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Writing for Description: Excerpts from *Finding My Irish*

by Sharon Shea Bossard

Sharon Shea Bossard has written a book, *Finding My Irish*, which combines her search for her ancestors, particularly her grandmother Bridget Murphy, with the story of their emigration and life in America. Sharon Bossard's talent for descriptive passages involves her reader totally in the scene. Not only do we see what she sees, but we hear and sometimes smell the image presented.

In October 2003, Sharon and her husband Phil traveled to Ireland to visit the place where her grandmother was born. Her search for Bridget Murphy revealed two birth certificates for two babies born on the same day, with the same name, in the same general area. The first location they were trying to find was Ballinskelligs, in the southwest of the Iveragh peninsula of County Kerry. The Irish name, Baile na Sceilge, means "Town of the Steep Rock/Crag".

Storm clouds gathered overhead while the mist from the ocean spread light drops of dew on our windshield. The road narrowed and the chilling fog rolled in. We turned up the heat. Riding along the coastline to Ballinskelligs, we got not only spectacular glimpses of the coastline through the intermittent fog, but we could also hear the mighty Atlantic Ocean force its arrival onto the rocky Kerry shores. We caught views of rugged cliffs stacked with boulders, and we watched as the thickening fog engulfed us....

When we entered The Glen, the fog lifted. The views were so spec-

tacular that Phil pulled the car to the side of the road so we could take it all in. I rolled my window down, and the smell of clean, crisp sea air enveloped us. Spread before us were lush green valleys, foothills dotted with sheep, and cottages with smoke twirling from their chimneys – Ballinskelligs greeted us with all of its splendor.

Beautiful blue skies greeted them the morning Sharon and Phil drove to Valentia Island – a perfect day to search for grandmother Bridget's townland. At the heritage center on the Island she showed Bridget's birth certificate and asked the location of Ballyhearney townland, and if any Murphy families occupied the land. They learned there were hundreds of Murphy's on Valentia and there were two Ballyhearney townlands. Sharon pulled an old letter from her briefcase, dated 1949, from a cousin, Hannah Keating. The heritage center volunteer knew Hannah and told them she had recently passed away. He directed them to the Kylemore Graveyard up the road and wished them safe journey.

At the entrance to the graveyard, they met a woman tending a grave. She too had known Hannah and would take them to her cottage.

It was important to see Lawrence and Hannah Keating's cottage; we appreciated Patsy going with us, for we would never have found the place without her help. Abandoned, this 300-year-old cottage stood strong against the wind. Stones of various sizes, stacked with sand to cement them together, formed the walls.

Tiny windows, caked with salt from the sea, offered us a glance into the past. A wooden barrel pushed up against the wall once stored the butchered, salted pig. A large open hearth fireplace, empty of peat, loomed vacant and cold. White-washed stonewalls flecked by eroding rock separated the rooms....

The pastures surrounding Hannah's cottage were rich with peat that provided fuel for the locals. As a young woman, Hannah would dig turf, load it on donkey carts, and haul it into town to sell. Located a few hundred yards from the rocky Atlantic coast, her cottage stood like a barren oak tree in a fifty-acre field....

Dark pink sea holly creeps up the rocks to join the bog pimpernel in a carpet of pastels, dotted with the blooming white puffs of bog cotton. Seagulls floating on wind currents glide overhead, an oil-canvassed landscape. In the distance are beautifully colored flowers, but not one was ever brave enough to move towards Hannah's cottage. I was convinced that surviving on this land surpassed any experience imaginable, and my thoughts drifted to my grandmother Bridget. She had stood here; she must have. Her young eyes rested on every rock I see. Her dreams were gathered in the waving field grasses, and they continue to soar in every wind current. A wildflower drifted past me, and for a moment I felt Bridget's presence.

Valentia Island, with 650 residents, is one of Europe's westernmost inhabited locations. It lies off the Iveragh peninsula in the southwest of County Kerry. On the Sunday, Sharon and Phil attended Mass at her grandmother's parish, St. Derarca and St. Teresa Church. Afterwards, they gathered outside with some parishioners.

I asked the ladies if they knew of a townland called Ballyhearney. There just happened to be a Bridie Murphy from Ballyhearney in the crowd. She told us her husband was also related to my Murphy family. We had found another cousin!

... Just minutes down the road from the church, we stopped at the Murphy property gate. It would be easier to walk as the weeds and brambles had grown onto the gravel path. Bridie told us to stay as long as we wanted. Grateful, we turned to walk the land. The original cottage had been gone since 1925. It was leveled many years after the death of Bridget's parents – her mother, Mary, had died at the age of seventy-nine on October 12, 1912, and her father, John, passed away on August 6, 1916, at the age of ninety-three. A two-story stone house, now vacant, had replaced their old cottage. Weeds and brambles blocked the entryway and had taken root in the cracks and crevices of the old place.

...In 1865, Bridget and her family had lived in a three-room cottage with a loft. A thatched roof with a poorly

vented chimney made the air inside the cottage smoky and damp. A big hearthstone fireplace took up one wall, with two hobs built in for seating. Stone and dirt were packed together to create the floor. A wooden table was pushed up against the wall under a small window. A rack bench for extra seating leaned against the wall opposite the hearth. Bridget's parents, my great-grandparents, John and Mary Murphy and their children: John, Michael, Ellen, Kate, Bridget, Pats, Mary, and Julia lived in the crowded little cottage tucked in a meadow near the channel of Portmagee on the townland of Ballyhearney.... Although it was reassuring that the Murphy family still owned the land, I was disappointed the cottage was gone.

We walked towards the sound of waves breaking on the shore. Ballyhearney was located directly across the channel from Ireland's mainland and the village of Portmagee. The winds were not harsh on this channel side of Valentia, in stark contrast to Hannah's land, which was pounded by strong wind gusts off the Atlantic. Here, on Ballyhearney, gentle breezes rolled across the tall weeds....

Looking across the channel to Portmagee, we saw sand particles that sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight. But behind us on Ballyhearney prickly thorn-bushes grew, surrounded by nettles and dandelions. Tall brown grasses mixed with weeds and thistles spread like a thorny car-

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pet over rocks and stones. Bridget's birthplace resembled an untended graveyard. A cloud drifted overhead. I felt a chill and wondered for a moment if the sadness of Bridget's departure on that spring morning in 1880 still lingered. I wondered how my grandmother had prepared herself for the long, arduous journey to America, for it must have been difficult to say good-bye to loved ones; she was only fifteen.

Her quest completed, it was time to go home and write Bridget's story, and to tell her family about their cousins in Ireland. Bridget died in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1913; her husband Michael Shea, from Cahersiveen, County Kerry, died in 1925. They are buried in Omaha, Nebraska, but their spirits are free to find their way back to the lush green fields of Ireland, to the mountains and valleys filled with the delicate wildflowers of their youth.

Sharon Shea Bossard, an Irish citizen, lives in Lake Zurich, Illinois, with her husband of 42 years. Sharon became interested in her Irish when she discovered how little she knew about her Irish family and background. Visit her website: <http://www.findingmyirish.com>



On Writing Family History

Writing family history provides the wonderful opportunity to become the family recorder of events, giving family members an eyewitness view of the past. It doesn't have to be boring. Spice it up; make it fun; burrow deep into your soul to capture the heartache. If your ancestors didn't leave an account of their lives, look for information from libraries, museums, and vital records. When you've done your homework – interviewing family members, securing and studying documents, pictures, visiting birthplaces, old homesteads, and cemeteries – you're ready to begin writing.

Find a comfortable place, collect music that evokes emotion and gather your favorite snacks/beverages. Use headphones to block out surrounding noises for you'll need to concentrate on each character and setting. Place their pictures in front of you; include photos of their homes, family, schools, and graves. Close your eyes; visualize

your characters and the settings; then take their journey.

Be honest. Deliver the information as recorded on the documents, but be aware of family relationships. Seek family permission and advice when reporting troubling occurrences, for you'll not want to alienate family members.

Descriptive passages bring energy to writing and create the visual experience that helps the reader "feel" the story. Weave facts into word pictures. Help the reader discover the social history of the times by painting a portrait of settings and characters. Bring characters and settings to life through suspense, drama, humor and a little imagination. The end result will be a wonderful story, and possibly a book, of interest to your family and others as well.

Sharon Shea Bossard