

Searching for Shane

By Danny Costello

“Whatever happened to the old songs

To all those little girls and boys”

-Rainy Night in Soho

Shane MacGowan

Tipperary June, 2004

The green signpost at the edge of the bustling County Tipperary town of Nenagh read “All Routes.” A white arrow pointed me and my rented Ford Mondero in the direction of two o’clock. Nenagh was ninety minutes into my five-hour, hurried shuttle between friends in Kilkenny and the Costello ancestral homestead in the rocky wilds of Connemara, County Galway. It was nearly noon and the promise of a lunch held my interest far more than the mundane route I’d chosen through Ireland’s midlands. I carefully navigated around Nenagh’s shop-hopping pedestrians, mothers wheeling baby prams, double-parked cars operating as open-air markets peddling Wellington boots and Wexford strawberries, and then down a cramped back street that ended in a t-cross with a shrunken laneway, which, in turn, led me into the bustling County Tipperary town of Nenagh. Having visited Ireland more than thirty times since the late 1970’s, I’ve become an old hand at driving “on the wrong side of the road”. But Nenagh was my Bermuda Triangle. I was lost, because I’d broken the unwritten Irish travel code to stick to the main roads.

Main roads in Ireland are the ones depicted by thick green stitching on the maps provided by the airport car rental companies. During my early visits I routinely trail blazed the razor thin, brown colored secondary roads that dice up a map of Ireland like a jigsaw puzzle. Granted, projected five hour trips often turned into seven hour ones. Yet that pioneering spirit that led to many an adventure above, around and inside Ireland’s pristine countryside dotted with embracing little villages with their rustic pubs, where oftentimes many of those extra two hours were spent. I’m not sure when it happened, but my pioneering spirit had waned and I started sticking to the green roads.

I blame it on the Celtic Tiger.

The Celtic Tiger is the nickname of the Irish economy that has been roaring for the better part of a decade. The high tech industry in particular has transformed Ireland from a country only decades removed from its historic agro-peasantry into Europe’s top economy. No longer is Ireland exporting its greatest resource – its people – around the world. Quite the contrary. The world is now knocking on Ireland’s door. The thing is, once the world steps inside, it finds that Kathleen ni Houlihan, for so long the charming and comely peasant girl, has grown into a full-blown jet setter with a chic handbag full of Euros. The Irish themselves are head over heels in love with Kathleen’s make-over.

As the Mondero and I trod a for second time past the fist-sized strawberries, I found myself pining for the days when the only McDonalds here were families visiting from Scotland and Ireland’s tiny roads had yet to succumb to the invasion of the “round-a-bout,” road circles that divert traffic away from just about all of the small villages, a great thing for an Irishman trying to get to work on time, but not so for the visitor in search of “Olde Ireland.” Once upon a time, traveling across Ireland was a simple game of

“connect the dots” as you followed roads from village to town to city, until you reached your destination. Now, traveling around Ireland can be like driving in circles, literally.

My great escape from Nenagh came by taking the first road heading out of town. Galway had to be out there somewhere. Within a mile I happened upon what the map would paint as a brown road. A white signpost advertised, “Puchaun 7 km. The sirens of Irish trips past began sweetly seducing my compulsion to stay on schedule. A detour onto the brown road would cost me twenty minutes, at least, and I found myself faced with a dilemma very much akin to: great taste or less filling? Being as I was on vacation, I went for great taste and turned left for Puchaun.

The Mondero hugged tight to the brown road’s swerving bends while light rain cast a gray veil over the Tipperary flatlands. Like most Americans, I don’t exactly know how long a kilometer is. Sometime back in grade school there was an all out national effort to teach us American kids how to decipher things like the rest the world. But even at our tender ages our innate Yankee superiority complex prevailed and we have successfully managed to remain sufficiently ignorant of the metric system. All we needed to know was that the little km’s are not as big as American miles. I was just getting used to the hypnotic rhythm of the slalom-like drive when appearing Bigadon-like out of the mist was a tree-cloaked village. I was in Puchaun.

By far the most dominant structure in Puchaun is Paddy Kennedy’s Pub, a two-story, yellow stucco building that towers over a scattered collection of tile and thatched bungalows. The second largest structure is the beer lorry parked outside. Paddy Kennedy’s should be big; since it also serves as the village grocery, hardware and post office.

I gave the doorknob a tug; the bar was closed. Consoling myself with the fact that my folly had only cost me seven little European km’s, I started back for the Mondero when the *crack-thunk* of a dislodging deadbolt stopped me. Standing in the doorway was an old woman peering back at me over the dark rims of her glasses. *Mrs. Paddy Kennedy, I presume?* She tugged at the tails of her black sweater. Her pinched lips parted begrudgingly. “Hullo,” she muttered. She was giving me “The Look.”

“The Look” is a glowering stare cast upon strangers who show up in out of the way places like Puchaun. Not all that long ago much of Ireland was considered an out of the way place, and only in metropolitan areas like Dublin or tourist havens like Killarney was I exempt from the chilly glare of “The Look.” The Mrs.-Paddy-Kennedy-I-Presume version reminded me of a grade school nun who would stare a confession out of you, because she was certain you were guilty of something. But just as the nun’s stares eventually cease intimidating, thirty-plus journeys to Ireland had taught me how to handle the wee publican’s inspecting eyes. (“*Daniel Costello, is there something you’d like to share with the rest of the class?*” “*No, S’ter*”)

There are three basic questions that Mrs.-Paddy -Kennedy-I- Presume needed answered – sort of like the riddle of the troll beneath the bridge. First and foremost, was I an Irishman? Second, was I lost? And third, if I was not lost, what did I want?

The first question would be the hardest for Mrs.-Paddy-Kennedy-I-Presume, because unless she quizzed me on kilometers, I know how to appear un-American in Ireland. The mop of premature gray hair helps. So does not wearing garish plaids with a camera slung around the neck, or speaking in decibels loud

enough to chase the birds from the trees. Just like driving on the left side of the road, I've mastered the Irish greeting of the little head bob while uttering just above a whisper, "Howzitgoin'." (The correct response to "Howzitgoin'" is, "Notoobad," because the Irish are naturally suspicious of anyone for whom the world is treating too well.) Mrs.-Paddy-Kennedy-I-Presume stood her ground in the doorway until I cut to the chase and simultaneously answered questions numbers two and three.

"Searching for Shane," I said, sending the diminutive publican's eyes rolling. She huffed loud enough to convey her disgust, and then led me inside the dim bar. The mention of a surname had been utterly unnecessary.

Shane MacGowan is a noted Irish singer/songwriter/lush. Shane and the Pogues (short for the Gaelic *Pog mo hon*, meaning "kiss my...fill in the blank") burst on the Irish music scene in the 1980's like drunken punks crashing a parlor room recital. Music traditionalists particularly didn't appreciate Shane and his signature stage pose of clutching microphone, cigarette and bottle of booze while swaying precariously, like a ship's captain at the helm in a storm, as he croaked their beloved folksongs. And, God bless 'im, the boy is nothing to look at. With jug ears reminiscent of Dopey of Seven Dwarves and Freddy Krueger dental work, no one would mistake Shane for John Wayne in the Quiet Man, though MacGowan's version of The Wild Colonial Boy packs a far greater punch than the Duke's. And yet while Shane's popularity throughout the Irish Diaspora soars, much of Ireland prefers to admire their boozy bard from a distance, particularly here in his home county of Tipperary.

"We don't care much for Shane," Mrs.- Paddy Kennedy-I-Presume proclaimed, topping off the creamy white head on my pint of Guinness. From her tone I suspected she was speaking on behalf of all Puckaun, maybe for all Tipperary. She sighed and added wistfully, "But he's a genius, so." As I sipped the cool, dark stout, she moaned about the artist's downward spiral into a life of drugs and alcohol. "His parents live just across the way in Silvermines," she said, rather hopefully, as if I might change my plans and visit Shane's folks instead. Pointing to a couple of low stools resting below a round-top table, she added, "Shane sits over there and drinks with Chisty Moore. Chisty plays here in the room in the back." Mrs.-Paddy -Kennedy- I- Presume was bragging now, and with good reason. With all due respect to the economy of scales, this was the Irish equivalent of saying, "Bob Dylan and Paul McCartney drink over there. And the Rolling Stones play here on the rare occasion."

We were interrupted by a creak at the door. In shuffled a short man wrapped in a worn brown overcoat and chewing on the tip of a pipe that he would not be lighting. The smoking band in Ireland was now six months old. It would take four score and six months for the smell of smoke to seep out of the woodwork of Paddy Kennedy's pub.

"You're not from here," Mrs.-Paddy- Kennedy-I-Presume declared, getting down to business.

"I'm from Washington, D.C. George Bush's neighborhood," I added, knowing full well I was opening the gates to a spirited conversation. There is nothing shy about an Irishmen talking politics.

"We don't care for Mr. Bush around here," Mrs.- Paddy -Kennedy- I -Presume said in a tone that indicated she was speaking not only on behalf of Puckaun and Tipperary, but for all of Ireland. I hesitated before responding, just in case she wanted to add, "Sure he's a genius, so..." Instead she stated emphatically, "We liked Clinton. He was our man."

The man with the smokeless pipe interjected, “Clinton!” and then submerged into a newspaper.

That the Irish preferred President Bubba was no surprise. The Clinton administration did much to promote the peace process in the north of Ireland.

Mrs.-Paddy-Kennedy-I-Presume leaned as far over the bar toward me as far as her five foot almost nothing frame would allow. “He came to Ireland. Twice. We liked Clinton,” she reiterated, as if saying it enough times would put him back into office. She didn’t mention that President Bush would be coming to Ireland in just a couple of days for a summit with European leaders. Unlike Clinton, George W. would not be arriving to open arms. Protest groups had been organizing anti-Bush demonstrations for weeks, including the aforementioned Christy Moore, who along with other top Irish musicians was sponsoring a protest performance called “When Bush Comes to Shove.” While the Irish are traditionally extremely hospitable toward Americans, it was still a good time for me to be muttering, “Howzitgoin.”

“Ah sure, don’t all the American presidents come to Ireland in an election year?” Mrs.-Paddy-Kennedy-I-Presume had taken full possession of the podium. “But Bush doesn’t fool us. Neither did your President Reagan that time he came just up the road to Ballyporeen. Stayed for one pint and then he left,” she admonished. “Tell me, who does a thing like that?”

I responded by shaking my head in feigned disgust, and then ordered a second pint.

She ranted her displeasure with the war in Iraq, though treading carefully so as not to offend her American customer. For my part I stayed more or less in line with her anti-war position, though treading carefully so as to not totally sell off the President. Because while I feel as inherently connected to Ireland as Bush does to Texas, we both are, after all, Americans - neither of us knows how far a kilometer is.

After consuming two pints and skewering one president, I decided the time had come to abandon my silly quest to meet an Irish celebrity and continue on to Galway. Mrs.-Paddy-Kennedy-I-Presume was sorry to see me go. I was no longer a stranger. She reminded me that the elder MacGowans lived in Silvermines and I had the distinct feeling that if the U.S. Presidential election were to be held in north Tipperary, Shane’s folks would win in a landslide. “Shane lives in Carney, just two miles from here” she said, giving me a grandmotherly smile. “There’s pub on the right hand side of the road. If he’s home at the moment, that’s where he’d be. In the pub.” She thrice repeated “right-left-right-don’t-mind-that-turn-just-keep-goin’” directions.

“...I felt myself nestling into the palm of Ireland.”

Once out of the misty village of Puchaun, the sun smiled bringing with it a perfumed breeze blowing in from the Silvermines Mountains, “just across the way”. I was now embarking onto Ireland’s “white roads.” These are laneways so narrow that approaching cars can pass only by slowing to crawls before squeezing by. White roads brush your senses clean of limiting calculations such time and distance. Here in the flat midlands, I felt myself nestling into the palm of Ireland. I found the Carney pub standing like a solitary white ship amid an endless sea of rolling green waves of hay. Tucking the Mondero against a

hedgerow thicket I looked around for the rest of Carney. It wasn't there. It was just me and the lonely bleached roadhouse. If Shane was inside he'd either walked from somewhere beyond the horizon, or had his limo driver drop him off.

Carved out of what once was someone's parlor, the Carney pub is a narrow room just large enough for the eight high stools lining the bar. The wood countertop, the color of which had been rinsed away by several generations of spilt beer, features three draught taps: Guinness, Harp and Smithwicks. Stout, lager, ale and that's it. There is no plasma television hanging from the ceiling and showing reruns of the English soccer league. The creaking and pallid wood retains the flavor of maybe a century's worth of smoke and beer along with stories whispered in the fading day, a rebel song sung at the end of it, a dance on a Sunday after Mass. The old roadhouse's endearing simplicity made me suddenly lonesome for my wife. Because she'd hate this place. Christine likes the Celtic Tiger's lacquered public houses where she could sip a vodka tonic and gaze at a menu of nouveau continental cuisine. By coincidence, I, having skipped breakfast, was at that very moment considering the Carney pub's menu. Should it be a full-bodied Guinness that would go perfectly with a bag of the regular, delicately pungent potato crisps? Or the lighter, sweeter Smithwick's ale complimented by the zesty cheese and onion potato crisps?

"You'll have to go to Paddy Kennedy's in Puchaun, if you want to drink with Shane," said the woman pouring my pint of Guinness. "We don't care much for Shane around here."

Carney Pub Lady was a strong built woman with platinum blond hair piled high above a naturally cheery face. A generation younger than Mrs.-Paddy -Kennedy-I- Presume, she had not yet earned the right to be thoroughly disgusted with the current state of the affairs - Ireland's or anyone else's. Still, Carney Pub Lady had been around long enough to view the world with hopeless resignation. She'd disowned Shane with a kids-today-what-are-you-going- to- do- with- them shrug of her thick shoulders. Shane is fifty.

"I've been to Paddy Kennedy's. They sent me here."

Carney Pub Lady's eyes widened. I could tell she was pleased by the referral. "Sure, Shane's a genius though," she said, reclaiming the Tipperary native son, at least for the moment. "You're first time in Ireland?"

"More like the thirty-first. Probably more. I've lost count. I'll have a bag of the cheese and onion crisps," I said, deciding to splurge.

Carney Pub Lady handed me my snack. Her naturally peppy countenance turned suddenly solemn. "You've seen lot of changes," she said with the distinctively Irish talent of simultaneously and seamlessly asking a question while making a statement. "Too many changes," she added, gazing pensively out the window at a landscape that could not have changed since...well, maybe ever.

I welcomed the period of silence. The sun shining through window wrapped me with warm nostalgia. It occurred to me that my visit to the Carney pub was, in terms of my many trips to Ireland, like going back to the old neighborhood. If you'd taken a snap shot of that moment, it might have been 1978, or 1958 or 1988 and the only changes in the photographs would be the waist sizes and hair colors on Carney Pub Lady and me. Yet as nice as it was belonging to a scene unbroken by time, I understood that, for many,

the photograph would only serve as a reminder of why this simple hamlet had become the “old neighborhood” in the first place.

I could have happily finished my pint and crisps while staring out the window in silent reflection. Were places like Carney really becoming an oasis struggling to survive in the newly prosperous Ireland? Would there even be a Carney in ten years? Would I finish my crisps before my Guinness or my Guinness before my crisps?

“You’re from Washington?” Carney Pub Lady said, shaking me from my contemplative trance.

I nodded and quickly began making a mental checklist of George Bush pros and cons. *Pro: likes baseball and barbecue. Con: the war and the economy. Pro: likes baseball and barbecue....*

“Terrible about your 911. We saw the planes go into the Pentagon on television. I tell you, no country deserves that, but least of all America. Not with what America has done for the rest of the world. Where would we all be without America? Tell me that,” she said, issuing a challenge, not to me but to anyone anywhere who might disagree. “Tell everyone in Washington that they are very welcome here,” she added for emphasis.

Ireland, the land of the legendary Cead Mile Failte – a hundred thousand welcomes. For three decades I’d traveled nearly every mile of the country’s rugged coastline and velvety valleys, been invited to weddings and wakes and barn dances and sporting matches, been given a river of tea to sip, an ocean of beer to drink and enough potatoes to feed everyone back in D.C. for a week. Indeed, over the years I have been adopted as one of Ireland’s own, yet never had I felt as unconditionally welcomed as I did at that moment when Carney Pub Lady stood on a soap box on behalf of the United States of America. We celebrated our mutual respect for America’s legacy of international benefaction by wrinkling our respective noses at the French but offering a few kind words for the English, something at one time unthinkable in Ireland. I considered Carney Pub Lady’s offer to welcome everyone in Washington here to the palm of Ireland and wondered how many would risk the expense of seven kilometers when the Dublin neon was only ninety minutes away.

“Now!” Carney Pub Lady pronounced, slapping two meaty hands against the old bar top. In Irish lingo, the word “now” used at the head of a sentence is declaration that something noteworthy is imminent. For example, when a bartender sets a frothy pint before you, he says, “Now!” When a restaurant server places a hot meal below your nose, she says, “Now!” Having already been served my breakfast of Guinness and crisps, I knew that Carney Pub Lady’s pronouncement of “Now!” was the equivalent of “*Stay tuned for a special bulletin.*” “Let me tell you how to find Shane,” she said. “You’d want to go round to Margaret’s Hair Affair. Margaret can tell you if Shane is home or not.” Carney Pub Lady first gave me directions to the country beauty salon, and then a soft, knowing smile which, I think, was her way of saying that she understood where this odyssey through the palm of Ireland was leading me.

But instead she asked, “So, what are you famous for?”

Margaret's Hair Affair is a cottage industry, literally. Alright, literally it's a bungalow industry. We're still in "white road" country here and, not surprisingly, Margaret's Hair Affair is the only home within sight. The Mondero crunched loudly over the loose gravel. It wasn't long before someone came to investigate. I don't think Margaret's Hair Affair gets much walk-up business.

She looked to be around my own age, meaning that her heydays were in back in the Seventies and Eighties, though by the way she sashayed toward me I could tell that she'd retained healthy reserve of hip-girl attitude for the new millennium. She reminded me of grown up fan of the Grateful Dead. Something in her mischievous grin that told me that, given the chance, she'd toss maturity aside in an instant for tie-dye cloths, love beads and a puff on a magic cigarette. Astute observer that I am, I correctly deduced by her expertly styled, short and sassy hair that I was about to meet the proprietor.

"Searching for Shane," I said.

Margaret nodded as if to say, "Of course you are." But instead she asked, "So, what are you famous for?"

"Nothing, yet. Why?"

"Because only famous people and Swedes come looking for Shane. And you're not Swedish."

"The Swedes like Shane?"

"They're mad for him. Far more than we are. We don't care much for Shane around here." Margaret shrugged and I wondered had she and Shane played in the sandbox together when they were little.

"But he's a genius and his parents live across the way in Silvermines," I interjected. Margaret's eyes grew merrier and I felt my rising status. Not only was I a mysterious Yank with unruly gray hair and unachieved but impending fame, but I was a mysterious Yank with unruly gray hair and unachieved impending fame who was *in the know*. Margaret looked at me with a kind of awe that said, "You've done this before." Or perhaps the sight of my hair was turning her scissors fingers itchy.

The hair stylist and I had a great chat at Shane's expense, dragging the proverbial dead horse of his substance abuse. A clean breeze rustled through the hedgerow. Margaret wondered aloud why anyone would want to search out Shane? I gave a clumsy response about musical influences that included Shane and Muddy Waters and just about everyone else in between Tipperary and Chicago. It was a meandering answer but if Margaret was bored by it, it didn't show, maybe because I didn't include Elvis. Even when the sun disappeared and the intermittent drop of rain splashed against our noses, we spoke on. In Ireland, if you're willing to invest time in a chat, you don't remain a stranger for long. In the case of Margaret I had been a stranger even less than with Carney-Pub-Lady or Mrs.-Paddy-Kennedy-I- Presume. Reaching Galway was totally forgotten.

Margaret pointed across the road to a copse of tree limbs drooping their leafy branches over a waist high wall covered in ivy. Through a small break in the wall of green peered a half of a dirty window, like the eyes of a shy child peeping from beneath a cover of blankets. Taking a couple of steps to my left, I could see that the cottage was barely more than a ramshackle.

“He comes here for the quiet and to write his songs,” Margaret said. “Look, the gate there is open for the first time in three months. I’d say he’s home at the moment. You should go talk to him. But first, you have to tell me what you’re not yet famous for.”

If, indeed, fame was in the offing for me, the reason for it was something I keep mostly private. Yet for some reason I felt compelled to tell Margaret. I took a deep breath. “I’ve written a novel based on an old folk superstition in Kilkenny called the Rag Tree. The story goes that the ground beneath the tree is inhabited by fairies. To me, the Rag Tree is symbolic of the old folk beliefs making a defiant last stand in an Ireland that’s fast changing. You’ll read all about it, one day – hopefully.”

Margaret closed her eyes as she breathed in the Tipperary air now swelling with new rain as though it were ambrosia. Her voice raced as she recited a litany of local prehistoric sites, monolithic tombs and earthen forts guarded by the fairy folk. Her little soliloquy on local folklore sprung forth from her like a happy song as her whole being projected a sense of awe of being the presence of ancient spirits. “Now!” Margaret said, returning from the land of yesteryear. The special bulletin came in the form of Margaret’s extended hand. “Good luck with Shane. And the book,” she said, leaving me alone with Shane’s rumpled house and the local spirits.

The house, which appears to be little more than place to drop one’s head, apparently is probably where Shane comes here to find his.

I’d met Shane once, backstage during a concert in Washington. He’d become paunchy and his skin was pasty. He dipped a cup into tub of iced vodka. He was pleased that I’d known he was from Tipperary and that his uncle, one of the superiors of the College of Surgeons in Dublin, once had instructed dentists to fix his nephew’s mangled teeth, and how he’d refused the cosmetic upgrade, because the warped choppers were a part of the Shane persona. The pasty complexion, the crooked teeth, the unkempt cottage, the Shane persona is a studied dishevelment. He’s a genius, so.

Half of the cottage is covered with lichen spattered tile roof, the other half by corrugated steel, like some island shanty. Reedy grass grows over and around a stone wall separating the cottage from the idle barnyard. The grayish stucco peels away from a faded white door like an old man’s gums pulling away from rotting teeth. A drainpipe dangles disconnected from the gutter. I don’t think Shane does much entertaining. Nor, for that matter, has he gussied up the place for the all of the famous people and Ingemars and Ingrids who might drop by. The house, which appears to be little more than place to drop one’s head, apparently is probably where Shane comes here to find his. I begin thinking of James Joyce and his Martello tower retreat outside Dublin, and William Butler Yeats’ Norman keep in Coole, County Galway, and of Ireland’s seemingly endless list of hermit saints. I toss Shane in with these other contemplatives and come understand this ramshackle to be where the composer cradles with his muse. I’m standing at the birthplace of hauntingly beautiful melodies and the pensive poetry of songs like The Broad Majestic Shannon and Rainy Night in Soho. I tapped against the weathered door, twice and then three times. It wasn’t as if the old house screamed, “Leave me alone!” Rather it whispered, “I am at peace here.” And hearing those whispers, I decided that my search for Shane was over. I’d found him.

Back in the Mondero I looked at the clock. My seven kilometer diversion had lasted two hours. My trip to Galway would end up taking me at least seven hours. It was just like old times.

Post Script

The Pogues and Shane have since reunited and are touring once again. They will be in Washington, D.C. at the 9:30 Club March 16, 17 and 18.

