



living with the past

Ben Brain travels to Ireland where photographer **David Creedon** shows him that home is where the art is. In his **Ghosts of the Faithful Departed** project, Creedon captures rural homes that were left to decay as a consequence of emigration

DRIVING through the spectacular landscape of west Cork with Irish photographer David Creedon, it's hard to imagine why anyone would want to leave these magical shores. Yet beneath its emerald exterior, history has coloured Ireland in a slightly darker shade. It is marked most notably by its periods of mass emigration over the past few centuries. David's recently completed project explores the consequences of the country's mass exodus through a series of beautiful, haunting interiors of the rural homes left to decay after the last remaining family member died.

David, 49, began the project almost inadvertently in early 2006 when, after completing a 'personal' photographic project on European cities, he was looking for another subject, this time with an Irish theme. Although he didn't realise it immediately when he photographed

a derelict house in County Mayo, the history of Ireland's emigration would become the subject of a new series of photographs that is now travelling the world as part of an exhibition that is gaining critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic.

David agreed to show me around parts of west Cork, returning to a house he had previously photographed and keeping a sharp eye open for the tell-tale signs of any more dwellings.

As we set out along the winding roads of west Cork in the direction

of Bantry Bay, David explained more about the project. 'I knew I was onto something after photographing the first house in County Mayo,' he says. 'I knew there was an emigration theme, but it wasn't about the people who left; it was about those who stayed behind. I couldn't get it out of my head why this house was abandoned in such a way. A couple of months later I came across another house, this time in Kerry, and then another in west Cork. I was showing them to people who said they knew of other houses like these, and

that got the ball rolling. Before I knew it I had a small portfolio of work.'

Eventually we reached our destination, although it was a while before I realised we had got there as there didn't appear to be a house in sight. David, too, would never have discovered this place if he hadn't been waiting for a green light during some road works about a year ago. Sitting there, he just made out the chimney poking through the trees and decided to investigate further.

The more he photographed the houses the more he discovered the stories behind them – a story of Ireland's emigration. 'It's not the emigration of the 1840s when people left because of the famine,' explains David. 'It's a more recent history, from the 1950s to the 1980s – my lifetime. Some people find it hard to believe that so many people left during this period.'

Between 1949 and 1989 it is estimated that more







← than 800,000 people left Ireland, and a 1956 census recorded a population of 2.8 million – an all-time low. Families were divided, especially in rural communities, as sons and daughters left in search of better opportunities in the UK and America.

Having pulled off the main road we clambered over a wall and fought through a thick mass of overgrown vegetation to discover a small cottage that was slowly succumbing to the tightening grip of nature.

Entering the decaying dwelling was like stepping into the past. It was an eerie experience, and I instantly understood the feeling David had described when he said the hair stood up on the back of his neck. It was like stepping into one of his pictures. After looking around for a while he set up for another shot, and there was some evidence to suggest someone else had been in the house since his last visit.

'I didn't want to move anything – for me that's not documentary,' explains David. 'It's very easy to go in and start setting things up – but that it is not what I wanted. I just went in and photographed what I found.'

Most of the houses he has photographed have been simply abandoned when the last occupant died, with no one claiming either the property or its contents. Kitchen utensils still hang above the sink, religious icons adorn mantelpieces, clothes still hang in cupboards and

drawers contain letters written to the long-departed. Like a forensic investigator, David could piece together the stories of the people who lived there, such as a calendar on the wall dating a house's last occupation.

'Many of the items I photographed reminded me of my own youth,' David continues. 'Even simple things like the wallpaper in one house was the same as in my mother's house. I think that is what these photographs do for many people my age – they bring them back to old memories and remind them of the past.'

It's been an emotional journey for David. 'Other people have also been moved,' he says. 'I have had calls from people saying, "Tears are running down my checks as I look at your photographs." A friend of mine said, "They are very sad, but very beautiful." I think it reminds them of a time years ago when they were part of a family unit that's now disbanded.'

Heading back to Cork for a well-earned Guinness, David talks about the process of putting on a large-scale exhibition of his prints. After editing his portfolio down to about 30 images, he had large-format prints produced and framed, which he took 'on tour'.

'The show, Ghosts of the Faithful Departed, weighs more than half a tonne and is a logistical nightmare,' he says. It has toured parts of the USA and is now being shown in Ireland. Eventually he hopes to bring it to the UK and mainland Europe. **AP**



To see more of David's photographs, visit www.davidcredon.com



shooting in low light

When photographing the interiors of derelict houses David likes to keep his technique as simple as possible. The light can be extremely low in the dark small-windowed rooms. When I was taking pictures of David working, my exposures were in the region of 1/15sec at f/2.8, ISO 1600. Naturally, this necessitates the use of a sturdy support or flash – which David prefers to avoid. 'The best piece of equipment I have is a Manfrotto tripod,' he explains. 'No matter where I go in the world, it's the first thing I pack. It's as important as any of the lenses or cameras, and I rarely take a photograph without it.'



'I like large prints (approximately 20x30in) as opposed to 10x8in prints where detail would be lost'

David only uses available light, which is limited, so his exposures are often in excess of 20 seconds. He also tries to maintain a small aperture, such as f/16 and a low 100 ISO sensitivity. He does occasionally mount his flashgun so he can use the infrared beam to assist focusing in the low-light conditions.

David switched to digital imaging for this project, finally relinquishing his Linhof 67 for a Canon EOS 20D, while lugging his increasingly heavy medium-format around the streets of Paris. He has since upgraded to a Canon EOS 5D and is utterly thrilled with the results.

'When I go in I always look for the wideangle shot first and then the details,' he says. 'I try to find things that I remember from when I was a kid. Most of my photographs are about the details, little objects lying around the place that you might not even see at first, as they lurk in the shadows. That's why I like the large prints (approximately 20x30in) as opposed to 8x10in prints where such details would be lost.'

