It's fitting that Kevin O'Hara completed the introduction to his book on June 16. That's Bloomsday, of course (its centenary just past), when James Joyce's characters walked the streets of Dublin in Ulysses. Like that slow-working Irish master of words, O'Hara took 25 years to complete his own grand tale of a perambulation of Ireland. A peripatetic masterpiece! And for my money I'd rather read O'Hara than Joyce (here'sy! yessiree!), although if you'd told me I'd so enjoy a book about a young Irish American walking his ass (excuse me, donkey) around Ireland, I'd have cast my eyes to heaven and put a wager on the table to the contrary ... and, like the old lads at the pub where this adventure begins, I'd have lost.

Without qualification, this is the best book I've read in five years—maybe seven. It rolls along at donkey-cart speed, telling with humor, humility, and dignity of a pilgrimage undertaken in 1979. As O'Hara's wife, a woman with patience beyond that of Job and the love of a big big heart, remembers:

this travel bug was even beyond himself. It wasn't that he wanted to get away from me, or run off with another woman. It was his love of Ireland. How could I wage a battle against mountains, lakes, and green fields? His urges were even beyond the understanding of his mom and dad, blaming it on his year in Vietnam. But it was deeper than that, and we were all helpless; we had to let him go and pray he'd come back again full circle.

Though it was undertaken "widdershins" (counterclockwise), the 1,800-mile journey, which lasted from April to December 1979—beginning and ending at Rattigan's Pub near Ballagh, near his grandmother Kelly's home in County Roscommon—took O'Hara completely around the Irish coast. He beat all odds near his grandmother Kelly's home in County Roscommon—1979—beginning and ending at Rattigan's Pub near Ballagh, the 1,800-mile journey, which lasted from April to December 1979. As O'Hara's wife, a woman with patience beyond that of Job and the love of a big big heart, remembers:

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Eventually the hooting turns to praise and admiration, even if he still doesn't know how to properly harness a donkey. We learn, as he does, many lessons from the humble (and not so humble, by turn) beast that proves a true companion.

After reading this book, it's easy to understand how Irish folktales came to be, for this is one in the making. It's chockablock with characters like the old fella who appears after a funeral procession passes, relating how Irish stoats hold funerals, then quizzing the author in riddles. Or the stout woman who stands herself before the cart and demands that O'Hara stop and meet her beautiful, marriageable daughter—a damsel who remains out of sight and, in a voice that could belong to the lusty Maevé, ancient Queen of Connaught, queries: "Why should I marry one man when I'm pretty enough to enjoy the company of a hundred?" No folk tale is complete without a hag, and O'Hara meets his one-toothed crone, who brags:

There was a fine nurse down the Gort Road who said I could work me tooth better than a soldier could work a Swiss Army knife. Why, I can pare an apple with it, or peel the odd spud if I put me mind to it."

He meets peasants and old lords. He spends a night with the travelers (tinkers). And yet nowhere does O'Hara suffer from, or visit upon us, any "Paddy-whackery"—no sentimental "shamrocks and shillelaghs" notions of Ireland or the Irish. He's too close to the soil and the people for any of that carrying-on. What you will find here is the true pilgrim's journey, told in all its rollicking good spirit, which at the core possesses a humility that will knock you down. One of the human hedge apparitions speaks of the blessings of "memory, truth, and respect." This book runs long on all three; to that triad, add humor and a celebration of language that will linger in your ears long after the final page is turned.

REVIEWER: Kathleen Cain is the Bloomsbrarian and a contributing editor at TBR.