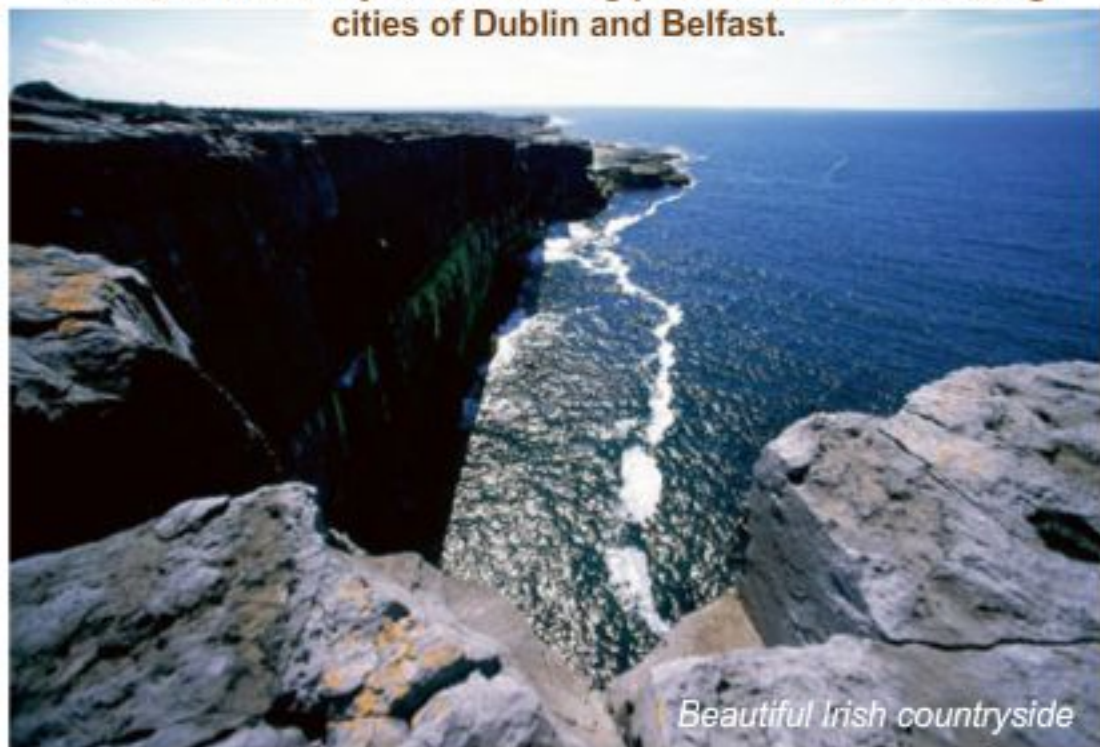


# Enchanting Ireland - One Of A Kind

By: DOMINICK A. MERLE

Ireland's top tourist attractions are generally listed as castles, cliffs, lush countryside, charming pubs and the contrasting cities of Dublin and Belfast.



Baloney. It's blarney. Not the village or the castle or the kissing stone. Just plain blarney, pure and simple.

Webster defines blarney as both "flattery" and "nonsense." But the Irish have taken it to a much

higher plateau---let's call it Blarney Supreme (B.S.) an enchanting combination of poetry, fact, fiction and legends that flow easily off their tongues in varying degrees.

Our tour guide for the week, Will, held an unofficial master's degree in B.S. or Blarney Supreme and should rightfully be ranked right up there between Dublin and Belfast. Rain or shine, Will came through, although it was often difficult to tell where history left off and blarney began.

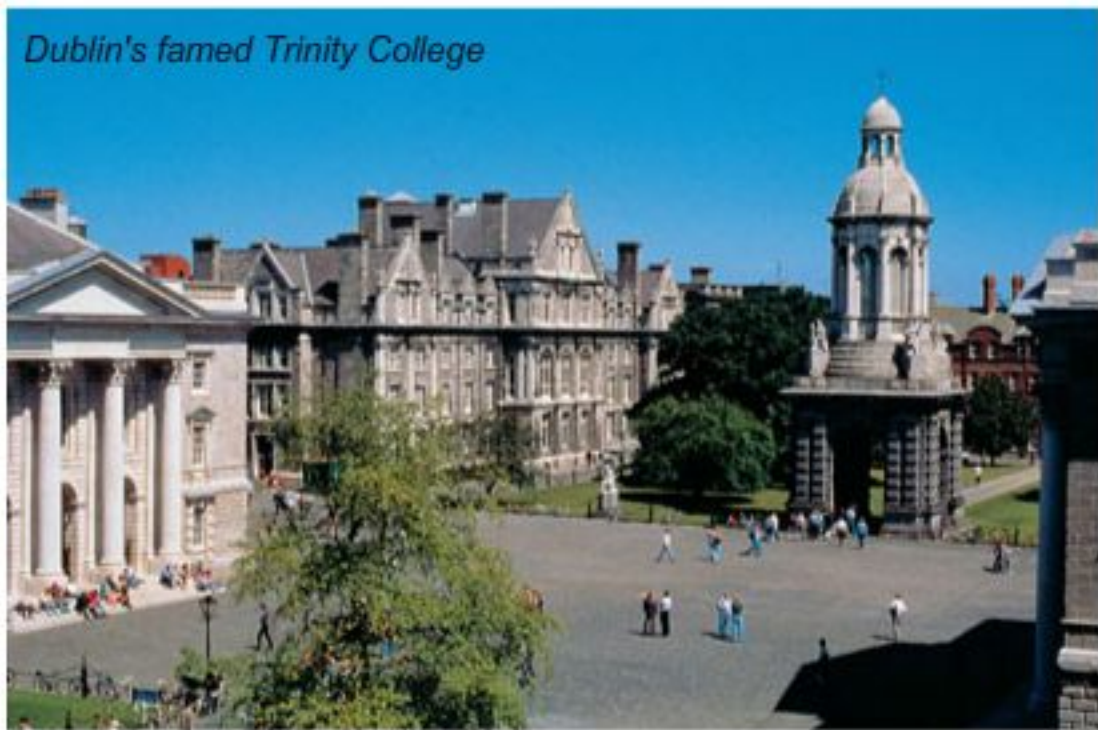
Now, just about every man or woman you talk to in Ireland has a touch of the blarney, and there are probably hundreds more like

Will, but I tend think that he's in the top echelon of storytelling with an extremely generous dash of B.S.

But like any good performer, Will knows when to take his bow, fade into the wings and let the Emerald Isle take center stage.

We began our tour in Dublin and went by mini-bus in a westerly arc through central Ireland, ending at the quaint city of Limerick.

*Dublin's famed Trinity College*





*Galway's  
pedestrian  
shopping  
street*

Our Dublin highlights included a tour of Trinity College, Ireland's oldest university founded in 1592 by Queen Elizabeth 1 and situated in the heart of the city. The college is famed for its collection of art treasures including the Book of Kells, a 9th Century illuminated manuscript in Latin containing the four Gospels of the New Testament. A masterwork of calligraphy, the

Book of Kells is generally hailed as Ireland's finest art treasure. A floor above this masterpiece is another treasure for the eyes, Trinity's remarkable library known as "The Long Room," which contains more than 200,000 books stored in oak bookcases. "The Long Room" is 210 feet long and rises 2 stories to a barrel-vaulted ceiling. It is a spectacular view.

Another Dublin highlight was our hotel, The Merrion, a luxury property created from four 18th Century Georgian townhouses and surrounded by beautiful period gardens. A simple plaque on one door designates the property as a hotel. Otherwise, it would appear you are entering one of the four townhouses.

The Merrion also houses a collection of 19th and 20th Century art which is considered to be one of the most important private collections in Ireland. The paintings date back to the 1600s, but the heart of the

collection is Irish and ranges from the 18th Century onwards. From Dublin we headed northwest to the passage tombs of Newgrange, one of the most famous prehistoric sites in the world. The tombs were believed to be constructed more than 5,000 years ago during the new Stone Age, making them older than Stonehenge. You can choose from a long list of legends as to who lived and died here. Will, of course, was more than willing to embellish on them.



*Galway Bay*

*The mysterious Newgrange site*



The main tomb, set deep within the hills, was constructed in such a way that on the shortest day of the year, a narrow beam of sunlight enters through a small opening and illuminates the chamber for a very brief period.

Visitors inside the tomb can experience, through special lighting effects, this dramatic once-a-year burst of sunlight.

Our next stop was Trim Castle in Meath, the largest Anglo-Norman castle in Ireland constructed over a 30-year period beginning in 1176. The award-winning movie *Braveheart*

was filmed here, and visitors have been flocking to the castle ruins ever since.

"Tourism people don't like it to be called *Braveheart Castle*," Will said, "but they sure like the turnstile count."

After another overnight at another castle, we headed for Strokestown Park House, a fully furnished 18th Century Georgian mansion containing Ireland's last remaining galleried kitchen with all of its original cookery.

Strokestown Park also houses the National Irish Famine Museum, and there is no room

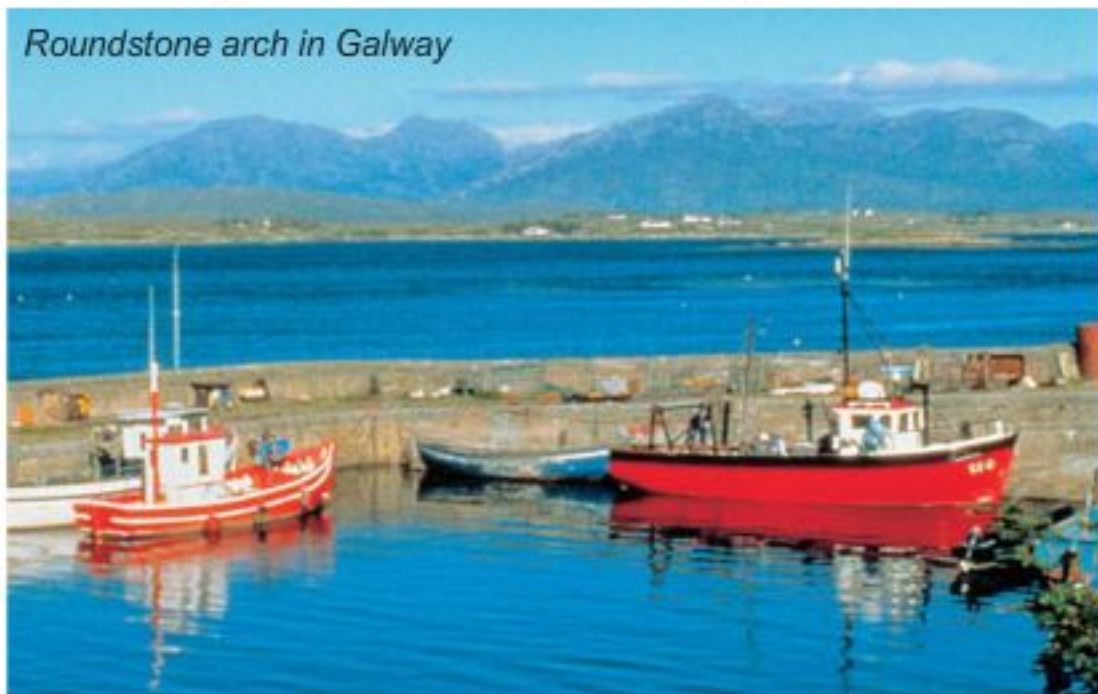
for blarney or nonsense here. This has become almost sacred ground to every man, woman and child in Ireland.

The great famine of 1845 almost wiped out Ireland's poorest social class through mass starvation and disease. More than a million died and just as many left the republic for good. It forever changed the face of Ireland. The museum is laid out in 10 rooms and contains a combination of original documents and images to trace this most tragic time.

Kilronan Castle was our next stop, a castle hotel that traces its history back to royal families. It is majestically sprawled on the shores of Lake Meelagh, surrounded by 40 acres of delicious scenery. Kilronan specializes in luxury wedding receptions and luxury pampering in its spa.

Next up on our westward arc was the world-famous Ashford Castle, Ireland's grandest castle with a history going back to the early 13th Century. Speaking of castles, as you're likely to do in

*Roundstone arch in Galway*





*Trim Castle*

the countryside, there are allegedly more than 4,000 of them in Ireland, but as will put it: "Sometimes we count a pile or rocks as a castle."

Ashford is hardly your pile of rocks. It's rated best resort in Ireland or Europe or the world by one organization or another just about every year. And it's got something for everybody, including a School of Falconry where guests are taught how to fly and recall the hawks.

Our walking tour of the charming city of Galway was cut short by rain, so we spent an extremely long lunch at Paddy Burkes Oyster Bar, before heading to our final stop in Limerick.

It didn't matter that he made a few mistakes, like calling Canadian Club a bourbon, because he said everything with such conviction and charm that I almost believed it myself. But such poetry flowed from him during the week-long trip.

I especially remember one line when he recalled his mother's cooking.

"You can taste the patience," he said, and you knew it came from the heart.

Failte is the Irish word for welcome, and so the Irish tourist board goes under the name of Failte Ireland. If you add Blarney Supreme to Failte Ireland, you get the acronym FIBS.

Now isn't that a coincidence?

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*Aer Lingus, Ireland's national airline, has daily flights to Dublin from New York, Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles.*

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*Typical Georgian doorway in Dublin*