

We have honor to be subjugated in fourteenth century by Chinese Pirates.

In sixteenth century by English missionaries.

In eighteenth century by Japanese war lords.

And in twentieth century by American Marines.

Okinawa very fortunate.

Culture brought to us — not have to leave home for it.

Learn many things.

Most important that rest of world not like Okinawa...

Trip fosters insights into heritage

By Beatrice Ganley, SSJ
Guest contributor

The character Sakini's introduction of John Patrick's play *Teahouse of the August Moon* describes Okinawa's "distinguished record of conquerors."

I cannot help but note the similarity between this record and the historical pattern of Ireland — the Celtic invaders, the Viking raiders, the Anglo-Normans and finally the British, who from the time of Queen Elizabeth I until the early 20th century have used penal codes, economic and social oppression to keep the native Irish poor, servile and malleable subjects of the crown.

But strange things happen on the way to colonization. In Patrick's play, the postwar occupation forces forget Washington's orders to build the islanders a schoolhouse — better to indoctrinate them into democracy — and end up building them a teahouse. In the process, the various characters are converted to the mentality of the islanders.

So too in Ireland. Each series of invaders has been absorbed and conversely "colonized" by the native Irish — so much so that some of the greatest patriots have been the Anglo-Irish. George Bernard Shaw thought this assimilation might be produced by the climate. Edmund Spenser is said to have remarked, "Lord how quickly doth that country alter men's natures."

Recently, I visited Ireland as a participant in the travel and learning experience called "Irish Traditions and Sacred Stories," which is offered by the husband-and-wife team of Robert Bela Wilhelm and Kelly Wilhelm, operators of Storyfest Journeys.

The seminar took place at the Irish Institute for Pastoral Liturgy, based at St. Patrick's College in Carlow. From Carlow we wove back and forth throughout the countryside: north to Dublin, Tara,

Slane, and Newgrange; through the Wicklow Mountains northeast to Glendalough; south west to Kilkenny, Holy Cross Abbey and St. Patrick's Rock at Cashel.

On days that we were not on the road, we attended morning sessions in which Bob presented various aspects of Irish culture and history, always with some stories based upon the traditional myths and tales. Some afternoons included presentations from a representative from the Old Carlow Society and from Father Seamus Feehan, a nearby pastor who uses storytelling as an essential element of his ministry.

Evenings after dinner we gathered for more storytelling, initiated by Bob with a tale illustrating the various themes found in Irish stories: the impinging of the other world upon this visible world, time and space intermingling without respect to logic, the relationships between men and women or — in an interesting aspect of the Irish experience — a story about telling a story.

After Bob's presentation, the storyteller's chair became vacant, waiting for one of our group to share a tale or sing a song. There was the tale told by his grandson about the shenanigans of Chicago politician Ignatius V. Donnelly and the true story on a woman's three marriages to her present spouse. We heard inspiring pieces, mysterious occurrences, short jokes and a few songs. One evening was reserved for dancing and music, which our group put together.

Among the times I find human beings to be especially beautiful are when poets read their work, or when anyone is dancing or singing. Now I add to that list the times when someone is in the storytelling chair with the group giving attention, creating the story along with the teller.

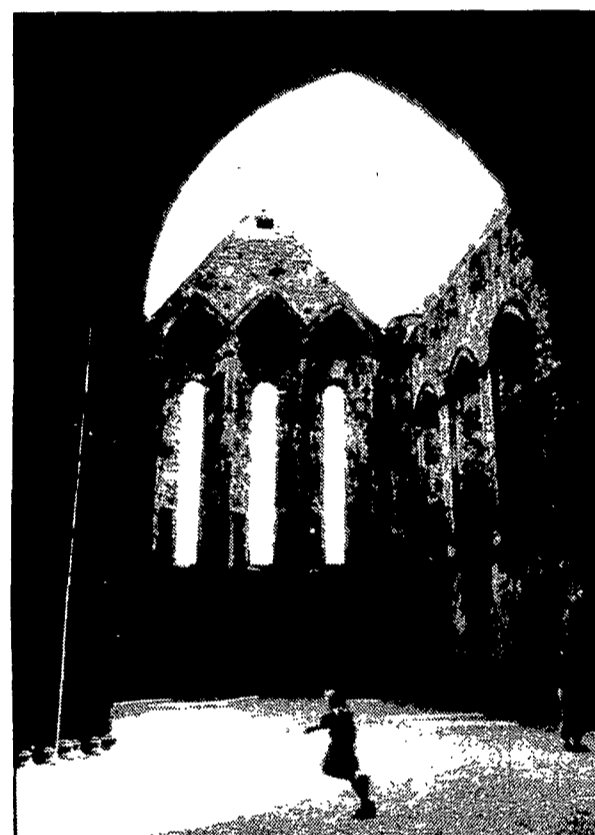
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Surrounded by the ruins of a church at St. Moling's Well — whose waters allegedly cure people from madness and frenzy — Robert Bela Wilhelm, far right, reads from a poem by Seamus Heaney recounting the antics of "Mad Sweeney."



Roses abound on the grounds of St. Patrick's College in Carlow.



A young girl runs through the ruins of St. Patrick's Church, which was built on the Rock of Cashel by the King-Bishop of Cashel, Cormac MacCarthy, in 1127.

Having returned from Ireland a little more than a week ago, I have difficulty sorting and sifting what I want to share. What follows are some notes taken along the way.

Roses!

None of my friends who has visited Ireland before me has mentioned the roses. But they are everywhere — on the grounds of St. Patrick's College, in the gardens at Kilkenny Castle, and in the table-top sized plots behind the cement fences and gateways of the small homes in the towns and cities.

These flowers look me in the eye with their large cabbage-like blossoms. I flash back to the ritual of visiting my grandfather in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. I was less than seven when he died, but I remember at each visit my parents saying, "Come on now, we're going up to see Father's roses."

We would walk up the terrace steps in back of his house. All of a sudden when we reached the top, there were (to my child's eye) an infinity of rose blossoms. No wonder they were so important to this man who emigrated from Ireland more than 100 years ago.

Family names

It does come from a certain place in Ireland, after all. Never before had I been able to find it on the

Photographs
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maps showing the areas in which various names originated. Unlike Murphys and MacCarthys, there are very few of them in the United States, so I often wondered if so, why couldn't I find the name in the rest of the Irish collection?

Browsing in one of the several collections yielded an answer. The name "MacSeanlaigh," a division of Roscommon and Leitrim. It mutated to Ganley, probably picking up the "e" in the United States.

And Benson, my maternal grandfather, not from the Vikings as we had supposed of its Scandinavian sound. The same name that it was an Anglicized version of a Norman translation of the Gaelic "Bennig" — "of God."

I don't have time to pursue the matter on my mother's side, but a woman from Donegal that she knows Feeleys from Sligo. They have roots that I can trace to Ireland.

Several people in our group are into genealogy and hunting activities. In fact it was John Benson whose name means "gentle" and he is) was the source in the book store.

Irish faces

At the bus stop, in the stores, in the streets, I seemed I saw people of Irish ancestry. Sister M. O'Connell back in Rochester. There is Sister M. O'Connell at the bus stop in Limerick; Catherine's mother walking in downtown window shopping on a Sunday afternoon. All is the dead ringer for Sister M. O'Connell playing the bodhran (an Irish drum) on Thursday evening.

"I can't believe it," says one of our group as if everyone here is one of my relatives.

The living and the dead, the near and the far, who knows when or where I may meet them. The stories we have been hearing, time and time again, and merges, creating an expanded sense of self, so I am not at all surprised.

Embellishment

Where would Celtic life be without the revolving back and forth between the living and the dead? With the music, with the whirling and the dancing, with the manuscripts. It is on the high cross at the National Museum, in the dances and in the native Irish speech.

I am reminded of one of my favorite camping trips. I love to wander around discovering the variety of equipment and gear — from a simple one-person tent to a full-on campsite with all the trappings of civilization.

Travel creates a similar opportunity to see how things are done elsewhere. I have seen people eat for breakfast (porridge, brown bread, boiled egg, sausage, brown bread) how they approach their work (ever business beginning around 9 or 10 o'clock) and the enjoyments they have (music, music).

I am in the pattern of one embelishing endeavor. It is a kind of "illuminating."

Enchantment

In spite of its tragic history, the violence — including a bombing that shattered the idyll of our trip — and the loss of some of its best sons and daughters (last year) Ireland continues to enchant its visitors. Is it the holy places, the caves or the high crosses, the monasteries? Or is it the special way of life as a tourist that creates a heightened sense of the beauty of the land and people here?

It is similar to my experience as a teacher during end-of-the-year assignments. Sitting at the desk, we were engaged seriously with their gaze around the room, observing them noticing me. Soon each student became unbearably beautiful and I would be overwhelmed by a tenderness.