

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

*Joseph Fleckenstein*  
**Roisin**

**A**fter a meal of lamb and parsley potatoes, we remained at the dinner table while my aunt warmed water for tea. Uncle Peter lit a cigarette and, leaning back, told me, "I thought tomorrow we would visit your Aunt Roisin." I replied, "Sure, whatever you suggest." He took a draw on his smoke, hesitated and mused, "It's a bit of a drive, so I thought we would stay over a few days. Take our time."

I had travelled from an army base in France to visit my aunt and uncle in County Monaghan, Ireland. Mother had suggested that, since I was stationed not that far from Ireland, I might enjoy a visit with her brother and sister-in-law. When the weather warmed, I wrote to my uncle and he invited me for a stay.

After tea, Uncle Peter and I went to a pub in town where he intended to use the telephone there. He didn't yet have one at the house. At the pub, I went to the bar for a Guinness while Peter made arrangements with the proprietor to use the telephone that was in a back hallway. Peter went to make his call while I took a seat at end of the bar. Two men were speaking in hushed tones at the other end of the bar. From where I sat I could hear Peter speaking with the operator. He placed the call and was promptly connected to Roisin. They chatted, apparently discussing our planned visit. I could hear some of what Peter was saying, but not all. Before hanging up, I distinctly heard him say, "Watch what you say." Strange, I thought, for a brother to say to a sister. At the time I gave no more thought to the comment, but the words long stuck in my memory. The significance of the caution didn't become known to me until decades later. When Peter came into the bar, he was surprised to see I had been sitting not far from the telephone he had been using.

Driving roads of the British Isles can be a challenge for an American. I had to continually concentrate on the task at hand in order to remain on the left side of the road. Turning corners in the towns is especially challenging. Except on the straight sections of the roads, I found it best to avoid becoming engaged in conversations. Roisin and her husband, Willie, heard us approach in the rental car and came out to welcome us. Peter did the introductions. In customary Irish tradition, we were invited to have ale or tea. I suggested tea.

Roisin and Willie lived in a small cottage near Lough Neagh, the largest lake in Great Britain. Their cottage reminded me of something out of a fairy tale. It was small, whitewashed top to bottom and had a thatched roof over all. Willie was employed by the RAF at a nearby military airfield. The couple had two small girls and two boys.

Roisin was everlastingly gracious and accommodating. She showed us to several sights around Northern Ireland and went out of her way to make special meals. The first evening, Roisin made a meal in my honor. She had bought a steak in town specifically for me and prepared it by boiling it in water. Others at the table ate chicken while I enjoyed the steak. One evening while Peter was telling a joke, I happened to turn and noticed Roisin studying me. She seemed lost in thought and her mind far away.

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I considered her gaze strange at the time, but gave the matter no more thought.

Rosin guided us farther north and to the Giant's Causeway, an unusual although natural collection of rocks along the western coastline. In Belfast we went to a museum that paid tribute to the RMS Titanic which was built at a local shipyard. In another museum we witnessed a number of artifacts that would be of primary interest to local Brits. A wing of one building displayed a chair upon which "...the queen sat while on her visit to Northern Ireland." I found the chair and its label amusing. Surely the queen had sat on more than one chair on her visit. How many other chairs had been enshrined? I was disinclined to comment. Brits, I learned, are sensitive to comments about their royals and quick to take umbrage with comments interpreted as bordering on disrespect.

On the second day, Roisin suggested she and I take a walk. She wanted to show me Lough Neagh which was close by. She said we could talk along the way. Willie and Peter would watch the house. She explained that the house was never unattended. To do so, if only for a brief time, might invite a flaming torch to the thatched roof. Two branches of Christianity were popular in the region although with theological differences important enough to warrant an action that might kill. As we made our way toward the lake, Roisin inquired about my life in the States. How's mother? Did we live in a house or an apartment? Was my brother also in the military? She was sincerely interested.

At the lake's edge we encountered a fisherwoman whom Rosin seemed to know. After the two exchanged greetings, Roisin asked if the woman had "any luck" that day. She responded, "Oh, yes. Would you like to see it?" Roisin looked to me. I said, "Sure."

We were led along the lakeshore to a nearby shack and to a box inside the size of a steamer truck. When the woman lifted the lid, dozens of agitated ells suddenly began churning around and under one another. Their eyes seemed to watch their tormentors. The sudden appearance of the slimy, snake-like creatures caused me to step back. I asked what the woman intended to do with her catch. "Oh," she said, "I ship them to London. Ells are very popular over there."

Rosin bought an ell from her neighbor and carried it back to the house. When she served the fish on a platter that evening, the pieces were still twitching. It seemed I was the only diner surprised by an entrée that was still moving about.

On the third day "up north" it was time to return south again. Then people in Ireland and Northern Ireland didn't hug one another the way Americans do today, but Roisin sincerely wished me well. We said our goodbyes before Peter and I headed south. It was the last time I saw Roisin although we occasionally exchanged letters in later years.

During the remainder of my stay, Peter continued showing me around and introducing me to "friends." In Irish speak, friends are relatives. I never learned what the Irish call those people I would call friends. The Irish friends all tried their best to fill me with tea or beer and good cheer. One day we went to a Gaelic game, a serious and ancient Irish game that seemed a mix of rugby and soccer. The competitors sometimes killed one

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another with their enthusiasm and high kicks. Eventually I had to return to camp in France. I considered my stay in the British Isles an opportunity to experience a way of life very different from the one I knew in America. My time in Ireland also showed me the kind of life my mother had for the nineteen years she lived there prior to her emigrating.

When I returned to the States and civilian life, my parents were anxious to hear of my experiences overseas. Mother, in particular, questioned me about the brothers and sisters she hadn't seen since leaving Ireland many years in the past. I mentioned my stay with Roisin in Northern Ireland, but I thought mother was not especially interested in hearing about that particular visit. In general, I noticed, mother was disinclined to discuss her days in Ireland.

The years ticked by and years turned into decades. In time, I am sorry to say, both Peter and Roisin passed away. First Peter, then Roisin. Also, both my parents. I miss them all to this day.

A year ago, an envelope came to me in the mail. It was postmarked San Francisco, although I grew to doubt it originated in California. The note inside was brief. All that was written was: "Roisin is your sister."

The writer hadn't signed the note. Strange, I thought. Who would send such a peculiar message? Although skeptical, I wondered if there was any truth to the peculiar note. Despite the pretenses of relatives, could it be that Roisin was actually my sister, half-sister to be exact? In an effort to solve the mystery I called cousin Macartin in Ireland and asked him directly. After a hesitation, he confirmed that, yes, it was true. Roisin was my sister.

Making additional inquiries after speaking with Macartin, I learned that as a teenager, mother was impregnated by a local farm boy. Her father insisted she marry the boy, but mother didn't want to be married to the lad as well as, so to speak, his farm. Mother chose to emigrate to America and, alone, bravely crossed the Atlantic. To start a new life in a country full of strangers – away from hidden whispers and innuendos. It was a different era.

I sometimes find myself thinking of Roisin. My parents likewise. I wonder if my father knew about Roisin. Back then a groom expected his bride to be a virgin. And why did the relatives think it so important to hide the truth for so many decades. I would have enjoyed talking with Roisin as a brother rather than as a respectful nephew. I would have kidded her about something in the British way of life. I would have used the term "Limy." With devilment in her eye, she would have placed a hand on my arm and called me a "Yank." We would have had a good laugh.