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I GO BACK TO IRELAND

By
JOHN STEINBECK

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Just about everyone with a drop of Irish blood in his veins wants one day to make a pilgrimage to the old sod, to see for himself that green paradise, land of heroes, kings and leprechauns. The author, who's half Irish, tried it—and received a few surprises.

There must be a kind of apprehension in the sleepy little villages of Italy, Germany, England and Ireland in the summer, when the descendant of the native comes back to discover the seat of his culture. I suppose Ireland suffers more from this than any other land. Every Irishman—and that means anyone with one drop of Irish blood—sooner or later makes a pilgrimage to the home of his ancestors. There he crows and squeals over the wee cot or the houseen, pats mossy rocks, goes into ecstasies over the quaint furniture, and finds it charming that the livestock lives with the family.

He wouldn't live there if you gave him the place. And the locals don't think they're quaint—they think they're perfectly normal. To them, it's the American descendant whose speech sounds outlandish, particularly when he puts on a nostalgic brogue, which he usually does. The natives must think the pilgrims are crazy.

I have just made such a pilgrimage. I am half Irish, the rest of my blood being watered down with German and Massachusetts English. But Irish blood doesn't water down very well; the strain must be very strong.

I guess the people of my family thought of Ireland as a green paradise, mother of heroes, where golden people sprang full-flowered from the sod. I don't remember my mother actually telling me these things, but she must have given me such an impression of delight. Only kings and heroes came from this Holy Island, and at the very top of the glittering pyramid was our family, the Hamiltons.

My grandfather, who had come from there carrying the sacred name, was really a great man, a man of sweet speech and sweet courtesy. He died when I was quite young, but it is remarkable how much I remember about him. His little bog-trotting wife, I am told, put out milk for the leprechauns in the hills behind King City, California, and when a groundling neighbor suggested the cats drank it, she gave that neighbor a look that burned off his nose.

Anyway, we grew up feeling singularly favored because of even our demi-Irishness. There was very little running back to Ireland for a look; there was none, in fact. My grandparents never went home to visit. I can recall only two relatives who did. One was a cousin of my mother's who was a judge of the Supreme Court in California. He went back, I guess, mostly to impress the Irish relatives with the importance of the American branch. They must have cut him down to size, because he rarely spoke of his visit.

Later, one of my uncles made the trip. He reported that he had wept out of pure sentiment the whole time. He also reported that the family was just about played out; there remained two sisters and a brother—Katherine, Elizabeth and Thomas—children of my grandfather's brother, all old and all unmarried. They lived in the "new house" (the old house had burned down several hundred years ago).

After my uncle's return, we had an occasional letter from Elizabeth. She wrote a thin, elegant hand, and her English had an exquisite quality, reminiscent of the eighteenth-century writers. We felt good about that; we didn't really believe any dull or illiterate Irish existed—in Ireland, at least. We knew plenty of that kind in this country, but perhaps we thought they had degenerated here.

I should have gone to visit long ago, but I didn't. During the war, I landed at various Irish airports and could have gone, but some curious, powerful reluctance always came over me when I got close to the home place. Meanwhile, the letters had stopped and we heard nothing more.

Last summer, my wife and I finally went there.

It's green, all right—but so is Scotland. It seemed to me a different green, but I wouldn't submit the two greens to a color test. We rented an automobile to cross from Belfast to Londonderry—an extravagance which outraged even the man who owned the car, a Rolls-Royce of sneering gentility, a little younger than Stonehenge and in a little better condition. Summer was full-blown in Ireland and the grain was bowing golden-headed ready for the cutting.

Then we crossed and came to Derry, and it's a dour, cold city to an outsider—dark, angular buildings and uncrowded streets, waiting for something—a city of protest against the rolling green of County Derry and the lovely hills of Donegal across Lough Foyle.

There was no home feeling in the bleak hotel, that carried its own darkness with it. The girl behind the desk would not smile nor pass a cordial word, no matter how much we tried to trap her. In the bar there was no gaiety. I don't know whether laughter was there before we went in for a drink or after we left, but none was offered for us to share, and curtains of rules brushed against us.

So Many Things Were Not Permitted

A drink in our room? Not permitted. Two minutes late to the dining room? Not permitted to serve after hours. A London paper, then. All taken. There was a hush on the people like the hush on the city, and the feeling that eyes brushed over you and dropped when you looked up. We were strangers.

The porter—not the real porter, he hastened to tell us, the real porter was away—said he would get us a man to drive us into the country the next day, a man who knew the countryside.

This not-the-real-porter was nice to us. He was sorry he couldn't have some clothes pressed for us; it was after hours. He wanted to bring a drink to us. He looked sadly at the bribe in his hand. He would try.

In a while he came back. The liquor was locked up, the manager had the key, and the manager was gone. A sandwich? The pantry was locked up. I don't know who had that key. A copy of the London Times in the morning? They were all ordered and it was too late to order another one. He looked as though he wanted to return the bribe; he was a young, dark, sad-looking man. I found myself trying to explain to him.

"Does the young lady at the desk never smile?" I asked.

"Rarely," he said.

"Is no rule ever broken at all?"

"I don't understand," he said.

"Look," I said, "my people came from hereabouts. They were law-abiding people, but there was a filament of illegality in them. My mother wasn't above putting too much catsup on her plate and sopping it up with a piece of bread in a restaurant."

"Catsup?" he asked.

I said, "One of my uncles had a major difficulty in college for stealing chickens. Another of my uncles had to be disarmed when he had murder in his heart, and I, myself . . ."

I stopped, because the not-the-real-porter was looking at me helplessly, trying to make out my meaning. My voice was rising against a wall of frustration.

"What I am trying to say is this," I said. "Has all illegality gone out of this rebellious island in three generations?"

"Sir?" he asked.

"I mean, if I should give you in your hand more than enough—twice more than enough—to buy a bottle of whisky, a loaf of bread and a sausage, couldn't you find some lawbreaker to sell them to you?"

"The rules are very strict," he said. "I'm sorry. I wish I could help you."

My heart broke for him.

"I'm not the real porter," he said. "Good night, sir. I'm sorry."

City More Desolate on Sunday

We sat in the window, looking across the street at the angry stone buildings and the small, locked-up shops. The street was deserted and a desolation came over us. I told my wife how brave and open my ancestors were, how full of lust and courtesy and fine laughter. I lied about them some—I guess I had to. The Sunday dark fell on that city which is somber even on weekdays and in sunlight.

Now my reluctance came on me tenfold and I wanted to give up the pilgrimage and go away quickly and forget it, because reality was violating every inherited memory and I was saying to myself that if the old folks went away from here, maybe they had good reason.

I put on a bathrobe and took the long, deserted, green-carpeted hall to the bathroom. From a room on the corridor came an old woman carrying a broom and a long-handled dustpan. I said good evening to her and her face wrinkled up into a smile that lighted the dark corners of that desolate corridor.

“Good evening, sir,” she said.

I stopped in front of her, because this was a tone I had not heard. “I know before I ask that the irons are locked up,” I said, “but can you steal an iron and take the wrinkles out of a pair of pants for me?”

“What room?” she asked, and then, “You’ll have smooth pants.”

The front was broken. In an hour she had the trousers back, still steaming a little, and I tipped her until she begged for mercy. We slept better because of her.

In the morning, we had our driver, all right—he who knew the countryside—a rakish man in a torn cap, who assured us that he knew every nubbin of a hill in all directions. He didn’t, but he was willing. His car was so old that it churned and clattered, and a blue, suffocating smoke came from it. We were looking for a place called Mulkerough. You can spell it half a dozen ways and it isn’t on any map. I knew from half-memory that it was near to Ballykelly, which is near to Limavady, and I knew that from Mulkerough you could look across the lough to the hills of Donegal.

We clattered and smoked along 18 miles from Londonderry, past thatched cottages and hedged little fields where the black bundles of the flax lay waiting to be taken in. The countryside was rolling and lovely and the blackness of the city went out of us. The Donegal hills were remote and sunny across the broad water of the lough.

We drove right through Ballykelly without knowing it was there, but at Limavady they turned us back. I guess I had thought of Ballykelly as a town; it isn’t—it’s what they call in Texas a wide place in the road. Except for two churches, it wasn’t different from the cottage-lined highway we had been driving on. An old man stood in front of one of the churches. “Mulkerough?” he said. “Second turning to the left—a quarter of a mile.”

“Do you know any Hamiltons there?” I asked.

“They’re all dead,” he said. “Miss Elizabeth died two years ago. You’ll find Mr. Richey, her cousin, on the hill, though.”

Mulkerough isn’t a place at all. It’s a hill and three or four farms near about. Mr. Richey came to the door of the house on the hill and he looked like some of our breed—the pink cheeks, the light blue sparkling eyes.

He said, “The Hamilton place is sold, sold to the ground. You can find out about it at the lawyer’s office in Limavady.”

I said, “I’m the grandson of Samuel; he left here a long time ago.”

“I have heard there was a brother,” he said; “went away to America. But wasn’t his name Joseph?”

It was the same everywhere we asked—my grandfather did not exist. So far as Ireland was concerned, there was no Samuel Hamilton. Why should they remember? The tree of our culture had no roots. Maybe I’d known that unconsciously, and that was why I had been reluctant to go back. My grandfather’s brother, he who stayed, that was different. And his children, they were different. And how much land they had, that was different. And how improved it was and how much it brought when it was sold. These were immediate things, and who could remember an old, old fact like my grandfather?

Everyone knew the three children of my grandfather’s brother. Miss Katherine, Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Tom. It was a good farm they had—about 200 acres—and a good house of two stories. These children never married, the two sisters and the brother; why? No one knew why. They were well-endowed, well-educated people, and they had more land than most. They had silver spoons and fine china and little coffee cups, so thin you could see through them, and all the collected things of the family for hundreds of years, pictures and books and records and furniture, to make them envied all over the countryside. But they never married. They were well known, well liked. They grew old together.

Miss Katherine was the efficient one, almost like Tommy’s mother, and Tommy did just what she said about the farm. He plowed when she said and he sowed when she said and he harvested when she said.

Miss Elizabeth was more for reading and writing things, and she had a rose garden. She spent a great deal of her time cultivating her flowers. Tommy was a silent man, but good, and well liked everywhere. The three grew older on the farm and they never married.

Then, about 12 years ago, Miss Katherine died. The directing head was gone. The farm went to pieces little by little and month by month, so slowly that it was hardly noticeable. Tommy, with no one to tell him what to do, when to plow and when to sow, began to neglect the land, and he sold some of the cows and didn’t replace them. When the roof leaked, he didn’t mend it. The hedges began to creep into the fields. When his friends remonstrated, he smiled and agreed that he should keep up the land, but the directing head was gone and there was no one to tell him.

Elizabeth, the neighbors said, had her head in a book. She tended the roses and she and Tommy grew ever closer together. And then, about seven years ago, Tommy died. He got a scratch on his side from a nail and did nothing about it, because nobody told him to, and he died of blood poisoning.

People who told us about what happened next did so reluctantly, as though they didn’t want to be gossiping. Miss Elizabeth, they said, grew strange after Tommy died—“strange” was the word they used. She’d be smart and clever as always, but there’d be things like this: she would be talking to a neighbor and at the same time listening to something far away. And right in the middle of a perfectly normal conversation, she would say, “Tom is going to take out that tree stump in the lane. We need a new tree there.”

And when neighbor women were having tea with her from those thin little cups you could almost see through, Elizabeth would say, “I’ll have to ask you to excuse me now, Tom’s coming in and he’ll be very tired.” And she would usher them out of the house.

And then in the night they'd hear Miss Elizabeth walking in the lanes between the hedgerows and she'd be calling her brother, telling him it was late and his supper was waiting. And several times she was seen in the night, searching through the fields. She was in a nightgown and her feet were bare, but she wasn't sleepwalking, they said—she wasn't asleep at all. She'd just turned strange, they said.

It wasn't as though she was crazy. Except for that, she talked as good sense as anybody, but she just could not bring herself to believe that her brother was dead. And she did another strange thing that was unlike her, they said. She got herself a cause. She joined the party which resisted with all its strength the joining of the northern counties to Eire. She worked for her cause and she made a will in which she ordered everything she possessed sold on her death and every penny turned over to the party that resisted the joining of Ulster to Eire, and then she died.

The neighbors said it was a sorrow to see the house torn apart. It was well known that the Hamiltons had beautiful things. On the day of the auction, the automobiles and the carriages came by the hundred, and people bought pictures just for the frames; and the beautiful silver went, and the fine china, and the books, bought for the binding only—and all by strangers. Strangers bought the farmhouse. It was a sorrow, the neighbors said.

In the Neglected Rose Garden

I went to see the house and there was nothing of us there. The rose garden was overgrown with weeds and only the whips of the rosebushes showed above the grass, with haws still on from the last year. The ivy had nearly covered the stone paths. The new owners were kind. But they were strangers, and, what was even worse, we were strangers.

The sexton of the church at Ballykelly is an old, old man, lean and dry, and his speech is like my grandfather's speech.

I asked, "Did you know the Hamiltons?"

"Hamiltons?" he said. "I ought to—I dug their graves. I buried them, all of them. Miss Elizabeth was the last, two years ago. She was a bright one."

We looked at the graves, with the new cement coping around the plot. "Miss Elizabeth put it in her will about coping," the sexton said. He didn't ask, but we felt that he wanted to know. I said, "My grandfather was William's brother." He nodded slowly. "I've heard," he said. "Went away—I forget where."

"California," I said.

"What was his name again?" the sexton asked.

The rain was beginning to fall. He left us for a moment and came back, carrying a full-blown red rose. "Would you like to have it?" he asked.

I took it. And that's the seat of my culture and the origin of my being and the soil of my background, the one full-blown evidence of a thousand years of family. I have it pressed in a book.

[The end of *I Go Back to Ireland* by John Steinbeck]