

Motoring Along in a Roundabout Way

I still feel bad about the left rearview mirror. Driving in the left lane in Ireland is difficult enough, but the narrow roads forced some interesting choices—either feed the left mirror to the rhododendrons or hit that oncoming truck.

Despite three weeks and 1,500 miles, my wife never got over her alarm every time I stuck her side of the car into the hedges. She didn't care that it was deliberate. Her reaction was always the same - duck and cover.

The first time was on the Ring of Kerry, a scenic drive that makes Highway 94 through Augusta and Defiance look like an interstate. An oncoming bus rounded the curve using all of its lane and a third of ours. We're talking inches here. That's why hedgerows in Ireland have car-shaped gouges. The Irish take this in stride. I didn't.

Perturbed about scuffing the brand-new Ford Focus, I noticed something on the narrow streets of Kinsale. Cars were parked willy-nilly, even on the sidewalks; every third or fourth car had a bashed rearview mirror. Some were hanging by the roots. It looked like poor driving to me. Wrong. These cars belonged to the good drivers. The others got fed to the crusher.

I clipped a wall on our way to Belfast. Two drivers were passing us on a twisty road when we met an oncoming truck. We passed three abreast. Tucked tightly against a stone wall, I forgot about the pillar ahead. Wham!

Now my wife, Mary, has big eyes. But in 25 years I had never seen them this big. God bless her, she didn't say a word. She swallowed hard, eased the window down, and snapped the folded mirror back into place. Miles went by before she spoke.

"You don't have to worry about the scratches anymore, she said.

"Oh, really? Why?"

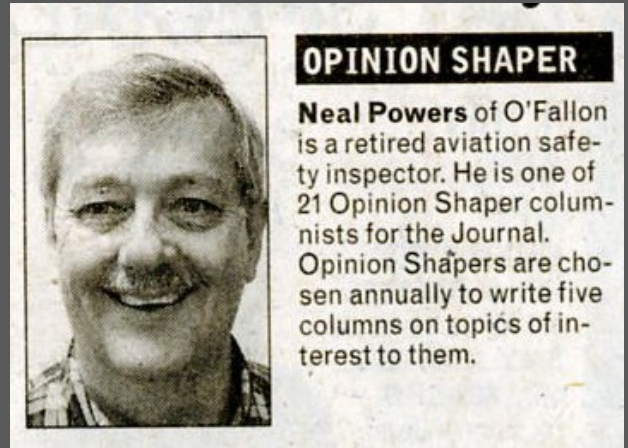
"You just ground off all the paint."

Now don't get me wrong. Touring Ireland by car was the thrill of a lifetime. We met wonderful people, saw stunning places, and were captured by its history and charm. But where motoring was concerned, some of us took lessons in humility.

We kept crossing paths with Jane and Bob from New York. One night over dinner we compared notes on our driving experiences in Ireland. Innocently, I asked why Jane always drove.

Because I hit a house," Bob answered.

I changed the subject. It seemed the least I could do. We talked instead about roundabouts.



There is a rule in Ireland that all roads must converge in a circle. Traffic orbits clockwise in a roundabout. If you discover an exit you like, you just squirt out. If you don't, there are an infinite numbers of opportunities ahead.

Roundabouts come in all sizes. They can take up acres on the motorways, but vary all the way down to a little white painted circle in the middle of an intersection. Americans feel secure with stoplights; the Irish like their traffic circles.

Even while threading through sheep, skirting along fjords and harbors, I knew a day of reckoning was coming. In the pubs, museums, or on the tour bus, I always knew Mr. Hertz would want his Ford back, and just like my dad, he was sure to make an issue out of that mirror.

When the day came it was raining. Someone had stolen all the Hertz signs at the Dublin airport. Unable to find the rental agency, in our search we hurtled through a roundabout in front of the terminal a dozen times.

When we finally located it, a nice man handed a map through the window and told us we had to go through the roundabout to a different location. Traumatized to plunge back into that same roundabout, I began to think I would spend eternity here.

The chap who inspected our car was actually delighted we brought back both mirrors! He handed me my receipt, fetched a luggage cart for us, wished us a nice day, and freed my soul from torment. Standing there in the rain, I was eager to return to the land of paved shoulders.

We enjoyed the pubs in Ireland. I became fond of an evening pint of Guinness. So it's reassuring to know we have pubs in O'Fallon that serve Guinness.

But there is a problem. To get to the closest one, I will have to overcome my phobia. I will have to drive through a roundabout in WingHaven. I am terrified that I will circle the wrong way. Maybe I should just call a cab.