

Strolling Ireland's Second City

Cork's port scenes, shops old and new, and Georgian houses

By NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

STANDING at the northern end of the Parnell Bridge in Cork, you could be in one of the grandest capitals of Europe. To the left and right are the imposing Greek porticos of the Cork Savings Bank and the Allied Irish Bank, both built by formally trained English architects in the first half of the 19th century. Across the river — the South Channel of the Lee — stands the symmetrical City Hall, a structure of the same period, its classical limestone facade and dome mirrored in the calm silvery water.

But what is equally essential to the true character of the second largest city of Ireland (population 138,000) is the sight of a vast and lumbering grain storage building off to the left of City Hall, and the view of the wooded hills that ascend in the distance behind it. And look to any of the Doric porticos and you will find the gable ends of

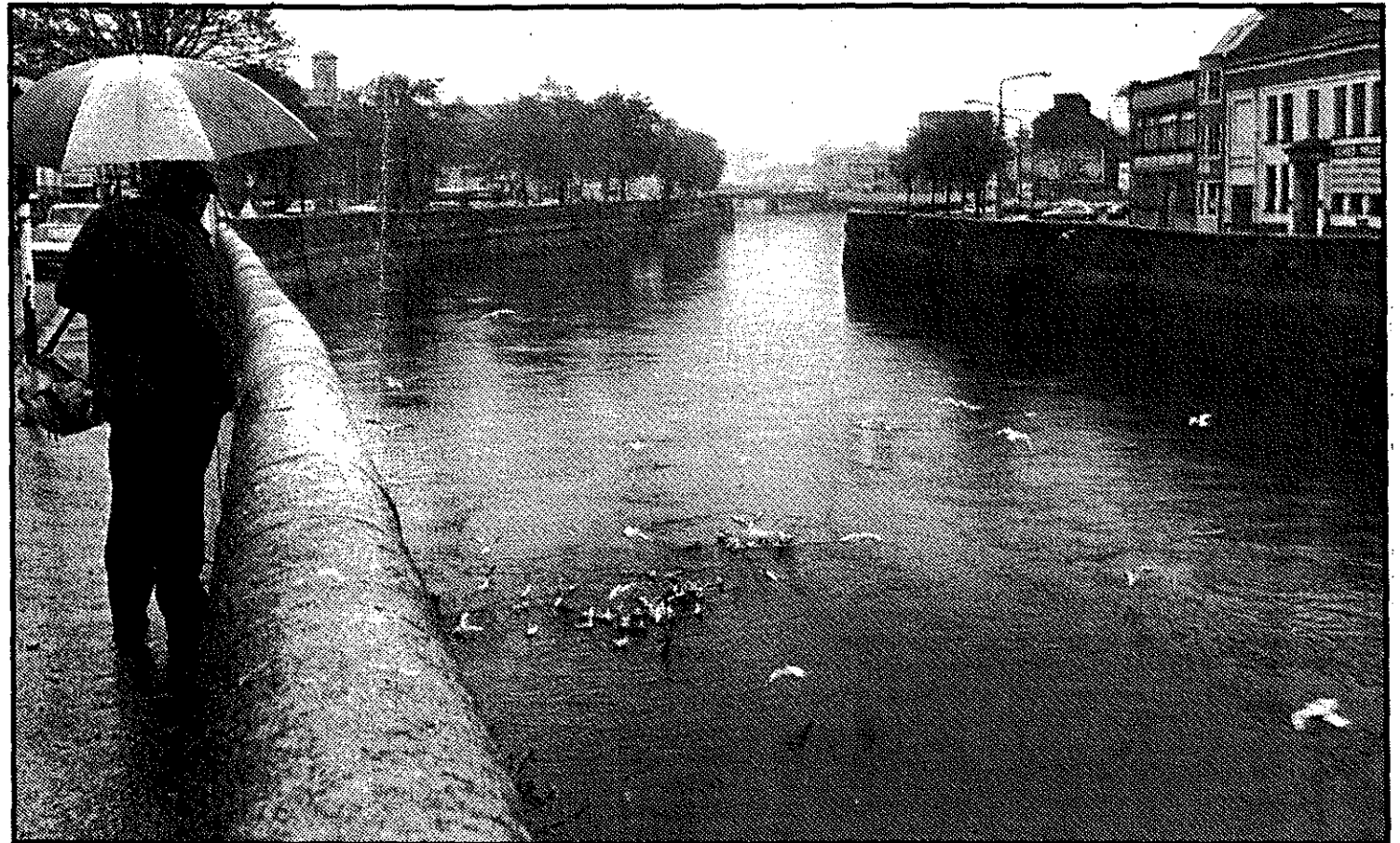
NICHOLAS FOX WEBER, who writes about art and architecture, has a house in County Cork.

mill and warehouse buildings. This is a working port, the former butter center of Europe, the place where the products of the surrounding farmlands begin their long journeys. It is also a city that has retained much of the character of earlier times; on Pembroke Street, for example, is a faded sign on a building wall advising you to "Cure your Corns with Mayne's Corn Silk."

Parnell Bridge is near the tip of the island that is the center of Cork City. In form, this section of the city is not unlike a miniature version of the bottom of Manhattan. Edmund Spenser, author of the "Fairie Queene," described what happens at the point: "The Spreading Lee that, like an island fayre, Encloseth Corke with his divided flood." The wide River Lee is the route to the sea, and at the spot where it narrows into the South and North Channels you see boats that ferry people and goods.

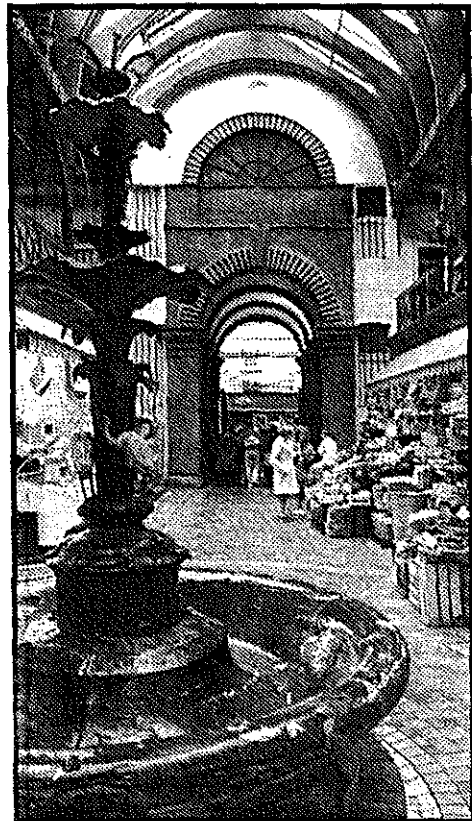
For a walking tour of Cork City from Parnell Bridge, take Lapp's Quay right onto Albert Street to see the Customs House, perhaps the finest building in Cork. With its lovely pale gray limestone exterior, the Customs House looks official without being grandiose. The striped stonework of the first story assumes the pattern of an open fan. Palladian windows help form a gently dignified facade above. The tympanum carries a well-carved representation of the Cork coat of arms — a ship in full sail between two towers. Stretching out toward the tip of the island behind the Customs House is the rugged red sandstone structure of the adjacent bonded warehouse.

Walking several blocks beyond the Customs House, turn left onto the quays until you can turn left onto Emmet Place. Here stands the Crawford Gallery, with its collections of 19th-century Irish art and recent work by leading Irish and English painters. Continue briefly to Paul Street, which for one very short stretch is a delightful shopping area. The Pinocchio Toy Store specializes in hand-made wooden toys; the name of the Mainly Murder Bookstore is self-explanatory. The House of James offers sophisticated Irish goods, ranging from Fermoy waxed cotton raincoats to Stephen Pearce's simple, elegant pottery, made out of local clay in the nearby town of Shanagarry. The House of Donegal, just across a narrow lane, encourages customers to design their own raincoats, choosing from a range of waterproof materials for the outside, any number of tweeds for the liners, and various color corduroys for the collars. The owner of the shop, formerly a tailor on Savile Row, will also make custom suits. Elsewhere along Paul Street you will find excellent booksellers, a butcher with halved pigs' heads in the win-



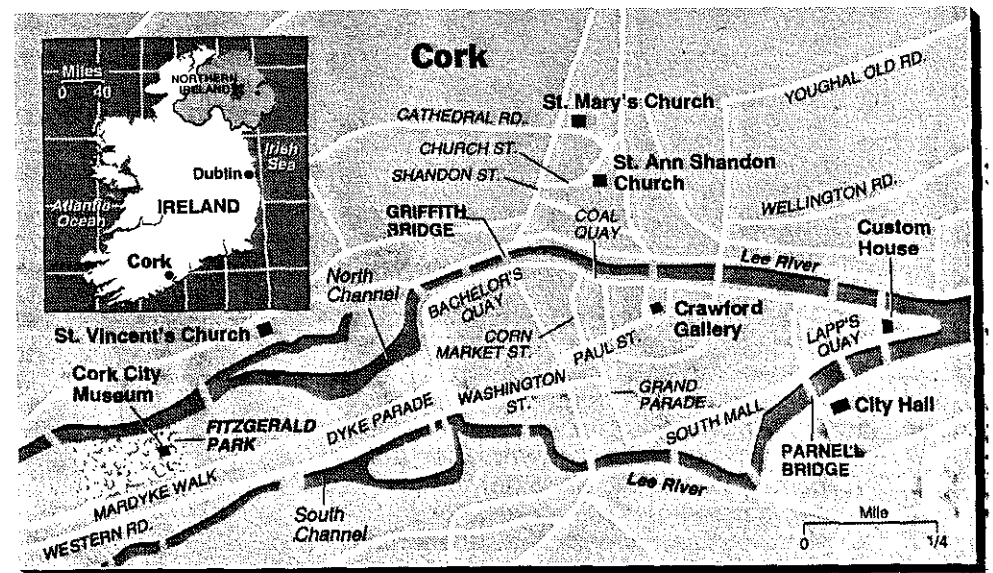
Photographs by Jonathan Player for The New York Times

ABOVE View from Griffith Bridge, on the west of Cork's island.
LEFT The English Market, where local produce and meat is sold.



dow, and a range of other shops on the first floors of pleasant three- and four-story buildings with residential spaces above.

Roughly across from House of Donegal is Paul's Lane, a narrow pedestrian passageway lined with antique shops. About 10 feet wide, it is formed by richly varied walls of rough stonework, some of it the mix of red sandstone and gray limestone that gave rise to the term "streaky bacon architecture." Turn left from Paul's Lane and proceed along the quays. Across the river looms the Dominican Church, a powerful portico on the river front that is very much in the grand tradition of Cork architecture of the early 19th century; you could easily mistake it for a courthouse. The Coal Quay opens on the left onto Corn Market Street, a perpetual flea market with vegetable stands and tables offering various items. Beware, however, of



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Walking in Cork

center, the meandering stretches of the Lee, large breweries and the lush farmlands that roll off into the distance. Ascending that tower, you will have passed the fantastic pendulum and machinery of the clocks that appear on all four sides of its exterior. These weigh two tons and operate dials 14 feet in diameter.

Just opposite St. Ann's are the restored ruins of the Cork Butter Market, now the Shandon Craft Center. Its workshops produce and sell weaving, batik, ceramics and crystal. Next to the Craft Center is the impressive Firkin Crane Center, intended to be the Lincoln Center of Cork (although the Opera House is on the other side of the river). In a former Butter Exchange building dating from the early 1850's, it has recently been restored with two state-of-the-art theaters, ballet studios and other performance spaces.

Go back down hill and over the river the way you came, and turn right along Bachelor's Quay. Across the water there is a row of Georgian houses facing you, their fronts and doors a marvelous range of contrasting blues, dark and light greens, and various reds. Follow the turn of the river to Mardyke Walk.

Thackeray, in his "Irish Sketch Book," described this promenade as a place of "delightful verdure, cheerful gardens, and broad green luscious pastures . . . How beautiful the scene is, how rich and how happy!" It has changed since he visited Cork, but it is still a pleasant thoroughfare and, walking along here, you can look off to your right back across the river to the sprawling Victorian buildings that loom from the hill above. Soon there will be a well-trimmed hedge on your right. This borders the Cork County Cricket Club, one of the oldest in Ireland; the sport has been played here since 1847. With luck you will see a match being played on the beautifully rolled Richard Beamish Field, named for the life patron of the place, a well-known local brewer.

You then reach Fitzgerald Park and the Cork City Museum. At the entrance of the park stands the President and Lord Mayor's Pavilion, a sort of high Victorian folly with ornate friezes that today houses public toilets and a small tea house where you can purchase snack foods that can be eaten at charming country tables next to the rose garden. The museum itself is small, but it has some excellent objects.

There is a fine collection of Cork silver, an indication of why Cork is known as "the rebel county." In earlier times all silver makers were supposed to take their goods to Dublin to have them hallmarked by the goldsmiths' society, who put their stamp of approval on all precious metals, but the Cork makers refused because of their fear of bandits on the journey

cross-country. Instead, they put their own stamp on — either the Cork emblem of the ship between two castles, or "sterling." In theory this was illegal, but everyone turned a blind eye to it, and the silver was recognized as being of good quality.

Another room downstairs contains historical displays on the Irish Revolution. There is a vintage photograph of Michael Collins, the early 20th-century revolutionary. Also on view are some of the bombs, guns, batons, bayonets and bandoliers used by the original I.R.A.

Upstairs there is a display of experimental "trial pieces" dating back to some time between the 7th and 10th centuries — small flat stones, incised in white on black with vigorous geometric designs. There is also a pair of ferocious looking helmet horns made of very thin sheet bronze and dating from circa A.D. 200. A decorated stone from a passage grave on Clear Island, off the coast of southwest Cork, has a highly charged pattern of vigorous spirals; from about 2500 B.C., it is a startling example of nonrepresentational art.

Head back to the city center along Washington Street and turn right onto Grand Parade — a wide and busy shopping street less promising than the name suggests. After just a few yards go left into a pedestrian walkway that will take you into the English Market. This is a large covered

market full of food stalls where you will see people selling the best local produce, lamb from the mountains of Tipperary, free range poultry, and woodcock and pheasants and geese in the winter. The fishmongers offer sides of smoked wild salmon, local oysters and mussels, and a range of fish that came out of the sea the previous evening. There is a French cheese vendor who has goat cheese and thick double cream and Brie and Camembert-type cheeses all made in Ireland.

Exit the Market onto Patrick Street, known as "the Regent's Street of Cork." This is a wide avenue that makes a sweeping curve through the center of the city. Jugglers and other performers are likely to provide entertainment on its sidewalks. Patrick Street has an excellent branch of Waterstone's Book Store; two large, old-fashioned, downtown department stores — Roche's and Cash's; and a renovated brick building that is now a mall with a large Marks & Spencer, Laura Ashley and other shops.

The surrounding area is the Irish equivalent of the medina — a network of narrow streets and alleyways, packed with shops of every description. Any route through it takes you to South Mall, where you will see the more imposing side of Cork again — Georgian bow-front houses and important Victorian buildings. This street was formerly a canal and, although it was filled in over a century

ago, its residents retain the right to dock a boat at the front door free of charge. Turn left on South Mall, and you will be back at Parnell Bridge.

Cork derives from "corcaigh," the Irish word for marsh. Like a marsh, this city where the main thoroughfares were once river branches is complicated and rich, elusive but full of life.



Photographs by Jonathan Player for The New York Times

The Firkin Crane Center includes theaters and studios.

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pkockets here — and of how some he merchandise came to be "second hand." This was once a thriving door market, but after the city officials virtually shut it down in the 10's to get rid of the prostitutes, it was never again the same. Cross the river on Griffith Bridge and head uphill on Shandon Street. Be sure to take in the hand-painted shop signs. Opposite Cattle Market Avenue, go right on Church Street. Beyond the Cork Old Folks Friendly Association, you will reach the handsome exterior of St. Ann Shandon, built between 1722 and 1726, with its square tower of 1750, faced on three sides in white limestone and on the other two with red sandstone. On top of the steeple is an 11-foot salmon fisher's vane, also dating from 1750, that represents fishing on the Lee. The church interior is ordinary, but it is worth going up the inside of the tower to reach its balconies for their commanding views of the city



The area around Patrick Street.

Ireland's second city

Information

The Tourist Information office is on Grand Parade; telephone (21) 273251.

Hotels

Arbutus Lodge, Middle Glanmire Road; (21) 501237. This establishment combines a high level of creature comforts with the local spirit. Everything about the place is truly Cork, and international at the same time: the cuisine, the luxurious rooms, the friendly and efficient service. Bed and breakfast about \$120 to \$160 for two, based on a rate of 1.64 Irish pounds to \$1.

Jury's, Western Road; (21) 276622. Part of an Irish chain, this is a modern and efficient hotel not far from Fitzgerald Park. About \$160 for two, not including breakfast.

Isaac's, MacCurtain Street; (21) 500011. This large and centrally located hostel has dormitory-style rooms with bunk beds, as well as bare-bones singles and doubles. Bed and breakfast \$37 or less for a double.

Restaurants

Arbutus Lodge. The fare here can be

lofty (local game birds, venison, a blend of quail eggs and sea urchins, or filet of sole with caviar sauce) or earthy (pigs' feet or bacon and cabbage).

Dinner is about \$33 a person, plus wine. Lunch in the bar — fresh salmon mayonnaise, or a plate of farmhouse cheeses — is about \$10.

Isaac's. This recent enterprise of the Ryan family, owners of Arbutus Lodge, features sophisticated dishes made from local ingredients and priced for the 90's: warm squid and almond salad; prawns in garlic butter; salmon and potato cakes — all for about \$12 a person. **Cliffords**, 18 Dyke Parade; (21) 275333. The post-modern setting may seem a bit too Los Angeles for Ireland, but the cooking ingredients are local and their preparation excellent.

Typical choices include mussels served in a light sauce on homemade pasta, the smoked haddock in a light puff pastry and other haute cuisine variations of pigeon or pork cutlets. Lunch \$20 a person; dinner \$43, not including wine.

N. F. W.