

Achill Island

Following their sea-trip from Clare Island, Visitors will come ashore at Cloughmore, Achill. To the West, there are imposing sea-stacks, along Ashleim Bay.



Achill landscape

"Ag tuile is ag trá, a chaitheann an fharraige an lá "
reads a signpost in the Irish language:
"Ebbing and flowing, the sea spends the day"

Their driver will have driven to meet the Visitors at the harbour. Just to the north of this, lies one of the many homes of Gráinne Uí Mháille, reminders of a 7th century Christian saint and two mass graves. A visit will be paid to the Achill Interpretive Centre during the tour.

A grim Graveyard

Saint Damhnat (Dymphna) founded a monastic site at Kildownet in the 7th century. She became a saint by popular acclaim. Parts of the present church at Kildownet (Cill Damhnait means 'the small church of Damhnat') are thought to date from the 12th Century. Today's church dates mainly from the 1700s and served as a working Catholic chapel in the 19th century.

There are two mass graves on either side of the roadway, each linked to the defunct Achill-Westport railway. Long before the railway opened in 1894, the story goes, a prophecy was made that 'carts on iron wheels' would carry coffins to Achill on their first and last journeys.

And so it came to pass. When the railway line did open, the first cargo comprised the bodies of thirty-two local labourers, drowned in 1894, when their boat capsized in Clew Bay. In 1937, the last train to use the line brought home ten young islanders, who had perished in a fire in Scotland. For a small church, it has a big atmosphere. The older graveyard of Kildownet contains, in addition to a memorial to the victims of the Clew Bay disaster, the unmarked graves of famine victims (1845-1848). Just outside the graveyard, by the shore, is a Holy Well.

Kildownet Tower

Kildownet Tower lies two hundred meters along the shore from Kildownet church. It overlooks Achill Sound, which separates the island from the mainland.



Kildownet Tower

The building is a fine example of a 15th Century Irish tower house. The three-storey structure stands about 40ft (12m) tall and has buttress fortifications at the top. Built in 1429 for the O'Malley Clan, it is also known as the home of the legendary Queen Granuaille (Grace O'Malley, 1530-1603), denigrated as a 'pirate' by the English.

Corrie Lakes: Mountain Walks

A **tarn**, or **corrie loch (lake)**, is a mountain lake or pool, formed in a cirque excavated by a glacier. A **cirque** (French, from the Latin *circus*) is an amphitheatre-like valley formed by glacial erosion. **Corrie** comes from the Irish/Scottish Gaelic *coire*, or cauldron. Most easily to see the beauty of the island's landscape, your Guide will take the second turn right after Dooagh (Dumha Acha – the burial Mound), driving right up to Lough Acorrymore (the Lake of the Great Cauldron). This is surrounded by scree slopes and is used as a reservoir. **Scree** is a collection of broken rock fragments, at the base of mountain cliffs or volcanoes, which result from periodic rockfall from adjacent cliffs.



Corrie Lakes

From the Lough, **there is a pleasant hour's hike north (boots needed)** towards a saddle, which overlooks Lough Nakeeroge (Loch na Ciaróige – the Beetle's Lake). In geomorphology, a saddle, col or notch is the lowest point on a mountain ridge between two peaks. In the NW of the island, just fifteen meters above the sea-level, the lowest corrie lake in Ireland is set into Blacksod Bay - like a bathtub.



Irish guys

Captain Boycott

The Captain's old Corrymore House lies below Lough Acorrymore. It looks engaging from a distance. Up close it is a sprawling collection of ad hoc extensions: set in a hanging valley, at the end of a line of holiday homes, it's the best and worst of Achill.

Gaelic Writers often assume nicknames. An Maignaire Súgach (The Merry Hawker) wrote about Captain Boycott - **the man who gave a new word to the English language**, was the son of an English clergyman. In 1854, after some time in Tipperary he left and leased an estate of 4,000 acres on Achill. Later, he became agent for the Lough Mask estates of Lord Erne (south of Westport), acquiring a farm of a thousand acres for himself.

Boycott proved himself a harsh agent. He had little sympathy with his tenants in those hard years. *"He treated his cattle better than he did us"*, one of them told a correspondent of the 'Freeman's Journal' newspaper in 1880.

The Irish tenant farmer was struggling against the wrongs of one of the worst, permanent foreign occupations Europe had seen. Mayo was (this time) the first place to resist. On September the 24th, 1880, all Captain Boycott's employees left him, at the request of the Ballinasloe Branch of the Land League (a body which advocated land reform). Everything came to a standstill. Nobody worked in his fields; shop-keepers refused to sell him anything; blacksmiths would not shoe his horses. His crops were ripening and they were his first and most urgent concern. The word **Boycott had entered the English language.**

The Orangemen of the North, planted by the English during the Plantations (ie of people, with the elimination of local populations) of the 1600s, decided to come to Boycott's aid. The 'Belfast News Letter' opened a fund and collected 800 pounds for him. Thousands of the drum beaters were getting ready to set out to Ballinrobe. The English government did not favour an Orange invasion of Mayo at that time, so they forbade the expedition. In desperation, Boycott asked for fifty men to reap his crops. Approval was given for sending fifty Ulster volunteers.

They set out, escorted by hundreds of troops, travelling by special train to Claremorris. The Lough Mask district swarmed with soldiers. On November 9th, three special trains with two hundred men of the 19th Hussars, and two companies of the Army Service Corps, with wagons, ambulances, and other war equipment, left Dublin for Ballinrobe. At Athlone, the expedition was joined by another train with four hundred more men of the 84th Regiment.

On November 11th, the Northern labourers reached Mayo. When they reached Claremorris, no carman could be found to carry them to Ballinrobe. They must walk the remaining fifteen miles of muddy roads. Fully seven thousand armed men lined the road between Claremorris and Ballinrobe. *'Well sir,'* said a local carman, to a correspondent of 'The Times', *"'tis the best menagerie that ever came into Connacht."*

The troops spent the night in the Ballinrobe cavalry barracks. They set out next day for Boycott's place at Lough Mask House. At the head of the party marched a hundred police, with loaded rifles. Then came the Hussars, with drawn swords, then two hundred men of the 84th Regiment, with fixed bayonets, marching in two files with the Ulster labourers between them. In the rear were two Companies of the 84th Regiment, guarding the provisions. Resident magistrates, constabulary officers, and press correspondents brought up the rear.

It was the most farcical official display ever seen in Ireland. The men of the Land League had their own new weapon [civil disobedience], and intended using no other, and it was to prove **more powerful than all the armed might of Queen Victoria.** For two weeks, the Ulstermen worked to harvest the crops, and all that time the rain fell in torrents. Such a downpour was never seen before or since in Connacht.

The End of Feudalism When the time for the departure of the 50 labourers and their escort came, the Land League advised the people to keep out of sight. They obeyed the instructions, and all along the road from Lough Mask House to Ballinrobe not a soul was seen, except one old woman, whom Father O'Malley a fervent Land Leaguer, jokingly accused of intimidating her Majesty's troops. With the Orangemen went Captain Boycott and his wife. The fall of feudalism

in Ireland had begun. At the head of the great cavalcade marched Father O'Malley, with an umbrella over his shoulder, to see that the way was clear. As Michael Davitt says:

“He continued to march at the head of the procession until it disappeared beyond the boundary of his parish into the records of history and of ridicule.”

The deserted Village Project

“No one knew enough to relate when and why the village was forsaken.”

(Heinrich Böll, The Irish Journal, 1957)



Stone house in the Deserted Village

An annual Summer Archaeological School is held at the deserted Village at Slievemore, NW of Dooagh. Set at the foot of the south-facing slope of Slievemore mountain, are the remains of a village of some 100 stone cottages, facing mostly in the north-south direction and extending for about a mile.

In Achill, as in many areas of Ireland, a system called 'Rundale' was used for farming, under English rule. This meant that the land around a village was rented from a landlord. This land was then shared by all the villagers to graze their cattle and sheep. Each family would then have two or three small pieces of land scattered about the village, which they used to grow crops.

Following from a study of the field systems beside the Deserted Village, archaeological investigation, and historical research - it has been deduced that settlement dates at least to the 12th Century (the Anglo-Norman period). 84 stone houses remain out of the 137 which were recorded on the first edition Ordnance Survey of 1838. Over 90% of the houses are aligned north-south, parallel to each other and fall into three categories - single chambered, two-chambered and a single chamber with an outhouse or stable attached. The megalithic tomb, close to the village, indicates that pre-historic people lived here c5,000 years ago. Over 1000 students from around the world have been introduced to archaeological field methods, accompanied by rigorous instruction in all periods of Irish archaeology.

Evidence for Neolithic agricultural activities can be traced on the slopes north of the Deserted Village, in the collection of pre-bog field boundaries, some of which extend nearly as high as the western ridge top of the mountain. Similarly, Bronze Age activity on the mountain may be reflected by these field systems and by several enigmatic round hut sites. Iron Age activity on Slievemore, if there were any, left no trace as yet recognised. Early medieval and medieval activity, by contrast, is supported by the probable antiquity of the Slievemore graveyard..

In 1845, a potato famine struck in Achill as in the rest of Ireland. The village was completely abandoned and so became known as the 'Deserted Village'. In the fields around the Deserted Village and right up the mountain, lie the tracks of 'lazy beds' (Trinseáil in Irish), in which potatoes had been grown. Most of the families moved to the nearby village of Dooagh, which is beside the sea, whilst others emigrated. Living beside the sea meant that fish and shellfish could be used for food.



Trinseáil (formation of trenches), lazy-bed system (beds for slow and relaxed labour)

Families which moved to Dooagh (and their descendants), continued to use the village as a 'booley village'. This means that during the summer season, the younger members of the family, teenage girls and boys, would take the cattle to graze on the hillside and they would stay in the houses of the Deserted Village. This custom continued until the 1940's. The residents would return to their homes for the winter months. 'Boolying' was also carried out in other areas of Achill, including Annagh on Croaghnaun mountain and in Curraun. Achill is one of the last places in Europe to have practiced this type of settlement.



Desert Village landscapes

Useful Links

- <http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/will-economics-trump-tradition-on-the-alp-/31102430>
- <http://www.gaeltacht.info/files/3-culture/3-briefs/docs/BX2-Mayo-Walks-EN.pdf>
- <http://www.independent.ie/life/travel/ireland/secret-ireland-achill-island-26604045.html>
- <http://www.destinationwestport.com/places-to-visit/achill-island/>
- http://www.minauncliffcottages.com/achill_island.htm
- <http://www.libraryireland.com/SocialHistoryAncientIreland/III-XIX-4.php>
- http://www.minauncliffcottages.com/achill_island.htm
- <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100010A/>

Blue Flag Beaches

Achill has five Blue Flag Beaches. Keem Bay, SW of Lough Acorrymore, is the most breathtaking: it is a sickle-shaped strand at the wester end of the island, scooped out of the mountains and fronting onto a deep bay once bloated with basking sharks.

Unserer Heinrich

German novelist Heinrich Böll (1917-1985), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, visited Achill regularly during the 1950s and '60s. His travelogue, 'Irish Journal', describes in loving detail his journey to Achill and his observations on island life.

Born into a liberal Catholic and pacifist family in Cologne in 1917, Heinrich Böll was drafted into the German army and fought on the Russian and French fronts during World War II. He was wounded four times before being captured and held as a US POW.

After the war, he turned to writing, basing his work on his experiences as a soldier. His first novel was published in 1949 and Heinrich Böll went on to have over 20 books of his work published. He also translated the works of other authors into German, including Irish writers G.B. Shaw and J.M. Synge. Böll's work has been compared with that of Graham Greene, both of them are said to have combined an unorthodox Catholic belief with a sense of the absurd in human actions. In 1972, Heinrich Böll was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in recognition of his humanist literature. An active supporter of writers in repressive régimes (Böll was the first to host author Alexander Solzhenitsyn after he was exiled from Russia in 1974), Heinrich Böll has been described as a literary spokesman for the disadvantaged.



Views of Heinrich Böll's Achill Cottage

Life on Achill and in Ireland generally in the 1950s provided Heinrich Böll with much material for indulging his penchant for the absurd and the incongruous, not least the casual relationship with time. The German writer, whose first book was titled 'The Train Was On Time', began his experience of the west of Ireland agreeably enough, observing that his train arrived in Westport right on schedule. Recounting the time he went to the cinema in Keel, Böll observed that - regardless of the time advertised - respect was accorded to the local clergy such that the film would only be started when they had all arrived. Böll's account of and meditation on the passage of time at the village hall in Keel is worth recounting in full:

.. "... Conversations are carried on across four rows of seats, jokes are shouted over eight; up front in the cheap seats the children are making the kind of cheerful racket heard otherwise only in school breaks; chocolates are proffered, cigarette brands exchanged, somewhere out of the dark comes the promising squeak of a cork being pulled out of a whiskey bottle; make-up is renewed, perfume sprayed; somebody starts singing, and for those who do not allow that all these human sounds, movements, and activities are worth the trouble of occupying the passing time, there remains time for meditation; "when God made time, He made plenty of it." Meditation comes surprisingly easily and is pleasant enough in this fairground of lighthearted gaiety, where bog farmers, peat cutters, and fishermen offer cigarettes to and accept chocolates from seductively smiling ladies who drive around during the day in great cars, where the retired colonel chats with the postman about the merits and demerits of East Indians. Here classless society has become a reality."

(Irish Journal, pp54-55)

The theme of time, and the abundance of it on Achill, was one that Heinrich Böll returned to many times in the Irish Journal. Referring to the island's position at the extreme western edge of Europe he observed:

"... Sitting here by the fire it is possible to play truant from Europe, while Moscow has lain in darkness for the past four hours, Berlin for two, even Dublin for half an hour: there is still a clear light over the sea, and the Atlantic persistently carries away, piece by piece, the Western bastion of Europe; rocks fall into the sea, soundlessly the bog streams carry the dark European soil out into the Atlantic; over the years, gently splashing, they smuggle whole fields out into the open sea, crumb by crumb."

(Irish Journal, p83)

Achill Island, with its 'classless society' (a legacy from when the Gaelic Brehon Laws were observed) and its casual attitude to time, appealed immensely to Heinrich Böll. He was also attracted to the poetry and humour of the Irish, which he contrasted with the stern and foreboding outlook in his native Germany. Böll wrote:

"When something happens to you in Germany, when you miss a train, break a leg, go bankrupt, we say: "It couldn't have been any worse; whatever happens is always the worst."

With the Irish it is almost the opposite: if you break a leg, miss a train, go bankrupt, they say:

"It could be worse; instead of a leg you could have broken your neck, instead of a train you could have missed Heaven ..."

(Irish Journal, p109).

To Böll this attitude requires poetic talent and creativity - to imagine a worse situation against which the present troubles seem tame. Coupled with the common Irish phrase 'I shouldn't worry', Böll contrasts this easy-going outlook with the grim reality of Irish history, famine and emigration. Time and again, he refers movingly to the displacement of Achill sons and daughters to England, Australia and the U.S., and his account of the deserted village at Slievemore carries a haunting pathos.

Referring to the family of the Dugort postmistress, 'Mrs. D.', Böll wrote:

"... One thing is certain, and that is that of Mrs. D.'s nine children, five or six will have to emigrate. Will little Peadar, aged fourteen, carrying his cardboard suitcase, hung about with medallions, supplied with a package of extra-thick sandwiches, embraced by his sobbing mother, stand at the bus stop to begin the great journey to Cleveland, Ohio, to Manchester, Liverpool, London, or Sydney, to some uncle, a cousin, a brother perhaps, who has promised to look after him and do something for him?"

(Irish Journal, p94)

In a passage that could just as easily refer to 1990, 2000 or 2016 were it not for the closure of many rural railway stations, Heinrich Böll continues:

"... These farewells at Irish railway stations, at bus stops in the middle of the bog, when tears blend with raindrops and the Atlantic wind is blowing; Grandfather stands there too, he knows the canyons of Manhattan, he knows the New York waterfront, for thirty years he has been through the mill, and he quickly stuffs another pound note into the boy's pocket, the boy with the cropped hair, the runny nose, the boy who is being wept over as Jacob wept over Joseph; the bus driver cautiously sounds his horn, very cautiously - he has driven hundreds, perhaps thousands, of boys whom he has seen grow up to the station, and he knows the train does not wait and that a farewell that is over and done with is easier to bear than one which is still to come. He waves, the journey into the lonely countryside begins, the little white house in the bog, tears mixed with mucus, past the store, past the pub where Father used to drink his pint of an evening; past the school, the church, a sign of the cross, the bus driver makes one too - the bus stops; more tears, more farewells ..."

(Irish Journal, p95)

Böll wrote in the mid-1950s:

"Of the eighty children at Mass on Sundays, only forty-five will still be living here in forty years; but these forty-five will have so many children that eighty children will again be kneeling in church."

(Irish Journal, p95)

Forty years later the forty-five adults that Böll expected to remain at home was more likely to be only twenty-five or thirty, and the eighty children he hoped would be kneeling in church was likely to be less than half that number.

This is something that Böll himself acknowledged in the 1967 postscript to the 'Irish Journal' in which he - as a Catholic who ploughed his own furrow of orthodoxy (like many of his Irish friends) - lamented the arrival of the contraceptive Pill:

"... a certain something has now made its way to Ireland, that ominous something known as The Pill - and this something absolutely paralyzes me: the prospect that fewer children might be born in Ireland fills me with dismay."

(Irish Journal, p109)

Little did he know that falling standards of Irish education, whereby eg 50% of students of science and computers fall out during their first year, has lead to an unthinkable, unthinking generation which too often does not even value vulnerable human life.



A View inside Heinrich Böll's Cottage

Heinrich Böll's legacy to Achill Island is evident most prominently in two places: his cottage in Dugort which, thanks to his family, the Böll Stiftung in Cologne, and Mayo County Council, is now an artists residence providing a short-term retreat for writers, poets and artists from Ireland, Germany and around the world. And Heinrich Böll's son, Rene, an artist, works and exhibits regularly on Achill Island.

An Dr Liam SS Réamonn

Na Comhluadair Bheo Teoranta