

States of the Union

WHEN IRISH SKIES ARE FROWNING

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

DIANE and I have spent much of the summer here sampling the beer and the blarney and admiring the many hues of green and blue—bays, meadows, mountains—that are spread beneath our hilltop bungalow.

At a certain distance the sheep appear as round, white rocks set amid the darker slates and granites—one of many hints in these parts that things are not necessarily what they seem. The sheep, in any case, do not always keep their distance. Yesterday evening we discovered a small flock of ewes, rams and lambs, plus a trio of bearded goats, grazing proprietarily in our own backyard. Where they came from, and into what misty pasture they eventually vanished, remains a riddle; but to our urban eyes they loomed as heaven-sent silhouettes against a perfect Irish sunset. What we mainly felt was gratitude.

The Irish climate being what it is, the visitor tends to settle for beauty, which is everywhere, rather than for comfort, which is harder to come by. The air is chilly here, the sky capricious and indifferent to the dictates of summer tourism. Derek Mahon, a witty poet who

happens to live about 60 kilometers north of Bantry, in the town of Kinsale, has described Irish weather as “a tide of sunlight between shower and shower”—a fair summation if a touch incomplete, meteorology-wise. A more weathered description might have alluded to a ripple of sunlight between shower and shower and shower and shower.

The Irish, of course, thrive on adversity—who else would make a gourmet meal of nettle soup?—so their talk of outdoor conditions sometimes strikes Diane and me as inappropriately upbeat. “Ah, it’s another grand day!” they assure us as we huddle sullenly beneath a broken umbrella. An elderly gent I sat next to at a pub one lunchtime told me he had arisen at sunrise that morning “just to breathe in the clean air. I was proud to be awake,” he said.

It is not hard to guess why people here prefer the silver lining, faint as it may be, to the scudding cloud. Irish weather and Irish history are inextricably linked, often with the gravest of consequences. It rained in Dublin the day of the Easter Uprising in 1916, dampening what had seemed at first a promising revolution. (The fact that the rebels had forgotten to announce their plans

to the general populace didn’t help matters.) Most of the plotters were duly executed.

In Bantry the main square is named in honor of another martyr to English tyranny and Irish weather—Theobald Wolfe Tone, founder of the Society of United Irishmen. In 1798 Wolfe Tone persuaded the French, ever eager to stick it to the English, to launch a small fleet of sailing ships toward Bantry Bay, the reasonable purpose being to liberate Ireland.

Alas, an unexpected storm blew the ships hundreds of miles off course, whereupon an English fleet captured the French one. Wolfe Tone was arrested, summarily tried by a military tribunal and sentenced to be hanged as a traitor (rather than shot as a foreign enemy). His response was to slit his own throat with a pen knife. He died five days later in solitary confinement, at the age of 35.

Probably every schoolchild in Bantry knows the Wolfe Tone story, along with many similar tales of disorder and sorrow—the Great Famine, the Battle of the Boyne and, more recently, the massacres of Londonderry. The losses persist. They hover over the landscape like smoke from a turf fire, part sweetsmelling, part acrid. They are a form of Irish weather.

In truth, everything here seems weighed down by history, much of which lies around us in ruins. Diane and I have puzzled over the 4,000-year-old stone circles that rise unaccountably out of the heather on mountain slopes and in cow pastures. We have climbed spiraling granite steps to the tops of crumbling towers and castle embattlements, mute reminders of Gaelic glories now smothered in ivy.

Still, below the cruel turrets there must have been mild herders of sheep and cows. These are the innocent dead, the powerless, for whom Derek Mahon sometimes speaks:

*“Save us, save us,” they seem to say;
“Let the god not abandon us
who have come so far in darkness
and in pain.
We too had our lives to live....”*

For a couple of frivolous reasons I

have wanted to meet Mahon—he and Seamus Heaney, both still in their 40s, seem the best of the post-Yeats batch of poets—but he is never at home when I telephone. Probably he is vacationing in some alien tide of sunlight far from Ireland. One reason I wish to talk to Mahon is to learn more about his uncle, whom he has memorialized in a fetching poem called “My Wicked Uncle.” A rake and a sailor, and a radical to boot, this man “claimed to have been arrested in New York/Twice on the same day....” Another time,

*Sailing from San Francisco to
Shanghai,
He brought a crew of lascars out
on strike
In protest at the loss of a day's pay
Crossing the International Dateline.*

(I looked up “lascars” in a dictionary at the Bantry public library. They turn out to be “East Indian native sailors.”)

The uncle was buried “on a blustery day above the sea.” At the funeral, writes Mahon, “I saw sheep huddled in the long wet grass/Of the golf course, and the empty freighters/Sailing for ever down Belfast Lough/In a fine rain....” The weather and the bellwethers are familiarly Irish.

THE OTHER THING I had hoped to discuss with Mahon was the proper role of tourists like Diane and myself, outsiders trying to make sense of this tight little insiders’ island. On reading a poem that appears to come to the rescue of all the dead in Ireland, I got the impression Mahon was beaming an urgent message at the likes of us foreign dabblers:

*You with your light meter and
relaxed itinerary,
Let not our naïve labors have
been in vain!*

Diane and I know nothing about light meters—ours may be inside our camera; it is certainly *in camera*—but our itinerary, it is true, has been shamefully relaxed. In the mornings Diane stays in the bungalow, working on a manuscript she has lugged all the way from Connecticut, while my Opel and I

coast down the long hill, known hereabouts as Vaughan’s Pass.

In the valley awaits downtown Bantry, a market town of some 3,000 souls, with its many pubs, victualers and vegetable stalls. The vegetables are mainly the type that grow underground—onions, carrots, turnips and, naturally, the ubiquitous potato. A dozen potatoes cost about 50 cents. A handful of onions, the one time I bought some, cost nothing. “Too few to weigh,” the vegetable man explained.

People in Bantry are not rich, but they seem to have money for food and videotapes, and also for sweets—candy, gooey rolls, creamy eclairs—with



DEREK MAHON

which they ply their gorgeous, downy children. The children are everywhere: in the shops, on the sidewalks, at the freezing beaches. I saw several double-decker baby buggies. In general Irish children are well-behaved and instantly huggable. They seem to thrive on underground vegetables, or else on the beam of liberty that lights up the entire island. It has been 65 years since 26 of the 32 counties freed themselves from the English. The parents, no less than the children, take it all for granted now; but unlike us Americans, they possess a racial memory. Theobald Wolfe Tone lives on.

In addition to Wolfe Tone Square

there is a Wolfe Tone Park, much of it a soccer field that slopes lushly down to a blue inlet. A few days ago three medium-size boys took us there—or we took them: We were giving them a ride part of the way home, after our paths had crossed in Donemark Falls.

The falls flow hard by the main road that leads from Bantry to Glengarriff, but they are totally hidden from view. Diane and I discovered them by accident (we do a lot of walking in the afternoons) and have returned more than once. There are steep cliffs and foamy cascades, dappled sunlight filtering through pine needles, black tidal pools where gray salmon can be seen gliding out to sea.

The boys threw stones at us. They were stalking us from atop a cliff as we loped from rock to rock in the gully below. “No more stones,” I shouted angrily, and they disappeared into the brush.

But we met them again in the marshland, whereupon Diane gave them a gentle lecture on safety, aggression and humanism. They listened politely—three tan-legged boys with blue eyes and silky brown hair—and then offered to show us around. This was their place. We, with our relaxed itinerary, were their guests.

Later, in the Opel, the older boy asked us to let them off at Wolfe Tone Park. “Who’s Wolfe Tone?” I said, and got three answers.

“He was a Bantry fighter,” the smallest boy said.

“He was a hero,” the middle boy said.

Then the oldest boy told us the whole story, ending gracefully with, “And he succumbed with no one present but his Maker.”

Diane and I lingered at the park while the boys went on their way. Not a creature was stirring, with the single exception of a small black and white sheep dog on the soccer field. This dog was having a fine time scampering up and down the long greensward, pausing now and then to roll around in the cool grass. No collar circled its furry neck; no master was in sight.

In a place like this, with the sun benignly sinking behind Bantry Bay, a dog can seem more than a dog.