



RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# I Never Knew That About Ireland

Christopher Winn

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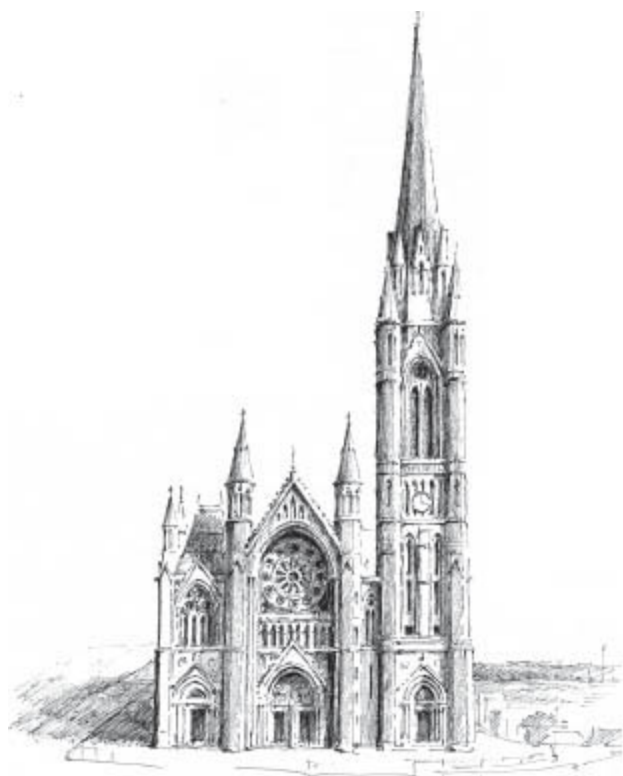
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## About the Book

Travel on a fascinating journey around Ireland to discover the tales buried deep in the country's history.

Visit each county of the four provinces of Ireland – Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster – and find out where dreams were inspired, where ideas were born, and where the unforgettable heroes of Ireland's past now slumber. A treasure trove of fascinating stories, *I Never Knew That About Ireland* is packed full of legends, firsts, birthplaces, inventions and adventures, and personalities both distinguished and dastardly.

This irresistible book gives a captivating insight into the heritage, memories and monuments that have shaped the character of each county of Ireland, searching out their secrets and unearthing their hidden gems.

## About the Author

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Christopher Winn, bestselling author of *I Never Knew That About England*, is a writer, quiz master and producer for theatre and television. He has written for the *Field*, *Country Life*, the *Sunday Express*, the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*. He worked for eight years on Terry Wogan's TV chat show, contributes questions for a number of TV quizzes and has toured the length and breadth of Ireland researching this book. Christopher lives in London with his wife, Mai, whose exquisite illustrations grace his books.

Christopher Winn

*I Never Knew That*  
ABOUT  
IRELAND



ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

Mai Osawa



EBURY  
PRESS  
LONDON

For Eben and Themy, whose generosity  
and infectious love of Ireland were so inspiring



*Tearaght Island Lighthouse*

## Preface

IRELAND IS LIKE nowhere else. Ireland is magnificent, mischievous, moody and misunderstood. It is Europe's Farthest West, the edge of the known world, a step too far for the Romans, a land wreathed in mist and mystery. In the Dark Ages when Europe was stumbling around in ignorance, Ireland burned bright as a centre of learning and civilisation. From Ireland came forth saints and scholars to spread their wisdom and their knowledge. Celts and Kings, Druids and Wise Men have left their memories carved in stone, on crosses and decorated arches – treasures that in any other land would be scrubbed clean of history, fenced off, subsumed by car parks and gift shops. In Ireland they are just there, left as they were meant to be, majestic, haunting, rooted in their landscape.

Ireland has a landscape to rival anywhere, from Europe's highest cliffs and wildest shores to the languid, lacustrine plains of the heartlands. The beauty of her scenery and the power of her legends has produced some of the world's great literature, poetry and music. And all is touched by a turbulent history, with a tinge of melancholy, a frisson of menace, an undercurrent of defiance.

But Ireland is also a modern country, forward-looking, energetic, alive with ideas and inspiration, drawing upon a legacy of innovation and inventiveness second to none. It is this combination that makes Ireland so intriguing, so alluring and so addictive.

This book tries to reflect that splendid, subtle complexity with tales of old and new, of tradition and discovery, nature and science, characters, philosophers, rogues and romantics. Like Ireland itself, there is something here for everyone.

ONE WARNING. IN Ireland, nothing is straightforward. Every name has two or three different spellings and myriad pronunciations. Every story has several endings and every legend a different setting. Where I have been forced to choose I have decided simply on the option that I, personally, like the best. If this offends I can only apologise and blame Ireland - frustrating, friendly, infuriating, unforgettable and forever fascinating, Ireland.





# *The Provinces and Counties of* **IRELAND**

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*I NEVER KNEW THAT ABOUT IRELAND* is divided into the four ancient provinces or kingdoms of CONNACHT, LEINSTER, MUNSTER and ULSTER, and the counties within them. The Irish rejoice in both their provinces and their counties. The provinces are the backdrop to history and legend, to battles between Kings and High Kings, warriors and saints, new ideas and new religions.

The name Connacht is derived from *Connachta* - the dominant tribal grouping in the north and west of the island during the early centuries AD. Leinster means land of the *Laighin*, one of the earliest Celtic tribes to arrive in Ireland, who settled in the south and east. The suffix '*ster*' is Norman French for 'land'. Hence Munster comes from the land of *Mumhain*, a derivation of the pre-Christian goddess Muma, and Ulster is the land of *Ulaidh*.

There were once five provinces, the fifth province being Meath, meaning *midh* or 'middle', which consisted of the modern counties of Meath and Westmeath with part of Offaly. COUNTY OFFALY was known for a while as KING'S COUNTY in honour of King Philip of Spain who was married to Queen Mary of England - whose own QUEEN'S COUNTY is now COUNTY LAOIS (or LEIX).

The counties are where people come from, where they belong, where their loyalties and identities lie. Each is distinctive, with its own character, architecture and landscape. They all have their own stories to tell.

# *Connacht*

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# COUNTY GALWAY

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COUNTY TOWN: GALWAY

*Gaillimh* – ‘stony river’



*Tuam Protestant Cathedral - rebuilt in 1878 and incorporating the widest  
Romanesque arch in Ireland (12th-century)*

## Galway City

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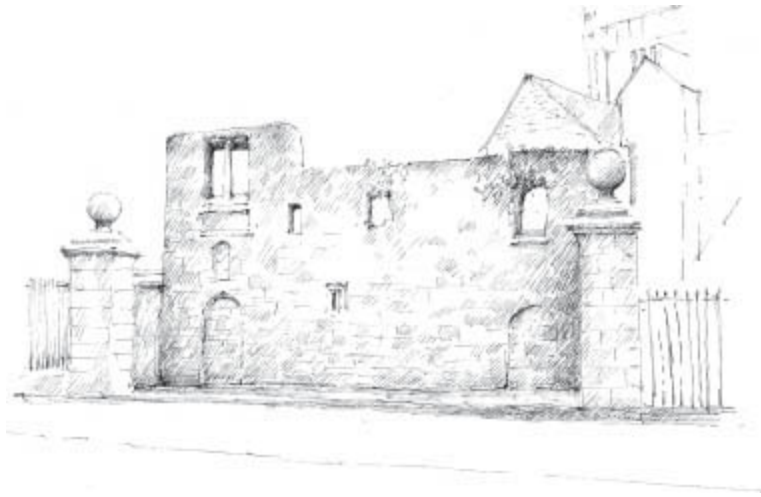
*Well Executed*

GALWAY, CAPITAL OF County Galway and THE BIGGEST CITY IN CONNACHT, is a seaport and tourist resort with a salty, maritime tang. GALWAY RACES, held in July, are a great Irish occasion, and in September Galway hosts one of Ireland's premier oyster festivals. The city has a Spanish feel to it, with many of the older houses built around an inner courtyard, Spanish style – a reminder of the days when the city's chief trading partner was Spain.

LYNCH'S CASTLE, at the junction of Shop Street and Upper Abbeygate, is an interesting early 16th-century tower house, now occupied by a bank, and is THE OLDEST BUILDING IN EVERYDAY COMMERCIAL USE IN IRELAND.

In Market Street, beside the cathedral of St Nicholas, is LYNCH'S WINDOW, which commemorates a legend that has worked its way into the English language. In 1493, the Mayor of Galway, JAMES LYNCH FITZSTEPHEN, was compelled to execute his own son, WALTER, on this very spot. Walter's sweetheart had been mischievously flirting with a handsome Spaniard, who was staying in the Mayor's house as an honoured guest, and young Walter was driven by jealousy to run the fellow through. The Mayor had no choice but to condemn his son to death and, since no one would come forward to perform the execution, Walter's father had to do it himself. This story is thought by many to have given rise to the expression 'LYNCH LAW' or 'LYNCHING', meaning *law administered by a private person, resulting in summary execution*. It has also, over time, come to mean *mob law*.

Whilst on the subject of execution, the man who beheaded KING CHARLES I is thought to have been a Galway man, known only as GUNNING. It was proving difficult to find an Englishman prepared to execute the English King, so Oliver Cromwell sent out into Scotland, Ireland and Wales for volunteers. Two men from Galway, Gunning and DEAN, came forward, and on 30 January 1649, Gunning found himself standing on the scaffolding outside the Banqueting House at Whitehall in London, axe in hand and wearing a black mask so as to remain unrecognisable. He stood poised while Charles uttered his last words, 'I GO FROM A CORRUPTIBLE TO AN INCORRUPTIBLE CROWN ...', then the King knelt down and placed his head upon the block. Gunning struck and an awful groan went up from the crowd.



*Lynch's Window*

On his return to Ireland, a grateful Parliament granted Gunning property in the centre of Galway, where the appropriately named KING'S HEAD pub now stands in the High Street. There is a plaque noting the story on a wall in the bar.

Another possible candidate for the King's executioner was the Mayor of Galway, COLONEL PETER STUBBERS, one of Cromwell's generals. Whoever it was that wielded that axe, he came from Galway.

Galway's CATHEDRAL OF ST NICHOLAS is one of the largest medieval cathedrals in Ireland, and possesses an unusual triple nave and three-gabled west end. CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS worshipped here in 1492 before sailing west to discover America.



Close to the cathedral is IRELAND'S SMALLEST MUSEUM, the NORA BARNACLE HOUSE MUSEUM. This was the home of writer JAMES JOYCE'S wife and inspiration, NORA BARNACLE, and contains exhibits, letters and photographs of their life together.



*Cathedral of St Nicholas*



*Ballynahinch Castle*

## Humanity Dick

### *Fighting for the Animals*

CONNEMARA is wild and moody country in western Galway and one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland. The chief town is CLIFDEN, founded in 1812 by a local landowner in an attempt to tame the wilderness and provide work.

Most of Connemara was once owned by RICHARD MARTIN (1754-1834), whose family held some of the biggest estates

in all Ireland. His home, the 18th-century BALLYNAHINCH CASTLE, stands above a small lough some 8 miles (13 km) to the east. As a young man Martin had a reputation as something of a hothead, earning the nickname of 'HAIRTRIGGER DICK'. Most of his duels were fought over the maltreatment of animals - in 1783 he was seriously wounded in a pistol duel with 'FIGHTING FITZGERALD', a Mayo landlord who had shot dead a dog. Martin believed that all animals had feelings and awareness and that abusing them was akin to abusing humans so, in 1822, he put through Parliament THE WORLD'S FIRST ANIMAL RIGHTS BILL. Two years later he founded the SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS, which became the RSPCA. In recognition of this he was renamed 'HUMANITY DICK'. He died broke, but much admired, in France.

A later owner of Ballynahinch Castle, from 1927 to 1933, was HH THE MAHARAJAH JAM SAHIB OF NAWANAGAR (1872-1933), known as 'RANJI'. One of the world's most brilliant batsmen, he played in fifteen Test Matches for England. Later in life he did much good work for the LEAGUE OF NATIONS.

## Derrigimlagh Bog

### *Pioneering Stuff*

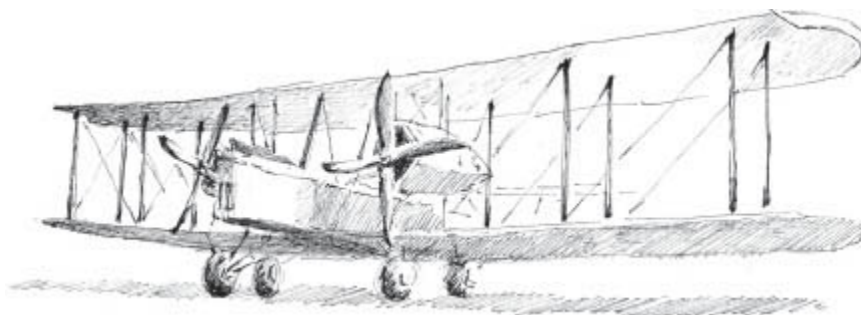
A little to the south of Clifden, off the coast road and down a rutted lane that peters out into bleak, brown DERRIGIMLAGH BOG, there are some concrete blocks and a length of rusty chain - the sparse remains of THE WORLD'S FIRST PERMANENT TRANSATLANTIC RADIO STATION. Here, on the shores of a small lough, almost as far west as it is possible to go in Europe, the radio pioneer GUGLIELMO MARCONI built a huge complex to house capacitors, receivers and accommodation for 150 staff. Having proved that radio

waves could travel beyond the horizon by sending a message to Newfoundland from Poldhu in Cornwall, Marconi moved here to Galway, where there was no land mass to interfere with the signals from his directional aerials. The station opened in 1907, and for nine years forwarded messages across the Atlantic from London and Dublin. It must have been an extraordinary place, with sparks and flashes like lightning bolts, hums and crackles that could be seen and heard for miles across the barren landscape.

There are few clues left to indicate that this remote bogland was once at the forefront of technology – the station was burned down in the Troubles and the introduction of new, more powerful transmitters meant that radio stations did not need to be located so far west. Marconi moved back to England, although it was apposite that his first proper radio station should have been established in Ireland – his mother was Irish, ANNE JAMESON of the celebrated whiskey family.

Close to the remains of the Marconi radio station, a white, beehive-shaped cairn marks the spot where, at 8.40 am on 15 June 1919, JOHN ALCOCK and ARTHUR WHITTEN BROWN nose-dived into DERRIGIMLAGH BOG after completing THE FIRST NON-STOP FLIGHT ACROSS THE ATLANTIC. They had set off the previous evening from ST JOHN'S in NEWFOUNDLAND in a converted VICKERS VIMY bomber biplane, powered by twin Rolls-Royce engines and with a cruising speed of 90 mph, and completed the 1,900-mile (3,000-km) journey in 16 hours and 12 minutes.





*Alcock and Brown's Vickers Vimy biplane*

The flight had been hazardous – their transmitter froze not long after take-off, and for long periods they had to fly at no more than 300 FEET (90 m) above the ocean to keep ice from forming. Several times Brown had to climb out on to the wings to chip the ice away. On spotting the aerials of the Marconi radio station, they came in to land, in somewhat spectacular style, on what they thought was firm ground but turned out to be soft bog. It was all worth it – they had joined the immortals, won £10,000 in prize money from the *Daily Mail* and were both knighted. They had also brought with them a mailbag containing letters for delivery in England – THE FIRST TRANSATLANTIC AIRMAIL. Alcock tragically died in an air crash later that year while Brown lived until 1948. Their airplane is housed in the Science Museum in London.

As you gaze across this empty, sea-swept bog today it seems inconceivable that two of the most influential events of the 20th century occurred right here, putting Derrigimlagh Bog at the vanguard of the modern world.

## Coole

*'our shadows rove the garden's gravels still'*

W.B. YEATS

A couple of miles north of Gort, there is a tumbledown stone gateway leading to a dark avenue that winds out of

sight through deep woods. As you enter, the trees seem to close in and muffle out the rest of the world, time stops and a drowsiness descends. A shaft of light appears up ahead, you step through a hidden gap in the pink stone wall and, suddenly, sunlight blazes and there, laid out before you, is a secret garden paradise of spreading green lawns, shady bowers, riotous flowerbeds and noble trees. To one side is a glorious copper beech that speaks of romance, and if you fight your way under its branches to the trunk, you will see why. Carved into the bark are the initials of some of Ireland's greatest writers, artists and thinkers, a living memorial to the days when WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE and SEAN O'CASEY all wandered along these walkways and dreamed of wit, great thoughts and poetry. You can feel their spirit still.



*Coole Park*



*Autograph tree*

This is the magical walled garden of COOLE PARK, beloved home of AUGUSTA, LADY GREGORY (1852-1932) from 1880 until her death. She was a friend of many of the great figures of the Irish literary revival and they were often drawn here to stay. Lady Gregory recalls George Bernard Shaw singing and playing the piano and the poet JOHN MASEFIELD, shy and in awe of Yeats, giving impromptu readings at tea. Along with Yeats, EDWARD MARTYN and GEORGE MOORE ([see Mayo](#)), in 1899 she founded the Irish Literary Theatre, which in 1904 became Dublin's ABBEY THEATRE.

The house was pulled down in 1941, and all that is left are the foundations roofed with grass, a fate predicted by Yeats:

*When all those rooms and passages are gone,  
When nettles wave upon a shapeless mound  
And saplings root among the broken stone ...*

Amongst those who have initialled the autograph tree are:

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW *Playwright*

JOHN MASEFIELD *Poet*

AUGUSTUS JOHN *Painter*

DOUGLAS HYDE *Playwright and First President of Ireland*

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS *Poet*

SEAN O'CASEY *Playwright*

JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE *Playwright*

GEORGE RUSSELL (Æ) *Writer*

GEORGE MOORE *Writer*

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*Edward Martyn (1859-1923) lived at nearby Tullira Castle and was a descendant of Richard 'Humanity Dick' Martin (see Ballynahinch Castle). In 1905, along with Arthur Griffith, he co-founded Sinn Féin, a political party dedicated to the creation of a united*

*republican Ireland, and became its first president.  
Sinn Fein means 'we ourselves'.*

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## Thoor Ballylee

### *A Poet's Retreat*

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS so loved Coole that, in 1916, he bought himself a retreat just down the road - THOOR BALLYLEE, a remote 16th-century riverside tower where 'under my window ledge the waters race'. He would bring his family here whenever they could escape from Dublin, and his 1928 collection *The Tower* contains a number of poems inspired by Thoor Ballylee.



On a wall of the tower are the words:

*I, the poet William Butler Yeats,  
With old mill boards and sea green slates,  
And smithy work from the Gort forge,  
Restored this tower for my wife George;  
And may these characters remain  
When all is ruin once again.*

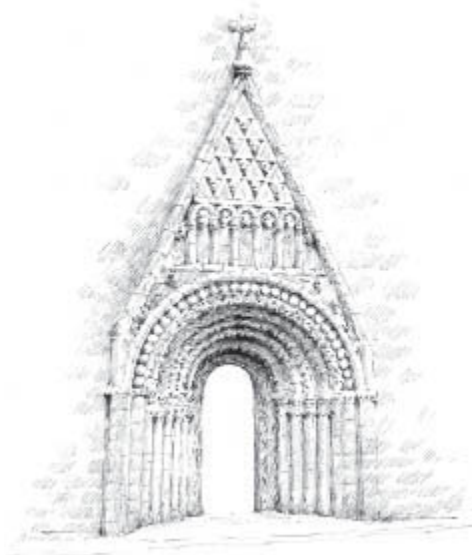
Thoor Ballylee did indeed become a ruin again after Yeats died, but it has since been restored and opened as a

museum. Today you can climb the spiral staircase and gaze from the battlements at the hilly woodland views that so moved the great poet.

## Clonfert

### *Romanesque Glory*

Hidden away down quiet country lanes in eastern Galway, close to the Shannon and the Grand Canal, is the tiny clutch of buildings that is CLONFERT. Clonfert means 'Meadow of the Grave', and even in this country of so many unexpected treasures, the glorious surprise of ST BRENDAN'S CATHEDRAL, rising out of that meadow, still has the power to astonish and awe. St Brendan, WHO MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE DISCOVERED AMERICA OVER 900 YEARS BEFORE COLUMBUS, was buried here in AD 578, outside what is now the great west door and THE SUPREME SWANSONG OF NATIVE IRISH ROMANESQUE ARCHITECTURE. It is a huge, delicately carved portal that dates from 1166 (just three years before the Anglo-Norman invasion), unmatched in Ireland if not the whole of Europe, six arches deep and crowned with a tall triangular tympanum.



The present cathedral, which incorporates this wonderful doorway, dates from the 13th and 14th centuries and is built on the site of a monastery founded by St Brendan in AD 558. A beautifully carved mermaid decorates the chancel arch inside – no doubt in tribute to the maritime heritage of the cathedral's founder.

St Brendan was born in Co. Kerry around AD 483. He became known as THE NAVIGATOR as a result of his many sea voyages around the British Isles. He sailed up and down the west coast of Ireland, visited Iona in Scotland and went to St Malo on the Brittany coast. Wrapped in the mists of legend is his seven-year voyage in search of the fabled LAND OF PROMISE beyond the western horizon. According to *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, a medieval manuscript written in about 1050, St Brendan and several companions, guided by his Celtic cross, sailed as far as Iceland, Greenland and even America. They celebrated Easter on the back of a whale, fought off a huge sea horse, met Judas Iscariot clinging on to a rock, and experienced many other adventures on the way.

Is it possible that St Brendan could have reached America? In 1977 the explorer TIM SEVERIN built a replica of the type of boat that St Brendan would have used, made from ash wood and ox-hides, and succeeded in making the journey safely from Galway to Newfoundland ...

St Brendan has the honour of having an Irish cream liqueur named after him, produced in Co. Derry, Ulster.

Buried in woods to the north of the cathedral is an avenue of ancient yew trees, over 1,000 years old, laid out in a cruciform shape. One arm of the walk leads to the BISHOP'S PALACE, a long mid-17th-century house that was once the Irish home of SIR OSWALD MOSLEY Bt. (1896–1980), founder of the BRITISH UNION OF FASCISTS. Mosley's second wife was DIANA, one of the famed MITFORD SISTERS, who had previously been married to BRYAN GUINNESS, of the Irish brewing dynasty.

The house was mysteriously burned down in 1954 and is now a poignant, ivy-covered ruin that somehow seems to complement the mystic aura of this ancient and bewitching place.

*Well, I never knew this*  
ABOUT  
COUNTY GALWAY

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LOUGH CORRIB is THE SECOND LARGEST LAKE IN IRELAND OR BRITAIN, after Lough Neagh ([see Ulster](#)).

On INCHAGOILL island in LOUGH CORRIB, beside the little church of TEMPLEPATRICK, stands a stone bearing THE OLDEST LATIN INSCRIPTION IN ALL IRELAND: *Lie Luguaedon Macci Meneuh* (Stone of Luguaedon, son of Meneuh). It dates back to AD 500 and is probably translated from an earlier Ogham stone inscription.

Incorporated into the 19th-century Protestant cathedral in TUAM are the remnants of a 12th-century barrel-vaulted chancel from a previous church, which includes THE WIDEST ROMANESQUE ARCH IN IRELAND.

ANNA LYNCH, grandmother of South American revolutionary CHE GUEVARA (1928–67), was born in Co. Galway. Her son, ERNESTO GUEVARA LYNCH, Che's father, said, in 1969: 'The first thing to note is that in my son's veins flowed the blood of Irish rebels.'

The ARAN ISLANDS, lying across the mouth of Galway Bay, are famed across the world for the pure white, distinctively patterned ARAN SWEATERS which have been made here for generations. The women of the islands still wear traditional red petticoats, thought to be THE ONLY GENUINE NATIONAL PEASANT COSTUME IN WESTERN EUROPE. The playwright JOHN



MILLINGTON SYNGE set his play *Riders to the Sea* (1907) on the Aran island of INISHMAAN, and in 1934 the American director ROBERT FLAHERTY filmed *Man of Aran* here, using island folk as the cast.

On a lonely, windswept peninsula jutting out into Galway Bay, at ORANMORE, stands one of Ireland's most romantic ruins, ARDFRY HOUSE. Built around 1770 on the site of a castle, the house has had a colourful history. In 1784, during the wedding of the 1ST LORD WALLSCOURT to a daughter of the EARL OF LOUTH, there was uproar when the Earl stepped into a particularly fruity offering left in the drawing room by a dog belonging to one of the guests, who had insisted on feeding the animal 'ripe peaches and apricots'. The Earl stormed around the house in a rage, leaving ruination and filth wherever he trod, much to the consternation of the unfortunate wedding party. The 3RD LORD WALLSCOURT was a man of enormous strength and temper who found it restful to walk about the house in the nude. His wife, the celebrated beauty BESSIE LOCK, insisted that he wore a cowbell somewhere about his person in order to warn the maids of his approach! Ardfry House was used as an atmospheric location in the 1973 JOHN HUSTON film *The Mackintosh Man*, starring PAUL NEWMAN. The house is presently undergoing renovation.



*Ardfry House*



Mary Anne Phelan, mother of actor MARTIN SHEEN who plays President 'Jed' Bartlett in the American TV series *The West Wing*, was a native of Co. Galway.



# COUNTY LEITRIM

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COUNTY TOWN: CARRICK-ON-SHANNON

*Liath Druim* – ‘grey ridge’



*Parke's Castle – restored 17th-century fortified manor house beside Lough Gill*

## Dromahair

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*Ireland's Helen ...*

DROMAHAIR IS A pretty, unassuming village on the River Bonet, east of Lough Gill. The 17th-century OLD HALL on the river bank occupies the site of BREFFNI CASTLE, ancient home of the O'ROURKES. Here, 850 years ago, there took place an incident that changed the history of Ireland for ever – a legendary tale of love and betrayal that set in train a series of events that would prove as dire for Ireland as the abduction of Helen was for Troy.

In 1152, TIERNAN O'ROURKE, Prince of Breffni, set out from Breffni Castle to make a pilgrimage to the holy island of St Patrick in Lough Derg. He left behind his beautiful young wife DEVORGILLA, safe, as he thought, within the castle walls. But when he returned she was gone, along with all her cattle and furniture, taken by a band of horsemen. Did she go willingly or was she abducted?