

A GUIDE TO IRISH HABITATS

SIX BOOKS TO COLLECT



A GUIDE TO IRISH HABITATS
HOUSE & GARDEN

BOOK ONE OF SIX

The **IRISH** Mail
ON SUNDAY

FREE INSIDE THIS WEEKEND'S
The IRISH Mail
ON SUNDAY

FIVE MORE TO COLLECT IN THE MAIL NEXT WEEK



Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

The memories remain after those faces in the sand fade

THE white waves lap around my feet. It is cold and grey, yet with every breath I feel more alive. The air is of the purest kind, fresh and fragrant like a heavenly dewfall.

In the distance I see a ship. It is large, but to my eyes it is no more than a speck on the horizon. Thousands of tonnes just resting on deep waters: what a marvellous miracle.

The gulls glide gracefully overhead. This is their habitat, a place that changes with every tide. That is so because nothing lasts here beyond the fleeting moment.

Famously, the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote: 'You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters continually flow in.' His purpose was to emphasise that change is the only constancy. Looking around, I can see the truth in what he said.

If you can never step twice into the same sea, it is because other waters continually flow in. With each new tide we have a new sea, a new basin beneath the stars into which fresh waters flow. As they do, they erase what we in vain attempt to establish on the shore.

Each day, the sand tells a story of human life in pursuit of peace, solace and play. All around me are footprints, evidence of people seeking tranquillity for the soul. I notice little sandcastles, buckets and discarded spades.

I see pictures imprinted on the sand, an attempt to engrave the human face where it cannot endure. For tomorrow there will be a new sea, one that will claim this shore as its own. No more footprints or faces, and whatever remains of the little castles will also be taken away.

We have no lasting monuments here, and yet it is in this place that so many of us seek refuge. As I walk, I pass an elderly couple hand in hand. No words, just a silent tenderness that speaks volumes.

I pass laughing lovers high on the sweet octave of life on the edge. For them, this is a place where the zest of youth can be expressed without restraint. We are strangers on the shore, but they see something in my smile that makes them smile back.

Troubled souls linger by the water. They stare at the sea, but it is obvious they are elsewhere. They have come here to find peace and you can only pray that they do.

Fearless children muck about in the wet sand. They defy the waves and end up with sodden feet. No tears, only an infectious laughter that is carried along on the wind. My own

son runs on ahead. He has a stick with which he draws little signs to guide my way. 'I don't want you to get lost or to lose me,' he shouts, 'so just follow the trail.'

As I arrive at each sign, I make sure not to stand on it. For me, it is a sign of precious life in a place where few things survive.

He waves and a fellow walker graciously waves back.

Here we can see 'a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower'. Here you can 'hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour'. For this place is one of memories that will not fade like 'a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'.

In the midst of endless change, where the entire landscape lasts but a second, there is something here of permanent value. Drooping spirits are raised up high, broken hearts are soon healed and the weary find a new source of life.

It is raw and wild in winter, soft and warm in summer. Yet, at no time of the year will you leave this place without a sense of rebirth.

We come to be cleansed and, in so many ways, we are.

I RETURN to where I began. The ship is heading out to sea. The elderly couple are on their way home, their faces aglow and their spirits high. Somehow, this walk is for them like prayer: a silent renewal of the soul.

I follow my footprints until I stand in the very spot from where our journey started. My son is still leaving a trail despite the fact that I no longer follow. As he runs to my side, a wave rolls over my feet.

I look down at the sand and find that my footprints have faded. Gone, too, are my son's trail and a cluster of little castles. It is as though everything I have just written here had never happened.

All things have been erased without a trace.

A new sea has consumed what we created in the shadow of the old. An hour of life has vanished with a single wave.

Walking away, we meet those who played and strolled alongside us. We all look different now, healthier and happier. We smile and nod knowingly.

The sea has carried away something of our lives. That this does not cause us to worry is because the cost of letting go is nothing compared to what we have gained.

Somewhere in those great waters drift our troubles and cares, taken away by tides into which we shall thankfully never wade a second time.