



LETTER FROM IRELAND

About Ulster without a fridge

Dear Aunt Ethel

In Donegal I read *Around Ireland With a Fridge*, in which a man and a refrigerator hitch-hike round the island for a bet. The fridge would have been useful, as last summer was the hottest and driest for decades. Although I stayed in the Republic or 'Southern' Ireland, my travels were throughout the province of Ulster, which is in the north. Six counties of Ulster constitute Northern Ireland, part of the UK. The other three belong to the republic, including Donegal, isolated in the top left-hand corner.

The Donegal countryside is lovely: water-colourogenic. Public transport is limiting, except between larger centres, but car-hire is exorbitant, rip-offingly so. So is everything in Ireland. Be warned against a visit unless well-heeled and knowing what you are in for. Preferably, earn euros while you are there. Even the locals are fed up, despite the boom of recent years. They are seeing tourists driven away, and not only by '9-11'.

Bed and breakfast was in a 3-star hotel with a leisure-centre. During the course of a job one aims to incur as little day-to-day expense as possible, relenting during weekends and other travel time. So I walked the 22-minute haul to and from the hospital, unless it was raining hard or a colleague gave me a lift. I adopted the Atkins-Oprah diet: protein galore in the full Irish breakfasts *à la* Atkins; shut up shop for the rest of the day as per Winfrey, apart from fruit purloined from the table. After work it was tea and digestive biscuits; later, if not on call, a scotch and peanuts, or occasionally a pint of Guinness and a ham sandwich in the hotel bar. (Do not measure cholesterol levels until you have been home for a while.)

Letterkenny General Hospital is busy, serving 120 000 people, much of Donegal. The style of medicine mimics the UK NHS, although there is not a formal national health system in the country. The staff was friendly: nurses and consultants mainly Irish, the rest of the doctors a cosmopolitan group. My Pakistani registrar was dubbed Soaib Murphy, so long had he worked around Ireland. There were a number of South African locums, and I was soon invited to a picnic. We huddled under a large tree sheltering from the rain until the chilly wind drove us indoors. One of our crew was looking after the mansion of a

gynaecologist on leave.

We locums are a pleasantly eccentric bunch. The psychiatrist would disappear from her upmarket city practice when patients were holidaying abroad, so no-one would notice her absence. The gynaecologist was paying off a sonar for a new practice. The GP was either asleep or on call. (He was working like a dog for plenty of boodle, but his wife said they were there for fun not money, and she was not happy!) A physician was missing his children terribly: his Irish locum had been too long and isolated. A radiologist, too elusive or reclusive to be at the picnic, was salting away things — like euros — for his retirement.

We 'pendelsarbeiters' agreed that, outside the workplace, Irish colleagues were no more sociable towards locums than in the UK. We are a necessary evil. The consultant I replaced called me a gentleman for not leaving a pile of unmentionables in my wake! Patients and relatives are the same as anywhere: appreciative or demanding or neither or both. Forty minutes in a small office as sole spokesperson to the huge family of a deceased octogenarian was a daunting experience.

On the other hand, meet the Irish as a visitor and you'll get charm and friendliness and information: from the delightful barber beyond one of the numerous striped poles, to the bar manager in the Mount Errigal Hotel, to owners of B&Bs. One could be mesmerised after twenty minutes of conversation, and feel that each had known the other lifelong.

Having South African friends and colleagues to assist my travelling was the key to a memorable stay: otherwise one could have been enjoying a comfortable hotel room, with TV and radio, anywhere in the world. Forays to tiny Tory Island, or to Fairhead on the lovely Antrim coastline to look for fossils, gave the opportunity for vigorous walking, which is not as safe or user-friendly as in Britain, lack of snakes notwithstanding.

These thoughts have taken ages to appear in print, Aunt Ethel, perhaps because I have hardly scratched the surface of a land so small, fascinating and complex. I must return — with a vehicle, not a fridge.

Yours affectionately,

Robert-Ian

'Doc' has been in specialist physician practice in Pietermaritzburg for almost a quarter-century. As Robert-Ian Caldwell he performs musical revues and writes an 'Aunt Ethel' column for the local SAMA newsletter. He and his wife (doctorate in plant pathology) and three children are all past UCT students.