Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

After a conference in Germany, I met up with my sister-in-law, Bekah, for a week in Ireland, both sections. Having visited Scotland in 1999 and Wales in 2016, I was looking forward to adding another area to my knowledge of the Celtic world. In addition, as a recovering English major, I have read and loved many Irish authors—I was looking forward to seeing the world that inspired so many brilliant writers. We started in Dublin, the largest city and capital city of the Republic of Ireland.

The Spire of Dublin (An Túr Solais)

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I was also looking for Irish. The Celtic languages haven't fared well in the modern world. Cornish is being resurrected, Welsh remains relatively vibrant in some smaller, rural communities (and I met a native speaker of Welsh, not because he was affiliated with the university but because he was with a woman who was affiliated with the university), and in general, the people and the languages were pushed to the edges of the British Empire, a deliberate matter of policy based on the idea that unity of language would bring unity of thought. That was a stupid idea and worked out about as well as stupid ideas usually do.

Street art and road work in Dublin—there was quite a bit of both

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

It seems like a good idea to warn bicyclists of the hazards of road work, but this is graphic enough to count as a threat. Bilingual signs are one part of a national attempt in the Republic of Ireland to try to maintain the language and culture. My first experience with spoken Irish was on the bus from the airport into town, on which the stops were announced by a digital voice in both English and Irish, English first, every time.

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The language of giving offense and of arguing for rights is English, even for street artists.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

My second encounter with spoken Irish was while we were walking around. We followed three people for a few blocks on our way to Trinity College, in an attempt to see the Book of Kells. A grandfather, father, and grandson were out for a walk. The grandfather spoke only Irish but understood English, and the grandson spoke only English but understood Irish, and the father was bilingual and working in the semantic space between generations. It was an excellent example of language attrition across generations, and given how few people in Ireland speak any Irish at all, hearing it on the street in Dublin was a momentous occasion.

A sculpture by Arnaldo Pomodoro, one of the many *Sphere within Sphere* (*Sfera con sfera*—that's Italian) sculptures; Bekah and I are reflected in the sphere

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

We didn't get to see the Book of Kells—it wouldn't come out of the floor. That was the explanation given. I like to think that that explanation would have pleased many of Ireland's writers. I can imagine James Joyce using the line to enhance some of his many descriptions of people-on-the-street Dubliners, with its attribution of will to a lavishly illustrated book that is imprisoned in a vault that spends its non-tourism day underground.

Instead, we found and fed the largest and loudest seagulls we'd ever seen or heard. They have not ingratiated themselves with the people, and there are politicians and journalists and others all trying to figure out what to do about the birds, and doing isn't going to work out in the birds' favor. I liked them a lot, but then, I'm not a sheep; enormous seagulls have killed sheep in the Dingle area of the Republic of Ireland.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

After Dublin, we left the city and headed to greener pastures and way back in time. This is the River Boyne, a reliable body of water that has been home to the people of Ireland from probably before they were Irish.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Our first stop in prehistoric Ireland was Knowth (Cnóbha), a mound and presumed passage-grave in County Meath. It is part of a complex of prehistoric mound structures; we visited three of them. As can be seen from this picture, each of the major mounds is surrounded by smaller mounds. Some of the mounds have been excavated, and some have not. It is probable that many of the weird little knobs in an otherwise rolling landscape of low slopes are unexcavated and unexplored mounds.

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Knowth alone has about a third of all of the megalithic art that has been found in the entirety of Europe. The stones around the base of the main mound are covered in petroglyphs. Including the entire complex of Brún a Bóinne, about sixty percent of all of European megalithic art is in this small area of Ireland. There are serpentine patterns, circles, and parts of circles.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

There are spirals. The artistic and architectural ideas on which everything is based are round, rather than right-angled.

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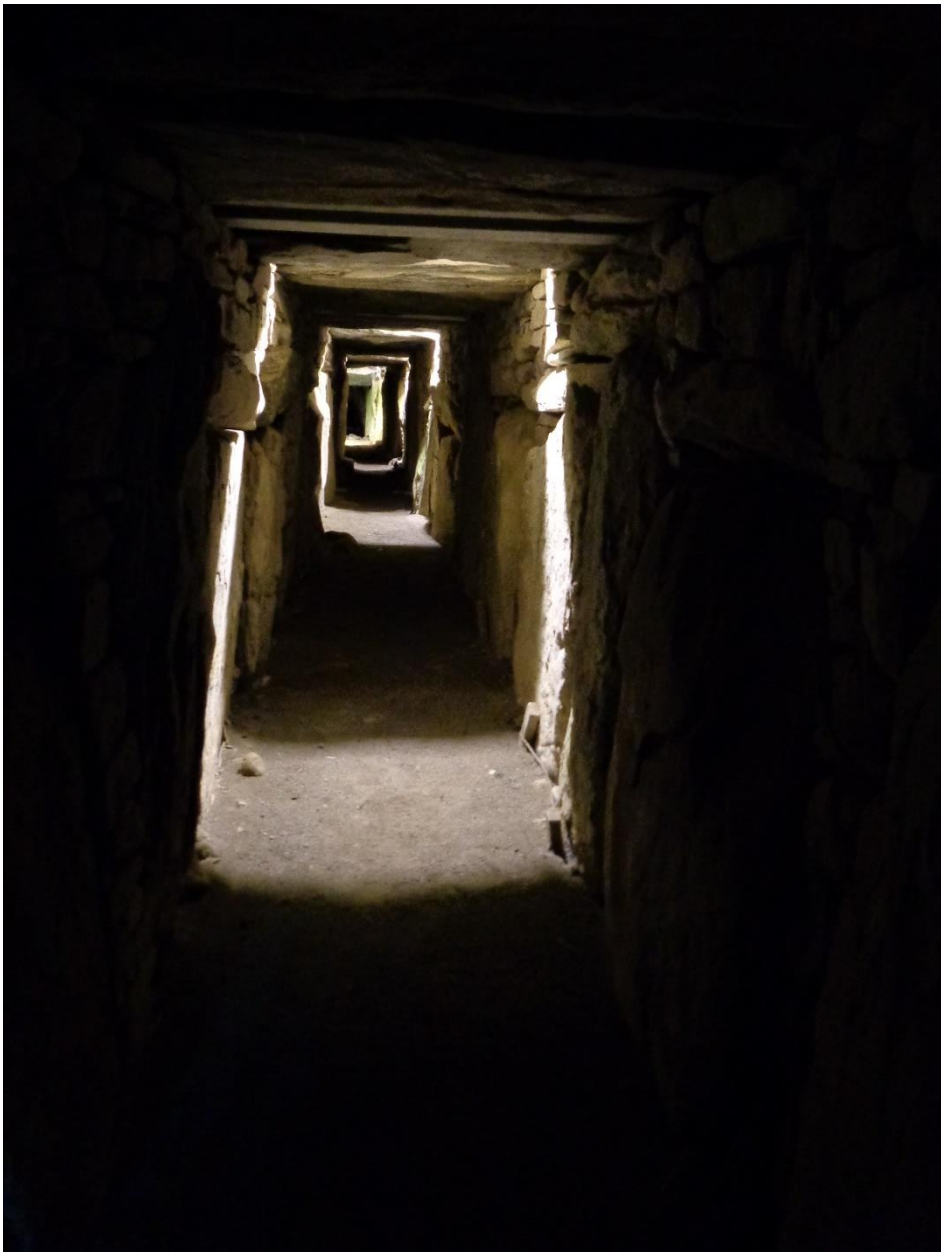
The passage in the main mound at Knowth.



Some scholars believe that this particular set of petroglyphs represents a solar eclipse, which would make two solar eclipses for the year: one in Missouri in the sky, and one in Ireland in stone.

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The mounds are old, older than the Egyptian pyramids and possibly older than Stonehenge (although, every time I see any kind of documentary on Stonehenge, it seems that it gets older, and not by as much as would be expected by the passage of time between documentaries). The Irish weather is not conducive to maintaining archeological sites in good condition, so when the mounds are excavated, there is a certain amount of reconstruction that has to be done. The kerbstones have to be rolled back up to reveal the petroglyphs, and the stone retaining wall, in this case at Newgrange, had to be reassembled from the stones that were scattered around the base of the mound.

Despite the weather in Ireland, the interior of the mounds is remarkably impervious to the weather, and the passages are oriented for precise astronomical events. At Newgrange, on the winter solstice, if there is a clear day, the dawn light shines down the passage and illuminates the farthest leaf of a clover-leaf-shaped room within the mound. Human bones have been found in these mounds, but the fact that there is a constant temperature, humidity, and light-level maintained inside the mounds at all times, regardless of the weather outside, suggests that they were originally for something more useful than graves, and that people dumped bodies in them later. In addition, clover-leaf-shaped rooms exist elsewhere; the megalithic structures in Malta have rooms of that shape. This kerbstone has long-ish shapes with round parts extending from them, perhaps a schematic map of the interiors of some of the mounds.

Dowth is a smaller passage mound, and has not yet been excavated. It is smaller than Knowth and Newgrange, and is on private land that is being used as a sheep pasture. This is a sign of our devotion to exploring the prehistoric; we waded through sheep shit to visit Dowth.

There are good reasons to leave sites like this unexcavated; the mud, grass, and shrubs provide some protection from exposure to the weather and tourists tramping their ways through sheep pastures.

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The entrance to the passage at Dowth is smaller than at Knowth or Newgrange. We could walk into those places if we kept our elbows tucked in and minded our heads, but this one was about the right size for a sheep.

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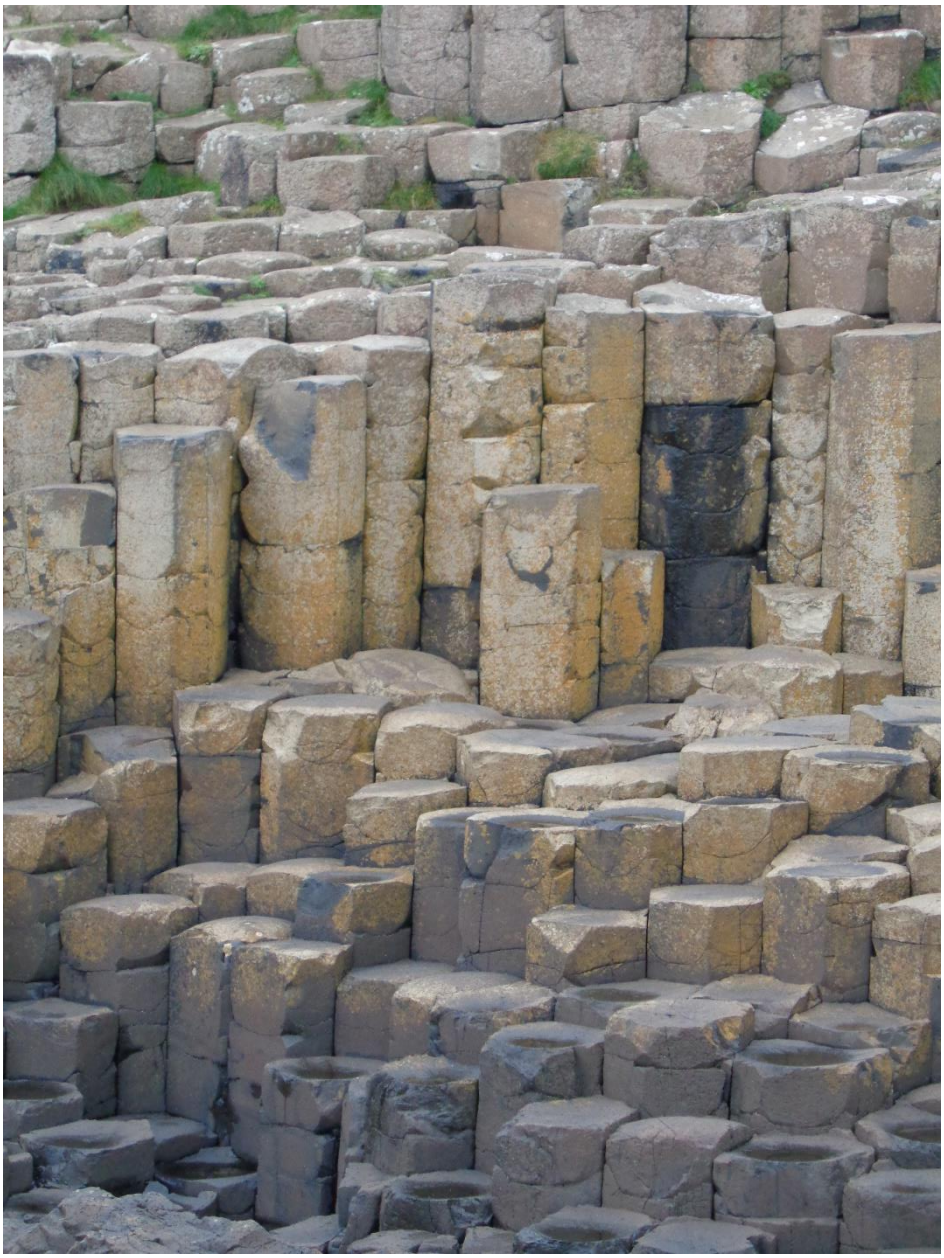
In Northern Ireland, which is far the smaller of the two sections of Ireland, we visited the Giant's Causeway, a volcanic formation along part of the northern coast. There are at least two stories. The Irish version is about a giant named Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn McCool), who was having a dispute with a Scottish giant, Benandonner. Fionn threw rocks at Benandonner and created a path across to Scotland, where Benandonner turned out to be more of a monster than anticipated. Fionn retreated back across the rock path he'd created, followed by Benandonner. Fionn was saved by his wife, Oona (not his first wife, Sadhbh, whom he met as a deer and who was later turned back into a deer by a druid named Fear Doirich, whom she refused to marry—but she wasn't Oona), who disguised Fionn as a baby and said that Fionn would be back soon. Benandonner figured that if the baby were so huge, he'd better leave before Fionn got back.

The geological story has only recently made progress, thanks to some experiments conducted at an Icelandic volcano, Eyjafjallajökull. Magma basalt fractures between 840-890 degrees Celsius; relatively hexagonal structures are easy to get because they form a flat tessellation, but as seen in the previous picture, not all of the pieces are truly hexagonal. The columns of polygons split off and seem to have levels at which they break. Some break off leaving a small hump at the top of the column, and some break off with a small scoop at the top of the column.



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If we'd been somewhat larger, we could have walked to Scotland.

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A look at the difference between what 840-890 degrees Celsius can do, vs. what a regular lava flow looks like. What I particularly like about this picture are the regular segments in the columns; when the rock above erodes away, these columns will start breaking off at these segments. I looked around for a loose segment to schlep back with me, but either others had already collected them, or they fall into the ocean.

The columns aren't always strictly vertical; these look like the rock was flowing like water until it segmented and hardened.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The entire island of Ireland is justly famous for its coastline. The next stop after the Giant's Causeway was the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge. This was just a random stop along the way.

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While walking down to the where the rope bridge attached to the mainland, we saw falcons gliding without traveling, thanks to a stiff breeze. Every so often, they would dive to the ground, sometimes coming up with another animal but more often returning to their gliding height empty-taloned.

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People are more dramatic about the rope bridge than the bridge deserves. People who are truly afraid of heights don't bother with the bridge and so don't call attention to themselves, but people who appear to want to be known for their fears cross the bridge and scream and say they're nauseous, all more loudly than I'd expect from people who have real acrophobia. It's a strange era, when people think it's an achievement to be loudly afraid or loudly offended. Whatever happened to being respected for one's fortitude and thick skin?

Why bother with a bridge at all? It seems that the local farmer wanted to expand his grazing area, and built a bridge out to a small island so that the sheep could cross to and from it for grazing and shearing. No need for fences once out on the smaller island—the end of the bridge could just be closed, and they'd be there until someone opened the end of the bridge again.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Ireland does have bugs, but there weren't many while we were there.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

In the land of whisky, we visited a distillery. Bushmills holds the oldest license in Ireland to produce whiskey; the license was issued by the British crown, of course. Giving people permission to do what they've always been doing seems a particularly imperialistic approach. But the company is no longer Irish; it's now owned by Jose Cuervo, a company famous for its tequila. The barrels come from the Jack Daniels facility in Kentucky. It's a small world; much of the northern hemisphere can be sampled from a shot glass.

It took us a while to escape Northern Ireland. Somewhere between Northern and Republic of, there are roads on both sides of the border, which is not made obvious with any markers or guard posts or walls or signs, that have the same names and numbers, and towns that have the same names. Murphy's law also kicked in, and the maps for the area crossed seams that made the region end up on different pages of the map. It's the Irish Bermuda triangle. We spent nearly two hours driving in circles and triangles in about a ten-mile-square area trying to reach the next destination.

We were a bit later than planned reaching the next hostel, but we stopped at this castle, the Dunguaire Castle (Caisleáin Dhún Guaire). An event was in progress, so we were limited to a walk around the outside of the castle.

The most interesting thing about the castle was a creek that emerged from underground and flowed into the ocean next to the castle. There was not a creek around the castle; I checked. While looking for the source of the water, we also saw this well-maintained cottage with a thatched roof.

I've already mentioned the Irish coastline—here is more of it, and a famous section, the Cliffs of Moher (Aillte an Mhothair). The boat schedule in the fall is not conducive to a one-week counterclockwise trip around the entire island, so we didn't take the boat to see the cliffs from below.

Instead, we took a walk along the cliffs. This is a paving stone with fossils in the area that has been smoothed out for the convenience of tourists.

A safety wall, also for tourism—huge tour buses stop at the Cliffs and unload dozens of people multiple times per day. Most people don't go beyond the walls and the paving stones, but we were more inspired by the snail, and we decided to go to the other side.

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There is a long-distance trail along the coast of Ireland. With the trail and the right-to-ramble laws common in much of northern Europe, it is possible to walk around the entire island. We took a day hike, with questionable weather blowing in. This was close to the point where we turned around because we both had to lie down on the ground so as not to be blown from the cliffs. I've hiked in all kinds of weather but have never been defeated by wind before.

In our defense, even the waterfall was defeated by the wind; here's the water being blown upward.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

More view along the way to Killarney National Park, the next stop. Killarney has been called the 'best day out' in Ireland. I still don't know how these things are measured, but we had a terrific day out. On the way, we drove out to nearly the end of the Dingle Peninsula. Dingle (Corca Dhuibhne) is one of the Gaeltacht areas, places where Irish is still spoken, or so the story goes. Ireland is full of stories; as Ciaran Carson notes in the introduction to the Tain (Táin Bó Cúailnge), an epic story, the places names in Ireland all come with stories—one can't walk outdoors without walking into a world of narrative. We walked around in the town of Dingle to try to hear some Irish, but although the signs continued to be bilingual, there was no Irish spoken on the street. We went into a tiny music store, and the proprietrix there claimed to speak Irish, but she had difficulty; I'm sure that if we'd asked in Irish, she would have done better, but contextual memory was working against her. In any case, she was not even fully bilingual.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

We started with a horseback ride. The stable that we chose for our excursion is in the process of developing a breed of horse specifically for overweight people who want to take trail rides; the horses are mostly Percheron in lineage; it's a good idea because normal trail horses don't have the heft for the modern, first-world, human body-mass. We weren't overweight enough to try out the new breed, but the stable personnel found horses to suit us and our differing riding skills. They did an excellent job lining up horses with riders, a tricky task that not everyone is good at or even thinks about, but with both horses and people being individuals, it's an important task.

The ride took us through the lowlands and forests near Lough Leane and Muckross Lake. Muckross has a monster. The monster has not been known for a long time; a blurry picture of the monster (always, the picture is blurry) from the 1980s is available, and a sonar image from 2004 is available, in which an unidentified 80-meter-long object was found (always, the object is unidentified). In the gaps allowed by a lack of clarity and identification, imagination runs wild, and one website I consulted recommended taking a bright flashlight if walking at night so as to stun the creature with brightness, if it appeared. I don't know how the writer reached that conclusion, based on the lack of information available, but one can reach any conclusion from a lack of information, so how that's done is probably not crucial here.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

These are members of the last surviving herd of indigenous red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) in Ireland; this kind of deer has been in Ireland since at least the era of the megalithic mound builders. It was a sunny day in Killarney, and the deer were basking, lounging, and nibbling. The males were engaged in an ongoing territorial dispute, bellowing across the valley the entire time we were in the park.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Ireland doesn't have a lot of forests or trees, so when I saw some, I took pictures. Some of the land would be difficult for trees to use, because of salt spray from the ocean or because of exceptionally ferocious winds, but inland, there could be forests, and there are not. Ireland has always had a solid fishing industry, so some of the trees went into building boat, and some older buildings are wooden, like the farmhouse in Bushmills, and probably some wood was burned for fuel, but it's hard to say where all the trees went.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

While in Killarney, we visited Ross Castle (Caisleán an Rois), but I didn't like my pictures of it. Instead, here's a hooded crow (*Corvus cornix*, caróg liath). Ross Castle itself was interesting, however. It was a traditional castle, the residence of the noble family in the area, the O'Donaghues (then the McCarthy's, then the Brownes), and the place the non-nobles fled to when other clans or the British were pillaging and burning in the area. It's not the oldest castle in Ireland, but it's in ruins, in part because of a British law that buildings without roofs were not taxed. The residents took the roof off and moved to lower floors and smaller buildings; for good measure, they knocked some of the supporting stones off so that the building could no longer support a roof, in case there was any question in the tax-assessors' minds. It fell to the British and became a British garrison. The Office of Public Works acquired it in the 1980s and has put all kinds of resources into stabilizing it. A different tax policy might have helped prevent the damage that is now having to be repaired.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Irish can be written with the ogham writing system, an alphabet of twenty characters, or feda, supplemented with five more forfeda, grouped into four aicmí, depending on direction of the strokes. Irish is not usually written with ogham; ogham looks like it was designed to be written with an axe, and one can imagine the inconvenience of an axe for writing vs., say a pen or pencil. But there are about four hundred of these stones left in Ireland and Wales. There were probably also ogham inscriptions in wood, but given the rain in Ireland, it's not surprising that the stones have the inscriptions that survive. All known inscriptions are names, and sometimes death dates.

The ogham stones we visited near Killarney were not in their original locations. Slabs of stone are useful, and the stones were often moved to be used for lintels or roofing over root cellars, etc. The stones we saw were found in an old barn, having been supports for a roof, after they were grave stones.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Having been to the lake, a geographical low point in the park, we decided to walk up in the higher regions, toward the Gap of Dunloe, which is visible in this picture just to the left of the cliff that juts out.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

We hiked up, so that we could see the gap from above.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Berries in the fall on a holly tree (*Ilex aquifolium*)—holly is important in Irish folklore: it protects people from evil, especially in the winter. People hang holly branches over their doorways to keep out the evil spirts and encourage visits from the Good People, who are small fairies who come in from the cold to places that have holly over the doorways.

The weather started to shift, from our sunny morning on the horses to a less sunny afternoon on the hills. The transition created multiple rainbows along the way.

We had both dressed for rain and wind, but we were not covered in four inches of wool, and we turned around once we got cold.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

One of my customary travel goals is to stay where I stay for under $20 USD per night. I don't always achieve my goal, but the attempt helps to keep costs reasonable. I achieved it on this trip, in an expensive northern European country. I should win something. We also stayed in a variety of interesting places. In Dublin, we were in a remodeled convent behind a church—the sanctuary is now the cafeteria. In Bushmills, we stayed in an old farmhouse that was being remodeled, very slowly, in part because the hired help were a couple of incompetent barely-post-adolescent males with entitlement complexes (I learned the word 'adultescent' today). In Doolin, we stayed in a stone farmhouse. In Killarney, in this picture, we stayed in a country house that had recently hosted a wedding, so recently that some of the decorations were still up, and there was a chair in the parking lot, which I backed into—who leaves chairs in parking lots? Good thing Bekah got all of the insurance on the rental car. In Cashel, we stayed in row housing.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The weather by the lake, in the afternoon at Killarney

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The weather continued to be damp for our visit to the Bonane Heritage Park, an area that has ruins from the stone, bronze, and iron ages. At the entrance to the section we visited was a crannóg, a fortification built in a pond. There are stone supports in the water to reach the entrance, and in theory, only the people who are supposed to be in the crannóg know where those stone supports are. Whoever gets to the entrance has soggy feet. This one now has a dock; no one has invaded recently.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The Bonane area has a large number of megalithic structures, including several bullaun stones. Bullaun stones have had holes carved into them, for some reason. In most bullaun stones, the hole is on the top face of the stone, suggesting that perhaps the holes were used for grinding or pulverizing or churning, but in this one, the holes are on the side. The stone does face the direction of sunrise in the middle of winter and might have this one functioning as a calendar, but I suspect that the rock has been moved and that the holes used to be in the top surface of the stone.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Bonane is a huge area with a lot of prehistoric activity. From this viewpoint, an altar is visible as a tiny rectangular outcropping on the ridge. The altar marks the southernmost point of moonrises. Some trees are growing in the area, but the park people keep them trimmed back to keep the altar visible. This might explain what happened of some of Ireland's forests—they could have been cleared to keep the calendar and map features of the human-made landscape accessible.

Bonane also has a stone circle, the Dromagorteen stone circle, made with available stones rather than carved stones, as at Stonehenge. The line of three stones that makes a straight diameter line through the circle points to the altar on the ridge already described. Other stones on the circle line up with where the sun rises on equinoxes and solstices. Using available stone makes this a project that anyone with sky charts could do; if I had a yard, I would make one of these.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The ring fort at Bonane was hard to take pictures of (it needs an aerial shot), so this is a picture of some heather that was still blooming. The heath family of plants (*Ericacea*) is enormous, and I'm feeling too lazy to try to figure out which member of the family this one is.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The Drombeg stone circle is one of the most commonly visited stone circles in Ireland, but not on the day we were there, thanks to the rain. Ireland should be a rainforest, given the rain, but here's another cleared area with a stone circle, some sheep pastures, and low-growing brush. The rectangular stone in the foreground is said to line up with sunrise on the winter solstice, but given the width of that stone, the sun probably rises over it for much of the late fall and early winter. There did not appear to be a notch in the stone that might have indicated the date more precisely, and as ogham demonstrates, when the Irish wanted to make notches in stones, they were capable of doing so.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

A view from inside the circle

Then on to Cashel, which, initially, wasn't a destination on its own but a place to stop on our way back to Dublin through the middle of the country after spending most of our time along or near the coast. We were aiming for Tipperary the town, but there wasn't a place to stay that met my usual criteria, and everything worked out. Cashel in County Tipperary is worthwhile on its own for historical and scenic reasons, as well as for nesting and roosting purposes, depending on who's doing the evaluating. It has been recognized as worthwhile with a designation of a Heritage Town of Ireland. Heritage Towns are designated as such because they exhibit centuries, and often millennia, as in the case of Cashel, through their architectural reach.

But I didn't find it easy to find out about Cashel, in Cashel. It's a small town, and the employees at the hostel where we stayed were mostly eager to hop on a bus to somewhere else. The best information we found in Cashel was on the wall of a bar where we stopped to have dinner; a small mural on the wall told the story of the brothers Pilib Ó Dubhuir and Donnchadh Ó Dubhuir who were active during the Irish resistance against British encroachment during the Irish Confederate Wars. The Rock of Cashel, originally known as Sid-Druim (Fairy Hill), is a limestone outcropping in the middle of rolling plains and has been fortified by various groups since there have been groups. Among the first were the Eoghnacht chiefs, who collected tribute from the members of the Munster tribes. A gothic church was constructed on the ruins of some of the Eoghnacht fortifications, an architectural message about who was really in charge. The outcropping, fortifications, and churches changed hands several times during the Irish Confederate Wars, and English military personnel ended the conflict by massacring over a thousand Irish Catholics, including members of the clergy. St. Patrick was active in the area and preached and baptized in one of the early churches on the site.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

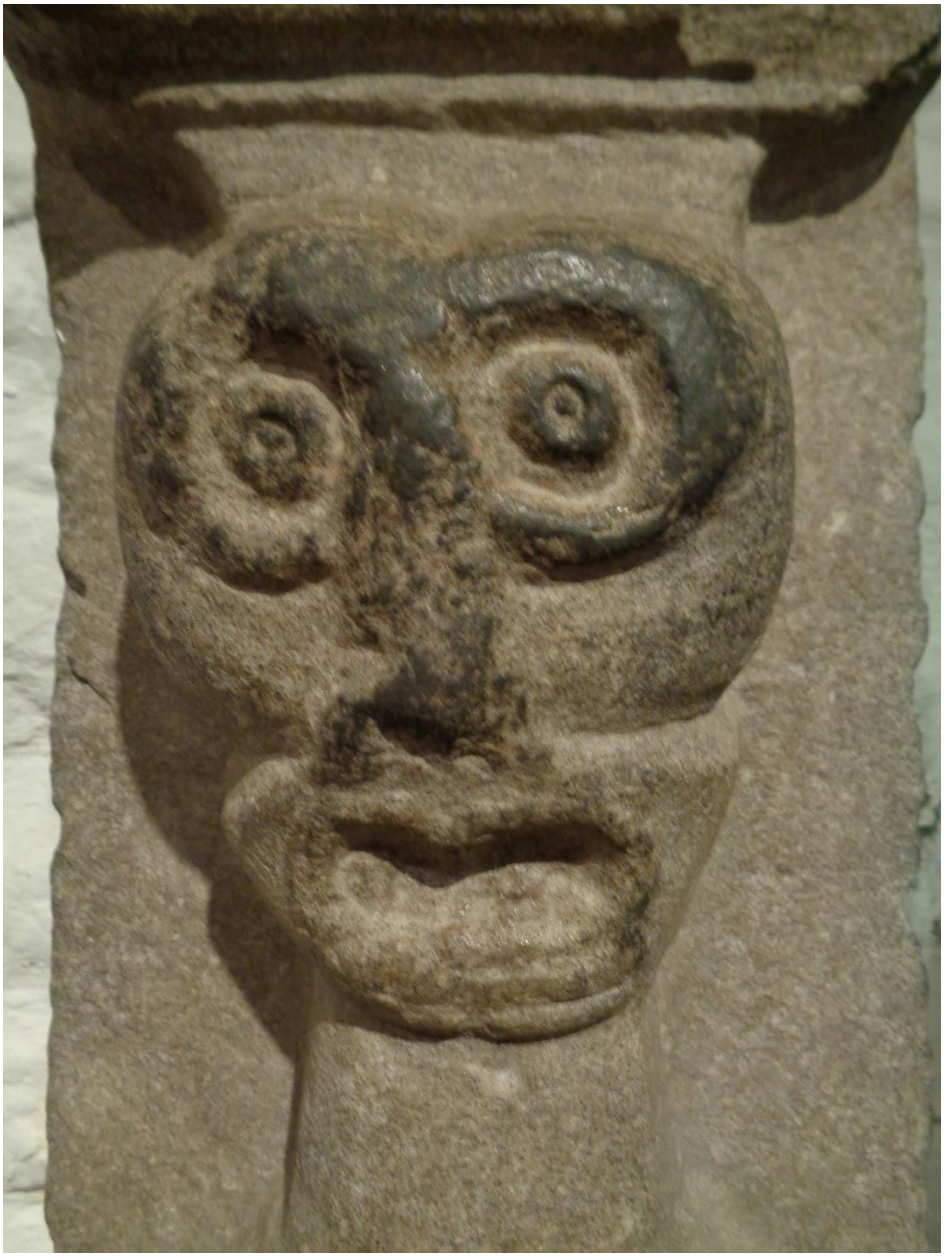
A view from the Rock of Cashel, overlooking the plains and some of the town of Cashel

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Inside the current church on the rock, St. John's Cathedral, a Georgian structure, are many ornately carved stones, this one on a stone coffin. These are Christian-era carvings that integrate both Christian and pre-Christian imagery.

Looking for Irish in Ireland, 2017: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

A small museum in St. John's church on the Rock of Cashel has some artifacts from the pre-Christian era, and this carving is one of the old ones.



After enjoying our explorations in Cashel (when we go back, we'll need to visit the library to see the world-class collection of 12th-century manuscripts), we returned to Dublin. The Book of Kells had decided to start coming out of the floor again, so we visited it. It (they—there were two on display, and I can only find information about one, so one of them was a copy, or no one is talking about the others, or both) stays in the vault, so the only pages visible are the ones on the spread for the day. There needs to be a digital arm in the vault to turn the pages slowly so that visitors can see more of the illustrations. We also visited the Library of Trinity College; finally, we knew what had happened to the forests of Ireland.

In the evening, before dropping me at the airport, we took in a play; the Dublin Theatre Festival was in progress while we were in the area. Theaters and all of the people who make theaters work were putting on multiple shows, often multiple shows per day, during the festival. We saw *Wind Resistance*, a one-woman show by Karine Polwart, at the Royal Lyceum Theater. The first half was a bit preachy, as if Polwart didn't trust the audience to understand her point, or her material to make her point, but in the second half, her interweavings of a naturalist's take on the migrations of pink-footed geese, her own experiences as a mother, and her chats with natives of Fala Flow, in Scotland, pulled together into a fascinating oral history of people, animals, and places. The second half was why she's an award-winning author and performer.