

Last of the Donkey Pilgrims

A Man's Journey Through Ireland

KEVIN O'HARA

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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 (heresy? 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 placed against him, not only by the "Four Masters"—regulars at Rattigan's—but by those of half the country as well, people who, even well into the journey, hooted and hollered with derision at this mad Yank as he approached their villages—not *riding* his donkey, mind you, as any Irish person with the sense God gave a goose would have done—but walking beside her.

His approach was humble. His donkey pulled a cart, a still-frequent method of travel in Ireland at the time, though rarely seen these days. His decision brought near-anguish to "Jimmy Mac, the Horse Man" of chapter 2 who procured and trained both O'Hara and "Missie Mickdermott," the ass that hated pigs (but loved kittens) and could travel all Ireland. "You're the talk of the parish!" an aunt complained, though eventually she helped, as did many others when they realized the perseverance with which O'Hara undertook the journey.

In all the days and nights of traveling, he never emptied a pocket to pay a bill for room and board. He was turned away only a dozen times when he asked for shelter. And only in the village of Kilkeel, a small enclave in the north of Ireland, was he met with no more than the wave of a curtain at the window. As for accommodations, he slept in barns, byres, sheds, abandoned houses—once, even, in the dog's bed. A curiosity himself, he became the first English speaker to be interviewed on the all-

Irish (Gaelic) radio station, Radió na Gaeltachta (no mean feat). His path was tracked and told in all the papers, local and national. Eventually recognizing the true pilgrim and character that he was, people along the way invited him in for a bed, a meal, and the curiosity of his company—which he has now repaid with grace and good humor. In 68 delightfully tight, well-focused chapters, he brings us along out of Rattigan's Pub and back again. The language is by turns rich and rollicking:

This village [Parknasilla], a favorite of George Bernard Shaw's, was no favorite of mine. There is nothing enjoyable about walking an ass past the Great Southern Hotel, where a twitch of her donkey brain littered a score of well-formed briquettes before the disdainful gasps of the hotel's brandy-sniffing, yacht-tanned guests.

Along the way we shoulder in with him through skin-slicing sheets of rain off the Atlantic. We laugh, pray, and cry. We suffer his humiliation as people line up outside villages to hoot him in. 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 Maeve, ancient Queen of Connaught, queries: "Why should I marry one man when I'm pretty enough to enjoy the company of a hundred?" No folktale 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 "sham-rocks 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.