

In Tough Times, Irish Call Their Diaspora



Chris Nicholson for The International Herald Tribune

Cameo Wood, near the cemetery where her ancestors are buried in Galway, Ireland. Ms. Wood, a California resident, was invited to visit Ireland and told she had ancestors there.

By [CHRIS V. NICHOLSON](#)

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LOUGHREA, [IRELAND](#) — The first message Cameo Wood received from Ireland had an air of mystery to it.

“We are trying to connect with members of the Ball family,” it read, naming her great-great-great-grandparents, Patrick and Margaret, and the parish where they had been buried, Kilchreest. “Contact me for more information.”

A resident of San Francisco, Ms. Wood is a hacker made good. Now on her “ninth or 10th” start-up, she and the rest of Silicon Valley are steadily recasting the future — but now she’s decided to learn more about her past.

Along with about 30 other people, many of whom received similar messages, Ms. Wood came to the west of Ireland for a few days in late June and early July to see the Galway parishes her ancestors had abandoned.

“I didn’t even know I was Irish until a few months ago,” she said. “My cousins wouldn’t believe me. We just thought we were random Americans.”

The visitors came at the invitation of [Ireland Reaching Out](#), an organization that just put on its first Week of Welcomes after a year spent tracking down the descendants of Galway exiles and preparing for their return.

“The project is based on a very simple idea: Instead of waiting for people of Irish heritage to trace their roots, we go the other way,” said Mike Feerick, who has been leading the charge to rekindle ties between the Irish and their diaspora.

“The people who left Ireland were in some sense the best part of us,” said Stephen Kinsella, an economist at the University of Limerick. “They were the most dynamic, the most ambitious, the most willing to succeed, and we did not give them the conditions where they could succeed.”

With the financial disaster in Ireland, success is once more proving elusive here. The country’s unemployment rate has risen from 4 percent five years ago to more than 14 percent now.

And just as they did in the decades following the great famine of the mid-19th century, the Irish are once again leaving in search of a livelihood. The numbers, of course, are much smaller: Statistics released last year showed that net emigration had more than quadrupled in the last two years to 34,500, many of them young men looking for construction work in Australia, or gravitating to traditional Irish communities like New York. But it still rekindles memories of Ireland’s troubled past.

“The economy has shrunk 21 percent in the last 11 quarters, which is an unheard-of rate,” said David McWilliams, an economist and celebrity here, who has thrown his weight behind the project as its co-director. “The effects of the crisis are in midtown Manhattan, where you can see young Irish immigrants walking up and down the streets looking for work.”

There is a word in Gaelic for those who left — *deorai* — which means exile or wanderer, as though they did not choose to leave and could not put down roots anywhere but the land of their birth. That idea has made its way into Ireland Reaching Out.

“I want Ireland to start thinking of itself not as a physical place, but as a people,” Mr. Feerick said, and he wants it to start acting like it, too, through local projects like the one in Galway.

Ireland Reaching Out is hoping to raise funds to expand to the rest of Galway and serve as a central Web site and database for similar reverse genealogy efforts elsewhere in the country.

Mr. Feerick enlisted a number of local historians whose knowledge of their communities, regional history and the destinations of Ireland’s emigrants have proved invaluable.

“I don’t know where everyone went, but I have a good idea,” said Sister Mary de Lourdes Fahy, who combed 19th-century land surveys for the names of the families who had left her parish. “I would go to the oldest lady in the locality, and I would show her the name, and she would say, ‘Oh, he went to Canada, he went to New Zealand, he went to America.’”

And by appealing to the Irish to come home, if only for a visit, the project could even help revive the local economy.

Walter McInerney, 47, was one of many in Galway whose jobs once depended upon the now-vanished housing boom. “I was working for a fellah doing alarms, eight years with him,” he said. “And then we went down to a three-day week, and then no work at all.”

During a walk in the hills of southeast Galway, Mr. McInerney struck upon the idea of giving tours here, with a 16-seat Mercedes bus he bought.

“This provided a week of work — my first week of work,” he said, during a pause in the tour, during which he ferried visitors for Ireland Reaching Out from village to village, and from their hotel to the Cliffs of Moher. “It’s been a great boost for me, given me a bit of confidence.”

James R. Kelly, a lecturer at Fordham University in New York who taught finance after a career in research and bond sales on Wall Street, believed that part of his family had come from southeast Galway, but he didn’t know exactly where.

“One of the nagging things was that I didn’t know who James Kelly was, my grandfather,” he said. “I felt compelled to find out.”

Mr. Kelly was put in touch with a local historian and retired teacher, Michael Fahy, and after a few calls, he soon found himself at what evidence suggests was his family’s ancestral farm, near a village called Abbey. He found himself shaking hands with people he thinks may be long-lost family members.

“He was like my guardian angel the whole week,” Mr. Kelly said. “He took me down to Abbey and found the home.”