

Ascending to the end of the rainbow

(excerpt from "Travels Abroad, Part II: The Celtic Isles", R.J. Beatty, 2015)

Another early departure saw us out of Killarney and up Highway N22 (later N69) to the River Shannon, Ireland's longest river. At this point we got on a ferry and headed across the Shannon, leaving County Kerry for County Clare – the thumb in my finger/peninsula/left hand analogy from the other day – and our final destination at the Cliffs of Moher on Ireland's western coast, a place I'd never heard of but would be intimately familiar with in the next few hours.

We drove through rugged, rolling lowlands under a cloudy sky with pockets of scattered blue, every so often passing through a town consisting of a few stores and other buildings down a main drag, a small stone bridge with one land passing over a swift, rushing stream, and little else. John kept up his usual patter of historical facts and oddities, the most interesting of which, to me, concerned the Black Irish, a sub-ethnic group in Ireland that apparently traces its heritage to the Spanish Armada.

The story of the ill-fated Armada is well-known (at least, it was to me): In 1588 the king of Spain, Philip II, amassed a mighty fleet, 130 ships strong, with the aim of invading and subjugating his most important rival for influence in Europe – England. This didn't work out so well; using long-range cannon, fireships and aided by a fast-approaching storm that swept into the English Channel, a much smaller English fleet repulsed the Armada. Driven north by the storm, the remaining Spanish ships had to sail all the way around the British Isles, where many wrecked on the rocky Irish coast – and the native Irish responded not by killing them and taking everything of value, but by hiding the Spanish survivors.

(That's right. They sheltered them. That's how much the Irish hated the English, even back then.)

Making a long story short: The Irish ended up intermarrying with the Spanish sailors, darker in complexion. And that's where the Black Irish come from.¹

But let that pass. The main order of adventure on this day was the jaunt to the Cliffs of Moher, and there really aren't many words to do this geographic wonder justice. The cliffs wrap around a small peninsula pointing almost due west from the mass of County Clare, plunging nearly straight down from a roughly 700-foot drop to the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean. The two most prominent features: the wind, and the view.

Dear God, what a wind. Dear Lord, what a view.

Keep in mind that the edge of the peninsula that holds the Cliffs of Moher juts straight out into the ocean, with nothing to break the force of the wind coming off the sea. And the wind is nothing short of furious – it may have been 40 mph, maybe more, cold and harsh. I was in relatively good

¹ At least, that's what John told us at the time. Additional research after the trip indicates that this theory concerning the origins of the Black Irish remains very much in dispute.

shape with flannel shirt, jacket and a toboggan borrowed from Dad – others, not so much. I saw plenty of people venturing toward the crest of the cliff with nothing on their heads whatsoever, including a pair of Japanese girls, long black hair whipping around wildly, who I’m quite sure would have frozen had they gotten lost after dark.

The park organizers had several trails/paths laid out going up the cliffs, and Dad and I went up the center one, consisting of steps progressing up the massive cliff in front of us. The wind was roaring and it wasn’t the easiest of times, but we eventually made it up the ridge. Of course, the wind was the strongest up there, so I snapped some photos, took in the view – which was not short of spectacular – and we headed back down, Dad to find Dottie Burkhart in the coffee shop, and me to take a crack at the southern ridge.

It looked challenging, but I was keen to take it on. Due to the position of the afternoon sun in the west, the photos I’d gotten so far were less than outstanding (they were still decent), meaning that aesthetically, a hike was in order. Ascending along the ridge I found out this might be a little more complex than previously thought; the stone path eventually petered out and was replaced by a narrow, muddy, rocky lane between barbed wire and a fence of huge stone slabs. Winding upward, eventually a huge mud puddle (fed by spray off the ocean) came into view, forcing myself and other hikers to scale the stone fence and move forward on a clearer path – albeit one more perilously close to the cliff’s edge.

But I reached the crest. And Lord, what a view.

The shadows falling from the upwards path gave way to a relatively flat expanse atop the cliff, mud and rocks, the sea stretching out from our boots into the great beyond of the North Atlantic. The sky was a brilliant blue and white, wind still whipping but not unbearably so; the breakers crashing against the bottom of the cliff seemed to change things, to let nature know you were out on the edge here, putting yourself in the Lord’s trust. Standing that close to the sky, neither trees nor boulders breaking up the long expanse of the horizon, but only equally hardy souls who’d made the climb, puts the search for the divine that much closer. And standing there on the cliff I suddenly was overwhelmed with the beauty of it all, the staggering wonder that is God’s creation; and I reached for my sunglasses, lest strangers be witness to the sight of a middle-aged man moved to tears at the sight of something so lovely he had never imagined it, with the knowledge that he might well – lives, paths and fortunes being what they are – never stand in this spot again.

(Oct. 24, 2015)