



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A pier in Dun Laoghaire harbour in County Dublin, Ireland. Hard times in the 1950s and 1960s drove thousands of young Irish to emigrate from the harbour, catching the ferry to Britain in search of jobs. Some are returning for an emotional reunion as part of The Gathering, a year-long event in Ireland.

# The Gathering

Ireland invites its many emigrants and their descendants to a year-long homecoming

Helen O'Neill

**DUBLIN** — The tall ships looked majestic as they sailed into the bay — replicas of the masted, rigged vessels that once transported millions of emigrants from these shores.

The ships had departed from Liverpool, England, three days earlier, carrying descendants of Irish emigrants in a reverse voyage billed as an opportunity to “Sail Home to Your Roots.”

A crowd on the docks cheered as they entered Dublin port and the crew unfurled a giant green banner with the words, “Welcome to Our Gathering.”

The May voyage was just one event among thousands taking place throughout Ireland, part of an ambitious year-long tourism drive to boost the country’s battered economy by luring its diaspora home.

Billed as The Gathering, the initiative is really multiple gatherings, large and small, ranging from the cultural and historic to the sporting, the quirky and the poignant.

“Bring them home. Treat them well. The Gathering is ‘Project Ireland’. Do your bit,” Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny exhorted fellow countrymen and women when the initiative was launched earlier in the year.

In every county, town and parish it seems that some group has taken his words to heart.

Highlights include flagship events like a July 21 Riverdance extravaganza, in which 2,013 master dancers are expected to kick up their heels along the banks of Dublin’s River Liffey and attempt to break the world record for step-dancing. The last record was set in Nashville with 632 dancers in 2011.

Popular annual cultural events such as the Galway Arts Festival, the Cork Jazz Festival and the Dingle Tradfest are all incorporating “gathering” programs, as are big sporting events.

Choral gatherings are huge. It seems like every little village or

town is hosting a gathering and inviting choirs from Europe and the U.S. to join them.

There are busking gatherings and blacksmith gatherings, scientist gatherings and even an “Evil Eye” spiritual gathering in Donegal in August.

There are quirky gatherings to raise money for charity — for example the redhead convention in Cork in August. And bog-snorkelling, sheaf-tossing and welly-throwing (Wellington rubber boots) gatherings.

The goal, tourism officials say, is to tap into the estimated 70 million people who claim Irish descent worldwide and bring at least 350,000 additional tourists home.

From around the world, they are heeding the call.

A gang of London ex-pats has organized a bike ride from Trafalgar Square to Killorglin, County Kerry, in time for the annual three-day Puck Fair in August. Reputed to be the oldest fair in Ireland, the highlight is catching a wild mountain goat and crowning it King Puck.

Legend has it that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a goat broke away from its herd to warn the town about the advancing army of English commander Oliver Cromwell during his conquest of Ireland.

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## Guelph writer gets a warm welcome after tracking down her cousins in Ulster

Melody Wren

**W**hen I heard about The Gathering taking place in Ireland this year, it tugged at my very core. I knew I had to go.

I grew up hearing stories about my grandmother and about my great grandparents from Northern Ireland and for years I have wanted to investigate further. Suddenly it felt urgent.

I wanted to know the truth about those stories — and also to learn if I had relatives still living there. I had to go.

First, however, I had to do some family research.

Gathering up as many names, dates and birthplaces in Ireland as

I could — plus birth, marriage and death certificates — was an important first step. Then I chatted to as many older relatives in Canada as I could, foraging for information and adding names and dates to the mix. The next step was to link up with a genealogist in Ireland who could look into records there that I didn’t know the first thing about accessing.

One thing I realized early on was that I was being quite unrealistic in thinking this could be done fairly quickly.

Apparently there were other people wanting the same genealogist to look for information about their own families in Northern Ireland. Who knew?

As I prepared for the trip, my objectives became clear. My first goal would be to find the site of my great grandfather’s farm and to stay in the area to get a feel for it. It would be icing on the ancestral cake to meet any living relatives. Did I dare dream that was possible? I didn’t think so.

Assisting me was a Dublin genealogist named Helen Kelly of Dublin. I also worked with Gillian Hunt, a researcher at the Ulster Historical Foundation in Belfast.

Just days before my flight, I received an enormous report that I hastily read. The information it held, combined with what I had gathered online from census records, allowed me to determine an approximate address for my great grandfather’s farm.

The census report, from 1860, even described his house as being thatched with four large rooms, three windows, two outhouses, a stable and a pigsty. It was roughly 100 kilometres west of Belfast, on Gleenken Road outside the village of Aughnacloy in County Tyrone.

Toward the bottom of the report, I came across the exciting news that I had living relatives.

It seems that my grandmother had a few siblings I didn’t know about and one of them had given birth to two daughters. They were both long deceased, but had grown children who were now living in the Belfast area.



MELODY WREN

Gillian Hunt (left) of the Ulster Historical Foundation in Belfast helps writer Melody Wren of Guelph learn more about her ancestors.

I was tingling with excitement. With this information, I was able to figure out which cousin lived closest to the area I would be visiting — and also his phone number.

It took me a while to work up my nerve to make the call. What would I say? I even wrote out a script out so that I would keep it simple and to the point.

He answered after the first ring. With my voice shaking, I said, “Hi, my name is Melody, I live in Canada and I believe you are my cousin.”

I explained that his grandfather had been my grandmother’s brother, which meant that we

shared great grandparents and that he was my second cousin.

How had I come across this information, he asked.

I explained the source and asked if we could meet, since I was flying to Northern Ireland the following week.

He immediately agreed to a meeting and said: “You must visit our farm.”

I told him that would be great and that I also wanted to go to site of great grandfather’s farm. Using Google Earth, I had located it on my computer and had actually seen the farm gate.

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MELODY WREN

A view along the Atlantic coast of County Antrim in Northern Ireland.

## Dublin cemetery helps visitors trace their kin

► **Ireland** continued from E12

A group of Irish emigrants living in Toronto who, partly out of homesickness, organized a club there to play camogie, is returning as part of an international camogie gathering at the end of July. (The sport of camogie is women's hurling.)

The event includes matches in Dublin's Croke Park stadium, hallowed ground for the Gaelic Athletic Association, Ireland's biggest sporting organization.

"To come home and play in Croke Park is like a dream come true," said camogie player Marie O'Riordan, who emigrated to Toronto from Cork in 2009.

"It's a fantastic way for emigrants like us to keep the connection and be part of something positive for our country."

But The Gathering has its share of critics too, notably actor Gabriel Byrne, who spent two years as Ireland's cultural ambassador to the United States.

Byrne has dismissed the initiative as a cynical government effort to "shake down" emigrants "for a few quid."

Whether the effort can draw enough tourists to dent Ireland's economic woes remains to be seen.

Ireland has been in economic turmoil since the real estate boom collapsed in 2008. Unemployment stands near 14 per cent and emigration is once again commonplace among the young.

Regardless of the economic backdrop, there seems plenty of goodwill toward gatherings — gratitude even, that they are showcasing aspects of Irish heritage that might otherwise be bypassed by tourists.

Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin, for example, is hosting gathering-related "Family Weeks" urging the numerous clans (O'Neills, O'Donnells, O'Briens) to start their gatherings with a walking tour of the cemetery and a visit to its unique museum. The cemetery staff is also offering expert help in tracing kin.

The gated 1832 cemetery with its soaring Celtic crosses and lush grounds (it was designed as a garden as well as a burial place) is a gold mine for anyone interested in Irish history.

It was founded by Irish politician Daniel O'Connell (known as "The Liberator" for championing the right of Catholics to vote) and a giant round tower above his crypt dominates the grounds.

Visitors can enter the crypt and stop by the graves of other historical figures including 19th-century nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell (dubbed the "uncrowned King of Ireland"), and founders of the modern Irish state, Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins.

The great houses, castles and gardens of Ireland are also celebrating The Gathering with tours and lectures like the recent "tracing your Wicklow roots" talk by genealogist Nicola Morris at the Powerscourt Estate in Enniskerry, County Wicklow.

While The Gathering has been a boon for her profession, Morris views it as more than just an economic initiative.

"There is a wonderful, grassroots nature to it all," she said. "It's a mixture of history and culture and community spirit and just giving emigrants a great big welcome home."

Perhaps that spirit is most evident in events like a recent reunion of the so-called "Forgotten Irish" in the harbour town of Dun Laoghaire, south of Dublin.

Hard times in the 1950s and 1960s drove thousands of young Irish to emigrate, catching the ferry to Britain in search of jobs. Many of them spent their working lives sending money home to their families, yet were unable to afford to return themselves.

As part of The Gathering, volunteers sponsored about 50 elderly emigrants on a visit home — a trip that included an wreath-laying ceremony next to a plaque in their honour on Dun Laoghaire pier.

"There were tears then and there are tears now," said Mary Carrick, 70, as she remembered the summer day in 1967 when she clutched her suitcase and waved to her parents from the ferry as it pulled away out to sea.

"The Gathering," she said, "is a wonderful way to remember our contribution and to welcome us home."

The Associated Press

## Locating great grandfather's farm was a special moment during trip

► **Ulster** continued from E12

When he told me that his home was in Dungannon, I was able to share the news that our great grandfather's farm was in Aughnacloy, only a few kilometres from where he lived. He laughed in surprise and we immediately made plans to see the site together. I hung up the phone that day both relieved and excited.

The next day I responded to an invitation to become his son's "friend" on Facebook. I knew we were family as soon as I started reading and observed the son's droll humour. He offered to meet me for lunch at my Belfast hotel when I arrived.

The following week, accompanied by a friend, I flew to Dublin and met with Helen Kelly, the genealogist I had been working with. Over a cup of tea, we studied the information I had gathered and scrolled through other records that she was able to quickly access.

Kelly empowers people to do their own research, but had been able to cobble together quite a bit of information from the scanty collection of dates and names I had sent to her. In particular, I learned, she was able to scan obituaries with a fine eye, picking up on small details that might be clues for further investigation.

Even if you don't meet living relatives in Ireland, Kelly told me, it's important to "go to the community that cradled your ancestors." The landscape is unlikely to have changed much, she noted. So sit and get a feel for it. Speak to the locals and spend time in their presence.

After doing a bit of sightseeing in Dublin, we took a train to Belfast. "Never forget that you are from Aughnacloy, Country Tyrone," my mother had always said to me when I was growing up. She would have been so pleased to know where I was going.

I carried a photo of my maternal grandmother with me because I felt this was her journey, too. Even though I had never met her, I was starting to feeling a closer connection. I also carried a small album of ancestral photos and pictures of current family members to share with my newly discovered relatives.

My second cousin's son planned to meet me in the lobby of my Belfast hotel soon after my arrival. I had hardly slept the night before and was as nervous as I would have been on a first date. Did my hair look OK?

When he walked in, we knew each other immediately (thanks to Facebook photos). Over lunch we made small talk, nervously, and I showed him the family tree that I had assembled so far, plus a photo of my grandmother, his great aunt.

Our subsequent search at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) proved futile in turning up more information, but being there with my new cousin was such a treat. It was surreal to be at a computer looking up family records, glancing over at my newly discovered cousin doing the same thing. I did get quite distracted as I looked at all the information that was available. I know I will have to return some day, since days, not mere hours, are required to do any kind of thorough research.

Getting stuck in a Belfast rush hour traffic jam didn't squelch my enthusiasm later as we toddled along winding country roads en route to his father's house in Dungannon. I must have been comfortable, however, because I fell fast asleep on the way.

We were welcomed at the door and tea and sandwiches were quickly served (an apple and Mars bar sandwich — that's a treat you have to try). We looked through my family pictures and my second cousin showed me a photo of his grandfather, my great uncle. I couldn't see a family resemblance at the time, but now, looking back at my photos from the trip, I realize there are some similarities.

We drove together to the site near Aughnacloy where my great grandfather's farm had been located and were able to walk across the property and the surrounding area. It was a deeply inspiring evening, one that my mother would have loved to see.

We took a photo of our newly connected family group in front of the farm gates. Driving through the area, I commented that the landscape was very similar to the Yorkshire Moors in England — so it's no wonder then that my grandmother ended up settling there when she left Northern Ireland. It felt like pieces of a family puzzle were sliding into place.

I had contacted the Ulster Historical Foundation several months prior to my trip and for about \$110 they had provided results for an initial search to find details about my family, using the information I was able to provide.

Back in Belfast, I made an appointment to meet the foundation researcher Gillian Hunt, whose work had allowed me to make contact with my cousins. She was so pleased she had been able to help and we chatted for an hour about further research that could be done. I agreed to a further search (costing about \$240), knowing there was a good chance that more information about my family could be found.

While family research was the main focus of my trip, I also made time to do some sightseeing.

Whenever I travel, I make a point of visiting local markets because I find they are a true representation of a place. So on our way out of Belfast, we stopped at the city's St. George's market. Operating since 1604, it is the last surviving Victorian covered market in Belfast, located close to the River Lagan and the city's Waterfront Hall.

It was well worth a visit and I picked up lots of goodies to bring home, including some original pieces of art, locally knitted items, linens and locally made chocolate.

## If you go . . .

### DUBLIN

**Where to stay:**  
The Gresham Hotel  
(www.gresham-hotels.com) at 23 Upper O'Connell St., is central for walking.

**Getting about:** The **Hop On, Hop Off Bus** (www.irishcitytours.com) is a wonderful way to see Dublin. You can get on and off when you like to visit attractions or have meals.

**Where to eat:**  
● **Seven Social** is at 7 Benburb St., Dublin 7 (www.sevensocial.ie). Scrumptious local food.

● **The Winding Stair Restaurant**, 40 Lower Ormond Quay, Dublin 1 (www.winding-stair.com), close to Liffey River and Penny Bridge.

### BELFAST

**Where to stay**  
Malmaison, 34-38 Victoria St.  
(www.malmaison.com). Boutique hotel in a former seed warehouse.

**Where to eat:**  
● **Ox**, 1 Oxford St. (www.oxbelfast.com). Focus on local, organic, seasonal fare.

### OUTSIDE BELFAST

**Magherafelt:** A tiny town about an hour outside of Belfast on the way to the Antrim Coast.

**Where to stay**  
Laurel Villa on Church Street  
(www.laurel-villa.com) a stunning B&B where Irish poets and poetry are celebrated.

**Where to eat**  
The Church Street restaurant, 23 Church St., (www.churchstreetrestaurant.co.uk). Boasts that all of its vegetables are produced within the same postal code.

### Tracking family history

- **Helen Kelly Genealogy** in Dublin  
www.helenkelly.com or 353-1-278-4040
- **Ulster Historical Society** in Belfast  
www.ancestryireland.com
- **Family Search:** www.Familysearch.org. Free access to records of births, deaths and marriages for Ireland from 1845 to 1958
- **Public Record Office of Northern Ireland**  
www.proni.gov.uk/index/family\_history.htm



MELODY WREN

Guelph writer Melody Wren began her search for family members in Ireland by speaking to relatives, gathering names of ancestors and studying old family photos.

From Belfast, we drove to the stunning Atlantic coast of County Antrim, stopping to walk on the Giant's Causeway, which is an essential stop for anyone visiting this part of Northern Ireland.

Formed more than 60 million years ago when molten lava cooled suddenly on contact with water, the Giant's Causeway is an awe-inspiring landscape of more than 40,000 interlocking columns.

There are stunning coastal trails to follow here, all with breathtaking views of jagged cliffs and bays lashed by wind and

waves. The visitor centre is an innovative, state of the art facility that rises out of the landscape with walls of glass, soaring basalt columns and a sloping, grassed roof.

And at nearby Carrick-A-Rede, you can test your nerve by crossing a 20-metre rope bridge that links the mainland to the small island of Carrickarede, 30 metres above the rocks along the coast.

It was the perfect end to a wonderful trip.

Melody Wren is a Guelph writer. Her visit to Ireland was sponsored by Tourism Ireland.



## Your guide to area Bed and Breakfasts

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**Roseville Hideaway B&B**  
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### BAYFIELD

**Brentwood on the Beach**  
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Zurich, Ont  
N0M 2T0  
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**Morning Glory B&B**  
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www.bbcanada.com/3343.html

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1645 Bruce Rd. 10 RR#3,  
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**Kildonan House B&B**  
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www.londonhouse.ca  
info@londonhouse.ca

**Through The Garden Gate B&B**  
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www.queenslandingguesthouse.com  
www.bbcanada.com/12574.html  
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Behind the Royal Bank  
(519) 662-2020  
www.waterlot.com

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www.scandiabandb.com

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www.willowbrk.on.ca

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Sauble Beach  
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www.bbcanada.com/1055.html  
email: getcov@bmts.com

### STRATFORD

**W Arrie's B&B**  
289 Coburg St.  
(519) 272-2005  
jrlgro@rogers.com

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(519) 273-3166  
www.hathawayscottage.ca  
hathaway@rogers.com

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