



NOTES ON A VOYAGE

HUGO O'DOHERTY

There is a poem called *An tOileán Úr* – The New Island – penned by an unknown Irish poet in the mid to late 1700s, about one man's reluctance to join the thousands upon thousands of people leaving Europe, and Ireland in particular, at that time.

After much deliberation, the unknown poet arrived in America and, once there, walked mile after arduous mile without seeing a single soul with whom he could communicate. Nothing but dense woods and the roar of wild beasts. Scared and alone, the poet happened upon a modest dwelling where the people asked where he was coming from. "Ireland," he said, "in the wood of Lisreagh, beside Lough Erne." As soon as the words left his mouth, wrapped as they were in the soft lilt of an Ulster accent, an elderly woman rose from the comfort of the fireside to greet him.

"God bless you of all the people I've ever met," she said, holding his hand. "Many were the pleasant days I spent in Ireland and beside Lough Erne in the wood of Lisreagh; there's no other place like it from Wales to the Head of Howth or from Cork to Lisbellaw."

Realizing that the only thing he particularly liked about the New Island was that he found someone reared not even an afternoon's journey from his own home, he resolved that he would be happiest back in Ireland, where he could pass the time with people who truly understood him.

We will never discover whether he made the trip home, though it is highly unlikely he ever did. Before steamships became the transatlantic norm, one could expect to spend seven weeks at sea before sighting land once again. His poem made the return voyage across the ocean, however, and became what is now a popular folk song in Northern Ireland. Perhaps he stayed, cultivated land and raised a family. Maybe one of his descendants, lured by tales of gold fields and a faraway ocean on the other side of the "island", travelled west on a wagon train a century later and helped to create the idiosyncratic Celtic aspects of what is now modern North American life.

The motif of pining for home while on an epic voyage has transfixed humankind since the first stories were ever told. Gulliver travelled, Dorothy had to make it home from the Land of Oz, while Odysseus took ten years to return to his Kingdom of Ithaca, an adventure that in turn inspired James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In many stories, as in real life, music is both the residual beauty that flows in the wake of an epic voyage, as well as often being a catalyst propelling the protagonists toward their destination. Song is both a cause and effect of where and how the journey proceeds, and no group of people understood that more than the Celts. After a migratory and wayfaring history, they have handed down a rich songbook of countless laments, anthems and love songs. The essence of the independent Celtic mind lies not only in what it thinks and how it thinks, but also in how it channels those thoughts for others through the medium of song. They are born entertainers.

It is salient that we seem as interested in the voyage home as we are about the journey to some unknown place. The hero of Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles, was faced with a choice by the Gods – stay in Greece, grow old, and die in comfort, or get on the ship to Troy and become the most famous and loved of all the Greeks, knowing that he would never return.

Knowing that you would never return. It was a choice faced by millions as they heard stories about the new lands of North America. Looking west from Galway Bay or the rugged Kerry mountains, they debated whether or not to make the journey down to Queenstown on Ireland's south coast from where they could hope to board a ship west. They might never have travelled more than a few miles from home in their life, yet tales of cheap land, abundant food, liberty and religious pluralism were hard to resist.

But home is also a difficult place to leave, especially when you know you will never return. At Ellis Island in New York Harbor, for decades the first piece of American land upon which the emigrant would rest his or her weary foot – indeed, the first person to pass through Ellis Island was Annie Moore from County Cork – a quote is written on the wall below the Registry Room. "Too soon I arrived at the quay and left my last footprint on my native land," wrote Robert Whyte in 1847, during the height of the potato famine that engulfed the island of Ireland.

"My last footprint.

*Finality. Certitude. Resolution. Hope. Fear.
A one-way crossing."*

That feeling is lost on those who make the same voyage today. We have airplanes. We have networks. We can make a few clicks of a button on a computer and instantly see family and friends from home while talking to them. Contemporary voyages may be easier and less heartbreaking, but we have lost something along the way – the songs. Music and poetry helped ease the sorrow while leaving an enduring legacy that defines who the Celtic people were and are. There's no app on any smartphone for curing loneliness. The less tangible aspects of our past – songs, stories, plays and more – are far more important to us than any material invention. Carried along through the ages by passion and pride, they are adapted and freshly moulded to entertain and empower whoever is fortunate enough to hear, see and muse upon such creativity. It is the sound and spectacle of *Celtic Thunder*.

For nomadic Celts, the ocean was their artery and their vein, moving to and from the heart of the voyage. Railroad tracks, rivers, canals and roads were an extension, smaller vessels running alongside. Of all the peoples that roamed not just across the wine-dark seas, but across the continent during those pioneering centuries, Celts played enormous roles in forging the paths of history wherever they went. From the unknown poet to the most recent emigrants, via American Presidents John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Barack Obama and former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, North Americans of Celtic ancestry owe a large measure of their success and freedom to those who came before. We are all indebted to them.