

THE YANK

Jeremiah Reardon August 7, 2014

On Sunday evening, January 8, 1990, I departed my native city, flying Aer Lingus from JFK in New York to Dublin, Ireland. I aspired to be the first McGeehan to locate the 'auld sod' of our Irish forbearers, John Daniel and Mary Anne O'Cannon who embarked for America in 1860.

Dublin's modernized suburban airport was ably served by speedy and efficient customs officers. I impressed them with my backpack, loaded with gear for County Donegal's coastal moist weather, warmed by the Atlantic's gulfstream.

Outside the terminal, I caught an express elevated train into downtown. I wandered clean streets with tidy shops and tourist filled pubs, making my way along River Liffey, across from Trinity College, founded in 1592. Wishing I had more time to explore, I focused on transferring by bus to Donegal, 150 miles northwest of the capital.

Dublin's intercity bus terminal was conveniently located across from the DOMED 18th century Customs House. Being the 'greenhorn,' I unwarily boarded and headed out of the city into 'The Troubles' of Northern Ireland.

This was the violent era beginning in the mid 1960's with no peace settlement in sight. Animosity over jobs, elections, British presence, and religious discrimination were cited as reasons to take up arms. Forty seven civilian non-combatants were killed in 1990.

The bus full of travelers wound through narrow streets of Dublin, gaily decorated for the Christmas season. From my rear window seat, I photographed picturesque scenes and citizens going about their business on a Monday morning.

During our trip to Dublin, I met a young Irishwoman traveling home from Dallas, Texas, on vacation to visit family. She was now my seatmate on the cross country ride. She was employed as a sales clerk on the TV set of the nighttime soap opera, 'Dallas,' and worked in the conniving JR Ewing's mansion gift shop. She confided

that she was assisted by a non-sectarian peace organization which placed young people abroad to escape the unpleasantness of war torn communities.

A few hours travel brought us to an isolated intersection, the location of a British Army Vehicle Checkpoint. Three weeks earlier, on Dec 13, 1989, two British soldiers, one Englishman and the other Scottish, were killed by Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) combatants. We were only 20 miles south of that Vehicle Checkpoint at Derryard, County Fermanagh, the county line of which we had now pulled to a halt.

Three blacken-faced soldiers exited the sandbagged outpost and boarded the quiet bus. "What the...?," I say to no one in particular, caught totally unawares. Two enlisted men, in their early twenties, stood guard with automatic weapons, while the officer wearing a side arm made his way down the aisle to the rear, looking from his right to his left. Searching for suspect enemy and weapons, I assumed, he stopped only once, to question me.

I later learned how IRA adherents are associated with wearing beards. Not many Irishmen had them, I observed. I sported a full brown tinged with red beauty, hence the questioning. I provided my passport and plane ticket, and responded evenly to his quizzing, "I am on vacation to Donegal to look for relations. I arrived today from New York City."

My pretty seatmate, smoothing over the tension, said in a casual manner, "Sir, we are acquainted from flying to Dublin on the same plane." After satisfying himself with our truthfulness, and hearing the accent of a 'Yank,' he returned my papers and exited the bus in front of the watchful guards.

For the next hour, we silently passed through the scenic villages to the west, skirting the wide river, Lough Erne. I braced myself upon entering Enniskillen, a town of 15,000 residents and home to Protora Royal School, attended by playwrights Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett. Enniskillen in Irish Gaelic means 'Cethlenn's Island,' named for a mythological Irish prophetess, who was wounded in battle, and drowned while swimming across Lough Erne.

While cars passed along the busy thoroughfare and shoppers strolled the sidewalks, the bus came to a halt at the depot. At the Remembrance Day Parade, Nov 8, 1987, eleven men and women were killed when an IRA forty pound bomb exploded at Enniskillen's War Memorial. Sixty three others were wounded.

We departed quickly and make our way to the adjacent county, Donegal, returning to the bosom of the Catholic Republic of Ireland. No Vehicle Checkpoint appeared at the crossing, and we were soon in the bustling city of Donegal on Donegal Bay.

I counted my blessings for deciding to move on quickly from 'The Fair (but expensive) City,' Dublin. The small town atmosphere of Donegal appealed to me. Everything a frugal traveler desired was within short walking distance. On the other hand, the capital with its half million population intimidated me with my small pocketbook and heavy backpack.

At the International Youth Hostel, the welcoming manager provided travel options for reaching my local destination. Present were half a dozen travelers from Europe and Australia. One expressed the commonly shared belief, "In Ireland, you get good value; the people are friendly to travelers; and, the country is beautiful!"

Early next morning, I departed the homey hostel with a simple breakfast under my belt. My search for two towns, Glenties and Lettermacaward, named by my mother, Genevieve McGeehan, as possibilities for locating our relatives, began on the clear and sunny Tuesday. The weather promised to be suited to my mode of transportation, hiking the rural region of the Blue Stack Mountains.

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