

Gael Force One

They call it a *bohereen*: a narrow, rural lane with a rough, grassy crown. Ours is a gravelly track meandering into the bog, its grass the only visible shade of green. Nearby, the geometric, stepped cuts that once yielded dense peat are still visible; fibrous, blackened offcuts piled aside.

Recoiling between gusts, rain-greased fuchsia burst brightly from the russet heather and brown grasses. The surrounding marshy pools are cold and pure, betrayed only by a dark, underlying earth that sucks in the light. The shades are ironic: the phrase 'black and tan' still stirring emotions in an area that bears the scars of conflict, hardship and separation.

At the confluence of land, sea and sky, County Galway's Atlantic Coast is rugged, ancient country that heals slowly, just like its peat bogs. It reveals itself equally slowly, the fickle elements choosing when to unveil nearby islands and distant peaks.

This is exactly as two British aviators, long adopted by the cheerfully resilient residents of nearby Clifden, discovered it a century ago. They made an impression: their temporary indent in this isolated bog burning their names into history. Who first flew the Atlantic? Most would suggest Lindbergh, but even he acknowledged his predecessors John Alcock and Arthur Brown. Now largely forgotten, theirs was a perilous mission that still resonates; to the unsuspecting locals on Sunday 15th June 1919, it came out of the blue.

Here were two modest, post-war heroes thrust into a grand challenge to tame the wild ocean. Considered outsiders, they believed in their odds (Brown, navigating, even postponing his wedding) but had already witnessed powerful rivals fail. They departed Newfoundland in a hastily repurposed biplane, heading east. The stars had aligned and only Brown could read them.

Over the almighty banging of a malfunctioning exhaust they communicated by handwritten note; their radio having already failed. Meteorology, engines and navigation were primitive: the Wright Brothers had only flown sixteen years prior. During the night they lost control and tumbled into the abyss, Alcock recovering the dive at a suicidal height that led both to taste salty air.

Blinded by fog, stinging sleet now gnawed at exposed flesh, jamming their controls. Watery daylight brought an epiphany: Clifden, home to Marconi's first transatlantic wireless station. Their sixteen hour, 1900 mile epic ended abruptly in the nearby Derrygimlagh peat bog. The station beamed the news back across the Atlantic far faster: the world had shrunk. To the stunned locals Alcock remarked simply: 'Yesterday we were in America'. Such words had never been uttered.

Today, Clifden is arty and brightly painted, pinched between incoming westerlies and the omnipresent peaks of the Twelve Bens. The latter provide a frame of reference: 'Tonight - the best fiddle duo this side of the Bens, eight-ish' quips a pub sign. Small-town Ireland is full of spiritual significance, but here's an alternative pilgrimage. Proud of its adopted sons, Clifden reveals the interconnection of all three pioneers with a little digging, peaty or otherwise.

I bring my little son on a murky evening to crystallise everything and hear what Derrygimlagh has to say; the names *Alcock and Brown* were engraved in my mind by a book of flight at about his age. Hardy grasses wave as we crunch along the bohereen, part of the Marconi heritage trail, towards the landing memorial.

The isolated cairn is tasteful, a giant upturned cone that funnels the aura of this historic spot skywards. A vast, marshy mosaic stretches beyond, concealing the unmarked landing site. Dark and distant in silhouette, the Bens punch into the loaded, racing overcast. Snaking between is the notorious Bog Road, still avoided by the locals at night.

Then something unexpected: a faint melody in the air. We both turn, scanning for walkers and their stolen, wind-whipped words. Nothing; the site is deserted.

The skeletal foundation of one of Marconi's buildings, long destroyed, lies before us. The wind blows over the exposed ends of ancient industrial pipework, severed at ground level. A century of history and progress is being distilled into keening, soulful notes, airborne again. The dreamers may have died but their dreams live on, whispered by this place for those who listen.

Hitching son onto shoulders, I lean into the wind and we rejoin the darkening bohereen for the long walk home, thinking about a century's ghosts. Yesterday we were in Clifden.