

A Canadian Perspective

Michael Barry, Grangeman, writes a great Blog through WordPress on the Internet, where he is also known as 'michealdebarra' or simply MB. In February, 2010, under the title 'Lakes, Tourists, Canadians', a beautiful piece of writing by Canadian, Barbara Craig, appeared on Michael's blog – <https://michealdebarra.com/2015/11/18/lakes-tourists-canadians/>

Michael's introduction to Barbara's written piece follows, as does Barbara's eloquent and oftentimes poignant account of visitations to the Grange / Lough Gur locality by herself and family members. It is a pleasure to read.

Introduction by Michael Barry (MB)

In recent weeks, MB has introduced you all some more to his Grange/HX [Holycross] homeland and to some of its scenery and characters. In a post of last week, he mentioned that his Mom operated a farm guesthouse during MB's growing-up years and after, and that many friendships endure from those days to the present.

One such friend is BC [Barbara Craig] from Canada. BC first visited Ireland in April 1976 and most recently in September 2015. She is a long-time follower of MB's HX blog and occasionally makes comment. During her recent September visit, MB had an idea to ask BC to take over his blog for one week, having a hunch that BC could write a good story. Even though she had never written much at all in her past she accepted the offer. How right MB was.

By Barbara Craig

Without a lake somewhere close by, I wither. Our region of Canada is full of them, large and small. My mother, being the same, seemed enchanted by Lough Gur when she saw it in 1975.

To begin writing this, I went down to Lake Ontario, to help me reflect on my 39+ years' acquaintance with Lough Gur and Grange.

Why am I thinking of Lough Gur, past and present? MB [Michael Barry], creator of the HX [Holycross] Report, has asked me for long memories and for a trip diary of a recent visit to the HX area. While there this fall, I was honoured to be the guest of Aine, Mike and Maeve Barry at Caherguillamore.

Blog readers know that MB is suffused with the HX spirit, life, and heritage. In this vein, yer man wanted a short history of my and Mother's separate visits to Grange, HX and Lough Gur. She and I, two drifting Canadians, were never there together.

I thought about my mother's reason for fixating, and that is the correct word, on Lough Gur, among other Irish sites. Beginning in 1971, the Irish Tourist Board had streamlined and heightened their incursion into North American markets. Thus in 1975 my mother suddenly had a colourful magazine, no less, which proposed and illustrated impossibly beautiful, rustic, authentic and inexpensive adventures around Ireland. The Board had opened an office in Toronto and Aer Lingus offered weekly direct flights to Shannon from Toronto (alas, that is no longer the case). All this was despite or possibly due to the full-blown oil crisis of 1974 (remember OPEC?). Dreamland beckoned at bargain prices.

Since very low prices were the only type that I or my relatives could contemplate paying, and since my mother's eyes glowed with the idea of finding her off-shore origins—she was 75% Irish—I too started to get ideas.

Mother's life at the time was difficult. Separated, yet with four, one disabled, of her eight children still under 18, she struggled. She certainly had grit and ability, but sometimes we paint ourselves into a corner. She could not have planned to pay for a trip. But her dam of uncertainty was about to break. I simply decided to work two extra weeks at my summer job, clearing enough cash to get her over there for a three-week stay. I was 21, in uni [university] on student loans, I had summer jobs to help pay tuition, so there was a bit left over.

After I told my very surprised and disbelieving mother that she was going to Ireland, on her first trip overseas, there was no stopping her. In early September of 1975, after my older, employed brother stepped up and matched my contribution, Mother went off for a four-week trip, which stretched to five weeks. Mother diligently and happily walked miles in and around the towns on her circuit of the country. In those days the local Irish Tourist Board offices would call ahead to book B&Bs for tourists; it was simple. Mother's plans worked like clockwork. Saving money on food, she slurped and gobbled every speck of the large breakfasts in her £7 a night accommodation, in order to exist on tea and snacks until bedtime.

The prices were amusingly low but other aspects of tourism were also very different. At many famous Irish tourist sites in the mid-1970s, facilities were basic and limited. Coach parking, souvenir shops, interpretive centres, glossy literature, lavatories and multi-national crowds were not the norm, as they are now, Killarney being a bit of an exception. It was a different world.

Now we come to Mother's first acquaintance with Lough Gur. I am trying to remember how she learned of it and why she took the trouble to visit what was then, and still could be, a place whose most important sites were almost inaccessible to a stranger not knowing the landowners, and to someone without wheels of some kind. Obviously, serious hikers or dedicated walkers would not have a problem, but none of the archaeological sites were marked in those days.

I can only guess that the Bord Failte office in Limerick must have had some printed information for tourists. All that comes back to me is a memory of some photocopied pages. Surely they warned her how inaccessible many of the sites were, about the rough terrain, the private property, the lack of signage, the few pubs along those roads, and the distances. Mother was 45 then, and never athletic. Yet she had stamina. I suppose that to her, a place off the beaten tourist track was alluring. For my mother did not like to follow crowds and trends. This is why a fall day in 1975 saw her at Grange, disembarking a southbound coach on the R512. Her B&B was Bridge House, proprietor Mrs. Patricia Barry. Mrs. Barry made Mom very welcome and comfortable in the 18th century farmhouse, as she did for visitors from Europe and North America.

It was the Barrys, Tony and Patricia, and other local folk who really helped direct Mother to what she was looking for around Lough Gur. Uphill and down dale she tramped, hoofing to all the sites, except the stone circle; it was not marked so she missed it. She loved it all. There were few if any other tourists on those idyllic hills then. But probably her quasi-adoration of the place came from the mesmerizing charm of the lake. There is nothing like a silvered, pristine, ethereal and historic lake for getting into your bones—especially if you remember another such, long ago and far away, in your former life.

Mother revelled in all the historical sites of Ireland during her long stay. She sparkled with joy as she told us about her experiences. Happily, she gained the confidence to travel a lot, scraping by

for months at a time so she could spend a week, or three, overseas. Yet all the while she had her disabled daughter at home. Her last time in Ireland, to Lough Gur, Barrys and to see Flavins was in 1998; she died in 1999 at age 69. But on that first return home in '75, the word to me was, "You have to go to Lough Gur, Barbie."

This injunction was carried out at the first opportunity. In April, 1976, finished with uni and with remnants of earnings from summer '75, I spent three weeks in Eire. Following the maternal itinerary, I got on a southbound coach on the R512. The driver looked as if he thought I'd be stranded, when I got off at Grange, near the bridge above the hamlet. That's how young I looked, and how nervous I seemed.

I am easily distracted. Once off the coach, I right away forgot to look around for Bridge House, because across a field to the west I saw an abandoned manor house. The old imagination started firing on all pistons; here was the setting for Thackeray's novels! Here had lived romantic figures such as the Gore-Booths of Lissadell House! As it turned out, it was only unromantic old Boss Croker's house. But I didn't yet know that, and determined to visit this eloquent ruin, I'd already deviated from the agenda designated by Mater.

Now I'm trying to retrace my steps up to Bridge House. After so long I can only reply on snapshots in the mind's eye. There is Mrs. Barry opening wide the door in welcome, so kind and friendly. But maybe I am confusing that picture with the later times I came to Bridge House, the snapshots of each beautiful welcome from a lovely friend. Here I see the dining room and the astonishing breakfasts. Around the table on my first morning, I see a group of Americans on their way somewhere, not to the Lough Gur sites. One stout, red-faced lady is expressing her relief at finally, after two days in Ireland, having seen a big American car. What bliss does she not feel as a result of this sighting!

But soon Mrs. Barry has instructed me to go up the road to the landowner's house to get permission to look at the old house. The next mental image is of a couple standing outside their house, asking me many questions about myself and my family. Soon I was sitting in their kitchen, drinking tea and eating bread. Maybe this image is saved as a picture because time seems to stop on occasions when one is so happy. Another enduring friendship began that day, which widened to include my mother on her later visits to the area. After that, our first meeting, it will suffice to say that with the help of a bicycle the Flavin family insisted on lending me, I cut short some of the distances between Grange and the points of interest at Lough Gur. The Flavin family matched mine in number, for I too am one of eight siblings. Some of their girls were around my age, which gave me instant companions.

For the many kindnesses of my friends at Grange, I am very grateful. Down the years, these memories have tumbled willy-nilly through my dreams.

Here are the details of what I can specifically remember of my trips in 1976 and '77: wandering around on Knockadoon, climbing Knockfennel, the New Church, climbing inside the Black Castle (is that possible?), happening upon the stone circle which was completely unmarked, cycling and walking the roads, tea and sandwiches for lunch at Reardon's (a request for tea and sandwiches causing some sort of long, urgently-whispered conference in Reardon's kitchen), meeting Karen and Gerald Barry, but not Niamh or Michael.

There was Mrs. Barry's extreme, motherly kindness in giving me dinner in the kitchen, late one evening after I'd come by land and sea from France, and when I was obviously very hungry and tired, but with nowhere to eat and probably no money to buy much food with, either. Mr. Barry,

Tony, stood there smiling and talking gently as I ate. Or the lifts she gave me into Limerick. Then there were dog and horse races in Limerick with Flavins, a night of singing at the Swans, with Ann and Norah Flavin and John Reardon, Cèilidh evenings at Flavins with Seamus playing accordion and young Margaret singing, the little children gathered round... and finally a memory of looking southeast to the Galtees from atop Knockfennel, feeling sick at the thought of leaving Ireland.

I have toured the country, of course, a few times, but Lough Gur and its people are my priority in Ireland.

Unfortunately, after 1977, 24 years were to pass before I returned. It was three weeks after 9/11, in fact, and my new husband was with me. Ireland had “changed utterly”. David got to know the new Ireland and the Irish. A Canadian of German and English stock, he was bemused by the place. Everyone he met liked him immediately. His wisecracks were appreciated.

In 2001, Ireland was still all charm but also modernity, prosperity, immigration—not emigration—and heavily multinational tourism. My mother, after her repeated visits, had never mentioned the sea change caused by the Celtic Tiger, heaven knows why. The difference in the place floored me. But I was happy about it.

David and I were over again in 2003, too, and sensed the beginning of Ireland’s first post-industrial recession, a novel experience for all concerned. Such tides in fortune as Ireland has recently seen may become tidal waves. This was my impression in sunny late September of 2015 as I rode Kavanagh’s coach from Dublin Airport to Limerick. David’s health and life’s big issues had again kept me away too long from Eire, so I was focussed on visiting old friends at Grange. Aine awaited me at a Limerick stop, and from the moment we met there until she took me to the security gate at Cork Airport a few days later, my feet did not touch the ground. I was engulfed in the warm flow of hospitality and fun, both sacred and secular, until I left for France. For Aine, entertaining me could not have been easy. She has an extremely busy life. There is little down time.

What a whirlwind of merriment we had. When struggling to sum up the Irish days of my Euro jaunt, for people back home, I will blurt out, “I gambled on horses and lost, drank, sang in the church choir, drank holy water from a sacred well, and read poetry in the pub!” This amuses the casual questioner, but some friends do want more details, so to them I tell of my longed-for visits with cherished old friends, renewing acquaintance with and getting to know Aine and Maeve and Aine’s dad Michael, not to mention meeting Father Sean, the choir of St. John’s Knockainey, the poetry group at Reardons, including the poet John Carew, zipping along the roads with Aine or Margaret, meeting folks at the football pitch, watching hurling, seeing the lake, the farm by Lough Gur and the interpretive centre with Aine, walking a country lane with her and Maeve and friend Eva, then a panorama of the two girls climbing Knockfennel as fast as mountain goats.

I had lunch and visits in May Flavin’s kitchen, sprints into Limerick with Margaret, and some wonderful teas and glasses of wine by the roaring fire in the Caherguillamore house. There was a too-brief morning at the Old Irish Ways museum, Caherguillamore, and my last morning’s quick but priceless few minutes, in the dew, at the Stone Circle; Aine made sure we went there before rushing through morning preparations.

Finally, there was some time alone at Lough Gur after Mr. Quinlan gave me a lift to the centre on my last day. It was decades since I’d been at the lake by myself. Either I was with David in ’01, with David, MB and toddler Maeve in ’03, or with Aine and girls. All cherished times that could not be topped, I thought, until I found myself alone. Illogically, the air’s silence was swallowed by the lake’s even greater silence. Such words sound like cheap sentiment, but St. Paul did get it right:

he spoke of “the peace that passeth all understanding.” Look over the waves in the sunlight one day, and think of that phrase.

There is another lake, far away from Lough Gur, which holds the original throne of glory in my heart. Through human troubles, it is lost to me now, but being its daughters, my mother and I were each completely open to letting one other lake sit alongside it. Lough Gur is different than Stony Lake, but it became as admired, awe-inspiring and loved as dear old Stony. Despite its solitary beauty, this place is not just a lake, some hills and some stone-age sites on a map. People make it. People make the memories. Memories of friends and good times round Lough Gur, of my mother, of David, of my much younger self, all crowd round. Then newly-learned images: of Aine and her sisters swimming in the lake a long time ago, of this lake as a playground for generations of neighbours—remaining so until the end of the world.

To personalize the aura of Lough Gur with relation to myself is downright silly; the centuries and millennia have looked impassively on its residents and visitors, and we are all just “dust in the wind.” The historical evidence highlighted in the (new and improved!) visitor centre makes that abundantly clear. Surely many a visitor and archaeologist has the name Lough Gur engraved on his or her heart, but it belongs to its own people, and to history.

My tapestry of friendship is full of colours new and old. Back to Yeats:

“Think where man’s glory
most begins and ends,
and say my glory was
I had such friends”

The view from the bus stop at Grange, as referred by Barbara Craig:

