

Ryanair: the Cú Chulainn of civil aviation

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I AM THE WIND SCOURING THE FOAM

In a recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Stalk and Lachenauer (2004) make the case for 'hardball' management. Business, they argue, has gone soft. Decades of employee empowerment, executive mentoring, social responsibility and customer coddling—coupled with copious amounts of touchy-feely consultancy claptrap—have emasculated managers, enfeebled organizations and generally sapped the fighting spirit of our once redoubtable road warriors. The corporate body is corpulent and sclerotic. Tooth-and-nail competition is capped and bleached, manicured and polished. The unacceptable face of capitalism has been nipped, tucked, Botoxed and collagen emplaced. The killer instinct is dying a death.

Stalk and Lachenauer's assertions may or may not be accurate. But, like the happy-clappy consultants they roundly condemn, *HBR's* hardballers have a solution to sell. Predicated on the take-no-prisoners ethos of Wal-Mart, Dell, Microsoft, Toyota and Ryanair, the headline-hogging Irish airline, they posit a 'hardball manifesto'. This consists of five forget-me-not fundamentals: *focus relentlessly on competitive advantage* (i.e. aim for constant improvement), *strive for extreme competitive advantage* (widen the performance gap), *avoid attacking directly* (sneaky does it), *exploit people's will to win* (maintain a war footing) and know the caution zone (keep it legal). 'We're not,' they conclude, 'talking about cruelty here: hardball is tough, not sadistic. Yes, you want rivals to squirm, but not so visibly that you are viewed as a bully. In fact, you want the people in your world...to cheer you on. And many of them will, as they share the riches your strategies generate' (Stalk and Lachenauer, 2004, p. 71).

There is, admittedly, something abhorrent about two Boston Consulting Group veterans advocating the corporate equivalent of Operation Desert Storm. It is, to adapt Craig Brown's (2004) apt analogy, akin to head lice disbursing advice on the latest hairstyles. Yet for all their fee-fuelled bloodlust, Stalk and Lachenauer's representation of contemporary business reality is not entirely inaccurate. Competition, we're told, is getting ever-fiercer, ever-faster, ever-more formidable. Good enough is no longer good enough, they say, only the very best, the very boldest, the very bravest will do. It's a Darwinian world out there, don't you know, where none but the fittest companies, products and brands survive. Kill or be killed is the order of the day, apparently (Allard, 2004).

If anything, in fact, Stalk and Lachenauer's vision is insufficiently ferocious, especially when it comes to Ryanair. Ryanair is more than a mere hardball player. It is a lean mean fighting

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machine. It is relentless, remorseless, ruthless, savage. It is a belligerent brand, a battling brand, a barbaric brand. It is the Cú Chulainn of civil aviation. Or as near as makes no difference.

Cú Chulainn, of course, was a bit of a hardball player himself. The mythical warrior may be best remembered for his single-handed slaughter of the ravaging armies of Queen Medb, as well as his frightening fight-to-the-death with Ferdia, at the blood-flooded Ford of Faughart. But he was no mean ballboy. On his first fateful journey to Emain Macha, the ancient seat of the kings of Ulster, the young warrior passed the time by striking a ball with his hurley stick, throwing the hurley after the ball and then flinging his javelin at the hurtling hurley. The javelin hit the hurley which hit the ball which Cú Chulainn caught up with and grabbed before it hit the ground. What's more, when this legend-in-the-making was attacked by the monstrous mastiff of Culann, the foremost blacksmith in Ulster, he drove his hurley ball down the guard-dog's throat, killing it instantly. And, when the blacksmith complained about the loss of his massive mastiff, the Ulsterman-of-war took the savage canine's place, thereby earning the name Cú Chulainn, the hound of Culann (Cunliffe, 2003; Delaney, 1994; Green, 2004).

Is that hardball enough for you, *HBR*?

I AM A BREAKER OF THE SEA

The hound of Culann has long gone, if indeed he ever existed, yet his superhuman achievements are not forgotten. The timeless tales of his enduring derring do are constantly recycled, periodically reinvented and regularly re-imagined for each rising generation of self-anointed Celts. From his role as an 'invisible brigade commander' during the 1916 rebellion (Foster, 2001, p. 10) to his latter-day incarnation as the muse of heavy metal musicians like Horslips, Thin Lizzy and Ash (Davies, 2000), the Hound of Ulster still howls on cue, even in tastefully appointed executive suites and the thickly carpeted boardrooms of big business. In a world where managers seek inspiration from Sun-Tzu, Alexander the Great, Good Queen Bess, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Henry V, Hamlet, Moses, Colin Powell and countless other icons, both real and imagined, it would be surprising indeed if the greatest warrior of all were not called to corporate arms, or recruited as a mercenary for wannabe management warlords or, given his prodigious charioteering prowess and penchant for hunting birds on the wing, adopted as a poster boy by the cutthroat captains of the contemporary airline industry.

Admittedly, the management of Ryanair has never acknowledged their indebtedness to King Conchobar's mythical champion, the legendary defender of the Brown Bull of Cooley. Nor, for that matter, did anyone ever imagine that Ryanair would develop into the warrior brand that it has become (and then some). To the contrary, when Ryanair was first conceived in 1985, as a one-plane, one-route operation, it was very much the runt of Tony Ryan's business litter. A latter-day legend in Ireland's commercial community, Ryan made his not inconsiderable fortune with Guinness Peat Aviation, a leading aircraft leasing company, and duly dabbled in all sorts of sidelines. Yet despite the benign neglect of its founder, the opposition of Aer Lingus, the Irish state airline, and the indifference of Aer Rianta, the Irish airports authority, Ryan's runt somehow survived and slowly struggled to its feet. By 1989, it was carrying 60,000 passengers per year, predominantly on the lucrative Dublin-to-London route. Although Ryanair was little more than a clone of the national flag-carrier, its prices were slightly lower than Aer Lingus, it flew into Luton, which was convenient for an enclave of Irish expatriates in North London, and because it also operated flights to and from Knock, a holy shrine in the west of Ireland, Ryanair received the unofficial blessing of the Catholic church, which sang its praises incessantly (Creaton, 2004).

Ryanair, unfortunately, fell foul of an Act of God, the first Gulf War of 1991. Like many of the world's airlines, it suffered from the downturn in passenger traffic that accompanied the conflict and, because the company also got caught up in Guinness Peat Aviation's disastrous IPO of 1992, Tony Ryan's tiny yet tidy sideline teetered on the brink of collapse. An unlikely saviour, however, existed in the shape of Michael O'Leary, the bagman, bean counter, bottom-line manager and all-purpose consiglierie of the Ryan empire. A fixer first and foremost, O'Leary's Damascene moment occurred when he made a courtesy call to Southwest Airlines in Dallas, where he was taken under the wing of Herb Kelleher, the hard-drinking, hard-driving, Harley-riding, Hibernian-loving hound-dog behind the low-cost, no-frills flying revolution that had taken the United States by storm in the years after airline deregulation (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1996). O'Leary saw the light.

Convinced by Herb's low cost credo, O'Leary returned to Ryanair with the born-again, brook-no-opposition belief of the recently converted. Appointed CEO in 1993, he set about rebuilding the company on the Southwest model. Aided and abetted by the admittedly glacial deregulation of the European airline industry—a consequence of the 1992 European Union Act—Ryanair rapidly rewrote the commercial aviation rulebook. Come the end of the decade, it was flying 6 million passengers to 32 European destinations, from Stansted to Stockholm, and providing employment for 1200 people. Two years later, in the aftermath of 9/11, its market capitalization exceeded that of high and mighty British Airways, as well as the erstwhile leader of the pack, American Airlines. The runt of the litter had become top dog, albeit a bit of a mangy mongrel that many in the industry regard as flea-ridden and distempered, and would prefer to see put down.

I AM THE GROWL OF THE OCEAN

Actually, a much superior canine comparison is the wolfhound. Ryanair has been nothing if not ferocious in its adherence to the Southwest template. In truth, it is even more Southwestern than Southwest, a rabid, attack-dog strain of the original breed. Kelleher may have trained, groomed and nourished the young pup, but O'Leary has made the low cost bone his own. If not quite the Hound of Ulster, he is certainly the Hound of Stansted airport.

Now, Michael O'Leary is an accountant by training and he has no love lost for smarmy marketing types. On one occasion, when refreshing the Ryanair 'brand' came up for discussion, he promptly pronounced, 'We have no intention of changing the brand or redesigning the image or the rest of that old nonsense. In my thirteen years at this company, Aer Lingus has changed its branding three times, British Airways has changed it three times, we've changed it not once, and the virtue of what we've done has been proven' (Calder, 2003, p. 114). True, these remarks are fairly temperate compared to some of the CEO's choicer phrases, most of which are derivations of 'fucker', 'wanker' and their cognates. However, it is fair to infer that Ryanair has consistently resisted the blandishments of brand image consultants, marketing makeover artists, service quality advisers and similar purveyors of business 'bolloxology', as the Cú Chulainn of low cost air travel adroitly puts it (Done, 2004).

Yet, for all his foul-mouthed fulmination at namby-pamby marketers and their airy-fairy ilk, O'Leary is a model marketing man. This model, however, is not that of the deferential doormat, the unctuous, obsequious, oleaginous, customer-hugging, have-a-nice-one, missing-you-already sycophant that we know and allegedly love. It is, rather, the marketing man-o-war, the marketing warmonger, the marketing gladiator, whose pugilistic tactics are predicated on the following six appropriately CELTIC actions.

I AM A ROARING BULL

Crucify costs: Ryanair's business model, like that of its Texan forebear, rests firmly on the ruthless pursuit of cost reductions (Felsted, 2003). Every frill or fancy or frippery or finery or frivolity that airline passengers formerly enjoyed on national flag carriers has either been excised completely or treated as a revenue-generating optional extra. In-flight catering, first-class cabins, frequent-flyer programs, free on-board magazines, generous baggage allowances, lavish departure lounges, plentiful cabin crew and adequate leg room have all been abolished or unbundled, as have paper tickets, assigned seating, covered jetways and compensation payments for delayed or cancelled flights. Reclinable seats, window blinds, liveried headrests, backseat pockets, hold-stowed baggage and, believe it or not, courtesy sick bags are also on their way out. So single-minded is Ryanair's pursuit of low costs that wheelchairs are regarded as optional extras, which must be paid for by their users.

Costs are also kept down by flying a single aircraft type, the Boeing 737 (which can be bought in bulk and maintained more easily), making maximum use of the fleet (through fast turn-around times and squeezing in more flights per day), eschewing elaborate hub-and-spoke route networks (which facilitate passenger connections but are beset by expensive delays), avoiding busy international airports in favour of sleepy secondary facilities on the peripheries of major conurbations (the grateful operators of which are 'encouraged' to provide incentives, rebates, promotional support, etc.), cutting out travel agents and analogous cut-taking, top-slicing, percentage-pocketing parasites ('screw the travel agents,' says O'Leary, 'what have they ever done for passengers over the years?') and, not least, by keeping a very tight reign on employee-related expenses. Wages are low, hours are long, holidays are short, demands are many, perks are few, or paid for. Ryanair's employees fork out for their uniforms, refreshments, health checks, airport passes, vetting procedures, car parking spaces and, incredibly, Christmas parties. They are even, it is sometimes alleged by scurrilous competitors, encouraged to purloin their ballpoint pens, post-it notes, paper clips and the like.

Keep a close watch on your watch next time you check in.

I AM A HAWK ON THE CUSP

Eviscerate prices: It is little wonder, given Ryanair's congenital cost-consciousness, that it is sometimes known as Eire O'Flot. If not quite the Trabant of commercial aviation, it is definitely the Daewoo. Indeed, 'doing a Ryanair' is an increasingly popular Irish expression, one that means more than merely travelling by the eponymous airline. It also carries connotations of the cheap-and-nasty, with the emphasis on nasty (Creaton, 2004). The upside of the downside, however, is exceptionally low fares. Ticket prices haven't simply been savaged by the attack dog of civil aviation, they have been slaughtered, disembowelled and their innards eaten raw. London for £29, Glasgow for £59, Paris for £79, Hamburg for £99, Stockholm for £39.99. And those are the expensive seats!

On top of its everyday low prices, Ryanair is renowned for periodic price promotions, which are unfailingly, if tenuously, linked to some spurious special occasion, celebration or anniversary (*The Business*, 2003). Christmas specials, Easter specials, summertime specials, St Patrick's Day specials and specials that announce the opening of new routes or milestones on the company's march to global domination are regular occurrences. Specials that spoil the specials of its low cost rivals are no less regular, as are knock-em-dead, never-to-be-repeated (until the next time) price spectacles. The 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers' flight, for example, prompted

Ryanair to offer 100,000 seats at 50p. When its monthly passenger numbers first exceeded those of BA—by 240,000—it offered 240,000 fares at give-away prices. Ryanair responded to 9/11, not with retrenchment or risk-avoidance, but its biggest-ever sale (one million seats at £9.99) and a keep-flying, keep-the-flag-flying, keep-on-keeping-on rallying cry ('Let's Fight Back!'). Indeed, it doesn't take too much imagination to guess what's going to happen in 2005, the 20th anniversary of Ryanair's glorious inception-cum-immaculate conception.

In his more expansive moments, moreover, O'Leary the Oracle is partial to predicting the end of airfares full stop. Airlines, he argues, will increasingly give away seats because they are no longer in the aviation business but in the delivery business. Just as newspapers, radio stations and television networks respectively deliver readers, listeners and viewers to advertisers, so too airlines will deposit people in places that wouldn't otherwise see a tourist, and in airports that can coin it with concessions, catering, car hire, semi-chic shops and similar ancillary facilities. Certainly, Ryanair's mastery of on-line ticket sales (90% of its seats are sold via the Internet), its commitment to the so-called 'dark art' of yield management (software that increases or decreases the price of tickets depending on take up, thereby maximizing revenue), its we're-not-proud preparedness to use aircraft fuselages as travelling billboards (among others, Ryanair has advertised Kilkenny beer, Jaguar cars and *The Sun* newspaper on the exterior of its jets) and its astute exploitation of the Ryanair.com website, which receives 50 million page views per month (affiliates pay heavily for access to all those eyeballs) mean that Michael O'Leary's Shangri La, where all airfares cost less than a cup of coffee, is not entirely inconceivable but sufficiently implausible to attract copious amounts of free publicity.

I AM THE SUN THROUGH THE DEW

Look ma, no loudhailer. Arresting as they are, Ryanair's Believe-It-Or-Not price promotions are fairly small fry compared to some of the company's Larger-Than-Life publicity stunts. Predicated, as ever, on Southwest's high-impact, low-cost PR programme featuring the flamboyant founder and sour mash-marinated major domo, Herb Kelleher, Michael O'Leary has steadily built up the 'character' side of his character (Bowley, 2003). If not quite the P.T. Barnum of Mullingar, he's a verging-on-the-ridiculous version of vainglorious Virgin supremo, Sir Richard Branson. On one occasion, for instance, he took advantage of an attempted hijacking at Stansted airport and promptly announced, 'It's amazing what lengths people will go to, to fly cheaper than Ryanair'. The Airline Pilot's Association was not amused and said so, to massive press coverage. On another occasion, he celebrated St Valentine's Day with a lovebirds' special—priced at £69, naturally—which was supported by press ads featuring the hopelessly romantic message, 'Blow Me (These fares are hard to swallow)'. This was accompanied in turn by silhouettes of two pairs of feet, one on top of the other. The Advertising Standards Authority rose to the bait and demanded a retraction, as newspaper column inches mounted. On yet another infamous occasion, he exploited the Vatican's long-awaited revelation of the Third Fatima prophesy by proclaiming that the Pope also revealed the Fourth Secret of Fatima: Ryanair's fares are lowest! This claim came complete with press ads featuring the Holy Father imparting the good news to an awestruck nun. Catholics were outraged, the press had a field day, and O'Leary laughed all the way to the publicity bank.

Indeed, for someone who supposedly loathes the media, The Michael is not averse to making a front-page fool of himself. He has dressed up as St Patrick, a snowman, Santa Claus and, in keeping with Richard Branson's trademark transvestite tradition, a flouncing, frilly-knickered French maid, in order to grab a banner headline or, failing that, an honourable mention on an

inside page. What's more, when gift PR horses come riding by—as when British PM Tony Blair and family flew Ryanair or Boeing named the company's low cost model as the best in the airline business—he never looks them in the mouth, merely opens his own ever wider. Far from exhausting the public's patience through overexposure, O'Leary's like Madonna in that there's always something newsworthy to report. His most recent headline-hogging stunt involved paying £6,000 for an Irish taxi licence, which means that his company car can sweep through Dublin's congested streets in the uncongested bus and taxi lanes. Michael may lack personal charm, but chutzpah he has in abundance.

O'Leary's credo, clearly, is that there's no such thing as enough publicity, good, bad or otherwise. The last of these is well illustrated by the case of Jane O'Keeffe, who benefited from one of Ryanair's earliest publicity stunts (Creton, 2004). Way back in 1988, she was the company's one-millionth passenger and was awarded free flights for life. Nine years later, when she tried to book some seats, Jane was brusquely informed that the deal was off. Her understandable complaints to the chief executive were met with in a tirade of personal abuse, where no expletive was left undeleted. Ms O'Keeffe sued for her rights and, when the case eventually came to court, Ryanair refused to settle. The judge ruled against the defendant, awarded costs to the plaintiff and, to cap it all, described O'Leary as a belligerent bully. Far from being a complete PR disaster, however, the CEO's parsimonious attitude reflected well on Michael O'Scrooge. As the *Financial Times* observed, 'O'Leary's investors must have loved the fact that their money was entrusted to such a miser' (Bowley, 2003, p. 20).

I AM THE SALMON WHICH LEAPS

Torture customers: O'Keeffe, of course, is just one among many disgruntled passengers. Trying though they were, her experiences are no more traumatic than many of those who fly with Eire O'Flot. In truth, the corporate trait for which Ryanair is best known is its total, absolute and unremitting maltreatment of consumers. The low cost carrier makes no bones about the fact that its customers are on their own when flights are cancelled or delayed. Put out passengers are not compensated with cups of coffee or meal vouchers, much less hotel rooms or taxis at the airline's expense. The tickets, after all, don't cost much more than a meal in a fast food restaurant, so why should Ryanair feed and water and ferry and accommodate those it has inconvenienced? If buses and trains don't do it, there's no reason why O'Leary should. He's not the patron saint of passengers, you know!

Ryanair's couldn't-care-less approach to customer care also applies to refunds and baggage. Not only are refunds never paid out, even if a passenger's travel plans are disrupted by the death of a grandparent, but the bereaved customer is told to fuck off for having the temerity to ask. What's more, if they want their pre-paid airport tax returned, as is their legal right, Ryanair imposes an administrative charge that exactly matches the amount in question. Granted, as corporate mantras go, 'fuck off granny' and 'no fucking refunds, you fuckers' are somewhat unusual in a world of 'customer is king' mission statements. However, unlike the purported customer-huggers, Ryanair really means what it says, especially with regard to baggage. If baggage is lost; too bad, it'll turn up eventually. If it is damaged, the customer is at fault for packing it improperly. 'The company,' opines O'Leary, 'is not the compensator of last resort for inappropriate or badly packed luggage' (Creton, 2004, p. 188). The basic problem, he goes on, is that passengers take far too much stuff with them. And it's got to stop.

Ryanair's modus operandi is 'when in doubt, blame the customer' and the company, evidently, is often racked by uncertainty. Not content with berating customers who burden themselves with

unnecessary baggage, or commit the unforgivable sin of wanting their money back, O'Leary hurls insults at them for good measure. He regularly describes them as 'the great unwashed', calls them 'morons' if they fail to find cheap fares on the company website, and takes perverse pride in the accusation that his is the 'lager louts' and 'stag parties' airline of choice. Indeed, when his Internet ticketing facility made the not inconsequential mistake of charging customers several times over for the service, he claimed that consumers' websurfing shortcomings were the cause of their problems. Hardly surprising, then, that Barbara Cassani, CEO of a rival low cost carrier, was moved to comment: 'They glorify making the experience as uncomfortable as possible. If a customer has a problem, they enjoy telling you to piss off. They believe that if customers aren't hurting, their costs aren't low enough' (Calder, 2003, p. 113).

In addition to maligning customers, Ryanair is never reluctant to mislead them. The rock-bottom prices quoted in its ads are often difficult to find in reality. Only a limited number of seats is available at the promotional price—which also conveniently excludes taxes and airport charges—and once the cheap seats are filled the rest pay more. The specials, likewise, are less special than they appear, not least the Easter specials, which don't apply to flights over the holiday weekend itself. Destinations, too, are described with the kind of poetic license that'd put Seamus Heaney to shame. Flights to 'Frankfurt' actually go to Hahn, a former airforce base 128km from the city. 'Stockholm' is served from Vasteras, 100km due south. 'Hamburg' is reached via Lübeck, an hour's train journey from the dubious delights of the Reeperbahn. Passengers to 'Brussels' are deplaned in Charleroi, a comparatively modest 46km distant from the alleged destination, those to Oslo are deposited in Torp, a mere 100km away, and visitors to 'Paris' find themselves in Beauvais, 60km north of the City of Light. At one time, moreover, travellers to 'Barcelona' and 'Copenhagen' were being flown to Perpignan (in France) and Malmo (in Sweden) respectively. It seems that bait-and-switch is alive and well and living in Dublin.

I AM THE WONDER OF ART

Infuriate all-comers: Ryanair's contrarian take on customer orientation, and resolute refusal to respond to dissatisfied customers' demands, is deeply ironic, not to say profoundly paradoxical. When the company itself is the customer—as it is with suppliers, airport administrators, advertising agencies, aircraft manufacturers and so forth—Ryanair is the most demanding customer imaginable and constantly dissatisfied to boot. It drives extremely hard bargains, negotiates ever-tougher deals and thinks nothing of brutally abandoning suppliers in order to bring them into line. When the caterer that delivered ice to Ryanair's aircraft tried to raise its prices, the carrier simply did without ice cubes until the uppity supplier saw sense (or, rather, passengers did without ice in their expensive soft drinks and overpriced alcoholic beverages). When the owners of Rimini airport attempted to increase Ryanair's landing fees, the service to 'Bologna' promptly transferred to an adjacent facility at Farli (whose operators were much more forthcoming on the incentives front). When the world aviation industry was in its apocalyptic post-September 11 slump, Ryanair seized the day and screwed Boeing into the ground on a new aircraft order (so massive was the company's discount on one hundred 737s, that O'Leary was moved to boast, 'we raped them').

Ryanair's rapacity is not confined to suppliers. Competitors too come in for rough and tumble treatment. British Airways was blasted in a notorious 'EXPENSIVE BA****DS' press advertisement which so incensed the world's favourite airline that it took the Irish upstart to court (Calder, 2003). Unfortunately for BA, the judge ruled that the flag-carrier was indeed ripping its customers off as Ryanair intimidated. O'Leary was delirious. KLM and Alitalia have also

been lambasted by O'Leary the Lip—to the point of painting 'Arrivederci Alitalia' on the side of its aircraft—as has almost every other European carrier. Sabena was summarily dismissed as 'a bunch of swindlers', Buzz flew 'shitty aircraft on shitty routes', Go and its fragrant figurehead, Barbara Cassani, was duly declared 'a dog', easyJet, bizarrely, is 'not the brightest sandwich at the picnic', and, when the CEO of Lufthansa suggested that Germans aren't really interested in low fares, the Mouth from Mullingar riposted, 'How the fuck does he know? He's never offered them any. The Germans will crawl bollock-naked over broken glass to get them' (Bowley, 2003, p. 21).

Above and beyond 'sticking it to Lufty', Ryanair's unerring ability to infuriate all-comers extends to almost every conceivable stakeholder, associate, affiliate or interested party. These include the European Union, which runs 'an evil empire', merchant bankers, who 'piss away money', Britain's air traffic control system, which is 'a fucking shambles', industry pressure groups like the Air Traffic Users Committee, who are 'a bunch of halfwits', assorted trade unions, which are typically told to 'sign the fucking contract or fuck off out of here', and do-nothing travel agents who are 'wankers' to a man and 'should be taken out and shot'. O'Leary's special ire, however, is reserved for the Irish government, which is reluctant to build a Ryanair-dedicated terminal at Dublin airport; the Irish airports authority, which consistently overcharges and systematically undermines the low cost titan; and, inevitably, the Irish state airline, which hampered the fledgling operation at every stage and, after being given a lesson in harder-than-hardball management practices, was forced to reengineer itself on the Ryanair model. O'Leary's tactics, what's more, have ranged from threatening to move his entire operation out of Dublin to full-page press advertisements maligning just about everyone in the government, up to and including the Taoiseach, whom he disparagingly describes as 'Dithering Bertie' and 'Prime Minister' Ahern (Creaton, 2004).

I AM THE SPEAR WHICH WINS THE BATTLE

Cultivate Contradictions: Contradiction is a defining feature of our purportedly postmodern times and Ryanair is a cairn of contradiction. As noted previously, it has no time for smooth-talking marketers, much less brand bolloxologists, yet is blessed with considerable marketing ability. It treats its customers diabolically—although not nearly as diabolically as it treats its suppliers—and they keep coming back for more. It opens routes to ostensible backwaters, which can't logically sustain the service, only to prove the pessimists wrong. It comes across as a wild and woolly operation that flies by the seat of its pants; however, the company's accounting practices are extremely conservative and each competitive move is very carefully planned (Creaton, 2004). It berates competitors for taking unnecessary legal action—Lufthansa in particular—but is pretty quick to involve my learned friends when Ryanair's own interests are at stake. It complains bitterly about government support for failing national carriers, such as Aer Lingus and Alitalia, but heads the hand-out queue when grants and regional incentives are being disbursed, to say nothing of the route-subsidizing practices of local airport authorities. It perpetually plays the part of the small start-up that's being persecuted by the big bully-boys of the industry, but the reality is that Ryanair is the most profitable airline in the world and, if not quite the biggest, certainly the meanest bully on the block (*The Economist*, 2004).

Its chief executive officer, furthermore, is a veritable menhir of ambiguity. Michael O'Leary is presented as an ill-educated hick from the sticks, who plays football with the baggage handlers, eats beans 'n' chips in the staff canteen and swears like a drunken sailor who's mislaid his wooden leg. He dresses in a farm-labourer ensemble, apparently aspires to owning a couple of country pubs, disdains the chardonnay-quaffing chattering classes, and makes much of his down-to-earth

upbringing in the market town of Mullingar. However, 'he is in fact a highly educated, gently reared scion of Irish country aristocrats' (Bowley, 2003, p. 23). He was schooled at Ireland's Eton, Clongowes Wood College (James Joyce's alma mater), read business studies at Ireland's Oxbridge, Trinity College Dublin, and worked for a blue-chip accountancy practice, Stokes Kennedy Crowley, before becoming Tony Ryan's financial enforcer. He lives in a palatial stately home, Gigginstown House, owns an acclaimed art collection, possesses a villa or two in Italy, is a regular patron of exclusive Dublin eateries and, according to malicious gossip, is actually a bit of a mummy's boy, who takes his dirty laundry home at weekends, once answered to the nickname 'Ducksie' and occasionally loudly announces, apropos of nothing, 'I'm not gay'. Mind you, he has a £250 million fortune to soften any blows to his far-from-fragile ego.

When it comes to customers, too, Ryanair is congenitally contradictory. Yes, it has no time for customer care, let alone coddling, cossetting or congeniality. But, unlike its full-service, full-fare, flag-carrier rivals, Ryanair doesn't rip customers off with amply-padded ticket prices, exorbitantly expensive add-ons and hi-falutin folderol. 'We give the public what it fucking wants,' says the happy-go-lucky Hound of Stansted (Creation, 2004, p. 234). The company, he also points out, receives less than one complaint per 1000 passengers, which compares well with other low-cost airlines. However, as it only responds to written complaints and, as most people know that complaining is futile in any event, Ryanair's record flatters to deceive. The reality is better captured in one of O'Leary's priceless remarks: 'Do you know how many people British Airways has got working in customer service? Two hundred of the fuckers. Do you know how many I've got? Three, and two of them are part-time' (Adams, 2004, p. 31).

The inevitable outcome of these corporate paradoxes is that most people have a love-hate relationship with Ryanair. It is the airline that passengers love to hate. It is the butt of well-I-never jokes, exaggerated tales of would-you-believe-it woe and water cooler exchanges of the 'my Ryanair experience was worse than yours' variety. Dedicated newspaper columns catalogue the company's customers' concerns and complaints. *The Guardian* once ran a 'Ryanair-Miles' competition inviting readers to guess which route deposited passengers furthest from its alleged destination (Beauvais, 200km from Eurodisney, earned the laurel). Columnists wonder when passengers will be asked to flap their arms in order to help keep costs down and their 737 aloft. Stand-up comedian Ardal O'Hanlan advocates doing away with airliners altogether and investing in a giant catapult which will simply fire Ryanair's customers, for £1 or thereabouts, to somewhere in the general vicinity of where they want to go. Parachutes, presumably, cost extra.

I AM THE WILD BOAR OF COURAGE

Ryanair's marketing strategy, in short, involves six CELTIC tactics: *Crucify*, *Eviscerate*, *Look ma*, *Torture*, *Infuriate* and *Cultivate*. Apt acronym aside, however, many might wonder whether CELTIC is Celtic. Does CELTIC actually meet appropriately Celtic criteria? Is CELTIC merely a Gaelic version of 'hardball'? Just how Celtic is CELTIC? These are highly pertinent (if utterly contrived) questions, though much of course depends on what is meant by the term 'Celtic'. As noted elsewhere in this special issue of *JSM*, the word has been used to describe everything from Iron Age tribes in western Europe to a post-Christian, neo-pagan, windswept-and-interesting worldview. Indeed, the very conception of the Celt is being challenged on one hand (James, 1999) and commodified on the other (Robb, 2002).

However, if 'conventional' accounts of Celticity are accepted—that is, those of (say) Frank Delaney (1986) or Nora Chadwick (1971)—then the answer is that Ryanair's strategy is not

simply Celtic but Celtic *in excelsis*. It doesn't take too much imagination, for example, to see striking parallels between the organisation's operational strongholds, such as Stansted, Charleroi or Dublin, and the great Iron Age hill-forts of Maiden Castle, Montlengerberg and Emain Macha. It takes even less imagination to recognize the resemblance between the Celts' peripatetic character and the mass population movements that have been unleashed by the carnivorous champion of no frills flying. It takes the merest minimum of imagination to note the eerie association between ancient Celts' abiding fear that the sky might fall (as reported to Alexander the Great, no less) and Michael O'Leary's remark that, if the EC ruled against Charleroi's subsidies, 'the sky will fall through' (Creation, 2004, p. 234). It takes no imagination whatsoever to note the obvious affinity between the cattle-based economy of the ancient Celts and the cattle-like treatment that Ryanair's passengers are expected to endure. As a *Financial Times* editorial aptly observes about our airborne bovine mover, 'the customer is more of a thing than a king, crammed in, served a minimal choice of food and drinks and then disgorged in airports often many miles from the nearest city' (Lloyd, 2003, p. 5).

More than almost anything else, however, the ancient Celts were renowned for their belligerence and boastfulness. They were a warlike people who fought at the drop of a hat, or even the hint of a drop of a hat, and who bragged about it afterward. They fought to the death, furthermore, as indeed does Ryanair. The company's avowed aim is to 'destroy the airline business as we know it'. The organization is prepared, O'Leary declares, 'to fight anyone, anywhere, anytime'. Tony Ryan's attack dog, its CEO vowed in 2002, 'is going to be a monster in Europe in the next ten years' (Creation, 2004, pp. 254, 158, 212).

Regardless of O'Leary's monstrous ambitions, he remains the Celtic heartbeat of Ryanair. He embodies the brand. He is the *gae bolga* of CEOs. He is nothing less than Cú Chulainn reborn. Like Cú Chulainn, he is the champion of an organization, not its founder or king. Like Cú Chulainn, he was appointed to his champion's position at a very early age (CFO at 28, CEO four years later). Like Cú Chulainn, his values were formed in an agricultural context—he even breeds champion bulls—and his feet remain firmly planted in the ground. Like Cú Chulainn, he is earthy, profane and stands accused of copious political incorrections (including blasphemy, misogyny and deliberate maltreatment of the differently abled). Like Cú Chulainn, he is prone to extraordinary fits of incandescent rage, which manifests itself in shouts, threats, bellicose body language and the kind of angry looks—aka 'hate beams'—that wouldn't embarrass Medusa (Creation, 2004, p. 110). Like Cú Chulainn, he commands a 'phantom chariot' that transports his warriors to mysterious places where they battle throngs of serpents (Alitalia), sharp-beaked monsters (BA), fearsome dragons (Go) and houses full of toads (easyJet). Like Cú Chulainn, he is blessed with a tricksterish side—such as his misleading remarks to the media about investments, ambitions, acquisitions, share sales and suchlike—as well as an uninhibited, occasionally self-deprecating sense of humour. And, like Cú Chulainn, he has recently eaten of his own flesh (the takeover of Buzz), is being lampooned by latter-day druids (newspaper columnists and stand-ups) and his once dependable steed, the stock market, is not only refusing to be bridled but shedding ominous tears of blood.

The end, should these portents prove correct, is nigh for Ryanair. *Sparagmos* looms, dismemberment beckons. If not quite strapped to a pillar (pilloried possibly) or carrying a carrion crow on its shoulder (as opposed to a chip), the Hound of Stansted is starting to look a little rough. Yet irrespective of whether it lives or dies, Ryanair has earned its place among the Celtic marketing immortals. As W.B. Yeats put it, in his preface to Lady Gregory's 1902 translation of the Cú Chulainn legend:

To us Irish these personages should be more important than all others, for they lived in the places where we ride and go marketing, and sometimes they have met one another on the hills that cast their shadows upon our doors at evening. If we but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea. When I was a child I only had to climb the hill behind the house to see long, blue, ragged hills flowing along the southern horizon. What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me, not even the merchant captains who knew everything, that Cruachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills! (Yeats, 1994[1902], p. 336)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I feel I must acknowledge my legendary source of inspiration. Legend has it that when the Celts first set foot in Ireland their bard-to-be, Amergin, burst into the poem that marks the sub-sections of this article. It is aptly entitled, 'The Mystery'. Aptly, because no one has a clue what it means (see Titley, 2000).

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