

# Windows of Wonder - A Taste of Donegal

(26th August 2012)

We arrived in darkness in Donegal, the sun having set an hour before we reached our cottage. But I was not prepared for the beauty that accosted me early this morning as I saw the sun come up over the hills. For what it revealed was staggering: a magical landscape of rolling hills, worn and wild, and sheep both strong and frail, huddled together for comfort and warmth.

We went to Mass this morning in the most beautiful setting I can ever remember. The church, itself an attractive building, was but a pale shadow of the natural canvas set out all around us. We could see the whole of Lough Gartan, the birthplace of Columcille, stretching out

in front of us as we parked our car. I was reluctant to move from one cathedral to another, but ten o'clock beckoned...

We took up our seats for the start of Mass when the organ struck up the purest, sweetest notes, familiar and strange at the same time, and Maria and I caught our breath, our hearts missing a beat, as we looked at each other with astonishment. Of all the places, of all the times, to be greeted with 'As I kneel before you', sung last, three days ago at my dad's requiem, and now welcoming us to the most beautiful setting in Donegal...and never before sung and played so hauntingly except by Maria herself. The sweetest sound, the harmony true...was it fairies or cherubim or seraphim? I could not tell, but we both knew that this was something ever so special. We sought out the music makers after Mass, and one songstress soon became three as Maria introduced herself and told a tale that must have seemed as tall as any heard in these ever attentive hills. And what a joy to see the childlike wonder in those angelic faces as the truth began to dawn that here before them was an ordinary person who had created an extraordinary hymn. And as Maria went on to tell that she had never before heard it sung so perfectly, so beautifully, their delight was magnified, and something new, I'm not sure what just yet, was born.

As we left that enchanting place, what we didn't tell them was that our purpose for coming to Donegal was to write, to tell a story, and they were amongst the first to hear it told.

But my pen cannot keep up with the events of today. For no sooner have I got up and stopped writing this tale, than a knock sounds on the front door of the cottage, and there on the doorstep stands the first of this morning's angels, armed with a newly baked cake. A tale tumbles from her lips of searching high and low to track us down to bring us gifts of home-baked cherry cake and local leaflets of treasured sights and hidden places... and wanting to thank us for coming by and saying 'hello'. And now we have a name – Helen – and a phone number too!

(30th May 2013) [Time to update the story...](#)

The cherry cake lasted us the week, a piece each day to round up our lunch. And so on our final day Maria rang Helen to return the tin and the cloth in which the cake had been wrapped. Helen came round to the cottage again to collect them. We talked and made so many connections. Helen invited us back to her house later that evening to chat further. One of the most important links that emerged was that Helen was at the heart of the Pushkin Project, an initiative to promote creative writing, especially with children and young people that was proving very effective in building and repairing communities. We shared our creative hopes and fears over a lovely supper, and set in course a friendship that has continued to this day.

As I look back on our visit, I cannot but wonder that just as Helen was sharing Maria's creation so beautifully at the Eucharist at the start of the week, so we shared Helen's creation for the rest of the week – a true taste of Donegal!

