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— I N T A L —

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FÁILTE

“Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals or nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.” - John O'Donohue

We are all the sum of the stories we
tell ourselves, arising from the nar-
ratives woven by our ancestors.
Every person on earth views life through that
lens. Is it a good story, one filled with prosper-
ity and hope? Or is it one of hardship and trag-
edy?

At this moment in history, we once again
face the challenge of resisting those that are
determined to control the story, warping and
manipulating our perspective. At no other time
in our collective past have we had more access
to information while, at the same time, being
all-too-aware that the storytellers we rely upon
are often untrustworthy. We are disarmed as
uncertainty and chaos rule the news cycles,
and headlines - true or false - travel the globe at
breakneck speed.

**“Storytelling enjoys a rich tradition
in Celtic history, with many tales
invented to impart wisdom, teach
values, explain mysteries, and offer
an ethical compass.”**

The story of the Welsh Goddess, Branwen,
is one such legend; Branwen found herself
caught up in a conflict - not of her own making,
but with tragic consequences for herself and
her family. The ancient account details how
the morally weak, in positions of power, use

tools of intimidation and violence as vengeance
reigns over reconciliation. Branwen's brother,
Bran, however, understands that “The man
who would lead his people must first become a
bridge” - the path to peace is through compas-
sion and forgiveness.

Stories help us to make sense of the world
around us. Thankfully, we all have the power
over the narratives that we choose to believe
in and, by doing so, we can change the course
of our own lives and those of our families, our
friends, our neighbours, our community, and
our world. We are all eyewitnesses to history,
and those fortunate enough can use their voice
to share stories that matter to choose a path of
empathy and remember that we are not mere
characters in the story, we are the authors - we
hold the pen.

The team at Celtic Life International are
passionate storytellers and delight in bringing
stories - ones with a decidedly Celtic spin on
life - to you. With each turn of the page, you are
keeping Celtic tradition alive; vibrant stories
crafted with vital voices by real people that are
more important than ever today.

**Siobhán L. Covington,
Publisher**



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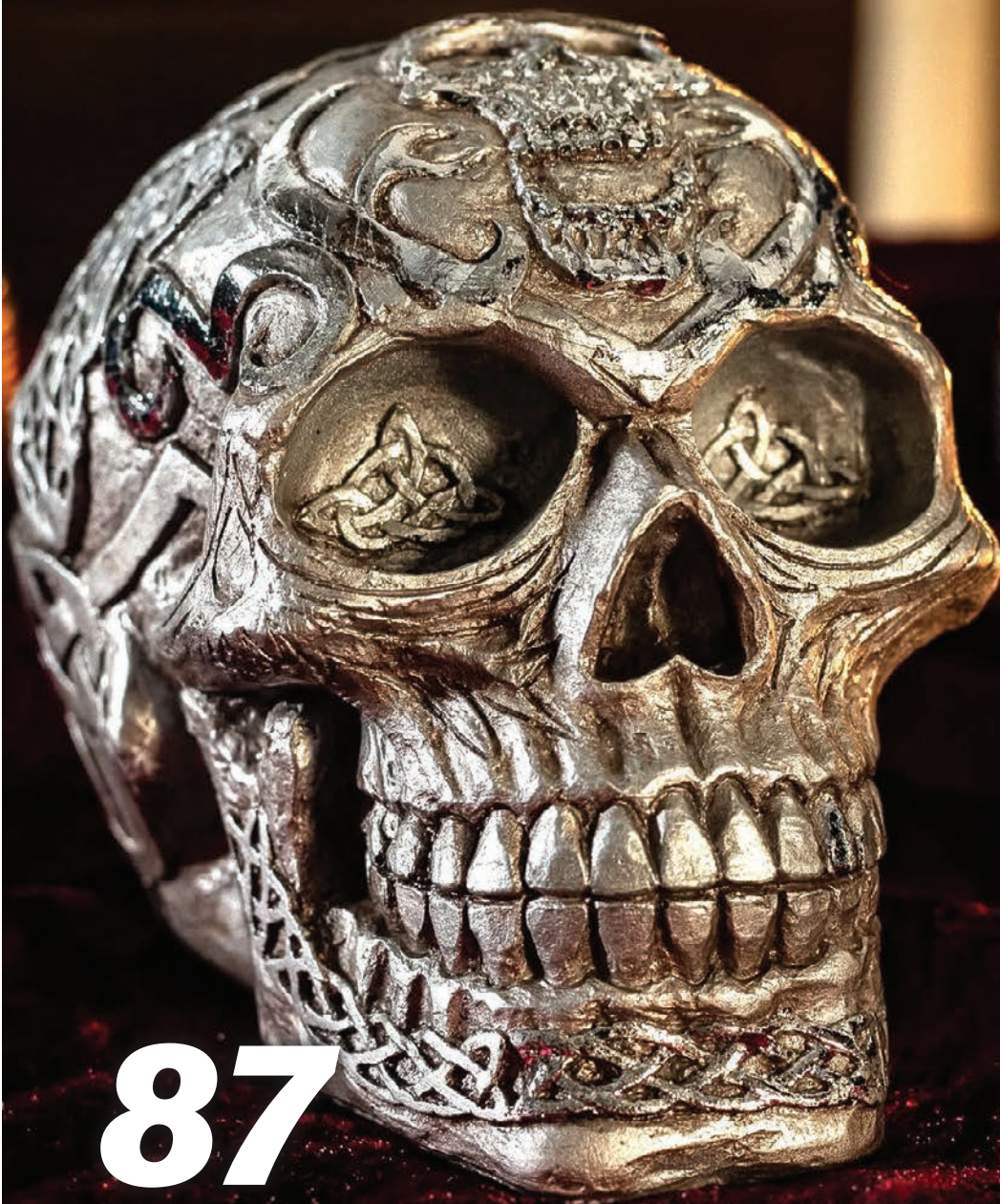
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87

Celtic Horror

9. First Word

11. De Tha Dol

13. Celts in Culture

25. The Trailblazing
Rose of Tralee

35. The Dropkick
Murphys take a stand

39. Alan Doyle can't
stop smiling

43. Writer, style icon
and fly-fisherman
David Coggins casts
a few lines

47. Chris Muise
considers Celtic
comedy

57. Tom Langlands
recounts an unlikely
love story

69. Photographer
Kris Tynski captures
the creatures of Cape
Breton

73. Storytelling is the
cornerstone of Celtic
identity

101. Close encounters
of the Celtic kind

105. The Celtic Chef

107. Dram

114. Last Laugh



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first WORD
with James Acken

Go Forth With *the* Dead

*Go light the lantern at your door,
And honour those who've gone before
The world's that part us now are twain
For Hallows' Eve is here again!
"Hallows' Eve," by Show of Hands*



Steve Knightly and Phil Beer, the English singer-songwriters who make up Show of Hands, can be forgiven if they play down the more visceral elements of what Samhain is all about in their song *Hallows' Eve*. Indeed, the honouring of ancestors in blood and spirit has been a core aspect of the turning of the year into shadow and darkness literally since time immemorial, but there is more to it than that - much more indeed.

We need not recount again (though fun it may be) Nera's corpse-laden journey or rehearse the young Setánta's (the Lad-Who-Would-Be-Cú-Chulainn) encounter with the Marrioghan, whose chariot is drawn by a horse impaled on its own yoke. We need not dig up once more the story of the parishioners who rose from their graves one night, carrying their own tombstones, out of repugnance for the vile remains of a colonial captain, or revisit the pack of severed heads that chased poor mad Sweeney, partially transformed into a bird, from the top of Sliabh Fuait. Yes, ancestors are part of an Aidhche Shamhna, but this is not a night for quiet, pious veneration. Nera leaves a party in full-swing to venture forth courageously since, we are told expressly, "great was the darkness of that night and its horror, and demons would appear on that night always."

The verb *doaibitis* is used here for "appear" and comes down into modern Irish as *taibhse*, literally "an apparition," but the key term here is *gran-datu* - horror!

There are no fewer than eleven different words for horror, terror, fear, and shocking revulsion in Old Irish, not including compounds and intensive variations. It was a feeling that they not only knew well but seemed to respect and enjoy as

much as any aficionado of the modern film genre. In fact, it could well be argued that our society's enjoyment of horror as a genre stems from a Celtic root. Among the genres listed as required of the bardic storyteller, genres like *tána* (cattle raids), *geneimean* (conceptions/births), and *fin-gail* (kin-slayings), there was the enigmatic *úatha*, the horror story!

Almost no example of an explicit *úath* comes to us with the term in the title, unlike stories like *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, *Compert Con Chúlainn*, and *Órguin Denna Rígh*, each of which literally has the genre in the name. Instead, we get so many horror tropes that it almost seems like every tale from the Celtic Middle Ages is a horror story, and it does not stop there. Modern Irish folklore is full of such tropes. Beyond the Scottish and Irish "washer women" - who really is another visage of the banshee - "the woman of the fairies" (though we would do well to remember that *si* originally also meant "burial mound") - there is the goblin "Red-cap," dying his hat in the blood of travelers, stories of submerged kingdoms and vengeful ghosts; it would seem most of our modern ideas about horror owe much to Celtic tradition. The headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow may have been placed in a Dutch community, but Washington Irving was first generation removed from Orkney.

“The Celts were into horror, as are we, but this begs the question - why?”

Aristotle famously asserted that there were only two genres: comedies and tragedies. The former is wish-fulfillment, and the second is catharsis, that is purification of the psyche through the vent-

ing of negative emotions. Horror, he would probably argue, would then be a sub-genre of tragedy, allowing us to deal with our latent fears in an otherwise safe context; and this is the usual understanding of horror's popularity.

I think we as Celts can go farther than that.

All Celtic horror comes back to "the Otherworld." Nera's adventure is really a story about how he brings his society into right relationship with the denizens of the *sidh* through a vision of a lame man carried by a blind man. This icon of our relationship with the Otherworld reveals why horror is so important: we need the dead, and they need us, though often our relationship with them may be fraught. Samhain is when we may confront the Wild, the Wyrd, the Horrible and befriend it rather than conquer it. After all, Nera begins his journey with the dead on his own back. It is a lot of baggage to carry unless it does us the favour of showing us the way.

*James Acken is a philosopher, professor, and the Creative Director at Acken Studios. He lives in British Columbia.
@celtic_coire*

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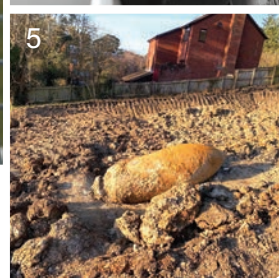
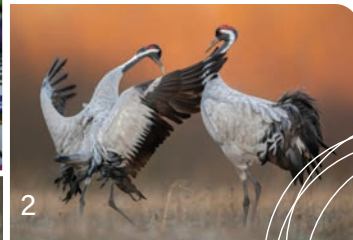
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De Tha Dol



1 Gaelg Aboo!

A Manx language badge is now available to all Girl Guiding and Scout units on the Isle of Man. This initiative is part of Culture Vannin's "Gaelg Aboo!" project, which runs until September 2026. According to a press release, the initiative has the potential to reach over 1,200 young people on the island. "The badge will be awarded to participants who complete a series of age-appropriate challenges linked to the workshops and follow-on activities," notes the release. These activities will help kids and leaders learn everyday Manx words and phrases in a fun and practical way.

2 Scottish Conservation

The largest bird in Scotland, the crane, was hunted to countrywide extinction almost 500 years ago. The animal was once considered a delicacy, and the demand for its meat led to the decline of the population. However, national efforts to conserve and restore the Scottish wetlands are gradually allowing the creatures to return. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has recorded six breeding pairs of cranes in Aberdeenshire since 2012, with a total of 250 pairs across the United Kingdom. While still rare, the hope is that the birds may once again become common in the area.

3 Archbishop of Wales

Archbishop Cherry Vann is the first woman to serve as an archbishop in the United Kingdom. She's also the first openly queer person to take the role. Vann, 66, secured the majority vote during an election at the end of July, earning her the title Archbishop of Wales. Before moving to Wales, Vann was among the first women to be ordained as priests in the Church of England and served as Archdeacon of Rochdale. In 2020, she was consecrated as Bishop of Monmouth, a position that she maintains alongside her new role.

4 Sable Island Artist-in-Residence

A Cape Breton fiddler and singer has been chosen for Sable Island's first artist-in-residence program. Rose Morrison, who is from Baddeck, N.S., was selected by the Sable Island Institute and Parks Canada back in May. She is taking up residency on the island for two weeks in October, where she will have the opportunity to create work inspired by "Sable Island's natural and cultural significance." The remote island, which is located almost 300 km off the coast of Nova Scotia, is home to wild horses and grey seals. Human access to the area outside of researchers and park staff is limited.

5 Remnants of Wartime

Occupants of a Cornish farmhouse were in for a surprise in early August, when two suspected World War II bombshells were discovered on the property during building work. Police were called to the area in a small village near Callington and, as a precaution, evacuated the residents. The nearby road was also closed for 90 minutes so the bomb squad could safely remove the devices. Fortunately, the shells were removed for disposal without incident and the area soon returned to business as usual.

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Celts in Culture



• Lisa Williams

Leathercrafter Lisa Williams is completely self-taught in her work. She operates her business, Celtic Leatherwork, in the Welsh countryside. According to her website, Williams was inspired to take up the craft after becoming frustrated with the lack of unique horse tack on the market. Her work aims to fill that gap, offering items such as browbands and bridles in Celtic, Viking, and/or medieval-inspired designs. "Armed with a few basic tools and an abundance of enthusiasm, I dove headfirst into the world of leatherworking," Williams writes. "I've always had a love for art, so applying that to leather was a logical step for me." Williams specializes in custom orders, from intricate Celtic knots to pieces inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Witcher*. In addition to horse tack and dog collars, she crafts accessories for two-legged folk as well, including belts and bags. She also makes pieces such as sword belts for those who do historical reenactment. Many hours go into her bespoke work, starting with the design concept and selecting the appropriate materials before finally getting to the hands-on part of the craft. Carving, painting, and stitching is all done by hand. This means Williams has a limited capacity for clients, as well as a waitlist. She sends her work all over the world to customers in Italy, Switzerland, Australia, and more.



• Pablo Sánchez Otero

Galician guitar maker Pablo Sánchez Otero was exposed to dedicated handcrafters from a young age. Once he reached adulthood, he studied architecture for a couple of years, but found he craved something more hands-on. He turned to woodworking and, soon after, began to focus on making instruments. He made his first guitar back in 2009. Otero's work has taken him across Spain and elsewhere in Europe, including the United Kingdom and Belgium. These days, he has settled back into his hometown of A Coruña, where he repairs, restores, and makes string instruments. His usual models include Spanish guitars, electric guitars, and mandolins - although he dabbles in other styles. "It is a true privilege and a real pleasure to be able to do what I love and keep learning every day about my work," Otero writes on his website. Otero aims to lessen his environmental impact by recycling wood where possible. For example, he once crafted three ukuleles using reclaimed wood from old pianos. Other times, he uses wood from old furniture. Of course, any repurposed wood must still meet his personal standards of quality. He prioritizes the use of local wood as well. There are some exceptions, such as the Italian or Swiss spruce he uses for mandolin and Spanish guitar soundboards. In addition to serving customers in his home country, Otero has worked on instruments for musicians in Portugal, Belgium, and even Japan.



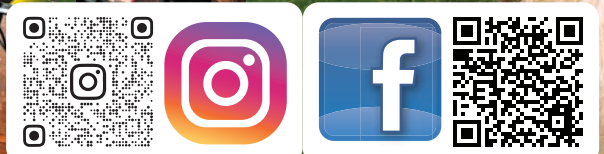
• Katie Cannell

Katie Cannell is a fibre artist from the Isle of Man, sharing her work under the name Organised Chaos Knitwear. According to her profile on the Isle of Man Arts Council website, Cannell entered the world of art at a young age, inspired by her grandmother. "Katie's artistic vision is deeply rooted in the island's natural splendor," reads the profile. "From the rugged cliffs and rolling hills to the quaint fishing villages and the ever-changing sea, she finds inspiration in the untamed beauty that surrounds her. Each stitch she knits tells a story of the island's folklore, wildlife, and breathtaking landscapes. Her creations are a tribute to the Isle of Man's vibrant heritage, honouring its Celtic roots and paying homage to the generations that came before her." Cannell's work has been displayed at the Pink Seaweed Gallery in Ramsey, and she also takes commissions. Offerings from Organised Chaos Knitwear range from quirky sweaters and vests to intricate patchwork cardigans. "In a fast-paced world, Katie's knitting is a gentle reminder to slow down, appreciate the beauty around us, and cherish the time-honoured traditions that bind us to our roots. Through her art, she invites us to embark on a journey of warmth, comfort, and connection—an embrace of the Isle of Man's cultural tapestry that continues to inspire her artistic vision."

48th
Central Florida
SCOTTISH
HIGHLAND GAMES
Jan. 17-18, 2026



TICKETS



Galway Bay Celtic Music Feis

October 13 - 19, 2025
Ocean Shores, WA

www.celticmusicfeis.com



The Galway Bay Celtic Music Feis returns this fall to Ocean Shores, Washington, bringing a week of song, dance, and Celtic camaraderie to the Pacific coast. Now in its 22nd year, the festival has become a mainstay of Celtic culture in the region, with an eclectic mix of shows and artists from the USA, Canada, and Ireland, as well as audiences from across North America and abroad. From October 13 - 19, the quaint seaside town will come alive with traditional ballads, lively reels, and the lovely sounds of choirs and bands. Originally established as a platform for Irish performers, the Feis has evolved into a week-long celebration held at the Galway Irish Pub and other venues, featuring a wide-ranging mix of musicians, dancers, and storytellers. Visitors can expect a dynamic lineup of Irish and Celtic artists, from well-known ensembles to new talent, bringing the tradition forward. In addition to the music, this year's Feis offers the chance to explore Celtic heritage through community dances, casual pub sessions, and the simple enjoyment of gathering to appreciate culture. The Galway Bay Celtic Music Feis provides a unique opportunity for making connections in a spirited atmosphere where roots are honored and the sounds of Ireland found on Washington's shores.

Sherwood Celtic Yuletide Festival

December 12 - 14, 2025
McDade, TX

www.sherwoodforestfaire.com



Make the festive season merrier this year at the Sherwood Celtic Yuletide Festival, held on Friday, December 12, through Sunday, December 14, just 35 miles east of Austin in McDade, Texas. Enjoy Yuletide cheer enhanced with heartwarming and lively Celtic music featuring a host of well-known performers gracing the stages all weekend long, including Andrew McKee, Bill Oliver and the Otter Space Band, the Blaggards, and The Byrne Brothers, among others, as part of the 150 shows featured daily from 10am - 6pm. Join in as a participant (website registration required), or as a spectator of the thrilling Highland Games, complete with Caber Toss, Shot Put, Scottish Hammer Swing, and more, along with an impressive Celtic Archery Tournament, where world-class marksmen show off their master skills. Try something a little different with the mystical Hawk Walk and experience an up-close encounter with majestic birds perched on your gloved hand. Take a stroll through the artisan marketplace filled with handcrafted treasures, perfect for your Yuletide gift list. Indulge in tasty treats and Viking-style mead, and take keepsake portraits with Santa and Mrs. Claus. Come gather for a weekend where merriment and memory-making meet medieval festivity. This holiday season, Sherwood transforms into a Celtic fairytale with music, timeless traditions, and wholesome enjoyment to celebrate with family, friends, and lovers of all things Celtic.

Central Florida Scottish Highland Games

January 17 & 18, 2026
Winter Springs, FL

www.flascot.com



The Central Florida Scottish Highland Games, the largest community event in Seminole County, was created to promote and preserve Scottish heritage. Each January, the two-day gathering - which is organized by the Scottish-American Society of Central Florida - welcomes thousands of visitors to Central Winds Park in Winter Springs. The festival begins on Saturday with competitions in Scottish heavy athletics, highland dance, bagpiping, and baking. Also on the agenda is an array of cultural activities, including border-collie demonstrations, Scottish clans, musical performances, a medieval camp, axe throwing, and the always-popular Boulder Boogie event, where contestants vie for bragging rights of carrying a heaviest stone the farthest distance. The festival is family-friendly, featuring a non-competitive "Kids Games" version of Scottish athletics. Also on site are Celtic wares and fares, including Haggis tacos! The whisky tasting welcomes attendees to sample expertly curated rare and unique spirits. There is something for everyone at the Central Florida Scottish Highland Games. Tickets go on sale October 1!

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Away From the Ordinary in Scotland



plan any vacations that we wouldn't be excited to go on ourselves."

As such, envy has become one of the main occupational hazards O'Hara faces. "We often pull together trips for clients that I wish I was travelling on myself," he admits with a smile. The other challenge is timing. Summer can be hectic, so he advises booking well in advance. "We are also big proponents of travelling in the quieter months of the year, when you get a little more of the country to yourself."

Regardless of the season, O'Hara began noticing an increased interest in travel to Scotland following the pandemic. "There has been a real appetite that continues to grow," he says. Yet it is more about impact than it is about numbers. "As a company, we are focused on tourism being a force for good in local communities, especially those we grew up in." That means allowing guests to discover locally owned hotels, restaurants, and attractions, and encouraging stays in culturally rich remote destinations where Scotland's historic essence comes to life. "We often suggest off-the-beaten-track settings, where visitors can really enjoy getting to know the area." For travelers seeking something beyond the guidebook, Away from the Ordinary certainly lives up to its name.

For O'Hara, collaboration is key to sustaining that vision. "We have found fantastic partners to work with in the Scottish travel industry. We connect with many Scottish organizations and work together to offer visitors the most authentic experiences that also provide sustainable benefits to Scotland."

Whether sharing about the remote edges of Ardnamurchan or the cobbled streets of Edinburgh, O'Hara's enthusiasm for his homeland is as engaging as the genuine warmth of a Highland welcome. Looking ahead, his plans are simple but far-reaching. "We would love to keep growing as we have been. We are a locally minded Scottish company that takes pride in welcoming guests from around the world."

@awayfromtheordinary

Scotland has a way of settling deep into your heart. For Aeneas O'Hara, founder and CEO of Away from the Ordinary, it never left.

"I was raised in Scotland, which left an indelible imprint on both my character and my outlook," he says. Growing up in the remote region of Ardnamurchan shaped his perspective in ways he continues to carry into his work. "A single-track road stretches for 25 miles to the Ardnamurchan Lighthouse. It is remote, wild, and beautiful. The sense of community is also incredibly strong here; people look after each other."

After a successful international career in financial technology, including a stint in New York City, O'Hara found himself helping friends and family plan their trips to Scotland.

"It always ignited a real sense of pride and enthusiasm within me," he recalls. In 2017, that spark became the foundation for Away from the Ordinary, a company committed to creating highly personalized, unforgettable tours of Scotland.

"We tailor-make travel experiences curated to each visitor," explains O'Hara. "Every

person is different, and we honour that when planning. We value the rarer luxuries of time, stillness, and space, and celebrate the Scottish qualities of humanity, hospitality, and honesty."

Those values are more than mere marketing ploys. Thanks to solid connections across the country, the Away from the Ordinary team arranges adventures that most travelers only dream about.

“From tours of historic castles to private whisky tastings, your very own ceilidh, whatever it is that you want to do, we can arrange it.”

Eight years in, the company continues to grow steadily. "We have helped more clients fall in love with Scotland this year than we ever have."

As CEO and founder, O'Hara is still involved in every aspect of the business. "I wanted to create a company that unlocked the best places in Scotland for visitors to explore." That means curating itineraries he would be thrilled to take himself. "We don't

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SAMS Celebrates Service and Culture

On Washington's Whidbey Island, the traditions of Celtic heritage blend with the long-standing legacy of military service. For Don Scoby, Commander and Pipe Major of the Scottish-American Military Society's (SAMS) Pig War Post 1859, those traditions are more than just memories; they are a call to service.

"As a Scoby, I am part of Clan Mackay with Scottish, Irish, and Welsh heritage, among others," he shares with Celtic Life International via email. "My ancestors come from three continents, and I am proud of the diversity in our family tree." On his paternal side, family members have served in every major American conflict.

SAMS was founded in 1978 at the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games as a national nonprofit veterans service organization. Its core mandate is "to preserve and promote Scottish and American Armed Forces customs, traditions, and heritage." It does so through educational programs, military awards, support of Highland Games, and charitable contributions, within a fraternal atmosphere.

Scoby joined SAMS in 2016, inspired by the WWII service of both grandfathers; one a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army, the other a Chief Boatswain's Mate in the Navy.

"Initially, I joined SAMS because it offered me an opportunity to honor my forebears. I enjoy being of service in my community, and I get to honor our veterans and service personnel regularly."

As Post Commander of Pig War Post 1859, Scoby balances multiple responsibilities.

"Our service area runs from the King-Snohomish County line north of Seattle into lower British Columbia," he explains. He wears many hats, serving as Webmaster and Pipe Major of the organization's pipe and

drum corps. "So far as I am aware, we are the only SAMS post with such a band."

The volunteer nature of the group brings challenges. "My schedule is irregular due to being a professional Highland bagpiper, author, and small business owner. We staff tents at veterans' and community events, provide color guards, and engage in service projects. SAMS is made up entirely of volunteers, so we must all find a balance."

SAMS has also furthered Scoby's interest in military history and enriched his music. His book, *The Patriotic Piper*, serves as the band's repertoire. The post also hosts a "Kilted Night Out" several times a year that gathers local veterans' organizations. "We share our current projects and mutually support them."

SAMS members are those who, notes Scoby, "value their Celtic heritage, along with possessing a sincere desire to serve veterans and their families,"

“Some meet us in person at events, some find us via our website, and some join through word of mouth. Our Post has a colorful cast of diverse characters that make our gatherings memorable.”

The Post is also active in the Highland Games circuit. "We participate in the Skagit Highland Games and the Seattle Games in Enumclaw. Many SAMS members are also active in their clan societies."

Despite the high interest, Scoby notes that younger generations are less visible. "Most of the people who volunteer in such organizations tend to be upwards of 50 years of age, so there is a definite need to involve younger people."

For Scoby, preserving history means speaking truthfully. "People of all ages should



know the good, the bad, and the ugly, yet still find great pride in what was done right. If we take the time to educate others about our ancient instruments, our traditional garments, and our ancestral languages, then people might experience a sense of wonderment."

Outside SAMS, Scoby remains committed to Celtic culture. A seasoned piper, teacher, and performer, he's also the founder of Celtic rock band Nae Regrets, and recently published *The Shanty Piper*, a book of sea shanties arranged for Scottish bagpipes. "It's been a blast to bring my Scottish culture into that arena too."

As for the rest of the year, "SAMS will be having its annual Pignick soon, followed by a large military appreciation event. This fall, we have a Kilted Night Out. We're always busy for Veterans Day, and then we do a service project and/or a parade during the holidays."

Through it all, the mission stays the same: honour the past, serve the present, and build a bridge for future generations. "Sometimes the greatest heroes are the ones unsung, who made sacrifices to preserve their kin and culture."

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Tucked away within the stark beauty of the west of Ireland, amid spectacular limestone hills, the Burren Yoga and Meditation Centre offers both a place of physical retreat and a space to unwind and reconnect with what matters most.

Founded in 1999 by Dublin native David Brocklebank, the centre has become a sanctuary for those seeking clarity and connection in an increasingly disjointed world.

“My mother was very kind and compassionate to others. She embodied what many religions preach, but few practice,” Brocklebank recalls. “From an early age, I had a strong motivation to help others reach their potential. When I came across meditation at 18, it came very easily to me, and I entered a meditative state quite naturally. Through practice, one gets in touch with one’s inner essence rather than listening to the babble of the mind.”

That feeling of inner peace infuses everything at Burren Yoga. From the guided outings through sacred hills once inhabited by druids and mystics, to the vegetarian meals crafted from local, organic ingredients and the glass-walled yoga studio that overlooks timeless landscape, the center offers more than a mere getaway.

“At 35, I realized that yoga and meditation were the most transformative practices I had ever come across,” shares Brocklebank. “I decided to put my life’s work into introducing these practices to others in an enjoyable but authentic way, so that others could experience the benefits.”

Burren Yoga was Ireland’s first dedicated residential retreat center. Since its founding, it has grown into a comprehensive sanctuary, offering services from a team of 14 or more highly trained yoga and meditation teachers, local guides, and reputable chefs. “Many people say they would come back just for the

food. But in such a peaceful and inspiring location, away from the noise and stresses, surrounded by such beautiful nature, it is more like food for the soul.”

Indeed, for many visitors, the center becomes a turning point. Some arrive curious, others depleted. “We see people from all walks of life. Some come here because they are going through a difficult period, and they need a break in a positive environment. Some realize that their lifestyle is not serving them well and want to learn healthier habits. And some people just come for the rest.”

Brocklebank notes that while modern life has its conveniences, it also comes with significant pressure. “The pace has changed radically over the past 50 years, and it’s speeding up. Yoga and meditation help us disengage from the endless noise.

“Practices that help us to detach from external pressures, improving our health and mental well-being, are vital to surviving the modern world.”

Yet Brocklebank’s own journey hasn’t always been easy. “We lived in a mobile home for 16 years with two children because we were denied planning permission for a house. Running a retreat center involves facing challenges. We weathered the recession and the pandemic. Having the gratitude to be able to provide an uplifting environment to others is great fuel to help overcome these challenges.”

That same attentiveness extends to Burren Centre’s environmental policy. Completed in 2021, new luxury features include underfloor heating, panoramic windows, super insulation, and even showers that run rainwater. Plans are already underway to make the center fully carbon neutral by the

end of 2025, including a spa with an outdoor bathing area and Solar PV panels for all energy needs. “We won the Silver award from Ecotourism Ireland for being proactive. Measures to protect the environment take a lot of work, but are extremely important to ensure we are looking after our planet as well as the Burren environment.”

Despite the growing success of the center, Brocklebank’s core motivation hasn’t changed. “Sometimes I receive a letter months later from someone thanking us for helping them change their lives. To know that the work one does helps others is the best reward.”

Even with all his logistical work with planning retreats, coordinating staff, and managing guest bookings, Brocklebank insists on staying personally involved. “I run the retreats in a very hands-on way. I meet with all the guests, go on most guided outings, listen, and interact.”

As for what lies ahead, Brocklebank is thoughtful. “We seek to consistently improve the center so that we can continue to thrive and grow, so more people can benefit from their time here and enjoy the precious moments of life.”

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Jim Barker's Celtic Cartoons



We all knew that one kid back in grade school who was always doodling in the margins of their notebook and catching the teacher's ire for wasting their time on cartoons when they should be studying for their future.

Jim Barker was definitely that kid back in the day. He was also - to his good fortune - a terrible listener.

"I have this theory that every kid can draw," Barker opines in a call with Celtic Life International. "If you sit down and tell somebody to draw as a kid, they'll just sit down and do it. Then, somewhere around the age of nine to 11 years old, they start getting it knocked out of them in school - 'that's not how to draw' - I just never got it knocked out of me."

Barker goes on to detail his early life in the central lowlands of Scotland, where he still resides today.

"I'm based in a little town called Falkirk, which is midway between Glasgow and Edinburgh, where I've lived all my life; was born here, stayed here, will probably die here.

"I've always drawn, ever since I was a toddler. I tell people, if you go back to the house that I grew up in and take all the wallpaper off the walls, you would gradually see Jim Barker cartoons going higher and higher up the walls."

Barker kept up sketching well after finishing primary and secondary schooling and went on to earn a degree in graphic design.

"I went to college in Edinburgh - over

50 years ago now - in what was then called 'design for print.' They taught you all the processes, from the thinking of the ideas to doing the finished artwork, to getting the printing plates ready.

"About a fortnight after I finished college, I walked into the job with my local newspaper as an advertising artist, designing adverts. I was there for about eight years, until they came around and said, 'we are £1.75 million in debt. There will have to be some redundancies.'

"I took a redundancy on the Monday. By that Friday, with my redundancy package, I had set up my own graphic design business."

Jim Barker Scottish Cartoons is still going strong today, which Barker credits in part to a never-waning audience who long for warm reminders of the highlands.

"One of the things I started doing was print on demand, which is the new designs for t-shirts and such, and I thought, 'what kind of niches will I go for?' I went for Scottish material that I aimed at Scottish expats in Canada, Australia, and America."

Of course, having spent half a century in the biz, Barker's seen the landscape change, especially when it comes to the tools of the trade. To survive this long as a professional doodler, he's had to roll with the punches.

“When I started doing all this stuff, everything was pen and ink on paper and what have you...”

"Then, somewhere along the line, somebody invented personal computers. Now all the stuff I do starts off with pen and ink, but then I transfer on to my computer and iPad. There are a lot of things I couldn't do without it."

Change in the face of new technology can be scary, he admits - the rise of generative AI, for example, concerns him as much as any artist working today. Yet he affirms the way to succeed in this business is to adapt, explore, and find ways to make new technology work for you and your method.

"You have to keep up with the times. You have to keep your eye on the current drawing styles and try and adapt to all of that. My philosophy is that, for some reason, I have this talent. How can I use that talent? It used to be newspaper cartoons, greeting cards, magazine illustrations. Today, you've got social media, animation, personalized cartoons, t-shirts, etc.

"There are still avenues for me to explore. With the internet, we've now got the opportunity to promote ourselves much more and to a wider audience. I do Zoom networking, and someone challenged me to take up Tik Tok. That said, I'm still very much learning how to cope with it."

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The Trailblazing Rose of Tralee

When Katelyn Cummins took the stage in Tralee this past August, she not only had high hopes of winning for her home county but also of bringing a fresh perspective to what it means to be a modern Irish woman. At just 20, Cummins became the first Laois Rose to win the International Rose of Tralee crown and is determined to make the most of her reign.

In the weeks following her triumph, Cummins has had her work cut out for her. “I’ve been going nearly every day since I left Tralee. It’s still a bit mad, really. I’m back at work as well. I come home in the evening and then do all the Rose of Tralee stuff. It keeps me busy, which I’m absolutely loving.”

The most striking thing about Cummins is her authenticity. While she may not precisely fit the mold that William Pembroke Mulchinock may have intended when he penned the 19th-century ballad that inspired the festival, Cummins is her own fierce brand of inspiration for 21st-century Irish women. Now an apprentice electrician with a company in Portlaoise, she also helps run her family’s dairy farm in Ballyouskill, Laois.

“Farming has always been part of my life,” she explains. “It gets very busy, and my sister Molly, my brother Jack, and I all take turns helping; from milking cows to moving cattle - we all pitch in.”

She approaches her trade with the same sense of grounding. During her school Transition Year placement, she realized how multi-faceted electrical work could be. “We

went to a swimming pool, a warehouse, a house, and a cheese factory all in one week. No two jobs are ever the same because every place is built differently. I think that’s so interesting.”

Cummins dismisses doubts about whether a young woman belongs in a male-dominated trade. “It took me about four months to get an employer because of a lot of comments such as ‘a woman wouldn’t be able to do this type of work’ or ‘it’s too physically challenging.’ That was a real downer for me. But I knew I really wanted it, and I just kept persisting. The place I’m with now took me on, and on my very first day, they handed me the papers to register me. I’ve been there two years, and I’ve had nothing but support.”

This combination of perseverance and fresh perspective is what makes her a powerful role model. She also refuses to see her use of hearing aids as a limitation. “They are no different than glasses - that’s the way they should be viewed. I have excellent hearing with my hearing aids. I’m very well able to lip-read, and I’ve got amazing speech as well. We are the same as everybody else. In Tralee, I don’t think I could even count three people who said anything to me.”

She is just as open-minded when it comes to education and believes that Leaving Certificate results do not determine a young person’s future. “If your Leaving Cert doesn’t go well, you can still go on further. You could do an apprenticeship. You can choose many different types of courses and still find your

way. It will not define who you are.”

For Cummins, who learns best by doing, her achievements support that there is no single road to success. “I wouldn’t have learned from reading or writing alone. I learn by working with my hands. And that’s OK, as there are many ways to learn.”

Perhaps the most inspiring part of her journey so far has been the connections she has made among the Roses themselves.

“It is a sisterhood. We bonded instantly. We all trust each other enough to tell our stories...”

“Every girl is different, and that’s what makes the Rose of Tralee so special. We all learn from each other.”

As she looks ahead to her year as Rose, Cummins is determined to make the most of each opportunity. “I want to say yes to everything this year. You only get this once, and then you hold it for life, but you only get the one year to fully embrace being the Rose.”

‘Being the Rose’ may take on new meaning if Cummins has anything to do with it. She hopes to reframe what the festival represents beyond outdated stereotypes. “I suppose I’d like to change people’s outlook and help them realize that it is not just a beauty pageant. It is really a celebration of Irish women inspiring other talented women who are special and different.”

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The Myths and Magic of Susanne Carpenter

On Dublin's north side, near the botanic gardens, author Susanne Carpenter finds inspiration in the lure of Irish lore and lineage. She describes her father working for Dublin City Council in the 1970s, when the foundations were being laid for the Civic Offices at Wood Quay. "My dad brought home stories of the viking settlement that became Dublin," she recalls via email.



Those tales were the beginning of a lifelong fascination with heritage that would eventually lead her to ancient sites around the country, forming the basis for her novels.

A fourth-generation Dubliner, Carpenter's roots trace back to Terenure and Ringsend, where her parents were born. Those roots cultivated a lifelong reverence for her cultural inheritance. "My love of Irish heritage has taken me to neolithic sites like Newgrange, to Kilmainham Jail, the site of the 1916 Rising, as well as to Brú Na Bóinne in the midlands and Grianán an Aileach in Donegal" - journeys that are reflected in her writing.

Curiously, writing was not Carpenter's first calling. Strong in math and physics at school, she studied engineering, while writing remained a distant dream. "Juggling a career and a young family, there really wasn't an

opportunity to write, and it joined the bucket list alongside the places I wanted to visit and the things I wanted to experience."

Carpenter reached a turning point two decades later, once her children were grown. "I found myself with the time to focus on writing. It was an opportunity to integrate Irish legends with a firsthand knowledge of heritage and technology."

As she visited the sites of her ancestors with an engineer's eye and deep sense of connection, her stories began to take shape. "I was fascinated by the ancestors who built these incredible structures without modern technology. When I began writing, the historic locations and legends from The Book of Invasions provided a rich inspiration for my stories."

Those stories evolved into *Tuath* and its sequel, *Fianna*; novels that delve into the Tuatha Dé Danann, the legendary tribe of Irish gods and heroes.

“Despite our knowledge of Roman, Greek, and Norse legends, we seem to have neglected our own, and I wanted to bring the Tuatha Dé Danann to life in a dynamic way...”

The challenge has been “marrying the technical details of the technology with the human frailty of the characters.” But seeing *Tuath* and *Fianna* on bookstore shelves has been gratifying. “When I completed *Fianna*, I felt a profound sense of accomplishment and relief overall. It was a moment of immense pride and satisfaction.”

Feedback for the book has been encouraging. With *Fianna* recently launching in Dublin, readers have already begun praising its storytelling and “deep connection to Irish heritage.”

Carpenter's research has been as in-depth as her stories. Between 2011 and 2015, she worked with a television production company specialising in Irish culture. “This allowed me to visit sites all around the country, many of which are featured in *Tuath* and *Fianna*.”

Her travels carried her beyond Ireland as well. “I travelled to the Isle of Man to research

Manannán, the Celtic sea god, and to Jutland in Denmark to explore the ancient site of Jelling. I also received invaluable advice from Druids, who have a deep connection with the Irish pantheon of gods and goddesses.”

Carpenter concedes that the shift from technical writing to fiction wasn't easy. “I write technical standards and detailed reports for a living - I thought it would be a simple jump to writing a novel, but I was wrong. The process of writing *Tuath* taught me a lot about structure and characterization.”

With the completion of *Fianna*, she found herself on even firmer ground. “I realize now that part of the writing process is building confidence and resilience.”

Her journey won't end with two books, however - the third instalment of the trilogy is already underway. “As I craft the third book - *Tír*, meaning ‘Nation’ - I find the characters themselves seizing the reins, guiding the tale along unexpected paths. I hope to finish *Tír* by the middle of 2026.”

For readers drawn to science fiction, fantasy, adventure, and especially to Ireland and its mythology, Carpenter more than delivers. Her deepest inspiration remains the country of her birth and her heart. “Rich with gods and heroes from Celtic myth, Ireland's lore unfurls as a tapestry for storytellers. Its wild landscapes and ancient ruins lend an ethereal backdrop to tales woven through time, while the country's cultural soul breathes life into characters who stride across history's stage.”



Susanne Carpenter



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Sian Keeps Gaelic Song Alive

When three young women were commissioned to perform songs by female Gaelic bards at Scotland's Blas Festival in 2016, they didn't expect to be celebrated as the Gaelic singing trio Sian a decade later.

"We enjoyed those first gigs so much, and there seemed to be an appetite for more, so we ran with it," recalls Eilidh Cormack.

All three members share strong Highland and island roots with family ties to Inverness, Lewis, North Uist, and Skye. Music - Gaelic song in particular - permeated their lives early on.

"We have all been involved in music from a very young age," Cormack explains. "Our families had a huge interest in - and knowledge of - Gaelic song. We got involved through Gaelic festivals, such as the Fèisean movement and the Mòd, and that is how we first came across one another, too."

That sense of heritage forms the basis of the band. "We have inherited a love of the legacy which we share with others," continues Cormack. "That drive to preserve and push forward the tradition, whilst breathing new life into it, keeps us going."

That spirit, she adds, has carried the trio forward. "Making a living from the job is tricky, as musicians battle social media algorithms, streaming platforms, and the rising costs of touring just to get our music out there."

Setbacks aside, their love for their roots and emerging talent gave them gratitude and opportunity. "We feel very lucky to dig deep into these traditional songs, stories, and composers, as well as taking the Scottish Gaelic language and culture to new audiences. We are bringing these traditional songs to

a new generation of Gaelic speakers, whilst encouraging others to learn and engage with the language."

To that end, Sian experiments with modern translations of well-known Gaelic songs, composes their own original material, and teams up with others. "Collaborations over the years with other Celtic exponents, such as Niteworks, Breton band Eben, and Welsh indie rock group Adwraith, have shown us the possibilities of marrying tradition with a fresh and forward-looking sound."

While Sian's hallmark three-part harmonies and arrangements form the core of their artistry, the band also reflects the many influences that have inspired their work. "Our latest release - 'araon' - meaning 'as one' in Gaelic, has our very own Innes White co-producing alongside Niteworks and LUSA's Innes Strachan, who has pushed our boundaries and introduced some more electric and electronic elements into our music."

The group also made their first music video, for the track *Pèidse Fir Ròdhaig*. "It was a huge highlight for us in the run-up to the album's release, and we are so pleased with how excited it made people about a lesser-known waulking song."

Sian's unique blend of deep-rooted customs and fresh creativity has led to some defining moments, including appearances at Glasgow's Hydro and Barrowlands, and with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. In one of their most memorable performances, the group scaled a corrie in the Cuillin mountains with dresses on their backs to record for Skye Live's online festival during the pandemic. Yet ultimately, for Cormack, connecting with the audience is key. "We simply

couldn't do it without them, and definitely feed off their energy during our performances, which usually contributes to our dodgy stage chat!"

Building a rapport with fans starts with the songwriting, where the trio focuses on the myth behind the music.

“It's always the story behind the song and the way the song is constructed around that story...”

"I love a good Gaelic rhyming scheme! Often, Gaelic songs aren't totally narrative as well, so there is a little left to the imagination."

Buoyed by the positive response they have received as a Gaelic-singing trio, Cormack is optimistic about the Celtic musical landscape, despite some weak spots. "The Celtic music scene is in a good position at the moment, but it is still a precarious one. The music scene is intrinsically connected to language and culture, and you simply cannot have one without the other. So, whilst we enjoy an increase in the number of people engaging with our music, we have to ensure they engage with and support the Celtic languages and cultures that the music stems from, too."

For now, the band is eager to take to the road touring aracon across Scotland in November. "Here's hoping the album will lead on to new venues and new places to visit in 2026 and beyond!"

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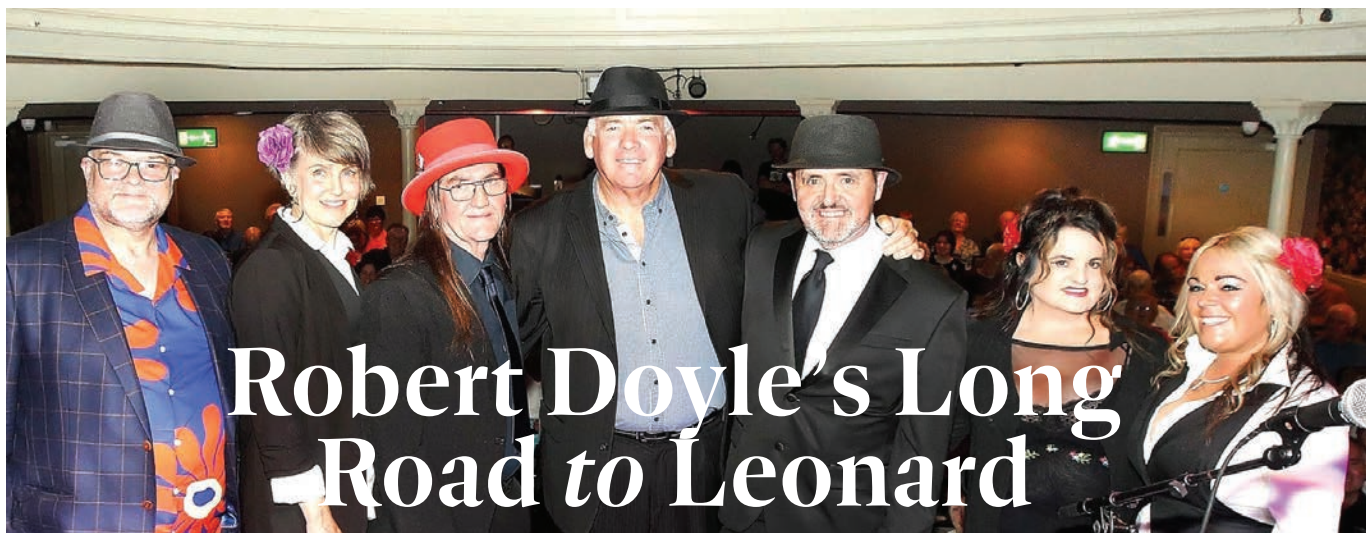
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Robert Doyle's Long Road to Leonard

“There is a crack in everything ~ that's how the light gets in.” ~ Leonard Cohen

Robert Doyle never imagined that his first professional performance as a singer would coincide with his first pension cheque. “Just a crazy kid with a dream,” he shares casually via email from his home in Ireland, highlighting the irony. But dreams - especially those imbued with reverence and persistence - have a way of manifesting despite the odds.

Born in Wicklow in 1955, Doyle's journey to the stage began not with fame or fanfare, but with a fresh start. “As a child, my family emigrated to the U.K. in 1958 due to there being no work in Ireland at the time,” he explains. He returned to Ireland as a teenager and later found himself in Zurich at age 21, where a chance encounter with Leonard Cohen at one of his concerts in 1979 would ultimately shape his destiny forever.

“I met him afterwards,” recalls Doyle, “and when he heard that I sang his songs, he asked me to sing for him and the band, but I didn't have the nerve to do it!” The opportunity passed, but a seed was planted.

Doyle's musical affinity for Cohen began even earlier, at 14, when he first heard the song *So Long*, Marianne. That initial spark never faded, even through decades of work as a photojournalist. “For 45 years, I did charity shows for various community groups and cancer charities, never believing that I would be good enough to do it professionally.”

But everything changed after Cohen's death in 2016. “We did a memorial concert of his music. For a few years afterwards, we were constantly being asked when we would

be doing the show again.” His long-time guitarist and musical director, Fergal Cantebury, gave him the final nudge: “He finally convinced me I was good enough to do it.”

The result was *Thanks for the Dance - The Leonard Cohen Story*, an immersive tribute show named after Cohen's final album. Featuring an eight-piece band, the performance delivers a rich musical journey through Cohen's life and work, including songs from his last two albums that Cohen himself never performed live. “That is an incredible honour, to deliver those songs live,” Doyle notes, “and quite humbling.”

In March of last year, Doyle experienced what he calls the most “mind-blowing” moment of his life during his sold-out show at Dublin's historic Gaiety Theatre. “I had attended that theatre hundreds of times to take pictures of actors, writers, and singers for almost 30 years. Now, I was singing on that stage.”

The response to the show has been overwhelming, and audiences span generations and continents. “We have people travelling from all over the world to our shows, including from Montreal, Israel, across the U.K., Switzerland, Spain, and Germany.”

Doyle has a soft spot for those who show up reluctantly. “My favourite thing is when I ask during the show if anybody has been dragged along by their Cohen-loving partner. Usually, half a dozen people shout out. I ask them to come up and speak to me afterwards to see if we have managed to convert them.”

“Often, they are moved to tears, saying it was a spiritual experience...”

Doyle's deep connection to Cohen's lyrics is at the heart of his performance. “It's simple; his lyrics are all-inspiring.” When asked how Cohen stacks up among legacy artists, he is firm. “Personally, I don't see any one with the same draw as him.”

Remarkably, young audiences continue to discover Cohen's work through these performances. “At every show, I am amazed at how many young people there are. I always make a point of pointing them out from the stage and thanking them for attending.”

Now residing in Spain while the rest of the band remains in Wicklow, Doyle is committed to continuing the tour as long as possible. He dreams of one day performing the show in Leonard's home. “That would mean the world to me.”

His gratitude is clear when he cites the most moving validation as the one he's received from Christian McCashin of the Irish Mail, who wrote: “This is as close as you will ever get to seeing Leonard Cohen live on a stage again.”

For Doyle - who once couldn't summon the nerve to sing for Cohen backstage in Zurich - the full-circle nature of his journey is not lost on him. “My greatest reward is that I am finally doing something that I dreamed of all my life.”

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Lo & the High Road Light the Way with *Lanterns in the Mist*

Modern yet mythical, folkloric but fresh, Lo & the High Road sit musically in a liminal space, where contradictions connect. Based in Cobourg, Ontario, the Celtic folk duo embodies a genre that - while grounded in tradition - inspires listeners with refreshed storytelling.

Their latest single, *Lanterns in the Mist*, strikes that balance with its roots in folklore that feel anything but dated. Led by Lauren Halasz and Colin McMahon, Lo & the High Road blend Celtic instrumentation with a contemporary folk approach.

"This song is from the perspective of a child who is being stolen away by fairies," Halasz explains. "It's a theme in stories from cultures all over the world. Sometimes, they are taken for sinister reasons, sometimes to be saved. We wanted to leave that question open."

Rather than relying on worn-out tropes, the song evokes the ethereal with a little edginess. "When Lo brought me the lyrics, I was struck by the darkness," says McMahon. "But what I heard was something energetic, almost danceable. So, we settled into that space, between wonder and danger, between the comforting past and the unknown world ahead."

Uncluttered and accessible, the song features bouzouki, fiddle, bodhran, and harmonized vocals, staying true to the tradition while adding a distinctive twist via Halasz's crisp delivery.

Halasz has been singing since the age of two. "I heard a choir for the first time. I didn't know how to read yet, much less read music, but apparently, I told my mother that I had to join a choir." As a teen, she listened to Loreena McKennitt and Celtic compilation CDs endlessly. Those early experiences planted the seeds for what would become Lo & the High Road.

Both studied classical music, with McMahon holding a Doctorate in Composition. Still, Halasz notes that they found themselves drawn in a different direction.

“We found the traditional career path to be very strict. In exploring Celtic music, we were able to find a voice that felt true to us.”

Their creative process is collaborative. "We write songs really quickly and then take a really long time crafting the exact sound that we want," Halasz explains. "We find that we work best when we both have incomplete ideas, and we turn them into one cohesive song together."

They often begin with a piece of folklore or historical detail, but the goal is always to connect and convey meaning. "Often, we start with a bit of myth that has evoked a strong response in us. If you feel something when listening, that's a successful song."

Their audience has certainly tuned in. After building an online following of over 200,000 fans - many of whom use their music for Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, Renaissance Faires, or woodland-themed weddings - the duo is now bringing their music to live audiences. "Recently we've been able to sell out shows on our own, not as a part of a festival or as an opener," Halasz says. "It's a pretty incredible feeling, to play for a room of people who are there just because they like our music."

In addition to a new live EP and more original singles before the year is out, Lo & the High Road is hitting the road in Ontario over the coming months.

"People come out to live music seeking all sorts of different experiences. I want our shows to create a space that feels magical and otherworldly, but also intimate and lively,"

Halasz shares.

While Celtic music has deep roots, the duo sees potential for exploration and expansion.

"Neither of us grew up in a Celtic music tradition, but we were able to find recordings and educational resources online," continues Halasz. "Community is such an important aspect of Celtic music, and online or in person, it's never been easier to join the party. With modern streaming platforms, Celtic music is more accessible than ever."

That openness, both musically and culturally, is integral to their approach. "I think it's important to learn from and maintain tradition, while also allowing space for new growth. Music is better without hard lines between genres."

Fortunately for both traditionalists and newcomers, Lo & the High Road continues to expand the boundaries of modern Celtic folk, bringing creativity and a fresh perspective while still maintaining its signature sound.

"We are not trying to escape reality," McMahon adds. "We're trying to build bridges between the old stories and the ones we're still writing."

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You may have noticed the famous Boston-bred Celtic punk rock band The Dropkick Murphys on the news or in your social feeds recently, namely for band frontman Ken Casey sharing his unfiltered opinion about the state of the world.

Casey's opinions don't come as a shock to bandmate Tim Brennan, who plays a number of different instruments for the band. The classic punk credo of 'fight the power' was on the minds of each of the members when they started work on their most recent album, *For The People*.

"The last thing we did was put out two fully acoustic records, where we took these unheard Woody Guthrie lyrics and put our own music to them," Brennan shares in a call with Celtic Life International. "We knew that the next Dropkick record had to be louder and harder than any of the previous stuff. Bearing that in mind, when I started writing music for the new record, a lot of it was intentionally heavy and dark."

And he is characteristically clear on the source of the darker inspiration for the music. "The world got turned upside down, politically speaking - especially in the US. When Ken started writing his lyrics, it would be difficult for him not to address the political nature of everything that's going on. It was a perfect storm."

Brennan has been a member of the Dropkick Murphys for decades, but he isn't a founding member. In fact, the person he attributes to setting him on his musical path was also

the one who introduced him to the Dropkick Murphys in the first place.

"When I was about 14, my English teacher in high school took a shine to me for whatever reason," Brennan recalls. "He taught me how to play the tin whistle, and he introduced me to the Pogues and Dropkick Murphys and all sorts of stuff. When I was about 20, I linked up with the Dropkick guys, and now I've been in the band for about 23 years."

Such sublime synchronicity is not lost on Brennan.

"It seems like hyperbole, but he changed my life. I still talk to him. He and I are still very good buddies; we talk all the time, and he'll come and see us when we're in his area. I owe a lot to that guy."

One of the songs on the new album, *One Last Goodbye (Tribute to Shane)*, paid homage to another one of his foundational inspirations.

“Shane MacGowan of the Pogues passed away two winters ago. To do a song in tribute to him was something that we knew we wanted to do...”

Brennan admits this new album has some of his favourite material that he's ever made with the band and includes songs that he is incredibly proud of.

"There are a couple of songs, like *Bury the Bones*, which is an Irish tune, but it's a dif-

ferent-sounding Irish song, and *Fiending for the Lies*, that don't sound like anything else the band has ever done. There's another song called *Streetlights* that's probably my favourite Dropkick Murphys song that we've ever made. There's a good amount of great stuff on there."

But the obvious single for the album, Brennan admits, is prototypical Dropkick fare - one that calls on all of us to meet the moment we're living in.

"There's a handful of very different-sounding songs on this new album, but *Who'll Stand With Us?* is not one of them. That's a very classic Dropkick kind of song. It was one of the first ones that we put together before going into the studio. Everybody knew exactly what it was supposed to sound like."

Ultimately, the album sends the trademark "Dropkick" message of defiance against the entrenched powers that be. "I think it's asking the question of all of us who spend all of our time working and trying to do the right thing: who is going to be there to support everyone who's trying to do what's right in the world, when it seems like the only people really getting the breaks are the billionaires and politicians? We're all in this together, and who's going to - quite literally - stand with us, and for what's right?"

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The Sounds of Stephen Hill Clement



The spirit of Wales stays with Stephen Hill-Clement no matter where his music takes him. With a career built on authenticity and connection with audiences, his songs are stories that blend indie, soul, and electronic sound, leaving listeners with something personal and universal.

“I’m from Cardiff, where the music scene is rich with history - people like Tom Jones, Shirley Bassey, and Manic Street Preachers have all come from these parts,” he shares with Celtic Life International via email. “It is a place where music feels like it’s in the air you breathe.”

Although he travels extensively for work, Hill-Clement remains based in Cardiff, where the landscapes and people keep him grounded. “There’s something about the mountains, the coastlines, and the quiet villages here that feeds my creativity. Plus, I like being close to family and friends.”

His love of music was instilled early on. “My mum was a huge fan of soul, so I was always listening to legends like Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. My dad was in bands, so I was also influenced by rock and pop. A melting pot of genres was always playing in the house.”

This inspiration, combined with his own creativity, led him to integrate deeper elements into his craft.

“Music has this powerful ability to express emotions that words alone can’t. I’m still driven by that need to connect with people on a deeper level. The human experience is universal.”

Yet his early career was marked more by fiery ambition. “When I first started, I was focused on just getting my sound out there, raw and unpolished. As I’ve grown as an artist, I’ve become more intentional about the stories I want to tell and the sound I want to create.”

As with many who choose a life in music, however, the path is not always smooth. “The biggest challenge is the unpredictability of it all. One day, you’re on top of the world, and the next, you’re wondering if you’ll make it through the next gig. It’s a constant hustle.”

Ultimately, though, Hill-Clement wouldn’t have it any other way. “There’s nothing like performing live and connecting with an audience. When I’m on stage, it’s like everything else fades away, and I’m in the moment, sharing something real. Knowing that a song or lyric I wrote has brought them joy is the ultimate reward.”

And there have been other rewards and career highlights. “I have been on the Radio Wales A List twice, been played on BBC Radio 1Xtra, on Spotify playlists, performed at Wembley Arena, and have done various TV shows. Getting to do what I love for a living is a huge privilege.”

That privilege, however, has not come about without effort, with his creative process balanced between moments of artistic vision that often bring on extended periods of labor. “Inspiration strikes unexpectedly, and then comes the long hours of tweaking melodies, finding the right words, and refining the production. Music isn’t always easy, but it’s always worth it when everything clicks.”

What ‘clicks’ for Hill-Clement most is his particular perspective. “Life itself inspires me,” he says simply. “Relationships, the highs and lows, the little moments that make up the human experience.”

His live performances pay tribute to this heartfelt approach, where he strives for more than mere technical precision. “A good song needs to have a strong emotional core that resonates on a personal level with energy, connection, and authenticity. A good live show isn’t just about hitting the right notes or playing a perfect setlist. It’s about the interaction between the artist and the audience, creating a space where everyone feels like they’re part of something bigger than themselves.”

Ultimately, his heart remains in his home country and its music scene. “Wales has a rich musical tradition, and we’ve got a ton of incredible talent here. However, I think the scene can sometimes be overlooked, especially compared to places like London.”

He believes collaboration and investment can keep the tradition strong: “Supporting smaller venues, giving emerging artists more opportunities to perform, and offering more platforms for Welsh-language music would help boost the scene.”

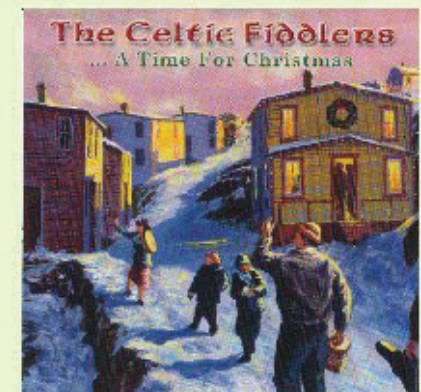
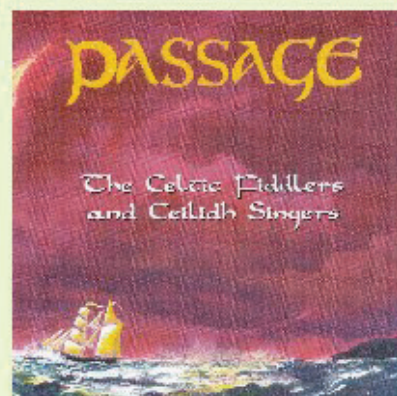
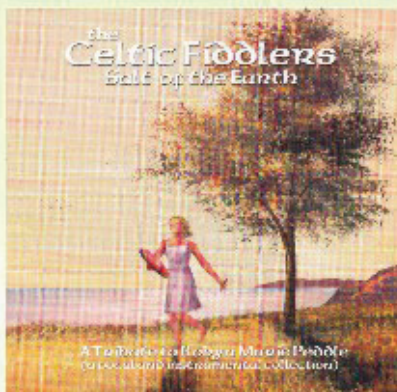
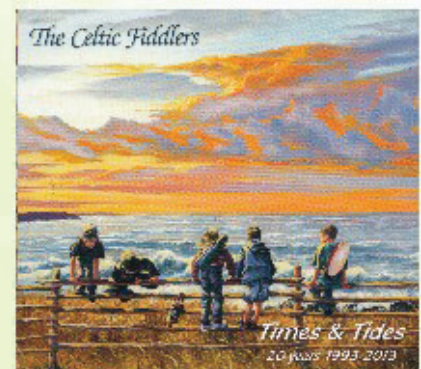
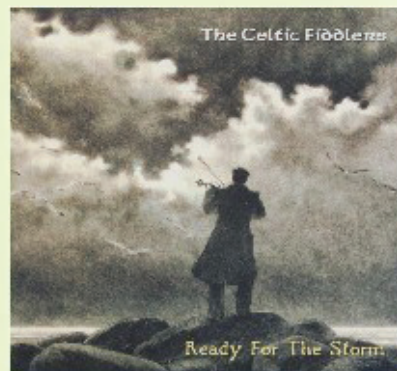
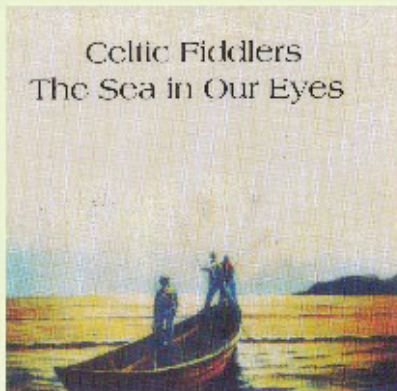
Hill-Clement himself is also set to boost his own latest projects. “I’m currently working on new music that dives deeper into some personal themes like identity, the complexities of relationships, and finding peace in an unpredictable world. I’m also planning a tour to support the latest release and looking forward to connecting with fans live.”

His latest single, *Tonight*, written by Tommy John and produced by Daniel Edwards, is available on all streaming platforms.

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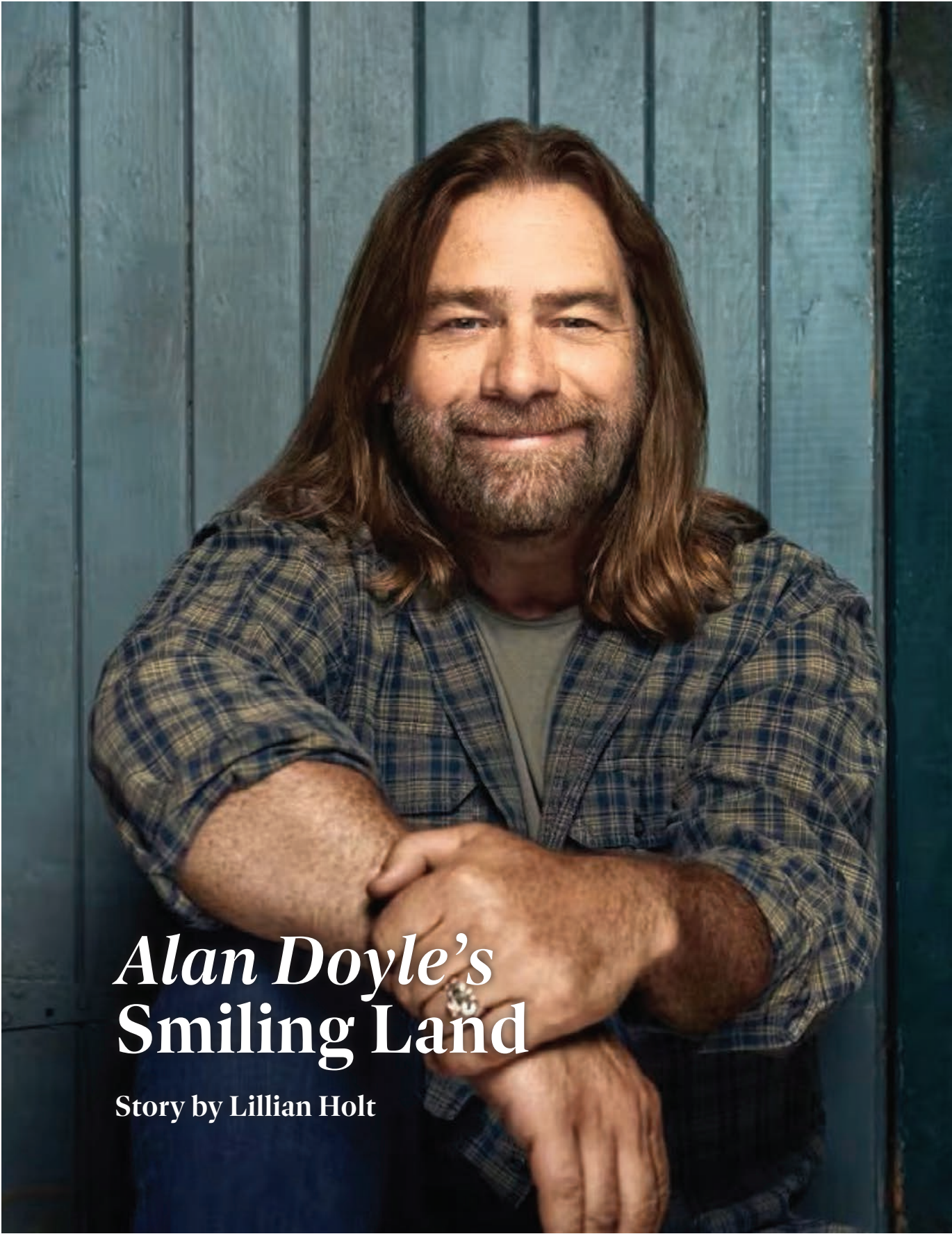


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Alan Doyle's **Smiling Land**

Story by Lillian Holt



Speaking with Alan Doyle, it becomes apparent that his voice carries the same warmth and energy that has filled concert halls for decades. As the front man for Great Big Sea, and now a solo artist, Doyle's connection to Canada - and more succinctly, Newfoundland and Labrador - has always been clear. Now, with his latest book, *The Smiling Land: All Around the Circle in My Newfoundland and Labrador*, he's turned his talent toward his homeland, revealing how even the most familiar places can be seen with a fresh perspective.

"I think I got the bug for travelling through Newfoundland during the COVID-19 pandemic," Doyle recalls via tele-

phone. Newfoundland had its own "bubble" during those strange months, and while the rest of the world was locked down, he wandered the province with his young son. "I began to see things through his eyes," he continues. "It began a burning question within me about whether or not it was actually the way I remembered it."

That single question became the inspiration for *The Smiling Land*. As a playful, funny, and tender travelogue, it takes readers from Fogo Island to Ferryland, across Labrador, and into Doyle's own St. John's backyard. At its core, the book reminds us that everyday places can surprise us as he takes another look at Newfoundland and invites us

to do the same.

Although he chronicles many adventures, for Doyle, the surprises didn't come with impressive hikes or harbours drifting with icebergs. Rather, his most significant discoveries occurred on the simple walks he takes with his coffee each morning.

"It didn't occur to me to include that walk in this book, because it's so familiar to me. But when I looked at it through the lens of a traveller or writer, I realized I walk by 16 historical buildings that are all significant on the way. But because it's my own backyard, I guess I just never clocked how cool that is."

The realization that the ordinary can become extraordinary when we take a second

look runs through *The Smiling Land*. Filled with whimsy, it's a book that also honors the sturdy resilience of a place shaped by harsh weather, hard work, and wicked wit.

Though Doyle has published several books and even dabbled in acting, he insists he's never stopped seeing himself as a musician at heart.

“I just wanted to be in a band. It sounds simple, but that's what I wanted when I was a kid. I'm 56 now, and still happy doing that.”

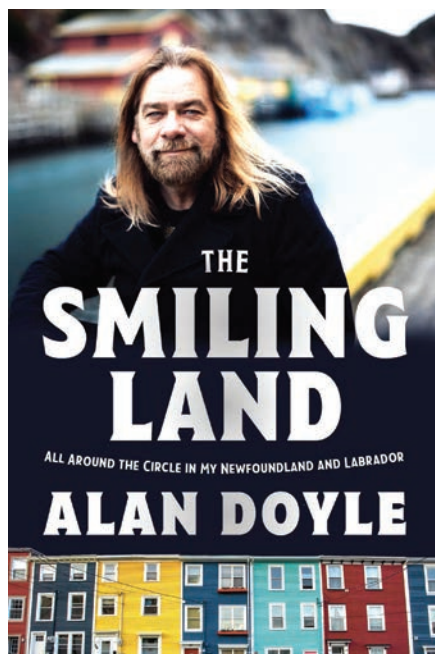
Music has given Doyle not only a livelihood, but also countless stamps on his passport. Touring the world with Great Big Sea, and then later as a solo artist, Doyle jokingly characterizes his perspective as being shaped by “the view out the window of a band van.”

“I'm really delighted to embrace the tentacles that my music has allowed me to reach; writing books, musicals, film, and television. But the short answer is always that I am happy to be in a band.”

For two decades, Great Big Sea brought Newfoundland folk traditions into venues across North America, blending sea shanties with pop-rock energy. Their songs became national sing-alongs, and Doyle's voice became synonymous with Newfoundland itself. Performed to packed houses, their shows were full of high-octane stomping and smiling faces. That energy, Doyle explains, came naturally to the band.

“We were all teenagers in the 1980s, in love with the glam bands. I didn't think, because we were singing Newfoundland-based folk songs, that we had to present them differently than Van Halen presented *Jump*. We didn't resist the urge to do it up, but we certainly resisted the norm of presenting folk music in the back of a library. We had no interest in that.”

Doyle's humble nature is always present - “I can't sound like anybody else. I was always a terrible cover singer” - admitting that his distinct voice became the very thing that set him apart. That distinctiveness, he



adds, is also what gave the band its longevity, which he sums up in one word: honesty.

“We didn't set out to make music that was from Chicago or Los Angeles or Toronto. We were singing sea shanties, playing tin whistles and bodhráns in the 1990s. We weren't Pearl Jam or Nirvana. What we were doing was genuinely ours, and we did it with passion and enthusiasm, and maybe it's just refreshing for people to hear somebody sing about a green boat.”

That authenticity carried into his solo work. Albums like *Boy on Bridge* and *A Week at the Warehouse* evoke memories of time and space, drawing on experiences that feel rooted in Newfoundland. But when Great Big Sea ended, Doyle's biggest challenge was continuity.

“To not really break stride was the big achievement,” he reflects. “I'm proud that I've managed to just keep rolling along. I owe a big deal of gratitude to the fans who came right along with me.”

Those same fans are likely to be just as eager to come along to *The Smiling Land*. The book's title, Doyle notes, comes from Sir Cavendish Boyle's ode to Newfoundland, written more than a century ago. But Doyle has always been amused by the poem's title.

“I've always giggled at that phrase. I've always wondered why. Is it as simple as the people here smile more? I do my best to answer that question in the book and explore

that notion that somehow hard times make us happier.”

Drawing joy from struggle is the paradox that defines not only Newfoundland's history, but Doyle's storytelling.

For all the somber themes of resilience and heritage, Doyle's favourite parts of *The Smiling Land* reveal his true nature, which has consistently endeared him to fans.

“I do love the whimsical things – they are often more defining than the heavy ones...”

“Like the fact that, as teenagers, we figured out a way to get to the big city in St. John's and back for free and get fish and chips along the way. That's genius.”

Stories like that embody the charm of Doyle's writing; playful, humble, and very human.

Even with a new book on the shelves, Doyle is as busy as ever. His musical theatre project *Telltale Harbor* is moving from Charlottetown to Toronto's Mirvish stage; he's finishing a new recording, and in 2026 he will begin a coast-to-coast tour of Canada and the United States.

Yet no matter how far he travels, his compass points home. Newfoundland isn't just where Doyle lives; it serves as his source for his music, his stories, and now, his books.

“When people ask what the book is about, I say: follow me around Newfoundland and Labrador because I know everything about Newfoundland and Labrador and then watch me discover that I know very little about it.”

More than a travel guide, Doyle's book is a meditation on memory, discovery, and belonging. It's about how the places we think we know may still surprise us if we pause long enough to look.

“I think we get desensitized to things. It's a gift when we can explore our own backyard and see things with new eyes.”

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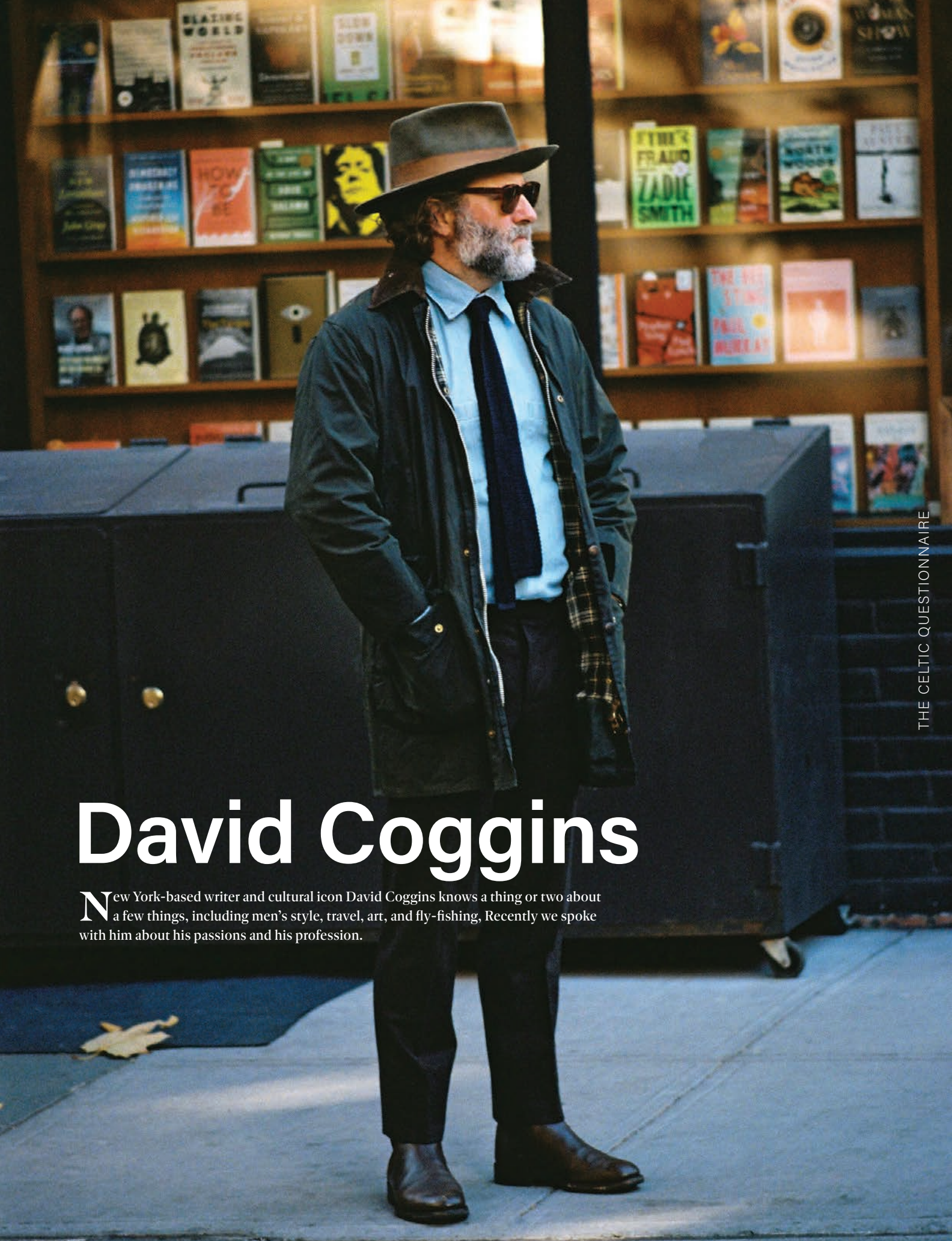


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David Coggins

New York-based writer and cultural icon David Coggins knows a thing or two about a few things, including men's style, travel, art, and fly-fishing. Recently we spoke with him about his passions and his profession.

What are your own family roots?

I grew up in America's Midwest, in Minneapolis; between Chicago and Canada, for those not locked into these matters. My family still has a cabin a few hours away in Wisconsin, where I still go each summer, and where I learned to fish.

When and why did you first want to be a writer?

I grew up in an artistic house, and I was interested in literature at a young age. Writing was something you were expected to do. But I'm not actually sure when I considered writing professionally - that's a daunting thing to admit you want to do. I started writing about art in my twenties; that's what I did for a number of years, and I enjoyed it.

Are they the same reasons that you continue to write today?

It's evolved over the years. These days, I write about other things I care about: travel, fishing, style and design, and other, more esoteric topics.

What are the challenges of the vocation?

Well, you have to have conviction in what you're doing, which I suppose is true of most work. Writing is something that is very private and then becomes very public. So, you might struggle with something on your own, and then it's out in the world. That takes a certain amount of balancing.

What are the rewards?

When things work out - when a story or book is the way you imagined it - and people respond to it, that's a nice feeling. Sometimes people will tell me they recognized something in what I wrote that meant something to them, or even something that made them laugh. It doesn't happen all the time, by any means, but it does make it worthwhile.

How have you evolved as a writer over time?

When I wrote about art, I was much more focused on style. I think I was more concerned with drawing attention to the way I wrote and the points I was making. That's a bit

embarrassing to admit. These days, I try to write in a way that might be considered more natural; I don't draw attention to the style quite as much. But I still try to get a line in that might surprise people.

Is your writing and/or creative process more 'inspirational' or 'perspirational'?

Ha! That's a good question. I try to write quickly and a lot. Then I edit even more. For a book, I edit an incredible amount. It's just combing through again and again. So, I guess it's some inspiration, and then a fair amount of the other.

What is feedback like from readers? And is that important to you?

First, you write for yourself. You're making this thing that you want to have meaning to you. But it's not fully realized until it's out in the world, so feedback is important. I do a lot of book signings and events, and it's nice to meet people who've read my work.

The podcast, the newsletter – what is the response like from your audience?

Well, the internet is very different. The feedback to a newsletter or podcast is immediate, where a book takes years to come out. I like newsletters because



I can react to what's going on in the world and going on in my life. They're much more conversational and, in a way, more intimate.

As you note, fly fishing is more than a sport (or an art, science, etc...) - it is a metaphor of sorts for living - was that intentional on your part with *The Optimist, The Believer*, and all the fishing articles?

Well, fishing is a funny thing to write about, because it's so fraught with metaphor. There's good reason for that, but sometimes you try not to make fishing about everything - you just want to catch a trout. In those books, I tried to communicate the straightforward pleasures of the sport, but also the feeling of failure and triumph that are also part of it. I like writing where the author cares about something - if he or she does, then I feel a connection to them, even if the topic is sailing or cooking or ceramics. So, I try to make clear what I feel about fishing, and hope that comes through to the reader.

Do you have a favourite fishing book and/or author?

Well, I have many. I love Thomas McGuane, who's a wonderful writer and inspiration and is very celebrated. I would also note *Blood Knots*, an incredible memoir by Luke Jennings, about his English childhood, his father's military life, and a charismatic schoolmaster he had who had a mysterious life. Now that's a fishing book that's really about everything. And his writing is painfully good. It makes me proud to speak English.

You've fished in Scotland - what was that experience like for you, and how was it different from other spots?

I love Scotland, and I love fishing in Scotland, despite a certain lack - or real lack - of success. The landscape, the rivers, the ghillies, the fishing huts. I love all that. Estate tweed - you've got to be kidding me. I caught my first Atlantic salmon in Scotland (after a long line of failure), so I have a special relationship to the country.

Have you fished in Ireland or Wales? If not, are they on the list?

Not yet, but they are on the list in a big way. The list is, alas, very long.

In your opinion, is fly fishing still a gentleman's sport?

Well, that's a good question. I think some of the principles remain gentlemanly (if I can use that word). That's to say, you're not fishing in the easiest way. You're using light tackle, often a dry fly, and try to return the fish to the water with a minimum of harm. I really believe in those things. But the sport is open to everybody, and that's a good thing too. Many of the best anglers I've met were certainly not



born on estates, and that's just fine.

From your perspective, what makes a modern gentleman?

I think you want to be kind and patient. The world moves fast, and we can be under the illusion that we're on our own — that we have to act quickly, and in our own best interests. So, I would say that a person who sees the humanity in other people, who brings a little dignity to small interactions, that's a good way to be in the modern world.

What's the difference between fashion & style?

Fashion is transitory and probably involves being embarrassed when examined in retrospect. It usually starts

from above - that's to say, a designer, who has their own agenda. Style is from within an individual, is more enduring, and explains something about how you view the world.

What advice might you have for younger people looking to start a career in writing and/or journalism?

I think you should try to write a lot - that hasn't changed - but you should also take advantage of technology, which has evolved. You should write about things that you know and care about. How did you learn to drive? What was the first summer job you had? These are good things to write about - they are universal but also very specific. It's also good to write about something that obsesses you, whether it's a football team or a heavy metal band.

What advice might you have for younger people looking to start fly fishing?

In a perfect world, you'd be taught by an old timer who knows you. If there's an uncle or stray cousin, then ask them to teach you. Otherwise, try to learn with a friend. Go to a fly shop, see if they teach lessons (many of them do), then maybe head out with a guide. That's the fastest way to learn.

What's next on your fishing/writing agenda?

I'm working on a few travel stories. A few fishing stories. And working on the proposal for my next book.

What is your favourite cuisine?

My favorite places to eat are Paris and Tokyo - I love France and Japan. But I'm an equal opportunity trencherman. I might stop short of haggis, however.

What is your favourite whisky/whiskey?

Again, I am very Catholic in my whisky choice. I used to be very into Islay whiskies and still love them. But a dram of Campbeltown sounds good to me right now.

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Celtic Comedy

Story by Chris Muise

“Gáire maith agus codladh fada, an dá leigheas is fearr i leabhar an dochtúra.” “A good laugh and a long sleep, the two best cures in the doctor’s book.”

- Gaelic Proverb

Humour is an essential element in any culture, and the Celts enjoy their fair share of funny – and with the myriad troubles facing the world today, there’s never been a better time for a belly laugh.

So, what makes the Celtic peoples so warm to wit? So grateful for a gag? So thirsty for tomfoolery? Recently, Celtic Life International spoke to three Celtic comedians to talk shop and uncover an answer.

Tadhg Hickey (Ireland)

Tadhg Hickey is, by his own admission, a late bloomer when it comes to comedy.

“I basically plucked up the courage in my early 30s - I was definitely late getting into the game.”

Hickey, who hails from Cork City, Ireland, says he took the academic route at first - having a great interest in world history - but knew that his heart was never really in it. As he puts it, he was too into shenanigans for a straight life.

“I always wanted to do comedy. For a while, I thought I was going to be an actor, then I realized I wasn’t very good. I went down a more commercial route with our national broadcaster here in Ireland, although it wasn’t controversial or thought-provoking comedy at all.

“We had some success with some sitcoms and whatnot. However, I felt dissatisfied as I wasn’t doing the type of comedy that I wanted to do, which was much more provocative, political comedy. I played the game and did the things I was supposed to do - gone to the meetings and conformed to the system - and it still didn’t work out. So, I thought, ‘I’ll just do my own thing.’”

Sometimes fate has a wicked sense of humour too, as Hickey would finally get the



Tadhg Hickey

chance to do the kind of comedy he wanted to do, but only after the whole world came to a screeching halt.

“It was a ‘necessity being the mother of invention’ kind of scenario, because I started doing that type of material and had a stand-up comedy tour booked, and then Covid-19 happened. Then I realized that I didn’t really enjoy touring that much. It wasn’t my favourite thing. Some comics just can’t wait to get on stage because it moves them in some way - I’m not like that at all. But being cooped up at home and having to make something happen myself, when the whole world was shut down? That appealed to my character.”

Hickey took to performing from his home - skits where he put his history nerd skills to work by portraying personified world superpowers as roommates, treating matters of global diplomacy as petty interpersonal squabbles.

“I became the geopolitical allegory guy, making all these countries work with these wigs and stuff. The beauty of it was - and this wasn’t deliberate - I’m terrible at accents, so everyone in the skits speaks with a Cork City accent. It had this weird democratizing effect - nobody could say you were being rac-

ist because all the African countries were me, Israel was me, Palestine was me, Britain was me, and Ireland was me.”

If any of this sounds familiar, there’s good reason - you might have encountered one or more of his skits on social media.

“One of the first sketches I did went completely viral and had millions of views, and it was on the BBC that night.

“I never realized that there was an interest in this type of comedy; I was literally just doing it because nothing else was working...”

Then, in October of 2023, Hickey stumbled upon another purpose his puns could serve.

“I already had a lot of Palestinian friends, and I was nervous about doing comedy at all because people were being murdered every day. But my Palestinian friends were like, ‘you need to get in here, because satire is going to play an absolutely crucial role in what’s ahead.’”

Hickey notes that he is now working with another comedienne, Nicole Jenès, to



Bennett Arron

develop and produce a satirical news program called *Not On Our Watch*, with a planned 2026 release. Rather than approach big broadcasters like Netflix or Disney, however, they are looking to produce everything themselves.

Bennett Arron (Wales)

Called the “Welsh Seinfeld” by *The Guardian*, we caught up with Bennett Arron while he was a jokester-in-residence of sorts at the 2025 Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

“I have been here two weeks, and I have one more week to go,” he recounts. “This is my eighth time here - my sixth solo show. My show is an hour a day and most of them have been full houses, which is great. I do something called the Free Fringe, whereby you don't pay for the venue, and the audience doesn't pay to come in - instead, they give a contribution at the end.”

Arron's climb up the comedy ladder wasn't without its challenges, however.

“I'm from a small place in South Wales called Port Talbot. I left to study drama in London when I was in my late teens. Drama school was a three-year course; I was kicked out after a year and a half. I did little bits of acting, then I started writing for TV, sending in sketches and ideas, and they got picked up, which went well. Then I was commissioned to write other stuff for several programs. One of the sketches I wrote, a producer said wasn't ‘particularly funny’ and I thought, ‘that was the best thing I have ever written. How can I prove him wrong?’

“So, I thought maybe I could try it as a bit of stand-up, and if the audience laughs, I was right. I intended to do one gig, and I did it; the audience laughed, and I thought, ‘I'll carry on a bit more.’”

That perseverance paid off, as Aaron was picked up by a BBC Comedy Awards talent scout who happened to be in the audience of his seventh or eighth stand-up gig.

“From there, I had an agent and started my career as a stand-up.”

Interestingly, parallel to his rise in the comedy circuit, another meteoric plunge was about to make landfall.

“At the same time as I started my stand-up career, I also - unbeknownst to me - became the first major victim of identity theft in the UK,” Arron says matter-of-factly. “Somebody had used my name to open accounts and run up thousands of pounds worth of debt. My wife and I became penniless and homeless; we had to move in with my parents, and my wife was pregnant at the time.”

Amazingly, he was able to turn this stroke of bad luck into another career move.

“Years later, I wrote an Edinburgh show about it, my first ever show, which didn't do well at the beginning,” he admits, recalling that his first two performances had to be cancelled for lack of attendance. After his fourth show, however, one member of the media gave him a rave review. “Then it picked up and did really well. On the back of that, I still go around the world talking about fraud and identity theft and cyber security.

“I was approached by Channel Four to make a documentary on the subject, in which I stole the identity of the Home Secretary and got arrested in a dawn raid by Scotland Yard and put into a cell! So that was fun. But that brought about a huge change, as I had found a loophole in the UK driving license application form, which had to be completely thrown away and rewritten because of what I had done. Instead of thanking me for the loophole, however, they arrested me instead, which was bizarre. I was expecting a thank you. Or at least an OBE!”

Over time, Aaron became more self-assured with both his comedy and his ability to handle just about any calamity that might befall him. In fact, he has written a new act that he tried out at Edinburgh Fringe this year, which touches directly on vulnerable parts of his life in a frank and funny discourse.

“When I started, because I was worried about being heckled, I just did gag, gag, gag - one after the other - and it seemed to work...”

“For example, I'd say something like, ‘Where I grew up, we had a village idiot. Well, I say that, but actually, I never met him.’ It's a lot of self-deprecating humour.

“In the last few years, that really developed as I gained confidence and refined my style. Now I am more into storytelling, which fits my personality a little better, especially with the show I am currently doing, which is called *I Regret This Already*. It doesn't sound like a laugh-a-minute, but it is a comedy. I talk about my dad having dementia, and about me having depression, which I've never had in my life, and the reviews have been the best I've ever had.

“I'm delighted about that because people have said it's a really moving show, but it's really funny as well, so they don't have a moment to get too upset before something humorous comes along. I wasn't going to do it as a show, but my wife said to me, ‘you have to make something good from this,’ in the same way as the identity theft thing, I made a dark experience lighter. Since then, a lot of people have been in contact, sharing that they have suffered the same thing and that it was inspiring to hear that I came out the other side of it.”

Justine Williamson
(Cape Breton, Nova Scotia)

When it comes to Justine Williamson's brand of comedy, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

“I started on YouTube in the early, early days - like 2006 - in high school,” she recalls. “People would always refer to me as



Justine Williamson



Tracy & Martina

the YouTube girl, because at that time, social media wasn't what it is today. Now it is normal for people to have a presence online, but when I started, it was pretty fresh and new.”

Williamson felt that a career in media was unquestionably in her future, especially after representing her hometown of Glace Bay for a television station's VJ search.

“That lit a fire under me to keep chasing after this dream,” she beams, recalling that around the same time, “I met Greg (Vardy), my comedic partner. We actually worked together selling cell phones and we got to know each other and became really close friends.”

Williamson had also developed a character in one of her YouTube videos named Tracy, which she also embodied in a Cape Breton-tuned parody of The Chainsmokers'



song #SELFIE to great effect.

"My local radio station was looking for someone who could do a strong Cape Breton accent to voice the parody song, so they called me in. I said to Greg, 'why don't we make a video to go along with this song?' That's how 'Martina' got dragged into the mix, because I wanted another woman, but I had no female friends who were willing to be in this ridiculous video."

Thus, the vivacious Cape Breton party girl comedy duo Tracy & Martina was born. Clad in leopard print clothes in every colour of the rainbow, cigarettes in hand, they took off in a big way, soon spreading the gag gospel via podcasts, touring dates, and television.

"It went viral, and people really took to the characters. Character comedy is strong in Cape Breton, and we just kept developing them further."

Williamson believes that, even as stereotypes, the characters appeal to people at home (and abroad - they have a hearty UK

fanbase) because everyone can see a part of themselves in Tracy and Martina, foibles and all.

"Tracy is unfiltered, rough around the edges, but she also loves her friends, and family really means a lot to her. The characters are a blend of people that we knew growing up - family, friends, enemies..."

“At first it was like we're two different people, but the longer I perform as Tracy, the more connected we become. Certain things bleed over...”

Much like how she took inspiration from the people around her, Williamson hopes to inspire other young women to explore careers in comedy.

"I would love to speak at schools - any way that I might encourage young girls to express themselves, especially in junior high, high school, because they tend to hold back.

You have to have a backbone and just not care what people think."

Punchline

If there is one unifying element of Celtic comedy, it is authenticity.

"It really boils down to authenticity," notes Williamson.

"Some version of authenticity is the main point," Hickey agrees. "Be authentic with your stance and your morality because it is all connected."

"Be true to who you are," adds Arron, "and take the audience on the journey with you, even if you're doing one-liners. Whatever you're doing to share yourself on stage, to be that open is quite a challenge; if you want to do it, you need to be prepared to bring the audience into your world. When you succeed, it's a fantastic feeling."

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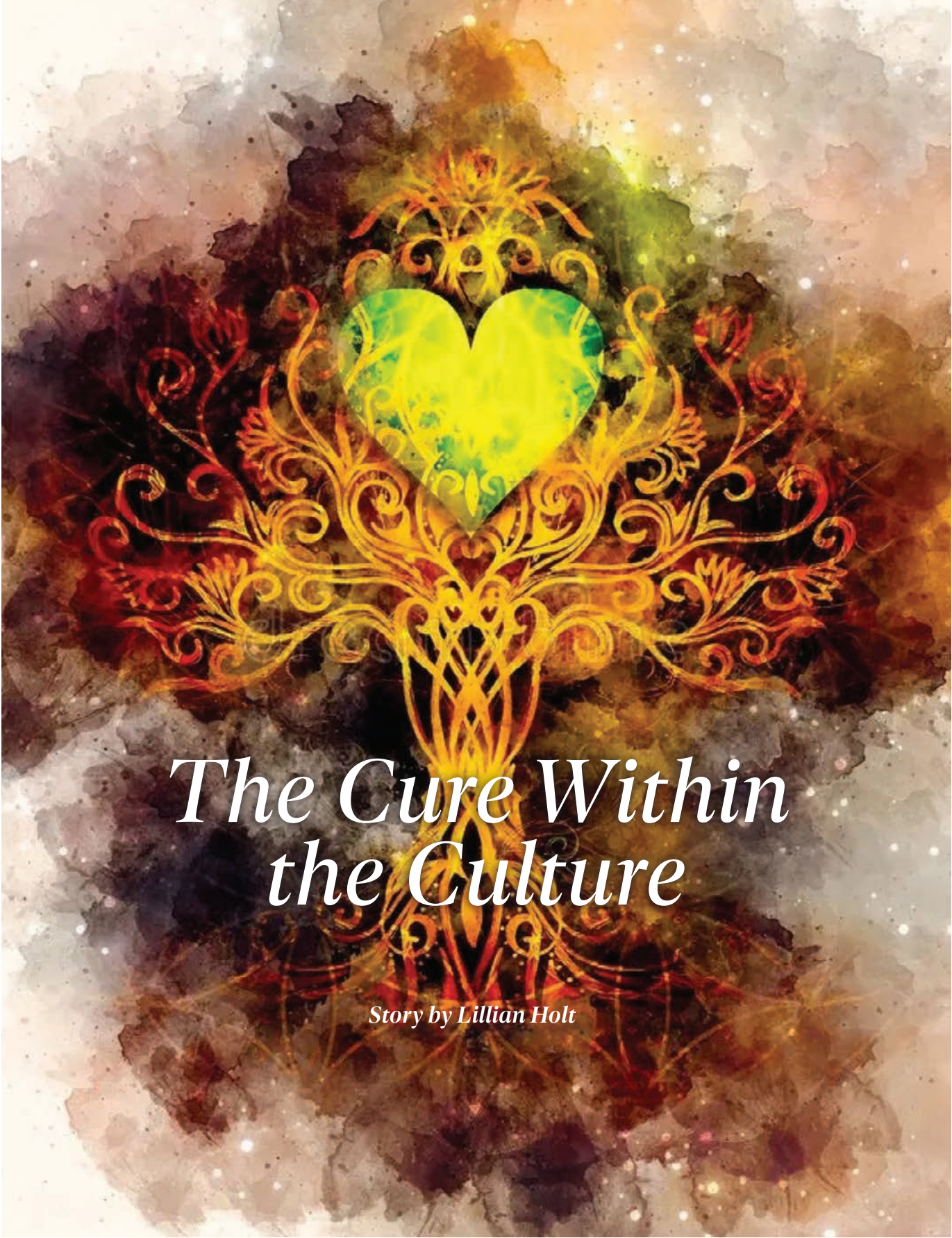
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The Cure Within the Culture

Story by Lillian Holt

“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

~Oscar Wilde

When Sean McCann stepped away from Great Big Sea in 2013, fans may not have realized that he was also stepping into a new way of life. After years of masking pain with alcohol, carrying childhood trauma, and feeling his creative voice drowning, McCann knew it was time for a change. He eventually traded arenas for intimate gatherings, started seeing music as a healing force rather than a hustle, and unmasked himself as The Shantyman.

Celtic communities from Newfoundland to Co. Armagh, from where McCann’s ancestors hail, have carried similar stories. While addiction and trauma have touched many, so has survival. Through its songs, stories, sacred rites, and seasonal rhythms, Celtic tradition doesn’t merely offer surface solutions, but subtle, ancient pathways to healing that provide the cure from within the culture itself.

“Music saved my life” has been a refrain for McCann since he left the spotlight. He lived that truth during the difficult stages of early sobriety. As he later said in an interview, “this guitar and the songs that came out of it kept me alive. I believe secrets can kill you, and I believe a song can save your life.”

Such perspectives are not unique to McCann. They reflect an age-old Celtic approach in which musical performance is not just entertainment but actually encourages personal evolution. Sea shanties, for example, made hard labor bearable while bonding communities; laments channeled grief; rebel ballads told the real story, anchoring identity. In the Celtic tradition, melody holds space for confession, comfort, and cure. In McCann’s pub-based solo tours, the communal act of singing becomes catharsis, restoring what shame and silence once masked.

For the Celts, music is both a reckoning and a balm to re-anchor body and soul. As McCann told Celtic Life International, “music is what I do for a living, but it is really what I need to do for life. It is an important tool that heals spirits.”

While music may carry the tune, truth-telling carries the story. McCann’s 2020 memoir *One Good Reason* confronts abuse,

addiction, and the cost of silence. Similarly, in the Celtic oral tradition, the seanchai (the storytellers) were respected for their ability to facilitate healing and well-being.

These “keepers of the memories” held an important communal responsibility. When McCann sings *Hold Me Mother*, he offers a confession that heals wounds.

“The success of my own recovery was based on my ability to finally accept the truth...”

Countless stories told in Celtic homes and pubs of personal lore, family ghosts, and everyday sorrow are woven into the broader tapestry of belonging and beingness that ultimately heals. It isn’t about mere biography, but more about reclaiming the spirit. Within a community, telling your story not only makes it matter, but it can loosen its grip. McCann’s - and others’ - disclosures reflect a tradition older than any wellness trend, where bearing witness is sacred work.

Celtic culture doesn’t view life as a straight line, but as a spiral path like the Triskele, that follows the rhythms and cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. This is also reflected in the Celtic wheel of the year, with the seasonal rites of Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine, and Lughnasa serving as reminders that endings and beginnings are part of the same eternal rhythm.

As Anne Marie Cribbin writes in her article *Cycles of Renewal*, “healing is not a one-time event, but a continual process of listening, honoring, and returning.” Seasons change, wounds resurface, inner storms pass, and regeneration begins again. For anyone serious about recovery, this cyclical viewpoint is a lifeline.

Other Celtic currents also echo this same pattern of resilience. The *anam cara*, or “soul friend,” is about active listening and witnessing without judgment. In recovery, this emphasizes the power of peer support, where a bond transcends polite-but-rigid social norms, opening up opportunities for connection and communion with our higher selves.

Just as the lighting of Imbolc fires signaled hope in the heart of winter, recovery can emerge in the darkest seasons, bringing inspiration and renewal. As well, locations known as “thin places” in Celtic lands - spots



where the veil between the seen and unseen is less dense - encourage reaching beyond the visible world for guidance.

McCann and others cultivate that sacredness within their performances, live or shared online, bringing people together in communal circles.

Today, the shantyman is not necessarily a relic or self-help guru, but a Celtic bard in the tradition of our ancestors. He harvests memory and pain, tunes it with melody, and offers it back into the community, transformed. Creating and sharing music and stories echoes many Celtic tenets that include retreating to the earth, honoring the cycles of nature, speaking truth as a sacred act, and walking the spiral path.

In a world eager to pathologize and even profit from pain, this Celtic cure offers something as ancient as the culture itself: the song, story, and the return of the soul to itself.



Celtic Pathways to Healing

Ancient wisdom for the modern recovery journey

While contemporary recovery frameworks like 12-Step programs offer powerful tools and peer support, many of their deepest truths can be found in traditional Celtic culture. Long before recovery had a name, Celtic communities turned to these enduring concepts to navigate pain and find renewal.

Anam Cara

A sacred companion who walks beside you, offering presence without judgment. Like a modern sponsor or guide, the anam cara holds space for transformation with acceptance, enabling us to reclaim our lost selves.

Thin Places

In Celtic belief, certain locations have a thin veil between worlds. Such places function as portals for insight or connection with ancestors and the Otherworld. The meeting of sea and sky at the Cliffs of Moher (Co. Clare, Ireland), or the wild landscapes of the Isle of Skye (The Quiraing, Fairy Glen, Scotland) are just two examples where such experiences are said to unfold.

Seasonal Cycles

The Celtic path to healing is reflected in the natural rhythms of the seasons within the wheel of the year: Samhain is a time for release and honoring the dead; Imbolc holds the promise of new life in the heart of winter; Bealtaine celebrates fertility and growth; and Lughnasa honours the harvest with gratitude. These seasonal rites mirror stages of personal transformation that encourage growth, balance, and renewal.

The Practice of Storytelling

In Celtic tradition, storytelling was a sacred act of preserving memory and healing. The seanchaí (truth-keepers) told tales of triumph and sorrow that helped communities process grief, find meaning, and restore dignity. Speaking truth through story was, and remains, a powerful path to self-care and repair.

Communal Song

Singing together is an act of collective strength among the Celts of old and modern times. Sea shanties, laments, and ballads carried the weight of grief, joy, and endurance, turning pain into perseverance, isolation into community, and sorrow into a song of hope.

Reverence For Nature

Celtic tradition has always revered the natural world, viewing it not as separate from humanity, but as a living source of spirit and wisdom. Sacred groves, rivers, stones, and animals were regarded as teachers and companions on life's journey. Healing, in this tradition, means returning to harmony with these natural cycles and finding renewal in the patterns of the earth.



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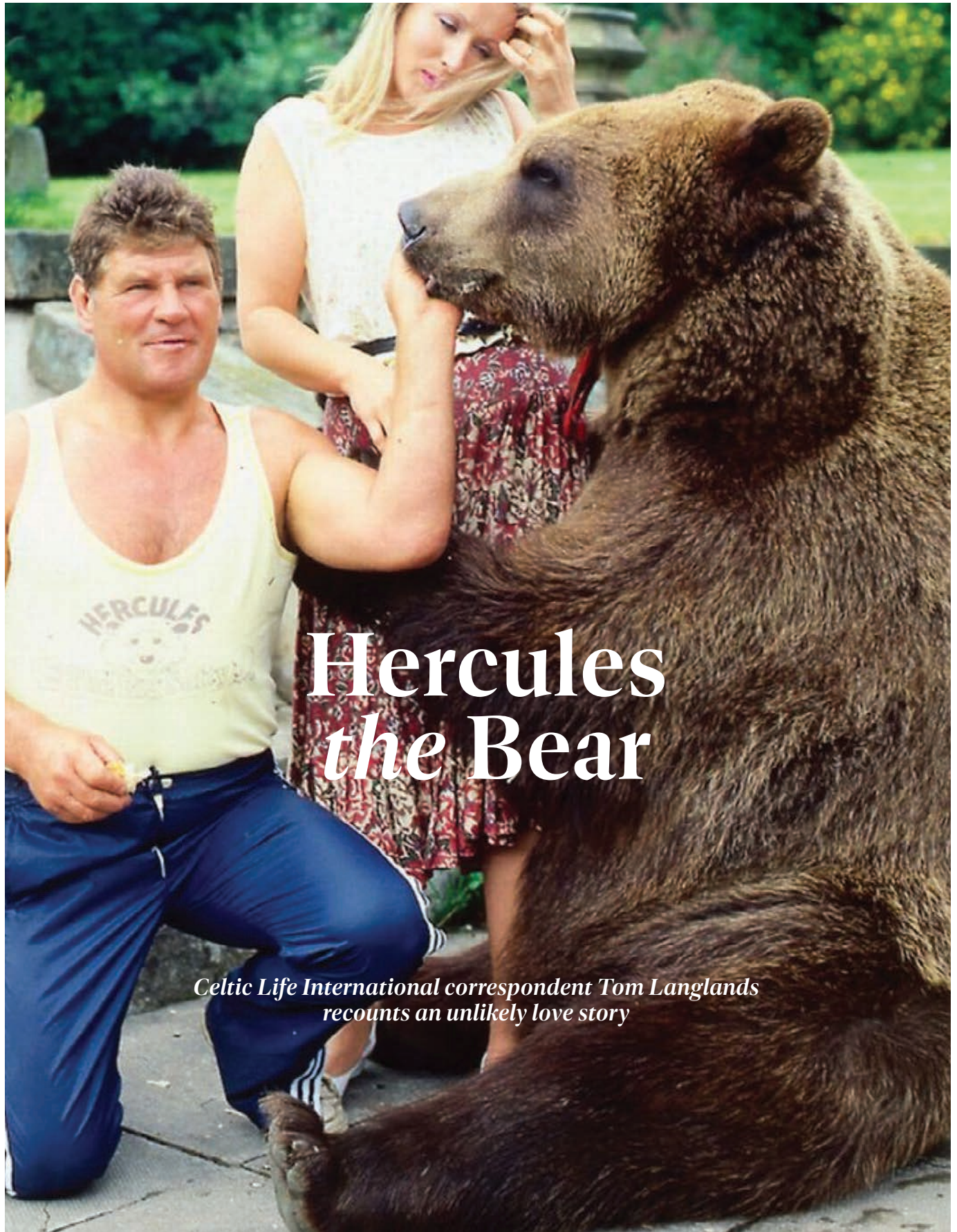
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Hercules *the* Bear

*Celtic Life International correspondent Tom Langlands
recounts an unlikely love story*

Bear Necessities is a ladies fashion shop on the High Street of Auchterarder in Scotland's rural Perthshire. It is renowned across the country - and the wider UK - for its stylish clothing and is a favourite place for brides' and grooms' mothers to get kitted out for that special day. Inside, it is larger than its modest frontage suggests. Standing by a large mirror adjacent to the clothing rails is a small, cuddly bear. For many, it is just an item of soft furnishing, a light-hearted piece of interior decoration. But for those who know, there is a good reason for its presence. *Bear Necessities* is owned by Maggie Robin, wife of the late Andy Robin, Scotland's world-famous wrestling champion, and is named in recognition of their adopted grizzly bear, Hercules. Maggie and I meet at a cafe a short distance along the street from the shop. We sit at an outdoor table for three, her beloved Jack Russell, Robbie, occupying the seat between us. Swatting away the late summer wasps attracted by our soft drinks, she mutters, "I hate wasps, they terrify me." It is an interesting insight into a woman who once shared her home and her life with a 500lb Goliath. "What you have to understand," she continues, in a moment of respite from the striped terrors, "is that this is a love story. There are many people fascinated by Herc and our life with him, but they fail to understand the love that we had as a family. Our love was, and still is, the most important thing in the whole story."

Maggie was a 21-year-old professional showjumper when she met Andy at the Perth Agricultural Show. She was demonstrating her prowess on a horse, and he was displaying his wrestling skills in the ring. She reminisces, "he was a big guy, jaw-droppingly good-looking in his turquoise wrestling shorts and white boots with a beautiful, tanned body and piercing blue eyes. I was wearing blue jeans with patches, and I was eating an apple. It's a moment that changed my life forever, and one I will never forget." The year was 1972, and the couple were destined to spend the next 47 years together, getting married in Los Angeles in 1983. By the time Maggie and Andy first met, he had already acquired a reputation as a formidable athlete. Brought up on a notorious housing estate in the shadow of Stirling Castle, Andy left school at 15 to work in the timber trade, turning his hand to boxing, wrestling, the shot put, and hammer throwing at Highland Games and shows. It was, however, his prowess in the wrestling ring and - in particular - his renowned leg grip, power-lock move that brought him early fame. In the mid-1960s, he had a spell wrestling in Canada, where he accepted the challenge of endeavouring to last fifteen minutes in the ring with Terrible Ted - an enormous wrestling bear. Needless to say, he succeeded, and it was a moment that would shape the future lives of the Robins.

Hercules was born at the Highland Wildlife Park in Kingussie in 1975. He was one of three siblings that the park could no longer accommodate. Andy had already developed a fascination with bears after his bout with Terrible Ted and had picked up on the news stories about the plight of the three cubs. He approached the park, and the Robins bought Hercules the year after he was born for the sum of £50. It was a brave decision - some said foolhardy - as the diminutive, boisterous cub would soon grow into a 10ft, 35-stone powerhouse.



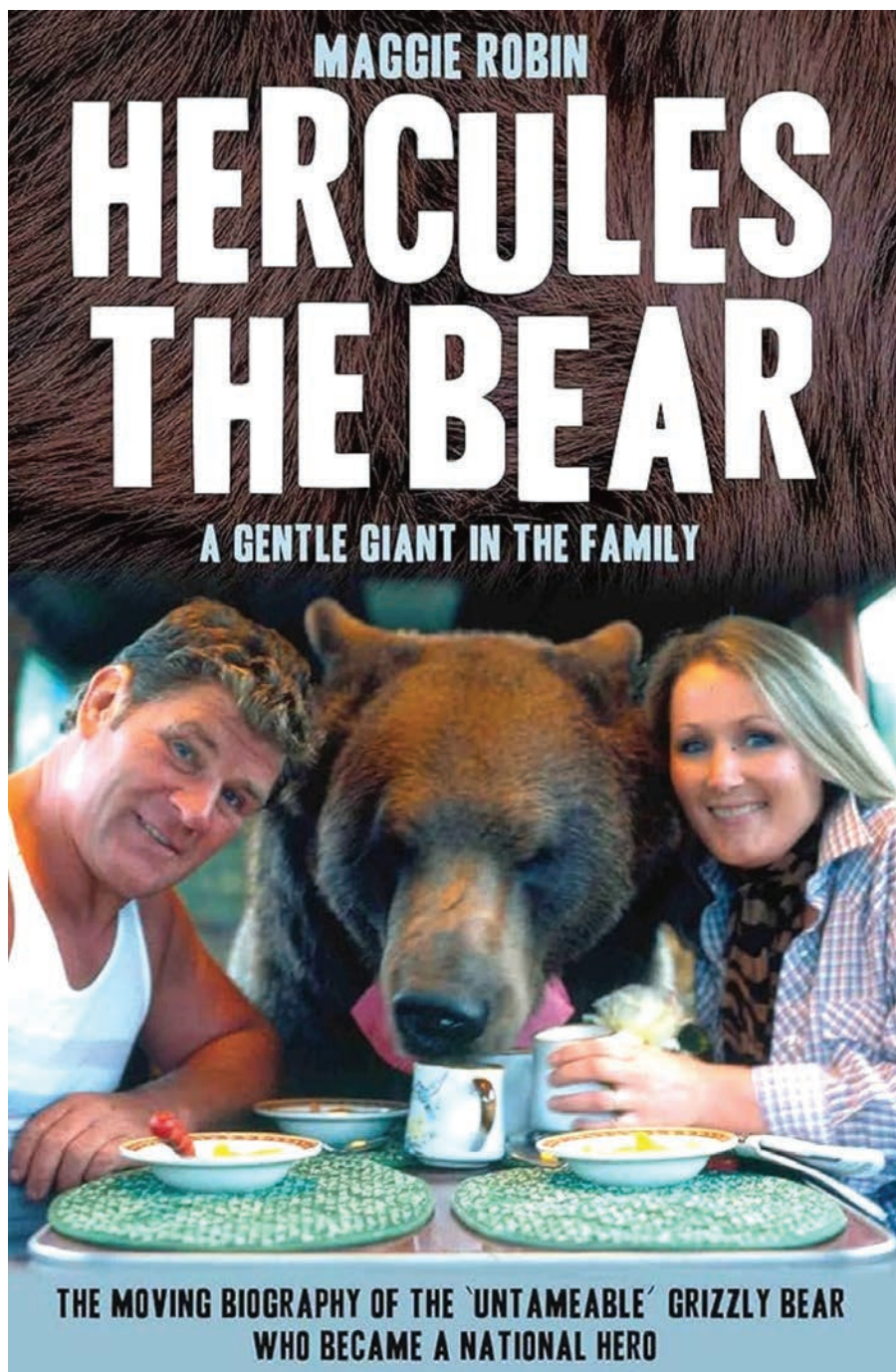
“People talk about training a wild animal and the challenges involved, but Hercules was never a wild animal. He was born in captivity and was destined, at best, to live out his life in a caged enclosure. Yes, Andy trained him, but he saw Herc as a pal, a sparring partner, someone that we could share our lives with - and that is exactly what happened.”

By the time Hercules joined the family, the Robins had made their home at the old, renovated drovers' inn at Sheriffmuir, a few miles south of Auchterarder. With plenty of land for horses and a bear, it was the perfect location. Andy built a log cabin beside the house. This was Hercules' home, though in truth, he would more often be found in the kitchen of the main house, tucking into an assortment of his favourite foods that included baked beans, eggs, grapes, strawberries, ox heart, carrots, and potatoes. Hercules only ever ate cooked meat. On other occasions, he would be found standing at the bar in the inn, enjoying a drink with the locals.

"Herc enjoyed beer and loved coffee with sugar and Carnation milk," laughs Maggie. "If you ever forgot the sugar, he would swipe the dish and all of its contents onto the floor."

Andy and Hercules spent hours together running across the landscape, splashing in streams, and when Maggie created a jumping area for her horses, she would lower the bars and Hercules would run behind, taking part.

Andy was in his prime in the 1970s, and Hercules had his debut wrestling performance with Andy at Perth Ice Rink in 1977. It proved



the world media, and when he was eventually found, stardom was inevitable. Hercules featured in chat shows and documentaries, starred in the Bond film *Octopussy*, and spent two years in California with further television and film roles, as well as live performances. He was a gentle giant loved by young and old alike.



Sadly, Hercules incurred an injured back in transit during the filming of a documentary in 1997. The injury was believed to be so severe that it was recommended Hercules be euthanized. That thought was anathema to Andy, who spent the next six months nursing the bear back to health with swimming exercises. Hercules recovered and remained at the centre of the Robins' lives for the next two years, eventually succumbing to old age in 2000. Hercules is buried on the island of North Uist. Andy passed away in 2019 and is buried beside his beloved bear.

Ten years ago, Maggie wrote the book *Hercules The Bear - A Gentle Giant In The Family*. Today, there is a renewed interest in Hercules and the Robins' family story of an amazing love that captured hearts across the world. A television documentary and further books are in the pipeline, and a Hercules the Bear theatre production premieres in Ayr this fall before going on tour. Walking back up the road to *Bear Necessities*, Maggie turns to me and adds, "it has been an amazing life, filled with fun and adventure. But most of all, it was filled with love." As I write this piece, Maggie is on North Uist visiting the final resting place of her beloved Andy and Hercules.

to be a big attraction, and Hercules' fame was born. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Andy and Hercules toured the country putting on wrestling demonstrations, but always enjoying life as a family. Maggie recalls, "everything we did, we did together. We never holidayed without Herc. Anytime we went away, Herc came with us. We splashed in rivers and swam in lochs. We had picnics and barbecues just like any other family. He was never forced to do anything he didn't want

to do. That would have been impossible anyway." Hercules won the hearts of the nation. Following a promotional documentary commissioned by Andy in 1980, Hercules' fame spread, and newspapers and television scrambled for a piece of the action. In the 1980s, while filming for a toilet roll commercial on Benbecula in the remote Uists island group of the Outer Hebrides, Hercules escaped and went missing for three weeks. The search for the bear captured the attention of

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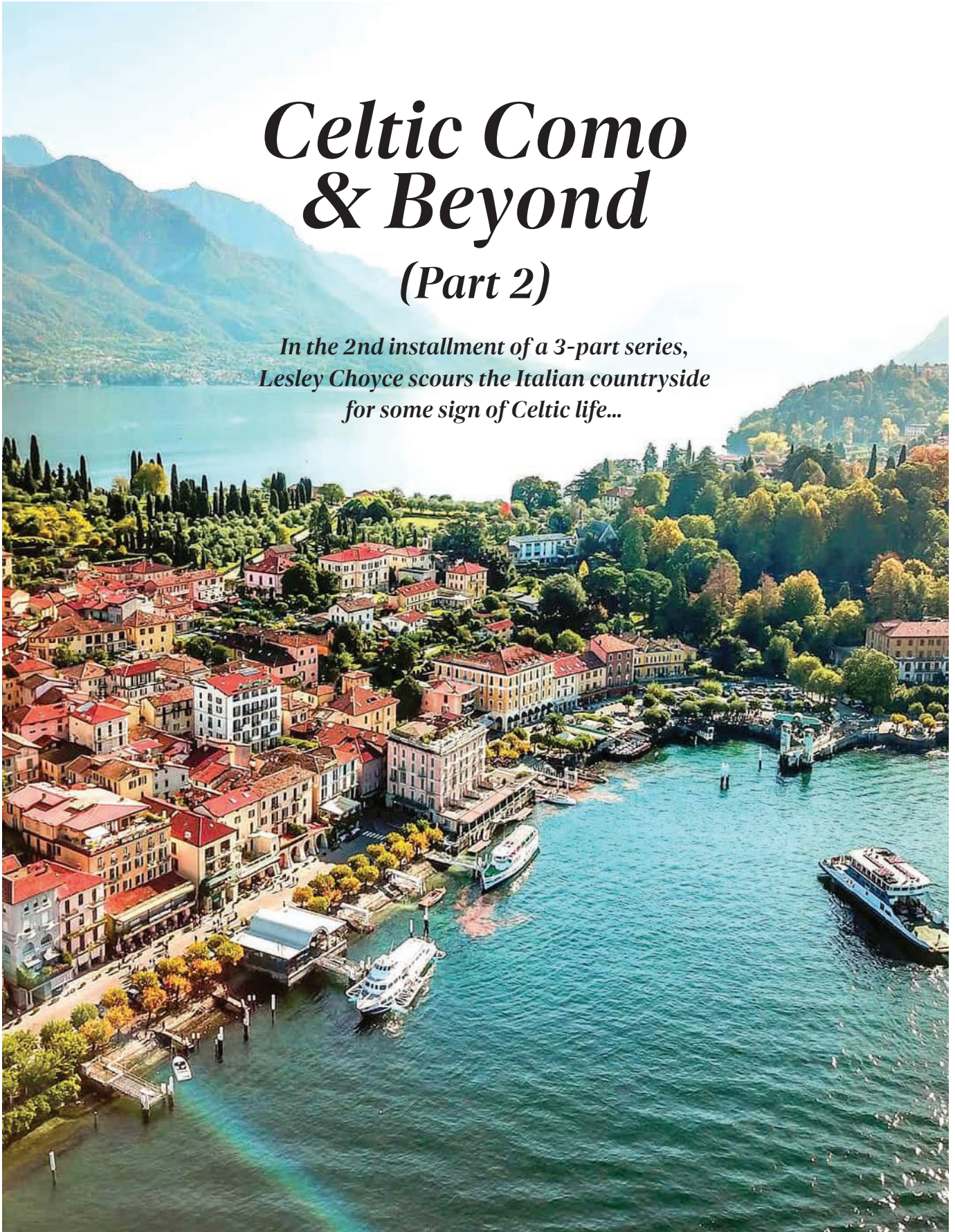
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Celtic Como & Beyond

(Part 2)

*In the 2nd installment of a 3-part series,
Lesley Choyce scours the Italian countryside
for some sign of Celtic life...*



After exiting the grandness of the Orrido di Bellano ravine, Linda and I retrieved our rental car from the train station parking lot and inched our way north along the eastern shore of Lake Como, headed to the Swiss border. Much of the rural landscape remained pristine, and I mused that a region like this must have reasonably accommodated the Celtic Orobii, who had lived here long ago.

Following through open fields, farmyards, and past grazing horses, we came to Forte di Fuentes and were greeted by a charming young woman who appeared to be having a casual picnic with a lad. I'm fairly sure we had interrupted what looked like a romantic luncheon, but the young lady gave us an informative historical brochure and a short story about the ruins we were about to see.

I was pleased as usual to know that here were ruins, instead of something "fully restored." It was a pleasant hike up a forest path to what remained of the remains, and I believe we were the only ones there. I'm a huge fan of anything of a military nature that is completely abandoned, and this one was whittled down by the seasons and covered with various mosses and green grasses that were freshly mowed. If we had brought a lunch, it would have been a great place for our own picnic and an afternoon nap. There

was a fine view of the Adda River Valley and the nearby town of Colico. If my history is correct (and I admit, I never truly trust any of my sources) those Orobii Celts would have hiked down through the nearby valley from the Lake di Mazza as they migrated south to carve out lives in the mild and benevolent environs of Lake Como.

The fort was built in the 1600s by the Spanish governor of Milan, Don Pedro Enriquez de Acevedo, to defend the northern border of the then-Spanish region against northern invaders. Spain eventually lost the territory, and, in 1769, Emperor Joseph II asserted that the fort was worthless anyway and should be abandoned. Nonetheless, some 19th-century bandits found it to be worthy of calling it their headquarters, whereby they could harass the local law-abiding citizens and avoid persecution by the lawmaking authorities.

Linda and I retreated south that afternoon thinking about how many times this corner of Lombardy must have changed political hands over the years. I don't think the Celtic folks were first, but they were well-established here by the time the Romans charged in after something called the Second Punic War. Then came the Lombards - ambitious military warlike Germanic people who took over. Thus, the name in Italian, Lom-

bardia. King Charlemagne grabbed the land during his reign, but as his empire also diminished, the region became an area of autonomous cities and communes.

Austria, Spain, and France ruled the roost at various times until Lombardy lined itself up with the Kingdom of Italy in 1859, and then there were other transitions during World Wars I and II. The point is that power shifted hands mightily down through the centuries. It was exhausting just to think about it, so I gave up and settled down for an indoor nap in our bunkhouse high up in the hills of Perledo.

I kept hoping to find another tiny black scorpion, but all we had in the house were some very large docile bugs that seemed to genuinely appreciate my efforts to relocate them outside into the flower beds.

Day by day, the Lake Como ferries were getting more crowded, so we decided to just keep trucking up and down the easternmost shore of the Lake.

“I was keen to get our feet on those elevated pilgrim paths to tread where salvation seekers, soldiers, and salesmen had trod for many centuries.





Lesley and Linda

Fortunately, there was one running horizontally along the hillside, just one street down from our abode.

The Sentiero del Viandante (“Wayfarer’s Path”) is a mostly offroad hiking trail now, what was once referred to as a “mule path” that runs from up above Coleco and the Fort on down to Lecco, a rather industrial-looking city we had passed on our drive up from the Milan airport. From Perledo, the path would take us to Vezio, the home of a much-touted castle that sits on an outlook high above Varenna. It was a rainy-but-warm morning for our sojourn. The forest and streams along the way seemed to emanate their own radiant energy. We passed a small gurgling stream and waterfall in a narrow valley and hiked the next leg of the Wayfarer’s Path up into the ancient stone town of Vezio.

Vezio’s origins are Celtic, of course. Ligurian-Celtic people settled here a few centuries before the birth of Jesus. On this day, it felt truly ancient. We followed narrow cobblestone walkways between buildings that seemed to have been carved out of the rocks. We were on our way to the Castle di Vezio, which appeared to be a somewhat odd, quirky, theme-oriented restoration of a yet another military outpost. According to Varenna Turismo, “standing for more than a thousand years is the Vezio Castle, where the history, art, nature, and culture of the area have blended in perfect harmony in a landscape of unparalleled natural beauty.” I think the castle folks did their best to make the place family-friendly, because there, perched on a ledge, was a lifelike ghost-woman. You

could also walk down into what had once been a prison with scary blood-spattered manikins, howling demon and rattling chain sounds, and even the smell of century-old urine that almost made the whole thing seem real.

Around Europe, I had noticed on our travels, torture (in the form of torture museums, at least) is a pretty popular form of entertainment, so I wasn’t shocked by the gruesome nature of the hype. After all, the castle grounds also had some fine gardens that allowed me to identify a plethora of herbs by name and a display about the locally ultra-famous *Lariosaurus*. Explore Como Lake points out that this is a “legendary marine creature whose history traces back to a bygone era. This aquatic reptile once graced the waters of present-day Europe over an astounding 235 million years ago.” It’s sort of Lake Como’s Nessie, and here at the castle, we discovered that fossils of “Lari” had been found right in our Perledo neighbourhood.

“I still prefer ruins over restorations, but a good presentation of ghosts, ghouls, medieval prison accoutrements, herb gardens, sea monsters, and even a display of falconry keeps the kid in me entertained.”

The little shop on the grounds even offered some most-excellent espresso. From this perch high above the lake, we hiked down a different path taking us to the north end of Varenna where we shared a traditional risotto lunch and made a weary two-kilometre trek with groceries, wine, and beer back up the steep slopes to our scorpion-free homestead.

Now that we had discovered access to the Wayfarer’s Path near our doorstep, the next day we decided to get back on the trail going south past the Vezio Castle to the next item on our hiking wish list: Fiumelatte. Fiume means river and latte means milk, just like the milky coffee you might buy after an extralong wait at Starbucks.

Okay, so it is a milky river. Not a big deal. The water is quite whitish because it is churned up with bits of limestone as it rushes down the mountain. But what else? Well, it just presents itself at a beautiful woodland setting gushing straight out of a cave in the mountain. Authorities, it appeared, had installed massive bars across this opening to keep children and reckless explorers out. Obviously, in earlier days curious travelers had attempted to enter the cave, forge against its powerful current, and got in trouble. But wait, there’s more; the Fiumelatte is said to be the

shortest river in Italy. After it forcefully gushes straight out of the mountain, it drops down a short, steep chute right into Lake Como at a town named after the river.

And yet more notably strange, this oddball river ceases to flow sometime in October and doesn’t get back to business until the following March. Leonardo da Vinci came here to study the unusual qualities of the water-flow and wrote about it in his *Codex Atlanticus*. Also known as The River of the Two Madonnas, during the 1600s it became a must-see stop on the famed European Grand Tour. Fortunately for us on that rainy morning, we were the only souls on hand to greet the emerging torrent as it spewed from the mountain. After that, it was a short hike down along this ultrashort river to where it spilled into the lake.

After all that excitement, we had a fairly uneventful long hike beside the highway back to Varenna, where we chowed down at Locanda Cavallino. (A locanda is a house that provides food and lodging, and cavallino refers to small horses, of which I saw none in attendance.) Linda ate her beef skewer on compote, and I tried a combo of lake fish, which seemed a bit tame compared to the robust North Atlantic haddock I was used to in Nova Scotia. I had a local brew of beer, but Linda ordered her first Aperol spritzer, an orange drink that seemed to have swept across the continent in popularity with lightning speed - although I’d give it a modest personal rating of possibly two out of five stars.

The restaurant itself gets high ratings on Booking.com, but I always like to read the reviews of the iconoclast nay-sayers who so often go against the laudatory crowd and complain. The only negative blurb I could find was that of an American woman who had ordered the local fish and found it “pungent,” by which I think she meant “fishy.” But even she admitted that she savoured her pumpkin gnocchi. (Pumpkin, really?)

After our repast, I was moving a bit slower, but Linda sprinted ahead of me back up the 2,000-or-so stone steps to our roost in Perledo. For me, each climb up our personal Lombardy stairway to heaven seemed to get longer and harder. However, looking down at the ground the whole way, I was becoming more familiar with various crevice flowers, ambitious weeds, shiny-leaved vines, and darting beetles. By now I knew when I was almost home, because I had to sidestep the familiar used Pampers diaper nestled in a corner step by an empty bottle of Prosecco. Here on a tributary to the famous Wayfarer’s Path, clearly not all pilgrims were considerate of their fellow travelers.

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Kathryn Callaghan

I was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland. When I was young, my parents and I moved to England to get away from 'The Troubles'. We returned to Northern Ireland when I was 10. I later went to the University of Ulster to complete a degree in Communications, Advertising, and Marketing.

I now reside in the small, rural village of Lisbane, about a 30-minute drive from Belfast.

I always had a love of art from my early years. I spent my free time as a child sketching and painting everything in sight. I felt compelled to capture life on a page and always loved the challenge of improving and developing my skills.

After a career in travel and outdoor

recreation, I returned to school to study fine art at Belfast Metropolitan College as a mature student. After the three-year course, I began working as an artist part time. This progressed to a full-time professional career within a few years, and this is now year 13.

I paint now to capture the beauty of everyday life, and I am inspired by the transient moments created by light, shadow, movement, sound and colour. I do this by pouring and splashing inky mixtures from mid-air onto an unmarked canvas. It is a very organic, 'in the moment' style that allows me to capture the essence or soul of the subject rather than a traditional representation. I want it to evoke a feeling or memory in people.

I believe that art is very personal, and touches people in unique and individual ways. Capturing the essence, rather than the exact, provides a platform for them to engage their imagination and allow their minds to wander – as if the painting is a portal into their own memories, feelings and experiences.

Currently, I am working on a new Ireland collection, inspired by my summertime campervan trip along the Wild Atlantic Way. The hope is to capture the essence of my beautiful home country and to incorporate a degree of 'wildness' into the artwork.

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My roots are Irish, English, and Polish - I would be third generation Canadian. I currently live in a small rural community - Beechmont, Nova Scotia, on Cape Breton Island.

My interest in photography started in my late teens. I spent much of my time out in nature, especially fishing, hunting, and foraging for mushrooms. I would often think to myself, 'I wish I had a camera with me.' It wasn't long before I invested in a point-and-shoot camera.

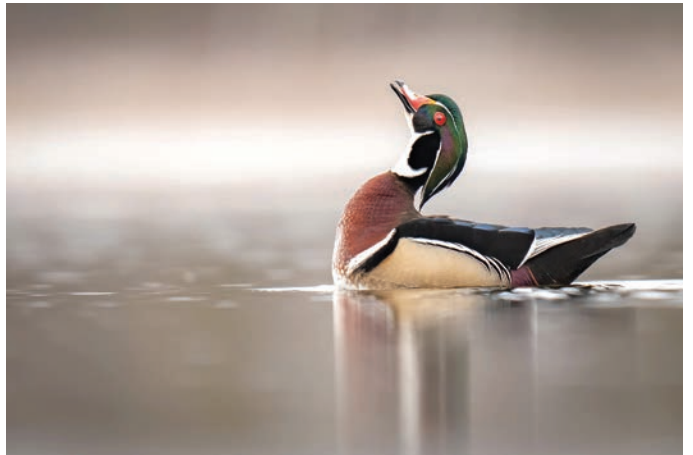
My deep passion for being in and photographing nature is essentially the same as it was over thirty years ago. Photography is a great motivator to get out, and can lead me to see a beautiful sunrise, hear an owl hoot, or simply smell the air along the coasts or in the forest. These experiences don't always guarantee me a great photograph, but they certainly keep the connection alive until the next opportunity.

I have yet to take my best photograph, so I continue to immerse myself in nature for inspiration. Living on beautiful Cape Breton Island makes it easier for me to stay inspired - we have an abundance of coastline and four distinct seasons of the year, so there is always something to look forward to, especially the fall and its vibrant colours.

A good photograph makes an instant connection with the viewer. It isn't always necessary to be perfectly sharp or super vibrant and bright for a successful image. Often, the subject plays the key role in the success of a photo, but it is what leads you to that subject, or how it is framed, or the way the light is used that really creates a special photograph.

Time is the biggest challenge - life is busy, and it's hard to be in two places at once. And it is important to understand that a magical photograph doesn't occur every time; it is one thing to spot a wild animal, but it's another thing entirely to get it in beautiful light - that requires a lot of time.

Nature photography has not only allowed me to connect with nature itself, but it has also led me to many wonderful friendships with other photographers on Cape Breton Island. I have been blessed with great support from the general community, as well as abroad.







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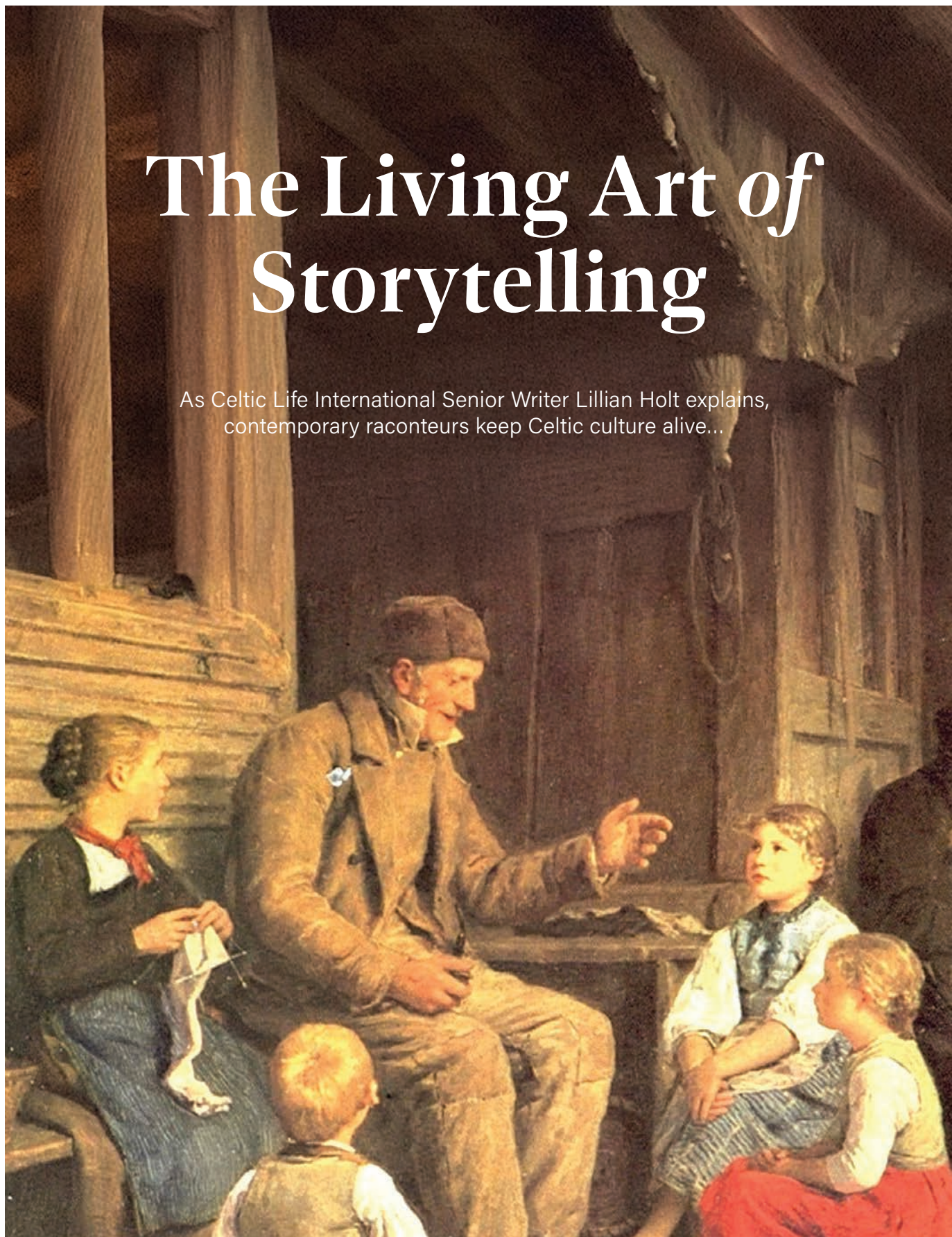
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The Living Art of Storytelling

As Celtic Life International Senior Writer Lillian Holt explains, contemporary raconteurs keep Celtic culture alive...



Once Upon A Time

Imagine a room lit only by the moon and firelight, casting shadows on stone walls as a timeless voice tells an ancient tale. A group gathers around the seanchai, listening intently to stories of heroes, gods, and the mysteries of the unseen realms.

This scene could have unfolded centuries ago in an Irish village, or just as easily any night of the week in a storytelling circle in Dublin.

For centuries, storytelling has been at the very heart of Celtic culture, passed orally from one generation to the next for both entertainment and education. Such tales carried wisdom and law, myth, and memory, holding communities together in times of hardship and celebration alike.

Today, the legacy of Celtic storytelling continues to bridge ancient and modern worlds. It lives on in the bardic memory-keepers, in the evolving customs of Ireland and Scotland, and in the revival that brings these tales to life for new generations.

The Bards – Memory Keepers

“Bards were not mere entertainers; their role was to preserve and transmit the oral history, mythology, and laws of their people,” notes Scott McEwen in the article, “The Celtic Bardic Tradition.” Storytelling, then, was not solely about entertainment; it was essential to the preservation of a culture.

Long before written records, bards stood as the custodians of Celtic society. McEwen explains that their role was so essential that many kings and chieftains employed them not only to keep a record of their reign and praise their deeds, but to safeguard historical knowledge.

“**The bardic tradition was the actual cornerstone of Celtic culture, composed of a powerful lineage of poets, musicians, and storytellers.**”

The bards also passed down the laws and ancestral memory, holding large repertoires of lore while weaving both truth and myth to cre-



ate meaning. Their tales were often sung, accompanied by harp, which was later linked with the sean-nós singing practice in Ireland. As one Irish storyteller put it, the style was both raw and refined, “a way of letting the story sing itself through both singer and listener,” to evoke joy and sorrow, longing and hope.

As the meeting point of poetry and prophecy, the bard’s influence was both potent and magical. His words could “inspire courage, heal wounds, or even curse an enemy,” as well as “gain insights into the future, uncover hidden truths, and communicate with the Otherworld.”

As a teacher, historian, and truth-teller, the bard was a figure who not only transmitted but embodied stories that reflected vital threads of identity and survival woven through Celtic life.

Storytelling Across Time and Place

As centuries passed, the oral tradition evolved into various forms across Ireland and

Scotland. In Ireland, the figure of the seanchai emerged as the local storyteller who carried the history and habits of a region. These individuals became beloved fixtures of community life. According to modern Seanachie Cyril May, the same holds true today. “Stories and storytelling may be the most unique thing about humans. We still grow and feed on stories like we do food.”

Alongside the stories, sean-nós singing also evolved as a “captivating art form that serves as a vital vehicle for preserving the country’s heritage and history,” cites Irish Storytelling and Sean Nos Singing. For centuries, its haunting melodies have carried the pulse of Irish identity, preserving culture through voice, rhythm, and song.

Across the sea in Scotland, the ansgeu-laiche - a Gaelic word for storyteller - wandered the Highlands, carrying tales from place to place. These traveling tellers of tales held a wealth of folklore, from the legends of selkies to the Tuatha Dé Danann.



session quickly grew into a movement. As Sorcha explains, “storytelling connects us to our shared past, and reminds us that whatever experience, no matter how profoundly frightening or isolating it might feel, it has been felt before.” Their shows mix live music with performance, infusing old myths with fresh energy.

These revivals are not only occasions for nostalgia, but opportunities for renewal, as tradition unfolds into timelessness. As Owen Staton observes, “I believe that we are in an age of discovery, where people are drawn to stories and the old ways in which they were told.” Ciaran Gaffney, who set up Seanchóiche in response to the COVIDS-19 pandemic, notes that stories satisfy “a collective craving for connection.” Storytelling festivals across Ireland, Scotland, and beyond are evidence of this, bringing together audiences of all ages.

“A good story is one you will want to hear again and again. An even better one is one you want to retell yourself,” say the Candlelit Tales founders. The cycle of listening and retelling continues, just as it did in the days of the bards.

From Past to Present

The Celtic world has always known that stories matter. They carry memory, imagination, and the wisdom of generations. From bardic courts to Highland glens; from sean-nós singers to modern stages; storytelling endures as a living force at the heart of culture.

At its core, the purpose of storytelling remains unchanged: to preserve identity, to connect past and present, to remind us that we belong to something larger than ourselves. These tales teach us, caution us, console us, and inspire us. They weave together memory and myth, and we may find ourselves listening with the same awe as our ancestors.

As Cyril May observed in Celtic Storytelling, “I feel like I am contributing to the world and the preservation of Celtic culture when I capture an audience with a story from more than 1,000 years ago. That feeling is delightful. Words and the ability to weave them are the greatest magic of all.”

Scot AnSgeulaiche, a contemporary storyteller, explained it this way: “Tales build a sense of human connection. If you agree that humans are not so much homo sapiens, but rather pans narans, the ‘Storytelling Chimp,’ then there is always a need for us to both tell and to hear stories.”

Irish and Scottish variations differed in style, with sean-nós singing in Ireland emphasizing rhythm and ornamentation, while Scottish border ballads carried a raw, narrative form. Yet both conveyed enduring lessons about courage, folly, love, and loss.

The tales continually adapted to the people and times, with both listeners and tellers reshaping and re-imagining stories to give them new life. Ciaran Gaffney, founder of Seanchóiche, a storytelling platform in Dublin, believes storytelling is “ever-evolving, because it unlocks those who listen to think of their own story, to be present, and to feel less alone.”

The Modern Revival

Far from fading, Celtic storytelling has enjoyed a distinct revival in recent decades. New generations of artists and festivals are breathing fresh life into old tales, ensuring their relevance for modern audiences.

Welsh storyteller Owen Staton describes how growing up in a small mining village gave him a deep sense of heritage. “It was, and remains, an area full of story and soul,” he recalls. His performances blend myth, history, and personal reflection and are often quite touching to audiences.

“I have had people moved to tears by some of the old tales. It stirs something deep within them...”

In Ireland, Candlelit Tales – founded by siblings Aron and Sorcha Hegarty, has reimagined ancient myths in a contemporary, theatrical format. What began as a small storytelling

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Scottish International Storytelling Festival

FEATURE STORY

Each October, Edinburgh and other locations across Scotland are enriched by the much-loved Scottish International Storytelling Festival (SISF). For more than three decades, audiences have gathered to share in a tradition that is centuries old yet remains vital with contemporary voices. Much more than mere readings in hushed libraries or somber halls, the festival takes place in vibrant venues where the listener is as important as the teller of the tale.

As founding director of the SISF Donald Smith recalls, the festival has been a success from the very beginning; evidence that the appeal of storytelling has never faded.

“People came and loved the stories and the traditional ways of sharing them. They wanted to be part of it, and we have never looked back.”

Now in its 36th year, the SISF has become a highlight of Scotland’s cultural calendar, illustrating how storytelling is a living art grounded in Scotland’s history - adapting and expanding to reach new audiences, while strengthening the community and cultural identity internationally.

Roots and Revival

Storytelling in Scotland has always been more than entertainment. It carried folklore and faith, law and lineage passed down from generation to generation around firesides, in fishing villages, and across Highland glens. Yet, it was not always celebrated.

“Storytelling has an especially important place in Scotland because everyone tried to suppress it but failed,” says Smith, matter-of-factly. “Church, school, and government wanted to break the ties between local languages, environment, and culture. They persecuted and even criminalized storytellers.”

Smith’s resolve reflects his own story of resilience. Born to Irish parents, he was adopted in Scotland but spent summers in Ireland, where he first experienced storytelling as “a natural part of everyday life.” Later, he studied at Edinburgh University under the guidance of Hamish Henderson, who touted the importance of folk culture and what he called “the carrying stream.” By the late 1970s, Smith was committed to a path aimed

at Scottish cultural revival.

That commitment led him to establish the Scottish International Storytelling Festival in 1989, following a small pilot project the year before. At the time, “people had been recording and archiving traditional storytellers like museum treasures - I thought, ‘why not offer this to live contemporary audiences?’” The response was immediate and confirmed his conviction that “storytelling is the people’s art form, equal and inclusive.”

Previously, the preservation of stories was often relegated to archives and collections. SISF helped redefine stories as a vital art form where tradition could be enacted, remembered, and renewed in front of audiences. As a result, storytelling in Scotland became more than just folklore, but an act of resistance and cultural survival.



Stories From Scotland to the World

What began as a small gathering in Edinburgh has grown into an international festival with an annual audience of over 40,000. From the start, the Scottish International Storytelling Festival has continued without interruption, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, this particular challenge brought about its expansion online and in the outer regions of Scotland, ensuring that stories were shared even when travel and gatherings were restricted.

This expansion fit well with the festival’s underlying ethos of openness and goodwill. Smith uses the phrase “cast your bread upon the waters” as a reminder that what is shared in the spirit of mutual respect and creativity



will eventually return in unexpected ways. This outlook has led to SISF's partnerships with local communities across Scotland and its growing ties with international networks of storytellers.

“The internationalism of SISF has increased as we have connected with people in other parts of the world. There is a huge global renaissance and interest in oral storytelling, live and in the online media...”

This year, the festival celebrates ties between Scotland and the Nordic countries, creating a cultural voyage that has the event “sailing between Iceland and Scotland, with lots of landing places.”

These innovations are more about enriching the context of storytelling than about compromising culture. “Firstly, there is a careful balance to be kept between our traditional roots and the contemporary revival of live storytelling,” says Smith. This balance keeps the festival fresh yet rooted, maintaining heritage while ensuring relevance for today.

“I want heritage and modern appeal to keep in close touch with each other. SISF is a

big event spread across Scotland, and I must constantly uphold its values and benefits.” The growth of the festival reflects more than just increased attendance; it is a recognition that storytelling has the power to transcend boundaries of language and nation.

Why Storytelling Still Matters

While the festival has expanded in scope and size, its most significant impact lies in the human element. For SISF, storytelling is not only an art but a social practice that sustains communities and recognizes individuals in time and place.

“Storytelling is not only a part of our culture, but a huge family and community resource,” Smith notes. The festival’s October dates also reflect the seasonal cycle when, as Smith puts it, “darkness overtakes the light, and we need to come together to get through another winter.”

The gathering highlights the very real connection between culture and environment, and how that has shaped Scotland’s history. “We are brought closer to land and sea,” says Smith. “The environment has also shaped us.” In a time of ecological uncertainty, such tales are another way to honor the landscapes and waters that sustain a distinct

way of life.

Established on the global stage, storytelling has now become part of what Smith refers to as the “International Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage,” with Scotland as a strong voice.

“Things progress when we ourselves take action, participate, and contribute. Then real change happens, for everyone. Perhaps the most important thing is that storytelling shows a world in structural crisis.”

From this perspective, storytelling then becomes a necessity that moves beyond entertainment. It preserves language, fosters identity, and includes everyone. “As we would say in Scotland, there is an especially powerful aspect of ‘not being beholden.’ Let people’s voices be heard.”

Carrying the Stream Forward

Ultimately, the Scottish International Storytelling Festival is more than just an annual cultural event. While it is certainly a celebration, it also acts as a safeguard that keeps tradition alive and opens it up to new audiences. The festival has shown how stories can not only cross borders without sacrificing tradition but also enhance it when they are shared and exchanged.

As Donald Smith prepares to step back from his official duties, he leaves behind a legacy that has lived up to his original intention: to preserve and share Scottish stories. “I will retire soon from my official roles but shall continue to support the festival and its networks as a storyteller and writer. I know that there is a lot of talent here to take the festival forward.” His words reflect the heart of the festival itself - that stories live on through their retelling, connecting people near and far.

“The big reward is seeing talent flourish across the generations, and to know that the festival is nurturing storytellers in all walks of Scottish life. Alongside that are the friendships, here and across the world, that grow naturally out of storytelling.”

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Dublin *Book Festival*

Story by Lillian Holt



With Dublin's designation as a UNESCO City of Literature, and the stomping grounds for such literary legends as James Joyce and Oscar Wilde, it comes as no surprise that Ireland's capital city has hosted a successful annual book festival for nearly two decades.

Not some stuffy affair in a dusty hall, the Dublin Book Festival incorporates many layers of the city's magic that once summoned the Muse for great authors. Writers and readers alike meet in gardens, galleries, and a full array of locations in the city that keeps turning the pages in its own story.

Festival Director Julianne Mooney Siron cites the significance of the event to bibliophiles. "The Dublin Book Festival shines

a light on Ireland's writers and artists. It is a gathering of readers too, one that takes place in many unique settings around Dublin city."

Indeed, during the DBF, the city itself becomes the setting for Ireland's own enduring tale, with venues, partnerships, and a cast of characters shaping a dynamic community celebration of books and publishing.

The City as Setting

From its start in 2006, the festival has been unique in hosting a full program of events across the city, rather than confining them to a single location. "If you attend the festival, you get to visit so many of Dublin's cultural spaces," Siron explains, "including cafes, gardens, bookshops, and more."

This year's itinerary has expanded even further. "We will be in special venues, including outdoor spaces. Along with libraries, hotels, universities, theatres, and galleries, we have events in distilleries, gardens, and even rivers," she exclaims.

Few cities can open up so widely for a book festival. Dublin's streets, once immortalized in Joyce's *Ulysses*, are literature's living geography. As a UNESCO City of Literature since 2010, its legacy carries the spirit of great authors like Yeats and Heaney, while also showcasing the promise of contemporary writers. The result is that Dublin itself becomes a character in its own unfolding literary tale.

This sets the DBF apart from any average book festival. While most book and publishing fairs take place in dedicated convention centers, the DBF takes place in unexpected spots, adding a delightful plot twist. A poetry reading in a garden brings verse to life, as does a storytelling session by a river. Carefully selected locations add a layer of meaning, where readers encounter not only the story, but Dublin's cultural past that is always in dialogue with its present.

Originally conceived as a strictly literary event, Siron came on board in 2010 to broaden its scope.

“The aim was to make the festival reflective of Irish publishing, and it has grown to echo that. It features many genres, from poetry to politics, history to well-being, fiction to memoir...”

Holding the Story Together

Yet, turning an entire city into a story-like setting comes with its challenges. "As our audiences grow, so too does our requirement for space," Siron admits. "We are constantly facing venue challenges to ensure we have places big enough to hold our audiences, while maintaining an intimate feel to the festival. There are a lot of logistics to tend to."

Siron coordinates the patchwork of venues, secures hotels for authors, and ensures that the spaces are large enough to accommodate crowds. "It is a very busy hands-on role, but I think anyone working in the arts knows that you just have to do what needs to be done." As with most artistic endeavors, fi-



turing new voices, with programs for schools, families, and young adults to “ensure that we are reaching as many different communities as possible.”

Soon after becoming Director, Siron added a children’s program.

“They are our future writers and readers, so it was important to create a program for them...”

“We keep this element free of charge to ensure that families can easily access these events.” In fact, the 2025 programme will see the launch of special events for younger attendees. “Getting teens interested can be difficult, so we are hosting a Story Slam for 13-to-18-year-olds, and we hope this will be the start of something.”

The program continues to expand in scope. “At our new festival hub in the IMMA, Royal Hospital Kilmainham, we will have events for all ages: writing workshops, authors in conversation, poetry walking tours, book club events, history talks, illustration workshops - a whole strand of events on climate change, biodiversity, and the environment - and more,” Siron explains.

The result is a festival as creatively dynamic as Dublin itself. Attendees engage with poetry, politics, history, and science, alongside all-age activities and late-night gatherings. Through building community connections, the festival’s own narrative continues to evolve.

Epilogue

For Siron, the culmination of the story lies in the creative expression. “It has been a huge year for Irish publishing, and our submissions were the biggest yet. The Dublin Book Festival was established with preserving Irish literary culture in mind, and our festival has gone from strength to strength.”

Strong as ever, the Dublin Book Festival and the city itself will continue as the setting for Ireland’s enduring love affair with books, with venues, collaborations, and a cast of characters celebrating the publishing world. And for one week each November, Dublin is less of a backdrop and more of a main protagonist; every street corner is another page, every conversation another line, and every author and reader is part of the plot.

nances can also pose a challenge. “If you talk with anyone in the arts, they will tell you the main challenge is budget,” she adds.

Her own perseverance stems from a passion that began in childhood. “My mum is a huge reader. She shared her passion for reading with her children, and I am so grateful for that. Having a job where I get to read a diverse range of books is a dream job.”

Yet the results are anything but fantasy, and the payoff is real, with attendance having tripled since pre-pandemic. For Siron, the rewards go far beyond the numbers. “After all the organizing, it is so wonderful to see audiences and authors come together. I love to see the authors’ joy when talking about their work, and the excited chatter from the audience. Seeing it all come together makes all the work worthwhile.”

And this year, everyone will come together at the iconic IMMA venues in the heart of Dublin 8, where authors, publishers,

and audiences can meet and mingle for book signings, reading nooks, panel discussions, storytelling, or drop-in family activities like arts, crafts, and scavenger hunts.

A Chorus of Voices

Although Siron takes on the bulk of the responsibility, the festival is based on a collaborative philosophy. “Collaboration is key to our success. We work with many venues, arts organizations, universities, publishers, and other partners, and it is important to manage and grow these alliances. I am always exploring new partnerships each year.”

Much like the essential supporting characters in a plot line, the collaborative spirit of the DBF brings together a chorus of voices, from household names to emerging talents, including Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright, John Banville, Paul Lynch, Graham Norton, and President Michael D. Higgins, among others. At the same time, the festival invests in nur-



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Amazing tales from Mazed Tales of Cornwall

Storyteller and textile artist Sue Field has spent over a decade reviving the folklore of her chosen home in the Looe River Valley of Southeast Cornwall. As the head of Mazed Tales, she views stories not merely as entertainment, but as a vital part of community life and identity.

"I was born and raised right in the middle of London," she explains, "but I came to Cornwall 50 years ago and here I've stayed. Cornwall is a land rich in myths and legends. It is the land of the giants, and where tiny piskeys play. I've always loved bringing stories to life theatrically in my role as a textile maker with Puppetcraft, and as a community artist and teacher."

The idea for Mazed Tales came during a trip to Canada. "My partner and I were visiting friends in Vancouver, and we came upon a large-scale sculpture of Raven, the trickster, at the airport. The sculpture led me to wonder about the myths and stories from where I lived. At the time, there was no collection of the folktales of Southeast Cornwall, so we decided to create one."

With initial support from Cornish funding body FEAST, the Liskerrett community centre, and collaborators including producer Denzil Monk, the Mazed Tales project began in 2013. The mandate was special, but straightforward. "Mazed Tales seeks to recollect the folktales of Cornwall, re-link them to the places they are set, and tell them in ways old and new with traditional spoken word, puppets, animations, illustrations, a book, or on a website."

Over time, Mazed spread across Cornwall through projects that combine storytelling with education, art, and performance. Since 2013, it has involved children retelling local tales in southeast Cornwall, presenting storytelling exhibitions with illustrations, and participating in street performances and puppet theatre. Today, Mazed West brings stories to life through podcasts, school projects, and puppet shows, ensuring Cornwall's folklore remains alive and accessible for new generations. "Kids learn their tales and record for the podcast *Cornish Tales for Kids*, available on Spotify. They also contributed pencil illustrations for *Cornish Folktales of Place*:



Mid and West Cornwall by Anna Chorlton, published by History Press, 2025."

As Mazed progressed, so did Field's skills. In addition to her many responsibilities, she oversees research of old books and archives, prepares funding applications, and liaises between artists, storytellers, writers, schools, and communities. She even costumes the puppets. "As an elder, I've been learning about podcast production, puppetry performance, and spreadsheets."

Managing many tasks is not the only challenge Field faces. "I am naturally quiet, so performing has been daunting. And I don't drive, so getting around Cornwall on buses and trains is tricky."

Yet the work has brought many blessings: droll tea parties in schools, children sharing tales with enthusiasm, Mazed's nomination for an Innovation Award at the 2014 Celtic Media Festival, and the satisfaction of seeing her '*Cornish Folk Tales of Place*' books on shop shelves. And then there are the puppets. "Each time we go storytelling in the community, it's a highlight."

Field believes storytelling is thriving.

“There is an explosion in the ways we tell stories now, with animation, computer games, and social media...”

"Podcasts about Cornish folktales are popular, including *The Piskey Trap* and *The*

Celtic Myth Podcast, recorded in Cornwall. Yet spoken word storytelling lives on. It's rooted deep within us and will still be there when the electricity fails, and the lights go out."

The importance of storytelling, she insists, cannot be emphasized enough. "Shared stories bind communities together. In Cornwall, folktales are an intrinsic part of our cultural heritage."

The next phase for Mazed is already taking shape. "We are building a new website, adding tales from West Cornwall, and information about tale collectors and Cornish storytellers past and present. It will be launched at the Morrab Library in Penzance in February of 2026, during National Storytelling Week. Students from Falmouth University's English Literature course will be contributing some stories."

From wee ones to wise elders, Mazed's audience spans generations who gather in an equally diverse range of settings. "We tell in a wide variety of venues: schools, libraries, heritage and archive centres, community centres, elder care homes, on the street, in cafés, and at local events."

The response has been very positive, with audiences welcoming the chance to hear tales about their own landscape and history. And for younger or would-be storytellers, her advice is clear: "Go for it! Storytelling is an instinct in all of us, and the tales belong to everyone."

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Sue Field

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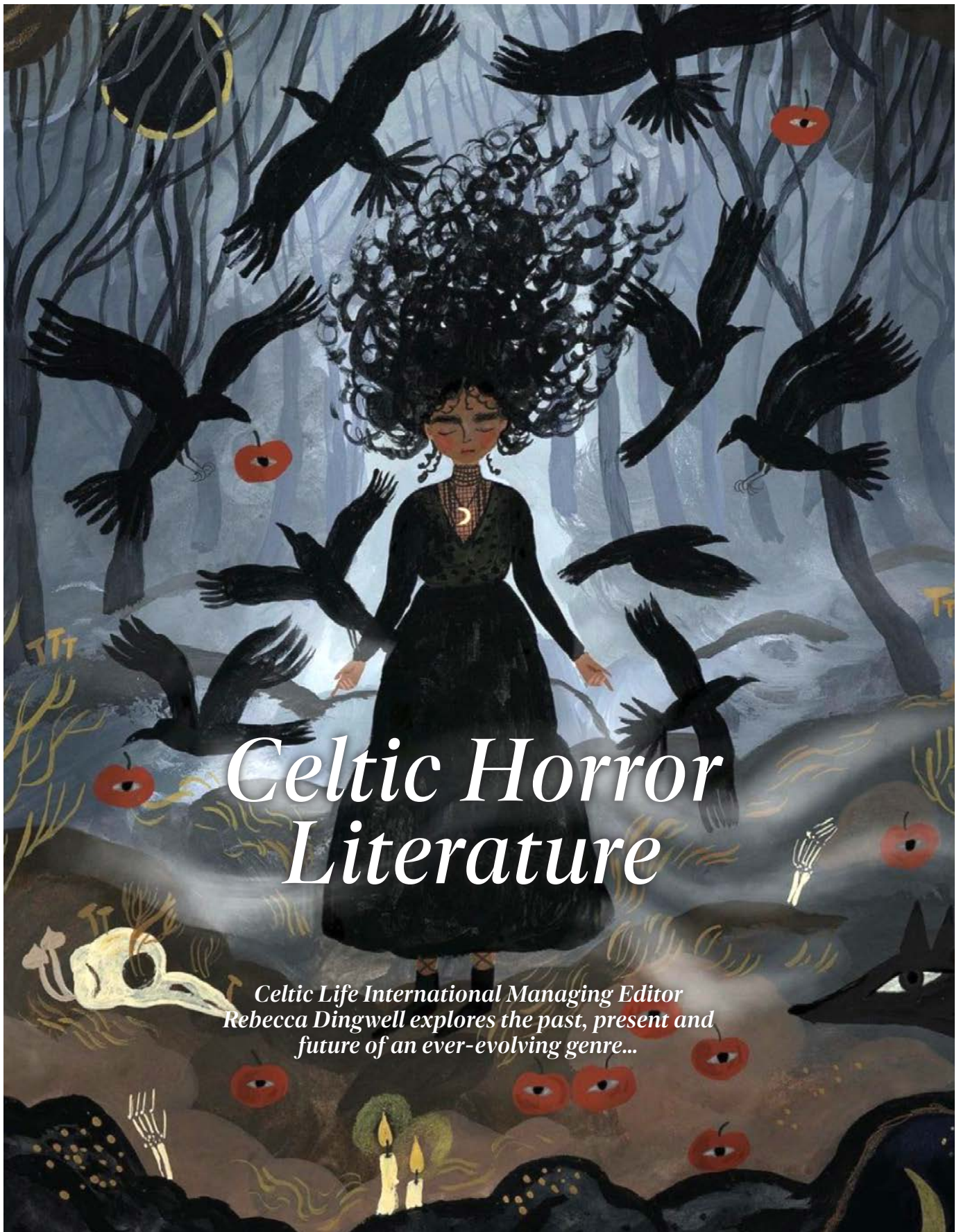
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Celtic Horror Literature

*Celtic Life International Managing Editor
Rebecca Dingwell explores the past, present and
future of an ever-evolving genre...*

The horror genre owes much to the Celtic nations and the writers - past and present - who have looked to them for inspiration. From misty moors to ancient castles, they provide an ideal setting for a haunting or a murder mystery. Folklore provides its share of influence, too, whether it's the legend of a spectral hound or the bone-chilling tale of a creature who drinks the blood of innocents.

Paying Tribute to the Trailblazers

It was two Irishmen who created the foundations for vampire literature: Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu published *Car-milla* in 1872, which influenced Bram Stoker to pen *Dracula* 15 years later.

Scottish horror anthologist and author Johnny Mains cites Stoker as one of his earliest influences. Mains became interested in horror at a young age - such tales provided a distraction from his difficult childhood. Around age 10, he read Stoker's ghost story *The Judge's House*.

"That story scared the absolute bejesus out of me," he recalls. "I had nightmares about that story for years." Then, as a teenager, Mains found his way to the works of Robert Aickman and more contemporary staples like Stephen King. He did most of his reading at school, since his mother disapproved of horror to the point that she would destroy such books if she found them.

Mains continued to devour horror in secret, however. He fondly remembers other impactful stories such as *Spinalonga* by John Ware and *The Haunted Pillar Box* by Rosemary Timperley. Later in life, he turned his passion into a career.

"I got really, really interested in trying to discover how horror developed and how the authors developed with it." In particular, Mains was fascinated by Victorian women who were published in newspapers and magazines, only to be largely lost to time. "These weren't women of means or of money - these were housewives." His first two anthologies focused on reprinting the work of such women, including British writer Catherine Lord (aka Lucy Hardy).

These books put Mains on the radar of the British Library. Since then, he has curated several anthologies for the National Library

of the U.K., including *Celtic Weird and Scotland the Strange*. (The latter is dedicated to Mains' high school librarian, who was instrumental in his formative years.) Through his anthology work, Mains tries to prioritize female writers where possible, since many were popular in their time but later forgotten.

“A lot of the stories and oral tradition would have been told by mothers to their children - whether they be spooky stories or not.”

Today, Mains resides “on the cusp of Cornwall,” continuing to research and write.



Johnny Mains

He's even written a sequel to that striking Stoker story as part of one of his own short story collections. His most recent anthology for the British Library is a collection of Christmas ghost stories titled *Illusions of Presence*.

"I love finding out who these authors are," he shares. "Sometimes I'm doing research that's never been done."

The Black Dog of Colby Glen, for example, was reprinted for the first time since 1899

when it was translated from Manx and published in *Celtic Weird*. The author is known only by the pseudonym Billy Pheric. Other writers are more recent and less elusive, such as Rosalind Wade, who found herself in legal trouble after basing characters in her first novel on real people. It didn't damage her reputation forever, though; she was awarded an Order of the British Empire in 1985.

"I think it's my duty to archive and research and bring back those authors," says Mains. "They were breaking barriers in a way they never even knew."

For Mains, it's hard to explain how he determines which stories to choose for the anthologies. "This might sound silly, but it's when I'm reading something and I think, 'oh.' It needs to move me."

Once he has selected the stories, it's time to decide how to organize them.

Celtic Weird is divided into sections by nation, while the stories of *Scotland the Strange* are presented in chronological order. *Illusions of Presence* is simply organized "by gut instinct," explains Mains, "because you can't have two stories set in a haunted house next to each other."

Since he's so often buried in older texts, Mains admits he doesn't always have time to read newer horror releases unless he's editing a modern collection. However, he notes that many modern writers are pushing the boundaries of what horror can be. William Meikle, he says, is one such writer, often blending horror and absurdity.

A Scottish author based near Bonavista, Newfoundland and Labrador, Meikle has penned dozens of novels, novellas, and short story collections. Like Mains, Meikle holds classic horror authors in high regard. He became enamored with the genre after a teacher read one of Walter Scott's ghost stories to his class. "I immediately went to the library and said, 'give me some ghost stories,'" recalls Meikle. He still counts some of the classics among his favourites, such as *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Meikle's interest in Celtic folklore and mysticism comes from even closer to home. "My granny was always telling stories about witches and monsters and bogles," he says. "She insisted she had a brownie in the house that helped her with the housework. She had

us kids running around the house trying to find it.”

It stands to reason, then, that Meikle’s love of horror and Scottish mythology sometimes come together in his work. “It’s all just one big jumble in my head,” he says. His 2024 novella, *The House on the Moor*, combines Gothic horror with Scotland’s folklore and misty landscape. Meikle also has an ongoing series about Sherlock Holmes, following the famous detective as he faces supernatural mysteries.

“I just do what I do and hope somebody likes it, basically,” says Meikle.

As ever, horror seems to have a way of finding its audience.

The New Voices of Horror

“My main concern was that *Meet Me at the Surface* wouldn’t find its readers,” Jodie Matthews says of her debut novel. “Luckily, I was wrong.”

Matthews grew up in a household full of books. Born in a small Cornish village, she was exposed to Cornish folklore from a young age, and her interest in creative writing began when she was in primary school. In 2019, she started work on her first novel, originally intended to be a work of historical fiction. This first draft wasn’t even set in Cornwall. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, however, Matthews reframed the story. By that time, she no longer lived in Cornwall and - due to travel restrictions - she couldn’t even visit.

“Researching further into Cornish folklore and writing about the stories I was familiar with made me feel more connected with home during that time,” Matthews shares via email. As a result, Cornish folklore played a major role in the book. “It was clear that this needed to be a story about Cornwall, homesickness, identity, and heritage.”

Interestingly, Matthews didn’t set out to write literary horror or even folk horror. “I just thought I was writing something weird and folky,” she explains. “I enjoy leaning into the strange and uncanny, and I’m naturally drawn to dark imagery in my writing. I wrote individual scenes as they came to me, and pieced the book together that way, so I suppose the horror elements came up organically in that way. The appeal, for me, is the creative freedom it allows - especially when working in

uncanny spaces - I can go as weird and murky as I want with horror.”

Indeed, having a penchant for the weird is more or less a prerequisite for writing horror, and to live in a place rich with folk tales and superstitions has an added advantage.

David Sodergren agrees.

“Many of us, especially in places like Scotland with its rich history of folklore, have grown up on tales of folk horror and ancient customs...”

A prolific author of horror fiction, Sodergren was born and raised in Edinburgh,



where he still resides. He’s published slashers, cosmic horror, and, of course, folk horror.

“I tend to use folklore mostly as a jumping-off point. A lot of Celtic folklore is fascinating but not necessarily ‘horrific,’ so to speak,” explains Sodergren. “I will take the elements that work for me and change them to suit my story. Part of what I love about myths and folklore is how they evolve over the centuries, so I don’t believe that adding or changing elements is detrimental to them.

Rather, it’s part of a long tradition of storytellers putting their own spin on things.”

Many authors are continuing this tradition. Mary Watson, a South African author based in Galway, incorporates Irish mythology into her modern fantasy thriller *The Wren Hunt*. Welsh-Turkish author C. M. Rosens touches on Welsh history and folklore in her work. Sam K. Horton writes historical folk fantasy set in Cornwall. Some writers even bring a Celtic twist to classic novels, such as Tim McGregor’s Frankenstein spinoff, *Eynhallow*, set on the Orkney Islands.

Sodergren notes that horror is a great way to learn about any culture, whether it be Scottish, Japanese, Spanish, or Mexican. “This international nature means the genre remains as fascinating to me now as it ever has,” he adds. This may be especially true of folk horror, which often taps into long-held beliefs and customs.

“Folk horror is enjoying something of a resurgence at the moment since its arguable heyday of the early ’70s,” says Sodergren. “Part of the appeal, for me at least, is a return to a more basic way of life. We are constantly overwhelmed with technology, from the grim onslaught of AI to smaller things like the constant, inescapable barrage of notifications on our phones, so it can be refreshing for readers to spend time in a simpler age of more earthly concerns.”

Johnny Mains shares the sentiment. “I think a lot of people harken back to the old ways of the land, the countryside, and what came with that: folklore.”

This both revives interest in centuries-old stories and gives space for the creators of today to reimagine them, whether through literature, film, music, or theatre.

“I will never be a gatekeeper of horror. You can get horror from all over the world written by people of every creed, nationality, and colour,” says Mains. “It opens up horror into this beautiful church where everything goes on under the roof. It’s incredible.”



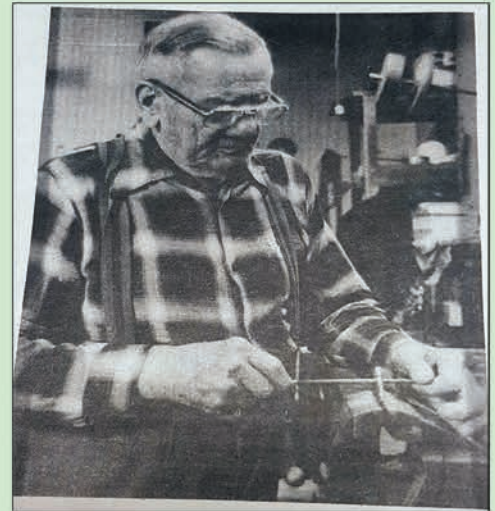
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Reel Reviews

Celtic horror on screen

Enys Men (2022)

Enys Men is a psychological horror movie set on an island off the Cornish coast. Mary Woodvine stars as the nameless protagonist: a volunteer responsible for monitoring the wildlife in the otherwise uninhabited area during the year 1973. The events of the film are, at first, unremarkable - as the volunteer writes in her logbook daily, there is “no change” in the environment. Soon, however, ghostly figures and strange happenings abound. Are these spirits of the island or signs of the protagonist’s descent into madness? The audience - and the character herself - are left wondering what is real and what is not. Enys Men was shot on 16 mm film and contains very little dialogue, giving it a dream-like (and, at times, nightmarish) feel. The sound effects and score provide an eerie undertone when spoken words are sparse. If your idea of a good horror film is a fast-paced slasher, you’d better give this one a pass. *Enys Men* will appeal to fans of movies such as Kyle Edward Ball’s *Skinamarink* and Alex Garland’s *Men*.

Fréwaka (2024)

Shortly after the suicide of her estranged mother, primary care student Shoo (Clare Monnelly) takes on the care of a troubled elderly woman named Peig (Brid Ni Neachtain). The small Irish village in which she finds herself is not a welcoming one, nor is Peig herself. As Shoo contends with Peig’s superstitions and trauma, she soon must face the truth of her own past. The film is primarily in the Irish language (as Shoo and Peig communicate in Irish) with some English scenes throughout. The story explores themes of intergenerational trauma, grief, and sacrifice. Those interested in the darker side of fairy folklore will be drawn in by director Aislinn Clarke’s attention to detail. While *Fréwaka* is a slow burn that takes the predictable story route at times, it’s still worth a watch for lovers of folk horror.



As Bestas (2022)

Inspired by true events, *As Bestas* is described as a thriller rather than horror. That said, it evokes enough distress and fear to be included here. The film’s protagonists are Olga and Antoine (played by Marina Fois and Denis Ménochet, respectively), a French couple who relocated to rural Galicia a couple of years prior. Several local men dislike Antoine, who recently cast the deciding vote to halt the construction of wind turbines in the area. Brothers Xan and Lorenzo (Luis Zahera and Diego Anido) are particularly resentful over this, believing money from the developer would have improved their lives drastically. The realistic nature of the story is what makes it scary, despite its lack of ghosts and demons. Petty disagreements escalate to violence and, since the authorities are little help, Olga must seek justice alone. I’m of the controversial opinion that few movies need to exceed a two-hour runtime, and *As Bestas* is no exception, but the expertly crafted tension and stunning Galician landscape almost make up for it. The film’s dialogue is in Galician, Spanish, and French.

A Dark Song (2016)

An excellent feature film debut from writer/director Liam Gavin which, almost a decade after its release, holds its own against the more recent revelations of modern horror. The protagonist, an aggrieved mother named Sophia (Catherine Walker), secures a house in rural Wales for a dangerous ritual. She then hires Joseph (Steve Oram), an experienced occultist - and abrasive alcoholic - to help her perform the rite so that she might speak to her deceased son once more. While this isn’t an especially unique premise for a horror movie, the execution sets it apart from others in the genre. The hair-raising moments begin long before the supernatural elements come into play. In many ways, the true horror lies in the relationship between Sophia and Joseph, which is controlling and abusive from the start. As Joseph prepares her for the invocation, he pushes her to her physical and mental limits, sometimes to the point of torture. At its core, this is a story about grief and the rage that comes with it. *A Dark Song* is the kind of film that buries itself under your skin.

The Feast (2021)

From its initial scenes, Welsh language film *The Feast* sets its audience up for 90 minutes of discomfort. The film follows Cadi (Annes Elwy), a young woman hired to cook for a wealthy family’s dinner party. As the story progresses, it becomes clear Cadi is more than she seems. This dark fable makes use of a haunting score and impressive cinematography to set the tone, incorporating elements of body horror and folk horror. It’s almost depressingly relevant in how it addresses issues such as the hoarding of resources and the exploitation of nature. As one character asks at the climax of the film, “after you’ve taken everything, what will be left?” Events culminate in violence and blood-soaked retribution. *The Feast* is not entirely unlike Darren Aronofsky’s *Mother!* in its messaging, but it’s leaps and bounds more interesting than its predecessor. Altogether a memorable movie, not for the faint of heart (or weak of stomach).



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Dark Tourism

Exploring the sinister side of the Celtic Nations

Boleskine House

~ Foyers, Scotland

In 1899, famed occultist Aleister Crowley purchased a manor on the southeast side of Loch Ness. He believed the secluded area ideal for his dark magical workings. The self-proclaimed “wickedest man in the world,” Crowley brought tragedy to most of those who had the misfortune to enter his life. He manipulated his friends and abused his romantic partners. Even so, Crowley’s work - including the Thoth Tarot deck he created with Frieda Harris - continues to fascinate people today. Now known as Boleskine House, Crowley’s former home is currently undergoing restoration work. The hope is it will be open to the public by the end of 2025.

The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic

~ Boscastle, Cornwall

The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic has been through a few incarnations. Originally founded by Cecil Williams in Stratford-upon-Avon, locals opposed the Museum of Witchcraft, eventually causing Williams to move to the Isle of Man. There, he opened the Folklore Centre of Superstition and Witchcraft in 1951 with the help of Gerald Gardner. The two men eventually fell out, however, and Williams returned to mainland England to establish his museum in Boscastle. Today, the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic is owned by Simon Costin. According to the museum’s website, it’s currently home to more than 3,000 objects and more than 7,000 books.

Château de Combourg

~ Combourg, Bretagne

The French village of Combourg is a must-see for history buffs and lovers of literature. Originally built around the 11th century (although it’s since been remodelled), Château de Combourg was once used for military purposes, defending Bretagne’s borders. French Romantic poet François René de Chateaubriand even lived there during the 18th century. It’s no surprise that



such an important landmark is said to be haunted. Chateaubriand himself believed he encountered the castle spirits at night while in his bedroom, situated on the top floor of a tower. As the story goes, the late Count de Combourg and the ghost of an unnamed black cat are the culprits.

Kyteler's Inn

~ Kilkenny, Ireland

Witch trials were not as common in Ireland as they were in other parts of Europe, but a handful of accusations did take place. Businesswoman Alice Kyteler was one of the few unlucky Irish folk to be charged with performing witchcraft. Kyteler married four

times, and each of her husbands died under sudden and mysterious circumstances. After she was accused of malevolent magical workings in 1384, she fled to England to avoid being executed, and Kyteler’s Inn (along with the rest of her property) was seized. Fast-forward all the way to 1986, when Nicky Flynn purchased the establishment, hoping to bring it back to its former glory. Kyteler’s Inn is once again a place for food, drink, and music - a piece of history which also allows visitors to taste traditional Irish fare.

Crumlin Road Gaol

~ Belfast, Northern Ireland

A historic prison dating back to 1845, Crumlin Road Gaol (a.k.a HM Prison Belfast or “the Crum”) held multiple high-profile inmates, including Bobby Sands of the Provisional IRA and feminist activist Dorothy Evans. It was sometimes referred to “Europe’s Alcatraz” due to the advanced nature of the building. While it stopped operating as a prison in 1996, Crumlin Road Gaol has since been restored. It reopened as an event venue and tourist attraction in 2012. Guided tours run on the weekends, taking visitors to the hanging cell, the historic holding cells, centre circle, C-wing, and the graveyard.

St Govan’s Chapel

~ Bosherton, Wales

Named for a hermit believed to have lived there during the 5th or 6th century, St Govan’s Chapel is situated in the cliffs of Pembrokeshire. Legend says St Govan (a lone monk) was fleeing Irish pirates when the cliffside opened up and offered him a place to hide. While there is no evidence St Govan actually existed, the story endured, and a chapel was built in his name around the 13th century. Those brave enough to descend the worn stone steps will find the little limestone building overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The place is at once beautiful and a bit eerie - better hope the pirates don’t find you!

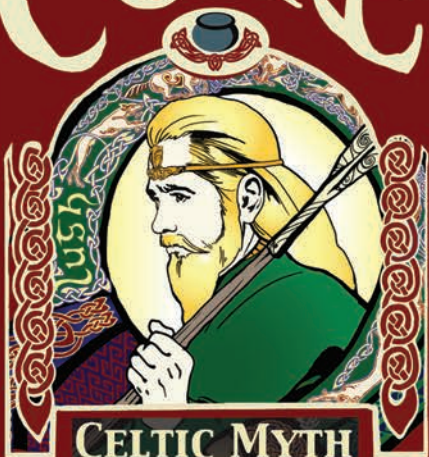
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Celtic Cryptids

Tales of monsters believed to lurk the British Isles and beyond

The Loch Ness Monster

Possibly the most famous Celtic cryptid to (allegedly) exist, the Loch Ness Monster (a.k.a “Nessie”) continues to capture the imaginations of people worldwide. The first reported sighting of the aquatic beast took place in 500 A.D., but the Nessie myth didn’t catch on internationally until 1933, thanks to a newspaper report from the Inverness Courier. Could the stunning Loch Ness, huddled in the Scottish highlands, be home to a such a creature? Although sightings persist, there’s no solid evidence to confirm her existence. Some believe Nessie’s trademark long neck is actually that of a swan. That doesn’t stop people from looking for her, however.



The Urco

The Kelpie

A lesser-known creature of Scotland’s lochs, the kelpie is a shape-shifting monster said to appear to people (especially children) in the form of a horse. Appearing benevolent at first, the kelpie invites onlookers onto its back for a ride, but accepting this invitation will lead you to your doom. By the time you realize something is wrong, it will be too late! You’ll be glued to the kelpie’s sticky hide, unable to escape, as it dives into the nearest body of water. The kelpie will make a meal out of you after you’ve drowned.

The Knocker

In Cornish folklore, the knockers are said to reside in caves, wells, and mines. Their name comes from tin miners who claimed to hear the dwarf-like creatures knocking and tapping. The knockers were also said to steal tools or food left unattended by the miners, although miners were also known to purposefully put food – such as a bit of Cornish pasty – aside for the wee beings. Similar tales existed in Wales. When Welsh and Cornish miners later settled in the United States, they brought the legend with them, and “tommyknockers” became part of American folklore as well. Stephen King even wrote a novel featuring the tommyknockers in 2010.

Gef the Mongoose

The tale of Gef the Mongoose may be the strangest of them all. As the story goes, a “talking mongoose” took up residence with a family on the Isle of Man in the 1930s. James and Margaret Irving lived in a farmhouse on the island with their teenage daughter, Voirrey, and each member of the Irving family reported bizarre experiences in the home. They conversed with a mysterious voice who introduced himself as Gef, an 80-year-old mongoose from New Delhi. The story sparked a media frenzy, with skeptics claiming that young Voirrey dreamed Gef up as an imaginary friend to curb her loneliness and boredom. Even after leaving the farmhouse, though, the Irvings never recanted their experiences.

The Urco

In Galicia, a massive spectral dog was once said to herald the coming of death. The urco (or, in Asturias, the güercu) is described as a wolf-like being with black or white fur and large horns atop its head. The urco would emerge from the river or the sea, dragging chains behind it. The story says that anyone who hears its terrifying howl or sees its monstrous form is at risk of illness or death. Folklore around ghostly black dogs is common in Europe, including the English myth

of the Black Shuck. Such tales are believed to have inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous Sherlock Holmes adventure, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The Afanc

The River Conwy in Wales is said to have been home to the horrible Afanc. This water monster was once believed to cause floods that terrorized those who lived in the Conwy Valley. Additionally, the Afanc attacked anyone who dared enter its waters. There are various versions of the Afanc myth and differing accounts as to what the creature resembled. Sometimes it is depicted as a giant beaver, but in other depictions it appears more crocodile-like (or even as a hybrid of the two animals). There are several legends of the Afanc’s defeat, including one in which King Arthur successfully slays the creature with the aid of his horse, Llamrai. Another tale tells of how an Arthurian knight named Peredur destroys the Afanc with the help of a magical stone.

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Cat Sith

Story By Cormac McAllister

COVER STORY

My mother named me Tadhg, which means “poet” or “philosopher.” It was a name usually reserved for the noble classes, though we were poor farmers. Still, she said no other name would suit me. I had a knack for storytelling and was known to spin a tale or two to get out of trouble. We may have been poor, but in many ways, we were rich. Rich in land. Rich in spirit.

The dark times come for us all. We in the Irish moors and Scottish Highlands know this well. We give thanks to whatever god may be for blue skies, golden leaves, and the harvest, knowing that just beyond the horizon waits winter; long, cold, and unforgiving. One such winter left me alone on our tiny farm, with only a small flock of sheep, and the endless rolling hills of the moor for company.

Many in our community found the land harsh and isolating, but I found the wildness of the moor beautiful - her purple heather, stunted mossy rowan trees, and mist-shrouded bogs. The sheep were not my only companions; the crows, ravens, and even the fox-colored moths were my friends. It was not an easy life, but I thrived there. The moor had an Irish temper and would change from calm to storm in a heartbeat, but I loved her better for it. With every gust of wind and drop of rain my spirit soared, and I was revived.

The darkness in the moors was like no other darkness I have ever seen, though the stars shone more brilliantly than anywhere else. As winter approached, the long evenings shepherding my sheep blurred the line between the human and spiritual worlds. I filled my hours by spinning stories, losing track of what was real and what was imagined by the time dawn came.

It was during those nights that I began to notice the presence. It started as a shadow. Many a night, I shivered as I gazed into the hollows, and between rocks, behind trees. The shadows they cast were long. Then, there was the soft padding of paws in the distance. Finally, in the light of the moon, I would see a pair of glowing eyes watching me from the edge of the darkness. Sometimes in the night, I heard a strange, wild yowling. At first, I tried to ignore it, but the creature per-



sisted, so I started to acknowledge it, to talk to it, and named it Cat Sith, harkening to the ancient fairy folk.

Once my sheep, hens, and cows were tucked away in the stable, I roamed the moor in the night. Strangely, I sometimes felt comforted by the knowledge that Cat Sith was nearby. I wondered if I was in the company of one of the great cats, a descendent of the legendary wildcats of the Scottish Highlands.

“The night of Samhain is when we honor the darkness and the unknown. We talk about our fears and sometimes face them.

That particular Samhain night, I joined my neighbors for a bonfire and autumn feast. I didn’t often seek out company, but I couldn’t

resist the promise of meat stew, colcannon, fresh apple pie, and mead. The fire on the hill was festive with neighbors and children dressed in masks and costumes, and hanging carved turnips to frighten away the evil spirits. As usual, the children begged me for a story. “Tell us a story, Tadhg!”

I clapped my hands to begin, and a hush came over the firelit circle. I looked around the faces young and old, and decided I would tell them about Cat Sith. “In the time before time, in the land of the Sidhe, lived a great fairy,” I began. The faces leaned in. “She wandered the Moors alone, cloaked in black, with long, shining black hair. A moon stone hung from her neck, glowing in the night. She had the power to transform into a giant wildcat, but only nine times. On the ninth time, she would remain a wildcat forever.”



I paused, watching their wide eyes. "One Samhain night, she transformed for the last time. Now she prowls the moors as the Cat Sith, shining black, with amber eyes and a white spot adorning her black chest. She arrives among us as the veil is thinned on this, the darkest night. And she lurks. She waits. She waits until the very moment of death," I snatched at the air with my hands, "to steal your soul."

I might have gotten carried away, fueled by the company, the fire, and too much hot whiskey. I saw a few worried looks among the children and softened my tone. "You see, the Sidh Walk among us even now. So it was, so it is, but here we are safe and sound."

The crowd let out a collective breath. Chuckles rippled through the elders. I sat back and listened to the lighthearted banter.

"Better guard those pies on the windowsill!"

"Forget the pies," roared a young man. "Better guard the near-dead; how are you feeling, Conall?" More laughter. However, others exchanged more serious looks. "I've seen it," one white-haired old man whispered aside. "I've seen those eyes in the dark".

Later that night, I returned to my cottage, my mask and costume still on to ward off the spirits. I walked quickly through the sloughs and grasses, not wishing to encounter any devilish spirits. Especially Cat Sith, who I had brought to life around the communal fire.

As I reached my gate, a high-pitched yowl pierced through the night. At first, I froze, then dashed inside, bolting the door behind me. My heart was still racing when I lit a small fire in the wood stove with embers

from the communal fire. But as I glanced toward the window, I saw them - two eyes staring back at me. Cat Sith! The face so black, it melted into the night; the eyes seemed eerily floating in midair. "Yeowl!" I tried to ignore it, but it went on. "Yeowl!!"

My pulse quickened and I held my breath, terrified, so that I nearly went faint. After what seemed like hours, I exhaled. My fear mingled with a strange reflection on the times I'd spent with the elusive Cat Sith. It had never harmed me, only followed me. Gathering my courage, I poured some milk into a saucer and crept to the door. I opened my creaking door slowly, ready to face the wild cat - or soul stealer - at my door. I peered into the darkness. There it was, the Cat Sith! But it was not the size of a giant wild cat, but a large black cat. I slid the saucer out and closed my door, retreating to the warmth of my hearth.

The next morning, the cat was gone, as well as the saucer of milk. But when I went to milk my cows, my pails were unusually full, brimming to the top. In the days that followed, my neighbors began to come to my door, grumbling that their cows had gone dry. I shared my story of the Cat Sith and the milk on Samhain. Some scoffed or laughed, while others vowed I had been blessed for helping the misguided spirit. All left with eyes gazing out over the moor.

The tale spread by word of mouth through the countryside, through the Irish moors and Scottish Highlands. I told the story over many more bonfires, always reminding people: depending how it's treated, they may be blessed or cursed. Over the years, I heard rumors of wild cats, of men claiming they'd seen a wildcat the size of a lion. I heard of women who kept vigils to guard loved ones as they crossed the veil. Children began to chant:

*"In the night when shadows creep,
Cat sith prowls, your soul to keep!
Once a fairy on moonlit hurst
Set out your milk or be ye cursed!"*

Though I haven't seen Cat Sith since that Samhain night, I often look for it in the hollows and the creeping shadows. My eyes forever gaze over the horizon, into the mysteries of the other world, and the moor.

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The topic of UFOs (unidentified flying objects) - or as the US government has taken to calling them in the last several years, UAPs (unidentified aerial phenomena) - has never been as hot as it is right now.

There have been whispers and legends of encounters with flying saucers and foo fighters in the popular discourse going back to World War II. With the release of official footage of giant airborne objects buzzing jet fighters at speeds that break the laws of physics, and highly credible members of the intelligence community blowing the whistle in Congress on a secret crash retrieval program that's keeping the presence of "non-human intelligence" secret from the public for more than 80 years, it feels like the truth isn't just out there anymore - it's almost here.

A common misconception amongst critics and skeptics alike is that this whole

UFO phenomenon is an American one; after all, the most famous conspiracy theories are set in the United States; Roswell. Area 51. The Phoenix Lights. It's almost like these encounters only occur in American skies. Nothing could be further from the truth - this is a worldwide phenomenon.

According to Nick Pope, a former agent of the UK's Ministry of Defence, a favourite spot that the green little men seem to love to visit here on Earth is the British Isles.

"Scotland, in particular, is a real UFO hot-spot," Pope writes in an email exchange with Celtic Life International. You might recognize Pope as one of the talking heads on programs like *Ancient Aliens* and any number of one-off UFO documentaries between the early 1990s and today. He has good reason to be, too; from 1991 to 1994, Pope was essentially the real-life equivalent of a British Fox Mulder.

"After I left government service, the U.K. declassified many of its UFO files, with thousands of documents being released - many of which I wrote. While I've been involved in everything from financial policy to counter-terrorism, I am best-known for having worked on the so-called UFO Desk, handling policy on the subject and investigating the several hundred sighting reports we received each year.

"With my name in the public domain, I became sought after as a media commentator on this subject. So, within the confines of the U.K.'s Official Secrets Act - which is binding for life - I've become a regular guest on TV news programmes when a UFO story breaks, appeared on numerous documentaries, and have acted as consultant and spokesperson on a wide range of UFO and alien-themed movies and TV shows."

As arguably the best expert on the topic that isn't in some top-secret bunker somewhere, we asked Pope to weigh in on some of the best and most compelling UFO encounters across the Celtic nations, starting with Scotland.

Pope begins by urging that, for every report made - every encounter that makes it to your eyes or ears - there are probably tens or hundreds more that are lost to history, because whoever witnessed them never breathed a word of it.

"There's always been chronic under-reporting," Pope writes, adding that the ability to capture evidence of these vehicles is also relatively new.

“These areas have a rich history of UFO sightings, but it's hard to say exactly how far back this goes, because it's only been in the last few decades - with 24/7 media, the internet, and social media - that ordinary people have had much of a chance of telling their stories...”

Despite all that, there are stories. Plenty of them.

"The town of Bonnybridge has been dubbed the UFO capital of the UK," writes Pope. "A local councillor lobbied for a public inquiry and urged the British Prime Minister to take action."

In fact, by some estimations, this small town of 6,000 souls near Falkirk earned the most UFO sightings on the planet, with an average of 300 sightings a year. The region even earned a nickname: The Falkirk Triangle.

One famous encounter in the Falkirk Triangle is that of Robert Taylor, who in 1979 ran afoul of a metallic grey spherical vessel, seven yards in diameter, just a stone's throw south of Bonnybridge at Dechmont Law in Livingston, West Lothian. Taylor, a forestry worker, claimed this "flying dome" stank of "burning brakes," and unleashed a pair of miniature orbs studded with prongs akin to depth charges that pummelled him to unconsciousness.

Returning home in a daze and covered in bruises, there was enough physical evidence of the encounter that, according to Taylor's obituary, "the case remains unique in British history as the only example of an alien sight-



ing becoming the subject of a criminal investigation."

"Six spectacular photos of a diamond-shaped UFO seen over Calvine were the best images we had in our files at the Ministry of Defence," adds Pope. "They were examined by intelligence community imagery analysts, who judged them to be genuine, and estimated that they showed a structured craft around 75 feet in diameter."

Of course, it's not just Scotland hogging all the ETs; all of the Celtic nations have their own close encounters, as well as across the Celtic Diaspora.

But how far back do these reports of alien spacecraft go in the Celtic corners of the globe? Only modern sightings go back to the Second World War - debatably, these grey guys have been visiting us for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years.

"These areas have a rich history of UFO sightings, but it's hard to say exactly how far back this goes," ponders Pope. "Going back further - hundreds of years - before mass literacy and the printing press, only the Church and the ruling classes really had much of a voice, so arguably we don't know much of our real history on anything - including UFOs."

There are theories, though, that Celtic

lore - when viewed through a discerning, modern eye - may contain hints that we haven't been alone for a very long time.

Think about the fae folk - about changelings in particular. A mysterious creature steals into your home, and it makes off with a loved one who is taken to a strange realm, and in their place is a not-quite-right doppelganger? Sounds like an alien abduction scenario, with a side of Invasion of the Body Snatchers thrown in for colour.

"I wrote a bit about this in my second book, *The Uninvited*, which focused on the alien abduction/contact mystery," explains Pope. "Researchers such as Jacques Vallee had previously drawn parallels between folklore and alien abductions."

"If one looks at folkloric accounts of the little people taking mortals to another realm, where time slows down or stands still, and if one considers the idea of a changeling, there are similarities with alien abduction reports, and the idea of human-alien hybrids. I specifically highlighted *The Gentry* and *Tír na nÓg*, but there are other examples, of course."

Tír na nÓg is where the mysterious Tuatha De Danann were said to hail from. This "tribe of the gods" was written about in the *Lebor Gebála Érénn*, or *The Book of Inva-*



sions, with poems telling the tale of how they came from a far-off land on flying ships surrounded by dark clouds, had god-like powers to control the weather and never age, and conquered Ireland, ruling from 1897 to 1700 BCE:

“The truth is not known, beneath the sky of stars, whether they were of heaven or earth.” - Lebor Gebála Éréinn, c.1150 CE.

Even their physical description - tall giants with red or blonde hair, pale skin, and radiant green or blue eyes - evokes the visage of The Nordics, a supposed species of aliens visiting Earth who could pass for extremely handsome human beings.

What's weird is, there are archeological findings suggesting people fitting this description across the global fossil record.

“Interestingly, archaeology has unearthed evidence all around the world of small colonies of red-haired people from the same time period as the Tuatha De Danann’s arrival in Ireland,” writes Ali Isaac in an article for IrishCentral.com. “The extremely well-preserved Egyptian mummy of nobleman Yoya, c. 1400 BC, shows he had blonde hair and Nordic features, as did his wife, Thuya. She was also Tutankhamun’s great-grandmother.”

“More generally, ancient astronaut theory suggests that all around the world, extraterrestrial visitations took place in the distant past, with our ancestors misperceiving this as visits from the gods,” confirms Pope. “There are even suggestions that ancient stone circles and monuments such as Stonehenge, Avebury, and Carnac may be connected to such ancient visitations.”

One day, some day soon, possibly, the question “are we alone in the universe” will be answered. Until then, we just have the stories of others who may have had a run-in with something out of this world to go by. But the earth folk of the Celtic world, according to Pope, are people who know there's more to the universe than just what we can prove.

“These are no-nonsense folks, so they're - rightly - suspicious of things like fake news and AI-generated images. That said, these are areas rich in folklore, so there's often a sort of general acceptance of the otherworldly, so to speak.”

Celtic Close Encounters

The Rendlesham Forest incident (Suffolk, England - 1980)

Also known as "Britain's Roswell," the Rendlesham Forest incident involved a series of sightings near RAF Woodbridge across two days just after Christmas. Officers were sent to investigate what was thought to be debris from a crash in the nearby woods, and came back with reports of strange lights, beams, and, in the most spectacular instance, Private Jim Penniston claimed to come into physical contact with a floating metallic triangular vehicle. It's notable for an abundance of evidence, including audio recordings of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Halt witnessing strange lights, and a triangular landing site that measured higher-than-normal levels of radiation.

The Ilkley Moor alien (West Yorkshire, England - 1987)

Retired police officer Philip Spencer (a pseudonym - he's never been publicly identified) claims to have been abducted by aliens while taking a morning stroll across the moor. Spencer suffered from the phenomenon of “missing time,” where his trip across the moor took two hours longer than it seemed to him, but he was aware of encountering a four-foot-tall green entity that ran into a nearby craft and flew away. Lucky for him, Spencer had the presence of mind in that moment to snap a photo of the supposed ET.

The Pentryrch encounter (Cardiff, Wales - 2016)

A small Welsh town of about 3,500 supposedly witnessed a full-on War of the Worlds one February evening. Several Pentryrchians recount seeing military planes and Apache helicopters chasing a dazzling array of colourful, glowing drones circling a gigantic pyramid craft in the sky. Authorities insist this was nothing but a training exercise, but locals swear up and down that it was no mere training mission.

Airship of Clonmacnoise

(Athlone, County Offaly, Ireland - circa 743)

There are seven different versions of this legend, and, since it was passed down through the Middle Ages, several embellishments are thought to have been made. Details aside, it was recorded in the annals of Ireland (namely, those of Ulster, Tigernach, Clonmacnoise, and the Four Masters) that a ship (or several) was seen floating in the skies above Teltown (or the abbey of Clonmacnoise), with witnesses claiming to see the crewmen onboard, throwing fishing spears (or an anchor) down to the surface. It seems likely even these early accounts of the event were second or third-hand retellings, so the details are all but lost to the ages. Still, clearly something remarkable happened that day around 743 CE.

Galicia UFO flap (Galicia, Spain - 1995-96)

A “flap” is when a rash of UFO reports crops up in a particular region, suggesting a pattern of high activity, and Spain's Celtic province of Galicja had one in the mid-'90s. A glowing oval craft was spotted flying over Santander, a multicoloured object was seen hovering off the coast of Gijón before vanishing, and a cameraman filmed a triangular craft doing maneuvers in the sky over As Pontes. One of the last encounters before this flap wound down involved a man who says he and his car were lifted 30 feet into the air before being set down further up the road - only sideways - outside the city of Lugo.

The Sandown Clown (Isle of Wight, England - 1973)

Possibly the strangest encounter in the Celtic nations - or anywhere, for that matter - is the case of the “Sandown Clown.” A pair of children were playing alone near a river when they claimed to have come upon a strange character wading out from under a footbridge, groping in the stream for a book it had dropped. The entity, which identified itself as “all colours Sam,” looked more like a circus act than an extraterrestrial; he had triangle shapes for eyes, a square brown nose, yellow lips, and wore a pointy yellow hat. The pair were invited to visit Sam in a metal hut he built, then left - later, when bringing a parent back to the scene of the encounter, there was no sign of the hut or Sam.



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Pot Roast Pheasant

Ingredients

1 pheasant, oven-ready
 2 rashers smoked streaky bacon, thinly sliced
 100g (3½oz) barley, soaked in water until soft
 2 carrots
 1 leek
 2 sticks celery
 12 baby onions
 300g (11oz) mushrooms
 3 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed
 50g all-purpose flour, seasoned with salt and pepper
 4 sprigs thyme
 1 bay leaf
 100ml (3½flop) marsala or red wine
 50ml (2flop) whisky
 150ml (5flop) chicken broth
 50ml (2flop) vegetable oil

For the cabbage

1 Hispi cabbage
 50g (2oz) butter, unsalted
 ½ tsp chilli flakes
 Salt and pepper

the CELTIC CHEF

with Gary Maclean

Pot roasting has all but disappeared from the family cooking repertoire, replaced in many homes by the slow cooker. While convenient, the results are never quite the same - I much prefer the higher temperatures and rich flavour that come from a traditional pot roast. Pheasant is the perfect candidate for this style of cookery; although it is naturally lean and can dry out very easily if not handled with care, pot roasting keeps it tender and deeply flavoured. For many in North America, pheasant will spark a memory of the hunt - whether from the great Midwest, where pheasant has long been a part of sporting culture, or from the autumn table, where a brace of birds might be shared at family gatherings. In Scotland, the connection is similar; pheasant has always been a bird of the field and forest, linked with the rhythm of the seasons and the celebration of the harvest. This four-portion dish brings together those traditions, pairing the bird with hearty barley, earthy root vegetables, and sweet, buttery cabbage - ingredients that are as familiar in Scotland as they are on many North American tables.

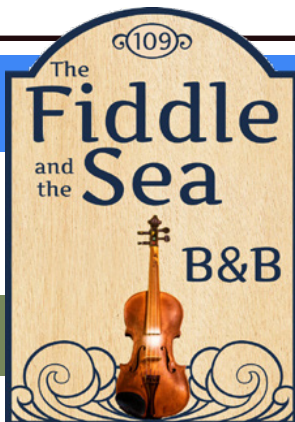
Instructions

The first task is to prepare the vegetables; peel and cut the carrots in half, and then cut each half into quarters. Next, peel the strings off the celery, then cut to a similar size as the carrots. Peel the baby onions and leave them whole. Slice the leeks lengthwise, and then chop and thoroughly wash. Clean and prepare the mushrooms, keep them separated from the other vegetables. Preheat the oven to 160°C (325°F). Dust the pheasant with half the flour, then heat the oil in a frying pan. Brown the pheasant all over, then remove from the dish - this will add loads of flavour and also make it look amazing. In the same pan, fry the bacon, vegetables, garlic, and herbs with the remaining 25g (1oz) of the dusting flour. Cook until the vegetables start to colour. Once they have coloured, pour everything into a saucepan big enough that it will hold the pheasant. Add the soaked barley. Put the pheasant on top and any of the juices back in, pour on the marsala, the whisky, and the stock, then cover and cook for 90 - 110 minutes or until the leg meat easily comes away. Meanwhile, cut the cabbage into quarters, then cut the quarters in half so that there are eight equal wedges. Heat a frying pan. Add butter and, once foaming, add the wedges of cabbage. Cook until golden, about 8-10 minutes, turning the cabbage as it colours. Halfway through the cooking, sprinkle with the dried chilli flakes and season with salt and pepper. Once cooked, remove from the pan and keep warm; in the same pan, cook the mushrooms and add into the pot with the pheasant at the last 10 minutes of cooking. Once the pheasant is cooked, carefully remove from the pot and serve with the vegetables and bacon - don't forget the wonderful sauce in the pot! Serve this dish "family style" with everything in the middle so that people may help themselves.

Slàinte Mhath! - Gary

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DRAM
with Andrew Ferguson

Bruichladdich *Distillery*



In 2008, the Bruichladdich Distillery on Islay released 20 new whiskies in just one year. The single malt boom was well underway, independent bottlings were flourishing, distilleries which had never bottled single malts before were rolling expressions, and existing brands were expanding their ranges. It was the start of the Golden Age of Single Malt Whisky.

The distillery - which reopened in 2000 under new ownership - had developed a cult following for its quirky releases and for boldly challenging industry conventions. Bruichladdich sales were booming, as whisky nerds and the general public alike eagerly lapped up every release. It seemed they couldn't get enough, until all of a sudden, they had.

In the years since, both Jim McEwan (Distillery Manager at the time) and Mark Reynier (former CEO) admitted that it had been too much. Both men were rightly passionate advocates of what their team was doing at Bruichladdich, and their enthusiasm was infectious, but this wasn't why they released twenty new whiskies in one year. The real reason was they needed the money.

When the Bruichladdich Distillery opened in 1881, it was state of the art. The facility was built around a central courtyard which

opened to the pier. Long before there were roads or ferries, island distilleries were supplied by sea. Empty casks and shipments of barley were unloaded, and casks full of whisky were loaded for the mainland. The distillery passed through a number of hands in the century that followed and scraped its way through the 1980s and early-1990s (a tough time for the industry), before finally closing in 1995.

When it was purchased in 2000 by Murray McDavid, Bruichladdich was in a sorry state. The purchase price of £6,000,000.00 included a fair bit of mature stock, meaning they would be able to start bottling whisky in short order, but the distillery required a considerable investment to get it up and running again, and more still would be required to build a brand from scratch. They were close to going under a number of times, but they hung on without sacrificing their bold vision.

In 2012, their efforts were rewarded when the French drinks giant Rémy Cointreau paid £58,000,000.00 to acquire the brand, distillery, and The Botanist Gin brand which was growing like Topsy. It is tempting to assume that the sale would have drastically changed things at Bruichladdich, but save for the departure of Mark Reynier, things continued on more or less as they had, but with the capital to realize some of their more ambitious goals.

“A dozen years on from the sale, the brand has retained its sense of place, deeply rooted on Islay.”

The distillery is one of the island's largest employers and isn't resting on its laurels, with plans to install its own maltings in a few years once the island's electrical grid can support it.

The number of annual releases of “The Laddie” (as Bruichladdich whisky is affectionately known) has never again neared its peak of 2008, but its core identity - or DNA as Jim McEwan used to call it - remains the same. They continue to produce and bottle the unpeated Bruichladdich, heavily peated Port Charlotte, and super-heavily peated Octomore. They continue to buy barley from local farmers for some of their releases, and they still have a devoted following who eagerly await each new limited-edition release.

Twenty-five years on from its resurrection, the truly remarkable thing to me about Bruichladdich is the quality of its entry level, flagship whiskies the Laddie Classic and Port Charlotte 10 Year. As excited as I am to taste all the limited edition releases each year, it is the Port Charlotte 10 Year and Laddie Classic that are the real legacy!

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Noah Grew

"It started as a bit of a social thing, but once I got into it a bit more, it became a real passion just for the music."

“The music has really been what’s pulled me through...”

Like many folks raised in the Ottawa, Ontario region, Noah Grew has Celtic ties in his lineage.

"My only real Celtic connections are my grandparents," Grew, 22, explains in an interview with Celtic Life International. "My grandmother is a Clark. I remember we were going through her house when she had to move, and we found all the old family papers, family trees, and all that. There was a descendant from Scotland, so there is a Scottish connection."

That connection, oddly enough, had little role to play in his decision to pick up the pipes.

"I was a drummer all through school, but when I turned 12, I decided to join the Air Cadets. But they didn't want drummers, they wanted pipers, so I thought I'd give it a try - I always thought they were cool. It just took off from there, but it was a very spontaneous thing. I kept playing the drums for a while but eventually stopped. Meanwhile, I've kept on piping."

Nine years on, and Grew's still piping strong.

"Even when I was just starting, I'd find a book of tunes and just go through and play them all. I'd find ones that sound good and then get a few of my buddies and get the band to try them.

"But what really excites me is the prospect of enjoying competitive piping. Getting to Grade One, getting to the open level, and playing really good music. That's really the hope.

"There are five grades, where grade five is a complete beginner and grade one is the best band in the world, and for solo playing, they have the same system," continues Grew. "Recently, I started going up to a new band for competition, another Grade Two band, the same level as my solo playing. So that's a big jump.

"I'm hoping this year that I'll be able to play with them in the contest and they won't cut me. I'm going to practice and all is going well, so it should be an exciting time."

Grew juggles his pipes with an academic career at Carleton University, working towards his degree in mathematics. He has his eyes on getting a master's in the same discipline, with a wish to eventually go into teach-

ing. His scholastic responsibilities sometimes keep him from opportunities where he could perform across the country, but he's made peace with that.

"After I started with that first community band, I joined the Air Force Band, and they do lots of events like tattoos. But often I can't go, as I might have exams or other school-related stuff. My dad is always encouraging me to go to these things when I have the opportunity, and someday I'd like to."

Grew shares one experience that had him travelling to perform in Nova Scotia - one that brought him closer to his grandmother, Elizabeth Grew, and to the Celtic culture that didn't initially spark his interest in piping, but has strengthened his resolve to keep playing all the same.

"She would talk about her Celtic heritage a little bit, but you didn't really get the full sense of it. But a couple of years ago, we did a whole road trip to Halifax and through Nova Scotia to some of those towns she lived in, and I got to practice the pipes in a few little places around there. There's a day I distinctly remember. I don't know when it was, but I played a piece that she liked; she was visibly happy, and my dad was excited."

Elizabeth has since passed away. Since then, Grew says this memory has become a cherished one.

"There was a meaningful connection there, I think, and it was just a nice little moment with her."



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Paul McNevin

~ In Tune With Tradition

From the lively pubs of Dublin and places beyond Ireland's shores, Paul McNevin has been part of the Irish fiddle tradition for more than three decades. Based in Kimmage, near Dublin, he has performed in thousands of sonic sessions, taught hundreds of students, and written respected tutor books for players at every level. His connection to the instrument is personal, shaped by years of listening, learning, and a love for his craft.

McNevin's journey with the fiddle began early. "I went to lessons when I was 10 but did not really get into music until I was about 13. That's over 30 years ago now," he recalls via email.

Yet music was a big part of his world long before he picked up the bow. "I have been listening to tunes since I was stool-high. Music was in the family. I went to festivals and sessions and became inspired. When people began improving around me, I felt I needed to catch up."

While his early inspiration came from festivals and family gatherings, McNevin says his reasons for playing have evolved over time. "I play today because I like the music, but teaching and performing are my work."

These days, he plays a Shang Wang violin, and his approach remains rooted in the

traditions he grew up with. "I play what is known as the stock and trade of Irish fiddlers, ornamentation- and repertoire-wise."

Yet his playing draws on a rich network of influences. "I value learning from different sources, so no player or style was out of bounds. The fiddlers I listened to most were from my father's recordings of Irish music on vinyl and cassette. The players who were a direct influence on me were Michael Coleman, Sean Keane of the Chieftains, Frankie Gavin, Liz Carroll, and Brid Harper."

Yet even now, those names are not merely part of the past for him. "Nowadays, I listen to new players, but I go back to those I listened to before and often find a new perspective." His own teachers - Tom O'Brien, from a well-known Dublin musical family, and Eddie O'Kelly, a multi-instrumentalist who taught at Comhaltas headquarters in Monkstown - were also key in shaping his style and technical skills.

Naturally, McNevin is clear on what constitutes a great fiddle tune; "one that fits seamlessly into the tradition will most likely be retained by musicians and become a favourite," he declares. For him, a tune's staying power is as important as its melody.

When it comes to his own creative process, McNevin tends toward flow rather than strain. "I look to be inspired, and trust creativity will happen, rather than try to force anything."

His adherence to tradition has served him well at notable points of his performing career.

"Playing with legendary Irish group Stockton's Wing was a highlight. They were inspirational for me growing up, and that

was an honour." His most enduring rewards, however, have come from working with his students.

“Teaching demands patience but can be very satisfying when pupils go on to become noted performers or fiddle teachers in their own right.”

Publishing his own instructional materials was also gratifying. "Releasing my fiddle tutor book was a proud moment for me after quite a bit of work." His publications include *A Complete Guide to the Irish Fiddle*, *110 Ireland's Best Fiddle Tunes Vol. 1*, and *Absolute Beginners: The Irish Fiddle*. Today, McNevin teaches privately in Dublin and online via Skype, making it possible for students from across the globe to learn from him directly.

As a veteran player, he believes the tradition is in good hands. "More young people are playing than ever, in my opinion. Youngsters can also access music more easily and at a younger age." Accessibility is one of the biggest changes from his early days, when finding recordings or skilled teachers required persistence - and, perhaps, a wee bit of luck.

While optimistic, McNevin nonetheless remains committed to preserving culture. He praises the work of Comhaltas, the global organization dedicated to preserving and promoting Eire's heritage. "Comhaltas does great work in spreading and popularizing Irish music." He still feels more can be done at official levels, however, and proposes practical improvements as a solution. "More government funding for performing, teaching, composing, and integration into the school system would help."

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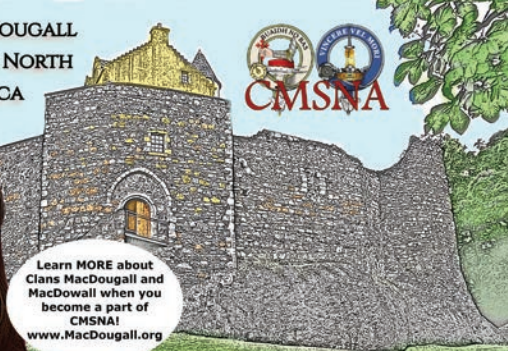


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the Campbell School of Highland Dance keeps Celtic culture alive

For sisters Elayna and Alexandra Campbell, Highland dance is more than mere tradition - it is a calling within a community.

The co-directors of the Campbell School of Highland Dance (CSHD) in Calgary, Alberta have built a studio rooted in Scottish heritage and heart. With over 150 students, eight instructors, and two busy locations, their school has become a vibrant hub for dancers of all ages and levels.

It all began with a mother's simple wish to ensure that her daughters understood and appreciated their roots. "It was important to our mom that we have something Celtic in our childhoods," says Elayna. "Her family is from near Maxville, Ontario, the site of the oldest Canadian Highland Games, and her family's clans were MacLeod and Campbell."

As children, the sisters dabbled in everything from Irish dance to bagpipes and drums, but dance was what stuck. "Highland was the thing that ignited a passion," beams Alexandra. "I loved the power and explosiveness highland demands, along with the competition. Elayna was drawn to the detail, the precision, and the grace."

Their early teacher, Sherril Medd, played a significant role in their journey. "She had this unique philosophy that every dancer was worth investment and attention," shares Elayna. "She believed that if you could find a dancer's 'currency,' you could help them reach their full potential. That approach was rare, but it made us feel valued. We use that same philosophy with our students today."

That philosophy has shaped a dance school that is more than merely traditional. "We are not your typical Highland dance school," laughs Alexandra.

“We made deliberate decisions to create a supportive, inclusive space where every dancer is celebrated, not just the champions.”

This meant applying non-competitive benchmarks for success, such as offering a junior instructor program to mentor the next generation of teachers, and implementing advanced methods like interval training, stress management, and mental health support. "Whatever can be done with intention and purpose, we do it," Elayna adds. "We also prioritize supportive friendship amongst our dancers, so that they have an incredible support network, are more resilient, and better prepared for competitions and life."

The sisters were required to muster up their own resilience dur-

ing the pandemic, when enrollment across cultural dance programs was sparse. "The year after COVID, we had no new registrations," Alexandra recalls. "We wondered if there was a future for highland. But we refused to give up!"

From the beginning, the Campbells have reaped rewards that extend beyond trophies and titles. "Dance was such a positive experience for us," exudes Elayna. "It transformed us from shy, reserved kids to people who are excited to perform. We've seen that same transformation in so many of our students."

That sense of empowerment and community is what keeps beginners and former students coming back. "We recently had a 75-year-old join our adult intro class," Alexandra explains. "Our Highland Adults program has something for everyone, whether they are beginners, returning after a hiatus, or still active. They can find their space in our program."

They also reach the youngest of dancers with their popular Highland Littles program, a playful movement and rhythm class for wee ones. "Children who join get world-class, research-backed instruction that propels them to their best dancing selves in a supportive and community-based atmosphere," notes Elayna. Parents also receive support. "If parents are willing to try, kids will fall in love with dance. We spend a lot of time ensuring parents feel included and understand the value within the community. It is such a positive experience for the kids."

The results speak for themselves; their dancers have competed nationally and internationally, performed in military tattoos across Europe, and have earned both scholarships and accolades. "Seeing our dancers succeed is our biggest thrill," smiles Alexandra.

The studio's upcoming season reflects the dynamic atmosphere with a "Healthy Dancer" workshop series, featuring experts on mental health, strength training, and injury prevention. Also planned are a Robbie Burns ceilidh with live music and dance, travel to various competitions, and the launch of their new South Calgary location.

Although the approach is modern, the preservation of Scottish culture remains strong. "Our dancers love the stories behind the dances," says Elayna. "The joy of seeing people delve into the history and culture has been gratifying."

For the sisters, the Campbell School of Highland Dance isn't just about learning steps, but about building confidence and connection. "We attribute our success to the vibe we create," adds Alexandra. "Dance should make you joyful, and it's our job to ensure that."

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