

A JOURNEY TO GLORY

By Mark Cornell

The still Lough is silver, the three surrounding mountains dark blue. We're silently making our way back from St. Kevin's, a grey, a twelfth century monastery. It's a pocket sized church, with its still intact steep, stone roof, small round tower and conical top, nestled into the leafy shoulder of a nearby hill. This whole area of Ireland is a complex of monastic ruins.

' You can see why Kevin was happy to establish a hermitage here amongst the birds, clear water, rocks and pines. A sheltered more tranquil spot would be hard to find,' said my wife Kath. I nod my agreement.

Man's been here a long time; some of these ruins were built over the graves and sacred spots of the pre-Christian clans. The early priests had to bend their teachings to accommodate the strong beliefs of the locals. Irish Christianity is merely one layer of belief over a people whose history stretches back to the Ice Age; they would have been here watching the glacier carve out Glendalough. Ireland is dotted with many by Bronze Age or Early Iron Age forts and stone rings. These people had a great reverence for the cycles of nature, the sky, land and water, they still do. You only have to walk around Glendalough or any other remote body of water in Ireland to know this is true.

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My fifteen year old son Tim, is starting to enjoy himself; he found the hustle and bustle of Dublin too much. But now that he's walking through his first lush European forest, calm has entered his teenage body. Poor Tim, he's also missing his constant companion Jim, the cockatiel. Everywhere Tim goes, Jim goes on his shoulder. Jim was named after James T. Kirk, captain of the Star Ship Enterprise. Tim and I went through a big Star Trek stage, where I bought the entire early nineteen sixties version and we'd spend long nights together watching episode after episode. Apart from the love of a good story, Tim has also inherited my deep love of nature. Even though he's fifteen he still doesn't mind going bushwalking with his old man now and then on the weekends. My son has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the birds, animals and plants that inhabit the forests nearby our native city of Melbourne.

Tim squeaks with glee as he points to a nearby tiny brown wood mouse. The little fella suddenly leaves the main trail to scribble up the rocky steps of a smaller path leading up a hill. We all decide to follow; the funny thing about this wood mouse is he's not scared of us as at all. He stays close, darting from one green hazelnut to another. The colour of his tiny eyes is as dark as the briquettes I used to haul into my family house when I was a boy. Despite my blisters we make it to the top and discover another church. This one's different, the roof's gone, perhaps a victim of the stupid Dublin English who sacked the

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whole area in 1398. Who knows? The flat headed entrance portal still stands, so do the walls, which are held up by a series of round arches. There's an old green plaque on the side of the entrance which informs us that its name is Reefert Church. The word Reefert is an anglicized version of the original Gaelic *Righ Fearta*, which meant burial place of kings. The plaque states that this was a royal burial ground before the coming of the Christians.

Tim leans over and chats to the wood mouse as I step through the entrance portal. Even though the roof has gone the church still feels enclosed, the clear blue sky acts as a natural ceiling. There's a humbleness to the monasteries of Glendalough, they were constructed to blend into and not dominate the landscape. Kath shivers as she makes her way through the entranceway. The only sound is off our shoes as we crunch our way across the pebbled floor. I come across a long flat hole in the wall and peek in; it's full of coins and candles, an altar. Someone has placed a card in which read, "*Life is not a race to the grave, but a journey to glory.*" Righ Fearta after all these thousands of years is still a living place of worship! I place some coins in and dedicate them to my Uncle Bernie Mullins, who died only a few weeks before our trip to the other side of the planet. Being a gentle soul, he should be at peace now in the Otherworld.

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Bernie always loved dancing, years ago when my family had do's, all of us would end up dancing in our tiny weatherboard house which creaked and groaned under the pressure of scores of feet. Bernie would always be in the middle of the clan grooving away to the song's we teenagers would insist on

playing, which was usually The Beatles. We've got a photo of him somewhere whistling while playing on his ukulele. Uncle Bernie was a fantastic whistler; he'd sometimes go all day. It's a dying art; you don't hear people whistling anymore. God I miss those dancing bouncing house days! But like my Uncle, I must keep myself open to the joy of existence, and travel's a good way of doing it. I nod to the altar, then make my way out of the church.

As Tim's little mate leads us back down the path, the hills and trees reflect like a mirror on the waters of Glendalough. We hear feral goats calling to each other and then a deer whistle high up on a hillside somewhere. The Rangers hut is tucked away in the turning forest. We tell him about our little visitor then smile when he reckons it's unusual for a wood mouse to be out in the middle of the day and that they're usually weary of people. Thank you little spirit for giving me the opportunity to revere my Uncle within such solitude. I continue to light candles and give offerings to Bernie as we explore the grander churches of Europe, but there nothing like Glendalough to remind you that like a leaf on a tree, you're a part of a whole.

Bio:

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favourite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.