ERINDIPITY

RIDES AGAIN

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MENTOR
BOOKS

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Foreword

You may be wondering how a second volume of *Erindipity* has come to find itself nestling between your fingers. How can the author justify doling out more information about Ireland when 2006's *Erindipity, The Irish Miscellany* claimed to be the definitive book of its kind? You may be wondering if you've been cheated. Or you may not be wondering anything at all. You may have closed the cover and not know I'm still talking to you. Permit me, anyway, to explain how this book came to be written.

In 2005, publisher Danny McCarthy asked me to expand on his colleague, Nicola Sedgwick's, idea of a book of Irish extremes: highest, lowest etc. I wasn't that inspired. The shelves are crammed with books offering the reader little naked snippets of Irish facts and figures. So we agreed that for every superlative, I would stuff in a load of other unrelated, sometimes rude, very occasionally untrue, bits of information and observations. The book would both celebrate and lampoon all things Irish. Happily for us, *Erindipity* got great mileage in print and on the airwaves, and the whole experience was hugely enjoyable. However, there were still a lot of questions, like little urchins tugging at my sleeve, begging to be answered. How long was the longest queue for ice cream? The best place to avoid getting your knickers bombed by the Jerries? And what was the best-ever miracle on the 7A bus?

So we decided to pull on our wellies, get back in the saddle and do one final round-up of facts. Some pieces are thinly-veiled attempts to vent my spleen, such as The Worst Song. Some are historic oddities, like the English soldiers who céilí-danced all the way to meet Rommel. There are two extra-long, extra-detailed entries to cater for hardcore factologists (nerds): Longest Road and Longest Stretch of Railway. For the rest of you, there's the Best Place To See Drew Barrymore In The Nip, and much more.

Enough explanations: let's get Erindipping . . .

Dedication

With all my love to my gorgeous wife Gillian
And a hug to my little godson, Nicholas O'Sullivan

Acknowledgements

This bit is always fraught with dangers – it's not who you put in, it's who you leave out that causes the trouble. Here goes, if my memory can be trusted:

Erindipity Rides Again would not have been out for Christmas if it hadn't been for two very decent, understanding human beings: Nicola Sedgwick and Danny McCarthy.

The former calmly tolerated my tardiness and did a fantastic job fine-tuning this book. Her quick-wittedness kept me on my toes and I am deeply indebted to her. I also happen to be very fond of her. Danny, you're some man for one man, as you culchies like to say. Apart from being a bit of a genius, you also happen to be a very nice man and a good friend. Thank you both.

I'd also like to thank the following for their encouragement: my mum, Grainne, sisters Deirdre and Niamh, brothers Rory and Murph, the Carrolls – Paul, Carmel, Sophy, Baby Ben and Dominic Lewis. Then there's Cianan and Sophy (Varadkar) O'Sullivan, Andrew and Gabriel Flood, Lance and Suzanne Hogan, Gareth and Charlie O'Connor, Maurice ('Rusty') Haugh, Tony and Aoife O'Donoghue.

The sources of information for this book are too many to mention, they include newspaper archives, the internet, RTÉ, The National Library and my own stack of history books and periodicals. Damien Corless' great book on Irish politics, *Party Nation*, deserves special mention for the Anthem and the *Irish Press* headline stories. A special word of thanks goes to Noirin Hegarty for being so flexible about my working arrangements. And the final word goes to the late Mark Ashton: we all miss you.

Contents


PEOPLE
PLACES

Shortest and Longest

Shortest Stretch of Coast

GAA nickname aficionados will already know that Clare is the Banner County, Meath the Royal County, Cork the Rebel County, Armagh the Orchard County, Kerry is the Kingdom, Waterford the Decies and **Leitrim** is . . . any guesses for what Leitrim is? Leitrim is 'Lovely'.

No one, not even its own inhabitants, could be bothered to dream up a sporting name for this pretty, but lonely, lump of Connacht. So they called it 'Lovely Leitrim'. Can you imagine a worse monicker to be inflicted with as you race out onto the pitch with your ball or your ashplant in your hand, fired up, baying for blood and the announcer roaring: 'Here come the Lovelies!'?

'Lovely' is what you reply when someone asks you how your cup of tea is. It's how you describe the beige socks you got as a Christmas present. It's the code word for

someone or something that's insipid, forgettable, uninspiring – but not too boring to be annoying. It sums up someone who is not interesting enough to be irritating, but dull enough for you to start spring-cleaning the inbox of your mobile phone while they're talking to you. 'He/she's really lovely,' you say to a mutual friend because you can't recall the person's presence as offensive, but neither can you recall them having any discernible features. Think Mr Potato Head from the movie *Toy Story* (1996) – denuded of his plastic nose, eyes, mouth, ears, hair and brows. Leitrim is 'Mr Potato Headless'.

Someone once said, uncharitably, that if Leitrim was a colour it would be taupe. Apart from being unfair this is also untrue – it would be grey. 'Leitrim' is the Anglicised version of *Liath Druim*, the 'grey ridge'.

That's not to say that Leitrim does not possess many wildly interesting facets, it's just that the rest of Ireland couldn't be bothered looking for them. And here are those facets: the county is 1,526 sq km and divided into two parts by Lough Allen – the northern bit being mountainous, the southern half being level. There's some industry (textiles, car parts, electrical goods and the like) and oats are grown. As are potatoes. And there's a pig farm somewhere. And there's lots and lots of grass. And rain.

So you see, Leitrim has a lot going for it.

It also has some wonderful scenery, but seeing as how scenery isn't edible its population declined from 155,000 in the Famine years of the nineteenth century to 28,950 in the present one. According to the 2006 Census Leitrim has the **Lowest Population Density** (that is, the

number of persons per square kilometre) in the State at eighteen. To put this in context, Dublin has the highest with 4,304 and the overall figure for the country is 60 per sq km. This figure is an increase on the previous low of sixteen, but is still rather diminutive.

But it's not all doom and gloom in Leitrim – it can boast a very high per capita number of world-class authors. First there's the late, brilliant son of Aughawillan, **John McGahern.** Okay, so it is all doom and gloom. Then there is, of course, the local drug-loving Australian-Mexican Booker Prize winner.

DBC Pierre – or **Peter Warren Finlay** as he was Christened in Oz – landed in Leitrim in 2000 after a colourful youth spent dabbling with chemicals and chasing various dodgy schemes, including attempting to locate the lost gold of the Aztecs. He was raised in Mexico by his wealthy English parents so the transition to life in crazy, out-of-control old Leitrim can't have been too hard. It was here with the rain dripping down the windowpane that he edited his debut novel, *Vernon God Little,* which won the stg£50,000 prize in 2003.

If DBC (Dirty But Clean) came to Leitrim looking for solitude he may not have been impressed to learn that the underpopulated county is split down the middle on gender lines: there are 14,903 chaps to 14,047 ladies. On top of that 33.1% of the population is under twenty-five. With that frisky, young 1:1 ratio Leitrim is seeing plenty of love action and should, in no time, be bursting at the seams with families bringing their kiddies to the only beach in the county. That beach also happens to be the

Shortest Stretch Of Coast In Ireland – 3.21 km of Donegal Bay, 14.5 km to the southwest of Bundoran. If it ever gets overcrowded, the inhabitants could always spend their holidays on Ireland's . . .

Longest Beach

Erindipity Rides Again is delighted to be the first book of its kind – or any kind for that matter – to reveal that there are nineteen rhyming counties on the island of Ireland. Most of them are pretty ropey, and five of them share the same end words, but rhyme they do. They are: Dubli(n), Monagha(n); Wick(low), Car(low); Wex(ford), Long(ford), Water(ford); Meath, West(meath); Kild(are), Cl(are); May(o), Slig(o); Lei(trim), An(trim); Ferman(agh), Arm(agh). If you rule out the Meaths, as they're really just the same name repeated, then the counties with the most rhyming letters are Kerry and Derry with four apiece. Incidentally, the non-rhyming letters D and K also happen to be the author's initials. The latter means very little but does hint at a grotesque, bloated ego at work on this book.

Derry and Kerry are not only the most rhyming counties in Ireland, they also share another unique boast. Benone/Magilligan Strand, from Downhill to the mouth of Lough Foyle in north Derry is considered one of the finest beaches in Ulster and is said by the good folk of that part of Ireland to be the longest in the country. They're not alone in this claim. A quick Google of 'Northern Ireland Longest Beach' will throw up

gazillions of sites saying the same thing. Even the excellent *London Independent* newspaper of 26 May 2001 and Irish News.com back up the claim (see http://travel.independent.co.uk/news_and_advice/article245973.ece and http://www.irishnews.com/tourism/derry/dyquick.html).

However, if you swim around the coast to the other end of the island you'll hear the same claim being made in Kerry. So who's right, the Foylesiders or the citizens of the Kingdom?

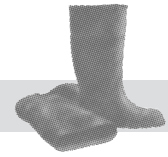
The answer is: Kerry. The longest beach in Ireland stretches 19.5 km from Maharees through Castlegregory to Cloghane village and can kick sand in the face of Benone/Magilligan Strand, which is only 11 km. However, (or 'highandever' as they say in Derry), the northern beach has an even more interesting claim to fame than its Kerry cousin – it was here that **Harry Ferguson** earned his place in the history books by making the first powered flight in Ireland back in 1909.

Ferguson (1884–1960) travelled a full 118.5 m in a monoplane that he had built himself. This intriguing man went on to drive racing cars, started his own motor business in 1911 and during the First World War designed and introduced tractors to rural Ireland, revolutionising farming. Motor giant **Henry Ford** was so impressed with Harry's achievements that he offered him a job (which he turned down), and in 1938 undertook to manufacture Ferguson's machines in America for the latter to sell. The deal was a 'gentleman's agreement', based on nothing more than a handshake and Harry

would live to rue it. After Henry Ford passed away he became embroiled in a dispute with the Ford Motor Company and eventually walked away with $9.25 m compensation in 1952. Similarily a 1953 merger with the Canadian Massey-Harris company worked out unhappily for him and he decided to retire, leaving an extraordinary legacy around the farmyards of the world.

Fergie was a real gent and his dream was to raise living standards all over the world. In 1943 he stated that agriculture 'should have been the first industry to be modernised, not the last'. Think of Bob Geldof on a tractor but with better personal hygiene.

Happily, Harry was not the first Irish transport pioneer with a heart of gold – there's also the charitable Mr Robert Dowling who's coming up in the next section. Now hurry along and read the following interesting facts.



INTERESTING FACTS

- Carlow has the bizarrest GAA nickname in the country. Its players are called The Scallion Eaters (pronounced 'Ayters').
- Ireland has one-third of the world's coastal links courses and two of them are based in the same County Clare townland – Lahinch.
- Kerry was once the centre of communications between Europe and the States. The first

transatlantic cable was laid between Valentia Island to Hearts Content, Newfoundland on 14 July 1865. The first commercial message sent from the Kerry station was from Queen Victoria to the American people and it read: 'Glory to God in the highest, on Earth peace, good will to men'. The island is also home to the oldest footprints in the northern hemisphere. The pre-dinosaur tetrapod tracks, which form a trail about 15 m long, were made between 350 and 385 million years ago. Endless gabbing and primitive life forms in Kerry? Who'd have thought it?

Longest Stretch Of Road

Forget the Romans – when it comes to road building, the Irish have always been top of the rubble heap.

Generations before Julius Caesar and the boys had the good sense to criss-cross their empire with highways and byways the Irish had shouldered their shovels, packed breakfast rolls in their satchels and headed off into the mushy peatlands to carve out our ancient bog roads. And while Custer and his men were getting free haircuts from battle-axe-wielding Indians, who were swinging their pickaxes to get the American railways up and running (well, they *are* a type of road)? That's right, the Irish, of course.

And when her Britannic Majesty, Queen Victoria, was

ruling the waves, or waiving the rules or whatever, who was it that was out digging her streets of London in the belief that they were paved with gold? Poor **Paddy Navvy**, that's who (while also offering to tarmac her driveway as well).

Is it any wonder then, that the Irish love their roads so much? In terms of recent history this love affair has become more of a wild, steamy-session-in-a-layby as our wealth and status in the world has grown. 'You can never have too many roads', the ancient proverb goes and it was this that prompted our politicians to go begging to Europe in the 1980s for money to build more of them. If we were all unemployed (which we were), then we might as well look busy, the logic went. Then as more people started working on the roads the unemployment figures went down and then the house prices started to rise because the New Navvys, as they were called, needed somewhere to live. Then the Old Navvys came back from Birmingham and London and got jobs working for the New Navvys and they too bought houses. 'Hello,' said the Americans, catching the scent of a fast buck, 'Those roads look mighty fine, and we were wondering if you guys would like to build us some factories for making stuff for erectile dysfunction and the like . . .' and the New Navvys

In terms of [Ireland's recent history with roads] this love affair has become more of a wild, steamy-session-in-a-layby as our wealth and status in the world has grown.

said, 'We'd love to, pals, but all our Old Navvys are busy working on the roads', and the Americans said, 'You should get some Polish Navvys, because they're cheap, they work hard and they only want Sunday morning off to go to Mass' and the New Navvys replied, 'Great idea', and went off to sell their Hiaces and buy state-of-the-art Jeeps to drop their children off at the childminder's because

A): they had loads more money and

B): only Navvys drove Hiaces and they didn't want to look like Navvys any more.[1]

Now there were more Hiaces and Jeeps on the roads than ever before, so the New Navvys created what became known as 'traffic jams' and used to spend hours sitting on their beloved roads honking their horns happily until someone else came up with an ingenious plan. 'Let's make some money out of these traffic jams,' they said, and they built toll booths in the middle of their new roads, which meant that the traffic jams were worse and they got to make money and buy more Jeeps and everybody was happy. And that is how the Celtic Tiger was born.

Fact. Now where were we?

The longest highway in the country is also the oldest and is called the **Esker Riada**, which traverses Ireland from Lucan in north County Dublin to Galway in the west. It is approximately 246 km long, which is 313 km short of the famous Appian Way in Rome (563 km), but 9,300 years older as the Romans only turned the first sod on their road in 312 BC.

[1]You may be interested to learn that this is The Longest Sentence in This Book. Try reading it in one go, out loud, without pausing for breath.

The early inhabitants of Ireland knew the Esker Riada as *An Slí Mór*, which translates as The Great Way, and to them it was the island's most important thoroughfare. The Esker Riada also bisects Ireland and the two halves are roughly equal in size. After the Battle of Maynooth in 120 BC, Conn of the 100 Battles and Owen Mór agreed that the country would be divided into two parts either side of the Esker Riada, to be called *Leath Cuinn* and *Leath Mogha* – Conn's Half and Mogha's Half respectively. Dividing the country north and south isn't such a new idea after all.

Many travellers on *An Slí Mór* would have been heading to places like Tara and Newgrange (*Brú na Bóinne*, built 3,100 BC) and might have stopped off at Ireland's biggest crossroads for a jig or cup of tea. This crossroads is located at Clonmacnoise which was founded by St Ciaran in AD 548 and is (tape measures aside) roughly in the centre of island. The dead centre of Ireland can be found at 53N and 8W, should you be inclined to locate it. For many years people believed it to be hiding in Emmet Square, Birr, County Offaly, but *Erindipity* successfully disproved this and destroyed the town's tourist industry. Please don't sue.

(It's in Tipperary near an area known as Kilcunnahin Beg, not far from Cloughjordan and 0.6 km ESE of The Pike).

At either end of *An Slí Mór* lie **Galway** and **Lucan**. Galway is famous for wild, beautiful scenery and stag parties while Lucan is famous for a big spa and a famous general (not the same person).

In 1758 a sulphur spa was discovered on the bank of the Liffey at Lucan village and the subsequent Spa Hotel became a favourite meeting place of the Dublin set who came to take the health-giving water and be entertained. Some visitors, however, left the hotel in an altogether unhealthier state than when they arrived. In 1825 Mr Owen O'Fisher from the Irish Society in London ingested more than the water at Ireland's **Most Famous Health Spa** for his breakfast. In his report to the society he wrote that his meal was composed of fried lamb chops, boiled tongue, eggs, cream, freshly churned butter, a variety of breads, griddle cakes and tea and coffee. He washed all this down, not with a glass of Liffey water, but a half balloon of white cognac. Presumably he went for a run on the treadmill afterwards.

Eventually drinking sulphuric river water went out of vogue and the spa building became a school for Protestant clergymens' sons. Then in 1883 the Lucan steam tram arrived, reviving interest in the spa, and a new hotel was built near the old one. This hotel is still there and will still supply draughts of the waters if you ask nicely.

Lucan is also famous for being the demesne of **General Patrick Sarsfield**, the man who signed the Treaty of Limerick with England in 1691. Sarsfield, the first Earl of Lucan, was born around 1650 to Patrick Sarsfield Snr and Anne O'Moore, daughter of Rory O'Moore. He was educated at a military college in France and built up an impressive career as a soldier. He was made MP for County Dublin on 7 May 1689 and a commissioner for raising taxes the following year. It was in arms, however, that

Sarsfield made his name because when William of Orange landed in Ireland he found himself guarding Athlone. Later that year he was made Baron Roseberry, Viscount of Tully, Earl of Lucan and Colonel of the Lifeguards.

He went on to be commander-in-chief of the forces in Ireland and after the disastrous Battle of Aughrim led his men in an orderly retreat to Limerick, an action that saved a lot of lives. He then brokered the terms of the Treaty of Limerick on 3 October 1691. But perhaps all the years spent drinking Liffey water had softened his brain so much that he trusted Perfidious Albion[2]. The Treaty consisted of two parts: military and civil. The military articles allowed Sarsfield and other members of the Irish army to join the French or Williamite armies. Most opted for the former and left Ireland for France on twelve ships carrying 2,600 men in the Second Flight of the Earls. So far, so okayish.

The civil part of the Treaty dealt with the treatment of Catholics and the property of those who had fought for King James. This part was ultimately broken and after 1691 the Catholics were penalised and their lands confiscated. As a result Limerick is sometimes called the City of the Broken Treaty. Or, in more recent years, City of The Broken Bottle On The Head of a Saturday Night.

Sarsfield died at the head of a French division at the Battle of Landen in Flanders on 29 July 1693.

As this is fast becoming the **Longest Stretch of Text in This Book** let's return to the Esker Riada. While being Ireland's **Longest And Oldest Highway**, is not, however, Ireland's Longest Stretch of Road. This is

[2] An old derogatory term for England

because it's not man-made. The esker is a natural range of rocky mounds which were deposited by a retreating glacier about 10,000 years ago at the end of the last ice age. Therefore it's not the Oldest Road either. That distinction could well belong to the Iron Age road on display at Corlea in County Longford, which was built around 150 BC across boglands close to the Shannon. The 18 m-long oak road is the biggest of its kind to have been uncovered in Europe, and is on permanent display in a purpose-built hall with special humidifiers to protect the wood. The part of the road that remains buried has been carefully preserved by Bord na Mona and the Heritage Service. We say it may be the oldest, but old bog roads are constantly being uncovered as the country's lust for flyovers and underpasses rages unabated.

But it's not just bog roads being discovered. In May 2007, just twenty-four hours after the Minister for Transport turned the sod on the €850 m M3 motorway in County Meath, it was confirmed that a site of major archaeological importance had been discovered in the Tara-Skryne valley. The circular enclosure, clearly visible on a hillside at Lismullin, was most likely used for rituals in either the Iron Age or Bronze Age. For years campaigners had unsuccessfully attempted to stop the 60 km M3 going through the area, which is one of the most archaeologically rich in Europe. The argument that it would destroy the soul of the place and inevitably ruin major historical sites failed to impress the men with the concrete mixers. 'Find ancient settlements/temples/ whatever at Tara? Go on out of that', had been the response. Didn't they look foolish

when they had to tell the New Navvies that construction was being put on hold? To say that work on the motorway has since progressed at a snail's pace would be correct and would also provide a pithy little segue into the following few paragraphs.

It's not just archaeologists who drive road builders around the bend. In 1999 work on the €160 m, 13.2 km M7 Kildare Town bypass ground to a halt because of a complaint to Europe about the plan to solve one of the country's main traffic bottlenecks. The culprit in this case was a snail.

It wasn't just any snail, however. It was the rare *Angistora vertiego* which lives in Pollardstown Fen, just 4 km from the bypass. Fans of the whorl snail claimed the new road would devastate water supplies to the marsh area, draining away nearly two and a half million litres as the bypass was dug near it. The fen is considered to be unique in terms of its flora and fauna – as well as for its most famous inhabitant.

True to its nature, the snail dragged out the row for over two years before it won its case. Engineers went back to the drawing board and eventually used an impermeable liner or 'tanking' in the construction of a 3.5 km section of the motorway, which finally opened in 2003. It was the first time that this method had been used in Ireland, so the little snail had made road building history as the **Shortest Campaigner to Halt a Roadworks**. This is all is very nice but doesn't get us any closer to revealing the Longest Stretch of Road, which is . . . but before we get to that, you might be interested to

know that the **Longest Stretch of Road To Be Snubbed By Everyone** can be found in County Cork. The M8 bypass of Rathcormac, Fermoy and Watergrasshill in the north of the county was opened in October 2006 on budget (€300 m) and eight months ahead of schedule. It had taken 400 construction workers twenty-seven months to build and the Government boasted that it would remove 17,000 heavy goods vehicles from the traffic flow through the villages. The good motorists of Ireland's largest county were delighted and understandably proud of their achievement – until they learned the road was to be tolled at €1.60 per car. Soon afterwards the unfortunate residents of Watergrasshill were complaining that the bypass had actually increased traffic through the hamlet by 6,000 vehicles per day, including around 1,100 trucks, which were all avoiding payment of the tariff.

In early 2007 the toll operators admitted that only 11,000 vehicles per day were using the stretch of road. Indeed, the toll proved so unpopular that drivers from Cavan began making weekend round trips to Watergrasshill just for the enjoyment of saving some money.

And finally, the unveiling of the Longest Stretch of Road ever built in Ireland. According to the National Roads Authority, 'the M8/N8 Cullahill to Cashel road project, which commenced in October 2006 and is due for completion at the end of 2009 is the longest road project ever to be undertaken in the State to date and comprises approximately 40 km (10 km motorway and 30 km high-quality dual carriageway). The M4

Kilcock/Kinnegad motorway which was officially opened in December 2005 comprises 39 km of motorway'. So now you know.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Roscommon is the Pothole Capital of Ireland. On 2 May 1985 Fianna Fáil's Bobby Molloy told the Dáil in Private Members' Time that 'there are LITERALLY millions of potholes in County Roscommon'. He went on to implore the transport minister to act, as he had told Mr Molloy on 'two recent occasions that he was the man who was going to fill the potholes'. The minister was good to his word, but decided that for him to personally fill in 'literally' millions of potholes might take up too much of his time. So he had them transported to Monaghan instead.
- There are approximately 97,000 km of paved roadways in the Republic of Ireland. All of it pristine, unclogged and well-maintained.
- Lentil-eating, tree-hugging crusties are frequently responsible for holding up roadways etc., but planners in County Kerry have to contend with an altogether different type of protestor – the hooligan fairy. In February 2007 the Little People were roundly blamed for sabotaging one of the

major national primary routes in the southwest. A mysterious dip which appeared on the N22 at Curraglass near Killarney baffled engineers and led to suspicions by one councillor that angry fairies were behind it. The road passes through a wide area of standing stones and ancient monuments on the foothills of the Paps Mountains. The locality is steeped in folklore and a number of place names refer to fairy forts or 'lioses'. In 2005 the road suddenly developed a big dip several metres long, and extensive repairs were carried out by the council. Two years later the road dipped again and county councillor Danny Healy-Rae demanded a detailed report into the matter. In a formal motion put before the council Councillor Healy-Rae asked: 'Is it fairies at work?' The council's road department later replied that it might be due to 'a deeper underlying subsoil/geotechnical problem'. This being tourist-conscious Kerry – where one can make a Crock of Gold out of a Crock of Crap – the former explanation was favoured by many of the good burghers of Killarney. Apparently the fairies were just laying the foundations for a troll booth on the motorway.

Longest Stretch Of Railroad Opened In A Day

Prior to the arrival of the railway in Ireland the primary mode of transport was either by donkey and cart or penny-farthing bicycle. The latter was particularly popular in County Roscommon as the big front 'penny' wheel was generally too large to get stuck in the 'literally millions' of potholes which were commonplace there until the late twentieth century (see Interesting Fact page 18). This bicycle's successor, the High Nelly Old Black Bike only caught on in that county after the potholes were exported. But this is a digression.

On 17 November 1834 the *Hibernia* – or Iron Horse as the ancient inhabitants of The Noggin used to call it – became the first train to steam down the 8.8 km track between Westland Row station in Dublin's city centre and Kingstown in south Dublin (now Pearse to Dun Laoghaire) at the official opening of Ireland's first passenger line. It made the journey in 19.5 minutes – just 30 seconds slower than it takes today.

The railway was intended to be opened in June of that year, but due to technical hitches and a massive storm which demolished the bridge across the Dodder at Lansdowne Road, it saw more false starts than Sonia O'Sullivan. The *Dublin Penny Journal* of October 1834 described one of the test runs:

> Connection between the engine and carriages was at first by means of chains, which as may be imagined, produced very unpleasant results when starting or stopping – the carriages crashing together again and

> again before they came to rest. The spring buffer to some extent remedied this, but it took some time before a silent and satisfactory method of coupling[3] was evolved.

The excitement around the project outweighed the initial objections to wasting stg£300,000 so that a 'few nursery maids' could descend from 'the town of Kingstown to the sea at Dunleary, to perform the pleasures of ablution'.[4]

The *Dublin Evening Post* was delighted with the opening of the 'splendid work' but was unimpressed at the early start the first passengers had to endure without their MP3 players, mobile phones and free newspapers to help them avoid making eye contact with their fellow commuters:

> Notwithstanding the early hour at which the first train started – half-past nine o'clock [sic] – the carriages were filled by a very fashionable concourse of persons, and the greatest eagerness was manifested to witness the first operations of the work. Up to a quarter-past five the line of road from Merrion to Salt Hill was thronged with spectators, who loudly cheered each train that passed. The average rate at which the trip was performed yesterday was nineteen minutes and a half, including the delay of about two minutes at the Rock, where passengers were taken up. Much confusion was occasioned at starting by the want of proper arrangement, but this inconvenience will be very easily obviated.

Some things never change.

[3] Yes, yes, he said 'coupling'. Choo-choo trains going in and out of tunnels, woo-woo, dirty sniggers etc. and so forth. Now that we've got the phallic symbolism out of the way, may we proceed?

[4] Old Dunleary, as it was called in the nineteenth century, is situated about 1 km north of Kingstown, or modern Dun Laoghaire. The ruins of High King Laoghaire's original dún (fort), built around AD 429, survived there until the early 1800s, when a Martello tower was built on it to protect against Napoleon's navy.

Trains may have been run at intervals throughout that inaugural day, but there was no set service until the following January when they were run every half hour, both ways, from 9–5 p.m. On Sundays the trains ran every twenty minutes, with a lunch break from 12–2 p.m., a single fare setting you back 1s, 8d and 6d for first, second and third classes. The William Dargan-constructed line was a great success with the well-to-do, as they realised that they didn't have to risk life or limb or irritated haemorrhoids using their penny-farthings or donkeys to get out to Kingstown for a 99 cone outside Teddy's ice cream parlour (minus the Flake as they hadn't yet been invented). 1834 also saw the emergence of the **First Train Spotters**. At the beginning there were only a handful of these hanging out at the stops along the route, and they had to share the one anorak, but five years later their numbers swelled as the Ulster railway line opened from Lisburn to Belfast. The descendents of these pioneering anoraks might be interested in the following statistics (everybody else look away now): The Dublin Kingstown track was 4 ft 8 1/2 in gauge or 1.4 m if you prefer metric. The Ulster line was 6 ft 2 in gauge (1.8 m). The real growth of the Irish railways only started to happen in the 1840s when the

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standard gauge had been fixed at 5 ft 3 in (1.6 m). Earlier lines were altered and in 1844 Dublin and Drogheda were linked, followed in 1846 by Dublin and Carlow.

In 1850 the total track lengths measured 885 km and ten years later this had more than doubled to 2,173 km. Today that figure stands at 3,312 km, of which 46 km is electrified.

Non Train-Spotters rejoin us here. While rail travel grew in the 1800s bike sales fell off, as did the fortunes of one Charles Bianconi – Ireland's **First Ever Bus Driver**.

Joachim Carlo Giuseppe Bianconi was born in Tregola near Como in Italy to a small farmer (1.6 m in his stocking feet) on 24 September 1786. The area was renowned at the time for the cultivation of mulberries and silkworms, which is apropos of absolutely nothing whatsoever to with this piece.

Young Carlo loved to help out on the farm and go hunting with his friends and, as his dad Pietro had his own silk mill as well as cows and pigs and the like, one can presume that he had a few decent ties in his wardrobe. At the age of ten he went to live with his granny and was educated by his uncle, the Rev. Giosue in Caglio. Being the outdoor type he didn't excel at his scholarly pursuits. When he was thirteen he was sent away to another school near Asso where he also failed to shine but did manage to find himself a girlfriend whose wealthy father didn't approve of him. Life was not a bowl of cherries for young Bianconi.

After all this shunting around his father reckoned he needed to be shunted around some more and so asked an

artisan print framer, Andrea Faroni, to take him as one of his apprentices to England where he intended to set up shop. And so young Carlo went from from farmer to framer and, true to form, there was even more travel on the cards.

Faroni decided against London and headed to Dublin instead, opening his business in the Temple Bar area in August 1802. It was here that Carlo and the other boys were sent out onto streets to sell their prints to the bon viveurs and stag parties of Olde Dubline Towne. As his English was lousy, many of the revellers thought Bianconi was selling pints and gave him a clip around the lughole for misleading them. Actually, that bit's not true. But it could be. If it was true then it would explain why his English improved so quickly and he and the other boys were so successful that they were sent off every Monday with a stack of prints, returning the following Saturday with pockets full of brass. Soon they were ranging further outside of Dublin and Carlo began taking note of the poor state of transport across the country. His apprenticeship ended in 1804 and he decided to stay on to start his own print-selling business. He bought a big valise for his wares and traipsed around the countryside with it on his back. Business was good, he was liked wherever he went and he started to use the English form of his name, Charles.

Eventually he tired of tramping the roads and settled in Clonmel, County Tipperary as a 'carver and gilder of the first class' at No 1 Gladstone Street. It was here that Charles the gilder struck gold (metaphorically, of course) in 1815.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars meant thousands of horses bred for the conflict came onto the market at knockdown prices of £10–£20. Forage was also reasonable so Bianconi seized the opportunity to set up Ireland's first cheap public transport system. On 6 July of that year the first Bianconi car ran from Clonmel to Cahir and back, carrying six passengers and mail 35.4 km at 12 km per hour. The fare was one farthing a mile and the service became so popular so quickly that Bianconi branched out to Tipperary, Limerick, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Kilkenny. Other places clamoured for their own 'Bians' too.

Over the next forty years an unprecedented communications network was built up with Clonmel at its centre. By 1825 Carlo's routes covered 941 km of countryside and he employed a huge workforce of drivers, agents, stable hands and guards. He even had his own factory to build his coaches which, from 1833 on, were producing the famous four-wheeled 'long cars' which could carry up to twenty passengers at a time. Bianconi had gone from being an itinerant peddlar to become one of the richest men in the land. Then came the age of the railway in 1834 (remember the railway?) which threatened to wipe out his business. Undaunted, Bianconi developed his system around the rail network, meeting the trains and carrying people to the more remote areas of the country. Before he died in 1875 at the age of 89, Charles Bianconi had twice been elected Mayor of Clonmel, helped establish the Catholic University, bought the stately Longfield House and 1,600 hectares of land in various parts of the county, married his

daughter off to Daniel O'Connell's nephew and witnessed the opening of the Longest Stretch of Railway Line on a single day.

This was the 122.3 km run from Mullingar to Galway on the MGWR (Midlands Great Western Railway), launched on Friday 1 August 1851.

INTERESTING FACTS

- In 1840 1,280,761 passengers travelled on the Dublin–Kingstown train line. In 2006, 27 million people used the Dart (Dublin Area Rapid Transit) service along the same route. The following are the stations servicing the Dart: Greystones, Bray, Shankill, Killiney, Dalkey, Glenageary, Sandycove, Dun Laoghaire, Salthill and Monkstown, Seapoint, Blackrock, Booterstown, Sydney Parade, Sandymount, Lansdowne Road, Grand Canal Dock, Pearse Street, Tara Street, Connolly, Clontarf Road, Killester, Harmonstown, Raheny, Kilbarrack, Howth Junction, Bayside, Sutton and Howth.
- Dalkey Dart Station is an anagram of Yank Ate Tart's Dildo (a favourite southside dessert) while Harmonstown Dart Station is Hoots Mon! It's Drawn Tartan, which is just plain gobbledygook.
- Bianconi once spent a night in the cells in Passage East, outside of Waterford, when he was caught flogging a print of Napoleon Bonaparte during

the height of the war. This meant he was either very brave or preternaturally stupid.

- Bianconi invented the *long* car, lived in *Long*field House and appeared in this book in the section '*Long*est Stretch Of Railway'. No, it's not a coincidence. Much.

Longest Distance Travelled In A Bathtub

Here follows an interruption by the author: the following two entries should, arguably, be included in the People section of this book as they deal with a number of very interesting and unusual characters. However, it would be wrong not to mention the diaspora and those places they have Hibernicised through their sheer audacity or, in some cases, pure nuttiness. South America is one of those places often overlooked by students of Irish history as they gaze westwards across the Atlantic. For example, many are aware that Admiral William Brown of Clifden founded the Argentine navy but may not know that the great cattle ranches of the Pampas are practically all owned by the descendants of emigrants who left these shores in the nineteenth century. These people, many of whom have never set foot in Ireland and for whom Spanish is a native tongue, speak English with their forebears' regional Irish accents. Similarily, how many could tell you that Che Guevara was of mixed Spanish and Irish ancestry and could trace his roots to the

Lynches of Galway? With this in mind, I beg your leave to include the following two Erindipitous pieces, both based around the Amazon and coincidentally the Peruvian town of Iquitos.

Actually, ignore all of the above. It's my book and I'll write what I want. *DK*

The longest distance ever travelled in a bathtub is 804 km, give or take a few metres.

Dubliner **Robert Dowling** set this pioneering benchmark in naval history when he set off down the Amazon in a customised household bathtub. Yes, that does say 'Amazon' and 'bathtub'. The Donabate man challenged himself to single-handedly sail 5,471 km along this mighty waterway (the Nile is its rival) in his singular craft to raise money for Temple Street children's hospital.

The idea came to Robert when he was chatting to friends about what mad thing they all wanted to do before they died. Twenty-five years – and a large dollop of his own money – later, the dream became reality when the forty-eight-year-old salesman-cum-sails man set off from the Peruvian town of Iquitos in May 2006 (possibly humming 'rub-a-dub, three, sorry, ONE man in a bathtub'. Or possibly not). His course was downriver with the flow to the border of Colombia and Brazil, covering 400 km and then on through the latter country, finally reaching the town of Almerim close to the coast.

His bath – should you ever wish to attempt this yourself – was housed in a steel frame supported by side tanks for

extra stability and powered by a 15 hp Suzuki outboard engine. The journey, undertaken with tinned food, a GPS unit, satellite photos and various charts and maps, started off well. The Peruvians had taken a shine to our naval hero and Robert enjoyed a relatively trouble-free journey until he reached Colombia. There he had to contend with the threat of running foul of the infamous, ruthless rebel group FARC. Travelling as quietly as he could by night he stole by their campfires and continued to negotiate the river into Brazil. It was here, sadly, that his plans went down the plughole. But it wasn't a rebel armed to the teeth or even a shoal of hungry piranhas that ended Robert's journey – it was a bureaucrat. After travelling 804 km through the jungle he was told that he couldn't continue because he didn't have a licence for his bathtub.

Picture the scene: hardy Irishman in a bath in deepest Brazil accosted by little man with a clipboard and a peaked cap . . .

Robert: Morning.

Bureaucrat: Morning.

Robert: Looks like rain. (*smiles*)

Bureaucrat (*sarcastically*): Well, you *are* in a rain forest. Do you have a licence for this . . . *(waves dipboard in direction of bathtub)* . . . vehicle? Sub-section C, Paragraph One of the Amazonian River Code clearly states that all motorised bathtubs must be licenced. It's the law, you know.

Robert: No.

Bureaucrat: Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle, sir?

Robert: Yes, I would mind.

Bureaucrat: Why?

Robert: Because we're in the middle of a river . . .

And so ended – if not exactly in those words – Robert's incredible journey.

However, the adventure didn't end there. In November 2007 Robert was making plans to return and retrieve his tub from the small town in Colombia where he had been forced to leave it. He was also planning his next trip down the Amazon to raise funds for disadvantaged South American children – on a jet ski.

This extraordinary, kind-hearted Dubliner won a Best of Irish Award from the *Irish Daily Star* newspaper in 2007 and *Erindipity Rides Again* believes Dublin City Council should erect a statue in honour of him.

We could nickname it 'Rob-a-Dub-Dub-in-a-Tub'.

Longest Distance Sailed Up A Hill

0.8 km (or half a mile). Whatever about the sanity of travelling down the Amazon in a bathtub, sailing a 340-tonne steamboat up a small mountain in order to build an opera house in the Peruvian jungle is clearly cuckoo.

This is what Mr Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald did at the end of the nineteenth century to entice the tenor Enrico Caruso to perform for him, according to German movie director **Werner Herzog**.

His 1982 movie classic, *Fitzcarraldo,* tells the tale of an Irishman who lives in the Peruvian back of beyond selling ice to the local Spanish rubber barons. Unlike Fitzcarraldo, these chaps know how to run a business – exploiting the Indians, not paying their pensions and whatnot – and he is considered a bit of a gobdaw, unremarkable but for his obsessive love of opera. Oh, and he's shacked up with the local madame which doesn't go down well either. (That reference to a lady of easy virtue and 'going down' is purely coincidental). Determined to build an opera house in the town of Iquitos (where Robert Dowling started his Amazon journey), Fitzcarraldo tries to prise financial backing from the tight fists of the local millionaires. After being laughed out of town, his hooker with a heart, Molly, backs him and he buys a boat and steams upriver to an unclaimed land parcel that he intends to exploit for its rubber. If he gets rich he'll be able to build the opera house and Caruso will sing there. 'If you build it he will come', a dreamy voice tells him at one point in the movie when he's standing in a cornfield. Or was that *Field of Dreams* (1989)? Yes it was, but something similar happens because the Fitzcarraldo of Herzog's flick is definitely hearing voices and could do with being connected to a couple of electrodes.

The only river access to his potential rubber planation proves to be unnavigable due to a series of rapids and waterfalls. However, Fitzer is undaunted and tells no one of his secret plan until he reaches a spot in the river that runs parallel with the upper tributary and his prospective

plantation. How is he going to get his steamboat 0.8 km over the mud mountain that separates the two rivers? With pulleys, ropes and a lot of Indian sweat, of course. Despite winding up broke – mentally and financially – Fitzcarraldo achieves his dream of opening an opera house.

Herzog's story of obsession and insanity, starring fellow German Klaus Kinski (perhaps they should have called it Fritz*carraldo*) is loosely based on fact, but the making of the movie was stranger than anything his fevered brain could have dreamt up. After the original leads, **Jason Robards** and **Mick Jagger**, were forced to pull out due to illness and tour commitments he got Kinski on board and then reshot the entire movie, which was already 40% complete. Robards and Mick had a lucky escape as filming proved to be an extraordinary ordeal, and involved hauling Fitz's 340-tonne steamship at a 45 degree angle over a small mountain – without camera trickery.

Herzog also shot several scenes onboard the steamer while it ploughed through the rapids, injuring three of the film crew. Kinski, Herzog's longtime friend and collaborator, was also something of an insurmountable obstacle as he fought with director and crew and seriously cheesed off the natives. At one point a local chief offered to murder him for Herzog, who turned down the kind offer as he needed him to complete filming.

The life of the real Fitzcarraldo was no less interesting than his fictional namesake. **Isaias Fermin Fitzgerald**

was born in 1862, the eldest child of an Irish naval officer who had settled in the mining district of San Luis de Huari, in the Central Andes of Peru.

The young Isaias was a bit of a firebrand and got up to all kinds of shenanigans including getting near-fatally wounded in a gambling quarrel just after finishing school. He was also accused of being a Chilean spy during Peru's war with that country in 1879, forcing him to change his name to Carlos Fernando Fitzcarrald. Still in his teens, he ran away into the jungle and took up work as a rubber tapper. By the age of twenty-six he was the richest rubber man in the Ucayali region of Peru, exporting his bouncy product all the way to London. At thirty-one the enterprising Fitzcarrald founded a city and had an isthmus named after him (who wouldn't want an isthmus named after them?), opening up a new transportation route which made him even wealthier. It was during the discovery of this new route that he hauled his steamboat up a mountain. Unlike Herzog, however, he chose to dismantle the ship and carry it up piece by piece to lighten the Indians' load.

This was not to say that he wasn't an utter swine to the indigenous people of the Amazonian forests. His brutality was as legendary as his brilliance as an explorer and his choice was simple: 'Work for me under horrible conditions on rubber tapping expeditions that will last for years – or be put to death.' Nice man.

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Despite achieving so much in his short lifetime, many today regard Charlie Fitzgerald as just another greedy cog in the wheel of English imperialism and a destroyer of native cultures displacing, as he did, various tribes from their territories. On 9 July 1897 the thirty-five-year-old Fitzcarrald/Fitzcarraldo/Fitzgerald was drowned in the Urubamba river, when the boat carrying him to his isthmus was wrecked.

Perhaps if he had chosen to travel by bathtub . . .

INTERESTING FACTS

- Staying with the domestic appliances theme, Robert Dowling's journey with a bathtub has a strong rival in the silliness stakes in British comedian Tony Hawks' trek around Ireland. At the close of the twentieth century an inebriated Hawks accepted a bet for stg£100 to travel the circumference of the country in one month – with a fridge. The trip was completed on time after his travelling companion (which cost more than his winnings) had gone surfing in the Atlantic, been blessed by a Benedictine nun, baptised in a pub, met a King and made a triumphal entry into the capital on live radio to

the strains of a bagpiper. Which is pretty cool. Even for a fridge.

- The Irish are not only fans of bathtubs and celebrity fridges, but are the world's top purchasers of Aga stoves. Thirty percent of all the iconic cookers/heaters sold across the globe in 2006 and 2007 made their way into Irish homes.
- Old rubber lips, Mick Jagger, has acted in two movies about larger-than-life Irishmen. *Fitzcarraldo* – where he had to pull out of filming – and 1970's *Ned Kelly* where he played the part of the rebellious bush ranger. Kelly was famous for wearing a bucket on his head . . . it wouldn't be a bad idea if Mick did the same.

Longest Queue For A Bath

The residents of conspicuously middle-class Dun Laoghaire, like Robert Dowling, love their baths. However, unlike Robert, the denizens of this seaside burgh are not renowned for having an adventurous streak (as they tend to vote for Fine Gael). They are certainly not rebellious. Blue-rinse grannies and spotty accountants (nobody else lives there) taking to the streets, storming the barricades and terrifying the powers-that-be? Ha! Never!!, you cry, snorting and hooting with derision.

Well, you're wrong.