

IRELAND IN THE SUN

October, 2009



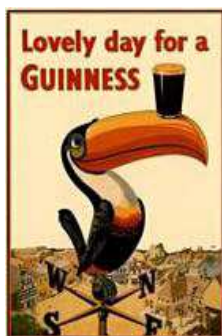
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Images: John Biggs but mostly Catherine Tang

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IRELAND IN THE SUN

Toucans in the nest agree
Guinness is good for you.



One of the first things that struck me when I hit Piccadilly Circus London in 1957 was a huge neon sign proclaiming the above. A large, brightly lit toucan bore a bottle of Guinness in her beak to feed her thirsty chicks. Guinness wasn't however particularly good for Irish playwright Brendan Behan – his daily ration of 16 pints proved more than even his massive body could handle. This is unfortunately not that ad, but a contemporary in of the Guinness Toucan series.

Somehow all that's related to the fact that I had accepted an invitation to address a couple of conferences in Ireland. I had attended an Irish Summer School in Trinity College Dublin in 1958, about which I remember next to nothing, while Ireland was a first for Catherine. So here was an excuse, but for various pressing reasons we could allow only five days there, two for business, three for driving around, which meant as we wanted a full day in Dublin, we had one and a half days for the rest of Ireland. Enquiries and Googling suggested that in that absurd time frame, and given the venues for business – the Institutes of Technology at Galway and Athlone – the West Coast and Connemara it had to be. We were concerned about the weather, expecting cold and wet in mid-autumn, but we were in for a pleasant surprise – including many other pleasant surprises.

Heathrow was the old-fashioned shambles I'd remembered from years ago, now with even more ad hoc add-ons. We transferred to Terminal 1 for Aer Lingus, Departure signs directing us to go upstairs. On going upstairs another sign mentioned that Aer Lingus Departures were in the basement. As usual, we boarded our aircraft from the front, but there was an interesting twist to our previous experience. Back rows have always been loaded first to clear the way for the front rows. Here the front rows loaded first while the back rows waited. I would have thought that this Anglo/Irish way would take longer, but I don't have any hard data that might confirm that suspicion.

Never mind, we landed in Dublin on time and picked up our rented VW as arranged. We were to drive about 240 km due west to Galway. Leaving the airport, we followed an endless series of detours because of road construction, a phenomenon that kept ambushing us wherever we went, including in the wilds of Connemara. Ireland, like

it's spell-alike Iceland, had been hit extra hard by the economic bust because it had been riding a boom created by low business taxes and subprime mortgages, all of which imploded. I wondered if all this infrastructure-building activity was a more sensible way of dealing with that than Kevin Rudd's giving \$900 to everyone except those who were too poor to have a taxable income and those too rich to care.

It was a pleasant drive along the N6, once off the motorway. The Irish Midlands struck me as just that, pleasant; nice towns, nice houses with neat well cared-for front gardens, more like parts of England than anything, except for the churches. *But*



– I hasten to add – the tourist book didn't claim that people flocked to Ireland to see the Midlands. Rather they came to visit almost anywhere else – and especially the west, which is where we were heading.

We didn't have time to explore Galway beyond the waterfront area and down-town

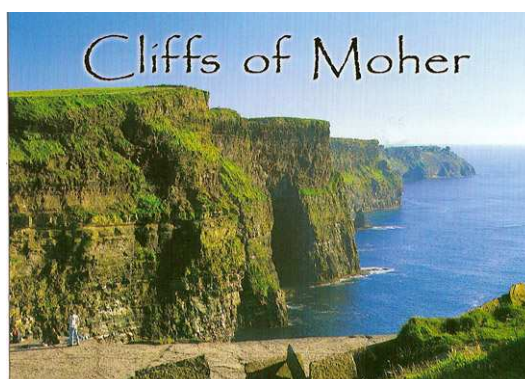


Eyre Square, which contained Kennedy Park, a small treed area dominated by youths standing around smoking. Galway wharves reminded me somewhat of the Hobart waterfront, and Kennedy Park of Franklin Square, but I have to say to Galway's disadvantage. It was cold and getting dark, so we went back to our hotel, a little disappointed

to tell the truth.

The next day was hectic business, which ended with me driving the 100 km back along the N6 to Athlone, for 24 hours of more hectic business. Then it was Friday morning and three days of sightseeing.

The mid-autumn weather was amazing, reaching 18 degrees and mostly clear and sunny. Heading south on minor roads, we again had the feeling we could be in rural England, except would England have had more public toilets? We were lucky to find a toilet in an old church, now a community centre. We decided not to stop at Limerick, traffic was chaotic and again, roadworks everywhere. We bypassed the town and



headed to Ennis. Originally we had planned to go round the coast taking in the much publicised Cliffs of Moher but pushed for time, and having crossed the Nullarbor and seen the Bunda Cliffs, we decided to pass on Moher. We were sorry when we saw a postcard of Moher, which is as grand as Bunda, you get to look more closely, and the Cliffs of Moher are a prettier colour.



No, we wanted enough time to visit the prehistoric Burren area, which Frommer's describes as "the extraordinary otherworldly landscape" that is difficult to describe. It is, so I won't try beyond saying it comprises eroded slabs of limestone that look bare and barren but actually have flora and fauna rarely seen elsewhere in Ireland. The guidebook said we should first visit the Burren

Centre at the little village of Kilfenora. We did, to find that the Centre had shut the previous Tuesday and wouldn't open until next March. Our next priority was toilets. The only restaurant was also closed, the village apparently deserted, except for a kindly soul who said there were no public toilets but suggested



we try the pub. It looked like the whole population of Kilfenora, about 400, were in the bar eating their lunch, reading the newspapers, drinking stout and coffee. Only the cat was left out. And all so quiet. Imagine the decibels Australians would create in that small space with alcohol on sale. Kilfenora was once a major diocese but became poverty stricken, the 12th century cathedral is in part ruins, the graveyard containing some Celtic high crosses.

On our way to the Burren we passed the eerie, skeletal Leamoneagh Castle, some relics of a stone fort and



Poulabrone Dolmen, dating back to 2,500 BC. Atmospheric country,



appropriately overcast, until we pass through the area and down to Ballyvaughan on Galway Bay. The scenery here is splendid in the afternoon brightness, through the village of Kinvara and the dramatic Dungaigue Castle.



A misreading of the map suggested we could by-pass Galway and take the presumably more scenic coast road heading west, then due north, instead of driving through



Galway and the hypotenuse to that triangle. But we can't bypass Galway and have to negotiate very heavy traffic that takes us right past the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology where we were a couple of days previously. But once through the other side of the wharves we see why Galway is so well praised. We didn't have time to stop, but could see splendid buildings in the CBD and along the front. The coast road takes us through Salthill and Barna, which are to Galway what St Kilda is to Melbourne, perhaps. No sign of economic difficulties here; scarcely a parking spot anywhere, restaurants and outdoor bars crammed, families swimming in Galway Bay ... nice to see everyone having a lovely time this warm autumn, but it is not what we had come to see.

We can't reach Tully fast enough for there we turn due north to hit the N59 some 40 kms later, which then takes us due West to Clifden, our destination for the night. It is late afternoon and we hurtle breathlessly over a plateau containing a lot of lovely looking rocks, hundreds of lakes still blue mirrors. All is so calm and bright. I see one shot of a line of three white cottages with roofs of brilliant colours, all different, each cottage indistinguishable from its inversion in the still blue water. What a composition! But a car is pushing me from behind on the narrow road. I'm easily persuaded to continue, for I'm unsure of the time it will take to arrive at Clifden. I rationalise that all this beauty is just the beginning of more to come. Surely there'll be more tomorrow on the way to Kylemore Abbey? I break the basic rule of photographic tourism: take it while it's there, for what you are now seeing is probably unique. There was indeed nothing like this the following day.



Clifden is a major beauty spot but of a different kind. We had previously booked the night online at Abbeyglenn Castle. We looked at it on the web, and read the reviews. Most people were very favourable – ‘atmospheric’, ‘elegant old world charm’ – but a few said the ‘old world charm’ was

dirty and faded, the restaurant greatly overpriced. We arrived at sunset, just in time to admire the view from our window and have a predinner pint of Guinness.



We disagree with the verdict about cleanliness: the place was clean, had splendid views and character. West Ireland has quite a few of such castles: pastiche built by Victorian millionaires in the 1830s. Another is Kylemore Abbey further up the coast. When the potato famine hit the West of Ireland, harder even than elsewhere, this once

prosperous and well populated area was decimated by death and emigration. Many of these castles became derelict, others recycled as extensions to modern houses. Abbeyglenn itself was sadly neglected from the 1850s to 1969 when it was renovated to the splendour it is now, with period furniture and art, huge living rooms left warm and cosy with a peat fire burning in the grate, not to mention a homely lounge bar dispensing Guinness.



So much for the first criticism of Abbeyglenn. As for the second, on entering our room we found a voucher on our bed, promising 15% off our dinner. The dining room is a splendid affair, in keeping with the rest of the place, eager waiters lining the walls. We were shown to our table, which had an Australian flag. Looking around I saw Danish, American and Scottish flags – yes, flags matching the nationality of the diners. Yet strangely the *Maitre d'* asked us where we came from as we sat down; maybe he'd temporarily forgotten his flags. After gratefully accepting a complimentary sorbet, we ordered just mains, chicken and guinea fowl, done beautifully and presented likewise, and a half bottle of an Italian red at the lower end of the list. "Dessert?" our waiter asked. "No thanks." "Coffee?" "No thanks." Then another eager waiter came to our table: "Dessert is over there. If you change your mind just help yourself." Ah, thought I, a complimentary dessert too! How nice. Not normally a dessert man, I played with a poached pear to please our kind waiter, while Catherine had some cheesecake. Just a little. Well satisfied we turned in for the night.

Next morning on checking out we found that our mains of 19 Euros, each presumably discounted by 15%, and the 18 Euro half bottle ordinary of vino, came to 80 Euros instead of my calculated 50 odd Euros. I made gentle enquiries. "Ah, you see there's 12.5% Tax ..." "Yes but..." "And the price is already discounted." "What? Before it appears on the menu..." I ask. But that crucial question is buried under the sharp plough of the receptionist's tongue, "And you did have sweets remember!" We are in a hurry to get away and a queue is forming behind us so I shrug and sign. In the car later, we reflect on this strange arithmetic. I regret I didn't demand a detailed accounting. We work out all sorts of permutations and combinations but couldn't see where the 80 Euros came from. So be forewarned when you eat at Abbeyglenn – check what's included and check the billing on the spot. Otherwise, we strongly recommend Abbeyglenn as a base in one of Ireland's prettier parts – and do spend more than one night there, even if you do eat out.

We had to arrive back in Dublin later that afternoon. But first, a detour through the West Coast of Connemara. Checking our early morning room view (still there), we

toured Clifden, a picturesque market town watched over by the 12 Bens mountain range.



We take Sky Road, with magnificent views straight out to the Atlantic, if not as dramatic as the Cliffs of Moher. Unfortunately, time requires us to rejoin the N59 to Letterfrack rather than continue round the coast. We hoped we'd already seen the best of the coast, but I don't know as we didn't go there and I daren't look at the tourist book to check. At Letterfrack there's an interesting Visitor's Centre which also closes in mid-October but unlike the Kilfenora Centre, this one closed days after our visit. We learn all sorts of things about the deforestation of Ireland and how peat is formed.



Kylemore Abbey is a few miles further on. This too is 19th century pastiche, built by a Manchester tycoon, Mitchell Henry, for his wife. It then became an abbey for Benedictine nuns who still run the abbey as a girls' boarding school. Sections are open to visitors, but we couldn't tarry beyond some photographs. On to Westport, which I think is one of the loveliest towns we visited, with a quirky antique shop. You can check the gender bias in the photos each of us took.



The long drive to Dublin was pleasant, as was the long drive from Dublin on our first day, thus completing our tear drop-shaped tour. The most exciting thing that happened on this leg of the journey was occasioned by the curious but challenging practice that required a rental car to be



returned empty. This means, if you don't want to risk stalling a few miles from the airport with all your luggage and missing your flight, keeping the tank distinctly less than empty. I estimated that the rental car company would gain on average a bonus of at least 5 litres of petrol per rental, the precise amount depending on the anxiety level of the renter. As we didn't intend using the car in Dublin, apart from getting to the airport, we thought our calculation could be made with some accuracy.

What also made this leg more exciting than usual was the fact that Dublin, like Hobart, has far too many one-way streets, but Dublin's are poorly signposted to boot. Our hotel was in the very centre of things, off a little side street from O'Connell Street itself. Unfortunately the name of the side street, Findlater Place, was not the name of the street that actually led off O'Connell Street, which was called Cathal Brugha. After three circuits of the city, which I *hadn't* included in my calculations for a maximally empty tank, we in desperation parked at a nearby parking station – which turned out to be very nearby: a block from Findlater Place, Cathal Brugha, and our hotel.

We'd chosen the Best Western Academy Hotel precisely because it was central and within walking distance from many of the city sights. We had just experienced the trauma of driving to a hotel in the CBD, but now we had the upside. We walked up and down O'Connell Street seeing so many things we had only heard about. The General Post office was the scene of the 1916 Uprising; Jim Larkin's statue, Big Jim



being an adored figure of the left, founded the *Irish Worker* in competition to the capitalist press, what today *Tasmanian Times* is to the *Mercury*, and cofounder of the Irish Labour Party. Behind him is the needle-like Monument of Light, which like many Irish statues bears irreverent nicknames:¹ “The Stiletto in the Ghetto”, “The Stiffy at the Liffey” and “The Erection at the Intersection”. The history of the monument is less peaceful than its name: it stands on what was once Nelson's Pillar until the IRA blew it up. At the end of O'Connell Street is the statue of

Daniel O'Connell after whom O'Connell Street is named (in the Protestant Ascendency it was called Sackville Street until 1922). O'Connell was born into a rich Catholic family but found careers in law and politics barred to him, despite promises. He fought for Catholic Emancipation, having a Bill passed through English Parliament in 1829 that allowed elected members other than those of the Church of England to be able to sit.

It was time to eat; where else than at Temple Bar, the other side of the Liffey? We crossed the O'Connell Bridge just in time to see the sun disappear behind the



Ha'penny Bridge. We found a restaurant that specialised in Irish food

(easy really). I had beef brewed in Guinness, and Catherine had Dublin coddle, which is basically slow



¹ <http://trifter.com/europe/ireland/the-statues-of-dublin-and-their-numerous-nicknames/>

boiled pork sausages with onions, both served on a mountain of mashed potato. And of course a pint of Guinness. All of which were very nice.

We'd already noticed that apart from the usual run of Italian, Chinese and other ethnic food, typical Irish hotel food seemed like Tasmanian food of sixty years ago only better cooked. This was confirmed when I Googled Irish cuisine. During the middle of last century, when Ireland was getting prosperous after nearly a hundred painful years of scarcity, a deliberate attempt was made to get away from grain foods and potatoes: meat and three veg became common. Today, there has been a return to traditional dishes such as Irish stew, coddle and colcannon (mashed potatoes and cooked cabbage fried up).

Next morning we took the first "hop on – hop off" Dublin Bus Tour, which stopped and started outside our hotel. They ran every 15 minutes, some with a recorded commentary, some with the driver doing a commentary and a sit-down comedy act. Some were very good, quipping Irish fashion throughout, others not so. We passed the statue of Molly Malone flogging cockles and mussels, but not now alive, alive-o. She is variously referred to as "The Dish with the Fish", "The Flirt with the Skirt", "The Trollop with the Scallops", "The Tart with the Cart" and "The Dolly with the Trolley".



While we stopped to admire Molly and her trolley, the driver sang "In Dublin's Fair City" in which her sad fate is narrated; as you all must know, poor Molly Malone died of a fever and no one could save 'er. Another version has it that Molly sold fish by day and other things by night, an energetic girl whose enthusiasm drove her to an early death, but not of fever. We then passed a recumbent Oscar Wilde in St Stephen's Green; he is known as "The Queer with the Leer" and the "The Fag on the Crag".



We soon discovered we'd been too keen on an early start. Our first three targets, Trinity College, the Tourist Office and Dublin Castle weren't yet open. After we'd waited for the Tourist Office to open (toilets, you see), the bells of Christ Church Anglican cathedral called. It was Sunday. We walked the couple of blocks to find sung Eucharist was about to start. A black cassocked verger told us that we



couldn't enter unless we stayed for the service, but we'd be most welcome to come back later. As the service took over an hour, and we had lots of other things to see, we thought we'd come back later. The Cathedral is connected by a unique street bridge to what was originally the Synod Hall that now hosts a Viking museum. We did come back later – after all it was where Handel's Messiah premiered in 1742 – only to find this time we were beaten by Evensong.

We consoled ourselves by rejoining the bus that took us to the Guinness factory. The factory was on the site at St. James' Gate which in 1759 the canny Arthur Guinness rented for £45 p.a. for 9,000 years. The present building was built in 1904 and



recently renovated as a show place in the rough shape of a pint of Guinness. Guinness is made like any other beer from, hops, barley, yeast and water, yet is so unique. The water is not from the River Liffey, as legend has it. If it was, our driver pointed out, it probably would kill you. No, the water comes from Co. Wicklow from a special peaty place, which may

account for the fact that Irish Guinness is very different from other stouts made from the same ingredients, and is quite different from Guinness made elsewhere. The biggest factory is in Nigeria, but I understand that Australian Guinness is made in WA; whatever, it is not as smooth or creamy as the Irish Guinness and doesn't need to stand for minutes after pouring. The guided tour concluded with a complimentary pint of Guinness in the 7th storey bar, overlooking the city.



Time to go to the National Art Museum but it was closed for lunch. To Trinity College then, and this time we were lucky: a tour led by a lanky, eloquent



undergraduate was about to start. He told us that Trinity was founded by Elizabeth I in 1592 for Protestant Irish students. It was only in 1970 that Catholics could attend but that was not because Trinity suddenly became more broadminded but because the Catholic Church did. It was only in 1970 that the Church allowed Catholics to enrol. As you enter the courtyard you see the famous 19th century campanile beside which is a statue of



the then Provost, Dr Salmon, who in 1904 strongly resisted another trend towards broadmindedness: this one to admit female students. He vetoed the Senate resolution to admit women; “over

my dead body,” roared he. He was prescient. On being forced to agree, he choked on the thought and died of a massive heart attack.

Our student talked us round the College, entertaining us with stories of past



Trinitarians and of present quaint customs. Just inside the main gate are two classical buildings with Corinthian columns facing each other: the Examinations Hall and the Chapel. They were designed in 1791 by a canny Scot, Sir William Chambers, who to the wrath of the College fellows designed *one* such building and repeated the recipe for

the other – but charged for two separate buildings. He was not asked back to design any more. One teacher in the 1700s was so hated the students threw rocks through his window, whereupon he took down his blunderbuss and shot one. The others returned the fire killing him. The students were tried but no conviction was recorded as they were of good character and came from top Dublin families. Several ended up as politicians. Many other stories which unfortunately we have forgotten. Passing Pomodoro’s *Sphere within a Sphere* (1982, donated by the sculptor), we walked through the multi-storied and high ceilinged Long Room (64 m long) that contains 200,000 antiquarian texts and the oldest harp in Ireland (the one displayed on



Guinness cans). An annexe to the library contains illuminated manuscripts the most richly decorated being the Book of Kells carefully preserved under glass. The Book of Kells relates the four Gospels with amazing people and animals interwoven into the



lettering.

We dipped out again at Dean Swift’s St Patricks Cathedral; they wouldn’t stop Evensong so that we could walk around taking pictures! We hadn’t had any luck at all with Dublin’s two massive Anglican cathedrals that served this overwhelmingly Catholic city.

We jump on the ever-circulating bus to take us to Old Jameson’s distillery in Smithfield, established in 1780. Too many others were interested in Irish whisky, however, and we decided we wouldn’t wait an hour or so for an available tour. Instead, we attended the bar to sample what the tour was all about, pondering the thought that Irish whisky is made from barley that is dried in clean air and thrice distilled, whereas Scotch is smoked over peat and frequently only twice distilled,

making Irish a smoother drop. Quite so. Jameson's comes in several grades; I bought a sample pack of miniatures and after strictly controlled experimentation, I would have to report that the 18 years old Limited Reserve at well over double the price of the standard bottle-shop Jameson's isn't double the quality of the latter. Either my aging palate is the problem or they shouldn't make the standard drop so good. Two other visitors happily agree.



We had dinner in an Irish pub, ordering Irish stew and Guinness to round off the trip authentically.

Of course our trip was too hurried. The bus tour alone should have been spread over two days at least if you want to do Dublin's famous museums, not to mention the fact that 1½ days for the rest of Ireland is ridiculous. We had many other places and areas recommended to us as "you must go there". It's as bad as those Mainlanders who come to do Tasmania in three days. Maybe even worse.

Speaking of ridiculous, how else to describe our drive back to the airport next morning, with the petrol indicator indicating a mouth-drying "empty"? But we made it and most important, the rental firm didn't cop a free bonus of petrol.

On the flight back to Australia on Cathay Pacific's CX135, I was awakened for breakfast by a grinning cabin steward and several beautiful Cathay hostesses who presented me with a card and a glass of champagne. I don't normally drink for breakfast, not even Guinness let alone champagne. So what was all that about? Wondering, I opened the card and found it signed by ten of the crew wishing me many many happy returns. I'd totally forgotten it was my birthday. I wonder how they found that out?

So let's drink to:



"Ireland in the sun!"