

The Commodius Vicus: A Rambling Route around Ireland

Peter Lynch took his time walking around Ireland and writing the story, but it was worth the wait.

Dalkey



Avoca



Barrow



Cobh



Jeannie Johnston



Lartigue Railway



Ireland is full of interest and fascination. Wherever you roam, there is something of beauty or wonder, whether it is a panoramic landscape, some industrial or architectural curiosity or just an encounter with some friendly or eccentric, or friendly-and-eccentric, character. A rambling route around Ireland would be a boon to Irish walkers and a huge attraction for tourists. There is a growing number of way-marked trails but a path allowing us to circumambulate the island is still a dream.

I set out some years ago to walk around the island, more-or-less following the coastal counties. Sticking to the coast itself would have been impractically long. The ideal of avoiding roads completely was impossible, given the limited availability of paths and rights of way. But I was still surprised that so much of the route could be travelled along old railways and canals or otherwise away from the hustle and bustle of traffic. There was only one rule: the sections of the journey should join up to form a continuous route around Ireland. Planning was one of the most enjoyable aspects of the adventure. The Discovery Series of Ordnance Survey maps were beginning to appear as I began the ramble, and they proved invaluable.

Robert Frost's poem, *The Road not Taken*, speaks of a traveller at a fork in the road who must choose a route and thereby miss

the chance to follow another. Any choice involves loss, a situation that I call Frost's Dilemma (see Box). I chose the route, which I called the Commodius Vicus, on the basis of personal preference and on an estimate of which choice would prove most interesting. But there is infinite variety and, if you are considering a similar journey, you should definitely make your own choice: solve Frost's Dilemma in your own way.

Joyce's Tower in Sandycove, the opening scene of one of the greatest journeys in literature, seemed the ideal starting point for an odyssey. The name Commodius Vicus, meaning a generous journey, is another Joycean allusion, taken from the opening lines of *Finnegans Wake*. I set out southward on a sunny December morning in 1996, clambering along the rocky shore to Bullock Harbour, around by Sorrento Point and down onto White Rock strand. After the sandy beach to Bray, the splendid cliff walk brought me to Greystones, and another ramble along a sandy beach took me to Wicklow Town (in the interests of brevity, I will telescope the days together).

Turning inland from Wicklow through Rathdrum, I came to Avondale House, Parnell's ancestral home, set in a magnificent woodland estate. Then southward to the beautiful Vale of Avoca. The old mining works in Avoca are fascinating, with pump-houses, ore-bins, chimneys and ochre

spoil-heaps on both sides of the road. From the village of Avoca, I strolled through Ballyarthur Estate to Woodenbridge golf course.

At Woodenbridge I turned west again, up the Croghan Valley through Aughrim and on via Ballinglen to Coolattin Estate. From there I headed south to the pretty village of Clonegal, where I visited Huntington Castle, and then continued to Bunclody. After crossing the northern flanks of Mount Leinster, it was an easy stroll down to the Barrow River at Borris. The ramble along the tow-path down the Barrow navigation was one of the most serene and enjoyable parts of the journey, heightened by the excitement of seeing a bittern in a reed bed below Graiguenamanagh. I also had a close encounter with a swan, whose mate was sitting on a nest directly beside the tow-path, and who objected to my presence. At St. Mullin's, I visited the monastic remains where Art McMurrough is buried.

I left the course of the Barrow and headed cross-country to Ballyhack, where the ferry took me from the county of purple and gold to that of blue and white, giving access to Munster. From Waterford City I headed to Carrick, passing through Portlaw, a strange village with an eerie atmosphere that reminded me of the cult film "The Wicker Man". From Carrick to Clonmel I took the path beside the peaceful River Suir. Then

crossing the pass between the Comeraghs and Knockmealdowns, we reached Cappoquin, where the Blackwater obligingly bends to the south. I wrote “we” since, from this point on I enjoyed the company of one or more friends on the ramble. The Blackwater River undertakes a spectacular right-hand turn at Cappoquin. We followed the river south to Clashmore and then crossed the estuary to come to Youghal, a town full of historical interest.

From Youghal we continued, along the bed of the old railway line and then through the ecclesiastical centre of Cloyne, where we stopped to admire the statue of Christy Ring, the eminent hurler who was born there. Then we came to Saleen Peninsula, on the eastern side of Cork Harbour. From Cobh we hitched a lift on the Navy tender to Haulbowline, enabling us to follow a route south of Cork’s suburbs. We reached Bandon by walking along an old railway line, which passed through Gogginshill Tunnel, about 900 yards long, and followed the river upstream. Then over a gap in the hills and across a beautiful footbridge spanning the lovely Lee, we arrived in Ballingeary. From there we entered the Kingdom of Kerry by crossing the gap at Lackabaun.

The path from Kenmare to Killarney is well-known to many *Walking World Ireland* readers, providing a delightful one-day ramble. After crossing the Windy Gap, we came to Galway’s Bridge, where we climbed a steep path through an ancient oak forest. The atmosphere here was mystical; one had the impression of being totally alone in a forest that seemed to have been untouched by human hand for centuries.

From Killarney we meandered northwards towards Tralee, finding on the way the

famine ship Jeannie Johnston under construction in Blennerville. It was now April 2000. We rambled up Banna Strand to come to Ballyheige. Then onward through North Kerry, to Ballyduff, and on to Carrig Island in the Shannon Estuary. En route, we stopped at a farmyard near Lisselton Cross to admire some remnants of the Lartigue Railway, an extraordinary monorail system that once linked Listowel and Ballybunion. Carrig Island is a good spot for bird-watching and we spent some time watching the waders feeding among the reed-beds by the river bank.

Coming to the ferry at Tarbert the next day, we were about half-way round the country. Several years had passed since the outset, but we were in no hurry; it would be several more before the grand Commodus Vicus was completed. The remainder of the journey will be recounted in the next issue of *Walking World Ireland*.

Frost’s Dilemma

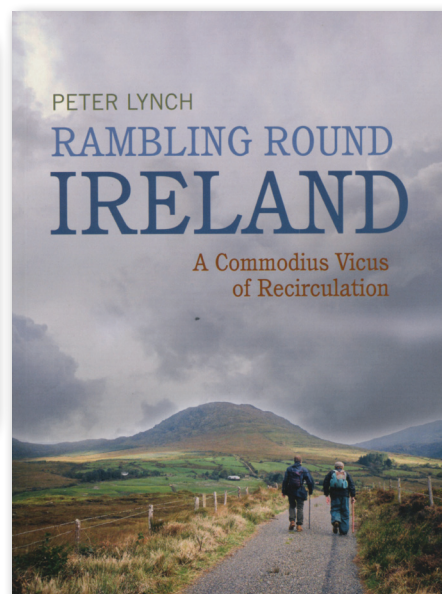
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth

The Road Not Taken – Robert Frost

The full account of Peter Lynch’s walk is given in his book Rambling Round Ireland: a Commodus Vicus of Recirculation, published by Liffey Press. For more photographs, see www.ramblingroundireland.com

I hope this story inspires some of you to walk around Ireland. But don’t follow the route I chose, for there is an infinite variety of other possibilities. I missed much of interest: the Wexford coast, the Kerry peninsulas, most of Connemara, the Rosses of Donegal, the Mourne Mountains and much more.

Robert Frost’s poem *The Road not Taken* speaks of a traveller, coming to a fork in the road, who must decide which route to follow, a situation that I call Frost’s Dilemma. At many points during the Commodus Vicus, I had to make a choice that caused me to miss something of interest. But you can look at Frost’s Dilemma as an opportunity rather than as a difficulty: since you have a choice, you have freedom; you can solve Frost’s Dilemma in your own way, and according to your own tastes.



Signposts



Tower



Celtic Cross



Water Ahead



Tunnel

