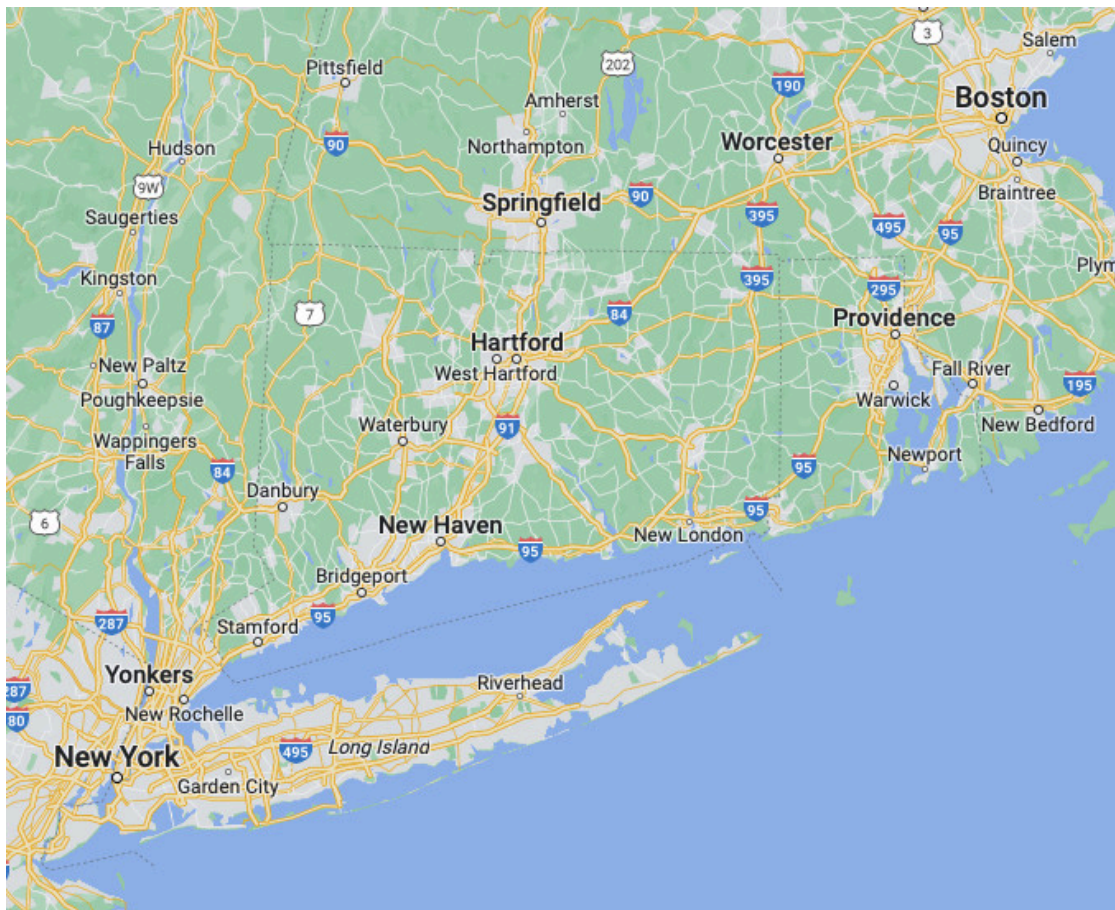


New England & *New York* 1998

PART TWO: NEW YORK



8 – NEW YORK

Monday, 26 October

Once inside the train, we sat on the left in order to get the best view. When we set off and left Boston behind, we got into conversation with an English businessman who was sitting in the seat in front of us. Shortly afterwards, a lively American girl with blonde hair joined us and introduced herself to all of us as Mary. During the journey she downed two large cups of coffee and guzzled a bag of M&Ms. As Colm and I were chatting to her for much of the time, I had little chance to write my diary or look at the scenery. Mary asked us where we would be staying in New York and I told her that we had booked to stay in the Chelsea International Hostel. She was quite amazed to hear this, for she would be staying in the same place. From now on she became extra friendly, especially to me, and several times reached over to touch me whenever she spoke directly to me.

Although the journey lasted five hours, the time went quickly. As we approached New York city the pleasant rural scenery gave way to a huge urban sprawl and soon we could see the skyscrapers of Manhattan in the distance. Mary got quite excited, but the sight did little for me. We arrived earlier than expected, at about 5 p.m. We followed Mary, who dragged a long floppy bag from the train and we struggled with our luggage. Slowly we made our way out to 7th Avenue, where we waited in line for a taxi. We just about fitted all the luggage into the back of the cab; Mary sat in front and gave directions to the expressionless driver. Colm and I were delighted to have Mary with us as we did not have to worry about the driver taking us on a 'scenic route'.

In no time at all we were at the hostel; Colm and I paid the driver \$4 and we hauled all the luggage into the narrow hallway of the building. After I had paid \$150 for five nights with my credit card, I was handed a receipt and a couple of keys. We now had to go out into the street, enter again by a different door and climb a staircase to get to our room on the second storey. Our private room consisted of just two bunk beds crammed into a tiny space. At least it was directly opposite a shower. This was quite a let-down – I had expected a lot better. Colm did not mind, but Mary was not at all impressed. After Colm and I had moved our luggage up to the room, we dragged Mary's awkward bag up the stairs to her small dormitory.

Colm and I then freshened ourselves up in the rough-and-ready shower and I changed into a fresh tee-shirt, for it was boiling hot in our cramped room. We went back downstairs, glanced at the packed and very smoky common room, then met Mary once again. The three of us then set off on foot and walked through Chelsea to Greenwich village, stopping at one point to look in a shop full of ladies' clothes at bargain prices. I was not very enchanted by this particular area. Once Mary had finished looking around the shop, we walked to a simple Italian restaurant and sat down to eat something. The background music consisted of a very dated performance of some familiar Baroque music, and the one waitress looked very bored. Mary, who initially had only wanted a muffin and yet more coffee, now decided to eat a proper meal. We all ate well; Colm and I paid the bill, much to Mary's delight. She was a strange girl, full of mixed-up ideas; she told us that she

was a reformed alcoholic, had been involved in the buying and selling of property, and now was bent on studying acupuncture. Although she was also involved in Alcoholics Anonymous, she had decided not to go to one of their meetings this evening.

When we walked back to the hostel, Mary asked us if we thought that everything was ordained by fate. I told her that I was inclined to sail through life without worrying about most things. When we parted at the hostel, she threw her arms around Colm and kissed me on the lips. Despite her rather exaggerated manner and confused way of thinking, Colm and I had enjoyed her company; as Colm said, it was good to have some female company.

As we were tired by now, we went to bed shortly after ten o'clock. I climbed up the metal ladder to the upper bed, avoided banging my head against the ceiling, scribbled a few notes about what had happened during the day, then settled down to sleep. Colm closed the window at the very last moment. As our little room was located at the back of the old building, it was relatively quiet.

Thus ended our first evening in New York; so far I was not very impressed!

Tuesday, 27 October

Despite some interruptions during the night – young people returning late, singing and laughing – I managed to sleep quite well. We rose at 7 o'clock and managed to use the shower before anyone else. We wandered out to 7th Avenue, where we found a small restaurant run by friendly Italians, and ordered a large breakfast of orange juice, porridge, a plate of fried eggs, sausages and 'home fries', then slices of buttered toast and jelly (jam).

Thus fortified, we sallied out for our first full day in New York. We found a subway station nearby and descended to the platform. First of all we got a map of the various lines, studied it and decided, after some hesitation, to buy a seven-day pass. We then returned to the avenue, crossed to the other side, went down to the subway and, after a pleasant girl had given us some help regarding directions, caught a train heading uptown. We travelled in a clean carriage that had somehow escaped being defaced by ugly graffiti.

We got out at Columbus Circle, at the edge of Central Park, then walked around the huge park towards the Metropolitan Museum of Art, passing many high-class hotels on our way. Although there was a fair amount of traffic on the roads, it was not as busy as I had imagined.

We reached the impressive-looking Metropolitan shortly after 9.30 and paid \$8 to go in. Instead of admission tickets we were given little tin badges, which we affixed to our jackets. Once we were ready to begin our visit, we decided to start in the section devoted to twentieth-century American art as it was nearby. We found a few interesting works here, including Edwin Hopper's *Lighthouse*. After this we made our way to the French and American furniture sections. Both were wonderful, especially the French, for entire rooms from various French *hôtels* had been reconstructed in the museum and filled with elegant furniture. In the north-western section of the museum was a huge courtyard with the façade of an American building set into a wall; in a room off the courtyard was a collection of exquisite American furniture.

We then wandered into a suite of rooms containing classical American art, where we admired the landscape paintings of Martin Johnson Heade and Frederic Edwin Church. In another room were fine portraits by Gilbert Stuart and some good examples of James Abbott McNeill Whistler's work. The stunning paintings of the American Impressionists came next: works such as *The Banks of the Loing* by

William Lamb Picknell, the wonderfully sensitive *Red Bridge* by Julian Alden Weir, *At the Seaside* by William Merritt Chase, *Across the Room* by Edmund Charles Tarbell, *Study in Black and Green* (featuring a girl in a green dress) by John White Alexander, *Repose* by the same artist (a lady reclining), *Summer* (a nude lady and her maid) by Frederick Carl Frieseke, *Fleur de Lis* by Robert Reid, *Northeaster* by Winslow Homer (a study of waves), and some beautiful portraits by John Singer Sargent.

Next we examined a fine collection of Dutch paintings: there were masterpieces by Vermeer, Rembrandt and Frans Hals. Then came the English school: works by Sir Thomas Lawrence, Gainsborough and so forth. Following this was a mind-boggling collection of French works: Georges de la Tour's *The Penitent Magdalene* and *The Fortune Teller*, Corot's landscapes and portraits of women (I had never seen his portraits before), paintings by Sisley and Renoir (we liked the latter's picture of a mother and two little girls in blue dresses), and works by Van Gogh and Pissarro.

By this stage we were on the verge of collapse and were contemplating leaving the museum when we chanced upon a special exhibition entitled *From Van Eyck to Breughel*. We entered the rooms, where we immediately noticed a hushed silence, and gazed in awe at the masterpieces, most of which were full of fascinating details. I particularly enjoyed concentrating on the background scenes in the beautifully executed religious works. There were several outstanding pictures by Van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. We agreed afterwards that this particular exhibition had been the highlight of the museum; we were very glad that we had persisted and not left.

Wearied by now from having looked at so many fine pictures, we went downstairs to the huge gift shop, where we looked at various books and souvenirs. We finally left when the place was closing at 5.15 p.m. We had been on our feet in the museum for about seven and a half hours! Despite this, we walked back around Central Park, taking a closer look at the big hotels, found the Carnegie Hall near the corner of 7th Avenue, then collapsed into a restaurant nearby to have a meal. Although the restaurant had been named the 'Parisienne', we discovered that all the staff were Greek. Hungry by now, we ate well.

Our plan had been to return to our humble abode in order to change into better clothing for this evening's musical recital in the Weill Hall nearby, but by now neither of us had the time or the inclination. Instead, we took our time, walked around a little after our meal and made our way slowly back to the Carnegie Hall. Inside the building I introduced myself to somebody in a small ticket office and was given two free tickets that I had booked some time previously.

Feeling somewhat out of place in our jeans and jumpers, we then joined some elegantly-dressed people in a lift, went up a few storeys, then stepped out into a small waiting area where there was a bar. We now found ourselves surrounded by several elderly ladies. While I squatted on the floor, Colm chatted with a pleasant old dear, while a rather crazy lady sitting close by contributed to the conversation. After a short while doors were finally opened and we were admitted into the small but elegant hall. By eight o'clock it was filled with well-dressed people, many of whom could be heard speaking German. It appeared that the concert had been subsidized by the Austrian Embassy.

Shortly afterwards the young members of the Haydn Quartet appeared. The first work was a familiar work by Haydn; it was very well played but, being quite tired by now, I was inclined to nod off. I paid more attention to the following work: an unfamiliar piece by the Hungarian-born Viennese composer Karl Goldmark, whose music I had probably never heard before.

As the hall was overheated and our throats were dry, we bought small glasses of sparkling mineral water at the bar during the interval, which knocked us back \$3 each. Later we saw a lady sipping water from a paper cup and concluded that she must have got the water in the ladies' room.

We then returned to the hall for the final work of the concert: an excellent performance of Schubert's famous *Trout* quintet, which meant that the musicians were joined by a pianist and a double bass player. The concert concluded with a prolonged round of applause.

As we had been sitting down for the duration of the concert, we decided to walk back to our hostel or to one of the subway stations on 7th Avenue. We walked southwards, passing various hotels, shops and skyscrapers, and passed through Times Square (merely a junction of avenues, and full of colourful neon signs). We stopped to look down 42nd Street, which looked deserted and uninteresting, then paused to watch a street artist work with spray paint. We were fascinated to observe his technique. Because of the spraying, he wore a cumbersome mask over his mouth and nose. We saw another artist farther down the avenue.

As we continued southwards, the bright lights and the razzmatazz began to disappear. At last we reached the humdrum surroundings of where we were staying. We entered the unwelcoming hostel, had showers and went to bed at midnight. It had been a very interesting though tiring day.

Wednesday, 28 October

After a very good night's sleep, we were up by 7 a.m. When ready, we walked to the same little restaurant down the road for breakfast. The pleasant Italian lady who had served us yesterday was able to guess most of what we wanted this morning. We noticed that several people who had been here on the previous morning were here again today; they were obviously locals.



The Statue of Liberty, New Jersey

When we had finished eating, we walked to the subway station at the junction of 23rd Street and caught a train going to South Ferry, right at the southern tip of Manhattan island. As we surfaced and returned to daylight, we were met with a high wall of skyscrapers. A small house and church, both of which looked quite incongruous, were situated quite close to them. We then walked through Battery Park to Castle Clinton, a low circular brick building, where we got our first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty out in the bay. At nine o'clock we bought tickets, at \$7 each,

for the ferry to the statue and Ellis Island, and were told that the first boat would leave at 9.30. I excused myself for a few minutes and, when I went back outside, I found that a very long queue had formed at the ferry port. Colm waved to me from near the front; he had seen the people coming and had got in line ahead of everyone. I joined him and, to pass the time, we looked out to sea, chatted and half listened to a black fellow who was singing songs to the crowd. A couple of Japanese girls stood beside me.



The ferry to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, New Jersey

At last the ferry appeared and we scrambled aboard. We soon moved off and, leaving the skyscrapers of Manhattan behind, we made our way across the bay to the Statue of Liberty. Unfortunately the sun now disappeared behind the clouds and everything began to look rather grey. Slowly the famous statue appeared to grow in size, though somehow it seemed smaller than I had imagined it to be.

We finally reached the little island, alighted from the ferry, then zigzagged around barriers to get to the entrance of the statue. We were delighted to discover that we did not have to pay to get in, though our bags and cameras had to be checked. Next came the climb up the staircase to the crown. This was an interesting experience, for once inside the statue proper, we found that there was a double staircase, which meant that we would not have to squeeze past people coming

down. All around us were large pieces of copper riveted together and bent into various shapes; the structure of the statue was most ingenious. Up in the crown, we were disappointed to discover that we had a very poor view of our surroundings thanks to the dirty glass in the small windows. However, it was an achievement to have got here.

We now went down and emerged at the pedestal, which we walked around. I found myself beside the two Japanese girls once again and was just trying to say a few words of very rusty Japanese to them when Colm called me away to take a photo of a couple from Belfast who had been ahead of us while climbing up inside the statue.

Afterwards we went down to the very bottom of the statue; while Colm went off to join the queue for the ferry, I went around to the front of the statue and took a photo of it from below. I then joined Colm and off we set in the ferry for Ellis Island, which we had seen from the statue.

We eventually arrived at the island and approached the large immigrants' building which, by now, was full of visitors. When we entered, we found ourselves in a huge hall. As we discovered that a film about the place could be viewed, we asked for two free tickets and walked into the cinema just as the film was about to start. It turned out to be an excellent introduction to the place and told its story through harrowing images.



The immigrants' registration hall on Ellis Island, New Jersey

After watching the film we went upstairs to the huge registration hall. We looked at one of the exhibitions in it but found that much of it was a repetition of what we had seen in the film. I had been led to believe that this was a fascinating place and that a whole morning or afternoon could be spent here, but both of us were glad to leave the noisy building and go outside, where we looked across to the skyscrapers of Manhattan and examined a circular wall of plaques bearing the names of immigrants, which were arranged in alphabetical order. Colm found quite a lot of people bearing his surname and I found several Gannons.

Shortly afterwards we made our way to the ferry and sailed back towards Manhattan. As the sun had now made a welcome appearance, I took some more photos of the Statue of Liberty and the skyscrapers. Returning to Battery Park, we went into the lovely old church in order to take a look at it. We discovered that Elizabeth Ann Seton, the founder of the Sisters of Charity in America, had lived



The Church of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Financial District, Manhattan

here and that this Church of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary had been built on the site of her home. As the place was peaceful and quite delightful, we relaxed here for a while, then went walking up the beginning of Broadway, where the sunshine was blocked by the presence of the tall skyscrapers. As we were feeling hungry by now, we stopped at a smart café and lunched on a bagel spread with cream cheese, then a muffin and a cup of tea. (By now I had noticed people walking along the streets outside holding disposable cups containing coffee or tea; obviously this was a new craze.) It was quite pleasant around here, for the buildings were very modern and slick. We were now in the business centre of Manhattan.



The World Trade Center, Manhattan

After lunch we walked round to the Stock Exchange, which we had hoped to visit, but found it closed to visitors now. We stopped to look at the nearby Federal Hall in Wall Street, then walked to Trinity Church, which we found to be very dark and heavy inside. We relaxed here for a few minutes, then made our way to the huge World Trade Center, which was a couple of blocks away. We were directed to

the entrance that we needed, where we paid \$12 to go to the top. After we had had our bags checked by security guards, we went up in a lift that only took a few minutes to get to the observation deck at the top of the skyscraper. Although the deck was a little bit gimmicky, there were tremendous views from the windows.



A view of Brooklyn from the World Trade Center, Manhattan

Here we were able to look down on other skyscrapers, out over the entire city and back to where we had been this morning. While I photographed some of the views and sat down to appreciate them to the full, Colm wandered off. Shortly afterwards I looked at a model of the city that was illuminated by small spotlights. Colm then reappeared and told me that he had been up on the roof, outdoors. I followed him and we went up together. As the views were much clearer from here, I photographed them again. I also managed to capture a dramatic scene as the sun began to set behind Ellis Island.



Sunset over Ellis Island and New Jersey, viewed from the World Trade Center

We then returned to the observation deck and then went into a small cinema, where we watched a film of Manhattan shot from a helicopter. The floor of the cinema moved and shook to simulate the sensation of travelling in the helicopter. Despite the poor quality of the video pictures, it was quite realistic.

As dusk was now descending over the city, we decided to eat here in the restaurant and see New York lit up. We had quite a good Italian meal: I ate a big hunk of pizza followed by a fruit salad, and washed it down with some mineral water. As we ate, we looked out of the windows, watching the lights of the city coming on. After we had finished eating, we went back up to the roof, where we admired the dramatic view once again.



The city lights of Manhattan as seen from the World Trade Center

At last we left – we concluded that we had got our \$12 worth! – and descended to ground level. When we walked outside, we discovered that it had started to rain. We ran into an expensive clothes shop across the road, where a liveried man stood by the door. Despite the high prices, Colm bought a tee shirt for half the original price; he intended to give this to his sister's partner. Fortunately the rain had stopped when we left the shop, but it soon began once again. We sheltered for a while in a doorway, then walked to the nearest subway station. We took a train back to our hostel, where we checked the noticeboard to see if Mary had left a note for us, but found nothing. We then had showers and later went to bed. It had been quite an interesting day.