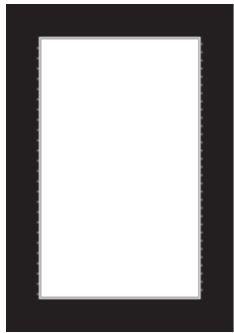


A Song for Ireland

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Several miles from the sea in the west of Ireland, outside the market town of Listowel, along county road 555, a path cuts into the overgrowth and up the hillside. I almost miss it. There is no street sign, no marking of any kind. High hedges bound the single lane—brambles brush both sides of the car as I drive past. Occasionally there's a break in the wild growth, and green fields speckled with brown and white cows come into view.

This is the townland of Lacca West. The vista in this part of north Kerry is surprisingly vast and looks out toward Ballybunnion and the Atlantic Ocean—America beyond. The road tracks the hills for so long without a house in sight that I become convinced I've come the wrong way. But with no way to turn the car, I drive on. Then ahead, on my left, a small yellow cottage, with two square windows set deep in thick walls. Standing on the three-step concrete stoop, and spilling down into the drive, are two dozen people—old women, strapping men, young kids. I've never seen any of them before. This is my family.

TRACING GENEALOGY, the search for roots, has a long tradition—and has become big business. Information gathering that was once a painstaking, sometimes needle-in-a-haystack ordeal, with false leads culminating in frustrating dead ends, or hours spent sifting through crumbling church records in musty basements, has been reduced to a few mouse clicks.

My own relationship to my Irish heritage had always been one of casual pride and affectionate, if uninformed, identification. When people asked what part of Ireland my people hailed from, "Cork" was always my answer. Yet I had no idea exactly where my clan called home. Yes, a great many McCarthys came from the southern part of the country, but that was as much proof as I had. The only information I ever got from my father was "Pop's father came from Ireland, a long time ago." No one, it appeared, was interested in knowing more and, in truth, neither was I.

“I’ve got enough family,” I would always quip. “I don’t need to go looking for more trouble.”

No matter how much my Dublin-born wife tried to convince me that roots and continuity were not only important but among the most valuable things in life, I resisted.

Then one day recently I was looking through old e-mails and accidentally came upon correspondence from a woman named Michelle in Dunmanway, Ireland, about a planned gathering of the McCarthy clan in Cork. She had also offered to put me in touch with people who could help trace my own particular roots.

I had missed the gathering, but now, I decided to reach out. I thought, simply, why not?



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An impromptu song delights pubgoers at Dick Mack's in Dingle.

I was told to gather as much information on my father’s lineage as possible. That didn’t take long. There wasn’t much: just a photocopy of an old marriage registry stating that in Jersey City, New Jersey, on August 19, 1885, laborer John McCarthy, “born 1857 (?)” in Ireland, son of Cornelius McCarthy and Mary Nolan, married Catherine O’Brian, born in Ireland “in 1857 (?)” at St. Joseph’s Church. There was no indication where they met, or if John’s parents, my great-great-grandparents, ever left Ireland. I knew that John and Catherine had three children, Cornelius, Johanna, and my grandfather, John, born July 10, 1890.

Without much optimism, I forwarded the little I had to Nigel McCarthy, who lived in England and was an amateur genealogist. He took the scant information and suggested I do a DNA test to see if it would provide any tangible results. The report that came back—labeled in codes like SNP R-DF5 and R-CTS365—was complete double Dutch to me, even after McCarthy’s explanation. The only thing I took away from my DNA trace was that there was a good chance I was related to Billy the Kid, as well as to a member of the Wild Bunch and Jesse James. At least my fascination with the Wild West had been explained.

Then came news.

And the news was a shock.

Nigel McCarthy had located my people, he was almost positive. It looked very much as if—using the Catholic Church’s baptism, and marriage and death records—my family could be traced back to the house of my great-great-grandfather, the place John was born and raised until he left for America. And that house, a farm, was located in ... County Kerry.

Kerry? There must be some mistake, I told McCarthy. “I’m a Cork man!” I insisted.

“Apparently not,” he said simply.

It was as if I awoke, after a lifetime of supporting the New York Yankees, to find that my people actually hailed from Boston, and I was meant to be a Red Sox fan.

What could be worse? Everything I’d been led to believe, everything I’d led myself to believe, for the past 25 years was suddenly revealed to be false. I was not from Cork at all, as I’d long boasted, but was, in fact, a Kerry man—the brunt of endless Irish jokes. Only this time, the joke was on me.

I was from the townland of Lacca West in North Kerry, a few miles south of Listowel, in the Catholic parish of Duagh. Not only that, but Nigel had identified 14 of my great-grandfather’s brothers and sisters, and tracked a fair number of their marriages. Add to this, he had ascertained the exact location of the old homestead—most probably, he suggested, in ruins now.



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Andrew McCarthy, wearing a Kerry football jersey they gifted him, gets to know members of his extended family in the town of Lacca West.

If it was true that Nigel had been able to locate the homesite, I'd be able to go and walk the land that my great-grandfather had walked before he left Ireland for good and came to America. The idea suddenly thrilled me.

But there was work to do first.

I had been a Cork man for all these years, or so I'd thought. If I was to embrace my new heritage, some changes in attitude needed to happen. I must get to know my home county, I concluded, before I walked my homeland. The best course of action would be to get an overview of the situation—from atop the highest mountain in Ireland.

CARRAUNTOOHIL is tucked into the heart of the Macgillycuddy's Reeks Range, just beyond the borders of Killarney National Park, Ireland's first such protected land. The area has long been one of the country's premier tourist destinations—for that reason alone, I always gave it a wide berth. But tourist destinations become popular for a reason, and in a land of wild and rugged green spaces, Killarney is among the most audacious. Grand blue lakes reflect jagged mountains bulging up under restless skies.

In the town of Killarney I purchase a thick Aran sweater I was told I would need for my hike up 3,415-foot-tall Carrauntoohil. I had assumed the trek to the top would be little more than a stroll, but local knowledge warned otherwise. Everyone from the store clerk to my father-in-law (“People die up there, Andrew. Are you sure you're fit enough?”) warned of the perils of the Macgillycuddy's Reeks. I dismissed this notion as mere Kerry braggadocio. After all, if I knew just one thing about Kerry folk, it was that in a land of prodigious talkers, they were among the absolute mightiest.

This seems to hold true for John Guerin, the guide I enlist after being assured the walk is far too treacherous to undertake alone. “People who dismiss these mountains on the basis of altitude can find a lot of trouble,” Guerin promises me.

We hike past mountain lakes and beneath recently sheared sheep clinging to ledges above us. We pass outcrops with names like Hag's Tooth Ridge and avoid the Devil's Ladder in favor of the scramble up Brother O'Shea's Gully (named after the monk who lost his life sliding down its steep pitch). Guerin is discussing the attributes of Kerry men—“There's a cynicism in the humor, to be sure”—when the bright sky grows suddenly dark. Rain begins to pelt down, then stops just as quickly, and the sky is clear again. High up, a silent plane flies over, headed west. Guerin follows my gaze. “Next stop, America.”

As we scramble higher over coarse scree, Guerin calls over his shoulder, “When you're exposed, that wind can knock you right off.” When I step up onto the ridge, a blast of air nearly carries me away.

Near the peak, jagged slabs of sandstone shoot up out of the ground like primitive grave markers. A single raven circles above, then rides a thermal west, over the Black Valley, the

last place in Ireland to get electricity and phone service, due to its remoteness, in 1978. The Dingle Peninsula comes into view, jutting out into the Atlantic, before being lost in distant haze.

Then it is a gentle march to the top. The summit is demarcated by a large cross. I sit beneath it as the wind blows. The low clouds race overhead, while the land below changes constantly in a shadow dance.



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Tradition holds that 16th-century Ballycarbery Castle, near the Ring of Kerry, belonged to the McCarthy clan.

I can feel my resistance softening to the idea of Kerry as my homeland. How can it not feel right to be connected to all this?

And so I set out deeper into Kerry, looking for further points of identification. Down in Kenmare, on Main Street, I come upon McCarthy's Bookstore. In Sneem, I fill up my car at McCarthy's Garage. And far out on the Iveragh Peninsula, past the westernmost reach of the Ring of Kerry, in Ballinskelligs, I stumble upon the ruins of a small castle. When I ask a local barman if he knows the heritage, he shoots back, "You mean the old McCarthy castle?"

Then I head to the Dingle Peninsula. Stretching 30 miles out into the Atlantic, Dingle is one of several Gaeltacht (predominantly Irish-speaking) regions in Ireland. It is remote, insular. You don't get to Dingle by accident; it is on the way to nothing but itself.

The narrow roads grow narrower. The wind is ripping off Inch Beach, a mile-long stretch of flat sand. In the village of Ballyferriter, I see nothing written in English. From every shop window, only Gaelic calls out to the passerby. Halfway out, the town of Dingle, with a population under 2,000, is the center of life. And Dingle buzzes.

The sign outside Dick Mack's pub reads "Pub and Haberdashery." Inside, the wall to the left holds shelves of scattered rubber boots and shoes; a few tweed caps hang from hooks. To the right, an old wooden bar lines the wall. Bartenders grab and pour bottles with lightning speed to service the throng. Two semiprivate drinking areas known as snugs, one beside the door, another at the far end of the bar, resemble nothing so much as confessionals. A few Tiffany-style lamps hang from above. Conversation, pitched over the din, is easy, considering the closest human is a few inches away.

Cirnan O'Brian has just sailed his boat down from Galway and is beginning a tale when a young fella climbs up on the bar, his head inches from an exposed lightbulb. He begins to sing a rendition of the Welsh national anthem. Impossibly, the crowd grows silent.

As we listen, O'Brian leans closer to me: "Those Welsh can sing, I'll give them that." The Welshman continues, gathering confidence and volume.

Suddenly I hear O'Brian growl, "Not in my house, he doesn't. Not in Kerry!" He shoves past me and in a flash is up on a wobbling stool. He lets rip a passionate, if unpolished, rendition of the Irish national anthem—hand over his heart. For a few moments the two men sing over each other, battling, without looking at one another. But soon the Welshman acquiesces and steps off the bar. As O'Brian finishes, he climbs down to roof-raising adulation.

The next day I visit low-key pub J. Curran, a few doors away, on Main Street. Soft-spoken James Curran draws a pint as he tells me about his father, who ran the pub before him. His father used to lend money to folks who were headed to America. Curran is in possession of their repayment letters, and I am curious for a look. He retrieves several overflowing ledgers from beneath the bar.

A letter sent from Brooklyn on November 5, 1929, is typical. "Enclosed you will find 3 pounds. It isn't much, but it will lessen the amount. I will send the rest later on, please God." Many of the letters are written in Gaelic. I don't find any correspondence from any McCarthys, but the letters bring home to me what a massive journey to America it must have been for so many.

With renewed passion and regard for the land of my forefathers, I race north. Past Tralee, the drama of the Kerry landscape becomes considerably subtler. The untamed mountains give way to rolling hills, which become almost flat in places.

I pull into the market town of Listowel and make my way to the hotel on the square. Nigel McCarthy has done the laborious research locating my clan, but when I need a man on the ground, Ger Greaney steps up. Greaney has a passion for the past, a detective's relentlessness, and a flair for the dramatic. We had spoken several times while I was still back in America, and he said he would have more news when we met.

He is waiting in the lobby of my hotel, documents in hand. With his glasses and a Kerryman's biting wit, Greaney strikes me as a friendly, if sarcastic, librarian.

I had originally intended to simply walk the land of my great-grandfather, and perhaps visit the site of what I was sure would be the ruins of the old homestead—if it could even be found.



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At the J. Curran pub, in Dingle, owner James Curran leafs through an old ledger containing mementos from Irish emigrants.

It can indeed be found, Greaney assures me. In fact, the house still stands, and is inhabited by my second cousin once removed (meaning that my great-grandfather John, who had come over to America, and the grandfather of the woman now living in the house had been brothers). She is home now, awaiting my visit.

Excitement and trepidation sweep over me. My once frosty relationship with my family back home had certainly warmed over the years (thanks in no small part to my wife), but I still find myself keeping a distance more often than not. My own children have, of course, burst my heart open and have gotten me thinking about legacy. Yet the idea that I am now about to bridge the gap across the Atlantic that had been carved open more than a hundred years earlier seems almost comical. I am, to say the very least, an unlikely ambassador.

I get into my car. A few miles out of town, just before the few shops and homes of Duagh, an unmarked, narrow lane veers up into the hillside. I think I made a wrong turn, and then I see them. Standing on the stoop of a small yellow home that looks out over the valley below are two dozen members of what turns out to be my family.

A roar goes up as I disembark. A gray-haired woman with mischievous eyes behind large glasses steps up and shakes my hand, then embraces me. This is Nell Fitzgerald, my second cousin once removed. Nell's daughter Mary, my third cousin, introduces me to her

husband, who presents me with a Kerry football jersey. When I put it on, all hell breaks loose. An endless round of embraces from more cousins and husbands and wives of cousins and children follow. Dozens, hundreds, of photos are taken. Inside we cram into the small living room, a picture of the Virgin Mary framed on the wall. Above the door hang the McCarthy and Fitzgerald family crests. I squeeze between Nell and her sister Mary on the sofa.

We scour the family tree Greaney had wisely provided me. Tea is served. We eat cheese sandwiches and fairy cakes. The children run in and out of the house. Everyone has questions for me, about my life, about my father—would he be able to come over?

“Can you dance at all?” Nell wants to know. “The McCarthys were great dancers. My grandfather used to turn a bucket over, get up on it, and dance a jig.”

Among my relations are a nurse, an army sergeant, a surveyor, and various laborers. At one point, a cousin sings a beautiful ballad as a hush falls over the boisterous room. We go outside and take more photos. We stroll down the lane to the remains of the O’Brian house—long ago two of the McCarthy boys had married two of the O’Brian sisters. There are more hugs. It is the kind of active connecting I’d always run so far from in the past. Their generosity touches me deeply.

Later, as I finally drive away, I see two dozen family members, strangers no more, waving in my rearview mirror.

*This story is adapted from [Journeys Home](#), published by National Geographic Books in February 2015, with essays by 26 authors including **ANDREW McCARTHY**. Photographer **DAVE YODER** is based in Milan.*

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