



Blarney Castle

Ireland

by Mike Greene

America is a nation of immigrants. Many of us can look back just one or two generations to connect with the country from which our family originated. In my case I can look back to the second decade of the 20th century when my grandfather left Ireland to come to New York. When my father was born in 1917 our ties to Ireland were strengthened. His mother died when he was a baby and my grandfather wasn't able to both work and care for him, so my father was shipped off to County Clare in the west of Ireland to get his start in life.

Sometime in the late 1920s my grandfather remarried and brought his son, my father, back from Ireland to Brooklyn. Imagine what it must have been like to get off a ship in New York and be introduced to your father and your new mother. Anyway...my father, Tom, settled into an Irish-American family with all of the stereotypical aspects. There were cops, firemen, nuns, lawyers, and politicians. When they all got together there were political and sports arguments carried out in a thick Irish brogue, their tongues lubricated by Scotch and Irish whiskey. When I arrived on the scene in 1948 I was brought into this immigrant family of characters. From them I learned to love everything Irish. I loved their passion for words and argument. I loved their music. I determined that someday I would visit Ireland.



Durty Nelly's Pub

In 2002 my wife, Gail, and I made our first trip. We flew to Shannon Airport in County Clare. The fun began when I rented a car and drove to our bed and breakfast for our first night. Imagine the lack of coordination I demonstrated when I had to shift with my left hand as I sat in the right hand driver's seat. Good grief! They drive on the wrong side of the road. I have never seen such a look of abject terror in anyone's face as I did when I glanced at Gail who sat there, white as a sheet, as I tried to maneuver into the proper lane of traffic without having a head-on collision. Mission accomplished. We got to the B&B and immediately left to go to Durty Nellie's, a pub that claims to date back to 1620.



Ring of Kerry

For the rest of the week we toured western Ireland, Gail wincing as the left side of our rental was scratched by every roadside bush on our route, as I tried to find the towns that my father and grandfather mentioned. We found Kilmihil and Kilmurry-McMahon, both part of the family lore. We took a ferry across the Shannon River and I did a credible imitation of Chevy Chase as I got caught on a roundabout in Limerick. We viewed the Ring of Kerry, a breathtaking loop in County Kerry. We went to pubs daily and drank Guinness with Irish football fans. (No...not our football. They have trouble getting their heads around the idea that we call our game football and rarely kick the ball.)

We spent a couple of nights in Galway, the gateway to an area called *Gaeltecht*, where Irish is the first language. We saw the area where *The Quiet Man* (before your time...John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara) was filmed. We toured so many castles that Gail decided that she was going to sit the last couple out as I climbed all over them. Mostly we enjoyed the people we met. It's hard to be a stranger in Ireland; it's apparently constitutionally

forbidden. No matter where we were, we found ourselves engaged in conversation with people we didn't know.

The whole trip can be typified by one evening in Galway. We went to a pub, hoping to hear some traditional music. The place was mobbed. We wedged our way in and I got us a couple of pints. A young woman with a fiddle joined a young man with a *bodhrain* (Irish drum), an older man with a tin whistle and another with an accordion and they just started playing together. This wasn't a band, just some locals who got together to play Irish music. They played jigs and reels that sounded like the music I heard as a kid. It was great. As I said, the place was mobbed; there was no thought of getting a seat. After ten minutes or so, a big, gruff guy tapped me on the shoulder and pointed at his stool and said, "This is for your woman." My woman and I both laughed and thanked him. After another hour or so of music and conversation between ourselves and with our new best friends around us we decided it was time to get some dinner. We had consumed all of the salmon, fish chowder and pub food we could face, so we decided to go to a Chinese restaurant. Our waiter was from China and was learning English on the fly. There was something amusing about a waiter speaking English with an obvious Chinese accent, delicately flavored with an Irish brogue. After eating Szechuan something or other (and being amazed that the locals had both rice and chips—French fries—with their meals) we headed back to our B&B.



Killarney

I could write a short story about the country, but I don't have the time and you don't have the patience to read it. Do yourself a favor. Visit a country where Americans are welcome and where our language (sort of) is the same as that of the natives. Stay in B&Bs. Eat and drink in the pubs. Listen to the music. Tour the castles. I would even recommend going to one of the corny medieval banquets. Enjoy the scenery—it is spectacular. Mostly, enjoy the people you meet in a country with a little different perspective from the one we have here. Ireland isn't a world power, but its culture and history have had profound effect on our own society. ...plus the Guinness and Jameson are pretty darned good.