

26 May, 2005

Hello again F/friends—

Reeve and Sabina arrived safely. We rented a car, and made our way around the south of Ireland, combining touring and hunting for old Meeting Houses. We took a break from pursuing Job and visited Doolin--a tiny sea side village within sight of the Aran Islands, and famous for traditional music--this was another of my favorite places during my visit in Ireland in 1988. So here's "Following Job, Part VI"

Scott Journal , Part VI

30 April, Saturday--Back in the South, in Drogheda--said to have been home to some of my ancestors. Today I'm just a tourist. Visited an Arts festival and a classic street market, held on this exact same site every Saturday for 688 years--everything imaginable for sale: clothes, bedding, CDs, great rounds of soda bread, fireplace grates.

Then caught bus to monastery ruins of Monasterboice, site of two of Ireland's most famous High Crosses, very large and intricately decorated with various scenes, mostly from the Bible. Bus, however, didn't exactly go to Monasterboice. Driver dropped me in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere and said just follow the signs. So Hi Ho, Away We Go--around a round-about (traffic circle to you), up one narrow country lane and down another--and there were the ruins. In addition to the crosses, there was a tower which was treasury, watch tower, and refuge for the locals from Viking raids. Couldn't have worked very well--it was sacked several times. Extremely nasty, brutal people the Vikings, and probably most of us with Irish blood also have some Viking as well.

On the way back, a persistent drizzling mist descended. The joys of car-less touring in Ireland! But I was laughing!

1 May, Sunday--No Meeting for Worship--Drogheda Meeting only meets once a month. Afternoon trip to New Grange--one of the greatest prehistoric monuments of Europe. A large passage tomb, with many intricate and beautiful carvings on surrounding stones. Entrance so narrow one had to duck and turn sideways to get into the high domed chamber--not for the claustrophobic--but amazing, just as a work of engineering. A narrow slot over the entry admits a long ray of light at sunrise for several days at the time of the winter solstice. ("Prehistoric" does not mean "primitive," and certainly not "slow-witted.")

4 May, Wednesday--At a lovely B&B in Bray. Delightful friendly hosts--a genial retired policeman and a retired teacher, who tutors people in Irish (which Ireland has been struggling to revive--with minimal success--for over 50 years) and makes wonderful home made bread and jams.

Bray is charming, a busy little seaside resort--at this season, moderately tourist free. (Anyone who sets a toe in the Irish Sea at this time of year usually makes a swift exit.)

5 May, Thursday--Bus to Wicklow, which would charm the socks off even the most hardened tourist. It perches on a high rocky bluff over the mouth of the Leitrim River, which provides a small deep water port. It is also home to about 3 1/2 monuments--a tiny ruined castle, a Franciscan priory (also in ruins), a large statue dedicated to the generations of Irish rebels who fought to throw off the oppressive rule of England, and the notorious Wicklow Gaol, where many of those same rebels languished while waiting to be transported to the prison colonies of Australia.

Job visited the Meeting House which once stood facing the side wall of the jail, just across a tiny lane, quite near the one-time army barracks. Very odd place for a Meeting House, and I speculate it could have had a strange impact on Job, though he doesn't mention it. He does comment on the oppressiveness of the Anglican Church, which was so full of a sense of its own virtue and correctness that it required the entire population to support it through heavy tithes, and had set itself the task of harshly "correcting" the obstinately benighted views of the Catholic population. It didn't think much of the Dissenting Churches either; at least they were Protestants, but Dissenters weren't allowed enter universities, or to serve in Parliament.

The more I read about the 1790's in Ireland, the better I understand Irish bitterness against the English. I find myself asking not only "How could they be so brutal?" but "How could they be so stupid?" Some members of Parliament were genuinely puzzled by the failure of the Irish to recognize the obvious superiority of the religion and way of life that were being imposed on them.

The rebellion finally exploded in 1798, but in 1793, there had been small uprisings, and various "subversives" were already resident in Wicklow Gaol. While Scott was in England, the British government declared war on the Revolutionary French Government, and feared, not without reason, that France would seek support in Ireland for spreading its frightening revolutionary ideas abroad. Job would have seen the soldiers from the nearby barracks patrolling the streets.

War was in the air, and Job writes of this feeling--though he interpreted it as a forewarning of the coming wrath of God which he was sure was about to fall on the "mystical Whore of Babylon" (the Anglican Church) and all who followed or cooperated with her. But when the explosion came, it was not the wrath of God but the wrath of the Irish. Job refers to the worship at Wicklow as being "painfully exercising." Maybe it was all those groaning prisoners across the lane.

8 May, First Day--Most of past two days spent making arrangements for Reeve and Sabina's arrival this week, and winding up research at Pearse St. Library in Dublin.

To Meeting at Monkstown--not one Scott visited--it didn't exist then--but interesting history anyway. Monkstown and much of the rest of the south side of Dublin Bay developed because wealthy Dublin Quakers wanted a convenient way to get down to their "country" residences in Monkstown--so they arranged to have a railroad built, one of the first in Ireland; it was nicknamed "the Quaker Railroad." It has now turned into the delightful DART Line, which whisks passengers up and down the coast from Howth to Greystones.

13 May, Friday--Back in Dublin after two days arranging car rental, etc., etc., for Reeve and Sabina's arrival. They landed safely yesterday, and are installed at a Dublin hostel. Their astonishing quantity of luggage required a larger car, so had to redo rental arrangements.

14 May, Saturday--Piled all our stuff into the DART, whisked down to Bray, re-piled luggage into our car and headed for Glendalough. Spectacular weather--bright sun every day since R&S arrived--they'll get a completely wrong idea of Irish weather. Spent afternoon exploring the once immense monastic settlement there--founded in 498 by St. Kevin, who came there to be a hermit--and soon attracted many students--and now hordes of tourists (one of many Irish ironies). Valley itself is one of Ireland's most beautiful places, two lakes tucked between steep forested hillsides.

On to hostel at Rathdrum.

15 May, Sunday--Thought about trying to get to worship at Enniscorthy, in Co. Wexford, but too far. So just set a leisurely pace and went to look for Enniscorthy MH. A major addition has been made to it since Scott visited there, but the old building remains, and the site is lovely--right on the River Slaney across from the center of town. Yet they faced the entry away from the river, up the hill. No distractions from "the world" here!

Also, by a series of odd coincidences, wound up at the new museum dedicated to telling the story of the Rebellion of 1798 and the most bloody and decisive defeat of the rebels at the Battle of Vinegar Hill, just a short way on the other side of the Meeting House on the north side of the river. (Friends persisted in attending worship anyway, and had to walk past bodies lying in the street, which they also helped to bury.) Co. Wexford was the center of revolutionary activity in the south, and again, local Friends must have been aware of rising tensions in the town, and Scott no doubt heard of this. The museum was very interesting--as Reeve observed, the Irish are great at celebrating defeat.

The Irish Free State was finally established in the early 1920's, by which time England was thoroughly sick of those troublesome people across the way. Now Ireland and the UK are great allies and all the the rebels wanted has been accomplished--in the south anyway. One has to ask why arrogant and pigheaded people had to put two nations through all that ghastliness.

16 May, Monday--Off for the southern coast, via Taghmon and New Ross. Taghmon supposed to be the site of a ruined MH--diligently drove up and down the narrow road where it was supposed to be--found nothing.

Different story in New Ross, a pleasant harbor city on the River Barrow. Here the one time MH sits in a rather lordly position at the end of the main shopping street. Only an imposing facade remains, much altered, but it suggests Friends here were inclining toward the prosperous worldliness that troubled Scott.

Headed for Tramore by back roads, hoping to avoid the congestion of Waterford, when suddenly we saw a most remarkable ruin in a field near the road. Turned out to be remains of Dunbrody Abbey, but unlike the ruins of Glendalough and other more famous places, it had only a tiny visitor center across the road, and that was closed. And there sat the Abbey in a field of unmown grass, the lonely wreck of a once beautiful building. The passing tourist can roam through at will, but we were the only ones there. Birds, wind, and off in the distance, a glimpse of the sea.

17 May, Tuesday--Set off from our pleasant hostel in Tramore to visit the port city of Waterford. In its way, it was the New Bedford of Ireland. In the 18th century, Quakers were only 2% of the population, but played a major role in Waterford commerce. As the local librarian put it, "If it moved, they were involved in it." They built ships, operated shipping lines, and supplied them with sails, ropes, and sea biscuits--now known to the world as Jacobs Cream Crackers . They started the Waterford Glass company. They lived elegantly, and built large and beautiful 18th century homes in the center of town--and a Meeting House to match. Job saw the beautiful neo-classical facade, which is still much as it was, and the elegant lobby with a broad sweeping staircase that divides at the half-landing. Hey--it's indisputably simple--but it's the kind of simplicity that costs plenty to design and build. It's now been beautifully remodeled as as an arts and education center, with a theater in the round occupying the former worship room. A fitting irony, given that these Friends were very strict on following all the rules of Quaker behavior--plain speech, plain dress, no marrying out, and definitely no visiting of theaters. One young woman of the Waterford glass family was dealt with for attending "assemblies" (fancy evening parties), and card parties. She was unrepentant.

18 May, Wednesday--Lost our great weather--gale force winds and furious rain squalls left me trudging through Youghal with a soggy map in hand, trying to find the MH. I did--perched high on the very steep hill that overlooks the harbor, but Job would never recognize it--it's a private home, and has acquired a third story with a conservatory on the end--must have a fantastic view.

21 May, Saturday--Took Thursday off in Midleton, to see Cobh--the port of Cork from which many Irish emigrants left for America, probably including mine. Also famous for being the Titanic's last port of call, and the place where the traumatized survivors of the torpedoed liner, the Lusitania, were taken ashore. Friday dithered about whether to go into Cork--traffic as bad as Dublin, and Meeting House Scott knew is long gone--decided not worth it just to go to look at a space now occupied by something else.

Now in Doolin, in Co. Clare. This is the west of Ireland--the part that looks like every postcard you ever saw and even though the traffic has tripled, on the road, cow pats are still more common than cars. Doolin remains the traditional music capital of Ireland, but the great pub that used to be the center of it all has become a victim of its own success--it's expanded, and now hordes of tourists sit around, eat fish and chips, and listen to other people perform--not a real "session." (It's barely a real pub.) Rumor has it that two other pubs about 3/4 mile down the road have taken up the fallen

standard. R&S off to the Aran Islands while I catch up with the electronic journal. Check out rumor when they return?

22 May, Sunday--Rumor true! Hallelujah! Walked back from pub last night in the moonlight. When I stood still, I could hear the roar of the sea.

23 May, Monday--Yesterday toured the starkly barren and beautiful Burren area of north-west Co. Clare--famous especially for its prehistoric remains, including the most photographed one in Ireland, the Poulnabrone portal tomb, a wedge shaped construct of carefully balanced flat boulders. It's surprisingly small seen from the road, standing starkly alone in the middle of a "field" of the same rock that elsewhere in this area is covered only by a few inches of soil. A bleak, poor land--known in modern times as the poorest parish in Ireland--yet people came here thousands of years ago--and stayed. This tomb has a mysterious "presence" for lack of a better word--and the forty or so tourists were oddly respectful in their manner. It seems to command us to remember "We were here. Attention must be paid. You are the newcomers. We were here long before you--remember us!"

A wild night last night--high wind all night, bouts of slashing rain, very cold. We all slept restlessly. Rain let up long enough to pack up the car--drove out to the ferry slip to see the rocky beach. Tremendous surf--appeared to be crashing at least half way up the walls of the little cove to the south--which must be at least 150--200 feet high. To think I used to imagine I would have enjoyed the seafaring life many of my Long Island ancestors followed!

On to Athlone.

24 May, Tuesday--AM off to visit Clonmacnoise, the other most famous monastic ruin in Ireland, not so spread out as Glendalough but wonderful site at crossroads of early Ireland--River Shannon was bridged here for main east-west road. Founder St. Kieran (548 AD) definitely not a hermit.

Afternoon off in pursuit of Job again, to Roscrea (or Ross Crea, as he spells it). An attractive, bustling little market town perched (like so many) on a hill--seems to have kept its utterly confusing medieval street plan intact. Searched Rosemary St. to no avail until someone suggested we asked at the library. Librarian sent us to the office of Eamonn Stafford, a charming elderly elf, who spearheaded the effort to get Roscrea to join in the celebration of 350 years of Quakerism in Ireland. He walked us back to Rosemary St., where he showed us the MH--through a rusty hole in a solid Iron gate--someone else had the key. It snuggles up to the wall of the castle--as does the MH in Neath (Wales) and the long vanished MH in Cork. The Neath site was given to Friends, but did these other Friends have some sort of thing about castles? Seems such an odd choice of site.

Eamonn himself is a convinced Friend, and is working with others and with the local historical Society to open the old MH for worship again--meanwhile they have Meeting for Worship in his office on Friday nights.

25 May, Wednesday--Swept through three MH sites today, getting lost several times on the way, due to Irish penchant for omitting rural road signs at crucial intersections. At one place, we found a sign that said "Edenderry 5 km." About a kilometer further down the road the next sign said "Edenderry 6 km." This is a very strange country.

At Edenderry, the caretaker was at home--so was able to get some interior photos.

Then off into the Bog of Allen to find the site of Timahoe Meeting. The Bog is, of course, a peat bog, and Timahoe isn't a village, it's a parish, and 'there's no there there"--a few houses are strung along a narrow road, but there's no MH--just a burial ground on an island of solid ground in the middle of the bog. This we found on the proverbial back side of beyond by dint of asking a knowledgeable man unloading crates of drinks at an isolated pub: "Quaker burying ground? Right up that road. Big stone wall around it. Can't miss it."

Just as we began to think we had missed it, it appeared. Timahoe was a feeble Meeting when JS was there, and was laid down in 1806. However, the BG is carefully maintained by a historical society, and has a large stone with a plaque on it standing inside the gate, which explains that it was unveiled by US President Nixon in honor of the Quakers of Timahoe--because his Milhouse ancestors emigrated from there.

Then--on the Ballitore, where JS visited, came down with smallpox, and died. For that, you'll have to wait.