

The Return

*Photographs and words
by David Creedon*

The greatest resource any country can have are its people, and yet the biggest export Ireland ever produced were its sons and daughters.

Between 1949 and 1989 over 800,000 left Ireland and by 1956 the population had fallen to 2.8 million the lowest that was ever recorded and left one author to question, "Are we becoming a vanishing race?" In fact Ireland is the only country in modern times to have sustained more than 100 years of population decline.

Driving in West Cork on a cold April morning I find myself stopped for road works the middle of nowhere. While waiting for the lights to turn green I contemplate if I should drive on as there is no cars about at this time of the morning. Then out of the corner of my eye I catch a glimpse of a chimney pot but I cannot see a house because of trees. I can see that slates are missing from the roof and the upstairs windows are open and it looks abandoned. Parking the car I walk down the lonely by-road until I reach the dwelling. The house is totally encircled by trees and as I make my way through the undergrowth I finally get to the front door that is slightly open. I enter cautiously; it is quite dark and it takes a while for my eyes to become adjusted.

The surrounding trees have cocooned the house and turned it into a time capsule and also protected it from passers by. Looking around I see a calendar on the wall which has a picture of Pope Paul VI dated 1977, the walls are painted in various bright colours, Pinks, Blues, and Yellows and when I entered into the kitchen there was this vibrant painted peeling green wall. In the centre was a solid fuel stove and scattered around the floor were kettles, newspapers and a blue tin of Jacob's Irish party biscuits decorated with shamrocks that now contained letters and bills, on top of the tin sat a snow globe. On the right hand side of the stove was a picture of "Our Lady of Perpetual Succour", while on a window sill is a clock with its hands stopped at twenty one



minutes past twelve and lying next to it was an Irish Sweepstake ticket that could have changed someone's life forever.

You could see the house had connections with America, lying around was a book of the American Constitution and upstairs hanging was a Star Spangled banner with forty-eight stars, this dates it to pre 1948. The flag was at an angle of forty-five degrees and reminded me of Joe Rosenthal's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima. Hanging next to it was a green army coloured dress.

The dreams and aspirations of many exiles was one day to return to their homeland but very few were so lucky. In one of the bedrooms was a shipping trunk; in this instance the trunk tells a story of emigration and return:

Mary Sullivan travelled to New York on the White Star Liner RMS Cedric that sailed from Liverpool on the 11th October 1930, she boarded the liner at Queenstown now Cobh sailing third class, nineteen years later she was to return. The labels on the trunk state; "Mary Sullivan - SS America - 16th August 1949 - Pier 61 - New York to Cobh - Cabin Class". The SS America had three classes of passenger; First, Cabin and Tourist class. On the menu for Cabin class passengers Mary could choose from Caviar or wild Irish smoked Salmon. The trunk still contained ladies nylon stockings in there original box,

the words "Nylons by DuPont" embossed at the top of each stocking, also included among her possessions was a passbook from the National Hibernian Bank in the Bronx that showed that she had savings of nine thousand dollars. Hanging behind a door was a dress with its purchase labels still intact, did the items of fashion in places like Queens and Brooklyn have no place in rural Ireland of the 1950's or did Mary ever get the chance to wear them?

Mary was lucky, she came home but for the most they had to stay.

I had a friend who once told me that he never knew his father. In fact there were thousands of Irish children who only ever saw their father maybe once or twice a year when they came back from the building sites in Liverpool or some other English city. Homecoming was a big part of emigrant's lives, meeting up with family and old friends, the parties and the craic.

These are the parts of homecoming you like to remember, the bits you like to forget are the after Christmas goodbyes, in the 1950's it was men headed back on the boat to bed sits in Coventry, Birmingham and London while in the 1980's it was the sight of mothers breaking down in airports as the said goodbye to sons and daughters as they headed to Boston, Chicago or San Francisco.



During this period young men and women emigrated in search of a better life, today in the United States it is estimated that there are over fifty thousand undocumented Irish who are unable to return to their homeland. Now middle aged with families of their own they can not come back for the simple things like a holiday, or the important thing like saying a final goodbye to a parent for fear on not been able to get back in.

There's a part of a Derek Mahon poem on a closed up garage and home. "The cracked panes reveal a dark interior echoing with the cries of children. Here in this quiet corner of Co Cork a family ate, slept and watched the rain dance clean and cobalt the exhausted grit so that the mind shrank from the glare of it."

Where did they go? South Boston? Cricklewood? Somebody somewhere thinks of this as home."

