

The Auld Sod

by John Farrow

Ireland can easily get you in her grasp with the lush greenness of her rolling countryside and the beauty of her melodious speech. All it takes is a run down a country lane to become immersed in the history and legend and magic that has been handed down for generations and more.

And if your roots have grown in her rich soil, there is an unmistakable tug of remembrance, of belonging, of being among the familiar even if only in a dream handed down in the subconscious. Soon, the tales that bind one to a place come seeping out.

A quiet stream winds through a valley in the lonely hills of Ulster, where men have tended their flax and sheep and cattle and told their stories since time immemorial. Stories of Queen Macha, the wife of Nevry who gave her name to the pretty little town nearby, the town of Ard Macha, or "Macha's height," known throughout Europe as a center of religion, learning and craftwork early in the First Millennium.

Have no fear of what lies underneath your falling foot -- there are no snakes in the valley or anywhere else in Ireland, it is said, because of St. Patrick. His first church was at the base of a hill in the town, the first Christian church in Ireland. A local chieftain converted to the new religion and gave Patrick the hilltop for a new church, and one has stood on that spot for more than 15 centuries.

The Vikings raided the area many times and it was not until Brian Ború of Muenster gave his life to end the Viking reign of terror near Baile Átha Cliath, or Dublin, with a decisive victory over the foe from the Northland. His body was buried in the church of St. Patrick on the hill in the town, now called Armagh.

A narrow road winds through the valley in the lonely hills south of Armagh, not much more than a boreen, really, following the old cow path heading to the Market Hill. These hills are well-settled now, unlike the rugged Mountains o' Mourne nearby that have resisted taming to this day and whose craggy granite peaks are the highest points in Ireland.

The Famine ravaged these hills as it did elsewhere, and the rocky land could not support all who tried to dwell there. Near the village of Derrycughan, a man left his father's rock-lined farm after burying his mother in a churchyard in the valley. He sailed for America, never to return.

They say that once you leave, you can never go home again. In a literal sense, perhaps that is true. But in another, deeper sense, you never really leave, either.

He came to America, married, had a family and

was buried there. And so followed his daughter. And his daughter's daughter had a son, who returned to the valley.

It was during the time of The Troubles. Near Armagh, on the way to the town of Markethill, there is the town of Portadown. Marchers and police were everywhere. Orangemen on one side and Catholics on the other. *Which side are you?* How can you tell? Why should it matter? He passed through in silence.

Even in Markethill there were police checkpoints and watch-towers and barbed wire. *You can't worship my God if you are over there*, they were saying.

It was disorienting in such a beautiful land and he was glad to leave. The little village of Derrycughan is today but a crossroads of abandoned rock farmsteads. A few hardy souls still cling to the land, but most have moved on. The little church is still there, however, and continues to tend the souls of those who remain, both the living and the those who sleep nearby. It was quiet here, and peaceful.

The church bells began to toll as the service let out, and a number of the older members huddled to discuss the visitors wandering among the gravestones. Finally, a little white-haired lady with sparkling eyes ventured forth and sang to him in the beautifully lilting sing-song manner that is the essence of Irish speech, "Are you ancestorng, dear?"

And of course, he was. As he explained the connection to his great-great-grandparents, a twinkle came to her eye and she exclaimed, "Oh, you must ring up Mary Magee over in Rathfriland. She was one of yours, she was!"

And so she was. Mrs. Magee came to the door, the spitting image of his grandmother. Over tea, they talked and laughed and discovered distant and not-so-distant family connections. And for once that day, nothing else seemed to matter.□

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