

# Phyllis Whitten-Hohnen's 1955 Diary of her trip to Ireland

What a hectic day! We finalised our luggage, made a booking for Ireland through the bank and then went by train to Cumberland Hall in Windsor Park, one of the Royal Residences which has been given to run orientation courses and week-end conferences for dominion students. Miss Buller an erstwhile SCM secretary is very active, Colonel Haldane was a sort of Bursar and Sir Walter Moberly is concerned.

My train to Liverpool left from Euston at 4.55. Ross saw me off and then left from the Airport at 9pm.

My train reached Liverpool at 8.30pm and I caught M.V Munster across the channel. With a nice cabin and a smooth crossing I managed to have a good sleep and watched the sunrise as we came into the dock next morning. A bus took us from North Wall in Dublin to the station at Kingsbridge. There I breakfasted with a charming little Irish nurse Miss Fitzgerald from Adare in Limerick who had trained as a nurse at Penzance and was going out to Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia. She told me how little there is offering to young people in Ireland unless they do training in England.

To reach Roscrea, I caught the Limerick train and it was pleasant to have someone to chat with. A junction we passed through was Bollybrophy. Everywhere notices were in Irish as well as English. Sir-gentleman, I was interested to notice. As we approached Roscrea. I had some misgivings, wondering if Ross had sent a telegram to Marjorie, in view of his frantic exit. Bobby Williams whose mother was Frances Whitten and who lives at "Fancroft" with Marjorie met me at the station. I found his speech extremely difficult to follow but he had a dry humour and was very kind in showing me around.

As we drove up Marjorie who is about 50 met me at the door and said "You're very welcome". She is rather a dear and I grew very fond of her. She suffers with her feet and has a lot of frustrations I feel but I'd find shoes polished or a hotwater bottle in my bed as gestures of her thoughtfulness.

Her brother Robert was visiting from Vancouver where he migrated in 1924. This is his 3<sup>rd</sup> trip home – the last time was 25 years ago. He is a carpenter with Canadian Pacific Railways.

Frequent sights were the little donkey carts jogging along, old ladies in boots with black shawls over their shoulders. Gypsies are frequent along the narrow roads, usually their horses are piebald. Bobby spoke of the gypsy or tinker class being the lowest stratum, then the working class. He also spoke of the gentry and remarked that the clergy usually came from the gentry class.

One night I heard a most unearthly sound outside and afterwards learned that it was a donkey braying. One morning a little gypsy girl came to the house begging for milk and was given separated milk. Next time she returned and asked for unseparated milk because she wanted it for a sick baby. She sang as she walked away along the lane.

I was very conscious of the ease with which people burst into song. Children were grubby but busy and full of life – usually barefooted or in gumboots. We passed some little girls out with small brothers or sisters in prams, when it was quite late.

At Roscrea are bacon works and cattle are sold in the main street. In Ireland one never lost the smell of manure from one's nostrils. Attempts at decentralisation are being made. Buildings are either very new or very old. There must have been long years when little progress was made at all. The old buildings are whitewashed or washed a yellow colour. The woodwork is often touched up with red. The newer houses are often of the bungalow type and roughcast.

There is very little social life for the young people, so they drift off to the cities or emigrate. Iris, Bobby's 16 year old sister, is a charming girl, attractive and with a good sense of dress but having done the equivalent of an intermediate at a church school she has left. For a while she helped in her aunt's shop in Belfast, for a while she did some mental nursing but was trying to get a job as a children's nurse.

Ireland has such a heavy rainfall the description of "Emerald Isle" is very appropriate. The grass is lush and vivid green. Along the narrow roads are hedges and old trees joining together in an arch. A great deal is being done to widen the roads and improve them and people are getting electricity for the first time and water laid on to the bathroom.

**Visit to Killaloe** – Iris, Bobby and I set out in Marjorie's car and passed through farming country – a green patchwork right down to Lough Derg. Iris called the honeysuckle growing in the hedgerow "woodbine" ideal spot for an angler. The Cathedral is of some interest and the Protestant Bishop's palace is close by. The bridge connecting the town with the village of Ballina has 13 arches and the huge weir helps as a breakwater. Shortly above the bridge, on the right bank of the river, stands Kincora, the fortified palace of Brian Coris.

**Cathedral of St Flannan's** – The first notable building erected following the Anglo Norman invasion 1172. Here are to be found the original early lancet windows in nave and choir alike – windows conspicuous for height and narrowness 16 ft high and less than a foot in breadth – the only complete survival of the period. The great triplet of lights in the East Well is the dominating glory of the Cathedral. The central light alone preserves the characteristics of the Norman Transitional period. N and S are two early English windows (1182). Splendid example of splaying of the stone. 30 1/3 ft high and 1 ft 8" in width, companions 25½ ft in height. Recently stained glass figures of Christ with his apostles has been added. The herring bone and dog tooth carving round the Eastern windows has been made visible by indirect electric lighting. The long corbels, projecting stones, are carved representing 6 kilted figures kissing and shaking hands.

In the nave of severe simplicity is a richly ornamented doorway in Romanesque style dating from 1070 and built into the western corner of the southern wall of the nave.

This doorway is traditionally said to have formed part of the tomb of an O'Brien, one of the early Kings of Munster. His memorial slab and incised cross would seem to uphold this tradition.

The Central Tower has twice been raised in height, first so the tower could be seen from the Episcopal residence and second to make room for a chime of bells.

The buttressing is of a very primitive nature. The walls are several feet broader some 4 or 5ft from the ground than in the upper sections.

Near the left of the Romanesque doorway is a stone mounted on a pedestal bearing a complete inscription in Runes and Oghams. The date is about 1000 AD done by a horseman who was overcome by guilt after sacking many churches.

Ogham – Is a form of writing said to have been used in Ireland, long before the Christian era. The scale consists of 4 series of scores, each series embracing 5 characters and each letter ranging from 1-5. The scale originally consisted of 16 letters – such was the Phoenician, Pelagic, Etruscan and **Celteberian**. The present scale consists of 26 letters.

St Flannan's oratory dating from 590 stands north west of the Cathedral.

Having afternoon tea at the Lakeside Hotel we drove home through Portunna.

Our route that day was Roscrea, Dunkerrin (market stalls), Moneygall, Tommyuarra, Nenagh, Killaloe, Portunna, Roscrea.

Limerick is a busy attractive town. It is the 3<sup>rd</sup> town in the Free State and has a history of sieges from the days of the Danes, who built it. Cromwell's General Ireton attacked it. At the end of the C17 it was besieged by William III. The Cathedral was closed.

We visited Adare – the home of the earls of Dunraven, a charming village with thatched roofs. There we looked in on the Fitzgerald's who have a racehorse stud and who had issued an invitation to us through Celia MacDonald. They were away at horse sales but I left a note and Bobby took my photograph coming from the doorway.

The whole district of Limerick is studded with remains of Cistercian Abbeys and Castles, which testify to the former glory and power of the Geraldines.

Our road took us in a circle from Croom to Croom. When we came to one cross road and Bobby made enquiries his comment was "The indications are – if we take that road, we'll end up in China".

In the township of Tipperary we called at a hotel where a pleasant waitress offered us lunch tho' it was 4.30. There we were glad to have tomato soup, sausages with bacon and hot coffee.

From there we called Cashal. In the midst of a wide fertile country "The Golden Vein", a 300 ft mass of limestone reared its head, its sides sharpened by the quarrying of generations of builders. This rock was a religious centre, earlier than any historical records – we know the sun and the winds were honoured there and the Druid's cast their spells.

- a. Round Tower C10 – a very perfectly preserved example
- b. Chapel of King Cormac – 1134
- c. Joining these buildings and stretching E and W beyond them, lies the roofless cathedral built between 1235 and 1270, crowned by a massive tower perhaps C14. At the western end a strong archiepiscopal castle C15.
- d. Hall of the Vicars Choral C15, where one enters.

**Round Tower** – The oldest building on the Rock, its date of erection being between 900 and 1000 AD. Built of freestone 91½ ft high, it originally consisted of 5 stories. It has a diameter of 17 ft and a

circumference of 56. 12 ft above the ground is a doorway where the tower wall is 3/6 m thickness. These towers were always built near a church, used as a stronghold for guarding the Host and the Sacred Vessels, relics and precious books of the community from harm. Later they were used as bell towers.

**Cormac's Chapel** – This remarkable building consecrated 1134, is in several respects unique in Ireland. Built of sandstone from Drumbane, the building is 50ft x 20ft with a stone roof and 2 square towers and contains a stone roof and groined chancel. The chancel is not central with the nave, as it was built in accordance with the Irish custom of symbolising the church as the Body of Christ, with his head inclining to the left side, where his Mother stood. Later under the influence of foreign architecture, the inclination was to the right.

Certain features of the building bear so close a resemblance to the Romanesque architecture of the Rhineland that it is not surprising to learn of links with well-established Irish monasteries of Cologne, Ratisbon and other places in Germany before its erection. Some years previously, it is on record, Dionysius, an Irishman, 7<sup>th</sup> abbot of Ratisbon, sent 4 men on a mission to Ireland to make a collection in aid of his projected buildings. Two of these men were craftsmen, William and Conrad the carpenter. Ideas regarding building came into Ireland from abroad in ancient times. Irish motives in their turn affected the arts of the Continent of Europe.

The massive high-pitched roof of stone was distinctly native, derived from the beehive hut built on the corbel principle.

Above the doorway in the south wall is a carved stone tympanum, depicting a huge beast, an uncommon feature in Irish architecture. Over the chancel and nave are 2 rooms of corresponding size, one of which was used as a library and has a complicated history system. The groined roof of the sanctuary has faint frescoes. There are scanty traces of the original colour decoration in the chancel and the chancel arch itself. Over the chancel is just discernible an architectural composition in white, yellow, deep red and blue. Some traces of colour also remain in the altar recess and there can be little doubt that at one time the whole interior of the chapel glowed with colour.

The nave contains a stone sarcophagus, a magnificent example of Irish stone carving, depicting Time and Eternity. The north and south porches are beautiful examples of ancient Irish craftsmanship.

The orientation of the chapel is 15 or 16° to the N of E. On the theory that ancient churches were orientated to sunrise on the feast day of the saint to which they were dedicated, the day for Cormac's chapel would fall in the month of May (Our Lady). Tho' not universally accepted it is of note that the orientation in the Cathedral is nearly due east, a direction agreeing closely with the sunrise of March 17<sup>th</sup>, St Patrick's Day.

#### **Sarcophagus** –

Originally regarded as Cormac's tomb but does not belong to his period or to his chapel.

The elaborate carving on its front face, a complicated Ribbon Beast interlacement, proclaims it to be CXI. In that century this motif, a metalwork ornament of earlier times and Irish or British in origin was re-introduced into Ireland, in a highly developed form, possibly thro the influence of the Viking cities of the coast. The unique coffer has lost its covering slab which is said to have been ornamented with a cross and also to have borne an inscription in Irish containing the name of Cormac. If this is true, the King bishop was buried in a coffer made before his time, or some other Cormac was commemorated.

In the sarcophagus was found a beautiful gilt copper crosier, belonging to the XIII century and is an example of the manufactures of Limoges in France, rarely found outside that country. Richly ornamented with animal and fish forms and delicate surface decoration, it has blue enamel inlays and turquoise, sapphire insertions. The vigorous little figure of St Michael within the crook has lost its wings but the dragon is perfect.

**The Cathedral** – Built by Donogh Mor O'Brien 1169 (?) managing not to encroach of the round tower or Cormac's chapel. The nave is less than half the length of the choir and the proportions are perfect.

The Cathedral is an aisleless building of cruciform plan, having a central tower and terminating westwards in a massive residential castle. Very characteristic of Irish church building throughout that time are the rows of lancet windows set rather high and evenly placed. All the wrought work of the chancel windows is of yellow sandstone in contrast to the limestone which prevails throughout the rest of the building.

The south transept contains the chapels of the Blessed Virgin and St Brigid and the flight of 122 steps to the pentagon tower, starts here. On the southern side of the North Wall, is a series of fine carved figures representing the Twelve Apostles with St Brigid and St Catherine. As there are no aisles a passage made in the thickness of the walls extends all round the Cathedral except the choir and gives access to the central tower.

**The Stone of Sacrifice and St Patrick's Cross** – Where people laid their tribute and the Kings were crowned and which still bears on its side faint spirals of the old carving. Now it supports one of the oldest crosses in Ireland which has a clothed figure of our Lord on the western side and on the eastern side that of a bishop fully robed-possibly St Patrick. Where the Kings of Munster were crowned.

### **History**

Rock must have offered a splendid site as a fortress even in earliest times. Corc seems to have flourished C4. He is credited with establishing his capital at Cashel about 370 AD. From then to the C12, "Cashel of the Kings" remained a chief residence of the Munster Monarchs.

St Patrick is alleged to have visited 450AD. It is said he converted and baptised the king whether Corc III or Angus we don't know.

**Cormac** – born 835 was King, poet and bishop. He knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Danish and wrote a glossary, the oldest comparative vernacular dictionary in any European language. He compiled a book of sacred writings which has been lost but his Book of Rights, treating the legal rights and duties of princes, chiefs and tribesmen, has been preserved. He died in 908 some time before the Danish invasions began.

Further history see booklet.

The great church remained in use till the middle of the C18 but its decay had been 100 years before. The chancel repaired 1667, tower re-roofed 1674, the great door renewed 1686.

1847 part of the castle fell during a great storm. Thoroughly repaired 1874-6 and extensive restorations done.

There are several abbeys near Cashel also in ruins. The view from the tower is magnificent and I'm sure the children would have enjoyed exploring.

**Our route was** – Roscrea, Nenah, Limerick, Adare, Croom, Hospital, Tipperary (lunch at 4.30), Thurles, Templemore, Roscrea.

Starting off at 7am in the morning. Marjorie, Iris, Bobby and myself. Limerick where a very big hydro-electrical scheme which harnesses the waters of the Shannon bringing electricity to small villages and providing power for industry. A big airport is there also. A fish ladder has been built in the war also to allow the salmon to go upstream.

Limerick, Adare, Newcastle, Abbeyfeale, Castleisland, Tralee, Killarney, Gap of Dunloe, Windy Gap, Killarney Tralee, Listowel, Glen Faynes, Askeaton, Limerick, Nenagh, Roscrea.

As we drove along in the early morning, we could see the little donkey carts jogging along to market, some with old ladies, some with lads. One wondered what their thoughts were, or if they just sat.

Someone told me a story of an old lady upbraided for being late to market because her little donkey was rather lazy. Her retort was, "The person who made time, made plenty of it!"

In Killarney we had our lunch and a persuasive driver of a jaunting can used his eloquence in vein, to get us into his conveyance.

The Lakes of Killarney are three in number, connected by a swift flowing stream and emptying their waters into Castlemaine Harbour, on the Kerry coast. The first glimpse of the lakes, lying like broad mirrors beneath the high mountains is breathtaking.

We caught our first lovely view after driving across the golf course and then proceeded through the Gap of Dunloe. The gap is a gloomy mountain pass cut through the rough rocky slope in the hills between the Toomies and the McGillicuddy Reeks. We passed Arbutus Cottage and Kate Kearney's Cottage where further jaunting cars were available or ponies to go through the gap. One girl we passed was obviously riding a horse for the first time. For five miles we drove along a narrow defile through scenes of savage magnificence. On all sides and angles colossal boulders precariously poised, seemed waiting to crash down. Along the pass ferns mosses and wild flowers grow profusely. From the interstices rocks, trees and shrubs shoot out fantastically, while the purple heather and the golden goose make a blaze of colour. Wild goats flock among the rocks and every now and then we could see a hardy mountain sheep. The winding road has shady graves of fir, larch, stunted oaks and mountain ash.

The point where the path is narrowest the peasants call the Pike. From it onward the mountains begin to recede and the pass is more open until crossing the shoulder of the Purple Mt past the 3 expansions of the Commeen Thomeen Lakes, into which St Patrick is said to have driven the last serpent, we suddenly came upon a magnificent view. Ladies View looking back along the valley.

Ruins of various abbeys, castles and towers? clad, we passed along the way. In a most desolate part we saw an elderly lady standing outside a mountain stone cottage, with her black shawl over her head.

At Windy Gap – souvenirs were being sold. I bought a woven scarf. Up there too, I talked with people visitors from Australia.

It was a long days drive for Bobby over very rough terrain. At Listowel he waited to see a radio friend and a very blaze' young lad about 12 came over to beg 1d or a cigarette. We wondered what his counterpart in Australia would have asked for. We had been told that people still beg in Ireland. A young lass might have a baby wrapped in a shawl, not necessarily her own, but a stage prop. On the way back it began to rain quite heavily which slowed down our progress and it was nearly midnight before we reached home.

On Sunday we went to church at the Roscrea Church of Ireland which has a very old entrance gate part of an earlier chapel and a round tower not far way. The service was very much like an Anglican and the clergyman quite a young man with an Irish lilt in his voice. There I met Mrs Lawrence, widow of a previous canon who was recovering from a cataract operation. She was a charming woman with a lovely speaking voice.

After church we drove to the Slieve Bloom Mts Lookout where we could see trenches where peat had been cut. Afterwards we went to Kinnetty to Francis William's place for afternoon tea. Her husband is a big farmer and there are 5 boys and Iris. The ceiling in the lounge room has an Italian plaster with Lazarus and Dues and the dog licking his sores. They had more mod cons in the house – radio, washing machine, electric light and aga type cooker. Marjorie in the old house still uses the wooden "keeler" for churning, a wooden strainer and separates twice a day. Every second day she bakes a brown damper loaf.

In the old kitchen at "Fancroft" were old sheep brands and enormous beams in the ceiling, deers antlers and on the walls polished copper pots. An ancestor was a tinker by trade in the days when each farmer needed a trade when seasons were bad.

We called also on Florrie – Mrs Rowe, a daughter of cousin John Whitten whose first wife died. Florrie and Joseph who now works for Shell in Dublin, had been brought up by Mr and Mrs Sheckleton a childless aunt and uncle. Florrie had a lovely skin and very sweet expression and Mrs Sheckleton seemed quite a gentle, ruddy coloured woman. They had met Mae Betts.

Later we drove to John Whittens, a big good-looking man in his 30s with 7 children by his second wife – a big strong plain woman. Jeannie, soft-voiced, tall and fair had done some very nice fancywork for the show. Kathleen, Valerie, Henry and Anthony were among the boys.

The fuchsia hedges are very pretty and bands of gypsies seem to be about, usually with picturesque piebald horses. Apparently the people are poverty stricken. They have a lower standard of living than we have and hygiene and diet are poorer. For instance with the coming of myxomatosis people wondered what the children would have for their stew in the winter to eke out the potatoes. Nevertheless, they mostly have a few pounds tucked away and they are happy, as a man in the train explained to me.

On Monday after gathering mushrooms in the fresh wind with the dog and the cat, I had some for breakfast. In the afternoon I called on Luttrells at the butcher's shop – he had met Dad. Then we went for tea to Mrs Lawrence who has brothers by the name of Frend in the Gunnedah District.

The diesel train broke down and was delayed an hour at Ballybrophy. I had a long talk to an interesting man from County Limerick who had just left his daughter at Roscrea convent. He spoke of drama and the Irish actress who had been playing St Joan in London.

He also spoke of Druid circles of stones whose antiquity goes back 2,000 years BC. Fortunately the Cork train was also late, so the boat waited.

Arriving in Liverpool next morning in a keen biting wind and drizzling rain a little boy of about 7 kept whistling: "The more we are together".

On the staircase at "Fancroft" is the crest with the sheaf of wheat and the reaping book and farming tools.

Marjorie showed me portraits where there is a quill pen and the date 1837. Somewhere in the family were Talliots who were Quakers.

## **Entry in a John Brown Bible - 26.1.1813**

December 14<sup>th</sup> 1857

Robert Whitten 1<sup>st</sup> Nov 1822

William 27<sup>th</sup> Oct 1823

Matilda 6<sup>th</sup> April 1826

Eliza 30<sup>th</sup> Jan 1827

Mary 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 1828, died 14<sup>th</sup> Feb 1907

Edward 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1830, died 15<sup>th</sup> April 1834

John 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1833, died 21<sup>st</sup> July 1879 (Marjorie's grandfather)

Edward 21<sup>st</sup> March 1835

Anne 13<sup>th</sup> Nov 1836

Joseph 26<sup>th</sup> August 1838

Anthony 1<sup>st</sup> Sept 1840, Feb 1914

Henry 23<sup>rd</sup> Aug 1942

Margaret wife of John died Feb 16<sup>th</sup> 1890

John Whitten v Margarit Lucas

Anne 1858-1877

Elizabeth 1860-1863

Edward 1863-1930

Robert 1865-1914

Martha 1867-1928

Joseph Abraham 1868-1918

Margaret Jane 1872-1896

Francis Elizabeth 1876

Mary 22<sup>nd</sup> Oct 1893 (Molly)

John 6<sup>th</sup> Feb 1895

George Washington 18<sup>th</sup> Aug 1896

Robert 23<sup>rd</sup> Aug 1897

Edward 8<sup>th</sup> Feb 1899-1943

Marjorie Isabelle 21<sup>st</sup> Feb 1907

Francis Elinor 17<sup>th</sup> June 1913

Mrs Woods - 12 Trees Road, Mt Merrion Park, Black Rock Dublin

To whom Marjorie pays headsent.

"My husband and I are first cousins, our great great grandfather was Anthony Whitten who lived at Elmville Clonmel.

This Anthony had 2 brothers Edward who was Marjorie's great great grandfather lived in 'Fancroft" died in 1850 and Robert who lived in Roscrea also."