

A LITERARY PILGRIMAGE: COUNTY CORK, IRELAND

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There is something about the feats of little places that inspires one to celebrate certain mysteries of achievement and historical happenstance. This is true in the world of scientific fact -- remember that tiny Russian village where people routinely live to be 120 years old? And it is true also in the world of literature. Take Ireland, for instance: such a little country with, as it were, such a big pen. Physically it could fit in England's sleeve, or America's pocket, and yet it has been to great literature what David was to Goliath. To any lover of language this feels wonderfully just -- the sweet justice of the underdog -- but it is curious, too. Is this simply geography asserting itself (the primacy of a particular landscape in the development of a particular art form)? Or history (the shaping -- by warfare, religion, economics, etc. -- of a particular people's relationship to language over time)? What factors, in other words, might make a little country like Ireland such a fertile ground for literature?

In late November my wife, Aleksandra, and I went to Ireland for the first time. We went in the hope of discovering for ourselves some of the hidden connections between literature and place that are everywhere implied, but never spelled out, in the best of that nation's fiction and poetry. And we went too in the shared belief that, like great fiction, the real meaning of any trip is found in the mysterious suggestion of human nature and experience. Because real history is made up of stories, after all, and stories come from people of a particular place and time. Travel, you could say, is our best way of communing with their spirits.

After much thought and debate, we decided to concentrate our trip within County Cork. Ireland's largest county, Cork has been birthplace or home or graveyard (or all three) to arguably more remarkable writers over the centuries than any other part of Ireland except Dublin. And though Dublin may claim what is certainly the most celebrated group of writers per capita of any city

since Athens, Cork nonetheless has a leg up when it comes to variety. It boasts strong representatives from the dual strains of Irish literary history, which is to say both the Irish and Anglo-Irish traditions. Among its children and lifelong admirers can be counted the likes of Edmund Spenser, Elizabeth Bowen, the brilliant short-story writers Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, and William Trevor, the great 18th Century Irish poet Eileen O'Leary, Edith Somerville and Violet Martin (known to their readers as Somerville and Ross), and the famed Irish storyteller known simply as The Tailor.

This short list alone, with its juxtaposition of Anglo and Gaelic names, may suggest some of the reasons why Cork spawned such a wealth of good writers. A large (by Irish standards) geographic area containing some of the richest farmland in southern Ireland as well as important sea ports like Cobh, Cork has long been a highly emotional, and often violent, battleground for those -- whether native or foreign, peasant or aristocrat -- who would claim it as their own. In the second half of the 16th century, under the sovereignty of Queen Elizabeth, more than 21,000 acres of fertile Cork land were occupied by English settlers at the expense of the Irish peasantry, touching off a history of brutal rebellions and suppressions that has continued in one form or another until the present day. For three hundred years, Cork was a stronghold not only of the Anglo-Irish, but also of the rebel Irish (the 20th century revolutionary leader Michael Collins was the son of a peasant farmer in Clonakilty and was himself assassinated in Cork). Throughout it all, death and birth alike, both sides came eventually to express their respective voices in poetry and narrative. That the native Irish voices should for so long have seemed underground is not really so surprising, given that they were so often short of resources and under seige. But those voices never ceased. From the 18th century -- when poets regularly met in the tiny hamlets of West Cork to hold "Courts of Poetry" as a way of giving each other support and encouragement -- until today, the Irish bardic tradition, in which the words seem to spring musciously from the land itself, has remained very much alive.

So our trip to Cork county was to be a pilgrimage of sorts, and also a kind of investigation. Needless to say, we would have to do a great deal of reading before we went. "It is indeed rare to pass a single mile without encountering an object to which some marvellous fiction is attached," wrote Mr. and Mrs. S.C. Hall, wise chroniclers, nearly two hundred years ago, of the Emerald Isle in their excellent travel book *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, etc.* "Every lake, mountain, ruin of church or castle, rath and boreen, has its legendary tale; the Fairies people every wild spot; the Banshee is the follower of every old family; Phookas and Cluricannes are -- if not to be seen, to be heard of, in every solitary glen." Such intriguing observations as these raised high hopes in our minds about the upcoming trip, but also faint doubts. Would the actual place amount to less than our idea of it, we wondered, or more?

Late fall is not tourist season in Ireland. There are reasons for this, of course, mostly concerning the weather; no one likes to get rained on. But as they say over there -- if you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes. The Irish light shifts with breathtaking speed, as if God were holding a hand-mirror above the land and tilting it this way and that, just to see how it might look. A lovely, contradictory impression that one immediately gets from many of the Irish people themselves, who are both compassionate game-players and punning stoics. And from the landscape as well, which though soft and green as youthful love was nonetheless full of stones once, millions of them, over every inch. The stones are walls now, covered with moss and lined by hedgerows. Criss-crossing the countryside, they are like ancient words found and gathered and stacked into sentences by unknown, forgotten bards -- visible songlines. Or so, perhaps, they just seemed to us, jet-lagged and excited and a little spaced-out, on the hour's drive south from Shannon Airport, Co. Limerick, to Mallow in Co. Cork, on our first -- inexplicably sunny -- morning in Ireland.

Mallow lies in the northeast corner of the county, a quaint town with the brightly painted houses and shops typical of so many Irish towns, where a garish rainbowed palette bespeaks a kind of winking Celtic optimism in the

face of nagging rain and neighboring bog. A few miles to the west is Longueville House, a beautiful Georgian manor sitting on 500 acres of pasture and woodland, where we would be spending the night. Here was Anglo-Ireland incarnate: the noble, well-staffed house looking out over grounds that, long ago, would have been granted to English subjects as reward for some service to the Crown (most often, this meant service in the Crown's army against the Irish insurgents fighting for the right to govern themselves). This was the country of Sir Walter Raleigh and Edmund Spenser and, in this century, Elizabeth Bowen, whose memoir *Bowen's Court* tenderly evokes both the house and the landscape of her childhood: "This is a part of Ireland with no lakes, but the sky's movement of clouds reflects itself everywhere as it might on water, rounding the trees with bloom and giving the grass a sheen. In the airy silence, any sound travels a long way. The streams and rivers, sunk in their valleys, are not seen until you come down to them." The sun was breaking through the clouds (for the hundredth time that morning) as we arrived, squinting and trying to remember why this place, so foreign, should feel so familiar. Of course it was the swift-moving clouds, which were like light, just as she had written. Silver-green frost lit the portions of the fields still in shade, where the pale sun hadn't yet reached. By afternoon, as we set out to explore, the sun had touched everywhere and was already descending; the frost was gone.

We went looking for the Anglo-Irish first, as this had been their corner of the county. We drove northeast into the Blackwater countryside (so-called for the dark, slender river that flows through it) towards the village of Doneraile. Three miles or so north of the village, I'd learned, was the ruin of Spenser's Kilcoman Castle, burned by Irish insurgents in 1598. Supposedly just the tower was left, unmarked but for the laurel sprouting from it, a distant reminder of the three thousand acres which Spenser had been granted by the crown and had lived on for twenty-six years. He'd been Sheriff of Cork for a while, and had written most of *The Fairie Queen* there, and all of *Colin Clout's Come Home*

Againe, changing the place names as he went, making out of imagined words his own, fantastic Ireland.

History, of course, never quite accomodates fantasy; it's too barbed and interesting for that. It was the trees and the land and his life in Ireland that Spenser loved, but not "the wylde Irishe":

Tho, backe returning to my sheepe again,
I from thenceforth have learne'd to love more deare
This lowly quiet life which I inherit here.

Perhaps it's the word *inherit* that stands out: there came a time (a time that would come again and again over the rest of this millenium) when the "native" Irish would have no more of it: they burned out the English poet and sent him packing. Undoubtedly, it was not all personal; there was already a history before Spenser ever arrived. The Elizabethans had confiscated the lands of the Irish chieftains and chased them into the forests; and when they couldn't find them in the forests, they began to cut down the trees, which were sacred to the Irish (in olden times, each species of tree represented a different letter of the Irish alphabet). The effects of this were various and lasting, among them the Ireland we know of visible fields and plains and gentle, naked hills; and, more particularly, a burned tower standing desolate beside a marsh.

We saw Spenser's tower from a distance, from a rise of a farmer's rutted dirt road onto which we had turned on an impulse -- suddenly there it was, gray spotted with green, truncated and bereft: all that was left. Around it were farms, a marsh; later, we were told that some of Spenser's land is now a wildfowl refuge. But any further observations about the great poet's tower will have to be taken on faith -- we never did get any closer to it. Somehow, every road we found seemed to lead away from it. After a while, it began to feel more like Narnia than Ireland. Though I suppose it just goes to show one: we live in a world of metaphor. We stared long and hard at the ruin from perhaps half a mile away. And then we got back in our car and drove through Doneraile towards the tiny town of Kildorrery, turning our thoughts to Elizabeth Bowen.

Like Spenser, the Bowen family arrived in Ireland in the 16th Century and settled on confiscated lands. Eventually, Bowen's Court was built, a property of its time and place, with a tennis court, croquet lawns, stabling yards, workmen's houses, rookeries, lawns, and a landscaped park densely planted with trees. Although born in Dublin in 1899, the writer spent much of her childhood in the family's country home, and lived long enough to see it sold for financial reasons and eventually, in 1960, demolished altogether. Hardly anything is there at all now; what's left of the limestone walls of the yard and gardens are used to keep some farmer's cattle from straying. But if you stop for a visit at Farrahy Church nearby, as we did, you will find the modest graves of Bowen and her husband Alan Cameron. Standing before them in the late afternoon, the years she spent as an adult in England seem like accident or afterthought; she seems Irish to the core. And one remembers not just *Bowen's Court*, but how some of the best stories she ever wrote are Irish stories -- "Her Table Spread," "The Happy Autumn Fields," "A Day in The Dark," and my favorite, "Summer Night."

We drove back to Longueville House by the small roads. It had been a clear day in November and now it was almost dark; rarely in my life have I witnessed a more beautiful or penetrating sunset. Heading west, we were heading straight into it. And I recalled the opening line of "Summer Night": "As the sun set its light slowly melted the landscape, till everything was made of fire and glass." And, in the next paragraph, the thrillingly plain, declarative, "The road was in Ireland." Simple as that. Among the houses we passed, embered by sunset, some were ruins. "Mere shattered walls, and doors with useless latch/ And firesides buried under fallen thatch" the poet William Allingham (1824-89) once wrote. And then I thought about John Millington Synge (1871-1909), who in his brief life traveled throughout the countryside and wrote the following: "At such moments one regrets every hour that one has lived outside Ireland and every night that one has passed in cities. Twilight and autumn are both full of the suggestion that we connect with death and the

ending of earthly vigour, and perhaps in a country like Ireland this moment has an emphasis that is not known elsewhere."

As Molly Bloom said, Yes.

Despite what we'd seen, it was difficult the next morning to believe that the Anglo-Irish were not still in power, that Spenser's castle had ever been burned: to stay in one of the old Heritage houses that have been transformed into hotels or guest houses is to step back in time, to find oneself on the set of a very specific sort of play: we sat in the elegant dining room eating our "Full Irish Breakfast" (your doctor doesn't want to know) and looking out through the high windows to the long, sloping pastures of the old estate, the tall oaks, the silent sheep. The sun was shining again.

But another Ireland awaited us -- what William Trevor, in his 1984 book *A Writer's Ireland*, calls "the native, underground voice." After breakfast, we packed up our things and drove west, following the Blackwater for a few miles, before turning south through the small town of Millstreet and then east again, cutting between the low mountains, to stop in the three-house village of Carrigannima. It was here that in 1773 an Irish colonel in the Austrian army named Arthur O'Leary was murdered for refusing to sell his mare to a Protestant for five pounds (by law the maximum value of any horse belonging to a Catholic), thus inspiring his widow to write a searing lament that today stands as one of the finest poems ever written in the Irish language. In *The Lament for Art O'Leary*, Eileen O'Leary (great-aunt of the Catholic hero Daniel O'Connell) gives voice and form and name to her love for her slain husband, from first infatuation to final, keening grief. She tells of their families -- Gaelic nobles -- and where they came from. She tells of their meeting "Beside the market-house" (in Macroom). And she vividly describes the moment she discovered his body:

I never lingered
Till I found you lying
By a little furze-bush
Without pope or bishop

Or priest of cleric
 One prayer to whisper
 But an old, old woman
 And her cloak about you,
 And your blood in torrents --
 Art O'Leary
 I did not wipe it off,
 I drank it from my palms.

She goes on to give full expression to her loss:

My love and my secret,
 Your corn is stacked,
 Your cows are milking;
 On me is a grief
 There's no cure for in Munster.
 Till Art O'Leary rise
 This grief will never yield
 That's bruising all my heart
 Yet shut up fast in it,
 As 'twere in a locked trunk
 With the key gone astray,
 And rust grown on the wards.

Aided by the directions of Thomas Cahill (now of bestseller fame, with such books as *How The Irish Saved Civilization* to his credit) and his wife Susan, in their 1973 book, *A Literary Guide to Island*, we found, in Carrigannima, the inn where O'Leary had last been seen on the night he was killed. A low terracotta-colored building, with signs on its facade for Crowleys Bar and for Guinness. Just down the road from it is the nondescript Walsh's pub, across from which we found the start of a footpath, leading to the south. Walking along it, we came after fifty yards or so to an iron cattle gate beside a ruined stone house. Not far past the gate, we came upon the narrow river, brilliant in sunlight. We came to a stone footbridge, a ruin now, unpassable. From Cahill we knew that

the grass-covered path just to the other side of the bridge, running along the river, had been a coach road in the 18th century. And there, third to the left, was the "furze-bush" where Eileen O'Leary had found her husband. Near it, today, a single cow stood, placidly grazing. She turned and regarded us, her body otherwise still. For a long time we stared back at her. It felt oddly like a painting, a moment frozen in time.

It was Eileen O'Leary who wrote her husband's epitaph:

LO ARTHUR LEARY
 GENEROUS HANDSOME BRAVE
 SLAIN IN HIS BLOOM
 LIES IN THIS HUMBLE GRAVE

We found it in the back right corner of the nave of Kilcrea Friary (c. 1465), which stands, more or less, in the middle of nowhere, about three miles west of the town of Ovens on the N22, and about a half mile to the south. The friary is a ruin, its roof long gone. We had it to ourselves. (In late November, it often felt, we had all of Ireland to ourselves). Around Art O'Leary were buried four centuries of the dead; flowers had recently been laid at the headstone of one of the graves. It was quiet enough to hear the old silence. This was one of our favorite places in Ireland.

The Irish seem to have a talent for pitch-perfect epitaphs. Perhaps because, in this overwhelmingly Catholic country, the words on a gravestone are meant as inspiration not just for the living but for the departed: food for thought on the next journey. At any rate, I know I wish Frank O'Connor could write my epitaph, the way he wrote *The Tailor's*. The Tailor (1860-1945; his real name was Timothy Buckley) was a legendary storyteller, a bawdy Irish Homer, who lived with his wife Antsy in a cottage in desolate, mountainous Gougane Barra in the Thirties and Forties, at the source of the River Lee, very near to where St. Finbarr had lived in a stone hermitage in the 6th Century (it was from there that St. Finbarr followed the river east to found the monastery that became Cork City -- eventual birthplace, as it turned out, of Frank O'Connor). Buckley's stories were collected by Eric Cross in the wonderful book, *The Tailor*

and Antsy, which the De Valera government saw fit to ban for its "sexuality" in 1943. But governments have never been very astute readers. In the old days countless writers, O'Connor among them, paid literary pilgrimage to The Tailor's remote cottage for evenings of story and drink. And it was O'Connor himself who wrote the words carved on the otherwise unremarkable headstone of Timothy Buckley's grave:

A STAR DANCED AND
UNDER THAT WAS I BORN

Gougane Barra is a magical place, savage yet serene: fearsome with outcroppings of rock, coppered at that time of year with heather and bracken, and greened with the pointed pine trees of some other landscape. Two swans and several small clusters of goats were our only companions on our afternoon there. It had rained hard earlier in the day, and a mist was lifting from the lake that sits in a shallow bowl made by the mountains; the feeling was of an intimate wilderness. On a tiny island connected by a causeway stands the ruined stone cells of St. Finbarr's hermitage. Close by the shore of the lake, across the road and up a few steps, nearly hidden by trees, is the small cemetery where The Tailor and Antsy are buried. And a very Irish place it is, as we came to know it: no pomp or circumstance, just the perfect words.

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