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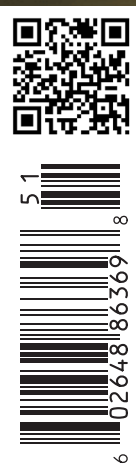
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FÁILTE

Amser

It is time again to usher out the past year with either a “good-riddance” or a nostalgic look back, holding onto moments and memories for future use. Regardless of how the past year played out, the anticipation of a fresh start with new horizons is irresistible. I love the chance to clean the slate and start making plans for personal growth, along with ticking a few items off my bucket list.

However, and I know many will relate, the one thing that repeatedly thwarts me repeatedly is...time...as in, there just never seems to be enough of it.

Time is an incredibly intricate concept - one that is seen differently through diverse cultural lenses. Monochronic societies - Northern Europe, North America, Australia - consider time as tangible and linear, often emphasizing its value; “strike while the iron’s hot,” “rest makes rust,” and likely the most well-known, Benjamin Franklin’s adage, “time is money.”

Polychronic societies - Latin America, Southern Europe, Pacific Islands - have a less rigid perception of time, emphasizing dynamic schedules, fostering relationships, and living in the present moment while taking the attitude of “mañana, mañana...” (tomorrow), “bahala na...” (accept what comes), and - from the Italians -

“since the house is on fire, let us warm ourselves.”

To further complicate the study of time (a field known as chronemics), some cultures don’t adhere to a linear or a flexible model; instead, they consider time to be circular. It makes perfect sense to align the passing of time with the ever-continuing cycles that pre-exist in our natural world. Many societies, including the Ancient Celts, used the phases of the moons and the passing of the seasons to guide them and provide structure for their lives.

The ancient Celts kept track of time using a lunar calendar roughly divided into two-week periods. Each year was further divided into a dark half, observed with the festival of Samhain, and a light half, celebrated at Bealtaine. Precise timekeeping was crucial, aiding them to align religious events and to accurately plan agricultural plantings and harvests. However, their observation of time had a bit of a wrinkle; the synchronizing of their lunar chartings with the earth’s annual rotation around the sun. The Celts recognized the problem, however, and it appears that they found a solution.

In 1897, an engraved bronze tablet was discovered in Coligny, France - a lunisolar calendar dat-

ing from the 2nd century AD, featuring intricate mathematical precision that reconciled the lunar cycle with the solar year; each year having twelve lunar months and every two and a half years an intercalary month was inserted, essential for harmonization with the solar year.

The Coligny Calendar had a significance to the Celts beyond simply recording the passage of time; it was a physical record of the Celts’ considerable astronomical expertise, represented an example of their timekeeping proficiency, and - at a period when the Julian calendar was being imposed throughout the Roman Empire - it permitted them to preserve cultural autonomy and a degree of control over how they interacted with the natural world.

As we step into a new year, let us take a lesson from the Ancient Celts and strive to balance the rhythms of our busy lives with the natural cycles around us.

From all of us at Celtic Life International, we wish you a very Happy New Year - one that grants you the luxury of having time on your side.

Siobhán L. Covington,
Publisher



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Strange Twists of Time

Celtic tales are packed with strange twists of time, often in the form of packing a whole year into a single day. For example, in “The Adventures of Nera” the hero enters the famed Sidh - the Celtic otherworld - after having watched the forces of the underworld destroy his home. Although he spends a year there, he returns home on the same night he left. A vaguely similar story plays out in the Welsh Mabinogion when the protagonist, Pwyll, agrees to swap places with Arawn, Lord of the Otherworldly Anwvyn - a name that means “deep world.” After spending 12 months there, and defeating Arawn’s enemy, he returns home to find it was as though he never left. Similarly, in “The Wooing of Étain” the Dagda pauses the movement of the heavens for nine months so that the birth of his son, the Bodb Dearg, does not give away his affair with Boand, the eponymous goddess of the Boyne River.

The concept of time can get even weirder in Celtic mythology, however; on the many otherworldly islands - as in Preiddeu Annwn and “the Voyage of Bran” - time seems to flow differently for different people in different places. When Oisín, Fionn mac Cumhall’s son, left for Tír na nÓg, “the Land of the (ever) Young” with Niamh Cinnóir, he remained young for three centuries until, setting foot back in Ireland, time caught up with him. An echo of this tale can be found in the story of Rip Van Winkle, written by a native of Scotland’s Orkney Isles and transplanted to the Dutch colony of New York.

Long before Einstein, the Celts blurred the distinction between time and space. It is a little-remembered reflex of the tradition now, but in older manuscripts there are numerous accounts of ancient lands underwater and future castles in the clouds. My personal favourite is an account in the Annals of Ulster when, in the middle of an outdoor mass, an anchor dropped directly onto the altar. Looking up, the surprised worshippers found themselves beneath the keel of a boat with equally surprised sailors gazing down at them, speaking a strange tongue. Stories of lands and peoples

drowned by the sea were so prevalent that it became an actual tale-type called an ‘eruption,’ the theme always being that land sank below the waves while the future remained bright above.

All this weirdness suggests a view of time that not only allows for imbas forsonai, the Light of Foreknowledge, but all the interconnected complex systems of magic in Celtic tradition, including shapeshifting, ghosts, sorcerous mists, weather-control, rituals of spellcasting, and even potions. In our modern world, we interpret these activities through the lens of “science:” potion-making becomes chemistry, imbas forsonai becomes psychic clairvoyance, and anything that doesn’t ‘fit’ into our scientific framework becomes superstition.



“*In the original tradition, however, fluidity of form was governed by no less intrinsic laws, though they are alien to our modern sensibilities.*”

How we invent those laws and the cosmology they represent is difficult because it is largely eclipsed on the one hand by the modern invention of time as a line from start to finish and the interpretation of the world on the other as an artificial work of divine skill, both of which were introduced by Christianity.

The older tradition seems to see reality as an unfolding out of darkness into light. Julius Caesar famously claimed the Celts of Gaul saw themselves as descendants of Dis Pater, the god of the underworld, which fits neatly with the widespread Celtic practice of individual tribes venerating their ancestors in the Sidh. Likewise, the day began not at midnight as the Romans calculated it, but from sunset - which is why the Oíche Shamhna, the Night of Samhain (Halloween) was considered the first half of the day.

Time itself flows from the darkest depths of the oceans into the supernal realms of the air - and when we travel, we not only travel through space but also through time. To visit each site of Celtic cultural significance is to connect intrinsically to the time and spirit of that place - a time and spirit that can seem tenuous to our modern senses but is no less indelible for all the water that has passed under the proverbial bridge.

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

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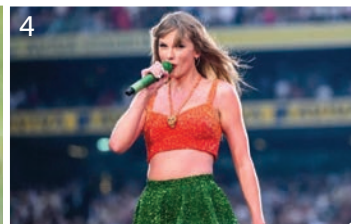
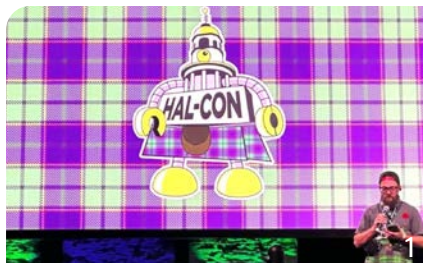
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De Tha Dol



1 Pride of Hal-con

Nova Scotia's largest Science Fiction and Gaming Convention now has its very own tartan. During Hal-con's 2024 festivities, designer Tim Poirier unveiled his creation, which had been officially registered with the Scottish Register of Tartans. Poirier was inspired to create the tartan after volunteering at the convention in 2022. After two years of research and communication with Hal-con's Board of Directors, the design was ready to be shared. According to the Scottish Register of Tartans, "green, purple and grey are Hal-con's corporate colours and a rainbow stripe has been added to represent the diversity and inclusiveness of the event."

2 Cornish Cider

For the second year in a row, respondents to a survey in the United Kingdom have indicated that Cornwall is home to the country's favourite cider. Rattler Cyder took the crown, with 96,000 consumers identifying it as a favourite. The cider - named for the Cornish Rattler apple - is made by Healeys Cornish Cyder Farm near the city of Truro. According to the Healeys website: "Scattered with over 3,000 trees, our leafy orchards are home to seven varieties of traditional Cornish native apples."

3 Manx Wallabies

Far away from their native homes of Australia and Tasmania, an estimated 1,000 wallabies live on the Isle of Man. Back in the 1960s, a small number of the animals escaped from a wildlife park in the north-west region of the Isle. Since then, the population has increased. It turns out that the Ballaugh Curragh wetland is similar to the environment wallabies enjoy in Tasmania. The Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture says it will need to evaluate the health of the population to see whether human intervention is required.

4 Taylor Swift's Irish roots

It turns out that "Miss Americana" has Irish ancestry. Pop star Taylor Swift, who stopped in Ireland as part of her Eras Tour last summer, is connected to both the Emerald Isle and Northern Ireland. Her maternal roots trace back to Dublin, while her father's ancestors are believed to have come to the United States from Derry. According to research by the Irish Family History Centre, Swift's paternal great-great-grandparents got on a boat from Derry in 1836. Although Swift took the stage at Dublin's Aviva Stadium, she has yet to perform in Derry - however the city's mayor has extended an invitation to visit.

5 Ancient Celtic Instrument

The word "carnyx" may not ring a bell, but some sports fans - as well as film fans - would recognize the massive, golden instrument if they were to see it. The sound of the carnyx kicked off the Wales vs Iceland game for the UEFA Nations League back in November, thanks to a band called The Barry Horns. It's also featured in the original Gladiator movie. According to the BBC, "the carnyx was originally used by the ancient Celts between 200 BCE and 200 CE" as they prepared to fight the Romans.

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Celts in Culture



• *Be Alice Embroidery*

Hand embroidery artist Alice Brady stitches Irish culture into her pieces. As a youngster, she never imagined that she might have a career in the arts. She was briefly enrolled in Irish Studies at Trinity College Dublin until she realized that she wanted to do something more hands-on. Upon leaving Trinity College, Brady took some time to build her embroidery portfolio before attending Ballyfermot College of Further Education for a fibre art and textile design course. From there, it was on to London's Royal School of Needlework (RSN). "I was living and working in England, but Ireland was always my subject," Brady writes on her blog. After graduating from RSN in 2017, she returned to her Dublin home and has since worked on an array of projects, including a series on Irish plants and their connection to folklore. This project also featured ancient Ogham writing, which appears frequently in Brady's other work and commissions. The Ogham alphabet was used in Early Medieval Ireland and Britain to write early and old Irish, along with a handful of other languages. Through her online shop, Brady offers commissioned work, embroidery kits and patterns. She also teaches classes for beginners. Her pieces demonstrate that "inspired by Ireland" means more than images of Leprechauns or four-leaf clovers, but that doesn't mean familiar images aren't present: Celtic harps, Claddagh, and Celtic knots all feature in Brady's available patterns. She also showcases the Irish language. bealice.ie



• *Adam King*

Stop by any gift shop in Cardiff and you'll see trinkets reminiscent of Welsh love spoons. But what exactly is their significance? Well, love spoons date back centuries. Traditionally, a man would carve a love spoon for a woman he wished to court. If she accepted the gift, it signified that she returned his interest in a romantic relationship. Although the tradition was not entirely confined to Wales, the more intricate, decorative designs we see today are typically from Welsh makers, including Adam King. "Love spoons are now given to commemorate weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, christenings and many other special occasions," King writes on his website. "Using my own designs, I carve traditional and one-off love spoons out of lime wood, an Indigenous species used for centuries for wood carving. All spoons are handmade by myself, using my own designs and finished to the highest quality using three grades of sandpaper then polished and waxed." From classic to contemporary, King's on-line shop is home to all sorts of designs. Celtic knots, animals, plants and more feature in his work. If a customer cannot find a piece that suits their desires, he makes bespoke spoons as well. "I have been asked to carve anything from national flowers and unique symbols to very personal things such as a Harley Davidson or an octopus which had very personal meanings to the recipients." adamking.co.uk



• *Cornish Blacksmith Collective*

If asked to picture a blacksmith, one might first imagine a fictional character: take Will Turner from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series or Kate from *A Knight's Tale*, for example. If you're lucky, maybe you've even seen a smith demonstration at a Renaissance faire or Celtic festival. Blacksmiths are more than the stuff of fables and history, however - and groups such as the Cornish Blacksmith Collective are proof of that. An unofficial group formed in 2005, mainly to run the forging competition and display at the Royal Cornwall Show, it continues to promote the craft to the general public and aims to keep the ancient art alive. The group is open to hobbyists and professionals alike, operating in a collaborative fashion. According to the Cornish Blacksmith Collective website, there are currently nine active members. One such member is Lisa Wisdom, who co-founded the Collective in 2012. She uses "found metal" to create works of art such as jewellery and metal landscapes. "My own practice became increasingly inspired by my immediate landscape. Walking from my door, I would collect fragments of metal from past industry and incorporate them into my work, reforging and shaping the found metal into new and usable objects," Wisdom writes on her website. "Amongst these remnants I would find broken, corrugated tin roofing sheets, once used to clad the quarry workings. These spoke to me of the Cornish landscape." Other Cornish Blacksmith Collective members include Nico Kenna, Jeremy Cash and Sanny Feye. cornishblacksmiths.com



Fun for the whole clan!

Tartan Day South Celtic Festival celebrates Celtic heritage over four days with an array of unique music, foods, shopping, Highland Games, heritage exhibitions, interactive local history and a Classic British Car Show. The event is built around National Tartan Day and is celebrated in multiple venues over four days. Tartan Day South is produced with and for The River Alliance. The driving force that develops projects that continue to improve the access to the incredible 90 miles of rivers that are the greatest natural resource in the heart of the Midlands of South Carolina.

Visit TartanDaySouth.com for more information!



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Central Florida Scottish Highland Games

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The Central Florida Scottish Highland Games is the largest community event in Seminole County. Organized by the Scottish-American Society of Central Florida, the annual festival was created to promote and preserve Scottish heritage. Each January, the two-day gathering welcomes thousands of visitors to Central Winds Park in Winter Springs, Florida. This year, festivities begin on Saturday with competitions in Scottish heavy athletics, Highland dance, bagpiping, and baking. The weekend also hosts cultural activities, including border-collie demonstrations, Scottish clans, musical performances, a medieval camp, axe throwing, and the always-popular Boulder Boogie event where contestants attempt to carry the heaviest stone the farthest distance. Also on tap is the non-competitive "Kids Games" version of Scottish athletics, Celtic artisans, weaponry, and much food and drink, including beer, wine, whisky, fish-n-chips, scotch-egg, and even haggis tacos! The whisky tasting welcomes attendees to sample expertly curated rare and unique whiskies, and The Ceilidh features multiple Celt-Rock bands.

Panama City Beach Scottish Festival

February 28 & March 1, 2025
Panama City, Florida
www.pcbsscottishfestival.com



The 31st Annual Panama City Beach Scottish Festival takes place on February 28 and March 1, and this year marks a significant milestone as the annual gathering expands to a two-day event. Held at Frank Brown Park in Panama City Beach, Florida, this year's festivities will feature Highland games, Scottish dancing, live bagpipe performances, whisky tasting, axe throwing, a Clan village, a Scottish Tea Room, and more. Musical acts this year include headliner Celtica Nova and showcase artist The Devil's Brigade. Attendees are invited to explore a diverse array of artisan vendors showcasing unique crafts, while enjoying traditional Scottish cuisine. A family friendly event that is open to all, the Panama City Beach Scottish Festival has become Northwest Florida's largest celebration of Celtic heritage.

Tartan Day South

April 3 - 7, 2025
Midlands of South Carolina
www.tartandaysouth.com



In association with National Tartan Day, Tartan Day South honors the Carolina's rich and robust Celtic heritage, highlighting the ancient traditions of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and more. This year, guests are invited to enjoy live musical performances, drum and pipe bands, traditional dancing, Highland Games events, a British car show, a sheepdog herding exhibit, Birds of Prey, axe throwing, clan and society tents, and more. A feast of Celtic-inspired food will be available for hungry visitors, and a Celtic marketplace will showcase fabrics, jewelry, ironware, and other cultural items. In addition, the annual four-day gathering will benefit the non-profit River Alliance, which strives to connect people to the area's rivers - Broad, Saluda, and Congaree - ensuring that these waterways are properly protected and preserved.



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Celebrating a Decade of Celtic Life

When Rebecca Dingwell agreed to work with Celtic Life International Magazine, she never fathomed that she would still be with the publication 10 years on to talk about it.

At the time, it seemed like an innocuous decision - an opportunity to add a few professional writing credits before graduating from the journalism program at the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, giving her a head start on building up a body of work to show the head-hunters seeking bright young reporters.

"Stephen (Clare - Celtic Life International Executive Editor) had sent an email to the journalism school at King's, and that got forwarded on to a bunch of the students," reminisces Dingwell. "I hadn't heard of the magazine before, but I checked it out and I thought it looked interesting. I enjoy writing about arts and culture, so I responded to Stephen. We had a little chat at a coffee shop, and it just kind of went from there.

"He never told me why he decided to hire me, specifically. I suspect it was because I was very responsive, and I probably seemed keen. I don't think that there were many, if any, millennial staff writers on at the time; perhaps Stephen saw the opportunity to connect with a younger audience that way."

Dingwell recalls an early story she wrote for the magazine where she started to realize just how wide the Celtic diaspora reaches.

"I was doing a Celtic Studies cover story," Dingwell recalls. "At the time, I was really making an effort to expand beyond programs or institutions that were confined

to either the Celtic nations themselves, or the Diaspora in North America, because I feel like that's what we hear about a lot.

"I came upon this study group based in Japan learning about Celtic culture. The person I spoke with told me they became interested in Celtic culture through Lord of the Rings and the Elvish languages in Tolkien's books. It was cool to see that somewhere that far away, and so seemingly far-removed from the Celtic nations, would have people that were very interested in it."

Dingwell can relate. She has some Celtic ancestry - not that it is a prerequisite to work for the magazine - some Scottish on her father's side, and Irish in her mother's maternal family tree. But what really drew Dingwell's interest from the Celtic world was the folklore.

"One of my first connections with Celtic culture growing up was the folklore around the island of Newfoundland. I knew about things like the fairies, that they were quite literally brought over by the Irish to Newfoundland - because fairies hid somewhere upon the settlers. That was always something that was very mysterious to me, and it still resonates very much."

If Clare had been scoping out Dingwell to bring a fresh, conscientious youthful voice into the fold, he couldn't have picked better; Dingwell possesses a strong sense of journalistic ethics and social justice and has been behind much of the subtle changes longtime readers may have noticed in the content of the magazine over the years. She spearheaded - and was encouraged to pursue - story

ideas that had never graced the pages of our periodical previously.

"I do think there was an overall push from me to help the magazine be a little bit more progressive, even just stylistically, in the way we worded things in certain stories when I was editing," Dingwell recalls about coming to write some inspired and important pieces for Celtic Life on some contentious modern issues, such as how the LGBTQ+ community and Black Lives Matter have their own Celtic connections.

"The worst thing is not to say anything at all. I knew I had done the right thing, as readers told me afterwards what it had meant to them."

Dingwell has evolved as much as the magazine over these past 10 years, if not more - she's evolved from a weekly reporter to a freelance columnist. She also tied the knot, and travelled to Scotland, England, and Wales with her hubby for her honeymoon. But one thing that's been a constant that whole time is Celtic Life, and she's got no plans on leaving us anytime soon.

"It was a good move for me. I've had some pretty cool opportunities; talking to people that I wouldn't have otherwise had the chance to connect with, learning and writing about things I wouldn't have otherwise gotten to write about. I also met (fellow CL writer) Caitlyn Mearns, who is one of my closest friends now.

"So yeah, no regrets."

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A photograph of four students walking along a paved path on a university campus. From left to right: a man in a light green polo shirt and khaki pants, a woman in a teal dress, a woman in a black dress, and a woman in a teal blazer and jeans carrying a laptop. They are walking past a large tree and a modern white building with large windows.

Irish Studies Program

www.fairfield.edu/irishstudies

FAIRFIELD, CT

Fairfield University, located in southwestern Connecticut only 75 minutes northeast of New York City, offers a dynamic program in Irish Studies. With a significant Irish-American representation among its students and alumni, interest in Ireland has characterized Fairfield for decades. This interest continues unabated today, as Irish people on both sides of the Atlantic have sought to resolve long-standing issues amidst an increasingly global economy. Fairfield's Irish Studies program enables students to investigate

Irish contributions to a wide range of disciplines, including literature, history, film, and art. Courses focus on the troubled history of the nation, its colonial and post-colonial significance, the difficult politics of Northern Ireland, and the inspired art and

literature that emerged from the turbulent Irish past. To complete the Irish Studies minor, students must complete a capstone research project in an area of their choice. Affiliated with the National University of Ireland, Fairfield's Irish Studies program, through study abroad in Galway, also allows students to take Irish-focused courses in archeology, economics, sociology, linguistics, and the Irish language. The program also offers on-site lectures, concerts, plays, and readings that complement the academic courses.



Fairfield
UNIVERSITY

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& Sciences

The Gaelic College

New Mabou campus offers opportunities for post-secondary students

The Gaelic College (Colaisde na Gàidhlig) has been a crucial cultural institution in Cape Breton for 85 years. Until recently, however, the “college” part of its title has been “a bit of a misnomer, in a way,” says staff member Kenneth Mackenzie.

Put simply, the Gaelic College is mostly known for its experiential learning opportunities through its summer and March Break programs. Students can take classes in just about anything to do with Gaelic culture, including Cape Breton fiddle, bagpiping, and - of course - Scottish Gaelic language. While there is no shortage of reasons to visit the Gaelic College, there are also a handful of online courses available for those unable to travel.

What’s more, the institution is continuing to expand its reach, including some longer-term immersion programs in partnership with Cape Breton University (CBU). These courses offer second and third-year credits for university students. Additionally, the Gaelic College has collaborated with Alberta’s Olds College of Agriculture and Technology on courses for the Olds College Master Weaver Certificate.

“It’s not just something that exists on a shelf or on a stage,” Mackenzie says of Gaelic culture. “It is alive.”

Mackenzie is the vice president of Beinn Mhàbu: the Mabou-based post-secondary campus which first opened its doors in September 2023.

The campus site was originally a convent and girls’ boarding school which then evolved to become a spiritual retreat centre. “When the Sisters decided it was time to move on themselves, it was a fairly competitive process” to obtain the property, notes Mackenzie. “We are thankful that the Sisters saw something in our vision.”

Again in partnership with Cape Breton University, the Gaelic College’s Mabou campus offers students the opportunity to



immerse themselves in Gaelic culture while earning post-secondary credits.

“There are numerous Celtic studies programs at universities, but we are trying to do something a little bit different here,” explains Mackenzie. “Students here get their Arts education within the Gaelic cultural worldview. So, rather than focussing on Celtic studies in a historical context, it’s a broader spectrum interdisciplinary program.”

The Beinn Mhàbu Gaelic Foundations program, which meets first year Arts program requirements for post-secondary students, offers four consecutive courses: History, Music & Dance, Folklore, and Literature of The Gael. Each takes place over six weeks.

Meanwhile, students also take part in a year-long course in Scottish Gaelic language.

As of September 2024, Beinn Mhàbu is offering second-year courses as well. These classes are crafted to fit into CBU’s Bachelor of Arts in Community Studies, through which students can major in Gaelic Language and Cultural Sustainability.

“It’s really hands-on,” shares Mackenzie, adding that this year’s students have organized activities from kids’ dances to beach clean-ups as part of their first semester. “Those are designed to build community and build life skills for these students.”

In addition to the long-standing Community Studies courses, Beinn Mhàbu’s second year includes Advanced Gaelic, Global

Language Revitalization, and Experiencing Music.

The hope is that Beinn Mhàbu will eventually have a full degree offering.

In the meantime, Mackenzie says the campus has attracted “a nice assortment of people” from Cape Breton, other parts of Atlantic Canada and further afield. This year’s batch of students even includes representation from New England and Scotland.

“It’s a nice melting pot. Some have stronger connections to the language or culture than others, or more experience with it - but it is great to see them coming together here onsite.”

Mackenzie notes that there has been an increased interest in Gaelic culture over the last five years, in part due to the popularity of the Outlander series. He also points to the recent inclusion of Scottish Gaelic on the Duolingo language app. Perhaps the biggest draw, however, is the community that Gaelic study offers as so many aspects of Gaelic culture (such as ceilidhs and milling frolics) are communal.

While online courses have certainly made the Gaelic College more accessible, “you can’t beat the in-person experience,” says Mackenzie. However, he adds, “I have seen some nice communities grow just in online settings.”

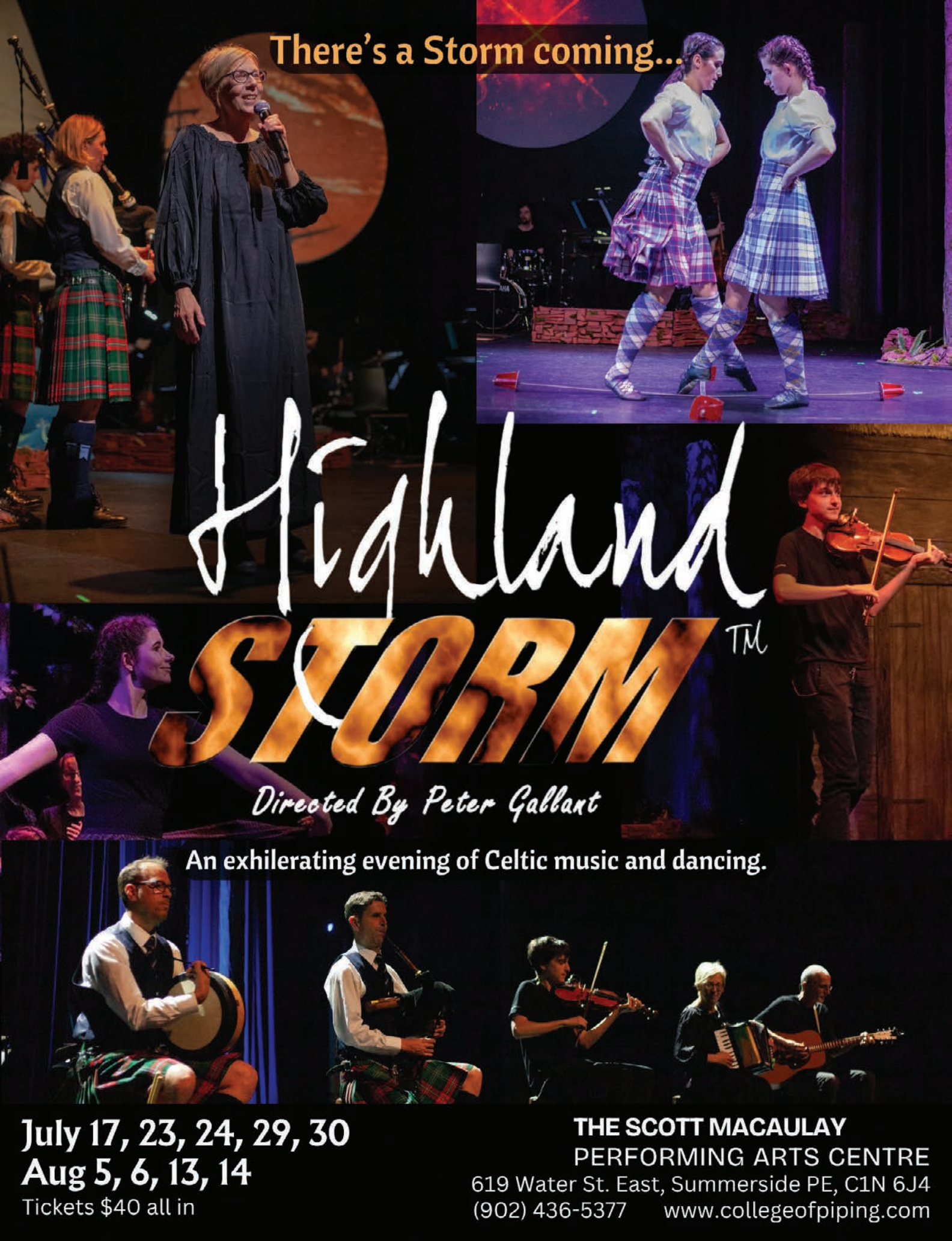
Gaelic, then, isn’t simply about keeping an ancient language alive. It’s about the people.

“More than just preserving something, I think it gives folks an opportunity to connect to something. To find themselves grounded in a place or a people - whether it is their family line or just something they feel drawn to - these days people are really missing that.”

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James Marsters

James Marsters is best known for his role as the cockney Vampire Spike in the longstanding TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Recently Celtic Life International Managing Editor Chris Muise spoke with the American actor about his own Celtic heritage, his travels through the Celtic Nations, and his return to the world of *Buffy*.

CL: Tells us about your heritage.

JM: I am a Western European mutt; English. Irish. Scottish and German.

CL: What got you into acting?

JM: I loved Monty Python when I was a kid, so - believe it or not - I practiced those accents and that prepared me for the stage. I was in theatre for about 10 years first before going into television - I did about 100 plays. Plenty of Shakespeare, and you need to be able to perform in what they call that a transatlantic dialect, and it is specifically for the classics. I trained at Juilliard for that.

CL: What's your experience been like travelling through The UK and Ireland?

JM: Oh, very good. There is a reason why actors from England are the best in the world - they have a very verbal culture. When you talk with someone there, you are kind of fencing with them - verbal fencing; a constant playful banter is taking place. And Scotland, well, I almost got beat up twice in Edinburgh. I was at a function as Spike and the organizers had me dancing with a lot of women from Edinburgh. I remember instinctually knowing to be polite with these women, and I'm glad I did, because when I left, all their boyfriends were circling the bar and had been watching me through the glass. I don't know if I'd have escaped alive if I had taken any liberties that night. There was another night that I was walking through the streets with my band, *Ghost of the Robot*, and someone said something snarky to our guitarist, and he decided to snark back. I was like, dude, not

here. They'll kill us. Not in Edinburgh, man. The Scots - they know how to fight for sure. Another time, I was playing music in at a musical festival in Wales and I remember being very, very nervous. I play rhythm guitar - I've been playing in bars since I was 13 - but as I walked around listening to other people perform, I thought to myself, "oh, no - music is a part of their culture in a way that has absolutely never been a part of mine."

CL: What do you think of Canadians?

JM: Well, for one thing, I haven't gotten beaten up yet! Joking aside, I was just out shopping and I saw three or four pairs of moms and daughters bicycling together, and the daughters were very safely following the moms. The moms were in front. They both had bicycle helmets, and one mother signaled to turn very carefully, even though there wasn't a lot of traffic around. I thought to myself 'well, this is why I love Canada.' Canada is the country that the USA thinks it is, but it's fooling itself. I recently watched a documentary film that asked the question 'what does Canada have that makes it great?' And this guy travels from one side of the country to the other and didn't find anything specific. However, by the time he arrived on the west coast he was like, I get it - it is everything. It is all of it together that makes this the best country in the world. Canada, I think, is about the closest thing to heaven that I have seen on earth. People here are very considerate of others. They tend to be thoughtful, well-read, mature. Seriously, if you live in Canada, don't immigrate. You don't need to.



CL: What's the new audio project, *Slayers: A Buffyverse Story*, all about?

JM: I thought that I was never going to be able to play Spike again, because I am getting older, but Spike is not - and that's the cool thing about vampires, we don't age. And so, I thought all that was completely in the rear-view mirror until Amber Benson - who played Tara on the show - wrote the project with Christopher Golden. Christopher did a lot of *Buffy* comic books and novels, and Amber is now a very successful screenwriter in Hollywood. So, they both know that world well and decided to team up with Audible on the podcast. It has its own proprietary technology that places the audience member in each room and moves all the actors around them in three dimensions.

CL: Like surround sound?

JM: Yes. I am listening to it now, and you can hear people walking around you, flying around you, getting beaten up, starting at one side and crashing into a table on the other side. If you have surround sound in your home, it will absolutely encompass you. Casey Wayland is the producer on this, and a large portion of the cast is back. The problem was, how do you duplicate that writing? I mean, if you are going to do more *Buffy*, it must sparkle, to have humour and romance and danger and a certain amount of sadness. Amber and Christopher really nailed it, and it works really, really well.

SCOTI CREATIONS

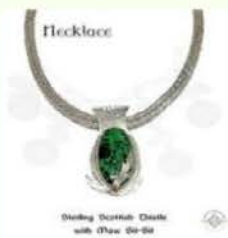


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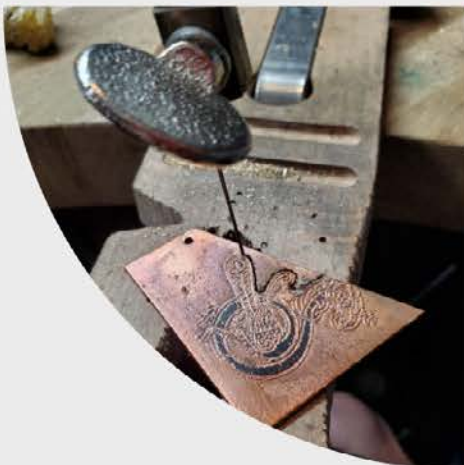
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Old Rugged Kirks

One Scottish man is on a mission

You don't have to carry the faith to appreciate the architectural beauty of an old heritage church; and with nearly 11,000 churches, chapels, and basilicas dotting the countryside, Scotland has a lot of architectural beauty to behold.

Sadly, it will soon have much less to behold, as The Church of Scotland plans to close between 400 and 700 churches in the next few years.

For retired quality surveyor Les Taylor, letting these hallowed halls fall to ruin - without at least recording their interiors for posterity so future generations can still enjoy them - would be the real sin.

"I was raised in the small market town of Turriff in northern Aberdeenshire," shares Taylor, who has uncovered some gothic masonry down his family tree. "My grandfather, a Barlow, was a local farm servant, and yet our lineage - curiously enough - has been traced back to the Earl of Findlater. Even though Findlater Castle itself is now a ruin, I don't think the owners would welcome me trying to take possession of it."

He didn't come to his current project by way of any targeted interest in church architecture, however - if anything, his start with the Old Rugged Kirks project was "a bit of serendipity."

"I attended the funeral of an old friend near Inverness," he recounts. "The church - like so many old Scottish churches - looked drab and almost invisible from the outside, the kind of place you walk past without a second glance. Yet inside, the transformation was total. Sunlight streamed in through the stained-glass windows onto mature, honey-

coloured woodwork and a soaring, vaulted timber ceiling.

"When I commented on this mesmerizing collage of colours to a friend next to me, he told me to enjoy it while I still could as the church was due to close, and a local furniture store had their eyes on it for long-term storage. From then on, this magnificent place would be lost to public view forever.

“It was then that the idea of Old Rugged Kirks came to me - recording and photographing the interiors of these old churches for posterity.”

Taylor has recorded history before, researching books both on the RAF Banff Strike Wing Air Force station and on German bombing raids on Scotland during World War II. Despite those prior experiences, he doesn't anticipate much funding to support his parish photography project. As such, he expects this to be an undertaking he will largely work towards alone.

"Right now, it is just me, although I am talking to interested parties who would like to get involved. Ideally, an office base and a full-time staff role or two is the aim, but that may be a long way off, if ever.

"Sure, there are government agencies and other sources of funding such as the UK National Lottery, but the harsh truth is that there is a distinctly political element to who is more likely to get official funding in Scotland and who is not. And while it is true that churches can secure funding for physical repairs, a project like this - to simply pho-

WWW.OLDRUGGEDKIRKS.COM

tograph and record the interiors of Scottish churches - is always going to be way down at the bottom of the pecking order with most of official sources of funding. So, until the project can get some funds behind it, it is going to remain an idea rather than a reality, perhaps with some voluntary work to keep things going during the odd evening and weekend."

The biggest challenge, he explains, has been getting the message out to the public.

"Newspapers and magazines have been approached in Scotland, but no takers yet. It's just not a big enough or controversial enough story, I suppose. Then it was suggested to me that Scottish communities in North America might be a good place to spread the word and look for funding, and that is why I'd like to reach out to people around the world with a strong sense of Celtic connection to Scotland and its heritage. My hope is that folks will visit the website, see what I am trying to achieve, and leave a wee donation to help support the project.

"In the meanwhile, here I am - rattling my collection tin as if it was a rainy flag day in Aberdeen. As that fine old Scottish saying goes, 'Mony a mickle maks a muckle!'"



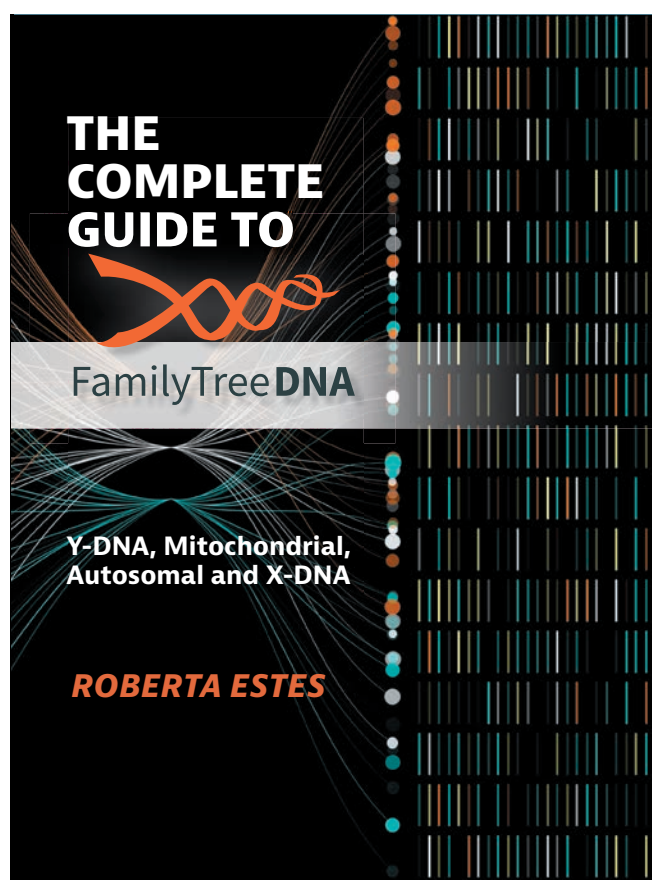
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Seachdain na Gàidhlig

World Gaelic Week celebrates Scottish Gaelic around the globe

Joy Dunlop has long believed her home country of Scotland ought to do more to promote Gaelic language and heritage.

Born on the country's gorgeous west coast, Dunlop now lives in Glasgow - known to some as "Baile mòr nan Gàidheal" or - in English - "the City of the Gaels."

"I love that it is a vibrant, multi-cultural city with a thriving Gaelic community," she notes via email.

A fluent Scottish Gaelic speaker herself, Dunlop is radio and television presenter, most notably as the host of BBC's Speak-Gaelic. She has also been the director of Seachdain na Gàidhlig (World Gaelic Week) since its inception in 2022.

"Whilst we have wonderful traditional music events that successfully celebrate our musical heritage, there was no specific Gaelic language equivalent in Scotland."

Meanwhile, Irish Language Week has been observed in Ireland since 1902 and, in Canada, Gaelic Nova Scotia Month has taken place each May for almost 30 years.

"I had floated the idea for Seachdain na Gàidhlig with a few different groups, but nothing ever came of it."

That changed a few short years ago. "I went to work with Hands Up for Trad, an arts organization that supports Scottish traditional music. This partnership was solidified when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and we collaborated on a few different arts projects. It was through this that the idea for Seachdain na Gàidhlig (World Gaelic Week) really came to life."

The goal of Seachdain na Gàidhlig is to celebrate Scottish Gaelic around the world. As Dunlop explains, anyone can take part or run their own event. Since the first Seachdain na Gàidhlig took place when pandemic num-



bers were on the rise again, all the events had to be shifted to an online format.

"However, it proved to be very successful in terms of engagement and gave us a great foundation on which to build."

Fortunately, in-person events have since returned, and ceilidhs, guided Gaelic conversation groups, and a Gaelic song workshop were all part of the 2024 festivities.

"Last year, we showcased over 170 events concentrated in Scotland and spread across more than 100 locations worldwide, including New York, Nova Scotia, Australia and London. The work that we do is hugely rewarding as it has a clear benefit to the people and communities that are involved."

“Language and culture are an integral part of life, both here in Scotland and further afield, and being able to contribute to this is such an honour.”

As Director of the yearly gathering, Dunlop often has her hands full.

"I am just as likely to be delivering information sessions or workshops, as filling in funding applications, or leasing with our partners. It is a hands-on role, which I love, albeit a part time role - although there never feels like enough hours in the day to do what I want to do."

Along with time restraints, finances are an ongoing issue also as her initiative is funded solely by Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

"Most of our budget is spent on small project grants and part time roles. We try and distribute as much money as we can to support as wide a range of initiatives and projects as possible. However, we are only a small team with an even smaller

budget, and I would love to find a way to bring in more revenue so that we can continue to grow and develop in the future."

Dunlop hopes that development will lead to even more events and initiatives - not just in Scotland, but internationally as well. In addition, she notes that while Gaelic is undergoing something of a revival in urban Scotland, it has been declining in the country's island communities.

"Whether we realize it or not, Gaelic language and culture is an integral part of Scottish life. It is built into every facet of our lives: from place names to turns of phrases, to music and politics. It is something that is uniquely special to us, and should be persevered, promoted, and supported. We need more investment at government level, more community engagement at the local level, and even more outreach work to target those who may feel that Gaelic isn't for them."

This year's Seachdain na Gàidhlig takes place from Feb. 24 to March 2.

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Greg Sinners

One man cuts his musical teeth on the shoulders of rock n' roll giants

“I started in Baltimore, at around the age of 13, taking guitar lessons,” recalls singer-songwriter Greg Sinners from his home in Delaware. “By the time I was 16, I was performing publicly in my first band, primarily at teen centres. My inspiration to play music started with The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and many of the bands of that era and later.”

In time, he would develop an interest in Celtic and classical music.

“My father’s heritage was German, and my mother was first-generation Irish in America. As a child, I was always told of where our family was from. There was a funny thing my mother used to say to me, regarding neighbours who had Irish last names. She didn’t mean it to be funny, but it makes me smile when I think about it now. She would say, ‘Be nice to them, they’re Irish.’ There was no grey area about who we were. As I’ve gotten older, I have become even more attached to my European heritage.”

Sinners has started and fronted several cover bands over his five-decade career in music, but soon realized that, to grow as a musician, he had to find and cultivate his own unique musical voice.

“Like most musicians, I started by learn-

ing and performing other artists’ songs. It was a great foundation, but after a few years, I realized the limitations of only copying others. I knew that reaching the next level of success would require writing original material. So, in my later groups, that was the main objective. Those bands performed a blend of covers and originals, but the emphasis was definitely on our own songs.”

Sinners’ musical output has ranged across several genres; he’s still very fond of his rock origins, and continues to produce music in that vein, but he’s also dabbled in other styles, including heavy metal and classical guitar.

His love of Celtic melodies is partially inspired by his familial connections to Ireland.

“Of all my songs, a few have a deeper and particularly special meaning to me. One is ‘Irish Rain,’ which is a tribute to my maternal grandparents.”

The song was inspired by a trip to the Emerald Isle.

“I still have family in County Galway that have lived on the family land for over 140 years, where my maternal grandfather was born”, he shares, adding that the house still stands on the property today. “I always

visit them when I go to Ireland. I started writing Irish Rain while I was staying at a remote cottage in County Mayo. I was sitting on the patio on a sunny day and the lyrics started coming to me.”

As he has with Eire, Sinners has honoured his musical inspirations over the years.

“I had a three-piece acoustic guitar and vocal group which performed at the ‘Abbey Road on the River’ Beatles’ festival when it was held in Cleveland, Ohio. This festival is billed as the largest global Beatles-inspired festival, with musicians from around the world. We also performed as the opening act for Davy Jones, formerly of the Monkees, at the Colonial Downs Racetrack in Virginia.”

Ultimately, however, the greatest reward for creating music has been - and remains - the music itself.

“As a songwriter, the finished product of the song and the recording of it is my reward. Dick Clark once said, ‘music is the soundtrack of our lives.’ That is so true. When I first began to play music, it was for the love of music itself, and that remains the reason I do it today. There can’t be any other reason to stay with it for decades!”

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being Bette MacDonald

Comedy has been the core of one Cape Bretoner's life for over three decades

From early days performing backyard skits to headlining sold-out tours, Bette MacDonald's journey has been as inspiring as it has been entertaining.

"Comedy has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember," she shares with Celtic Life International via email from her home in Nova Scotia.

As a youngster, MacDonald's basement and backyard doubled as performance venues, often with only neighborhood moms as audiences. As such, comedy was always a family affair - a fun and safe testing ground for new material.

"We still carry on that tradition. Every tour has a dress rehearsal for our family, and their feedback ensures our shows are ship-shape. And here we are - thirty years later, I am more excited about performing than ever."

The secret to making something funny, she has learned, is keeping things simple.

"Comedy is about making big things small and small things big. For example, one of my characters, Wayne Tomko, treats a minor accomplishment as being worthy of the national news, and something like a fender bender is a monumental disaster that could end in fisticuffs."

Her ability to find humor in the mundane of everyday life resonates with audiences of all ages - a skill honed through years of keen observation and reflection.

"I am inspired by other people's stories. In fact, the funniest people I know aren't professional performers - they are my own family members, working in fields like law and social work. If they ever took to the stage, I would be out of a job!"

Collaborating with her husband, May-



nard Morrison has been a major factor in her success.

"Working with Maynard is both a joy and a necessity - we now share a brain."

Her writing, paired with his expert handling of logistics, allows for a division of labor that eventually evolved into a "well-oiled machine."

“We are not just colleagues - we are great friends and happily married. I am eternally grateful for that...”

The couple found creative ways to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We started a video series called Stuck in the House, featuring a group of guys who rarely leave their square mile. It kept us engaged and connected with our audience during a tough time."

Now, thankfully, live audiences are back in full force.

"We are on the verge of a sold-out tour, just like last year. That's not boasting - it is the sound of relief and gratitude as people are hungry for live entertainment again. We have long-time fans who've been with us for decades, and newer faces who discovered us through the TV show Mr. D. Our core audience tends to be older, and they are the most fun - they really know how to party!"

As for the younger crowd, MacDonald notes, "I hope they will put their screens away and experience live shows. There's nothing quite like it."

With the continued rise of social media and the simultaneous reduction of content length, the comedian has adjusted, making the most of new opportunities and challenges.

"Social media has been great for promotion, but it has also shortened attention spans. As someone who works in long-form entertainment, I find the idea of 60-second productions mystifying."

Her advice for aspiring comedians is a testament to her own experience.

"Learn everything you can and work with as many people as possible. Your job is to serve the script and respect the audience - they paid good money to see you."

The next 12 months will see MacDonald and Morrison keeping busy with the business of being funny.

"I will spend the winter writing, then hit the road in the spring with another of my shows - Made in Cape Breton. After some beach time in the summer, it's back to work on the next Christmas show. "This career has been a gift. Recently, Maynard and I talked about how lucky we are to do what we love. It is a good thing, too, as I am - admittedly - absolutely not qualified to do anything else!"

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Imagine! Belfast

*One woman works to turn ideas
into activism, creativity, and fun.*

Story by Lillian Holt.

Nestled in the heart of Northern Ireland's unique festival scene is Imagine! Belfast - a vital and vibrant annual gathering dedicated to progressive ideas, dynamic social discourse, and giving voice to - and uniting - diverse viewpoints.

At its helm is Mags White-O'Kane, a passionate advocate for the event's mandate as a "high-quality showcase for the discussion of contemporary political and societal issues including new ideas on politics, culture, and activism."

As the event's newly-appointed Director, she brings a wealth of experience from her decades-long work in the region's arts and culture scene.

And, despite growing up amidst the backdrop of The Troubles, White-O'Kane has maintained her warmth and wit. "I am an Irish woman, born in Co. Antrim, although my dad is from Malton, North Yorkshire. As a result, I have a very high tolerance for unpredictable weather and strangely enjoy swimming in freezing water."

Now living in the picturesque village of Magheralin, roughly 15 miles southwest of Belfast, she is quick to commend her community.

"Magheralin is in Co. Armagh, proud County winners of the 2024 All-Ireland Senior Gaelic Football Championship. I believe the celebrations are still ongoing in a few of the local establishments!"

White-O'Kane's relationship with Imagine! Belfast began when she became involved as a performer and events organizer in the city's comedy scene.

"I was promoting a small cabaret night at the famous Duke of York Bar in Belfast."

Her admiration for Peter O'Neill, the festival's founder, and his willingness to embrace unconventional ideas, made an indelible impression. "Peter was known for his radical spirit, which persisted with the formation of Imagine! Festival of Ideas and Politics."

White-O'Kane is happy to carry that torch forward.

"I am passionate about cultural diversity, participation, compassion, and activism. This really is my dream job..."

Her role now encompasses everything from programming to fundraising.

"We are a micro-organization. Our team comprises me as full-time Festival Director and Peter has stayed on - thankfully - in a supportive role as Executive Producer.

"At its core, Imagine! Belfast is rooted in creatively tackling relevant social issues, encouraging under-represented groups to

participate in political and cultural debates, stimulating reflection and discussion on challenging issues, and promoting free speech, good relations, cultural diversity, and equality."

Held each March, the event encompasses a week-long series of events, engaging people in discussion and debate and championing the values of Community Engage-



Mags White-O'Kane

ment, Collaboration, Innovation, Diversity, and Sustainability.

White-O’Kane highlights the contributions of the Board of Trustees, volunteers, freelancers, and an exceptional design team who bring the festival’s vision to life.

“Alongside our amazing venues and event organizers, we are so fortunate to draw on the talent and energy of many wonderful partners.”

She notes, however, that operating in Northern Ireland’s distinctive arts and culture landscape does present unique hurdles.

“Most arts organizations here depend heavily on public funding and sponsorship. Imagine! Belfast hosts over 100 events in just one week, which is challenging enough, but we also operate on extremely limited budgets.”

Despite those challenges, White-O’Kane remains optimistic, citing “the goodwill of our wonderful partners, including universities, public funders, businesses and venues” as instrumental in finding solutions.

The rewards of being involved, she muses, are significant.

“The Belfast art scene truly is a family. In 2024, 50 percent of our audience members attended a festival event for the first time, and 42 percent had never been to these venues before.

“We are not just reaching new audiences - we are introducing them to new spaces and ideas.”

Equally meaningful is the festival’s engagement with marginalized communities.

“Twenty-one percent of our attendees identified as disadvantaged,” she continues. “That kind of impact makes all the hard work worthwhile.”

The programming is designed to attract a broad spectrum of attendees.

“Our audiences are mostly from Northern Ireland, but we welcome visitors from around the world. We invite open submissions, encouraging innovation and creativity from new contributors.”

Brimming with anticipation for the upcoming program, White-O’Kane is upbeat.

“Our 2025 lineup includes BAFTA-nominated author Lemn Sissay, celebrated



comedian Jo Caulfield, LGBTQ historian Jon Savage, and poet Erin Fornoff as our ‘artist’ in residence. We will also feature events on environmental politics, body positivity, gender equality, and much more.”

The full schedule lists over 100 events, including a special Day of Democracy, a celebration of Ska, Reggae and Two Tone, concerts, film showings, exhibitions, seminars, workshops, and more.

The festival’s venues are as eclectic as its programming.

“From the MAC (Metropolitan Arts Center) to unconventional rooms in classic pubs, churches, and even the famous Belfast Glider bus, our events will take place all over the city.”

Since its inception in 2015, Imagine! Belfast has expanded exponentially.

“We started with 43 events in 14 venues. Last year, we hosted 376 speakers and performers across 44 venues, with a total audience of nearly 20,000.”

Reflecting on the festival’s role in the community, White-O’Kane emphasizes its unique value for “curating controversial and provocative events.” She adds, “It is an important platform for showcasing emerging artists and providing space for voices often ignored in local political discourse.”

While fulfilling that mandate has been

a success, White-O’Kane acknowledges the broader struggles faced by the arts sector in Northern Ireland.

“Our part of the world consistently receives less investment in the arts compared to the rest of the UK and Ireland. To make a real difference, both increased investment and collaboration from policymakers are urgently needed.”

Nonetheless, she is staying positive.

“The goodwill and relentless enthusiasm within the arts sector do a lot of heavy lifting and Imagine! Belfast is a testament to that spirit.”

Going forward, White-O’Kane’s is excited about the opportunities to grow the gathering.

“I want to take Imagine! Belfast into an exciting new era. We aim to reflect the diversity of modern Belfast while challenging binary perceptions of identity in the North of Ireland. Belfast looks and feels very different from days gone by and Imagine! Belfast aims to reflect that transformation. This festival is about more than events - it is about fostering understanding, connection, and change. And, on top of all that, it’s good old fun!”

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Heather O'Neill & The Capital of Dreams

It has been almost two decades since Heather O'Neill released her debut novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. The critically acclaimed book won both the 2007 Canada Reads Award and the Hugh MacLellan Prize for Fiction. Since then, the Montreal-based scribe - who is of Irish and French descent - has been as busy as she has been successful, publishing an array of award-winning novels, short stories, and essays. Recently we spoke with the scribe about her latest work, *The Capital of Dreams* - a vivid, breathtaking dark fairytale of life, death, and betrayal.



CL: You are a native Montrealer.

HON: Yes, I was born here and have lived the majority of my life here. I left a couple of times but kept returning. Being here in the 1990s and early 2000s was the perfect place for a young artist - it was cheap, safe, and bubbling with creativity. I lived in the Plateau district then, and it was standard to go out at 3am, stumble out of a pub, and get creative with somebody. I currently live in Outremont, so I'm still close to that neighbourhood.

CL: Are you still stumbling out of pubs at 3am?

HON: Haha. I can't say that those days are over entirely, however the hangovers are far worse than they used to be. Let's just say that I have learned to temper my after-hours creativity.

CL: One of the things about the new book is its economy - you leave a lot to the imagination. Was that something you did consciously, or did it happen organically?

HON: Over time I became more of a craft person. My sense of creating stories has become stronger. When I started writing, I felt like I was a poet, and I had these imagery and visceral moments. With experience, I developed confidence in building worlds through structure, and it has been interesting to see my technique evolve and to have a sense of the ending and all the twists and turns it takes to get there. I can now see the bigger picture as I am creating it.

CL: Miles Davis said that music is the space between the notes.

HON: I love that. I love writers who write in a simple and yet devastating way, creating all these moments that just stuck with me - they created worlds without having to spell everything out. And I wanted to achieve that kind of simplicity with *The Capital of Dreams* - almost like a children's book, or maybe a fairytale.

CL: There is a lot of dark humor in there.

HON: I have always liked how Samuel Beckett dealt with trauma in a funny and absurd way in his plays, and I tried to capture and convey some of that in the new book with Sofia (protagonist). It is as if she tries on different philosophies the way she might try on different clothes while playing dress-up. I wanted to offset some of the darkness with that childlike sense of wonder and play, especially wordplay. So, yes, there is a certain sense of silliness about the whole thing which was intentional.

CL: As comedy was once born out of tragedy.

HON: Yes, because that is real life. I mean, comedians will often tell anecdotes about terrible things in a funny way to make people laugh - and that is a gift, when you really think about it. It is a coping mechanism. That's why we will often see or hear people laugh at what seems the



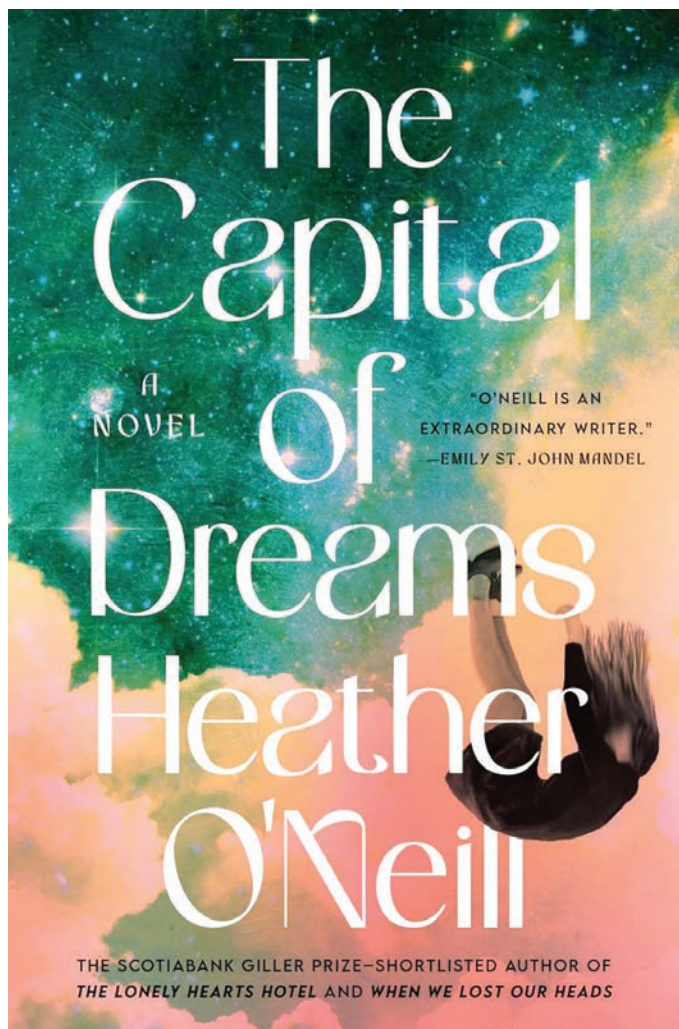
most inappropriate of times. And yet, in one sense, it is a completely normal, and even healthy way to process trauma.

CL: Was the new narrative a deliberate attempt to create a modern, or post-modern fable?

HON: The idea of developing contemporary mythologies is more important than ever, if only to better reflect the new complexities of the modern world. We seek and find truth through storytelling - we have been doing that as a species since we first developed language and art - and we must make some sense out of the times, especially for younger generations who are trying to process and heal whatever collective or individual trauma they might be experiencing.

CL: Similar to the reviews for Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, a number of critics and readers have noted that the book simmers in the subconscious after reading it - like a timed or delayed release of emotions, ideas, moods, etc.

HON: So far, the response has been fantastic. It is resonating with readers, maybe in the same way that *Life of Pi* touched some sort of collective nerve, and I simply couldn't be more thrilled.



CL: *What has the feedback been like from the people around you?*

HON: I am very close with my daughter, who lives across the street, and it was funny to have her perspective because when I was creating the character of Sofia's mom Clara Bottom - who is my first mother character, as I have always written motherless characters - I made her egotistical and arrogant, and my daughter was like "Oh, so that's you!" or "that's your evil avatar!" which kind of kept it light and in perspective for me.

CL: *So how much of you found its way into the book?*

HON: When I write each of the characters, there is always some aspect of me pushed in a different direction, or I just take parts of myself and then integrate them with other people. So, there is always a little dose of me in whatever I create. That's unavoidable, really, with any work of art. We are all a little elegantly demented that way.

CL: *Elegantly demented?*

HON: That's the part of being an artist that I have always been attracted to, writing in beautiful ways about what might be ugly or grotesque. We don't need artists to tell us that something that is beautiful is beautiful - artists are far more

effective when they take something horrid or terrible or painful and present it in a beautiful way.

CL: *That is something that only comes with time and experience. You wouldn't have been able to write this book 20 years ago.*

HON: Yes, exactly. And, like any craft, it really is about putting in the hours. There is no substitute for simply sitting down and getting on with it.

CL: *So, does that speak to how your creative process has evolved over the years?*

HON: It's funny - like, odd or strange funny - there are often times when I am feeling inspired to write and nothing comes of it at all. And then there are times when I feel like I am slogging through the mud creatively but end up with a few good lines. And then it can be the other way, so I don't know if I have a set formula per se. Sometimes, when the characters won't 'come out' I will 'go in' to meet them. Does that make sense? And I still write freehand, because the process helps me to access parts of my mind that I wouldn't be able to otherwise. My pens and pencils are sort of like magic wands that way.

CL: *What is the role of a creative in society today?*

HON: Well, that's the big question, isn't it? And it is one that we have wrestled with for centuries - art for art's sake, or art for mankind's sake? And there is more conversation about that now than ever before. Do you just go into hiding and do what you do for the sake of it, or is there some bigger purpose at play there? For me, I'm a bit of both, but I think I fall on the side of the latter. And the way I do that is through my writing.

CL: *Again, something that only comes with experience.*

HON: I have found that, as I have matured, I have a greater sense of the world around me, my place in it, and my responsibility towards it. When we are younger, we are all we really think about.

CL: *What's next on your creative agenda?*

HON: I wrote a serialized novel for the Montreal Gazette, so that will be coming out as a complete little piece sometime soon, and I am currently working on another novel which will be about witches.

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The Irish Rovers

Even after 60 years, there is no end in sight
for The Irish Rovers. Story by Lillian Holt.
Photos by Hamish Burgess.

The Irish Rovers, a name synonymous with the robust tapestry of Canadian and Celtic music, celebrated their 60th anniversary in 2023 - a milestone that solidified their status as legendary cultural ambassadors.

From their modest beginnings in Toronto's folk clubs to international recognition and honours, the band's journey has been both engaging and entertaining.

Their most recent recording, *No End In Sight*, not only marks their illustrious career but also echoes the longing for joy and connection in today's challenging times.

"I was just 16 when I met Jimmy Ferguson," reminisces co-founding member George Millar over the phone from his home in British Columbia, Canada. "We sang songs we had learned growing up in Ireland, never imagining it would go beyond the folk clubs of Toronto. We gave it a year. Now, 60 years later, I'm still saying, 'Let's see where this goes.'"

Things haven't always gone so smoothly, however.

From the start, the Rovers walked a fine line between "trad" and contemporary Celtic melodies, with purists in Ireland and abroad frowning upon their blend of folk standards and popular tunes like *Puff the Magic Dragon*. However, the band's willingness to adapt endeared them to audiences worldwide.

As immigrants from Northern Ireland, they often grappled with questions of cultural identity, captured poignantly in their 2020 song, *A Band Without a Country*.

"In Ireland, we weren't seen as traditional enough, and in Canada, we weren't from Newfoundland, so we didn't fit the Celtic mold there either. But in America, they embraced us wholeheartedly, and we found some solid footing."

True enough, Millar and his peers enjoyed immediate success with their early performances in California. What began as a quartet - Millar, Millar's brother Will, Ferguson, and "Cousin" Joe - captured international attention in 1968 with *The Unicorn*, a whimsical tune penned by poet and children's author Shel Silverstein.



Almost immediately, the song gained traction with a late-night radio DJ in - of all places - Albuquerque, New Mexico.

"We stumbled upon Unicorn, thought it was different, and gave it a try. Next thing we knew, people were sitting up, paying attention, and asking for it all night long. It just took off."

Interestingly, Glen Campbell - a rising star at the time who often worked as a studio session musician - was selected to play guitar on the now-famous song.

“To see our name alongside the Beatles on the charts was surreal. We were just a group of lads playing Irish songs with no idea this would happen...”

No End In Sight stands as a testament to their timeless relevance. Its lead single, *Hey Boys Sing Us a Song* - nominated for Single of the Year at the 2023 Canadian Folk Music Awards - succeeded in capturing the spirit of the times.

"The world is not in a good state right now," Millar reflects. "That song came naturally."

"It is not a protest song, but it is a call for something lighter, something hopeful. We all need some happiness back in our lives."

True to Ireland's rich storytelling tradition, the band continues to weave both history and contemporary themes into their music.

"I try to write songs that sound timeless. When someone asks, 'Where did you find that old tune?' and I can say, 'Actually, I wrote it,' that's the greatest compliment."

Over six decades, the group has both entertained and inspired countless other artists as well, including Alan Doyle of Newfoundland troubadours *Great Big Sea*, who once told Millar, "Without The Irish Rovers' TV show, there would be no *Great Big Sea*."

The band's influence extends far and wide, from their iconic television appearances and long-running television series in Canada to their contributions to Celtic culture. Along the way, the Rovers were recog-



nized as cultural ambassadors for both Ireland and Canada.

Their dual heritage is a point of pride for Millar, who holds citizenship in both countries.

“Celtic culture is everywhere. It is the music of the people, simple yet powerful. Whether it is an Irish pub in Russia or a festival in Milwaukee, that connection is universal.”

Millar credits the global resurgence of Irish music and dance to cultural phenomena like Riverdance. “What that show did for Irish culture was incredible. It brought a modern flair to traditional art and captivated young people everywhere.”

He also sees the preservation of Celtic culture as a shared responsibility.

“There is so much good music coming out of the Maritimes and other places now. But if you are going to sing these songs, know what you are singing about. That authenticity matters.”

Authenticity, he muses, alongside camaraderie and a collective sense of purpose have been at the core of the group’s long success.

“We like each other, plain and simple. You hear about bands breaking up over ‘musical differences.’ That is nonsense. You start a band because you share a vision. If you lose that, you have lost everything. When you start a band, you should know what you want to do - simply stick to your guns and play the music you love.”

Despite losing founding members Jimmy Ferguson and Joe Millar, the band continues to thrive with new players, including Joe’s son Ian.

“The band is as strong as ever, and as long as we’re enjoying ourselves and delivering for the audience, we will keep going...”

“We are folk singers at heart, but also entertainers, and every show - whether it’s for 100 people or 2,000 - has to be your best. Audiences know when you’re not giving it your all.”

As they mark their 60th anniversary, The Irish Rovers continue to evolve while staying true to their roots.

“Nobody will know better than me when it’s time to call it a day,” says Millar flatly. “But right now, we are enjoying every moment. We are probably on our fifth farewell tour. However, so long as there is an audience, there is no end in sight.”

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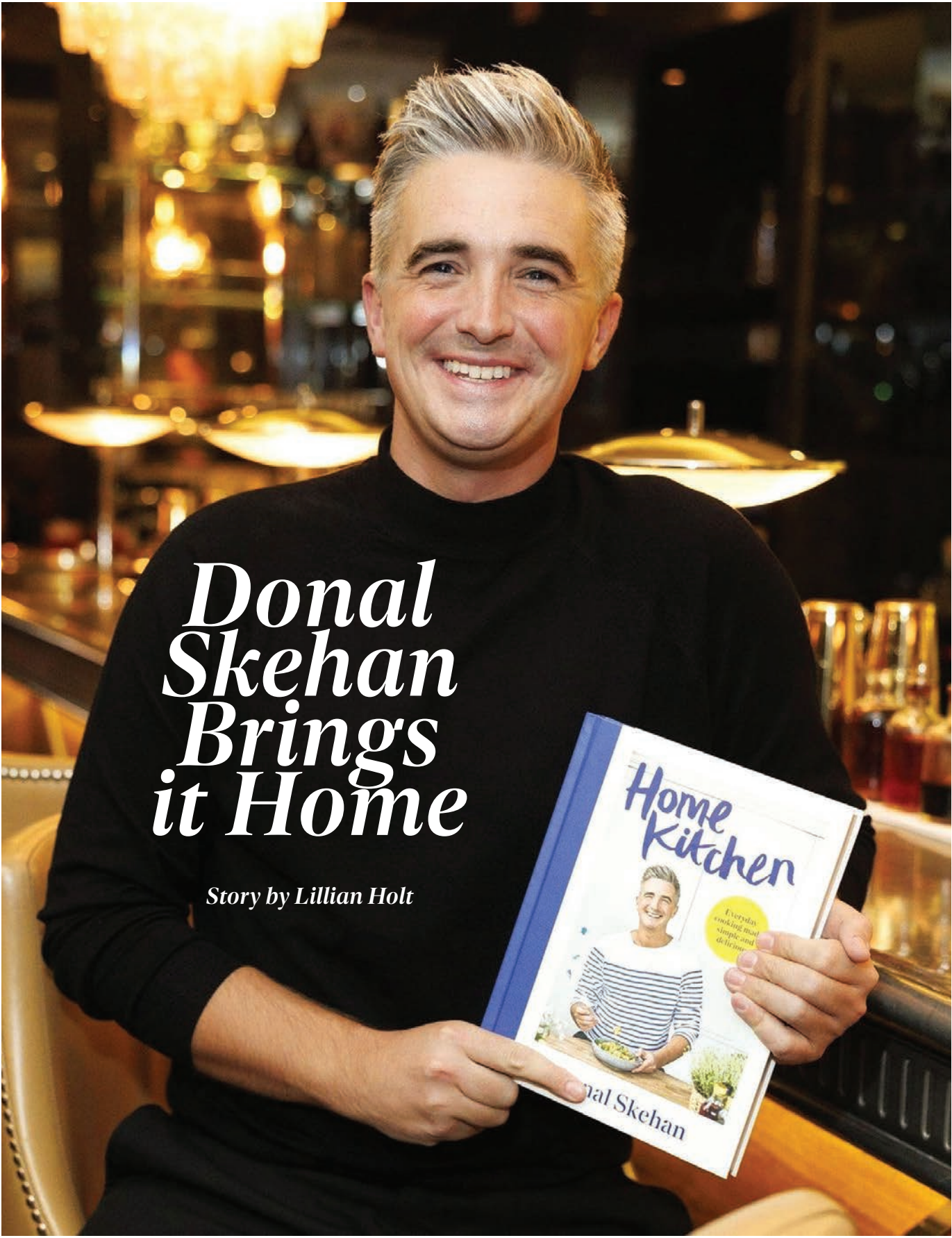


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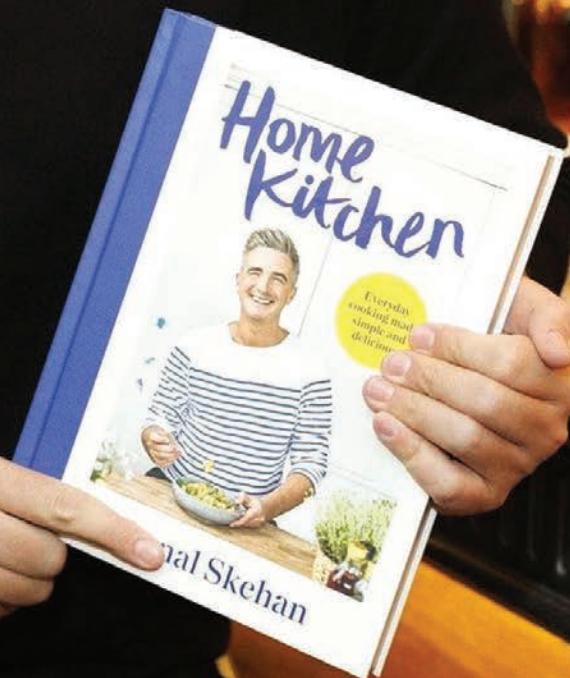
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A photograph of Donal Skehan, a man with grey hair, smiling and holding a book titled 'Home Kitchen'. He is wearing a black turtleneck sweater. The background is a blurred restaurant interior with warm lighting and brass fixtures. The title 'Donal Skehan Brings it Home' is overlaid in large white serif font on the left side of the image.

Donal Skehan Brings it Home

Story by Lillian Holt



Equally renowned for both his charming demeanor and his culinary expertise, Irish chef and media personality Donal Skehan has carved out a distinctive spot in the global food industry.

From humble beginnings as one of Ireland's first food bloggers to international fame, the 38-year-old continues to balance accessibility and authenticity within the ever-changing dynamics of food trends.

With a focus on convenience and relatability, Skehan emphasizes the importance of creating recipes that resonate with audiences and address the everyday challenge of what to serve for supper.

"It comes down to the purpose behind your lifestyle and what you are doing," he shares over the phone from his home in Dublin. "Early on, I learned that there is no point in my writing and creating recipes - as exciting as they might be - if people aren't going to actually make them and enjoy them."

His latest cookbook, *Home Kitchen* - and the accompanying TV series, *Home Cook* - serve-up easy-to-follow, practical instructions for meal prepping. The projects were conceived following his return to Ireland after living and working for several years in Los Angeles, California.

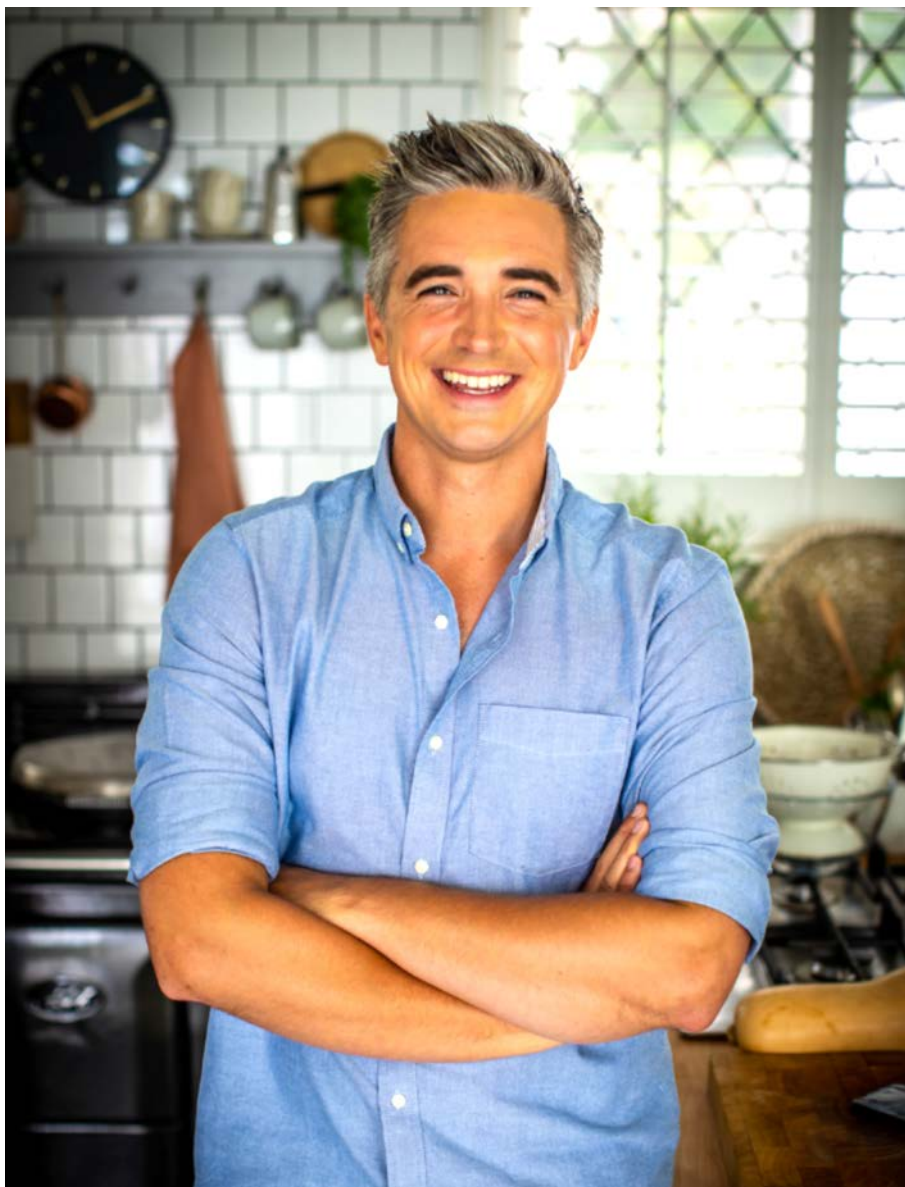
The homecoming reconnected Skehan with Irish traditions, family, and the incredible local produce that the country has to offer.

“Coming home puts everything in perspective. Ireland’s incredible meats, dairy, and seafood reminds me of what makes our cuisine so special.”

The new cookbook celebrates the staples of daily Irish life, from hearty Sunday dinners to quick weeknight meals, blending nostalgia with practicality - a testament to the evolution of Eire's culinary culture over the past decade.

"When I started, food writing was the domain of chefs and critics. Now, anyone with a story and passion can share their voice."

Today, Ireland boasts a world-class array of Michelin-star restaurants, chefs, and food producers championing local and seasonal ingredients. However, Skehan believes there is still room for growth, particularly when it comes to supporting small restaurants



and businesses. As such, he advocates for a change in public policies to encourage innovation and sustain the vibrancy of Ireland's food scene.

"Support is there for really young food producers. The only thing that we are missing is a little more leniency on the tax front for our smaller restaurants and businesses to flourish."

One of Skehan's exciting new ventures is Wind Shore Goods, a creative lifestyle brand that he says has helped him to "scratch a long-held creative itch." Rooted in his artistic heritage - his grandparents were sculptors - the brand blends aesthetics with functionality. Wind Shore Goods offers thoughtfully-designed homeware items that elevate daily ritu-

als, such as elegant coffee cups, artisanal vases, and finer food items. The project marks a full-circle moment for the celebrity chef, who previously published a magazine showcasing Irish artisans.

“It really is a platform for celebrating craftsmanship and products with purpose...”

Though still in its early stages, Skehan plans to expand the range while collaborating with other artisans. The brand reflects his desire to root his life in meaningful connections and thoughtful choices, a sentiment shaped by the changing tides of his own family life and the need to find balance and stability.



"One of the big things for us, particularly as a family who has moved around a lot and are now approaching an era of setting down roots, is that we want every item that comes into the house to have something of a purpose and that also tells a story."

The brand's debut also includes a curated collection of high-quality ingredients, such as olive oil pressed on the first day of harvest, encapsulating an ethos for mindful living.

"First and foremost, it showcases our fantastic Irish artisans. It also allows me to have a bit of playfulness with finding and creating something purposeful with a custom collection of some of my favorite ingredients, putting them at the forefront."

As if launching a lifestyle brand wasn't enough, Skehan is also working on a new cookbook and TV show slated for release in 2025. While details remain under wraps, he hinted that the projects would continue his tradition of combining simple, delicious recipes with heartfelt, and typically Irish, storytelling. Additionally, he plans to return to the United States for promotional events.

As a husband and busy father of two young boys, Skehan notes the challenges of balancing a demanding career with family life.

"It is certainly something I struggle with. I sometimes get it right and sometimes I am out of kilter."

To stay grounded, he prioritizes activities that "fill his cup" - including meditation, cooking for pleasure, and long walks along Ireland's cliffs with his dog. These rituals help him recalibrate when the scales tip too heavily toward work.

Achieving a proper work/ life balance is characteristic of the many practical challenges facing busy families and individuals today. His transparency reflects the self-care and mindfulness that speaks directly to viewers looking for equilibrium in carrying out everyday essentials like food prep.

“We have a young family with two cute and crazy boys, and we need answers and quick fixes just like anyone else...”

For those aspiring to enter the culinary world, Skehan's advice is clear: find your platform and be consistent. He credits his early success to his food blog, which allowed him to share his voice and showcase his photography - a skill he continues to use in his many projects. He advocates using various social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram that offer similar opportunities for aspiring culinary creators.

"It is easier than ever to be visible. Make use of social platforms and understand that good visuals are very important. I still photograph all my own food for my cookbooks and beyond. Having the ability to showcase your work is key."

As he embarks on another ambitious year, Skehan hopes that his projects continue to inspire others - both abroad and in his own home.

"I am always trying to bring my vision back to solving the endless question of 'What's for dinner tonight?'"

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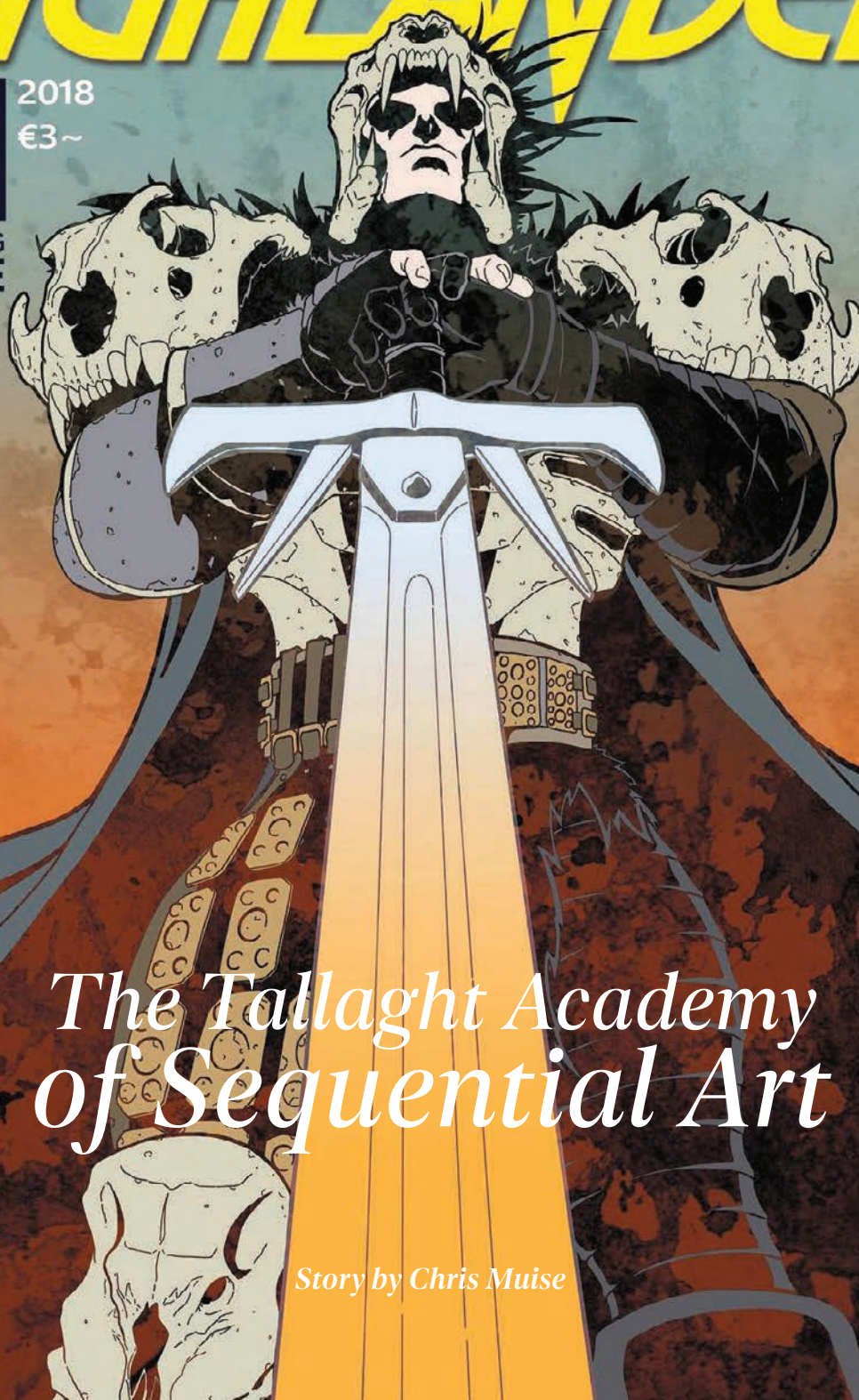
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The Tallaght Academy of Sequential Art

Story by Chris Muise

CULTURE

Millions of kids have dreamed of working in the world of comics. However, as those youngsters get older - and start thinking about a post-secondary education and subsequent career - the path to the funny pages is rarely a clear one.

"I grew up idolizing Batman, as every kid does that's into the medium," says Aaron Cunneen, a 30-year-old from Co. Cork tells Celtic Life International over Zoom. "The dream was to make comics. I always wanted to break into it, or to get beyond just starting, but I had no idea how."

It took some time, but Cunneen is making headway; earlier this year, he came across an opportunity to learn practical, hands-on skills to help him break into comics via classes taught by industry professionals.

"I was at Dublin Comic Con earlier this year, and there was a presentation about this academy," he recalls. "I was like, whoa! I need to see if I can get funding for this."

Cunneen is referring to The Talaght Academy of Sequential Art in Dublin, launched at the onset of 2024 by author and indie comic publisher Eoin McAuley.

"We call it TASQ for the international audiences, and it makes a great handle for social media postings," McAuley shares in a Zoom call from his office in Dublin, before moving on to discuss the rich Irish origins of some of the storytelling mechanics that are at the heart of all comics. "Ireland has a very rich history of comic book creators. Not even just the recent stuff; for instance, Grace Gifford, the wife of the Irish revolutionary Joseph Plunkett, was a political cartoonist.

"You can go back even further to ancient times; take the Irish high crosses, for example - what you see is essentially a three-dimensional comic strip...scenes from the Bible carved into stone. Or the work of Harry Clarke, the famous stained-glass artist who depicted a series of sequential images in his work. One of our lecturers here at the academy, Derek Tyler Attico, pointed out in his class The Fundamentals of Sequential Storytelling that the stained-glass window was a way for conveying scenes from the Bible, for the masses, for people who couldn't read or write.



“Sequential art is one of the fundamental universal languages that we have...”

"With the comic book form the text becomes secondary - the audience will understand what is happening intuitively through the visuals."

Like many other bright-eyed dreamers, McAuley was unsure how to make a living from making comics.

"My origin story, as it were, goes back to when I studied history as an undergraduate in Trinity College Dublin. There was a competition for a business idea, and I came up with the idea of a comic book publishing company called Lightning Strike Comics."

McAuley had friends and colleagues from Dublin City Comics, and the support of a local social club called The Geeks Easy.

"I realized there are many talented artists and writers and myself, all gathered in this room on a weekly basis, but none of us had

two cents to rub together or any gainful employment. Everyone seemed willing to come on board."

McAuley forged strong connections with these fellow artists - many of whom went on to work for the big names in comics, including Marvel, DC, Image, Boom! Studios, etc - leading him to several professional contracts, as well as a lecturing opportunity with Pulse College in Dublin, where he would teach entrepreneurship in entertainment fields like animation and video games.

"Then, in January of this year, I came to a crossroads," shares McAuley. "I was reflecting on my career and looking at the body of work I was doing, and I said to myself, 'What would be next?' Turns out my passion for comic books was still there.

“Ultimately, I resolved to redefine what I was doing and set up my own academy in Tallaght.”



McAuley pooled all his connections, colleagues, and experiences he accumulated over his career to open the doors to his academy, which is located at The Edge, a shared office and co-working space in Dublin. He wants to use all the collective experience under his roof to give aspiring comic creatives real, practical advice - from the technical aspects of making comics to entrepreneurial skills like online marketing and social media.

"Essentially, what we have designed is a direct path to industry," says McAuley, who wants others to benefit from his mistakes. "I was the canary down the mine shaft. I am not here because I'm great - I am here because

I have made every mistake possible, and to make sure others don't make those same mistakes."

TASQ-Art offers two 12-week semesters through the year between three study tiers; full-time in-person student, full-time online, and part-time/in-person with an on-line weekend course load.

"We are all working with the same material at the moment," notes McAuley, "so no group is falling behind."

For people who aren't looking to become students but wish to support the academy, there's an Academy Membership, where subscribers can get access to the same lectures

featuring big names in comics as the students do. In addition, there is the anthology series TASQ-Force, published by Lightning Strike, featuring student work and licensed newspaper strips translated into Gaelic

"I would have loved to have had something like TASQ as a kid," says Dan Schkade, a midwestern USA comic artist whose current run on Flash Gordon is among the titles being translated into Gaelic for TASQ-Force, as well as for the local Dublin newspaper The Echo.

"I didn't go to any kind of school for art," continues Schkade, "but I did go to conventions and show my drawings to other artists, and I would get advice from some big names, like Tim Sale, Tony Dezuniga, and Bruce Timm.

"TASQ is replicating that experience without the airfare. The idea of a college where you can enjoy a collaborative collegiate experience with other young people at the same time is awesome and I wish there was one in every city."

That collaborative collegiate experience is paying off for Cunneen, who found the funding he was hopeful for from Aiséiri, an organization that helps people take their life back from addiction.

"I am making up for all that lost time and I'm absolutely loving it," he beams. "I am working on a strip now, something that Eoin has been helping me with. I'm not anywhere near close to making a comic, but - even just in this first semester - I have already learned so much."

Cunneen's childhood dream of making comics - as with other like-minded dreamers - is the reason McAuley opened the doors at TASQ, and why he hopes they will be open for years to come.

"As long as I can keep a roof over my head, pay the rent, and feed myself, that's all I want," he says. "I don't need to make massive bucks out of this - I am satisfied with seeing the good work, the satisfaction of a job well done, and the pride in watching people achieve their dream of seeing their story published."

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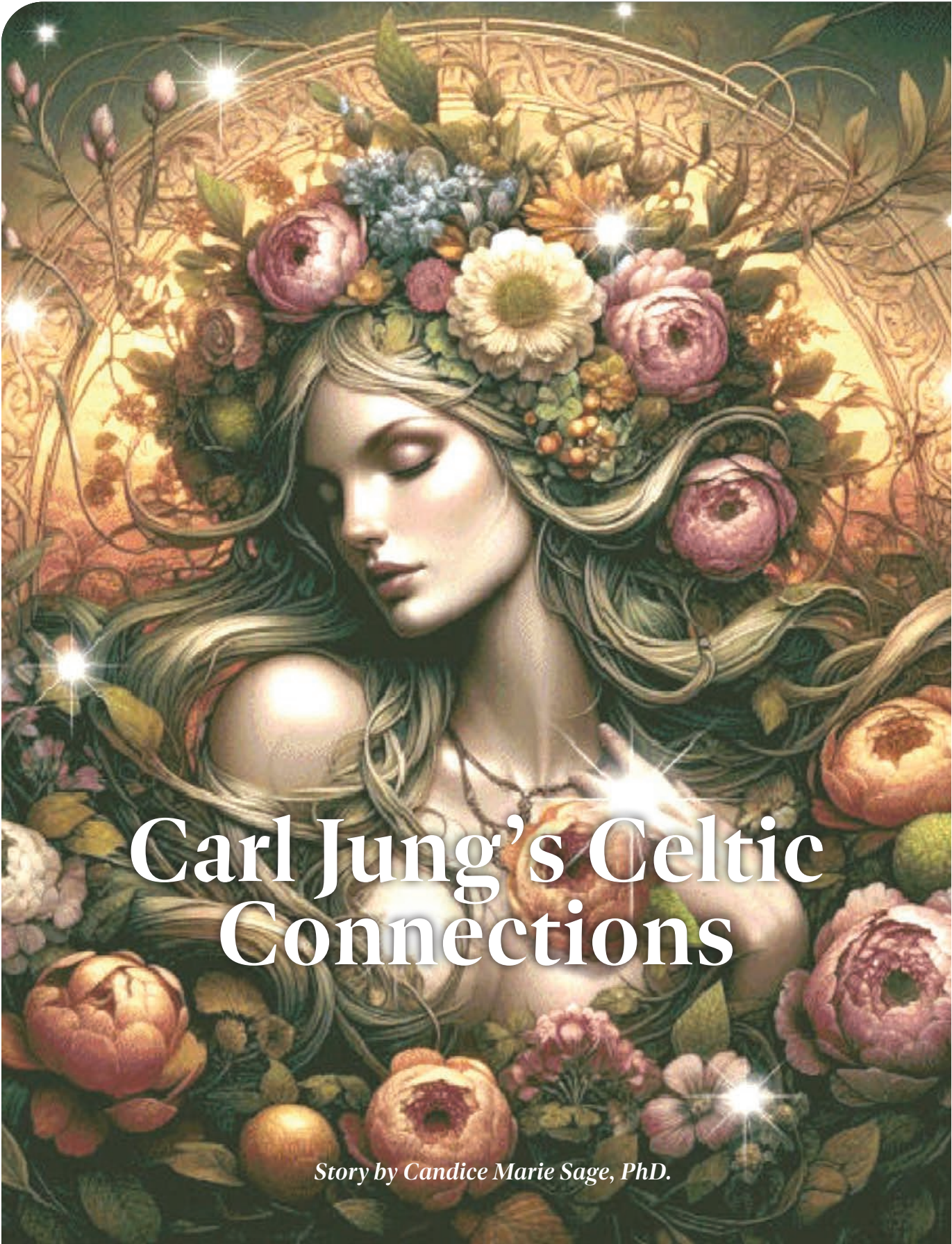
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Carl Jung's Celtic Connections

Story by Candice Marie Sage, PhD.

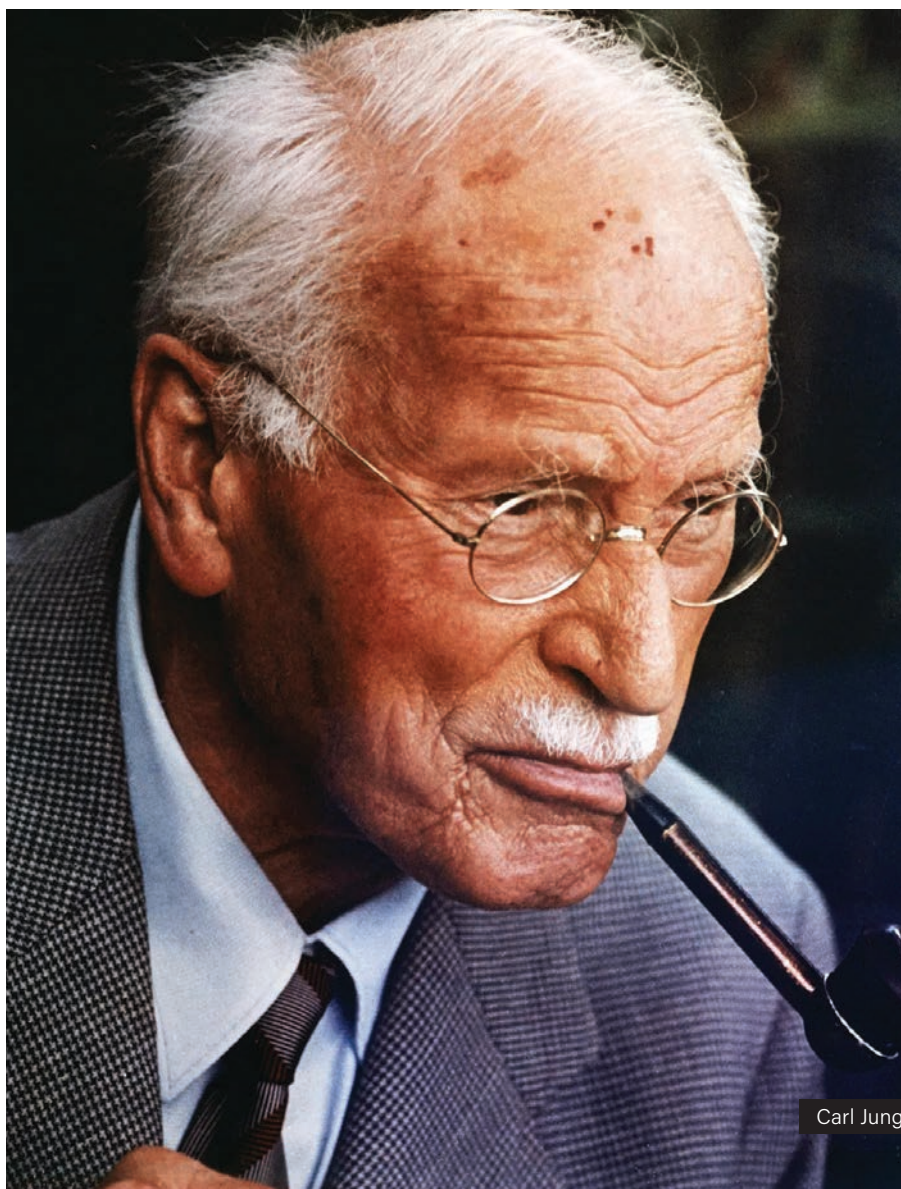
Archetypal is the Greek word for 'original pattern'. Swiss psychoanalyst/psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) used the concept of archetypes to better understand factors that influence personality and human behaviour. For example, archetypal figures like the Hero not only have an impact on our dreams, but also upon our conscious thoughts, beliefs, and values. Jung explored the individual's conscious mind - perceptions, thoughts, and actions. Human beings are also affected by the 'personal unconscious' mind that holds onto forgotten or suppressed experiences. Of particular interest, however, is Jung's concept of the 'collective unconscious' - a shared collection of memories, experiences, and knowledge inherited from our ancestors.

We know from the emerging science of epigenetics how trauma affects us in particular ways that have been passed down genetically (hence the term inter-generational trauma). However, talents, strengths, and resilience are also inherited - not just through the influence of kin in our lives, but also through our DNA.

Jung considered the experience of dreaming - and how symbols manifest from myths and the subconscious - as a religious process. For those with faith in an established religion, the process might be easier as the path is already paved. Jung firmly believed, however, that any person could be guided by their own religious authority.

Archetypes connect cultures all over the world through powerful universal symbols that imbue mythologies, spiritual movements, and religions. Celtic mythology is rich with gods and goddesses that represent elements of Jungian archetypes, and can serve as those who searching for greater identity and meaning in hyper-capitalized, consumerism-driven Western societies.

Jung acknowledged that archetypes could intermingle, giving rise to 12 archetypal figures or images. These include the Ruler (King / Queen); the Creator / Artist; the Sage; the Innocent; the Explorer; the Rebel; the Hero; the Wizard / Magician; the Jester; the Everyman; the Lover; and the Caregiver / Mother.



Carl Jung

“ Jung further divided the archetypal figures into masculine and feminine characteristics through his concepts of the animus and anima - the male and female parts of the psyche, respectively

For him, the masculine relates to problem-solving, emotional stability, and logical thinking. The feminine is characterized by intuition, emotional connections, trust, and empathy. Jung has been critiqued for his projection of a male, white, cis-gendered, Eurocentric psyche of what it is to be female.

To bridge this gap, feminists argue that

the archetypes should be viewed without a gendered bias, as all humans can exhibit these characteristics.

People of Western societies tend to be most familiar with male archetypes, which arose from the monolithic God of Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity). The four Jungian male archetypal figures are; the King, who seeks maturity by achieving balance within control of his realm. Sometimes described as the Father figure, he represents authority, wisdom, protection, and provision; the Warrior, whose courage and resilience serve him in the pursuit of a noble cause. Also described as the Hero, his is a courageous journey in response to a challenge or crisis; the



Magician, who becomes the master craftsman, through the pursuit of knowledge and technology, provides meaningful contributions to the world. Also described as the Wise Old Man, he seeks wholeness and self-realization through wisdom, insight, and intuition. The Magician understands the ways of the world and how to use this wisdom for the good of all; the Lover, who experiences the world with youthful idealism and an innate belief in goodness. This archetype embodies emotion and excitement and inspires creativity in all that he does.

However, prior to Hellenic and other Western patriarchal religions and mythologies, holistic models of goddess archetypes and energies were tied to Mother Nature, the Land, and feminine creation. That influence prevailed across the planet.

The seven female archetypal figures are the Mother, the Maiden, the Huntress, the Mystic, the Sage, the Queen, and the Lover. Goddesses of mythology can be used to further journeys of self-discovery and inner wisdom on how to live with more intention and purpose.

“The Celtic values of inclusivity, integrity, authenticity, creativity, and a reverence for Mother Nature were passed down through the ages, and - in a socially and economically divisive world – are needed more than ever.

For all genders, the feminine archetypes, and the goddesses associated with them, can inspire us to develop our strengths to better ourselves and our communities.

Celtic mythology is particularly helpful in this regard - the tri-goddesses of Celtic mythology, Danú, Brighid, and the Mórrígan provide ways for all genders to tap into the powers of the Ruler, the Sage, the Mystic, the Hunter, the Lover, and in particular, the Mother/Creator/Protector.

In Celtic mythology, we see the Tri-goddess represented through three attributes: warmth, wisdom, and warfare. These align with Jungian archetypes; wisdom is associated with the Sage, the Mystic, and the Mother.

The goddess Cailleach is known as the Old One - all-knowing, she is wife to the sea god Manannan and is said to control the weather. She also rules the healing arts and sciences, childbirth, death, and rebirth - roles traditionally associated with the Mother. Her time is that of fall and winter.

Warfare aligns with the Huntress, the Queen, and the Mother. Warfare is embodied in the tri-goddess The Morrigan, who is always at the ready to fight for her beloved land and people. She, too, is associated with the Mother roles of life, death, and rebirth.

Warmth aligns with the Maiden, the Mother, the Queen, and the Lover. The Druid tri-goddess Brigid represents warmth and is linked to the spring and summer months. Her goddess identity and importance to Celtic culture was the only one that survived foreign domination. She is now deemed a Saint and is celebrated in the Christian liturgical calendar on February 1, as well as at Imbolc in the pagan Wheel of the Year of Sabbats and seasons. Brigid rules learning, healing, and the smithy/fire crafts - qualities associated with the Sage and Mystic.

Though she is absent from the earliest Irish mythological narratives like the Book of Invasions, it is important to acknowledge Danú, the Irish Mother Goddess of creation, destruction, and regeneration. She is the symbol of the land itself, and the progenitor of the divine Tuatha Dé Danann (the supernatural folk). Danú is Ireland's most revered goddess, a symbol of the country's fertility. In Jung's Theory of Anima Mundi, there is a connection between all living beings, and a soul to the world, which is Danú's role in Irish mythology. She is the mother of deities, heroes, artisans, and craftspeople, and protector of the lands. She also presided over all coronations of Irish Kings of old and their goddess queens.

In the tri-goddesses, we can better understand the holistic nature of Celtic culture, including ties to nature, spirituality, and the Veil (collective unconscious). It is very possible that the missing piece to our thriving as a society - and indeed our very survival as a species - is the goddess and the archetypes and values that she embodies.

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Invisible Cities

One Scottish organization encourages the disadvantaged to share their experience, strength, and hope.

Story by
Tom Langlands



Ixited Edinburgh's Waverley Railway Station to the sound of bagpipes emanating from an opposite corner of Princes Street Gardens. It is a prime busking spot, with tourists milling around waiting to take a city tour on one of the several open-topped buses parked along the edge of the road. A bus tour, albeit a form of guided tourism, is nonetheless a good and unique way to get a quick overview of a city.

Being early for a meeting with Zakia Moulaoui Guery, the founder of Invisible Cities, I opted for a leisurely stroll via some of the back alleys and the old stone staircases that ascend the steep slope into Edinburgh's Old Town to connect with the Royal Mile. From there it was a short walk along the cobbled road past St Giles Cathedral and on to the historic Grassmarket. Passing through the alleyways, I encountered the occasional beggar and the remnants of cardboard boxes that had been someone's bed for the night, the torn edges still frosted in the shade. On the main thoroughfares I saw groups of tourists being led by guides or huddled around some point of interest. Within a few hundred yards I had witnessed two very different sides of the same city.

I met Guery in the cafe at The Grassmarket Community Project and, over coffee, she explained that what I had just witnessed was typical of many modern cities, "The homeless and the socially disadvantaged feel unwelcome

and unwanted and will often hide in doorways and back alleys while the tourist industry tries to keep visitors from seeing what it regards as the less attractive side of the city."

That, she explains, was her motivation to create Invisible Cities. The concept is simple: homeless people are trained to be tour guides, acquiring greater self-worth and sense of belonging, while at the same time offering the discerning visitor an insight into parts of the city connected with the guide's own life story - perhaps a more authentic, and less sanitised tourism experience.

“ Invisible Cities doesn't just embolden homeless people, it also seeks to encourage others - such as corporate clients, students and local businesses - to engage with the disadvantaged in society; it is a two-way process.

Intrigued about Guery's background and how the model for Invisible Cities evolved, I asked her how she came up with the idea. Reclining into a comfortable sofa with latte in hand she explains, "I was born in the south of France to a French mother and an Algerian father. As a youngster my mixed-race heritage made no difference at school or to the friends that I grew up with but as I got older, I became aware of preju-

dices creeping in. My father had come to France at a time when the government actively sought workers from the people in the nation it had colonized. That changed when Algeria gained its independence in 1962 but by then my parents were settled in Saint-Etienne."

Both parents have now passed away, but she recalls with great fondness how her mother became a social activist and, in the absence of formal support systems for isolated women, it was her mother who regularly invited random women to stay in the family home. "I just thought my mum had lots of friends," she laughs.

Having grown up speaking both English and French, Guery became a language teacher in France before applying for a placement through the British Council that saw her land a job at Edinburgh's prestigious George Heriot's School. After eighteen months, she realized that while she enjoyed preparing lessons, teaching wasn't the career for her. She left, taking a series of jobs in bars and restaurants before applying for an office job with the Homeless World Cup Foundation using her language skills. The organization encourages participating countries to identify homeless people with an interest in football and then select a pool of players to represent their home country on an international level. I can tell by her body language and the intonation in her voice that the post was a turning point.



“I stayed with them for over five years. I was appointed Director of International Partner Development and was responsible for organizing and promoting events worldwide. I learned the power of street football and how team spirit and purpose can change lives.”

The job saw her travel to European tournaments but also further afield to Mexico and Chile. The 2024 Netflix movie, *The Beautiful Game*, starring Bill Nighy and Micheal Ward was inspired by the true story of the Homeless World Cup.

Sadly, while in Chile in 2014 Guery took seriously ill. At twenty-seven years of age, she was diagnosed with cancer and required major surgery. Unable to travel for a year she spent time thinking about how she could make a difference to the lives of people in need. In 2015, she travelled to Greece, volunteering to help the tens of thousands of refugees displaced by war and economic crises across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, who began arriving by boat on the island of Lesbos.

“It was gruelling and harrowing, however it only strengthened my resolve to make a difference.”

In Athens, she made friends with the people running *Shedia* - Greece’s magazine about homelessness. The magazine had emerged on

the back of Greece’s participation in the Homeless World Cup. Inspired by *Shedia*’s promotion of education, training, and employment opportunities, Guery returned to Scotland and took her evolving ideas to the Good Ideas Academy - a body funded by the Scottish Government to support ideas for social innovation. After four months of learning, Invisible Cities was launched in 2016 in Edinburgh. Part of the program at the academy involved the exploration of funding options, and with Guery’s track record and enthusiasm several local business and enterprises agreed to fund the project.

Using homeless agencies to identify suitable candidates, potential tour guides are selected and given extensive training that can last up to a year. They are taught communication and timekeeping skills and, as they are paid for the work they do, financial help to manage their earnings. Individuals are encouraged to develop their own specific angle for a tour drawing on their personal life experiences or interests, all the while being supported in all aspects of their development by trained professionals including healthcare workers. All tour guides learn the basic history of certain places but may take clients to less well-known areas, sharing their own journeys that may have involved crime or alcohol and drug abuse. One guide, Sonny opens up about his journey through crime and prison while another, Gayle - with a background of

domestic abuse - focuses on the women of Edinburgh, pointing out that there are more statues to named animals in the city than to named women. A typical tour comprises four to six individuals and lasts no more than two hours. Like the football teams of the Homeless World Cup, individuals gain strength from the camaraderie and team spirit of the organization and from each other. For many, it will be the first time they have had a job, have felt valued, or feel like they have been given a purpose in life. With tours promoted through accommodation providers, Edinburgh University, and various businesses and other social enterprises, Invisible Cities has proven to be so successful that it has now been rolled out in Glasgow, Manchester, York, and Cardiff, with other cities in the pipeline.

Although the founding of Invisible Cities has involved a long journey embodying ideas and experiences gained from her travels across the globe Guery is quick to point it that it all has its roots in Saint Etienne, “It was watching my mum help so many struggling people through difficult times that instilled in me the desire to help others.”

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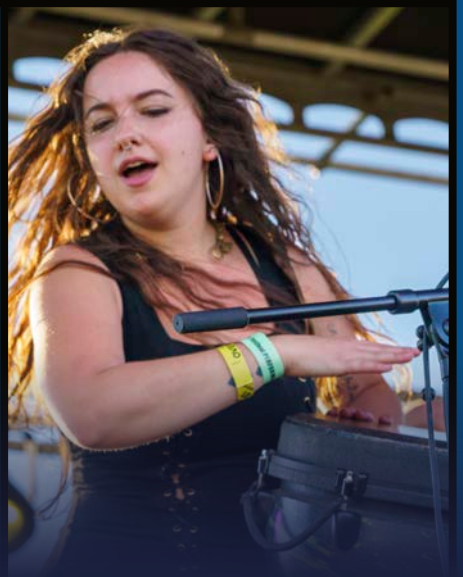
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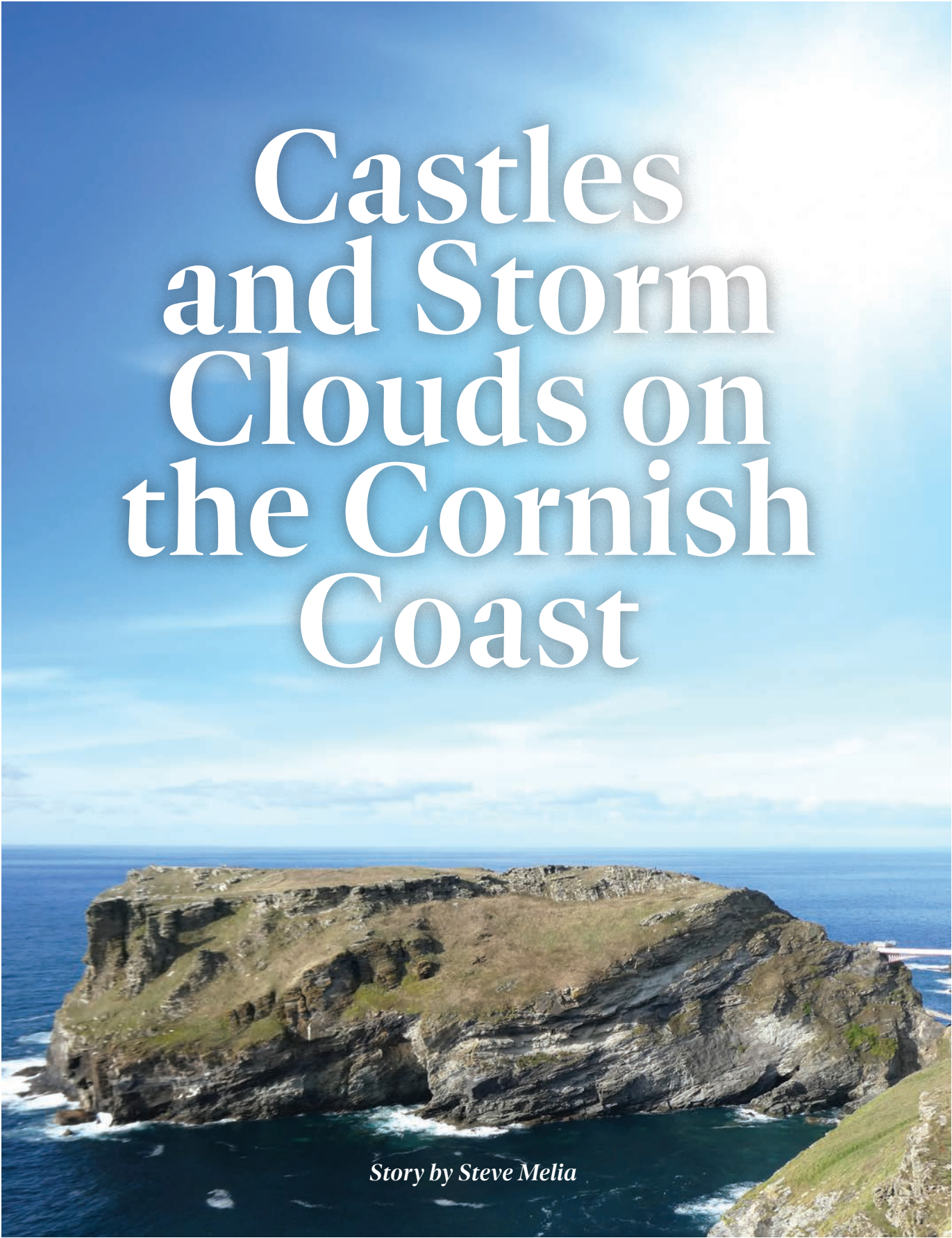
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Castles and Storm Clouds on the Cornish Coast

Story by Steve Melia

For over a thousand years, Cornwall has been ruled as part of England. However, as many Cornish people will tell you, they are not English - they are Celtic.

The origins of Cornwall's ambiguous status go back to a time between the departure of the Romans and the Norman conquest, from which few written records survive. Some recent archaeological finds are changing what we thought we knew about that era. To learn more, I set out on a walk along the Cornish coast, from Port Isaac to Bude, stopping first in Exeter, where the story begins with the arrival of the Romans.

The rail line to Cornwall passes through Exeter in the neighbouring county of Devon, regarded as a rival by many Cornish. It is a small city of 130,000 people, but it feels larger. Climbing the hill from the main station towards the centre, one is surrounded by history, some of it obvious, and some of it waiting to be discovered down the side streets and passageways. The Roman walls around the historic centre are still largely intact, although they have been repaired and rebuilt several times. If one looks closely, one can see the different styles from each era, with the Roman stonework at the bottom.

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum has a room devoted to local history and pre-history. In the Roman collection, some of the artworks look strangely naïve - a note beside one of them says "The artists who made these were not as skilled as their Italian counterparts." This was frontier country, and Exeter was the westernmost town in southern Britain, the capital of the Dumnonii administrative region. The name Dumnonii came from a local Iron Age Celtic tribe. The boundaries of their territory, and how far Roman rule stretched into Cornwall, remain uncertain. Archaeological finds suggest the Cornish population was less Romanized than their neighbours, but new evidence has emerged of Roman military sites and of a road network.

What happened after the Romans left is also shrouded in mystery. The museum showcases very little between the 5th and 9th



Merlin at Tintagel

centuries, as little has been found. We know that Exeter was abandoned soon after the Romans left. There are a few historical references to a new Celtic-speaking kingdom called Dumnonia, but not much is known about it. Few documents survive from that time, but one important site I was planning to visit on the Cornish coast revealed more.

At 1,014 kms, the Southwest Coast Path is the longest long-distance footpath in Britain, and the landscape varies from grassy meadows to steep rocky cliffs. When the sun shines on a clear day there is nowhere else in the world I would rather be. I saw ravens, kestrels, buzzards, stonechats and many others. Butterflies are declining across most of Britain but there were plenty of them flying that day.

That stretch of the coast was steep,

rocky and slow going, and the 11km to lunch at Trebarwith Sands took me until mid-day. Tintagel Island was visible in the distance, gradually looming larger in the afternoon. I was planning to visit it the following day, but the UK Met Office had published a weather warning, so I took as many photos as I could. That proved a wise decision.

The island, which is managed by English Heritage, is attached to the mainland by two footbridges, one of them added in 2019. From different points on the coastal path, one can see the remains of a 13th Century castle. However, the places that really interested me were out of sight, on top of the island.

Excavations in the 1930s revealed the bases of rectangular stone buildings from post-Roman times. The archaeologists thought they had found a monastery, but later



Steve on Port Gaverne Beach

English Heritage's Curator for the West.

"We already knew that this was an important site," he explains via video, "But modern techniques now allow us to date things more precisely, and to trace where they came from. We only excavated an area the size of a tennis court, but it has confirmed that this was one of Britain's largest settlements after the Romans left. We have traced the sherds of pottery and fragments of glass back to Greece and Turkey and have now recovered more exotic pottery from Tintagel than the whole of the rest of Britain for that period."

Books and documentaries have described Tintagel as a centre of Dumnonian royalty.

"This was certainly an elite settlement, possibly a royal settlement, but we don't know if there were really kings as we imagine them today, or if they were more like leaders. The buildings are quite similar in size - there is no palace here, and no bones have survived, so we can't say for sure who these people were. We believe they were Cornish, but they could have come from elsewhere."

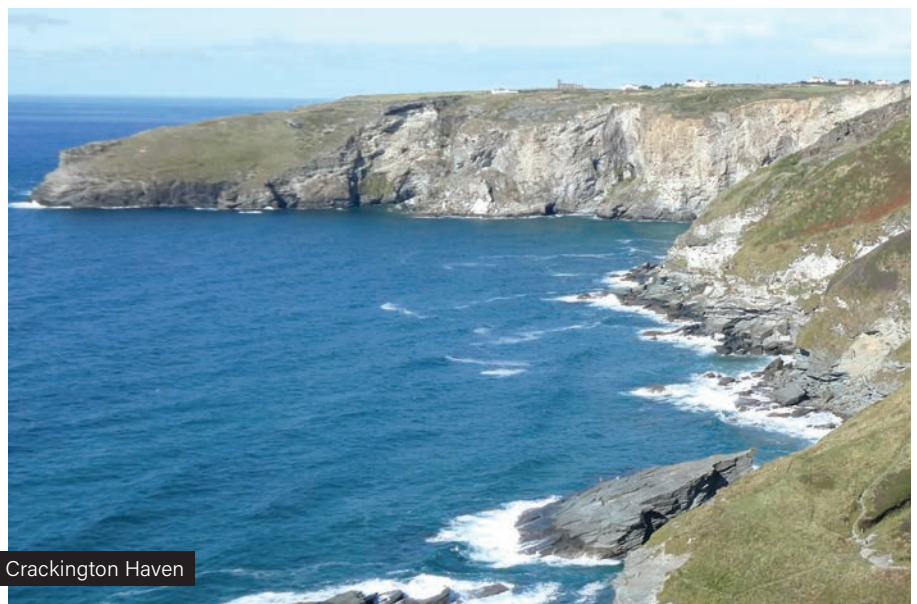
We talked for nearly two hours, and I began to realize how, even today, we cannot be sure how post-Roman society was organized. The documentaries, media reports - and even

excavations cast doubt on that. The most recent digs began in 2016, generating a flurry of media interest.

“Tintagel is known worldwide for its connection to King Arthur.

In the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth named it as the place where Arthur was conceived with the help of Merlin the magician. That legendary connection might have persuaded Richard Earl of Cornwall to build his castle there. As I found in Bretagne, wherever King Arthur hung out, tourist kitsch soon followed. I climbed back up the main street, past businesses with names like King Arthur's Arms and Merlin's Cave Crystal and Gift Shop.

I had arranged to interview Win Scutt,



Crackington Haven

some of the history books - have overstated what we really know. The final report of the excavation will soon be online, and Win tells me it contains a few more surprises.

The following morning, I returned to the castle to find a sign saying: closed due to high winds. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised.

The storm had not yet arrived, so I walked down towards the beach. Merlin's cave, accessible from the beach at low tides only, runs underneath the island. A small sculpture, the face of Merlin, is carved into the rock nearby. Part of his nose has been chipped away - perhaps a random act of vandalism, fired by the same outrage which led some Cornish critics to attack English Heritage's 2016 presentation of the site as a "fairytale theme park".

The small interpretation centre mentions the legends and their possible influence on Earl Richard, but most of the display concerns the history of the site. It includes a few of the pottery fragments excavated there.

"There is a tradition of presenting historic sites in a dry information-giving way," shares Scutt. "We wanted to use public art to appeal to people's emotional intelligence, to create tactile elements, particularly for children; but the interpretation on the island is quite subtle - just a few small plinths with objects you can touch. It has been very successful."

There was one other place I wanted to visit before leaving Tintagel; King Arthur's Great Halls is unashamedly dedicated to the Arthurian legends. It was built in the 1920s behind a 19th Century stone house, where I met John, the curator, who told me, "Groups like to come here first, because we are the only place in Tintagel which tells the story of King Arthur."

In the first room behind the entrance, actor Robert Powell tells a shortened version of King Arthur's story. Following Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur, the Celtic Romano-Briton, has become 'King of England', and in this version the English have travelled back in time to fight against the Saxons!

The main hall behind the house is a monument to the obsession of one man, a wealthy businessman from London called Thomas Glasscock.

"Pronounced Glass'ck" John corrects me.



Bude Storm Tower

“The stained-glass windows around the hall are impressive; each one illustrates a different aspect of the Arthurian legends.”

While I was inside the hall, the storm began. The coastal path can be slippery at the best of times and in storms it can be quite dangerous. I sheltered inside the entrance to a shop, waiting for a bus to take me the next 8

km to Boscastle.

In the National Trust café beside the river in Boscastle a sign tells of the flood of 2004. The highest water level reached the beams above my head. I remember watching a helicopter on the TV news, rescuing people from rooftops. 80 vehicles and 6 buildings were washed into the sea, but - amazingly - no one drowned.

During the night, the storm strengthened, and everything seemed to be rattling.



King Arthur's Great Halls



Excavations on Tintagel Island

The hostel where I was staying was partially destroyed in 2004. Thankfully, the rain subsided in the early hours of morning, though it was still somewhat blistery.

The path from the village to the coast climbs over rocks looking down over the harbour. A gale was still blowing. I came to a cliff edge where I thought: if I climb round there and slip, I will be fish food. So, I turned back, and found the official coast path, which had branched-off earlier.

Those 21 kms from Boscastle to Wide-mouth Bay are amongst the toughest of the whole the coastal path, climbing 1250 metres with steep descents in between. There were strange rock formations, some of them natural and others created by long-abandoned quarrying. It was scary at times, but also exhilarating.

The only food stop was halfway, at Crackington Haven, a combined Cornish and English name, which sits on an ancient lin-

guistic boundary. To the south of a line from there to the River Ottery there are Cornish placenames, like Tresparrett, Trevigue and Pencuke. To the north, they turn English, such as Coxford, Wainhouse and Jacobstow, a reminder of the next phase of Cornish history - the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons who settled that part of Cornwall.

Was this a peaceful or a violent process?

I asked historian Dr Oliver Padel, who told me, "There was a military conquest ending in 838, with the battle of Hingston; but there was also gradual settlement by farmers - they are the ones who changed placenames on the ground. There must have been some people already living there but they may have been sparsely scattered, so there might have been peaceful settlement as well as, perhaps, a certain amount of coercion."

“It would take another thousand years for English to replace Cornish across the whole of Cornwall.

As the last native-speakers aged in the 18th Century, antiquarians began recording their language, leaving a legacy for later revival movements.

Over the years I have watched the coastal path retreat inland in many places where rising seas have reclaimed the terrain. At the end of the walk in Bude, I stopped to photograph the town's most famous structure: the octagonal Storm Tower. Built in the 1830s, it has been dismantled and moved inland twice, most recently in 2023. A painting in the Castle Museum shows the three different places where it has stood.

The museum is partly staffed by volunteers. One of them, Mike Bosworth, is an expert on the folk music of Cornwall and Devon, on which he produces a podcast.

I ask him if people in this part of Cornwall consider themselves to be English.

He thinks for a moment and replies: "That's difficult to say. Most people here are like me - incomers."

My return journey was easier: just one bus to the lovingly restored railway station on a reopened branch line in Okehampton, back in Devon.

"That's typical," said a woman I met in Bude. "They get something like that in Devon, but never here!"



King Arthur's Great Halls

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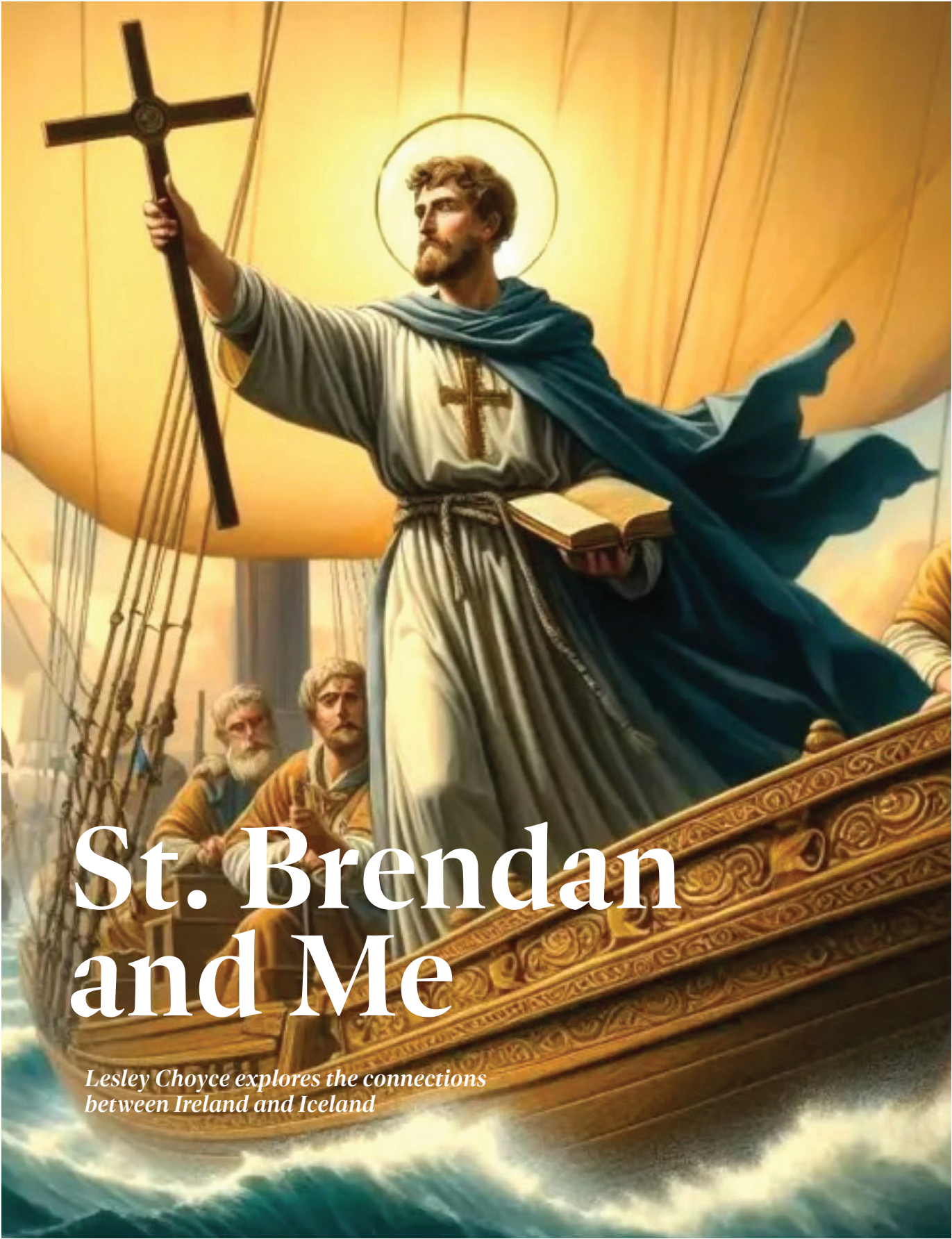


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St. Brendan and Me

*Lesley Choyce explores the connections
between Ireland and Iceland*



Growing up Protestant, I knew very little about saints...although I recognized that many towns, churches and schools were named for them. Today, if my sources are correct, there are over 10,000 recognized saints, so I will likely never be able to keep up with them all and the many volumes of hagiography that have been written down through the ages will most likely go unread by me.

Nonetheless, in 1995 - while I was researching the history of my province for my book *Nova Scotia: Shaped by the Sea* - I was stunned and fascinated to learn of St. Brendan the Navigator, born around 489, who set off from Ireland with thirty men in search of paradise on earth. Some said that he found his

way to the shores of Nova Scotia. This was all news to me - an Irishman who "discovered" North America long before all the other restless European explorers.

But wait. There are several versions of this story. Some are pure oral history - and is that really history at all, or just storytelling? Some were written down but not until hundreds of years after Brendan was gone. Facts about anyone in the sixth century are hard to come by, even concerning world-famous saints. So, let's just assume this is a story with some shred of possible truth, but a good one it is.

The one I settled on went like this.

A message from God tells Brendan to set off in search of a peaceful place. Along with

thirty men, he sets off across the Atlantic in a curragh, which must have been one sturdy large sea vessel even though it was made from wicker and the skins of slaughtered animals. He encounters sea monsters, demons and much more, fails to find his destination but tries again, eventually ending up on an island where he meets a lone shipwrecked Irishman who tells him of the desired idyllic island. There, Brendan finds his paradise (known as St. Brendan's Isle to some), and is greeted by a man wearing brilliant white feathers.

There are many variations of this story, this legend, this myth, or whatever it is. But, let's face it, it's a damn good tale. However, here's what is tweaking in my brain right now about the connection between me - a 21st



century modest Canadian peripatetic scribe and St. B - a famous sixth century Irish mystic; I live on the shores of Nova Scotia, where the revered one once (perhaps) landed. In the last year or so I have travelled to Newfoundland, Maine, Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Azores - all destinations that stake a claim to have been visited by the wandering saint. Clearly, he remains a most popular fellow. While in Tenerife, I learned about a nearby phantom island, San Borondon, which is supposedly that very promised land the pilgrim and his crew were searching for. However, the locals made it clear I couldn't visit there since it comes and goes according to its own whims. It is, after all, what they call a phantom island.

“As a storyteller, I do find the whole business much more interesting than many less-intriguing threads of real history.

And it really is quite charming that so many locales lay claim to a very personal connection to Brendan. According to various legends, his famed isle could have been anywhere from the Faroe Islands in the far north to some unnamed islands near the equator. If any of it is true, he must have been an extraordinary navigator indeed - which may explain why he is the patron saint of whales, sailors, The U.S. Navy, and (much to my delight) senior citizen adventurers. He must still be

rather popular because I see there are dozens of St. Brendan medallions, pendants and other jewelry on sale on Amazon although I am not in any hurry to buy any of the stuff.

So, yes, I should really prepare my weather gear and get on up to the Faroes and, more importantly, make my own pilgrimage to Tralee on the wonderful Dingle Peninsula where our hero was born, and then on to the Clonfert Cathedral where he is buried, to pay my respects. And if the venerated monk's body is buried there, that more than suggests that he really existed, right? So, somewhere there is a trail of evidence of how his life truly played out. Perhaps. But I won't go there yet, for fear the true yarn of his mortal years would be much less exciting.

Kerid Crater



But there is a bit more to my own tale concerning me and the saint.

And it goes like this.

In June of 2024, my intrepid and long-suffering wife, Linda and I circumnavigated Iceland - by car, I admit, not curragh. It was on our bucket list and a relatively short, direct flight from Halifax to Keflavik. We'd been told the weather would be mild in June. It wasn't. A fierce North Atlantic storm had been assaulting the island nation and the very proper Viking-sized car rental agent warned me more than once to be careful when getting into our rented Corsa because so often the gusty winds would rip the doors right off the cars. This fact, and the pelting steely rain, did not bode well for our foray. We lingered in Reykjavik until the wind gods of Valhalla relented. It was in the national museum there that I detected the first historical hint that the Irish had been here. And they'd been here a long, long time ago, maybe well before the Vikings even. And legend has it (as they say), that Brendan the Navigator himself had set foot on Iceland on one of his journeys. I

was floored.

While sipping a surprisingly large lager at a downtown pub called Bastard Brew & Food, I scrolled through several websites looking for further clues concerning anything Celtic in Iceland. According to Sunna Olafson Furstenau on Irish Roots in Iceland, I came across this: "It is believed that Irish Christian Monks and/or hermits came to Iceland in the 8th century. The Vikings started settling Iceland by the year 874, and the claim is that the heathen Vikings chased the Irish monks out of Iceland. The 'Íslendingabók' tells of the Celtic monks who left the island of their own free will because they did not want to mingle with the horrible heathen Norsemen."

And yes, the 8th century was too modern to connect with Brendan, but it revealed that he was not the only Irish settler on these frigid shores. But then I came across this dubious but jaw-dropping "fact" - "Genetic studies in Iceland reveal about 20 percent of the males and 63 percent of the females have Irish ancestry." Whoa, Nelly.

I began to ponder why so many more

women would have Irish blood in them than men and that deserved at least one more round of Bastard brew as I explained to Linda that, from here on, we would be on the look out for more clues concerning Irish influences and their whereabouts in Iceland.

That night, as the gales finally began to abate, in a further attempt to overcome my Protestant handicap in understanding more about my now favourite saint, I turned to The National Catholic Register (online). Ignoring newsworthy pieces about the Eucharistic Congress and gossip about the Vatican, I found further embellishment concerning the saint's voyages. One other variation on the travelling story asserted that, "The 93-year-old St. Brendan fasted and prayed for 40 days on a mountain peak on the rugged Dingle Peninsula, in County Kerry, the southwestern most point of Ireland, in order to discern if he should go on a pilgrimage to Paradise. When he made his decision, he gathered to himself anywhere from 18 to 150 other monks, depending upon the source, for a voyage that lasted seven years."

“That helped to explain why he is the patron saint of elderly travellers.

But more importantly to my continuing research, the legend told of Brendan and his crew encountering “floating crystal palaces” and “mountains in the sea spouting fireballs.” To many, this is interpreted as Iceland, the land of fire and ice.

In the days that followed, the weather improved as we drove across the south coast. Here, we drove through sulphur-stenched fields of volcanic vents, climbed to the top of the Kerid crater, ventured behind the spectacular Seljanblands Falls, and wandered among beached islands of crystalline ice at Diamond Beach - undoubtedly those “floating crustal palaces” that awed Brendan. We also nearly wandered into a quicksand field at the base of the melting Jokulsarlon Glacier, which is being carved away year by year by global climate change. Clearly, Iceland was still a land of fire and ice, beauty and danger.

We did our best to hit the high spots like the basalt canyons of Studlagil, the mud pots of Hverir, another crater at Hverfjall and Godafoss, (meaning the falls of the gods), to name but a few. But as we took a break from all the driving, holed up in a hotel in Akureyri, just 62 miles from the Arctic Circle, I realized that we’d strayed far off the path of my quest for St. Brendan or anything remotely Irish.

Fortunately for us, I was overheard expressing my concern for this at the Akureyri Backpackers pub. A heavily bearded fellow sipping some sort of blue cocktail introduced himself as a history professor from the local university and, after some perfunctory small talk, he offered up the advice that we really needed to visit Akranes on the southwestern shore of the island which was fortunately on our last leg of our circumnavigating journey. He claimed it was the most Irish town in all Iceland. I said we’d make a beeline for it.

On the way there, we had a most excellent hike through one of the most exhilarating lava fields of the journey and ventured on up to the top of another fine crater at Grabok.

Akranes calls itself a “classic fishing



Irish monks

port” and boasts a population of 7600. We drove through an industrial area on our way to the folk museum and lighthouse, which looks somewhat like a concrete dilapidated 1950s Buck Rodgers rocket ship perched on the stony shore. Inside the lighthouse were some bold innovative paintings by local artists and nearby was a huge fish factory wall with images of...well, fish and various fish-related things.

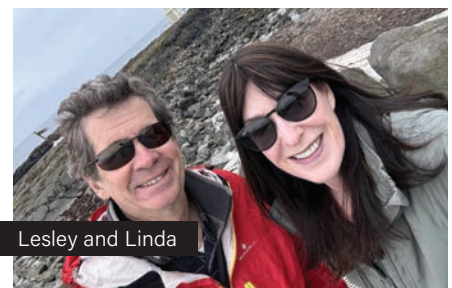
It was a drizzly, chill day, alas but reminiscent of days back home on the cold damp coast of the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia, so we felt right at home in our rain gear as we pitied other Akranes visitors running for shelter. While wandering about, we learned that we were a bit too early for one of the town’s most festive events, Írskir dagar. According to Adventures.com, “Irish Days is a fascinating event that commemorates the Celtic heritage of the town. It is observed on the first weekend of July. People, dressed in Lopapeysa, the Icelandic sweater, party the whole day. The most exciting part of the day is the competition on who has the reddest hair.”

So, yes, indeed there was a very important Irish connection here. In fact, the town was first settled by two Irish brothers, Thor-módur and Ketill Bresason, who made their home here along with family members and friends in the year 880. This made it one of the first Christian settlements in Iceland. And the rest, as they say, is history.

As we walked along the bleak lava shore-

line away from the lighthouse, it was hard to imagine why this particular stretch of coast would lure the Bresason brothers to forgo the green pleasant land of Ireland for such a stark and forbidding parcel of coastal volcanic rock. Anyone’s best guess would be that they had good reasons - religious, political, economic, or social - to leave their native home and move their families here. Perhaps it was the wealth of fish in the sea...for even today, these are still healthy well-stocked fishing grounds.

I had to admit that it was unlikely that St. Brendan himself had set foot here a few hundred years before his latter countrymen. However, looking eastward toward Akrafjall, the mountain towering gloomily above the town, and then turning my face west again, into the salt-laden North Atlantic wind, I was sure I could feel the spirit of the old blessed seeker right here with us in the far northern reaches of the planet and waiting to guide us on to whatever “blissful Island” we might find next.



Lesley and Linda

WWW.LESLEYCHOYCE.COM

DRESSED TO KILT TO RETURN TO NEW YORK FOR TARTAN DAY



SATURDAY EVENING, APRIL 5, 2025

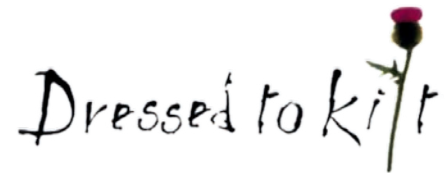
For the first time since before the pandemic the Dressed to Kilt charity fashion show is returning to its New York City roots. Co-Founded by Sir Sean Connery and Dr. Geoffrey Scott Carroll in 2003, it is now the most prestigious, largest and exciting Scottish fashion show in the world. It is also one of the largest fashion shows in the world in terms of press & media generation and it is the highest profile Scottish event of New York City Tartan Day. (www.dressedtokilt.com).

THE VENUE:

THE CHURCH OF THE HEAVENLY REST

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www.dressedtokilt.com



THE 2025 FASHION SHOW THEME:

“COUNTRY COUTURE; FROM THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS TO FIFTH AVENUE”.

This will be a tribute to the fashion of the countryside and the great outdoors. Our runway becomes a stage for outdoor lifestyle fashion that encompasses hunting, hiking, riding, skiing, climbing, boating, etc. There is a Country Chic look that is emerging, and this movement is bringing nature back into urban environments.

The proceeds of the event will benefit the NAVY SEAL Foundation.

“

“Scotland has a wealth of amazingly talented designers and artists and it is important to show that there is more to Scotland than its traditional associations. The Dressed to Kilt fashion show in New York City has helped open many of these doors.”

— Vogue.com

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CONTACT/INFORMATION:

Should you wish to be involved in the next fashion show as a runway model, a contributing designer or a sponsor, contact gscarroll@mindspring.com. For the first time we will be inviting our designers and sponsors to provide us with 2-3 minute videos (with audio) of their organization. These will be shown on large screens for the hour before the show and during the several hours of the post-show party. Tickets will be available for purchase in January 2025.



Jamie Ferguson

jkfman.com
@jkf_man

My parents emigrated from Scotland and Northern Ireland to Canada and we lived there until I was about 15 and then my whole family moved back to Scotland where I finished High School and went to university. I currently reside in Northern Ireland, in a small village just outside of Belfast.

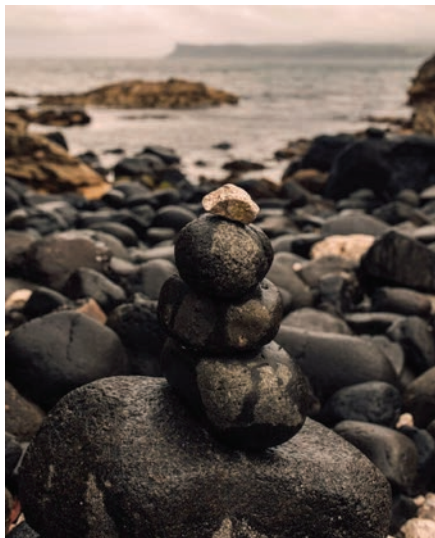
My interest in photography developed around the same time as my interest in menswear - the early 2000s. I saw examples of street style photography on blogs and Tumblrs and became fascinated with photographers like Scott Schumann and Tommy Ton, who were attending fashion trade shows like Pitti Uomo, showcasing men of all ages and nationalities dressing in ways that I hadn't encountered before.

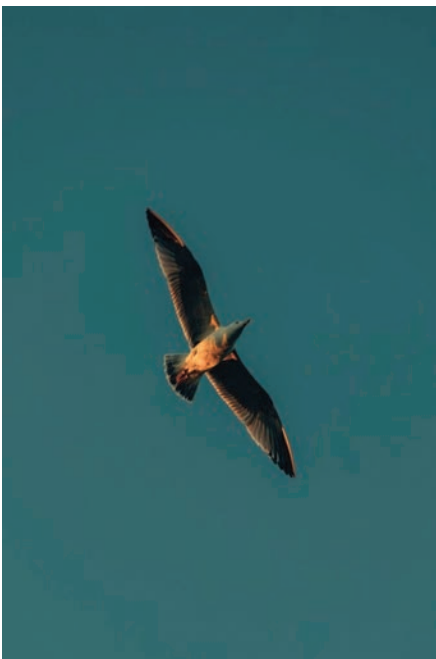
I have now been working in menswear for over 15 years, and freelancing as a photographer for over 10 years, so I remain involved in both of those worlds. I still get a kick out of shooting people who dress well and stylishly. However, I am now doing it in a more focused manner, working directly with brands and clients themselves, and - being self-taught - I am still developing my personal style of photography.

Over the years, I have been able to hone in on what I like about an image. Primarily, it is always going to be about the clothing and how someone is wearing it - how an individual has styled something, what they have chosen to wear with it, the fit, the drape, the cut, the proportions, colour, texture, pattern, the mix of differing styles - these always draw me in first and foremost. But I have come to realize that I enjoy seeing a lightness in the people I shoot - searching for more candid images, looking for that humour at times. It is something that I strive for more than anything else now.

Freelancing in any kind of creative arts can be extremely challenging. There is the continual development of style - I never want to rest on my laurels or 'switch off' as I find ideas constantly pop into my head. And then there are the proposals for future projects, the approaching of new clients, the liaising with existing clients, etc. Factor in family life and it can become hard to find a balance, which is important as being creative isn't a faucet one can simply turn on and off - that "downtime" with my wife and two sons is crucial.

I have been very lucky to work with clients whose products I greatly admire, travel to places around the planet that I otherwise wouldn't have had the chance to visit, author one book and co-author two others, and work in an industry that I enjoy and get a lot of satisfaction out of.





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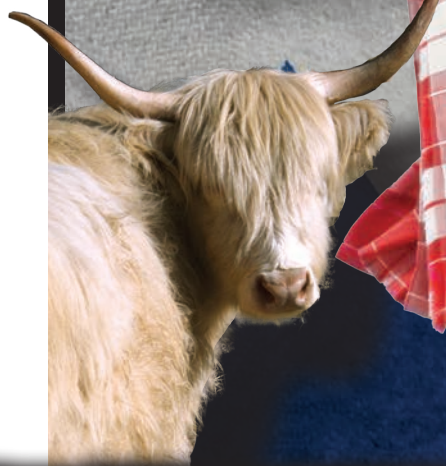
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My background is mostly Scottish and English, with some Scandinavian. I was born in New Zealand in a tiny town called Paparoa, in Northland, in the north island of NZ. My mother is British-born and my father is of Scottish descent. My parents moved us to Auckland when I was five and that is where I grew up. I then moved to Sydney, Australia where I have lived most of my adult life. I currently reside in the famous Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia.

As far back as I can remember I was interested in and good at art. It was an escape into another world for me, a form of meditation. I could create something from nothing and feel a sense of accomplishment. As well, I wanted to create beauty in my world, when sometimes in the 'real world,' things were not so beautiful. During high school my art teacher, whom I am very grateful for, encouraged me to take my art more seriously and

that I had the talent to go a long way.

I am driven to continue my work because I need to be creating, and whilst doing that, I can dive into other worlds, escaping the mundane or 'not so nice' things happening in the world. At the same time, I endeavour to bring something from a blank canvas - from nothing to fruition - and create something that is hopefully beautiful.

My art has evolved through the years. I think my earlier work was quite naive, both figuratively and metaphorically. I struggled a bit with the fact that I wanted to be a painter but also an illustrator. My work after the loss of my partner, especially, took on a deeper aspect, and so did some of the more whimsical and otherworldly artworks take on this aspect too. As well, different stages in one's life and experiences have brought about more maturity in my work.

One of the challenges is that it can be a very solitary vocation and you have to be

incredibly disciplined. The ups and downs of selling your work do not provide a 'regular' income, in comparison to a 9-5 type job. Staying on top of social media, and being able to self-promote - which I initially found went against my grain - has had me adjust and push myself out of my comfort zone, in order to be current and relevant to a broader audience.

I do get a sense of reward when I see my artwork hanging in people's homes all over the world, and again, when I see my artwork in publications, magazines, and reference books; and when I inspire others to create and follow their path. Selling paintings, or artwork, or being commissioned to paint illustrations is always an affirmation and a blessing. Being commissioned to paint portraits for clients, or fashion illustrations for both individual clients and publications, is also rewarding.

Some highlights in my career include being accepted into the prestigious Parsons

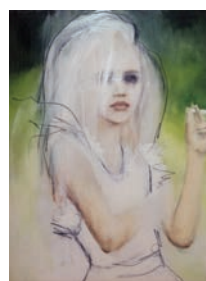
School of Art (The New School) in NYC. Unfortunately, due to a family tragedy, my studies were cut short. Being commissioned by art collectors internationally and around the world, by magazines and publications over the years, to create paintings, portraits and illustrations were also highlights. Having my artwork selected by Saatchiart to be featured as one of the top ten portraits in a gallery in London, UK, and gaining a visa to the USA based on my artistic merits - the Visa for Individuals of Extraordinary Abilities and Talent- are most memorable.

My creative process is more about inspiration. If I'm not inspired, I don't feel like painting or creating. Travelling, music, fashion, movies, other art and artists, museums, galleries, reading, food and nature, all inspire me. For me to create, I need to truly love the image I am working from, or have some sort of emotional connection to the image. At other times my art paintings and illustrations evolve exclusively from my imagination.

When choosing a subject, I have to 'fall in love' with the image (I normally work from photographs), or have a connection of some sort. Sometimes it's a piece of prose or a lyric in a song that can be a starting point. At times, what I start with becomes something entirely different, usually the painting directs me and takes me on a journey.

I've been told by viewers and collectors of my art that there is a little bit of me within the paintings or illustrations. I think my work has a definite signature, a flair; an authenticity and honesty to it. I'm mostly self-taught so I've developed my own way of doing things to get the end result. I haven't been locked into a certain way of painting or illustrating, or any doctrine. Sometimes I have made what I thought was a huge mistake that has turned into a blessing and a much better outcome than I had imagined, taking me on a different journey.

Speculating on what makes a good piece of art is a very difficult concept to ponder. It's such a personal perspective. Seeing not only the talent, and the execution, but also the authenticity, and honesty behind it, is an important factor. When a piece of art 'speaks' to you; when it takes you away from yourself





and the world and evokes an emotion in the viewer, or inspires the viewer, it is significant. It is equally powerful when art takes a screenshot of a period for the viewer to see how things were in that decade or century in history.

My personal perspective and experience on the current state of the visual arts in Australia and New Zealand is that I have sold very few paintings and illustrations to art collectors in AU & NZ. My markets are the USA, UK, and EU mostly, with some sold in Asia. I do have my art for sale through an AU online gallery and I have to put the prices lower as it seems that, from my experience, they don't seem to value art as much as, for example, the US, UK, and EU. My artwork is sometimes quite niche and figurative, and sometimes nudes are not as palatable to some markets. If I were painting beach scenes, perhaps, I would sell more to Aussies! So my focus really hasn't been on the AU market but on the art-collecting markets that support my artistic career.

Perhaps the situation can be improved by creating and allowing for increased respect for the art and culture communities; bringing more awareness to the general public, and placing more value on art and culture than just beach culture. In Australia, it's very much about the beach and lifestyle which is fair enough, as most people live in coastal cities and have a beach nearby. But also, it is a very small market compared to say the USA or EU market.

My creative agenda for the rest of the year involves travelling and living out of a suitcase, as I was in much need of a break and some inspiration. Seeing different cities, and countries, meeting different people along the way, and going to galleries, museums etc. brings me a new set of ideas, creativity and inspiration. But travelling brings limitations on what you can do. I've managed to do a few paintings while away so far. I'm hoping to gain more exposure by way of publications, and building more of my communities on social media platforms like Instagram. As I develop new ideas, I would like to build some affiliations/collaborations with, for example, the newly revived vinyl record labels and fashion brands.



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Inis Meáin



Marie-Thérèse de Blacam

I am from Midleton in East Cork and grew up in a typical Irish country town in the 1980s. I was educated in an Irish-speaking secondary school near Cork City which led me on a path to an Entrepreneurship Degree through Irish at Dublin City University.

After graduating, I worked in business and marketing in Ireland and internationally while completing a 4-year diploma in Fashion Design by night.

For the last 18 years I have been living on Inis Meáin in the Aran Islands, Galway, with my husband Ruairí de Blacam, who is a native of the island.

Inis Meáin Knitting Company was founded by Ruairí's parents, Tarlach and Áine de Blacam in 1976, as part of the island

co-operative at the time, to provide proper employment to the women of the island, as many of the men were occupied with farming and fishing. Ruairí and I took over the management of the company in January of 2023 to continue his parent's legacy and lifetime achievement. Currently, we are the main employer on a tiny island community of 180 people, helping to sustain a remote population and share a culture with a world-audience.

Inis Meáin is rich in culture, and this is referenced in our designs - the island holds endless inspiration in the landscape and seascape.

We design and make uniquely rugged, yet refined, small-batch knitwear that is

inspired by the exceptional nature and rich culture of our location. Our sweaters are a culmination of 50 years of design evolution, all to make sweaters that feel like a second skin, like something that one has worn their entire life. Our wardrobe is one of hardy practicality for the outdoors combined with Sunday bests and fits for the long boat or plane journey into town.

When someone walks into a room wearing one of our pieces, people take notice - our understated and subtle design is devoid of logos or branding but oozing confidence and originality. It is a celebration of the human hand and real luxury.

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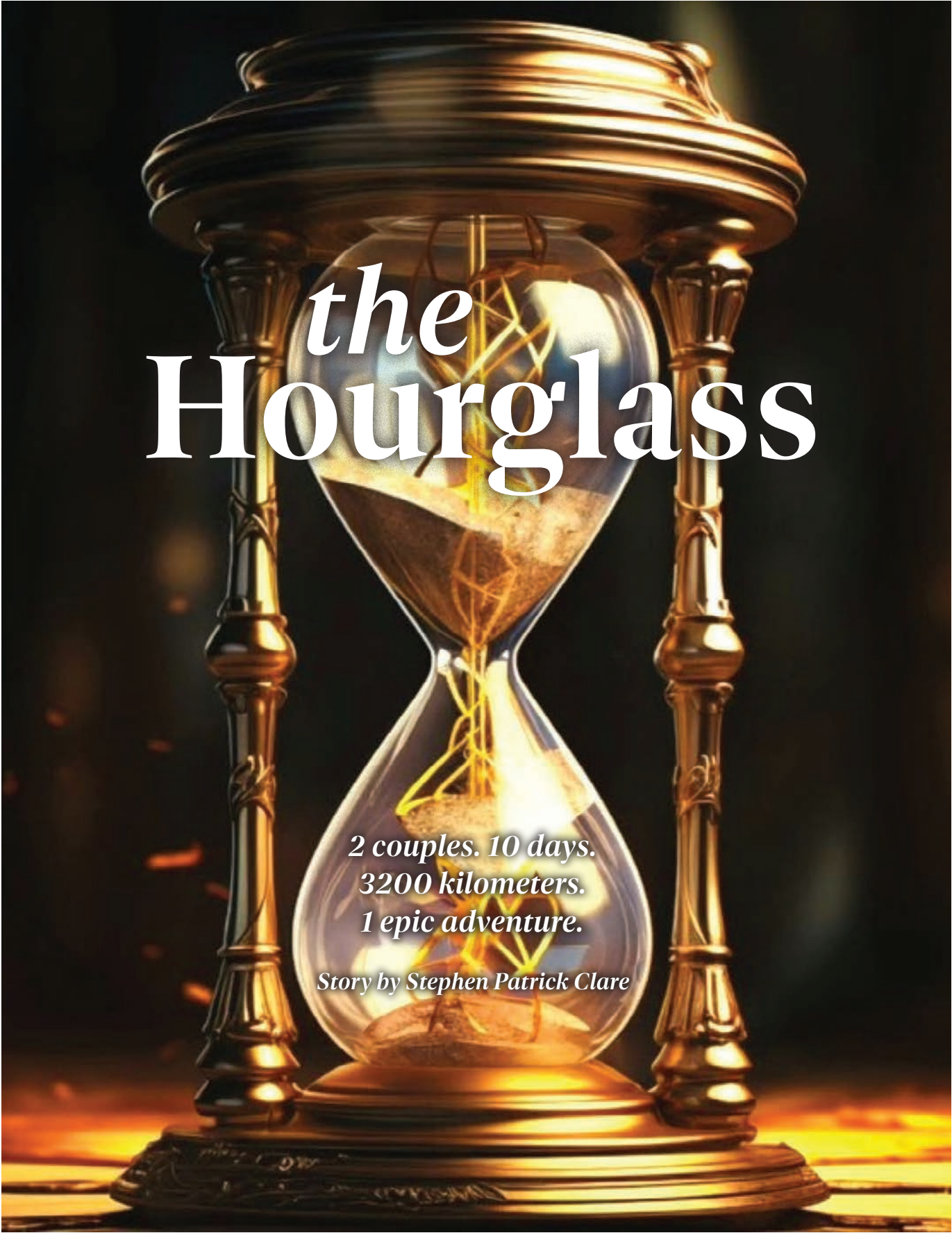
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Story by Stephen Patrick Clare

**Grains of sand
First to last
Head to heart
Hourglass**

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” I ask Rami, who is behind the wheel of our vehicle.

“Yes, yes...all good,” he replies.

It is June of 1993, and the 5-piece, post-punk rock ‘n’ roll band that Rami (Noujaim) and I formed in 1988 - The Dysfunctions - are en route to the small community of North Bay, Ontario from Toronto, where we had performed the previous evening. We are on tour in support of our major-label debut recording, *Torn*, released only a few months prior. As Rami navigates long stretches of highway, I furiously scribble notes in my journal - a tour diary of sorts. Suffice it to say, however, that cramming five twentysomething males into a minivan makes for some stories that are, well, better left unpublished for the time being.

North Bay is 360 kilometers (225 miles) from Toronto - due north. Halfway to our destination, we exit for a much-needed band bathroom break, refilling the gas tank, and re-upping on java (“you don’t buy coffee, you rent it...”). We return to the road, on time and target for that night’s gig.

Except, something seems off. My innate sense of direction feels...awry. I have been travelling long enough to know my way around a well-worn, gas station paper map.

“I dunno man,” I sigh. “I mean, I trust you and all, but I’m pretty sure we are going the wrong way.”

“No, no...all good,” Rami assures me.

Sure enough, a short while later, a road sign indicates that Toronto is only 85 kilometers ahead - due south.

I met Rami after responding to an ad he had placed in Montreal’s only English newspaper *The Gazette*, looking to put a band together. We hit it off immediately, sharing a mutual love of our beloved and legendary “Habs” hockey team (24 Stanley Cups!), and post-punk, alternative rock music. He was also - and remains to this day - an exceptional timekeeper.

Egyptian by birth, his family arrived in Canada from Lebanon in the 1970s, having been subject to that country’s ongoing civil strife.

Over the next few years, we would share many musical adventures together; writing, recording, touring, and all the many vices that go with the vocation of being budding rock stars. We also became the best of friends, and I was both proud and honoured to attend his marriage to Sue (Goncz) in 1993, where I had been asked to serenade the newlyweds with one of *The Dysfunctions*’ original compositions, *Harboursong*.

Even after the band broke up the following year, and the couple’s subsequent move to Toronto, Rami and I remained close, celebrating the arrivals of our children, mourning the loss of loved ones, and marking life milestones. While we drifted apart at times, as happens when people get busy with kids and careers, he was always just a phone call away, and I am forever grateful to him for staying by my side as I walked through recovery from addiction, a difficult divorce, and - more recently - a challenging battle with cancer. It

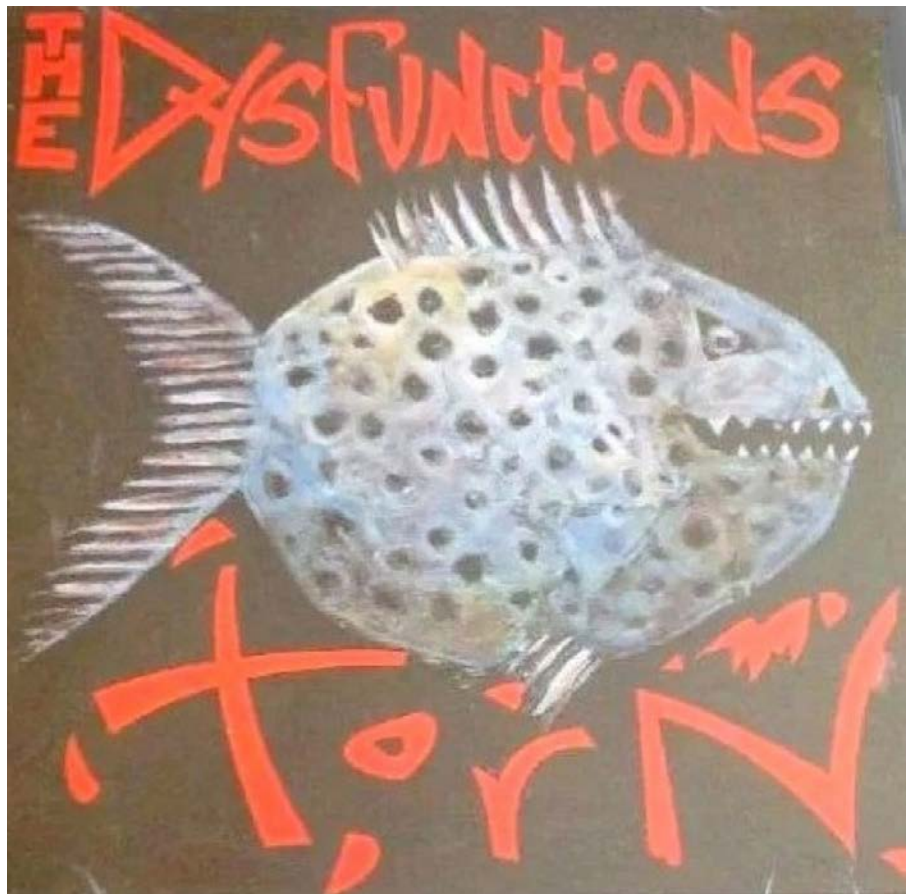
was a no-brainer for him to stand with me as my best man at my wedding in 2022.

Sue’s heritage is Hungarian. After a stint in the financial world, she was called to serve God - as was Rami - and found herself immersed in the world of spirit. “To be born again,” she once explained to me, “is to accept Christ with an adult mind.”

While we might not share the same beliefs in that regard, we have always been respectful and interested in one another’s spiritual growth.

Despite having no Irish or Celtic connection (that we know of), the couple both became passionate about the Emerald Isle thanks in large measure to the music of U2, Sinéad O’Connor, The Cranberries, Hot-house Flowers, The Waterboys, and all the great sonic artists that arose from Eire’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ years.

Rami and I had been talking about travelling to Ireland together since my two-month misadventure there in 1989 (another story for another time). Although he had visited Dublin before with work (Microsoft), his experiences on the Emerald Isle had been limited





Rami at Windmill Lane

Derry), and then wind our way across Northern Ireland before returning to Dublin.

“We will be travelling clockwise around the island,” I reminded everyone as we drove to our hotel in Dublin’s Dockyards district.

And while we did have several “must-see-and-do” attractions and activities on our agenda, there was sufficient margin built into each day for spontaneous and/or serendipitous opportunities.

As all four of us are life-long U2 fans, our first stop was Windmill Lane, Dublin’s famed recording studio where the Irish supergroup produced most of their albums. Other world-renowned artists have “tracked” at the facility over the years also, including The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Kate Bush, AC/DC, Hozier, Kylie Minogue, Niall Horan, Lewis Capaldi, Van Morrison, and many more.

Despite the jetlag and lack of sleep, the poignancy of seeing Rami sitting at the facility’s mixing board wasn’t lost on me; we hadn’t been in a studio together since our Dysfunctions days.

After, we walked across the Liffey River to Epic the Irish Emigration Museum, an immersive, multimedia facility that documents the stories of those who left the Emerald Isle for greener pastures. Sue, in particular, was touched by the tales of those who were forced to depart during the Famine years (1845-1852).

Over dinner that night, the Noujaims related their own families’ experiences as emigrants to Canada. Raised until the age of 8 amidst the backdrop of inner-city battles and bombs in war-torn Beirut, Rami still lives with that childhood trauma.

History was again on our minds the following day; after exploring the area around St. Patrick’s Cathedral and Christchurch Cathedral, the Noujaims met us at Trinity College Dublin. Amazingly, even after more than a dozen trips to Ireland, I had never seen The Book of Kells.

Wikipedia details The Book of Kells as “an illustrated manuscript and Celtic Gospel book in Latin, containing the four Gospels of the New Testament together with various prefatory texts and tables. It was created in a Columban monastery in either Ireland or Scotland circa 800 AD.”

For our friends of faith who have made numerous religious pilgrimages over the years, the experience was both engaging and

to the country’s capital city, mostly its famed Temple Bar district - enough time, however, to develop a life-long love for Guinness.

After he retired in late 2021, we began revisiting the idea of travelling together, and - in our first phone call of 2024 - he noted. “It is time my friend...let’s talk Ireland.”

By spring, rough dates had been picked out, ideas and options picked over, and by summer we had a basic plan in place. As I had been to Ireland many times through the years, Rami and Sue were happy to leave the itinerary in my hands. My past experiences suggested that we go off-season - post Labour Day - when tourist numbers begin to fall, and the weather is still reasonable. My only piece of advice to them was to bring light rain gear. As it turned out, we wouldn’t need it.

Over an ocean Under the vast Tempus Fugit Hourglass

After touching down within an hour of each other in Dublin, my wife Karen and I reconnected with the Noujaims in the airport terminal before making our way to the car rental.

A few jokes were made about having arrived in Ireland on Friday the 13th. However, I don’t believe in luck; time and experience make for proper planning and preparation.

The plan was simple; after two days in Dublin, we would head south along the coast before making our way westward and then north along the Wild Atlantic Way (Kerry to

Ten Pints in Ten Days

While by his own admission he is no connoisseur, Rami has sampled his fair share of Guinness over the years - certainly enough to merit the moniker of "knowledgeable." Given the intense, and often aggressive, debate both in Ireland and abroad over who pours the best pint, we opted to omit individual pub names and precise locations out of concern for his safety. Kidding! Here is his list of his preferred pints - a matter, he says, that was merely "a difference of a few degrees."

1. Dublin
2. Galway
3. Belfast
4. Giants Causeway
5. Donegal
6. Derry
7. Waterford
8. Tralee
9. Dublin (airport)
10. Wicklow



Dublin



Karen at The Long Room

enlightening.

Equally stunning was the college's "Long Room" - one of the most impressive libraries in the world. Although only 65 meters in length, the space - originally constructed in the early 1700s - is home to over 200,000 books.

The highlight of the day, however, was an extended visit to the Guinness Storehouse, where we toured the facility before sitting down to sample a "wee bit o' the Black Stuff."

Like the proverbial "kid in a candy shop," Rami anxiously waited for his first pint to settle. The first sip is known to locals as "splitting the G" - a reference to the logo near

the top of the glass that signals how much to taste off the top.

"Ahhhh...that's the real deal," he said, leaning back with a smile and a faint trace of the stout's trademark moustache, noting that nothing back home in Canada could ever compare. Rami had agreed to "taste-test" Ireland's best-known brew on our journey around the island, rating and reviewing each pour - something we dubbed "Ten Pints in Ten Days."

"The thing is, you must be patient," he mused philosophically. "You can't guzzle Guinness - you have to savour each sip. After all, the best things in life take time."

I remind him that there was a time where

“slamming” back the beers was the best thing in our lives.

“True, true,” he acknowledges with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, perhaps recalling our band’s backstage antics. “But we are older now, and hopefully a little wiser. I can’t drink the way I used to back in the day - the hangovers kill me.”

I asked him if he agrees that the reason we go grey is because things are no longer as black and white as they once were.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “The things that mattered to me as a teenager, or even in my 20s and 30s, aren’t nearly as important to me now. But, like a lot of things, that awareness only came about with time.”

The topic of time came up time-and-time-again over the coming days, including at dinner that night.

“In our western world, we see time as linear,” I expounded, taking the floor. “That is, we understand it to be a single straight line from one fixed point to another, usually from start to finish. The Celts, however, saw time as circular - a continual cycle of seasons in which there is no past or future, only the eternal present.”

Sue summarized, “So, similar to some other spiritual or religious movements - say, Buddhism for example - the Celts were all about being in the here and now in the natural world.”

Studious and serious, Sue is the perfect partner for Rami, who lives light on his feet. As a couple, they complement and bring out the best in one another.

“Without her, I would be homeless,” Rami had joked with me that afternoon. “And I’d probably be a full-time drunk.”

After blessing the meal, Sue raised her Chardonnay, toasted the table, and the conversation turned to our children.

“Somehow,” she laughed, “in spite of us, they have not only survived - they’ve thrived.”

With that, we all reached for our phones to check in on our kids and share some new photos. Later, walking back to our hotel through Temple Bar, we finalized our plans for the following day.

Sundays in Ireland are sacred, traditionally a time for church and family, and Rami



and Sue attended Mass before we departed Dublin for parts south.

Before leaving, however, we made a couple of quick “bucket list” stops, including visiting both Bono’s childhood home and Temple Mount, the non-denominational secondary school where U2 met and made music.

Although it was Rami’s first time driving on both the “wrong” side of the road and the “wrong” side of the car (there were, admittedly, a few close calls), we somehow survived the drive through the city’s busy North Side streets before hitting the highway.

Equally impressive, and perhaps surprisingly (more close calls), we arrived alive an hour later at the Glendalough Hermitage Center, where I had spent a week in silent retreat just months prior. I would later document my experience for our 2024 Mid-Winter edition “Macalla” - the Gaelic word for echo.

Set amidst the heather-laden hills of Co. Wicklow, Glendalough is the ancestral spiritual domain of the Celtic Christian tradition, best exemplified by St. Kevin (498 AD - 618 AD) who lived there for most of his life in peaceful harmony with his surroundings.

A “chance” encounter with - and hands-on blessings from - a group of local hikers at the Hermitage Center was a lovely touch as we set out on our own jaunt through St. Kevin’s nearby Monastic City and then along the trail where I had my “moment” just months ago.

“I can feel it,” said Sue, as I pointed to the exact spot where, for just a split-second, I had felt heat and light pour through my heart and hands. “This is one of those ‘thin places’ you were telling us about, right?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Ireland is known for its transparency between this world and the otherworld. Perhaps that is why the Celts felt so at home here, and maybe why I do.

"I haven't tried to recapture that experience," I continued. "I wouldn't even know where or how to begin."

"Don't," she stated flatly. "These things are only meant to be moments - we couldn't handle it if we were in constant conscious contact with the Creator; it would blow our circuitry."

"Moments..." I whispered to myself. "Like numerals on a clock; meant only to mark time through memories..."

Back in the car, Karen recited Seamus Heaney's classic poem "Digging" out loud. As part of our daily 'ritual' one of us would read something from his enduring collection of verse, *Death of a Naturalist*.

Later, over bowls of hearty pub grub at The Granville Hotel in Waterford, my wife brought up "the clock."

"What's the clock?" asked Rami.

Pointing to a sizeable, sturdy marble timepiece on the bar's mantle, I shared the story.

"My great-grandparents on my mother's side were from Port-Aux-Basque, Newfoundland, and both were of Irish heritage. When they married, they received a handcrafted marble clock as a gift from family overseas, which was then passed down several generations and now sits proudly - albeit silently - in my living room. I have since learned that there were only two of these clocks ever made, and that they are almost identical. I 'discovered' the other one by 'chance' during one of my previous stays here."

We deferred our debate on the merits of "chance" to the following day's drive which would take us clear across the southern tip of Ireland.

***No future now
Nor the past
Time stands still
Hourglass***

One of the benefits of being in the front passenger seat for the duration of our journey was selecting our daily soundtrack, and there was no shortage of Spotify as we navigated the country's southern coast - a steady stream of Irish melodies, old and new.

"Ok - favourite concert ever?" Rami asked me.



"U2," I responded. "1985. Montreal Forum. The Unforgettable Fire Tour - that show was...unforgettable."

To prove my point, I put on a live version of the band's stirring 1984 homage to Eire, *A Sort of Homecoming*. Rami and I started singing along - terribly - at top volume.

"Good thing you chose the drums," I laughed, adding in query, "Ok - what's the best show you've ever seen?"

"Easy," he replied quickly. "U2. Last year. The Sphere in Las Vegas. It wasn't really a concert though - more like a religious revivalist event."

I tee-up "Every Breaking Wave" from the band's 2014 album *Songs of Innocence*.

"Every breaking wave on the shore, tells the next one there'll be one more..."

The *lyrics* hit home as we hugged the coastline, the soft scent of the sea wafting through the car windows.

"The eternal ebb and flow of tides," mused my friend, breathing in the fresh ocean air. "God did some great work here - this part of Ireland feels timeless."

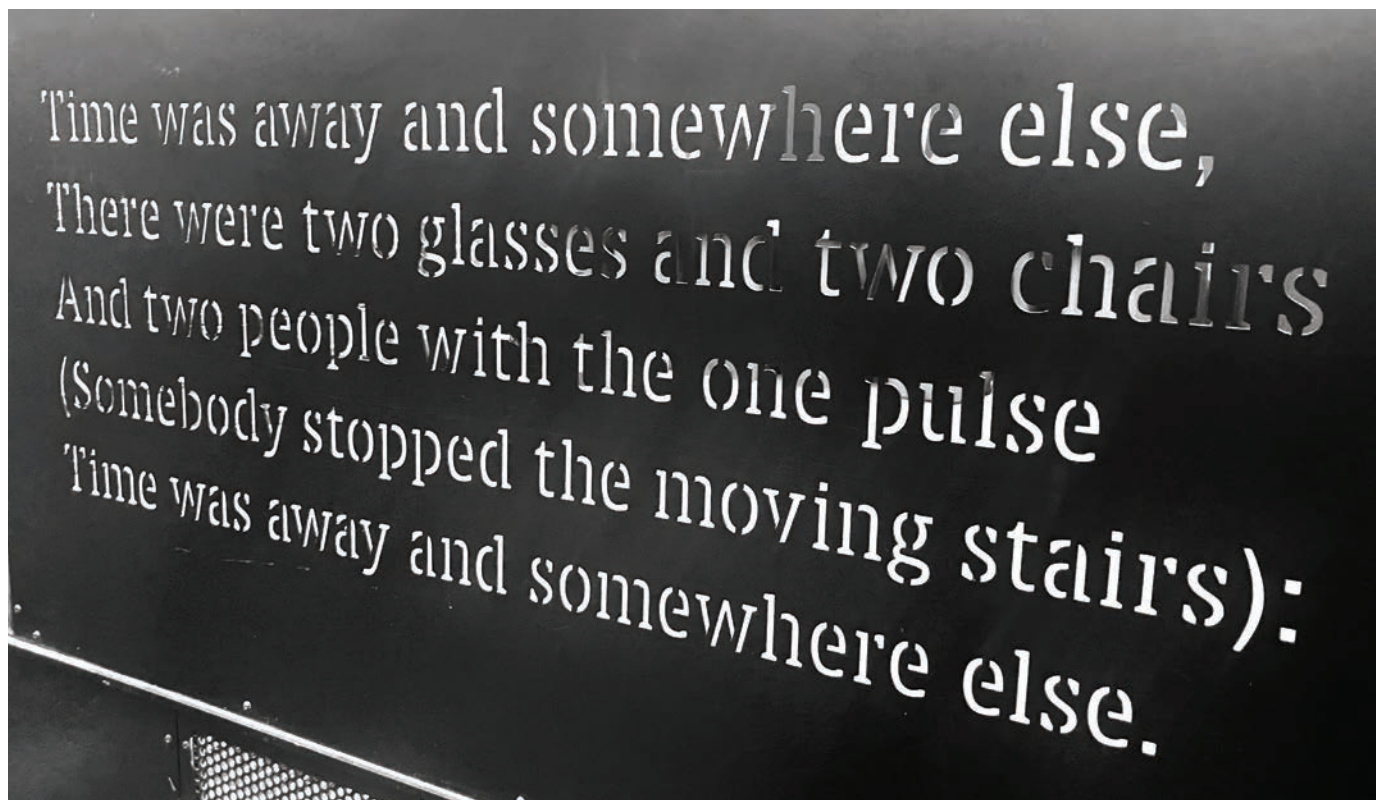
We turned north towards Blarney Castle - one of the items on the Noujaims' list of

desired destinations. To be honest, I shuddered when it was first brought up for our trip agenda as I have a severe aversion to anything "touristy" and had successfully managed to steer clear of the call to kiss the Blarney Stone for years.

And while the site attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors annually who pay to pucker up, the castle's beautiful gardens are often overlooked. As are the ancient Celtic Druid grounds behind the building, where the four of us walked small trails that took us past spaces once designated for both celebration and sacrifice.

Back on the road, I reached for my phone's playlist. Inspired by the fauna and foliage, I play *The Garden*, the last track on the last album (*Clockwork Angels*) from Canadian power-trio Rush - another band that Rami and I bonded over more than three decades prior. It would be the only non-Irish song played on our ten-day trek.

*"The measure of a life is a measure of love
and respect
So hard to earn, so easily burned
In the fullness of time
A garden to nurture and protect..."*



That night, after dinner and drinks at our hotel in Tralee, Rami and I slipped out to the facility's patio and talked through the triumphs and trials of growing older.

"To further quote Neil Peart," I exclaimed, referencing Rush's brilliant lyricist/percussionist, 'We are only immortal for a limited time.'"

We raised our glasses in honour of family and friends that had gone before us, before their time.

Averaging 320 kilometers of driving each day (3-4 hours) meant that there were some items on our itinerary that had to be dropped in favour of others. Perhaps my one regret on our Day 5 agenda was not getting to the Dingle Peninsula. Next time.

Nonetheless, everyone was on board with the day's schedule and, as we drove through my family's ancestral lands (Co. Clare) - and with Rami now fully comfortable at the wheel - we soon found ourselves at another major tourist attraction.

While I had been to the Cliffs of Moher on numerous occasions - and despite the on-

slaught of tour buses - Ireland's most popular site remains a beacon of natural beauty that never fails to take my breath away. The Noujaims were soon breathless also, though more likely a result of the steep climb from the parking lot to the top of the breezy bluff. Nearby, a young fiddler busked traditional Irish melodies, looking to cash-in on ex-pats longing to hold on to their heritage.

"Tourism is Ireland's primary economic driver," I shared later in the car. "The country welcomes more than ten million visitors each year, and roughly ten per cent of those people will make it to the Cliffs of Moher."

Heading north to Galway, we dipsy-doodled from coastline to countryside, taking in the region's lush landscape.

"I had no idea how beautiful everything here is," Sue shared.

Rami echoed her sentiments. "There is something so gentle about these rolling hills and fields - there's almost a dream-like quality to them."

I explained that, as most of Ireland had never been industrialized, much of the soil and waterways had remained untouched over the generations.

"That is true," agreed Sheena Dignam

of Galway Food Tours as we sampled some of the city's unique and superb culinary creations. "And it has had a huge impact on the quality of our food, most of which is produced fresh locally. Galway's markets are diverse, with everything from cheese to sushi, oysters to curry stews, doughnuts to falafels. The best part of Galway, though, is the atmosphere - we're always up for a bit of the craic!"

"What's the craic?" asked Sue.

That evening, sitting in a snug corner of a cozy local pub, pints in hand, amidst a bevy of locals and visitors smiling, singing and clapping along to live Irish "trad" music, I leaned over to Sue, "This," I noted with a sweep of my hand across the room, "is the craic!"

"Aye laddie," Rami piped-in with a newly uncovered Irish accent and a grin as wide as Galway Bay.

I told them that while Dublin might be the country's capital, the core of authentic Ireland is on the west coast where the language, customs, and culture have been best preserved.

The entire region, we all agreed, seemed to be steeped in another, softer and simpler time.

More evidence of those ancient ways was present the next day as we wove our way up the west coast; road markers, town names, shop signs - all in Gaelic.

Driving past the tiny town of Spiddle, I again reached for my phone, this time blasting one of my all-time favourite albums - The Waterboys' Fisherman's Blues - which had been written and recorded in the area in the late 1980s and was a pivotal influence for The Dysfunctions at that time. Rami and I sang along.

Sue had requested that we stop in Co. Mayo to visit the Knock Shrine.

Again, as per Wikipedia, "The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Knock, commonly referred to as Knock Shrine, is a Roman Catholic pilgrimage site and national shrine in the village of Knock, County Mayo, Ireland, where locals claimed to have seen an apparition in 1879 of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, Saint John the Evangelist, angels, and Jesus Christ (the Lamb of God)."

For practising Catholics, shrines are faith-affirming stations on their spiritual journey.

"Catholicism is a living, breathing religion," shared Sue as we strolled through the site's massive courtyards, shadowed only by the Holy edifice itself.

As a "recovering Catholic", I confided with her that I struggled to reconcile the seemingly vast expanse between Christ's core message and the behemoth building that I now stood before.

"I get that," she nodded, adding "the Church has a long history of hypocrisy and it's no wonder that attendance for Mass is down across the world - young people just aren't as interested or involved anymore."

True enough, most on site that day were elderly, with many using canes, walkers, and wheelchairs, perhaps praying for relief from ailments - physical and otherwise.

"Time will tell if Pope Francis is able to bring about reforms and bring the Church into the 21st century," she admits. "But he's a Jesuit, so we are hopeful."

Like me, Sue has a strong connection to the Jesuits - a progressive piece of a digressive institutional puzzle.

"For Rami and me, it is all about our personal relationship with Jesus," she explained.



The Craic

"The fact that we are immersed in this community of faith with like-minded people gives us greater support and a better opportunity to give back and help others."

"It sounds a lot like my 12-step fellowship," I noted.

"Yes," she concurred. "The parallels are there; like you, my life path is one of soul care, aiding people with spiritual, mental, and emotional health issues."

While terms like "trauma" and "trigger" have become buzzwords in recent years - and the virtual world an online, abstract storefront for self-help gurus and prophets-for-profit - it is easy to understand the appeal of religion.

"There is a reason why the Church has lasted for as long as it has," she explained. "And there is a reason why we call the Bible the 'Good Word' - like the 'Big Book' of your 12-step program, it is still one of the best guides to the good life, filled with timeless wisdom."

Wisely, Karen reminded me that food for the soul would not be enough to sustain us for the remainder of our journey that day, and we devoured a bowl of chowder and a side of soda bread at a nearby cafe before getting back on the road.

There was much food for thought as we drove out of Mayo, through Sligo, and into

Co. Donegal - my favourite part of the Emerald Isle, and Karen's as well.

After settling in at our B&B, we ventured into town, stretching our legs at the Abbey Cemetery - a special and sacred space for my wife, who is sensitive to matters of spirit - before walking by the town's namesake castle and stopping at a nearby church where we spoke with several staff members.

A fine meal followed (oysters), accompanied by fine wine (Chardonnay), and the discussion turned to our day.

"I'm still in shock," said Rami. "First of all, the weather has been perfect, with sun everyday - the opposite of what we were expecting."

I knocked twice on our wooden table.

"And I can't get over how beautiful today's drive was," he continued. "You really feel connected to the land here, and people have been so warm and welcoming that you'd swear they are Canadian."

I remind him that 15 per cent of our home country's population are descended from Eire.

"And" I continued, "this is another of Ireland's 'thin places' - perhaps that is why there are so many artists in the area; painters, photographers, writers of all sorts, and musicians. This tiny part of the world birthed the

likes of Enya, Clannad, and Rory Gallagher from one pub alone - Leo's Tavern."

My own experiences back in 1989 stood as testimony to the creative forces at play here in the gorgeous northwest corner of Eire.

***Harboursong
Finished fast
Sifting sounds
Hourglass***

I first came to Donegal in 1989 on a two-month, solo hitchhiking trek around the island. Travelling only with my backpack and old acoustic guitar, I felt at home amidst the country's lyrical landscapes, and my journal entries from that time contain random thoughts, strange scribbles, a few (mostly) awful attempts at poetry, and pages upon pages of verses for songs-in-progress.

One of those tunes - Harboursong - would end up on The Dysfunctions album and, in time, hold a special place in Rami and Sue's love story.

I vaguely recall writing the song one Sunday morning on a pier in Killybegs harbour, likely hungover. Oddly, it took me only five minutes to complete the entire piece - music, lyrics, melody. Even stranger is that I have no sketches or notes for the song in my travel journal. As Bono has said about the magic of making music, "sometimes a song simply shows up and steps right into the room."

Thus, after coffee, we drove 30 minutes west to Killybegs from Donegal Town, stopped for breakfast, and walked down to that same pier only to find the gate locked with a huge "No Trespassing" sign across the front. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a gentleman appeared, flashed a pass, and - in what can only be described as a moment of pure Grace - held the door open for us. We approached pier's end and stood for a moment in reflection before the song's opening chords arose from Sue's phone. I began to sing. Even with severely damaged vocal cords (caused by the cancer treatments), I managed to hit and hold the notes (another moment of Grace), with Rami, Sue, and Karen soon joining in.

Surely, hearing four adults wailing away at some old, unknown power ballad by the



Killybegs Harbour

sea must be quite the sight for locals. Then again, this was Ireland, and sights of this kind are the norm rather than the exception.

By song's end, we were holding hands and hugging, our eyes moist with emotion. I felt like a time-traveller, with memories flooding back to me as if 35 years had passed in the blink of an eye. Time stood still, if only for that moment, and that was all I could ever ask for - a moment...in this case, a full-circle moment.

Before departing, I quietly slipped a well-worn, much-loved guitar pick between two stones.

We walked back to the car and drove a few kilometers to Slieve League, Europe's

highest sea cliffs, where we gazed in amazement at the churning waters of the Atlantic. I noted that we were positioned directly across from Newfoundland, where my mother's family had settled after coming to Canada more than a century ago.

"It's definitely darker here," noted Rami, as we walked back to the car. "It's a different shade of green, for sure. Is that because of its more northerly location?"

"Yes, likely," I replied. "However, there is something about this part of Ireland that is darker than down south - perhaps it is our proximity to Northern Ireland. Things are definitely darker there, but I believe there is more beauty in those 6 counties and its peo-

Harboursong

*Something I can't tell you
Something you won't know
Something of a secret
Something I can't show*

*Something sort of sacred
Something rather rare
Something I am scared of
Something I can't share*

*'Cause I hide away
When I shy away
And things I speak
I cannot say*

*Something in the reason
Something in the rhyme
Something in the seasons
Something out of time*

*Something in your questions
Something I can't bare
Something in salvation
Something of a prayer*

*'Cause I hide away
When I shy away
And things I speak
I cannot say*

This is my Harboursong

ple than in all of the Republic.”
We drove on to Derry.

I have recounted my adventures in Northern Ireland a number of times in the pages of Celtic Life International over the past 13 years, privileged to witness - and perhaps, in my own small way, contribute - to the region's healing.

As we crossed the border, I recounted some of those escapades to Rami and Sue, having already sent them some background information on The Troubles and the ensuing 1998 Peace Accord prior to the trip. Nothing could have possibly prepared them for what they were soon to see first-hand, however.

Nestled just inside the infamous Walls of Derry, our hotel was only a few short strides to our first destination, the Museum of Free Derry in the Catholic stronghold of Bogside. Along the way, we stopped to snap shots of the Free Derry wall, the large and colourful murals of fallen heroes, and the Bloody Sunday Monument, erected in honour of the 13 Catholics that were brutally murdered there by British paratroopers during a peaceful protest on January 30, 1972.

“I remember when Sunday Bloody Sunday came out,” Rami said. “It was one of the first U2 songs I heard. You know, it's one thing to read about what happened here, or watch a documentary, or hear someone sing about it - but it's another thing altogether to

see it for yourself. It suddenly becomes very... real.”

We entered the museum, and for the next hour I watched both Rami and Sue absorb the harsh realities of the region's 30-year civil conflict. We left the museum somewhat stunned, walking soberly through other neighbourhoods before pulling into a local pub for a mid-afternoon pint.

The bar was busy with people of all ages, accents, and backgrounds, chatting and laughing.

“Humour is one of the ways that human beings deal with tragedy and suffering,” said Sue. “It is a coping mechanism of sorts, a means of survival.”

I concur, adding that some of the world's best art has arisen from the ashes of some of the world's worst atrocities. One need only to look at the flood of films about the Vietnam War that were released a generation after that conflict for clues and confirmation of collective healing.

In particular, comedy - and the ability to laugh at oneself or one's circumstances - was born of tragedy, as per the ancient Greek theatrical tradition.

“Have you guys heard of Kneecap?” I asked. “They're this hilarious young rap trio from West Belfast - kind of a Beastie Boys meets Derry Girls kind of thing - who brilliantly take the piss out of themselves and all that sectarian nonsense.”

Sue seemed sombre...lost in thought,



Stephen at Epic Ireland



clearly touched by our museum visit. In a post-trip email exchange she shared, “I was deeply moved. The plight of justice - the eternal desire to be seen, heard, and honoured - is distinct, but equal; a circle - not a hierarchical world view. It is in our blood and bones, as we are made in the image and likeness of God, with God imaged as community - a family circle.”

Rami’s reply was equally reflective, “I remember feeling sorrow. I was also intrigued with the connection between the Irish and Palestinian peoples - the shared history of struggle, and the sense of empathy for each other’s experiences, including their conflict and displacement.”

Similar emotions arose touring Belfast the next day, a striking contrast from our morning stops at the Giant’s Causeway and Dunluce Castle.

A late afternoon walk through both the (Catholic) Falls Road - where we all signed the “Peace Wall” - and the neighbouring (Protestant) Shankill Road was a reminder that, despite ongoing efforts to heal the pains of the past, ignorance and idiocy are still alive and well.

“Those folks are in the minority now,” I shared as we grabbed a Black Taxi back downtown. “Peace has brought profitability for most residents, and they won’t be giving that up anytime soon. Like back home

in Montreal, the young people here aren’t buying into the ‘divide and conquer’ politics anymore.”

Rami and Sue know exactly what I am talking about; we all came of age during Quebec’s referendum years, when our rights as English speaking people were stripped from us. The Noujaims were just two of over a million Quebecers to leave the province over a 15-year period.

“We don’t talk politics or religion here,” I advised. “If a local brings it up, feel free to engage. If not, talk about the weather - something everyone can have an opinion on.”

As the Noujaims visited the Titanic Museum, Karen and I cruised Belfast’s quirky Cathedral Quarter, where the streets were packed with performers as part of the city’s annual Culture Night. Revellers of all denominations were out to celebrate, including a roving “trad” band that wove its musical way through the merriment.

Rami and Sue soon showed up, and the four of us jumped into a pub for a pre-dinner pint, only to find it swarming with patrons young and old. We found seats at a small corner table and, after I jockeyed for position at the bar and wrangled pints back to our seats, we met and chatted with a retired city councillor named John and his wife Eibhlin. Interestingly, he was a Protestant, and she was a Catholic.

“There was a time when our marriage would have been unthinkable,” John told me. “Now, nobody gives a shite, which is wonderful. This peace thing has worked out pretty good for us. And I’m loving retirement; the kids are out of the house, and the wife and me now travel two to four times a year - great to get away from the bloody damp and cold!”

With that, a group of “calendar” firemen (Karen’s words) take the small stage and launched into song. Uniform clad, the “Fire-Choir” fired up the room.

In good spirits, we walked over to EDŌ for one of the finest meals any of us have ever had, eating and drinking into the late evening. After 48 hours of heaviness, it felt good to lighten up and simply enjoy each other’s company.

***Let it go
Let it pass
Turn it over
Hourglass***

The drive back to Dublin was filled with more lively discussion, more U2, and more Seamus Heaney.

We were all exhausted, however, and I took the opportunity to remind everyone that the word travel comes from the French root word travail, meaning work. This wasn’t a week on the beach in Barbados - although that would come soon, with Rami’s 60th birthday just around the corner of the new year.

With early flights the next morning, we were prepared to call it a night after a small bite at the airport hotel. Rami and I still had one last adventure, however; returning the rental car. And though our GPS informed us that we were less than a kilometer from our destination, it took us the better part of 45 minutes to find it.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” I ask Rami, as we circled around and around and back again.

“Yes, yes...all good.”

***For my brother Rami - "a fine man he..."
~Stephen Patrick Clare, 2024***



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Katie Robertson



One Scottish piper provides a fresh perspective

At just 17 years of age, Katie Robertson handles health conditions that would leave most of us flat on our backs. Yet, this lively lass from Carnoustie on Scotland's east coast is a testament to tenacity, talent, and - ultimately - triumph.

"I started learning the chanter in school at the age of 13," she shares via email with Celtic Life International, adding with a smiley emoji, "purely because music lessons corresponded with getting out of history class! I wasn't particularly a fan of the bagpipes, but due to my disabilities it was the only instrument that was an option for me, albeit in an adapted way.

"Roughly a year later in May 2021, I progressed to the pipes but taking it much more seriously as I wanted to achieve something before my life-threatening spinal surgery for scoliosis."

Beset with a range of medical issues that affect such basic functions as eating and breathing, Katie - or the "Wheeled Piper", as she is known to her social media fans - has endured several stays in hospital, none of which deterred her from developing her impressive musical skills.

"I couldn't eat anything and had a feeding tube fitted. Unfortunately, I suffered an allergic reaction resulting in a nasal bridle being necessary. However, there wasn't a hospital admission where I didn't bring my digital pipes, chanter, and laptop for Zoom lessons."

Despite a host of added complications, Robertson discovered that not only was playing the pipes a form of physiotherapy for her hands - adversely affected by the pain of

overlapping conditions and treatments - but it also provided a pathway to both inner and outer strength that has since boosted both her busking and live performances.

"Piping is one of the best therapies. My health aside, other challenges include being judged before I play a note because I don't fit the mould of what a piper 'normally' looks like. I love it when people hear me busking from inside shops before they see me. They comment on the music - and that is what it should be about - but when they see the chair, they stare at me for the right reason!

“One of the biggest rewards piping gives me is the chance to change people's perceptions of what anyone can do...”

As such, and with a long list of highlights to her still-budding career, Katie shows little signs of letting her current condition, or anything else, slow her down.

"My earliest achievement was getting a 1st and 2nd in The Royal National Mod after only 3 months on the pipes - I was so new to piping that I didn't even have a kilt to wear! I also got to play with the famous Red Hot Chilli Pipers in front of over 1000 people. I have played in the Usher Hall in Edinburgh twice, once with Ross Ainslie, Ali Hutton,

and the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra, the other with The National Youth Pipe Band. I have participated in Piping Live! this year and last. In July 2023, I opened the UCI Cycling event at George Square in Glasgow. My favourite moment was in April 2023 in Dunning Village Hall where I played with my biggest musical inspirations; Ross Ainslie and Tim Edey."

Playing pipes that were specially designed by the late John Elliot from G1 Reeds - who spent weeks working diligently to find a solution to allow Katie maximum ease - Robertson currently owns two sets of Great Highland Bagpipes - a standard 2004 Kintails set, as well as a newer set of B flat Marr Bagpipes with a one-of-a-kind chanter designed specifically for her.

Despite the modern adaptations, Robertson's musical style is rooted in tradition.

"I know more 2/4 marches than I can remember the names of, can read music, and strive to deliver the right notes in the right place at the right time. As I evolve as a player my appreciation for various styles has shaped my own. Although I do play march, strathspeys, reels, and piobaireachd, I love the trad scene and playing with other instruments. Recently, I have started composing my own music with the hope of one day making an album of it."

Considering all that she has already overcome and mastered, her more-than-30k online followers surely have something to look forward to.

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Robert Zielinski

Robert Zielinski revisits his roots on Kiangardarup

Aclaimed traditional Irish fiddler Robert Zielinski has made a name for himself blending the sounds of his heritage with the inspiration of Western Australia's natural landscapes.

Growing up in the orchard district of Karragullen, Western Australia, Zielinski's childhood was steeped in nature. "As a kid, I spent most of my time outside in the bush either working or riding my horse or bike," he recalls via an email exchange with Celtic Life International.

His introduction to music came early, as he listened to records with his sister and took in the talents of his uncles, both professional guitarists. "They bought me a guitar when I was seven, but I really hated it. One day I almost used it as a raft to get over to an island in a swamp, so that was the end of that."

It wasn't until Zielinski heard the violin that his path became clear.

"The sound went right through me, and I suddenly felt like everything would be okay."

His Grandad Stephan - who had played violin in Poland before the war - brought him a small fiddle and taught him how to hold it. "The same feeling would come every time I heard or played the fiddle - it still does."

Zielinski's latest recording, Kiangardarup, was a six-year labor of love that draws directly from his experiences living near the Torbay Inlet in Western Australia.

"The music was so vivid in those first moments when I heard it, that there really wasn't any option to not record and share it. I actually recorded my fiddle parts outside at the Torbay Inlet and surrounding country."

Inspired by the Minang people's ances-



tral lands, Kiangardarup takes listeners on a journey from dawn to dusk under the canopy of giant karri trees. Additional tracks were recorded in Perth with Melinda Forsythe (cello), Manuela Centanni (wooden flute), and Jim Green (bouzouki). The project culminated in mixing and mastering at Abbey Road Studios in London.

The fiddler's favourite tracks on Kiangardarup are Campfire and New Dawn.

"Campfire showcases my best playing. It was very cold in the forest that night at around 3am, and I was dreaming of the warmth of a fire."

New Dawn holds special meaning also, as it highlights the didgeridoo, played by Ken Hayward. The track also features bird calls from endangered species, including white-tailed and red-tailed black cockatoos.

Zielinski recently premiered the album at the Perth Concert Hall and received a standing ovation.

“My favorite moments are when everyone connects with the music...”

His connection to Irish traditional music runs deep, thanks to early mentors like Mick Doherty, nephew of the legendary Donegal fiddler Johnny Doherty. "Mick and I remained great friends for over 25 years until he passed away in 2014. Traditional Irish music is like my first language - it just makes sense to me."

Despite his dedication to tradition, he doesn't shy away from innovation. "Music is a mystery. It is abstract and doesn't make logical sense, but then it makes more sense than anything."

The journey to create Kiangardarup came with its fair share of challenges; after failing to capture the original inspiration during two concert hall recordings, Zielinski invested in a home studio.

"You must be relentless in this process, constantly asking if something's right and figuring out why it's not if you have a slight feeling it isn't. The perspiration comes with the work you put in after your initial inspiration. This is the pure hard work that makes all the difference."

Zielinski remains optimistic about the future of traditional fiddle playing.

"Most definitely, there is more interest than ever. In traditional fiddle playing, I would advise younger players to listen to the likes of Michael Coleman, Tommy Potts, Paddy Canny, and Bobby Casey."

Plans for 2025 include recording a new composition, Waychincup, and dreams of touring Ireland with his partner and collaborator Manuela Centanni. "We'd love to perform Kiangardarup in Ireland one day."

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Linda Harley

Celebrating Culture,
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A retired civil servant turned Scottish Country dance instructor, Linda Harley personifies the rich cultural tradition of dance in Northern Ireland.

After exploring different dance forms and styles over a lifetime, she discovered - and now shares - her love of Scottish Country dancing with others in and around Belfast, bringing connection and customs to her community.

Born and raised in Northern Ireland, her maiden name - Campbell - traces back to ancestors who settled in County Armagh centuries ago. She currently resides in Lisburn, just south of Belfast, though her travels have taken her as far afield as Luxembourg.

Harley's love of dance began as a youngster with ballet, and she later explored line dancing, salsa, and tap. After attending Scottish ceilidhs, she was inspired to start Scottish dance in 2007.

"I really enjoyed the fun and the music and joined a beginner's class when it started near me," she recalls. "Dancing has always been a very important part of my life. As soon as I entered the room of Scottish Country dancers, I knew this was the kind of dancing I could do for many years."

"A room full of people all joining with gusto to a live band playing rousing tunes - well, that is something that makes my spirit soar."



Over time she was inspired to motivate others, and, after qualifying as a Scottish Country dance instructor in 2017, she now teaches weekly classes in Lisburn and serves as chairman of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS) Belfast branch.

Her commitment extends beyond the local community, however; she has served on the RSCDS finance committee and as deputy director at the annual summer school in St. Andrews, an important event in the Scottish dance calendar.

Scottish Country dancing attracts a wide range of participants. While older women seeking to stay active make up much of Harley's classes, she notes that younger members also benefit from discovering its charm. Some have even made the transition from Highland dancing to the lower impact, yet equally engaging Country dances.

The cultural activity is more than just exercise, however.

"Many older people live alone, so being able to come along to a class, catch up with friends, and enjoy some gentle exercise is really important."

While the RSCDS was founded decades ago in an effort to preserve and promote traditional dances, the organization's ongoing commitment to creativity keeps the customs fresh.

"Thousands of new dances are devised each year, which is a great way of keeping this older dance form exciting."

While young people show interest, attracting them remains a challenge. The RSCDS Youth Services Committee works hard to innovate, organizing family-friendly camps and global virtual festivals. Harley remains persistently committed to spreading the word about the many social and cultural benefits of Scottish Country dance for those of all ages.

"If anyone finds the magic formula for increasing membership, especially for young people, do please let me know!"

The coming months promise to be busy for the troupe, with a Burns Night celebration, a St Patrick's Day ceilidh, and monthly summer dances. A Mayday school will help dancers sharpen their skills, while ceilidh evenings will prepare wedding guests for classics like the Dashing White Sergeant.

Looking further ahead, 2026 marks the 80th anniversary of RSCDS Belfast, and celebrations will feature a weekend school at the Europa Hotel with guest tutor Janet Johnston and music by Ian Muir. A special tea event will invite members, past and present, to reminisce, while a St Andrews Ball will feature Ian Robertson's renowned tunes.

For Harley and others in RSCDS, Scottish Country dancing is more than just movement - it is a celebration of culture, community, and connection.

"If everyone is leaving the class with a smile on their face, then I am happy."

@RSCDSBelfast

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Apple Frushie



the CELTIC CHEF

with Gary Maclean

Home baking is one of life's simplest and most rewarding joys, bringing warmth, creativity, and a sense of achievement to the kitchen. Of course, it is more than merely about making food - it is a chance to connect with our culture and customs. Apple Frushie is a traditional Scottish dessert that offers a unique twist on the classic apple pie. Frushie is an old Scots word meaning "brittle" or "crumbly" which applies to the pastry. This variation has the addition of honey and rose water. Be careful when using rose water, if you use too much it can taste more like an air freshener than dessert!

Ingredients

For the pastry

7oz (200g) all-purpose flour
125g (4oz) butter, unsalted
50g (2oz) sugar
1 egg
Pinch of salt

For the filling

5 Braeburn or Cox apples
85g (3oz) sugar
2 tbsp honey
Few drops of rose water

Instructions

Rub the butter flour and the salt together until you have a breadcrumb texture. Make sure that some small lumps of butter remain after combining the butter and flour. Crack the egg into a bowl, then add the sugar, and lightly mix. Add the egg and sugar mix to the flour and butter and then - using the palm of your hand - bring this mixture together to form a dough. Make sure you don't overwork the dough at this stage. Next, flatten out the pastry to form a disk about 1-inch (3cm) thick. Wrap the pastry in plastic wrap and place into the fridge to rest. Once rested, roll out thinly and line an 8-inch (20 cm) tart case, make sure you leave some pastry to finish the pie. Peel, quarter and remove the core from the apples. Slice the apples thinly and start to line the pastry case with them, adding a little honey, sugar, and rose water to each layer until you reach the top. Save a little of the sugar to sprinkle on at the end. With the remaining pastry, roll it out thinly and cut into strips, then lay the pastry into a lattice design on top of the pie. Pre heat your oven to 350 °F (180°C). Brush the pie with a little layer of beaten egg and a sprinkle of castor sugar. Bake in the oven for 25 to 30 minutes until it is golden brown.

Slàinte Mhath! - Gary

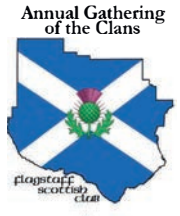
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DRAM
with Andrew Ferguson



The Case For Kavalan

DRAM

Roughly a dozen years ago, I hosted a “blind” single malt tasting at my shop, the Kensington Wine Market. The idea behind blind tastings is to remove biases such as age, brand, distillery, and price. It allows for the best products to be acclaimed purely upon their merits. I specifically didn’t market this event as a Scotch tasting as I was intending to include something rather unusual, at least at that time; a single-malt whisky made in the Scottish style from the Kavalan Distillery in Taiwan.

Kavalan was founded in the northeast corner of Taiwan in 2005 by the King Car Group. It is about an hour’s drive south of the capital Taipei, on the other side of the Snow Mountains, in Yilan County. The distillery was named Kavalan in honour of the county’s original name, and as a nod to its Indigenous people. Spirits flowed from the facility’s stills for the first time in March in 2006, and it wouldn’t be long before the distillery was turning heads.

Lee Tien-Tsai started what is now the King Car Group in 1979, selling root beer. Looking for a more profitable enterprise, the firm switched to vending canned coffee a few years later. By the end of the 1990s, King Car was a dominant player in the coffee business in Taiwan, with a rapidly expanding business abroad. They soon started lobbying the government - which had a monopoly on domestic alcohol production - to allow private enterprise. In 2002, they finally prevailed.

One of the consultants hired by Kavalan to help them set up their distillery is the late, great Dr. Jim Swan. That name might be familiar, as he had already consulted with dozens of distilleries around the world, including producers in India, Canada, the United States, Ireland, Scotland, and Israel. Dr. Swan had a secret recipe for producing young whiskies with more mature tasting profiles, and it worked especially well in hot climates like Taiwan.

“Kavalan is not a small producer, and the King Car Group’s vision was always for it to be the dominant player in Asia.”

However, despite being one of the 10 largest malt whisky distilleries in the world, they have never compromised quality for quantity. The company prides itself on having one of the smallest, most precise middle cuts (heart) in the industry, and it certainly doesn’t skimp on oak.

The region’s climate is hot and humid, with daytime temperatures frequently exceeding 40°C (104°F). This helps to speed up maturation, but also means the distillery’s “Angels Share” (evaporation loss) is between 5-7 per cent each year, compared to 1-2 per cent in Scotland. The first whisky was released in December of 2008, and by early 2010 it had gone viral. At a Burns’ Night blind tasting organized by The Times in Edinburgh (technically Leith), the Ka-

valan edged out 3 Scotch whiskies and an English whisky, making headlines around the world.

This was one of the reasons I put on the blind tasting; Kensington Wine Market had been given the privilege of launching Kavalan whisky in Canada, and we had been rather impressed by them. I put a bottle of the Kavalan Solist Vinho (STR cask) in a lineup of other cask-strength single malt whiskies, the rest of which were all Scottish, and the results were unprecedented.

Of the 20 guests in attendance, 19 of them picked the Kavalan as their favourite whisky.

This was not only stunning as the whisky was Taiwanese, but because everything else in the lineup was at least 18 years of age, and the Kavalan was less than five. There was one table of four, with three Scots and an Englishman. When I revealed to everyone that the evening’s most popular whisky was from Taiwan, they weren’t shocked, they were angry. “How could this be? Surely this is a joke!” It was not.

Fifteen years on from its founding, Kavalan has gone from strength to strength, and today its whiskies can be found in all the best whisky shops worldwide. The distillery welcomes an astounding 1 million visitors a year, more than 10x the number the most visited Scottish distillery could claim. And, in addition to whisky, the visitor center - in a nod to Kavalan’s origins - also serves up a mean cup of coffee!

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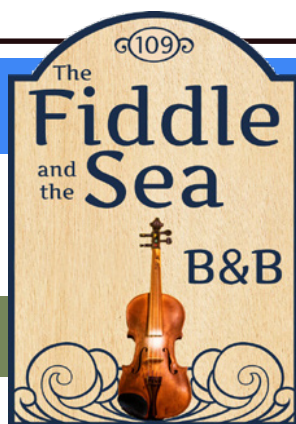


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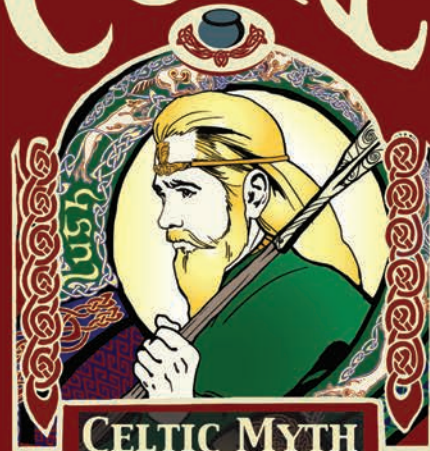
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Sage's CIRCLE
with Candice Marie Sage, PhD

The Wheel of the Year

My father is a first-generation German immigrant to Canada. My maternal grandmother is French-Canadian whose family settled here in the 1700s, while my maternal grandfather (Sage and Boyce) is second generation Irish Catholic from County Cork, and before that, Donegal. I was not alone in my diverse makeup; growing up in Montreal in the 1970s, multiculturalism was a rich tapestry of cuisine, custom, culture, and religion.

My German grandmother might have been a druid; on our walks through the woods, she seemingly knew about every plant - its healing properties and nutritional value, and which mushrooms to eat or avoid. Through her, I developed a deep appreciation for how humans are a part of nature, not overlords.

Though raised Catholic, I began searching for something more in harmony with nature as a teenager, dabbling in the 'occult', reading Tarot cards, and studying astrology to better know myself. It wasn't until I became a gardener in my early forties that pagan traditions really captured my imagination. Along with these newfound 'old' insights into the rhythms of the seasons, my affinity for the holistic nature of Celtic culture, its ties to nature, spirituality, and the Veil (collective unconscious), began to take root (or perhaps they had simply laid dormant in me all of those years).

My doctoral studies in health policy and equity explored the practice of de-colonization, identifying hierarchies and power imbalances, and trying to right them to achieve a more wholesome environment in which to live and thrive. Lately I have been exploring the themes of self-discovery, self-birthing, and self-identity through Celtic Goddesses and the archetypes they represent.

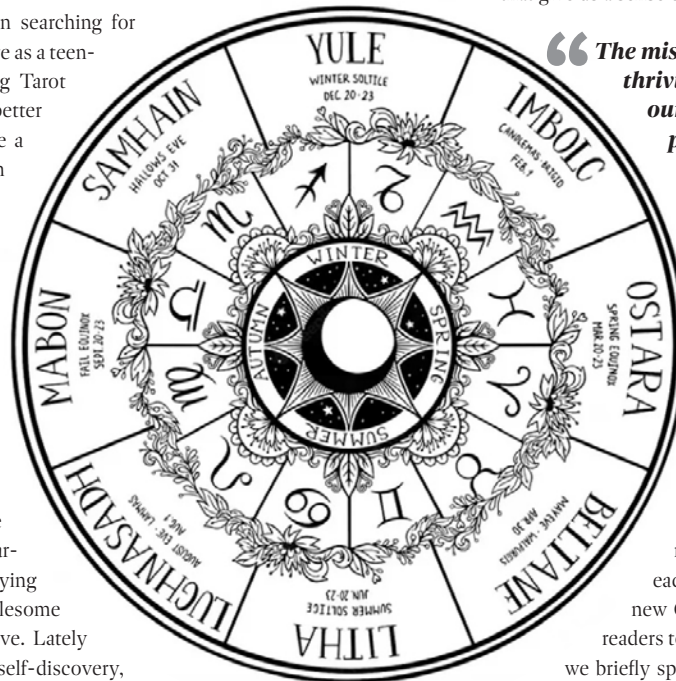
Once my children left home to start their own lives, it was time to re-design mine. While I have always tried to be an authentic person, this new journey in some ways was a homecoming to self once there was no one left for me to "take care of" (except the cat).

My recent pilgrimage to Ireland to search for my 'dán' (life's purpose/work) further revealed a longing to resurrect and re-tell the stories of the Celtic Goddesses to better understand myself, my role in my communities, and my

part to play in the broader, modern world - one that is so in need of grounding and healing. I explored many important sites in County Meade but was particularly inspired by stories of the coronations of Kings at the Hill of Tara (and their marriage to goddesses), Newgrange, and the River Boyne.

A reflection from Ireland and my communion with the River Boyne; when the goddess was written out from the stories of the coronation of Kings, so was the link between human subjects and the Mother, our Earth. Hierarchies were developed and the mundane became the dominion of women and the poor. Our severing from the Divine Feminine cuts us off from the very energy web of creation that birthed all of us, leaving us to grasp for the cords of connection that give us a sense of identity and purpose.

“The missing piece to our survival (and thriving) as a species is the goddess: our connection to the Womb - the place of all creation - the universe, and the soil, air, and waters of our land.”



The marriage of the King - the Divine masculine, the Provider and Protector - to the Divine Feminine that is the Land itself must be resurrected in our imaginations and societies.

This is the theme I will be exploring in each edition of Celtic Life International over the next 12 months, following the pagan Wheel of the Year, reviewing Celtic customs associated with each seasonal sabbat celebration, introducing new Celtic goddesses or gods that may inspire readers to connect with the Old Ways. This edition

we briefly speak to Imbolc, the tri-goddess, and Saint Brigid, with more to follow in February. Spring highlights Ostara (Easter) and Beltane. In summer, we take a look at the fire celebrations of Litha (Vernal Equinox) and Lughnasa, and fall will cover Mabon (harvest thanksgiving) and the end of the pagan calendar with Samhain (Halloween).

Here's hoping your Winter Solstice celebrations were merry and that the lights of Yule continue to warm your January!



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