

A stone near the Old Pier indicated that Laoghaire, King of Tara and High King of Ireland, had his sea fort (or Dún) here in the fifth century. He was the one with whom St. Patrick had a run-in over the lighting of the Paschal Fire. Passing the old Coast Guard Station, we came to the attractive new headquarters of the Commissioners of the Irish Lights. The building has a form reminiscent of a large lighthouse lantern, with an extensive array of solar panels on the roof.

Public access to the foreshore is under constant threat from acquisitive yacht clubs and others. I recalled a miniature ‘harbour within a harbour’ hereabouts, which is now gone, perhaps obliterated when the Marina Office was built some years ago. The large HSS Ferry was coming in as we came to the end of the ramble at the Caffè Ritazza, where we revived ourselves with some strong coffees. With just one mile remaining, the Commodius Vicus was all but over.

Stage 87: Dun Laoghaire to Sandycove

For the final stage, a group of our friends assembled at the Ferry Pier in Dun Laoghaire on a stormy November evening, near the stainless steel sculpture, Gaoth na Sáile, made by Eamonn O’Doherty, which is in the form of wind-swept sails. The Town Hall clock read seven o’clock. The building now known by some as the County Hall has been refurbished and extended. The clock is occasionally called the Four-faced Liar, like that in Shandon in Cork and many others. Nearby is the reconstructed Victorian Fountain, destroyed some years ago by a group that Mark referred to as the ‘local woolly-faces’. They had run a chain around it, hooked up to a van and driven away, completely shattering the original fountain. Across the road is the Pavilion Theatre, originally an Edwardian pavilion, later a cinema, where we were often admitted without payment in our youth by the manager, who was a neighbour; a belated ‘thank you, Mr. Kinsella’.

Near Carlisle Pier, an obelisk stands on four great stone spheres. It was erected in 1821 ‘To commemorate the visit of the King to this part of his dominions ... when he graciously named the harbour the “Royal Harbour of George IV” and on the same day embarked from hence [sic].’ Richard Colley, Marquis Wellesley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland gets his

name on the monument. He was a brother of Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington. On the back of the monument, the laying of the first stone of the East Pier in 1817 is commemorated. John Rennie was the Directing Engineer. John Aird, another engineer named on the obelisk, was a relation of Mark. Some years ago another group of self-appointed liberators blew up one of the spheres supporting the obelisk but failed to topple it. The British Empire is made of sterner stuff! The renovations are now hardly noticeable.

The anchor of the RMS Leinster rests on a stone nearby. The Leinster was torpedoed near the Kish Bank by the Germans in October 1918, just one month before the end of World War I, with the loss of 501 passengers, crew and postal workers. Another memorial stone marks the loss of 15 gallant men when the Kingstown life boat went down in 1895.

As we passed the East Pier, the effect of the storm became evident. Huge rollers were thundering in, driven by the strong north-easterly wind, and smashing off the pier. The sight was a spectacular backdrop to our ramble. We passed the old sea baths, which have languished in a state of dereliction for several decades.

When we reached the Forty Foot there was a crowd gathered to witness the enormous waves breaking over Elephant Rock and Peak Rock. There was no question of going down into the swimming area with such raging surf, so we took some photographs and then repaired to Odell's Restaurant for a meal to celebrate the conclusion of the Commodus Vicus. I gave a short speech at the dinner, summing up the experience, and it is reproduced below.

Greetings friends, welcome and thanks for coming to join the celebration of the completion of our ramble round Ireland, the Commodus Vicus of Recirculation.

One of the great privileges of being a weatherman is that one has complete control of the elements. The thunderous waves that we witnessed on our short walk were planned some thirteen years ago, as a suitable finale to the ramble.

You may ask, Why? Why would anyone walk around Ireland? There are many answers. It was partly a pilgrimage, partly a travel adventure,

partly an educational trip and partly a Zen Buddhist exercise. As Zen, it was a great success, because nothing really happened. It is wonderful when nothing happens: I was not robbed or mugged and no accidents or serious mishaps befell me. I didn't even lose my virginity. But it was enormously enjoyable, especially when I had the company of my friends and fellow-Hillpigs, Mark and Frank and Tom.

I was in no hurry. Just as well, since it took thirteen years. That comes to about half a kilometre per day, a truly blistering pace. Everywhere there was something of interest: the landscape, the wildlife, industrial heritage, archaeological sites and, of course, the people of the country. We take it for granted, but it is really marvellous that Ireland is a peaceful and friendly country and a pleasure to travel in.

*We came across a variety of wildlife on our travels. We saw a bittern, now very rare, and black-tailed godwits – you are all familiar with them, no doubt – and the little egrets that have since become widespread; *Egretta garzetta*, what a name, what a dame! At the outset I could recognise very few wild flowers and learned that there is a rich variety in Ireland. Literary connections are everywhere: Joyce was a running theme for the walk, we visited Kilgarvan, where the Kerry poets are commemorated, Yeats's Castle in Gort, the Kavanagh Country in Monaghan, and Dunsany, whence hailed Francis Ledwidge. And we found evidence of the scientific heritage that is often ignored. Boyle nearly drowned in a stream in Waterford; if only he had, we would not have had to learn Boyle's Law in school. And Kirwan, an early expert in chemistry. And of course Hamilton, Ireland's greatest mathematician and a world-leading figure. Following the dinner, I will present a three-hour discourse on quaternions [groans from the audience].*

Many hours would be needed to tell you everything, so I will just pick a few highlights of the ramble, a sample from our journey through Cork. In Ladysbridge, in Irish Droichead na Scuab or the bridge of the brushes, we were told in the local hostelry that the village was named for a heroic event when the Black and Tans were beaten off the bridge with brushes. And why Ladysbridge? 'Sure, 'twas de wimmin was holdin' de brushes.' We verified the scholarly integrity of this account with another local, who added that 'Der's no ladies here anyway, only a few oul' biddies'. We caught the Navy tender from Cobh to Haulbowline; you may not know it, but you owe your

freedom to Mark and me: as members of *An Slúa Maraí*, we guarded the coast in the sixties, and not a single Soviet submarine was able to penetrate our defences. In Ballinhassig a woman learning that I was walking round Ireland remarked 'You must be a shkilled walker'. 'I learned when I was very young' was all I could think of replying. In Crossbarry we were treated with great deference by the local publican. 'The new monument is up. Would you like to see it?' he asked. Perplexed, we agreed, and he drove us a few miles to see a Celtic cross commemorating some republicans who had recently been killed. We kept quiet, but I am convinced that he thought that we were 'down from HQ' checking that money had been used for the intended purpose.

The bishop and the actress were our constant companions. English is a delight: almost anything can be misunderstood, usually with a sexual import, if you have a dirty mind. Thus a simple question, 'What's up?' takes on a new meaning as, 'What's up? as the actress said to the bishop', or, 'I'm coming! as the bishop said to the actress'. You get the point (as the bishop ...). We were having a meal in Macroom chatting about wildlife, and in particular caterpillars, when Mark uttered the most memorable bishop-and-actress statement: 'I must look up the Hairy Molly.' And while I'm on the subject, Frank and I spent an hour or more in the village of Muff in Donegal, searching for the Muff Diving Club, but to no avail.

There were many curious incidents: one day I walked from Ballinglen to ... Ballinglen, in a great fog-bound circle; Lady Dunsany made a pot of coffee specially for Mark; standing astride an electric fence, I nearly lost more than my virginity; we saw ogham stones and sheela-na-gigs (always worth a detour) and Jimi Hendrix' death certificate.

After climbing the mountain euphemistically called the Devil's Mother, Frank and I went to a meeting of the Quiet Man Club in Cong, where this greatest-movie-of-all-time was made. The film was based on a story written by Maurice Walsh, Tom's uncle. The organiser, Des McHale, opened the meeting with the astounding revelation that he had managed to identify the dog that ran across shot when John Wayne was thrashing poor Maureen O'Hara. And he added, 'We actually have someone here today who has not yet seen the film!' He was referring to Frank, who must be the only Irishman over fifty who has not seen *The Quiet Man*.

The Final Navigation

We had a few run-ins with security on the ramble, but nothing to worry about. In Maynooth we were under threat of being forced to re-trace our steps, but I had a Plan B: to shout 'Run like hell', scarp for the front gate and scramble over it before the security man could do anything. Fortunately, it didn't come to that: we managed to persuade him to allow us through the college grounds. Near Spencer Dock we had another, more colourful, scrape. The towpath expires at the North Strand Road and, wishing to follow the canal, we hopped over the wall and crossed the rails. But soon a large Nigerian gentleman drove up in his 4x4 and asked us, 'How did you get in?' 'Oh, we came in by mistake, and we're trying to get out,' I said, not really answering his question. His supervisor phoned him at that moment. 'Deys com in by mistake, and deys tryin' to get out,' he said. He was on our side! He let us go out by New Wapping Street, just where we wanted to go.

We came to the Luas line, just being completed at the time. This was one of the many changes that happened in Ireland during the course of the Commodius Vicus. The completion of the Jeannie Johnston, tied up on the river nearby, was another. Mobile phones had arrived, iPods, the Internet, Google Earth, and GPS. The Y2K bug had come and gone without incident, and another bug too, Foot and Mouth disease. Euros had displaced pounds, and the Celtic Tiger had prowled for a while but was now nowhere to be seen. Finally, the Good Friday Peace Agreement had been signed, and was holding. Perhaps this was the best of all.

By the goodly Barrow, I saw a bittern, An Bunán Buí, a once-common bird in Ireland. A poet wrote: 'The yellow bittern that never broke out / In a drinking bout, might as well have drunk.' He urges us to make hay while the sun shines, and drink up while we can. He goes on: 'I was sober a while, but I'll drink and be wise / For I fear I should die in the end of thirst.' So, I urge you now to eat up and drink up and enjoy yourselves. Thank you.