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A Winter on Ireland's Big Waves

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TRANSWORLD IRELAND

Contents

Map	ix
Introduction	1
1 Cloudbusting	11
2 Light Out for the Territory	47
3 An Elemental Pull	89
4 Winter Days	119
5 No Man's Land	133
6 Northern Lights	153
7 Mac's, 8 a.m.	183
8 Keskerdh Kernow	203
9 Day Is Done	227
Picture Acknowledgements	253

1

Cloudbusting

A million footsteps had trampled over the fields of Little John's Farm and by nine o'clock on Sunday night England was darkening and the world felt drunk and happy. The crowd would sing out the end of summer. This was the last night of the August music festival in Reading. On the main stage Interpol glided through their set and a sea of bodies sang the chorus lines. Fergal Smith was somewhere among them. It was his birthday, and he had just returned from what most twenty-four-year-olds would consider a fantastical summer, spent hopping from Tahiti to Australia to Fiji to Indonesia and back with nothing but surfing on his mind. He ought to have been happy. In July he had achieved what he would remember as 'the longest, biggest, most perfect barrel I ever got'. This was at Cloudbreak, a fabled wave close to Tavarua Island, a tiny heart-shaped resort off Fiji. The swell had presented itself on weather charts a full week before the wave materialized, giving

the best wave chargers time to book flights and rush from various corners of the earth to be there when it was surging, on 11 July 2011.

That morning had started with a punishing lesson for Smith, when he got caught on the wrong side of a gargantuan wave as the reef drained, leaving him standing in a faded T-shirt and shorts before a rearing mountain of water (think of a two-storey house) which sent him skating across the rock face, embedding dozens of coral fragments in his back. For the rest of the session he paddled with one arm because his injured side was too stiff and sore, but the next morning, out of the blue, he found himself cutting through this beautiful dream of a wave that had formed not only there on the balmy Indian Ocean but years earlier in his mind, when he spent school lunchtimes wandering the beach in north Mayo. That single wave made his summer; it was also a vindication of what he had decided to do with his life. He told himself that he didn't mind what happened after that. And now he was on his way back home to Clare and he was with Tess, his girlfriend, and they were standing among tens of thousands of blissed-out people, and he knew that this was a privileged life.

He ought to have been happy. But he couldn't help it: he felt wretched.

Just twelve hours earlier, Smith had flown from Tahiti into London. He wasn't long there when he checked the weather charts. There was no particular reason for this – it wasn't as if he was going to surf the Thames – apart from the fact that like all serious surfers he has a meteorologist's obsession with fronts and patterns. He needs to know what is going on out there, at all times. And what he saw made him feel queasy.

Even as his plane had left Tahiti, the makings of an unholy swell were beginning to bubble up, as if to taunt him. He had already amassed mind-boggling air miles over the previous three months, jumping from continent to continent on the promise of spectacular waves. He knew that nothing would beat his experience at Cloudbreak; not this summer. Yet he felt such a narcotic pull that he had to force himself not to buy another ticket and fly straight out of Heathrow again. He was terrified at the thought of missing a once-in-a-lifetime day on the ocean. And he knew that he was experiencing the perpetual dilemma that all surfers must battle: the junkie's chase for the true epiphany, the perfect hit. Logic told him that he was doing the right thing, but as he stood there at the concert he drove himself to distraction wondering what was happening on that small cubic stretch of ocean thousands of miles away.

The sheer torture of that evening stayed with him for the next few months. The forecasts had been right: the waves were spookily gigantic and intimidating, so much so that they became a trial of endurance and courage for even the most experienced practitioners in the world. On a damp Saturday in early October, Smith was sitting in his living room still trying to justify not being in Tahiti to himself. He lives in a cottage that is a ten-minute drive from Lahinch but which could take ten days to find without very precise directions. Outside it was raining softly and steadily; the sea was flat and the sky low. Smith was content just to sit, drink tea, and let the afternoon slide by.

'We were at this concert and it was great,' he says, recalling his mood that evening in Reading. 'Elbow, people like this,

playing. But you know, you get one day like that and you don't know if or when it is going to come along again. I kind of avoided looking at the charts in the end because I was getting sick to the stomach. Ah, I don't know. In some ways, I'm glad I wasn't there. Who knows what would have happened? Nobody got hurt even though the waves were absolutely crazy and that was a miracle. So maybe I would have been the one who would have been hurt had I been there. Plus, I didn't really know anyone who would have given me a tow. I would have got a tow – I know I would – but if I was towed into a wave I didn't really want by someone I didn't really know – it's a whole scene and there is pressure and it is not comfortable. And you get smashed. And all for what? A photograph? Nobody who was out there enjoyed it, so far as I hear. It was just hell. It was up there with the scariest waves people have seen. Nathan Fletcher [Fergal's team rider with his sponsor, Analog] was there and he was saying that he didn't want to go but felt he had to. Nathan lost two good friends this year and he got smashed by two really horrible waves and he came out of it fine. So I think my not being there – the fact that I didn't see the swell – was a sign that I was meant to leave when I did. Now I feel kind of lucky because it was just silly and I might have been pressured into doing something that I didn't want to do.'

And then he fell silent, uncertain as to whether he had won himself over or not.

If Smith is certain about anything in life – and his opinion on most subjects tends to be definite – it is that it's not worth living unless you are doing what you want to do. He was fortunate in that he discovered at a young age that nothing

would eclipse the feel of surfing, and since then he has shown a rigorous commitment to placing the pursuit of waves at the core of his life. If he had accepted his natural place on the surfing pyramid he would never have been out surfing Cloudbreak with a dozen of the most illustrious surfers on the planet as his audience. He was in the company of men for whom big pounding waves had been a natural habitat since childhood. Smith didn't even grow up on the coast.

His parents run an organic farm close to Westport in Mayo. He surfed for the first time when he was seven when his father bought a beat-up board for thirty Irish punt during a family holiday in Achill and handed it to Kevin, his older brother. That was it: the boys were hooked. But Fergal was fervent about surfing. He never thought of it as a sport or as a pastime. Rather, it was a way of living that he wanted to follow. For the next ten years he badgered his parents to bring him to the sea at every available moment. In the beginning he surfed with friends on summer days in Achill and they were every bit as good on a board as he was – the same knacky childhood balance, the same fearlessness, the same sense of fun. But he alone had this gnawing feeling every time he left the water, this vague constant longing that accompanied him through his day-to-day life. It didn't occur to him that surfing should be a seasonal activity. He just wanted to be in the water, all the time.

There are still folders at his family home in Mayo containing notepads that he began keeping in secondary school, their leaves crowded with ideas about what he needed to do to get better. He devised an improvised fitness programme, with push-ups and yoga and balance exercises. 'I was like my

own drill sergeant,' he laughs. After school he began going to the gym and concentrating on sprinter's exercises – jumps, lunges, weight-bearing crouches – to develop his leg muscles. At school in Louisburgh he simply wasn't interested in the time-honoured ritual of traipsing down the town, having a cigarette and sniggering at the usual jokes. Instead he would jog down to the beach. 'Just to see the sea. I'd run along this back road and sit at the beach and make it back before the bell. I think the lads in the class thought I was completely mad but they were easy-going about it. It was a redneck school and they hated townies but I came from a farming background so I fitted in. It wasn't as if I was going around wearing flashy clothes and talking about it.'

When he was fourteen he felt competent enough to enter surf contests along the west coast. He got beaten, all the time, throughout that first year. Ollie O'Flaherty from Lahinch seemed to show up and win every contest Smith entered. 'I used to hate him for it. But the truth was I just wasn't very good. There was nothing for me in terms of becoming a surfer. It just came down to determination.'

The problem was that life kept getting in the way. It made absurd demands – insisting, for instance, that he attend school every day. Eight daylight hours locked indoors and no concession to the idea that there were waves out there: it seemed pointlessly restrictive.

He made up for it at weekends. The family had always been outdoorsy. For years, Fergal and Kevin had packed up soups and pastas and wet weather gear and a portable stove and had their parents leave them at the base of some mountain on a Friday evening and collect them again on Sunday afternoon.

They worked their way across most of the mountain ranges in the west of Ireland, camping out and learning how to survive in the damp haze of an Irish winter. Now they began using the survival gear for winter beach trips in Mayo, spending the day in forbidding waters and gales, drinking from flasks in between trying to surf icy, messy waves. ‘We just grew up freezing and shivering. We got used to it. I was skinny as anything but I’d stay out in the water for five and six hours at a time. Then we often used to walk for an hour or so back down the road to save Dad or Mum having to drive the whole way to pick us up.’

It was, for the most part, a desperate, thankless pursuit, but it was all that he had and he loved it. He would come in on a Monday morning and listen to how his school friends had spent their weekend. GAA games. Nightclubs. Television. ‘And I suppose I was asking myself: am I weird? I thought everyone thought the same way as I did. You know, you aspire to do what you want to do. When I look back at it, I was a complete loner. But it didn’t bother me in the slightest. It wasn’t that I was anti-social. I just didn’t see the point. I wasn’t in school for any reason except that I had to go.’

Then, at fifteen, he came up with a brainwave. Transition Year loomed and Smith discovered that by taking up a work placement in a local hotel he wouldn’t really have to attend school. In no time he had signed up to become the most enthusiastic pan washer in Ireland. When he had acquired world-class expertise at ‘pot-walloping’ he signed up for life-guarding duties in the local swimming pool. It meant he had a legitimate excuse for not showing up in Louisburgh very often. So that school year was perfect. He showed up for his

work shifts and spent the rest of the year hightailing around the country looking for waves. Kevin had a Citroën Saxo and they used to flatten the back seats and bundle their boards and whatever clothes came to hand into it and set off on tours to the handful of coastal towns that represented Ireland's surf spots. They were perennially broke but still managed to sneak in a trip to the Canaries, where they walked everywhere with their boards because they couldn't afford transport, and from there they caught a boat to Morocco and surfed the warmest waters of their lives.

When it came to returning to school for the Leaving Certificate, Smith was convinced that he didn't want to go. It wasn't the usual adolescent moan about education either, just an awareness that the system in which he was involved – learning sonnets and theorems by rote for set examinations and a possible place on a college course which would secure him a steady profession and a narrow, predictable life – held no interest for him. The very thought made him panicky. When he told his parents he wanted to leave, they told him that that was fine but warned him that he would have to start working. Kevin had graduated as a mechanical engineer and was leaving for Australia. It was agreed, as a compromise, that if Smith stayed in school he would inherit the Saxo, which would give him daily access to the sea. For the first time in his life, Fergal didn't have to depend on his parents or brother to transport him from home to beach.

He got his licence two weeks after his seventeenth birthday and slogged through his final year in school. His last examination in the Leaving Certificate was in construction engineering. He had started the day by surfing in north

Mayo and then showed up for the afternoon exam. The paper finished at four o'clock. He can still remember the delicious sense of impatience he felt as he was going through his final question. At home, his bags were packed and his boards were zipped up. As far as Smith was concerned, his new career began that evening. Except it wasn't a career so much as a vocation. He had his heart set on being a professional surfer whatever the consequences.

He made this choice in 2006, at the height of a decade in which Ireland had become slightly drunk on prosperity, a period when new wealth dripped from the nouveau mansions, the haute cuisine restaurants, the restored peasant cottages and the Land Cruisers and convertibles that roared along country roads in the summer. Smith belonged to the first generation of Irish Leaving Certificate students who were raised to assume that career and lifestyle ambitions weren't just attainable, they were a birthright. To the tens of thousands of Irish teenagers who sat their final exams that year his decision must have seemed as abstract and mysterious as entering the priesthood. Smith turned his back on the chief obsessions – money and getting ahead – and declined the safety-net of obtaining a third-level qualification. He just went for it.

So his mother collected him from outside the exam hall and he said good luck to his friends, who were busy making plans for the night's celebrations. Smith changed out of his school uniform in the back of the car as his mother drove into Westport – the last of countless trips with Fergal and his surfboard. He took the ten past five train from Westport to Dublin, got the bus to the airport and met up with

Hugo Galloway, a young Waterford surfer with whom he was friendly. They boarded a plane for Australia that night.

‘I wrote my goals down. It wasn’t a plan. More of a plan-slash-dream,’ Smith says of that time. ‘I wanted to spend two months in a surf centre in Australia, just improving. I was aiming to be a competitor then. I wanted to be the first Irish guy to crack the qualifying school.’

But Smith was caught between the luxury of having waves at his disposal every single day and a burning sense of duty to improve. He was still only seventeen but he was deathly serious about what he wanted to do. He knew that this wasn’t just a fad, a lark for a few months before he rejoined the herd and signed up for a conventional life. He was hard-headed in his approach, and from the beginning, when he saw just how smooth and effortless his Australian peers looked in the water, having surfed every day from the age of six, he began to have misgivings. Smith was never under any illusions about his own ability. Whenever he talks about his early years surfing he never shies away from saying that he was just ordinary.

Others see it differently. Dave Blount, a Waterford surfer, felt as if Smith had just fallen to earth as a fully formed surfer when he first came across him. ‘When you are in your mid-twenties and still trying to make the Irish team and this fifteen-year-old comes out of nowhere, you take notice. That’s how it was. You’d ask: who is that lad? From Mayo. A goofy-footer [a surfer who plants his left foot at the rear of the board]. Has a brother Kevin. Any good? Yeah, they’re handy. Then you go out and he has three off-the-lips done and you are thinking: what the fuck is going on here? It’s true that there were a few guys on a par with him as a junior, when he was riding