

HISTORY IS ALIVE IN IRELAND :

**memories are long and old-timers in a cork pub can tell you
whose ancestors hoarded turnips during the famine**

by Robin Mader

Robin, her husband Len and their sons Daniel and David, have just returned from a four year posting to Ireland, which "enriched their lives and modified their goals and values".

"Would you consider a European posting?" asked my husband one night in June. "Which one?", I answered, only slightly curious.

We had been back in Ottawa less than two years after a posting to New York and it was only in the past month that I had finally begun to feel settled. That very morning I had stood outside our comfortable, organized, New Edinburgh home feeling smug and content and now, with only six words, my newly acquired sense of well-being was in jeopardy.

Exactly which European post wouldn't be revealed unless we were willing to be considered available. Our willingness to be posted, however, depended on which post it would be. London, Paris, Rome — YES. Glasgow — NO. My gut feeling was to resist but...we aren't in the foreign service merely by chance and...two weeks later we were house hunting in Dublin. (Having dithered over choosing a camera for six months, we had given up our newly settled lives in less than two days.)

We arrived in Dublin with North American eyes, experience and prejudices. Everything looked dirty and nothing worked properly. The bin men who clear the streets and collect garbage had been on strike for weeks and the sidewalks were almost hidden by

the litter. In the past year, the banks, oil delivery companies, trains and buses had also been on strike.

We were warned that in looking for a house, we should only consider one which had several heating methods and under no circumstances should we take a house where telephones were "to be installed" — the wait could exceed two years. After inspecting only four houses we found the perfect one and by "bucking" tradition and choosing a centrally located townhouse rather than a more countrified manor house, we opted for convenience (and as it turns out, started a trend).

A posting in Ireland is a special opportunity to experience a way of life superficially very similar to our own but fundamentally quite different. Since language is no barrier and the people are about as friendly, open and hospitable as possible, the opportunities are plentiful for integration into the many complicated layers of society. The accent, of course, gives you away initially, so do the North American expectations, assumptions and manners, but with time we established perhaps the most solid friendships of our married lives. People and talk are the distractions in Dublin — time is elastic in order to accommodate conversation, which is a priority.

History is alive in Ireland: memories are long and old-timers in a cork pub can tell you whose ancestors hoarded turnips during the famine. "The Northern Question" is discussed but often with a bit more distance than one would expect. However,

it soon becomes quite clear that the more one knows about it, the more complicated and insoluble it appears.

Religion permeates Irish life to an extent unthinkable to North Americans, while luxuries, efficiency and pure consumerism are relatively rare.

Not one Irish friend owned a clothes drier and that is in a country where it rains perhaps four days out of five. Few people have central heating and most North Americans freeze all year round — especially when dining, (without several protective layers), at the home of the true, hardy Irish who think nothing of wearing parkas and fingerless gloves inside.

Greater Dublin is a city of about 500 000. It has some exceptionally fine Georgian architecture, the largest enclosed public park in Europe, delightful antique shops and one of the world's finest collections of Islamic and Far Eastern art. It is the political, educational and cultural centre of Ireland, so living there is fascinating. Sports are so important that pages 2 and 3 of *The Irish Times* are dedicated to the latest racing, rugby and hurling results. There are at least five race courses (horses, of course) within a half-hour of the centre and heaven only knows how many pubs. Since Dublin is a port and Ireland an island, the sea and sailing are everywhere.

Like any eastern Canadian, I was easily captivated by the year-round greenery. At every season different varieties of shrubs and flowers bloom. Imagine planting primulas in December. In fact, gardening is probably nowhere enjoyed with more enthusiasm (except perhaps England), and I don't mean neat rows of annuals shrieking their garish colours to the casual observer. In Ireland, even amateurs can revel in producing the most subtle gradations of colour and scent.

Since Ireland is a rather small island, the sea is always close by and it transforms the often turbulent skies into perpetually changing abstract tableaux. Our sense of colour was so affected by the Irish light that the deep clear blue of Canadian summer skies seemed blinding when we returned.

How do we look back on a four-year posting to Ireland? We really believe our lives have been enriched and our goals and values positively modified.

As our own post report says, "Nowhere is more beautiful than Ireland...when the sun shines," but really...even the sunshine is unnecessary.



O'Connell Street in Dublin, Ireland