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The Emigrant Return

Tracking Relations in County Kerry

BY KIA W. McINERNY

At the ferry terminal at Kilglornin my brother Brian jumps down, sniffs the air. "Ah. Cow dung! I love it." We're heading to Portmagee, stark lovely village on the Dingle Peninsula. My father was born there. Although he last saw his family in 1931, we hope to find relations my father has not seen or heard from in over six decades.

Brian tears through towns of pubs and post offices to arrive at Portmagee before dusk. My father, looking like a son of Shannon in tweed cap and cabled sweaters, rides beside him in the lead car. My husband and I follow with my nephew Martin.

At Kells Bay, an energy seizes my father. From memories fixed in his ninth year, he directs our small caravan like one whose sight is suddenly restored. Along a narrow road by the beach, his old schoolhouse. Constructed n 1887, it stands abandoned now, above a quickening sea.

"Dad, this could be your desk." He's posed behind a small weathered plank desk outside, a poignant figure in his tam and white beard. There's a happy Irish smile but his eyes squint to hold back tears. So long ago.

Down the road, a pink house beckons my father. "I'm going to knock at the door," he says decisively. But there is silence. As he turns away, the door is opened by a woman who could be my father's twin. In plaid skirt and heather sweater, she laces her hands at her dress front so firmly her knuckles turn white. Who is this stranger, speaking the soft vowels of America?

"I'm John McInerney, my mother was a McCarthy. Are there still McCarthys. in Portmagee?" They speak politely for several minutes, then Dad steps briskly down the path to the car. The woman is a McCarthy/Driscoll, my father's cousin Crissie till lives nearby.

In twists and turns along country paths, we trace my father's memory. Often, Brian's car disappears altogether in the banked grass, and we glimpse only sky and a few feet of road before the next bend.

Abruptly, Brian halts beside a ruddy young man driving cows along the lane. My father rolls down his window to address him. There's pointing. Gesturing. And my father steps from the car to embrace him. It's Crissie Driscoll's son! Crissie, my father's cousin, is the daughter of his uncle Johnny. Like all the women we've met in Ireland, she's vigorous and hardworking. Trim in parka and slacks, Crissie has mothered eleven children. Presently, she bakes scones and tend her calfs.

"Ye've come from America," she repeats softly, as proof of some spell. "Ye'll want to see the cottage."

My father's grandparents, Timothy and Mary McCarthy, owned the charming stone cottage on the grassy beach of Dingle Bay. We can see the cottage from Crissie's house. My father, his mother were born there. Crissie minds the house for a London couple who bought it for a seaide retreat. It would fetch several million dollars in Malibu.

Cozy with beamed ceilings and

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grew into an important trading centre. Its importance is due to the agricultural development of Southern Russia, and for being the biggest producer of agricultural machinery in the country.

Some 80% of Russia's combine harvesters and 70% of her cultivators and seeding machines are produced in this busy city. Rostov is in the Ukrainian Republic and the 'black-soil' lands of the Ukrainian steppes are one of the most important wheat-producing areas of the world.

Since the completion of the Volga-Don Canal, Rostov is connected to five seas. A vine growing district in the Don territory is famous for its sparkling red wine.

We were taken on a conducted tour of the city which has a population of one million. During World War II, or as the natives call it, the Great Patriotic War, three quarters of the buildings were destroyed and one in every four people was killed. Re-building is still in progress, and most people in this city live in high-rise apartments.

The Liberation Memorial 1943 was pointed out to us, which is 70 metres high and we also saw a bust of Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut. Rostov has many open spaces with trees, shrubs, flowers and fountains.

The highlight of our stay was a visit to the island settlement - Starocherkasskaya, the former capital of the Don Cossacks. The Cossacks were originally fierce warrior-horsemen from the Steppes of Western Asia, who became soldier-farmers and were given lands around the lower Don on condition that they fought for the Tsars. The boat to this island on the river Don left at 9.30 am. Before we embarked, passengers disembarked bringing with them produce for the local markets. Mostly old women, they walked to and fro between the boat and the quay-side. Dressed in black with strong, black boots, and 'kerchiefs around their heads, they hauled sacks of potatoes on their backs up the steps and deposited them on the quay-side. Some of the women carried buckets of cucumbers on wooden shoulder harnesses. Others had pails of strawberries covered with muslin while still more carried boxes of tomatoes and eggs.

Dmitri said the bridge over the river Don united Europe with Asia. In less than an hour we landed on the island. It was like stepping back in time about 200 years. The houses were small square stone structures raised several feet from the ground. It appears that the river overflows from time to time and floods the island. People working the small holdings were mostly elderly women with manual implements. A muddy road skirted the island and there was no motor traffic, no electricity pylons and no television aerials. The silence was unique. There were no dogs barking, but hens were heard cackling.

A museum on the island depicted the domestic apartments of old - a kitchen with stove and samovar, wooden chairs and tables and a dresser with china. The living room had a clock with pendulum and a display cabinet with family photographs and ornaments, as well as a table and chairs.

What came as a surprise was a very ornate church on the island, known as the Cathedral of the Resurrection. Very high stone steps led to the massive wooden doors. The Cathedral has nine onion shaped domes with gilt crosses, and it also has a bell tower which leans. Inside the walls were whitewashed and the altar had 123 icons which have recently been restored. The gallery was extensive and formerly held the choir. The Tsar visited here in 1823 and the Cathedral ceased as a place of worship in 1926.

On our return on foot, we noticed several women standing at a huge table. On display were carrots, beetroot, cucumbers, tomatoes and strawberries. The population of the island is 2,500 and life seems to be taken at a very leisurely pace. It was almost impossible to believe, that less than an hour away, there was a bustling city with non-stop traffic - a city called 'the gateway to the Caucasus'.

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Cozy with beamed ceilings and alcoved windows to the sea, the house is lovely, set against dramatic skies, hilly pastures of black and white cows and fat sheep. The walls are pale stone with shallow hearths for peat fires. A huge fieldstone hearth dominates the main room which my father calls the kitchen. All his meals were cooked there. Pots still hang along the stones.

Upstairs, a loft of tidy bedrooms have their own views of the sea. My great grandparents slept there when my father was eight.

The house inspires old stories of my father's pranks. He and his brothers chased the greyhound, and sicced them on the cats for fun. They traumatized Aunt Julia's hen by sticking her neck in a bottle and setting her to sea. "We got a licking from my grandfather for that," Dad says. "She never laid eggs again."

My favourite, though, are images of Uncle Johnny and his collie Queenie. "Uncle Johnny was good with dogs. Queenie, she had the gift for herding cows. At milking time, Uncle Johnny would stand right about there," my father points to a spot in the lower pasture, "and shout his commands to Queenie in the far pasture. I can see him drilling that collie every day at milking time."

Indeed, it seems my father watches his uncle beyond the window, with Queenie barking, darting at the cows hooves to get them in line. "When it was time for Queenie to retire, she tutored her puppy in the field, it was astonishing."

Crissie peers at me in the light from the alcove window. "Ye're the picture of yer Aunt Margaret," she says. What was she like, I want to know, my grandmother. "Oh yer Aunt Margaret, she was a lovely woman." My grandmother returned to Kerry often, every two or three years. She would hire a driver to bring her from Shannon, take her on excursions to Dublin.

My father sits alone on a wooden bench near the hearth where he might have warmed himself after chasing the cats. His hands clasped, he looks down, lost in memory. My father has a lot to remember, a lot to regret. His mother's family, his father's people, he's never been back. Never even written to the cousins who he grew up with. It's natural to seek acceptance in one's adopted country, especially when one is drawn, like my father, to fit in. He succeeded at becoming an American, and putting the past behind. There was a cost, and I see it in the sadness of his reflection on the pane.

There's no hotel in Portmagee. Crissie helps us build a peat fire in her daughter Eilee's house, which is closed up for the winter. The heat is off, it's chilling cold, but there's no place else to stay.

Still light at seven o'clock and it's pleasant gazing out the picture window. My brother glances out casually, jumps up. Martin streaks from the pasture, panicked, the cows in hot pursuit. Stirred, they stand glaring at Martin through the dilapidated fence. He mocks them, delighted, nothing like this ever happens at the mall at home.

At nine thirty as we're retiring fully dressed to our beds, Crissie arrives with Christina and Caroline, two of her children. They whisper among themselves, regarding Brian and me like sculptures in a gallery. "They take after Aunt Margaret, don't they Ma?" Christina asks. Crissie nods, "They've got the drawn faces of the McCarthys."

Christina remembers my grandmother visiting when Christina was just a child. "Prim and proper she was, her pale hair secured just so with a bone comb. One day we passed a school of children playing in the mud, barefoot. Aunt Margaret couldn't get over it. In this day and age, she said, to go without their shoes."

Next morning, Crissie brings up cornflakes, eggs, milk, tea and Irish bacon. We stroll the strand to the village, a rather grand name for a store the size of a closet, three pubs and a shuttered restaurant. Cautiously, we pass the cows, hoping there won't be a mad cow as gored Mary McCarthy's leg. The pubs are already open, and we pause in a cozy one with painted urns of sailing ships. Already, the men are gathering.

Of my grandmother's effects, I've only her pearls and her passport, last stamped in 1969. Yet the pubkeeper smiles in recollection, "Oh, Mrs. McInerney, she was a lovely woman."

By the time we've returned from our walk, Crissie has tended her calfs. She hurries down, anxious to take us touring among the relations.

The homes of our Irish cousins are comely and neat. All are educated and comfortable financially. Where is the impoverishment that led my grandparents to leave? Ironically, we find Kerry rich in the important things, beauty and quality of life. In just a few decades, we've come to value the very things grandmother rejected.

Our tour continues to Ballyskellig, a small bathing village where my great grandparents met and are buried. Crissie assumes we want to see their graves. The stone markers in the old abbey and graveyard date from the 1800's. Celtic crosses, druidic shapes that evoke ancient mysteries. We explore the ruins of McCarthy Castle in the bitter cold. (Brian accuses me of acting like a princess; perhaps this was my castle in ancient time). We find our cousins taciturn, they regard us as curiosities. Yet they get on easily with my father, leaning in close to speak softly and earnestly. Later, I was astonished at my father's complaint, "It's tiring listening to these Irish, I can't understand them."

A often as possible, I draw them out on my grandmother. And I feel a growing sadness for her tragedies. Her first trip to the States fell far short of her dreams. The voyage was hard. Immediately, she became ill. She lost a kidney, it drained their savings. She was forced to return to Kerry, alone with her three boys.

When the Depression hit the States in 1929, America refused re-entry without proof of wealth. My grandfather built a large bank account from friends, and used every means to secure their visas to America. But it took two years, in the Irish countryside.

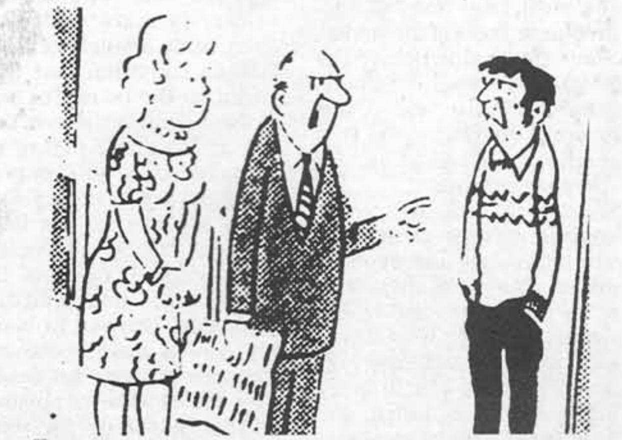
In New York, financial problems pursued them. My father's younger brother, Joseph, concealed a burst appendix to save medical bills. His death made a wound which never healed. After my grandmother's separation from my grandfather, her love affair with Captain Tuttle led her back to Ireland and England. Did she hope they would marry? Unfortunately, my grandfather declined her request for an annulment. And she would never contravene the Church.

Suddenly, I miss my grandmother. Why couldn't I have known her better? Why couldn't she have lived to join us here?

Dusk again, and time to go. Photographs all around. And finally, a tearful hug from Aunt Crissie. "Ye'll be back," she Indeed. We came here ignorant of our family, the cousins my father left behind, but we came to know them quickly, and their love will surely draw us back.

SOURCES

Ireland promotes family and heritage as one might expect. And there exist excellent resources for lining up contacts before you go. The Irish Consulates in San Francisco and New York are extremely helpful and will send packets of sources. The Genealogical Office in Dublin maintains a consultation service as well.



"Do you mean to tell me Sylvia's already spent three hours getting ready to go out with THIS?