

The Edge of Strangeness

What makes a place familiar? What causes that feeling that you have left your home ground? I can feel the change near the Ulster border more than on the political one, yet parts of Leitrim seem like home to me, and parts of Cavan do not. Rivers and loughs do not divide but rather unite – and therein lies a clue. The Erne basin holds me in the hollow of its hand. Wherever rain may fall is home to me, so long as that rain will eventually end up at Assaroe. Elsewhere it runs to stranger seas – to the Liffey or Limerick or Londonderry. That strangeness begins a bare seven miles to the North, on the Omagh road, somewhere between The Harp and Togherdoo, and if I travel up the Erne and round the corner of Cuilcagh, it is waiting for me somewhere on the road to Ballinamore.

I first came through Ballinamore by reason of a blown up bridge – the bridge at Aghalane. Every year my mother would drive my grandma and some of us children down to visit her brother who lived on a farm near Cork city. We'd leave early in the morning, have a picnic somewhere near Athlone and lunch under the Rock of Cashel, and if we were lucky we would arrive in time for tea. The route was unvarying; Cavan, Granard, Edgeworthstown. Not until Granard did we feel that that we had finally left home ground.

When the bridge went my mother found another route, through Swad to Ballinamore, and thence following the Shannon via Dromod and Roosky to Longford. But she liked to avoid large towns; Longford in particular confused her, so she soon found another way to Edgeworthstown. by turning left in Ballinamore opposite the Courthouse. We only went that way a few times. After my uncle moved back to his home country of West Cork our route drifted ever westwards, until at last we went through Sligo and Clare to take the ferry at Tarbert. Yet always for me that left turn in Ballinamore symbolised the start of adventure, and returning on that road, descending into Ballinamore and turning right to climb the street past the Commercial Hotel was the start of coming home.

Over the years I began to explore the countryside by bike and grew more familiar with the town, but it always remained on the edge of strangeness, the most southerly point I could reach in a day. I never again travelled that little road to my knowledge, but it remained clear in my mind's eye. It climbed past a wooded glen on the left and then, not far outside town, there was a sharp turn to the right, and just on the corner was a small stone church in a graveyard with a grey stone wall around it, and an iron gate.

One day, confined by Covid, I took the trip again – courtesy of Google Maps. I stood again in the main street of Ballinamore (as it was nine years ago) and turned to the left. There was, of course, no bypass the last time I had gone that way. That was the road I went on the bus to Carrickallen on the night before the lockdown, but in my minds eye the old route went straight on where the main road crossed the Ballyconnell canal and turned left. So that was the way I went.

And – nothing. No glen, no bend, no church. No gateway in which we had stopped. Nothing familiar in Cloone or Drumlish. Nothing to remind me that I had ever passed that way before. Perhaps I did, once. Yet, exploring the road to Carrigallen again, I discovered why the splendid isolation of the Mart had seemed familiar. That was the wway we had gone – I remembered it now – through Arvagh and Ballinalee to Edgeworthstown via the Bracklin Road. Yet, though there was a stone church on the corner just past Carrigallen, it was definitely not the church I thought I had rememberd from nearly fifty years ago.

As I get older, the more I realise I can be mistaken. I have spent a lifetime looking at roads and wondering where they go. There are other roads in other towns for which I get the same feeling. Some I have explored, some I never shall, and some I misremember, filling the gap with scenes from elsewhere. That stone church, I am almost certain now, is from somewhere in County Antrim. Or perhaps not: my dreams are filled with familiar roads that lead to places not found on any map.

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