



Rainbow over Doonagore Tower, Doolin, County Clare

# A RETURN TO IRELAND

Brian Luke Seaward  
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View of Westport, County Mayo from the top of Croagh Patrick

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Rainbow over Killarney Lakes, Killarney, County Kerry

# INTRODUCTION

## Rainbows & Pots of Gold

Ireland is a country rich in history, geography, culture, religion, music, and mystery. To some, Ireland is an enigma. To others, it is a land forgotten in time trying to catch up. Her people are proud, smart, clever, pious, and perhaps above all else, quite humorous. Cast under a cloud of destitution for centuries; brought upon by their British neighbors (more accurately called occupiers), the Irish have endured, and continue to endure.

Ireland claims the distinction of several Nobel prize laureates in literature including W.B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, and Seamus Heaney. And let's not forget the celebrated works of Jonathan Swift, James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill, Oscar Wilde, C.S. Lewis, Sean O'Casey, Bram Stoker, Patrick Kavanaugh, Frank McCourt, Maeve Binchy, and Elizabeth Bowen. Neither literature nor Guinness is all Ireland is famous for, however. Like a pebble cast into the waters of a great lake rippling out to the four corners of the planet, the music of Ireland, in all its many forms, is one of its greatest treasures. Ireland *is* the pot of gold at the end of each rainbow.

Most photography books on Ireland have a similar template: four sections, with each section devoted to one of Ireland's four provinces—Ulster (north), Munster (south), Leinster (east) and Connacht (west)—highlighting the sites and landmarks in each. On occasion, some books offer a historical perspective, from the Stone Age to the present.

As a frequent visitor to Ireland, with one eye always scouting the best subjects to photograph, I found myself intrigued with aspects unique to Ireland, regardless of from which province or epoch they came.

This picture book offers a unique approach to exploring Ireland: through the portals of her castles, round towers, islands, music, thatched-roof cottages, and abundant stone structures that punctuate the landscape. As a frequent contributor to the *Celtic Connection*, a monthly magazine published in Denver, Colorado, I have explored these topics with great interest. At some point they all merged into a critical mass that, together with a collection of photographs, begged to be blended together and bound between the covers of a book.

I find myself returning to Ireland quite often, camera in hand and imagination in tow. On each trip to Ireland, I never cease to be amazed at the countless treasures to discover and landscapes to explore. Ireland is a mecca for photography, yet if that is all you do, you will be missing a lot. It is my wish that this book serves not only as an inspiration, but also as a symbolic passport to visit the Emerald Isle yourself.



Mount Errigal covered in snow, Gweedore, County Donegal

# ONE

## The Beauty of Ireland

Ireland's location on the world map places it at 53.1424 N and 7.6921 W in the northern hemisphere. The Emerald Isle sits pretty high on the top of the planet, and some consider that to be one of its best assets. Surrounded by water on all sides, its location has offered it not only a type of isolation, of sorts, but also protection. Considered by most to be the westerly end of Europe (Iceland also holds this distinction), Ireland is a land of smooth rolling hills, stunning mountains, temperate midlands, and more pristine beaches than you can shake a shillelagh at.

Ireland may be situated quite north on the planet, but the Gulf Stream waters from the Caribbean bring moderate temperatures to this corner of the planet, offering surprising glimpses of flora not readily expected by tourists. It is quite common to see a native species of palm trees (*Trachycarpus fortunei*), thus adding one more shade of green to an already emerald countryside. Some estate gardens have the more traditional palm trees as well, all of which turn heads in amazement. True to the myths that have circulated for generations, the mystical aura of Ireland holds many truths to discover, countless landscapes to breathe in, and many delights to behold.

Consider the stunning view of Mount Benbulbin in County Sligo, as the setting sun casts a golden hue on its emerald green fissures. Or call to mind the countless pristine beaches found on what is now called the Wild Atlantic Way, including Rosstown Beach in County Donegal, which plays host to many surfers in all kinds of weather, or Keel Beach on Achill Island in County Mayo, one of the best kept secrets in all of Ireland. Glencar Waterfall, in County Leitrim, rivals the Powerscourt Waterfall in County Wicklow, and both are eclipsed by the beauty of Torc Waterfall in Killarney National Park (County Kerry). It's no secret that if you were to compile a list of the most beautiful places in Ireland, you would need several volumes to contain them all.

Although Ireland has the fewest trees in all of Europe (invading forces leveled thick forests of oak and pine for shipbuilding eons ago, leaving the hills and valleys barren), efforts are underway to begin to restore what was once an island thick with cathedral forests. Gone also are the wolves and bears that once roamed the forest glens, hunted to extinction in these parts a millennia ago. But the wildlife that does remain, including foxes, deer, and



Dining room of the Ross Castle, Killarney, County Kerry



Welcome to the Ashford Castle, Cong, County Mayo



Living room of the Glenveagh Castle, Glenveagh National Park, County Donegal

Dining room of the Knappogue Castle, Ennis, County Clare



Dunguaire Castle, Kinvara, County Galway



Fiddle and case, Dingle Peninsula, County Kerry

# FIVE

## The Music of Ireland

On an elevated platform, in the corner of the village pub, rests a fiddle on its stand. In close proximity, to the right, is a bodhran (the Irish drum) and a guitar. On the opposite side of the fiddle is a banjo and an instrument some people mistake for bagpipes: the Uilleann pipes. (The Irish don't play the bagpipes, that's Scotland.) In the wink of an eye, three musicians, one with a penny whistle in her shirt pocket and fiddle in hand, take the stage, pick up their instruments of choice, and get settled. With a nod of the head by the lead fiddle player, the room is filled with the undeniable sound of traditional Irish music. Within seconds, patrons' feet are tapping to the rhythm of the tune, "Pretty Peg," followed by "Lacey's Jig." All across Ireland this scene is repeated with great regularity and delight, from County Cork to County Donegal, from Ennis to Dublin. In pubs far and wide, in all four provinces, people may come for the Guinness or Murphy's, but they stay for the music. And they listen.

### **If You Don't Hear the Music, You Don't See Ireland**

When the British invaded Ireland many centuries ago, they tried to force its defiant inhabitants to adopt British culture by making illegal their religion and their language, and by taking away their land. Winston Churchill once said, "The problem with the Irish is they don't want to become British." A sticky problem indeed. Despite their best efforts, from Henry the VIII to

Churchill, all attempts failed. Most certainly, the one thing they couldn't take away from the Irish was the music. Long before I ever took my first trip to Ireland, I heard an expression that stuck with me, "If you don't hear the live music, you really don't see Ireland." No truer words were spoken. And although it may seem like a cliché when you watch movies about Ireland, from *The Quiet Man* and *The Field* to *Waking Ned Devine*, to hear a lone flute or fiddle tune as the camera pans the lush green landscape, traditional Irish music is no cute cliché. So beloved is Irish music, from ballads and laments to jigs and reels, that although much of the world has moved on from CDs to iTunes and MP3 playlists and streaming services, you can find a wide selection of Irish music CDs for sale in most every town across the country. Penny whistles and fiddles may be iconic with traditional Irish music, but elsewhere in the Emerald Isle, the harp is not only the instrument of choice, it is the national symbol. Despite what some people may believe, not all traditional Irish music sounds alike. The music found in the pubs in Dingle varies considerably from that heard in Doolin in County Clare or Letterkenny up in County Donegal. It was once explained to me by Mairead Mooney, the founder of the acclaimed group Altan, that the traditional music in county Donegal has been greatly influenced by the Scots who were moved out of Scotland by the British several hundred years ago.