

The Wild Atlantic Way Cycle of Michael Culligan

Vinny and I set off last Sunday morning, 19 June at about 10 o'clock, to get to Thurles for the Munster Hurling semi-final between Tipperary and Limerick, with the intention later of following Mick Culligan on his challenge to cycle the Wild Atlantic Way. I help out with the Junior A Kilmacud – Crokes Hurlers and Mick is the manager of the team with fellow mentors and coaches Gerry McGrath and Billy Noctor. Mick is a great motivator for the team and I was especially looking forward to follow him part of the way on the cycle.

We arrived in Thurles on a wet rainy Sunday without tickets and found that all the best seats were sold but we did get a pair of tickets in the corner of the old stand, not too bad a place to view the match and at least we were under cover and not getting wet. Fourteen minutes into the game John Bubbles O'Dwyer was red carded by the referee for striking his opponent and consequently is now suspended and will miss the final against Waterford in July. It was now doubtful that Tipp could win the match with fourteen men against fifteen but as the game progressed it was Tipperary who looked like they had the extra man and in the end won the match.

After 6 o'clock we headed for Nenagh to get to somewhere in Galway to chase Mick down. We motored through Nenagh, Borrisokane and Portumna and carried on 'till we reached the Loughrea Hotel and Spa and booked in for the night. It was a fine hotel and Vinny watched the golf - €49.50 each for the B&B. However there was a boil-water notice in force so we could not drink the tap water and had to survive on alcoholic beverage which was not a bad thing.

On the following morning, Monday, we started out for the Wild Atlantic Way to find Mick and we got to Roundstone, in Connemara, and waited there for a long time expecting the cyclists to come through the village. It was here that I met a man and his wife, Brendan and Mary Logue and in our conversation it emerged Brendan was in school with Sean Donnelly many years ago and it turned out that Mary, his wife, lived down the road from me in Cabra, Thurles, about a half mile away, and was a good friend of my sister, Mary. This was back in the fifties.

We did meet some of the cyclists in Roundstone but not Mick and we decided to go out the road a bit and waited outside Keoghs, in Ballyconeely, a small ribbon development in west Connemara and surrounded by beaches. This is where we greeted Mick for the first time, when he came along the road, escorted by Kevin Coakley and his missus. We filled up the water bottles, gave him two bananas and a packet of raisins for the journey and they continued to cycle on for Clifden.

We met Mick again, about 10 km ahead, in Clifden with a cyclist friend, Maurice Smith, from Canada, number 58 in the group. Here the two of them had a meal in Guys restaurant, and were in great form, before cycling onward.

In Keoghs of Ballyconeely I purchased two ice-cream cones for Vinny and myself. I really would not mention this but for the episode which followed. On the road towards Clifden Vinny began to complain about a bad pain in his upper abdomen, just below the breast bone. We got to Clifden and Vinny went in to Foyles hotel thinking he would get some relief in the toilet but this was not to be.

He then came across the street to the restaurant where I was sitting with the two cyclists and I could see that Vinny's pain was now severe so we went back across the street to the hotel and asked the lady there to phone a doctor, but this was not successful, as it was nearly 6 pm and no doctor was available on the phone or in surgery. We decided to walk up the street to the doctor's surgery but this was closed. There was a pharmacist's shop beside the surgery which was still open so we went in and described the condition that Vinny was experiencing to the pharmacist. She advised that we go to the district hospital and one of the assistants accompanied us in the car to show us the way. The nurse, at the hospital, took the blood pressure and did an ECG test to check for the problem. She then phoned a Doctor McLoughlin who came and did some more tests and administered some medicine. The pain had diminished at this stage so it looked like we could travel on, and then Vinny got up from the examination table and the pain returned. An instant decision was made to call the ambulance and after waiting more than an hour and a half Vinny was transported by ambulance to University Hospital Galway, emergency department. Here he was examined again and further tests, including blood tests, applied and he spent the night on a trolley and next day, which was Tuesday, waited until 2 pm. to get the results from the medics. What a relief for Vinny, fortunately the prognosis was good so we rejoiced and were happy again and decided to travel on.

Late on the Monday night I tried to book in to a number of guest houses near the hospital but they were all full up so I checked in to Jury's Inn for a single room, which was really a double room, and paid € 119 for the night. However Vinny, in his generosity, paid for the two of us the next night, at a much better rate – he must have been mad.

Tuesday morning, on the road again, we travelled thru' Tuam and Foxford to Ballina and then made our way west by Bangor Erris until we reached Belmullet, such a magnificent drive along this route, all mountain and bog, leading to the most beautiful coast line. We called in to Talbots bar, ordered a fish chowder and hooked up to the WiFi to do some tracking and found that Mick, at this stage, was a good way off. We enquired at Talbots about a room for the night but found it was a bit out of our league, but it looked a nice place. So, we booked in to the Broadhaven Bay Hotel and Leisure Centre, which is on the WAW route and has a fine swimming pool and WiFi and we rumbled Mick again. As it would be some time before Mick passed this way we took a drive out the road towards Mallaranny to view the countryside and returned through a small village of Gweesalia home of the the Kiltane GAA club, whose footballers wear the same colours and jersey style as Tipperary. Magic! At the crossroads here, at approx 9 p.m., we met again with Mick and his buddy, Maurice. They were both fairly tired but they took on water, bananas and raisins and headed out around the headland of Ceann Ramher and then back and on towards Belmullet. Mick had said at this juncture that shortly he would probably be looking for a place to stay for the night and next day we found out that both of them had crashed out in the Broadhaven hotel for a few hours and were up and on the road before we had a swim in the pool and breakfast.

On Wednesday morning we travelled on the road to Ballina by the Céide Fields through Ballycastle and Killala and then out along the road to Sligo and stopped in Ballysadare and waited at the bridge over the river Owenmore. And who should come along only the Bomber Green who was chasing money as well as chasing Mick. So we had a confabulation, i.e. a discussion while we waited for the cyclist. (I never used that word before now) Mick came along with his friend, Maurice, and we again watered them and offered bananas and fruit and gave

Mick a map for the WAW ahead. The two cyclists then adjourned to the local SuperValu where they had some food and continued on.

At Ballysadare we also met with Mark Macentee aka Macker, who lives in Cavan and was doing some business in the area. Macker played on a minor hurling team in the mid eighties for Kilmacud Crokes and Vinny and myself were the mentors for the team.

So the Bomber went off again chasing down business and we went on to the Sligo Park Hotel and booked a room for the three of us for the night. We had some picnic stuff with us and it was a wet afternoon so we located ourselves under the shelter of a big leafed tree in the corner of the place, fried four eggs on the stove and made tea and eat some brown wheaten bread and butter. Later we met again with Gerry the Bomber, after business hours, and went in to Sligo to eat at a restaurant and afterwards went to Corkey's pub, owned by Brendan Power who was also a minor hurler for Kilmacud Crokes in the mid eighties and played on the sane team as Macker. Here we sat down to drink some pints and to watch the Irish v Italy match on TV. Vinny was doing the driving and did not imbibe too much. The pub was packed with ardent fans of the game and with four minutes to go as Brady buried the ball in the Italian net the place erupted as I am sure it was the same in any other pub at that time.

On Thursday morning Gerry the Bomber got up earlier than the two of us. A little later when we roused ourselves we went for a swim in the hotel pool and Gerry Bomber at his breakfast had read Mick's message about his concern over loss of sleep and balance and came back in to the pool to let us know. We decided to track Mick on the app and found he was in Killybegs, taking a sleep, but we did not then know where. However we went after him and in a hotel in Killybegs we got an idea from the tracker of his location and headed on to meet him in the mountains, on the R263, not far from Glencolumbkille. We talked a bit and he looked fine so we then drove on to Glencolumbkille so we could meet him in the village. He stopped at a local shop and got some food and we topped up his water bottles and supplied him with sultanas, just to vary the diet from raisins – he drinks huge quantities of water. We carried on to Dungloe and as Hugh had suggested we introduced ourselves to his buddies, John and Ann, who own the Butterrock Café. They gave us a very warm welcome and gave food to us and we used their WiFi to track Mick once again. Mick peddled in to town about 6:30 pm and had a wash and a cup of coffee in the Café and I took some photos outside the Butterrock café which I put on the M2M WhatsApp. At this stage we said our goodbyes to Mick and wished him well and safe journey as we intended to go back to Dublin the next day.

Now we had to find a place to stay for the night and Hugh had been on to us and offered beds to us at his house in Annagry, which is just about twelve kilometres up the road from Dungloe. We got to Annagry, a beautiful scenic place, and we stopped at the Caisleáin Óir hotel and bar, where we were to meet Hugh's sister in law, Ann's sister, to get the keys and direction to the house. I was standing outside on the steps of the hotel at about 7:40 pm when five cyclists passed by and Mick was in the middle of them and I don't know who the other four were, probably local cyclists out for a spin and helping Mick along.

On Friday morning we left Annagry and headed for Letterkenny and went on to Bunrana where I thought we might see Mick and give him a cheer just one more time but he had gone

through the town so we headed for Derry and the road home to Dublin. We knew then that he was accompanied by Ronan and would be looked after and chaperoned the rest of the way to Derry.

Tracking Mick on the laptop was obviously a great service and on so many occasions we called in to hotels and restaurants to do this. If a restaurant did not have a WiFi service then we did not eat there but anywhere we used WiFi it was generously and freely given.

I am happy we went on the journey and trailed Mick and chased him down, as far as we did, and look forward to meet up with him again and have a confabulation on the whole event. There I have used that word again in the same essay, maybe I should have written gossip.

Mick you are a hero in Kilmacud Crokes. Maith an Fear.

Gerry P.