

— I Will —
ARISE
and Go Now

Reflections on the Meaning
of Places & People

Herbert O'Driscoll



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INTRODUCTION

About Memory, Gratitude, This Book, and Its Title

In one sense, this book is a simple retelling of scenes from the sequence of my life. Born in Ireland in 1928, I followed in the footsteps of countless fellow countrymen and women before me and set sail across the Atlantic in 1954, returning briefly the following year to be married, and then settling permanently in Canada. This vast and lovely land would be our home for most of the rest of our lives, welcoming into its bosom our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and serving as home base for wide-ranging travels.

The first section of the book, “Old Country,” is a collection of things remembered from childhood and student years, lived mainly in the small city of Cork in the south of Ireland, and punctuated by long summers on my grandfather’s farm in Donaguile, County Kilkenny.

The second part, “New World,” tells stories from my years of active ministry in Canada, the United States, and, on occasion, other parts of the world Church.

The last portion, entitled “To Be a Pilgrim,” recalls experiences from those years (largely in what some might loosely call “retirement”) during which I had the privilege to lead many groups of fellow-pilgrims on trips to the Middle East, Ireland, and Great Britain.

One could say it has been a relatively unadventurous life, but it is one in which I have been given gifts of love and friendship, and opportunities to learn and grow, far beyond my counting or deserving.

So in another sense, these pages allow me to revisit in memory the times when, and places where, I was given something of lasting, permanent value—an image, an idea, an insight—and the people who gave them to me, or in whose company I shared them.

“Remember me,” writes Christina Rossetti, “remember me when I have gone away, gone far away into the silent land.” I’m sure that there is in all memoir something of that most human wish to both remember, and to be remembered.

I note my own interest in those of my family who lived before me. I find myself wishing I had asked them more questions about their lives, and learned the stories behind old photographs that show in the vigor and attractiveness of youth those whom I knew only as elderly. I hope that those who come after me might be grateful that I kept the door of time open wide enough to give them a pathway back, should they wish it.

I have read enough biography and autobiography to know that there is something fascinating about the living of another human life. I would like to think that there are things in my own life that might attract the interest of others, even if only to spark in them a recollection of similar escapades and experiences of their own.

Those of us who were born between the two world wars of the twentieth century, and have lived on into the first quarter of the twenty-first, have witnessed a transformation of human experience seldom, if ever, equaled in world history. That might seem to render the recent past irrelevant, and yet the very opposite seems to be the case. Popular history, historical fiction, and memoir have all become immensely widely read genres.

It is as if to be whirled into an unpredictable and frightening future makes us all the more interested in a very different, yet still familiar, world where those who nurtured and loved and formed us were themselves formed. After all, the world’s great literature teaches us that in every age, the experiences of human life, and our responses to them, can be understood and shared in common across centuries, if not millennia. If this be true, how much more may it be true of the recent past?

The memories that matter live on as much in the heart as in the head. Think of your own deepest memories: the ones that bring with them feelings, longings, delight, a sigh or a tear, a tightness in the chest, a lump in the throat. I’m willing to wager that for you, as for me,

they are connected with specific times and specific places, with a room or a landscape, with a season and its weather, and always, always with the voice and the face and the name of a person. So it is with these memories of mine.

A few words about the title of this book. You may have recognized it the moment you saw it. One day when W. B. Yeats was living in London but wishing very much to be back in the west of Ireland, he was sitting at a restaurant table—shall we imagine it to be one of the ubiquitous Lyons tea rooms of those days? Suddenly, he reaches for pen and paper and begins to scribble rapidly, before the idea is gone.

If I know anything about how these things happen, I'm sure that the bustle of the restaurant faded, the traffic outside the windows disappeared, and Yeats was wafted away to a small wooded island near the shore of a lake in County Sligo. His pen darts across the page, and for the first time the world sees the line: "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree."

Or did it?

Is it possible that the original hastily scrawled line in the notebook on that tea-stained, crumb-dotted table was not quite as it finally became? If I know anything about how a poem forms in the mind, I think it's quite possible that Yeats may have written half a dozen opening lines before he settled on the one that we have today, the one that takes us as surely as it took its author from the thundering traffic of crowded London to the beloved, quiet little treed island of Innisfree in Lough Gill.

That love and those memories were formed early on. Yeats's family moved first to London when he was only two, but he spent long summers with his mother's parents in Sligo. The countryside beneath the looming slopes of Ben Bulbin is the world of the poet's childhood, and of his lifelong imagination, and the source of many of his best-known poems.

So it is for many of us. The years of childhood and adolescence are when life is most generous in giving us a rich treasure house of memories and images that can be stored up for use in later life.

On a May day just over three years ago, I found myself with a group of friends on a small craft moving slowly under grey skies across the calm waters of Lough Gill toward Innisfree. As we circled slowly around the island, listening to the elderly owner of the boat reciting Yeats's lines, it occurred to me that I had found the title for this collection of memories which I had been jotting down for some time.

These pages take us not merely to Innisfree, but to many places that I have been fortunate enough to visit in a long life, with much travel. Some of them were visited in childhood and youth. Others were shared with my wife, Paula, and, in later years, our family. Still others with friends on pilgrimages hither and yon. What they all have in common is that in that particular place, at that particular time, with those particular people, I learned or discovered or experienced something that I later realized had been life-forming, and that has stayed in mind and heart: what we sometimes call an epiphany.

For that, one can only be grateful. You will discover that gratitude is another theme running through this book. Frequently, I have been moved to record my recollections of an incident, as a way of saying "thank you" for it—often to a specific individual, whether encountered in the flesh or through the conversation that takes place between writer and reader—at other times to the hand of fate or God that caused something important to happen, whether one realized its significance at that moment, or only much later.

Johann (Meister) Eckhart, Dominican theologian and mystic in the Rhine Valley in that dark and terrible early fourteenth century, wrote, "If you were to say only one prayer in your whole life, and that prayer were 'thank you,' that would suffice." Such is my prayer.

So, let's you and I arise and go now . . .

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