

2005

Twice to the Emerald Isle

Patricia Clark

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

Recommended Citation

Clark, Patricia (2005) "Twice to the Emerald Isle," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol29/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Patricia Clark is a professor in the Writing Department as well as being GVSU's poet-in-residence. She is also serving a two-year term as poet laureate of Grand Rapids. Her book of poems My Father on a Bicycle came out in 2005.

TWICE TO THE EMERALD ISLE

I crossed the ocean twice to Ireland in recent years, one journey planned as a site visit to Trinity College Dublin as the key part in a GVSU/Writing in Ireland proposal. After Dublin, I combined this first Ireland trip with a three-week writing residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Center in County Monaghan; the other journey came the following year, summer of 2004, when I returned with students for seven weeks. On both trips, my husband Stan Krohmer came with me—we had decided to see Ireland for the first time together.

When people talk about visiting Ireland, they always exclaim about how green it is, oohing and aahing about the numbers of greens, going on and on as though they were art majors about Kelly green, or chartreuse, or green, green hills. That's all well and good, but I grew up in the lush Pacific Northwest of the U.S. where green is commonplace. I can't separate my impressions of Ireland from the faces of people I met—forget the green: Ireland is summed up by its people.

"Dublin is not Ireland." That was a comment made to us by American friends and academics who knew Ireland. To them, Dublin was and is too close to Chicago in its urban frenzy, the Grafton Street shopping crowds undistinguishable from the Miracle Mile shops. Dublin didn't seem like Chicago to us, though, as we walked and walked, past St. Stephens Green to Trinity, back down Baggott Street to our hotel. There are no sky scrapers in Dublin; actually, there are height limits on buildings so that the city keeps its historical look. And I have never found cab drivers in Chicago quite as eager as drivers in Dublin to launch into historical accounts of uprisings and trouble. Our cab driver from the Dublin airport to the city even pointed out the bullet marks still visible in the façade of the GPO and the 'rising in 1916.

Our first visit involved meetings with the USIT staff who handle the organization of the Irish Studies Program at TCD, especially Françoise Gil and Seona MacReamoinn. We met them just off Aston Quay and

O'Connell Street in the USIT offices bustling with Irish students lining up to get visas to work in the U.S. in the summer. The USIT offices (shared with Amnesty International) were just as crammed as the lobby—with people, files, computers, office furniture. Francoise Gil, a dark-haired French woman, showed us around campus. No matter the weather or temperature, Francoise was always elegant. Her hair curled beautifully in the misty rain, what the Irish call a “soft day”—while mine just went awkwardly awry.

The Trinity campus was founded in 1592, a walled campus with gates for pedestrians and cars, gates locked at night. We were shown the classroom where the lectures would take place, the brightly painted (but paint peeling in the corners) “Debating Chamber”—just off the nearby cobblestone square with the beautiful Henry Moore sculpture. There was also The Buttery, the morning dining spot, we'd get to know for scones, fruit, coffee and tea. There was construction underway for new dorms, and as we walked around campus—passing a playing field where people in white played cricket—we heard many different languages spoken: German, English, Italian, and Spanish. There were also frequent tour groups with children or adults wearing matching backpacks in bold colors.

The next-to-last night in Dublin, Stan and I bought tickets to the play *Sive* at The Gaiety Theatre down near St. Stephen's Green. Both Francoise and Seona had plans that night, declining our invitation to join us. Seona suggested that we meet her later for supper at Trocadero, which she said was a hangout for the theatre crowd after a performance.

The play was a dark drama, all about entangled love and buried family problems including violence and alcohol, as I remember—typical Irish fare. Afterwards, we walked up Grafton, over to William Street and found Trocadero. The maitre d' wasn't thrilled to seat us until we mentioned Seona's name (pronounced “shone-a”) How could we have known she was a regular, lived right around the corner in the neighborhood, and that dropping her name would have a transformative effect on the man? Suddenly it was, “Come right this way.” We sat at the bar with Seona until we were seated at a fine table, with great service all night long as we feasted on dau-

phine potatoes and steak, enlivened by a delicious cabernet. Now we saw how Dublin really came alive after 11 p.m., quite like New York. Now the restaurants hummed with people, and music blared into the street as couples and groups of people hurried past. We'd been having dinner far too early, in thinly populated dining rooms. Here was the reason why: everyone was out late the night before.

It turns out that Seona Mac-Reamoinn, the Irish Studies Summer School staff director, is a force in the offices and networks of Dublin tour guides, travel agents, journalists, academics, writers and artists. Never one to talk about herself, it was only later we learned her father had been a famous journalist in Ireland (still alive, though not in good health). Later, dropping her name at Annaghmakerrig, I found out that everyone knew Seona. Later, too, we saw her avid interest in literary Dublin, as she introduced Anne Enright at a Trinity reading, as she welcome John Boland from *The Irish Times*, and as she introduced Gerald Dawe, Boland, and me at a poetry reading in Dublin.

As we three hugged goodnight, well past midnight, after our wonderful meal, I felt it was clear that the evening had closed the deal with Irish Studies at Trinity and GVSU. Now we would return, now we were welcomed into the “family” of life in Dublin, especially Seona's circle. Kisses all around, we made our way back down Baggott Street to our Georgian House hotel.

Into the West, now, and a new adventure: driving in Ireland. Once I had mastered the stick shift car

and the roundabouts (scary the first time), we headed to Galway with a lot of other Friday traffic. Despite intending to start early, it was nearly noon as we left the airport where we had picked up the car.

We had a hotel (Brennans Yard) in Galway and an address for it, but no idea where it was, exactly. Back in the U.S., I had sent an email to Michigan writer Thomas Lynch, the well known poet and undertaker of Milford, Michigan. I'd met him briefly once at Schuler Books in Grand Rapids, but wasn't at all sure he'd remember me or respond to an email request about recommended hotels or sights to see in Galway. I shouldn't have doubted his generosity. Within thirty minutes, I had his reply. He recommended the Great Southern Hotel in Galway (well out of our price range, with rooms beginning around 230 euro per night) and went on to offer names of bookstores in both Galway and Dublin, with notes about which proprietors to say hello to and what greetings to offer.

That must be why we were so warmly and graciously received at Kenny's Bookshop on the main street in Galway. Two brothers run the place, along with their elderly mother. My husband and I browsed a long time before I got up enough courage to introduce myself. With the mention of Lynch's name, the smiles came out and even warmer greetings. Then the offer to take my photo ("You do have a published book, don't you?"). Later that afternoon, I returned with a copy of *North of Wondering*. Brother Tom took my photo. When Stan came looking for me, Des said, "Oh, he's back there—she's being hung." At least for the time being, my photo would join the other photos gracing the walls there in Galway.

After some days in Galway, we headed northeast to County Monaghan, driving on a Sunday through wet, lush, rolling countryside on a road that curved over and back from the border to Northern Ireland. I would spend three weeks writing at a place called the Guthrie Center, known affectionately as Annaghmakerrig, for the lake of the same name on the large estate. Tyrone Guthrie's long-ago home, the place now offers residencies to writers, painters, and other artists. Many of the residents are Irish, coming for a few days or as long as three months, some with bursary awards (like our

arts councils), but a number come from international places: the U.S., Germany, the U.K., Italy, and others. Stan and I arrived on a Sunday afternoon, planning to spend the night in Monaghan town but coming over for a quick look.

The next day Stan would catch the bus back to Dublin and thence to a homebound flight. We parked the car in front and walked around the side of the house. No formal greeting: someone leaned out a window, saying "Are you coming to stay?" "Yes," I said—and the person waved us to the back door. We came in through the kitchen—a lovely way to enter any house. It turns out the residents had just had the afternoon meal—early supper, on Sundays—and offered us leftovers. We declined, but someone looked on a schedule hanging above the washing machines to find out which room would be mine. "Ah," said Judith (an opera singer who I would later come to admire, for her dramatic flair), "You've been given the best room in the house: Lady Guthrie's bedroom."

How could I leave the bed each morning? It was a sumptuous brass bed with a thick mattress and even thicker duvet over crisp white sheets and white lacey counterpane.

But rise I did, for my desk, and then for coffee from a French press downstairs. I would make a small pot and then climb the stairs back to my room, eager to find words to describe this green, wet, wild countryside.

Making friends was the best part, even before finding words: Cherry Smith, Vincent Sheridan, Becky O'Connor, Kieran Patton. It was the first two, Cherry and Vincent, that I somehow aligned with from the start: Vincent had a topographical map and pored over it at lunch breaks and tea breaks. We began a hunt to find and visit the megalithic sites in the area. The Guthrie Center and Lake Annaghmakerrig are in County Monaghan, known far and wide as "drumlin country." Drumlins are mounds of earth left by receding glaciers, so the landscape isn't smooth, but the hills are hilly themselves, dotted with drumlins.

We worked, separately, each day (I often rose at 6:30 or 7, my usual time back home) and then met up for a drive around 4 in the afternoon—heading out in my snazzy red Opal, looking for sites. Vincent was the map-reader until he got us horribly lost one day. Then Cherry

took over, rather sharply critical of V's abilities with the maps, and steered us to a blue-marked spot between lanes and creeks and farms.

Megalithic stones. These are sites holy to the ancient Celtic peoples, sites marked with dolmen stones, fairy circles, and altar stones, all aligned and arranged with celestial constellations and the stars. We knocked on doors to find directions and assailed bystanders. We parted barbed wire and scrunched under or over; helping each other. We patted amazed cows and skittish horses. We transcended cow plops and muddy lanes, lanes that fronted boarded up stone houses with dogs tied scruffily in the yards. One man came out to give us directions, looking as though, sounding as though he hadn't spoken in several years. The tattered curtains at a front window wagged forlornly.

Back at the Guthrie House for a communal dinner, prepared by a cook—Darlene was our favorite, by far—and everyone wanted to hear about our adventures. Two of Tyrone Guthrie's stipulations for the house were that a variety of artistic endeavors be embraced and that the residents eat the evening meal together. The rough plank table there, suitable for seating a crowd of twenty, as I recall, was our grand place for those meals. The talk flowed and the wine helped it along, and afterwards we retreated to work or went into the parlor to share music, or poems, or stories.

Party pieces: everyone in Ireland seems to come prepared with one, or more. In May 2003, when I was in residence at the Guthrie Center, Vincent got up and sang, a capella, "Danny Boy." Becky and Matthew

sang a duet, a beautiful Irish ballad, in perfect harmony. Tom from Waterford recited bawdy poems. Brian Kennedy (a celebrity to the Irish, but a stranger to me—backup singer with Van Morrison) sang and played classic rock and roll tunes on his guitars. Brian sang duets with Valerie (the gardener at Annaghmakerrig)—together their voices mouthing the mournful words from the song “Carrickfergus.”

Our journey with students began with orientation sessions and then a casual supper at our house in Grand Rapids. The students were just now meeting each other. One was dropped off by her mother, an identical blond Dutch face and body to the student’s. Another two were driving together, got lost, and were late. And another couple arrived together, already “seeing each other,” as it turned out later. Two of the students had already traveled internationally—and both seemed adventurous and outgoing. None seemed overly shy, and all seemed excited about Ireland.

We talked about practicalities of money, packing, clothing, and books. The standard warnings: Try to blend in, not to stand out as an American. Don’t wear clothes with American symbols on them. And don’t wear provocative clothing with vulgar slogans. It isn’t safe to join political demonstrations in another country. Yes, you are all subject to the laws of our host country. GVSU and the International Program were subsidizing our program somewhat this year, and we didn’t have the requisite ten to fifteen students. I was grateful as I considered the logistics of passports, tickets, medical histories, and itineraries. If we were a group of twenty-two, I’m not sure I’d be this calm.

The best way to travel and enjoy yourself: be flexible. We arrived in Dublin and were met by Francoise, but once we arrived at the Trinity campus in Dublin, we realized we couldn’t have our rooms until afternoon. Was it terrible? Yes, it was pretty bad. We were jet-lagged, grimy, and cranky now that we’d arrived with all our luggage and then trundled it across cobblestones on the historic campus quad. On the plus side: the Trinity folks will store the luggage for a few hours, and we aren’t being singled out: everyone arriving will have to wait to move into their quarters. We’ll be grateful for our

rooms at 2:30. It's 9 a.m. The students were happy: after coffee and pastries with Francoise, they headed off in a pack to buy mobile phones and get some euros. Soon we'll all be able to call each other. Francoise helped me figure out how to use my mobile phone. She was patient and composed. I need to go to France and see if all the French are this helpful and warm.

Monday and we're welcomed to the Irish Studies program for the opening day of classes, and already there's a problem. Overnight there was an incident. Daire Keough, the director, says that some students were drinking, came back very late, made noise (unacceptable), and someone was hurt, an ambulance had to be called. The debating chamber (the room for our classes) fell very silent as Daire stated, with a quiet tone of anger, that such behavior wouldn't be tolerated and people will be sent home. "It's not to occur again." Later, I learned to my relief it was not GVSU students in trouble. In fact, our students performed well throughout the trip—showing up on time in the right attire, asking questions, and mixing well with the other U.S. students we joined.

Traveling with students, going with them to the lectures on literature and history at Trinity College, I realized we don't have identical perspectives. Yes, when they were excited, often I shared their excitement: an example was our first experience at the theatre, seeing Boucicault's melodrama *The Shaughbraun* at The Abbey. They glowed with excitement; they were ready to change into theater majors and become singers. They even loved the dog that made a brief appearance onstage. But other times their criticisms of tour sites or events didn't tally with my experience. We visited the childhood home of Charles Stuart Parnell in County Wicklow on the first weekend, for example, and the students were bored almost to tears. For them, there wasn't enough context yet to understand why this place or person mattered. Okay, a fair criticism. But the guidebooks are full of information about James Joyce and Parnell, his significance in the Joyce family fortunes as well as the literature itself. I am taking mental notes, though: when we travel with another group to Ireland in a future year, I'll be sure to have them read some about Irish history and

the important place Parnell has in its history and for James Joyce.

One of our students never left Dublin—while the others headed out, in pairs or groups, to catch the train to County Cork, to Galway, or hop a flight to Paris on our three-day weekends. This is the same student who was decidedly not interested in international cuisine or the local Irish fare: she wanted to eat at Subway, or Macdonald's. Nevertheless I invited her to ride the Dart train to the east, to Howth along with Stan and me on a Friday, our day of no classes. We wanted to see the Irish Sea and visit the local fishmongers. I planned to cook some wild Irish salmon, I figured, if I could find some. This student agreed to come along and seemed to enjoy herself—our stopping at a pub for tea and hot chocolate during a sudden downburst, our wandering around looking for a castle and getting quite lost. Back at Trinity, though, she headed off immediately to check her email and I wondered if her lack of curiosity didn't have a lot to do with the boyfriend at home, the one she was crying over just before we flew out of the Grand Rapids airport.

One night we planned a visit to a club called Mother Hubbard's with two students. Early in the day Stan and I walked up to the place and bought tickets for an evening performance by Georgie Fame. I had never heard of him, but Stan said he played with Van Morrison and was a fabulous musician, so we had invited a couple of the students along. After supper we met in the

Trinity quad and headed up Dame Street close to the Liberties District of Dublin. Photographs in my album show our exuberance that day: the two students posed with a sculpture near Christchurch Cathedral. And the club experience turned out well. For one thing, there's no smoking anymore in Irish pubs, so it was a delightful smoke free experience. And the club was small. We nabbed a table right near the front, sitting only fifteen feet away from Georgie Fame and his vintage blonde Hammond teak B3 organ. It was a small club, and the folks around were friendly. A man next to me said his brother was responsible for the appearance of Georgie Fame, and he told a wonderful story about meeting the Beatles due to his brother's connection with the performer. I have a CD signed by Georgie Fame, and photos of the Mother Hubbard's sign: a woman in a red bonnet.

It wouldn't be right to leave out a mention that the Writing in Ireland group spends six weeks in Dublin but one week, too, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. It's not the last week; instead, we left Dublin and returned to it for our final week and closing events. But when the whole group decamped for Belfast there was a party atmosphere. For one thing, we were tired of Dublin's noisy traffic and tourists. For another, we'd heard plenty about Belfast: now it was time to *see* some of it. Events lined up included a meeting with the Lord Mayor of Belfast, as well as tours of the famous murals, and a political evening at Stormont where we'd meet representatives of several political parties, including Sinn Fein, the DUP (the Democratic

Unionist Party), and the UUP (the Ulster Unionist Party). The students would be housed in a brand new dormitory, each student to his or her own room (with shower!), and the staff and faculty would be housed in a hotel. Then the weather turned suddenly sunny and warm; all signs looked good.

One of our first evenings was a reading by poet-in-residence at Queens University, Medbh (pronounced "Maeve") McGuckian. Our host Peter Collins admitted to being mystified by Ms. McGuckian's work, but that was much later in the evening, long after his gracious introduction of her, and then the poems. She read a whole series about her infatuation with U.S. film star Gregory Peck. Often her explanations of the poems were integral to the understanding of them; if a reader simply encountered the poem without explanation, I'm not sure what he or she would get. Certainly we were fascinated by her odd obsession, and her recounting of talking to Gregory Peck's widow after his death.

A historian, Peter Collins was our able guide next day to the murals, found along gables of houses and shops in various contested areas of the city. Peter's commentary overwhelmed the actual images of the murals, however, with their hooded gunmen and hearts dripping blood, as he told the personal stories of children accidentally shot on the way to school, and other people massacred in retaliation. Clearly he could remember exactly what year it had been and the child's name and age; clearly the history of Belfast was burned into his memory, the way the fires at times lit the city and marked the landscape.

Belfast completed the picture for us, helped us understand—if ever outsiders can—how fierce the conflicts had been and still were, to some extent, despite the Good Friday Agreement and talks of reconciliation. Still the IRA did not agree to give up their weapons, and still—as we returned to the U.S. and followed the news—the political parties refused to sit down with Sinn Fein. Mostly what we learned in Belfast was how not to presume to understand what could barely be understood sometimes by its own citizens.

We were changed by our journeys. How could we not be? However, it was not easy to say how. The students

talked about Irish diction and clothes, not to mention the prices of things. I couldn't forget going down under Dublin Castle to see the original fortress walls and the seepage that was the "dark pool" Dublin was named for. Stan captured with his Rolleiflex some of the images that mattered most to him—in both Dublin and in Belfast. And I gave poetry readings of my own work with Gerald Dawe (the director of Trinity College's Creative Writing Program) and John Boland (from the *Irish Times*) at Trinity College, as well as a reading in Portadown, Northern Ireland with Guthrie Center friend Cherry Smith—hearing for the first time how my poetry sounded in a place far from home. How we were changed, how we saw the world differently, would be felt subtly, I suspected, for years. What we wanted, quite simply, was another chance to be changed, again.