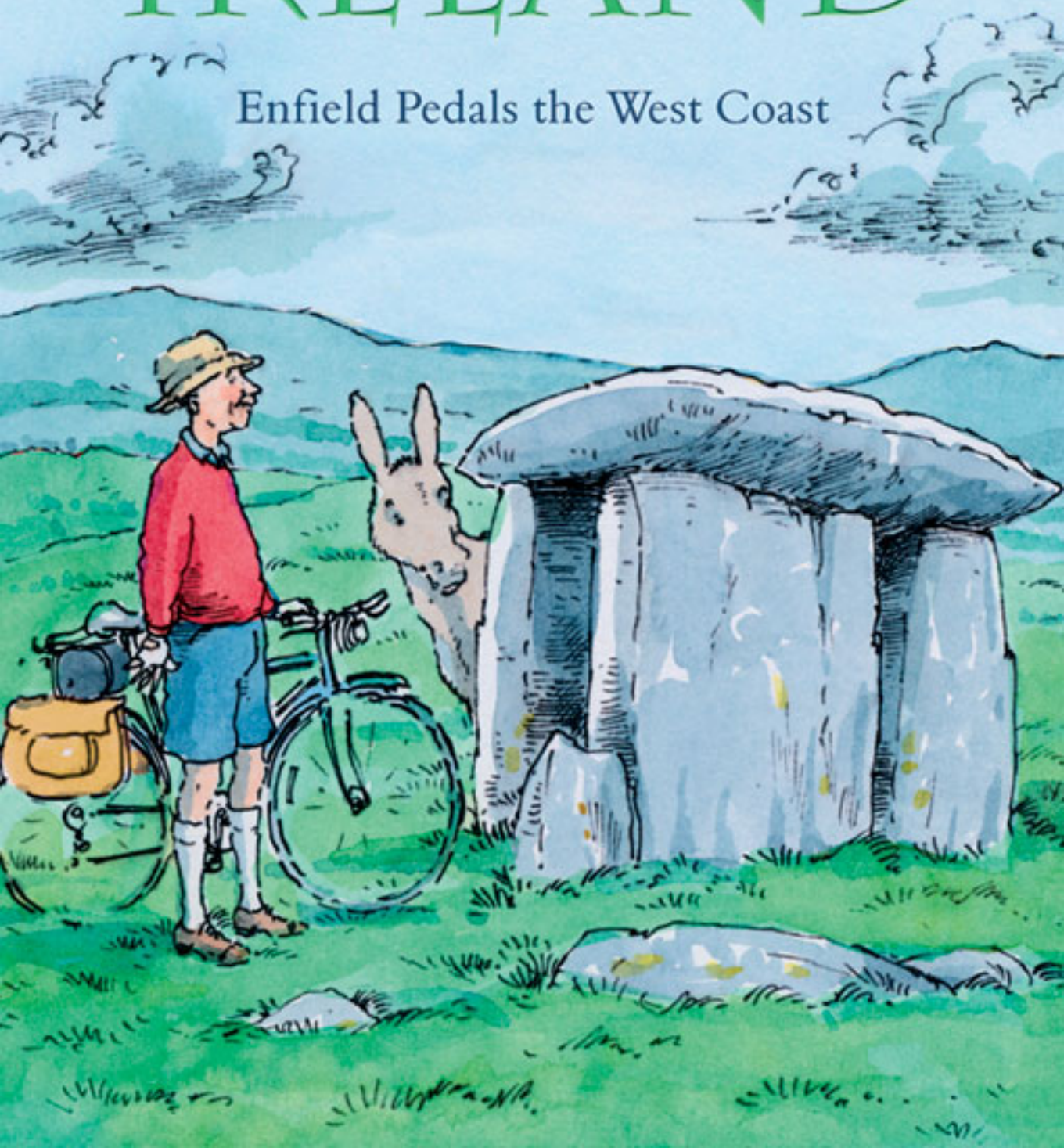


EDWARD ENFIELD
FREEWHEELING
THROUGH
IRELAND

Enfield Pedals the West Coast



FREEWHEELING THROUGH IRELAND

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CONTENTS

Preface.....	5
From Cork to Galway.....	9
Some Preliminary Encounters with the Irish.....	73
The Second Trip – Clare and Galway.....	93
Mayo.....	131
Sligo and Donegal.....	159
Dublin.....	183
Kerry and Cork.....	196
Bibliography.....	220



PREFACE

This book is about my experiences on my bicycle in Ireland, and where it seemed appropriate I have included some passages of Irish history. I ought to follow the usual practice and express my thanks to various learned persons who kindly read the draft and removed a number of errors, but unfortunately I knew no such learned persons whom I could ask, so I have to risk it on my own. Possibly I may shelter behind the dictum of that great Irish writer Oliver Goldsmith, that ‘A book may be amusing with numerous errors, or it may be very dull without a single absurdity.’

My thanks are due above all to those many people who spoke so freely to me on my travels, even when they were faced with my recording machine. I must also thank Miriam Somers, who found out some facts that I needed. She belongs to the organisation Heritage Island, and I recommend anyone going to Ireland to get their Touring Guide (address: 11–13 Clarence Street, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin). Otherwise, if I have made any mistakes, those who find them will enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that they know more than I do.

I definitely have to thank Jennifer Barclay of Summersdale Publishers, who sent me back my first draft peppered with shrewd and penetrating editorial comments, such as ‘Why not?’, ‘Tell us more’ and ‘I don’t understand’. I attended to every one of her comments as well as I could, and while it is not for me

to say the book is any good, it is better than it would have been without her.

There was one point on which she would not let me have my way. I wanted to put on the cover the words 'Complete and Unexpurgated'.

'Whatever for?' she said. 'There is nothing to expurgate.'

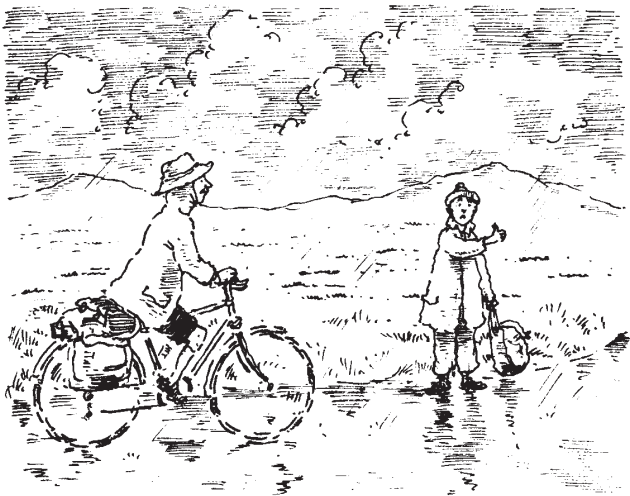
'That is why it is complete.'

'But why say it?'

'Because,' I said, feeling rather pleased at the ingenuity of the idea, 'the grubby-minded people will buy it, hoping to find some grubby bits inside. They will be disappointed when they find there are none, but by then they will have parted with their money so it will not matter.'

Jennifer, however, seemed to think I should stick to writing and leave the marketing to them, so the cover is as you see it, the work of Peter Bailey, whose brilliant illustrations frequently brighten the pages of *The Oldie* magazine. And as there are no grubby bits, I can say, as Goldsmith said of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, 'Such as mistake ribaldry for humour will find no wit.'

To my sister and excellent friend Clarissa



FROM CORK TO GALWAY

I had a number of reasons for not taking my bicycle to Ireland until I was 64, the main one being that I had been twice before and did not like it. I went on holiday to Tipperary in 1946, and again 20 years later to Waterford on business, and it seemed to me that the countryside was dull and the people hopeless.

‘Have you been in Ireland before, Mr Enfield?’ they asked in 1966.

‘Oh yes. After the war in 1946.’

‘Ah, it would have changed a lot since then.’

‘No. Not a bit. Not at all.’ Fortunately they did not press the point, or I would have had to explain that all the buildings which were peeling for lack of paint in 1946 were still in the same state in 1966, and every third shop was still a pub or a bookmaker, and the walls were still supported by men who leant against them with their hands in their pockets, having nothing else to do. When I went for a third time, on the trip I am about to describe, the whole place was transformed. Nearly everyone now lived in a new white bungalow with a trim garden, and all the walls stood up by themselves. This, they say, is due to the Common Agricultural Policy, which poured millions of subsidy into Ireland. They did not produce an extra egg, slice of bacon, or pint of milk but instead they took the money and built themselves houses.

Why, you may ask, did you want to go again? To give a rather roundabout answer to this simple question, I have found that there are three times in life when life itself improves. The first is when you leave school; the second is when your youngest child leaves home; and the third is when you leave off work. At each of these steps your freedom increases. At school you spend most of your time doing what you are told to do by other people, then as long as you have children at home you spend much of your time doing what they want you to do. When the youngest one decamps and there are just the two of you at home, you seem somehow to get a second youth. Finally when you leave off work, that is the best of all, because every day becomes Saturday.

I had been, for many years, a local government officer, and now I was a retired local government officer, which

is a good thing to be as the pension arrangements are admirable. I was, to my great delight, rich in time and comfortably off for money. I had a wife of a most tolerant nature, who remains quite calm if I propose to get on my bike and clear off for a bit. A couple of years before I had had an exhilarating time riding my bicycle across France from the Channel to the Mediterranean, and now I wanted to do something similar. The west of Ireland, they said, was very beautiful, and the whole place had come on a lot since I was last there. Possibly I had misjudged it on my earlier visits so 'To Ireland,' said I to myself, 'I shall go.'

I did not consider for a moment that I might possibly visit Ireland by any means other than by bicycle. When I got back from my bicycle trip across France people asked me, 'Which was the best part?'

'The cycling,' I replied, because it was. There is no better place from which to see a country than the back of a bicycle, and bowling along on your bike is not so much a means of getting somewhere as a pure pleasure in itself. Some of my knowing friends made what they thought were perceptive remarks about Ireland, such as 'wet!' or 'hilly!' But I brushed these aside with some resentment, as they implied I was so delicate that I must not get wet or such a wimp that I could not climb a hill.

A message reached me, via my son, from Craig Brown, that prolific humorous writer who appears in many guises, sometimes as Wallace Arnold, sometimes writing 'The Way of the World' in the *Daily Telegraph*, and sometimes in yet other forms such as a restaurant critic. He said I ought to hitchhike in order to have

interesting conversations with the people who gave me lifts, but the only effect this had was later to make me feel superior as I rode past the people who were waving their thumbs in the air.

I did, however, buy a new bicycle. The Dawes Civic which had carried me across France was now three years old, and bicycle technology had moved on in the interval, or so at least it seemed when my daughter arrived on her new Peugeot and I could not keep up with her. After a good deal of study of catalogues I decided on a Raleigh Pioneer Elite but by the time I had made up my mind it had gone out of date and become last year's model. This did nothing but good. The young man who runs the local cycle shop explained that bicycles are a matter of fashion like motorcars (or like management techniques, which have to be changed every now and then to keep management lecturers in business). Everyone wants the latest model or the latest bicycle, and as the bicycle makers cannot always think up technical advances every year they generally just change the colour or the trimmings and call it the new improved version. The fact that mine was last year's colour, a discreet dark blue, meant that it cost £250 instead of £350, as the man in the shop had bought up a batch at a discount.

He let me try it, and the real advance seemed to be in the gears. For the mountains of Ireland I thought I needed lower gears than the lowest of the six I had on the Dawes. The Raleigh had 21, an idea on which I had previously poured scorn, but now the gear change had been made so smooth that there seemed to be no loss of impetus as I hopped from sprocket to sprocket. The bicycle also

seemed somehow to roll along better on the flat, as well as going up hills better, and I reckoned I was a mile-and-a-half to two miles faster than I had been before.

I changed various things from the Dawes to the Raleigh, such as my comfortable saddle, the electronic speedometer which my daughter had given me for my birthday, and the tool kit. I rode it around to get used to it, took it back to the shop to have it adjusted, and it was in a high state of readiness, and I in a high state of morale, when thieves came in the night with bolt cutters and cut through two padlocks and a steel cable and stole it. It was rather eerie going into the stable where I kept it and looking at the place where it ought to have been to find it was not there. I felt like one of those millionaires who is robbed of an Old Master and says it must have been stolen to order. There were three other bicycles but they were left behind, so the thieves had come looking for mine, knowing it was there, and I must have been under observation by unknown eyes.

Far from being disinterested, as policemen are generally reputed to be about stolen bicycles, the Sussex Constabulary treated it as the big event of the year. They sent an officer round at once who took a detailed statement, noted the frame number, carried off the severed padlocks as evidence, and did everything that could possibly be done short of recovering the bicycle. My first thought then was to go back to the Dawes, but my wife stepped in to say that she had been wondering what to give me for my sixty-fifth birthday and now she knew – another Raleigh Pioneer Elite. Back I went

to the cycle shop owner who drew another from his bulk purchase stock, worked furiously on it to get it ready for touring Ireland, and I had it just long enough to decide that the standard-issue saddle was damnably uncomfortable and to change it for another by the time D-Day arrived.

As will be clear from any Irish prices that I have quoted, my trips were made before the euro had taken over from the Irish pound, or punt, since when they say the Irish have got even more prosperous. Too much so, say some, and they complain that there is an excess of house building, as in England, and even signs of people being in a hurry, which was never an Irish trait. I am sure, though, there are some things which cannot or will not change.

I found that the entire Republic was in a grand conspiracy to make sure I enjoyed myself. The whole place is one vast network of bed-and-breakfast places, so I never needed to book because wherever I was, however remote the region, sooner or later one always turned up. There is a code. The letters 'B&B', a shamrock and 'ITB approved' means the rooms will be to the high standard required by the Irish Tourist Board, and the absence of such a sign means that they may not. 'All rooms en suite' is a frequent addition to this sign. If you turn up in the afternoon they say, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' and they give you a cup of tea and a minor feast such as scones or apple pie, for which they do not charge. Under all circumstances they appear to be delighted to see you.

Furthermore, it is inexpressively beautiful. I had been prepared for this, but not for the variety. At one moment you seem to be in the Lake District; and the

next you are in Cornwall; then you could be on the moon; then you are in a wilderness; and then in the most perfect valley that you have ever seen; and then beside a Norwegian fjord.

By a stroke of genius they had made it possible to cash a Eurocheque anywhere. The banks in the small towns, the grocers in the villages, and even the garages in the middle of nowhere displayed signs saying 'Bureau de Change'. When I think of the enormous security precautions in Italy, when I had to be imprisoned in a glass sentry box as a preliminary even to getting inside the bank, the cheerful way in which the Irish handed over £120 with no fuss was a restorative to one's faith in human nature. Because of all this you can be quite carefree, or at least you can in June, taking no thought for the morrow, but confident that the morrow will take thought for the things of itself. I loaded up my bicycle with much the same sort of stuff that I had taken to France except that I did not take a tent or any camping gear. This was my concession to the 'wet!' school of thought, and anyway the Irish bed-and-breakfast system had such a reputation that it seemed madness to deny myself that part of the experience. I had spent ages poring over maps and making detailed plans before I went to France, most of which was quite unnecessary, so this time I picked up a second-hand, out-of-date guidebook from a charity shop, and made a rough plan that would get me to Connemara, which seemed to be the place that was generally most admired. A good way to get to Connemara seemed to be to start from Cork, and a good place to start for Cork is from Swansea, so for Swansea, by train, I set off.

As the train advances into Wales they begin writing up the names of the stations in Welsh, a language which is very well supplied with consonants but is rather short of vowels. This makes the place names impossible to pronounce and gives the impression that you are in a foreign country, but lost, as there is no means of telling where you are. Swansea, though, was given in English and I found the docks without difficulty. If things are now as they were then, everyone making the night crossing from Swansea to Cork should have a cabin if they can possibly afford it. I did not, and although it was a flat calm, several people managed to be sick as a result of getting drunk. Whether sick or not, drunks tend to be noisy, so the room with the reclining seats was not a quiet place, nor was anywhere else, and certainly not the bar. Although I had three seats to stretch out on, it was not a comfortable trip.

The ferry was called *City of Cork*, and had an Irish girl announcer but was in every other respect Polish. The captain was Polish, the notices were in Polish and the crew were all struggling with the English language with limited success. My daughter, who had crossed a month before, thought that if you said 'My baby has fallen in the sea' it would take ten minutes to find someone who understood what you were worried about.

I had expected the ferry to Cork to arrive in the city of Cork and that I would land among docks and buildings in the centre of things. Not so; I got off at a ferry terminal 12 miles away. My plan for the first day was to cycle to Macroom, which is 24 miles from Cork, or possibly to go a further 10 miles to Ballyvourney, but the ferry terminal being where it was, an extra 12

miles was inevitable. Still, it made the navigation easier as I did not have to pick my way through an urban area, but bowled along on a flat road to the outskirts of Cork, skirted round these outskirts, and pedalled in the direction of Killarney.

I was, I recall, quite cheered by my first impressions, in spite of the fact that I set off under cloud, which later became mist, and then turned to drizzle, and ended up as rain. There were green fields and stone walls and hills and it was lovely. On the ferry I had noticed a young man with a shaved head and a pigtail, whose luggage consisted of a small bag and four Indian clubs such as are used by jugglers. He was hitching for lifts, and I kept passing him, and then finding him in front of me again. The third time I saw him we had some conversation, and I asked him whether the road signs in Ireland were in kilometres or miles, as I could not make it out.

‘Both!’ he said. ‘If the sign is green it is kilometres, and if it is black, it is miles, unless it is kilometres.’

Well, I had not come all this way to find it was just like anywhere else, and I could see why places which seemed quite close on the black signs got further away on the green ones, although I was cycling towards them.

A little way out of Cork I took a minor and very picturesque road which follows the River Lee, as far as Macroom. The Lee is a little river, the road beside it is also little, and the river comes and goes, and the fields and hills are green and it was all very pleasant but I was getting wet. By Macroom I was seriously wet, as the gear which had seen me safely across France did not seem to

care for a steady Irish downpour. I went and dripped all over a shop which had gone to the trouble of advertising itself in England as an antiquarian bookshop. I like that sort of shop as a general rule, and went into this one with hopes of picking up some rare work at a bargain price, but it turned out to deal only in second-hand paperbacks. Never mind, such shops are most useful to us cyclists, who like to travel light and cannot carry many books. I bought for 30p a thriller by Len Deighton, secure in the knowledge that when I finished it I could either throw it away without worrying, or graciously present it to the landlady wherever I was staying, which is what I did. I consulted the man in the shop, who recommended the Mills Inn in Ballyvourney, so, wet as I was, I went the extra ten miles. The road had been easy all the way from the ferry, I left the terminal at half past seven and reached the Mills Inn at two o'clock having done about 50 miles, very delighted with the countryside and not at all tired.

On the way I passed some thoroughbred-looking horses which were clustering under a tree, and they reminded me that there came from somewhere near here one of the best letters I have ever read. The art of letter writing is, I fear, now dead, having been killed by the e-mail, the Internet and the text message. Its death will be a great loss to English literature, but the letter I was thinking about did not come from some eminent English author but from a local landowner. It was addressed to a horse dealer with the aristocratic name of Captain Vere de Vere Hunt, who was in business in London as 'Captain de Vere Hunt's Horse Agency, under the patronage of nearly all the Royal Courts and a majority of the noble

FROM CORK TO GALWAY

families and aristocracy of Europe'. Captain de Vere Hunt published, in 1874, a book called *England's Horses for Peace and War*, and he put at the end a collection of testimonials from satisfied customers plus this lovely letter, addressed from Castle Mary, County Cork:

To Captain de Vere Hunt

My dear Sir – I have received your letter offering me £10,000 for “Caroline”, “Blarney” and “Union Jack”. His Lordship’s offer, through you, is liberal; but the fact is, I race and breed for my own amusement, and being easy on the score of money, I beg, with thanks, to decline.

Hoping to see you at Newmarket

I remain, yours truly

W. Longfield.

Did ever a man conjure up in so few words and with such elegance such a picture of contentment? I often think of Mr Longfield, breeding and racing horses for his own amusement, and coolly turning down an offer of well over half a million pounds at today’s rates, not because the offer was not liberal, but on the grounds that he was easy on the score of money. The phrase ‘I beg, with thanks, to decline’ is one that I have adopted and modified for my own use. From time to time I get out of doing something I don’t want to do with the words ‘I will, with thanks, decline.’

At the Mills Inn they gave me a warm welcome and an excellent room with a bath, lots of hot water and towels, tea-making equipment and television, and then,

next day they gave me breakfast. And what a breakfast it was! A glass of fresh orange juice; fourteen prunes; three rashers of lean bacon; two eggs; two sausages; one tomato – all of which is known in the vernacular as a ‘full fry’ – plus soda bread, toast, marmalade and excellent coffee. ‘If an epicure,’ says Dr Johnson, ‘could remove by a wish in quest of sensual gratification, wherever he had supped he would breakfast in Scotland.’ This is something the Irish would dispute and certainly my Ballyvourney breakfast was high on sensual gratification.

It was served by a girl who ended every sentence with ‘OK’, which I found catching, so our conversation went like this:

Girl: If you want anything else, just say, OK?

E: OK.

(Pause)

Girl: Everything OK?

E: OK, thanks.

Girl: OK.

My plan for this exploratory trip was to go from Cork to Connemara and Galway, taking in the Aran Islands, and then from Galway I would go by train to Dublin, and from Dublin home. I had an admirable little guidebook called *Ireland for Everyman*, by a Mr H. A. Piehler and published in 1938. This I bought for ten pence in a bookshop run by a charity called The Lions. The Lions have it in common with Rotary and the Freemasons that they are all widespread organisations which do good works but which I have never been asked to join. I have sometimes wondered why no one ever asked me to be