

Finding Myself In Ireland

By Barbara McNally

Almost ten years ago, I took my first trip to Ireland, where I found images and parts of me that I didn't know existed. I found them in faces and personalities all around me; in their laughter and ability to laugh at themselves; in scenery; castles and cottages; in the weather—stormy and changeable like myself; in the roads: driving on the “wrong side of the road” (the story of my life); in their music and dancing that made me feel alive and proud to be Irish; in their passion for independence and self expression in any form; and in their stories of heroes and villains, sinners and saints—all that is within me. It was like going HOME after a long absence away from my friends and family. It was like coming home to myself.

My inspiration for the trip was my Irish Grandma Pat. After she passed away at 92, my mother and I came upon a collection of photographs among her effects—of 70-year-old Grandma Pat baring her breasts, wearing not much more than feathers and furs. All my life, I'd been compared to my Grandma Pat,

a flapper and suffragette who was bold and passionate. But discovering these racy photos, I realized I was nothing like her. I'd just gotten out of a deeply dependent marriage and was finally free, but I didn't know what to do with my freedom. So with Grandma Pat as my internal guide, I struck out alone toward the shores of this faraway country. I didn't know what to call what I was doing: A vacation; a voyage? I was on a trip to rediscover myself by going back to my roots. It was a re-creation of the person I longed to become, a rebirth. I had a feeling that if I traveled back through the archways of history, I might find in my Irish ancestors some reflection of my lost self, some thread that I could carry into the future. Ireland was the best of both worlds—completely foreign and new to me, but also deeply embedded in my DNA. I believed that, on the Emerald Isle, I could tap into something primal, mysterious, and true.

During my 23 years of marriage, I'd let my husband plan all of our family vacations. But this time, he would not be sitting beside me, hogging

the armrest and putting his stuff on my tray table. I'd booked my flight at the last minute. I hadn't booked a hotel room or reserved a rental car. I didn't even know how long I'd be gone. Aside from a vague notion of going to Westport, the small coastal town in County Mayo where my great-great-grandmother Bridget O'Dwyer was born, I didn't have a plan. With no timetables or itineraries, no maps or travel guides to follow, it was a flying-by-the-seat-of-my-pants kind of trip. However, when I landed at Shannon Airport, I discovered I had no pants because my luggage didn't make it.

It was August—peak tourist season—but I managed to get the last rental car at the airport; a “super-compact” little blue Fiat 500. Maybe a good thing my luggage hadn't arrived, because it probably wouldn't have fit. I drove out of the airport (on the left side!) and kept driving until I saw a sign for a destination that I found impossible to resist: Dingle, 70 km; not Dublin nor Donegal; not Cork nor Kerry; not even Westport, where my great-great-grandmother was born.

I would start my adventure single and ready to mingle in Dingle.

Looking back, it seems fitting that I started my exploration of Ireland on the Dingle Peninsula. I read that Saint Brendan the Navigator began his journey to North America—nearly one thousand years before Columbus—from Dingle. Brendan was an Irish monk born in 484. In 530, he embarked on a journey that lasted seven years. Scholars disagree as to how far Brendan traveled, but archeologists have documented the presence of ancient Irish runes in West Virginia.

Also, in the late 1970s, British adventurer Tim Severin journeyed from the Dingle Peninsula to North America in a handcrafted replica of Brendan's curragh, a rugged little sailing vessel. Severin successfully reenacted Saint Brendan's brave sail, but what I found most fascinating was that Saint Brendan was forty-six years old when he set sail across the Atlantic—the same age as I on my first trip to Ireland.

The scenery was enchanting, rolling



green hills that gave way to villages with low stone fences and thatched cottages and lichened churches. In Dingle, each storefront was painted deep maroon, slate blue, or sage green. It looked like a postcard, where every third business was a pub.

I found a room at a quaint bed-and-breakfast, where the owner shared my great-great-grandmother's name—O'Dwyer. I enjoyed beef stew and freshly baked soda bread and a proper "fry-up" for breakfast. I'd eaten traditional Irish foods all my life, but nothing quite like that breakfast: fried eggs, hot porridge, bacon, sausage, and black pudding. When I was a child, my grandpa used to say, "If a lassie is brave enough to eat black pudding, she'll go far in life."

On my first day, I found a nearby stable to ride horses. I picked a bay Connemara, an authentic Irish breed known for its athleticism and good temperament. Fiona, the girl who took me riding, gave me a history lesson on the area. She took me to the thousand-year-old Gallarus Oratory and showed me the "fairy

forts" built by the Celts in the Iron Age. Later that night, we went to a pub to hear a fiddler, and I gave Irish dancing a try.

The next morning, she introduced me to Celtic Christianity and took me to a beautiful Sunday service filled with poetry, music and singing in Gaelic. In town, she introduced me to her friend, Bridget—a witch (or Wiccan)—who taught me about women as a healing force, which was an interesting idea to me as a physical therapist. Bridget suggested I visit a well in Liscannor, dedicated to her namesake, Saint Brigid, the patron saint of women, wanderers, and children born out of wedlock. When I arrived at the well, it was night, under a full moon, and I met Bridget's friend Naidra, a fellow Wiccan, who had a six-fingered hand. At this point of the trip, I was wondering when I'd wake up and find myself back in my bed in California.

But, I was there to seek and find myself. I followed Naidra in their custom of drinking from the spring three times and making a "wish" to Saint Brigid. I felt such positive energy there—like a deep hum that came from within my own body, feeling my ancestors and their joy, their pain, their triumphs, their tragedies, and their strength.

My next stop was Galway, where I stayed at the majestic Ashford Castle in County Mayo, a thirteenth-century, five-star hotel with stables—my kind of fairy tale. At the castle, I took advantage of their world-renowned equestrian center, and explored the grounds on horseback, where Sir Benjamin Lee Guinness planted thousands of trees. I also visited Ireland's School of Falconry, where they train predatory birds like falcons, eagles, and owls.

There was a magic in the air in the Ireland that left me wanting some company. I made a bold move and asked one of the falconers, a handsome British man, out to a pub. That night, I took him to bed—my first one-night stand, which felt like waking up after a long, troubled sleep. I was literally swept off my feet...in a castle.

I left Ashford Castle for nearby "Cathair na Mart," the Irish name for Westport. Driving through, I realized that many of the landmarks were familiar from stories Grandma Pat had told me over the years. I was home!

There, I visited the Heritage Centre,

which offers genealogy services. I got a preliminary report, then the lady directed me to a local bed-and-breakfast run by a Connor McNally. Connor taught me that the McNally name means 'poor.' The clan is known as Black Irish, because the native Irish mixed with Spanish survivors of the Armada that wrecked off the coast of Westport. He told me one woman in my bloodline is legendary—Grace O'Malley or Gráinne Ní Mháille, the Pirate Queen.

Grace had been a strong-willed woman of means, who lived in the area during the sixteenth century. Her family came from Clare Island, just off the coast of Westport, and she used it as a base of operations for her seafaring adventures. She attacked ships at sea and fortresses on the coast—a real take-no-prisoners kind of woman, admired for protecting Ireland. She was respected by men and women alike for her savvy techniques and recognized as a leader of fighting men, a real coup for a woman, especially in those days. Married several times to prominent figures, Grace accumulated a great deal of wealth, both through her own escapades and her inheritances. Grandma Pat had looked up to her as a kind of role model, a woman ahead of her time; a fearless, heroic warrior who lived during a period of social change and political upheaval—one of Ireland's foremost feminists.

Connor also taught me about the Great Famine—the reason my great-great-grandmother had left Ireland. She was one of eight girls, and the only one brave enough to sail on a "coffin ship" to America. Her sisters chose to stay in Ireland and either joined the convent or starved to death. None of them had children.

I biked to Croagh Patrick, with the thought of climbing the mountain and paying my respects to Ireland's patron saint. But I ended up sidelined by the National Famine Monument, a coffin ship with skeleton bodies bearing tribute to those who had suffered and died during the Great Famine. I hadn't expected my visit to Westport to be so emotional, but like most Americans, living in the land of dreams, I'd been blind to the significance of my ancestors' suffering until I walked that same path, pedaled that same road. I shed many tears and visited the graveyard in Aughavel to thank my ancestors for their sacrifices.

In Ireland, my understanding of life and religion had been ripped open

and exposed, and there in Aughavel, I felt as if it had been sown back together. I felt at peace, knowing that I came from brave, honest stock. I had the genes to be a strong, independent woman, to do good things in life. I was ready to go back to California. My time in Ireland was over.

On my last day, I went to explore the history of the village of Knock in County Mayo, which houses the Church of the Apparition. I ended up having tea with Sister Catherine, a nun in the Saint Mary of the Angels order, and talked to her about Christianity and being Baptist vs. Catholic, and the idea of whether or not you're able to be both a spiritual and sexual being.

My experiences in Ireland taught me I couldn't live a one-dimensional life—or even two. There was so much more. I wanted to embrace every aspect of being a woman, mother, lover, fighter, and sage. I wanted to be passionate and stand up for what I believed. The Wiccans had shown me the value and power of the feminine warrior within. The pirate queen, my ancestors, Grandma Pat, and even Sister Catherine had shown me that it was perfectly acceptable, maybe even commendable, to have and enjoy sex, to speak up for what I wanted.

On my way to the airport, I felt a sense of resolution. I was a McNally through and through. I didn't have to change, but realized that I just had to be myself. I came back from Ireland more aware of myself and of my place in the world, more confident and less dependent. Ireland taught me to move on and leave the baggage behind.

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