

CHAPTER XXXV - OUR IRELAND ADVENTURE



Here I am kissing the Blarney Stone.

I've fallen in love with a place called Ireland. I'm but one of millions around the world who have at least a drop or two of Irish blood in their veins. My wife, Anita, and I spent twelve days touring this wonderful island in June, 2004.

My first impression of Dublin was of the colorful doors. It seems that all the doors in Dublin had been painted whatever color seemed handy at the time. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to it. A black door would stand next to a green door followed by a yellow or an orange one. There were blue doors, purple doors, gray doors, on and on depending on the door painter's fancy.

Later, someone told me that these doors were painted different colors for a very good reason. Local legend has it that once upon a time these gaily-colored doors were all pretty much the same as doors everywhere. This was all changed due to the Irishman's love of his local pub. The pub is a place where an Irish man can relax in the evening with a pint, or two, or three of their favorite beer (most likely Guinness) before going home for the night. After an evening of song and cheer, these fun-loving Irishmen faced the formidable task of finding their way home. Unfortunately, after a few glasses of brew, all doors look alike. Often the hapless Irishman found his way to the wrong door, and, subsequently, the wrong bed.

Understandably, this upset the wives somewhat. A committee of irate wives was formed and they decided upon a solution. Paint the doors all different colors. That way, the hapless husband could navigate his way home, guided by his wife's favorite color. Unfortunately, most Irishmen become colorblind after a pint or two and many of the husbands still found their way to the wrong door.

From Dublin, our tour took us on a grand adventure around the Emerald Isle. Our bus took us to south to Waterford and then west to Blarney, Cork, Ring of Kerry and the Dingle Peninsula. From Dingle, we traveled inland to Limerick and then back to the coast to the Cliffs of Moher. We then meandered to Galway and on to Donegal. From Donegal, we traveled into Northern Ireland, visiting Londonderry and Belfast. From Belfast, we motored back to Dublin ending our 11-day journey having traveled 1, 333 miles.

Once we began our journey, I could hardly wait to see the thousand shades of green that Ireland is famous for. Ireland is green indeed but not any greener than my own backyard. What did astonish me was the abundance of wild flowers that are domesticated in our country. South of Dublin, rhododendrons seem to be all over the place, dominating the landscape. Later I saw large patches of Iris, clusters of fuchsias and foxglove. In some areas it looked as if local gardeners had trouble growing domestic plants because of the intrusion of all the wild ones.

As the Irish countryside unraveled, we were pleased to discover that Johnny, our tour guide, was a walking encyclopedia of Irish lore. Through humor and unbiased wit, he helped us with a better understanding of Irish history. He told us about ancient monuments, historic castles, mansions and fortifications as well as the present Irish situation. Johnny's informal lectures made the tour very worthwhile.

On several other occasions, Johnny turned us over to other tour guides or local hosts. One special treat was Roland McNamara, a half-Irish, half-Chinese Buddhist who told us about the politically divided city of Londonderry. He pointed out that the Northern Loyalists called it Londonderry. The Southern Separatists insisted on calling it simply Derry. Roland stated that he had many good friends on both sides of the political conflict. Many of his friends were troubled by his neutrality. They all accepted the fact that Roland was Buddhist. Even so, they wanted to know, was Roland a Catholic Buddhist or was he a Protestant Buddhist? His best friend often worried about his ass getting sore from sitting on the fence.

Johnny also turned us over to other hosts when we toured both the Waterford Crystal Factory and the Old Bushmills Distillery. Waterford Crystal dates back to 1783 and the distillery was licensed in 1608. Both tours were fascinating. The crystal tour ended in a large display-sales room and the whiskey tour finished in a large tasting room. We now have two lovely pieces of Waterford Crystal among our souvenirs, and I have the memory of the taste of an excellent 12-year-old Irish whiskey.

We stopped at a mountain pasture at one point where Johnny turned us over to a skilled sheepherder who demonstrated a master's control over his dogs. Using voice and whistle commands along with hand signals, he had amazing control of his working sheepdogs. These wonderful dogs retrieved a flock of sheep from a distant pasture at his command. Then, after putting them through their paces, he had his dogs return the sheep to their original location.

On other occasions, Johnny left us entirely on our own. At the Cliffs of Moher, we were happy to simply stretch our legs and soak in the breathtaking beauty of the area. Apart from its beauty, this area is famous as the kingdom of a lesser king named O'Brien. Of all the lesser kings, O'Brien had the worst reputation for lust and cruelty. O'Brien was most despised for his decree that all maidens in his kingdom be presented to him on their thirteenth birthday. He would then bed them all, checking their suitability for eventual marriage. Ironically, shortly before his death, he had ordered that a monument be erected in his own honor. With tongue in cheek, this monument is referred to locally as O'Brien's last erection.

Another fascinating place on our journey was Giant's Causeway. It is truly a must-see-to-believe phenomenon. It consists of thousands of basalt rocks that were formed by repeated heating and cooling into polygonal columns. Irish mythology has it that in ancient times these rocks once formed a bridge to Scotland. Scotland is only 15 miles away but was much closer in the olden days. A bridge was built by an Irish Giant named Fionn MacCumhain, better known as Finn McCool. In those days, this mighty Ulster giant was the high king of Ireland. Hungry to expand his holdings, Finn McCool decided to build a bridge to Scotland and add those lands to his kingdom.

Once in Scotland, he spied another giant at a distance. This was the Scottish giant, King Benandonner. This Scotsman was much larger than Finn McCool. Still unseen, Finn made a hasty retreat back to Ireland. The next day, King Benandonner was informed about McCool's trespass into his kingdom. Benandonner was furious and crossed over into Ireland searching for the Irish interloper. Now fearing for his life, confided his awful mistake to his wife, Oonagh. McCool was both terrified and exhausted. Oonagh told her husband to take a nap and she would keep an eye out for the Scottish giant. As McCool slept, Oonagh heard the sound of thunderous footsteps. She saw the mighty Benandonner approaching. The quick thinking Oonagh dressed her sleeping husband in a nightgown and bonnet. The huge Scotsman pounded at McCool's door and demanded a confrontation with the Irish King. Oonagh shushed the Scotsman and told him to be quiet or he would wake the baby. Upon seeing the giant baby, Benandonner fled in terror. A baby this size would have to have a very large father! The thoughts of confronting such a huge man struck terror in the Scotsman's very bones. He departed in such haste that his wake destroyed McCool's bridge behind him.

When some one mentions a visit to Ireland, more often than not, they are asked, "Did you kiss the Blarney Stone?" Blarney Castle is a charming old ruin that is beautifully landscaped. If you climb about four stories up a very tight-spiraled staircase, you come to the top of the castle tower. This tower was built as a defensive structure. The narrow staircase spirals to the right in order to give defending swordsmen the advantage. At the top of the tower is the famous Blarney Stone. If a person lies on his back, with someone he trusts holding his feet, he can be lowered to a position that allows him to see and kiss the Blarney Stone. Kissing the stone is supposed to endow the gift of eloquence (better known as blarney or bullshit). If you are thinking that kissing the blarney stone is an awful lot of bother, you are absolutely correct. Was it worth it? Absolutely.