

The Road To McCarthy

Contributed by
Thursday, 22 January 2009

From the man that brought you 'McCarthy's Bar' now shares his experiences as he travels around the world in search of his Irish roots and identity. This book starts with our travel writer on a chaotic flight to Gibraltar before eventually having comic encounters with tourists and monkeys once he is on terra firma. He then heads to Morocco where he turns detective to track down his alleged hereditary Gaelic Chief the MacCarthy Mor. Is he the genuine article or just another charlatan?

These early incidents in the casbah of Tangier are shambolic and hilarious in true McCarthy style. As he wanders the crowded streets he becomes more suspicious, uncertain and paranoid. His acute and shrewd observations are present once more and the reader is soon sucked into the quest with him. The book is packed with plenty of contemporary and historical tales concerning all things Irish but this time with a global twist.

With its broader, and more ambitious scope this is a denser and much more detailed work than the previous quirky 'McCarthy's Bar.' As a consequence this book is not as free – flowing but the humour is still present and its hugely enjoyable once you get into it. For every poignant story from the Irish Diaspora there is a funny often hilarious observation or story from the present. He has an excellent eye and ear for all things modern and a passionate thirst for history.

From Tangier he is off to New York City for the world's biggest St Patrick's Day celebrations where he finds himself doing a book reading in front of a bar full of boisterous drunken Glasgow Celtic supporters. The author always manages to find himself at the centre of something and it is often the chance encounters on his trip that make for the most exciting interesting and enlightening.

What I enjoyed so much about reading this is McCarthy's sure grasp and knowledge of his subject matter and his enthusiasm to learn more. He speaks to the reader as an enthusiastic, slightly disorientated, dishevelled traveller and not down at you like a knowing scholar...the book is all the better for this.

His travels take him to Tasmania where he regales you with chilling tales of convict life there as well as his witty observations on the people there. He visits Montserrat where he investigates the claims that 50,000 Irish were forcibly transported to work in the plantations of the West Indies by Oliver Cromwell in the 1650's. To his obvious pleasant surprise he learns that the Irish have indeed left their mark in this exotic location where he explains 'the national symbol is Erin on a harp, and passports are stamped with a green shamrock...' He also notes that the patois spoken is similar to that of West Ireland.

He moves on to Butte Montana a former thriving copper mining town that attracted many Irish immigrants in the 19th century. Here he learns the wonderfully quirky story of an Irish priest teaching the native Americans to dance – fast forward about fifty years later and Hollywood went there to learn the 'authentic Indian dances' from the native Americans that they had learned from an Irish priest! The book is full of little gems like this.

His journey takes him to a town named after a mining prospector, McCarthy in remotest Alaska. It has a population of 18! And is a land of snow, bears, huskies, and skidoos, home – brewed whiskey and abandoned copper mines among the mountains. From this unlikeliest place he ends his journey back in Ireland for poignant reflection and a fitting end to his search.

This is an excellent book written with huge wit and energy, sadly it was to be McCarthy's last as he passed away in 2004, I cannot recommend reading his work enough, he will be missed.

