The new board's remit was limited solely to the export of milk-products. (5) Kerrygold only began being marketed within Ireland in 1973. It shared this exclusively extra-national marketing position with only two other semi-states, Aer Lingus, the Irish airline, and Bord Failte, the Irish Tourist Board. Until this point, Irish butter had been exported wholesale, primarily to Britain, to be blended with local produce. It was all sold under the title of 'Irish butter' with minimum packaging and certainly no branding from individual creameries. (6) *An Bord Baine, The Bord Baine Story: twenty-one years of growth in the Irish Dairy Industry. Dublin, 1982; Information from the Cork Butter Museum.* Even within Ireland, while local creameries used distinctive packaging, butter was sold via local monopolies as a commodity, not a brand. The decision made by An Bord Baine's first committee was to replace Irish-butter-the-commodity, with Irish-Butter-the-brand. While the people involved in the process, notably the first General Manager Sir Anthony O'Reilly, remember this as a totally unprecedented move, in fact, the Danish government had already branded Danish butter internationally under the Lurpak name in 1957. (7) *An Bord Baine, The Bord Baine Story; Information from <http://www.lurpack.com>*

An Bord Baine's task was to create an identity not just for a single product but for the combined efforts of the entire Irish dairy industry. The project was thus to brand Ireland itself and it is not surprising that there are distinct similarities between the advertising and design strategies used by Bord Baine and the two semi-states officially charged with creating the image of Ireland abroad: Aer Lingus and Bord Failte. In fact, I would suggest that the marketing of Irish butter, the first truly national export, is best understood in terms of tourism. Through posters, packaging and especially television commercials, consumers in Britain could experience tourism without travel. In this system, I argue, the branded butter itself comes to function as an 'authentic' souvenir.

Tony O'Reilly claims that he invented the name 'Kerrygold' because 'marketing is about imagination and ethos and image, and Kerry and Kerrygold are the image that we want[ed] to project of Ireland to the world. And the rest, as they say, is history.' (8) Quoted in Lysaght It was Kerry's international fame as a tourist destination, rather than as a dairying centre, that was important. Understandably, O'Reilly emphasizes his own role in the construction of the Kerrygold brand, but the main architect behind its success was the London office of an American advertising agency, Benton & Bowles, who developed Kerrygold and its advertising from its inception until the 1970s when the Dublin-based Irish International agency took over.

### Postcolonial Butter

Ironically, given its London origin, the design of the first Kerrygold pack (Figure 1) is a classic example of the 'Celtic Modernism' that characterizes much post-war Irish graphic design, a synthesis of tradition and modernity. The overall symbolism is of the butter as golden ingot — the kind of thing that might perhaps be found at the end of a rainbow. The yellow floral repeat pattern might be understood as evocative of buttercups — wild, natural — but it also evokes the rectilinear pattern created by butter-pats that was the only marking on its precursor, wholesale-exported butter.

A comparison with the design of Lurpack, Kerrygold's main competitor in the British market, is revealing. Unlike Irish butter, the Danish product had since the early twentieth century been sold directly to consumers, though only under the generic name 'Danish butter'. The 'Lurpack' brand name derived from the symbol of four intertwined *lurs*, 'bronze age musical instruments and symbols of Denmark', that were first registered by the Dairy Board in 1901. (9) Information from <http://www.Lurpack.com> Given this precedent, it is surprising that the equivalent Irish national emblem, the shamrock, does not appear on the Kerrygold packaging. I can suggest three possible reasons for its omission. Firstly, in the export market, the shamrock was closely associated with Aer Lingus. (10) In later years, after Kerrygold began marketing in Ireland, the two companies often engaged in advertising tie-ins, notably the 'tastes better at home' campaign of the mid-1970s. In this advertising the peripatetic shamrock often roamed between the brands. Secondly, the Kerrygold brand sought to evoke the idea of Ireland as an *imaginary* place, a landscape, rather than a specific national identity. Finally, the use of uncial lettering provided a 'Gaelicising' effect in a much more contemporary and 'authentic' way than a shamrock might have done. Certainly, the greatest graphic interest on the pack is provided by the uncial-like typographic treatment of the brand name 'Kerrygold'. As is typical of Irish typography of the period,

the letterforms evoke the Irish alphabet and its national associations through generic uncial forms without actually taking the shapes of the Irish characters. The letter **R** for example takes the uppercase roman form, rather than the long, dagger-shaped Irish **R**. The **D** however, is given a minuscule form. This letter is often treated in such a fashion as it references uncial without impairing legibility for the habitual reader of roman. Neither letter **K** nor **Y** appear in the Irish alphabet, so their ‘gaelicness’ is entirely dependent on the assumed association of uncial with Celtic Ireland.

That the touristic image of Ireland associated with Kerrygold was created in England is interesting. Both Bord Failte and Aer Lingus used Irish agencies (even though both semi-states favoured the Dutch designers employed at Dublin’s Sun agency) but Bord Baine do not appear to have consulted any Irish company before taking on Benton & Bowles. (11) *On the commissioning of Irish agencies by Aer Lingus and Bord Failte, see Hugh Oram, The Advertising Book. Dublin: MO Publications, 1986.* It is noteworthy that Bord Baine’s commissioning of a UK firm did not raise a murmur from opposition deputies, who generally used any opportunity to berate semi-states or to accuse the government of unpatriotic acts. No mention was made of the economic loss to the country — the irony of exporting thousands of pounds worth of business to promote export — or the problematic idea of having the international image of Ireland constructed by the colonial other. (12) *Dail debates are archived at <<http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/en.toc.dail.html>> There is much discussion around the establishment of An Bord Baine, but thereafter Kerrygold is only really mentioned in passing, positive, comments on successful Irish exports. Why, then, did they cross the water?*

There are several explanations. The first two are pragmatic. Firstly, as Britain was Kerrygold’s primary market, it would have made sense to go to an agency who had experience working with that target audience. Secondly, given the importance of television advertising to the campaign, it would also have seemed sensible to go to an agency with long experience in that medium. (13) *Editorials in 1961-2 issues of Campaign, the journal of the Institute of Creative Advertising complain of Irish firms taking their TV advertising accounts abroad.* However, other Irish companies appear to have gone to English agencies only for the TV work, retaining Irish firms for their print and packaging. The third possible reason for the approach to Benson and Bowles is more controversial and ties in to wider issues about Anglo Irish relations and the post-colonial experience. The alacrity with which Irish organisations turned to British service providers, especially for design and advertising, and the unproblematic, apparently ‘natural’ way this was done could be construed by the post-colonial reader as having at least a touch of the Uncle Tom’s about it. Could this

be seen as evidence, perhaps, of continuing, 'internalised' colonization, where the metropolitan centre is always seen as somehow more knowing and generally better? Of course, there is nothing new in the collaborative construction of Irish and English cultural identities. As the literary critic, Declan Kiberd notes, the history of Anglo-Irish relations is a game of mirror images. He sees the image of Ireland as one constructed by the colonizer as England's Other, what he calls 'not-England'. (14) Declan Kiberd *Inventing Ireland: the literature of the modern nation*. London: Vintage, 1995, p.9 Kiberd sums up his argument in *Inventing Ireland*:

The modern English, seeing themselves secular, progressive and rational, had deemed the neighbouring islanders to be superstitious, backward and irrational. The strategy of the revivalists [in the early 20th century] thus became clear: for bad words substitute good, for superstitious use religious, for backwards say traditional, for irrational suggest emotional. (15) *Ibid.*, p.30 The negative aspect was painfully obvious in that the process left the English with the power of description and the Irish succumbing to the picture which they had constructed. (16) *Ibid.*, p.32

Kiberd argues that Irish literature and culture has yet to emerge from this construction: could the same be true for Irish visual culture? While valuable in opening up the game of mirrors, Kiberd's binary distinction is ultimately too limiting a formula for examining the subtleties of the post-war Irish image. (17) For an even-handed and informed evaluation of the claims of postcolonial theory in Irish literary and cultural studies, see James Livesey and Stuart Murray 'Post-Colonial Theory and Modern Irish Culture' in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 119 (May, 1997), pp. 452-461 It is not flexible enough to admit a third term, and thus there is no discussion of the similar experiences of modernity of comparable non-colonial European states, such as Denmark, for example. Equally, Ireland does not always fit easily into the framework of a postcolonial reading. Nevertheless, it seems that no matter where we turn in this Kerrygold campaign, we come up against binary pairs: English/Irish, tradition/modernity, nature/culture, producer/consumer. The binary structure reflects the structuring device used in the advertising itself: the apparent naturalness of such binaries — rural/urban, tourist/local, English/Irish, past/present — are useful for the advertiser in negating the complexity of the actual circumstances of the production of the product and of its advertising.

Such binary distinctions provide a rather superficial way to examine the cultural production of 'modern' Ireland. Following Luke Gibbons's idea of 'regressive modernisation', I would suggest that tradition and modernity are actually inseparable, one existing inside the other. (18)

This is the defining argument of his *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996) but is most clearly articulated in his Introduction and in Chapter 6, 'Myths of Modernisation'. One could equally suggest that tradition is in fact an invention of modernity. Just as Judith Williamson explained in *Decoding Advertisements* that the idea of nature is an historically-situated construction by its supposed opposite, culture, so 'tradition' can be understood as only coming into being through the self-definition process of a culture which sees itself as non-traditional — whether this is the England of Benton and Bowles or the modernising Ireland of O'Reilly and Bord Baine. (19) Judith Williamson *Decoding Advertisements*. London: Marion Boyars, 1978, Chapters 4 and 5 It seems apt here to support this argument with a quote from Dean MacCannell writing in 1989 about The Tourist:

For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles. In other words, the concern of moderns for 'naturalness', their nostalgia and their search for authenticity are not merely casual and somewhat decadent, though harmless, attachments to the souvenirs of destroyed cultures and dead epochs. They are also components of the conquering spirit of modernity — the grounds of its unifying consciousness.

(20) Dean MacCannell *The Tourist: A new theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989, p.3

What is at issue in this paper, then, is not the economic 'facts' of development and modernisation — although this is the discourse that provides the primary referent system for Irish self-representation in the 1960s — but rather how tradition and modernity were mobilised symbolically in the context of a tourist gaze.

### Consuming Ireland

Figure 2, an advert which appeared in the *Stock Exchange Gazette* in 1966, is a good example of the link between tourist images of Ireland and those used by promoters of Irish exports. Ireland itself is the country's most valuable export and the sign which gives meaning to the commodity being advertised. (Note here that there are no cows, it is the land itself that produces the butter!). Williamson writes:

... the advertisement does not create meaning initially but invites us to make a transaction whereby it is passed from one thing to another. A system of meaning must already exist ... exterior to the ad — which simply refers to it, using one of its components as a carrier of value ... (21)

Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, p.19 The product which

initially has no ‘meaning’ must be given value by a person or object which already has a value to us, i.e., already means. (22) *Ibid*, p.31

In the case of the Kerrygold product, the meaning is clearly transferred in the advert from left to right — the logical sequence of reading. The anchoring and reductionist caption ‘This is Ireland’, informs us that it is ‘Ireland’ that is the object correlative for ‘Kerrygold’. What, then, is ‘this Ireland’? What existing meanings are already associated with Ireland and how are they symbolically mobilised in the advertising?

We should note the importance of the audience — here the British businessman, in his office or on his way to work, reading the *Stock Exchange Gazette*. As John Urry has written:

[The tourist] gaze in any historical period is constructed in relationship to its opposite, to non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness. What makes a particular tourist gaze depends upon what it is contrasted with; what the forms of non-tourist experience happen to be. (23)

John Urry *The Tourist Gaze*, (2nd ed), London: Sage, 2002, p.1

Thus, we have again the image of the mirror. The idea of Ireland is constructed in Britain by the prospective British tourist, whether their potential journey is geographical or imaginary. Certainly, Benton and Bowles’ initial ideas had played directly on stereotyped ideas of Ireland as a rural, traditional, ‘not-England’. The first television ads announced the butter as ‘village churned’ i.e. rural and handcrafted. Curiously, it was actually the word ‘creamery’ that the test subjects picked up on. (24) *Powers of Persuasion*, BBC documentary, c.1964 (Courtesy Cork Butter Museum) They seemed to confuse the word ‘creamery’ meaning a dairy co-operative, with the idea of ‘creaminess’ (perhaps with an Irish accent?). This process is recorded, or rather re-enacted, in *Powers of Persuasion*, a 1964 BBC documentary on advertising which used Kerrygold’s successful campaign as a case study. (25) *The documentary is worthy of study in itself as an example of the mythologizing of advertising as part of 1960s Swinging London*. The scene is set as a group of achingly hip young creatives in cravats sit around a table smoking pipes. They report back that the test group has picked up on ‘creaminess’ in the ads they’ve been shown.

‘Do we know anything about the cream in Kerrygold?’

‘Fact is, John, there’s a pint in every packet!’

‘We know what Ireland is, we don’t have to make Ireland be — Can’t we just do Ireland, pure?’

This is a clear statement of the presumed ‘naturalness’ and stability of the connotations of Irishness for a mid-sixties, middle-class British viewer. Ireland has an existing meaning which can be ‘done’, ‘pure’. The original tag line of the TV commercials: ‘Please, don’t cook with



**Figure 1** [Top-left] Benton & Bowles' first campaign for Kerrygold, 1962. Courtesy Irish Dairy Board.

**Figure 2** [Bottom-left] Benton & Bowles, advertisement for Kerrygold in The Stock Exchange Gazette, 1966. Courtesy Irish Dairy Board.

Kerrygold', which made a virtue of its slightly higher price tag, was rapidly replaced with more emotional and less direct appeals including 'Ireland is Kerrygold country' and 'Made of Ireland' along with the quantifiable guarantee of 'a pint of cream in every pack'. While advertising continued to evoke mystical Irish landscape, the campaigns became more focused on how that landscape, especially the green grass, was available within the Kerrygold package, within reach. The advertising for Irish butter not only distils time, *pastness*, into the package, it also distils place: Ireland. The link between Kerrygold advertising and the tourist industry is made clear in the Irish Dairy Board's 1967 promotional film, *Golden Gallons*. Board Failte photographs and the Irish tourist board's magazine, *Ireland of the Welcomes* feature prominently on the table of the advertising executives during the film's re-enactment of the creative process that led to the first television adverts.

In Benton and Bowles's advertising, 'Ireland is Kerrygold country', not the other way around: why go to Ireland when you can have Kerrygold (i.e. Ireland) at home? To borrow another idea from Judith Williamson, Kerrygold is denoted as *different* to Ireland (better than, more available, technologically improved) but connoted *as* Ireland (the land is 'Kerrygold country'). (26) In *Decoding Advertisements*, Williamson uses this model to discuss the advertising for Rimmel's Sunshimmer fake tan (p.106) The primary advantage that Kerrygold holds over Ireland is that one can actually consume it, without travel. This takes us to the idea of the souvenir, of which Susan Stewart writes:

The place of origin must remain unavailable in order for desire to be generated. All souvenirs are souvenirs of nature, yet it is nature in its most synthetic, its most acculturated, sense which appears here. Nature is arranged diachronically through the souvenir; its synchrony and atemporality are manipulated into a human time and order. (27) Susan Stewart, *On Longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1993, p.151

Benton and Bowles were keenly aware that they were involved in the construction or mediation of the Irish tourist image. In an article (presumably an advertorial) in *The Irish Times* in February 1968, Douglas H Lowndes, Chairman of Benson & Bowles, evoked binary constructions of the Irish stereotypes, ostensibly to dismiss them. Note that he is writing specifically about the image of exports, but with the assumption that all consumers are potential tourists:

The old British music-hall image of the long-lipped peasant, the dubious back-kitchen butter churn, the unmade road cluttered with donkey carts is crumbling

fast and being replaced with an awareness of the truth. Every tourist can see for himself that the rural charm of Ireland is increasingly interwoven with sophisticated farming installations, that the grey boiled potato is as notorious a fiction as the flaccid boiled cabbage that used to be the principal weapon of critics of English cooking and that the hired Cortina in Kinsale is the same as the one in Scarborough. (28) Douglas H Lowndes 'Irish marketing invasion of the United Kingdom', *The Irish Times*, February 6, 1968, p.22

He goes on to note the links with Aer Lingus and Bord Failte:

...each advertising man can see the interplay between his own campaigns and those of the companies he does not handle. Between Aer Lingus and the Tourist Board, I understand, this interplay is closely planned. But, in addition, every time Kerrygold prints a gorgeous colour picture of fat Irish cattle grazing by a tranquil lake, every time the Pig and Bacon Commission shows Irish bacon sizzling and Irish pan, not only does a British reader get the flavour of Irish food, but a hint of a flavour of Ireland itself. (29) *Ibid*

Once again Ireland is presented as consumable, edible even, Ireland is not a place to escape to but one to experience, to consume directly.

### Consuming Ourselves

Following Britain and Ireland's entry into the EEC in 1973, Kerrygold exports were more rigorously controlled and Bord Baine made the decision to launch the brand at home. This was marked by the first of many synergies between Kerrygold and Aer Lingus with the slogan: 'Kerrygold tastes best at home'. Now Kerrygold was presented explicitly as part of the tourist experience, a direct link to 'home', and hence even more clearly a souvenir.

The logo of the Dublin agency Irish International began to appear on Kerrygold advertising from the end of 1960s, initially on trade advertising aimed at Irish farmers. From 1973, Irish International began to advertise Kerrygold directly to the Irish market, by the late 1970s they were undertaking overseas work as well. While I have yet to find conclusive proof, it appears that Benton and Bowles ceased to work with Kerrygold around 1970. Figure 3 is typical of the work done by Irish International in the 1970s. How should we read these ads aimed at the Irish market, with their obvious references to kitsch, commodified, touristic images of Ireland? Are they evidence of the incorporation of the tourist gaze into Irish advertising? Or can they be seen as examples of a playful and

knowing self-parody that I have mentioned elsewhere as characteristics of Irish advertising? Certainly, Stephanie Rains sees such puncturing devices as a way of negotiating the difficulty of celebrating modernity in the early Bord Failte films which primarily promoted Ireland as an unspoilt rural idyll. (30) Stephanie Rains, 'Home from Home: Diasporic images of Ireland in film and television' in Michael Cronin and Barbara O'Connor (eds) *Irish tourism: image, culture, and identity*. Clevedon; Buffalo, N.Y.: Channel View Publications, 2003, p. 208.

The more common, post-colonial reading of such images invokes the idea of the 'Stage Irish' whereby the Irish perform the Irishness that they feel is expected of them by their audience and then incorporate this image into themselves as 'natural' Irishness. However, drawing on Gibbons' discussion of Irish tourist postcards we can, paradoxically, see this celebration of tradition as an announcement of modernity. Gibbons argues that John Hinde postcards create an absent Ireland for which the assumed reader is nostalgic. The images, which on the surface seem to celebrate tradition, in fact mark its passing. The representation of an assumed tradition serves to remind the viewer of their own modernity.

(31) Luke Gibbons 'Back Projections: John Hinde and the New Nostalgia' in *Transformations in Irish Culture*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1996

One finds a direct continuation of this idea in contemporary advertising for the Irish market in the form of the current Irish Kerrygold television advertising campaign 'Sure we export all our best stuff', devised by Irish International's Eoghan Nolan. The protagonist, an emigrant returning for a brief holiday in Ireland with his pregnant German wife, fills a box with 'Irish soil' to bring back for his son's feet to touch. The highly emotive symbol of the soil provides an object correlative for Kerrygold — which is likewise made of the very stuff of Ireland and connoted as 'full of the land'. There is a curious nostalgia in this advert which makes distinct references to the last recession of the 1980s in the colour scheme used, the interior of the old home and the hint of self-reference to the well-know Kerrygold ads of the 1980s. Through these means, a pastness is evoked which is at once sad but also reassuringly familiar, authentic even. To return to MacCannell's statement that 'for moderns ... authenticity is thought to be elsewhere', 'nostalgia' and a search for authenticity 'are components of the conquering spirit of modernity' thus in the Kerrygold ads of the 1970s and today we could suggest that the Irish audience have themselves become tourists at home • (32) Dean MacCannell *The Tourist*. p.3

**Figure 3** Irish International, advertisement for Bord Baine, c. 1977. Courtesy Irish Dairy Board.

### Following the Kerrygolden Road to the Markets of the World.

Being Dairymaid to the World means getting a lot of different kinds of dairy produce to a lot of different countries—over eighty at the last count.

That means speaking a lot of different languages. And more importantly, it means having gained a lot for Ireland—more than £20m worth of exports last year alone.

It means achievement that is the envy of the world. In a mere fifteen years the Irish Dairy Industry has attained a degree of success which has taken other nations many decades. It means achieving for the brand name Kerrygold the status of a household name for quality—world wide.

Being Dairymaid to the World means seeing that the efforts of all the people who work within the Irish Dairy Industry are brought together into one coordinated marketing operation. So that the skills of the dairy farmers, exporters and manufacturers, research teams, financial experts and Bord Baine's overseas sales teams can all be allowed to play their full part in helping the national export effort.

Some maid. Some dairy.

**Ireland**  
DAIRYMAID to the WORLD

AN IRISH BAINNE The Irish Dairy Board