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Three Irish Journeys

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To quote John Lennon, “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” A corollary is that a good journey consists first of the pleasures of planning it, but then also of what actually happens on the trip.

While dreaming of an eventual international work exchange, I did not pass up a chance for a packaged tour to Ireland. I knew exactly what to do with the “half day at your leisure” in Dublin. I wanted to see Marsh’s Library.

A plaque at Archbishop Narcissus Marsh’s grave says he “first conceived the idea of founding a library when he came to Dublin as Provost of Trinity College. Twenty years later [1701] he spent 500 Pounds on building and establishing the first public library in Ireland.”

Today Marsh’s Library is one of the few 18th century buildings in Dublin still used for its original purpose. It contains about 25,000 volumes, most of which date from the 16th or 17th centuries. The library also contains about 300 early manuscripts, including both music by composers from the first half of the 17th century, and incunabula.

The library is located next to St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, was Dean of the Cathedral from 1713 to 1745. Other material I read in preparation for the trip explained that the section of Dublin around St. Patrick’s was a slum area in Swift’s day, and that the Cathedral had been quite rundown. This indicates that Ireland’s first public library was established in what became an impoverished area. I had also read that this was a library where the rare books are chained to their shelves, and scholars did their research in “elegant” alcove “cages” which were locked to prevent the loss of any materials.

The most intriguing prospect of all was the possibility of meeting the ghost of Dr. Marsh himself. He is said to wander the library, seeking a family document that he placed inside a book but cannot find. Libraries serving impoverished areas, security issues, impromptu bookmarks! The more libraries change, the more they stay the same.

Marsh’s Library is generally closed on Sundays and Tuesdays. The day we were in Dublin was Monday. It was also August Bank Holiday, the equivalent of a U.S. National holiday. Therefore, this week the iron gates to the library were locked on Monday instead of Tuesday. So much for the journey planned.

There was also, however, the journey experienced. Trinity College Library draws long lines of tourists, even on Bank Holidays, because it houses the ancient and famous *Book of Kells*. This work is actually four volumes of the Gospels, illuminated by four monks about AD 800. The book is famous for its colorful, intricate Celtic designs into which are woven images of animals and Latin text.

Before our “leisure time” in Dublin, we had a half-day tour of the City, which included a stop to see *The Book*, of which only two volumes are on display. I had no high expectations, having experienced other famous art exhibits. These expectations were met by an exhibit winding through one room full of enlarged illustrations on panels of explanations too lengthy for anyone to read, leading the crowd of tourists into a darkened chamber containing the main event.

In the center of the dim room, a glass display case held four ancient books, including the *Book of Kells*. Tourists—tall tourists—crowded six-deep all around the case. On tiptoe I managed to see the lovely little *Book of Mullen*, a smaller, soft-edged, gray-paged book open to a friendly-looking Saint facing a page of text. A card next to the book presumably explains something about the book; you’ll have to ask a tall tourist what it said. Oh yes, I got a glimpse of the *Book of Kells*. It looked just like its pictures.

The tour books that said I must see the *Book of Kells* also said things like, “While you are visiting the *Book of Kells*, take time to see the Long Room of the library.” In the Inner Sanctum of *The Book*, a sign points the way to the Long Room. Obedient tourist to the end, I followed the sign.

Wow. Here was the unexpected knock-your-breath-out experience of the kind that keeps me addicted to travel-



The Long Room, Trinity College Library Dublin.

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3 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Fridays. But the library in Wendlingen am Neckar was probably most typical with 24 open hours:

10 a.m. to noon and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday
2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Wednesday
3 p.m. to 7 p.m., Thursday
10 a.m. to noon and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Friday
8 a.m. to noon, Saturday

Handicapped access is limited. For example, in Köngen the library for a population of 10,000 is housed in a renovated historic grainery that used to store the grain tithes which paid the farmers' taxes. To enter the building, patrons must climb two staircases, with no elevator option. In Baden-Baden the library is an intricate warren on three floors of what appears to be a renovated residence. Patrons meander through a series of tiny rooms crowded with shelving and featuring a hodgepodge of collections. It's a browser's delight, but hardly handicapped-accessible.


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ing. Here was a huge—yes, long—room with an incredibly high arched ceiling, lined with arches which led to alcoves of 15- to 20-foot high stacks of old leather-bound books. Ladders in each alcove give access to the top shelves, if you are not a tourist confined to the center hall by thick red cordons.

High above these alcoves are galleries leading to more 20-foot alcoves of book stacks. The room smelled of old wood and leather. I could feel the presence, in the far upper reaches, of ghostly students who had not yet learned everything they wanted to know when their bodies had failed them.

The Long Room, built in 1712, is a cathedral, built to worship knowledge as contained in books. All libraries share that ancient reverence for knowledge. Our own little shrines in Oregon may lack some of the age and grandeur of that cathedral. But they serve the same purpose, perhaps, as the icons and shrines that dot the Irish landscape and result in such institutions as Our Lady Crowned Credit Union. They are daily reminders of the importance of preserved knowledge.

There is a third part to every journey, after the planning and the experience. After your return home comes the research, and sharing, of new interests opened by the experience. In the research for this article, I was reminded that even 300-year-old institutions change with the times. I did not get to see Marsh's Library in Dublin. You and I both, however, can access the catalog of Marsh's library at <http://www.kst.dit.ie/marsh/>. 

Of course, in some ways Germany's libraries and reading habits are much like America's. Harry Potter is everywhere in Germany—in the bookstores, in the libraries and featured in dinner table conversations in many households. Germans evidence surprise that Harry is known in America, however, despite the fact that English editions of Rowling's titles are easy to come by. In a typical bookstore browsers can choose from German hardcover editions, British hardcover editions with either the juvenile covers or the more discreet black-and-white adult covers, and British paperback editions. Bookstores are quite prevalent in Germany and seem to be on every other street corner. Many are small and have limited offerings but occasionally travelers will find a Borders-type store, complete with calendars, a coffee bar and even a fountain burbling in the sitting area. So if you're traveling in Germany, rest assured that bibliophiles are definitely willkommen. 



The Long Room, Trinity College Library Dublin.