# THE AGNOSTIC PILGRIM: *Travels with a Celtic Saint*

*The Agnostic Pilgrim* follows David Moore as he rides his bike from Bangor in Northern Ireland to Bobbio in northern Italy, tracing the route of the seventh-century Irish monk and hard-ass St Columbanus. By turns funny and profound, this entertaining piece of travel writing explores what happens when a non-believer goes on a 2000 mile pilgrimage.

David Moore
<address, phone number and email address here>

## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

I am a 31-year-old writer and journalist, living in Dublin. I gained a double first class degree from Cambridge University in English and Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic, studying the history and languages of Europe from AD 500-1000, and am thoroughly versed in St Columbanus' period. I also have an MPhil in Anglo-Irish Literature from Trinity College, Dublin.

My journalism includes freelance work for the *Irish Times* on arts and technology, and travel writing for the acclaimed American website, *Salon*. Other writing credits include work for *The Illustrated London News* and *d'Side* magazine.

I am also the creator of Modest Proposals, a long-running online opinion column which boasts over 1200 subscribers to the email edition. Currently, I write on film and television for the award winning Irish website, P45.net.

***Examples of work:***
The New Dublin (Salon magazine, 1998)
http://www.salonmag/wlust/feature/1998/03/17feature.html

Changed Utterly? (Modest Proposals, 2001)
<soon to be on http://www.davidmoore.cc>

Connoisseur of Crap (Square Eyes, 2001)
<soon to be on http://www.davidmoore.cc>

Links to poetry, fiction, and other journalism
http://www.davidmoore.cc

## *THE MARKET FOR THE BOOK*

*The Agnostic Pilgrim* is an entertaining piece of travel writing and history. St Columbanus' route from the seventh century provides the shape for the journey, and raises questions over the spiritual dimensions of travelling as a modern pilgrim, especially if you're a non-believer.

The writing is humorous and reflective, and shows that travel to relatively familiar places (the Loire valley, Lombardy) can still yield rewarding experiences when visited in an appropriate frame of mind. The book shows how truly worthwhile travel can be a combination of three journeys - the physical, the historical, and the internal.

With the light touch of Tim Moore's *French Revolutions* or Pete McCarthy's *McCarthy's Bar*, the book also has a historical appeal to a non-specialist audience. So the market for the book includes those who are interested in well-written humorous travel writing with more heft than the usual episodic rambling. The book would be of average length - around 80,000 words - and in standard format, with the addition of simple maps and an insert of photographs.

## *PROMOTION AND MARKETING*

As a journalist in my non-travelling guise, I am planning newspaper and magazine articles looking at different aspects of the journey, generating interest in the book. I have also created a website, (<now called http://www.accidentalpilgrim.com/>) which includes a great deal of information about the trip. During the journey, the site was advertised on the award-winning site P45.net, and the traffic figures are very good.
On publication of the book, the site could easily be adapted to support its marketing. I'm also available for readings and appearances, and have experience of radio and TV interviews from my Silicon Valley days.

## *CHAPTER OUTLINE*

(Please note, sample chapters are included in full for your review)

*Chapter 1 - Over the Alps*
The book begins with a dramatic present-tense account of a single day on the journey - riding up to the top of the snowy Splugen Pass between Switzerland and Italy. The chapter then describes the frightening descent via pitch-black tunnels and hairpins to Chiavenna.

*Chapter 2 - Genesis and Research*
This chapter describes the genesis of the trip's idea and the time spent gathering the kit and researching St Columbanus. Includes a light-hearted account of gaining access to the Manuscripts Room in the library of Trinity College, Dublin. It also provides a brief history of Columbanus, and an outline of the route.

*Chapter 3 - Dublin to Dundalk*
Setting out on a trip to Bangor in County Down to visit the place where Columbanus trained. The chapter describes visiting sites at Newgrange and Monasterboice. At this point in the journey, I see it as a pleasant jaunt, not expecting to learn anything about Columbanus or myself. One of the threads in the book is the growing awareness that however lightly I embarked on the adventure, its completion brings a deeper sense of meaning and achievement.

*Chapter 4 - Into the North*
From riding a bike through backroads border checkpoints and 'bandit country' towns to the faded elegance of the seaside resort of Newcastle, Co. Down. Also describes my first real encounters with Columbanus, on the spot in Bangor where he lived for over 20 years, and at the harbour where he set sail for Brittany.

*Chapter 5 - Ferry to Brittany*
The real trip begins. After two days of unpleasant slog from Dublin to the ferry at Rosslare, I spend the overnight crossing to Roscoff in a drug-induced haze, but then have to ride my bike at the other end, and camp for the first time.

*Chapter 6 - Food and Shelter*
I begin to find my rhythm as I ride towards St Malo, where Columbanus first came ashore. I meet a helpful old cyclist in a rainstorm, but I'm only focused on food, shelter and washing cycling shorts.

*Chapter 7 - Towards the Loire*
In my second week, I discover the joys of singing as you cycle, and get shaken down for francs by a twelve-year old. A lovely hotel outside Nantes restores my spirits and I reach the Loire encouraged by a waitress wishing me 'Bon courage'.

*Chapter 8 - Hot and Cool*
Roads start to melt as the temperatures hit 37 degrees centigrade, and I spin along the Loire. The chateaux keep coming, and the river retains some traces of earlier times with ruined amphitheatres and tiny Romanesque churches. Some blessed early-morning cycling moments

*Chapter 9 - Tours to St Benoit*
On a rest-day in Tours, I kneel at the tomb of St Martin in the crypt of the Basilica of St Martin, where Columbanus held an all-night vigil. I burst into tears, moved by the place, the history, and my journey so far. I begin to realize there's something more going on than a combination of an academic curiosity a Dark Age saint and an interest in cycling.

*Chapter 10 - Across the Middle*
Leaving the Loire, the museum in Auxerre makes me wonder what Columbanus made of the Romans, and I'm in a tent in Avallon listening to England's 5-1 victory over Germany in the World Cup qualifying game. I get a wrong number on my mobile phone, and have to explain to the guy that I'm not Sean and not in Limerick, because I'm on the side of the road in France.

*Chapter 11 - Autun and Buddhism*
The hills increase, but I reach Autun at the end of the third week. I feel worried, because everything is going well, and while at a cafe table enjoying a meal I'm suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of rightness. It's most unexpected, but I feel I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world. The next day, I eat the world's worst lunch, and a trip to the Temple of a Thousand Buddhas turns out to be a rainy detour as I end up in a roadside business hotel in a mining town.

*Chapter 12 - Approaching Luxeuil*
I approach Luxeuil, where Columbanus founded three monasteries. There are more signs of his presence as I trace his daring prison escape from the ancient town of Besancon. As summer fades into autumn I head for a lakeside restaurant in Vesoul for a Friday night meal, becoming the only customer they have all night.

*Chapter 13 - In Columbanus' Town*
After 1600km I reach the stern statue of St Columbanus outside the church he founded. The tourist office adopts me, and I'm soon giving interviews for the local paper and all is well as I clamber up to the cave Columbanus used for quiet contemplation. At exactly the same time, the first hijacked plane crashes into the World Trade Center. The tone of the trip changes, as I wonder why I'm bothering to do so strange a thing when thousands are dying in a city I know well.

*Chapter 14 - To Basel and Baden*
I'm flat for the next couple of days, listening to coverage of the aftermath of the attacks as I lie in my tent, and riding my bike because there's nothing else to do. There are memorial services in Basle and flags at half-mast in Baden. Designated bike routes speed me along the banks of the Rhine, and I suffer my only youth hostel experience of the journey - awakened by drunken Swiss guys singing Britney Spears in the middle of the night, and told by the manager not to ride over the Alps under any circumstances.

*Chapter 15 - Mountains*
After a pimp-chic hotel room in Zurich I acquit myself pretty well on the first big climbs of the trip. More rain as I climb up to 3000ft on the way to St Gallen, founded by one of Columbanus' followers. The library there displays ancient manuscripts written by Irish monks, but I lose any cultural kudos by eating in a Hollywood theme restaurant where the menu is printed on old cans of film.

*Chapter 16 - Austria and Liechtenstein*
I cross four borders in two days heading to the lovely Lake Constance resort of Bregenz, where Columbanus founded a monastery. Liechtenstein is a strange amalgam of 'Heidi' and strip malls,

and I'm high up in the Alps, looking at a very bad weather forecast. I have to combine two days' riding into one, and try to make it over the pass to Italy before the rains come.

*Chapter 17 - Lake Como and Monza*
Out of stern Switzerland and back into a country where I can speak the language, I don't mind that it's still raining on Lake Como. I push the boat out on a lakeside hotel room in Bellagio, and sit on my balcony watching the boats coming in. I eat my way towards my friends' house near Milan. But the riding is dangerous and the closer I get to my final destination at Bobbio, the more nervous I get.

*Chapter 18 - Milan to Bobbio*
A day as a civilian in hectic Milan, and I'm back on the bike mixing it with huge trucks on the road south. I pass through San Colombano al Lambro, named for our saint, and arrive in Piacenza - possibly the only Italian city in which it's hard to find a restaurant. Then I ride up the Trebbia valley to Bobbio, where Columbanus died in 615. Every detail seems special as the kilometres count down and I can't quite believe I've made it to the place I've been thinking about for five months, and riding towards for six weeks.

*Chapter 19 - Paying my respects to Columbanus*
I spend four days in Bobbio, a handsome town in a wooded valley in the Apennines. Columbanus is entombed in the crypt of the basilica that bears his name, and I'm in tears as I kneel before his sarcophagus and tell him about my journey. I hadn't realized it when I started, but I was on a pilgrimage. Up to a cave on a hillside that's linked to Columbanus.

*Chapter 20 - On holiday*
I meander back to Milan through Piacenza (still can't find a restaurant), Cremona (so pretty it breaks your heart), and Pavia, where I make my last Columbanus connection. A tiny alley is named for him, containing the ruins of a church which held his remains for a few decades in the tenth century.

*Chapter 21 - One last thing*
I'm in Milan Linate airport when a jet crashes into a smaller aircraft on a foggy runway outside. Over a hundred people are killed - a terrible end to a great trip. As we wait we share stories, and finally reach Dublin chastened but in one piece. I ride my bike from the airport and arrive home not quite the same as I left.

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## SAMPLE CHAPTERS

David Moore
<address, phone number, email>

## CHAPTER 1

So I'm sitting in a tiny cafe in a place called Splugen. 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, and I've a feeling the aging proprietor was speaking Romansch just to confuse me further). 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. 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 over a month since I left Dublin, and I've travelled over two thousand kilometres clear across France and Switzerland. It hasn't been that demanding physically, but today is different – today's the day I pedal my bike over the Alps.

My pasta arrives and I launch into it, hoping the starch with keep me grounded and give me the fuel I need. I've made a reservation at a hotel here in Splugen, just on the Swiss side of the border, and I've already been climbing for twenty-six kilometres today, but the weather forecast for tomorrow and the next day is poor. There's another nine kilometres of steep climbing to get to the top of the Splugen Pass, before the long descent on the Italian side of the border. Laden down with panniers and a handlebar bag, the bike handles like a oil tanker – it's solid and dependable, but turning and stopping are both gradual manoeuvres. 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 there's a knot of tension at the base of my spine as I remount and head out of town. 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 out and follows a stream. 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 an increasingly snowy bowl, with no obvious exit, no valley to aim at to get me out of this. The altimeter function on my watch shows me slowly 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 from the base of my spine upwards. 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 is 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 of day's riding it took me 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 Splugen. 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 signs for the customs post. Inside the post there are three guys in uniform 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 'gallerias' on the Italian side of the Splugen Pass, tunnels carved on the sheer face of cliffs doubling back on themselves so sharply 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. 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 shudders. 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 gallery ahead. This time a couple of 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 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. The next tunnel has a couple of openings carved in the side wall, letting light in, 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 pretty 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 and relax a little before 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. 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 seventies 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 cafes 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. Since that day in the sixth form when I'd flicked through a university prospectus and stumbled across 'Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic' as the first course description in an alphabetical list, I'd been sold on medieval 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. Eight years before, I'd started out just riding around town and watching the Tour de France on television, but 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'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 only looks like remarkable prescience now, I'd decided that the time was right to do something else just before the high-tech economy tanked. 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.

Readjusting to life in Dublin had been harder than I'd anticipated. I'd been home for four months, and had drifted through the weeks doing almost nothing. This may sound ideal, but as befits someone born in England with an Irish mother, it soon emerged that I suffered from both an Anglo-Saxon work ethic and a Catholic guilt complex. Pure-bred English people work hard and play hard – get their heads down when required, but enjoy the fruits of their labour. This was what I should be doing, having put in mad hours while working in San Francisco. But as soon as I tried it, my Catholic guilt complex kicked in. 'Look at you, not doing anything in. Who do you think you are? You shouldn't be taking it easy. 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-Saone region, where he founded three monasteries. After twenty years there he was expelled from the country for annoying the royal family – he seems to have been a difficult person 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 that this one Irishman had seemed 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 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 to a large degree 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. And yet here I was, getting up late, putting in a few hours with the books before sloping off for mid-afternoon coffees that melted into early-evening drinks. I'd regressed, and I was loving it. 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 jokes about Posh and Becks, and lunch arrangements for the new Italian cafe on the quays.

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 tourist come in to see the Book of Kells.'

'Check.'

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

'Right.'

'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 yesterday 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 heading 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-Sâone 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 Theuderics, 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 historians use to describe brutal battles and internecine warfare) 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 Orléans), 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 tricksy 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 lightweight 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 middle-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 three years in America, eating my way elegantly across Europe sounded great. But first I had an appointment in Norn Iron.