

A walking weekend in Connemara

“That was the best ever”, whispered Lori. “It was hot and sweaty but exceptionally satisfying. A great one”

What could have induced such an outburst from a lady not renowned for such uncontrolled passion as we sat that on that late Monday evening in Yeats’ Tavern in Sligo, eating goat’s cheese salad served by Mrs Doyle’s secret love child with the sun glinting of Moran’s Peak? All will not necessarily become clear as we go back to the beginning.

Friday – Eileen’s Initiation

The story, strangely, starts where ends, in Yeats’ Tavern in Sligo. We met there for a cuppa in the glorious sunshine of Friday lunchtime, sunshine that was a portent of things to come for the weekend. The idea, the Colonel’s idea as are all ideas on weekends away, was that it would give everyone a chance to meet up and would break up the long journey to Letterfrack. We all hoped that such a large group could help us deal with the Colonel’s inability to pass anything above 100 feet without climbing it! It almost worked! We could still see Sligo when we diverted Knocknarea and Queen Maeve’s tomb! A nice relaxing walk in the sun, not much climbing, surrounded by insects impervious to all repellents and an ideal introduction for our newest member, Eileen. As the more experienced cleared the mound without a backward glance – new motto, The Devil Take the Hindmost - it was left to Ian to initiate Eileen and was he good? Remember that only a short few weeks ago this man lost his virginity on Horn Head! In the space of 10 minutes he used every encouraging and cajoling phrase imaginable: *“You have the worst of it over”* (If you had any idea what was up ahead you would run for your life now). *“It is not as high as it looks”*. (Hillary came here to practise for Everest) *“I will look after you”*. (You are on your own) *“Take your time, they are not that far ahead”* (Hurry up for **** sake). And the most recent invention, *“Yes, it is very doable”*. (An attempt to do that is almost certain suicide)

Meanwhile Shaun had searched high and low for the sheep's main toilet area so that we could have our first of many meals al fresco.

An excellent break in the journey; an opportunity to get reacquainted with the group and to put a blindfold on the Colonel as we began our trek to the south west.

Arriving in Letterfrack in the early evening we checked into our accommodation, an excellent hostel run and managed by a Big Finn. We hurriedly prepared for our favourite pastime, eating and drinking. Rumours were rife that Paul was flying directly from Brussels to join us and that he would introduce some high-tech and high fashion walk wear to the club. You can imagine our disappointment as we swatted the midges and saw Paul getting off a bus! Still, we had the clothing to look forward to and what a revelation! A sweat shirt that does, even before you put it on! Keeps you toasty hot in winter and can lead to dehydration on a mildly warm afternoon. And this for a mere £70!

And he was lucky to get it. When he arrived in Galway the shop was closing but they saw him coming!

Saturday – Peter falls the first time

It's always serious on the Saturday. And this one was no different. Away at 10.00 o'clock, the full group, up Diamond Hill in the Connemara National Park, in glorious sunshine. And it was brilliant to be accompanied on this part of the walk by our most senior and almost revered member, Charles. We look forward to many more!

Early warning signs of how the day would progress were ignored; much discussion about the need for a sign saying "*Do not interfere with the ponies*". Who was this sign aimed at? Had there been complaints from the ponies? Did the warning only apply to the native ponies? If you brought your own could you do what you liked with it? You get the gist?

Walking and talking we reached the summit to astounding views over Kylemore Abbey and the lake shaped like a fish. After a coffee and the usual banter one group headed back down Diamond Hill to encouraging taunts of

'Faders'; *'What a waste of good walking boots'* and *'Why don't you get a shirt like Paul's'*. A little bird tells me that these 'faders' from Saturday managed to get lost on the way to their familiar and easy walk on Sunday. Using their well honed map reading and orientation skills it only took them an hour to make the 10 minute journey by car to the start of the walk. There was no similar problem orienteering their way to the cafe in Letterfrack for large slabs of home made lemon meringue pie.

The more adventurous headed down the very steep back of Diamond Hill on our way to Bin Breac and Bin Bhan.

If we thought the ascent was steep it was nothing to the descent. Taking immediate and firm control of the situation the Colonel suggested that Peter go and see if there was a way down towards the river. Ever obedient, and to his bitter regret, he did just that. For reasons as yet unexplained the group split again with Monica leading Peter down through the ferns to the river bank. From a distance this looked perfectly innocent; two people meandering slowly in the afternoon sun! From a distance no-one could see the furtive looks of terror as Monica desperately tried to get away from the following Peter, now behaving like a hunter with his prey at his mercy!

But, she reached the river and safety, rushing across like a wildebeest trying to avoid snapping crocodiles!

The rest of the Group caught up and there was a short and very constructive debate on what we had learned and how, next time we would do exactly what the Colonel said or she would sqweam and sqweam! Unusually, Peter got blamed but he bit his tongue and smiled in what he hoped was total condescension.

And up Bin Breac. And boy was that steep, exhausting and sore on water supplies! And Paul's shirt had another trick up its sleeve as we managed to replenish our water bottles in the Niagara in his wake!

Going down! Conjures up all sorts of images! But mostly that it is easier than going up. Not with Foyle Hillwalkers! Perilous to put it mildly! Death stalking every footstep as we descended towards Kylemore and the car park.

Walking along, casually enjoying the view and quietly ruminating on the meaning of life Peter was suddenly the wrong way up, blood pumping out of lacerations to his knee and ankle, a bruise the size of Lough Neagh on his **** and a hand damaged almost beyond repair! Helpful and sympathetic colleagues quickly diagnosed his condition with probing questions such as, "Did you fall?" "Are you hurt?" "Is that blood on your leg?" and, "Have you any water left?". And so on they went, Peter bearing the pain silently, offering it up for the souls in Purgatory and thankful that it had taken his mind off his injured thumb. In the bar that night he would be referred to by one and all as 'Stoical' and a 'Brave little soldier'.

Nothing to say about the bar that night except that the quality of food was excellent, prices reasonable, service good, portions very large and the midges were outside! By the way, the Bard's Den is highly recommended to future visitors!

Sunday – Mary's Open Day

Sunday morning after everyone had completed their individual religious observances we headed off for another day's adventure. Away out into the wilds of Connemara and the ascent of Bin Chaonaigh. A lovely start to a walk, a gently inclining path up the side of the valley to a small church and the Stations of the Cross on the side of the hill. You will have seen the photographs on the website and it was really a beautiful place inspiring Mary to drop to her knees and offer up fervent prayers for her health and safety. She offered to prostrate herself on the small altar in a gesture of virgin sacrifice. No-one seemed keen which resulted in a bit of a 'lip' for a while! Today's walk was marvellous, the sun continued to shine and the views were fantastic. After a reasonably steep climb we stopped for a short break, a bit of lunch and the usual gossip. In a show of neighbourly support Joe was heard to comment that future requests for teabags, sugar, milk or any other

commodity would be met with violence. That helped Mary's developing lip not at all!

From the peak we wended our way along a well defined path with only gentle inclines to our final peak, the top of Bin Idir an dá log. (Mountain between two slopes) And we started the equally gentle descent back to the car park. And all went well until..... we came to the bad bit; a treacherous overhang at the top of a very steep gulley. For some reason the Colonel had posted Shaun at the top of said gulley, reason unknown, while she consulted her map and compass. It is so comforting to hear the words, "*It is fine. I know exactly where we are*". That comfort is deeply undermined when followed by, "*Just to be sure, Ian, can you give me a GPS reading?*" (Where are we, Ian?).

And the Colonel, the passionate Lori, Shaun, Peter, Joe, Ian, Monica and Bernard showed their agility by going down the rock face first at great risk to themselves. In fact, Peter exacerbated his agony by gashing his knee on the sharp rock face as he put his total faith in the Colonel to direct him down. Self-sacrifice for the greater good! But we were now in a position to ensure everyone else – Mary and Paul - got down safely. And the different approaches were a treat to witness! Mary first, using all of her feminine wiles, put her faith - and her bum - in the hands of the waiting males declaring an amnesty until she was safely on the ground. Which took an inordinate length of time but cured her lip!

Paul's tactics were somewhat different if a little startling! In order to curry favour with his helpers he threw his rucksack at Bernard and Shaun and tried to spear Monica with his walking poles! An unknown side - effect of the new shirt? The equivalent of an overdose having tested it to its limits over three days? We will never know!

An excellent night in the bar, another excellent meal, a word of thanks to the Colonel for organising and looking after us over the weekend and some lively but friendly banter. We all got a touch except Joe. For some reason no-one mentioned his heroic leadership skills in January when he missed completely

the mountain he was aiming for – no, not the Curley Hill in Strabane – Errigal, only the biggest bump in Donegal! And it will never be mentioned again!

Monday – Pauline’s Pilgrimage

Monday morning and home! Nope! Little whispers ran around that Croagh Patrick on the way home was a strong temptation. And, after a short visit to a local graveyard of which a little more later, we set off in high spirits eager for the challenge.

Up Reek, as it is affectionately known, in bright and very hot sunshine. Over the shale and around narrow paths meeting pilgrims in their bare and bloodied feet, Pauline was heard to pray quietly to herself. Prayers not listed in any prayer book, Catholic, Protestant or Dissenter. Frequent references to the terrain, how steep it was, how difficult, how she would never attempt such a feat again if God could only see his way to getting her safely to the top and back down. Of course how could God ignore such fervent entreaties and Pauline was back in the car park in 4 hours, thanking God and Mary (not the Virgin, unless I am mistaken) for their help and reaffirming her pledge never to set foot on this hill for as long as she lived or longer! A shower and a change of clothes and away we went, Bernard and Mary to meet relatives and the rest of us to meet up again at Yeats’ Tavern in Sligo. And, you will remember, that is where we came in! A great weekend indeed!

The visit

Many will know that one of the Industrial Schools highlighted in the Ryan report on abuse by the Christian Brothers was located in Letterfrack. There is a small cemetery close to the Catholic Church where there are memorials to the boys who died in care between 1894 and the late 50’s! A visit, in memory of those short and cruel lives, is a must and a very moving experience.