



Psst... wanna copy of TASH 6?

INTRO...

Well its been a long year since TASH 5 saw the light of day and many things have happened not only to me but also to the rest of the world. The rest of the world, however, can publish their own fanzines. This one is, as ever, all about me and was going to be subtitled 'Wot I did on my 'Olidays' but a thorough beating over the head soon dispelled that notion. What you finally got was a little bit of home spun culture; the title of the article means: 'Welcome to Donegal'. What, you'd guessed?



Most of you reading this will know that I've not been idle inbetween TASHs. I continue to contribute THINGY to The Organisation APA, a new APazine called The Garret is published for Pieces of Eight; and I'm also one of the editors of Götterdämmerung, Ireland's leading fanzine (though TASH may regain that title yet). On the other hand I'm Clubs Columnist for the BSFA, Administrator of The Organisation and when I've had a few drinks have been known to be enthusiastic about running another NICON. Sometimes being sober sheds a wonderful perspective on your life.

Your humble scribe hard at,er...

I've also not been idle in my personal sphere. I've long since graduated from University with a degree in Political Science, spent 3 months or so selling Unit Trusts, a month as a temporary clerk in our Local Health Authority, 7 months as a researcher for a local publisher, four months working as an accounts controller for an insurance company and finally, and currently, 10 months for the Inalnd Revenue as a Collector of Taxes (there, wasn't too painless now was it?). In amongst that lot was 7 months or so unemployment which wasn't very nice at all and is the only reason I'm still collecting taxes after 10 months. You'll be glad to know I'm still drinking Guinness & Bushmills Whiskey. (Some things never change, eh?).

What about the rest of that amiable bunch of rogues that go to make up Belfast fandom (and the NICON crew you met in TASH 5; remember that? NO? Good.) Well Eugene is still nursing (a serious hangover), Bill is studying Law at the University of Buckingham, Joe is still repeating his second year of Amedia Studies course at the University of Ulster, Al is married and settling down (Eugene is also married by the way, I was best man- Ha-but hasn't settled down), Peter is an Academic Administrator at the University of Warwick. Where does all the time go?

Finally thanx to Vinç Clarke for the Electro-Stencilling and Euge Doherty for running off this zine. Address: Tommy Ferguson, Flat 1, 33 Camden St., Lisburn Rd., Belfast, BT7 6AT; Northern Ireland. Next issue: Er...

Failte Go Donegal...

And welcome to another world. Although this ancient part of Ulster is only ten miles from where I live it takes an eternity to get there. My girlfriend, Nyree, and I went there on a holiday recently, touring the whole of Donegal in her twelve year old yellow mini, called Buttercup. From the commercial area of Southern Donegal with its fishing and knitting/weaving towns of Killybegs and Donegal town itself, to the vast barren wastelands of the North and Derrybeg and Bloody Foreland. The round trip was one that the mini wouldn't live to reminisce about; the Department of the Environment for Donegal and especially its roads division has a lot to answer for.

It is not only the people of Donegal that make it so different but the landscape, the buildings and even the very air itself is strange. Whether this is because of its remoteness or the influence of Britain over the past couple of hundred years I'm not sure, but the place is downright weird. A wonderful example of this is Bundoran in the South of the county, where we were to start our journey ('Bun', 'Bally', and 'Killy' are all prefixes to place names, they mean town or village roughly speaking). Upon arrival, however, we changed our schedule.

Bundoran is the epitomy of everything that is 'different' about Donegal: it is made up of one main street that is a good half a mile long and which contains absolutely everything the population needs. This would appear to be beer and alcohol as every other building on the street was a pub, bar or off-sales. Not ones to be put off by an over exhuberance for beer, what really depressed us was the condtion of the place. If you can imagine a sea-side town in the late fifties or early sixties when everyone took domestic holidays you would have a good picture of Bundoran. Now, further imagine what the town would look like today if it had been left to just rot away on its own, the pink paint fading on the walls of the bigger buildings, shop windows with sun soiled displays and stray dogs barking rabidly. This is what the poor end of Donegal is like; there is nothing else to trade with but long forgotten memories of good times and the last vestiges of a once glorious atmosphere. We had a word for this sort of difference: reality; and being on holiday had nothing to do with that, we came to the end of the street, turned and left.

We then drove to Donegal town, about thirty miles, to arrange accomodation for the rest of the holiday. Home of Magee International Fashions it is the exact opposite of Bundoran: a real history upon which to develop a vibrant tourist industry, you could see this in the two 'A' class hotels in town; a flourishing export industry based on tweed and aran sweaters and an honest to goodness commercial centre in town. The difference was also visible in the people. Used to dealing with American tourists they were all sirs and madams to us and glowed with a vitality of life; or did they? A closer look at the town revealed that it was also a tourist trap, the shamrock goods made in Hong Kong and Singapore, the drivel written about the homely Irish women knitting aran sweaters in their quaint thatched cottages and the continous exhortations to buy for export and hence miss the crippling effects of the Irish Republics' amazing tax laws. It was just the same as Bundoran really, but it looked much, much better.

Finding accomodation wasn't diffulcult. In Donegal one thing you notice about the houses is that they are predominantly new, a result of the high priority the county has on the EEC's Regional Development Programme. The entry of Spain and Portugal into the EEC has meant that Donegal is now the tenth 'worst' region on the RDP comapred to its previous second place (Southern Italy has been at the top ever since the Programme was established). On each of these new houses are signs advertising Bed & Breakfast facilities; on the way into Donegal town for example, every house in one row was letting at least one room to B&B travellers. Nyree's idea of a holiday, however, does not include staying in someone else's house and hence we were looking for a cheap hotel for a few nights, a task that proved very troublesome as the B&B houses had sown up the cheap end of the accomodation market.

Hunting through our Bord Failte (Ireland's tourist board) guide we came across a hotel in Derrybeg that was in our price range, phoned them a booked a room for a few nights.

"Er, Thomas, where exactly is Derrybeg?" asked Nyree, after completing the call. "Buggered if I know..." I replied hoking around for the map.

We eventually found Derrybeg at the very tip of the map, up near Bloody Foreland and, like the name suggests, miles from absolutely anywhere in the heart of the Gaelteacht. This is an area of Donegal where everybody speaks Irish as their first language and some of the older folk don't speak English at all. It is perhaps most famous though, for the fact that the Irish folk group Clanad (which means 'family' in Irish) was born, bred and discovered there.

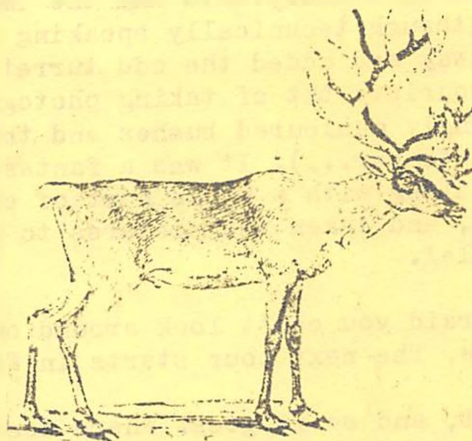
When we got there, five hours later, Nyree and I were starting to feel the effects of touring Donegal in the mini. I think this is the real reason we missed the hotel and not the fact that it was virtually impossible to see from the 'road', even if you were looking for it. As things turned out though, it was very well placed with regard to the Gaelteacht and was to prove an excellent home base for touring the acres of nothing that is called North-West Donegal.

The next day we set off after a breakfast that was doing the breast-stroke in grease with the egg looking very much like an island in a lake of little black bits of something. Thankfully there was cornflakes and lots of toast to make up for it. Our first port of call that morning was the Glenveagh National Park and Castle.

The park itself consists of nothing but scrubland and mountains but you'd be hard pressed to find more impressive scrubland and mountains. There wasn't any sign that would indicate you were in the park and indeed that mornings drive consisted of the same desolate landscape that somehow was awe inspiring in its ability not to let anything with the merest hint of colour grow on it. What finally clinched our location for us was the increasing slope which the poor mini was trying to negotiate and the high mountainous pass we finally ascended. Off to the left was this biblically damned pile of \$cree that just vanished into the mist of the early afternoon, or maybe they were indeed clouds. Off to the right was this huge pile of scree that... you get the idea. Ahead of us (we'd stopped to take pictures of nature doing its utmost to inspire us and yet, at the same time, remain entirely contemptous of our mere existence) was a road.

In Donegal the local authorities have a way with words that some lawyers I know are in awe off; 'road' is one of those words. What we would call a country lane they word term a major secondary road and a trunk road in Donegal would normally be refered to as a favourable thoroughfare for Himalayan goats. Now when you consider that there is only one major secondary road in Donegal which navigates the circumference of the county (its called the N56, and many is the

time we were actually glad to see those figures on a road sign, we couldn't actually read the destinations as they were in Irish) you will begin to realise why poor Buttercup had to have her clutch and chassis welded back together again when we returned. Anyway, this road stretched out before us through the 'high mountainous pass' that belonged in a Tolkien novel ("The Road Goes Forever On," or, "There And Never Back Again," perhaps?). If you ever played The Hobbit computer game you will understand why you can't get through the 'High Mountainous Pass' if you ever come to Donegal, Buttercup did...



Artists Impression Of The Irish Red Deer.

A few yards further on we came to our first sign of life, of any kind in the national park: the eponymous sheep. They weren't the only ones who'd been here recently, though, as there was a shrine 'to our blessed virgin Mary, Mother of Christ' which had fresh flowers adorning it. That gives you some idea of how religious these people are; the nearest town, or house for that matter, was at least fifteen miles away across impenetrable territory during the winter. I mean what was the point? To bless the sheep? I give up and I'm the one who is supposed to know about 'these things' as Nyree put it, laughing hilariously.

So that was the park. Impressive? Yes, but where were the deer leaping wildly about and being chased by hunters to the strain of John Williams playing the Spanish guitar?

"They've gone off to the lower pastures for the winter; you'd be very lucky if you caught sight of them," one of the guides at the Park information counter told us. He then pointed out one of those relief maps of the area with buttons on one side that said things like: "Deer winter retreats," and, "location of mountains," and even, "the way you just came." I mean, WHAT? When you pushed these buttons, of course, little orange and red lights buzzed on and off on the relief map to further illustrate that you were now in the devil's backyard; more colloquially put: the ass end of no-where.

The information centre itself was the paragon of modern technology... No, I'm lying actually. Flashing bulbs had just replaced a pensioner with a long stick who told dumb American tourists that this was Donegal (and there was still arguments about replacing aunt Madge with these new fangled gadgets). There was the usual displays of local geology, plant life, breeding and feeding grounds (an interesting juxtaposition) and why you couldn't actually see one of the largest populations of Red deer in Western Europe, so large they have to carry out bi-annual culls. Not that it mattered much anyway, their breeding, feeding and winter retreat grounds were all off limits and they can hear cars coming into Donegal.

"So when can we see the Red deer?" I asked.

"The third week in July is usually your best bet," I was told. But enough of the centre and off to visit the castle and its famous gardens.

Now this was more like it, there was history here and recent history at that because until the mid-sixties this was still the country home of a rich American Industrialist. It was generously given over to the Irish government when he

moved back to Pennsylvania and the immense acreage was sold off at a penny a throw. Although technically speaking a country manor the builder got a little carried away and added the odd turret here and there and a portcullis etc. We did the touristy bit of taking photographs of ourselves in the gardens beside the amazingly manicured bushes and the wonderful blooming flowers (and this was in September...). It was a fantastic garden with palm trees and bamboo in evidence along with a whole host of other indigenous plants. Having been suitably impressed, and taken the pictures to prove it, we went in to have a look around the 'castle'.

"I'm afraid you can't look around on your own, you have to be accompanied by a tour guide. The next tour starts in fifteen minutes."

"Ah well, and so it goes. Where does it start?" I enquired.

"In the main hall annexe. That will be £2.00 please."

This started a trend that was to continue throughout our brief stay in Donegal. Anything of remotely any interest to tourists, especially Americans and Germans, whose wallets usually weigh more than their brains when it comes to this sort of thing, the Irish tourist industry swung into full gear. They hired some local paid them 50p an hour and educated them somewhat about the feature and then charged £1 for anyone wanting to even look at the afore-mentioned edifice. Photographs weren't allowed we were told, because they would set off the alarm; which was presumably situated at the desk selling official postcards of the castle and its environs.

After all this cynicism though, I must say that the quid was well worth it: the castle was unique. From the front hall with a twenty pound salmon hanging on the wall, to the master bedroom done up in its full splendour (even though it was only the guest master bedroom, the other, even bigger, room being refurbished at the time). The turrets it turned out contained three circular bedrooms for male and female guests, the other wasn't specified but was called the Chinese room; Chinese artefacts being all the rage when the house was furnished. The whole place literally staggered the senses, and was worth an absolute fortune. Personally I was grabbed by the music room: fully insulated with velvet, Stradivarius in one corner and Steinway in the other. Goshwow-ohboyohboy. I would have paid a couple of quid to see, and experience that.

After the castle we took a round-a-bout route back to our hotel taking in the scenic beauties of Northern Donegal; all old hat to me I'm afraid but Nyree seemed to enjoy it, reminding her of her mis-spent youth... Our landing back at the hotel seemed to be the cue for the cook to start dinner and an hour and a half later we sat down to some good old fashioned Donegal home cooking, i.e. half a lamb each, a feild of spuds between us and a small lake of grease to keep it all afloat. At that stage though, we were ready for it and fairly wolfed it down (the fact that our stay included an evening meal had little to do with the clean plates afterwards).

The evenings entertainment consisted mainly in trying to figure out if the regulars in the hotel bar were talking about us, or indeed, if they were talking at all. Irish, you see, is a very guttural language and its hard to know if all those vowel combinations actually constitute a construct or merely a clearing of the throat from the ever-present peat fumes. I favoured the latter. This viewpoint was given credence because I was ordering the drinks, though not necessarily paying for them. The barwoman would come over and start to ask us what we wanted in Irish (Nyree still insists that she was merely clearing her throat) but quickly understood we couldn't understand what she was saying,

and reverted to:

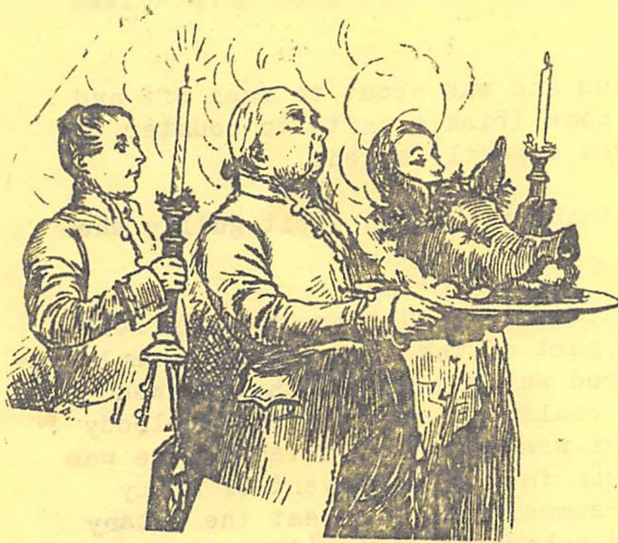
"Same again?"

This phrase sums up a method of serving drinks which still has me baffled. The pint of Guinness for my goodself would be put on and promptly forgotten about. Nyree's port on the other hand would be served with efficiency and the least amount of decorum i.e. a wine glass would be up-ended over the bottle and the barwoman would then turn to serve someone else. When the requisite half hour for the pint of Guinness to settle had passed (and not congeal, as some German tourists would have it) she would return and look at the bottle of port with decorative wine glass and wonder. Seeing me she would suddenly remember what that strange bottle was doing and promptly turn both over. When the port started to pour over the rim and stain the bar-top she would hand it to me with the pint and say:

"Er... give'us £2.00"

So the night wiled away with me ordering pints of Guinness in advance; by my reckoning last orders for Guinness was 9.30 and Nyree getting completely pissed on two ports. At this stage a half bottle of the stuff was well within Nyree's sobriety limits. All this at a measly £6 or so...

The following morning saw very athletic attempts by pieces of dead pig trying to stop themselves drowning in grease before they suffocated when it congealed, as it very rapidly did. After a lot of cornflakes we got ready for the next souhorn in our sight-seeing trip of Donegal: Glen Columkille. After saying our goodbyes to the hotel owner and Derrybeg generally (well, a dog and a few sheep that were present at our exit) we set off in Buttercup admist various rumbling growls and protests from the super-structure of the engine mounting.



The drive down was nearly as exciting as the drive up. Panoramic views your humble scribe is incapable of doing justice to, although analogies to Voyager pictures might give a vague indication of effect. One interesting phenomenon noted was the weird difference inweather that a few hundred metres of elevation can produce. As we drove up a rather smooth hill, hence the length of time it took us to reach the plateau it hid, the weather got increasingly worse. From the piercing sunshine that greeted our departure from Derrybeg, clouds began to appear and a fine mist descended upon us; soon it began to drizzle and then rain. Upon reaching the plateau we discovered a gale lying in wait for us and the pitiful car had some diffulculty in navigating the already treacherous goat path.

Dodging the last pothole we found ourselves plunged into a very sharp descent and through into the valley that lay gloriously before us,

Pig on the hoof, for breakfast?

rainbow in tow. All of this passed in the space of about a half hour, and the majority of that taken in getting to those exalted places in the first place. Strange place.

Glen Columbkille is even stranger. It is as far west as you can go and still remain in the county and for that reason is even more remote than any definition of that word could possibly convey. Why visit the place, then? I have often asked myself that since but have still failed to beat the enthusiasm that was generated by the original desire: the reconstructed typical Irish village of the late eighteenth century.

Parking the car (giving it a rest, as Nyree put it) we wandered over to have a look at the motely collection of buildings which Americans were already busy taking photographs of, having photographs taken of them in front of the buildings and having photographs taken of them taking photographs etc.

"I'm afraid you can't go in there sir," said a semi-offical looking person; i.e. he didn't have a button badge which said: 'we're from Boston and just so damn glad to be here.'

"Why not? Reconstruction? New additions? Refurbishment? Lack of scaffolding?"

"Er, no. You have to be accompanied by a tour guide," came the reply.

"Have you been having trouble with thieves then?" I asked.

"No."

"Oh. Where can we get one of these tour guides then?" I enquired, looking through the Americans saying: 'Gosh,' and, 'Gee, Amy will'ya look at...' like a bunch of neo-fen at a world con.

"There'll be one around 2.30," he informed us and was about to rush off and accost some Germans who wanted to bring back some Irish granite to counter the exodus of bits from the Berlin wall, when Nyree expertly noted:

"How much does the tour cost?" and I still think he looked a bit guilty when he told us it would be £1 each.

Having seen much similar edifices and artefacts at The Ulster-American Folk Park in County Tyrone I thought that the best part of the tour was the sample of some locally brewed mess that we were assured was similar to that brewed over 100 years ago in this very valley! No... really? Yes it did taste bloody awful. The other interesting aspect of the tour was the guide herself. She was all of fourteen years old, had just escaped from the local convent of mercy and seemed to have nothing else to do for the summer except repeat the litany of the travel guides' speech to the bemuse and aghast tourists ('Its only a pound dear...'). I think that it was natures revenge that made Glen Columbkille such a desolate and isolated place that the people forced to live there had such an incomprehensible dialect, even to us. 'What'd she say Amy, something about space invaders?'

We left that little hamlet a lot richer in knowledge but little else, that was to come later. On the way out and down to the south coast we actually passed some road-works. I couldn't believe it the last people to fix these roads were the British and that was in 1919 when the people of this area were bitterly complaining: 'What have the British ever done for us?' Well, there was roads, I thought. I really began to get a grasp on the mentality of the local

council when I realised how they were going to fix the roads. They were actually filling in the immense potholes with rubble from the side of the road and, as we tried to pass on the other side, the side of the road slipped away from us and poor Buttercup suffered further humiliations. Personally I think this is the only road-working team in Donegal and they are permanently travelling around the county as things got worse. They'd obviously spent the past few years in this nether region hoping that no-one would notice their absence in the more (I was going to say densely) populated areas. No-one did.

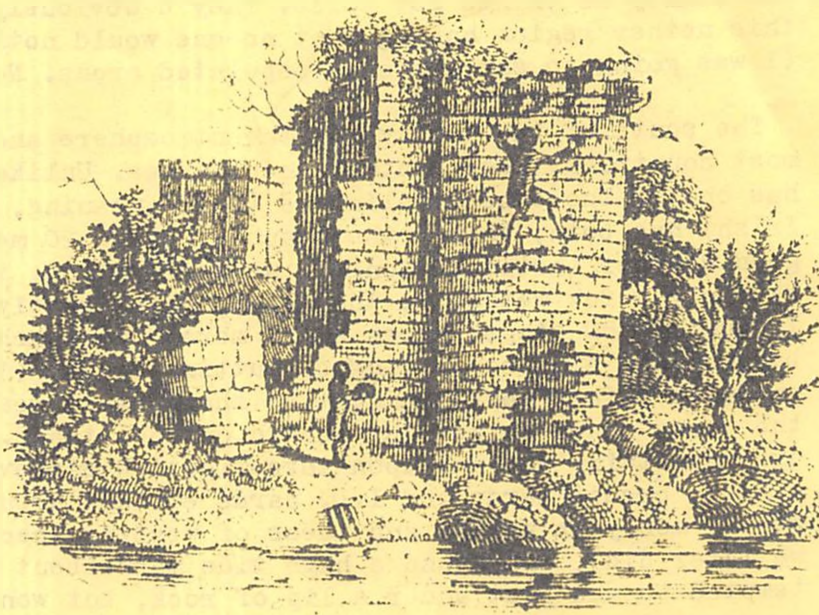
The south of the county has the atmosphere and appearance of the South of most countries: good weather and beaches. Unlike the rest of Donegal, which has one or the other, Malinmore (Malin meaning, you've guessed it, headland in Irish) has both; though the beach at about 20 metres just qualified and the good weather lasted as long as we were willing to stay. From the headland it was only a few metres to the beach, unfortunately most of them were downwards. I counted 650 steps, Nyree a bit more. The beach nestled in the crook of a bay, either side consisting of jutting cliffs ('His chin jutted, cliff like...') and with a fast approaching tide there was a real danger of being cut off from the steps as we walked the length of the strand. Walking swiftly I stumbled over something red and upon investigation discovered a purse which contained a dozen credit cards and I.D. cards etc and about £40IR. We rushed off to the steps, money in pocket and ideas of posting the cards back to their owner (which we later did), and found a high tide mark about ten metres up the cliff... I'm tempted to add just under a lip of rock, but won't.

After this amazing piece of good fortune an already thoroughly enjoyable holiday became a wonderful escapade in a place where no-one knew us, or would remember us. We went on down around the south of the county to Killbegs, which is to fishing what Sheffield is to cutlery. The town is dominated by the pier which stretches out from the main street deep into the Atlantic ocean. Moored at various points along it are large and small fishing boats, some unloading their stinking catches, others loading their nets for another twenty hours at sea. We took a dander down the pier and saw a completely efficient usage of manpower in the various operations surrounding the boats, everyone knew exactly what they had to do and did it with the minimum of fuss. The birds swirled and dived for little tit-bits. The stench, though, is my most over-powering memory of the town and it hung on our clothes and in the car for days.

Finding a decent hostelry in that town was like looking for a wine bar in a Terry Pratchett novel. We finally settled on a place set off from the main centre of the town i.e. the docks, and got comfortable with a great sense of ease and wholeness. This was helped immensely by the fact that the bar served Amstel beer on draught which I promptly reserved two pints of, and a half for Nyree who was driving... After a few phone calls to re-assure family members that we weren't lost on some wasteland of a moor we decided that lunch was not to be had in any of the fish and fish shops that seemed, strangely, to dominate the eating habits of the locals.

Having driven through one end of the town we circled round through the other end to catch some of the scenery and on towards Ardara where we had booked in for the night with largesse. Stopping off once again in Donegal town we had lunch which consisted of two immense baked spuds, gravy that the Graf Spey could not have sunk in and a ball of mince that must have been microwaved as I fail to see how it could have been otherwise cooked properly. I seem to recall Nyree's burger being filled with a similar edifice although somewhat battered to fit in the bun. It was the best snack I'd had in Donegal, and that had NOTHING to do with the fact it was the cheapest; not surprisingly this was served in a pub.

Coming out of the pub, which was called the castle gate or some such, we found out why tourists flocked to this part of Donegal rather than the staggeringly more beautiful areas of the North and North-West. Donegal castle was located on the road just off from the pub and it was exactly what we needed after the big feed. After another small fortune paid to get (though by this stage we'd cottoned on and produced cards which looked vaguely studentish and got in for half price) in we took ourselves off round the castle. I'm still at a loss as to what we actually paid to see. Walls half stood around a small yard, looking apologetic for not being more impressive, and the tower was a sad affair of modern steps and, well not much else really. As is usual it was left to a small plaque to explain why we were impressed, and poor; you could even buy a book which told you how to become over-whelmed with a sense of history and even poorer. Its only redeeming feature was a good vantage point to view the town and its surrounding countryside.



Tommy tries to find a sense of History.

Ardara brings back a few memories and most of those were early in the day... You see we'd found all this money and booked a room in a lovely family run hotel, got settled in and then went down for dinner. Another big feed followed with wine, and spirits and then down the street for a sing-a-long which wasn't quite a cleidgh because they also sung pop songs throughout. It was one of those nights where you know you have a good time, can remember vague events blurring into each other to make misty recollections of an enjoyable evening. I'm sure you know what I mean.

We took our leave of Donegal after what was the best breakfast of the whole holiday. It brought back all those memories of a fry-up consisting solely of solid food and which didn't float around the plate of its own accord. With Nyree starting work early in the evening back home we set off to leave us plenty of time for a cup of tea, or something in Derry. That journey was, and still is, one long blur for me. My body had just realised that, not only had I spent the last three days in a car, but said car was a twelve year old mini being driven around the torturous roads of Donegal. I kind of flunked out a little on that trip back and my navigation skills, what little they were, also decided to take a little rest. Hence we missed a few turn-offs and tempers flared somewhat in the mini; only to be expected really.

Getting into Derry we were both so knackered, and I wasn't even driving, that the promise of a rest at our house was like Gods promise to the congregation at Caana. Its a great shame that nearly all holidays end like that, tired and poor, but at least we had all the memories of a wonderful time, a wonderful area and a great three days together.
