Bantry, a small harbourside town in the far west of Ireland, may not be famed in song and story like Galway or Tipperary, but it stages a spectacular annual gathering of readers and writers.

The story of how an international publishing house and world-class literary festival sprang in West Cork should inspire rural and regional literature-lovers everywhere.

‘The aim of Fish is to get new writers into print,’ says festival founder Clem Cairns, of Fish Publishing. ‘Not just in a magazine, or latterly on the internet, but in a quality anthology, with excellent work from around the world selected by well-known writers. It’s a solid and positive way to encourage new writers, so if they’re serious and dedicated they may go on to further publication. I’m delighted to say this has been the case for many writers over the years.’

The Fish Anthology publishes the prize-winners and some short-listed entries from its contests, spanning poetry, short stories, memoir and flash fiction. At first the Anthology launch was accompanied by ‘a few readings and a couple of seminars’. Gradually it expanded into a week-long festival.

‘My philosophy was to make the festival accessible to everyone,’ Cairns says. ‘We were the first literary festival to hold workshops for song-writing and speech-writing. We ran sessions on sports writing, journalism of all kinds, memoir, poetry, short stories, the novel, women's writing, children's writing. We used to run a travel writing workshop where participants went off to an island for a night or two and returned to Bantry, often wet and seasick, to complete their task. Innovation was key.

‘To attract the kind of folk who read, but might feel out of place at a “literary” event, I’ve made sure to invite writers like Roddy Doyle and Pat McCabe who are popular, make people laugh, break down barriers between what’s perceived as high and low literature. Quality is the only standard.’

We’re told that as large publishing houses struggle, the way is opening for small presses. In Australia, many of these are based outside major cities. I ask Cairns whether regional Queensland publishers and potential festival organisers should take heart from Fish’s success.

‘Absolutely. Living in a remote place, it was important for me to keep contact with the world outside, and Fish was a vehicle for this. We brought the best international writing
we could to Ireland and to Bantry, and showed the best Irish writing to the rest of the world. A worthwhile exchange.’

Being based in a small rural centre can be an advantage, especially when you highlight the town’s unique locality, history and character.

‘A small festival, in a small town, in a remote place, offers intimacy. Workshops that run for a week provide the continuity of a kernel of top-quality writers. I also insist that writers, publishers and agents who give talks and readings stay two nights, so people can meet them. A late-night Bedtime Story session in a pub gives unpublished writers a chance to read their work. Run like this, the Festival constitutes a temporary community intersecting with the permanent one.’

I was unable to stay for the whole festival, but a few highlights indicate the quality and diversity of sessions on offer:

Jim Crace, author of eleven novels including Whitbread winners Quarantine and Continent, read from his work-in-progress Harvest. Jim’s wit and wisdom included robust advice like, ‘Be true to yourself and the story. It doesn’t matter if your book’s not published - there are thousands of books. Stop whinging, just do it.’

Edward Marston and Judith Cutler, a husband and wife team who’ve written over eighty crime novels between them, interviewed each other (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) about their writing processes, literary influences, and aspects of craft.

James Harpur and John F. Deane read poems in the same session, which I found joyous to the point of mystical.

But my real festival find was Theo Dorgan, poet and travel memoirist. Theo read from his poetry collection Greek, and memoirs Sailing Home and Time on the Ocean, to kick off the maritime-themed Bantry Bay series.

There’s still time to enter this year’s Fish Flash Fiction and Poetry competitions. And if your holiday plans include an Irish summer, it’s well worth the drive out to Bantry to take part in this feast of a Festival.

FURTHER INFORMATION
West Cork Literary Festival will be held in July.

www.westcorkmusic.ie/literaryfestival/

Fish contest details are available at the website, www.fishpublishing.com, and are regularly detailed in WQ’s competitions section. See pages 18-19 for the latest.