IRELAND:

A CELTIC JOURNEY

Translated excerpts by Bruce Thomson

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Foreign rights by Kirsti MacDonald Jareg,

Author

kirs-jar@online.no

**DINDSENCHAS** I have come to Ireland in search of stories. Little hairy anecdotes. Tales with awkward shapes and too many feet. The great creation myths. The shameful stories that live down caves and shy away from the light. The old Celtic bards even used to have a special name for all the legends and myths that had taken root in this rough, barren landscape: *Dindsenchas* [Din-shen-eh-chas] - “Lore of places”. This was the kind of stories I wanted to hunt down, coax out, and dig up on my journey round the coast of Ireland.

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**CONNAUGHT**

The Clifden car, which carries the Dublin letters into the heart of Connemara, conducts the passenger over one of the most wild and beautiful districts that it is ever the fortune of a traveller to examine... No doubt, ere long, the rush of London tourism will come this way…

William Makepeace Thackeray, From Galway to Ballinahinch

From *The Irish Sketch-Book* (1845)

**A bitter man in Galway**

It is Friday night, and I have just stepped off one of Galway’s streets and into a pub to hear a little music, knowing perfectly well that you can’t stay sitting on your own for long in Ireland unless you really want to, and even then, only barely. A broad-faced man with crooked teeth asks where I come from, and the conversation is underway. By which I mean the monologue is underway, but that is just fine with me. I am in Ireland to learn, and can easily tolerate being lectured to. But this chap can’t open his mouth without throwing a joke into every other sentence, and I try to laugh in all the right places so he doesn’t take me to be some stiff upper-lipped, pompous Scandinavian. I once read that in this country, pompousness and a lack of humour are cardinal sins, on par with being tight-fisted, or teetotal.

 Yet after three pints of Guinness, an aggressive self-pity starts to sneak its way into this chatty Irishman. I felt an ominous wobble begin to take hold in the tightrope that criss-crosses Ireland, a tightrope upon which it is far too easy to misstep. The man grew up in England, after his parents moved away to earn money when he was a wee boy. They were part of the Irish diaspora, but did the Irish government ever care about their emigrants? Did they? He sets down his tankard of ale and fixes me with a harsh look. For a brief moment, I wonder whether I could have ever made a difference to Irish emigrants. No! Nobody cared! He slams his fist down on the counter, but nobody raises an eyebrow, since the musicians in the corner are drowning out any sounds of this violent outburst. “We were like air to the Irish government. AIR! There’s only one person who’s ever understood the fate of the Irish diaspora, and that’s Mary Robinson.” He is referring to the previous president of the Republic of Ireland. One of the first things she did was extend a hand out to all Irishmen, whether they lived in Ireland or further out in the world. Now my companion’s voice rises one step louder: “And we might not have been parasites in England, but we weren’t exactly popular. Especially not after the IRA started up with their bombs. It was difficult to tell the Brits why they hit so often. What were they fighting for, the brits would ask, weren’t the wars of religion over and done with? Why did these Irishmen have to be so barbaric?”

 The man on the barstool is sick of being invisible, of being underappreciated. He is bitter, but he assures me that he has plans, because the government needs to open its eyes, oh yes, their eyes were going to be opened wide! What kind of plans did he have? “I’m keeping that to myself,” he says, casting me a sly glance. “But the Irish constitution has to change, so Ireland becomes less corrupt!”

 I have an unpleasant feeling that I just shared a beer with a would-be suicide bomber.

 **Farewell, Pan-Celtia**

Then I make a mistake. Since we had started by talking about presidents, I want to extend my own hand to this bitter man, and create a kind of kinship. I reach into my rucksack and retrieve the book my great-grandfather, John Macdonald, edited for the Scots Gaelic organisation, An Comunn Gàidhealach. This book from 1927, *Voices from the Hills*, has a stale odour and a green velvet spine. The cover shows some harp-playing angels, the true icon of Celtic culture.

 I flick through it, to a chapter written by professor Douglas Hyde, who later became the first president of the Republic of Ireland. “Douglas Hyde, aye. He was a poet, a ‘scholar’,” says the bitter man, and I sense a glimmer of hope. “But he was also a Protstnt,” he says, and I hear in his voice that something about this is terribly wrong - but what?. “A... Protestant?” “Of course he was. A *protstnt!* But the first prime minister was a Catholic.”

 Slowly it dawns on me. I am the only one in this conversation who is interested in the pan-Celtic nation my great-grandfather dreamed about. I am the only one who is obsessed with the similarities between the cultures of the Irish and Scottish West-Atlantic coastline, and their shared history. The oppression of Catholicism. The contempt for and suppression of the Gaelic language. The emigration to America, Australia, Canada and Argentina. White slaves in the Caribbean sun, sold off by the commanding officers of the fanatic Englishman, Oliver Cromwell. The farmers’ uprisings leading to new land ownership laws at the end of the 1800s. Landowners who had people thrown out of their houses because sheep brought more profit than starving crofters. The love for Gaelic poetry and music. The Gaelic myths.

 Douglas Hyde was one of Ireland’s foremost champions of Gaelic cultural heritage and language, which was why my great-grandfather wanted him to contribute to *Voices from the Hills*. But my great-grandfather’s dream of a pan-celtic nation sparked no interest in this bitter man. My entry ticket was invalid. The religion card trumps everything.

**The Lights in Antrim**

If the bitter man had asked what errand I was on in Ireland, I might have told him that I was following the Celtic trail from the Scottish Isles. The family on my mother’s side hail from the largest group of islands: The Hebrides. For around 500 years this vast archipelago was a Celtic universe, with the sea as its highway and clinker-built *birlinns* ferrying clan-chiefs from one island to another. When the English language, its culture and the Protestant Reformation took hold in the Scottish Lowlands, the Celtic culture, Gaelic language, and Catholicism in the west were kept safe by wide rivers and high mountain passes.

Yet the Scottish west coast hasn’t always been Gaelic-speaking. Dál Riata is the name of the ancent Irish-Scottish kingdom that formed in a bygone era, specifically the 3rd century AD. Irishmen rowed and sailed to Scotland from the north-eastern coastline of their own land - Antrim - in order to conquer land and settle there. These *Scotí,* as the Romans dubbed these Gaelic peoples, were even the source of the name Scotland. In their luggage, they carried with them the Gaelic language, as well as Celtic laws, customs and mythologies, and in the 6th century: Christianity.

Antrim… Ireland! In my close study of the Hebrides, I had managed to draw an invisible, made-up line in the middle of the sea, straight through the ancient Celtic civilisation of Dál Riata. You have to be brought up with nation states and planes to see the ocean as some kind of obstacle, and have complete tunnel vision to not see the connections between these two green coastlines. A few years ago, when I took the ferry out to the Hebridean whisky island of Islay, they shone out clear and bright: The lights from the Irish county of Antrim. I could even make out the white houses on the other side of the North Channel, or its more poetic name: The Sea of Moyle. In the twilight, I could see the allure of this “Emerald Isle” across the sea.

**Father Eddie**

I hear on the Irish radio channel RTÉ that a body was found on Lettermore yesterday. I’m back on the mainland now, lending my ears to the car radio as I search for the home of Father Eddie. It can’t be too often that the tiny isle of Lettermore ends up hitting the headlines. The police are asking listeners for help identifying the drowned man, who had been in the water for several days.

 A good while after the third bridge, just as I am wondering whether I’ve got myself lost again, there is a cream-coloured church. And Father Eddie was quite right - there is the cluster of trees he described. “They’re easy to spot; there aren’t any other trees nearby,” he said on the phone when I was arranging to meet the man who others have described as a fountain of knowledge.

 Father Eddie is waiting on the steps to greet me. Éamonn Ó Conghaile, his Irish name, isn’t just a priest, but also a traditional Irish storyteller - a *seanchai* [shanachi]. He invites me into the kitchen. There is something about kitchens. Something honest and unpretentious. A room that encourages good conversations and relaxation. I say yes to tea. Strong tea. “You can’t make it strong enough.” I tell him. Yet I turn down cake, as the Irish breakfast I gobbled up earlier will last me right up until my evening meal.

 Father Eddie has spent long periods of his adult life as a fisherman. He learned the tricks of the trade from his father, who had taken him out on boats ever since he could walk. In the summer, they would head out to sea around five in the morning. Bait they found down on the foreshore, where father and son would turn over stones in the tidal channels. They knew exactly where the eels liked to hide. Then they stripped off the skin and cut them into chunks - an enticing bait. But jelly lures that spun in the water worked fine too, and their favourite was an amber-yellow jelly eel. It had a twist in it, which made it look as though it was swimming through the water. “Cod would love this red eel with a white tail, a grand old lure that you can’t find anymore,” Father Eddie explains. By trolling for fish, they could only really get one catch at a time, though it would be a big one. On the Irish coastline they could fish for salmon - while it was still legal - as well as shellfish: lobsters, scallops, crayfish, prawns and crab. With lines, nets and pots. In small boats around 25 feet long, in tar-canvassed *curraghs* and Galway hookers.

 According to Father Eddie, certain parts of these traditional sailboats have Old Norse names, from back when Norwegian Viking kings ruled the Emerald Isle. “The folklore version of Vikings is a long way from the written history,” explains the priest. “Aye, they attacked us, but they also taught us a lot about building boats. Surely that wouldn’t have happened if we were just fighting each other? Raiding wasn’t anything new, either, we were used to it. The Irish clans raided each other too.”

**The silent woman and a little about DNA**

While we are speaking of Vikings, Eddie tells the story of an Irish woman who was captured and sold as a slave to a Norwegian prince on Iceland. Over time, she gave him a child. But she never spoke a word to him, and he thought she was deaf.

 Yet every day, this woman had a strange habit of taking her child out into the wilderness. One day the prince decided to follow her, and to his great surprise, he could hear from his hiding place that she was speaking Irish to the little child. He came out from where he was hidden and asked the woman why she never spoke to him. Because, she replied, he had never asked her father for her hand in marriage, as was proper according to Irish customs. No, he had to admit that was true. Perhaps their whole marital union had been a little rushed. Would she care to accompany him back to Tyrone in Ireland, to the castle where her father was a lord? The prince would love to do it right this time.

 As soon as the winds were in their favour, the little family sailed eastwards. Once in Tyrone, the Icelandic prince asked for the hand of the lord’s daughter, and the long overdue wedding ceremony lasted for seven days and seven nights. And a thousand years later, Eddie tells me that Icelanders still come to Tyrone every year to celebrate this Irish-Icelandic connection.

 This tale has parallels with the famous Icelandic Laxdæla Saga. Melkorka is the name of an Irish princess who had a son named Ólafr Hoskuldsson. In secret, Melkorka teaches her Gaelic mother tongue to her son. In the saga version, Ólafr is the one who travels to Ireland to seek out his Irish grandfather.

 Regardless of what is or isn’t true about this Irish princess, stories of Celtic women on Iceland are supported by modern research. The Icelandic genetic research company, DeCode Genetics, has to a large extent proven that Icelandic women have Celtic background from Scotland and Ireland. Iceland’s men, on the other hand, have inherited around 80% of their genes from the Norwegian coast.

 So what does this mean? By the 9th century AD, Ireland had already become a stepping stone in the Atlantic Ocean. The Vikings didn’t sail straight to Iceland, but carried out shore raids and picked up women before travelling further west, either taking them by force or buying them at Dublin’s slave markets. Others were married off to Norwegians living in Scotland and Ireland. In other words, the vast majority of Icelandic women are the descendants of white, Gaelic-speaking slaves.

**A Knife in the Mast**

There is another Irish connection to Iceland, too. According to *Landnámabók*, the medieval Icelandic Book of Settlements, there were already Irish monks or *Papar* [from Latin meaning “father” or “pope”] in the land of sagas by the time the Norwegians came ashore:

Bede the priest died 735 years after the Incarnation of our Lord, according to what is written, and more than one hundred years before Iceland was peopled by Norsemen. But before Iceland was peopled from Norway there were in it the men whom the Northmen call Papar; they were Christian men, and it is held that they must have come over sea from the west, for there were found left by them Irish books, bells and croziers, and more things besides, from which it could be understood that they were Westmen [Irishmen].

 Another source, the Irish monk Dicuil, gives us a description of the island of Thule, an islandbeyond the Faroes, where a man might pick a louse from his shirt in the middle of the night, when it is just as light as in the middle of the brightness of day. The monk describes midsummer nights with “no darkness to hinder one from doing what one would.” A day’s sail from there, and your way was blocked by a wall of ice. Monks had lived on this island for thirty years, Dicuil claimed - which in practice would mean the end of the 700s.

 If Irish monks really did live on Iceland, something for which there has yet to be found any archeological evidence, they would not have sailed there in the *knarrs* of the Nordic latecomers. Their vessels would have been canoe-like *curraghs*, that are only found on the west coast of Ireland and Scotland. The construction technique for these is simple. Hazel branches were stuck into the soil and bent to form a bow, then the hull would be woven together with willow branches. The next step would be to stretch cowskins tightly across the frame and sew each of these skins together. After a few days drying, the boat would be seaworthy.

 “Way back when, you had to wait for the wind to turn before setting sail. But the monks had their own way of changing the wind direction,” claims Father Eddie. “They would use magic. The same magic used by the druids when they still lived here. By the way, I believe that they still do live here, but that they have just been assimilated into modern society.” When Christianity reached Ireland, people held onto all the good things of Ireland’s pre-Christian culture, in Father Eddie’s opinion. Nowadays, many folks believe that magic is something supernatural, something dark and evil, but Father Eddie disagrees. “We don’t even have the word ‘magic’ in the Irish language,” he says. “We have a word for ‘good’ - that which come from God - and then we have another word for things that come from ‘evil’”. There is always this sense of good and bad - God is the source of goodness, and Satan is the source of evil. I know that in English, the word ‘magic’ doesn’t sound good, but then we don’t have that word in Irish.”

 Eddie himself has used magic to help people change the wind direction. It was back before he became a priest, but he still maintains that there was nothing evil about what he was doing. “I would use a knife to control nature.” “A knife?” “Aye, we would jam a knife into the mast, with its sharp edge turned skyward. But we pushed it into the mast in the direction you wanted the wind to come from.” Though there were set rules people had to follow if they wanted to gain mastery over nature. You were only allowed to use this helping hand to save the boat or the crew, such as if you were making a dangerous crossing. So a kind of emergency option? “Aye, the knife has been a sacred item for a long time. Three things were sacred: Knives, fire and a man’s word. You couldn’t be called a man if you didn’t keep your word.”

 One time, a man abused Father Eddie’s trust. The priest had told this knife technique to a sailor who was taking part in a hooker regatta, which is a normal sight on the Galway coast. Dozens of wooden boats with big red, brown or black sails race through choppywaves towards a buoy far out to sea, before tacking round it. “I didn’t know what kind of a man he was. He jammed his knife into his mast, just as I had told him.” So what happened? “Well, he won the race.”

**St Brendan’s Castle**

“The other way to redirect the wind is the method Saint Brendan the Navigator used to travel to America, or wherever else he fancied,” Eddie explains. “He built what we call a storm castle, a *casiel doininne*. The monks eventually claimed this ritual for their own, and dubbed the structure *St Brendan’s Castle*.

 “You can make one of these storm castles out of small pieces of driftwood found floating in the ocean, or even with kelp and peat. The foundations were made out of seven pieces. It should be built to be about this high.” The priest extends out his hand about two or three feet above the ground, “And should be formed into a point at the top.”

The door of the castle, which was often just a small crevice, should be placed in the direction you wanted the wind to come from. Then you should set up small stations all around the storm castle to stop and pray. Once the building was finished, you had to walk seven times sunwise around the fragile tower. Then it was time for the most important part: Hitting the top off the storm castle. Only a third of it. This would provide you with a favourable wind. If you knocked off two thirds, you summoned up a gale, and if you brought the whole castle down, it would make a storm strong enough to sink a boat.

 “So seamen were still using these methods even in your day?”

 “Aye, I learnt this from an old sailor who had spent his entire life on sailing boats. He could remember the last time one of St Brendan’s Castles was built - on the Isle of Carna, to the north of here. A group of women made one out of peat, and for a very good reason.”

He pours me another cup of tea, and asks whether I’m hungry: perhaps a little bread and some cold meats? My stomach is still filled with my Irish breakfast, and I decline. Besides, I want to hear why the women built the castle.

“Aye well. Several boats had sailed south to Kinvara in Galway Bay, and then on to County Clare to sell the peat, for there’s no firewood in those parts.” By ‘those parts’, he means the bleak, harsh, and chalky landscape south of Galway. “But if the weather was nice and the wind died down, these women’s husbands would have a good excuse to come ashore in Clare.”

 In the olden days, there were ‘ladies’ who worked in the pubs of Kinvara and Galway, and who would love to get their hands on these sea voyagers’ money - one way or another. “This drove the women back home up the wall. After all, they had done the hard work of drying the peat, and carrying it onboard with baskets on their backs. So they built one of St Brendan’s Castles to make the wind pick up and blow from the right direction, and bring their boats and husbands home.” And did they succeed? “Oh, did they! Of course they did! After all, these castle builders were *determined*!”

**A Class on American History**

When alone in a restaurant, it is always hard not to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations, especially when the venue is practically empty. Right now I am listening in on a history lecture, two tables away from me in an Asian restaurant in the small village of Carraroe. Three generations of Irish-Americans are seated around a table eating Chinese food, while the mother informs her two children that both Ireland and the USA have been colonies of, and oppressed by the English. “The Irish clans could never put aside their differences and stand together, so they never managed to kick the Brits out. And the same happened with America. Virginia and Boston were busy fighting each other, and could never unite against the colonial power.” She has a quote ready: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” “Do you know who said that?” The children have no clue. “It was Benjamin Franklin.”

 The children, whose names are Sean and Liam, gaze longingly at their smartphones. “Listen,” their mother says with a hint of annoyance. Apparently she hasn’t taken her children all the way to Ireland so they can play games on their phone. “We have a very similar history. England used to own Ireland, just like they owned us. This is England, Ireland and America,” she proclaims, as she sketches out an imaginary map on the paper tablecloth. “After the war with England, any remaining loyalistswere thrown out of the USA, and fled to Canada. Once the war was won and we had freed ourselves from England, there were still tensions between these American patriots and British loyalists. They had problems trusting one another. Just like in Ireland.”

 A man on the neighbouring table, glances over to me with a grin. He finishes off his dinner and wanders over to my table. He has noticed that I am reading Tim Pat Coogan’s best-selling history book about the Irish diaspora. He has actually met Coogan, and read many of his books. My fellow diner’s own name is Pádhraic [Gaelic for Patrick], or P.J. for short, and he comes from Derry in Northern Ireland. He has just spent some time learning Gaelic at a summer school in County Donegal, which he thinks is the most beautiful region in all of Ireland. Now he is travelling together with a younger student to see more of the west coast, and to practice their Gaelic. But apparently it is hard work, because the dialect here in Connemara is far removed from the one in Donegal.

 After dinner, we pop into the pub right next to the restaurant. Two brothers, well into their eighties, are sitting by a small, dark-stained table, each with their own Guinness and tweed sixpence lain out on the table in front of them. P.J. and the younger student, Ben, soon find themselves deep in conversation in Gaelic with the two brothers, but P.J. is struggling to understand what they are saying. These old gentlemen don’t really speak English, so they can’t clear up any misunderstandings. These must be two of the few surviving Irishmen who aren’t bilingual. I don’t understand a word, and am completely excluded from the conversation.

 Irish politicians are touchingly united on the issue of preserving the nation’s mother tongue, Irish Gaelic, even though it is slipping through their fingers like sand. So in a way, tonight I am witnessing a special event, one that will soon be lost to history: Being excluded from a conversation in Gaelic, not because the two gentlemen wants to shut me out, but because they have no other option.

**Lawlessness and Rounds of Drink**

The father of the two uninterested American children from the restaurant has walked out of his history lecture, to ask the girl behind the bar whether they have any Hookers. The bartender’s face stiffens, and she casts him a dark look. Hookers? She gives the American a cold stare. What does he think he’s playing at? Does he think she’s running a brothel? “No, we don’t have hookers here,” she replies curtly, and turns towards the next customer. The name of Galway’s newest addition to the beer scene is apparently named after the region’s traditional sailboats. Unfortunately for the American, the bartender is clearly not acquainted with the brand.

 Ben gets up to buy a new round of drinks. I still have a good deal left in my glass, and mull over how on earth I am going to crack the Irish custom of footing other people’s bills. Both P.J. and Ben’s Guinness glasses are still three quarters full, yet Ben is still coming back with more drinks. What is it with these people? Do the Irish imagine they are going to die of thirst if they don’t keep at least one beer as back-up at all time? Are they afraid the bartender is suddenly going to take ill, and disappear for the rest of the evening? While I still have half a glass of wine left, I am first bought one, and then two backup glasses from people I don’t even know.

 I first became acquainted with the Irish drinking concept of buying rounds in the small traditional pub of Tigh Kitt. The pub is situated in an inconspicuous location along the R336 road, on the outskirts of Carraroe. I was invited there by a local man, who promised me “the real stuff.” None of these amateur musicians who play for tourists, oh no. In here there were five local musicians, with fiddles, guitars, accordions and *bodhráns* - the traditional Celtic drum played in both Ireland and Scotland.

 Tigh Kitt, meaning ‘Kitt’s House’, has a unique history. A few years ago, Kitt, after whom the pub was named, came to the realisation that she didn’t have long left to live. Her lifelong wish was to start up a pub where people gathered to play and sing together. So she did. After Kitt’s death, musicians and locals have honoured her memory by gathering here every Thursday to play. Now and then the musicians even perform *sean-nos*, songs in the ‘old-style’, where unaccompanied singers just sit on their barstools, singing out verse after verse in Gaelic. *Sean-nos* always tell a story. Some of these stories are funny, but most are tales of famine, poor farmers being driven from their homes, dying rebels, or unfortunate romances. Perhaps this was why they got under my skin and filled me with a blue feeling, even though I couldn’t catch a word. I asked my drinking companion: so are all these songs as sad as they sound? “All Irish songs are sad. Except the ones where we fight.” I pressed him: “So they have a good ending when you fight?” “Ah, no. They don’t really end well then, either.”

 A travel guide which I read before my first trip to Ireland had offered up a few sentences about the Irish drinking culture. The trick was: don’t wait for your own pint to run out, get a round in when your friends are close to the bottom of their glass. It’s possible this rule works a treat in Dublin, but it definitely doesn’t work in Connemara. My friends at Tigh Kitt sat there with two or three pints of lukewarm beer each, lined up in a row in front of them on the table, ready to quench the thirst of both walkers and drivers home. Was this all a competition in Celtic generosity? When I ended up with a third beer in front of me before even managing to finish off my first, I finally realised how to crack the Irish drinking rules. I crouched down like a tiger, preparing to pounce forward and wrestle past the others - at last I would be able to buy in a round before they had drunk three sips of Guinness. But as I dug my heels into the ground in an attempt throw myself towards the counter and buy drinks for every man, someone else beat me to it. It felt like we were competing in a kind of upside-down game of musical chairs. Shamefaced, it hit me that I had committed the worst sin of all. Caesar once claimed that the Gaels would dole out the death penalty to people who weren’t generous and welcoming hosts.

 Which was why, a few days later in the Carraroe pub, I decided to grill P.J. from Northern Ireland about Irish drinking rounds. How do you know when it’s time to buy someone a drink? Is it after they’ve taken their first, second, or third sip? “Oh no, no, no,” he sighs. “That’s not how it works at all.” Huh? What I had been witness to, according to P.J., was the panic that takes over when closing time approaches. Because even though the pub has stopped serving, you won’t be thrown out of the pub, like you often are in England. “Us Irish love to break the law,” he says, contradicting the theories of Tim Pat Coogan, his favourite author. Coogan claims that Irishmen are actually just as law-abiding as everyone else, but that they are simply followed their own, Celtic Brehon laws. Their penchant for breaking British laws has given them a rather undeserved reputation as lawbreakers.

 Well I never. An outsider might be led to think that Irishmen are just proud of being rebels and lawbreakers. The day before, I had been put on the spot by a man from Carraroe: Did I know the difference between Irishmen and Anglo-Saxons? The risk of overstepping the line and ruining the conversation was so high I decided not to hazard a guess. “The difference between a Brit and an Irishman,” the man went on, in a proud voice, “is that when a new law is brought in, the Irish try to find out how we can get round it, while Englishmen follow it blindly.” He rounded off his proclamation by serving me some *poítin* [put-cheen], moonshine, from a bottle he had stashed away in the fireplace.

 So what kind of rules do the Irish break? I ask P.J. “Closing times. Aye, the pubs close their doors, but everyone who is still inside still sticks around to throw a cracking party. We break the smoking ban, too. Once you start drinking illegally, you might as well smoke illegally too. And non-smokers don’t complain.” I point out that this might not be too strange. After all, no-one would dare protest and be deemed a party pooper. P.J. cuts me off. “One time, when I was a young lad, I was home alone at a neighbour’s house, drinking *poítin* with some friends. By the time their ma came home, all of us 11-year-olds were completely scuttered.” And did she ring their parents?” P.J. laughs. “No! She couldn’t do that; she’d been brewing and selling the *poítin* illegally!”

**On the Way to Skellig Michael**

“Yesterday I left the Kerry coast in an open boat,” wrote the playwright and Dubliner, George Bernard Shaw, in 1910 as he journeyed to Skellig Michael. “33 feet long, propelled by ten men on five oars. These men started on 49 strokes a minute, a rate which I did not believe they could keep up for five minutes. They kept it without slackening half a second for two hours, at the end of which they landed me on the most fantastic and impossible rock in the world: Skellig Michael, or the Great Skellig, where in south west gales the spray knocks stones out of the lighthouse keeper's house, 160 feet above calm sea level.”

 A century later, a small fleet of rustbucket fishing boats chug southwest along the shores of Valentia Island. Out on open water, the sea showers the passengers sitting at the stern in regular intervals. Guided by my own experiences from the Scottish islands, I have found myself a dry spot behind the wheelhouse for shelter, and started up a conversation with a stonemason who works on the preservation of Skellig monastery. After a while talking, he invites me to spend the night at his place on the mainland. It’s far cheaper than a B&B, he points out. Is this simply a stereotypically Celtic, friendly and welcoming gesture? I signal to him that I have a family, and he seems genuinely shocked. I have children? Who looks after them while I’m gone? I tell him how the children have a dad. He doesn’t repeat his invitation. (Some women I meet in Ireland are just as blown away by the notion of a man looking after children. The very mention of it makes them burst into laughter. Aye, that’ll be the day! Leaving your kids with their pa. The little ones wouldn’t survive a day! Ha, ha, ha.)

 We approach the two islands, Great Skellig and Little Skellig. Dark, jagged, sharp rocks. They bring to mind the island of St Kilda off the Hebrides. Just as raw, black and inhospitable. A place you would never have believed people would want to go ashore, let alone settle. The islands have no trees, and no big caves. Which means no natural shelter from the squalls, downpours and snowstorms from the Atlantic. Yet this remote location was exactly what the Irish monks had in mind when they built a monastery on the larger of the two islands, at some point between the 6th and 8th century.

 One gannet. Two gannets. Thousands of gannets. Tiny white feathers, fluttering in the wind or flicking between the sprays of froth in the water. Gannets are my favourite birds. With a two metre wingspan they soar, almost glide, across the wide grey skies. It takes only a few slow beats of their milky white wings, and they rest on the wind as they scour the deeps for fish. They ready their dive, then smack into the surface of the ocean at up to a hundred kilometres per hour, equipped with their own natural airbags in their skull and ribcage.

 Little Skellig is a sheer cliff that serves as a fine nesting spot for birds. The smell hits me with a smack. A sour and salty stench rushes into my nostrils. All smells are hard to describe, but this one reminds me of some other well known odours. I have experienced it before. Near St Kilda’s rocks, the cliffs of Westray on Orkney, and on the Hermaness National Nature Reserve on Shetland. The smell of thousands of nesting birds spraying guano, turning the rocks below so white that you could use them as sea markers from a mile away. Soon I hear the loud cacophony of a nesting cliff. A dull roar, like the huge and steady crushing sound of an old-fashioned machine, one which grains of sand have found their way into its gears. The rhythm speeds up and slows down like an old steam train. An auditory illusion, of course - the gannets don’t have a conductor.

**“Welcome to Skellig Michael!”**

Skipper Walsh ties up at the lighthouse pier on Great Skellig Michael, where the monks used to tie up their own hide-skin boats when they lived here. They originally had three mooring points, each with steps leading up to the monastery. Now everyone uses the southern approach. One by one, we all teeter on the edge of the gunwale, then shakily find our legs on the slippery steps up to dry footing.

 The first section of the path is easy. A reasonably wide trail, put in place by lighthouse engineers, curls round the rocky cliff face. A helicopter pad sits close to the wall, which I suppose is reserved for real emergencies, like if tourists or workers seriously injure themselves. Three deaths have been recorded in recent years: A German woman in 1995, and two Americans who fell off the steps back in 2009. After these two fatal incidents, UNESCO demanded a safety review of Skellig, one of the organisation’s world heritage sites.

 According to the lighthouse keeper at the time, three deaths also occurred in the 1800s. In 1820, the keeper Whitehart lost his life whilst stacking hay, and two young men fell to their deaths a few years later. What happened to the lighthouse worker Séamus Rohu, who disappeared without a trace in 1957, is anyone’s guess. There have been a number of other nasty falls, but none that resulted in loss of life.

 We skitter at varying speeds to a meeting place at the bottom of the first staircase. A woman is huddled up on the slope and sobbing loudly, while a man tries to comfort her. This doesn’t look promising. A guide is providing us with safety guidelines before she lets us roam free on our own, while pretending as though she can’t see the miserable lady. Although I do catch the guide throwing the occasional glance over her shoulder to check how she’s doing. This woman becomes the elephant in the room. No-one speaks out about why she is crying, so my imagination starts to run wild. Maybe she has dreamt of coming to Skellig Michael ever since she was a child, only to suddenly realise that she can’t bear to walk up the steps. Perhaps this is an American couple on honeymoon, and he bit her head off after she had a panic attack on the way down. Or has she just revealed that she was prepared to sacrificehim to keep herself safe, like in crash landings, when married couples sometimes trampleover each other to reach an emergency exit? Could she be overwhelmed by religious ruminations after the sight of that tiny little monastery, nestled in clouds that clingbetween the two rocky peaks?

 “Welcome to Skellig Michael, everybody!” The guide exclaims, shouting to drown out the weeping woman. “It is very, *very* important that you all listen to what I have to say and follow these instructions. If you don’t feel completely comfortable on the first ledge, then you should *not* go further.” We all look up at the first ledge. There aren’t many steps between here and there, but they are unnervinglynarrow. “Remember: these steps get *extremely* slippery when they’re wet. Keep your eyes at the steps all the time. Concentrate on *every single* step. If you want to take pictures, stop and take them while you’re standing *still*.”

 I have made my way up the first set of steps and am far from “completely comfortable.” But I have dreamt of coming to this island for a long time, and have been made to wait several days until the sea crossing was calm enough.

At least there was a chain to hold onto at the narrowest part of the way up to the first ledge. But now it gets serious. 600 steps, directly upwards and without any railings or ropes that could spoil this sacred pilgrimage site. UNESCO considered various solutions after the deaths in 2009. They could close the island, put up railings or just carry on as before, preserving its unspoilt quality. They opted for the latter. Which means these steps haven’t been changed since the monks clambered up them over a millennium ago.

600 Steps

I decided to lock onto a man in front of me like a leech. My eyes latch on to him and bore into the heels of his boots. I don’t know whether he has noticed he is being followed. When he stops, I stop. *This isn’t suspicious*, I tell myself. *It makes perfect sense here to pass each other as little as possible*. The steps are uneven and wobble occasionally. There is nothing to hold on to, so a step to your left or right might result in you sliding down the green cliffside to your death. A couple dressed in matching Gore-Tex jackets are on their way back down. She has a pair of binoculars hanging from her neck. I stop still to give them room to pass but shamestricken, I choose to remain on the safest side. Right up against the cliff face. Gripped by *Vertigo Cowardis*.

 Higher and higher we climb, the leech and its unknowing host. The mist thickens. The landscape turns black and white. The man and his bootheels disappear off to the left, while the staircase on to the monastery carry on to the right, round a breakneck drop. He clearly wants to explore a jaw-droppingly terrifying spot on the way to “Needle’s Eye”, one which introverts would wander off to when they found the monastery to be a little too crowded. I am struck by a joke Father Eddie told me, back when I was in Connemara. “A long, long time ago, monks in Ireland used to live in small monasteries on islands or up in the mountains. Three of these hermits decided to go deep into the mountains to live far away from people. They lived there for seven years without speaking. Not a word. Even when they prayed to God, they prayed in silence. Then one day, they heard mooing. One of the monks said, ‘Listen, a cow.’ Seven years passed by before the next man opened his mouth: ‘No, it’s an ox.’ Seven years after that, the third monk exclaimed: ‘You both talk too much, I’m leaving.’”

 I am a leech without a host, and must continue on my own. I now turn to a new tactic: the Terrified Horse Trick. I hold my palms up against the sides of my face to avoid seeing anything on either side. It isn’t far, now. The guide said the hike up would take around twenty minutes, but I have walked twice as fast out of sheer terror. George Bernard Shaw once wrote that Skellig was “an incredible, mad place, which still tempts devotees to make ‘stations’ of every stair landing”, referring to the pilgrim’s little rituals as they approach their shrine. I haven’t seen any pilgrims go down on their knees and pray, or walk in sunwise circles. I also doubt whether anyone still crawls through Needle’s Eye and kisses the “stones of pain” 700 feet above the Atlantic Ocean, as they clearly did when Shaw was here.

 The walls of the monastery are only a stone’s throw away, but now I am seriously high up. Flagstones mark out a narrow path along a drop so severe that it conjures up compulsive thoughts. I am one of those people who tends to sprain their ankles. In UNESCO’s safety review it states: “On Skellig, even for those who remain on the standard route, such a slip or stumble is likely to become a free fall, with serious injury or death as a consequence.”

 And then I’m safe. The monastery is sheltered by a wall that follows the cliff edge. But anxious people like me have our own way of thinking. When we reach the top, there is no reason to celebrate. We immediately start worrying about the trip back down. Though if Shaw had a fear of heights, he didn’t mention it: “At the top amazing beehives of flat rubble stones, each overlapping the one below until the circle meets in a dome.” He is writing about the six monk cells which the Irish refer to as “beehives”: Six grey, dry-stone walled igloos are in sitting in a terrace. They seem to be standing just as firmly as they were 1500 years ago. The monks used to gather for prayer in the two large dry-stone wall oratories, which look like upturned boats sheltered from the wind. Their doorways point north-east, with a view of Little Skellig’s bustling world of nesting birds, a busy contrast to the silence of this small, grey, orderly monastery.

“Our Dream World”

The monastery was founded by the monk St Fionan, and was first mentioned in written sources from the 700s. Yet it had probably already been constructed by 500 AD, when Christianity was still brand new in Ireland. Then, somewhere around 1000 AD, the whole place became dedicated to St Michael, from whom the island’s name is derived. There probably weren’t more than twelve monks and an abbot living in the small community at any one time. They lived off bird eggs, dried fish, some vegetables from a small garden and milk from hardy goats and sheep. Corn and wine could be traded from the mainland, while fresh water was gathered from cisterns of rainwater, which seem to be collecting just as well today as they did 1500 years ago.

 Some of the monks on Skellig Michael lie buried in a tiny weecemetery, which looks like a walled flower bed filled with soil. It seems as though the monks were buried top and tailto save space; there are two rows of gravestones facing each other, like they have a little conversation going on. The tall, weather-beaten Celtic cross is teetering slightly, the amount of lichen growth bearing witness to just how much clean air there is here. This barren monastery was obviously a victim of harsh weather and the monks probably lacked basic comforts too. But the island life did have its upsides. An unknown writer in the 1100s wrote: “How marvellous it is to be embraced on an island, on the edge of a cliff from which I can look out over the open sea.”

 You would think that people on such a blustery isle as this would be invulnerable, impossible to raid. But according to a manuscript from the Abbey of St Gall twelve hundred years ago, a monk staring out to sea in the dead of night let out a sigh of relief when he saw that it was a stormy night, because it meant he was safe:

Bitter is the wind tonight

It tosses the ocean’s white hair

I fear not the course of a clear sea

But the fierce heroes from Lothind [Norway]

Skellig Michael experienced its first Viking raid in 795, the same year as the attack on Iona Abbey in Scotland and two years after the raid of Lindisfarne Priory in the North Sea. The Inisfallen annals describe another attack on Skellig in 812: “Scelec was plundered by the heathens and Étgal was carried off into captivity, and he died of hunger in their hands.” Abbots were often kidnapped and held to ransom, but something clearly went wrong with Étgal. The raids continued throughout the 9th century, but the monks didn’t surrender. They clung on, repaired the damages and refused to budge from the island until the 12th century, when the monasterial system in Irelandwas reformed.

 Why did Irish recluses and monks seek out such weathered, desolate locations? And who came up with the idea of setting up monasteries on these barren islands with such precipitous surroundings? The history of Ireland’s monasteries is closely tied up with the fate and customs of Christians in the Middle East. In the early years of Christianity, believers would move or flee into the desert to live safer and more ascetic lives as recluses. Certain mountaintops in Egypt became so popular that, somewhat ironically, they became home to several thousand hermits. The higher up and harsher the nature surrounding you, the closer you were to God. Eventually it became a tradition for hermits to come together in order to pray, and by the time Ireland was Christianised, the monasterial system in the Middle East was the exemplary model: Monks each still lived in their own cell, but gathered for mealtimes and prayer, and lived according to codified rules. The Irish monks must have thought it through meticulously - they had no deserts, but they had plenty of weather-beaten rocks, islands and mountaintops that would be perfectfor prayer and contemplation. Which is how Skellig Michael became Ireland’s most extreme reply to these Eastern desert monasteries.

 When George Bernard Shaw left Skellig Michael, the lighthouse keeper followed him down to the pier. When it was time to bid Shaw farewell, whether due to his solitude or his talkativeness, the lighthouse keeper tried tosqueeze the last few words out of this writer - for who knew how long it would be before he met another human being? It was misty and dark as the fishermen rowed Shaw back to the mainland. Without compass, and over threatening currents and furious tides they were “pursued by terrors, ghosts of Michael”. They were racked with fear of the sea swelling up and over the gunwales, making every fresh breeze a fresh fright. With no way of knowing where they were heading, “two hours and a half before us at best, all the rowers wildly imaginative, superstitious, excitable, and apparently super-human in energy and endurance.”

Our own departure is far less exciting, perilous and difficult. But one aspect is still the same, a hundred years after George Bernard Shaw shoved off from Skellig: “I tell you the thing does not belong to any world that you and I have lived and worked in: it is part of our dream world.”