

The Accidental Pilgrim

by David Moore

Chapter 1

So I'm sitting in a tiny café in a place called Splügen. It's a Saturday towards the end of September, and the weather is cloudy, with mist draped over the views outside. I'm finishing off my lunchtime soup (not sure exactly what's in it – my German is terrible). I'm shaking a little and feel light-headed, and I'm watching the other diners with a gently fevered intensity.

A young Italian couple are relaxing over their beers, keeping an indulgent eye on their daughter, who's fascinated by the old jukebox in the corner. A well turned-out Swiss couple are sitting in the corner with their dog obediently curled up at their feet. The proprietor and his wife are at another table just about to start their own late lunch.

It's been well over a month since I left Dublin, and I've travelled over two thousand kilometres clear across France and Switzerland. But today's the day I pedal my bike over the Alps.

My pasta arrives and I launch into it, hoping the starch will keep me grounded and give me the fuel I need. I've already been riding uphill for twenty-six kilometres today, but there's another nine kilometres of steep climbing to get to the top of the Splügen Pass, before the long descent on the Italian side of the border. Laden down with panniers, the bike handles like an oil tanker, and stopping is gradual at best. In the battle between gravity and cantilever brakes, gravity would definitely win, especially in the rain. So there's nothing for it, I just have to get on the bike and combine two days' riding into one while it's still dry.

After the food and a coffee I feel better, but I remount and head out of town with a knot of tension at the base of my spine. There's snow on the tops of the mountains, which is where I'm going. Poring over maps at home, I'd never even considered that there'd still be snow up here at this time of year. A sign tells me the pass is open except to large vehicles, and then the hairpins begin. Eight or ten loops up the hillside in the bottom gear and I'm looking back down over the town nestling in its high valley, then round the corner the road straightens. My

legs are burning and my heart's racing, but I can just about keep going like this for now. A few cars pass me, and I look for some reaction from them, but the sensible Swiss-registered Audi estates slide by mutely until a young Italian in his sporty two-seater Mercedes comes towards me and honks his horn, waving. Dude.

The road is heading up into a snowy bowl, with no obvious exit. The altimeter on my watch shows me gaining elevation in five metre blocks – 1845m, 1850m. It's colder now, and my top is zipped up to the neck, despite all the heat my effort's generating. Ahead is another set of hairpins as the road zigzags up into the mist.

I can't believe I'm doing this. A surge of excitement jolts me. The legs are feeling surprisingly good now, and a rhythm comes easily as I'm out of the saddle round the bends, and sitting down again for the straights. I'm at 1900 metres now, and the top of the pass is at 2115. The highest mountain in Ireland is half that height. There's snow on the side of the road, and I stop on the outside of a bend and reach down to run my fingers through it.

The mist is closing in, but it doesn't matter that I can't see the higher peaks around me. I'm just looking for the next corner, as each one comes to represent one day of the all the riding it took to get here. This one is the day I rode to Chateaugiron, this one is the slog into Besançon. This one is that morning coming out of Avallon, and this one the off-road excursion on the way to Baden. I grab a quick look around and out loud say, 'Thank you.' to the mountains, to the days I've put in to get me here, to the bike (especially to the bike). I'm going to make it to the top.

After the next fold in the ribbon of road, it heads round a corner to a building, the first since Splügen. It's a restaurant, but up still further is another structure. With melted snow running down the road and visibility down to ten metres, I pass the customs post. Inside three guys in uniform are watching television. They glance out the window at this Englishman who's ridden up the mountain on

a bike, and wave me through without bothering to come out and get cold. I'm in Italy.

It's a shame I can't see any of it. I stop for a self-timed photo in front of a sign with an Italian flag on it, and put on my jacket for the descent. As mountain climbers will tell you, getting to the top seems like the big achievement, but getting down is often the hardest part. The first few kilometres are not so bad; past a lake of smooth silver water, with a father and son fishing in silhouette on the shore, and down through a tiny collection of houses.

But then ahead of me looms a narrow tunnel. I have a faint recollection of seeing some pictures on the Internet of the Italian side of the Splügen Pass, with tunnels and galleries stacked above each other in the cliff face, joined by hairpin bends so that the road you were just driving over becomes the roof of the next loop. But there's no time to recall much detail before I'm launched into complete darkness. My bike lights are useless – I can't see the road ahead at all. Or the walls. Or the ceiling. Or my hands on the handlebars. I've got a vague sense of being in the middle of the road, and I know I'm still going downhill pretty fast, but I'm blind. I hit a pothole and the bike bucks me. The tyres swish through some water that's dripped from the roof. I'm half standing over the saddle with the pedals level, trying to stay light on the bike, to let it ride itself, because that's all I can do. Then there's a smudge of white in the distance off to the left a little and it widens quickly: the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm living a cliché.

I'm through it and back out into the world. Holy living fuck. I brake and lean into a hairpin and see another tunnel ahead. This time two cars are coming in the opposite direction, their lights illuminating the narrow road and the cratered wet surface. I can see more but the roaring cars fill my ears, the noise echoing around the enclosed space. With the sound bouncing around it's impossible to tell if there are any vehicles behind me. I hold on and fight the disorientation. Next comes a gallery with a couple of openings in the side wall for illumination, but it drops more steeply than the previous two, and there's a sign announcing eight more hairpins ahead.

I concentrate intently round the steep bends – ones to the left are easier, as you're on the outside and the camber allows you to feed the bike into them while still moving quickly. Right hand ones are much harder, as you scrub off speed coming into them, and turn sharply as the road drops away on the inside of the bend. Run wide and you're into cars being gunned into the corners on the way

up. At the back of my mind there's a voice saying 'This is very dangerous. I'm not happy. I shouldn't be here', but there's no choice, and I take a deep breath and try to focus on the next tunnel. There's no light in this one either and I have a vision of me slapping the bike down on the tarmac as a car comes round the corner. I can't tell where I am on the road, but at least I'm going fast enough that I'm not in there too long.

Then the kinks unwind for a time and I shoot through the first real settlement on the way down, with the road still dropping insanely. The speed on the trip computer keeps rising: 45km/h, 50, 55. And cars are still streaking past me on the narrow road. More hairpins and my body is tight from being in the same stretched position for so long, but the air is warmer and the mist has cleared, revealing wooded slopes and narrow gorges.

And suddenly I'm coming to a halt at a crossroads in terracotta Chiavenna. There are crowds wandering around, little mopeds zipping between the cars, and there's the chatter of Saturday afternoon shopping. I'm quivering, my head's buzzing, and I feel emptied – I've left it all on the mountain. I shake my head and swear quietly to myself. The scene is so ordinary and so far removed from my last few hours I might as well have been teleported into this town. I've ridden my bike up nearly a mile in the sky from where I started that morning. And then descended madly for 30 kilometres in what felt like ten minutes.

But the man I had followed from Ireland had made the same journey in his sixties wearing sandals, so I wasn't so hot.

Chapter 2

I blame Paul Weller for everything. I was sitting in the Olympia Theatre in Dublin waiting for him to take the stage, talking to my housemate Garrett about what I'd do if I owned a car.

'I wouldn't use it around town, but I'd head off down the country. Or I'd go over to England and visit all those cathedral cities I've never been to: Durham, Lichfield, Wells, Winchester.'

'Sounds good.' Garrett was more interested in when Paul Weller would appear.

'And Lindisfarne. Always wanted to go there.'

And this is when it happened. Thinking about one monastery led to thoughts of others, a door in the recesses of my mind opened up, and out came a half-remembered itinerary I'd learned about in college.

'Or I'd take the ferry to Brittany, and follow St Columbanus across France and over the Alps to Italy.'

If I'd stopped there, it might not have been too bad. But then I had to go on:

'Of course, if you were really going to do it, you'd have to go on a bike.'

I was doomed. Dublin is a city full of ideas – the pubs and cafés resound with people plotting the next big thing in film, or literature, or (until recently) technology. Everybody's doing one thing when they'd really rather be doing something else. Maybe pints of Guinness work as radio receivers for stray notions that are floating around looking for a chance to happen. Of course, many of these ideas just aren't very good, and many more are good but come to the wrong person.

But sometimes the right ideas come to the right people, and that's when the trouble really starts. And that's what happened to me. There seemed to be three conditions necessary in the recruitment of someone to retrace the route of an obscure seventh-century monk across Europe: the first was an interest in the period of history. It's not called the Dark Ages for nothing, and distracted by the promise of lots of historical sources, some vibrant characters and a hankering after relevance to the present day, most historians tend to skip the unfashionable block of centuries from 500 to 1000AD.

But not me. A bookish boy, I'd been very fond of Tolkien and Dungeons and Dragons. 'Robin of Sherwood' had been my favourite television pro-

gram. As I got older, my fascination with swords and myths turned into a slightly more respectable interest in early medieval history. One day in the sixth form I'd flicked through a university prospectus and stumbled across 'Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic' as the first course description in an alphabetical list, and I was instantly sold on illuminated manuscripts, Pictish symbol stones and obscure Insular Latin writers such as Aldhelm and Byrtferth of Ramsey. I scoffed at the Renaissance as an event so recent it was impossible to assess its true importance. (I've often wondered if the course had been called 'Norse, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon' instead, would I now be an anthropologist or an archaeologist). Of course, I hadn't opened any of the books since I left college, but at least I had a vague notion of who St Columbanus was.

The second condition was an interest in cycling. While at university in Cambridge, I'd walked rather than cycled, but Dublin was bigger so I'd started riding around town and watching the Tour de France on television. Soon I was doing sponsored rides to Kilkenny and carrying my expensive bike up the stairs at work to sit beside me all day. Things had got out of hand when I'd worked in America for three years, and mountain-biked in Colorado and Wyoming and had a regular ride that took me through downtown San Francisco and over the Golden Gate Bridge. Now I was back in rainy Dublin I thought things might calm down, but I fell in with a couple of cycling friends and neighbours and there was no hope for me (I'd tell you how many bikes the three of us have between us in our little corner of the street but unless you were a bicycle thief you'd just laugh). But for all my cycling, I couldn't repair them, and I'd never stuck all my kit on the back of the bike and headed off on a long tour.

Thirdly, you'd need to have the time to do it in. After 18 months in Kansas and 18 months in San Francisco, I'd returned to Dublin. I'd worked for Internet companies, and with dumb luck that I now pass off as remarkable prescience, I'd decided right before the high-tech economy tanked that the time was right to do something else. I didn't think it would be riding a bike to Italy, but by the time Paul Weller had finished his encore with 'That's Entertainment', my mind was racing. I appeared to be the perfect candidate to carry out this idea – there was no good reason for me not to do it. Well, there were thousands of reasons, but I would just start with some research, anyway – I might not even end up going.

Readjusting to life in Dublin had been harder than I'd anticipated. I found the city dirty and unfriendly, and too focused around pub culture. I'd come back because I had a house here, but it felt in some ways as if I'd outgrown Dublin. I wasn't taking advantage of all it had to offer in terms of nightlife and culture, but I still had to put up with all the hassles of living in a large and increasingly expensive city. I had a notion to move, but no real incentives to go anywhere. After years in cubicle hell doing things I didn't care about, I had also vowed that I'd never work in an office again, but had no real picture what I should do instead. My challenge was to think of something before my savings ran out.

I'd been home for four months, and had drifted through the weeks doing almost nothing. This may sound ideal, but it soon emerged that I suffered from both an Anglo-Saxon work ethic (from my English upbringing) and a Catholic guilt complex (thanks to my Irish mother). Pure-bred English people work hard and play hard – my inner English lad said, 'You should be largin' it, mate. You worked hard in San Francisco, and now you can go mental. Top banana.' But as soon as I tried it, my Catholic guilt complex kicked in. 'Would you like at himself there, living the life of Riley. It's well for some. Who does he think he is at all? He should go and find some more work to do.' So I did.

The first thing was to find out more about St Columbanus. Returning to my old haunts in Trinity College and the National Library in Dublin, the basic facts were quickly established: Columbanus was born around 550AD and was one of the first of the early medieval Irish monks who set off across Europe, founding monasteries as they went. He trained in Comgall's monastery in Bangor, Co. Down, but eventually felt a calling to become an 'exile for Christ', and sailed for France with twelve followers. He crossed France, and settled in Luxeuil in the Haut-Saône region, where he founded three monasteries. After twenty years there he was expelled from the country for annoying the royal family – even the Pope found him difficult to deal with – and headed into the Alps to found a monastery at Bregenz on the shores of Lake Constance. After around a year there, he continued over the mountains into northern Italy, ending up in a small town called Bobbio in the Apennines near Piacenza. He died in 615, and within a century around a hundred more monasteries had been founded by his pupils and followers. His foundations became

beacons of scholarship and teaching in a Europe that had suffered waves of barbarian attacks and related chaos.

The distances involved and the influence this one Irishman had were remarkable enough, but what was even more remarkable is that a wide selection of Columbanus' writings still survives – letters, sermons, the Rules he wrote for his French monasteries, even some poetry. This collection of work represents the earliest writings by an Irish person that we have, making Columbanus the first Irish man of letters.

As well as Columbanus' own writings, one of his Italian followers named Jonas wrote a history of his master's life within 30 years of the saint's death. Jonas' dour translator maintains the life is 'written in a barbarous Latinity', but it contains a remarkable amount of detail about the saint, gathered from people who were there at the time.

All this was very promising. Not only would it be possible to work out his route, but it might also be possible to build up something of a picture of the man himself, despite the fourteen centuries between us. I was enjoying being back in the libraries again. My sister argues that it takes at least five years to recover from being at university, but I maintain that there's no getting over it. When I hear guests on 'Desert Island Discs' prefacing one of their selections with, 'Oh, this reminds me of my time at college. Best years of my life,' I choke on my cornflakes. To appear on the programme you have to be a success in your chosen field, and yet 40 years on, people are looking back on their whole adult lives as something of a let down after their 36 months of freewheeling adolescent excess. I'd not been very excessive myself during college, so I welcomed the chance to try and be a better (that is, worse) student this time. So I got up late, put in a few hours with the books before sloping off for mid-afternoon coffees that drifted into early-evening drinks. After the grind of work, this was great. My commute was a stroll into town. My email stopped being full of production schedules, CVs of prospective employees and the agenda for the weekly team meeting; instead it was corny jokes and lunch arrangements with fellow slackers.

Then the challenge of the Manuscripts Room arrived to impose some structure on my life. I'd come across references to two books written in the 1890s by a woman called Margaret Stokes, a member of a storied Dublin Anglo-Irish family. Her grandfather, Whitley Stokes, had fought with the United Irishmen alongside Wolfe Tone (who described Whitley as 'the very best man I have ever known'). Her

father, Dr William Stokes, had been a physician to Queen Victoria and president of the Royal Irish Academy, while her brother, also called Whitley, had spent 20 years in India as a civil servant, but was best known for his translations of Old Irish texts. Margaret was an artist and illustrator, deeply involved in the Celtic Revival movement, and she had travelled to France and Italy to trace the paths of several of the Irish monks on the Continent.

This was perfect for me, but first I had to get to the books, which appeared to be kept at the centre of a labyrinth. Garrett, a PhD student at Trinity and old hand at this, briefed me on the strategy for gaining access to the Manuscripts Room.

'First you go into the shop downstairs in the old library, where the tourists come in to see the Book of Kells.'

'Check.'

'Then go up the stairs past the No Entry sign, into the Long Room.'

'Is that allowed?'

'Of course. Then it's past the guard at the top of the stairs, and under the rope. Along to the end of the room, and you'll see a set of double doors.'

'Is there a sign or anything on the door?'

'Yeah, I think it says Private, Keep Out.'

'I see.'

'Now when you open the door, an alarm might go off, but don't worry about that. Go down a flight of marble stairs, past a huge painting of the Battle of the Boyne.'

'Down? But didn't you say the Manuscripts Room is above the Long Room?'

'It is. Turn right, and in the corner is a small lift. Go into the lift. I don't think it says so, but you want the third floor. You'll come out at the reception desk for the room. Then you're on your own.'

Librarians make it clear that their sense of duty is to the books, not the people who want to read them, and the most rigorous librarians of all oversee the rare books or manuscript rooms, guarding their priceless holdings like a dragon on a hoard of gold. So when I appeared before the surprisingly glamorous female librarian at the desk with my request, she seemed disappointed. Another person come to disturb us. Why can't they just leave us alone with the collection? I was all but frisked for pens before being allowed in with my pencil and notepad, and seated at a set of tables in the middle of the room with a grey foam stand in front of me. While the books were being retrieved I tried to work out why Margaret Stokes' works were even in the Manuscripts Room – they were published books from a little over a hundred years ago, only yester-

day by the standards of a library like Trinity's. The two green hardbacks were brought by a younger librarian, who placed the first one on the foam stand, and instructed me on the use of the lengths of card and leaded ribbons to turn the pages and hold the book open. She then retreated to her desk in the corner, from where she could survey the room.

The book on the stand was *Six Months in The Apennines, or a Pilgrimage in Search of Vestiges of the Irish Saints in Italy*, published in 1892. I opened it, and saw the reason for all the care over this modest tome – there inside the front cover was an Ex Libris stamp from Lady Gregory, stalwart of the Celtic Revival, friend to W B Yeats, and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre. I had an image of her sitting in the garden at Coole Park, and turning to Yeats.

'Willie, have you read this new book by Margaret? It's quite delightful.'

'Not now, Augusta, I'm trying to write. Can you think of a word that rhymes with 'Innisfree'?'

While I was reading about plucky Margaret arriving in Italian towns and commanding a passing young boy to carry her camera up the side of a hill for her, the phone rang for the young librarian and she dealt with a query from an American genealogist. She patronisingly explained that just because someone had been admitted to the college didn't mean they had gained a degree, so they might well not show up in some of the records. While spelling out her email address, she seemed to lose patience.

'No, that's T, C, D. No, D. Yes, Trinity College, Dublin . . . So, TCD dot IE .

. . . Dot. IE. I for 'indigenous', E for 'Erin'. Indigenous Erin? Librarians.

Most of my time in the libraries was spent establishing a route to follow. Born somewhere in Leinster (possibly around Carlow), Columbanus had lived in the monastery in Bangor, County Down, near Belfast until he was in his forties. So I was definitely going up to Northern Ireland before anything else. In 590 he had set sail for France. Bangor now doesn't offer any ferry crossings to anywhere, so I'd have to travel down to Rosslare in the south east to start my own voyage. Some scholars think he landed in Cornwall (there are two places that appear to bear his name there), but most agree that he headed straight for Brittany, which was much easier for me. So that was the first part of the journey taken care of – up and down the east coast of Ireland, then onto a ferry.

Columbanus spent some time in Brittany before visiting one of the Frankish kings who granted him land for a monastery near Luxeuil in eastern France. The route he took to get there, or even where he met the king is unknown, but he probably went along the Loire, then struck out eastwards through Chalon-sur-Saône and Besançon.

We have more detail about his return journey to the coast of France. After nearly 20 years around Luxeuil he fell out of favour with the royal family, and was escorted off the premises. Columbanus' hagiographer Jonas lists the towns the party of Irishmen went through as they headed for the port at Nantes. Again, they headed cross-country to the Loire, and this time took a boat down the river. Columbanus was supposed to sail back to Ireland, but Jonas tells of a miracle that stopped his boat from sailing out of the port, and it certainly seems his guards lost interest after escorting him this far, so instead of heading home, the party of monks headed back inland, but further north.

Political history at this time in France is a hugely confusing succession of Sigeberts and Sigismunds, Theudeberts and Theuderic, all fighting for control of different parts of the country, which was loosely divided into three kingdoms. Columbanus' dispute was with the king of Burgundy, a Theuderic, but he was welcomed by the king's relatives, who controlled the other two realms.

After travelling through Paris and Metz, Columbanus reached the Rhine, and headed up the river, aiming for Bregenz on Lake Constance, where he had been granted permission to found another monastery. After a year, the changing political situation (the term medieval historians use to describe brutal battles and internecine strife) forced him to move again, and this time he went southwards to Italy, where the Lombards had recently seized power. He was welcomed at court in Milan, and granted land in Bobbio, 40 kilometres south west of Piacenza. He was only in Bobbio a year, before he died in November 615.

Columbanus' zigzag peregrinations were much more extensive than I'd imagined. It would have been impressive enough if he had travelled the shortest route from Bangor to Bobbio, but he had also crossed France three times, and navigated a sizeable chunk of what's now Switzerland. To follow every last yard of the route would involve a lot of repetition, and would also see me travelling huge distances to visit towns in which at most Columbanus may just possibly have spent a night.

Some places were clearly more important than others, and while a range of detours were easy to plan on a map, I was going to have to travel every last yard under my own steam. So a compromise plan emerged. From Brittany I'd head to Luxeuil along the Loire, (we can definitely place Columbanus in Nantes, Tours and Orleans), and then press on to Switzerland meeting the Rhine at Basle, cutting out the German loop. Then through Switzerland to Bregenz, which turns out to be in Austria (who knew?), before turning south over the Alps and down to Lake Como and the last leg through Milan to Bobbio. I sat in the elegant expanse of the National Library reading room with *The Times Atlas*, marking off distances on the edge of a piece of paper. The marks went along one side of the sheet, round the corner and back down the other side: 2500 kilometres, give or take quite a lot. Over 1500 miles. It all seemed a very long way on a bike, but there were two obvious attractions to the route. Firstly, it went through lovely places – Brittany, along the Loire, Lakes Constance and Como, the Lombard Plain. If Columbanus had founded monasteries in Belgium, I'm not sure I would have followed him. After three years on another continent it would be good to reconnect with my European cousins, especially following an Irishman who was so well accepted all the way from Ulster to Lombardy.

The second appeal was that if I was riding to Italy, I'd definitely need some new kit. The gearhead in me rejoiced. The bike itself was already taken care of – putting aside the tricky bikes I'd been riding in the States, all ceramic particulate frames and NASA-derived drivetrains, I dug around in the cupboard under the stairs and pulled out an old Dawes touring bike, made from unfashionable steel. I'd bought it years ago almost by accident, and found it slow and dull, and had never given it a fair chance. It was, however, the perfect choice for a very long trip: comfortable to ride, it had a rack on the back for attaching panniers, and a set of low gears that meant you could spin along in very pedestrian fashion. It was also a simple machine, with gear shifters on the down tube of the frame and old-style cantilever brakes. I'm mechanically illiterate, so I didn't want to be fussing with rear shocks or funky handlebar shifters on the side of a rainy road in the middle of nowhere.

There were lots of other things I did need to get, however, and over the next weeks I immersed myself in the arcane world of the serious bike tourist. I scoured the Internet for gear reviews and bargain prices, assembling a shopping list to make James

Bond envious. The great outdoors had come a long way since my camping début on the primary school summer trip to Dorset. Everything was now technical, breathable and wickable, and made from Gore-Tex, Taslan, Rip-Stop, mesh, fleece or Cordura. If it didn't fold up to the size of a cigarette packet and boast so many features that you couldn't write them all on the tiny box, then it wasn't worth having. Being at one with nature had been replaced by ignoring it entirely inside your bubble of performance products.

But I guessed I would need all the help I could get, so when the freakishly light but devilishly expensive packages started arriving, I felt heartened that there were few scrapes my combined altimeter, barometer, temperature gauge, compass, heart-rate monitor watch could not get me out of. Of course, Columbanus had much more modest equipment, and I would perhaps have done well to recall his wise comment that 'the man to whom little is not enough will not benefit from more.' But it was clear that while I might be following his route, I would be spending my days in more comfort than my saint. I planned to camp some of the time, but I also planned to stay in hotels in the larger towns, and eat a great deal of good food. This set me at odds with Columbanus' instructions to his monks: 'Let the monks' food be poor and taken in the evening, such to avoid repletion.' But after my years in America, eating my way elegantly across Europe sounded great. But first I had an appointment in a place known to the locals as Norn Iron.