





## CATHEDRALS FOR THE DEAD—1990

### **PROLOGUE**

For 20 days in the summer of 1990, we traveled in Ireland, England, and a few other Continental locales. Truth be told, I've been to the other regions of civilization before but never to Ireland, which is where I would have been happy to spend the entire time.

There were many factors that led the family to the vacation leap across the pond, some personal, some professional, some financial and some dumb luck. For years I'd had this quasi-guilty feeling that my children's summers had not been up to speed. They'd been pleased with the situation as it was, with a swimming pool in the back yard, a week or two at either U.Va or Va Tech for sports camp, and a drive to family elsewhere—Florida, New York, New England or Tennessee. But I felt I'd let them down, is all. No beach houses, camps and sailing and swimming lessons, as I'd had.

The time left for family outings was running out. Lee was 16, Micah 14. They'd taken enough schooling for Europe to be meaningful. They were old enough to appreciate it, and fun to be with. Sun Oak and I enjoy their company. But they'll get out the house sooner than I like to think, on their own doing what they want to do as older teenagers and college students and how many opportunities remain for the family to travel together? We had some spendolas stashed. We didn't want that porch on the side of the house that much in comparison with the trip, so we tossed the money at a travel agent and didn't even look.

For Sun Oak the trip was just the thing: She had been recovering slowly from a long stretch of allergy and respiratory problems and was finally on a diet and medical regime that was making sense, and she was feeling stronger. It was time to take a vacation and get away from household duties. As for me, the trip had a symmetry all its own.

I learned in June that my latest six-year assignment with the company's U.S. group was at an end. After nearly five years with the company, and assignments in Chicago and New York, I had been transferred to the compa-

ny's U.S. headquarters in Fairfax to lead the downstream domestic public relations group. Now as this assignment concluded, in September 1990, I'd leave behind the issues of U.S. marketing and refining and begin life as an international busybody looking after Mobil's public affairs interests in such places as Indonesia, Nigeria, Norway, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the U.K., and perhaps even more exotic climes as yet unknown.

L.A.'s air quality, refining technology, the politics in state legislatures and their taxing and confiscation habits, refineries' relations with their neighborhoods, rewards for the capture of service station stick up men and such—all of which had occupied my professional duties for a decade—were soon to be in someone else's poke, not mine.

Besides, the relocation of the company's headquarters from New York City to Fairfax a year earlier meant my boss had moved as well; ever since he and I had been like two squirrels in one cage, neither comfortable with the other on his turf. We'd kept patience and tried not to make it personal, but he resented my autonomy in Fairfax and I resented his horning in on my turf. We were both relieved when the cage door opened to make good my escape to another, better perch in the corporation. Ever since word of my move, I'd been winding down my U.S. duties and watching his name be placed on meeting call lists where my name should be; I held my counsel, letting the system work its way. So the vacation arrived at just the time to capstone my time in U.S. operations.

Then there was my personal questing of recent years into things ancestral, historic and genetic in that part of consciousness where you wind up looking mostly at shadows through the vapors. For help in this quest, Ireland and the U.K. were places I just had to see.

I had gotten past much of my old sense of loss and envy in recent years. It had taken a bit of doing. I'd patched up relations with my father some years before his death in 1988. My research into my family history and common sense persuaded me that I could avoid his fate if I stopped drinking myself in 1982. With his help and that of my other relatives, I had channeled much of my writing energy into researching family history. Perhaps I could find the origins of the rupture in my family, I had wondered, if I understood more about their backgrounds. That's what got me started, probably, but in no time the joy of the hunt had provided me with all the motivation I needed.

Come Halloween, Dad would be dead two years. My time in Yankee-occupied Northern Virginia was nearing six years and the very familiar touchstones of New England, New York, and the Midwest were becoming ever more distant memories. My children were nearly grown and the most creative seeds of my life had been sown, mostly; what remained was to prune, shape and help the fruit to flower on the tree.

In preparation, I'd read through all the travel books and made itineraries. I made the kids an outline of things they were going to see and why it was important. I listed the names of our ancestors from Ireland and England. They were good enough not to toss it all out and humored their Dad, who clearly was overreacting to this whole affair. As for them, their main concern at that time was that they were going to be strapped in a seat in a heavier than air machine suspended above the ocean for about five hours and if anything went wrong it would be trouble beyond their imagination's worst thoughts which cropped up in the late evenings from time to time in the weeks just before we left. No amount of modern rationalist discussion of aerodynamics and physics would do. Their first flight over the ocean simply had to be over, which it was soon enough.

### **I. IRELAND—ORIGINS**

Our British Air flight to Heathrow landed at 8:30 a.m. London time on a hot July morning. After a pass through more guards, checkpoints, metal detectors and dogs than I thought possible in peacetime, we got to a bus filled with people with white faces, red cheeks, and auburn tinges in the hair wearing somewhat tweedy conservative clothing and were ferried to a waiting BA 767 fueled to fly to Dublin.

When we got off the plane in London, the British Air folks as a gift had given us a cake, the three layer kind with frosting and an inscription saying Happy Holiday, as if we were going to a party. (We turned out to be pretty good customers, it seems.) Since we were famished, we ate the cake as we waited for bags to get off carousels and the like. Though it was sticky and a burden to carry around Heathrow and Dublin airports, I liked the impracticality of the gesture, as well as the nourishment. When we touched down in Ireland, it was overcast and cool. I had been up for nearly 20 hours and it was about 10 a.m. my time and I hadn't had a wink of sleep. By the time we were in Dublin airport, all of us were on a version of automatic pilot, getting our vouchers from the CIE Tour folks, and a Leland Rover from Hertz. Our first decision was to avoid a long drive. We chose to spend our first night at the Boyne Valley Hotel in Drogheda ("drow-HEE-dah" to Americans, "DRAW-dah" to Irish). The historical allusions and its proximity to the Hills of Tara and Battle of the Boyne were too hard a pull to avoid. Besides, it was only a 45-minute drive north.

As I pulled into mid-afternoon traffic on the N-1 leading to Belfast, I realized it was all happening RIGHT NOW THIS VERY MINUTE; ALL PLANNING IS OVER; THIS IS WHAT THE TRIP IS NOW JUST AS IT IS HAPPENING. We were in a dingy cast off and not expected to return for a week. It was all up to us now, in this car...driving on the WRONG SIDE OF THE STREET AT 60 MPH AND PEOPLE ARE GOING BY ON

THE LEFT—BY ME AND AT ME. This was too much. Up ahead was a “turn around.” I’ve got to stay on the right, no, the left, holy smoke...I’m going counter clockwise around this circle and why is that guy coming right at me from the right....

It was unnerving. I never got over it, not after seven days and 820 miles around the island; a sense of imbalance stayed with me throughout. It was like driving backwards in a rear view mirror, all the time.

But everything in the country was off just so. To the eye, the countryside was even more beautiful than the most sentimental postcard. There really are 40 shades of green in Ireland. It was breathtaking. And the people looked so much like folks in the States, the blondes, black, brown, red and auburn heads. The skin and complexion were familiar in a Boston or Queens neighborhood. The language was familiar and the words communicated fine, but it was just ever so different. The people at the hotels, the grocery clerks, pedestrians we asked directions of, gas station folks, curators at antiquities and public buildings, and even the customers we ran into in line at checkout counters were so, well, sweet. After a few days this sweetness, the niceness of it, became so pronounced that I began to fear for them. They were too nice to live. They were like some beloved but pixilated relations who dithered along the paths of life without a care, taking absolutely no heed of the snakes hanging from the trees and sniffing around their ears.

Call it innocence or charm. If in Queens, where my darker suspicions were often rewarded by the discovery of truth, I’d call it cunning. In my Queens self, I wondered if there was some secret orientation, given to every Irish person in elementary school, which says:

*Hey, here’s the scam. You’re going to have all these dopey Americans roaming around our countryside for the rest of your life spending big bucks. They’ve got their head filled with romantic slop about their leprechauns, and fairies, and their Irish home, and how bad the famine was, and how smart the Druids were, and how their mother’s hearts were broken, and how devout our faith is, and weren’t those British folks awful and all that. See, we like them to think that. We want them to think this place is just like their dreams. So help them along. Make it complete by being so nice they will be stunned into silence. We want them to believe that we really do care if they are happy with our country, whether they are having a good time, whether there is anything we can do to make their visit more pleasant. And use those words too. We want you to bend over backwards so they leave their money behind and take off and have this wonderful experience and they will tell all their friends they can’t believe Ireland is so nice.*

I have learned of course that my Queens self can be wrong; emotions and personalities are never so easily orchestrated. Besides, simply everybody was this

way: absolutely, unashamedly and beautifully charming. As Irish driving was to my sense of integrity as a driver, so too was Irish social intercourse to my sense of survival. How can these people be so nice and live? It bothered me.

At night, as I floated toward my dreams, I'd hold conversations with the Irish people I'd met earlier that day: Don't you know how dangerous the world is and how you've got to fight for everything you get in life. There is a struggle to be waged every hour of every day to stay ahead of the pack and not sink back into the brine of poverty and ignorance. The world is starving and can't wait to get its hands on your poke. You've got to be wary, got to be ready, you have to be cunning and not let anybody get the better of you or else the wind'll blow you like dust...

This was the Irish American talking. The Irish in Ireland are different. After all, they didn't leave, did they? They aren't in Canada, the U.S., the U.K., New Zealand or Australia or in other more remote parts of the planet that always seems to have more than its share of Irish nurses, doctors, social workers and priests. Why is that? They stayed behind to make it work in what is still an unrelievedly rural country. This is no weekend garden. This is a farm. The national highways are, with only a few exceptions around Dublin, the airports, and the port at Cork, on a standard with rural secondary roads in the States. The N-1 to Belfast from Dublin is a two-lane roadway with wide shoulders. Cattle have dominance. In County Clare, we turned a corner north of Lahinch on the way to the Cliffs of Moher and nearly ran into a bull. It was walking down the road and it was supposed to be there too. Earlier we just avoided sheep crossing a road in Kerry. Animals matter in this country, they are given respect on the landscape.

The behavior on the roads illustrates. In the States it's clear right off that everybody on a road has his place. There are clearly marked lanes, passing is highly regulated and cutting somebody off is an act of aggression that everybody understands leads to high blood pressure, aggravation and, in L.A., sometimes gunfire. In Ireland, this is not the case. Ireland is a family picnic where everybody knows everybody is related to somebody close by. Under these circumstances everybody cuts everybody a lot of slack; you watch out for each other like you do a second cousin, of whom you occasionally are called upon to forgive a lot. It is an understood thing and tells of a shared trust foreign to the traveler. As such, on Irish roads, if you must pass somebody you do so comfortable in the knowledge that if you happen to wind up aiming at a driver in the oncoming lane a couple of things will happen: first, the person you are passing will ease over into the shoulder lane, giving you more room, and second, the person you are aiming at, at 60 mph, will ease into his shoulder lane too. To the Irish this presents no problem. In this way, the road accommodates all three cars going past each other at 120 mph, and nobody gets high blood pressure, sweaty palms, or is forced to have

nightmares, like the Americans who try to navigate this sea.

Tourism is Ireland's biggest machine. This is no secret; we've seen the leavings of this industry the world over. In the States it falls to the shamrock, leprechaun, St. Paddy's Day variety, which all support a mythology about the Emerald Isle. In Ireland it also deals with family history businesses, family crests, maps of family names, and, in the case of Americans, posters showing famous Americans who have Irish roots. It accommodates hordes of foreigners roaming the countryside all the time. Thousands of homes throughout the island are organized and certified as a "Bed & Breakfast," or B&B, which are but independent profit centers in Ireland's national industry. The employees are Mr. and/or Mrs. Charming Irishperson and their product is a separate room or two on the premises for travelers and a series of large tables where these travelers can enjoy breakfast and the completely winning personalities of their hosts. The B&B's are tourism factories. They are organized into an association, and have a computerized voucher system that enables everything to be done electronically. You can reserve a B&B down the road each morning as you plan your trip across the island. The same is true of all the hotels on the island, only the breakfast is a few pounds extra. If you want VIP castle hotels it will cost you just a few more pounds, but the voucher system is the same. The Republic's Irish Tourist Board set this system in place, and watching it work was a wonder. Respect the system but marvel still at the people. Disney Inc. would improve if were as effective and efficient and responsive as the Irish and the Irish Tourist Board.

Our first morning, we left Drogheda for the River Boyne where we found the battle area. There the Dutchman, William of Orange, settled James' hash and determined that Protestant England would be a stick in Ireland's Catholic eye for centuries.

The Battle of the Boyne was fought July 1, 1690. James, a Catholic, was a son of Charles II and a brother to Mary, William's wife. William and Mary, being Protestants, had been asked by England's noblemen to take the throne of England to replace the Catholic James. This conflict of in-laws was such an important battle in Anglo-Irish history it is hard to consider how the world these 300 years later might be different without it, or if James had won. But it wasn't to be. James had landed well to the south at Kinsale (which we later visited) and gathered his 26,000 hired killers, idealists and hangers-on in hopes of regaining the English throne. William had 36,000 killers of his own and triumphed that day on the piece of terrain that today is a sleepy country crossroads and as silent and warm a spot as a deserted Caribbean island at noon. James survived the moment to flee to Dublin, then south to Kinsale and later to France, where he died in 1701, his Jacobite dream lost.

The four of us, descendants of that day, surveyed this country crossroads in silence. Flying insects and songbirds made the only sounds to disturb the place.

We then made our way to an even more ancient site nearby, the Newgrange passage grave in County Meath, which was constructed by Druids and their Stone Age adherents about 3000 BC. It is one of the planet's oldest pagan antiquities and a marvel of construction, engineering, and astrological precision. Experts of such things say it one of the finest examples of so-called Breton passage graves. Long just a large grass-covered mound, the tomb was unearthed in 1963. For nearly 5,000 years myths about fairies, evil spirits and dark consequences kept the local inhabitants from disturbing the area. The circular mound is some 40 feet high, and around its base are huge slabs of granite placed end to end. One massive entry stone has elaborate carvings on its face, swirling circular ridges that give the effect of wind, clouds or river rapids. The mound occupies about two football fields in area. The outside wall is a mix of white quartz stones and round granite boulders. They didn't have mortar in those days so the original wall has fallen down; and the stones were left undisturbed in a buried state for millennia. The wall was reconstructed using a computer to help show which stones went where. Surrounding the mound in a circle every 50 feet or so are rectangular stones about 10 feet high. All stones were quarried dozens of miles away and rolled there by hand. It is the work of ages by hundreds of pagans devoted to the hereafter.

Which brings me to the people. Our first "official" Irish person was the lady who was to take our 1.50 Irish pounds a head for the entry fee to Newgrange. She was the first person we had encountered after the hotel, where I didn't have the presence of mind to get Irish money in exchange for my Visa traveler's checks.

"I feel like an idiot," I said right off, holding up the Visa check, "but can I write you one of these for the fee?"

She was in her mid-40's bright faced and slender with dark brown hair. She leaned over and took a gander at the fancy printing on my Visa check. "Oh, my. That is in American dollars, is it?"

I said yes.

"Oh, well, then. Just go on about you. I have no way to change that. I don't even know what it's worth."

"But I owe you some money."

"Oh, so you do. No matter. Just don't tell the others up ahead."

"Are you sure?"

"What would you have me do? Turn you away? Tell you you can't come in after you've come so far? Off with you. You'll owe the money to the Irish government is all. But mind you don't let the others know."

I walked up to the antiquity floating on air over this welcome. How do you respond to such a gesture? Anywhere else, I'd have expected the lady to be in her rights to tell us to cop a mope.

After an initial survey of the area, a younger woman approached dressed in a very casual fatigue-style jacket, with flannel pants tucked into her wool

socks and wearing heavy leather boots. She called all the 20 or so visitors over for the official guided explanation of the mound.

Her voice had a strong theatrical style, spoken from the diaphragm. We at once got used to the singing quality of the accent together with some peculiar pronunciations, such as the hard T for the “th” in words. Thing is ting; cathedral, for example, is cah-TEE-drull. And it was a burial cathedral that she described, together with a physical description and various theories of what it all meant. Of course, there is no written record, she admitted, so this is moderns trying to interpret the sounds of ghosts.

Besides its size and the engineering marvel of moving and fashioning such massive stones to construct the monument, the central wonder of the mound was a passage chamber, which was constructed in the center of the mound. A narrow passageway about 20 yards long rose at an incline as it proceeded into the mound itself. At the center it opened into a small sanctuary about 20 feet high with stone alters in the sides. There the cremated remains of the dead were treated in a ceremony of honor of the chief of all gods, the Dragda Mor.

Unusual, however, was the passage chamber’s astrological precision. Above the entry to the chamber on the outside was a stone “light box” though which sunlight could pass. The light box was built in such a position, and the passageway at such an angle, that on December 21, the winter solstice, the year’s darkest day, the sun is perfectly aligned to penetrate directly into the heart of the inner chamber at 9:30 a.m., illuminating it with maximum sunlight for about 10 minutes. Our guide turned the lights off with us in the inner chamber and showed how the light would have worked at that moment. It was a dramatic and moving moment in a room built by Druids to explain the unknowable.

A question she asked fixed the moment: “Can you imagine, now, if you might, what kind of people is it who would choose for themselves to live in hovels but would build such a cah-TEE-drull for their dead.”

The four of us never got over that visit; or the guide’s question. It set the tone for our entire stay in Ireland and beyond, in London and Italy. It turned out that in each of the places we visited we marveled at how people honor their dead, be they Druids, Anglicans or Romans. That was my goal during this visit after all; after Newgrange we began aiming at the towns of my ancestors to find, explore or create the cathedrals for the dead.



Our next destination was Clonmel, in County Tipperary, a drive to the south, which we did all day long, stopping here and there in towns to eat, get gas, or stretch legs and browse. Clonmel, on the northern banks of the River Suir north of Waterford, is the birthplace of my great-grandmother, Catherine Sheedy, the mother of my grandmother, Alice O’Connell.

Catherine had followed her brother Michael, the stonemason, to America, sailing with Michael's bride to New York in 1863. Michael had come the previous year to establish himself. He had found work in Connecticut where a large stone hospital was under construction. He moved to Hartford where he later became a homebuilder and contractor. Michael's bride and sister moved in. After a spell in Hartford, Catherine moved to Middletown, Ohio, to work in the home of a family of means. One might be tempted to think Catherine became a domestic or maid. She considered herself a dress-maker. No one who knew her would ever consider contradicting her on such a matter.

Months after I returned home, I learned more about Catherine and her family in Clonmel. A cousin forwarded two letters found in a family trunk that had been written by Catherine's father, John Sheedy, in 1871 and 1874. It turned out that my great-great-grandparents, John and Ellen Sheedy, lived at 5 Peter Street, Clonmel, and had written to Catherine, brother Michael and their other children in America. Based on the letters, it was clear that John and Ellen Sheedy missed their children and didn't have much to comfort them in Ireland. Excerpts from John Sheedy's letters follow:

*May the great and Almighty God grant ye a long and happy life in this world and a happy death hereafter; this is our prayer night and day for ye...we received your kind and loving letter with your fine and grand picture and I am happy to tell you that every one that see it admired it you may be sure your poor old mother showed it many with tears in her eyes...*

*I was in hospital ten days up to that time and twice since but with the help of God to go there no more would sooner die in a ditch than go there again. I hope to hear from ye before I die to make it short we have no friends on this earth but our blessed Lord and his Blessed Mother and ye three may Almighty God spare ye to us...*

*Your poor mother is holding her old grip still she says if I died she would face the sea live or die sink or swim to see ye all once more...*

*Your mother wonders much that you would forget her in so short a time but often says that is our own fault but if we are in the fault you must forgive us for we have many bills to meet with here in Clonmel which you often see before now but God was kind and good to ye and brought you to the land of promises and he left us old sinners to die with the druids...*

*God's will be done now dear girls we close with ye for the present may the Blessing of God and our ten thousand blessings and your hearts love be with ours forever and the blessing of the Holy Mother of God be with ye now and forever amen dear girls we close for the present adue; we remain your affectionate Father and Mother John and Ellen Sheedy, Peter Street No. 5, adue.*

Catherine lived in Middletown, Ohio, for years before her marriage in 1880 to Thomas Francis O'Connell, a widower with two nearly grown children who, after the marriage, moved out for good. One, a daughter, Ellen, became the housekeeper for the parish priest, and the son, Thomas F. Jr., moved to Brooklyn where he joined the Navy.

Catherine Sheedy and Thomas O'Connell had three daughters, Edith, Alice and Frances. Thomas couldn't read or write. He worked with his hands, arms and back. Little is known about the origins of Thomas O'Connell, though family tradition holds he was born in Galway, went to America as a boy and wound up working in the Irish labor gangs that built the Ohio Canal from Cleveland to Portsmouth. It was in Portsmouth, the canal port on the Ohio River, that his name first occurs in American records and later in Middletown, where steel mills were attracting investors and workers.

Because of these modest origins, in the O'Connell family it was up to Catherine to maintain standards, which she did with a firm hand insisting the girls have piano lessons, learn their lessons and a trade, which was dressmaking. During the Depression of 1893 the family moved to Hartford where Thomas accepted a job from his brother-in-law, Michael, who was prospering despite the trouble. The O'Connells eventually purchased a brick three-family home on Jefferson Street, which was constructed by Michael Sheedy's organization and which was paid for by the money earned by Thomas and carefully saved by Catherine, who, as with all things in her home, managed the accounts. The girls finished high school and became dressmakers. One married a man who would years later take a job from my father in a ball bearing plant. Another married a politician named William Rankin, a Democratic Party operative, who served as mayor of Hartford in 1931-33. Alice, my grandmother, married James Michael Collins, the railroad master mechanic.

Leading to Clonmel, the terrain was flat farmland and only became picture book Ireland as we approached and passed through the mountains into Tipperary, when pines and forest began to blanket the landscape and heavy white clouds bumped against the tops of the hills. On the outskirts of town were orchards. Clonmel takes its name from the Irish Cluain Meala, meaning honey meadow. Entering Clonmel we passed through a rainstorm. Our tires sang on the roadway as we entered the town's afternoon traffic.

Clonmel has a population of about 11,000 and is the commercial center of Tipperary. But it is a medieval town in the 20th century. Between one-way streets and the general confusion, I was lost. We turned around on one street and I saw a middle-aged housewife walking to the supermarket on the corner. I rolled the car window all the way down.

"Excuse me, could you tell me where the Clonmel Arms Hotel is?"

She looked over at me and for a moment looked at though I had startled

her or woken her from a dream. Then, a flash of recognition, and she came across the street to the car window.

“Oh, yes, the Clonmel Arms...” She was now holding her hand to her chin and then touching my elbow for emphasis as she explained “...you have to get to the light, there. Yes. And to the right. Yes. And you go down four blocks it is...and take a left...and all the way to the key it is. Yes, that’s it...all the way to the key, that the important thing...it’s all so confusing isn’t it because of the streets, they are one way and the traffic is so bad...”

When she said “key” I figured she meant some kind of key-shaped intersection near the walled gate, which we had seen along the town’s modest skyline. She repeated the directions three times, each time using slightly different language, and each time with a little more assurance. By the end of her explanation, she had displayed such neighborly concern and interest in our safe journey, she was wishing us well and patting my arm in affection and waving good-bye. We were completely charmed. The problem was that I didn’t understand a thing she said. And, it turned out, the central point of her explanation—the key—I didn’t get at all.

A couple of more requests for directions finally got us to the Clonmel Arms, which was right in town, a village really, on a one-way street just a block from the key—the River Suir. It turned out “key” meant river. Perhaps the woman was saying “quay,” which is sometimes pronounced “key” and means “wharf”—not a word you hear every day in the States. The hotel was quite genteel, somewhat old fashioned with a heavy wood decor. It had a lace-curtain quality to it, and the matron and master of the premises, who were behind the reception desk, were keeping up standards, even if their clothing and grooming were just a touch frayed at the edges. A well-dressed, somewhat prim woman greeted us with a sincere smile and eyebrows arched in anticipation.

“The Collins is it?”

I was excited enough with this greeting that I had to keep from telling her that we were likely cousins, and Catherine Sheedy, my grandmother’s mother, was from here and going on like some ninny from the States. But that’s the way I felt: at home.

After settling in we explored the town. This wasn’t tourist Ireland. It could be like any town in upstate New York or Pennsylvania that had generations of poverty and prosperity overlaid on top of the people. Parts of Clonmel contained the remains of the medieval walled city, while other parts were as up to date as electronic bank teller machines on the sidewalk. For dinner we chose the Emperor’s Restaurant, a Chinese joint that had immigrants on work visas from Singapore and Hong Kong as employees. We had a nice walk in the cool evening air before a light rain forced us indoors.

Before bed, we watched Irish TV, which was a mix of U.S., U.K. and Irish

sitcoms, drama and news programming. There was SkyNews, a type of CNN Headline news of Europe, and we were fully informed about the affairs of the day in western civilization. I scanned the phone book and found about two dozen listings for Sheedy, and resolved to contact them later.

On the street below, the sound grew from a disco next door where a wedding party was livening up. Prosperous young adults dressed in casual designer clothing that might be seen in any California beach community arrived to enjoy their Saturday evening. As the night wore on, and long after we went to bed, the volume of the record playing stayed way up. The crowd sang to the music, which would be familiar to any American. In Clonmel, County Tipperary, on the fringe of what moderns call Europe, a gang of party-goers of young Irish adults was singing at the top of their lungs along with New Jersey's Bruce Springsteen: "Born in the USA...I was born in the USA..."



On our drive the next day we aimed below Cork City at Kinsale, a picturesque resort town, which was on the edge of West Cork, my destination. Since my arrival I had read local books, catalogues, assorted papers, maps and the like to learn more facts about the ancestors. One authority fleshed out details about the name Collins, which I knew to be the English version of the Irish name: O'Coileain. One account held the name meant "young dog," and that the O'Coileains were closely related to the O'Donovans and originally from Ui Conaill Gabhra, which is now Connello in County Limerick. In 1178, they were expelled from their land by Normans and fled to West Cork where they settled. In time, the name spread to become common again in Limerick, Cork and across the Shannon River to County Clare where Collins is common in the west of the county.

I had decided to explore West Cork that day and drive north to County Clare next. We drove through a strong thunderstorm all morning and arrived in Kinsale when the storm still had an hour of drenching rain to go. Kinsale turned out to be a lovely natural harbor with an upscale marina that was eager for the trade of French, English, German and Dutch yachtsmen. The harbor was situated with rolling green hills in the background. A brisk breeze blew the entire time we were there. Kinsale had a vibrant tourist trade, of a quality to rival Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard or coastal Maine. The town boasted of its antiquities, which included ruins from the forts constructed by King Charles and King James, who both used the port as a staging area for their respective assault forces. As we made our way through the shops and to the lunch spot we got doused good with rain as well as tourist propaganda targeted at upscale Europeans.

It was here that I found, as I was to learn later in Kilrush and Dublin, that the character of Ireland is not so simple as American notion would have it. As

in Clonmel, where Catherine Sheedy might learn the value of gentility and the necessity for appearances and standards, it was in Kinsale that I learned that the Irish can organize a story to make money too. The Trident Hotel, where we stayed, was modern and wasn't shy about selling its conveniences and enhancing its benefits to boost trade. The harbor berthed yachts with flags from most European countries. In the parking lot were cars with tags from the U.K., the Netherlands and Germany. This was a town with condominiums beginning to sprout on the hill across the bay. A freshly painted harbor vessel was named Free Enterprise.



That afternoon we set out to explore the southernmost point of the Collins name, which the books told us prospered around a town called Dunmanway. This was the turf of the revolutionary Michael Collins, who by July 1921 had led the Irish Republican Army to military stalemate with the British and signed the treaty with Winston Churchill that led to today's Republic of Ireland. For the sin of leaving Ireland's province of Ulster within the U.K., a Civil War resulted during which Michael Collins, the IRA hero, was murdered by the IRA. Such is the symmetry of Irish wars.

To get there we enjoyed wonderful scenery as we drove west along the coast out to Bandon and Inishannon and then along the River Bandon through a terrain that is more beautiful than any Hollywood mythmaker could imagine. As we took the final 10 miles to Dunmanway we came upon a flat terrain whose evenness lulled the three passengers in the car to sleep. Perhaps it was the effect of the jet lag. Maybe the beauty of the huge trees hovering overhead and the shallow river rushing by to the right. But as I drove in silence that stretch of road leading to Dunmanway, I was overcome by the strangest sensation; a knowledge of familiarity is the best description I can muster. It can't be denied or admitted. There is no proof. It just is. It was a pre-linguistic sense that here is a place I am connected to, though how only ghosts can say.

I stopped by a large cemetery. No Collins at all. The only signs of kinfolk in Dunmanway that day bore not the name Collins, but Kearney instead. The last name of my great-grandmother Mary who married James Collins in New York after getting off the emigrant boat with her family and his the year before, could be seen above a modest dining establishment on the main road called Kearney Restaurant.

We retraced our steps the next morning and saw the wonderful vistas of Bandon, Inishannon, driving north to Macroom and Kilarney. Through Tralee and Listowel our destination was a ferry terminal at Tarbert on the Shannon River.

There I got out for a stroll to the riverbank and waited for the return of

the craft that would ferry us to Killimer in County Clare. The river water shimmered under the strong wind. A thought of my father came to mind. I regretted that he had never seen this spot and felt this river air and smelled the aroma of the place. It had been not quite two years since his death that Halloween morning on the 64th anniversary of the death of his mother, Alice O'Connell. When I first understood the perfect balance of these Halloween deaths of mother and son, I was speaking to my sister Tara that October morning about his death. I had gazed out the window of my office in Fairfax and saw a huge black bird perched on a high tree branch 50 yards across the way. As I looked at the bird it turned its head toward me and took flight. It flew straight at me, closer and closer until just feet from the window it flew up, away and disappeared. Now nearly two years later, I walked back to the car and saw Lee and Micah on the green bank throwing bits of bread to a flock of black birds that had just landed at their feet. A chill ran through me. How can you explain such a phenomenon?

From the deck of the ferry, I could see in the distance the telltale sign of modernism. There around the bend stood massive exhaust stacks from a power station. The industrial world jabbed the sky like a fist in the eye, jarring my Shannon River ideal. On the drive to Kilrush we passed the home of these stacks, a coal burning electrical generating station operated by a utility and proudly boasted of by local leaders for its steady contributions to the economic health of the area.

Kilrush looked eager for such dependable investments. Contributions to prosperity, however made, were no sin in Kilrush. Signs pointed out that consumer goods could be had in Kilrush ahead. Small residential subdivisions were under construction on the hills entering town. By American standards, though thriving, Kilrush was such a small place. Hardly on the beaten tourist path, this was a commercial center of middle-class Irish. In town, cars were double-parked, delivery trucks were off-loading goods for stores. People, busy about their lives in this thriving town, crammed the sidewalks. The stores were filled with customers. Carpenters, plumbers and other tradesmen were about the center tending to their business.

Was it ever so?

We drove past an abandoned church, covered with vines and its cemetery overgrown with weeds and scrub. It turned out to be Church of Ireland, the Protestant rulers' church, and wholly untended now. In contrast, on the other side of town, St. Senan's Catholic Church was great granite and marble, a proud structure that was as sturdy and well cared for as any building in town. We drove several blocks down Frances Street to the edge of the Shannon where the receding tide revealed a wharf cursed with mud at low tide. To the east were rows of attached gray houses, with men in heavy work clothes gathered here and there. Lee and Micah took turns taking video, while I turned the

car around and slowly took in this scene out my open window.

“Hi,” I said to one group of men as I maneuvered the car around.

“Good day to you,” one of the men, about 50, said in return.

He and his companions were my ancestors’ home-towners but such things were simply the facts of the matter. What the moment called for was courtesy and friendliness. Nothing more was necessary for me to feel a connection with the village scene.



How did Kilrush enter the lives of the Collinses and their kinsmen, the Kearneys, Gormans, Mangans, Brians and Langans? The area’s early years are known only through the rhythms of myth and legend. They start with St. Senan who, in 540 AD, established a sanctuary and religious community on Inis Cathaigh, or Scatterry Island, a 179-acre island two miles in the Shannon River from what is now Kilrush. In St. Senan’s religious house no women were allowed; and his piety made his sanctuary a religious center in Ireland for centuries. Over time, 11 active churches were constructed on the island, and the ruins of seven of them remain. The most visible feature is a 120-foot round tower with walls four feet thick and a circumference at the base of nearly 53 feet. It is the tallest round tower in Ireland.

Kilrush, a settlement covering several hundred acres, grew on the northern bank across from St. Senan’s in the territory known from ancient times as Corca Baiscinn or West Clare. In Irish Kilrush is Cill Rois, and means Church of the Promontory.

The settlers, both Irish and Norse, fought over the island for generations. From their stronghold at Limerick, Vikings in the first millennium occasionally turned their eyes to the Christian fortifications on that small island.

In 950 AD one group of Norsemen from Limerick seized the island, but lost it 24 years later to another of their tribe. Brian Boru, on his campaign to expel the Vikings and unify Ireland, invaded Scatterry Island in 977 AD and massacred the Norsemen and their chief, Maghnus. The island remained in Irish hands for more than a century, though Boru would soon lose his life in his final but triumphant battle in Clontarf.

After the arrival of Normans under William FitzGilbert de Clare from England in 1169, the Vikings of Limerick tried to reassert their authority over the Island and retook Scatterry in 1176. Three years later, Anglo-Norman knight William Hoel burned and destroyed the Vikings’ works on Scatterry.

The conflict between the Irish, Normans and Vikings caused the dispersion of the clan O’Coillain from Limerick in 1178. Most went to County Cork, others fled down the Shannon River into West Clare. The Normans reorganized ecclesiastical affairs in 1188, and monastic institutions declined in influence. The religious center at Inis Cathaigh faded. By the time of Queen

Elizabeth I, St. Senan's ancient holy island became simply an administrative district of Limerick, having been granted to that city's mayor and citizens by Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, in 1578.

When the Spanish Armada sailed in August 1588, only to be tossed by storms and defeated by the English navy, some surviving ships found their way to the west coast of Ireland. Many wrecked, yet seven lined up in the Shannon Estuary on September 5, 1588, and anchored off Carrigaholt. Spaniards came ashore at Kilrush hoping to trade wine for water. English authorities had told the locals to capture and kill any Spaniards they found. Not wishing to tempt bombardment from the Spanish fleet or the wrath of their English rulers, the villagers simply gave the Spanish some water and urged them to leave. The Spanish left, though the *Annunciada*, a 700-ton vessel, was leaking. The Spanish burned it as they fled.

In 1600, the war waged by the northern clan chiefs O'Neill and O'Donnell to drive the English from Ireland was running out of steam. As this Nine Years War drew to a close, Kilrush entered the history books again, as a staging area in the English war plan to subjugate Munster province. The blockade of rebel forces by the English under Lord Mountjoy and Sir George Carew was working. Having defeated Connacht Province, Carew had his sights on Munster to the south. On July 24, 1600, Carew came to Kilrush with 1,050 infantry and 75 cavalry and used the town as his base of operations. On July 28, Carew crossed the Shannon and landed at Carrigfoyle, beginning his conquest of Munster.

After the end of the war, and the consolidation of English authority over the four provinces, Kilrush was turned over by the Crown to Sir Daniel O'Brian and the Earl of Thomond.

It was during this period that Kilrush fell under the domination of the Vandeleur family, who would transform the town into what it has become today. The Vandeleurs were Dutch, among those who came to Ireland to take part in England's wars against the Irish. By 1630, the Vandeleurs had settled in Sixmilebridge. The Vandeleur estate was damaged in the 1641 rebellion and the following year James Vandeleur asked the Crown to make up his loss. His claim was restored by a grant in Clare under Oliver Cromwell's plantation program. In a census taken in 1658 the Kilrush parish population was 267 with the town itself holding 89. By that time, James Vandeleur's son, Giles, had become High Sheriff of County Clare, and his descendent, the Rev. John Vandeleur, arrived in Kilrush 1688 to rent a home and land from the Earl of Thomond.

Rev. John Vandeleur had come to Kilrush as a Protestant minister. In 1691, Vandeleur, like many of his fellow Dutchmen, fought in the Battle of Aughrim, which was one of the many Williamite victories in the struggle against the Catholic Jacobites. Subsequently the Rev. John Vandeleur, and

later his son, John, and grandson, Crofton, consolidated their holdings either in leaseholds or purchases from the Earl of Thomond and the Crown. By 1749 Crofton Vandeleur controlled Kilrish and much of the surrounding area.

In 1797, Right Hon. John Ormsby Vandeleur succeeded his father Crofton as head of the Vandeleur household and estates. He acquired wealth by helping negotiate a vote in favor of the Act of Union of 1801, which resulted in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. His marriage to Lady Frances, daughter of the Marquess of Drogheda, helped too.

The Vandeleur holdings, however, boomed after the arrival in 1802 of Sir James Paterson, a Scots businessman, who settled in Kilrush and went into the oats trade. Paterson began trading with Shannon River ships, purchasing directly in Kilrush rather than dealing through Limerick. The Napoleonic wars caused farm prices to rise and with them the fortunes of both Paterson's business and Kilrush. By 1805 there were 30 liquor and grocery establishments, shopkeepers and tradesmen of all descriptions in town, including 10 cloth shops. Vandeleur in 1806, with an eye on Paterson's enterprise, decided to develop Kilrush as a port for export, under the direction of the collector of Limerick. In 1808, Hely Dutton in his survey of County Clare, wrote:

*Kilrush is rising fast into some consequence and if capital did not prevent it would export many articles of agricultural produce that are now bought on commission for the Limerick merchants. A good quantify of corn and butter is bought by Mr. Paterson, a very active and intelligent inhabitant, who had been of the utmost benefit to Kilrush and the adjoining counties.*

The oat market had taken off. In 1802, the year Paterson began his oat business, the Kilrush market sold 12,000 barrels of oats; in 1807 it was 26,000 barrels; and in 1812, 34,000 barrels. In 1812 he went into the shipping business and began a ferry service between Kilrush and Limerick and created a holiday travel market for families bound for Kilkee.

By 1831, Kilrish had 712 houses, and establishments making flannels, stocking, sheeting and bandle cloth and other forms of linen. A tannery, soap manufacturing plant, mail factory, rock salt refinery were also in operation, together with the corn, cattle, butter and pig export business. By 1835 wharf traffic, trade and ferry work was so prosperous that two banks were established and the National bank and the Agricultural & Commercial bank both opened branch offices.

Vandeleur expanded downtown and by the mid-century much of his town plan would be finished and look as it does today. But as these improvements were made other problems away from Kilrush were in motion that would undermine everything.

First came disease; in 1832 cholera struck. West Ireland, particularly Clare, was devastated. Charles Lever, a young doctor sent to Clare by the

Dublin Board of Health, came to Kilrush in May 1832. A companion said that when Lever arrived “he found the town sunk in gloom and despondency, owing to the ravages of the fearful disease.” Dr. Lever himself wrote:

*Of the fearful raves in the West, in the wilds of Clare, and that lovely promontory that stretched at the mouth of the Shannon into the Atlantic, I have been the daily witness, and even to recall some of these incidents passingly was an effort of great pain.*

Then other catastrophes struck: the great famine of 1845–47 caused death and misery, not only from starvation but also from the collapse of the economy and the subsequent evictions of the tenant farmers.

In 1841, the Kilrush Workhouse had opened on a six-acre site on the north side of town. It was built to accommodate 800 and the first indigent people moved in in July 1842. After the famine struck, the workhouse was renovated to accommodate another 500. Smaller auxiliaries were set up in buildings nearby and in neighboring villages. With the famine, the economy collapsed; tenant farmers couldn’t pay the rents. Evictions mounted. Between August 1848 and January 1849 more than 7,000 people were evicted in the Kilrush area. In 1849, 150 tenants a week were evicted.

A British MP named Paultette-Scrope, who toured Kilrush and West Clare area that year, said that some 20,000 people were evicted in 1847–49. Workhouse logs note that 3,900 people died during that time, not counting those who died alone in the fields, by the roadside, and in abandoned hovels of the county. Not all of these people were from the Vandeleur estates, but most were. Most were evicted for nonpayment, but some were evicted for “clearances” so that the landlord could use the tenant plots as pasture for cattle. By 1850 the workhouse was looking after more than 5,005 people. Between March and September of that year, 1,014 died.

Rev. S. Godolphin Osborne, a Protestant cleric who inspected the area, laid most of the blame for the misery and starvation rampant in the Kilrush area on the Board of Guardians, which was chaired by Crofton Moore Vandeleur. Osborne found that inmates at the workhouse were malnourished and that the conditions for the evicted were inhumane. Noting the contrast between Ireland and England, where in 1850 preparations were underway for the Great Exhibition of Industry to be housed in the Crystal Palace, in London’s Hyde Park, Osborne wrote:

*When, the other day, I looked on the Crystal Palace, and thought of the Kilrush Workhouse, as I have seen it and now know it to be, I confess I felt as a Christian and the subject of a Christian government, utter disgust.*

Ten years later, Henry Coulter toured Ireland and wrote *The West of Ireland*:

*Existing Conditions 1862.* Demand for land was intense. Farmers were eager to expand and could do so at the expense of the weaker tenants. Coulter found a divided citizenry; a strong farmer class was emerging, and it was as hostile to the small farmers and laborers as the Vandeleurs and other landowners were. In Kilrush itself, wrote Coulter:

*The town is a remarkable instance of the improvement which has taken place in so many country towns throughout Ireland since 1846...the shops in Kilrush have doubled in number and greatly increased in size.*

But the tone of the commercial relations had changed. Before the famine, Coulter said, people paid their loans promptly.

*Now it is almost impossible to obtain money from them except by legal process, and in numerous instances the traders who endorsed their bills to the Banks, have been obliged to meet them to their serious embarrassment...The land for several miles around Kilrush is very poor, having a light surface and a very retentive subsoil; to use the expression in common use among the people it is 'cold, spewy land.' The wetness of the Spring and Summer are therefore peculiarly unfavorable to tillage in this locality; the loss fell almost entirely on the small farmer and the laboring man.*

For the laborers and craftsmen alike, the problems were acute. Wrote Coulter:

*With regard to the large laboring population living in and about the outskirts of the town, the want of employment has reduced them already to a miserable condition, and they are now living on the money raised at the pawn offices, which are the only establishments at present flourishing in Kilrush.*

The small tenant farms were failing, and their livestock and goods sold off. Tradesmen in town suffered. Coulter said the emigration that had drained off the population immediately after the famine had dwindled to a trickle by 1862. However, he predicted that the poor harvests of 1859-61 would cause a new wave of emigrants, "if landlords do not act with judicious forbearance and if some assistance be not given to enable people to struggle through their present difficulties."

This was the predicament of the Collins family in Kilrush in 1863. The shipyard where they had been employed as blacksmiths failed. What of this Collins family? There was Sinon, born in 1812 in Kilrush, a son of James and Catherine (Brian) Collins. Sinon had married Mary Langan, born in 1812, a daughter of James and Mary (Gorman) Langan. Mary, who had at least four children, died at age 47 in March 1859. Sinon remarried a younger woman, named Honora, who gave birth to a daughter in 1862. In the spring of 1863 it was time to move. Economic life in Kilrush was in ruins. In the spring of 1863,

Sinon and his family, which at that time included sons, James, twins Eamon and Andrew, and a daughter, Catherine, made their way to Liverpool, where on April 25, they boarded a 181-foot sloop called *The American Union*.

Sinon and his 21-year-old son, James, my great-grandfather, were berthed in the lower desks as passengers #514 and #520. Though they were blacksmiths, these two Irish Catholic migrants were identified as “labourers.” The ship arrived at Manhattan’s South Street Seaport on May 25. The United States was at war. The Civil War battle of Gettysburg occurred weeks later, followed by the draft riots in New York, which killed hundreds.

According to family tradition, the Collins family made its way as best it could. At St. Andrew’s Catholic Church in Manhattan on July 16, 1864, James Collins married Mary Kearney, 18, the daughter of John and Mary (Mangan) Kearney, Kilrush neighbors who had come to New York with the Collins family. These were my great-grandparents, and in September 1864, the Collinses moved across the Hudson River to Jersey City, where Sinon and James found work as blacksmiths in the Erie Railroad yards. Sinon worked for the Erie until his death October 21, 1886, after a few days’ illness. He was buried at Bergenhill, Jersey City.

Railroads were the economic engine of the age. But in western Pennsylvania a new economic colossus was being assembled. In the years just after the Civil War, John D. Rockefeller, the ambitious owner of an oil refinery in Cleveland, was attempting to manage the wild swings in price that were endemic to the new petroleum industry that was emerging as a result of oil discoveries in western Pennsylvania. Rockefeller reached a transportation agreement with the New York Central and Erie Railroads to ensure that Cleveland refineries weren’t placed at a disadvantage to the refineries in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and New York that were served by the competing Pennsylvania Railroad.

As a result, rail business boomed for the New York Central and Erie, particularly for an Erie affiliate, the Atlantic & Great Western Railroad, which served upstate New York, western Pennsylvania, Ohio and, importantly, had access to Cleveland. As a result of this new economic strength, work ramped up in the Atlantic & Great Western maintenance yards in Meadville, Pennsylvania, north of Pittsburgh.

It happened that while these new opportunities were beginning to emerge in western Pennsylvania, the Erie rail yards in Jersey City became the focus of anti-English Fenian activity. Sinon obliged the agents for the Irish rebels who wandered the work places of the Irish immigrants looking for money.

His son did not. James Collins took his opportunities west. In 1868, he and Mary relocated to Meadville, Pennsylvania, where my grandfather, James Michael Collins, was born in 1871. The Collins link with the railroad contin-

ued. My grandfather grew up to work as a mechanic in the Meadville railroad yards, and in 1897 moved to Hartford, where he began a 37-year career with the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, moving often to posts among the yards on the line, eventually rising to become a master mechanic and supervisor.

It was in Hartford in 1909 that James married Alice O'Connell, who had been born in Middletown, Ohio, in 1882 and moved with her parents, Catherine (Sheedy) and Thomas O'Connell, to Hartford during the depression of 1893-94. Their son, Robert Thomas Collins, my father, was born in Hartford in 1910.



I went upstairs at the Kilrush Town Hall to a cultural center where two fellows told to me about the town and suggested books I might read. I explained about the Collins, Mangan, Gorman, Kearney, and Brian connections and showed them my family chart. The one named Considine said that Collins was a well-known name in Limerick, West Cork and "particularly west of here in West Clare. But nobody from Clare named Collins is here now, except the insurance fellow John Collins, but he is from Kerry; but the others, Gorman, Langan, Mangan, Brian and Kearney, they are all familiar names in the hereabouts." As at Clonmel, hearing this connection was the reward.

Kilrush was unlike much of the Ireland we had seen so far, it turned out. It was a town built for commerce and trade, proud of its coal-fired power plant and its benefits. This was a practical place that dealt with the substance of economic life. There were few poets here likely to spin from mere dreams. Something more substantial was required here.

West Clare, he had said, so off we went to survey the terrain, aiming at the Cliffs of Moher, which we found were cold and ominous in their beauty as their height stood flat against the Atlantic waves. The wind blew continually over the green edges of the cliffs and across the plains of West Clare. The landscape had few trees. There was nothing to break up the steady damp penetrating wind. We fell silent as we drove over this land. The vista was becoming horrible in its starkness. What of the people who would inhabit such a place? What of their dreams? They must have been stark indeed, stripped quite plain. A hardness and practicality would certainly creep into the make-up of such inhabitants, who would quickly see the facts of the matter and find little peace in fantasies.

Was this what drew the first Collins to Kilrush? Sinon and James Collins in Kilrush became blacksmiths, working iron in fire. Like the Druid alchemists of old, they turned the minerals of earth into the hard instruments of power from which new dreams could be made. When the work at home gave out,

they went to America and the railroads. There the younger immigrant's oldest son would also work for a railroad. In time, the oldest son of this railroader would work for an automobile company. Still later the oldest son of the automaker would take his dreams into an oil company, using words to forge a living as a corporate alchemist. In the case of these Collins sons, the winds of West Clare bred dreamers of a most practical sort.



We stayed the night at a modern motel south of Ennis called The Clare Inn Hotel, on the grounds of the Dromoland Castle overlooking the lowlands of the Shannon Estuary. Here was the European Ireland. The hotel was low and the dominant color was green. Inside it could have been Illinois, complete with the conference rooms, which were filled with European business guys and even a crew of mid-level Japanese corporate types smoking the place up. No doubt they were trying to scope out a smooth business entry into the European Common Market through Ireland come the EC-92 reforms. This breakdown of the economic borders was causing trouble. Irish farmers were worried about their subsidies. Ireland and the U.S. were that day negotiating the so-called GATT treaty, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. The farmers didn't like the sound of it. They figured the Irish government was about to reduce trade barriers and expose their beef, pork and grains to competition. Along the road to the hotel were hand-painted signs: "Farmers Say: No GATT Sell Out."

The Clare Inn Hotel was near the Shannon Airport, and part of the domain of the Shannon Regional Development Authority. The SRDA, a subsidiary of the Ireland Development Authority, was a kind of state-sponsored regional Chamber of Commerce, designed to cut red tape and promote the Shannon Airport area. The material published by SRDA was widely distributed around Ireland. An SRDA pamphlet was how I learned about the ferry from Talbert to Killimer. But their stuff was everywhere and in all the magazines. The SRDA seemed a bit aggressive. Its publicity materials and style would be ideal for, say, Orlando.

That evening we drove to a nearby village shopping area and had a pizza. The newspaper headline read: "Outrage In Clare—IDA ends SRDA funds." Ah-ha; thought so. The IDA said the SRDA had gone beyond its charter and was marketing itself at the expense of other regions in the Republic. Nowhere in the article was there a statement that the SRDA was too shrill and designed to attract just the kind of folks now residing in the Clare Inn Hotel, but that's what it was. It was unseemly.

With the ghosts of Clonmel, Cork and Clare in my head, Micah and I put on our baseball gloves and for an hour threw the ball back and forth on the hotel grounds overlooking the green patched valley below. That evening on

Irish television the topic of discussion was the recent murder of British MP Owen Gow by an IRA car bomb in London. Gow has been on the IRA hit list because he opposed the recent Anglo-Irish Treaty that did two things: had the Republic declare itself four-square against IRA terrorism, and allowed the British and Irish governments to consult with each other periodically about the administration of Ulster. All knew this was designed as a tentative first step along the road to some kind of British withdrawal from Northern Ireland in some form someday. Gow opposed the measure as a sell-out and one that wouldn't work to boot because it did not comprehend the Ulster Protestants' fears adequately. For his injection into the debate the IRA killed him.

A British politician who had once served as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the Thatcher Government gave a moving discussion of this tangle on Irish TV. I didn't get his name. But, at one point, he explained that relations between the Dublin and London governments were, in fact, quite good indeed. "Our problem in London is that we don't understand how seriously the words we say there look in Dublin." He added: "Oddly, we get on so well. We have a shared culture, shared language, history and so on. The only trouble, of course, is that much of what we know of our history tells us we should hate each other." As evenly as that, the truth was told about friends and kinsmen who struggle not to be enemies.



The next day, we drove to Dublin, moving across the island at a leisurely pace, passing through Limerick, Nenagh, Borrisokane, Ballingary, and Kildare like it was the most natural thing, which by then it was. This route showed Ireland as a modern place, with shops and groceries here and there and telephones. We were Americans on holiday going to the big town, Dublin, which was the where Patrick Howard, born in 1820, married Susannah Lunney. In Connecticut, their son James would marry famine refugee Mary Ann MaGee; they became the parents of Louisa Close Howard, my grandmother.

The outskirts of Dublin were akin to the somewhat more quaint sections of Queens; heavily traveled industrial roads crossed our paths as we aimed at the taller buildings on the horizon. It was modern traffic, only backwards; it took concentration to stay the course. We finally found the River Liffey and snaked our way south of the city through Donnybrooke to the Montrose Hotel on a divided highway that could have passed for the outskirts of any American city.

After checking in we drove back to central Dublin and parked at St. Stephen's Greene. We walked along fashionable Grafton Street to Nassau Street, taking in all the sights, including Trinity College and the huge number of young people. Everywhere were folks in their teens and early 20's, dressed in all manner of fashionable middle class wares, including punk leather. The

demographers were right; Ireland is filled with the young. Throughout our visit we'd seen plenty of people under 25; but now that it came to mind, where were the men? If there were plenty of young people, where were the men from 30 to 50 years old? Elsewhere was the answer; to find work abroad.

We crossed O'Connell Bridge, saw the Parnell Statue and The Post Office with the bullet holes still visible in the outside from the gun battle at the 1916 Easter Rising. Tourists look at these relics, of course, as did we. But if born amidst a graveyard's monuments, you might not care to make a living amidst such beautiful melancholia well preserved for the sentimental. You might prefer to earn your way in the living world.

The next day we spent the morning walking and made like tourists in and out of shops of Grafton and Nassau Streets. We took an escorted tour around Trinity College with a fine-spoken young graduate who filled us in. The College was founded in 1591 to educate Protestants and until 20 years ago was very much still an English college in Ireland. This was such a sore point the Cardinal of Dublin until 1970 refused to permit Catholics to attend. Times have changed, and more than 80 percent of its students were now Catholics. Housed in the ancient Trinity College Library is Ireland's most precious antiquity, the Book of Kells, written by monks in the 8th century and kept now to testify to the devotion to the bedrock of faith in the long ago. It is such a perfect relic for Ireland, as it points up the respect paid to those aspects of life, which have no monuments except language and memory.

Its charm, you see. The Irish have it either born into them or learned from the wonderful talkers in their midst. But charm so beautiful and abundant can be too easy a thing, like a crutch to lean on in case hard work doesn't appeal as the way to create the world around you. Charm's curse is that it's thin, and gone in a moment. The memory lingers, and it is sweet and of value in the nights when you think of things long ago. But warm memories don't plant the field or build the factory or cure cancer or kill the enemy. Such things require no charm at all, just hard persistent repetitive work focused on your goal all the time.

In the stores, we bought a few things such as clothing, crystal and a tie with green shamrocks. I looked for a black thorn cane I'd promised myself in memory of Dad, who had used a cane in his later years. I had told myself I should get one in his memory. But when I saw them, stacked there in a bin for Americans to buy, I didn't like any of them. They weren't elegant at all.

"These are just for sentimental Americans, right?" I joked with the sales girl.

"Oh, I suppose they are," she agreed, pleasantly.

"A bit corny, don't you think?" I asked, looking at myself in the mirror holding the black painted thorn wood cane, obviously manufactured by the thousands and as common as a Nathan's hot dog on Coney Island.

“Corny isn’t a bad thing sometimes,” she said evenly. She was, of course, right. Sentimentality is very much a wonderful thing and if this cane is your instrument to express it, fine enough. Only it wasn’t. I decided to get something quite different.

It was a black Gaelic cross carved from peat and fashioned to represent the High Cross of Muiredach from the Monasterboice, County Louth, with images of Biblical stories carved in its sides. It was beautiful, too expensive and perfect. Today it rests in our living room.

We were running out of steam. We’d traveled 820 miles in six days. It was time to chill out. The logistics of our departure the next day meant we needed to be at the Dublin airport early for the mid-morning flight to London. We all had liked the Boyne Valley Hotel, Lee particularly. We decided to return there because it was familiar and had a genteel country flavor that would cap our trip nicely. So we headed north on the N-1 and were in Drogheda by mid-afternoon for the winddown. Micah and I tossed the baseball again, while Sun Oak watched and Lee took pictures. We attracted a crowd of small children before they were whistled home by their folks. It was impolite to gawk, they were told. We didn’t mind, of course, showing off Yankee skills. It had been in my mind that to play catch with my kids in Ireland was about as good a life’s goal as one could have. It was enough to achieve such symmetry; no audience was necessary. Later we took a slow tour of the town, which in 1660 had been overrun by an army led by the Puritan Oliver Cromwell, which killed every man, woman and child they could find.

## **II. ENGLAND—THE LAST EMPIRE**

We drove through the densest fog the next morning and made the airport in plenty of time. The flight arrived at Heathrow at noon, and the British Airways voucher for the London Transit Air Bus A-1 got us deposited on Cromwell Road near the Forum Hotel by about 2 p.m. on Thursday, August 2. A four-pound cab ride had us at the Royal Garden Hotel on Kensington High Street a few minutes later.

We were bombarded with urban images, so different from Ireland. Most of the buildings in Kensington Gardens, the part of town we found ourselves in, were no taller than five-story flats, brick mostly and quite genteel. I half expected to see the chimney sweeps from *Mary Poppins* dancing along the London rooflines. The traffic was as discombobulating as in Ireland, but busier.

What was surprising was the number of Arabs dressed in long white robes going along the street. Several Arab families dressed in long robes were living in our hotel. But so many more were moving in and out of the stores and banks out front. Look at them all, dozens. At a bank across the street I went to exchange some traveler’s checks for pounds. An Arab in line in front

of me was agitated and demanded to see the manager. When the manager appeared he looked bored and listened to the complaints for a few minutes.

"I'm sorry, but 5,000 is the limit," he said, looking beyond the Arab and at me as if to say: next.

We spent the day resting, eating take-out Chinese from "Stick & Bowl," and walking in the neighborhood near Kensington Palace before we read in the next morning's paper what was causing the activity: Iraq had invaded Kuwait. The Kuwaitis vacationing in London were stranded without their money or their future.

The next day was the hottest day of the century, 97° F. We walked about as best we could, drinking bottled water often. We strolled through Kensington Gardens, about the Albert Memorial and the Royal Albert Hall. We sought refuge in the cool of the Science Museum, where we distracted ourselves for hours seeing a British version of the Chicago Museum of Science & Industry, which we all enjoyed. The heat forced us to return to the hotel. We passed the Victoria and Albert Museum, where the pockmarks from the Nazi blitz were still visible on the stonework. A plaque commemorated the markings as a reminder of the sacrifice and courage of Londoners. In London there was much to remind you of war.

I picked up issues of the *International Herald Tribune* and we turned to the news on the BBC and ITV channels. With the rest of the world, we became transfixed on Kuwait. Here in London, the center of the news was Washington. The question was: "What will Washington do?"

It was odd, hearing all these British news types and British political officials talking about George Bush, as though he were their leader too. And Bush behaved like it. He was taking charge of the forces for righteousness. For an American family in London, this was riveting.

Everything we did in London thereafter was colored by the invasion and the world's response. At first, of course, it was Bush alone, swiftly and decisively; then Thatcher and the U.K. came right along in support. The rest of the civilized world was another story. Germany and Japan couldn't be heard from and the French behaved normally, which is to say counter to the Anglo-American response. Eventually they would come around. As for the rest of the European community and Japan, their response was so at odds with that of the Anglo-Americans it could almost be termed cowardice or duplicity.

Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, later acknowledged that no one wanted the United States to be the world's policeman. "But when the world needs a cop," he asked, "who do they call?"

As these events unfolded, you had to ask: Hey, whose kids' blood was at stake? And for what? Defense of European and Japanese oil supplies; resistance to aggression; maintenance of world order now that the Russians were history? And why didn't Europe and Japan care? How come the States and

Great Britain, now only a shadow of its Empire, were the only ones standing up and saying: Saddam Is A Lying Murderer Who Will Be Stopped. As for the Arab royals and their empires? How long would the American people tolerate Americans lives being lost for royals who won't allow democracy at home? What of the Saudi family and the rest of the Arab galaxy? Who are these guys? Are we supposed to trust them?

You had to wonder at all this. If you ask an American to kill and die you'd better have a damn good reason. Arab royal empires, oil and the European and Japanese economies aren't good enough reasons. Americans will die to liberate people from slavery. If that isn't happening, Americans will quit the killing. Americans believe in crusades against evil, not murder.

The British, of course, have some history in that part of the world. In the wake of the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the British Foreign Office decided the boundaries between Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait, and also chose which Arabian families would become royalty. This British Imperial Fiat was part of what was called the Uqair conference.

Nobody except the winners in that desert jackpot liked it much. The royals in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia survived, but in Iraq they were made short work of by gangsters like Saddam Hussein, who began his career as a teenage assassin. For 70 years, the Arab world's Saddam-style thugs never did like the border work of the British, or the fact that some Arabs were royal and the others not.

History notwithstanding, however, what is it about the personality or attitude of the Americans and English that allow each to presume to respond to Saddam so? In Ireland, the people may privately think just that way, but who can know? Their public policy in World War II was neutrality.

Such notions haunted me as we made our tour through the neighborhoods of Kensington, Mayfair, Knightsbridge, Belgravia, Westminster, Marblebone and Bloomsbury, Covent Garden and the City of London itself, and in the public spaces of Piccadilly, Trafalgar Square and the Mall. But it came into bold relief outside Buckingham Palace on Saturday, August 4, after we watched the Changing of the Guard with 10,000 others. There was a particularly festive air that day as the country was aglow with the ceremonies and commemorative publicity surrounding the 90th Birthday of the Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

The Changing of the Guard ceremonies had been spectacular despite the crowds and heat. After all this is a timeless event and staged by the most theatrical and pageantry minded people in the world. But it was a magnificently hot day and we were tired and thirsty and on an errand to get tickets to a play we didn't go to later that night.

We were making our way through the crowd down the Mall when all of a sudden we were stopped at a police barricade with a crowd of others. The

people were crushing forward. It became very uncomfortable. In a moment or two I became separated from Sun Oak and Lee and Micah and couldn't see them behind me any longer. I was very close to the barricade, just inches from the faces of several bobbies who were patiently telling everyone to stay calm and don't push now.

Then to the left the crowd began singing: "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you..." I turned and saw huge iron gates open just so. Out stepped this stout white-haired lady dressed in baby blue. A cheer rang out, a burst of applause and some shouts of joy. It was the Queen Mother. I aimed my video camera at her as she came down the side of the crowd toward us and just let the moment happen. Hollywood has nothing on the Brits! She was lovely, still quite spry, smiling warmly and seeming to genuinely enjoy the people and moment.

Within a few moments she returned to the gate to her dwelling and disappeared. The barricades were removed. Sun Oak, the kids and I found each other quickly and enjoyed the serendipity of the moment. We inspected the camera to make sure that I had recorded what happened okay, which I did.

Later that night as I lay waiting for sleep, I thought of other video images of royalty in front of Buckingham Palace. All the histories of the 20th century seem to begin as with the flickering images of the array of European royals who had come in 1910 to the funeral of King Edward VII. They were bedecked in their finery and feathers and coaches and horses and moved unknowingly in front of one of the earliest motion picture cameras. These pampered monarchs and their fellows were mostly related to each other and could not know that within an eyelash of time they would be swept away from the world's stage in a million and more deaths and gone forever.

The visions of the royals who survived were now modest, except in the U.K. where the royal family retained a unique corner of the British national psyche. To the British they represented triumph. In the U.S. context, it would be where Americans think of the flag, of Lincoln and Washington, of baseball played on grass, of cowboy stories and Indians and country music, of the Marine Corps hymn, hamburgers and hot dogs, interstate highways and cars, of Hollywood and TV and Mickey Mouse. It would be where the mythic images define your national community. In the U.K., it's the royals. They still have meaning.

The Queen Mother hadn't wanted the job in the first place. She got the job by surprise when her brother-in-law, Edward VIII, decided to quit the king job and run off with his Baltimore squeeze. Edward became a jerk; his sister-in-law, as Queen Elizabeth (mother of Queen Elizabeth II), became a giant. She had sand. Hitler said Queen Elizabeth was the most dangerous woman in the world. During the war, she had stayed behind in London during the Blitz. When Buckingham Palace was bombed she went to the East End

and said: “Now I can look you in the face. You see, my home has been bombed, too.”

Churchill provided the words to boil the blood. Queen Elizabeth provided fortitude. She will be loved forever for it. Tears come to the eyes of people who see her. She has become their identify, their living link with victories over tyranny when the Empire stood for what is right. Now, in August 1990, she was 90 and in possession of a serene smile as she walked in front of a tourist’s video camera. Was her image foreshadowing some new dark age? Was Kuwait a modern Sarajevo?

The next day we went to Westminster and saw Parliament, 10 Downing Street, Big Ben and Westminster Abbey. Outside the abbey stand statues of Richard III, Cromwell, Churchill. In the Cathedral’s ancient confines were images that told of centuries of continuity in British glory. It also is the seat of Anglican authority, visible witness in opposition to the pope and his ilk. What audacity! Henry was a bigamist and thief, is all, and didn’t have the political skill to finesse his problem by bribing the right cardinals and Italian princes to get his way. As for his daughter Elizabeth I, she was an imperial warrior who thought nothing of stealing neighboring Ireland to enhance her domain. And all to the tune of anti-Catholic rhymes and the smell of the burning bodies of those who dared to disagree and were tied to stakes and set afire.

Yet such stories aren’t so simple. There are layers of subtlety to understand. Down in the basement of the abbey, in a museum room, was an elderly lady dressed in tweeds and linen whose job was to answer the questions of the confused. She pointed out the effigy of Charles II, son of the unfortunate Charles I and successor to the Lord Protector Cromwell. On his deathbed, she explained, Charles II confessed to a Catholic priest that all that anti-Catholic Protestantism had been a mistake. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” She told the story with such glee in its mischief.

“You know,” she whispered a few moments later, “they (royals) still confess on their death beds.”

Despite these disputes, Westminster Cathedral, as a memorial, has no parallel. And the memorial is decidedly martial in tone. Throughout the centuries, those honored here are the dead from war. Churchill’s floor stone is the most prominent. Next to it is the stone for the Unknown. On a pillar nearby is the Congressional Medal of Honor awarded to the Unknown by the U.S. Congress after World War II. On the wall near the front door is a plaque commemorating President Roosevelt for the support he gave during the Battle of Britain before the U.S. entry into the war. The Brits believe this stuff, and it shows. The overall effect was so telling I was moved to tears.



On page one of the book review section of the *London Sunday Times* that day,

under the headline “Myths of Paradise,” was a rumination about a book called “Home Country” by Richard Mabey. The reviewer explained how managing the landscape in England has deep roots, back to the time of a mythical leader of giants named Albion who stole apples owned by immortal gods and turned the island into paradise. Controlling the world by controlling the landscape is an obsession in England, the argument went. The English Garden, for example, is known throughout the world as a tidy and ordered display of beauty. Yet it masks a more fundamental view of the world, in which the English assume that the world needs tending, managing, shaping and cultivating by supreme gardeners, namely the English themselves. Mabey’s book tells how a storm in 1987 ripped through southern Albion, killed people and ripped up acres of trees. The public’s reaction was a kind of national bereavement. What caused the reaction was not the loss of human life, however, but the destruction of the trees. Committees were formed to “help the trees.”

There it is, I thought, the perfect metaphor. Gardens illustrate just the difference between the English and Irish points of view. In Ireland there seems to be a complete lack of interest in such controlled natural gardens. The homes on the country’s roadways were simply there; no gardens, no lawns, no sense of ordered beauty. The tourist books say this is very Irish. A thing grows on the ground of its own accord, because of the weather and rain, and it is not in the Irish national character to disturb the process.

My cousin, Jim Collins, and I joke about lawns and yard work. He rarely sees the difference between healthy grass and weeds. “If it’s green I figure that’s okay with me,” he said. For my part, I do my bit around the house because it keeps me in good standing with my wife. Sun Oak, of course, is a garden genius. In Fairfax, neighbors walk by our home specifically to look at and remark about Sun Oak’s success.

But there it is. An attitude about how to approach the world. The English feel compelled to make it better according to their lights. The Irish do not. The Irish are content to let the world be and concentrate on the hidden, interior world of the spirit, where charm can, at times, be the tool to trick fate.

This difference of outlook has translated into different consequences. Ever since the Normans, the English have tried to turn Ireland into an English garden. In spots they succeeded. But the Irish were like weeds sprouting up to spoil things. They had a religion they wouldn’t abandon, and manners that wouldn’t be pruned away. Finally, in 1921 the thorns on the branches and the poison of the leaves were such irritants; the English abandoned all Ireland but Ulster to its own devices. The Republic of Ireland is the peaceful and happy result in the Irish south, while the agony of Northern Ireland continues to breed in the British north.

Such a desire to cultivate, however, is not all bad. There is an arrogance to the English you simply have to stand back and admire. They are very assertive

and can make you weep at their la-di-da ways. Is there anything so steep as the nose down which some English gaze? The fixation on class and royalty is comforting to most English, I suppose, particularly to those who find themselves above others. But it isn't fair. It's un-American, is what it is. I call it wrong. But this society gave the world common law, the freehold that led to private property and wealth creation, and parliamentary rule. It gave the world its language, which today is the language of choice in many Asian and African countries as well as in the world of commerce, travel and communications.

The English carried the Cross to create Empire for the Crown. The Irish were the first victims of this aggression. North Americans right behind. And thanks be. Some of America's first English settlers were the ancestors of my beloved grandfather, Willis Isaac Savage, my lone Puritan ancestor. In the first wave of Puritans in the 1630s were all his ancestors: from Oxfordshire villages came Samuel Boreman, Mary Betts, and John Savage and Elizabeth Dubbin; from Warwickshire came Edward Griswold and his wife Margaret; from Essex came Nicholas Knapp, John White and his wife Mary, William Mead and his son John. From Suffolk came Elinor Lockwood. Robert Hibbard and his son John came from Salisbury. Peter Brown from Hastings and William Potter and his wife Frances and mother Hannah from London and Robert Johnson from Yorkshire.

They, like the others in the Great Puritan Migration, were fleeing Anglican authority. They and their descendants would establish towns and villages in Massachusetts and Connecticut, intermarry, help populate New England and eventually come into life nearly three centuries later in the being of Willis Isaac Savage, of East Berlin, Connecticut, who became a farmer like his ancestors. In New England society, he would remain a humble Yankee, remote from the refined styles, tastes and fashions adopted by some of his more tony kinsmen.

As a young man, Willis met a young woman who arrived in town with a retired Congregational minister and his wife who had no children of their own. Louisa Close Howard, who was the oldest daughter of a large Irish family from Stamford with too many mouths to feed, had been taken in by the village minister, Rev. Francis Potter, and his wife Olivia Close, to ease their loneliness.

Louisa and Willis would raise a family of three; one, my mother, would marry my father, an Irish Catholic, the ambitious son of a railroader. Now their son is on a holiday in Ireland and England with his wife and their two children reflecting on the sweep of this process.

The Irish, with an English hurricane at their back, had spread around the world like seeds blown in the gale, settling in domains created by earlier English storms in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and America swelling

these societies with their descendants. Ireland is the only European country that never had a colony. No matter. The Irish were used to such journeys. Irish priests, the Druids' descendants, armed with the glories of salvation, carried their ways to those places as well as Latin America, Asia and Africa. They had earlier traveled to Charlemagne's court, some say ensuring the very survival of Christianity and the future of the faith.

Irish weeds became a hybrid breed, thriving in distant English gardens. In America, the new inhabitants learned their lessons well. In time, care for the gardens of the world passed to them. Now, a Yankee with roots in Dublin, Clare and Clonmel can cheer as the New World's gardeners hold a sharpened hoe ready to strike snakes dead.