

David McLoughlin



Tall Poppy: Castleconnell, 1985

One day after Mass—the younger monks like lighthouses in black among the visiting parents, a sea of boys in navy blazers, and the older sisters who anybody between thirteen and eighteen was busy eyeing up—Br. Patrick said to Mum and Dad, “You know, I think David might just qualify for an exemption from Irish. He’s had most of his primary education outside the country, after all.” It was 1985, the Michaelmas term, and we had just come home after two years in New England and three-and-a-half in Belgium before that.

My father was an executive with the aircraft leasing company, Guinness Peat Aviation, or GPA, and since our move to Brussels in 1980, where he worked with the European Union, I’d lived in comfort and somehow apart from wherever we happened to be as we followed his career. In Dublin, my childhood had evolved in a new suburb without a past—only a present and a future. We had left for Brussels just when I was about to begin national school, and the laying down of certainties about Irishness. Darien, Connecticut, where we’d moved back from, was in one of the richest congressional districts in the United States; Brussels was like a diplomatic bubble. I was a teenager, and had been living in a variety of Pales since we left Ireland. At some point between the ages of seven and thirteen, the thread linking Ireland-before-leaving and Ireland-after had melted away, as if it had never been there. Now I was a student at Glenstal Abbey, which was famous as one of the elite boarding schools in the country.

When the exemption came through, my classmates were jealous: “Bloody hell, Yank. What are you going to do in all your free classes?” The only other boys who didn’t have to do Irish were Andrew Westbrook and his brother, who had lived in Nigeria all through primary school. During Irish class, as Andrew and I played table rugby in the library with an octagonal silver 50-pence piece, one of us making his thumbs into goal posts while the other spun the coin for a penalty kick. Andrew’s stories juxtaposed the luxury he’d known in Lagos and the watery fields and hedgerows of Clare-Galway, where he had lived before Africa. Sometimes I knew we had something unspoken in common. It was strange. It was as if he was still, partly, where I had been. I didn’t think about it, but I didn’t envy him. I didn’t realize that I hadn’t fully come home yet myself.

I was slowly beginning to understand that coming back was more complicated than leaving had ever been. As people insisted “but, where are you *from*?” they didn’t have the patience for my story, for the ellipses between Dublin, Brussels, Darien, Glenstal, and Limerick. Ireland only had space for the simpler narrative. But my family didn’t fit it. We were some of the first emigrants to return, and they didn’t know what to do with us. For Dad to have been promoted back to a place people were emigrating from—and where those who had stayed were fighting to get by—was unheard of.

In the dark onset of November 1985, we were still living in O’Brien’s Bridge, in the house on the hill, slightly back from the village, that looked onto the Shannon and the long, narrow bridge where fishermen stood in stone booths, dropping their lures into eddies. I was angry on my Sunday visits home—or sad, without knowing why. As if quoting something, with the shyness of addressing something difficult, Mum sometimes said, “you seem a little bit at loose ends, Daedo.” That was her old name for me. “Or like a dog looking for a bone,” Dad blustered, patting me on the back in his own loveable awkwardness, good cop-bad cop all in one person. Home was still in storage, and leaving Glenstal, even for a day, reacquainted me with the floating feeling.

Mum said later, “Leo McGrath used to say in parent-teacher meetings: ‘the boys sometimes get confused about which place is home. Don’t worry, he’ll get over it soon.’” I had that confusion. But there was the other thing, too. Ireland was only on Sundays, from ten or eleven in the morning until eight or nine at night, when Dad drove me home: back to school. The first September, as we walked to Sunday Mass—the navy blazer’s cuff itch, its too-long sleeves, the crest on the breast pocket with the raven aloft on a background of red and grey—the other boys said, “Hey Yank, your parents are coming today, aren’t they?” Andrew Westbrook would pretend he hadn’t heard, and I’d nod, downplaying it. I felt some anticipation, but after a few weeks of visits, I was beginning to take it for granted. Mum and Dad lived ten miles away. Of course I’d be visited. The others soon stopped mentioning it once they realized I’d get a visit every Sunday. Whenever Dad drove me back on Sunday nights, there was disruption and sadness in the ten miles of dark fields between home and school. It was as if I were a teenager in Edmund Spenser’s retinue, looking at a perplexing new territory. But the truth was, it was me who’d been colonized. I had come back to look at Ireland with the sceptical, worldly eyes I’d adopted while living in a patch of WASP New England.

When my parents collected me, after Sunday Mass, parents and priests adjourned for tea and biscuits, to the big room with varnished wooden floors just past the black-and-white marble entrance hall; the fathers who were “Old Glenstallions” seeking out their favorite monk, maybe a mentor from their time at “Glen.” But we almost never went, as I was eager to get the hell out. I would

throw my yellow laundry bag in the boot as Tiddles and Andrew and David B. M. Kieran scuffed at the gravel as they went past, down the line of BMWs and Jaguars belonging to the parents and sexy sisters of the boys who were going out for lunch at the Dunraven Arms Hotel, and then on to activities that felt interim and empty—and were, because they couldn't actually go home.

Andrew wouldn't get a visit until Christmas. My friends had their hands deep in their pockets, as they went by. "Bye, then, Glocker. See you tonight," they'd said, the gray of Sunday spreading ahead of them.

I liked Sunday mornings at home best. It was still the youth of the day. I breakfasted on a fry-up like a young king, my mother hovering, serving me, my little sister and brother Rebecca and Marc vying for my attention, Dad regarding me indulgently. It was nice to feel special. "Leave the dishes, love," Mum would say, letting me retire to veg in front of the television, which I barely saw at school. I could watch it, or cycle through our VHS collection with titles like "Ireland vs. France 1983," in Dad's almost illegible lawyer's cursive.

Then came Sunday lunch: Mum's roast beef, chicken paprika, or stuffed pork steak trussed in red elastic string. And then the melancholy arc toward school.

Sometimes my parents suggested a walk, an expedition to Knappogue Castle or to the defensive crannóg that was its own island. It was only half an hour away, and was an Iron Age representation of my secret state of mind. They never suggested Bunratty. I never thought of it, or of the cottage owned by GPA beside it where we had spent our first week home. Less than six months back, that inter-zone summer of arrival felt years ago, now. I usually managed to wriggle out of their attempts to get me out of the house, doing my best to not go into Ireland. In Darien I'd skateboarded on the road. In Ireland, I didn't want to leave the house or garden. When I did, people had questions about my identity.

Ireland was becoming a place to shunt through. I was like a West Bank settler who only drove on a prescribed network of bypass roads. Middle-class Dublin had felt safe, but in the Limerick-Tipperary-Clare hinterland, I was like the by-gone Anglo-Irish. What constituted my world was a series of friends' houses that we visited: analogous to Protestant Big Houses, places of safety. Otherwise, the world outside Dublin and school was a zone where my identity was questioned through the entry wound of accent. "So, where're you from, then? You English? Or 'merican, like?"

Five months after arriving from America, Mum and Dad bought a house in Castleconnell, a village nine miles north of Limerick City, right on the River Shannon. GPA made demands: Dad's boss Tony Ryan extended his power even into mapping the limits of where employees could buy or rent. You had to be a maximum of forty minutes' drive from the office. He knew well that without this diktat, the executives would commute from Killiney, Ballsbridge, and Dalkey.

Castleconnell was as close to Dublin as my parents could get and still be within range. In those days that was important to them; thirty years later, they still say, “We’re *from* Dublin, but we live in Limerick.”

Jan Leyden was from Castleconnell. One day he said, “your parents have just bought Island House. We used to play in there. It was great!” *Not anymore*, I thought. Those incursions would fade, just as Jan’s Limerick accent was fading, and becoming Glenstal’s version of a south side Dublin accent. Only the biggest bidders didn’t have it. Jan brandished the *Irish Times* property section at me, with a photo of a house with Greek pillars covered in ivy, and antique stone lions on either side of the front door. The article gave the price, luxuriating in the details:

Brian McLoghlin, Esq., Chief Legal Office of Guinness Peat Aviation, Ireland’s aircraft-leasing success story, has purchased Island House at auction, for 250,000 Punt. Island House, on Cloon Island, a unique property of nine acres, fronts onto the River Shannon, with direct access, and includes woodland, an eel trap, a large and small island, the ruin of a Franciscan friary from the 1200s, and a house of five bedrooms built in 1815 by Sir John Allen de Burgho (Burke).

My mind went blank. To an adult in 1985, £250,000 was a king’s ransom. To a thirteen-year-old, it was unimaginable.

In those years, the *Sunday Independent* ran features about GPA houses, with satisfied mug shots of the executives—Colm Barrington, Maurice Foley—superimposed on aerial views of dorics and demesnes, none of which was grander than Tony Ryan’s Kilboy estate in Tipperary. GPA was its own mini-boom during the 1980s recession. If not members of the 1 percent, we were definitely 5-percenters in the gray environs of Limerick in 1985. GPA was paying Dad’s salary in dollars at a time when the punt was weak, and the big house was part of the evidence.

Dad’s new promotion, to be chief legal officer at the head office in the Shannon Airport tax-free zone, was a step up even from the swimming pools and tennis courts of Darien. GPA houses were always in their own grounds, and usually not in a village or town. Sean Donlon’s and the Ledbetters’ fronted directly onto Lough Derg, with private docks; others were up lengthy driveways. Island House was one of the most beautiful, and definitely the most unusual. It actually *was* on an island: “Cloon Island” was written across it on the local ordnance survey map. Cows grazed on the Clare side of the Shannon. A stream of the same river ran under the driveway, which doubled as a bridge, and had battlements. The garden was a riverbank. There were swans and herons, and salmon fishermen in tall green boots wading out midstream with their fly rods.

At the back of the house, a red bridge crossed over to another, thinner island, where the ESB’s fisheries had one of their “beats,” as their assigned fishing rights

were called. It was also where poachers and illegal day fishermen liked to fish, as it was farthest from the house.

Later, Mum and Dad would do up the old house to make it their dream home, with four bathrooms, a wine cellar, conservatories, and a dark-wood spiral staircase to Dad's study in the attic. In the future, one day a nice old man would wander in as far as the back door, which was something not even the worst trespassers had the balls to do. Maybe we were having lunch on a summer day, or it was a Sunday, which explained why I was there.

Dad went down to him, and said, "Nice day, isn't it?"

"Ah sure, soft enough alright, 'tishn't it?"

"So, how can I help you?"

"Well, I just wanted to have a look at de domes," he said, gesturing at the multilevel conservatory that ballooned botanically at the back of the house on either side of the double staircase. He rocked on the balls of his feet, looking up.

"Well. Aren't they something, now?" Then, after some small talk, he headed off, back down the driveway to the village. He was a nice old man, but after Dad came back to his ham-and-mustard sandwich and explained his purpose, the incursion itched somewhere inside me. I didn't say anything, but it irked that people were still ignoring the property line, "drifting" through the gates that now said *Island House* on the pillars, crossing a clearly delineated boundary. Maybe I'd become a capitalist in Darien—certainly I'd become a consumer—but that wasn't it. I was unsure about boundaries. When I was at home for the holidays or on a Sunday, I found it hard to leave the house.

In 1987, while my parents were renovating, they moved out for a year into a modest house called The Rectory, which was further from the village. On the back road to Limerick near Lisnagry, it wasn't contrastive to others: or to Scanlon Park, the council estate that was directly opposite the gate of Island House. So, for a year, when I came home from school on visits, there was a kind of privacy that I didn't feel in Castleconnell. A sense that I could, in terms of social class, be like everyone else. After and before my parents did up the house, if I left our "grounds"—this was a new word—people knew who I was, even though I'd never met them. The way I dressed and spoke, pegged me as blow-in. And if they didn't know at first, they guessed: "You're from Island House, are you? Ah, sure, it was great playing in there as a lad. You know there's a right-of-way there, don't you?"

Country ways were stubborn. It would take twenty years for that assertion to die down, when Castleconnell was becoming almost a suburb of Limerick, when the things that made me most anxious in the beginning were what I missed later. The Ireland of our recent arrival was authentic, but parsing the finer points of belonging and difference was one of its favorite pastimes. 1980s Ireland was like a surgeon who operated on live nerves without an anaesthetic. Though the scalpel

was almost mythologically sharp, I felt every passive-aggressive feint and barb in their questions, and didn't have an answer.

After we moved in, I discovered that there was a Them and an Us. I was Them, and not just in my own mind—and so, I become a defensive snob. Mrs. Levy, the old Anglo-Jewish lady who'd lived there before us, had taken to living on the ground floor, which felt like a basement as it had no views of "the grounds" that had been taken over by the locals. The villagers fished freely; kids built their forts under the rhododendrons which, if you were small, were a canopy under which you didn't need to stoop. So, when we moved in and started to push the boundary back to the property line, there was a reaction.

"Ah, now Missus, there's always been a right-of-way here, now."

"Well," Mum would explain, "it's a right-of-way for fishermen who've bought the rights from the ESB."

"Ah now, Missus," the man would shake his head sadly, as if disappointed in us. He was ambiguous: not admitting defeat, he wasn't declaring war either. Years of this sort of class strife began. Some were acute—panes of greenhouse glass smashed; a stolen bike or chain saw; boys mooching along the riverbank; clothes disappearing from the washing line—followed by spans of time that were quiet. Fishermen who had the rights to the beats came in the gate and walked up the Beech Walk, the lovely line of beech trees along the river bank. They were reassuringly upper middle-class, and had the right equipment: fly rods, waders, and nets. Attended by gillies, they had paid for the right to fish for salmon.

Castleconnell had been a Victorian salmon resort. At the local shop, Shan-non Stores, there was a huge stuffed salmon above the till from the time when the local man John Enright had been fly-casting champion of the world in 1896, before the Ardnacrusha dam had dropped the water level for rural electrification in 1929. As the years passed, there were fewer salmon. But in 1985, men still came to the front door, needing both hands to lift a salmon. Mum, as the "Lady of the Island," would always buy it, with the twenty pound notes with Yeats on them, the notes that were almost foreign to me.

One day, Mum and I were driving along the west bank of Lough Derg, on the Killaloe side, when we came across a man on the back of a mare, riding bareback, a foal following, untethered. The horseman was smack in the middle of the lane. The foal was skittering to the right, almost on the verge of—but never quite fully—bolting into oncoming traffic. It was a quiet road, but still. I knew Mum would say something. By this point, Marc and Rebecca both had ponies; we had a horse box, and Mum drove them to events on every weekend in the wine-coloured Range Rover. Mum slowed as she passed out, a view of the white of the foal's eye as we drew level. The automatic window rolled down.

"Why don't you mind your horses?" she said.

Completely matter-of-fact, he said, “why don’t you mind your own fucking business?”

Mum threw back her head and laughed. He smiled to himself, and she drove on. They seemed to have enjoyed the confrontation.

We must have gone on to talk about horse safety, but I didn’t mention how I was still stressed and a little shaky inside. And, I was amazed by Mum. Any kind of confrontation would have had me disconcerted, but one that put me on one side—black Saab 900 turbo with spoiler and automatic windows—and him on the other, a Traveller riding his horse barebacked—was additionally difficult. As it was, I already felt boxed in, and oppressed by outside definition. Mum, always in designer sunglasses even on a cloudy day, wasn’t bothered at all. I loved that, but worried about myself.

Mum and Dad took the move in stride. Later, Dad said, “When we first moved in, we started getting invitations to dinner parties by people we didn’t really know, where they had out the best silver and china plates. The other guests were always”—now he put his voice in pious italics as he recited—“‘the doctor, the solicitor, the teacher.’ And I realized, ‘these are the pillars of rural society.’ It was very middle class. And, it was so boring.” We had returned, with all our American prosperity, at least ten years before Celtic Tiger showiness became commonplace. Well-to-do executives from GPA were something new entirely in rural society, and the new money was making people sit up and take notice, in positive and negative ways. Every week, the executives were closing big deals in Cairo, Jakarta, Asunción, flying on planes they treated as if they owned—which they did, in fact. In first-class lounges all over the world, the British and American old guard looked up from their Gordon’s with surprise: an Irish accent with a power suit was something new. The trickle-down was that sometimes, instead of taking the train to Dublin, we flew. With our sheafs of standby tickets from Aer Lingus, it was cheaper. Once, a helicopter dropped Dad off in the field next to the house, sending the cattle running for the ditches. In Limerick, clothes were varieties of gray, like low weather. Among the Opel Corsas and Toyotas, the Saab may as well have been the Bat-mobile.

I was ashamed that we had more than others; and less, too, in ways I couldn’t explain. Andrew Westbrook might have understood. The only others who could were the sons and daughters of Dad’s workmates, the other GPA children, but I met them very rarely. Some of them were in boarding schools in Dublin, or Kildare; others were at school in England. When we met at Christmas or Easter, I sensed an uncertainty in the voices that I judged as English-sounding, or transatlantic. But I kept my own worry tight and didn’t speak it.

Slowly, I realized I was a part of a new floating class. We had no real precedents, and weren’t part of the doctor-solicitor-teacher-bank manager brigade. This new world was made up of business executives, and most of them worked

in GPA. Some of them behaved like celebrities. They sent drivers to pick the kids from school, and phoned the best restaurants in the city an hour before the busiest Friday night sitting, saying, “Joe Clarkin, GPA. Table for eight, please.” Once, a high powered young lawyer from Dublin 4 crashed his BMW through a wall speeding to the Monday morning meeting, and landed in someone’s front garden. As the family came out in their dressing gowns, their mouths open, he rushed past them, bleeding from the head, shouting, “I have to make an urgent phone call!” They presumed it was for an ambulance; but when the phone bill came, it showed a call to Tokyo.

Over the years, docks accommodating yachts and speed boats appeared along Lough Derg; halves and quarters of race horses were invested in, follies built. One executive had a personal helicopter. A renovation craze set in among the GPA wives, with saunas and steam rooms, indoor swimming pools and outdoor plunge pools. The company was high on success.

The day that epitomized it was one of the summers we went to the Adare Fair. GPA was the sponsor, and the company had a private enclosure smack in the middle. We were given rosettes with “GPA Guest” in gold writing. Whenever I left the enclosure, I put mine in my pocket, not wanting to be identified with a place that was set apart, where a bar and catering area had been set up, chefs in their toque hats serving barbecued fillet steaks, pork sausages, jacket potatoes with sour cream and spring onions, several kinds of salad; and kilos of strawberries and cream. For us it was all free. The women wore Gucci sunglasses, and their hair was highlighted a sandy blonde. At the bar, florid-faced men in linen suits were drinking Pims under rakish Panama hats. There were loud British, American, and posh Dublin accents, but few accents from Rathkeale, Kildimo, or Newcastle West, and very few indeed from the townlands where we lived.

Even though GPA was sponsoring the fair, one could sense wisps of resentment, like invisible streamers caught in the trees, outside the enclosure. Bottles of Bollinger popped as the loudspeaker announced the winning bullock; men in caps and boots muddy with silage stalked by, smoking Woodbines on their way to the ploughing competition. Inside the enclosure, in some of the people—almost always the children—I could have sworn that there was a lostness, because our feet couldn’t connect to the ground that the executive class, our parents, had now staked as its own, but which was nonetheless steeped in inherited local ways.

The country wasn’t empty. It was full of people, most of whom gave the impression of knowing the story—the “*sceal*,” they would say, garnishing their talk with Irish. As the knowing *focal* in Gaelic dropped into the conversation, like a ball bearing in a Claymore, it rippled outward like an unknown code, and resonated in me like anti-matter.

Everyone seemed tight with insider knowledge, and delivered quick repartee.

They were delighted with themselves as they said things like, “Christ, lads, now we’re suckin’ diesel, heh?”

“That we are, boy, that we are.”

“We feckin’ are. Oh, we’re suckin’ *daysil* alright, lads. Through a straw.”

“A pipe more like, Seamus.”

“Oh, watch out for this fella, now. He’s a dark horse. A right hoor, he is alright. Oh, watch him. Ha, lads?”

It was a knowledge in which history and place had merged deep. The country people seemed to have been born with it; or, almost the same thing, they’d absorbed it in national school, and from living close to the townland’s pulse. By now it was innate. These were the Little Piggies Who’d Never Left Home. Or, if they had, it had been to the building site in London, driving a taxi in New York, and a room in Woodside in a house filled with other Irish. They hadn’t left Ireland the way I had. It was me that was the empty territory. I was the impostor.

To link Glenstal to Ireland, first you had to have Ireland inside you. The boys in my class were the sons of solicitors from Dublin and Cork, or big farmers from Meath, North Kerry or Tipperary, country doctors and vets from Wexford, Sligo, and Cavan. They had grown up uninterrupted. They all came from somewhere. At least, that was what I believed. They accepted me as one of their own, but as I took soundings on their accents, there wasn’t a solid place for the echoes to return to. Andrew was the only one I could have shared my worries with. But all through our free classes, I never asked him straight out. I never even whispered it to myself. I didn’t have the words then for the empty feeling, for when you come back and are strange in your own country.

~ NEW YORK CITY

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