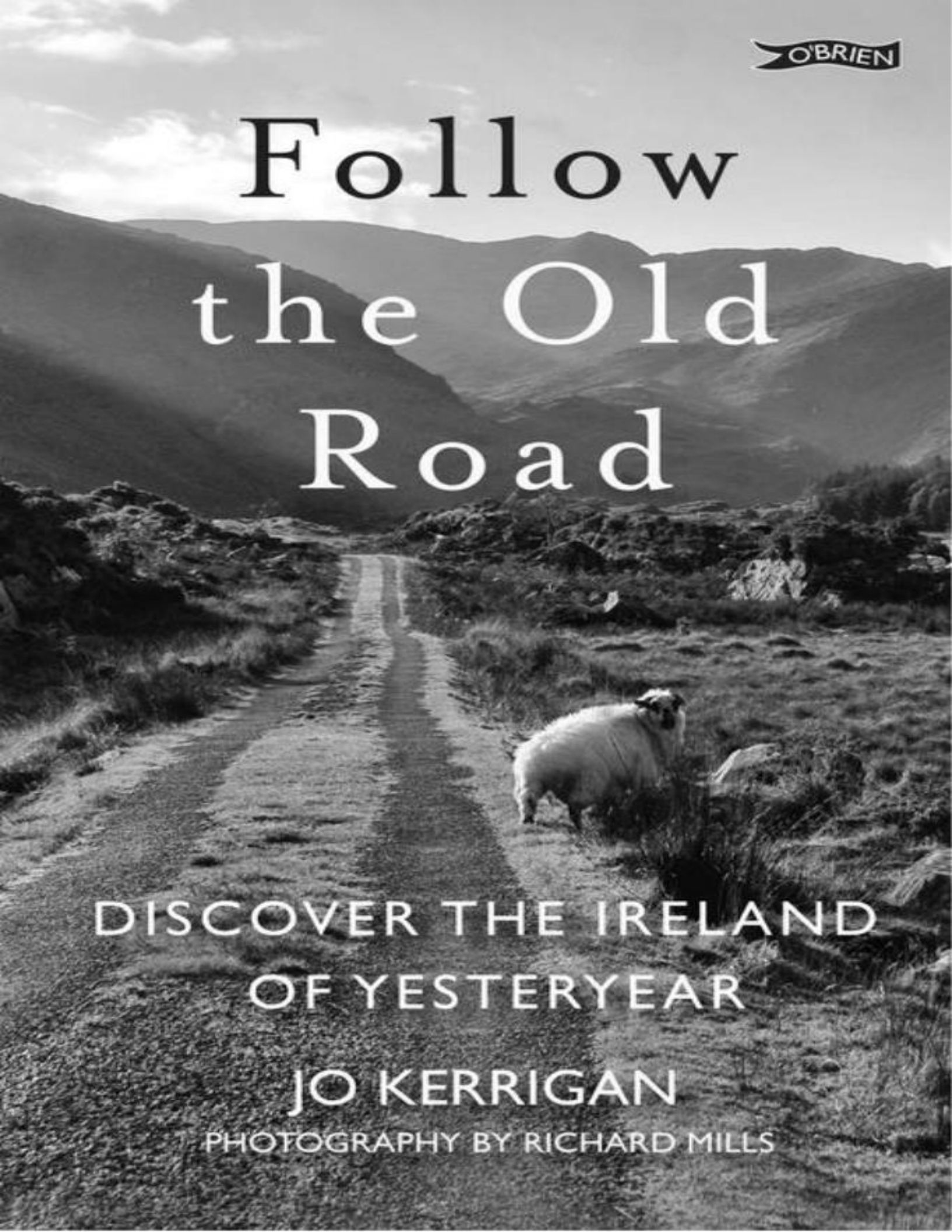


A black and white photograph of a dirt road winding through a mountainous landscape. A sheep is standing on the right side of the road in the foreground. The title "Follow the Old Road" is overlaid in large white serif font.

Follow the Old Road

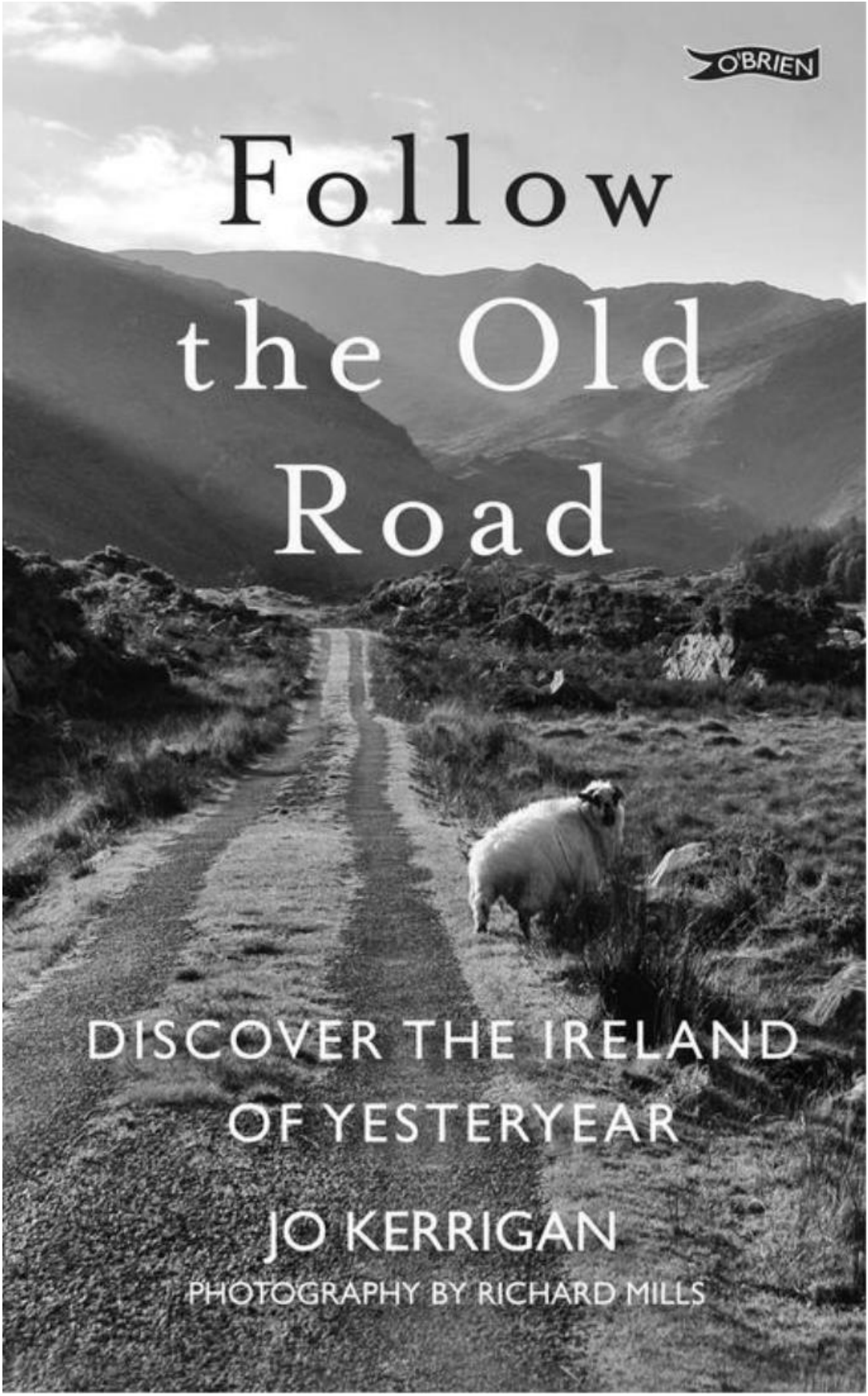
DISCOVER THE IRELAND
OF YESTERYEAR

JO KERRIGAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD MILLS

The O'Brien logo is a small, dark, stylized banner with the word "O'BRIEN" in white, serif, uppercase letters.

O'BRIEN

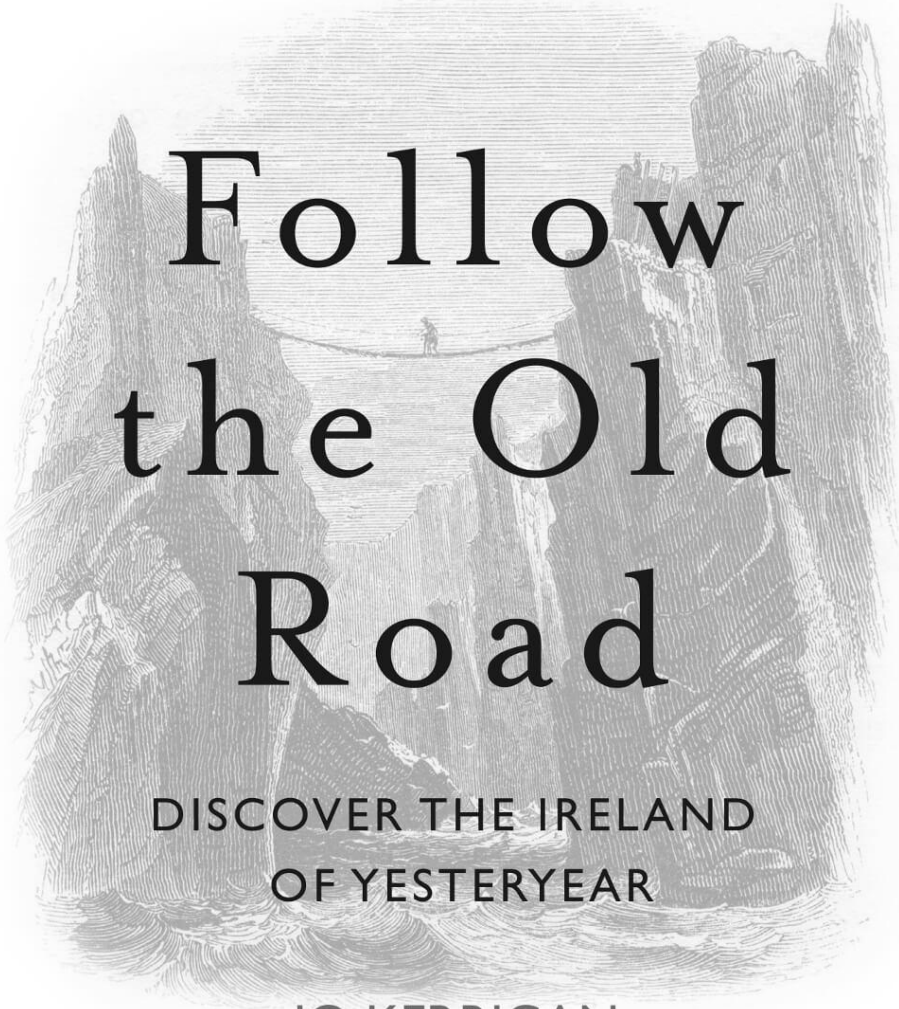
The background of the book cover is a black and white photograph of a narrow, unpaved road winding through a rugged, hilly landscape. In the foreground, a sheep is standing on the right side of the road, facing away from the camera. The road leads into the distance, flanked by grassy slopes and shrubs. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a sky with scattered clouds.

Follow the Old Road

DISCOVER THE IRELAND
OF YESTERYEAR

JO KERRIGAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD MILLS



Follow the Old Road

DISCOVER THE IRELAND
OF YESTERYEAR

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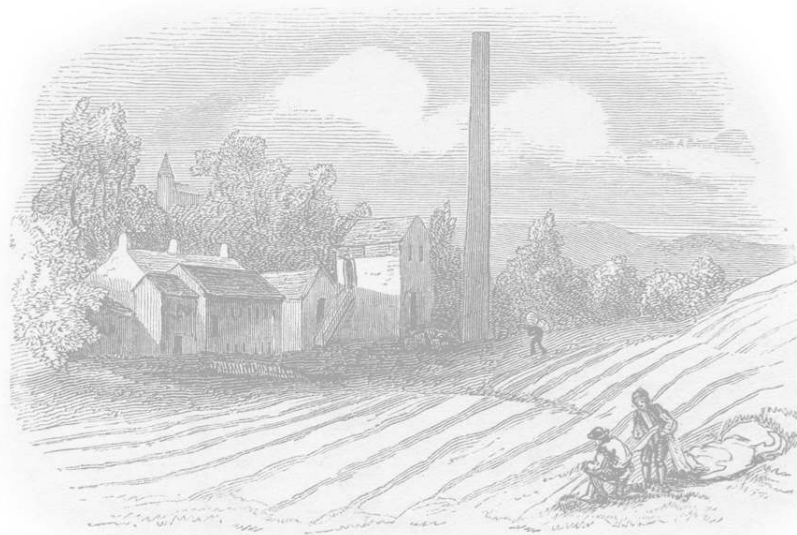
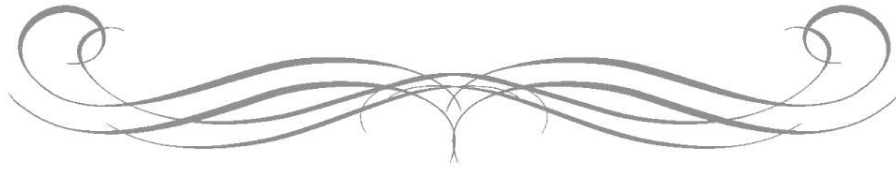
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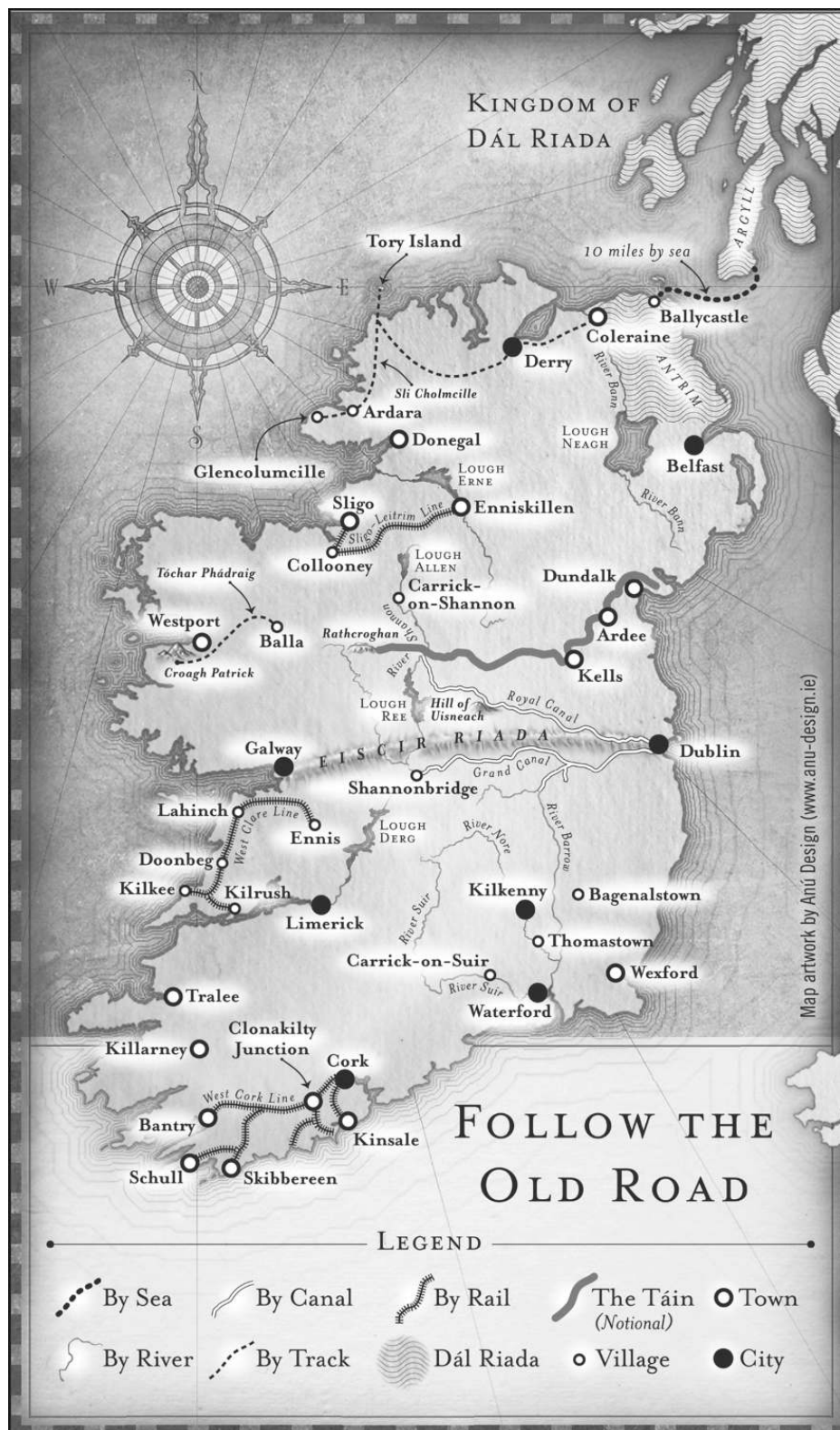


THE O'BRIEN PRESS
DUBLIN

Dedication

To those who created the old roads of Ireland;
and those who now take the time to rediscover them







TITLE PAGE

DEDICATION

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I
THE GREAT RIVER ROADS

CHAPTER II
TRACE THE TRACK: PATHWAYS TO THE PAST

CHAPTER III
SLOW AND SERENE: THE CANAL AGE

CHAPTER IV
A FAR-OFF WHISTLE: LOST RAILWAYS

CHAPTER V
FOLLOW THE COAST: SEA ROADS

INDEX

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Cormorants on a slipway

Introduction



We live in an age where travel within our country is defined by the car we drive, the nearest motorway. All movement is land-based, road-based. It's hard to imagine, but long ago, people travelled in very different ways. It's time to look back and remember those ways, even, perhaps, to rediscover them. They're still there, waiting to be found.

The first settlers arriving on our shores found safe havens, natural harbours, the estuaries of rivers, and settled there, in sight of the ocean that had brought them to this land. Gradually they moved inland to more fertile soil, following the course of the river. These natural waterways were the easiest way to travel when most of the country was covered with thick forests and it was all too easy to lose the way or run into danger. In later centuries, great lords built their castles and monks their

abbeys along these river roads, and in turn, towns and cities developed around them.

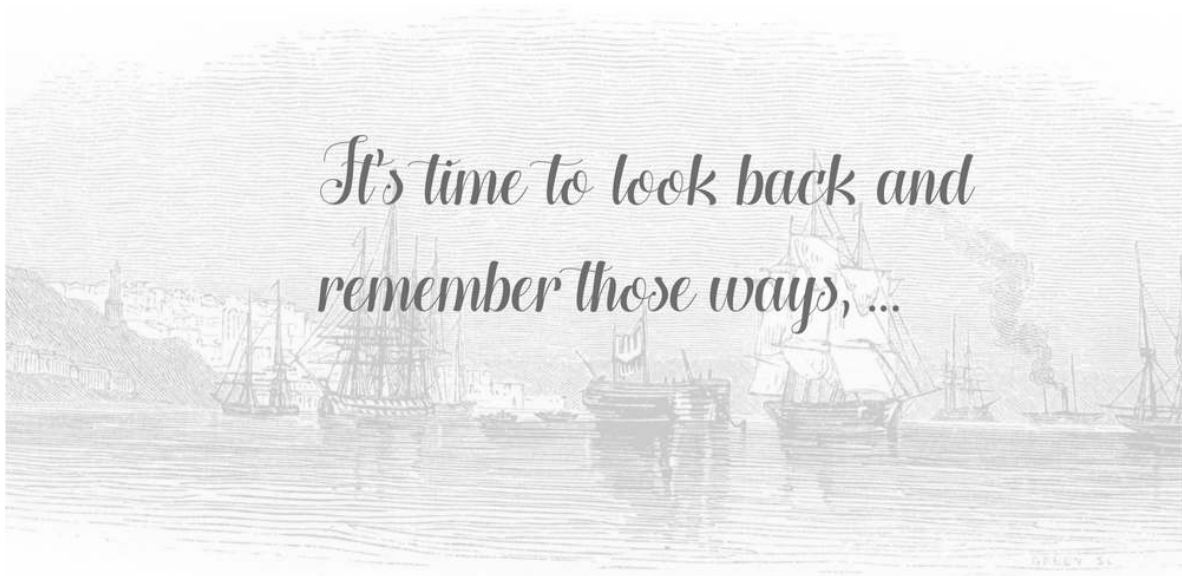
Tracks also began to appear between isolated settlements or between such settlements and ports where markets were held. Longer routes were marked out over mountains, through passes, across boglands. Where the land was very boggy, wooden trackways called toghers were built, similar to the old corduroy roads which led into Siberian Russia. And pilgrims travelling to ancient sites of worship followed old tracks, guided by marker stones and distinctive natural features in the landscape. Gradually major roads became identified: for example the Slíge Mhór across the midlands, on a natural esker or raised causeway. These were still rough and ready trackways, but they made long distance travel possible.

Later still, as the world of industry expanded, businessmen saw the possibilities of expanding the useful river system to allow carriage of heavier loads further distances. Canals made connections possible between already important waterways and also extended the navigable length of individual rivers by cutting off large natural loops or avoiding narrow, rough, or shallow stretches.

Ironically, the canals of Ireland were hardly out of their infancy before they were threatened by the advent of the railway, and many fell into disuse, becoming silted up and overgrown by the lush growth that in Ireland is always ready to invade and take back its own.

At its height, the railway system covered almost every part of Ireland, with the stations and halts of little branch lines serving tiny settlements and connecting to the main routes between cities. Once the motor vehicle became established, though, the railways too began to decline, and today what remains is but a skeleton of what once was. Yet still there in the countryside lie the old tracks,

the forgotten stations, the hidden halts, each one with its own story to tell.



In our own time, the increasing demands of commerce and cars have encouraged the creation of new, ever-faster motorways and dual carriageways, shortening journeys between major destinations, cutting off wasteful curves and by-passing towns and villages which once saw a constant roar of traffic. The journeys are faster, yes, but the amount you miss by following the main through route is incalculable. If you want to know more about the real Ireland, then do yourself a favour. Find the old road. Rediscover the old ways of travelling. By turning off the main highway and discovering venerable routes, some of which have been travelled for thousands of years, you will see Ireland in an entirely different way.



River Shannon at Clonmacnoise

CHAPTER I

The Great River Roads



hen we think of old roads, tracks, byways, we naturally tend to visualise these as being tramped out over the centuries on solid ground – over mountains, through valleys, leading to sacred sites, markets and castles, linking one community with another. Yet there are far earlier roads, known and followed by travellers since prehistoric times.

Those who first came this way by sea (itself the most ancient and well-known path) found Ireland had a deeply indented coastline with safe and sheltered bays. They followed the rivers that flowed into these bays, rivers that pointed the way ever onward and upward, drawing the intrepid explorer on with the promise of fertile soil, fresh water and, above all, a safe place to settle.

The great river roads connecting Ireland's interior to the sea gave easy and relatively safe access. No need to beat through thick forests where enemies or wild animals

might lurk, no danger of losing your way. When a highway like that opens up in front of you, the most natural thing in the world is to accept its lure and set off to find out what lies round the next bend. And where the first explorers led, others followed, each contributing to the gradual expansion of settlement and trade.



Ireland is bountifully supplied with rivers, each with its own story to tell from prehistory to the present. Here are three (or perhaps we should call it five, strictly speaking) that reflect different aspects of those stories and of the country. They are the Shannon, the Bann, and the Three Sisters.

THE SHANNON: FIRST OF ALL, LINKING ALL

The longest river in Ireland and indeed longer than any in neighbouring Great Britain, the Shannon rises from a dark and mysterious pool in Co. Cavan and flows south

and west for 360km (224 miles) through or between eleven counties before reaching its estuary, which is itself a major harbour. Virtually dividing Ireland in half, it's our supreme waterway, known and travelled for thousands of years. It has seen invaders, pilgrims, colonialists, battle fleets, engineers, industrialists, and finally pleasure-seeking tourists. As such, it is linked to every stage of Ireland's history and development.

Whoever first happened upon its spreading estuary must have wondered what could possibly lie further inland, since from the sea it is not possible to guess just how far the wide waters continue. What we do know is that it was familiar to the world's earliest traders. It is shown on Ptolemy's famous 2nd-century map, which was itself compiled from earlier sources held in the legendary library of Alexandria in Egypt.

Alexandria was an important trading centre at the cross-roads between west and east. The Pharaohs gently but firmly insisted that any books or writings arriving with travellers should be confiscated and copied for their library. In fact the originals were then kept by the Pharaohs, the travellers getting the copy. The great library became a treasure house of knowledge, and Ptolemy would thus have gathered his information on Ireland from sources such as nautical charts or descriptions of journeys, which would themselves have originated from information passed between trading ships over previous centuries. We can be fairly sure, therefore, that a good knowledge of Ireland's coastline and its major rivers was available from before the time of Christ. And that in turn argues a succession of visitors to these shores, whether traders or travellers, from a long way back.

What did they come for - trade, raid, worship or settlement? The trade route from Iberia to Ireland and

Great Britain stretches back into prehistory. Ships from the Middle Sea or Mediterranean would have brought wine and salt north, exchanging it for hides, wool, grain and copper. They in turn dealt with Greek and Phoenicians, and it is quite likely that these traders from the far south also came to Ireland. From the north, the Danes brought tar and timber, seeking foodstuffs and hides in return. Later they would return in their longships, to plunder, terrorise, and finally settle.

Then there were pre-Christian pilgrims who might well have made the long journey to visit famous sacred sites like the Hill of Uisneach, using the river roads to reach them. And finally there were those seeking new lands, somewhere to settle, found a community, raise families and crops. Many came to the estuary of the Shannon.

This river has always been of strategic importance. When Oliver Cromwell ravaged the country in 1654, his principal aim was to ethnically cleanse three of the four provinces to free up the land for incoming English settlers. Any surviving landowners were given the choice of going 'to Hell or to Connacht'; that is, die or migrate into the poorer land west of the Shannon.

Approaching from the sea, the Shannon estuary appears enormous, as indeed it is, with Co. Limerick spreading out on the southern side and Co. Clare to the north. The estuary has boasted its own river monster since ancient times, a fearsome creature called Cathaigh, which sported a horse's mane, a whale's tail, and death-dealing nails of iron.



Scattery Island

St Senan, patron saint of Co. Clare, is said to have defeated Cathaigh at Inis Cathaigh, or Scattery Island, which lies in the estuary just outside Kilrush. You can't keep a good monster down, though, and she might still be spotted on stormy days if you keep your eyes open. Senan afterwards founded a monastery on the island, the ruins of which still stand, along with a round tower. Catch a ferry there from Kilrush and enjoy the peace that now envelops an islet which has seen Viking raiders, sheltering Spanish Armada ships, Tudor invaders, and even more recent British army outposts. An island in such an estuary is a key strategic location, whatever the century.

A short distance upriver from Scattery, the estuary narrows a little, and here a modern car ferry crosses between Killimer and Tarbert, reflecting thousands of

years of boat travel transporting travellers from one side to the other. The name Tarbert, or Tairbeart, means a draw-boat or portage, that is, a place where boats must be pulled across land to reach another stretch of water. The ferry port is in fact on a little island just off the mainland, although this is now connected by a bridge. In early times, those crossing the estuary at this narrower point might well have had to drag their boats across the narrow island before reaching the Limerick shore. The car ferry is an ideal way to experience the space, the grandeur, the wildness of this great river as it meets the sea. Dolphins are often spotted disporting themselves around the boats (they really seem to enjoy accompanying them).

Foynes, on the Limerick side, was the first landing base in Ireland for seaplanes or flying boats from North America. Surveys were made by Charles Lindbergh in the early 1930s, and the first transatlantic flight from Newfoundland landed there in 1937. In 1942, Foynes was abandoned in favour of a new airport at Shannon. Today it houses a museum of flying boat history.

The distinctive fishtail shape of the upper estuary becomes noticeable here, the River Fergus forming the north fin, and leading on to Newmarket-on-Fergus, Clarecastle and Ennis. The southern fin of the fishtail is the Shannon itself.

The flat landscape we see today around the Shannon estuary was far more thickly wooded in antiquity. Archaeological digs, as well as occasional marked drops in sea level, have revealed the remains of coastal forests as well as trackways and wooden dwellings. The remains of woven willow fish baskets and fish traps have been found, and the medieval Annals of Innisfallen record that in 1105 ‘...there was caught by fishermen in the sea of Luimneach [Limerick] a fish of unheard-of size which measured fifteen feet, and two ingots’ weight were

obtained for it.' Was it a basking shark? A pilot whale? Or perhaps one of Cathaigh's offspring, escaped from St Senan's clutches?

Lough Gur, 22km (13.6 miles) south of Limerick, was probably settled by migrants arriving via the rivers Shannon and Maigue some 6,000 years ago. Today's site has been reconstructed to give an idea of what life was like in the Stone, Bronze, Iron, Early Christian, and medieval eras. About 300m (330 yds) west of the main centre is the largest stone circle in Ireland, Grange, built around 2,200 BC. The largest of its 113 standing stones is known as Crom Dubh, after an early pagan harvest god.

Bunratty Castle, on the Clare side of the Shannon, is a tourist magnet, offering everything from medieval castle banquets and shopping to a folk museum. The Vikings got here first, though, creating a settlement in the 10th century on high ground, giving them extensive view south over the estuary. That strategic position was not lost on the Anglo-Normans either: they established a medieval town on the same spot. By 1287 this had a population of about 1,000 people, and boasted a castle, a court, a shambles (meat market), fairs, a water mill, a fish pond, and a rabbit warren. One 14th-century Irish text refers to 'Bunratty of the wide roads, oared galleys and safe harbour.'



Basking sharks swim just under the surface of the water.

On the other side of the Shannon, lies the thriving city of Limerick. It was founded by the Vikings who discovered a handy island there on which to set up camp in 812. Today known as King's Island, this is hardly distinguishable as a separate entity from the rest of the city when driving through, but keep a sharp eye out when heading for King John's Castle and you will see that you have to cross the smaller River Abbey en route. The Abbey is a distributary rather than a tributary, as it forks off from the Shannon a little way upriver, and then joins it again near the old Potato Market. One might well think that the island got its name from the castle, but in fact the 2nd-century Ptolemy map mentioned earlier does show a place called Regia (i.e. King) in exactly the same spot, indicating a much earlier royal settlement. That wouldn't be surprising, since it's a natural river crossing and a good defensive position.



Bunratty Castle

The Viking sea-king Thormodr Helgason used this island base to range up and down the Shannon from Lough Derg to Lough Ree, snatching treasures from monasteries and abbeys along the way. The Limerick raiders, however, met their match in 937 when they clashed with their Dublin counterparts on Lough Ree and were thoroughly defeated.



Treaty Stone and King John's Castle, Limerick city

In Norman times, the walled city on King's Island was known as Englishtown, to distinguish it from Irishtown, which was kept firmly south of the Abbey river and thus off the island. King John's Castle was built here in 1200 and is one of the best-preserved examples of its kind in Europe. Close by, St Mary's Cathedral, founded in 1168, is the oldest structure in the city still in daily use. Some five centuries later, the Treaty of Limerick was signed here on a block of limestone, ending the war between the Jacobites and the Williamites.

Killaloe, upstream from Limerick, lies on the southern shore of Lough Derg and the west side of the Shannon, with Ballina directly across on the eastern shore. It's another one of the principal crossings of this major river road and as such is rich in history and archaeological discoveries. In St Flannan's Cathedral is a unique stone bearing both Viking runes and ogham. The runes read

‘Thorgrim carved this stone’ while the ogham records ‘A blessing upon Thorgrim.’



Killaloe, Co. Clare

Killaloe is the birthplace of the High King, Brian Boru, who ruled his kingdom from here before meeting his death at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. There are two claims for his ancestral home. The first was Kincora, or Ceann Coradh, meaning ‘head of the weir,’ a castle that stood on a hill above what is now Killaloe town. Unfortunately, nothing remains of that ancient royal stronghold. The second site, fortunately, is still with us.



The Thorgrim stone, St Flannan's
Cathedral

Brian Boru's Fort is a circular earthwork standing on a spur of land overlooking the point where Lough Derg narrows into the Shannon. It is also known as *Béal Bóru*, or 'port of the cattle tribute', indicating that a toll was levied on goods and animals using this crossing, or alternatively, that tributes were paid here to a ruler. Whoever controlled this fording point controlled the strong trade route from the coast into the heart of the country.

A short walk down from the road leading north from Killaloe town brings you to the huge and silent tree-ringed fort which must have been a hive of activity in the days when it was a royal seat. The king would never have allowed the magnificent surrounding trees to grow to their present height though, as it would have interfered

with the ability of the watchmen to keep a sharp eye out in all directions.



Brian Boru's Fort

The ringfort actually dates from an earlier period than that of Brian Boru. More than 800 stone implements, including stone axes, hammer stones and perforated stone sinkers for lines and nets, have been found in this area, and many stone axes within the fort itself. This suggests that a Stone Age settlement occupied the site because of its position by a convenient fording point, which could also be used as a safe harbour for the small boats used for fishing. It was certainly an excellent strategic spot, and one from which the king could sally forth at speed either along Lough Derg or along the river, depending on where the trouble was brewing.

U

Uisneach, Hill of [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#)

Ulster [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)

Ulster Canal [1](#), [2](#)

United States [1](#)

Upton [1](#)

V

Valentia Island [1](#), [2](#)

Versailles/New Versailles [1](#), [2](#)

W

Wales [1](#), [2](#)

Walkinstown [1](#)

Waterfall [1](#)

Waterford [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#), [10](#), [11](#), [12](#), [13](#), [14](#)

West Clare [1](#)

West Cork [1](#)

West Indies [1](#)

Westmeath [1](#), [2](#)

Westport [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)

Wexford [1](#), [2](#)

Wicklow [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)

Woodstown [1](#)

Y

Youghal [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)



About the Author

Jo Kerrigan grew up amid the wild beauties of West Cork. After a distinguished academic and journalistic career in the UK, including winning the Oxbow Prize for medieval history at Oxford, she returned to her roots and now writes for many national and international publications. A specialist in history and folklore, she is also interested in old crafts and runs a popular weblog, celticmemoryyarns.blogspot.com.

Richard Mills was born in Provence and moved to Ireland at the age of 16. He has combined his career as a press photographer with a passion for wildlife photography, and has garnered numerous national and international awards. He was the subject of a TV programme by the wildlife film-maker Éamon de Buitléar, and he has contributed images to hundreds of publications across the world, including his popular book, *Ireland's Bird Life: A World of Beauty*.

Jo and Richard live in West Cork, surrounded by books and cameras, cats and dogs. Their first book for The O'Brien Press was *West Cork: A Place Apart*, which pays tribute to the heart-stopping beauty of this region. Their second, *Old Ways, Old Secrets*, explores the ancient beliefs and customs still practised in Ireland today.

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