

1

The Commodius Vicus Commences

'Billy Pitt had them built', Buck Mulligan said, 'when the French were on the sea. But ours is the omphalos.' Ulysses.

The Omphalos, a sacred stone at Delphi, marked the centre or navel of the world. This image was used by Joyce when, in the opening episode of *Ulysses*, he had Malachi Mulligan describe the Martello Tower in Sandycove in terms of it. Joyce's Tower, the opening scene of one of the greatest journeys in literature, seemed the ideal starting point for an odyssey.

The notion of a walk around Ireland had been in the back of my mind for some time, but I had never given it serious consideration. One sunny Sunday morning, the first day of December, 1996, I arose to find a spider in the bath. Overcoming a mild arachnophobia, I transferred him to the window-sill. Perhaps this gave me a sense of omnipotence, or perhaps something heard on the radio as I ate breakfast triggered thoughts of travel. Morning Miscellany was playing, with its characteristic hotch-potch of diversionary tales: Isambard Kingdom Brunel; a Lady on her London Accent; Megalithic Crannogs in Lough Gara. An orchestrated version of the Beatles' *Girl*, and *A Lovely Bunch of Coconuts* on a barrel organ punctuated the spoken pieces. One item, on the Maritime Inscription, the fore-runner of *An Slúa Maraí* in which I had served as a youth, may have caused a wanderly synapse to fire: join the Navy and see the world. Whatever the reason, I decided that now was a good time to start. Thus, I set out on a journey of about a thousand miles without preparation of any kind. I had no equipment, no training and inadequate knowledge. However, it was to be quite a learning experience, and all needs would be met along the road.

As my house is about ten minutes from the Martello Tower, I decided that the omphalos would be the official starting point. So, after breakfast I ambled down to Sandycove. A cold front had passed through during the night and the air was crystal-clear with a fresh north-westerly breeze. A few cargo ships lay at anchor in the bay, saving dues by delaying their entry to the port. The shamrock-emblazoned funnel of the cross-channel ferry *Isle of Inisfree* moved across the northern horizon. A flock of oystercatchers rose suddenly, startled by my arrival and emitting their

alarm-call, ‘bi-dee, bi-deee’. At Otranto Place I stopped at the stone erected on the centenary of Joyce’s birth. In 1983, a tree was planted here by the Cathaoirleach of Dun Laoghaire Corporation, who did not pass up the chance to have his name included on the inscription. A few lines from *Ulysses* are carved on the stone:

... he gazed southward over the bay, empty save for the smokeplume of the mail-boat, vague on the bright skyline, and a sail tacking by the Muglins.

Not the most apposite choice, as it contains an uncharacteristic Joycean gaffe: from Sandycove Point, the observer would have to have directed his gaze eastward, not southward, to spot the smokeplume of the Holyhead-bound mailboat. An even more notorious blunder occurs a few pages earlier, when Joyce has Stephen and Buck Mulligan ‘looking towards the blunt cape of Bray Head that lay on the water like the snout of a sleeping whale’. The cetacean simile makes it clear that no other headland was intended; yet Bray Head lies behind Dalkey Hill and is quite invisible from Joyce’s Tower.

I passed around by the little Sandycove Harbour; a lifeboat was based here as early as 1803, one of three around Dublin Bay and arguably the earliest organized lifeboat service in the world. The original lifeboat-house is now part of a private residence, *Neptune House*. Passing *Geragh*, formerly the home of the architect Michael Scott, built like a ship in the stark international style of the ’thirtys, I came to the Martello Tower. As hinted by Buck, William Pitt the Younger was Prime Minister at the time the tower was built in the early 1800’s. It was one of a chain of seventy-four such defences built around the coast to repel a possible naval attack by Napoleonic forces. As the invasion did not occur, the tower never saw military action, but its role in literature has ensured it abiding fame. In September 1904 Joyce stayed for about a week at the tower with Oliver St. John Gogarty. The opening scene of *Ulysses* takes place on the gun platform at its top. The tower is now the Joyce Museum, open during the Summer months, and containing a collection of memorabilia of the author and some first editions of his works.

The yelps and hoots of a few intrepid swimmers drifted up on the wind from the Forty Foot bathing place. The name is the source of several theories, the most probable being that the 40th Foot Regiment was based in the the nearby battery, which was built shortly after the tower and manned by a garrison of thirty-six men. There has been a long tradition of bathing here, originally reserved for men only. The Sandycove Bathers Association, formed in 1880, made many improvements to the amenity. For the last thirty years or so men and women have shared this excellent swimming place.

Stage 1: Sandycove to Killiney. Sunday 1 December 1996

‘Warm sunshine merrying over the sea’, wrote Joyce, but Bloomsday was in June. On this fresh December day, I was reluctant to emulate the hardy swimmers’ early-morning plunge into the scrotumtightening sea, so I clambered down to the rocks and began my odyssey. A small fishing boat piled high with fish boxes, plied its way homeward. Further off-shore, the huge new car-ferry, the HSS, was easing its way into Dun Laoghaire. I hopped along from rock to rock, heading south-east towards Bullock Harbour. There are large areas here where the rock has been cut down to a level plane. There was extensive quarrying of granite along the shore between Sandycove and Bullock in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many holes, notches and grooves can still be seen in the rocks: fingerprints left by the quarry-men. These granite rocks are the northern extremity of a large body of rock, the Leinster Granites, extending in a broad strip from Dublin Bay south-westward through the Wicklow Mountains, Mount Leinster and the Blackstairs, as far as south Kilkenny. This granite is a fine building material and has been used since early times for the many castles and churches in this area and, more recently, for the Martello Towers. Sandycove and Bullock harbours were built by the Ballast Office in the mid-eighteenth century, to transport the stone across the bay to build and extend the Dublin quays. The durable granite was used for Dun Laoghaire Pier, the South Wall in Dublin, and numerous elegant houses in the neighbourhood of Dalkey.

At Bullock I had to climb through a garden and over a high wall to drop down onto the quay. A Dublin Port and Docks Board notice, warning that swimming was forbidden in the Harbour Entrance, was superfluous on this occasion. A handful of small boats danced merrily in the clear water, but most boats were on dry land for the winter. Bullock Castle, standing in a commanding position over the harbour, was built by the Cistercian Monks of St. Mary’s Abbey in Dublin, to protect their fisheries. They had another castle and a large farm at Monkstown. The castle is finely built and in good repair but is not open to the public. It is owned by the Carmelite Sisters, an American Order who run Our Lady’s Manor, a home for the wealthy bewildered, with buildings in a range of styles of increasing ugliness as one moves eastward. Whatever about its benefits to the residents, the Manor has a gloomy, oppressive, almost overpowering effect on the harbour, doing little to enhance its attractiveness.

I carried on up the steep hill from the harbour, past the site where the Shangri-La Hotel once stood. This was one of a number of local hotels of character which are now gone, others being the Cliff Castle, the Coliemore and the Khyber Pass. I passed another Martello Tower, with access blocked by a high steel gate. Several fine houses along this road back onto the rocky shore, which is nice for the owners,

but of no earthly use to the rest of us. There are strong arguments that the foreshore should be accessible to all. Certainly, a path around the coast of Ireland would be an enormously valuable amenity, and even an approximation to this ideal would be of huge benefit to the country.

At the top of the hill, I came to St Patrick's Church, a noble granite building with a solid elegance, standing on a rocky outcrop. This Church of Ireland was built in 1843. I peeped in and saw that a church service was being celebrated, although celebration was not the mood induced by the hymn, whose doleful minor key negated its theme, 'Rejoice, rejoice'. A little further on I came to Loreto Abbey, another beautiful cut granite building, erected just one year before St Patrick's. It is an impressive building with a spectacular setting overlooking Dalkey Island, and is still used as a convent school. At the end of a lane behind the school, a well-constructed tunnel leads to Lady's Well, in the grounds of Carraig-na-Greine. The owner of the house, Charles Leslie, built it sometime around 1850 so that he would not have to suffer the indignity of seeing the plain people of Ireland trudging across his land, laden with buckets of water. The tunnel is about six feet high, enough to walk upright in comfort. Near the well, it branches, with the right fork leading to Lady's Well, and the left one continuing eastwards. Exploring it as boys, we convinced ourselves that this passage led under the sea to a smuggler's lair on Dalkey Island. In fact, it is to another exit, although I could not find just where it surfaced. Sadly, the tunnel is now bricked up. I hope that some day access to it will be restored, for it is a source of wonder and adventure and historical interest.

At the top of the lane I saw the ruin of Carraig-na-Greine beyond a hockey pitch. A notice said 'Trespassing Strictly Prohibited', but I took no notice of it. This course of action was to be repeated on many occasions. There are too many of these signs, and in this case another notice indicated that work in progress was funded by *FÁS*, and included local contributions. I reasoned that if I were contributing to the work I ought to have a right to oversee it. The house is another fine granite building, just one storey and basement, but was in a derelict state, and with an uncertain future.

Coliemore Harbour was built around 1868. It is a beautiful little harbour, thronged with small boats on summer days. At the diminutive harbour, a few divers were entering the water. Across on Maiden Rock the sea-birds, mostly gulls and cormorants, luxuriated in the morning air. There were about twenty boats on the slip but, apart from the scuba divers, the water was deserted. The view across to Dalkey Island is one much favoured by amateur painters, and is often seen reproduced in the art-shop windows of Dalkey village. From time to time, a coronation is held, crowning some local big-wig as King of Dalkey Island. This old custom has a long tradition and is good fun. The King has a long and illustrious title, and

he is crowned with great pomp and circumstance, and ferried out in glory to the island.

A tourist map of the neighbourhood stood in a display case beyond the harbour. Coliemore Park and Sorrento Park were marked, the former also known as Dillon's Park and the latter, very occasionally, as Dowland Park. I climbed the hill, below a statue of a sailor which stands on a rock at Nerano, overlooking the island. At Dillon's Park I found a sculpture of two goats, made from concrete pasted into a wire mesh frame which was rusted and broken. Billy stood looking for his brothers on the island while Nanny reclined beside him. They were the worse for wear, though there only a few years (they have since been patched up). I followed the goats' gaze across to Dalkey Island, where there stand three ruins, St Begnet's little church to the west, a Napoleonic battery to the east, and a Martello Tower crowning the highest point of the island. There is a small fresh-water well below the tower, which is surprising for such a small island. Begnet was a local saint who lived in the seventh century. His feast day is celebrated on the 12th November.

Growing up near here, we had many happy days fishing, or just messing about in boats. The currents in Dalkey Sound can be strong, and we often had a tough job pulling back to Bullock Harbour against the tide. The island is a wonderful place to spend a sunny afternoon, and there are boat trips from Coliemore Harbour during the Summer months. Frank Mitchell, the late renowned naturalist wrote in his book *The Way that I Followed* that Dalkey Island was the chief treasure-house of his archeological career. He carried out several excavations on the island and found a wealth of artifacts, some dating back over 5000 years, indicating human presence here over a remarkably long period.

I followed a path from the park around to Sorrento Point, to enjoy a breath-taking view of Killiney Bay, with the whale-like Bray Head visible at last. However, the way forward was fenced off so I returned and crossed over to Sorrento Park to find a recently-restored mosaic depicting John Dowland (1563-1626), an Elizabethan poet and lutenist. Here I rested for a while, drinking in the panoramic views. On nearby Beacon Hill there was a Coast Guard Station in earlier times, now used for private residences. A tiny red-brick hut on the hill served us as a Scout's Den for a time. Below the park is Sorrento Terrace, in a most spectacular setting and comprising eight fine houses built around 1845. The end house, whose grounds include Sorrento Point, was sold for almost six million pounds shortly after I passed.

I carried on round to the Vico Road. The source of the name is uncertain, but it is sometimes associated with Giovanni Battista Vico (1668-1744), a famous Neapolitan philosopher. He formulated a *Law of Cycles*, which sought to reduce the entire course of history to a threefold succession of phases, theocratic, aristocratic and democratic — or divine, heroic and human — which he saw exemplified in government, language, literature and civilisation. Joyce was much taken with this

philosophy, and once commented to a friend ‘...my imagination grows when I read Vico ...’. The cyclicity of human affairs was fundamental to the structure of *Finnegan’s Wake*. The redolance of the phrase *commodius vicus of recirculation* in the opening sentence of the book appealed to me, and I decided to adopt it for my Hibernian circumambulation.¹

The Ramparts was, like the Forty-Foot, formerly a Men-only bathing place. It is very popular, and now more egalitarian too. This neighbourhood has an Italian flavour, with Killiney Bay often compared to the Bay of Naples. Many houses here have Italianate names: La Scala, Milano, Mt Etna; the last is particularly apt, as it stands over the railway tunnel and must suffer volcanic sounds and tremors as the trains run beneath. I passed the Cat’s Ladder, a steep flight of steps up to Shaw’s Cottage, where GBS lived for eight years of his youth around 1870. He later wrote with only slight hyperbole that “I lived on a hilltop with the most beautiful view in the world”.

Taking the path down across the railway I came to White Rock beach. Huge granite bullwarks, fifty feet high, support the railway here. In a cliff cave nearby, Flann O Brien’s wonderful scientist hero De Selby fabricated his unique concoction DMP. The water was too high to walk around the White Rock. A man with an Alsatian told me the tide was falling, but there was no need to wait as I climbed across the rock easily. Behind the granite outcrop is another slate-like green rock, schist, I recalled from school geology. Robert Warren, a former owner of Killiney Hill and surrounding lands, was compensated for facilitating the building of the railway by being provided with a private bridge and platform, which can still be found above White Rock.

On Killiney beach the pattern of footprints in the sand near the water’s edge conflicted with the Alsatian-man’s hypothesis about a falling tide. The White Cottage stands on the beach just beyond White Rock. I remember spending happy days on the beach and having lemonade and ice cream in what was at that time a Tea Room. There were also pop dances in the White Cottage in the swingin’ sixties. The nearby Court Hotel, formerly a private home, is a curious amalgam of gables and conical towers. It was a pleasure to visit this friendly and comfortable hotel² for refreshments before catching the train home. At Killiney Station I bought a single ticket back to Glenageary, from a surly, grumpy ticket-man, who didn’t know his luck. On such a beautiful day there were plenty of reasons to smile. I had come, with digressions, about five miles in two hours, representing half of one per-cent of the full circle. It was a good and pleasant start.

¹ Here I invoke Humpty Dumpty: “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.” Thus, a *commodius vicus* is a generous journey.

² The Court Hotel has since gone the way of the Coliemore and the Khyber Pass.