

The heavy toll paid by the people of Normandy for the June 1944 Allied landings on their shores has been well documented. Hundreds of towns and villages were destroyed, and thousands of civilian lives were lost, on the eve of the liberation of France from German occupation. Of all the towns bombed by the Allied liberators, one earned the infamous title, "capital of the ruins": in Saint-Lô, the capital of the Manche region, the scale of destruction was unparalleled.

The story of another, less well known, Normandy landing forms the subject of this book. It tells the story of how a group of Irish people, medical and non-medical, came to the ruins of Saint-Lô to start and run a hospital. One staff member who worked there for six months was later to achieve world-wide fame as a writer: Samuel Beckett.

The book outlines the main stages of the project: it reports how the recently founded Irish Red Cross Society offered the French Red Cross a hospital, entirely equipped and run by Ireland; how some obstacles, logistical and diplomatic, were overcome and how the town of Saint-Lô was chosen as the destination. Prepared during the course of some ten months in Dublin, and shipped to Cherbourg in August 1945, the hospital was slow to get off the ground, reaching full capacity in the following spring. It was inaugurated officially in April 1946. The book tells of the warm and friendly relations between Irish staff and the people of Saint-Lô, the illnesses treated, the leisure pursuits preferred by the Irish on their time off; and finally, it tells of the controversial manner in which the Irish medical team withdrew from the hospital at the end of 1946, in spite of a demonstration of some thousands of townspeople pleading with them to remain... The so-called "Irish Hospital affair" provoked a minor scandal in Saint-Lô, but this book reveals several issues at stake, hitherto unknown.

The book concludes with an account of what became of the Irish Hospital after it moved to the town's brand new hospital in 1956, and sketches the subsequent careers of the staff, the most famous of whom was Samuel Beckett.

Generously illustrated with period photographs, the book is based on research carried out in archives in Dublin, Paris, Saint-Lô and Perth in Scotland. It also draws from unpublished personal documents and interviews. The author, who is the posthumous daughter of the hospital's pathologist, Dr James Gaffney, lectured in French at University College Dublin.

An important chapter in the history of Franco-Irish relations, written in English with a summary in French.