

July 27, 2015
(June Letter)

Hi Samantha,

Fran and I are now on our last day of our adventure in Europe. There are many exciting stories to tell about this trip so you might be hearing about them for the next few letters.

We came to Europe because I had an opportunity to teach at a summer school in Ireland and Fran had a conference in Milan. I have been attending this summer school for many years now since it is such a wonderful way to learn about other countries and how they deal with rural issues and challenges. One of the best ways to learn about any subject is to compare how it is dealt with in other places or by other people. I never cease to be surprised by the way in which this helps me understand and make decisions. This annual summer school is extra special because I meet many of my favorite colleagues each year and we get to exchange stories and insights in a stimulating environment.



The first week of the school was held in Dublin, Ireland. This is a very old city (like most of them in Europe) with a history of major changes and challenges. It was settled by the Celts many centuries ago. These were the people who inhabited many parts of Europe and developed a culture of song and legends that we know today in the form of French dancing, Stonehenge, Merlin (of Prince Arthur's court), and even Asterix and Obelix. In Ireland, the culture is carried by songs and storytelling that are very much part of Canadian culture as well. The phot above is from a town near Dublin named Athy.

The Irish are a significant part of Canadian culture since there were hundreds of them who came here when the British took over their land and as a result of a major potato infestation that wiped out their staple food. It created horrendous famine conditions in Ireland and drove many to emigrate to North America. It was the Irish (along with the Scots) who were used as the major form of labour in the

building of eastern Canada. Many of them settled in Québec since this was the most Roman Catholic of the regions in Canada and most of the Irish (and many Scots) were Catholic.

There are still plenty of signs of their contribution to Canada that we see - particularly in Eastern Canada. The style of building (stone and brick), the songs, and the biggest St Patrick's day celebration outside of Ireland.

It took many years and much hardship to drive the British out of (most of) Ireland. Only Northern Ireland is still under the control of Britain - with flare-ups of fighting still occurring. Dublin, however, is in the heart of free Ireland and a city that is known for its recent growth in electronics and internet programming. It's also full of busy pubs!

When we were in Dublin, we visited a factory where they produced malt from the barley, hops, and other grains that go into the production of beer and whisky. We also toured the factory where they brewed the most famous of the Irish drinks: Guinness. The factory was more like a carnival show than a factory since they used all sorts of visual and audio techniques to tell the story of Guinness and the process used for producing it. I got somewhat annoyed at the way they exaggerated its importance - much like current advertising for cars, perfumes, and electronics.

After holding several days of seminars and field trips near Dublin, we travelled across the island to Galway - a lovely town on the west side of Ireland. Like Dublin, it is a town of stone, narrow streets, and traffic travelling on the "wrong" side of the road. It takes a great deal of care to be a pedestrian in this context since instead of looking to the left for oncoming traffic, it is necessary to look to the right. Many times I have been just about ready to step out on the road and had to quickly pull back because a car is bearing down on me from the right. I remember when Fran and I rented a car in the UK many years ago - how difficult it was to drive since we had to constantly tell ourselves to keep to the left. The most difficult time occurred when turning a corner - I kept wanting to turn into the right lane of the new street.



One of our field trips took us to the town of Letterfrack in the Connemara region near Galway. The picture on the left is from a peat bog area above the town. We visited a college there that specialized in the training of artists. We were both very impressed with the lovely and imaginative woodwork presented by the students - including furniture, household items, and even some wooden bowties. They had a huge workshop with tools that would make JP drool with envy (I know because I did).

Also associated with the college was a company that worked restoring old items like horse-drawn carriages, doors, inlaid furniture, and even animal bones. We were impressed with the work of a young woman who was busy trying various dyes to get the curtains for a carriage replaced with the same colour as the original. It looked like challenging but very interesting work.

One of the most spectacular tours we took was to the Aran Islands (on our day off from the seminars). It is an island just off the coast of Galway where people have been living for many centuries. The farms are

small, the land is harsh, and the houses look tiny. I have attached some photos from that visit. You can see the way in which the fields are all marked out by rock walls. My back ached just thinking about the many years of heavy lifting that it took to create these walls and the hard work required to make the rugged land fertile. One way they did this was to carry seaweed into the fields to produce a thin layer of soil among the rocks.



One of the spectacular sights of the Aran Isles is a settlement or fortress on the edge of an enormous cliff. Archaeologists haven't been able to determine whether this was a fort structure or one created for ritualistic purposes. The walls form a series of semicircles around a flat small surface right at the cliff's edge. One theory is that this was a place of worship since the people believed that their dead ancestors travelled to the end of the earth - and this spot was definitely the end of the earth in those days. The closest land to that spot we now know as Newfoundland. We were amused by one of the local people referring to the house in which they lived as "the one that was second closet to America". She introduced us to a guy who lived in "the closet house"!



There were many other sights that the summer school participants were to visit, but Fran and I had to catch a flight to Milan for her conference. We therefore hopped on a bus back to Galway and flew to Italy on June 30th for some new adventures.

Love,

