

'Oughterard is a lot like Rhode Island'

By ERIN O'BRIEN

First of all, there's really no such thing as an Irish short story.

The seed was planted for my journey long ago, with a seventh grade social studies assignment to create my family tree. I already knew Grammy and Grandpa were from Chicago and New York. I hid my disappointment from my father when he said my great-grandmother was from St. Louis. I sighed; my friend's mom was from England, and her dad had a Cherokee ancestor.

On my mom's side, her mom was from Boston, and her dad from Los Angeles, like us. Then she smiled to remember her Irish great-grandfather, Barthly Molloy. I wrote his name on a shamrock leaf on my paper, as I filled in the other half of my family tree. One day, I decided, I'd stand where Barthly once stood, and see what he had seen.

This August, as I packed my suitcase, I included a photocopy of Barthly's sepia tone portrait to carry with me. His tweed flat cap framed his light eyes, and a jaunty boutonniere adorned his lapel. It's the one of the few photographs I have of him, recent acquisitions from my ancestry research, where my path converged with that of a fellow time traveler, Julie, from a different branch of the family tree. Over the past two years she's become a pen pal and friend, as we've shared family photos and information, filling in the blank pages of the family history, and signing our correspondence, "Cousin."

My destination was County Galway, the place where I landed 30 years ago, with a compass and a map in my backpack, and wondered aloud to Pat, my Irish friend I made along the way, if our ancestors had met. "I knew the moment we met you were a Galway Girl," he'd said. The gift of the Blarney, I'd thought quietly.

Years later, my research would lead me to a copy of Barthly's immigration card, and the name of his hometown in County Galway, Oughterard ("Uachtar Ard" in Irish, "the height on the upper side of the river.") I remembered Pat identifying me as a Galway Girl.

The old church was there, where my great-great-great grandparents brought Bartholomew Joseph Molloy to be baptized when he was two days old, and where he returned as a thrower from America, to remarry. His home was a stone's throw from the church. His final resting place was nearby, beyond the remaining walls of a stone chapel. I'd mapped it out, and conferred with Julie. "On the way to the church you'll run right into the house," she assured me, and emailed me the coordinates to the headstone in the cemetery. These events in the life of Barthly Molloy would provide me with my itinerary.

As I looked below to see the patchwork quilt of green fields, stitched together with stone fences, I remembered the first time I'd gazed upon it from a plane window. The sight filled me with the same anticipation.

My cabbie, Liam, was waiting when I arrived at Shannon Airport. "Hi, Liam!" I waved. We'd corresponded by email and I'd proposed my itinerary—with a side trip to Aughnacloy Castle, and the Quiet Man bridge. As it turned out, his was the only cab company in Oughterard, population 1,319, and he was available.

On the hour and a half drive to my ancestral home, like any good cabbie, Liam described the landmarks along the way, noting the remains of a derelict castle on the side of the freeway, university buildings, and he even pointed out a rainbow.

Liam asked where I was from, and when I said I was originally from California, but recently from the smallest state, Rhode Island, he responded, "Ah, yes, the Boston Red Sox."

Coincidences start adding up

I mentioned the only book I could find on Oughterard, was by Jess Walsh, who, by the way, had the same surname as my great-great-great grandmother. "Oh, she lives right over here," he casually mentioned, with a nod over his left shoulder. Before I knew it, he'd pressed her number on his cell phone mounted on the dashboard. "Hello, Jess, Liam here. I have a lady looking for the Walshes..." This was the first of many coincidences I would encounter on my trip.

"Tell her I have her book!" I whispered.

On the road, the miles of picturesque rural settings gradually changed to more established towns. On the subject of Walshes, I referred to Barthly's house in Oughterard, down the street from the church, owned by a Nora Walsh as recently as 2009. Julie had mentioned something about a funeral home, and I'd seen Walsh's Funeral Directors on a Google street view of Oughterard.

Again, Liam reached for the call button on his phone, saying, "Dermot Walsh," in explanation, as the phone rang. I heard a man's voice on the line. "Hello, Dermot, Liam here. I have a lady here looking for the Molloy house..." I wondered how many Walshes lived in Oughterard. Dermot explained the Molloy house was two doors down from his business, and currently owned by Mr. O'Toole. I began to feel like a character in a BBC miniseries.

Liam smiled at me in the rearview mirror and summarized, "Oughterard is a lot like Rhode Island."

My hotel was located in the town square, which I'd chosen for its proximity to Barthly's footsteps. There I met Yvonne, whom I'd communicated with by email as well. The new restaurant employee was an 18-year-old young lady by the name of Molloy. "You'll have to meet Antoinette Lydon," she decided, writing down the person's contact information. "She's a local genealogist." Not even inside my hotel room yet, I already had three leads.

Eager for adventure, but too hungry to explore, I walked across the square to a restaurant, among the buildings festooned with tiny triangular flags in the colors of the Irish tricolor flag, which ran from one roof to another across the street. My table was beside a session band of two fiddlers and a banjo player who were playing the jig, "Calliope House." As the three musicians were bathed in lights, and the sweet sounds of the strings filled the room, I was transported to the past on my first night back in County Galway.

The musicians took a break as a waitress replenished their pints of beer. I thanked them for the song, and the woman fiddler asked if there was anything I'd like to hear. "The Black Velvet Band," was my request. Noting my accent, her fellow flautist said, "I'll play

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The author bid a fond farewell to Liam, her cabbie and personal tour guide in Oughterard. (E. O'Brien)



A session band at The Boat Inn, Oughterard, plays the jig, "Calliope House." (E. O'Brien)

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