

'Hilarious... from that prince among travel writers, the literary conqueror of the Hindu Kush' *DAILY TELEGRAPH*

ERIC NEWBY



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Round Ireland in Low Gear



DEDICATION

For the Irish,
the Eighth Walking (and Talking)
Wonders of the World

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INTRODUCTION



The roads are very variable, some being grand, others very bad. Intercourse with the peasantry will be found interesting and amusing. Nothing can exceed their civility and courtesy; and for those who are not too particular it will be found an excellent plan to lunch in their cottages, excellent tea, home-made bread, butter and eggs being procurable for 1s. [5p] a head.

The Cyclists' Touring Club Irish Road Book, c. 1899

In the autumn of 1985, more or less on the spur of the moment, we decided to go back to Ireland and travel through as much of it as we could in the space of three months or so, starting in the South. The North could wait. If things improved there, so much the better. If they got worse we would simply not go there. We were not going to travel in the guise of sociologists, journalists or contemporary historians. I was unlikely to write a book called *Whither Ireland?* or *Ireland Now*. We were not going there, we hoped, to be shot at. We remembered it as it had been some twenty years previously, when it had been idiosyncratic and fun. (Romantic Ireland was long since dead and gone, as Yeats wrote, 'with O'Leary in the grave' – that is, if it had ever existed.) We were going there, in short, to enjoy ourselves, an unfashionable aspiration in the 1980s.

It was now mid-November. All Souls' Day was already past. The dead season, as far as weather went, was in full sway all over the northern hemisphere and would last until Easter, and probably longer. We had no illusions about the dead season. Anywhere in the British Isles and in most parts of the Mediterranean it conjured up vistas of matchstick figures bent double by the wind, silhouetted against a colourless sea without a vessel in sight to break the monotony; sun lounges in hotels and guest houses filled with rolled-up carpet, those still open soldiering on with a skeleton staff, the proprietors in the Canaries, those left in charge in their absence never quite sober.

But it will be better in Ireland, we said, putting our faith in the Gulf Stream, and in the Irish themselves with their humour, and trying to forget, while adding up their other virtues, their cooking though even that was said to have improved.

The reason we chose to begin our journey in this dead season was simply that at home in Dorset in the not-so-dead seasons we are engaged in extensive gardening operations without any sort

outside help. We have a large kitchen garden in which we grow all our own vegetables; large expanses of grass to be cut, a lot of it in a steep-sided orchard which, no sooner than one turns one's back on it, becomes infested with moles whose excavations knock hell out of a mower; not to speak of a long, tapering field and quite an extensive beech wood to try and keep under control.

Having decided to explore as much of Ireland as we could between December and March and the rest of it when we could afford the time, we then had to decide what means of transportation to employ. My first impulse, one not shared by my wife Wanda, was to walk it; but what makes Ireland such a meal from the walker's point of view is its coastline, which is 3500 miles long, more than a thousand miles longer than that of England and Wales and exactly a thousand miles longer than that of Scotland, and a lot of it on the Atlantic coasts very indented. Peninsulas such as the Iveragh, the Beara, the Dingle and Mizen Head are between thirty and forty miles long. To skirt the perimeter of these four adjacent peninsulas would involve a journey of at least 255 miles – the Ring of Kerry on the Iveragh Peninsula alone is over a hundred miles – and at the end of it one would only be about six miles further on one's way. Similar vast detours would also have to be made, if one was serious about it, all the way up the West coast.

According to the excellent *Ireland Guide*, published by the Irish Tourist Board (otherwise Bord Fáilte, the Welcome Board), it is possible to visit the country 'in its entirety in a couple of weeks' by car or motorcycle; they then go on to say, however, rather like a band of roguish leprechauns, that 'you cannot see everything, of course'. But we both rejected the idea of using a car on the grounds that whoever is driving sees hardly anything except the road ahead – if not they shouldn't be driving – and the one who isn't is either permanently map-reading or looking things up in guide books to entertain the driver, and getting ticked off if he fails to do so, which leads to what my wife calls 'rowls'. In this way no one sees anything. Motorcycles we regarded, and still do, as just plain dangerous.

Buses sounded a little more promising but a closer look at the *Amchlar Bus do na Cuigi agus Expressway*, otherwise the *Provincial and Expressway Timetable* (not surprisingly there is no equivalent for 'Bus' and 'Expressway' in the Irish language) showed that some of the services were pretty skeletal in the winter months. The *Amchlar Traenach*, or *Train Timetable* (trains, presumably because of their more ancient lineage, having somehow contrived to get themselves incorporated in the language) offered even less hope. However carefree the image the Irish Railways tried to project it was obvious that the system had suffered the attentions of some Irish equivalent, if such can be imagined, of Beeching, the destroyer of the British railway system. To understand what had been lost as a result it was only necessary to look at the railway map in the 1912, and last, edition of the splendid work, *Murray's Handbook to Ireland*.

We also ruled out horses, as we are both terrified of them. Anyway, we would have had the problem of feeding them. I could foresee us buying them dozens of packets of All Bran at the supermarkets and getting soundly kicked for our pains. Remembering what happened to Mr Toad we were less than enthusiastic about hiring a caravan. What we really needed was a balloon, but that would have meant employing a balloonist, and most likely ending up beyond the Urals.

The only other practical method of making the journey, although I was not sanguine about persuading Wanda to agree, was by bicycle.

PART ONE

December

CHAPTER 1

State-of-the-Art



STATE-OF-THE-ART *adj.* (*prenominal*) (of hi-fi equipment, recordings, etc.) the most recent and therefore considered the best; up-to-the-minute: *a state-of-the-art amplifier.*

Collins English Dictionary

A bike is a very personal thing and the only person who can really judge it is the rider.

The Bicycle Buyer's Bible, 1985/6

When I was seven or eight I used to have an awful recurrent nightmare about Germans invading England on bicycles.

It was inspired by a story in a germ-laden, pre-First World War magazine which I rescued from a dustbin behind the block of flats we lived in by Hammersmith Bridge in south-west London. In the tale, the Germans were landed on the shores of the Wash under cover of fog – a difficult feat, but the Germans were up to it. Instead of horsed cavalry, however, which would have had a pretty glutinous time of it out in the marshes, battalions of them squelched ashore with folding bicycles strapped to their backs.

Once on *terra firma* these *pickelhaubed* hordes split up into flying columns and, led by expert local navigators, traitors to a man, of whom there were inexhaustible supplies even before 1914, swept through the fog-bound low country at a terrific rate. In the course of the following night they seized all the principal cities of the Midlands, including Birmingham. ('Only ninety kilometres as the crow flies,' said some unspeakable turncoat, clicking his heels.) Cambridge fell without a shot being fired, which was not surprising considering its subsequent record – or was it the long vacation? Other columns were directed towards the metropolis. At this point the narrative ended. It was a series of events and by the time I went back to have another dig in the dustbin to find the sequel it had been emptied.

They must have been foiled in the end because we later won the Great War, but for years I had this terrifying vision of Germans with spiked helmets pedalling swiftly and silently over Hammersmith Bridge in the night, finding my bedroom and spitting me on their bayonets like

knackwurst.

~~It was therefore to some extent paradoxical that the swiftness and silence of the bicycles about which I had dreamt with such horror, as irrational as the horror of whiteness described in *Moby Dick* but equally real, were the very qualities which subsequently attracted me to this form of transport, and turned me into a keen cyclist and owner of many bicycles of varying degrees of splendour.~~

My first really good bicycle was a second-hand Selbach which I bought from a boy at school for £3 – it would have cost about £12 new. I was heartbroken when it was stolen from the school bicycle shed. Selbachs were the Bugattis of the cycle world. The frames were made from tapered tubes which, although almost paper thin, were immensely strong, and they were fitted with Timken roller bearings instead of conventional ball-bearings. The lightest machine Selbach built is in the Science Museum in London. He flourished between the wars, and was far ahead of his time. He was killed when the front wheel of his bicycle got stuck in a tramline in South London; he didn't even rate an obituary in *The Times*. Ever since the 1890s, when for a time it was fashionable, though never as a competitive sport, cycling had been and still is hopelessly *déclassé*. Even today the only socially acceptable bike for a member of the British upper crust is one that looks as if it has been retrieved from a municipal rubbish dump, and probably has.

The finest bicycle I ever had was a Holdsworth which my father allowed me to order when I was sixteen. He had arranged with a Swiss business acquaintance of his called Mr Guggenheim that I should work in his silk firm in Zurich in order to learn the business and the German language, and no doubt he thought that cycling up and down the Alps would keep my thoughts in wholesome channels. It was a model called Stelvio, and was specially designed for cycling in the Alps.

It was hand-built in a small shed at the back of Holdsworth's shop in Putney by a thin, energetic, chain-smoking genius with wispy hair and a terrible cough. He had lined the walls of the shed with a really wonderful collection of pin-ups all of which displayed enormous tits; presumably to stimulate him to even greater activity. They certainly stimulated me. It was the finest bicycle procurable at the time and it cost a colossal £20. The day I took delivery of it I remember him bouncing it up and down on its over-size hand-made tyres as if it was a ping-pong ball.

'Luvly job,' he said, with a cigarette stuck to his lower lip. 'A real iron. Go out and give the Alps a bashing. Funny to think I'll never see 'em.'

I never saw the Alps either, let alone gave them a bashing. The arrangement with Mr Guggenheim was shelved when my father found out that the kind of *Schweitzerdeutsch* they spoke in Zurich was so extraordinarily funny that if real German speakers heard it they fell about. I never dared tell the creator of the 'iron' that the furthest I got was the Black Mountains on the Welsh border.

In the war I rode huge bicycles with 28" wheels that weighed 60 lbs or more, of the sort still popular in parts of India and Africa. At the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, which I attended in 1940, a special drill had been invented for riding these monsters:

'Number One Platoon!' (or whatever it was) 'Arf Sections Left! *Prepare to Meount! ... Meount!*' And we would wobble off into the asylum country round Broadmoor.

Wanda's affair with the bicycle was very different from mine. For her there was, and still is, the Platonic, archetypal bicycle, the first one she ever had. It was the sort of bicycle on which droves of girls used to cycle past the prison camp in which I was incarcerated in the Po Valley, near Parma during the war. Similar droves were to be seen riding through the equally flat countryside around post-war Ferrara in Visconti's film *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*.

It was a single-speed lightweight roadster with an open frame, raised handlebars fitted with a wicker basket and a back pedalling brake on the rear wheel, the upper part of which was covered with

thin cords to prevent the wearer's skirt becoming entangled in it, which made the whole thing look like some archaic stringed instrument on wheels.

It was a present to her from her godmother on her sixteenth birthday. Originally she had given her a wristwatch but Wanda displayed such obvious disappointment on receiving it that her godmother eventually wrung from her the confession that what she really longed for was a bicycle. Unfortunately Wanda's godmother had no idea how much a bicycle cost, and the money she gave Wanda in lieu of the wristwatch was totally insufficient to buy even a good second-hand one, which was why Wanda's bicycle came to be made up of salvaged parts, re-assembled by the village bicycle repairer. In spite of this it was a good bicycle, with a frame made by the still excellent firm of Bianchi.

Because of all this Wanda had the fierce affection for her bicycle that most people reserve for their living. So when the Germans occupied Italy in September 1943, and her father was arrested by the Gestapo as an anti-Fascist, her bicycle was impounded as an additional punishment, to which she took strong exception. Eventually she succeeded in tracking it down to a German military headquarters at Salsomaggiore, a spa miles away from where she lived in the foothills of the Apennines, to which literally thousands of confiscated bicycles had been taken.

'You have stolen my bicycle,' she said without preamble to the first German officer she encountered there, who happened to be a colonel taking a turn in the open air.

'What, me?' he said in genuine astonishment, saluting. 'Why should I take your bicycle? I have no need of a bicycle.'

'Well, if you didn't take it your soldiers did. My father was in the Austrian Imperial Army. *F* never stole ladies' bicycles.'

'Where is your bicycle?' he asked.

'In there,' she said, indicating through open doors in a hangar what appeared to be the biggest second-hand bicycle shop in the world.

'*Signorina*,' he said gallantly, anxious to be rid of this Slovenian fury he had somehow unwittingly fielded, 'if we have taken your bicycle I can only apologize on behalf of the Wehrmacht. We are not here to make war on young ladies. We will restore you a bicycle. Please take *any* bicycle. I will personally authorize it. Take a *good* bicycle.'

'I don't want *any* bicycle,' she said. 'I want *my* bicycle.'

Eventually the colonel was constrained to send for a couple of soldiers and order them to force their way through the masses of bicycles, many of them superb machines, any of which she could have had for the asking, until they reached the enclave in which Wanda's humble machine was finally located. For with Teutonic efficiency they were grouped according to whichever town or village they had been impounded in.

Knowing all this, and that a facsimile of her old bicycle was the only thing that would really make her content, I felt myself in the same sort of spot as the German colonel at Salsomaggiore in 1943. In one of my wilder, more fanciful moments I imagined trying to sell her the idea that dropped handlebars are nothing more than raised handlebars installed upside down. And in my mind's eye I could see her wrestling with them, like an Amazon with the antlers of a stag at bay, trying to return them to what she regarded as their proper position.

The heart of rural Dorset is not the easiest place to find out about the latest developments in the world of bicycles, but by good fortune our local newsagent in Wareham had a copy of a magazine called *The Bicycle Buyer's Bible, 1985/6* on its shelves. By this time the question of what sort of bikes we were going to take with us if we were going to get moving before Christmas was becoming extremely

urgent. *The Bible* gave detailed specifications of about three hundred machines with prices ranging from £105 to £1147, and £1418 for a tandem.

The machines that interested me most were the mountain bicycles, otherwise ATBs, All Terrain Bicycles. Everything about a mountain bike is big, except for the frame, which is usually smaller than that of normal lightweight touring bicycles. They are built of over-size tubing and have big pedals ideal for someone like me with huge feet; wheels with big knobbly tyres which can be inflated with four times as much air as an ordinary high-pressure tyre; very wide flat handlebars, like motorcycle handlebars, fitted with thumb-operated gear change levers; and motorcycle-type brake levers connected to cantilever brakes of the sort originally designed for tandems, which have enormous stopping power.

Most of them are fitted with 15- or 18-speed derailleur gears made up by fitting a five- or six-sprocket freewheel block on the rear hub and three chainwheels of different sizes on the main axle at the bottom bracket where the cranks are situated; a sophistication so conspicuously unnecessary that Thorsten Veblen would have had ecstasically adding another chapter to his great work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, had he lived to see it. This equipment produces gears ranging from 20" or even lower (which can be a godsend when climbing mountains) to 90" or even higher for racing downhill or with a following wind on the flat.¹ Not all these gears are practicable or even usable, however, for technical reasons.

These mountain bikes looked very ugly, very old-fashioned and very American, which was not surprising as they were the lineal descendants of the fat-tyred newspaper delivery bikes first produced by a man called Ignaz Schwinn in the United States in 1933. To me they looked even older. They made me think of Mack Sennet and Fatty Arbuckle and Jackie Coogan. If I got round to buying one I knew that I would have to wear a big flat peaked cap like Coogan's. Eighteen gears apart – perhaps settle for fifteen – and providing we could find one with an open rather than a man's diamond frame model, this seemed exactly the sort of bike, in the absence of her beloved Bianchi, that Wanda needed to carry her the length and breadth of Ireland and even up and down a holy mountain or two.

“To buy a mountain bike now”, I read, “is to win yourself a place in the first of the few rather than the last of the many.”

It was a wet Sunday evening in Dorset. We were in bed surrounded by the avalanche of catalogues and lists I had brought down on us by clipping out the coupons in *The Bicycle Buyer's Bible*. One dealer, in what seemed to me an excess of optimism, had also sent order forms which read

PLEASE SEND ... MOUNTAIN BICYCLES(S), MODEL(S) ... FRAME SIZE(S) ... COLOUR(S) ... PLEASE GIVE ALTERNATE COLOUR(S). I ENCLOSE A CHEQUE/BANKER'S ORDER, VALUE ...

‘I don't want to be one of the first of the few,’ Wanda said.

‘Shall I go on?’ I said. ‘There's worse to follow.’

‘Okay, go on.’

“From prototype to production model they have been around for less than a decade. In that short time they have been blasted across the Sahara, up Kilimanjaro, down the Rockies and along the Great Wall of China.”

‘Isn't it true that the Great Wall of China's got so many holes in it that you can't even walk along

it, let alone cycle along it?’

‘Yes, I know,’ I said, ‘~~but there is a picture here of two men sitting on their bikes on the top of Kilimanjaro. And anyway, just listen to this: “With each off-the-wall off-the-road adventure, with each unlikely test-to-destruction, the off-road-state-of-knowledge has rolled the off-road-state-of-the-art further forward.”~~’

‘Read it again,’ she said. ‘More slowly. It sounds like bloody nonsense to me.’

‘There’s no need to be foul-mouthed,’ I said.

‘It was you who taught me,’ she replied.

I read it again. It still sounded like bloody nonsense and it came as no surprise when I later discovered that some of the early practitioners of this off-the-road-state-of-the-art mountain bike business hailed from Marin, that deceptively normal-looking county out beyond the Golden Gate Bridge on the way up to the big redwoods, which gives shelter to more well-heeled loonies to the square mile within its confines, all of them into everything from free association in Zen biodegradable chain cleaning fluid, than any other comparable suburban area in the entire United States.

‘Read on,’ Wanda said.

“‘You don’t have to be some gung-ho lunatic to get your kicks”,’ I read on. “‘Take a mountain bike along the next time the family or a group of friends head off for a picnic in the woods. There’ll be plenty of places to put the bike through its paces and it sure beats playing Frisbee after lunch [interval while I explained the nature of this, I thought outmoded, pastime to Wanda]. Or take the bike on a trip to the seaside – rock-hopping along the beach is a blast.”’

‘That’s enough,’ she said in the Balkan version of her voice. ‘I can just see you on your mountain bike, a gong-ho (what is gongho?), Frisbee-playing, rock-hopping lunatic.’

‘I say,’ I said, some time later when the lights were out, ‘I hope all this isn’t going to make you lose your enthusiasm.’

‘Enthusiasm for what?’

‘For these bikes, and Ireland and everything,’ I said, lamely.

‘Not for these bikes, I haven’t,’ she said. ‘I’ve never had any. Nor for Ireland in winter. If I come it will only be to make sure you don’t get into trouble.’

‘What sort of trouble?’

‘In Ireland all sorts of trouble,’ she said, darkly.

We went to London to make the rounds of shops selling mountain bicycles, and if possible purchase some. Under the arches off the Strand, in the substructure which was all that remained of the Adelphi the Adam brothers’ great riverside composition, we saw and rode our first mountain bikes. Wanda tried something called a Muddy Fox Seeker Mixte, which had an open frame constructed from Japanese fully lugged chrome molybdenum tubing with Mangaloy manganese alloy forks; I tried a Muddy Fox Pathfinder which had a lugless frame of the same material, put together by the TIG (Tungsten Inert Gas) welding process. Wanda quite liked her Mixte which reminded her a bit of the old Bianchi open-framed bike on which she had ridden out to bring me and my friends food and clothing in the autumn of 1943.

What the staff of most of the bicycle shops we visited had in common, we discovered, was almost complete indifference as to whether we bought one of their bikes or not. This was surprising considering how much money was involved and the fact that the industry was going through one of its periodic slumps. In mountain bikes there was nothing worth buying under £200. From £200 to £300

the choice was very limited and it was only in the £300 to £500 range that one started to find high quality bikes. From £500 to around £1000 or more, one was in a world of prototypes and pure competitive machines in which everything, as the *Buyer's Bible* put it in a way that I was beginning to find insidiously corrupting, was 'silly money'. One thing we had learned was that whatever we bought, our bikes should come from a firm that actually built, or at least assembled them, on their premises. But time was now running out and if we did not leave for Ireland within ten days we would have to wait until after Christmas. One of the firms we had not yet visited was called Overbury's, in Bristol, who designed and built their own racing, touring and mountain bikes. And Bristol had the added attraction that our daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren lived there.

Overbury's premises, in Ashley Road, can scarcely be described as being at 'the better end' of Bristol; in fact Bristol has no better end. The more enviable parts are perched high above the city on the top of impossibly steep hills or on huge cliffs above the Avon Gorge, from both of which every one of the inhabitants look down with Olympian detachment on those less fortunate mortals below. Overbury's, which is run by Andy Powell and his mother, Enid, is about the size of an average newsagent's and is crammed with bikes that are either beautiful or sophisticated, or both, and all the complex bits and pieces that go to make them up. What space remains is taken up by machines in various states of malfunction or collapse awaiting attention. In fact on the Monday morning we visited, it was rather like being in a National Health doctor's waiting room during surgery hours. One of the more spectacular accidents had befallen an *ATB*-riding log-hopper who had failed to clear a huge pile of them in a Forestry Commission conifer wood. The resulting smash had destroyed the special welded guard bar, fitted under the bottom bracket to protect the triple chain rings from just such a mishap, doing a wealth of damage.

'You're looking at more than a hundred nicker,' the owner said with gloomy pride, when I showed an interest in it. 'That's the end of guards for me.'

We were lent a couple of test bikes on deposit and we set off with them in the back of our van for an attractive open expanse called Ashton Court Park, to try them out. Wanda's was the most expensive and the most unconventional in appearance. It was called the Wild Cat and was going to take a bit of living up to.

Mine was a Crossfell, at that time the most expensive of Overbury's diamond frame mountain bikes.

By the end of this outing Wanda was very depressed. It was not surprising: the last bicycle she had ridden had been a borrowed ladies' Marston Golden Sunbeam which she had used while house hunting in South London in the 1970s, perhaps the finest conventional bicycle ever made. This was the bicycle on male versions of which deceptively fragile-looking curates used to zoom past me, as I frantically pedalled my Selbach back in the 1930s. She liked the semi-open frame of the Wild Cat, but found it difficult to live up to the image conjured up by its name. She couldn't cope with the complexity of the twin-change shift mechanisms on the handlebars which controlled the eighteen gears: the right-hand one which shifted the chain from any one of the six sprockets to another on the Shimano Extra Duty Freewheel Block; the left-hand one which shifted the chain on the costly overdrive Shimano Biopace triple ring chainset. 'Biopace delivers power when you need it most,' the blurb said. 'Computer analysis shows round rings force unnatural leg dynamics that interfere with smooth cadence and can lead to knee strain.'

In comparison with a traditional lightweight bicycle fitted with narrow, high-pressure tyres we found the knobbly mountain tyres sluggish uphill, but very good downhill at speed on a track full of pot-holes. The saddles, amalgams of leather and plastic, we both agreed were hell. By the time of

trial run through the wilds of the Ashton Court Park was over I had resigned myself to giving up the idea of mountain biking, or any other sort of biking, in Ireland; but when we got back to the shop and redeemed our deposits Wanda, to my surprise, told me to go ahead and order. 'If I have it I will have to use it,' she said.

There was no problem in producing my Crossfell in time, as there was a frame in stock of the right size that only needed stove enamelling. Wanda's Wild Cat, as its name suggested, was more difficult. It would have to be built from scratch in seven days. But first her inside leg had to be measured for the frame – a feat difficult to accomplish in a crowded bike shop when the subject was wearing a skirt – and all work ceased while I performed it.

In a state of shock at the realization of the enormity of what I was doing I allowed Andy Power to persuade me that I should also have eighteen gears. I forget the reason he gave. Perhaps he had run out of five-sprocket freewheel blocks, the last shipment from Osaka having gone down with all hands in the South China Sea to become a source of wonder to marine archaeologists around 3000 AD, who would eventually identify them as amulets against the evil eye.

In the course of the next hour or so I spent vast amounts of money – we paid for everything for ourselves – on what bicycle builders laughingly refer to as 'optional extras': pumps, front and rear reflectors, guards to protect the derailleur mechanisms, frame pads to make it easier to lift my diamond-framed Crossfell over gates and fences, over-sized mud guards for the over-sized tyres, two sets of front and rear panniers, front and rear pannier frames to hook them on, 'stuff sacs', rudely named bags to keep our waterproof clothing in, front and rear lights, drinking bottles, Sam Brown belts and trouser clips made of reflective material that might improve our chance of not being knocked down and squashed flat at night. Foolishly, having donned them and then looked at one another, we decided against crash helmets – 'head protection for the thinking cyclist', as our catalogue put it.

We also needed a whole lot of tools and spares: a three-way spanner, a ten-in-one dumbbell spanner, two brake spanners, a pair of cone spanners, a Shimano crank bolt spanner and freewheel remover, a 4" adjustable wrench, three Allen keys, a spoke key, a cable cutter, a pair of pointed pliers, a tyre pressure gauge, an adaptor so that a garage air-line or a car foot pump could be used with Presta bicycle valves, a set of tyre levers, spare spokes, two spare inner tubes, spare gear change and brake cables, spare brake blocks (at a colossal £3.90 a pair), and valve caps.

My next purchase was something called a Citadel Lock which had a half-inch metal shackle said to be proof against a pair of 42" bolt cutters and big enough to lock both bikes to a parking meter or a set of railings at the same time. However it was so heavy that we left it at home and took with us instead a couple of pre-coiled 5ft steel cable locks which would last about ten seconds against bolt cutters.

By this time I began to feel myself in a state of euphoria, like a character in a Fitzgerald novel going shopping – Gatsby stocking up on shirts, or Nicole Diver buying an army of toy soldiers in Paris in 1925: 'It was fun spending money in the sunlight of the foreign city, with healthy bodies ... they sent streams of colour up to their faces; with arms and hands, legs and ankles that stretched out confidently, reaching or stepping with the confidence of women lovely to men.' Although it was a bit different in Bristol in deep December for a senior citizen with all the confidence of a man unlovely to women – well, most women.

Then we shopped for clothes. The most difficult to find on the spur of the moment, because they were very expensive, were the long zip jackets with baggy trousers to match made from Gore-Tex, a wind and waterproof material which allows perspiration to evaporate. Shoes were another problem

Cycling shoes designed for riding lightweight bikes on the road would be hopeless anywhere off it waterlogged old Ireland. In the end we both took climbing boots and short, wool-lined wellingtons which were warm and could be accommodated on the big mountain bike pedals but soon lost the linings. And we bought long wool and nylon stockings with elasticated tops that came up over the knee and waterproof over-mitts with warm inner linings.

We also spent a gruesome hour in company with other senior citizens stocking up for the winter buying thermal underwear, which everyone said we must have: long johns to sleep in and underwear to ride in. Some of it looked terrible, especially a particular brand of men's underpants which came down to the knees and gave the wearer, in this case myself, an air of geriatric instability. It also, when warmed up, gave off an awful pong. 'I wonder,' Wanda said, emerging from the fitting room in which she had given the thumbs-down to the underpants, and surveying the milling throng, 'if they are all going to Ireland, too, on bicycles. If they are we shall look pretty silly.'

As I had promised myself, I took with me a huge cap that had belonged to my father – almost a dead ringer of that worn by the now dead and gone Jackie Coogan, which Wanda from now on referred to as my 'Jackie Hooghly'.

The bikes were delivered to us by van from Bristol the following Tuesday at what was literally the eleventh hour. Together with the optional and non-optional extras, all done up in protective wadding they made an impressive pair of packages, and the bikes themselves, which had been wrapped like Egyptian mummies in the equivalent of cerements, were so scintillating when finally exposed to the light of day that it seemed a pity to foul them up by riding them. If there really was such a concept as state-of-the-art, this was it.

'We can put it all down to expenses,' I said to Wanda.

'I wouldn't count on it,' she said. 'I can just see the expression on the Inspector of Taxes' face. He'll laugh all the way to your funeral.'

'Well, why did you let me buy all this stuff if that's what you think?' I asked.

'I was going to stop you,' she said, 'but when I saw how much you were enjoying yourself somehow I couldn't. You looked like a small boy in a sweet shop.'

We set off to negotiate some of the network of lanes in the Isle of Purbeck, the majority of which involve ascents of unnatural steepness. The first part included a fairly hard climb along the flanks of Smedmore Hill. This time I rode behind Wanda in order to be able to tell her when to operate the front and rear gear shift mechanisms. This worked all right until she suddenly pulled the left-hand lever back and at the same time pushed the right-hand one forward, while still riding on the flat, which transferred her instantly to the lowest gear available to her, 23.6", leaving her with her legs whirring round until she fell off.

In spite of this setback, she did succeed in climbing the hill, from the top of which we roared downhill towards the hamlet of Steeple, which consists of a manor, a vicarage, a very old church which houses a giant eighteenth-century version of a pianola and a plaque displaying the stars and stripes of the Lawrences, a family who were collateral ancestors of George Washington. From here the hill climbs to the summit of West Creech Hill, a rise of about 295 feet in 1000 yards, which may not seem much, and certainly doesn't look much, but is in fact excruciating. If any of the Alpine passes I rode over on my way to Italy in 1971 had been as difficult as parts of this hill, I would never have ridden a bike over the Alps at all.

'You go on,' said Wanda, when the time came to tackle it. 'Don't watch me.'

From the top, completely breathless, I watched the little figure gallantly toiling up, very slowly

very wobbly at times, but she made it.

‘I did it,’ she said. ‘Not bad for a grandmother, am I?’

I felt so proud of her I wanted to cry; but privately I prayed that there wouldn't be many similar hills in Ireland.

When we got back to the house Wanda allowed me a fleeting glimpse of what her hand-finished calf leather, high-density, memory-retentive foam Desmoplan base saddle had done to her in the course of about six miles and I knew that unless a better alternative could be found she would be a non-starter in the Irish Cycling Stakes, 1985. So I got on the telephone to Enid in Bristol and the following morning a large carton full of saddles arrived by special delivery.

I had solved the saddle problem on my mountain bike by ordering a Brooks B66 leather saddle which had big springs at the back. Most mountain bike saddles seem to have been designed by men who don't realize that on a mountain bike the rider sits more or less upright, as on a roadster, so that the whole weight of the body, divided on a bicycle with dropped handlebars between the saddle and the bars, falls on the saddle. It is even worse for women. Women have wider hips and, as the *Buyer's Bible* delicately put it, having presumably taken female advice, ‘the pubic arch between the legs is shallower, making the genital area very vulnerable to pressure’.

The saddles we now received were mostly similar in construction to the one that had originally come with Wanda's bike. Some had been injected with silicon fluid, to make them more bouncy beneath the layer of ‘high-density memory-retentive foam’ already referred to. With all these lying around in the hall, it resembled a saddle fetishist's den. Eventually, Wanda chose a Brooks B72 leather touring saddle, ‘specially designed for women cyclists and those wanting a broader support’.

I now spent the time, when not engaged in packing my pannier bags (we were leaving the next day), in bashing her saddle with a lump of wood, and rubbing it with Brooks Proofhide and something called Neatsfoot Oil in order to take some of the sting out of it for Wanda's inaugural Irish ride, which I was planning with my customary inefficiency.

CHAPTER 2

To the Emerald Isle



There lay the green shore of Ireland, like some coast of plenty. We could see towns, towers, churches, harvests; but the curse of eight hundred years we could not discern.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON. *English Traits*, 1856

Ireland is not Paradise.

JONATHAN SWIFT, in a letter to Alexander Pope,
30 August 1716

I spent our last evening in England in the basement bedroom of our daughter and son-in-law's house up on the highest heights of Bristol, where those who are chronic worriers wear oxygen masks, making final adjustments to the Crossfell and the Wild Cat.

There were no other contenders for this utterly boring task. Somewhere upstairs, above ground, my eleven-year-old grandson, using his father's computer, was extracting information in a matter of seconds from what appeared to be thin air. Elsewhere in the building my granddaughter was dancing the sort of dances that little girls of six habitually execute, dreaming of being Flossie Footlights Fonteyn. In the kitchen my daughter was about to start roasting a duck, happy, one hoped, at the thought of going back to work in the outside world from which bringing up her children had largely excluded her. Half a mile up the road, immured somewhere in a wing of the University, her husband, mathematician turned biologist, was locked in what looked like becoming a lifelong struggle to extract the secret of what makes eyes and ears function.

And somewhere in the house was Wanda. She was about as interested in the finer points of her Wild Cat as I imagine Queen Boadicea would have been in the alignment of scythes on the axles of her chariot wheels. Both assumed, rightly, that some member of the *lumpenproletariat* would be keeping their equipment up to scratch. For Shimano Deore XT hubs, Biopace computer-designed drive system chainwheels, 600 EX headsets with O ring seals, and such – all items I had been forced to take an interest in, simply to know what to try and do if they went wrong – she cared not a hoot.

One of the best reasons for owning an ordinary bicycle with no expensive trimmings is that

everything about it, apart from mending punctures, which is a bore whatever sort of bike you have, comparatively simple. With expensive, thoroughbred bicycles it is another matter altogether.

If I had ever forgotten this I re-discovered it when I tried to fit Wanda's final selection, the Brooks B72 leather saddle, the one 'for those wanting a broader support', to a highly sophisticated space age Sr Laprade XL forged alloy fluted seatpin with micro-adjustment and a replacement value of around £20. A lot of money, you may say. But worth every penny of it since, according to those who know, anything nameless in the field of seatpins may snap off with rough off-the-road usage leaving the rider either impaled on what is left of it or, at the very least, pedalling away without any visible means of support, rather like a fakir using a bicycle to perform a variation of the Indian rope trick. I had asked Overbury's for a seatpin which gave the maximum amount of adjustment and that was it.

By now it was seven o'clock. 'It won't take long,' I said, talking to myself in the absence of an audience.

The saddle was mounted on a frame which consisted of two sets of parallel wire tracks and each of these tracks had to be attached to the Laprade pin by means of a clamp with two parallel grooves on it. The principal difficulty I experienced in performing this ostensibly easy task was that the track wires were not only too far apart to fit into the grooves but were extraordinarily resistant to being drawn together. However I finally succeeded in doing this making use of a form of Spanish windlass made with a lace from a climbing boot and a skewer.

I was so pleased with myself at having accomplished this feat that I failed to notice that when I inserted the tracks into the grooves I did so with the saddle the wrong way up.

This was the moment when my daughter, fearing for her dinner and my sanity, set off in the rain and darkness to enlist the help of Charlie Quinn, who lived a few doors away. Apparently Charlie Quinn was a schoolboy who was completely dotty about bikes and when not engaged in doing his homework spent most of his spare time either riding them or working on them in a part-time capacity at Clifton Cycles, a rival bike shop to Overbury's.

Charlie arrived with a comprehensive tool kit which included a pair of clamps, with the help of which he drew the wire tracks together with shameful ease, and inserted them in the grooves. It was therefore not without a certain despicable satisfaction that I noted that when he tightened the bolt the tracks were still loose in the grooves and the saddle wobbled.

By this time I would have been in despair, but not Charlie. 'That's all right,' he said, 'I'll give you some scrim. That'll hold it.' It did indeed hold it. By now the duck was nearly ready.

'Is there anything else?' he asked.

'Well, if you wouldn't mind terribly I've got to fit some pannier adaptor plates. It's quite a simple job. But what about your dinner?'

'I've already eaten it,' he said. 'I call it supper.'

All those bored by the horrendous complexities of bicycle mechanics should skip the rest of this section and resurface on page 30. For those who are not, I should explain that pannier adaptor plates are flat pieces of alloy with holes cut in them and drilled to take a single nut and bolt. These plates had to be fitted because the hooks on the elastic cords supplied with the Karrimor rear panniers to keep them in place were not a proper fit on the American-designed Blackburn alloy carriers. Although they will work at a pinch the hooks cannot be guaranteed to remain hooked on, especially when the bicycle is being used on rough ground.

It was soon obvious that we were in trouble. In order to fit the plates, the bolts used to attach them to the carriers had to be inserted through the brazed-on carrier eyes at the lower end of the chain

stays, and then through eyes in the triangulated struts at the bottom of the carriers. The devilish thing was that it was not possible to insert one of these bolts from the outside in, and secure it with a nut on the inside of the carrier eye, because any nut on the inside would become enmeshed with the teeth of the outermost low-gear sprocket on the freewheel block.

This meant that both rear wheels had to be taken out so that the bolts could be inserted from the inside. At the same time the rear axles had to be packed with sufficient washers between the cone locking nuts on the hub axles and the wheel drop-outs to spread the chain stays sufficiently to give the necessary clearance to keep the bolt heads out of range of the teeth of the outermost sprocket.

But this was not the end of it. The addition of these washers had the effect of throwing the rear derailleur shift mechanism out of its pre-set alignment and this in turn affected the alignment of the front derailleur which shifted the chain on the triple chainwheels. And it was not only the shift mechanisms that went on the bum. The springing of the seat stays with the washers on the axle caused subtle alterations to the settings of the Aztec brake blocks fitted to the XT cantilever brakes operating on the rear rims and also to the amount of travel on the brake levers.

Almost literally enmeshed in all this Charlie was in his element, rushing backwards and forwards between our house and his in pouring rain, for nuts, bolts, washers, more tools and so forth. Meanwhile, I wondered if it would be all right to desert him and go off and eat the duck. When I did, feeling a pig for doing so, I don't think he even noticed I'd gone.

It was not until we got back to England that I discovered that there had not been any need to fit these plates at all, as Blackburn marketed special shock cords to attach Karrimor panniers to Blackburn carriers.

The morning after Quinn the bicycle wizard had performed his magic and we had eaten the duck and gone to bed, we set off in torrential rain that turned day into night to drive our van with the bikes in to Fishguard.

Here, on the coast of Dyfed, otherwise Pembroke, in what is known as England beyond Wales, the windswept, watery Fishguard with rainbows overhead, with its brightly painted houses glittering in the sunlight and its harbour built in the 1900s, itself a period piece, there was already a feeling of Ireland. Perhaps the French thought they were in Ireland when they undertook the last invasion of Britain here in 1797, commanded by an American, Colonel William Tate, and laid down their arms before a bevvy of Welsh ladies dressed in traditional cloaks, under the impression, it is said, that they were soldiers.

We spent most of the voyage re-packing our pannier bags. Sitting surrounded by them in the ferry saloon we looked like beleaguered settlers on the old Oregon trail. It was remarkable how much room two sets of front and rear panniers, not to speak of the stuff sacs, took up when removed from the bicycles. All the contents had to be put in plastic liners as the panniers were not guaranteed waterproof against torrential rain, and since these liners were opaque, once they were packed it was difficult to remember what was in them. We had started off very efficiently at home before leaving, sticking on little labels bearing the legends 'spare thermal underwear', 'boots and spare inner tubes', and so on, but now Wanda decided on a complete and more logical redistribution, while other passengers looked on with fascination.

It was seven-thirty before we finally disembarked at Rosslare; and a cold, dark evening with the wind driving great clouds of spray over the jetty. We had planned to stay the night there in a bed and breakfast and take a train to Limerick, where we proposed to start our cycling, the following morning, but we now discovered that in winter there was only one train a day to Limerick, and this was due to leave in seven minutes. We had to buy tickets and somehow find something to eat and drink as we had

eaten nothing except a cold sausage each and a rather nasty 'individual rabbit pie' in a pub since leaving Bristol.

A porter told us to put our bikes in a van at the end of the train. When I had finished locking them up he changed his mind and told me to put them in an identical van at the other end of the train, so I unlocked them and did so. Another man said that was wrong too, so I unlocked them again and took them back to the original one. Meanwhile Wanda was buying the tickets at a reduced rate using our international old age pensioners' cards. By now, in theory, the train should have left.

The station buffet was warm and friendly, but served no hot food, only ham sandwiches which had to be made-to-measure. Wanda boarded the train while I waited for the sandwiches, but after a minute she got down and rushed into the buffet crying, 'The train, the train is leaving!'

'It isn't leaving, whatever your good lady says,' remarked a rather quiet man in railway uniform whom I hadn't noticed before, who was only about a quarter of the way through a pint of Guinness. 'Not without me, it isn't. I'm the guard,' and he took another long draw at his drink. Emboldened by this I ordered a second one myself. Eventually we left more or less on time: the station clock turned out to be about ten minutes fast.

There ensued an interminable journey through parts of Counties Wexford, Kilkenny, a large segment of Tipperary and Limerick, in a hearselike, black upholstered carriage with doors to the lavatories that looked as if they had been gnawed by famine-stricken rats. Outside it was still as black as your hat with a howling wind and torrential rain, and the dimly-lit, battered stations at which the train stopped reminded me of our travels in Siberia. At Wexford our kindly guard, who was in his early sixties, and very old-fashioned-looking in his peaked cap and blue overcoat – infinitely preferable to the ludicrous Swiss-type uniforms affected by British Rail – brought us a jug of hot tea which, after two pints of Guinness in something like five minutes, I was unready for. Meanwhile we spent an hour or so continuing with our re-packing, forgetting which container was which and starting all over again, but this time without an audience.

At Limerick Junction a man with wild hair, a huge protruding lower jaw, wearing a crumpled check suit and looking like a *Punch* 1850s cartoon of an Irishman joined us in our carriage and began producing unidentifiable items of food from plastic bags.

His meal was interrupted by the arrival of the guard to inspect his ticket, and he spent the next twenty minutes slowly and laboriously going through his pockets and his plastic bags, time after time without ever finding it. Eventually he produced a 50p piece which he offered to the guard who, by that time bored with the whole business, rejected it. The train – could it be called the *Limerick Express* or wondered? – arrived at Limerick thirty minutes late, at 11.45 p.m. The weather was still appalling but the area round the station at least still seemed lively and the pubs were still taking orders.

Pushing our bikes through the rain we arrived on the threshold of the Station Hotel, from which the last revellers were being ejected, to find that a double room was £22 a night and the night was half over.

So instead we went round the corner to Boylan's, part gift shop, part B and B, where we were warmly welcomed and our bikes put in the shop to see the rest of the night through in company with a consignment of nylon pandas. A kindly girl, Miss Boylan, brought tea and cakes – 'Try and eat them,' she begged, as if we were convalescing from an illness – and we went to bed after a nice hot shower, whacked and surrounded by our mounds of kit.

'What a fucking day,' Wanda said before she dropped off. It was difficult not to agree with her.

CHAPTER 3

Birthday on a Bicycle



Nothing in Ireland lasts long except the miles.

GEORGE MOORE. *Ave*, 1911
(An Irish mile is 2240 yards – an English one 1760 yards.)

As there is more rain in this country than in any other, and as therefore, naturally, the inhabitants should be inured to the weather, and made to despise an inconvenience which they cannot avoid, the travelling conveyances are arranged so that you may get as much practice in being as wet as possible.

W. M. THACKERAY. *The Irish Sketch Book of 1842*

The next morning I opened a window and was confronted by a painting of a double-headed eagle glaring at me from a wall across what had once been an alley three feet wide, presumably the sign of some former mediaeval hostelry. Rain was falling in torrents and I was in a state of despair and indecision as to what we should do. I could see ourselves sitting in tea shops for days on end waiting for it to abate, playing with nylon pandas and sleeping for endless nights in Boylan's B and B.

I became even more depressed when I suddenly remembered that it was my birthday. Wanda had forgotten it, and this made her depressed, too. Anyway, she gave me a kiss. Then, after a huge breakfast, we sallied out with our bicycles into the terrifying early morning rush hour traffic in Limerick, among drivers many of whom appeared to have only recently arrived in the machine age and were still on the way to it, with Miss Boylan's warning still echoing in our ears. 'Be careful, now, on the Sarsfield Bridge, for there are a whole lot of people blown off their cycles on it every year by the wind of the lorries, and *kilt!*'²

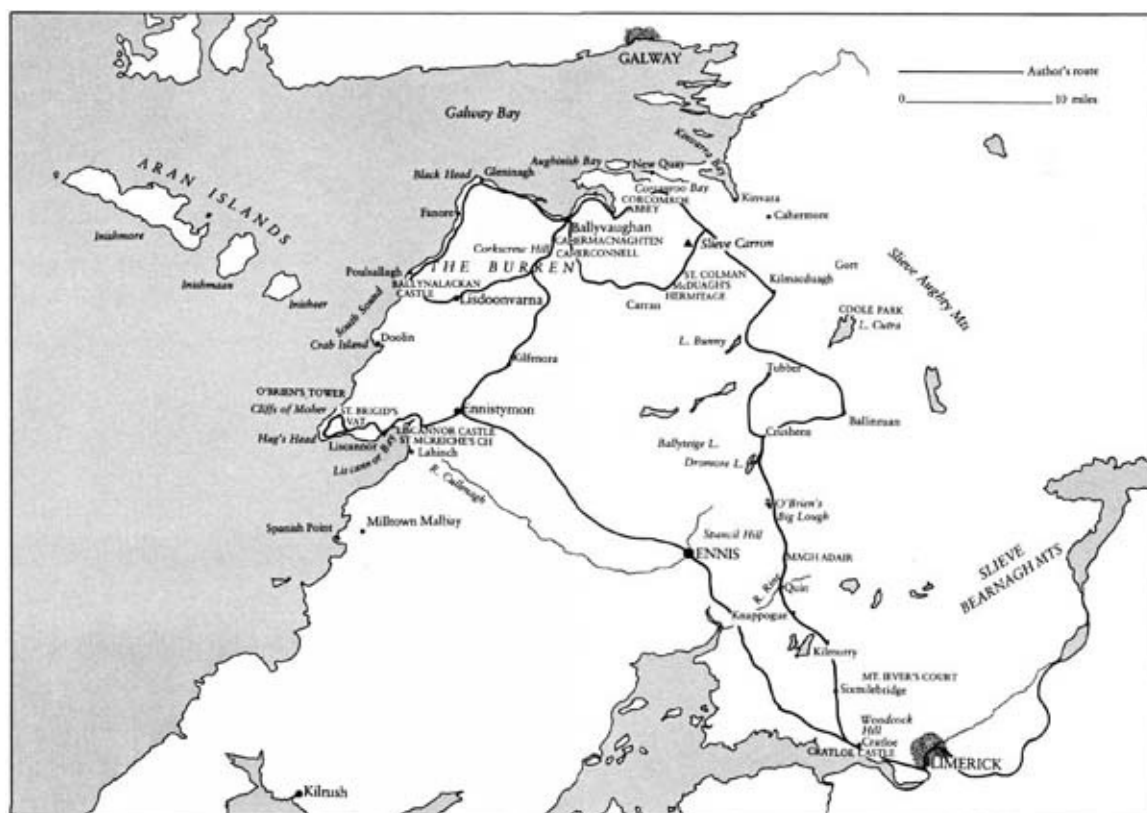
We were heading for County Clare, via the dread Sarsfield Bridge, passing on the way through the establishments of purveyors of bacon (bacon is to Limerick what caviar is to Astrakhan) and tall, often beautifully proportioned eighteenth-century brick houses, many of them decrepit to the point of collapse.

It was somewhere in O'Connell Street that Wanda contrived to get in the wrong lane and was borne away on a tidal wave of traffic, crying 'Hurruck, help me!' at the top of her voice, although what I was supposed to do to help her was not clear. The last I saw of her for some time to come was disappearing round the corner into that part of the city where stood or used to stand some of the relics of British Imperial rule, such as the County Gaol, the Lunatic Asylum and the Court House of 1811. She finally fetched up back at the station, after which she took a right into Parnell Street and started all over again.

'You've chosen a grand day for it,' an old geezer about the same age as me said as, reunited at last, we were crossing the Sarsfield Bridge. He let out an insane kind of 'Heh, heh, heh!' cackle as a result of an afterthought.

He was wearing a white beard with lovely yellow stains in it that looked like the principal ingredient in a prescription for birds' nest soup; an ankle-length oilskin coat to match the stains in his beard and a sou'wester ditto, an ensemble that made him resemble the fisherman on a tin of Norwegian-type sardines. I would have hated to live next door to him, in Limerick or anywhere else. 'Wise guy, eh?' I shouted after him, but he didn't get it, probably because his sou'wester was fitted with flaps.

We were pushing our bikes along the footpath, not even riding them, but still being deluged with un-recycled Irish rainwater that was being thrown up by the west-bound trucks whose drivers, deprived of the pleasure of actually 'kilting' us, were now doing their best to drown us, and we were damn nearly succeeding – the very same men who, reunited with their wives and eight children all under the age of fifteen at weekends, wear subfusc suits and take the collection bags round on the ends of long sticks at Mass, eventually leaving a bundle, and generous bequests to the Society of the Holy Name.



Meanwhile, huge and pale and speckled in the rain, the Shannon flowed on, under the bridge, towards the mighty sea, past what looked like a disused Indian chutney factory in Bengal with a tall chimney, and past quays built in the 1870s for what was to be another Liverpool, though it never

became one in spite of there being nineteen feet of water off them at high water springs.

~~Here, the Shannon was 154 miles from its source on the slopes of Cuilcagh Mountain in County Cavan, near the Northern Ireland Border, a place I had promised myself we would visit if we could do so without getting our nuts blown off. At this rate, I wondered if we would ever live long enough to reach it.~~

Then, suddenly, the rain stopped and the sun came out. Too unnerved by the happenings on the Sarsfield Bridge to really appreciate the fact, we pushed our bikes a few hundred yards or so through suburban Limerick along the N18 to Ennis and points north, then turned off it and rode out into the country on a lesser road between thin ribbons of bungalows, some of them offering yet more beds and breakfasts. And now for the first time we had the chance to appreciate what it was really like riding mountain bikes laden with gear. To me it was much as I imagined it would be to ride a heavily loaded camel, the principal difference being that you don't have to pedal a camel.

To the right now was Woodcock Hill, a green, western outlier of the Slieve Bearnagh hills; to the left were fields in which donkeys bemoaned their loneliness and battered old trees stood in the hedgerows, and beyond all this to the south was the Shannon, much enlarged since we had last set eyes on it, shimmering in the sun.

A car passed, going in the opposite direction, and the four occupants waved to us cheerily, as did a young man in shirt sleeves, waistcoat and cap who was in a ditch, wielding a fearsome-looking slashing instrument on a long handle that made him look like a survivor of the Peasants' Revolt.

'It must be your Jackie Hooghly hat,' Wanda said. 'They think we're Americans.'

The wind was strong and cool, if not downright cold, but at least the sun was shining and the road was flat – well, almost. We were in Ireland at last. There was no doubt about that. In fact we were now in County Clare.

At the village of Cratloe, an avenue led steeply uphill from silver painted gates to a grove modelled on that of Lourdes, one of the countless thousands erected during 1954, the Marian Year of Special Devotion to the Virgin, decreed by Pius XII. Silver painted gates and railings in Ireland are an infallible sign of the proximity of something Catholic and therefore holy.

To the south of the road was Cratloe Wood. Inside it was wet and dim and mysterious, with long, diagonal shafts of sunlight reaching down into it through the trees. Some of the oaks were descendants of those that had provided timber for the hammer-beam roof of London's Westminster Hall, when it was built in 1399; and for the roof of the Amsterdam Town Hall, later the Royal Palace, built in 1648 on a foundation of more than 13,000 wooden piles. And long before all this, in the ninth century, men had come here all the way from Ulster to cut down oaks and carry them away northwards to make a roof for the Grianan of Aileach, the summer palace of the O'Neills, Kings of Ulster, on Greenan Mountain, near Londonderry. At some very far-off period the wood had been cut in two by what is now the N18, and another beautiful part of it is still to be found south of this road in a walled enclosure, which forms part of the demesne³ of Cratloe Castle. It belonged to the Macnamaras who, together with the O'Briens, seem to have had more castles in these parts alone – the remains of more than fifty have been identified – than most other families had in the whole of Ireland. At Cratloe itself there are three castles within half a mile of one another, which could constitute some kind of record.

After paddling around in these woods for a bit, wishing we had brought our waterwings, we resumed our journey; but not before Wanda, one of whose foibles is to have no faith in maps, however good, or map readers, however accomplished, had knocked on a cottage door to enquire the way to Sixmilebridge, for which we were bound and to which I already knew the route.

The misinformation she was given by an innocuous-looking old body – 'Sure, it's just away down

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