

Dear fellow travellers

LISMORE (Ireland)

"The church with the handsome spire, that looks so graceful among the trees, is a cathedral church, and one of the neatest kept and prettiest edifices I have seen in Ireland. In the old graveyard Protestants and Catholics lie together - that is, not together; for each has a side of the ground where they sleep, and, so occupied, do not quarrel. The sun was shining down upon the brilliant grass - and I don't think the shadows of the Protestant graves were any longer or any shorter than those of the Catholics? Is it the right or the left side of the graveyard which is nearest heaven I wonder? Look, the sun shines upon both alike, 'and the blue sky bends over all'."

(from WM Thackeray's 'Irish Sketch Book', 1843)

A fair few years have passed since Thackeray stumbled through Lismore en route from Waterford to Cork, documenting "the manners and scenery of the country" along the way. Thackeray's 'Irish Sketch Book' is a classic piece of early travel writing. Every bit as good as Mary Wollstonecraft on Scandinavia or Ann Radcliffe on the Rhine Valley.

Thackeray's account of Lismore on the eve of the Great Famine nicely mocks sectarian foibles and pinpoints Lismore as a thoroughly amiable place. More than a century and a half later, Lismore is not much changed - a township that nestles gently at the foot of the Knockmealdown Mountains. Lismore carries the imprint of Ireland's ecclesiastical history. The church upon which Thackeray remarked is dedicated to St Cartagh. It is set in a wonderfully textured churchyard and retains its cathedral status despite the fact that Lismore is no longer the seat of any bishop. The town is dominated by Lismore Castle, in the gardens of which Edmund Spenser is said to have wandered while penning his allegorical celebration of the virtues, 'The Faerie Queene'. Who knows whether that really is true, but the myth was enough to inspire the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones three centuries later. He designed two magnificent stained glass windows for St Cartagh's cathedral, devoted respectively to Justice and Humility.

IMMRAMA - LISMORE FESTIVAL OF TRAVEL WRITING

Lismore, you'll have gathered, is a place that celebrates its literary and cultural connections. That commitment finds expression in a literary festival which is, as far as we know, unique within the English-speaking world. Today is the start of the annual IMMRAMA, Lismore's Festival of Travel Writing. Of course other literary festivals have had a travel writing component. This year's Oxford Literary Festival had a decent travel writing thread. Elsewhere in England, recent festivals in Bath and Norwich featured travel writers. Even hidden europe had a slot at last month's Kingston festival. But nowhere else can match Lismore in having a festival that really places travel writing centre stage.

And why the name IMMRAMA? An old Irish word, meaning travels - and more specifically alluding to those fabulous tales of Irish mythology where heroes cross vast seas in search of other worlds.

Thursday morning... Lismore... a beautiful summer day with the Knockmealdown Mountains presiding over the lovely Blackwater valley. Villages like Cappoquin nestle on wooded hillsides. The avenues of yew hedges where Spenser might or might not have written 'The Faerie Queene' have been groomed to perfection. As Thackeray (or even Coleridge) might have said 'the blue sky bends over all'.

Had you realised that you can browse an online archive well over one hundred past issues of hidden europe e-news at "<http://www.hiddeneurope.co.uk/barticles.php?tPath=1>"? The next issue of our magazine will be published on 4 July, featuring Moldova, Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, Andalucía, the Lot region of France and much more.

Click here to forward this newsletter to a friend:

<http://www.hiddeneurope.co.uk/lists/?p=forward&uid=107262ddfc4728a3ab5f0d9a6b49fcc7&mid=70>.