

In search of an authentic Irish pub

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A PINT OF PLAIN: HOW THE IRISH PUB LOST ITS MAGIC BUT CONQUERED THE WORLD

By Bill Barich

Walker, \$25, 242 pages

REVIEWED BY JOHN GREENYA

Thirsty? Then you'd better have an ample supply of Guinness at hand while reading this interesting and informative account of what is happening to the traditional Irish pub. And maybe also a hankie, because it's not a happy tale. An Irish-American writer who followed his heart (and a woman) to the home of his forbearers, Bill Barich set out in this, his eighth work of nonfiction, to find an authentic pub to be his "local." To his dismay, and mounting dyspepsia, he found that the real Irish neighborhood pub is all but gone.

"I wanted a local with a timeless quality," he tells us up front. "It should be humble and welcoming, I thought, and have a strong sense of community, where a shared set of values still obtained. The pub I imagined embodied the virtues traditionally associated with Ireland — kind and gentle, polite, good-humored and devoted to the spoken word in all its base and exalted forms. It would be a refuge, a safe harbor with worn wooden floors, a bar that could tell stories, gents in flat caps and a turf fire blazing on cold winter nights."

Instead, he finds that the traditional Irish pub — think of the local in "The Quiet Man" with John Wayne — is swiftly becoming a thing of the past, and not just in the city but also, and maybe especially, in the countryside where the new and very strict anti-drunk-driving laws have scared many long time customers into staying home at night. It's all very sad, and as the book progresses, if that's the right word, it gets sadder and sadder. Eventually it's quite sobering, and that is the right word.

Barich begins his search in Ranelagh, "... a bustling, prosperous [Dublin] neighborhood with the air of a tightly knit village. ... Front doors are brightly painted,

the iron gates and fences are constantly retouched, and lace curtains still flutter in some windows." But the times, they have a-changed. A block from his house, Ranelagh Road, the main commercial strip, provides a prime example:

"Until recently, you could walk there and buy a paper from a newsdealer who fancied the horses, pick up some vegetables at a greengrocer, and stop at a butcher shop for some lamb chops for the evening meal, but you can't do it anymore. The small tradesmen have disappeared, driven out by whopping real estate prices and the inability to compete with supermarkets and franchised convenience stores. Ranelagh's terraces may look plain and uniform from the outside, but the new money spills over into the streets, where a fleet of shiny Range Rovers, Mercedes, and BMWs vie for attention and status. Once you could only order the most basic fare at our restaurants — glorified chip shops, actually — but now you can dine on foie gras and prune terrine with pear puree, pickled pear slices, and pistachio oil at a bistro with a Michelin star."

The pub scene is equally depressing. Going, going, and almost gone are the fabled local pubs of yore, replaced by the cookie-cutter products of the Irish Pub Company (The highly successful company's Web site tells us, "Established in 1991, the Irish Pub company has proven itself as the premier designer and builder of authentic Irish pubs throughout the world.") and others of the same ilk such as the Celtic Dragon Company and The Old Irish Pub Company. As Mr. Barich points out, you can now visit an "authentic" Irish Pub on your next trip to Hong Kong, should you care to — and he makes it quite clear that if you do care to, he'd have no interest in sharing a jar with you at any time or in any place.

If a local has the good-pub criteria mentioned above, then, Mr. Barich informs us, it will, by nature, also have "craic," which he says is pro-

nounced like the English word "crack," and means: "... fun, especially the fun to be had in pubs [that] can be as elusive and free-floating as ectoplasm, suddenly appearing out of nowhere."

In search of the true Irish pub (and, if he's very lucky a craic-filled night), the author travels far and wide in both the city of Dublin and then about the country itself. Along the way, he stops to give us a brief history of the public house in Ireland, then a disquisition on the different ways drunks are viewed in America and Ireland (pitied in the Emerald Isle and portrayed as a figure of fun in the U.S.A.) as well as a short history of Guinness, both the beer and the



man, Sir Arthur Guinness, the brewery's founder. As his circle of research widens, so does his disappointment, which soon spreads beyond the pub scene.

Of Ballitore in County Kildare, he writes, "A visitor sees only Mary Leadbeater's gently rising hills and the River Griese still meandering, although just barely, and blocks out the new developments that are making the real Ireland ever more generic, suburban, and American." Later, he sums up, "One truth was beyond the scope of irony. The traditional pub, plainly furnished, with no phony bric-a-brac, recorded music, or TV, where a genuine publican ran the show, the barman (or women) didn't change by the week, and the

locals outnumbered the tourists, was on its last legs."

Now for a quibble before climbing back on the praise wagon. Sure as I am that all the bad news is true, the fact remains that a little of it goes a long way. And reading one lament after another, no matter how beautifully phrased, tends to cast a pall. It's almost like sitting at the bar next to a guy who keeps crying the blues; after a while, you find yourself going to the gents (or the ladies) whether you have to or not. It's almost — dare I say it? — like listening to a reformed drinker. Fortunately, the author's lamentations are interspersed with sketches of lovely scenery and some marvelous Hibernian characters.

One quibble, however, does not a good book spoil. As he's shown in book after book, and especially those that deal with horse racing, Mr. Barich couldn't write a bad sentence if he tried. "A Pint of Plain" overflows with colorful descriptions and vivid, entertaining prose, all very Irish don't you know. The book also serves as a fine Baedeker for many things Irish, from its famous writers to its topography, geography and sociology.

And speaking of sociology, I was very pleased to see Mr. Barich mention Dan Oldenburg's seminal work, "The Great, Good Place," a book about the loss in American lives of "third places," those gathering spots that are neither work nor home, but nonetheless very important to a sense of community. The same thing, he is saying in this book, is happening right now in Ireland, the ancestral home of so very many Americans.

I'd also like to thank the author for introducing me, via an article about him in the New York Times, to what he called the most authentic Irish pub in New York, Kin-sale's Tavern (1632 Third Avenue). I checked it out personally (cup of soup and a half-pint of plain, \$5.69), and can attest that it is, to borrow a phrase, a great, good place.

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