

Close to Ireland (for the Paddy Group Challenge)

by Elizabeth Enslin

The closest I've been to Ireland is Conwy castle on the coast of Wales. It was summer, mid-way through college. I was naive and dreamy then. I wandered historic and literary monuments throughout England and weighed my future options. Major in anthropology or English? Save others in the world (did I mention naive?) or explore my own cultural identity in it?

A trip to Kenya earlier that summer inspired ideas for saving the world. As for cultural identity: I knew I had a lot of German in me and some English, but what I wanted to be was Celtic.

My grandfather had given me some hope. An avid reader on all things UK, he claimed some Welsh ancestry, including relation to a distant Welsh cousin of Anne Boleyn.

I arrived in Conwy growing more sure of my future (or so I thought then), but still looking for a past. I wandered the castle, trying to channel my inner Guinevere or Ceridwen. But the rain and wind inspired less attractive images: winters with no central heating. offal thrown out the windows, and burnings or beheadings to punish the kind of unconventional woman I aspired to be. A lover of history, even the violent sort, I didn't mind the more gruesome images; but I couldn't forge my identity in them either.

In the small town of Conwy, fantasy gave way to the practical challenge I faced throughout England and Wales: edible food. There may be some great cuisine in the British Isles, but on my limited budget, I didn't find it. I counted on Indian and Pakistani restaurants to deliver me from soggy fish and chips or stale sandwiches made with crustless, white bread. And I found in Conwy a meal so

memorable for its fiery heat and perfect blend of spices that I tend to recall it now as a turning point that steered me further down my circuitous path to living, working and giving birth in Nepal.

Traveling south through the Snowden mountains, I hoped to hear my ancestral tongue spoken or perhaps even stumble upon a welcoming crowd of bards. What I remember is a long train ride through small mountains, more inedible food, and a few stops at stations where old men did speak Welsh but (understandably) didn't show much interest in outsiders.

I don't yearn now for that Celtic connection the way I once did. But every year on March 17, I wonder: besides wearing green, should I celebrate the tangled history of slavery, missionizing, colonization, famine, migration, nationalism, and ethnic pride that has given us modern St. Patrick's Day?

On this St. Patrick's Day morning, mindless web surfing turns up some tidbits I had missed before. St. Patrick was born in Wales. Maybe, he too shares a distant cousin with Anne Boleyn.

I also learn that some consider St. Patrick the patron saint of engineers. I call out to inform my engineer spouse of this. A lapsed Catholic of Polish heritage, he's rushing to catch a bus that will deliver him to a cubicle where he'll spend the day designing circuit boards. I hear the door shut behind him.

I'm on my own. So I will do what I often do: pull out the mandolin I've neglected for the last few months, play a few jigs, and sip a bottle of Guinness.

And for dinner? Spinach paneer and lime chutney with rice. At least it's green.

