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# The Commodius Vicus: A Rambling Route around Ireland (Part II)

by Peter Lynch

**A**bandoned railway lines provide wonderful opportunities for ramblers, as they often traverse regions that are otherwise difficult to access. There are unique features, like viaducts and tunnels to be negotiated and the lines often pass through interesting terrain while being free from steep gradients. The abandoned line of the West Clare Railway gave us a route from Kilrush to Kilkee, via Moyasta Junction. From Kilkee we followed the coast for a while before heading inland at Ennistymon. The strategy now was to take a large semi-circular diversion to the east of Galway

city, again avoiding the urban sprawl. We passed through "Sweet Corrofin" and Tubber and Coole Park, once the home of Lady Gregory, a founding member of the Abbey Theatre. From Gort we headed for Athenry, where there are interesting monastic ruins, and made our way to Cregg Castle in Corrandulla, following a network of minor back roads. Then to Greenfields, an angling centre on the shores of the majestic Lough Corrib.

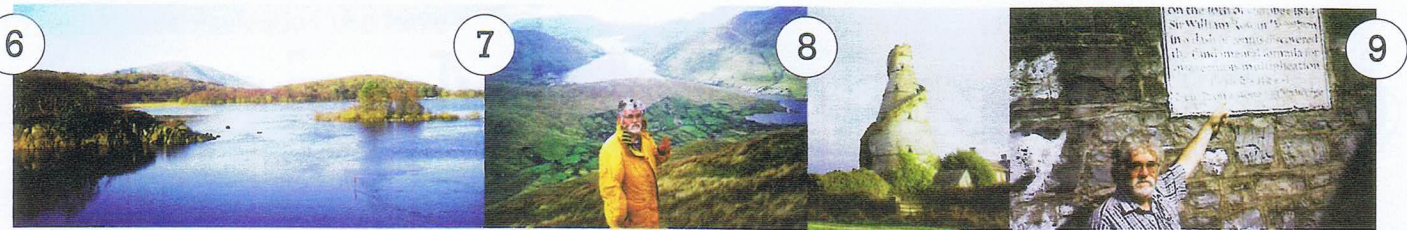
The following day we were in Cong, where we participated in a meeting of The Quiet Man Club. From here the terrain became more mountainous, and we reached Killary harbour by climbing Magairli an Deamhain, the mountain euphemistically called The Devil's Mother. The view from the summit of this peak, down the fjord with Mweelrea and the Connemara mountains framing it, is magnificent.

We branched off at Doo Lough heading south of Croagh Patrick to reach Westport. Then we took a by-way to Newport. A walking and cycling route has since opened along this route. We chose the route through the Windy Gap to come to Pontoon, a minor Mecca for anglers. Then on to Ballina and Iniscrone, and eastward to the tiny town-land of Skreen, noted as the birthplace of a famous scientist, George Gabriel Stokes. Digressing southwards over the Ox Mountains, we reached Coolaney. Again, we circumvented the built-up region around Sligo by following a semi-circular route, through Yeats' Land of Heart's Desire around Lough Gill, entering Northern Ireland briefly at Beleek.

From Donegal town we took the route through the Barnesmore Gap to reach Derry via Ballybofey and the curious, atmospheric village of Raphoe. There are many alternative routes through Donegal, and the coast is truly spectacular so, once again, Frost's Dilemma was confronting us. From Derry, the western shore of Lough Foyle led us to the ferry at Greencastle, where we crossed to Magilligan Point, to follow the golden strand to Downhill and on to Coleraine. On the way, we visited Mussenden



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Temple, a tiny rotunda modelled on the Temple of Vesta in Tivoli, and perched precariously on the cliff-top. It is a short walk from Coleraine to the Giant's Causeway and the majestic North Antrim Coast.

The North Antrim Cliff Walk is about as good as it gets for walkers in Ireland: a firm surface, well away from traffic, with constantly-changing views, all spectacular, and the surging surf providing a soothing acoustic backdrop. There is a good range of bird-life to be seen, and a rich fauna. But before all this comes the extraordinary geology. The 40,000 or so hexagonal prisms of basalt were formed in an uncertain volcanic maelstrom some sixty million years ago. Some of the basalt columns are more than a hundred feet tall. The area makes a lasting impression and prompts speculation as to how the causeway was formed. This is an Area of Outstanding Beauty and an Area of Special Scientific Interest, and has recently been declared by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. What a blessing it would be if there were more paths like the North Antrim Coast Path around the Irish coast. It is not an impossible dream.

From Ballycastle, where the Lammas Fair was in full swing, the road led on round the north-eastern extremity of the island, with the Scottish mainland and islands clear on the horizon to the north and east. From Cushendall, we headed up the sylvan Glenariff valley and on to Broughshane. The striking profile of Slemish, with its huge dome-like crown, loomed up before us. It was here, as we learned at school,

that the young Patrick tended sheep and dreamed of escape back to his patrician family in Wales. Beyond Antrim Town, Ireland's largest lake, Lough Neagh, was to our right. After a diversion along the Lagan Canal to Moira, we reached the Upper Bann at Portadown. This allowed us to walk the full length of the Newry Canal, another wonderful day's ramble. From Newry we headed again "into the interior", to follow an abandoned railway line from Kingscourt down to Navan.

The Hill of Tara was now a stone's throw away. Much of Ireland's history and mythology is associated with Tara and it is rich in archaeology and spiritual significance. Another day's ramble, in the course of which we visited Dunsany Castle, brought us to the Royal Canal at Kilcock. This provided a traffic-free route through the heart of Dublin, taking us through a series of 'Namalands', derelict construction sites which have little prospect of completion until the economy improves. The canal tow-path brought us almost to the Liffey, where we found the Jeannie Johnston, now ship-shape and sea-worthy, tied up near the new Convention Centre. We had seen it on our rambles some nine years earlier, under construction at Blennerville. From Ringsend, we followed the coast, along Sandymount Strand and through Booterstown and Blackrock, back to our starting point at Sandycove.

The journey round the island was about 1200 miles. It could have been done in a few months by someone with enough free time and energy. But I was in no hurry: just

as well, since it took about thirteen years to complete the circuit. And it was enormous fun, with nothing bad happening and memorable encounters with friendly people at every stage. There was nothing heroic about it; we slept indoors every night and suffered no hardships save a few drenchings.

Could a recognized Commodius Vicus, a walking route around Ireland, become a reality? Of course it could, and it would be of enormous social and economic benefit. There has been significant development of way-marked trails. Many of these could be linked up and extended to complete the circuit. At the foundation of the State there were almost 3500 miles of railway. The total is now less than 1500. So, there are some two thousand miles of derelict railway "hiding in the bushes" and waiting to be put to use. And all of this could be done for a small fraction of what it costs to build a motorway.

The chosen route was my personal solution of Frost's Dilemma, and much of interest was missed: the Wexford coast, the jagged Kerry coastline, most of Connemara, north-west Donegal and the Mourne Mountains. There is a vast range of other possibilities and we might think of the Commodius Vicus not as a single route, but one strand of a rich tapestry, a golden braid encircling an emerald isle.

The full account of Peter Lynch's walk is given in his book *Rambling Round Ireland: a Commodius Vicus of Recirculation*, published by Liffey Press. For more photographs see

[www.ramblingroundireland.com/](http://www.ramblingroundireland.com/)

**Mark Draper**, who came along on many sections of the Commodius Vicus, passed away in April 2011, on the slopes of Derrybawn, in beautiful Wicklow - the Garden of Ireland - while on a map-reading course. We were looking forward to more rambles together, but will have to carry on without his wonderful company and his marvellous and frequently outrageous humour. The courageous volunteers of Mountain Rescue Ireland did all they could to save him, and their help is gratefully acknowledged.

#### Adieu

A grand commodius vicus we bestrode,  
Through Ireland's rich and verdant countryside,  
And heartfelt was the friendship of the road,  
With laughter ringing out at every stride.

You loved the birds, the flowers and the trees,  
And all the gentle people of the land,  
The open skies, the rivers, lakes and seas,  
And dreamed of future journeys we had planned.

Then all too soon, upon a Wicklow hill,  
A sudden chill ran through the April air;  
You left us here to ramble on alone.  
One final breath you whispered, then lay still,  
Fast in the arms of one who loved you dear,  
Silent, upon a peak in Derrybawn.

- 1 Barnsemore gap, Donegal
- 2 Sea cave, Antrim coast
- 3 Belleek Pottery on the banks of the Erne
- 4 Tools of the trade - boots and hillpig
- 5 Aasleagh Falls, where Bull McCabe slew the American in The Field
- 6 Nephn Mountain from the lake in Pontoon
- 7 Peter on Magairli an Deamhain overlooking Killary Harbour
- 8 The Wonderful Barn near Leixlip
- 9 The plaque on the Royal Canal commemorating Hamilton's discovery of quaterninions