

ADVENTURE IN IRELAND

A little history, politics, golf, the craic, and a polite riot.



Derry City (1622)

In 1998 I returned to Ireland to attend the funeral of my mother. She had been fighting cancer for the previous two years and had used the time very creatively to fulfill her noble objectives in life. But now, the bell tolled no more and she had been released. After the funeral, I decided to get away and spend some time alone. I went to Northern Ireland tentatively to play golf at a remote links outside a town called Ballyliffin. The course proved most interesting and I was getting a little cocky at having achieved a few easy pars. But then I almost scored a hole in

one which, it seemed, caused the golf god to rise up and express its indignation; a fierce wind came out of the North Sea and battered me so relentlessly that I had to seek protection in a sand bunker. It did not let up and eventually I had to fight my way off the course bunker to bunker. I suffer from a heart condition and thought it quite amusing that my body should be found in a sand bunker. But, no such ignoble death for me. I was later told that a couple of years earlier Nick Faldo landed his helicopter and played a few rounds, then apparently, he made enquiries to buy the place. The golf committee refused his offer on the grounds that it would cause too much change in their lives - lucky for Nick.

I proceeded to the nearby town of Carrickowen known locally as Carrick. I imbibed a leisurely Guinness as I chatted to the locals. I decided to remain a few days and was directed to a B&B called the Idaho. The Idaho was run by an elderly couple, Bill and Helen. They received me like an honored guest and treated me with such gentle formality it was like going back in time to a forgotten era. Meals were always served in the parlor, complete with affects, such as beautifully designed Celtic lace napkins that I would consider sacrilege to actually use, and fragile china cups and plates. I was the only guest at the time and they both spoiled me with attention. One afternoon, Bill and I were talking golf over tea in the kitchen when Helen came back from shopping. She gently reprimanded Bill for serving me tea in the kitchen when it should be served in the parlor. Bill shrugged goodheartedly and winked at me as I retreated to finish my tea in the parlor. One morning, after polishing off an incredibly delicious breakfast of rashers (bacon), eggs and fresh brown bread, I said to Bill, 'You and Helen are treating me like a king.' He looked at me and said, 'Sure, aren't you a king?'

I made my way around the town getting to know the local characters. One of the pub owners, a young man, was particularly curious to know why I was always writing in my book. I told him that I wrote poetry and whatever else happened to pop into my head. I asked him how he got to own such a nice establishment and he replied 'Ah sure you're not supposed to ask that.' I asked, 'Why not?' He hesitated, apparently avoiding the question and then proceeded to tell me that the annual Apprentice Boys' Parade was occurring the very next day in Derry city which was barely twenty miles away. He suggested that I should attend and because he seemed to take me seriously as a writer, he gave me the name of an

IRA member I could contact at a certain pub in Derry. Apparently, this individual could give me the inside track to something I did not already know but perhaps needed to. I asked if I'd be in any danger and he assured me that there wouldn't be any danger.

The Apprentice Boys' Parade celebrates the victory of the protestant King William of Orange over the Catholic King James. The apprentice boys apparently facilitated the victory by closing the gates of Derry to King James. It was the 310th celebration of this annual event which in the Protestant view represents a direct covenant with God solidifying their right to control the Province. Consequently, every year religiously (pardon the pun) for the past 310 years they re-birth King Billy's victory by flaunting it in the faces of the Catholics whose areas of control they insist on marching through as is their right under the law. There has always been violence associated with this march because it is not only a celebration of misguided ideals, it is also a deliberate attempt to intimidate the Catholic minority population. Over the years the violence has escalated as the ruling Protestants became more and more an entrenched majority cut off from their own source by increasing negative public opinion. Both sides are at each others throats and neither will budge, as if any concession is an insult to the many who have died for their respective causes.

Next day, I headed for Derry and was quite surprised to find one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen: a walled city, one of the few remaining in Europe. The structure of the wall is maintained in excellent condition and it is possible to walk a complete circuit around the town. The beautiful river Foyle runs alongside and gives a most romantic and story book charm to the location. The streets are cobblestones, newly placed and maintained to reflect the past. The city center is free of automobiles. The buildings for the most part are modern re-creations of a historical past. The pubs are without doubt the most authentic I have ever experienced. It was difficult to drag myself from one to the other as each in turn wrapped me in its charm and attempted to detain me. Of course, the red wine helped; a concession to my 'heart' whose medication I had forgotten.

It was Christmas-time in Derry and people were busy shopping. All in all it appeared a happy time, certainly there was no hint of fear in anybody. I began to wonder about the parade; "maybe I picked the wrong day," I thought. I decided

to head for Shipgate Street, the location for my possible IRA rendezvous. At the top of Shipgate St. I could see the parade passing by. The street is wide enough for two cars with a narrow footpath on either side. Shops and homes lined the road on either side. There was no way off the street other than to enter one of the shops. I began to walk up the slight incline toward the passing parade and as I got closer, I could see that the army and riot police had cordoned off the top of the street so as not to allow anyone access to the marchers. In front of the police was gathered a crowd, I noticed that the ones towards the front were wearing stocking type masks over their heads. These were advancing close to the police intimidating them by lobbing bottles and rocks on top of them. I was fascinated as I watched this exchange. I noticed that a television crew was recording everything. I was approaching nearer and nearer when suddenly the police and army decided that enough was enough and started to advance on the crowd behind the armored vehicles. The crowd began to run down the street and I suddenly found myself faced with the scene of everybody running toward me. I froze for a few seconds as this registered and then I also turned on my heel and began to run for all I was worth. As I ran, I was visualizing the headlines on the world news reading 'Escalation of violence in Derry, disabled American caught leading riot.' But, I had more important and immediate concerns because by now some of the 'hooded ones' were passing me by. The newspaper headline became more real in my head and I knew I had to escape this dilemma somehow. It occurred to me that other than the 'hood' it was not possible to tell who was who other than through the fact of running away. Consequently, I jumped to the footpath and blended into the onlookers hoping that no one had noticed. The armored cars and the running soldiers and police began to pass by with an occasional bottle being thrown by the sidewalk onlookers. One bottle smashed at my feet and I remember registering disappointment to see that it was a Budweiser instead of a Guinness. The police resumed their position at the top of the street. The hooded ones came back to their original position and back and forth it continued until the last marchers had finally gone by.

I decided to explore the wall and climbed the steps only to come face to face with about a dozen riot police who were stationed there to keep watch on the crowd below. They were very intimidating looking, armed with huge plastic bullet guns. Even though I was wearing my bomber jacket and probably matched the look of a

middle aged 'terrorist' I figured again that I would be perceived as a threat only if I chose to run. So, I walked right up to them and engaged them in conversation about general things of interest: soccer, overtime, life and love. They were happy to talk. They were just kids and reminded me of my own sons back in the States. They were bored and happy to spend some time talking to me. We parted company and I even gave some of them my e-mail address. They said that as much as they would like to allow me to walk around the wall they were under orders. We parted company and I descended to street level. Evening was nigh, dusk pervaded to slowly transform the landscape into a fiery spectacle; cars were burning as molotov cocktails exploded. As I was watching in the crowd, a young man brushed past me apologizing 'sorry mate' as he threw a 'cocktail' at an empty car that was out of harm's way. I ducked into the pub where I was to have the tentative rendezvous with my IRA contact. The pub was the essence of a home away from home; people socializing, drinking pints and doffing half-one's of whiskey and sherry. The horse racing was being broadcast from Ascot Downs and European soccer was on another monitor. I contemplated this odd situation as I admired a perfect pint of Guinness. The surreal outside noise of molotov cocktails exploding and the rushing around of police all seemed to blend somehow into the comfortable ambiance of the pub. I was relieved that at least the Proprietor had the good sense to close the shutters over the windows. There was really no true concern on anyone's face as if 'seen it all before'. Of course they have, after all, it has only been going on for 310 years. I asked the bartender if my contact was available and was informed that he might come by later. He did not show, and after a very lovely time under the spell of the antithetical seduction 'we are all going to die and no one here gives a damn' I finally left to retrieve my car and return to Carrick which, at that moment, seemed a million miles away. I was quite pleased at myself for being able to control my paranoia with humor while in the pub. Back in Carrick I met with my friend and he asked me if I saw anyone injured or if there were any buildings burning. I said no, that it appeared to me, all in all, to be a very polite riot. He said that if even one business was lost due to the rioters, all of the people with the hoods would be 'knee-capped.' He explained that the IRA controls everything in Northern Ireland and that because the current peace negotiations are being engaged in such a favorable economic climate the price for peace is being paid under the table to appease the so called 'terrorist

faction' by setting them up in businesses. I wondered why the Muse invited me to this experience, I left Carrick after doing the rounds to say goodbye to my friends, many of which I shared special moments. We promised undying love and made plans to meet again that we knew had little chance of coming to pass. It was a good and necessary gesture in its moment and honored an easy transition back to lives in different worlds. I felt like the comic book Lone Ranger leaving his silver bullet and saying to his horse 'HiYo Silver, away!'