

Scots Wha Hae

Wednesday 6th September 2006

Michael and I left Marlborough Road just before noon and got through town painlessly; we were greeted with a few cheery beeps and waves, and enquiries about our bikes from a taxi driver. We crossed the Liffey before Church Street and went through Phibsborough and Finglas; by the time we passed west of the airport we were in open countryside. I spotted a thing that I had never seen before: a Saorstát Éireann letterbox (not currently in use).



We stopped Ballyboughal to ask for a restaurant; there weren't any around, but the filling station had a deli section so we bought some of their hot sausages and rashers and chips with coleslaw and a bottle of Rioja, and had them in a tiny park by the waterless river. Clearly this was the wino quarter, in fact there was an opened but not emptied bottle of white wine on the bench. We left that on the ground, not wanting to touch someone else's stash (besides the risk that it may have been recycled) and tucked in to our nosh. Everything tasted that extra bit tastier, as it always does when you're cycling.

Michael had come to our house directly from a hospital appointment, with good news: his cancer is in remission. We talked of his bridge clubs, and the problem of choosing between finding more interesting company and remaining loyal to where you are. Michael also asked me whether Proust is worth getting into. That's a hard question—he certainly is brilliant and you can come out a convinced Proustian, but I had to push myself to keep going through a large proportion, if not most of it. Obsessive isn't the word.

Ballyboughal is named after the *Baculus Iesu*, a wooden staff that had been handed to St Patrick personally by Jesus, and had been venerated in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, until the Reformation, at which time it was destroyed. At least they suppose it was destroyed; it may still remain in various hands, for sale to tourists—like the skull of St Patrick, another skull of St Patrick (as a young man) and so on.

I let Michael cycle ahead while I dumped our rubbish. Finding a set of bottle banks a hundred yards on, I doubled back and retrieved our wine bottle from the bin, for re-disposal. Either you believe in recycling or you don't.

Michael had attached a GPS to his handlebars, but it tried persuading us to take the motorway. At least it showed us where we were, and what our elevation was. Several hills topped the 400 ft mark, and the Mountains of Mourne beckoned majestically from the distance. We walked up the steepest slopes, and I sampled the blackberries, which were perfect and magnificent. It surprised me that the big ripe ones are on the same bunches as red and even green ones. How many decades have I been picking blackberries, to be surprised by that?

At one intersection, shortly after crossing the M1, a cyclist stopped at a crossroads to examine our recumbents, having only seen them before in pictures. By six we reached Drogheda where we took a room in a B&B called “Villarosa” on the north road. The owner pointed us to a nearby Chinese restaurant where we had a decent din with lovely jasmine tea to round it off. We were in bed before ten.

Thursday 7th

We left Drogheda at 9 am and went by the back roads to Monasterboice. A busload of Germans were being given a talk on the high crosses which I listened in on: the scene of the last judgement had the devil forking the unworthy into hell with his trident, while the worthy sat in rows behind an ensemble of harp, recorder and unidentifiable third instrument. Down below were Adam & Eve with Cain slaying Abel, and other salient scenes. The guide recalled a colleague describing one scene as the story of “unglaublicher Thomas”—incredible Thomas.

We went by other back roads back to our chosen path. Michael’s girl guide (his GPS speaks in a female voice) wanted to send us along the motorway, so we had to disobey her at every turn.

We had merry beeps and waves from passing motors, and a chap on a red motorbike slowed down and did a wheelie in our honour shortly before Dundalk. We stopped for lunch at the Windsor bar and had turkey and ham with pints of stout served by a blonde Eastern European girl who said they didn’t do espresso, but perhaps decaf was something similar? Michael did his best to dissuade her gently.

Across the river Louth becomes very hilly. We only knew we had crossed the border when we saw the ads for fireworks, and a sign telling us that from here on distances and speed limits were shown in miles. Please be advised.

Very few cyclists were to be seen.

Only one, really, who drew alongside for a chat as we cycled: a slim weathered beardy young man from Galway, carrying no packs but with odd rags tied to the handlebars, and a wrecked saddle covered with a bit of foam.

It seemed to be all climb towards Newry, alongside the construction of the coming motorway. It is an uncomfortable cycle, with the hard shoulder vanishing frequently, and lorries zooming past the elbow. A breathtaking last descent brings you down into the town.

We walked through some of the streets of Newry—a pleasant town once you get off the beaten track. Part of Hill Street is dedicated to double-parking. We then managed to escape the main Belfast road, setting off



westwards to Rathfriland. Near the top of the hill coming away from Newry we found a large isolated inn and stopped for a pint. We seemed to have the whole place to ourselves.

Rested and fortified we rode on to Rathfriland, up and down the pretty drumlins with the majestic mountains (not unlike the far-famed Kerry ones) in the background. Rathfriland is right at the top of a hill, and I rode ahead to buy provisions just in case we landed in a B&B without food. Right at the top of the town we were directed to the Old George Hotel, which did indeed have food, and very nice too—salmon with the works. The car park where we left the bikes had a splendid view across the valley.



And so to bed, shortly after nine.

Friday 8th



We had our breakfast before eight but didn't get away till nine. A brilliant morning, and a thrilling descent from our hilltop town—losing all our hard-earned altitude in one headlong rush. More drumlins brought us to the picturesque town of Castlewellan, also on a hill, where we sat and did some running repairs: tying Michael's rear mudguard away from rubbing on his wheel. An information board invited us to go round the corner and view Bustard's Boot, Shoe and Clog Factory but we were just too busy at the minute.

Down and out of that wee town we turned left for Ballynahinch and stopped beside a swan-bedecked lake to have some elevenses—namely the emergency rations from last night. Ballynahinch was pretty, as are all the towns that get more affluent as you approach the city, like the Portuguese towns.

At Ballygowan the girl guide directed us to Comber, but we chose to go directly to Belfast. From there on she gave us orders to turn back wherever we were, so we stopped paying attention. From the overall paper map it appeared that all we had to do was press on straight ahead, so we did, down the Castlereagh Road (instant traffic jam as soon as we hit it) and on into a neat quarter where the

streets are named in Irish and hung with portraits of the 1981 hunger strikers. We stopped to regroup, finding a dead end up ahead, and some little girls asked for a go on our bikes. Michael said we were looking for a way to the docks, in North Belfast, and they said “but that’s Protestant”.

We went ahead guided by signs, compass and altitude (downhill brings you to the water) and found a road going to the docks, but only via a motorway. A chap in a car at traffic lights told us to double back, and we found the Queen Elizabeth Bridge and hugged the shoreline until we found an entrance to Clarendon Docks. A security man directed us to the Stena area, and we bought pedestrian tickets (£44 the pair—bicycles go free).

After a few backs and forths trying to check in as a car, we checked in as pedestrians and were ushered through a side door to the front of the queue of cars. We locked up and went up to the pedestrians’ lounge for a coffee. The boat was fifteen minutes late arriving in but only five minutes late leaving: we watched the (services?) lorry back dexterously up to its ramp as the ship loomed up behind it. Very soon the lorry had boarded, and a bike, followed by motorbikes, lorries and cars were streaming off and away. We were called on board first, and tied ourselves up near the exit port. Upstairs we discovered that the layout was exactly the same as the Dun Laoghaire-Holyhead cat, very big and comfortable. We were (naturally) first into the restaurant, where we were charmingly served steak and ale pies with a bottle of Campo Viejo. After the smoothest of crossings we arrived near Stranraer and the ship stopped (ships don’t stop, do they—hove to?) to let the tide rise a few feet before docking.

We disembarked through the passenger exit and got straight onto the road. I went ahead to find the first place to stay the night, which was not far to seek: the Craginelder Hotel. We got a fine spacious room with a sofa, but there was a loud extractor fan noise; they said it would go off when the kitchen closed at 8.30, and indeed at nine it did, whereupon we collapsed into a deep sleep.

Saturday 9th

Early breakfast—off by 8.35. Another glorious day, a little misty at first.



Some staff of the hotel warned us that there were steep climbs up Glen App, but it was a steady gentle slope, not like yesterday’s drumlins. We actually found the next hill stiffer, but every up has its down. We arrived in Girvan shortly after noon and had lunch in the Roxy—“Scotland’s No.1 bar for 2004-5”. With a pint of John Smith we both had a truly excellent fillet of sea bass in a potato and leek broth—really a consommé, and quite special. We stayed around for chocolate fudge cake.

The afternoon was beautiful and the road was pretty; we got off the main Ayr road and had a high road over the coast. A long drop brought us down to Ayr, a rather staid and proper place. We met up at the Post Office around 5 after getting separated (Michael's front gear cable had broken) and had a pint of Ptarmigan in the Old West Kirk, which has been incongruously turned into a pub. We sat with a man from Edinburgh who had come for a wedding and was stoking up with advance pints before being joined by the rest of his family.

Two women I asked for directions pointed me to a road with several guest houses, so we went there, but they were all full up. Michael rolled into the salubrious Savoy Park Hotel which gave us a grand room and a grand meal, a good stabling for the beasts and pleasant service in everything.

Sunday 10th

Breakfast only started at eight so we each had a leisurely bath. The room was our most palatial since the 17th century *Hôtel des Petits Augustins* in Montreuil-Bellay south of the Loire. Great big long cast-iron bath. Michael had kippers—at last: he'd been looking forward to them all along. We paid up and got on the road shortly after nine.



Ayr morphs into Prestwick with other burghs along the way distinguished from one another only by their post offices. Coming out of Prestwick we spied a sign for a cycle route to Troon, which we took. This took us away from the busy roads, and for a lot of the time was away from roads altogether, running beside the railway or through a wilderness or two.

At Troon we stopped, just beside the beach, to do some repairs on Michael's bike. He had brought a spare gear cable which he now fitted, and I had some Gafa tape to firm up his wing mirror, which is just made to be far too flexible. The jobs went well, but still took an hour. A chap came and asked about our bikes, and Michael gave him the address of the shop in Bearsden. He sounded exactly like the posh Scotsman in "The Book Group". He's interested in a recumbent trike, being slightly spastic.

We progressed through more moors and back ways and emerged at Girvan in time for lunch. The Marina Inn looked inviting and we had good rest and refreshment there (chips with everything). We saw some old boats up on supports in an enclosure, but didn't stop for the Maritime Museum.

We followed the coast as much as we could when the cycle path petered out. We took down the cycle route's URL for future reference. The coast road is beautiful with views across to the islands, but the day was misty and overcast so we didn't see them clearly. At about 5.15 we arrived in Largs and found a room in the first B&B—no en-suite but a bathroom to ourselves and lots of room with a view across the bay towards Rothesay on the Isle of Bute.

Alison, our young hostess, was slightly fussy, taking down our details and taking payment in advance with a £10 key deposit; but she made us a cup of tea to have outside while she made up the room, and she booked us into the restaurant of the hotel next door, which proved a winner. I had a perfect steak and Michael had three very good lamb chops, done to a T, whatever that is. We drank some Montepulciano and finished up with a glass of Laphroaig to celebrate Sunday. Jenny texted me to tell us that Malachy was going to play a big solo piece by Ian Wilson tonight, so we toasted him.

Monday 11th

Alison's boyfriend Alan hadn't managed to get any sense out of www.nationalcyclenetwork.org.uk so we got directions to the Largs Library where we found the site, logged on and downloaded and printed a map of cycle routes round Glasgow. We left Largs around 9.30 and continued round the coast, calling in to ask about the Rothesay ferry at Skelmorlie: they leave every 45 minutes. After Greenock the road was fairly built-up, one town running into the next, and the A78 became busier, preparing to transform into the M8. We spotted an inn on a side road at Langbank and had lunch there, with a pint of something nice.



We stayed on the side road, which was hilly but suddenly countryside again; we had blackberries along the way for our pud. We crossed the motorway to get to the Erskine Bridge, a fine structure opened in 1971, that brought us to the north of the Clyde, where Bearsden is. A few helpful chaps showed us the directions

for Bearsden (which is pronounced Bear's Den) and a series of ups and downs, once more in open country, brought us there by four. We asked a taxi man about guest houses, not too far from Switchback Road, the ominously-named street of Michael's target bike shop, and he sent us down a very posh avenue that reminded me of Sevenoaks, to another semi-country suburban road in Milngavie (pronounced mun-GUY). The B&B had no rooms free, but sent us to a nearby Travel Inn, who also had no rooms, but they phoned ahead to another Travel Inn on the same road, who took us in and gave us a spanking new-looking room with loads of space.

Tuesday 12

The weather forecast warned us of rain, and there were a few spots when we went up to the pub (the Burn Brae, where we ate the previous evening) for our breakfast. The Travel Inn lady had told us how to get to Switchback Road, which is well named, and seems to be a major route into Glasgow from the north-west. I failed to spot the group of shops hidden on a parallel road, and continued on to the end of the road where it becomes Bearsden Road. A lady with a bike said she remembered a bike shop on Switchback Road but she thought it had closed ... I turned back and this time spotted the shop, Kinetics, with Michael's bike outside. He had just placed his order for an electric motor built into a hub; it'll mean a whole new wheel and new derailleur cogs, which will leave him with a spare wheel. The shop is small and jammed with recumbents of all types, one very attractive diamond+ recumbent tandem, and a couple of sharp tricycles. I asked about the difference between two-wheels-in-front and one-wheel-in-front, and the chap (Ben Cooper) said the two-in-front is more stable but the one-in-front is more manoeuvrable. I tried out the Scorpion (two-in-front) up and down the pavement, and it certainly is comfortable and responsive, and its turning circle is smaller than mine is on the PDQ, so I'll recommend it to Anto who has expressed interest in a recumbent trike. It has soft rear suspension and a commodious carrier; I asked about visibility and Ben said he has a friend who commutes into Edinburgh on one, and finds no problem being seen; the main problem is seeing around stationary vans and the like. The Scorpion has terrific disc brakes, low comfortable handles and positive steering, and it's not hard to sit down into and stand up out of, even though your seat is low to the ground.

We left Ben after taking advice on how to get back to Erskine; I bought a tiny neat pump for a fiver. The neat way back to Erskine is along the canal which we crossed just down the Switchback Road. The towpath is well maintained, sometimes muddy but firm even though puddly, sometimes black gravel. The only bother was lifting Michael's bike over the motorbike barriers—but that is a small price to pay for freedom from traffic, roundabouts, traffic lights and the rest.

At Clydebank we went into a shopping mall (which boasted a Dunnes Stores) for coffee and a loo, and I bought my digital watch a new strap. Such a watch: I keep it on my desk at home, and only brought it because I don't care if something happens to it; it wasn't designed (it seems) to outlast its first plastic strap, but this is now its third at least.



We got to Erskine and saw the bridge towering above the canal. Helpful passers-by directed us to the start of the bridge, up through a residential road and down a cycle track through a wood, up a slope and voila. The bridge cycle track was blocked with two vans parked for maintenance work, so we cycled on the roomy and empty pedestrian path.

We have seen very few cyclists along the way; hardly any in the country, a few dozen on Sunday, and a few today near the city. We spotted a short way to get to the small road we wanted on the south bank, and went back along our Monday tracks as far as Bishopton. By now it was 1.30 so we called into the Bishopton Inn for lunch. The barmaid recommended pints of Tennents Velvet, which went down well; Michael had a mixed grill with Lincolnshire sausages and I had a small portion of Desperate Dan cow pie. A shower came and went as we sat, and though I put on the rain trousers twice or three times in the afternoon, they weren't needed in the end.

We had no alternative but to take the busy A78 back to Wemyss Bay, where we took the ferry to Rothesay on the isle of Bute. On our way to Glasgow we had asked details of a man at the ferry dock, and he had recommended a Hopscotch ticket to take us round the islands, so that is what we asked for. The service from Rothesay to Arran marked on Michael's map is discontinued, so we got connections around Bute to the Mull of Kintyre: two of us, three crossings, for £14.60 all in, the bikes going free. We only had quarter of an hour to wait for the ferry, which docked with a flourishing twirl and took off pronto; it was well filled with cars in both directions but ours were the only bikes.

Twenty minutes later we found ourselves in Rothesay-O, and watched the silver Rolls-Royce roll off first followed by the hoi polloi. Possibly the Marquess of Bute?

*There once was a Marquess of Bute
Who found himself loaded with loot*

*So he spent it philandering
With women, meandering
From house to ill house-of-repute.*

We made a beeline for the first hotel sign we saw, the Esplanade, which is being done up and we suspect under new management. They took a long time debating whether they had a room for us or not, but they offered us a choice of two, one with bunks and one with three beds which we took. They showed us a room on the first floor in mid up-do where we could stow the bikes, and we had a cup of tea in our room. I didn't fancy dinner in the hotel as a peep in the kitchen showed a bank of deep friers, so we wandered out and found that there was very little on offer in



Rothsay. A barman pointed us to The Black Bull, an inn with a dining room. They said ye have five minutes to order, as they closed the kitchen at eight, so we ordered haddock and chips and ate it in the bar watching Liverpool play PSV Eindhoven. The haddock was truly excellent, possibly even better than Luigi's of Ranelagh. To celebrate our arrival in the Isle of Bute we had a Talisker, rather like the Laphroaig, very tasty and pleasant. At the hotel I renewed my assault on the fiendish sudoku that had refused to progress for me at all during the trip, though Michael solved it in one go. This time I cracked it, and immediately did two others as well, to stamp on it as it were. Michael watched the end of the football (goalless, which Liverpool seemed happy with) and I read a little more of Dan Dennett about intentionality.

Wednesday 13th

We were one half of the tables for breakfast. A rather well-spoken lady dealt with us, saying she had no waiters (the Polish waiter was hoovering downstairs) and generally appearing to be in charge and new at the job—but very pleasant and helpful. We retrieved our bikes along the narrow passageway and down the stairs, happily not bending Michael's mirror which has remained good and firm since Troon.

I had just come to the end of my clothing supplies and suggested looking for a laundromat. We found one, but it only opened at ten; calling in at the information centre (also closed till ten) and the post office for post cards which we wrote and posted on the spot failed to keep us busy past ten o'clock, so we forgot about clean clothes and at 9.50 we headed north out of town.

The morning was mixed, the clouds sometimes covering the hills across the water, sometimes lifting to show Kerryish scenery. As we cycled the day brightened and we were surrounded by beautiful countryside and great silence. All day it threatened to rain, but it held off and we had the peace and glory that we first had in mind, had we thought about it.



At the north of the island the road came to a stop at the Rhubodach ferry, a tiny creek that traditionally they used to make the cattle and sheep swim across. The ferry goes back and forth constantly, and a few minutes had us back on the mainland with a road sign saying 'Glasgow'. We had a choice of roads that diverged and rejoined, so we took the smaller coast road, a lot of which is single track, past old and desirable houses, and some new and desirable ones too. The vegetation was luscious and every bend revealed more Killarney scenery. By noon we reached our most northerly point, and followed a sign to a hotel for lunch. A Polish waiter gave us nice ale and good lunch (though the potato and leek soup tasted of a lot of vinegar and paprika) and regaled us with heavy metal CDs. The ale was so good we repeated the experience. A Yorkshire or Midlands couple came in with their large boxery dog, which we made a fuss of. I recalled

comic books of our youth, reminded by Michael's venison of a joke I had thought pure genius at Fiachra's age: Customer says what price is the meat today, butcher replies "Well the venison is deer but the mutton is sheep". Also an episode where Laurel and Hardy got a job putting up posters for Boston Pills, and at the end of the day found they couldn't put up the last one since the boards of the hoarding they were to stick it on had POST NO BILLS painted on them—so they rearranged the boards to say BOSTON PILLS. Brilliant!

After lunch we went down to the local kirk and looked at the famous carved stones from the 14th and 15th centuries. We sat for a moment in the kirk itself, a small 18th century T-shaped building with three galleries, ideally suited to preaching. The son of one 17th century minister there was Colin MacLaurin, the mathematician who was appointed professor in Aberdeen at the age of nineteen.

Then we headed south, which became quite steep climbing. At the top of the climb was a lookout point over the Kyles (narrows: *caoil*) of Bute—we could see the ferry we had taken. However we were now on the western side of the fjord (Loch Riddon).

Thursday 14th

We cycled across the isthmus and back to the Arran ferry. It was drizzly and the clouds were low but there was no wind to blow them away. When we got to the ferry we found that the previous night's sailing had been cancelled because of heavy seas. We spoke



to a Scot called Eric Ireland who was travelling with his wife and another couple (also called Ireland—they had first met over a misdirected bill) from Plymouth. They told us that the north way around Arran was the smoother ride. We hadn't a long time to wait for the ferry, we got tickets on board, and Hopscotch tickets on to Ardrossan. The crossing was as smooth as could be, about 20 minutes. We stood by a hot-air vent and dried out, but by the time we arrived I was glad to sit on the bike again; standing can be hard on the back.

The clouds were so low we couldn't see the tops of the mountains of Arran. Heading north brought us soon enough to the Arran Distillery so we nipped in for a taste of Arran ten-year-old and a spot of lunch, as it was past noon. The ten-year-old was so promising that we bought some to take home for presents. The lunch was excellent: sirloin steaks done exactly as we wanted them, with a smoky barbecue finish that made me wonder was this an American concern. The distillery is only in business eleven years, and they have done all the right things, including getting the Queen to open it, and winning prizes in competitions. There used to be an Arran distillery before, but it had closed down; some enterprising types obviously shopped around for a name to buy and produced a good plan. The girl who sold us the bottles told us the chief distiller had come from Ireland.

We waited over our lunch for the rain to ease up and it did, a little. Sufficient mountain tops showed themselves for some atmospheric photos, but the best model was a young deer who stood in a laneway between houses and let me approach quite close for a picture.

There was quite a climb over the glen and we made several stops and took several walks. We zoomed down the other side and met more cyclists working their way up. The zoom was so extreme we had to put our brakes on, more than once.

We reached Brodick just as a ferry arrived, and got on board almost straight away. This was a much bigger boat, almost ocean size; we tied our bikes up alongside two others, owned by Scots who had been over on a three-day visit to Islay. I changed my soaking shirt, but Michael stayed in his. We just sat in a lounge for the one-hour trip; the sky had finally lightened but not much. I read some Dan Dennett and dived into another fiendish sudoku. In no time we were there in Ardrossan; it was 5.30 so we decided to put up for the night rather than push on through the continuing drizzle towards Troon. Some guys in a chip shop told us where to look for a guest house; the first one we tried the lady did her best to put us off and succeeded in sending us to a nearby hotel who were very welcoming, even putting our bikes in a function room overnight. The reception chap found a number for P&O and I rang them to find that there is a sailing from Troon at 10.05 tomorrow; so we set an alarm for 6.15 and had an early dinner. We could see Arran from the dining room, and at last the clouds had lifted and we could see the whole noble skyline.





Friday 15th

We woke with our two alarms at 6.15 and had everything packed up before breakfast at seven. Our table was set for us with glasses of tomato juice and cereals as ordered. Tomato juice on muesli is kinda weird but it goes down. The fries were so big we both left bits, with apologies to the waitress. The night porter got our bikes out of the function room, where his bike was also lodged, and we were on the road by 7.30. We decided to go by the off-road cycle route we had taken coming north, as it looked more direct than the big road, and it probably was; but it was not what you would call well signposted. I took a few dubious turns but luckily only had to go back 20 yards each time. I pedalled on furiously to try to get to Troon by 9.05, as the chap I had phoned told us to be there an hour in advance of the sailing time.

I did pretty well, despite one egregious misdirection: the last cycle track sign one mile from Troon directed me up into Barassie railway station, from which there was no exit that I could find. Nevertheless I got to the P&O ticket office at 9.15 and joined a ticket queue. Two doors led into one room with a counter facing us and one girl manning it; the two queues merged uncomfortably. The boat arrived at the same time I did, and soon we in the left queue were asked to move right, to let the disembarking passengers through. One chap in our queue had stern words for a right-queuer who merged in ahead of him, but they didn't come to blows. The lone girl had to sell tickets and also issue boarding cards to those who already had tickets; the queue moved very slowly. After 20 minutes she was joined by a chap. After queueing for half an hour I got our tickets and boarding pass, but Michael hadn't arrived. I spoke to the man directing traffic at the gate and the man directing the cars, and positioned myself for best visibility, but the time went by and no Michael arrived. I went back into the office to unbook for this sailing, and they gave me a ticket for the 20.20 instead.

As the ship steamed out I ambled back along the way I'd come, expecting to meet Michael nursing a punctured bike; I got back beyond Barassie and went into the housing estate that the track ducks through, and had just turned back thinking I had gone wrong and reached a dead end, when Michael shouted to me—there was a track there that I hadn't spotted. He had taken a wrong turn early on and had to double back twice, adding 7 miles to his distance. The weather which had been misty and cold when we set out was now brilliantly sunny and warm.

We decided to find a launderette, and got directions from a man coming out of his house. His directions were very precise, and, supplemented by other directions along the way, we got directly to the laundromat. A cheery woman took in our bag and told us to come back at 2.30, so I asked her about the town library and we went down there. I got onto www.oedilf.com and caught up on my limerick workshops (now heading for a hundred approved limericks) while Michael found a classic bridge book and studied that.

When I had finished with Oedilf (and h2g2) we browsed through some children's books on sale at the door, and Michael bought books for Maya and Rosie. Leaving the Library we ambled along the main street of Troon, leaving our bikes at the Library and found a pub that served lunch. Taking it leisurely we managed to string it out till 2, when we retrieved our bikes and headed back to the laundry. Excellent clean dry clothes! A good few more of mine than of Michael's: he fills his bags with stuff more useful to the bike, spares of all kinds.

We then sloped back down to Ayr Street and had a cup of coffee and a read. Michael got a bit more sterling—Bank of England notes, in case Bank of Scotland ones were refused in Northern Ireland. Down then to the sea front, a long beach, near where we had done our repairs a few days before, where we found a shady shelter and Michael read some Dennett while I typed up this exact chronicle of our comings and goings.

Finally the time came to leave the assiduous skate-board practisers and board our ferry. This one was a cat quite like the Belfast one in size and outward appearance, but very different inside, not nearly so posh. We had a chipper-style dinner, relieved by individual snipes of wine, and settled down in fairly comfortable



seats to watch a Matt Damon thriller on a large TV screen. Arriving in Larne we were first off the ship and sped off to find a bed. The first B&B was closed for the night (it was now about 11) but the proprietress spoke to us over the intercom and directed us to a nearby hotel where we and the bikes got comfortable lodgings.

Saturday 16th

On the road shortly after nine: another brilliant day. We followed the main road to Belfast, through lush

countryside; the road was often narrow with no hard shoulder and the drivers (with the exception of the lorries) tended to cut us rather fine, so it wasn't particularly relaxing. In Carrickfergus we stopped and sat on a bench looking out to sea and a chap came and talked to us. He had been a racing cyclist in his young days and had thought nothing of cycling to Dublin in a day, staying overnight and cycling back the next day.

At Newtownabbey a cycle track appeared that took us all the way into Belfast, alongside the motorway but well separated from it: the most luxurious cycling facilities of this trip. Where it stopped a pub appeared, offering lunch. The waiter told us of his marathon running in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and had us laughing with his account of the cheers he got from the Mexicans who mistook his Irish flag for their own.

From there the cycle track was along the road, through a huge and smelly industrial estate. We crossed the Lagan by a footbridge near where we had crossed it before, and got directions to Stormont—straight out that way—from a man in caterer's livery.

The road to Stormont was through an area decked with Loyalist slogans, immaculately painted. Michael said they hadn't changed an iota since he was here five or six years ago, though the paint looked fresh.

Up a long hill, contending with a lot of traffic; we stopped at a Spar to buy bananas and batteries for my front light which had died on me just as we were preparing to board the ferry last night. At Stormont we turned aside to rest in the park and view the architectural oddity; it certainly makes the most of its location. Michael lay under a tree while I went in search of a loo. I found one in the Mo Mowlam memorial children's playground.

At the top of a later hill, finding myself well ahead, I stopped to insert my new batteries and dropped the screw from the cateye lamp onto the rough grass; it took me twenty minutes to find it again, and when I did, the light didn't work. Maddening. We headed for the Ards peninsula, which meant going through Newtownards, an awkward place to negotiate, where I was cut in on at a roundabout, which is scary enough. The Scottish drivers are much more patient.

After that the landscape became more rural, and we started down the shore of Strangford Lough, with its shallow muddy shoreline. There was still plenty of traffic, still short of patience in getting past us, though cheerful in its beeps and shouts and waves. Short beeps I take as approving, long beeps dis.

At Kircubbin we spotted a restaurant offering accommodation and since it was almost six we called it a day and booked in. It turned out to be a real find—lovely room

and outstanding restaurant, were it not for the paintings. We said *châteaux* to the chef/owner, Paul Arthur. Michael considered making a trip there with Bobby, eating and staying the night, then going home in the morning.



Sunday 17th

Paul made us our breakfast at eight: good coffee and a big fry. We were on the road by 9 and followed the A2 to the ferry at Strangford. The day was cloudy but promised to clear up. Everywhere children roared at our bikes, first with laughter, afterwards in appreciation. At the ferry a queue of them wanted a go, so I pushed them round in circles.

Across the water, a crossing of a minute or two, we set our course for Newcastle and the mountains of



Mourne, which loomed up magically ahead. The day brightened up gradually and we progressed fairly well against a head wind. We avoided Downpatrick, but I got a photo of the 15th century Bishop's castle, a similar building to Bunratty with its high arch over the door-wall. I told Michael of the dispute between Armagh and Downpatrick, each claiming to have the grave of St Patrick—one of them the grave of St Patrick as a young man, perhaps. He was surprised to hear that the Romification of the Celtic church

had started before the Normans arrived, with the Augustinians taking over Christ Church Cathedral (then an abbey) in the 11th century, while Dublin was still Viking, and making a rule “no Irish monks need apply”.

I was surprised to be approaching the Mourne from the east more than the north; again, a Kerryish aspect (am I biased?). We stopped in Clough for lunch, in Frenchie's Restaurant where there was four-course Sunday lunch going. I told Michael about Jenny's message yesterday, that Auntie Phyllis was confined to her bedroom and Frances Good wanted us to move her to a nursing home. Jenny had said she'd cancel her teaching and go to Cavan with me on Tuesday. Michael suggested we go separate ways, since he wouldn't be able to make Dublin by Monday, whereas I would.

I rang Jenny in Waterford and said I'd come home on Monday and go to Cavan on Tuesday. I rang Frances but got no answer; after lunch I rang Phyllis and she made relatively light of things, saying Hughie was looking after her and she could move about and get to her chair and her loo, but she wouldn't attempt the stairs because she was getting dreadful jags in her back and she couldn't tell when one would strike. She was glad to hear we were coming on Tuesday. So Michael continued on the A20 round the south of the Mourne, and I took the A24 to Newry by the north of the mountains.

I reached Newry around six, and found a B&B up the long hill on the Dublin road, ready for a quick getaway in the morning. It was in a quiet side street, and only had a double room, but that did me fine. The shower was a little cool, but I was so bathed in sweat that I enjoyed one anyway.



Monday 18th

I woke with my phone alarm at 6.15 and had some juice and cereal and tea and toast for breakfast, not waking the folks of the house and slipping away by 7.30. By eight I crossed the border and was on my way down to Dundalk. Either the road works had been finished or the traffic was light (though there were plenty of lorries) or perhaps the fact of going predominantly downhill was enough to make it much easier going

than it had been going north. The morning was bright, but it clouded over gradually; there was a slight head wind.

I followed the A1 as far as I could; when it threatened to turn into the M1 with no apparent escape I slipped away to the left and stopped at a garden centre, just about to open (it being a minute to nine), and asked for directions. They told me to go by Castlebellingham, and half an hour later I stopped for a second breakfast in Foley's Cottage there.

Shortly after that it began to rain. By the time I reached Balbriggan it was pelting, which may have reduced my clarity of observation, as I took two wrong turns at the roundabouts leaving the town. After a bemused tour of a huge housing estate with only one entrance, I took a rest and had some water and a banana, then found the right exit from the roundabout, with assistance from an Indian-looking and -sounding postman on a bike. Not long after that came another invitation to the M1; there was an escape route hinted at the top of the signboard, if I went through both roundabouts ahead, but it had no destination marked on it, and, humbled by my sad experience at the last roundabout, I decided to avoid both roundabouts and take a left turn earlier, which was marked "Lusk". At least I knew that Lusk was on the coast, and I could trickle down to Dublin by the sea. I had left the map with Michael, foolishly expecting that the Dublin road would not be hard to find at any point.

The road to Lusk was surprising for its single-mindedness; five miles or so, quite straight, a good new dual carriageway with no signs or places along the way. I started having serious doubts whether I was giving myself a long detour.

Finally I arrived at or near Lusk, to find a traffic jam caused by a large lorry stuck across a road. The lorry was just extracting itself as I arrived, and I asked directions from two guards leaving the scene. They said I might as well bypass Lusk and go straight to Swords, and I did, thinking that Swords must have been the missing destination on the roundabout sign, and by now sure that I had given myself many extra miles. Checking the map later, it seems that I had gone fairly directly after all.

The rain came and went; when it came it came in buckets. I decided not to stop for lunch, as it would have been very hard to get started again, though once wet it was perfectly possible to push ahead. The exercise keeps you warm enough, even though rain gear gives up under a sufficient drenching and all your clothing becomes equally soaked.

Swords eventually vanished from the signs without materialising, and was replaced by Dublin Airport. I didn't relish navigating the roundabouts there, but in the event they were no bother, thanks to a slip-road that took all southbound motorway traffic away before the roundabout itself. The result of that was that all who entered the roundabout with me were either going straight ahead like myself or turning right for the airport. There was no-one cutting across me to turn left, which is the cyclist's reason for disliking roundabouts. At a busy roundabout it takes both luck and pluck, not to say gigantic bloody-mindedness, not to be forced to turn left immediately, regardless of where you want to go. You must enter the roundabout bang in front of the following vehicle, with your right arm rigidly horizontal, otherwise you have no choice but get swept off at the first exit.

This brought me through Santry by three o'clock, in a renewed spate of rainfall, and I was warmed thereafter by the pleasure of drifting downhill into Dublin past long strings of jammed cars, vans, buses and lorries. I reached home before four, and dived first into a shower and then into some dry clothes—utter heavenly bliss. Heaven is a relative thing, after all.