

*Mike Harding*

## 24 *Connemara on my mind: Connemara*



I can walk from my cottage door in Connemara out along bramble-sided lanes and down to the foreshore of Cleggan Bay. If I follow the tideline northwards, I can strike up the hill which forms the northern arm of the bay, rambling through bog and over rock outcrops until I come to the ruins of an old Napoleonic watch tower.

The tower, square-built of semi-dressed stone, first began to fall after a storm which hit west Connemara in the 1970s. Since then, time and the Atlantic weather systems that rule this coast have picked and gnawed away at the work of those English engineers until nothing is left now but a stump and a jumbled mass of stone.

I often think of those army engineers, probably from places like Bolton or Billericay, ordinary English lads who must have wondered what in blazes they were doing here in this colonial outpost on the western edge of their world. They wouldn't have understood the language, the religion or the ways of the local people, and would have felt as foreign here as the tea planters in Ceylon and the District Officers in Uganda.

*The Twelve Bens from  
across Derryclare Lough*





Below the hill is a holy well, one of many hundreds that can be found all over Ireland, and a sign, not just of Ireland's Catholic heritage, but also of its pagan roots. For though these wells are often named after saints like Patrick or Brigid, they are far older than that.

Springs and wells were sacred to the Pre-Christian Irish (as they were to the people of the west of mainland Britain, the Welsh and Cornish in particular, and think of the Derbyshire well-dressings). The custom of hanging rags and bandages to the branches of the trees around them goes back to the days when wells were worshipped as a source of life. Some of the wells are dedicated to the Virgin: Tobar Muire is common here (and is how Tobermory on Mull got its name) but my favourite is Tobar n'Galt – 'the well of the mad' – in Sligo. A drink from it was said to cure ills of the mind.

The well under Cleggan Hill has no name; it is simply marked on the map as Holy Well. I come here whenever I climb this hill. The well is hard to find, Catholic Ireland isn't what she used to be, and it is overgrown, occluded by nature seeking to claim back the land. The place has an atmosphere, as all holy wells do. Pure water bubbles out from the bedrock only yards from a cove where the sea endlessly rolls up a shingle beach.

*Sea thrift on the beach*

*Sunset at Rosses Point, Clifden*

I bring small children here; nephews and nieces, and they play in the sea yards from the well, with Inishbofin in the distance and sea thrift and broom twitching in the Atlantic breeze. It is a special place; and in a way it is a symbol of Connemara itself, which is more a state of mind than a place.

Connemara has no defined boundaries; it is not a political state, and has no TD (Teachta Dala, Member of the Dail), no MEP (Member of the European Parliament), no offices, no symbols or insignia. You could loosely describe it as starting just north of Oughterard continuing to Killary Harbour. Eastward it holds the Twelve Bens, and ends at the Mayo border. It is in County Galway, yet it is more than the county in which it sits.

It is great walking country. Climb to the summit of Derryclare and look around you and you will see a land that is half land, half water, with lakes and boglands stretching away to the sea. Across the Inagh Valley lie the Maumturks, a line of quartzite summits which mark the furthest west of St Patrick's travels.

The seaward fringes of Connemara – Spiddal and Carna in particular – are Irish-speaking and have produced a rake of great traditional singers, dancers and musicians. If you want to hear Irish music at its best then seek out Marcus and P.J. Herson or Johnny Connolly and you will hear what people call 'the pure drop' - no flash Riverdance stuff, but pure sean nos (old style) music and dance.



Galway, both county and town, evoke pride and passion of course, but Connemara means much more. It was to Connemara that the many of the Irish were driven by Cromwell when he sent them 'to Hell or Connaught', and it was to Connemara that J.M.Synge came, that Padraig Pearse came. As many will tell you, this is the real West.

Synge found his voice here, echoing the stories and the voices of a people poor in everything but language and their imagination. Pearse came here to his small cottage to dream his dream of an Ireland free from the coloniser. The British murdered him in Kilmainham Jail after the Easter Rising of 1916, but his dream lived on.

A place of mountains and lakes, sea inlets and holy wells; it is too easy in a way to romanticise Connemara, to present a picture of donkeys carrying creels of turf to thatched cottages, of red-haired children in Aran sweaters. The truth is nothing like that: Ireland has changed more in the last twenty years than in the previous two hundred; the 'Celtic Tiger' has brought new pressures, new anxieties, new greeds.

Ireland is now one of the most expensive countries in Europe; I bought exactly the same basket of groceries in Andalucia and in Connemara – and the Connemara basket cost more than twice as much. The thatched cottages have gone too, and the landscape painted by Paul Henry is now cluttered with bungalows and threatened with other developments from airports to wind farms.

There is an element of gombeenism (usury) here that is doing more to destroy Ireland than the Brits ever did. Yet I suspect that, just as the English tower above my home fell into decay, the works of the destroyers and the corrupt, visionless ones, to whom landscape is nothing but money, will go the same way. In a hundred years time people will look at their ruins and wonder. Underneath it all, the heart and spirit that is Connemara will survive all their towers, all their vanities.

*Peat stacks, Connemara*

