

# VITALI'S IRELAND

by Vitali Vitaliev

## SAMPLE CHAPTER:

### Chapter 2: The Garden of Ireland

*' . . . in Wicklow, a pedestrian is understood.'*

(*'A HANDBOOK FOR TRAVELLERS IN IRELAND'*, MURRAY, 1912)

*'The peasantry of Co Wicklow are quiet and industrious, and are said to be generally handsome, with Roman profiles.'*

(*THE 'IMPERIAL GAZETTEER'*, W.G. BLACKIE, ED., 1855)

YOU ARE ENTERING THE GARDEN OF IRELAND ran a cheerful road sign near Bray. Having just negotiated the largely treeless streets of central Dublin, I was glad to be entering a 'Garden', even if a metaphorical one. As my second time-travelling journey in search of Irishness, Co. Wicklow was an obvious choice, being the closest to Dublin, where I was based.

Before the journey, I looked up Co. Wicklow in the appropriate reference book — in this case in *Lippincott's New Gazetteer of the World* — a 2,100-page, ten-kilo boulder of a tome (the weightiest folio in my collection), published in London in 1906 — a volume that a 1912 traveller would have been likely to consult: 'Wicklow is a mountainous district abounding in romantic scenery . . . It is mainly a pastoral county. Pop. in 1851 98,978; in 1901-60, 284 . . .'

This laconic entry on page 2001 of the matter-of-fact 'Gazetteer' struck me as rather unusual. It was the only one in the whole of that behemoth of a book where the word 'romantic' was used.

The fact that the county's population dwindled almost two-fold between 1850 and 1901 reflected the massive emigration in the aftermath of the Great Famine. Interestingly, according to the 2005 *Encyclopaedia of Ireland*, the population of modern Wicklow is only slightly above its 1850 mark at 114,719. The style of the Encyclopaedia's entry on Co. Wicklow, however, was somewhat different from that of the Gazetteer: 'Co Wicklow . . . comprises an extensive natural environment (*sic*) on the doorstep of a large city . . .' Little 'romanticism' here, I had to admit.

'There is a strange savage quality about the mountains and the sea that begins to deteriorate when you call it scenery (or — in modern terms — 'environment' — VV),' the inimitable Filson Young wrote in *Ireland at the Crossroads* in 1903.

I thought that the politically correct term ‘natural environment’ had a much bigger deteriorative force than ‘scenery’.

At least, the Wicklow Mountains were still there and seemingly intact.

Shortly after Bray, formerly known as ‘the Brighton of Ireland, and one of the most pleasant and best-situated watering places in the country’ (Murray, 1912) now home to Ireland’s largest MacDonalD’s, occupying the disembowelled and still graceful (from the outside) building of the former historic Town Hall — the Wicklow Mountains came into full view. They were neat, compact — as if freshly packaged — and not at all dramatic, with no steep cliffs, snow-capped peaks or gaping precipices. In all fairness, they were not even proper mountains, but — as it was aptly put by my down-to-earth 2004 *Rough Guide to Ireland* — ‘really round-topped hills, ground down by the Ice Ages, with the occasional freakish shape . . .’

‘A tour through Wicklow is a favourite relaxation with all Dublin residents, who are, indeed, fortunate in having almost at their own doors a succession of changing scenery, in which mountains, sea, wood, and river are blended together, furnishing environs that no other city in the kingdom can boast,’ Murray wrote in 1912. Judging by the sheer number of cars running in both directions on the N11 motorway ninety-three years later, it was still the case. My ‘patriotically’ green and ‘unpatriotically’ tiny Fiat Punto was blending nicely into this flow.

‘One of the first things he [the motorist] will notice, is the almost universal habit of allowing domestic animals of all kinds to occupy and browse on the roadways. Care, and constant care, must be taken in regard to them, if the motorist is to avoid risk and unpleasantness,’ noted Murray.

The distracting part played by domestic animals was now taken by ubiquitous road signs, pointing to ‘heritage sites’, ‘scenic routes’ and other local attractions and ‘amenities’. DRUIDS’ GOLF COURSE said one of them, and my imagination immediately conjured up the image of a bearded druid in a baseball cap lifting his golf club to the skies.

Near Enniskerry, a brown sign with POWERSCOURT GARDENS on it flashed past my window. To me, it was a reminder not so much of the magnificent country house of Lord Powerscourt as of Powerscourt waterfall. When, encouraged by Murray, I went to have a look at that ‘very fine fall, though, like every other, dependent for scenic effect on the volume of water in the river’, I was shocked to discover that one had to cough up €6 to admire the ‘wonderfully fine? (JM) view. It was in a way even more shocking than nightly fireworks above Niagara Falls on the US-Canada border (to enhance the natural beauty?) — at least they didn’t charge for staring at them.

While in Ireland, I saw only one worse example of Celtic Tiger greed: an old seafood shop in a Dublin suburb that used to give away fish heads to local angler boys, started charging the boys 50 cent per fish head in 2003!

Having to pay for seeing a waterfall sounded like yet another Ostap Bender scam. That fictitious smooth operator, hero of 1920’s novels such as *The Twelve Chairs* and the *Little Golden Calf*, created by a brilliant tandem of Soviet writers, Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, once found himself terribly hard-up in the Russian town of Piatigorsk in the Northern Caucasus and

came up with the idea of charging gullible tourists an entry fee to The Drop — a puddle of stinking malachite at the bottom of a mountain cavern. When questioned by an inquisitive militiaman for what purpose the money was being collected, Ostap quickly retorted: 'For general repairs to the Drop . . . So that it won't drop too much.'

I could envisage a dispassionate Powerscourt Waterfall park warden addressing a similar query: 'For the waterfall, not to fall too much.'

It has to be said that the resourceful Ostap only charged thirty kopecks for the view — a pittance compared to the six-euro Powerscourt viewing fee — probably due to the fact that any 'repairs' to a waterfall were bound to be much costlier than those to The Drop.

To be able to observe the surrounding landscape and to read directions, while maintaining my time-travelling 'double vision' (i.e. constantly measuring up realities against the 'ossified carcass of time' in my ninety-three-year-old guide-book), I had to stay in the 'slow' left lane, and as a result was constantly tailgated by other drivers which was annoying and felt similar to someone peeping over your shoulder trying to read your newspaper in a crowded train carriage. I noticed that Irish motorists loved tailgating — much more than their British, Australian or even French counterparts. This is a significant change from 1912, the dawn of motoring, if we believe John Murray:

'Courtesy and consideration from others are as quickly responded to in Ireland as in any country in the world, and the motorist who exercises both will have no difficulty in travelling through Ireland in all its highways and byways.'

I thought that obsessive tailgating was probably part of the new 'Celtic Tiger' mentality, for some modern Irish drivers, indeed, behaved not like 'courteous' and 'considerate' motorists, but rather like tigers in pursuit of their prey. They — and not 'domestic animals of all kinds' — constituted the main 'unpleasantness' on the roads of Ireland in 2005.

No wonder Ireland was only one of three countries in Europe that saw an increase in the number of people killed on its roads in 2004. Among the most tragically ironic accidents was that of James Bohanna, a 21-year-old farmer, who was travelling home after spreading slurry on a field near Ballycullane in Co. Wexford. At some point, the spreader on his tractor became detached and blocked the road as he turned into the lane leading to his farm. It was already dark, so he jumped out of his cab to run down the road and warn passing motorists to slow down to avoid the danger. He was struck by an oncoming car almost straight away and died instantly.

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I turned off the motorway to visit Wicklow Town, the county's capital, and followed numerous signposts to Wicklow Gaol — the town's main tourist attraction.

I crawled through the town centre for half an hour trying to find a parking spot and was reminded of Murray's description of the traffic in 1912 Ireland: 'At cottage doors, or in shops in villages and towns, horses and carts are left standing alone, and the rushing noise of a

motor or sound of the horn is apt to cause a bolt.’ No amount of honking on my part made any difference ninety-three years on: the cars, parked all over the place, simply refused to budge.

‘Pedestrians’ might still be ‘understood’ in 21st-century Wicklow, but motorists definitely weren’t . . .

I had to drive up the hill away from the centre and finally squeezed my Punto into a narrow gap between cars in a ‘School Set Down Only’ car park. Descending on foot back to the town centre, I caught a view of the whole of Wicklow — a sight that corresponded almost exactly to Murray’s ‘quaint-looking town stretching in a semicircle round the bay, and, with the cliffs on the South, the few ruins of the Black Castle, and the distant promontories of Wicklow Head, makes up a very charming landscape.’

You can change the wallpaper and rearrange the furniture in the rooms of an old house, but you can’t replace the view from its windows . . .

Walking down New Street, I came across ‘The Forgotten Lady’ — a shop specialising in huge garments for women. It was an obvious misnomer and should have been renamed ‘The New Lady’, the reason being that — due to a near-absence of junk-food and couch-potato culture — obese ‘ladies’ (as well as ‘gentlemen’) were much less common in the early 20th century than they are now. The world-famous Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogue had to print a special note in its 1908 issue apologising for not being able ‘to furnish larger sizes’ than the 28-inch-waist and 42-inch-bust in women’s ‘frocks’ — rather average by modern standards!

The name of a barber’s shop in Market Square — ‘The Rebel Barber’ — was at a first glance even more puzzling, before I realised that it referred to the fact that Wicklow was at the margin of the 1798 rebellion, and the statue of Billy Byrne (or as it was put by Murray — in somewhat derogatory fashion — ‘Statue to “Billy” Byrne, the rebel leader of 1798’, stood across the Square, near the town hall. It was surrounded by loitering teenagers.

I decided I would never use the services of ‘The Rebel Barber’ (even if the name of that shop had a proper historical explanation), for where was the guarantee that he wouldn’t start ‘rebellious’ while cutting my hair? I didn’t want to end up with my ears trimmed up — instead of my curls . . .

With that resolution firmly in mind, I entered the semi-dark lobby of ‘Wicklow’s Historic Gaol’ now a museum, of course.

‘Can I have a quick look at the Gaol?’ I asked a black-clad female receptionist.

‘Are you from Germany?’ she asked me in return.

Although in Ireland I am often confronted with the question: ‘Which part of Italy do you come from, Mr Vivaldi?’, I have as much Italian blood in me as Pavarotti has Ukrainian. But interestingly, I have never been taken for a Ukrainian, simply because most people in Ireland do not seem to have a clue what Ukraine actually is — a vegetable, a mineral, or, indeed, a country. Psychologically speaking, the near-obsessive desire of the Irish to know where their accidental interlocutor comes from can probably be explained by not being quite certain of their own place in the modern world and by frantically trying to position themselves in it.

But to think that I was German — that had only happened to me once before — not in Ireland, but on the aptly monikered Scilly Islands. And it was not for your average beer-swilling German that I was mistaken, but for Herr Karl Baedeker, one of the pioneers of modern guide-book writing, himself!

In year 2000, I habitually travelled around the UK with a tattered copy of *Baedeker's Britain*, 1893. A staff member at the tourism office in Hugh Town, the Scillies' capital, who had been forewarned of my arrival and of the main tool of my research (the old Baedeker guide-book, of course), asked me whether I could read in English. I answered in the affirmative adding that I could write, too, and had just published my seventh book in that language. I was then asked when exactly I was going back to Germany.

'It is nice to meet you, Mr Baedeker,' the woman smiled. 'They have just phoned me from London and asked me to reserve a room for you . . .'

I realised that — in an amazing twist of fortune — I had been eclipsed by my own old guide-book and denials were useless.

'*Der Kutscher ist betrunken,*' I replied gravely, using the only complete German sentence I knew by heart. The 1886 edition of *Baedeker's Manual of Conversation*, another gem of my book collection, had for once proved helpful . . .

Having reassured the inquisitive receptionist at the gaol that I was not German, but a Ukrainian-born Russian, with British and Australian citizenships, temporarily living in Ireland (I could see her reaching for her handbag — probably in search of an aspirin), I proceeded to the first room of the gaol-cum-museum that was called the 'Education Room'.

On one of its walls, next to the old map of Tasman Peninsula, was a drawing of 'the Model Prison of Port Arthur', Tasmania's most horrific gaol, where many convicts, dispatched from Ireland (including 105 from Wicklow), ended their lives.

Port Arthur and the whole of 'Tasman Peninsula' were familiar to me. While living in Melbourne, I frequently travelled to Tasmania, for it reminded me of Europe. Indeed, the convicts of that 'secondary' British gulag (they were normally sent there for misdemeanours committed while already serving their terms in continental Australia), knowing there was no return, had planted numerous European trees, built Gothic churches for themselves and thatched cottages for their gaolers. The Model Prison of Port Arthur opened in 1830 and had a 'silent' or 'separate' policy. Its inmates lived and worked in solitary confinement, in complete silence and anonymity. They were called out by numbers only, just as in German and Soviet concentration camps a hundred years later.

The British 'experiments', however, went further. They made the convicts wear masks at all times, lest they be recognised by their fellow sufferers in 'airing yards'. It was only in the chapel, where each prisoner had his own 'praying box', allowing a view only of the priest and the altar, that he could remove his mask. Warders never spoke to prisoners and communicated solely by hand signals.

In the 1850s Port Arthur was frequently visited by inspectors from London who were very impressed by the colony's 'pioneering' methods. One thing they failed to understand, however, was why prisoners in Port Arthur were going insane in growing numbers. A special

asylum had to be built in the prison grounds. In 1871, the number of mad convicts reached 111, exceeding Port Arthur's sane population, and soon afterwards The Model Prison had to close, since there were no 'normal' inmates left.

I am still of the opinion that punitive psychiatry as a method of suppressing dissent was attempted first not by the Russian Bolsheviks, but by the British in Port Arthur, still described as an achievement in some British history manuals.

I was brought back to reality by an obstreperous Irish toddler, happily knocking on the glass dome covering a model of Wicklow Gaol's gallows — complete with miniature freshly hanged prisoner, his tiny pink tongue falling out of his mouth. The little brat's young mother was telling him off: 'See, that man was very naughty — he was knocking on the glass, like you are, so you'd better stop . . .' The kid immediately calmed down. Dr Benjamin Spock would certainly have disapproved.

PLEASE WAIT TO BE SUMMONED BY A GAOLER! warned a sign at the prison's entrance. I waited and waited, but nothing happened, so I just went inside to be greeted by the hubbub of pre-recorded voices emanating from numerous mannequin sets. Everything — prisoners, gaolers, sailors, guards in Port Arthur (the exhibition followed the exiled convicts to Tasmania) and even a plate of thin prison gruel — was made of plastic. The convicts spoke (or rather moaned) with a distinct Irish drawl ('Oh, we shouldn't have started this mutiny . . . Now I'll never see Wicklow again . . .'), whereas the warders had a feline Cockney accent ('I don't trust these Irish convict bastards . . .').

A man, dressed in black period costume of uncertain period, suddenly materialised from nowhere and introduced himself as 'Richard Beeton, the gaoler'. I asked whether he was a relation of Mrs Beeton, but he ignored my question and said, with a bad English accent: 'If you get locked in one of the prison cells, just bang on the door — I'll come and get you out for a few bob . . .'

The café was firmly shut, 'for stock-taking', I was assured by a handwritten note stuck to the door. That was an obvious lie: there was not a single living soul inside the café, and all the chairs had been placed on table tops. 'Stock-taking' was a common excuse for closing down shops and restaurants indefinitely in the Soviet Union. The other popular pretext was a mysterious 'sanitary hour' that often lasted for days on end . . .

At the Museum exit, next to a tattered mannequin of a warden, clutching a rubber stamp in his plastic hands, freshly printed 'Wicklow County Gaol Release Forms' were neatly stacked on a table:

This is to confirm the release of . . . . .

Who resides in the town of . . . . .

In the country of . . . . .

CRIME COMMITTED:

For the crime of stealing 127 dead rabbits being the property of Thomas Byrne, a sentence of four month's imprisonment.

Having completed your sentence and the Gaoler being satisfied that you have reformed and therefore are fit to be discharged into society, you are hereby released from Wicklow County Gaol

#### OFFICIAL RELEASE STAMP

Having visited a number of kitschy museums, I was nevertheless shocked by such a blatant trivialisation of gruesome Irish history. As someone who came close to being imprisoned himself for his views, dissenting from the official Soviet dogma, and who had visited a number of prisons and labour camps as a journalist, I was extremely sensitive (possibly, over-sensitive) to any belittling of human suffering — for reasons political or purely commercial.

And I hadn't endured the gift-shop yet. Many months of travel in the USA taught me to be wary of museum gift shops. I will never forget a porcelain salt-and-pepper grinder on sale (for \$25) in the gift shop of the Seventh-Floor Museum in Dallas, Texas — the very building from where President Kennedy was so treacherously shot dead. The grinder was in the shape of JFK's head, and one could squeeze salt (or pepper) out of it by twisting the President's neck!

The stock of the Wicklow Gaol gift-shop was not that outrageously inconsiderate, yet still extremely insensitive. Among the items displayed were 'Die Cast Metal Handcuffs with Working (*sic*) Lock & Keys — not suitable for children under 3' (but clearly fine for playful four-year-olds — a tempting buy for the young mum of the toddler from the education room). And next to the handcuffs: 'whoopie cushions', fridge magnets, bottle openers, hair brushes, erasers, etc. — all proudly carrying the Wicklow Gaol logo on them.

It came as no surprise to learn from one of the museum brochures that 'Wicklow Gaol can be booked as a venue for business seminars'. As I read later in the *Wicklow People*, a local newspaper with headlines of the type, 'Heroic Bouncer Saves Drowning Woman', the county 'has been aggressively marketed for industry'. And the county's history, too, I could add.

I could not possibly leave Wicklow Town without 'inspecting' the only Murray-recommended hotel that was still there — The Grand. Indeed, it was still 'nestling in Wicklow Town' (to quote the hotel's glossy brochure), yet its once beautifully Victorian exterior and interior had been modernised beyond recognition. A couple of stained-glass windows and a mahogany reception stand in the lobby were the only reminders of the Grand's former grandeur — as testified by several old photos of the establishment displayed above the bar, next to a framed copy of the mystifying 'Tourist Menu of the Year 1995' (the food would have been a bit stale for my taste. Another genuine touch of bygone times was the old drawing of a man with a smoking pipe in his mouth on the door of the gents' toilet. Otherwise, cheap dusty rugs, plastic furniture and a terrible stench from the kitchen prevailed. The 'tea/coffee making facilities, television with access to hair dryer, iron and ironing boards', generously promised by the hotel's brochure, did little to enhance the non-existent ambience.

In the lobby, from where the now-defunct Grand Staircase — an essential feature of every Victorian hotel — must have originated, a poster advertising the WEDDING PACKAGE AT THE GRAND HOTEL included:

BRIDAL SUITE FOR BRIDE & GROOM  
GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE ON ARRIVAL (just one?)  
RED CARPET  
WHITE LINEN FOR TABLES  
PERSONALISED MENU CARDS —  
and — last but not least —  
CAKE STAND AND KNIFE

The munificent ‘package’ — we were warned by the small print at the bottom of the poster — was ‘based on minimum numbers of 100’.

Next to this impressive example of the miserly Celtic Tiger epoch, was a photo of a lady inside one of the hotel’s rooms (possibly, the very ‘bridal suite for bride & groom’). She was looking at herself in the mirror, carefully wrapped in a white towel, another — smaller — towel bound around her head. It was plain she hadn’t exercised her right to a hairdryer yet. I was reminded once more of Filson Young’s comment in *Ireland at the Crossroads*: ‘ . . . Ireland, that land of comfortless hotels . . . ’

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Thank God, shopping for souvenirs (or any kind of shopping, for that matter) was not on the agenda of the much less commercially minded travellers of yesteryear. The only time ‘shopping’ is ever mentioned in Baedeker’s *Manual of Conversation*, 1886 is in the chapter on how ‘to hire, or buy a horse’:

‘I wish to hire/buy a horse, to take a ride through the town and its environs; have you one to let out? If I like it, perhaps I may buy it.’

‘Yes, Sir; I have chestnut horses, white-spotted, dapple-gray, bay, grey, spotted-grey, black, white, dun, spotted, piebald and cream-coloured. I have some of all kinds. What colour would you wish your horse to be?’

‘I care little about his colour, provided he has not a bald face and is handsome and tractable . . . ’

And so on, before it comes to haggling over the price:

‘How much do you ask for him?’

‘Fifty pounds have been offered for him more than once, which I have refused; you shall have him for sixty.’

‘This is very dear. Such a price frightens me.’

‘Examine the head, the chest, and the legs of this horse. He is faultless in all points. His mouth is so fine he could almost drink out of a glass . . . ’

Unlike shopping, helping the traveller to choose a place to stay overnight was of utmost significance to both Murray and Baedeker. Their methods of research, however, differed substantially. Baedeker inspectors always travelled incognito and never accepted ‘freebies’,



whereas Murray was much less autonomous and was prepared to run an ad for a hotel in return for hospitality. Since Baedeker, sadly, never ventured to Ireland, we have to rely on Murray for a general description of early-20th-century Irish hotels:

‘Speaking generally, the hotels of Ireland are inferior to those of England, Scotland or the Continent,’ he begins, only to add diplomatically: ‘There are however, many exceptions to this general statement.’

Among those ‘exceptions’, by the way, he specifically names ‘The Wicklow district’, where ‘good hotels have rapidly developed’.

‘Many of the smaller hotels,’ Murray continues, ‘are not so bad as they appear at first glance. Outward indications of characteristic Irish free-and-easy carelessness (*sic* — VV) may be accompanied with substantial food and clean sleeping accommodation; almost invariably with good-humoured civility and attention.’

Talking about the quality of service, Murray seemed to favour so-called ‘boots’ (locally based servants with no special training) over the ‘imported waiter’ — ‘an exotic luxury often engaged for the season from Dublin or some other city’. This thought is echoed by Filson Young, who in *Ireland at the Crossroads*, speaks with derision about ‘the little army of Swiss waiters, those half-witted creatures who only know the world of hotels, rush hither and thither in the discharge of their remorseless disobedience.’

My own observations of travelling in Ireland in 2004-6, show that the role of the noncompliant Swiss waiters of a hundred years ago has now been usurped by newcomers from Poland — often even more defiant and ‘disobedient’ than their notorious Swiss precursors.

Staying at Woodenbridge Hotel in Co. Wicklow (allegedly, the country’s oldest hotel in existence) which was described by Murray as ‘excellent’ in 1912, I watched Polish kitchen workers monopolise the establishment’s only public phone to conduct endless conversations with their homeland and totally ignore the paying hotel guests, hopping from one foot to another in the lobby in feeble (and largely futile) attempts to attract their attention.

When I had a problem with the electric lights in my room one evening, a Polish electrician, called Pan Fix-it-owsky (clearly, I’ve invented this name), turned up only to say that he spoke very little English and therefore I would have to wait until the morning (when the whole issue of electric lighting would become irrelevant in any case).

Whereas lighting inside my room was non-existent, the same could not be said about the hotel’s own façade, brightly lit by two powerful searchlights. It would have been fine, had it not been for the fact that one of them was also lighting up my room — not to the extent to allow me to read and write, but well enough to stop me sleeping.

I called Reception at about midnight, asking them to switch the lights off and was told that they (the lights) would have to stay on ‘until the last patrons leave the car park of the hotel’s bar’.

Judging by boozy noise from downstairs, the party in the bar was still in full swing.

‘When will that be?’ I enquired.

‘At one a.m.’

'For sure?'

'No . . .'

They were prepared to ignore the interests of the hotel's guests for the sake of a bunch of money-spending boozers.

When the lights were still on at 1.30 a.m., I called Reception again. The phone was answered by a Polish night porter who sounded exactly like my friend, Pan Fix-it-owsky.

'We can bring you a mattress to cover up the window,' he suggested.

I had to spend the night in the treacherous glow of the Celtic Tiger's predatory eyes . . .

Among other things, the Woodenbridge Hotel boasted a regulation 'De Valera Suite', where the former Irish President, allegedly, spent his honeymoon.

Looking back at my travels around Ireland, I have to admit that it was hard to find an Irish hotel that did not claim to have hosted the ubiquitous De Valera, even if for one night only. In England, the same could be said of Charles Dickens, and in Scotland, of Mary Queen of Scots.

A framed Victorian poster of the hotel (*'First Class. Best views in Wicklow, if not in all Ireland. Sanitary work has been carried out on the finest and first scientific principles.'*) hung on the Reception wall, next to a dubious, and clearly not Victorian, ad for 'Adult Dancing'.

'Well, at least the views are still stunning,' I was thinking at breakfast. The tables were unclean, the waiters — sullen, and the orange juice was off. The 'scientific sanitary principles' of yesteryear seemed to be well-forgotten.

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*'Rathdrum is a place of no special interest in itself.'*

(*'A HANDBOOK FOR TRAVELLERS IN IRELAND'*, MURRAY, 1912)

RATHDRUM — HOST TOWN TO BAHRAIN ran the road sign. I found it puzzling in the extreme. What was the connection between this small Wicklow town 'of no special interest' and the independent sheikdom on the Persian Gulf?

The only mental link I could draw was entirely of my own making. Several years ago, I wrote a spoof limerick for the 60th birthday of a Ukrainian friend of mine, now living in Melbourne, Australia. It went like this:

There lived an old man in Ukraine  
Who once travelled to Melbourne by train.  
He returned in a week  
Feeling hungry and sick,  
For his train got stuck in Bahrain.

If we are to believe that limericks as a genre originated from the early-19th-century Irish-language satirical verses of the Poets of the Maige from Co. Limerick, then the association —

no matter how flimsy and illogical — would be as follows: Bahrain was mentioned in my limerick; limericks come from Ireland; Rathdrum is a town in Ireland. Bingo!

I was on the way to my hotel in Woodenbridge and decided to stop in Rathdrum to withdraw some cash from the ATM. As I was walking towards it, my way was suddenly blocked by a black armoured van. Behind it, a khaki-coloured army truck suddenly screeched to a halt. Several dozen heavily armed soldiers in camouflage uniforms and flak jackets jumped out and surrounded the van, their submachine guns aimed at the doors of the Bank of Ireland.

It all happened so fast that I didn't have time to get scared or even surprised — I just stood there on the pavement, clutching my bank card and watching.

'What's going on?' I asked a passer-by — a podgy middle-aged man, most likely a local.

'Can't you see?' he chuckled. 'They are delivering afternoon tea to the bank . . .'

'No, seriously.'

'Seriously? They are worried about bank robberies by the IRA — hence all the fuss. That's how they deliver cash to banks in Ireland these days. Just gives the soldiers something to do, I guess.'

A couple of minutes later, the soldiers jumped back into the truck and it sped away, together with the van. The anti-hold-up operation, which itself looked like a carefully planned hold-up, was over.

'At least now we know that the money is there, so we can go and break in safely,' commented my facetious companion.

I decided I'd rather withdraw cash somewhere else. On the way out of Rathdrum, I braked next to another HOST TOWN TO BAHRAIN sign and got out of the car. SPECIAL OLYMPICS, 2003 was written in the right-hand corner in small letters I hadn't been able to discern from behind the wheel.

Hosting the Bahrain Special Olympics team several years before should not have been recorded as Rathdrum's only claim to fame. It was, after all, 'home' not just to Bahrain, but also to Charles Stewart Parnell, one of Ireland's most important and interesting politicians. But, except for a modest road sign pointing towards Avondale House, where Parnell was born in 1846, there was no mention of the 'uncrowned king of Ireland' in Rathdrum. Unlike that of 'Thomas "Buck" Whaley', who, according to an impressive memorial plate in the town centre, 'walked to Jerusalem and played handball against the Walls of the Old City.'

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To use one of Baedeker's (and Murray's) favourite epithets, Rathdrum was a 'quaint' town indeed! Just like the whole of Co. Wicklow that, over the two years in which I lived in Ireland, became one of my favourite destinations. Even now, living in London, I often return to the Wicklow Mountains in my meditations and dreams.

Enjoying the beauties of Co. Wicklow, however, did not stop me from noticing other — less attractive — details. Most of them, it has to be said, were fairly recent 'innovations'.

It is hard to imagine a spot more romantic and calming than The Meeting of the Waters 'at the confluence of the Avonmore and Avonbeg, which here unite.' (Murray). Even if

these days it could be also called 'The Meeting of the Watering Holes' due to the two unremarkable pubs beside the visitor centre, with one of Ireland's tackiest gift-shops, straddling the place where the rivers merge. There, I could easily relate to the following observation of Murray's: ' . . . it must be confessed that tourists often feel a certain amount of disappointment with it [The Meeting of the Waters], a necessary result when any place or thing has been exaggerated . . . ', although what he meant in 1912 was the famous poetic description of the spot by Thomas Moore, 'Ireland's National Poet', carved in stone and replicated all over the place.

I also enjoyed passing through the picture-postcard village of Avoca (Murray used to spell its name and that of the surrounding valley as 'Ovoca'), alias 'Ballykissangel', with its graceful church and unlikely Greek wine bar, The Village Greek, on the river bank. Even a *Wicklow People* article claiming that some of the village houses were infested with 'rats as big as elephants' had failed to deter me from frequent purposeless detours to the village and to the nearby town of Aughrim ('a pretty village' — Murray) — charming and beautifully kept, with elegant crescent-shaped terraces, lined with gas lanterns; with the genuine Nana May's Coffee Shop, serving excellent espresso and a substantial Full Irish Breakfast for a mere €6.50 — the price of a sandwich in Dublin. Aughrim was also home to one of the best-preserved small Victorian hotels in Ireland — Lawless's Hotel ('quiet quarters at the little hotel for cyclists and pedestrians' — Murray). Sadly, the Celtic Tiger had reached Aughrim, too: most houses at O'Neill & Flanagan Estate Agents were priced at over €600,000. And revisiting Aughrim shortly before leaving Ireland in December 2005, I was saddened to see that the whole Victorian quarter (which, ironically, included the offices of O'Neill & Flanagan), had been razed to the ground to vacate the space for a new housing development of rubber-stamp modern cottages.

Visiting Glendalough, I could not help remembering a wise 1903 pronouncement of Filson Young: 'There was never any more absurd idea than that prosperity could be brought to Ireland by opening it up as a tourist resort.'

The same disease which had taken hold of Wicklow Gaol also seemed to have infected Glendalough, starred by Murray in 1912 for its 'silent and deserted ruins' giving 'a singular impressiveness to the scene'. The sacred site has been nearly destroyed by rampant tourism: interpretation centres, re-enactments of all kinds and constantly wowing elderly American visitors. No longer 'silent and deserted' . . .

The unique monastic city itself, which, incidentally, could be also reached by St Kevin's Bus Services (!), was so well hidden behind flea markets, 'St Kevin's ice-cream' (!) stalls, gift shops and Internet cafés that it took a while to find it nestling behind the huge concrete visitor centre, charging a hefty entrance fee.

St Kevin would have to take a bus to get to his cave these days. To while away the time, he could have sucked on his own 'St Kevin's ice-cream' on the way!

No 'tiger' — Celtic or other — could, however, swallow up the striking views from the Wicklow Gap, one of the best natural vantage points in the country reached by driving up the

historic British-built Great Military Road. The only slight distraction blocking the view was a large 'interpretation' sign, which announced: 'Deep inside the mountain is a 292 megawatt electricity generation station, managed by the Electricity Supply Board'. I was reminded of Filson Young's statement, 'Who would care to go on to the beach after having read the sign-post, "This way to the beach"? What has the great sea to offer for the entertainment of the frame of mind created by that sign-post? So much direction takes the heart out of curiosity . . .'

What a brilliant mind he had. I couldn't help thinking that all those unnecessary signposts not only spoiled the best sights, but also transformed any beautiful view into someone else's — boring and importunate — 'point of view'.

Thankfully, there were few 'directions' to Greenan Farm near Rathdrum run by Jonathan and Will Wheeler — father and son, no interpretation signs or visitor centres. They were the only real farmers I met in Co. Wicklow. In full accordance with W.G. Blackie's 1852 description of Wicklow people, they were both 'industrious' and 'handsome', albeit I had failed to notice whether their 'profiles' were 'Roman' or not, as Blackie suggested.

The farm was home to a set of lovely little museums of traditional farming tools, machinery and household items. It also possessed Ireland's largest collection of old bottles. Why not? Old bottles, with their peculiar shapes and faded labels, Middleton Whiskey (a rare Cork blend), Thwaites Mineral Water, Bovril, or Dr Nelson's Improved Inhaler, can be no less fascinating than old books.

The museums struck me as genuine. Unlike Glendalough or Wicklow Gaol, they were very much *alive*, probably because the collectors' main aim was not to make megabucks (the entry fee to the farm was symbolic), but to preserve the past. They were both equally concerned about the ongoing destruction of Ireland's old values.

'We began collecting in 1970, feeling it was a pity that the old ways were being forgotten,' said Wheeler Senior.

'We'll never make a fortune, but it is our way of life,' echoed his son. 'It's a shame they're building all these ugly houses on sacred sites, including here in Wicklow, for Ireland has such small and sensitive landscape. And reporting unlawful developments can be dangerous . . . Ireland is punch-drunk on its so-called economic boom . . .'

They were right, of course, and it seems apt to finish the chapter on the still-beautiful Co. Wicklow with a quote, not from an old, but from a bang up-to-date source, a piece in the London *Independent* newspaper from 11 April 2005: 'History [in Ireland] has taken second place to a sense of a country revelling in newfound prosperity . . . It is a country where materialism often prevails over old ways.'

Sad, but true . . .

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