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Head Over Heels and Back Again

By Dr Angela Maye-Banbury

GREAT BRITAIN - LEICESTER



“I am hopelessly in love with a memory. An echo from another time, another place.” So said French philosopher Michel Foucault when reflecting on our power of recollection to transport us into a different realm. When it comes to Achill, I am utterly enchanted. Head over heels and back again. I am enamoured with every aspect of Ireland’s biggest island: its complex and rich history; its inspirational people past and present; the magnificence of its landscape, the beauty of spoken Achill Gaeilge and the island’s music and folklore.

Achill Oral Histories, the community-based project I founded in October 2018, is testament to this profound affection I have for Achill Island. The project is dedicated to the creation of a publicly available archive featuring the life histories of the people of Achill. It aims to connect anyone who is interested in the island and the real-life experiences of residents recounted in their own words. Oral history is a people’s history enabling people to recount their life history on their own terms. Each account is systematically recorded, transcribed then preserved in a publicly available repository.

Marvel at the power of the mighty Atlantic which has, over the years, engulfed then redeposited the sandy beaches of the island’s shoreline, recreating the beaches thought to have been lost forever.

People, place and what we understand as ‘home’ come into their own at Christmas. The advent of COVID-19 has reminded us not only how fragile life is but how deeply interconnected we really are both locally and globally. Achill Oral Histories seeks to connect the widespread global Achill diaspora who are united by an unremitting attachment to this very special island.

If inspiration is running dry on where to spend this Christmas, look no further than Achill Island. During last two years, the tightly knit Achill community has negotiated the dual challenges of protecting themselves against COVID whilst ensuring the island remains open to tourism. Christmas spent on Achill Island is always extremely special, a real gift for the mind, body and soul. The festive season of 2021 already has all the hallmarks of something extremely special. Experience a turf infused Proustian rush as you take in the aroma of burning turf on an open fire.



Watch the magnificent sunset as you walk along the breathtakingly beautiful beach at Keem Bay. Look up the spectacular slopes of Croaghnaun, Ireland's highest sea cliffs. Retrace the steps of Achill families for times long since past as you walk through the extraordinary 'Deserted Village' at the foot of Slievemore mountain. This potent site of memory contains around one hundred original homes occupied by the Achill people. It catapults the visitor back to the 1840s during the harrowing years of An Gorta Mór (The Great Hunger or Irish Famine) when the families who lived in the village were evicted by British landowners.

Marvel at the power of the mighty Atlantic which has, over the years, engulfed then redeposited the sandy beaches of the island's shoreline, recreating the beaches thought to have been lost forever. Become mesmerised by endless landscape and ever-changing light. Take the plunge and go for a bracing New Year's Day swim in the ocean at Silver Strand, Dugort taking comfort from the fact that your efforts will support the RNLi. Afterwards, feast on some of the island's delicious salmon and other seafood washed down, of course, with a pint of Guinness.

Visit any of the island's excellent pubs for 'craic agus ceol' in equal measure. Recreate the Achill 'Lá na Dreoilín' (Day Of The Wren) St Stephen's Day tradition where the children would go from house to house, hoping to be given a little spending money "Dreoilín, dreoilín, dreoilín... rí na n-éan, is mór do mhuirín, is beag é féin, éirig suas a bhean a tí; is tabhair pingiun don dreoilín." A full description of the Lá na Dreoilín' tradition recounted beautifully by retired teacher and Achill champion Tom Johnston, is [available on the Achill Oral Histories web site](#).

Wherever you may spend the festive season, keep a little of Achill Island's magic in your soul. The COVID crisis will mean that I will not be able to be on the island this Christmas. But my memories and the wonderful stories I have heard there will sustain me until I can return to my beloved island once more.

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