

# First Person: Searching for my Irish roots

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DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER

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As far back as I can remember, I knew I was Irish.

My mother talked about how her ancestors left Ireland in 1852, setting off across the ocean to a new life in Melbourne, Australia. Her grandfather was 5.

When my mother spoke of her grandfather, she called him her Irish grandfather, not her Australian grandfather. She always used his full name in these stories, Michael Thomas Gleeson, and the awe in her voice told how much she respected and loved him.

For a special treat, I'd be allowed to play my mother's Kate Smith record on my small record player. I'd lean in close, humming along with the songs: "Molly Malone," which seemed so sad, "My Wild Irish Rose" and "When Irish Eyes are Smiling," my favorite.

As the years passed, I'd read about genealogy websites and wonder — was it possible to trace our Irish roots?

A year before my mother died, I was planning a trip to Ireland and wanted to do some sleuthing into our family tree. I discovered that if we ordered a copy of my great-grandfather's death certificate from Australia, it would list where he had been born in Ireland.

When we discovered the name of his village, Gowran, in Kilkenny County, I stayed up late searching for more information and came across a site called 'Kilkenny family names search'. On it, I found a Brian Gleeson, from Melbourne Australia. I typed out a quick email.

The next morning, when I opened my email, his name jumped out at me. Yes, he knew of my great-grandfather; Brian's great-grandfather and mine had been cousins. But then I almost fell off my chair. Brian was completing a 500-page book about the Gleeson family tree and had made many trips to Ireland to research it.

I couldn't believe my good luck. As we emailed back and forth, he gave me all the important facts and places to go.

A month later, as my Aer Lingus flight circled, I marveled at the lush, green landscape, surrounded by the sparkling blue ocean. Once past customs, I got into my tiny rental car, trying to get used to being on the other side of the front seat, and to remember to drive onto the other side of the road. I took a deep breath, followed the car in front of me and headed in the general direction of Kilkenny County and Gowran.

That afternoon, I found a B&B and the proprietor nodded when I told her I was looking for my family roots. In the nearby town, a bowl of thick soup, served with warm soda bread and rich butter made the perfect supper. I snapped photos of signs for Gleeson Realty, Gleeson Bar and Gleeson Brothers Company reveling in the novelty of seeing our family name.

It was odd how at home I felt. Everyone greeted me warmly and someone even stopped me on the street, mistaking me for a friend. I did seem to look like everyone else; wow, I am Irish!

The next morning, a Sunday, I found my way to the small village of Gowran. I arrived at the church during Mass, so I slipped into a pew in the back. I sat in awe and thought — this is the same place where my great-grandfather went to church, before they left for Australia. It was my first experience of knowing that I was linked back in time, over 150 years, to a place I'd never been before. I had roots here.

After the Mass, I followed the white-haired priest to the vestry to look through the church records. It took him a few moments to find the right box for 1847, but then he handed me a leather-bound book.

Within a few minutes of squinting at faded handwriting, I found my great-grandfather's baptismal record. His parents had signed it, so with their names, I located their marriage records a year before. Bridget Maher had married John Gleeson, right near where I sat. My great-great grandparents. If they hadn't gotten married, I would not be sitting here.

I couldn't have explained the jolt of energy that tingled through me when I spotted their names. Or why it moved me to look at the handwriting on the yellowed pages that had been so carefully preserved.

I sat for a while, just staring at their names.

What had it been like to leave their home and travel across the world to a new country?

But the letters on the page gave me no new answers.

As I left the village, I rolled down the car windows and let in the spring breeze, listening to a radio station from Dublin.

The narrow road wound past green farm fields, villages with church steeples and lines of fresh laundry flapping in the breeze. As I was going over the wonder of the day, Bruce Springsteen came on the radio singing "Born in the USA." I turned it up, singing along with his raspy voice, belting out the words.

“Yeah, I was born in the USA.”

That was the truth. I am American.

But all those relatives in the church directory, who voyaged so far to make a new life, they would be proud of me, exactly as I am: A Yank who cared about her Irish roots enough to travel back to Ireland to see their names in the parish registry.

Yeah, I was born in the USA, I thought.

But down deep, I’m Irish.

Read more of Diane Covington-Carter’s work at [dianecovingtoncarter.com](http://dianecovingtoncarter.com)