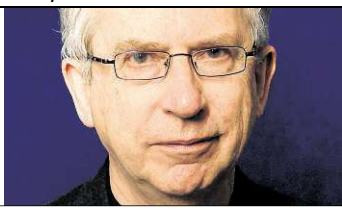


INTERVIEW

Arts&Books, page 7



'SOMETHING BAD'S GOING TO HAPPEN':

Peter Carey talks to Belinda McKeon

News Review

the Best Place to Live in Ireland

MAUGHEROW, CO SLIGO
'I have never heard anything like the roar of the Atlantic here in winter'

What I love most about this place is that it is haunted by everything and everyone that ever passed through it. I have been coming here for more than a decade, having bought a cottage in a hollow just before the Celtic Tiger found her stride. It was a ghost that brought me here: that of my father, who was born a half-dozen fields away, in Mount Edward.

Strictly speaking, my house is in Lislary. But when I say this to Sligo people, most of them look at me blankly. My postal address is Ballinfull, and my electoral ward is Lissadell

North, but the locality is known to locals as Maugherow. Maugherow is actually a tiny village on a hill to the wild west – a church, a school and a huddle of houses – but its name seems to claim everything from Grange in the north to Drumcliffe in the west.

The house where I now live about a third of my time (and escalating) is the birthplace of the developer Tom Gilmartin, whose lethal Maugherow memory caused the establishment of the Mahon tribunal.

Down the road, an ethical half-mile away, is a house once owned by Charles Haughey. It was left to him by a longtime supporter in the 1970s, and there is some dispute locally about whether he ever visited it, although his family spent many a summer there, according to

unsworn local testimony. I am toying with the idea of looking to have our road renamed Tribunal Boulevard and opening a bread-and-breakfast establishment to exploit the untapped potential of ethics-and-surf tourism.

The rugged coastline to the west is a much-favoured haunt of water warriors from all over the world. The claim that only Hawaii offers a more challenging swell can seem like an exaggeration until you've spent an idle hour watching these guys dice with a watery grave.

Walking from Haughey's house on the lip of the foreshore towards what I am coming to call home, I am watched by the beady eye of Benbulbin (below), which sits like a slumbering tiger in the distance. It has become, by dint of genius and opportunism, the spirit of Yeats,

which surveys Maugherow as though it always has.

There is no single Sligo landscape; perhaps the reason for its largely undiscovered condition is that it contains a multiplicity of distinct landscapes. Of these, Maugherow is perhaps both the wildest and the subtlest. It is a strange collision of farmland and wilderness, seeming to persist on the extremity of civilisation.

When I do not live here I live in Dalkey, in Co Dublin, where the sea also lingers, but I have never heard anything like the roar of the Atlantic here in midwinter.

The people of the Maugherow peninsula oscillate between a desire to shout the glory of their place from the top of the mountain and

an equal but opposite determination to keep it to themselves. It is the quintessence of unspoilt, an untamed oasis that lies quietly between the golfing blandness of Rosses Point and the Nordie refugee camp that is Mullaghmore.

Another of the peninsula's attractions is that phone signals enter here with a reticence that proposes silence as the default condition.

Broadband is available at the Texaco station in Grange, a day out away, but not otherwise, so Maugherow is a tweet-free zone. In this, the country of my heart, there are more than enough ghosts to chat to.

John Waters

Photograph: Chris Hill/Tourism Ireland



BELFAST 'I don't want to live somewhere with white picket fences and manicured lawns'

Haunted by the Troubles, caught somewhere between swaggering brio and dark introspection, and painfully proud of its flawed icons – *Titanic*, George Best – Belfast is a city like no other. At once savage and benign, soberly conformist and wildly bizarre, it's the kind of place that inspires intense reactions. It's where I was born

be strolling through unspoilt meadows and woodland, blue hills in the distance.

It's a walkable city too: 20 minutes takes me into the centre, and my kids walk to school across two lovely parks. Yet even the life of the city itself can be unexpectedly beautiful: the two great Harland and Wolff cranes rising against the sky above a slope of red-brick terraced houses; a guerrilla garden, bursting with spring flowers, created in the courtyard of an old RUC station. Somehow these moments of beauty seem all the more poignant and precious because of the city's terrible past.

We Belfastards, as my son insists on calling us, care about the place, you see.

There are plenty of creature comforts these days. You're never short of good places to eat and drink, and at the weekend St George's Market is alive with noise and colour. If shopping is your thing, you'll be

spoiled for choice: despite the economic crisis, Belfast remains a retail nirvana, from the cut-price charms of the Wyse Byse stores to the more elegant offerings at Victoria Square.

The truth is, I don't want to live somewhere bland, with white picket fences and manicured lawns. Belfast is weird and complicated and truculently charming. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Fionola Meredith



A city like no other: Belfast City Hall and (below) Fionola Meredith. Main photograph: James Fox/Getty

and the place I live today. Let's get the obvious negative side out of the way first. Yes, Belfast remains, in many ways, a dysfunctional and disconnected city. When the travel writer Paul Theroux visited in the 1980s he said the city had a bad smell and too many fences. It's a bit more fragrant now, but the number of peace walls, or interfaces, has actually increased – a third of the house-high fences have gone up since the 1994 ceasefires.

Yet I love living here. Belfast is a small, friendly city where you're always bumping into people you know. There's a vibrant, irrepressible arts community that is never short of new ideas and projects, often produced on a shoestring, with friends happy to muck in. Belfast has long been known for its dark humour, and you don't get that distinctively anarchic spirit anywhere else.

Another advantage of the city's small scale is that the countryside is never far away. I live about two kilometres outside the city centre, but within five minutes' drive I can



CORK CITY
'Its intimacy is to be cherished. The convenience of a city with the human scale of a town is what makes the city stand apart'

When you're from Cork it's hard to be humble. The biggest county, the tallest building, the longest coastline, the second-largest natural harbour in the world. If self-regarding pomposity were an Olympic sport, I'd like to think we'd be world champions.

As if our heads weren't swollen enough, when *Lonely Planet* came calling, it labelled Cork one of the top 10 cities in the world to visit in 2010. Don't take my word for it. Here's how the guide described the city: "Cork is at the top of its game right now: sophisticated, vibrant and diverse, while still retaining its friendliness, relaxed charm and quick-fire wit." Rumours that the author is from Knocknaheeny are without foundation.

But there are those who say Cork's obsession with defining itself in competition with, say, Dublin is a classic sign of an inferiority complex. Peel beneath the fatty layers of self-trumpeting bravado, they might say, and you'll find a gnawing anxiety about its second-city status.

Seán Ó Faoláin railed at times against the small-town provincialism and the "damp dark miasmic valley". Paul Durcan wrote about the city being as "intimate and homicidal as a little Marseilles". But Cork's intimacy is something to be cherished. The convenience of a city with the human scale of a town is what makes the city stand apart.

After all, it's people who make a neighbourhood, a village, a town or a city. The social fabric that binds a community together – running into friends, familiar faces in the shops, simple, everyday human contact – is still firmly in place, at a time when it's frayed and stretched in much smaller places.

A stroll along the spacious, redesigned main thoroughfare and its connecting arteries of smaller streets

is a pleasure. You do not feel bullied or harassed on the city streets.

At a time when life is being sucked out of the centres of countless towns and cities as a result of poor planning and out-of-town shopping centres, Cork's retail core is in remarkably good shape. It feels vibrant, modern and alive.

The city has challenges. The eyesore of the docklands needs to be tackled, and some of the poorer communities are badly scarred by neglect. The city still has its back turned to the incredible amenity that is the harbour (the second largest in the world, remember?)

Ultimately, Cork has a way of winning people over. Even Ó Faoláin mellowed with age. When he wrote his memoirs at the end of his life, he couldn't help admiring the city's "quiet sense of self-possession... It's something that one can only speak of as an air or a tradition, indigenous, time-established, as old as Shandon's bells."

Spoken like a true, modest, Corkman.

Carl O'Brien



Sun city: students make the most of the weather in Fitzgerald Park, Cork. Photograph: Clare Keogh/Provision



Time out: Michael Viney at home. Photograph: Michael Mc Laughlin

THALLABAWN, CO MAYO
'Birdsong, the rumble of surf and lungfuls of the cleanest air in Ireland'

From the kitchen, a hillside sheep pasture much as it was before the Famine, scattered with glacial boulders and sculpted with huge bolsters of lazy beds, then soil-black, now green. The stream divides the grass in a rocky hollow worn over centuries; we see it glinting and tinkling in the morning sun, more rarely in roaring, white-water floods.

From the living room, Connacht's highest mountain, Mweelrea, fills most of a window, playing tricks with distance. Snow makes a Japanese etching; a south wind spins clouds from the summit in lenticular meringues. I keep binoculars for armchair climbs to places where I used to go. Beyond it yawns the mouth of the Killary fjord and the far, Tolkien peaks of Connemara.

From my workroom, looking west: a rim of sheep fields to the shore, a long, creamy span of sand, the slow unlacing of white breakers.

Out there, low humps of islands – Inishurk, Inishbofin – and beyond them the ocean horizon: 50km on a good day, but always, spiritually, infinite. Where the sun sets, left to right through the year, marks off the calendar in Technicolor sunsets. Sometimes in winter, early at my desk, I see a full moon move a shining path across the sea, even more bewitching than broadband.

All this without stepping outside. Do that and it's birdsong and the small talk of commuting ravens, the

swish of leaves, the distant rumble of surf and lungfuls of the cleanest air in Ireland. Sometimes, an enveloping silence, miles wide. Also, sudden smallness in this huge amphitheatre: smallness, but also connection with a sensual natural world, a man in his due habitat. You have to take its tempers of rain and wind, and deadening days of drizzle and fog. You need interiority and weatherproof hobbies (a polytunnel!) Not, then, the best place for everyone, thank goodness.

Looking out now, across the hedge (was that another hare?) and stripes of stone walls, two holiday cottages shine white against the sky. There are plenty more along the 12km to Louisburgh, but, spaced between us and the mountain, where the road ends in the sand, most of the new build was for indigenous families, among them grand neighbours and friends.

Some people need the human warmth of towns. On holiday, they seek out crowded beaches, to be sure they are enjoying themselves: ours is huge and deserted for almost all the year, and on fine bank-holiday Sundays we look the other way. It was never, in any case, a strand for sitting down on, even with one's back to the dunes.

No downsides, then? Remoteness matters now and then – 50km to the hospital, in Castlebar, for instance, or forgetting the thing that wasn't on the list for the once-a-month stock-up in town.

In a fine local usage, such miseries are "matterless": we're millionaires in living where we do.

Michael Viney

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