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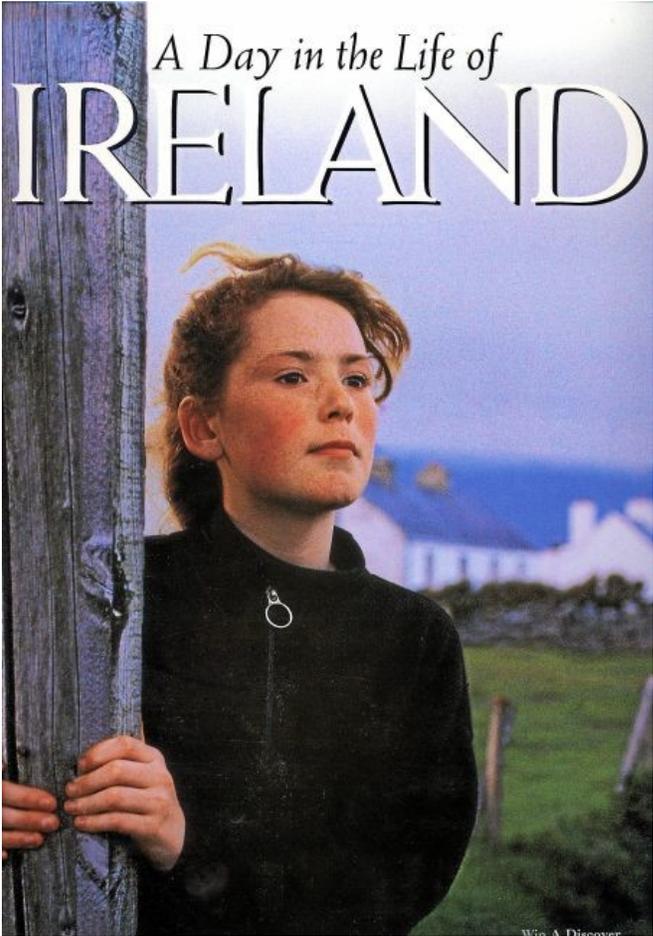


The Berkshire Eagle

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Kevin O'Hara: Venturing into the Mystic



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"A Day in the Life of Ireland," Collins Publishers,

Posted Monday, March 16, 2015 2:10 pm

By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD >> Laboring for years to complete the story of my donkey travels, back in 1991, I asked my good friend, Steve Satullo, who'd been working with me on the manuscript, to meet me in Ireland and get an idea of what the book was truly about. Steve was then running Either/Or Bookstore on North Street, and didn't think he could get away.

"C'mon, it'll be a blast," I promised him. "You'll even get to meet characters from the book; Grannie Kelly, the Four Masters, even Missie, my donkey. This will seal the deal for the whole project."

Steve eyed me dubiously, perhaps realizing the book was still years from completion, at my donkey pace. But he eventually surrendered, and in short order we found ourselves motoring up the west coast of Eireann on a brilliant October morning.

The following day, after a night of revels in the village of Doolin, we set out groggily to visit my grandmother in Co. Roscommon. My mom's mom, a topping woman of 98, made a grand fuss over my friend, preparing a hardy meal over her turf-fired open hearth. I was happy to share with Steve her colorful banter, her centuries' old farmhouse, and the eccentric mix of villagers who came bustling through her door.

After our meal, we hurried to a nearby meadow where my dear donkey Missie grazed. In my frequent trips to Ireland following our travels together in 1979, my nut-brown mare had never failed to recognize me. This visit was no exception, as she snorted happily at my approach, and gladly sniffed my pockets for apples.

I lingered at Grannie's a few days, while Steve took the rental car on his own to visit Yeats Country, accompanied by the soundtrack of Van Morrison's "No Guru No Method No Teacher," as he played the role of "One Irish Rover."

Upon his return, he told me of his "Revelation at Rosses Point." It came as he was walking in all-weather gear along the strand, in the dark of night through a howling North Atlantic rainstorm. Out of this tempestuous squall at the edge of the world, he felt the voice of God, or nature or something out there, speaking to him directly. This encounter with Celtic spirituality remains with him to this day.

Saying farewell to Grannie Kelly — though, thankfully, I'd see her twice more; the last at her 100th birthday celebration — Steve and I continued through Connemara, with hopes of reaching Cong Abbey in Co. Mayo that evening. But we dawdled too long in this enchanting landscape, and arrived lost and confused at a crossroad after dark, where two fingerposts pointed crookedly in opposite directions. One read: Cong — 4 miles. The other: Cong — 8 miles.

Naturally we took the shorter route, but wound up back at the same blooming crossroad four twisting miles later! We spilled out from the car, laughing like fools in Faeryland. Gathering our wits, we wisely took the 8-mile route, and finally reached our destination by the grace of presiding Irish spirits.

Next, a round of golf. And I'm not talking Lahinch or Ballybunion, but a nine-hole boggy tract on the poor northwest island of Achill, reachable by bridge from the mainland. For three quid, we rented clubs and teed off amid a brewing gale with no one else on the links but a young shepherd, and hundreds of bleating sheep that followed us around like a Sunday gallery at the Irish Open.

I asked the young lad why the pins were only belt-high. He readily replied, "Sir, if they were a trifle taller, wouldn't they turn themselves into flying javelins on a blowsy day like today, and kill us all."

On our last night, we had dinner in Achill's village of Keel. There we admired a young bus girl who scurried about tirelessly, greeting one and all with a melodious mix of Irish and English. She introduced herself as Orla, and charmed us not only with her blushing freckled face, but with her passion for her native soil. She was so lively and lovely, she reminded me of the indomitable spirit of Maeve, the mythological queen of Ireland.

A week later, Steve was back at Either/Or, checking in new titles, when he took out a copy of the newly-released photographic compilation "A Day in the Life of Ireland." When he saw the jacket, he couldn't believe his eyes, and took the book around to his staff—Jean Barbas, Susan Brown, Mike McKeever, and his partner, Christine Erb — with exclamations of amazement.

Then he called me, asking if I could come down to the bookstore right away. When I arrived, he excitedly showed me the new Irish photo book, and asked, "Am I crazy here, or what?"

My eyes popped as I gawked at the cover. "My gosh, Steve, it's Orla from Achill!"

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Eagle.

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