

HELLO IRELAND 2013

Dia Duit Ireland 2013

Friday 25th October

Ever since discovering I'm 1/8 Irish, I've been aware of a strong hankering to visit Éire, the Emerald Isle, birth place of my paternal great grandfather. So, when our son Dan asked if Alan and I were interested in a week's self catering in County Galway during the autumn half term holiday, I jumped at the chance like a leprechaun on poteen. Alan was also raring to go, as his grandfather (although from Italian-English roots) had been born in Ireland and had spent part of his childhood there while his father was a coastguard.

As the time grew nearer, though, so did the reality of crossing the Irish Sea at the end of October – especially when two days before our departure, Dan started to mention the shipping forecast, sea state, wave height and red warnings, as moderate to strong gales were expected. To be fair, he did try to put my mind at rest by saying it looked as if we might be sailing in a lull between the bad weather, so I kept my hopes up for a good, long lull.

The weather was skittish as we left Pontardawe for Pembroke Dock and while we sat in a car park en route about 90 minutes later eating lunch, there was a huge cloudburst with accompanying strong winds. The sailing was scheduled for 14.45 and when we arrived, I wasn't surprised there weren't many cars queuing up. We didn't have to wait too long and as our car boarded the *Isle of Inishmore*, I noticed some Irish writing and felt myself falling instantly in love with the Irish language and possibly all things Irish. Except whiskey. Sorry.

We found some comfortable seats with a small table in between and settled down for the four hour crossing. Alan and I took Willow with us to investigate the shop and on the way back there was an announcement from the Irish captain in rather a lilting, delectable Irish accent to say that the crossing would probably be a little rough and in the event of motion sickness, the advice was to stay seated - fair enough.

There were certainly some white crested waves as we left Pembroke and the wave action resulted in people veering from side to side as they walked along, but the movement was really quite gentle to what I'd been envisaging after my Pacific Ocean experiences in 1974 and I wondered what I'd been worrying about. I expect the stabilisers helped ☺

Alan and I took 5 year old Willow and 3 year old Piran to the play area, but after half an hour or so some older boys started to be a bit rough and rowdy, so it seemed a good idea to return to our seats and eat some of Alan's buns (if that doesn't sound too weird). As the late afternoon progressed into early evening, we ate some more sandwiches and had a hot drink, until eventually some twinkling lights of Ireland came into view. I felt quite excited to be looking out at Ireland after all my hours of slaving at the computer over a hot family tree!

It wasn't long before we were ready to drive off the *Isle of Inishmore* into the intoxicating Irish evening, although no alcohol had been consumed as yet. The hotel Dan had booked at Rosslare (*Ros Láir – Middle Peninsula*) for one night before we travelled across Ireland was only about a 15 minute drive away and from what I could see, Rosslare was a pleasant place with attractive housing and individual hotels, rather than the boring corporate variety.

We arrived at Cedars Hotel and checked in with the help of a delightfully accented Irish lady. Our rooms were large and inviting, I felt it was rather a pity we were staying for just one night! However, since it was approaching 20.00 and Dan for one wanted to avail himself of a Guinness, we convened at a corner table in a spacious and far from crowded bar, where innovative Halloween decorations hung around intriguingly. Well, Willow and Piran were intrigued and anything to keep the children amused after the tedious travelling...

We all had one drink and then Paula took Willow and Piran up to bed. Dan looked enquiringly at Alan to see if he was going to have another Guinness, so I kept them both company with a second bacardi and Pepsi. It wasn't a hardship, to be honest.



Sláinte!

It was enjoyable sitting there chatting desultorily and watching people come and go, but it became more of a challenge to keep our eyes open, so we gave in and proceeded to our rooms for our first Irish night. It had been a long, tiring day, but thankfully a safe one ☺

Saturday 26th October

The bed was comfortable, but I lay awake for hours – too excited, obviously! We'd arranged to meet for breakfast between 07.00 and 07.15 to make the most of the day, which meant Dan had to forgo the delights of a cooked Irish breakfast not served until 07.45. A noble sacrifice...

The sky gradually lightened as we ate our various selections from a choice of cereal, fruit, yoghurt, toast and croissants, with fruit juice and tea or coffee, but it was looking overcast by the time we checked out at 08.15. The plan was to drive north towards Dublin and visit Newgrange (*Sí in Bhrú – Mound of the Brú*), a Neolithic passage tomb at the *Brú na Bóinne (Palace of the Boyne)* Visitor Centre in the Boyne Valley.

We would have stopped somewhere halfway if we'd come across an appropriate place, but everyone was OK and the roads were mostly fine. In fact, they seemed reminiscent of what English roads used to be like several decades ago, with much less volume of traffic and therefore much fewer frustrated, angry drivers. The scenery was interesting and the place names to die for – so many Ballysomethings! My favourite was Ballycanew – well, can you?

The traffic around Dublin wasn't great, but we made our way to the Boyne Valley in County Meath. I'd heard of the Battle of the Boyne, but here my knowledge ended. I've since found out it took place in 1690 between Catholic King James and Protestant King William and seems rather complicated, although still a key part of the folklore of the Protestant Orange Order.

On arrival at Newgrange, it was the Banana Order for us – without much protest, as we were a little hungry and had decided to visit the site before lunch. We walked to the Visitor Centre and were allocated to the 11.15 tour, due to start shortly. It was indeed a short walk to the shuttle bus that took us on a short five minute drive to the passage tomb, where we were assigned a guide (not especially short) and then walked the short distance up to the actual site.

It was quite a sight with its massive grass covered mound measuring 76 metres/249 feet across and 12m/39ft high and positively mind blowing to think that it had been built around 3200 BC, before Stonehenge in England and the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. Around the base was a retaining wall of 97 kerbstones, some of them decorated with megalithic art. Although generally classified as a passage tomb, it's now recognised to be more like a temple with special astrological, ceremonial and spiritual significance.

We first of all had a brief talk outside in the bracing autumn air about the stones and the history of the place, while the previous tour group was still inside. I loved our guide's Irish accent, but so much so that I found myself listening to her accent rather than the actual content of what she was saying. I also found that it was a bit tricky to take photos with so many people milling around and just as I managed to manoeuvre myself into the right position, the previous party started to emerge. A point in favour for digital editing!

However, it was clear to see that the entrance stone was very significant, with its wonderful carvings of circles, spirals, concentric semicircles, lozenges and a beautiful triple spiral. It was impossible not to wonder about the symbolism of such designs, but as yet there is no known answer. Above the entrance passage was an intriguing 'roof box', the purpose of which literally came to light when it was our turn to go inside.



Entranced with the entrance...

We were sadly but understandably informed that no photography was allowed inside and also that we must carry our bags rather than have them over our shoulders, in order to avoid brushing or knocking against anything. The passageway was 19m/60ft long and very narrow, leading to a central chamber with three alcoves – and was therefore in a cruciform design, just as in La Hougue Bie on Jersey (inside which we'd been allowed to take photos!)

To be fair, though, we hadn't had any guide in La Hougue Bie, especially one with such a delicious Irish accent. It was a bit of a crush as we all gathered in the central chamber and probably a good strategy to have earlier advised people prone to claustrophobia to enter last in order to be first out. I couldn't help wondering what Willow and Piran were thinking about this strange turn of events...

The talk was quick, entertaining and informative, culminating in a display that started off in total darkness to mimic the effect of the sun's rays entering through the roof box at winter solstice. Yes, the aforementioned roof box is where the action is, rather than the doorway, as the passage gradually slopes upwards.

I appreciated the display, as it helped me to envisage the alignment of the sun's rays into the chamber, but it was soon over and we were shepherded out in time for the next group to have their turn. In high season, visitor numbers are so great that people are advised to arrive as early as possible and be prepared to wait, as there's no guarantee of being allocated a tour. Autumn half term has its benefits!

The weather was fortunately still dry outside as we proceeded to walk around the outside of the monument, looking at really quite intricate carvings on some of the kerbstones – but it was also very cold and windy, so we made our way back down to the shuttle bus and hence to the Visitor Centre. There was a spacious but quite crowded café there, where we enjoyed a sandwich lunch and a drink. I was shamelessly amused (enough to take a photo) to see that the chocolate sprinkles on my cappuccino were in the shape of a shamrock ☺



A pity to drink it – but not really!

After annoying myself by deliberating mightily in the shop (so many nice things!) Alan and I took Willow and Piran for a rapid exploration of the exhibition. From what we saw, it was very well presented with some excellent models and displays, but time was disappearing too fast and so we had to leave Newgrange to carry on with our journey to Roundstone in County Galway. It had started to rain. Hard!

The next few hours were undeniably tedious as we drove west, except for those lovely Irish place names, such as Drogheda, Ballybrit, Kilkenny, Ballinaboy, Gort, Oughterard, Muckanagherdauhaulia. Mmm! Back to reality, though, we stopped mid afternoon at a small retail place in Athlone (*Baile Átha Luain*), a town on the River Shannon, to buy a few supplies such as bread, milk and cheese and to use the facilities, to put it politely. Alan also filled our car with petrol – well, the petrol tank to be pedantic. The day was definitely taking its toll, not to mention a few of the roads, but very reasonably priced at around €3 or less.

The final leg of the journey became more interesting as we drove into the region of Connemara (*Conamara* – from *Conmhaicne Mara* meaning *Descendants of Con Mhac of the Sea*) and approached the west coast proper, where our destination of Roundstone (*Cloch na Rón* – *Rock of the Seals*) was situated on the western arm of Bertraghboy Bay, County Galway. I know I should have carried out some initial research, but I was surprised it was such a mountainous area – although it was no surprise that a Dan-type holiday would somehow involve mountains!

We literally took a short recess at Recess (*Sraith Saileach* – *Stream of the Willow Tree*), a small village nestling in an area of bogland, forest and lakes and dominated somewhat by the brooding Twelve Bens, a range of impressive quartzite sharp-peaked mountains. On the lower slopes of these mountains the famous Connemara green marble quarries are to be found – but for the present (although we didn't venture into the gift shop there) we just got out of the cars in what turned out to be an extremely cold wind and gazed at the view opposite.



Recessing at Recess

Kay Santillo, 2013.

Impossible to miss in the parking area was a monumental sculpture of the Connemara Giant, although it was hard to take a photo with the lighting conditions. Willow and Piran were released from their car and ran around the Giant's base to expend some energy. While watching out for them, I noticed that behind the giant there was a strange geometric monument bearing a plaque that stated: "ON THIS SITE IN 1897 NOTHING HAPPENED." If this was an example of Irish humour, I absolutely loved it!

The light was failing as we finally drove along a very scenic coastal road to the fishing village of Roundstone overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It had an 'end of the land' feel, due to the many rocks, small islands and inlets, with seaweed scattered thickly along the shore. After turning up a hill and through some fairly scattered houses, we drove along a short rural road to where our holiday home awaited us amongst gorse and moorland, against the backdrop of the friendly looking Errisbeg Mountain. I don't know how a mountain can look friendly, but it did.

A slightly frenetic session of room allocation and unpacking followed, after which Paula kindly made us a tuna pasta bake and the usual early evening activities followed. Willow and Piran went off happily enough into their shared bedroom and peace finally reigned. A lot of peace, to be honest, as it appeared Dan and Paula had an aversion to watching any television. As it happened, I had things to do, notes to write up – and before my eyes attempted to close altogether and remain shut, I departed for the bedroom at just before 22.00. *Oíche Mhaith!*

Sunday 27th October

Stormy weather had been forecast for last night and it certainly arrived. I think I kept myself awake rather than the howling wind and driving rain though, because I just couldn't sink down into sleep for ages. It was past 01.00 before I slept at all and then it was fitful. I heard voices at 05.45 (in the living room, not inside my head) but the hour had been put back, so it wasn't really as bad as 05.45! Willow and Piran were understandably excited and running up and down the corridor outside our room, so we emerged at 07.00 for a life saving mug of tea.

As it became full daylight, the wind was still blowing very fiercely, but the house was very snug with underfloor heating and triple glazed windows. Dan suggested a walk along a beach near the house and by about 09.15 we were all dressed up and ready to go. It was only a very short drive along a small rural road with a wide strip of grass growing in the middle, past the Errisbeg Hotel and onwards to Gurteen Beach (*Trá na Feadóige – Beach of the Plover*).

As soon as we stepped outside the car, the wind was a force to be reckoned with and I was a bit concerned that Willow and Piran could be blown away on a sudden freak gust! However, we started our walk on a path above a lovely stretch of silvery sanded beach, with many 'white horses' racing madly out at sea. As there were quite a lot of big rocks in places, there were some spectacular waves crashing into them amid plumes of wild, white spray. In the exposed rough spots, Paula kept hold of Piran and I kept hold of Willow, while Alan and Dan took lots of photos – I managed to sneak in a few, though ☺



Stormy beach

There had been a short, sharp shower not long after we'd arrived, but when we'd been there for about half an hour, a sudden squally shower caught us out in the open. The wind was so strong that I just stood still and held on to Willow, being constantly buffeted around and having to fight to stand up at all. Hailstones stung our faces and because we turned away from it, the hail was driving into our backs and the backs of our legs. Dan was wearing winter trousers, while Alan and Paula were wearing leggings, but the children and I weren't as well equipped. I could feel the backs of my legs becoming soaking wet, but the wind was so strong that when the hail stopped and the sun came out, it felt as if they were drying quite quickly.



Willow enjoys a dry spell!

We walked further along and I managed to have a bit of fun taking a few more photos. More people had arrived to watch the waves, or walk the dog, or whatever. Dogs on leads, hopefully, or they might have taken flight! Alan and Dan were still ensconced in their photographic activities, but when another squally shower arrived and we became wet all over again, both Willow and I were reaching the end of our good humour and when Willow complained to her dad, he agreed that it was probably time to walk back to the car.

Although my gloves were wet and useless, the backs of my legs were drying out once again as we retraced our steps. Just before we reached the car park, though, the inevitable happened and another violent, squally shower rendered us very wet yet again. I felt so uncomfortable as we drove back to the house that I must confess to being disgruntled. My grumbles were most definitely dissing! It was a relief to take off all rain soaked clothes (including knickers) and replace them with dry ones. Even the contents of my bag were soggy and had to be dried.

Still, a mug of hot coffee worked wonders, followed not long after by a lunch of cheese sandwiches, crisps and fruit. The need to shop for food was growing more evident, but for the remainder of the day, we decided to go out for a drive and stop at a few viewpoints to look at the scenery. The wind was still blowing a hoolie – which is an interesting word, because while I've used it to mean a very strong wind, in Ireland it apparently means a get-together, or a party in a small place. Language is great ☺

We had no party in a small place or otherwise, but the views of the coast were grand. The mountains were mostly misty and when we stopped at a monument to Alcock and Brown's trans-Atlantic flight in 1919, I couldn't hold my camera steady at all – but it was grand!

We returned to the house at 15.00 for a very welcome mug of tea and biscuits. I mostly played with Willow and Piran until teatime, which consisted of baked potato with a choice of cheese, tuna, egg or butter. Alan had made some flapjack that also filled a culinary gap. Then the evening slowly descended, along with the sudden quietude as the children went to bed!

Monday 28th October

This morning we were awoken at 06.15 by a Piran-type protestation, but delayed entry into the child zone until 07.10. I have made a Grandma Kay ruling that a mug of tea must be drunk by the grandma in question before she will take part in any reading stories, colouring, playing or talking. Some things are necessary for survival...

The weather seemed to be similar to the day before, with hopefully a lessening of the wind. As long as there are sunny spells, it helps a great deal and even adds to the quality of photos with some wonderfully dramatic skies. Photography features a lot when Dan and Alan are involved and I enjoy a bit of a dabble, now with my pretty new blue camera.

Paula had planned a visit to a place called Cong (*Conga* – from *Cúnga Fheichin* meaning *Saint Feichin's Narrows*), a village straddling the borders of County Galway and County Mayo. We left the house at about 09.30 and drove along a scenic moorland route that could easily have been the Lake District in England, with a range of mountains of varying heights and shapes rising above picturesque lakes below. The views were so inspiring that we stopped a few times to take photos. It was fairly cold and we had to dodge some significant showers, but the wind was minimal compared to yesterday's savagery.

When we arrived at Cong, we parked in the large, empty car park and walked into the main street. It soon became obvious that Cong is famous for where the film *The Quiet Man* had been made in 1951, starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara. I'd never heard of this romantic comedy that's slightly older than I am, but the village was clearly proud of its part in the film and still enjoying financial gain from playing host, particularly from a Quiet Man Museum.

However, our destination was the ruins of an Augustinian abbey, founded in 623 AD by the aforementioned St Feichin and built on the site of a 16th century church. A rain shower greeted us just after we arrived, but we were able to shelter until it passed. There were quite a few people wandering around as we first investigated the remaining architecture that included Gothic windows, Romanesque arches, pillars, columns and some outstanding sculpture.

Willow and Piran seemed quite happy to run around and we soon progressed to the abbey grounds, where one of the most interesting features was a ruinous monk's fishing house, probably built in the 15th or 16th century on an island in the River Cong. It had been constructed on a platform of stones over a small arch that allows the river to flow underneath. A trapdoor in the floor allowed the monks to drop a net to catch fish and thereby ensure a fresh supply whenever needed – presumably there would have been no shortage of friars.

We moved from the fishing house to a bridge spanning the river, where we stood for a while watching fish leap out of the water to catch flies. What is this life if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare ... and watch fish leaping out of water to catch flies? It was strangely compulsive as the fish swam away in an unknown direction before making another sudden, brief appearance. Willow and Piran were intrigued and delighted when they spotted a fish!



Bridge over the River Cong

Kay Santillo, 2013.

After leaving the abbey, we walked back through the town to the car park – I couldn't help admiring a perfect Irish green *Telefón* box and a blue *Garda* sign outside a station that looked just like somebody's house. It's not that I wanted to ring the police, more that the 1/8 Irish part of me was strangely happy. Maybe in a previous Irish life I was an informant...

Our packed lunch was consumed mainly in the cars, due to another rain shower that came from an increasingly cloudy sky. Our next planned stop was at Nymphsfield stone circle, but as we reached it we could see from the road that access was unclear, there was nowhere easy to park and the circle was in a fenced enclosure within a grove of trees anyway (difficult to photograph), so we gave up and drove on to find more viewpoints of the mountains.

In fact, Dan led us on a road up a mountain, where the clouds over the lake below were dramatic to say the least. Needless to say it rained, although we were able to nip out with our cameras in between the showers, as the sky changed from one moment to the next with a dynamic mix of blue sky and rain laden storm cloud – which on reflection is a bit like this year has been on many fronts, meteorological and otherwise. Great views, though ☺

Moving on down the mountain road, we then headed towards Kylemore Abbey, a Benedictine monastery founded in 1920 for Benedictine nuns who had fled Belgium in WWI. Although it was clearly a popular visitor destination set in beautiful surroundings with extensive walks, we didn't investigate for several reasons, including the weather, the commercialisation of the place, the time of day and the fact that we still had to do food shopping. We did, however, investigate the toilets (good) and on the way out, Alan and I quickly investigated the gift shop.

It wasn't too far to Clifden (*An Clochán – Stepping Stones*), the largest town in Connemara, where it was easy enough to find a supermarket. I think we were all quite tired, but I enjoyed the understated but very present Irishness of the atmosphere. Not only were some excellent Irish products on sale, but Irish type music floated out over the loudspeaker, interrupted occasionally by announcements about the week's special offers at so many Euro, all spoken in a delightful male Irish accent. By a man, I should probably say.

It had been rather a boring day for the children, so we bought two packs of Halloween cakes for everyone. They certainly seem to make the most of Halloween in these parts and I could only imagine the forthcoming community shenanigans with broomsticks, strange costumes and a few alcoholic beverages. Fair enough on those cold, windy west coast nights – and the really good thing was that there was hardly a sign of Christmas anywhere as yet!

Thanks to the supermarket, sea bass was on the menu for the evening and very tasty it was too. The evening activities soon began, whereupon Dan finally gave in to temptation and set about lighting the woodburner. I was surprised it had taken him so long, to be honest, as he'd been gazing at the woodburner's equipment and the basket of logs since we'd arrived. Anyway, it's safe to say we were warm all evening – hot, actually. Hot enough to perspire and have to take off clothes...



My daddy the firestarter!

Kay Santillo, 2013.

Tuesday 29th October

I took a while to get to sleep again and Willow was up early at 5-something, but when Alan and I presented ourselves in the living room area, she had been busily practising writing and was doing very well indeed. I can actually remember the thrill of learning how to write, so well done Willow, even if you did contribute to the bags under my eyes!

It was a calmer, sunnier day, so the plan was to set forth on a 2-hour pilgrimage to Achill Island (*Acaill* meaning *eagle* or *Oileán Acla*) in County Mayo that Alan very much wanted to make. His paternal grandfather, Frederick James, had been born in Ireland while his father, Charles Reuben, had been a coastguard there and they had spent summer holidays at Achill.

Alan had inherited an old postcard of the island showing a cluster of houses that were part of a small village at the foot of Mount Slievemore (671m/2201ft) and he'd been fascinated ever since. This village on the north side of the island had finally been deserted in the 1940s and the ruins of the houses left to slumber on and decline peacefully.

We managed to leave at 08.45 on a cold, breezy morning with sunny intervals sneaking out through various hefty cloud formations. For a while we travelled along the same road as yesterday, but then drove past Killary (where apparently Ireland's only fjord can be found) and more or less north west. Rather than stop at one of the interesting looking villages we passed through for a civilised morning coffee (no underlying regret in that ... possibly) we ploughed straight onwards with just one quick stop later on for Piran to wet the roadside verge.

The scenery was beautiful as we drove through the mountain areas with ground level moorland and what looked like evidence of peat digging. Nearer our destination, we travelled along the Atlantic Drive, with spectacular views where the sea was very much in evidence – but not coast as we know it. On the west coast of Ireland it seems that there are hundreds of inlets and islands of various shapes and sizes, the effect of which is quite stunning.

Eventually we arrived at Achill Island, the largest island off Ireland's west coast and joined to the mainland by a short road bridge. We'd encountered a shower or two of rain while more inland, but at the coast there was lots of blue sky with cotton wool clouds. As we drove along, I realised it was more populated than I'd imagined, but still had a very spacious feel. In fact, all of Ireland we've seen so far (with the exception of the large cities, which we've avoided) has felt more open than England, with more air to breathe. There seem to be many more detached, individual houses set amid green land and many such new houses being built.

Alan had thought the plan was to visit the deserted village near Dugort and became perplexed when Dan and Paula in front of us drove past there and ended up at a beach that seemed to be at the end of the island. It was a lovely beach, to be sure, but the blue sky situation was looking a little tenuous. When we parked, Alan told the others they were welcome to stay, but he was going to go back towards Dugort. In the end, we took out the biscuits and the cameras to eat and use respectively and all drove back to the deserted village after about ten minutes.



The beach we spurned

Kay Santillo, 2013.

When we arrived there about 15 minutes later, Alan was clearly transfixed and delighted to be at the actual place at last. The wind was punishingly cold, but the sight of the derelict, ruinous houses sprawling below the mountain, open to the elements and opposite the sea with its pretty inlets and islands, was a sight to behold. Alan was soon off, leaving the path to head upwards on the somewhat boggy moorland to the houses, his camera purposefully in hand.



Only memories live here now...

I stayed on the path for a while, but couldn't resist the lure of history for long and eventually we all ended up on the hillside, wandering around slightly aimlessly and trying to keep warm, while Alan bonded with the past and took numerous photos. The sun kept disappearing behind clouds, but fortunately there were still a few sunny intervals. Willow and Piran seemed perfectly happy pretending that one house was Willow's, while another was Piran's and I was really impressed with their ability to play in that remote place – and their resilience to cold!



Willow at the door of 'her' house

Finally, Alan had seen enough and we walked back to the cars for our packed lunch. It was a relief to sit in the comparatively warm car and I was surprised at the number of people who were around, walking along the path with or without dogs and generally investigating or enjoying the area – Achill Island is apparently regarded as one of the most remote and scenic areas in Ireland and I can understand why, as even at this tired time of year it was beautiful, invigorating and awe inspiring.

As for the abandoned houses, there were about 80 of them in total, all made in unmortared stone and consisting of just one room that served as living room, kitchen, bedroom and even stable. In 1845 the potato famine struck Achill and the village was abandoned, as families moved to the nearby village of Dooagh by the sea, where there was a supply of fish and shellfish for food. However, the village was still used as a 'booley village', meaning that teenage children of the families and their descendants would take cattle to graze on the hillside during the summer and stay in the houses. This custom continued until the 1940s.

Dugort had been the original tourist destination on Achill, where a hotel had been established in 1839, originally named the Achill Mission Hotel. Overlooking Blacksod Bay (a delightfully down to earth name, possibly because Achill is 87% peat bog) Dugort has two beaches with idyllic sand dunes and grasses, the smaller one at the foot of Slievemore Mountain called Silver Strand, while Golden Strand lies further east. It's easy to imagine Alan's grandfather and his family enjoying summer holidays in this wild and heavenly area, although as a large family, it's highly unlikely they stayed in the hotel. Who would care, the beaches are great!

After all this ruminating over lunch (though not in the digestive sense), it was time to move on to what must have been Silver Strand beach. It was very windy, but the view was terrific. The sand dunes looked very inviting, but Paula stayed in the car with the children while Dan, Alan and I just nipped out for a short while to take photos.



Let's slip off to a sand dune...

Our next stop was at the top of Mount Minaun (466m/1529ft) where there was the most glorious view and the most vicious wind! The ground was very peaty with a certain amount of bogginess, but well worth any discomfort to look out over peat bogs to the very west coast Irish landscape of islands and inlets culminating in a mountainous horizon. Definitely well worth the freezing nose, cheeks and fingers! Having said that, I was really glad to get back into the car...



Mountains, sea, islands, inlets and peat bogs!

It was time to be homeward bound, although I was sorry to be leaving such a wonderful place. The drive back offered many inspiring views, though, enough for Dan and Alan to stop and take photos. The sky above the Connemara mountains looked so dramatic at one point, with dark grey rainclouds pierced by a rainbow – we've seen so many rainbows these last few days. This time of year certainly has its benefits, with not only the 'interesting' weather, but also the fewer visitors everywhere. Today at the deserted village, it was much easier for Alan to take photos with hardly anybody else around up there on the windswept hillside.

We arrived back at the house at around 16.20 and Willow wanted me to do something with her straight away. When I said I was tired and just needed a short rest, she said I'd had a long rest sitting in the car. You can't really fault that! Alan and I did play with Willow and Piran while Paula set about cooking pizza. Dan meanwhile was seeing to orders he'd received – an unusual amount since being on holiday, which is awkward but good.

The children were a bit awkward but good about going to bed and then Dan and Alan went outside to take star photos. Dan came in to say that the Milky Way was visible with the naked eye, so Paula and I took our naked eyes outside with us to gaze upwards in suitable awe (and get in the way of Alan's photos, since he couldn't see us in the darkness). It really was a beautiful sight and a fitting end to a day full of beautiful sights. Thus endeth day four!

Wednesday 30th October

We both slept quite well and joined the others at around 07.00 in the living room area, where Willow was practising writing again. It was raining rather hard, although Dan said the current band of rain would be clearing at around 09.00. Dan and Paula then set about making a cooked breakfast – compensation for the cooked Irish breakfast Dan had missed at Rosslare perhaps? As a non meat eater, I only had to open the front door once and sniff the fresh air to clear the smell of sizzling sausage-type dead flesh from my nostrils ;-)

In fact, the rain continued well after 09.00 and so we stayed in for morning coffee, while I mainly occupied myself with Willow and her holiday scrapbook, plus other pen/paper/sticker activities with Piran. The rain then cleared and so we had an earlyish lunch at the house before preparing to walk up the mountain opposite.

That sounds impressive, although at 330m/984ft it would seem that to be called a mountain is a little far reaching – or not far enough as the case may be. What constitutes a mountain seems to be subjective and unclear, although it was at the least a very impressive hill and seeing it's known locally as Errisbeg Mountain (and since I want to say we walked up a mountain) it could quite well be described as a small mountain.

So, we set off for the small mountain along a path, but quickly reached the bottom of the mountain slope and began to climb upwards. We'd dressed for cold weather, but the air was surprisingly warm and items of clothing were soon removed. It was a little tricky manoeuvring over the rocks and boggy bits, not to mention the streams and boulders. Some of the boulders were quite large and once I had to be hauled up somewhat unceremoniously by Dan, but I've had worse experiences...



Mossy, boggy tussocks and hummocks

It had become evident that although there were some faint tracks, there were no clear paths, although it seemed easy enough just to carry on in an upward direction. We stopped every now and again for a breather and to look at the view below. It really put into context where the house was situated, not far away from the sea and fairly isolated from other houses. The wider view was superb, with the typical islands and inlets against a mountainous horizon.



Well worth the climb

As we climbed, it naturally became colder and the wind was much more in evidence. Discarded clothing was once again put on as the wind chill factor kicked in. I must confess to becoming a bit on the tired side and when we reached one summit and saw there was still a final one to go, I was happy to stay put with Paula, Willow and Piran, while Dan and Alan carried on to the top. Paula sat with Piran to shelter him from the cold, while I spent most of my time with Willow, who was pretending that one big bowl shaped rock was a dinghy and we were serving each other food!



Do you like my dinghy?

Above us, we could make out Dan and Alan at the top and I could see Dan posing on a rock – presumably for photographic purposes rather than a strange rock fetish. They descended a lot more quickly than they'd ascended, which was good because staying still in the cold was becoming somewhat uncomfortable. It began to feel better as we all gradually made our way down carefully, but since it was approaching 16.00, the temperature was never really warm again. I felt strangely glad, though, that once more we'd experienced close up contact with the essential Ireland – and Ireland was beginning to feel more and more essential in my psyche.

After a welcome mug of tea, Alan and I attempted to play with Willow and Piran, but first of all Willow had a bit of a wobbly and then Piran appeared to go over to the dark side. Not to worry, Willow stabilised and Piran came back! We had a tuna pasta bake for tea and then Dan the firestarter sparked into action and the woodburner blazed away for a while until the flames settled down and so did we...

That is, we settled down until Alan and I decided to play cards and Dan decided to join in. We started off fairly sedately with ordinary Rummy, but then progressed to Rummy 500, which actually evolved into Rummy 1000. It probably had nothing to do with the O'Hara's Irish Stout, nothing at all, but Dan ended up laughing until he was crying, which is an unusual phenomenon. And so it was *Oíche Mhaith* on day 5!

Thursday 31st October

Piran seems to have developed a cough and we could hear the poor little soul coughing rather a lot last night. However, most of us didn't finally wake until daylight came filtering through the blinds, which was rather a pleasant change – in fact, Alan and I didn't deign to rise from our warm, comfortable bed and walk the few steps to the living room area until around 07.45! Dan and Willow were already up, Willow concentrating hard as she once again sat busily practising her new found writing skills.

The weather was dry but considerably windy, so after the usual leisurely breakfasting and getting ourselves ready, we set off for the Sky Road, which sounds strangely romantic. This involved heading north to Clifden, which doesn't sound nearly as strangely romantic, but then we drove on to a very scenic route with spectacular views of the Atlantic Ocean. To the south was Clifden Bay framed by mountains, while to the north was Streamstown Bay – and the route was named the Sky Road because at Slyne Head, it apparently rises to 150m/492ft above sea level. Not quite up in the sky, but it's a lovely name ☺

We reached a fairly large parking area overlooking a spectacular panoramic view, where a massive road sweeper vehicle was somewhat incongruously parked (which I only mention because Willow and Piran seemed more taken with the sight of that than the view itself – what a great place for drivers to stop for a coffee break, though.) We, on the other hand, had stopped for a photo break and so I duly grabbed my camera and got out of the car. I nearly got right back in, as the wind was so extreme!

When I struggled along to the end of the parking area for the best view, it literally took my breath away. I had to hold my suitably gloved hand up to my nose so that I could breathe, which actually felt a bit scary and meant that when I went to take a photo, I had to cease breathing for a few seconds. How I managed to achieve anything remotely passable is a wonder – and it was pretty remote up there.



Literally breathtaking!

The landscape was mostly heathland, grassland and a patchwork of traditional fields, while the panoramic view extended in an arc that looked out over the islands of Inishbofin, Inishshark, Omey, High Island, Inishturk and Inishturbot – *inish* or *inis* obviously the Irish word for island – which are names to die for (but not necessarily by being unable to breathe). I cannot deny I was very glad to get back in the car and rewarded myself with a few sneaky mini Smarties that I'd brought along for the children!

We drove on then from the Sky Road Loop to the more northern Cleggan Loop that offered exhilarating views of the rocky Connemara coast around Cleggan, following the fringes of Streamstown Bay. We stopped several times as the scenery changed while we drove along and it was always great. At one place in particular the waves were breaking hard over rocks and small islands, creating what must have been huge plumes of spray quite far out at sea. Having said that, trying to capture them in a photo proved a little difficult...



Sky, rocks, sand and waves

The beaches were strewn with seaweed and the quiet little inlets were often fringed with grasses. Lough is the Irish word for loch, meaning lake, which also includes the arms of the sea (another strangely romantic idiom, although with sinister watery undertones). I remain slightly uncertain about what constitutes a lough, a loch, a lake or an inlet, but I do know now that lough is pronounced loch – and what's in a name anyway, as they're all so beautiful.



Alan braves the wind

I kept thinking that Willow and Piran must have been a bit underwhelmed with all the stopping and starting and the general non-child oriented activity this holiday, but I have to say that they've always seemed very good natured about it and who knows what seeds of deep appreciation of nature are being sown in those fertile young minds? I personally think that's invaluable, so I hope they did look out at some of the wild scenery and store the memory positively for some as yet unknown future benefit.



A lough bordered by a beach

Kay Santillo, 2013.

It had been a loopy morning, but by about 11.30 we left the Cleggan Loop and drove on to Letterfrack (*Leitir Fraic – Rough Hillside*), another delightful name. Here we headed to the Visitor Centre for Connemara National Park, opened to the public in 1980, but unfortunately it had closed for the winter season only the day before. The toilet facilities were available, though, after which we walked back to the cars to eat our packed lunch.

There were several walks starting out from the Visitor Centre that looked interestingly Irish, with scenic mountain views, expanses of bogs, heaths, grasslands and woodlands. Some of the park's mountains are part of the famous Twelve Bens or *Na Beanna Beola* range – Benbaun, Bencullagh, Benbrack and the porcine Muckanaght (*Meacanacht – hill like a pig's back*).

So, after lunch we set off on the short Yellow Trail, but had only just started up the hill through some woodland when Dan looked around and exclaimed at the rainclouds coming our way. After some deliberation, the general consensus was that we didn't want to get wet, so we turned around and retraced our steps – and got wet because we weren't quick enough!

I could tell that the front of my trousers would cause me most damp discomfort as we stood under shelter and discussed plan B, which turned out to be that Alan and I would go to Clifden to investigate gift shops that might sell unpolished pieces of Connemara marble and then buy a few necessary items from the supermarket, while the others would return to Kylemore Abbey. We thus split amicably for an hour or two and set off on our separate missions.

Everything was dry (apart from my knees) as we parked the car and walked up the main street in Clifden. The first likely looking shop we entered was big enough, but we were the only customers, which is a situation I find uncomfortable. There were a couple of natural chunks of Connemara marble on the shelf, but when Alan asked the price from the couple standing at the counter, it turned out they were purely for decoration (the chunks of marble, not the couple).

The man said it was nearly impossible to buy a chunk in its raw form, but the woman suggested a shop over the road, run by the daughter of a quarry owner. I was standing nearby, surreptitiously looking at some worked pieces of marble with my knees positively melting at the sound of their accents – which must have inadvertently helped to dispel the dampness. They'd been so friendly that I couldn't leave the shop empty handed and bought two small marble angels before we crossed the road to find Derval Joyce in the pink shop!

Inside the pink shop where Derval Joyce herself was alone, we espied some raw chunks of marble, but they were unfortunately either much too big or too small. Alan once again engaged in conversation, while I self consciously looked around the rest of the shop. I was becoming desperate to find something small to buy and in the end settled on two of the small marble pieces at €1 each, plus a pebble-like piece with a painted design.

As Derval Joyce wrapped up the purchases, the conversation moved from Connemara marble quarries to Cornwall and how Derval would love to visit there, as one of her favourite authors is Daphne du Maurier. I can't remember how it changed to the retirement age in both Ireland and the UK, but after a short while of commiserating with each other about the state of the government, we said our smiling goodbyes and left the pink shop – out into the rain.

It wasn't very far to the supermarket, though, where we just bought a few items and I once again enjoyed the Irishness of the music and the advertising over the loudspeaker. The drive back to the house was enjoyable along the scenic moorland road – at one place, some thick white cloud was hugging the mountain peaks, looking really picturesque.

Our evening meal consisted of fried salmon, carrot and broccoli, followed by ice cream – it's not a holiday without ice cream ;-). Dan lit the woodburner and nearly smoked us all out, but managed to rectify matters before we all coughed ourselves to death! Alan and Willow proceeded to laugh their way through a board game, the children had a bath and went to bed and then the playing cards came out. Rummy 500 was a little less raucous than the previous evening, but still a little on the noisy side perhaps ... possibly ... who can say?

Friday 1st November

When we arose for the day at around 07.30, the weather looked similar to previous days – rather a lot of cloud cover, but with several clear breaks. Since the clouds were moving along quickly, the wind was obviously quite high. Piran's cough was still very much in evidence but he seemed to be coping well, apart from not eating much breakfast.

Dan and Paula had bought the children a kite each at Kylemore Abbey the day before and since the weather forecast was reasonable (and windy) the plan was to go to Gurteen Beach to fly them. The kites, that is, not the children. Hopefully.

This time when we stepped out of the cars at the car park, we weren't nearly blown off our feet, which was a good start. The beach itself was reasonably empty for most of the time we were there, especially the further along we walked. Also this time, the sea wasn't being frenziedly whipped up high on the beach, which meant there was a lot more fine white sand to walk on. I'm not sure how much seaweed is normally there, but there was a great deal of the stuff and it seemed quite fresh, so presumably the storm had been responsible for that too.

We had to stop midway and shelter near a big rock while a shower passed, but it was a mild, inoffensive little one compared to Sunday's aggressive onslaughts. There was a lovely view at the end of the beach, where we stopped to take photos. Willow and Piran amused themselves with the sand and were really very patient considering the promise of kite flying.



The view at the end of the beach

Finally the cameras were put away and we retraced our steps for a little distance until we came to an open expanse of sand – it was idyllic and deserted, a beautiful place to fly a kite. To be honest, I'm not sure the wind was idyllic because I've never flown a kite, but there definitely was a wind and the kites did fly... To begin with, Dan flew Piran's kite, while Paula flew Willow's kite (while Alan and I attempted to take kite flying photos – difficult!)



Let's go fly a kite!

After a while, Alan gave Willow a helping hand and she ended up flying the kite on her own, which Grandad Alan seemed even more pleased about than Willow herself!



Willow nonchalantly flies her kite

Everyone was eventually kited out, so we drove the short distance back to the house for coffee and then lunch. As we hadn't really investigated Roundstone itself, in the afternoon we took a stroll down the hill, along the prettily named Fuchsia Lane and into the village with its main street opposite the harbour. It was actually very pleasant weather, despite the storm warning Dan had told us about, with the possibility that our ferry tomorrow will be cancelled. No-o-o!

It was best just to enjoy the afternoon of course, although a small Irish village in November wasn't exactly the most vibrant of places. However, shops were still open and people were still out and about as we walked along to one section of the shore and then to the remains of a Franciscan monastery that had been established in 1835.

Within its walls was a shop/workshop called Roundstone Music and Crafts that was famous for making the bodhrán, or Irish drum. It seemed unlikely that such a place would be open so late in the year, but as Paula and I dithered outside with the children (while Dan and Alan were temporarily absent on a photographic diversion) someone emerged clutching a brown paper bag. Paula then boldly went inside with Willow and Piran, followed later by the rest of us.

It was surprisingly large and full of souvenirs, although looking slightly jaded at this end of the season. A man sat busily engaged in making what I suppose was a bodhrán, but I confess that I didn't look closely due to empty shop embarrassment. I did have a good look around at the gifts, though, coming away with just some postcards and fridge magnets instead of something rather more imaginative – like a bodhrán perhaps!

Walking back to the main street, we passed a children's playground where Willow and Piran happily let off a bit of childish steam. The rest of us managed to restrain ourselves. We then set off up the hill to the house, past several stylish new individual houses set in a decent sized area of land. We were all impressed with the housing we'd seen – and all in such a wonderful area of Ireland with the most amazing mix of coastal and mountainous scenery.

A reviving mug of tea followed this final Galway outing, followed later by baked potatoes with various accompaniments and a yoghurt dessert. However, I was pretty sure I'd succumbed to Piran's cold at that point, as exhaustion hit me like a steam train (an Irish one, of course, on its way to Ballyflamingvirus). While Dan and Alan made an early evening visit to Gurteen Bay to take star photos, I roused myself to play a board game with Willow and I'm happy to report that neither of us was actually bored ☺

The stargazers returned with some astrally excellent photos, especially of the Milky Way – so many stars! We then settled in front of the woodburner for our final Irish evening, which involved a drink and another enjoyable session of Rummy 500. We were all exceptionally tired, though, so it was a slightly early night. *Oíche Mhaith* on our final Galway evening ☺

Saturday 2nd November

The predicted stormy weather arrived overnight and at 05.30 it erupted with thunder and lightning. It wasn't horrifically close, so Alan and I managed to doze until around 07.15, when we presented ourselves in the living room area and found out from Dan that although yesterday's ferry had been cancelled, our booked one at 21.00 would be running. I was glad and apprehensive at the same time, as well as feeling undeniably viral.

The usual organised chaos of having breakfast, getting ready, packing everything and leaving the holiday home was achieved in two hours, just a little complicated or enhanced (however you look at it) by the understandably excitable Willow and Piran. There was a lot of rain and wind around as we left and also the most amazing rainbow that Alan and I managed to miss completely, but Dan took full advantage of photographically!

As we drove along, the mountains looked dark and brooding, swathed in misty grey cloud. On the moorland alongside the road, where rectangles of surface peat had been cut, they had turned overnight into huge, sodden peat bogs that somehow exuded an atmosphere of stoic desolation. Throughout the week on our travels, I'd often noticed deserted stone buildings that brought to mind the horrors of the Great Famine in the mid 19th century.

I've no idea if these deserted dwellings were actually the result of the potato famine, but I've been drawn to the subject ever since I recently discovered that my great grandfather (born in Carrick on Suir, County Tipperary) had ended up in a London workhouse in 1851 at the age of eight, after fleeing Ireland with other family members. In fact, our planned route back to Rosslare was going to take us through Carrick on Suir, something I was looking forward to with great anticipation, despite the inclement weather.

After a couple of hours, we stopped for a break at a place where there was a famous old tower, but it was closed and so we just ate a flapjack in the car park and 'went' *au naturel* in the nearby woods, as you do (when you have to), before continuing to Tipperary. The roads had changed to more motorway-like than rural-like, but although I don't like motorways in the slightest, I decided I'm actually not averse to Irish motorways.

The weather was still overcast and started to rain as we entered the town of Tipperary. To my surprise, Dan and Paula in front of us pulled up at St John's Famine Graveyard, which I hadn't even known existed. My heart leapt in a mixture of ancestral delight and sorrow at the sight of the graveyard stretching upwards into the distance on the Tipperary Hills and no amount of rain and cold wind would have kept me from getting out of the car to take a few photos.



The Famine Graveyard under a suitable sky

St John's Famine Graveyard had been established in 1847, close to the fever hospital, to accommodate the volume of deaths in Tipperary Workhouse. During October 1849 to May 1850, following years of deprivation and disease, around 1400 people (of whom about 500 were children) were buried there in mass graves. I could only stand for a few moments and vow to visit here again, but I was glad to have made even that quick connection with the past.

It was back to mundane reality then and because it was approaching lunchtime, our next stop was at none other than Tipperary Tesco! I have to say that Tipperary Tesco was just like any other Tesco and it didn't have a café, so some doughnuts were purchased and we were directed to a nearby small but perfectly formed shopping mall, where there was an eating place. It was pouring with rain by then and cold with it, so we were really glad to sit inside and enjoy a hot snack involving soup, bread rolls and chips.

Our next scheduled stop was at Carrick on Suir (rather than Carrick sur mer, as Dan so delightfully said in an inadvertent moment) or *Carraig na Siúire* meaning *Rock of the Suir*. It had once been a thriving market town at the south eastern corner of County Tipperary, straddling both banks of the River Suir. I could hardly believe I was physically there as we arrived at this seemingly inconsequential Irish town that for so many months had just been the fascinating but distant name of where my father's father's father had been born, totally unknown for six decades of my life.

It was much bigger than I'd imagined, but as we got out of the cars in the car park, the biting cold wind whipped around us relentlessly. The rain had stopped, but the temperature felt more like midwinter on a cold, grey afternoon. A cold, grey afternoon in Carrick on Suir, though! I felt quite sorry for the others as we determinedly walked down the main street in less than amenable conditions and thought how good of them it was to humour me – and there really wasn't anything remotely funny about that wind.

The buildings seemed to be an interesting mix of old and modern as we battled our way against the elements along the strange pavements. It wasn't just that they were completely unknown pavements, but as Paula pointed out, there were some unusual inspection covers with Celtic designs on them. It's strange what you notice...

We walked as far as a large and very sturdy looking stone bridge that had been built in 1447 across the river Suir and I tried to hold my camera as still as possible while the wind buffeted me around persistently. Carrick on Suir had apparently grown in prominence during medieval times, when the woollen industry was set up and had contributed much to the town's posterity, along with fishing, basket weaving and other river related employment, with the population growing to around 11,000.



The River Suir from the 15th century bridge

Over the next 120 years, though, the town suffered from high taxes and levies on the woollen industry at the hands of the British, who were no doubt hell-bent on protecting their own woollen industry. This led to high unemployment, poverty and emigration that was added to greatly by the famine years – the British have a lot to answer for in my opinion.

By the early 20th century, industrialisation had reached the town with the opening of cotton factories and a local creamery. The arrival of the tanning industry in 1930 gave regular and dependable employment, but the long recessions of the post-war 1940s and 1950s led once more to widespread poverty and emigration to Dublin, Britain and further shores.

The general feel of the place did seem quite run down, but there were some historical buildings that definitely told a story, particularly the murals. I had no idea what *An Sibín* meant when I took the photo, but it refers to illicit brew houses where *poitín* or poteen, the high potency alcohol made from potatoes, was made and sold. Good old lethal Irish moonshine!



The buildings and murals told a story...

The tannery closed in 1985 when the population was roughly 4000, causing immense hardship (yet again). However, recent years have apparently seen a drop in unemployment and in 2006 a rise in population to almost 6000, thanks to the opening of a bicycle component factory and other small businesses. The future of Carrick on Suir, though, is likely to be that of a commuter town serving the nearby larger towns of Clonmel and Waterford. I was very glad I'd visited even briefly, but there's obviously a lot more to investigate, so I promised myself I'd return in the not too distant future – in late spring or early summer!



The tannery mural

Having completed a small circuit of the centre and feeling that the only sensible option was to seek shelter from the inhospitable weather, we decided to drive back a short distance to a likely looking place that Paula had noticed along the way for a hot drink. This turned out to be Blarney Woollen Mills, where it was cosy and warm – and they sold some lovely hot chocolate that really hit the by now very chilled spot.

It was quite crowded, but rather heartening to see Irish families out shopping and enjoying themselves. It might sound a bit fanciful, but they all seemed generally quite happy and friendly and smiley – the place was warming me in more ways than one. We also wandered around the shopping area after our hot drink and even bought a couple of items.

As the light faded, however, it was time to leave Tipperary and head for Rosslare. I was sad to go, but still interested in the places we passed by. At New Ross (*Rhos Mhic Thriúin*) I was intrigued to see signs to a Famine Ship, which I've since found out is an authentic replica of an 1840s emigrant vessel to America. It would seem that because of trade between Ireland and England, it would have been quite easy to find any manner of boats to England ... but I would so love to know where my great grandfather sailed from and where he landed.

With such thoughts as these still chasing themselves around in my head, we finally arrived at Rosslare just before 19.00. There was plenty of time to sit in our cars, eat the sandwiches made earlier that morning and wonder just what the weather had in store. There were two ferries running, the Irish Ferries one to Pembroke (ours) and the Stena Line ferry to Fishguard.

At 20.00 we were allowed on board and there were indeed quite a lot of passengers due to the cancelled ferry (Alan enquired about a cabin, but they'd all been booked). However, there was still plenty of room and we found comfortable seating that was a mixture of easy chairs and longer seats. We settled down and gazed with amusement at the other passengers walking past us carrying cushions, pillows, sleeping bags and duvets. Obviously this is the thing to do, but we managed perfectly well without any bedding and were quite warm and comfortable.

The captain told us over the intercom that the sea state would be rough to moderate. I therefore prepared myself for an 'interesting' voyage, noticing the sick bags strewn around liberally on tables (empty sick bags!) To be honest, I never saw anyone who looked remotely as if they might want to throw up, although I did have my eyes shut half the time.

There was definitely a fair bit of movement as we started to plough our way across the Irish Sea, enough to make the toilet doors bang and cause car alarms to go off down below – but nothing terrible at all and it seemed to gradually become calmer as the hours went by. We all spent most of our time resting and Willow for one actually went to sleep for quite a while.

Alan, Dan and Paula had some coffee later on, but my throat was bothering me and I preferred just to sip water. I was surprised when I realised we were approaching the twinkling lights of Pembroke sooner than I thought, with Willow and Piran awake at that point, avidly watching proceedings as we docked. There were no problems leaving the ferry and we were soon driving on empty, freakishly early morning Welsh roads, reaching Pontardawe at around 02.35.

I absolutely loved being in Ireland, even in the stormy weather, because that was all part of the experience. It was so good to connect with the Irish elements – to stand by the sea with the wind howling all around me; to breathe in the peaty, moorland air while gazing up at mountains; to step carefully on the springy turf to avoid the peat bogs and squelchingly fail; and to gaze at remains of Ireland's past with a secret pride in my own 1/8 part Irish ancestry.

A lot of Irish history and the potato famine in particular was appalling, but the Irish people seem to have survived smiling and very comfortable within their Irishness – their land, their customs and beliefs – in an understated but very real way. Their sense of humour also appears to be very much alive and kicking, as well as their love of music. I've come away from just one week there feeling that there's so much more to discover and experience. I'm going back!



Kay Santillo, 2013.