



THE 13TH HOLE

Mulranny Memories

One summer my husband and I decided to try our hand at some of the beautiful golf courses in Ireland. We only had five days so we limited ourselves to the west of the country, north and south of Galway.

We are not so fanatical about our golf that we forget to look around us. In fact we usually alternate a day of sight-seeing with a day of golf. So, between taking in the views on the Sky Road, soaking up some stunning scenery around Ballynahinch Lake and the Twelve Bens, and dutifully studying peat bogs as if they contained some clue to the Irish character, we managed to play Ballyconneely and Lahinch, both courses built on dunes along the coast. Ballyconneely is an expansive, rugged and windswept course, whereas Lahinch appeals to the eye with its endless hummocks, hillocks and hollows, and is memorable for the 'Klondyke', a massive dune right in the middle of the 4th fairway.

On our third day my husband remembered that our friend, Denis, had a summer house in the neighbourhood, so we called him and left a message at his office. Within hours a lengthy fax arrived at our hotel, full of details of how to get to his house, where to find the gardener who could show

THE VIEW FROM THE LADIES TEES

us around, the name of a good restaurant in the nearby town and, of course, the name of and directions to his own golf club, only a nine-hole course but his favourite in all of Ireland. We followed Denis's instructions to the letter and so, after admiring his beautifully refurbished nineteenth century manor house located on its own peninsula and complete with a boathouse full of toys for boys and men, a tennis court and a football pitch, at 5.00 p.m. we found ourselves driving into Mulranny Golf Course, a few miles along the coast from Westport.

Given the splendours of Denis's summer estate, we expected something pretty posh. Posh it was not. Next to the dirt car park was a wooden shack which passed for the clubhouse and pro shop. The door was unlocked but nobody was home. A small sign on an army issue desk said, in handwritten upper case letters:

GREEN FEE £10
PLEASE PUT IN BOX
TROLLEY £2

The trolleys in question were standing outside the door.

We paid our fees and surveyed the course. The setting was indeed stunning. The course was laid out on undulating land sloping down to high shoreline cliffs. In the evening light the view of the ocean to the southwest was breathtaking. Suddenly I saw that something was wrong with this picture: there were cows peacefully grazing as far as the eye could see. 'But where is the course?' I asked my husband. 'These are grazing meadows.' Yet the first tee was there to the left and, although the scene had at first appeared deserted, we suddenly spied another couple in the middle distance, clearly playing golf.

In my twenties I had lived on a farm in Normandy. Normandy is big dairy country and cows are everywhere. We raised some of our own, too, so I knew what an invest-

MULRANNY MEMORIES

ment they represented. The idea of driving my golf ball into the middle of the herd went against everything I had learned in my years there, but clearly that was what we were expected to do. So I adopted the approach I always adopt when I want to be sure to avoid hitting something or someone (like a greenkeeper). I aimed right for one of them. I missed, of course, and my ball bounced harmlessly on the fairway.

Well, actually, the fairway and the rough were pretty much indistinguishable. The cows had seen to that. So after punching our balls out of a few hoof prints, we made it to the green where we found to our wonder (but of course!) they were surrounded by low barbed wire fences with little gates on one side. These little cow-less sanctuaries were as challenging as any greens I've played: the grass was about as even and manicured as my own back lawn.

By this time, my husband and I were laughing and joking like schoolchildren on an outing. All the tension that I normally carry around the golf course, all that tiresome striving for perfection, dissolved into the light of early evening. As we collected our balls and let ourselves out of the green enclosure, I gazed around at the scene. There were the cliffs, untamed nature at her loveliest. Here were the fields that had been grazed for centuries and carried the scars of tough weather and thousands of hooves. And here we were, two little human beings, out for some exercise, fresh air and a friendly match, playing a game on the land just as we found it. No heavy earthmoving equipment had shaped these links, no special grasses, no tining or aerating, no fertilisers or expensive mowers.

In that moment I had an inkling of how golf began: as an enjoyable pastime played on the land just as mother nature made it. My memory of that day has been my companion ever since, and in my moments of deepest frustration on the course I only have to think of Mulranny to remember that golf is, after all, just a game.