

Irish Gifts

A Supplement to the

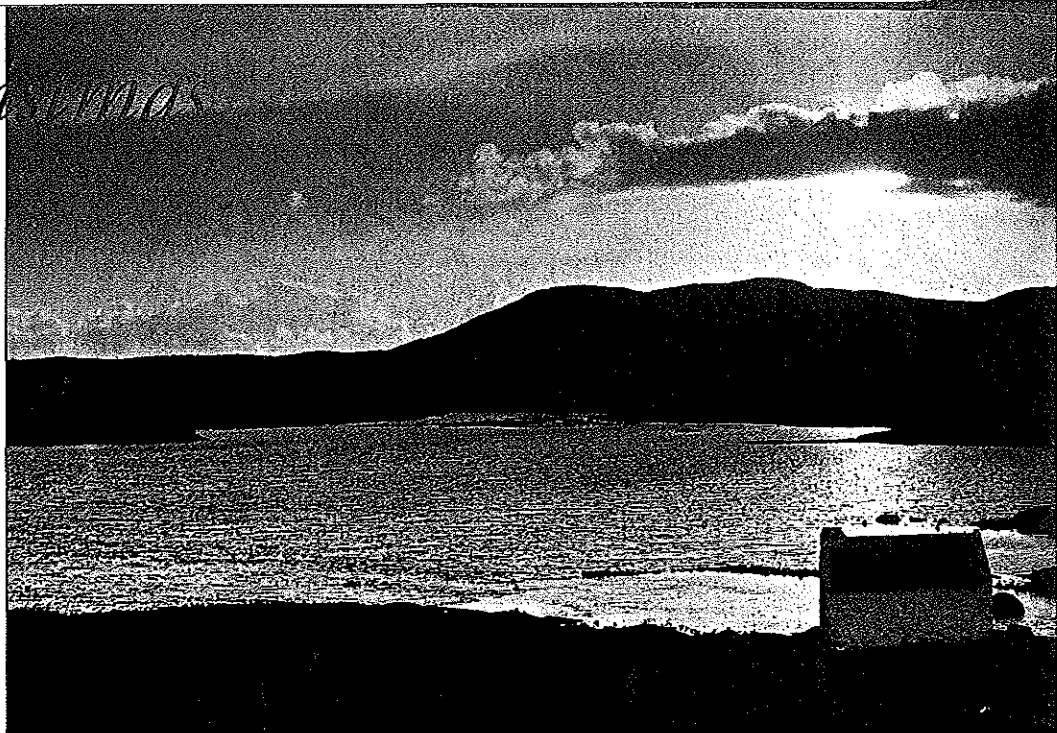
IRISH ECHO

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An Irish Christmas

Still ten days before Christmas Eve and our holiday frazzle was worse than ever. But this time reprieve was in sight. Well before the 25th we would be at a safe remove from everything frantic. We were heading to our private family haven a short walk from the sea in farm country two miles from a secluded village in Ireland's County Cork. Having previously known this small renovated cottage only in the long days of summer, we had decided to pay it a winter call.



By Nicholas Fox Weber

Katharine and I would not have missed the chance last month to show our daughters the Christmas windows at Saks and Lord & Taylor, but for the last two weeks of December we could have done no better. Lying in bed with the children for the past hour, looking past the thick rough plaster wall at a view of fields, ocean and sky, we have done nothing but talk quietly and watch the horizon line appear and disappear in the mist as the water developed a silver sheen with as strong a glow as the brightest lights of New York.

Ireland lives for Christmas time. It isn't just a matter of "getting and spending," (the words with which Keats preceded "laying waste our powers,") but of everyone caring more deeply than ever about other people's happiness. If anyone has illness or sadness in his family, his friends and neighbors will lament, "It won't be much of a Christmas for him." And if there is any way of being even more than usually generous in this society where giving is second nature to begin with, you can count on finding it this season.

Consider the stop we made on our way down from Shannon Airport to our cottage. Following breakfast at our favorite Georgian country house hotel (Longueville House in Mallow), which included stewed gooseberries and applesauce — both made with fruit from their orchard — topped with homemade yogurt, we were handed a bag of scones. We shouldn't face an empty larder "when coming home for Christmas," the donor explained. "Have the white ones for tea — they have a bit of sugar in them — and the brown for breakfast. The jar has a bit of homemade apple jelly in it that should do with either."

In the town of Clonakilty, where we stopped for further groceries, there was no problem in

leaving our parcels heaped behind the cash register at one small market so that we wouldn't have to carry them to the butcher's and produce store as well. We imagined the reaction back in Connecticut had we asked a check-out person at the Stop & Shop to mind our purchases. The butcher's shop had a window full of Christmas turkeys hanging from their feet,

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their feathers still on and their necks dangling. To our inquiries about fresh game, the man trimming our rack of lamb offered to shoot a pheasant for us the next weekend, or to prepare one of the ducks roaming his farmyard. Like everyone else, the woman at the cash register said how nice it was that we were "coming home" for Christmas — knowing full well where home was most of the time, but doing her best to make us feel we belonged here too.

We stopped, as always, at the house of the farmers up our road. Having become great friends since we bought the cottage three years ago, they mind the place in our absence, and their children are the center of our children's lives.

And so we settled into Irish life. Our nearest neighbor, Tim, greeted us as usual with uproarious laughter, pointing to the sea and asking,

"Which way to America, sir? Did you come by car?" Totally toothless, he is difficult to understand, but his grin gets through if his words do not.

In the week before Christmas Day, I took an overnight junket to Dublin. At tea in the Lord Mayor's Lounge in the Shelbourne Hotel, the splendid Victorian brocades and ornate plasterwork made me think of Christmases a century ago. The yuletide ambience linked past and present: the electric lights of the Christmas tree and wreaths reflected in the sparkling chandeliers, the pianist moving from "Cockles and Mussels" to Cole Porter to a jazzy "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

The section of Cork City called the English market — an enclosed area packed with food stalls — also offered seasonal treats. As Katharine and I stocked up on large sea scallops with their glistening coral, Finnan Haddie, fresh ("green") ham, and some of the remarkable spiced beef, our American accents attracted repeated inquiries on where we were from and how long we were staying in Ireland, followed by the inevitable "How lovely that you've come home for Christmas." While six woodcock were plucked and cleaned for us, we succumbed to a free-range goose raised just for this time of year. Food is often good in County Cork; at Christmas it is extraordinary. That evening we dined on magnificent poached oysters and Tipperary venison with red currents at Arbutus Lodge, a Michelin-starred restaurant and luxury hotel we had often before visited in summertime but now would hate to miss in December.

In the British Isles, Christmas dinner in a restaurant can be a great thing. We happily took ours at Dunworley Cottage, a 200-year-old stone farmhouse surrounded by ruins and looking like something one might have found in Provence fifty years ago. To reach it we

passed incredible sweeps of Dunworley Bay, its rough coast and roaring surf lit for Christmas by a sky that made a Cecil B. DeMille biblical spectacular look understated. We knew we could count on Dunworley's German-born chef, Otto Kunze, for fine Christmas fare; sitting on the pine country chairs painted red and enjoying the warmth of a peat, wood and coal fire, we were not disappointed. His Christmas menu started with a rich, earthy duck pate and a sweet hazelnut prune pate on little puff pastry pillows in loganberry sauce (made from fruit he had picked and preserved that summer); a peppery double-strength soup of organically-grown onions, caraway and white wine; herring from nearby waters, redolent of a flavor that puts the bottled stuff to shame, served with apples, onions, oak leaf lettuce and beets; local goose in a rich demi-glaze, accompanied by a stuffing of prunes and apples and bread-crumbs, crusted mashed potatoes, red cabbage cooked with apples and raspberry vinegar and walnut oil, and leeks and carrots with pesto. There was homemade stollen and white and dark chocolates with coffee. Not just in its scale, but also in the authenticity of its flavors, this was a Christmas dinner that Jonathan Swift, who lived in these parts, could easily have eaten, even if he wouldn't have had our good luck in accompanying it with an Australian Merlot.

Christmas does not end on Christmas Day in County Cork. For one thing, almost every shop remains closed for a minimum of two days after the 25th; many take half-days for the next week or don't open at all until January 2 or 3. If it is post-Christmas sales you are looking for, or the chance to exchange your gifts, you have come to the wrong spot. (The Trag Knitwear Factory Shop, near Skibbereen, does offer a happy exception with its post-Christmas discounting of fisherman's sweaters in various colors and of Irish handknits.) Above all it is a time for family and visiting. For reflection.

And then there is St. Stephen's Day. For my children, to whom Halloween was previously the pinnacle of existence, St. Stephen's Day has now taken the lead. Celebrated on the 26th (Boxing Day in England), for County Cork children it doubles the thrills of Christmas. With large ribbon-trimmed holly branches over their shoulders and charcoal on their faces, they go from house to house "singing for the wren," garnering candies and cash (as much as a pound per house) wherever they stop. This year, in spite of the forecast of "sunny intervals," it rained constantly, which in no way discouraged Charlotte and Lucy or any others from trudging along for many hours, diligently walking up country roads and down lanes to houses generally a quarter mile apart from one another.

A neighbor remembers that in the old days there would be a dead wren among the pink and crimson ribbons in the holly branch. No one seems too sure why that was, or what the precise background of the holiday is, but everyone knows the requisite song:

*The wren, the wren, the king of all birds
On St. Stephen's Day she was caught on the furze.
Although she was little, and honor was great,
Cheer up the dear lady and give us a treat.*

*I chased the wren all over our town;
I chased the wren six miles around.
So up with the kettle and down with the pan,
Give us money to bury the wren.*

I will always hear it with the melody played by a local child on her tin whistle. And remembering my children's ecstatic accounts of toffees, fruit jellies, pence and pounds.

That furze on which the wren got caught has golden yellow flowers at Christmastime (in summer it is bare). I

saw lots of it today as Lucy and I rode our bicycles the two miles into the village. Instead of the usual pre-New Year's commotion — "Where's my cummerbund?" "What do you mean the sitter has to be home by midnight?" — I have just spent a balmy December 31 accompanying a 7-year-old on her longest two-wheeler jaunt ever. The Fra Angelico light pouring down over the green fields and silver sea was unbelievable. We stopped at the local shop (the size of a small room) so that she could spend some of her St. Stephen's Day spoils, and then, by appointment, met Katharine and Charlotte for lunch at the pub.

That pub overlooks a view remarkably like the one painted in murals at La Cote Basque: a pier, boats, the open sea. Looking toward it, we downed our tomato soup and mixed toasted sandwiches, accompanied by bitter lemon for the girls and rich creamy stout for us. The fellow who painted our house last summer stopped in for a pint, and we ended up talking with him for an hour. He would help us find edible seaweeds next summer. Since we bought the first round, he did the second, which for the girls included homemade apple tart that they ate while sitting on stools at a far reach of the bar and chatting with the woman working the beer tap. We had nowhere to rush to, nothing planned. And life has never been better. □

Nicholas Fox Weber's next book, Patron Saints, will be published by Knopf next spring.



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