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<https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.ht259b362>.

For an archived snapshot of the story as it appeared between 2020 and 2023 on

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Dublin Core

Title

Pedalling through Wales

Subject

Travel and travel writing

Dervla Murphy

Cycling

Creator

Maria FitzGerald Houlihan

Publisher

Ports, Past and Present Project

Date

2023

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Relation

<https://perma.cc/RE96-8SLV>

Format

Curatescape story

Language

English

Coverage

52.01067352795288, -4.986300518513136

Curatescape Story Item Type Metadata

Lede

Dervla Murphy is recognised internationally as one of Ireland's most eminent travel writers. She is the author of over twenty-five publications and has received critical acclaim for her travel chronicles.

Story

Seventy years ago, a young woman from Lismore County Waterford set out with her bicycle on her first trip out of Ireland alone. The trip would take her to England, a 'Pagan land' something that did not go unnoticed by her neighbours some of whom were 'Aghast' to learn of the nineteen-year old's itinerary. Supported by her parents, she left on April 15 1951 feeling only 'Delight' and 'Joy' as she cycled by Lismore Castle, the Irish seat of the Duke of Devonshire, bound for Waterford some seventy eight kilometres away where a boat would take her across the Irish Sea.

Dervla Murphy is recognised internationally as one of Ireland's most eminent travel writers. She is the author of twenty-six publications and has received critical acclaim for her travel chronicles. Her first book, *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle*, was published in 1965. In 2016 she was the subject of a film documentary, *Who is...Dervla Murphy?* An intimate film portrait of Ireland's foremost travel writer. Most recently, she was a recipient of the Ness Award, from the Royal Geographic Society For the popularisation of geography through travel literature (2019). But before India there was her 1951 trip to England and Wales where she spent three weeks pedalling. It is this trip that forms our discussion at her Lismore home.

A thrifty traveller, she took a cattle boat 'because it was cheap' from Waterford Quay to Fishguard in Wales; a sea-crossing that has left a lasting impression on her. For many years cattle boats transported livestock back-and-forth the Irish Sea sometimes allowing passengers like Dervla on board and she recalls three or four other passengers also with their bicycles. However, while she was a cycling tourist with a three-week tour ahead and an enviable itinerary, these other passengers 'were going to jobs that would involve cycling to and from work' once they disembarked. Thus, her comment reveals a glimpse of the economic realities many people faced during the 1950s and the peripatetic nature of some peoples' lives during a time of economic stagnation and mass emigration.

Nevertheless, it was the plight of the animals on the crossing that remains to the forefront of her memory, what she calls: 'The horror event at the way the cattle were treated'. Her philosophical concerns chime with today's ethical questions about the treatment and welfare of livestock, and of animals in general. A passionate environmentalist, she recalls, 'the cruelty when they [cattle] were being driven onto the boat'; something she 'vividly remembers'. In Fishguard no trucks awaited the cattle, instead they were 'driven by a drover' further into Wales and beyond. The tradition of cattle-driving, of taking livestock to market or sales, has a long tradition in Wales and there remains evidence of drovers' roads dating back to Roman times.

As we chat she recalls her, 'Surprise at discovering the Welsh were so like the Irish'. Her remark emphasising, perhaps, the varied cultural and historical connections between Ireland and Wales. Indeed, as she cycled through the 'wilds of Wales!' she says, 'I really felt that I

hadn't left home... that I was still on my own territory'. It was not until she crossed into England that she felt like she had started travelling. With a capacity to cycle one hundred miles a day, she visited London and Oxford and the birthplace of Shakespeare, Stratford-upon-Avon.

Dervla describes this trip to England and Wales as 'seminal'. On her return to Ireland she published her first essay and sold three further articles to the Irish monthly magazine, *Hibernia*. Exactly one year later in April 1953 she repeated a second sea-crossing to Fishguard on a longer five-week continental tour 'taking time-saving trains from Fishguard to Dover' en route for Belgium; a trip she calls, 'very exciting!' The descriptions of which can be read in her revealing autobiography, *Wheels within Wheels*, published in 1979.

From these modest travel-writing beginnings, Dervla Murphy has gone on to delight and inspire many with her intrepid accounts. Her writing remains a tour de force. She possesses an anthropologist's eye and a steadfast dedication to social justice. As our conversation draws to a close in her home-study, I certainly feel that I have been in the presence of one of the great travellers of our time. The rest, as they say, is travel-writing history.

My sincere thanks to Dervla Murphy for her hospitality and unwavering generosity.

My thanks also to Stephanie Allen & Barnaby Rogerson at Eland Publishing. For more information on Dervla Murphy's publications, please see: <https://www.travelbooks.co.uk/dervla-murphy>.

Factoid

Related Resources

Murphy, Dervla. *Wheels within Wheels, The Making of a Traveller*. London, Eland Publishing Limited, 1979.

"Who is Dervla Murphy? An Intimate Film Portrait of Ireland's Foremost Travel Writer." Vimeo, uploaded by Mixed Bag Media, 5 May 2016, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/dervlamurphy/159471458>

"Medals and Awards." Royal Geographic Society, <https://www.rgs.org/about/medals-award/2019-awards/>

Carradice, Phil. "The Drovers of Wales." BBC Blogs - Wales, 8 Mar. 2012, archived at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/d0214007-fead-3c68-b8cb-f4ac7b78ad3d>

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