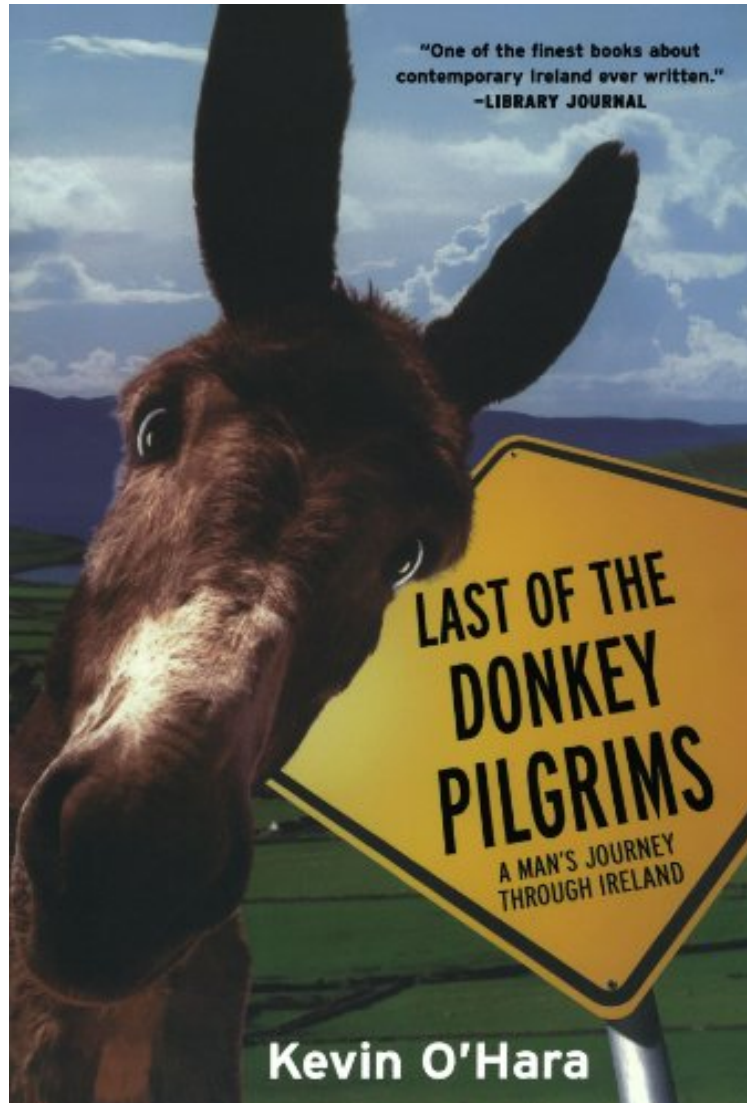


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## Last of the Donkey Pilgrims: A Man's Journey Through Ireland

*Kevin O'Hara*

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**Kevin O'Hara : Last of the Donkey Pilgrims: A Man's Journey Through Ireland** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Last of the Donkey Pilgrims: A Man's Journey Through Ireland:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Treasure Even After All These YearsBy SerenaKevin O'Hara who lived in the U.S. had trouble forgetting the time he spent in Vietnam. In 1979, the year he turned 30 years old, he went to his grandmother's home in Ireland. He planned to stay one year and he hoped to have an adventure that would help him forget the worst of the mental pain of being in Vietnam.In a local Irish pub he came up with the idea of taking six

months to travel the perimeter of Ireland in a donkey cart. A trip of about 1,700 miles. With expert help Kevin purchased a cart and a donkey and with less than 100 pounds in his pocket he and Missy started their journey. Kevin was a very kind soul and could not bear the thought of beating his donkey to keep the cart moving at an acceptable speed. So, he decided he would make the trip walking next to his donkey and he would never hit her again. He met many generous Irish people who fed him and let him stay on their property no matter how little they had. There were many evenings spent in pubs and a lot of evenings entertaining the families who fed and boarded him with stories of his travels which Kevin felt helped him earn his keep. When Kevin weighed himself at the end of his journey he was surprised to find that he had only lost a few pounds. Despite feeling hungry much of the time along the way he must have been fed plenty to keep his weight up. (And plenty to drink too.) This book was published in 2005 which was 26 years after Mr. O'Hara's journey. It's still a very interesting story and hasn't suffered from the 38 year gap between the journey and my reading it. I think the writing was excellent. What I didn't like was the epilogue supposedly written by the donkey mostly about the donkey. I would have much rather had an epilogue that also included Kevin and how he fared back in the United States after his trip. Hopefully, better than Missy. I hope he has had a good life and that he has kept his wonderful sense of humor and generous spirit. I want to be clear that this book is not always a page turner. It has monotonous moments, but overall it is very entertaining. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. This is a great read! By MJ Burton I loved this book! Its a heartwarming and wonderfully told account of Kevin O'Hara's 1979 walk around Ireland with an unlikely companion, a donkey named Missie. Kevin and Missie are on a quest to circle the entire Irish coastline, some 1800 miles, but their journey is so much more than just the ambitious walk. Self-discovery and true grit are hallmarks of Kevin's story, as are the warmth, wisdom and generosity of the Irish people. You will smile (maybe cry a little too) as you read Kevin's rich character profiles of the people he meets, and you will take great pleasure in his gorgeous descriptions of the scenery, the pub and home life, some difficult and dangerous treks up and down mountain passes, and a fair number of long days of inclement weather and/or other physical, mental and financial obstacles to his ultimate success. Kevin and Missie walked right through northern Ireland at a particularly tense time during the Troubles. The timing was shortly after the IRA attacked and killed Lord Mountbatten while he was on vacation in County Sligo, and I could feel Kevin's trepidation. His account of those days on his journey was both moving and unnerving. I'll sum up my thoughts this way: if you already know and love Ireland, you'll be planning your next trip after reading this book (I'm doing just that). If you haven't yet had the pleasure of getting to know Ireland, you will fall in love for sure! 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Much Better Book Than I Expected By Bradawn This is a much better book than I expected. Reading the preview I thought this would be a comic tale of a daft "Yank" who got it in his head that it would be a good idea to see Ireland by donkey. To some extent it is that, but there is more to it. It's a story of a man and his donkey - - really. We get involved in the plight of Kevin and Missy as they make their trek around the perimeter of the Island. Apparently, among the many things that donkeys hate to do, is travel, that is, be away from a home. In the end this may be a greater feat for the animal, than even the man who struggled to care for her. They meet many people, see many things, and accomplish much. With the help of generous and humane individuals, Kevin and Missy surmount physical, medical, and emotional obstacles, including a very tense situation in Northern Ireland at the height of "The Troubles". While being very entertaining, Kevin O'Hara gives us a unique insight into the land, the people and the culture of Ireland. A wonderful read on many levels.

Kevin O'Hara's journey of self-discovery begins as a mad lark: who in their right mind would try to circle the entire coastline of Ireland on foot and with a donkey and cart no less? But Kevin had promised his homesick Irish mother that he would explore the whole of the Old Country and bring back the sights and the stories to their home in Massachusetts. Determined to reach his grandmother's village by Christmas Eve, Kevin and his stubborn but endearing donkey, Missie, set off on 1800-mile trek along the entire jagged coast of a divided Ireland. Their rollicking adventure takes them over mountains and dales, through smoky cities and sleepy villages, and into the farmhouses and hearts of Ireland's greatest resource: its people. Along the way, Kevin would meet incredible characters, experience Ireland in all of its glory, and explore not only his Irish past, but find his future self. One of the finest books about contemporary Ireland ever written... In a style evocative of Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, O'Hara writes memorably of his most unusual way of touring his ancestral home of Ireland. *Library Journal*

One of the finest books about contemporary Ireland ever written... In a style evocative of Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, O'Hara writes memorably of his most unusual way of touring his ancestral home of Ireland. *Library Journal* A witty, whimsical walk around an Ireland before the Celtic Tiger' of the European Union found its economic legs, before the roads were improved, and before battalions of Audis and Mercedes replaced the donkey carts, farmers, and unhurried pedestrians of another day. *Boston Globe* A delightful book to be enjoyed by everyone on a life pilgrimage. *Catholic Library World* Kevin O'Hara is neither a madman nor a saint; he is an original. The story he tells will be an inspiration to any person who has ever tried to patch a broken life. *Morgan Llywelyn* Skillful piece of travel-writing; like the Irish fog, it's both glowing and lightly pushed by an unacknowledged melancholy. *Kirkus* sAbout the

Author Kevin O'Hara has spent the last twenty years working as a psychiatric nurse at the Berkshire Medical Center. He lives in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

### The Donkey Proposal

#### CHAPTER ONE

#### The Irish Midlands MARCH 1979

It was at Rattigans Pub in Kilrooskey, County Roscommon, that I first proposed traveling the coast of Ireland with a donkey and cart. The elderly patrons, biting at pipes and smelling of turf smoke, rolled in amusement. "Yere thinking of walking an ass about Ireland?" jawed Hugh Mannion from a high stool. "I have two at home that wont cross Derrane Bog!" "Arragh, Hughie, now, be fair to your man," chimed Willie Cassidy from behind a hand of playing cards. "Thered only be the one ass that could circle the Ring of Ireland, and thatd be Johnny Rabbitts jackass who swallowed the umbrella!" I soothed my throat with a generous swallow of the black native Guinness, and sought refuge by the potbellied stove, flashing back to my inaugural pint here when I was seventeen. That long-ago summer, my younger brother Dermot and I were unwillingly sworn into the Celtic race in a drunken stupor. Now, on this cold winter night in 1979, thirteen years later, nothing had changed in this illustrious parish pub but the Harp calendar. My uncle Vincent, to whom I had sketchily mentioned my plans, had warned that my "donkey proposal" would be greeted with ridicule by these age-old pensioners, who gathered every Friday evening at Rattigans. But who else knew more about a donkeys strengths and limitations than themselves? I took another gulp of the milk-warm stout, thinking back on that wondrous incident days earlier. Pedaling home to my grandmothers on the Knockcroghery Road, I was knocked off my bike like Saul from his horse when I saw a farmer smoothly tipping his donkey and cart down the road. "Thats it," I gasped at the vision. "Thats how Im going to travel the whole of Ireland." Now, taking a deep breath and another fortifying sip, I mustered the courage to speak above their merriment. "But say, for instance, I was truly willing to go through with it. Could a donkey, a good one, travel the coast of Ireland? Id take it easy, eight to ten miles a day, and Id give myself eight months to travel the eighteen hundred miles." Rheumy eyes glinted and glanced. The Yank wasnt having them on: he was dead serious. The house went silent. Playing cards were flattened. Miserable March rattled outside the panes. Pints were called for and collected as the old gentry of the parish circled their stools to gather their wisdom. "A jackass, cut-jack, or a mare?" asked Mickey Owens, still eyeing me with suspicion. "Never a jack," voiced Jack Rattigan, lifting the cap off his brow. "A jack would be braying sonnets in June, bugling day and night in August, and downright altogether mad in the snows of December." "A cut-jack, then?" suggested Joe Hickey. "A cut-jack is neither useful nor ornamental," mused Jim Tiernan. "A cut-jack has no heart. Nipped. Dry as polished glass. tis a mare the Yank would need, young and well-handled." "The very thing," agreed the tall and scholarly Headmaster Dalton. "A young mare sound of wind and limb, and a fine temperament. You wouldnt want her kicking the stars from the sky." "A good mouth and square feet," added Hugh Mannion, "free of spavins, curbs, and sidebones. And shed need to be well-shod with pony shoes and frost nails to cover those miles." I stood among these wizened fellows my mothers former schoolmates nodding my head in agreement, but not having a blooming idea what they were on about. "A double fistful of oats every morning would do her kindly," continued Willie Cassidy. "But dont go giving her a bucket of water after a good feed, or shell cripple up and die with the gripe." "Search Roscommon and Westmeath for your mare," offered Paddy Tiernan, "and dont go to any knackers or horse jobbers. With your Yankee accent, theyd sell you a mule without a tooth in its head." "Better still," added Dan Madden, "if youre sincere in setting out on this caper, go see the horseman, Jimmy McDermott, in Kiltewan. If theres ever a mare that can circle Ireland, Jimmy Mac would be the one to find her." "And keep a safe distance from the Spanish jacks," jabbed a smart aleck from the corner, "or your mare will be carrying extra baggage on the road home!" The donkey seminar ended abruptly as the playing cards, itching in the hands of Willie Cassidy, were reshuffled and dealt again: the quarter-final round of "25" for an Easter turkey was at stake. Jim Tiernan, however, joined me by the stove. My grandmothers neighbor in the village of Ballincurry, he told me how his donkey could travel twenty Irish milestwenty-five English miles a day on a pinch of oats. "An ass would go forever if you gave her her time," said old Jim, rubbing a plug of tobacco in his hands. "Pity is, too many farmers hurried and abused them. The only worry I see in you traipsing the world with a mare is that she could easily become homesick and lose heart. And when a mare loses heart, nothing will set her going again." "What makes a mare lose heart?" I asked the affable man. "Tis easy enough, Im afraid," he continued, packing his yellowed briar pipe with his thumb. "Mare asses worked a hard long day in Roscommon. But whether they were off to market with a sow, to the creamery with a can or two, to the bog for a cartload of turf, or to the fields to draw in the hay, they always knew theyd be home by nightfall to be fed and watered. Your mare wont have that luxury, for shell be traveling the roads day after day, over mountain and bog, and at night be tethered in a different field or placed in some stinking byre. Nor will she be able to make any sense of your wanderings." I suppose a jack would be right for your journey if they werent so ornery," he went on, lighting his pipe. "A jack is a common rogue, a rambler, but a mare likes her home. I heard a story years back of how a County Longford man sold his mare heavy in foal to a County Fermanagh man. The deal was settled over a jar of stout and the mare was boxed and carted up through Longford, Leitrim, and beyond the border town of Enniskillen. Fifty miles, if not more. Well, wouldnt you know, three days later this same Longford farmer was walking his fields, only to spot the sold mare feeding her downy foal. The poor creature had made good her escape and traveled fifty miles in two days to give birth on the third. Now, doesnt that give you some idea of their homing instincts?" Of course, not everyone at Rattigans was as helpful as Jim Tiernan. There was a scrum of old wags who brayed and whinnied throughout the

seminar, asking one another if both my oars were cleaving the sea and other opprobrious remarks better left forgotten. But, all in all, it had been a fine evening. My proposed journey, however whimsical, now seemed at least plausible. I sat on a wooden bench by the doorway, finishing my drink and tucking my pants into my socks for the bike ride home, when Hugh Mannion addressed the happy crowd, saying I'd be nothing short of a folk hero if I managed to circle Ireland with a donkey and cart. "Hed be much like those wise men," he exclaimed, raising his bottle of barley wine, "who climbed Faerymount one