



A Walk to Remember

The Pittsfield, Mass., native and author of *Last of the Donkey Pilgrims* proves that not all who wander are lost

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IT'S AN INTIMIDATING PROSPECT: pen a story about another writer, especially one with much more experience, wit, and flair—not to mention one who once trekked 1,720 miles around the perimeter of Ireland accompanied only by a stubborn mare and then crafted a comical and poignant memoir of the journey. Hoping to organize my thoughts, I take a brisk lap around Park Square before meeting up with Pittsfield, Massachusetts, native Kevin O'Hara in his hometown at—where else—Patrick's Pub.

All anxiety is immediately allayed, however, over pints of Guinness as the fifty-eight-year-old O'Hara—soft-featured, silver-maned, and radiating a warm, gracious enthusiasm from his slender frame sheathed in a maroon cable-knit sweater and taupe twill trousers—makes an unexpected confession: it took him more than *twenty years* to write his memoir, *Last of the Donkey Pilgrims*, published in 2004 by Forge Books.

"I didn't really have writer's block; I just had an overwhelming task," O'Hara insists in his typically modest manner. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime journey—to write that down on paper, *how* do you catch it?"

But catch it he did. Using an exhaustive journal of the soul-searching jaunt around his ancestral homeland with nothing but the beloved Missie "Long-Ears" Mickdermot and a green hard-cover copy of *The Hobbit*, O'Hara eventually crafted a 430-page chronicle of 1979 Ireland and the warmth and generosity of its culture. He set out on his journey amid public ridicule, carrying the discontent bottled inside his soul since serving as a crash-rescue firefighter and medic for a year in Vietnam. Yet despite a rough start, he soon discovered an open door at every twist in the road.

"Once they knew I wasn't a tinkerer or a traveler, I was *home* for the night," he marvels of the 140-plus homesteads that welcomed him. "I never went into a pub in '79 where I had to spend a dollar; if I had the donkey outside that was it. [The book] is a tribute to the people of Ireland, which was a very poor, Third-World country when I did it."

Finding solace in the companionship of Missie and flaunting his natural gift of gab, O'Hara ultimately earned respect as a brother of the countryside instead of a foolish wanderer on an improbable mission. And walking the old roads allowed much time for self-reflection. "You go eight to ten miles sometimes with very little in the middle," he notes. "All you had was the twitching ears of your donkey and yourself. You had a lot of time to dream."

When O'Hara finally returned to Rattigan's Pub in Kilrooskey, County Roscommon, after the yearlong loop, it was with the same hundred dollars in his pocket, mystical bonds with thousands of Irish comrades, and a mass of vivid memories. His travels had soothed a lifetime of wanderlust that began in 1953 at age five upon leaving England with his Irish-born parents and four siblings on the Queen Elizabeth to plant new roots on this side of the Atlantic. Settling first in Great Neck, New York, the family relocated to Lee and, shortly after, Pittsfield—close to an aunt in

Lenox, Massachusetts. His father, Jimmy O'Hara, had yearned to safeguard his clan against the inevitable "pains of emigration," but living an ocean away from the lush, rolling hills of their native Ireland was a harsh reality for his mother, Lella.

"I never knew anything of what my mother lost," O'Hara later explains as we approach the first block of Wilson Street in Pittsfield and the six-room half-duplex he shared with seven siblings for the bulk of his childhood. "But if you looked into the back-



Fill 'er Up: Kevin O'Hara gets Missie "Long-Ears" Mickdermot ready for another day on the roads of Ireland (below) in 1979.





Belita and Kevin O'Hara

yard when we were kids, our landlord had about five or six junked automobiles he used to tinker with, garbage cans, and clotheslines on the tree with all its ugly limbs right over the bedrooms of our house. Then we went to Ireland with open fields, beautiful views, friendly people, and I said, *oh, my gosh.*"

Though stirred by his mother's nostalgia, the impetus for O'Hara's monumental trip developed when he turned eighteen and his own world changed dramatically. "I never had to fight or carry a gun in the war," he begins, a pained expression creeping upon his face. "The only thing I saw was what it would be like walking through Baghdad today—people getting blown away, the suffering. We used to go into Saigon a lot and just photograph; you'd see children selling newspapers without legs. It hits you."

Inspired by Thomas Anthony Dooley, a pioneering doctor who established hospitals in Laos and Cambodia during the conflict and who authored a gripping account, *The Night They Burned the Mountain*, O'Hara enrolled in the nursing program at Berkshire Community College upon his return.

He eventually earned a position as an or-

derly at Berkshire Medical Center, where he met his wife, Belita, but the angst from his experience in Southeast Asia never quite dissipated. Even after two trips to Ireland with Belita—post-honeymoon in 1974 and again in 1977 for six months, which was ultimately an overzealous attempt to learn the art of thatching roofs in order to mend his Grannie Kelly's that resulted in a near-depletion of the couple's nest-egg—the feeling grew. It was time for drastic measures.

"She was making dinner," O'Hara recalls of the evening he approached his wife with the proposition. "I said I needed to take a walk." Belita, now sitting adjacent on one of the green plaid couches in the couple's cozy living room on Montgomery Avenue, jumps in. "I said, 'OK, dinner won't be ready for another fifteen minutes.' And he said, 'No, I have to take a *really long walk.*'"

Belita, a native of the Philippines, somehow understood. Now, with *Last of the Donkey Pilgrims* approaching 20,000 copies sold and commencing a sixth soft-cover printing, Belita still receives letters from readers thanking her for granting O'Hara permission.

"I look in the audience and I can see the lumps rising up in people's throats," says O'Hara of the regret he's spotted at the nearly two hundred readings he's held so far throughout New England. "Sometimes I feel like the luckiest man in the world because I did a journey of a lifetime and I was able, after many years, to put it to paper . . . and it reads all right, ya know?"

This is a serious understatement. "Anytime you wanna feel good you pick it



up and read another chapter—it's just filled with sweet beauty," says Mike Haley, a fellow Pittsfield native and movie producer currently collaborating with O'Hara to bring *Last of the Donkey Pilgrims* to the big screen. A copy of the book landed in Haley's hands after a chance meeting with O'Hara's brother Michael at the St. Joseph Central High School Class of 1960 reunion a couple of years ago.

"He has an honest eye—it wasn't over-exaggerated or flowered or twisted," Haley observes. "And it's got all the elements that will make a great movie: a man's struggle to find himself, a beautiful look at Ireland, a story of man and donkey. . . . I saw a lot of potential for mysticism."

O'Hara's twenty-three-year-old son Brendan, a screenwriter and graduate of Savannah College of Art and Design, is helping pen the script, and, "if the world spins right," the trio hopes to begin shooting in the fall of 2008. When asked about the project, O'Hara leans back in his chair dramatically and takes a sweeping drag off an imaginary cigarette. It's a quintessential Kevin O'Hara moment, before he breaks back to modesty. "No, that was great fortitude," he insists, evidently still kind of shocked. "Everything has been serendipitous; before the movie, the book came, and that was because of Steve Satullo. Without his assistance, I would have a pile of pages *this high* in my little room," he confesses, throwing a palm up above his head. "He pushed me to write it."

Satullo, the former owner of Either/Or Bookstore in Pittsfield and now a culture consultant to The Clark in Williamstown, Massachusetts, is hesitant to take much credit. He had hosted an exhibition of O'Hara's photographs in a gallery attached to the bookstore shortly after the great journey and was awestruck. "My feeling from the beginning was that

Hoofin' It: (Right) The author and Missie on their way in Ireland in 1979. (Opposite, bottom) Donkeys collected over the years decorate Kevin O'Hara's home office.



PHOTO COURTESY KEVIN O'HARA



he was a great storyteller with a great story to tell, but he was untutored as a writer," Satullo says. "So we had a twenty-year seminar in writing!"

Indeed, O'Hara recalls climbing the stairs to his home office many an evening, just after the St. Charles Church bells rang at six, and slipping on headphones pumping Van Morrison to drown out the sound of son Eamonn—now twenty-six and a classical pianist trained at the Boston Conservatory—"bangin' away" on the ivories in their downstairs living room. "The journey was so far away that the only thing to get [you] back was Van Morrison in your ear and a Guinness by your side," O'Hara insists. "I dug out the memories."

Over the course of those twenty-odd years—transitioning from a typewriter to a word processor to a Gateway PC along the way—the process ebbed and flowed like the waters crashing into the Cliffs of Moher. Multiple voyages to Ireland left voices fresh in his mind, vital to the dialogue-heavy narrative. But still, "I put it away for months, for years," O'Hara confesses. "Then I'd be playing golf, coming down the eighteenth hole, and I'd hit an errant shot—which came quite frequently—and I'd say, *you can't focus on this game because you should really be writing.*"

His work at the hospital actually helped immensely. "When people are true with emotions—which they are especially when they're hurt—I think you catch their pain. You see that so vividly day after day; when you write a character who suffers you *see* all the symptoms. And I think it's part of the Irish psyche anyway to be a little gray and forlorn, especially in a world that suffers."

Spencer Trova, founder and former executive director of Main Street Stage in North Adams, Massachusetts, has worked at Berkshire Medical Center with O'Hara since

1978. "He had a lot of trouble making beds," Trova quips of the early days before offering more serious analysis. "Kevin is probably one of the more unique identities the world has ever known. He can de-escalate any situation with his humor, and is very adept at it—and things get pretty tense working at the psychiatric unit."

Trova recalls an instance "years ago when we put patients in Geri chairs. There was a woman who was agitated and banging on the table with rhythm and almost screaming. Kevin walked into the room and started *dancing*. A few minutes later she was laughing."

Satullo agrees wholeheartedly that O'Hara has that effect. When O'Hara introduced him to Ireland in 1991, he says, "I experienced it as a spiritual place as well. It's his ease and comfort with any kind of person that was key to his actually making the journey. Kevin seems to know everybody, but even if he doesn't, he has this *instant* acquaintance with them. It's part of his writing—light and humorous and winsome and engaging—and part of his personality."

Back at Patrick's, O'Hara takes a swig from his pint and leans across the table as if to share a secret. "I *stole* time," O'Hara whispers, his blue-gray eyes twinkling. "The old men on bikes, the old donkeys with carts, the old women with cans going to the well and back—*that does not exist any longer.*" The words are unnerving; he estimates that the highways and byways that have since cropped up across the Irish countryside, replacing charming thatched cottages and sheep-scattered fields, has triggered a sixty percent increase in automobiles.

O'Hara leads a short tour through the pub, pointing out his photographs of Ireland that line the brick walls, and remarking that his book's 2004 launch party drained the

establishment of Guinness in a matter of hours . . . twice. “It’s funny,” he remarks. “The most outlandish, most spontaneous thing I’d ever done has turned into the hallmark of my life.”

He’s already embarked on his next literary journey, a book of short stories tentatively titled *Stories From the Footbridge: Growing Up Irish in New England in the 50s and 60s*, slated for completion in the spring of 2008. A prequel of sorts to *Last of the Donkey Pilgrims*, the collection parades tales from a “bizarre, fun, loving, tough in certain ways, poor but very rich childhood”—after-hours shenanigans at St. Charles Parish and School, where his father worked as a janitor; mornings trading milk money for Mallo Cups at Nichol’s Pharmacy and afternoons sneaking into the Boy’s Club and the CYC; crossing the now-decrepit Wahconah Street footbridge to see his girlfriends; summers spent building soapbox-derby rigs, splashing around in Pontoosuc Lake, and caddying at the Country Club of Pittsfield—most influenced by his nostalgic essays published in the *Berkshire Eagle* over the past two decades. “It’s the little things,” says O’Hara softly. “You don’t have to come from a great, grand place to have good stories.”

He’s naturally optimistic, and rightfully so. After all, his first book has been praised as “like John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, but much funnier,” and the author himself has been dubbed the Frank McCourt of the Berkshires. But ultimately, Kevin O’Hara is simply a *genuine* storyteller.

“I think there’s a rare gem in Kevin,” enthuses Haley, echoing scores of the author’s friends and colleagues—“Team O’Hara”—who collect religiously on Friday afternoons at Patrick’s to enjoy his latest anecdotes. “He’s almost a throwback, a bard of the times when he was brought up in Pittsfield—which we shared in a way. He has a hunk of that Irish, romantic soul in him that you don’t find today. I’m lucky to know him.”

Aren’t we all. **BL**

Amanda Rae Busch is assistant editor of Berkshire Living and remains mesmerized by Kevin O’Hara’s tales, best enjoyed over a nice pint of Guinness—or two.

THE GOODS

Last of the Donkey Pilgrims
By Kevin O’Hara
Forge Books
www.kevin-ohara.com

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Kevin O’Hara in a reflective moment at Patrick’s Pub in Pittsfield, Mass.