

Between 1949 and 1989, over 800,000 people, mostly young, were forced to leave Ireland in search of work. The vanishing peaked in 1955, when 55,000 left the shores. Many went to America on holiday visas and never came back. When the older generation died the title of their homes would pass to their children abroad, who could not even return to Ireland to attend the funeral. These were desperate choices

Not Wanted on Voyage

North Mayo, 2005 (below left). "While visiting these unoccupied houses I felt like an intruder," says David Creedon, "disturbing the spirits that still haunt every room. In some homes it looked as if the last activity was the waking of the dead, the closing of the door and the abandonment of the house"

"The devotion to the Catholic faith is always present (below right) and there are three icons you'll always find in Irish houses: the Sacred Heart, Our Lady of Perpetual Succour and the Infant of Prague. Here Our Lady is resting against the wall by the fireplace"



"The only contact with the outside world often was the radio (below). And the only way to keep in touch with loved ones was by letter. For anyone reading a letter it wasn't just the content but the interpretation ... reading between the lines. Troubles expressed in a letter became worries. With no one to talk to people would naturally turn to prayer"

"The return. The owner of this trunk (bottom) had left for New York on 16 October 1930, on a 3rd class passage on the White Star Line. When she came back on 16 August 1949, she travelled cabin class from Pier 61, New York to Cobh. The menu offered caviar and wild Irish smoked salmon. She must have made a bit of money on her travels!"



"This is the only Infant of Prague I saw with its head on (below); traditionally they are decapitated. They are given as wedding gifts, and often put into the garden on the night before the wedding"



“This Ford Consul (below) in an abandoned garage in Ross Common would have been built in the 1960s and most likely assembled in Cork – back in the days when there were ‘jobs for life’ ”

“Cattle were occupying the ground floor here (bottom). You can just make out the Sacred Heart on the chair. For me, these photographs are not images of other people’s houses but pictures of all our homes”



> Silence, Exile and Cunning

> John O’Farrell

> Photographs David Creedon

For a time, the German Democratic Republic was the best place in Europe to go squatting. West Berlin has a long history of organised squatters, sharing information and advice about “stealing a house”, as they quaintly and honestly call the process of appropriation. But is it theft if no-one wants the property? Is abandonment consent?

After the simultaneous opening of the Berlin Wall and closure of the Warsaw Pact, thousands of Ossies simply left and went west. Entire blocks of flats were vacated of people, deserting their possessions for the better class of tat and furniture they hoped to find in Dusseldorf, or Hamburg, or simply a few kilometres across the redundant free fire zone that marked the navel of the Cold War.

Capitalism, when it landed on the East, called people like the sirens, asset-stripping the populace of the young, the bored and those who hungered for what good Marxists called the “super-structure”, that surface glitz of unfathomable depths that made no sense to Historical Materialism. Or it could have been an older impulse, one that necessitated embracing the taboo that had almost defined the failure of the Soviet empire; the right to move. At bottom, it said that those states could not trust their own citizens. The Museum of German History that used to grace the Unter den Linden (just opposite the vast embassy of the USSR and its prominent bust of Stalin) referred to the “necessity” of building the Berlin Wall as some ingrates were leaving “like thieves in the night.”

But these thieves were reclaiming an older right. They were challenging the restrictions of space, choosing to make their home at their heart’s place rather than submitting to the fate of geography and the accident of birth.

A few years after the Fall, I had the dubious honour of a lengthy chat with an ex-member of the Politburo of the Staatspartei, who by 1993 was playing a leading role in organising the unemployed, which then accounted for about 50 per cent of the Ossie working population. I asked him when he realised the game was up. He said it was the day in 1987 when the Stasi briefed him and a handful of others that the official figure for emigration visas of always 5,000 was hokum. The real figure was over 2 million. That proportion of the GDR’s population of 17 million shocked the apparatniks to their core, because they knew what a

risk it was to make a formal application to leave.

If such a number were prepared to face personal and family ruin, then what of the rest? Erich Honecker, the ailing patriarch of the walled workers’ state was kept blissfully ignorant, only being told by Gorbachev as they marked the 40th anniversary of the enterprise in the summer of 1989. After that, they kissed like dons in a bad mafia movie and agreed that the contemporaneous example of Tiananmen Square was not an option.

In another part of Europe, the problem was also keeping people in. Ireland had been shedding its young for a century and a half, its population sliding from eight million in 1841 to less than three million by 1961. The mid-1980s saw the all-time peak of emigration, but “the Fifties” has an iconic ring in Ireland, an era of conformity, stagnation, ineptitude, belligerence and flight. Those who dared read the banned James Joyce tended to follow his advice for a free-thinker’s survival: “Silence, exile and cunning.”

Like Poland now, in Europe but gnawed by the rhetoric of the comic twins who act as President and Premier, some leave for psychic survival. Most however, get out for material ends, leaving very little behind. Like those who left the abandoned homes in rural Ireland, their slow decay frozen by David Creedon, many will replicate those icons abroad, with knobs on. Witness the new bungalows of the successful Irish-Americans with their garish idols of Christ and his Sacred Heart, of Mary “Our Mother” and of Pdraig Pearse.

In reverse, it is common still to find busts and portraits of that most successful son of the Atlantic crossing, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. His visit to the Ould Sod in 1963, five months before his date with destiny’s bullet, was the highlight of the Irish “Sixties”, and an odd death knell for the Ireland carved by his host, Eamon de Valera. The then president of Ireland was born in New York poverty and extolled the “homely

virtues” of frugal living and pious patriotism. His Boston guest was rich, vibrant, sexy and powerful enough to have almost cost the earth only months before. He was most of all, successful, and said to a young, bored and hungry generation that any Irish man can “be like me”. You can be born again in a suitcase.

It was those emigrants, those who left in the ‘60s and ‘80s who created modern Ireland. They sent back ideas and thoughts that could not have lifted under the fog of holy Ireland. They left for the things that dreams are made of (“like food and money and dreams and love/ the things you never thought of”) and then introduced those dreams to Ireland. Which is why young, bored and hungry Poles and Lithuanians and Ukrainians and Portuguese and East Timorese and Palestinians and Libyans and Nigerians now make up an estimated 10 per cent of the population, one of the fastest rates of immigration into any country in modern times.

People’s stuff is smaller these days. It is digital and virtual and that is probably why there is a mini-boom in family portraits and snapshots on eBay. Moving the length of a continent is easier, cheaper and faster than taking the ferry across the Irish sea. Migration is transient, work is fluid, home is a movable feast. People move forward and back in a manner unthinkable a generation ago and their “home” is in many places, a portfolio of experiences as much as a photo album or a “forever box”, floating capsules of time and space.

In the ‘50s, emigration to America was a done deal. No returns for Christmas or funerals, ever. They were a living death in the family. A tradition started called the “American Wake”, the last chance to mark the passing of the living souls to the other side. That is the raw core of those abandoned cottages, why they are untouched except by time and why the Sacred Hearts still flicker on the mantels. They are cemeteries **8**

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"Lived alone without you
Shadows on my wall
Ghosts in my looking glass
and voices in the hall"

"Ghosts" – Horslips



David Creedon will be exhibiting these pictures at Ballina Art Centre, Co Mayo from 4 April and at Fotahouse, Co. Cora from 8 June 2007