

The Gathering: Going Down the Goosebump Trail

Words & Photos by Mariellen Ward



After a very long day of driving the ribbon-narrow lanes of County Cork, I arrived at the tidy village of Castletownroche. I got out of the car and walked the main street, from a newish Catholic church at one end to a spooky Anglican one at the other, in about 15 minutes. And that included stopping at the Spinning Wheel Pub Museum, founded in 1791, and bantering with a very drunk man sporting a bushy red beard, then buying ice cream from a pretty young woman with a sing-song accent in a brightly lit convenience store.





My ancestral village was real. It really existed. People lived there. It was no longer just a name on a map, an imagined place, fogged over by time and generations, like a mythical village that appears from mist once every hundred years. I had a 20-page written family history with me in the car that mentioned Castletownroche twice, and now I was walking its streets. Everything else in my search for my family roots in Ireland was murky, but Castletownroche was real, and it was about to get better.

A very short drive to the outskirts brought me to the wrought-iron gates of Blackwater Castle. Driving in, I seemed to enter a very different world from that of the simple, almost austere village. The sky was gently overcast, the early autumn day warm, and the long drive, shaded by trees, transported me into a lush, green world of deep quiet and solitude. Finally I rounded a corner and there it was—an imposing ancient tower and grey stone castle surrounded by a generous, forested property that dropped into a ravine threaded by the River Awbeg (a tributary of Blackwater River). I felt as if time was standing still, as if I had entered a European landscape painting.

Patrick Nordstrom, current owner/manager of the 12th century Blackwater Castle, showed me around with entrancing tales from the castle's history. And then I got the goosebumps genealogist Helen Kelly promised.



The Gathering

I was in Ireland for The Gathering Ireland 2013, a year-long festival of events to celebrate Irish culture and history, and to entice and entertain visitors, especially the Irish diaspora. Though The Gathering was launched by the Irish Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister for Tourism and is being supported by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, it is largely a grassroots initiative, composed of events put together by Irish people, communities and the diaspora.

When I was in Ireland for my Gathering trip, I met Director of Market Development for Fáilte Ireland John Concannon. John told me they consider The Gathering an overwhelming success. Where they expected 500 events, they got 5,000.

Events have included clan gatherings, traditional music festivals, events celebrating famous Irish writers, a leprechaun hunt, and even the world's longest Riverdance line: 16,093 people from 43 countries danced their way into the record books on July 21, 2013 in Dublin!

An unexpected side effect of The Gathering initiative was a major morale boost for the country, which has suffered a sharp economic downturn the last few years. The expected effect was to lure the diaspora population back and help them connect to their mother country. In my case, anyway, it worked.



Walking the Ground in County Cork

My research revealed that my Whelan and Roche ancestors came from County Cork. Whelan was my Nana's maiden name and Hannah Roche was one of my great-great-great grandmothers. She apparently came from Castletownroche and immigrated to Canada in 1823, marrying my ancestor Peter Whelan in about 1840.

According to Patrick Nordstrom, Blackwater was originally a Roche castle—hence the name of the village, Castletownroche. But it fell to Cromwell's forces in 1649. The last Lord Roche to own and inhabit the castle, Maurice, was away when the Cromwellian forces attacked, leaving his wife, Lady Ellen, in charge of defense. Apparently she acquitted herself very bravely and held off the British forces for as long as she could. But in the end, the castle fell and Lady Ellen was imprisoned, then hanged in 1652.

Since my name is Mariellen, and I have had neck problems most of my life, I got the promised goosebumps when Patrick told me this as we stood on the castle grounds. Was there some mysterious connection between Ellen Roche and me, perhaps something in the collective unconscious of our family—if indeed we are even related? Are my life-long neck problems the result of past-life karma?

This was the highlight of my Gathering trip to Ireland because it hinted at the depth of mystery behind life, family and destiny; because it gave me goosebumps; but mostly, because I felt I had found a castle I could call my own. ■

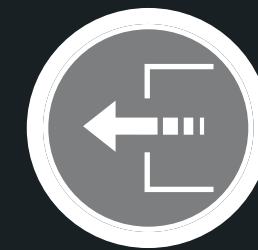




Table of
Contents

NEXT

Cycling the Aran Islands

