



FEATURE

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OF TIMES PAST

After being banished from Ireland at 14, it took **Richard Fitzgerald** 15 years before he would go back home. When he did return, with camera in hand, he began his most challenging project yet. Anna Bonita Evans reports.

Kerry Cottage, 1972.



Rosary night, County Waterford, 1991.

The familiar adage for successful storytelling is to write about what you know. This can be applied to other forms of artistic expression, such as photography, and is especially so when considering Richard Fitzgerald's pictures of rural Irish communities. Finding the series' underlying depth and charm just as intriguing as Richard's portrayal of his subjects' demanding way of life, I went on a quest to find out more. As Richard began to talk, it became clear this on-going project is as much about him working through his own nostalgic attachment to the subject as it is about

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producing a powerful photo-essay.

Revealing he grew up in an area much like the places featured in the photographs, Richard says, 'As a child I lived in a traditional thatched cottage in County Waterford, which can be found in the south-east region of Ireland. Our village didn't have electricity and the other conveniences one might associate with

1950s life.' Conjuring up a romantic image of times past, he goes on to say, 'Thinking back to those days I remember the village roads as dark and mysterious places, where shadowy figures moved in the twilight; there was often the sound of horses' hooves in the distance.' >

Opposite top
Peatcutter beside his fireplace, County Galway, 1971.

Opposite bottom
Horses and jaunting cart at Inch Beach, County Kerry, 1970.



< Yet as a teenager life as he knew it unexpectedly changed when he was shipped to London. 'I was thrown out of Ireland at the age of 14 for being wrongly accused of stealing a bottle of lemonade at a crossroad dance. I had bought shame to my family and soon found myself on a ferry bound for England.' Despite this possibly irrational reaction to an alleged petty crime, this banishment still appears to play on Richard's mind: 'Even now when I return to Ireland I still half expect someone to tap me on the shoulder asking me to leave again.'

With no family to fall back on in the foreign and fast-paced London, Richard had to fend for himself. Through good luck and resourcefulness he found himself a room to rent in a house belonging to a professional photographer; it was here Richard developed his passion for the art. 'The photographer, Cecil Stone, had a studio and darkroom in his home. He became my personal tutor so I learned about lighting and the secrets of his chemical mixtures for toning prints.' This complete immersion in photography gave Richard the skills to land a job as a darkroom printer with a Fleet Street press agency, where he continued to develop his interest and expertise.

Swept up with the creative opportunities available to him in England's capital, and possibly still carrying the stigma of his exile, Richard didn't go back to Ireland for almost 15 years. The scenes that welcomed him when he did finally return took him by surprise: 'I was astonished how the old world I knew from my childhood was fast disappearing, so felt compelled to record it. I decided on that first visit to begin a personal lifelong project on my native homeland.'

This work has now become a 40-year documentation of those living and working in some of the most remote areas of the country. Unequivocally compelling, Richard's images show how the landscape, importance of community and religion are at the core of this society's way of life. Vastly different to his day-to-day work as a studio photographer, Richard explains that as the project progressed he looked forward ever more eagerly to re-engaging with the landscape of his birth: 'When I travelled home I would head straight for the mountains and back roads as it was there that I was likely to find the kind of images I was looking for.' >



Racehorses at Tramore beach, 1985.



Bringing home the coffin, Ballintlea, 1992.

◀ Consciously composed with a clear adoration for Ireland's spirit ringing throughout, at first glance these pictures could be seen as leaning towards the pastoral – an almost idealised version of country life. Asking Richard about the rather romantic approach he adopted, he says: 'I do like the idea of the beauty deriving from the picturesque and think at times my work leans towards the fine art principles of the 19th century pictorial photographers.'

Yet looking closer we see Richard doesn't shy away from showing the hardships and difficulties these people endured, or as he eloquently calls it: 'capturing the dark underbelly of Irish rural life'. The men and

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women's weather-beaten faces, their starkly furnished rooms with cavernous fireplaces and the isolated location of the villages all add to portraying the challenges they faced.

Although Richard felt compelled to record a way of life that was disappearing fast, it's remarkable how many of the images were taken during one of the most progressive

decades of the 20th century. The 1970s was a time of change, where pictures of public protests, rock 'n' roll and MG cars dominated. But here Richard shows a place harking back to a time akin to 100 years before, where people travelled by horse and cart and family gatherings consisted of kneeling down for evening prayer rather than sitting around a television. Highlighting the fabric of a marginalised society starting to unravel, Richard's photo-essay holds as much resonance now as it did when he took the first images.

To see more of Richard Fitzgerald's images go to richardfitzgerald.com