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CelticLife

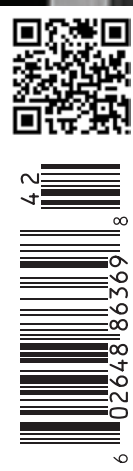
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FÁILTE

Celtic Culture

For all intents and purposes, the people that exist on this planet today are a genetically homogeneous species. While small genetic variants can be found from one geographic region to another, the difference in the human genome is remarkably small. Race is a social construct and, thus, the only factor that truly differentiates us from one another is our culture.

So, that said, what defines a culture?

A shared language is intrinsic - allowing for rituals, symbols, social norms, and beliefs to be communicated effectively. Flourishing cultures also reveal themselves through their cuisine, mythologies, music, art, and so forth.

The Celts are renowned for their culture - one that is steeped in legends and lore, with deep connections to the natural world. Although ancient, with roots dating back to the Iron Age, Celtic culture continues to thrive today as a touchstone for spiritual movements, environmental sustainability, craftsmanship, and festive celebrations.

“The Celts were deeply inspired by their surroundings, often reflected in the creation of intricate and symbolic designs.

Similarly Celtic music has traversed the ages and can still be found across the globe in traditional pub settings, onstage at festivals, and in the studio as collaborative fusions.

It is interesting to note the upsurge in Pan-Celtic sentiment in the 19th century. Formed to strengthen the bonds between Celtic Nations along political and cultural ideologies, several organizations tackled the question of what constitutes a culture. Some advocated self-governance, whereas others focused on the promotion of the Celtic language. As can be expected, controversy ensued while attempting to define the inclusion criteria. When Galicia and Asturias (Spain) applied, their requests were rejected based on the lack of a discernable Celtic language in the regions. The Celtic

languages are Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish, and Breton, and are still spoken by millions of people today. The existence of archaeological evidence, shared history and the presence of more Celtic words being used in the current language than either French or English, has thus far not swayed the decision for inclusion.

So, revisiting the question of what distinguishes a culture - is it a common language, religious beliefs, epic legends? It may encompass all of these, but - more pertinently perhaps - it is the ability to survive and thrive. Culture is an organic and evolving process - it is embodied by the blending of bagpipes and jazz in Central Park, the appearance of ancient Celtic knots on modern facades, and it exists in the spirit and souls of those who know the importance of nurturing it.

Siobhán L. Covington,
Publisher



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first WORD
with James Acken

Airson Gràidh nam Bàrdachd

Why is poetry and song so important to Celtic culture? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer beyond the simple, almost tautological declaration that poetry is an essential part of the Celtic identity. One of the most eloquent assertions of this was made in the 13th century by Giolla Brighde Mhac Con Midhe when he wrote,

*Dá mBáidhthi an dán, a dhaoine
Gan seanchas, gan seanlaoidhe,
Go bráth, acht athair gach fhir,
Rachaidh cách gan a chluinsin*

*Should poetry be drowned, O People
Without ancient lore, without the old lays,
Till Judgment, save for the father of every man,
All will pass away without ever being heard of.*

This doesn't really answer the question, though, and ever since the Celtic Renaissance Romanticism has invested the importance of poetry to the Celts with a yearning for transcendence through the natural world. As Yeats said of their poetry, "their wild music as of winds blowing in the reeds, seemed to me the very inmost voice of Celtic sadness, and of Celtic longing for infinite things the world has never seen."

These seem to be two very different inventions of poetic importance. For Giolla Brighde, the importance of poetry is social and practical. It connects society across generational divides and establishes a structure of knowledge for where we are in time and space. For Yeats, however, poetry connects the Celt first and foremost through the natural world to the worlds beyond it. The Romantic Celt for Yeats does not fit well into the complex practicality of modern commercial life, and poetry is an instinctive outpouring of this character. Giolla Brighde would seem to have been a rationalist when it came to poetry, while Yeats is a full-blown Romantic, but the tradition is deeper and stranger than this.

Bàrdachd is the modern Scots Gaelic iteration of the Classical Gaelic bairdne, literally the art of the bard, while filidheacht denoted the high poetry of the learned elite. (The modern piobaireachd, popular at Highland Games, is a direct imitation of the bardic art translated into pipe music.) These were the Aos-Dàna, the People of Gifts, and the tracts and treatises that we have from their tradition suggest that both Yeats and Giolla Brighde represent Celtic poetry well. Amid the highly structured concepts and technical vocabulary for sounds, quality, mutations, and morphology are references to divination, curses, spirits, and magical symbolism. Poetic facility is presented as three cauldrons in the same manuscript as legal tracts, and the hierarchy of poetic grades mentions the imbas forosnai: the "light of foreknowledge."

“For us in the modern world, it is easy to presume that the poetry of Celtic heritage is an open book - “magically delicious” as the man on TV says.

Entering into the tradition, though, is reminiscent of one of my favourite Gaelic songs: Uamh an Òir - the Cave of Gold. I have come across two different accounts for this song; one on the Isle of Skye and the other along the river Torridon in Ross-shire, though there is a very interesting and different account collected by Alexander Carmichael back in the day. It involves 12 who delve into the cave and a piper, accompanied by a dog, who enter to try and win the famed gold, but the last that is heard of them is the song the piper sings.

*Eadarainn a' chruit, a' chruit, a' chruit,
Eadarainn a' chruit, mo chuideachd ar m'fhagail,
Eadarainn a luaidh, a luaidh, a luaidh,
Eadarainn a luaidh 's i ghall' uaine a sharaich mi.*

*Between us the harp, the harp, the harp
Between us the harp, my people abandoning me
Between us, O Love, O Love, O Love
Between us O Love. It's a green hound that has wounded me*

Galla uaine, contracted to gall' uaine through elision, is a magnificently weird phrase. "Uaine" - meaning "green" - is typical of new growth, to be differentiated from the smoky, blue-green of gorm, while galla refers to a female dog with all that implies. This is a difficult word to pin down etymologically, but the connotation is a monster of the underworld that could be a woman. A similar phrase, "gast glastliath," is used in the medieval tale, Tochmarc Étaín. A lord of the Tuatha Dé Danann named Midir tricks the human king Eochaidh Aireamh into giving up Étaín, Midir's own queen who had been cursed to take on human form. Eochaidh must identify his bride out of fifty identical women. The implication involves shapeshifting, the natural world, the need for insight and good judgment, and above all art. It is cryptic, haunting, highly structured, and beautiful - and both tales involve remembrance of the past and frankly disturbing elements of the supernatural. After all, only the dog emerged from the cave, and it had been stripped of all its hair.

So why after all this is Celtic poetry so important? We may not be able to give a logically exhaustive answer, but it may be enough to say that poetry is central to Celtic identity because it manifests both aspects recognized by Yeats and Giolla Brighde Mhac Con Midhe: the dark yearning for what lies Beyond and the luminous, rational fabric that binds our society together.

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

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De Tha Dol



1 Scottish Fashion Spotlight

A Scottish fashion designer was in for a surprise when pop star Taylor Swift stepped out in a dress from her collection. Recently, Swift was spotted strolling in Brooklyn wearing a green velvet dress, and photos soon circulated online. Jade Robertson, co-founder of Little Lies, recognized the dress when a member of her design team sent her the photo. The Perth-based company has a number of designs inspired by Stevie Nicks, including the piece sported by Swift. The dress in question sold out - well - swiftly.

2 World Surfing Championship

A Cornish woman took home a gold medal after competing in a surf competition in California. The 2023 International Surfing Association (ISA) World Para Surfing Championship took place in mid-November, seeing 184 athletes from 27 different countries compete. Charlotte Banfield, a 23-year-old from Penryn, discovered a love of surfing when her mother enrolled her in a surf therapy program 10 years ago. Banfield lives with epilepsy, cerebral palsy, and autism, and she had trouble fitting in at school. Her time in surf therapy allowed her to fall in love with the sport and she hasn't looked back.

3 Vindication Swim

In 1927, Mercedes Gleitze set out to swim the English Channel. She would be the first British woman to accomplish the feat. Gleitze went on to accomplish many more difficult swims, and she was the first person ever to complete the 100 miles around the Isle of Man. A biopic about Gleitze began filming in 2019, slated for a 2022 release, but the COVID-19 pandemic put things on hold. *Vindication Swim* was finally released in theatres this past International Women's Day.

4 Maritime Sitcom

What better place to set a sitcom than in an Irish pub? A new TV show called *O'Don's* was filmed in Miramichi, N.B., with 200-year-old local fixture O'Donoghue's Irish Pub as the set. Co-created by Jimmy MacKinley and Erica McLean, the show follows the events after a self-absorbed out-of-towner takes over management of the pub. MacKinley emphasizes that while the show is inspired by O'Donoghue's, the characters are a far cry from the people who actually work there. Additionally, the story takes place in a fictional New Brunswick town called Port Mcgee. *O'Don's* is available on Bell Fibe TV1.

5 Manx Artwork

The national gallery within the Manx Museum recently displayed a new collection, including never-before-seen works. The gallery focuses on pieces by Manx artists or artwork inspired by the Isle of Man itself. Some of these pieces haven't been able to grace the gallery walls due to their condition, and so museum curators spent some time assessing what needed to be done. A few oil paintings were sent away to a specialist, for example. Other pieces needed to be mounted or required their existing frames to be strengthened. Most of the artwork is now available to view online at iMuseum.

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Celts in the Community



• Hill Pony Resources

The Dartmoor Pony is native to Devon County and has lived in England for hundreds of years. In the 18th Century, the ponies were used for work in the coal mines, and, in the 19th Century, they were bred with other types of horses to become polo ponies. Like its descendant, the Newfoundland Pony, the Dartmoor Pony population declined in part due to changes in legislation. Fortunately, organizations have popped up in hopes of protecting and preserving the remaining animals. One such organization is a pony rescue in Cornwall that has saved 120 ponies and counting. Hill Pony Resources is a charity, owned by Mary Houghton, which has cared for and rehomed Dartmoor Hill ponies since 2014. The rescue is based in Callington, not far from Dartmoor National Park. Not only does Houghton take in feral ponies in need, but she also helps owners who are no longer able to care for their ponies. "We have expanded our charitable aims by caring for older ponies, ponies who were at risk of being put to sleep due to behavioural issues along with ponies who had to be signed over due to owner struggles and ill health," Houghton told the Cornish & Devon Post recently. "We have also organized and supported castration clinics for colts so that they can return to the moor where they do not add to the breeding of more foals."



• Beach Buddies

Since 2006, Beach Buddies has been cleaning the beaches of the Isle of Man. Bill Dale founded the charity after participating in a handful of shoreline cleanups with friends. They collected more than 30,000 pieces of trash over six weekends, driving home just how big the island's litter problem had become. What started among a group of friends has since become a huge movement. Today, more than 17,000 volunteers pitch in with Beach Buddies, making the venture a nationwide effort. The charity has been featured in National Geographic and received numerous accolades. At the end of January, Beach Buddies was recognized in one of five categories at the Energy Globe Awards in Norway. "We have been saying for many, many years that we believe we have found a simple and workable solution to the problem of rubbish on the world's beaches and in the oceans, and to receive an endorsement like this is just incredible," Dale said at the event. Energy Globe highlighted how Beach Buddies had created a sustainable and efficient system of engaging with the community to clean the Isle of Man's beaches to standards which no other country has achieved." He's right: the Isle of Man has even earned UNESCO status as a world leader in ocean protection. Beach Buddies has also collaborated with the Department of Infrastructure to help improve the Manx footpath network.



• Man Down

At the start of 2024, Cornish mental health organization Man Down released a powerful campaign video. The film depicts a young family going on the hikes together, with the father showing subtle signs of depression. At the end of the film, the mother and daughter go to their usual hiking spot without the father and leave a bouquet of flowers on a cliff overlooking the ocean. The viewer is then prompted to reach out to Man Down if they are in need. "If we can catch men before they are at that point, we can help them, we can let them talk because there are consequences to taking your own life," said Pete Cooper, a volunteer coordinator with Man Down. In a January interview with ITV, he explained that before he was a volunteer, he was a support group attendee struggling with suicidal thoughts himself. "There is a ripple effect of people who are in your immediate family, your immediate friends circle and the consequences just go on and on and on." Founded in 2018, Man Down is a non-profit focused on reducing suicide among men in Cornwall which has some of the highest rates in the United Kingdom. The organization hosts regular meetings in more than 20 communities, where men over the age of 18 can gather for an informal peer support group.

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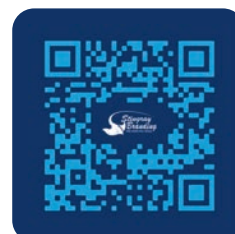
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Northern Nevada Celtic Ceilidh

May 18, 2024
Reno, NV
www.irishnevada.org



This spring, the Sons & Daughters of Erin (SADOE) will host the Northern Nevada Celtic Ceilidh in the Reno Brewery District of downtown Reno. The annual, day-long gathering will serve up an array of activities for visitors, including performances from the Sierra Highlanders Pipe Band, Scottish Dancers, local Celtic entertainers, renaissance actors, and more. Musical headliners include Seamus Kennedy from Maryland, the Dropkick Mickeys from Southern California, and Reno favorites The Blarney Band. Clan tents and vendors will be on site as well. The festival continues the legacy and traditions of the region's original Celtic Celebration, which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A non-profit Irish Heritage organization, SADOE presents and sponsors Celtic entertainment, celebrates Irish history and culture, donates to local charities, and participates in community events. The event is free and open to all.

Smoky Mountain Scottish Festival & Highland Games

May 18-19, 2024
Townsend, Tennessee
www.smokymountaingames.org



Scotland in the Smokies is calling you to celebrate the 42nd anniversary of the Smoky Mountain Scottish Festival & Highland Games - Tennessee's oldest festival of Scottish, Irish and Celtic culture - in the stunning foothills of Townsend, just outside the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. From May 18 to 19, guests will enjoy the best in folk, roots, rock, and pop music, along with a barrage of Highland bagpipes and drums. Also on tap are feats of strength by caber-tossing athletes, authentic Highland dancing, kilt-clad clans, whisky tastings, sheep herding demonstrations, along with a strong selection of fares and wares from the Scottish, Irish, and British homelands. The wee ones will be entertained with their very own Highland games, including a caber toss, a kilted dash, stone and axe throwing, and more. Kids aged 15 years and younger enjoy free admission, making for an engaging weekend for the entire family.

The Sounds of Celebration

May 25-26, 2024
Vernon, BC
www.okanagantattoo.ca



The stunning landscape of Vernon, British Columbia is the backdrop for this year's Sounds of Celebration, a stirring spectacle that brings people of all backgrounds together for two days of fun and festivities for the whole family. This extraordinary event is a vibrant showcase of dancers, musicians, military bands, marching troops, athletes, and more, all coming together to create an atmosphere that is engaging, entertaining, and electric. Guests will experience the sheer power of music, dance and a 100-voice choir, all designed to unite, inspire, and uplift the human spirit. More than an event, the gathering is a celebration of life, love, and the joy that binds us all.

Motor City Irish Fest

June 7-9, 2024

Livonia, MI

www.motorcityirishfest.com



The Motor City Irish Fest is the premier Irish-themed event in Southeast Michigan, featuring 20 bands and performers performing Irish and Celtic music in two tents at Livonia's Greenmead Historic Park. This year the annual gathering is celebrating its 14th year with a showcase of musical artists, including internationally-renowned Irish trad troupe The Black Donnellys, Irish singer/songwriter Sina Theil, and Harrisburg-based Celt-Rockers the Kilmaine Saints. The family-friendly event features a Cultural Tent exploring the history and culture of Ireland, traditional Irish dancing featuring local Irish dance schools, Irish dancing lessons, Irish football demonstrations, pipe bands, a kid's tent, vendors, beer stations, whiskey tastings, and more.

Greater Moncton Highland Games & Scottish Festival

June 11-15, 2024

Moncton, NB

www.monctonhighlandgames.com



Moncton will once again celebrate 'feats of strength & feasts of lobster' as it hosts the 2024 CSAF Junior Men's & Women's Championships. The Greater Moncton Scottish Association is proud to host the inaugural Women's Juniors Championship, marking a new era of growth in the sport. In addition to the Championships, guests of the Games will enjoy heavy events, pipe band and Highland Dance competitions, agricultural displays, Clan tents, live music, a 5K Tartan Run, and demonstrations of swordsmanship, sheep shearing, spinning, fly casting, blacksmithing, and more. The festivities kick off with two free community concerts during the week, while the main event takes place in Downtown Moncton on Saturday, June 15. A great way to kick off the summer festival season on Canada's East Coast!

The Chicago Scots 38th Annual Scottish Festival & Highland Games

June 14-15, 2024

Wheaton, IL

www.ChicagoScots.org/festival



The Chicago Scots are proud to host the Midwest's largest Scottish event, the 38th annual Scottish Festival & Highland Games, at the DuPage County Fairgrounds in Wheaton, Illinois on June 14 and 15. This treasured, two-day, family-friendly celebration will bring back many crowd favorites from previous years, including North America's largest pipe band contest, a fully-stocked Scottish marketplace, the iconic caber toss, haggis throwing, activities for kids, Highland dancing competitions, live musical performances, Dogs of Scotland, a British car show, parades, contests, and much more. In addition, this year's gathering is proud to welcome back Scotland's National Chef Gary Maclean to the festivities. All proceeds will benefit Caledonia Senior Living & Memory Care, the principal charity of Chicago Scots - the first and longest running not-for profit in Illinois. Parking is complimentary, and children under the age of 12 enjoy free admission.

Embroid Highland Games

July 1, 2024

Embroid, ON

www.embroidhighlandgames.ca



This year marks the 85th Embroid Highland Games, a celebration of the region's rich Celtic roots which hail back to 1820 when the area was originally settled by those forced from their lands in Sutherland, Scotland. That heritage will again be celebrated on Canada Day in 2024 with several special events, including competitive Highland dancing, massed pipe bands, piping competitions, heavy events, Scottish animals on display, agility dogs, Scottish dogs on parade, whisky tasting, barrel racing children's Scottish-themed crafts and activities, and the always-popular Tug of War contest. Guests will enjoy live music all day at the Muckle Tent. Adults are welcome to stroll and enjoy a wee libation on the fully licensed grounds, and the vendor's area is always worth a visit with its fine array of Scottish wares and fabulous food trucks.

Glasgow Lands Scottish Festival

July 20, 2024

Northampton, MA

www.glasgowlands.org



The Glasgow Lands Scottish Festival - a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting and preserving Scottish culture - celebrates its 29th anniversary this July. Over the past three decades, the annual gathering has become one of the most notable Celtic events in Massachusetts, earning its place as the only Scottish festival within the state and the second largest in New England. This year, guests will enjoy an array of activities, including a Highland Pipe Band Competition featuring over 30 bands, Irish dance demonstrations, Heavy Athletic contests showcasing several world record-holding athletes, and a rugby competition. The Celtic Pub Tent will highlight the sounds of Scottish music with Albannach, Enter the Haggis, Tartan Terrors, and Sarah the Fiddler. Check out one of the many vendor booths for Celtic-inspired wares and fares or visit the Clan Village to show off some Celtic pride. Also on tap are children's games, the Pioneer Valley Harpers Guild, spinning and weaving, sheep herding, and - again this year - whisky tasting. A day-long event that is fun for the whole family!

New Brunswick Highland Games Festival

July 26-28, 2024

Fredericton, NB

www.highlandgames.ca



The New Brunswick Highland Games celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2023, and the 2024 gathering is shaping up to be another amazing display of Scottish and Celtic culture in New Brunswick's capital city. Hosted on the grounds of beautiful Government House, this year's edition will feature another unforgettable Saturday Night Ceilidh. All the fan favourites return in 2024, including the heavy events, Highland dancing, piping and drumming, the massed bands, cultural workshops, tasty food & beverages, kids entertainment, live music, and much more. There is something for everyone from all walks of life, and guests are invited to 'Be a Scot for the Weekend'!

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Ceotha

One scottish woman creates the ties that bind.

“It’s great to be in the business of making people happy,” says Ceo, owner of Ceotha - a Scotland-based company specializing in artisan Celtic handfasting cords.

“The cords can be such a meaningful and integral piece of someone’s love story, and playing a small part in that is truly priceless.”

While the “business of happiness” may not have a price tag, Ceotha’s online sales continue to increase thanks to a client list that spans the globe.

“The main challenge is simply how busy we are. It seems that handfasting cords get more popular every year and, at times, it has been difficult to expand as fast as the demand is rising.”

According to historical records, the handfasting tradition - in which a piece of rope or fabric binds the hands of a couple during a wedding ceremony to symbolize their commitment to one another - goes back to 7000 B.C. Popular in 17th-century Scotland, the rite has enjoyed a contemporary revival, in part due to numerous depictions in mainstream media and within neopagan circles. The result has been a resurgence of handfasting in both secular and religious marriage ceremonies.

“It started to appear in pop culture more - for instance, in *Outlander* and *Game of Thrones*,” explains Ceo. “But I think people are also having more unique weddings, and handfastings are a versatile way to put your own spin on the ceremony, as there is no right or wrong way of doing it. Couples can use it to symbolize meaning in whatever way they want to express their love. Also, I think with the pandemic, many couples had to postpone or cancel their wedding and then eloped or had a very small ceremony.”

As it turns out, the pandemic proved to be the perfect time for her to launch the venture.

“During this time, I ran and developed a community store, and this awakened my entrepreneurial side. When I realized that I enjoyed running my own business I decided



to go full-time with the handfasting cords. I have loved building a team, setting up our studio, and running a successful business that is rooted in this craft. And I am increasingly feeling called to spread the word about handfasting - it is such a beautiful, versatile, and open tradition.”

“During foregone times, handfasting was a temporary ritual to preclude or replace an official wedding ceremony.”

Similarly, Ceo’s business launch was conceived only as a short-term method to pay for a pastime while she finished her Ph.D.

“I sort of fell into it, really. I had a small Etsy shop selling various crafts. I played around with some rope and felt like what I had created - a double-hearted love knot - would make a nice handfasting cord, so I listed it. A few weeks later, someone bought it, and then someone else purchased one a couple of weeks after that. Pretty soon I got rid of all the other listings and was only doing handfasting cords.”

Inspired by Celtic symbols and folklore, Ceo provides made-to-order designs from scratch. Created exclusively by the owner, Ceotha originals include the Love Knot, The Infinity Knot, The Prosperity and Josephine Knots, and styles that incorporate three and nine - classic Celtic numerals rooted in long-held traditions.

“The Nine knot (done) three by three is a potent number in Celtic folklore. Celtic knotwork is originally drawings of a pattern. Translating those patterns into something that can be represented through two strands of material can be a challenge. We are very proud of our original designs.”

Keeping up with ever-increasing demand, Ceo still manages to maintain a personalised, hands-on approach.

“I work very long hours. I liaise with customers, design cords, and run the business side of things, but I am also still extremely involved in making the actual cords. I have two cord-making ‘apprentices’ on my team, but while they are learning, I still have my hands on every single cord that goes out.”

And while she is hoping to expand the business in the coming years, for now Ceo and her team are content to contribute.

“The number one reward is hearing from customers about how much they love their cord. It is such a privilege to be a part of a couple’s celebration of love in this way.”

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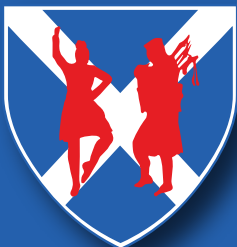
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Rosslyn Chapel

*Scotland's famous spiritual site is alive
with spirits of the past.*

Story by Tom Langlands

HERITAGE



I was a student of architecture when Umberto Eco's best-selling novel, *The Name of The Rose*, was published in 1980. The plot involves a series of unexplained deaths in an Italian abbey which Brother William of Baskerville sets out to solve. Assisted by his novice, Asdo of Melk, their detective work involves decoding signs hidden in the Abbey's library. I was enthralled by Eco's knowledge of medieval history and how the characters interpreted the mysterious signs and symbols they encountered. At that time, Eco held the chair of semiotics at Bologna University. It was a subject I knew nothing about back then, but I soon learned that semiotics is the science of signs and about how we acquire meaning. I discovered that aside from fiction, Eco had written about how architecture communicates and how we interpret buildings. For me, that began a decades-long journey into the world of architectural semiotics.

Forty-four years later that journey has brought me to Rosslyn Chapel in Midlothian, Scotland.

Originally destined to be the Collegiate Church of St Matthew, I stand in its cool interior surrounded by a bewildering array of carved signs and symbols - some obvious, some obscure, and others bizarre and unfathomable. The work of master stonemasons is everywhere I look - faces, angels, demons, dragons, skeletons, ropes, foliage, stars, coats of arms, and columns with the most extraordinary and exquisite detailing. This is no mishmash of haphazard, architectural elements, nor is this the whim of overzealous



masons. The building is a myriad of signs and symbols, and it is trying to communicate with me. It is reaching across the centuries, and it has something powerful to say.

Although the Chapel was a Collegiate Church dedicated to St Matthew, it forms but a small part of the original plan to create a cathedral-style building that was never realized. Founded by William St Clair in 1446, it occupies a site near the remains of an earlier castle. The St Clair family can trace their ancestry to Orkney and Norway and to the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte - giving rise to the St Clair (Sinclair) name - and subsequently to England fighting alongside William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Later, the St Clairs found favour with King Malcolm III (Malcolm Canmore) of Scotland, and it was a St Clair that escorted Princess Margaret - the king's bride-to-be - from the court of Hungary to Scotland. Around the late 11th century, William St Clair, an ancestor of the Chapel's founder, was granted the barony of Rosslyn (or Roslin).

Rosslyn Chapel is of modest size - around 70 feet long by 35 feet wide and 40 feet high - on account of it being part of a much larger cruciform shaped building that was planned for the site. Sadly, the grandi-

ose plan for a collegiate church ended with the passing of the building's founder in 1484. What William St Clair did finish in his lifetime is none-the-less extraordinary. The Chapel is host to as many mysteries as one cares to mention. Some say the carvings are evidence of links to the Knights Templar - the protectors of pilgrims to the Holy Land - or to Freemasonry. Legend has it that during the persecution of the Knights Templar in 1307 by King Philip of France some templars fled to Scotland and into the protectorate of Rosslyn's St Clairs. Tales of a concealed crypt being a repository for everything from the Holy Grail to the Ark of the Covenant and even the head of Christ himself abound! Unsurprisingly, such theories attract international attention and spawn best-selling works of fiction such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* where Robert Langdon, the story's protagonist, visits Rosslyn and encounters a mysterious sect guarding the secret of the Holy Grail. Such works feed into the human desire to find mysteries where perhaps the truth is simpler. When we don't understand something, we speculate and there is much to consider in the myriad of messages reaching out from Rosslyn's medieval walls.

Ian Gardner is Director of Rosslyn Cha-



pel Trust and, as he explains, “It is necessary to consider religious sentiment at the time the chapel was built.

“Overtly aligning oneself with the Christian faith and making grand gestures in stone alongside monetary gifts to good causes was a way of easing the soul’s entry to heaven.”

As if to reinforce the point, I see a sword-carrying William St Clair perched atop a wall pillar, while elsewhere an angel bears a shield featuring the St Clair coat of arms. Murder in a Christian setting has a long history and Rosslyn is no different. Toward the east end of the interior stand two strikingly different columns. These are known as the Mason’s Pillar and the Apprentice Pillar. Both are highly decorated but the Apprentice Pillar featuring eight dragons wrapped around the base with rising, twisting vines springing

from their mouths is intrinsically the more complex of the two. According to legend, the master mason carved his pillar first and then headed overseas to seek inspiration for the other. While away, his apprentice carved the second pillar. Upon returning and seeing the outstanding work of the apprentice the master flew into a rage and murdered him with a mallet. He was executed for his crime and carvings of the gashed apprentice’s head, his grieving mother, and the master mason overlooking the crime scene with the master’s head orientated towards the offending pillar.

Gardner highlights some of the biblical stories and characters depicted around the chapel noting, “At the time the Chapel was built few ordinary people could read or write and as a collegiate church one of the ways to educate the illiterate was to use carvings to bring stories to life.” I note Adam and Eve, Lucifer as an upside-down angel bound by rope, depictions of the seven deadly sins opposite the seven virtues, Moses sport-

ing horns - owing to a mistranslation of the Hebrew ‘keren’ meaning ray of light or horn - clutching the Ten Commandments, the star of Bethlehem and the nativity scene, Jesus, a dove and an angel holding the heart of Robert de Brus and another playing bagpipes! Other carvings appear non-biblical and may be rooted in the history of the St Clair family and its legends. Gardner indicates an arch over one of the windows that appears to show maize and aloe vera. These plants are indigenous to North America, yet the carvings predate Columbus’ discovery of the New World in 1492 as the chapel was completed by 1484. Legend has it that Prince Henry Sinclair commanded a fleet of ships that reached North America in 1398. Looking up I observe that the roof is in five parts, each section ablaze with stars and flowers in different configurations.

During the Scottish Reformation of the 16th century, Protestant beliefs saw the overthrow of Catholicism. Thus, many objects and buildings regarded as papal were destroyed. Although the St Clairs were Catholics, Rosslyn Chapel avoided the worst of these excesses, but the altars were destroyed, and the building was abandoned and left to rot. It is testament to its beauty and far-reaching appeal that efforts have been made in more recent times to save, restore, and conserve what is left. Today, Rosslyn Chapel remains in the ownership of the St Clair family. The Rosslyn Chapel Trust was founded in 1995 and exists to oversee the ongoing challenges of conserving the building for future generations.

Before leaving I pause in the doorway for another look into a building that speaks from the past. I know that I will be back as there is too much to take in during a single visit. Mysteries remain unsolved and perhaps other mysteries have yet to surface. Some of the narrative of Rosslyn Chapel is straightforward - other parts are more complex, and the meaning of others has been lost over the centuries. As I turn away, I am reminded of a quote from Eco’s *The Name of The Rose*, “My good Asdo... during our whole journey I have been teaching you to recognize the evidence through which the world speaks to us like a great book.” Rosslyn Chapel is such a book.

(All photographs supplied by Rosslyn Chapel)

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Tomnahurich Cemetery

As Celtic Life International
contributor Jo de Sylva explains,
Scotland's Tomnahurich Hill
towers over Inverness'
past and present



Tomnahurich Graveyard

Cemeteries are fascinating places. Perhaps it is the reminder of our own mortality, or the stories of the people who inhabit the graveyards. Whatever the appeal, they don't come more full of history and mystery than Tomnahurich in Inverness.

Tomnahurich Hill stands to the South of Inverness on the A82 as you leave the city. At 67 meters high and 500 meters long, the mound can't be missed on an otherwise flat area of land, behind which sweeps the Caledonian Canal.

The hill is a rarity in geological terms - an Esker was formed within ice-walled tunnels by streams that flowed within and under the glaciers. When the glacier melted, the remaining deposit of sand and gravel left a ridge, making up Tomnahurich Hill. The hill is covered in a plethora of native and exotic species, including maple, oak birch, beech cedar, and of course yew trees, with graves dotted amongst the impressive grounds.

In mythology, the yew is the mother of all trees and can be found in graveyards across the U.K. Yews have been known to live to over 2,000 years and were believed to have been brought to Scotland by the Celts from Spain as far back 570 AD. Druids saw the Yew as a sacred tree which symbolized death and resurrection and their groves were considered Celtic Holy Sites long before Christianity took hold in Scotland. It is believed that Yews were planted in graveyards because

the roots would grow through the eyes of the dead and hold them in place. Even Shakespeare mentioned the poisonous qualities of the Yew when concocting a poisonous brew in Macbeth; "slips of Yew, silvered in the moon's eclipse."

The structure of the Yew is such that it's the ideal wood for Long Bows. Robert The Bruce ordered the bows to be made from the wood of sacred Yews at Ardchattan Priory in Argyll, which were later used during the Scots' victorious battle at Bannockburn in 1314.

The hill has been known by numerous names, including the Hill of the Yew, the Hill of the Fairies, and The Hill of The Boat due to its shape.

Old archives note that it was used as a place to dole-out local justice, giving it the nickname Hill of the Court. In addition, given its stunning view across Inverness and the surrounding land, it has also been known as Watch Hill.

In Medieval mythology, it was written that the giant Fingal sleeps deep within the hill of Tomnahurich with his army. Fingal is said to be chained to the ceiling of the hill, and if a mere mortal should strike the chain 3 times Fingal and his army will rise in defense of Scotland.

Not only is Fingal said to sleep in the hill, but Thomas the Rhymer, a 13th century Seer, is said to be resting in the hill with his

army of men and horses ready to rise and save Scotland. He is also thought to have been the lover of the Fairy Queen.

The Brahan Seer - known as the Scottish Nostradamus - was the fortune teller for the 3rd Earl of Seafort, Kenneth Mackenzie. The Brahan Seer lost his life at the hands of the wife of the Earl of Seafort when he predicted, correctly, that her wayward husband was in France "entertaining the women of Paris." Furious, she had him boiled in a vat of oil, but before his untimely death at Chanonry Point, The Brahan Seer predicted "One day ships will sail round the back of Tomnahurich Hill." In the 16th century this would have seemed an absurd prediction as the hill was landlocked, but in the 19th century Thomas Telford built the Caledonian Canal, which indeed saw the canal snake around the hill as it heads Northeast, joining the Moray Firth to the west coast.

“Fairies have long been associated with Tomnahurich and are renowned for their tricks and mischief.”

One particular tale, dating back to the 1600s, tells of two fiddlers who came to Inverness to busk. The fiddlers were exceptionally talented, but on that day they made very little money. Tired and dejected, they began looking for somewhere to sleep. Eventually they came across an old man who, seeing the fiddlers, asked "are you musicians?" to which the lads replied "yes, we have been in Inverness all day and have earned practically nothing." The old man then explained he



The Brahan Seer



Yew Tree

needed musicians for a party and would pay them handsomely. The lads were delighted and followed him.

As the small group passed out of Inverness and into the countryside, they came across Tomnahurich and continued up the hill. Halfway up, the old man stopped and gestured towards the hill. Suddenly, the hillside opened to reveal a huge brightly lit hall filled with laughter, gaiety, and merriment. The hall was lavishly decorated with an intricately-decorated gold ceiling. The walls were hung with wonderful paintings, and the people were some of the most beautiful the fiddlers had ever seen. There were tables laden with exquisite food, enough for days of merriment. The old man told the boys to eat their fill and, when they were sated, to begin playing.

The fiddlers filled themselves to the bursting point, enjoying every mouthful of some of the best food they had ever eaten, and then began to play. The guests were wonderful dancers, and the fiddlers were having the time of their life. The crowd kept encouraging them to play faster, and, thoroughly enjoying themselves, the boys played to a frenzy.

Finally, the old man came back and told the boys that they had played wonderfully. Exhausted, but happy, the pair packed up their fiddles to leave. As they were leaving the old man handed each of them a bag of gold -

more than they had ever had in their entire lives. Delighted, they thanked the old man and began walking back towards Inverness.

As they strolled down the hill, they noticed slight changes in their surroundings and the closer they got to the town the stranger things became. Thinking it was only fatigue, they dismissed the oddness. However, as they approached the town, they noticed new houses they hadn't seen on their journey to Tomnahurich. People were wearing bizarre clothes and laughed and sniggered at the fiddlers, saying they looked like their Grandads.

Disappointed though not disheartened, the duo decided to head home to their village just outside Inverness. Upon arriving, they stopped into a Church to thank the Lord for their good fortune.

As they walked towards the church with the congregation, another old man pulled the fiddlers aside and asked "gentlemen, what are your names?" The fiddlers answered him, and he looked aghast. "My Grandfather spoke of you - you went to the same school, but you disappeared 100 years ago. Many people claimed that you had been taken by the Fairies." Confused and frightened, and as the final toll of the Church bell faded, the boys crumbled to dust.

“Alongside fiction and myth, the hill also has its fair share of factual history.”

In the 1600s, Oliver Cromwell stripped the trees that stood on Tomnahurich to build his citadel in Inverness. Not only did he desecrate the site, but he also took stone from the Greyfriars Church and St Mary's Chapel in Inverness and stone from the Monasteries of Beauty and Kinloss, leaving those buildings as ruins. The fort was said to house 1,000 men. When Charles II came to power, he ordered the stronghold - at the request of the Highland chiefs - to be destroyed. The remaining clock tower still stands in an otherwise industrial area of Inverness.

Cromwell was incredibly pious, banning anything that was perceived as fun, including theatre and sport.

In 1863, the Tomnahurich Cemetery company stated, "the hill of Tomnahurich presents opportunities rarely to be met with and may unquestionably be made one of the most impressive cemeteries in this or any other country."

The hill was sold to Inverness Council by a distant landlord who had been a slave owner in the early Victorian period.

The cemetery on Tomnahurich is the resting place of many interesting characters, none more so than Ambrose Salvona, the great, great grandfather of country singer Dean Owens. Ambrose was a lion tamer and was thought to have come to the U.K. from Italy in the 19th century, bringing with him his dancing bear. His simple gravestone bears the inscription "In Loving Memory of Ambrose Salvona. Lion Tamer. Died at Inverness 13th October 1917. Aged 88 years." Ambrose was an incredibly colourful character, marrying twice and fathering at least 10 children before moving to Inverness in his 80s.

At the end of his life, he was admitted to the geriatric hospital in what was an Inverness poor house, and in his death notice it states that "a procession across town took him to his final resting place" where he was "buried by friends."

No explanation has been found as to why Ambrose travelled to Inverness, but like the faeries, Fingal, and Thomas the Rhymer, this may remain one of the deep mysteries of Tomnahurich.

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CELTIC WINDS



the Bretons: Saints *and* Migrants

As Celtic Life International correspondent
Steve Melia explains, the Celtic coast of Brittany
holds many secrets...



In the fifth and sixth centuries, as the Roman Empire collapsed and the Anglo-Saxons pushed westward, some of the native Celtic population fled across the English Channel to the peninsula which now bears their name: Brittany. Their descendants would speak a Celtic language, Breton, from the same Brittonic branch as Welsh and Cornish. They would create independent kingdoms, build churches and monasteries, fight amongst themselves and eventually unite against the threat from the Frankish empire to the East.

I had cycled for two days to reach Exeter, heading towards Plymouth and the ferry to Brittany. In a small park, Rougemont Gardens, stands a red sandstone tower, named after a man with a shameful role in this story, if his medieval biographer is to be believed. According to William of Malmesbury, Athelstan, King of Wessex and most of England, “cleansed” the city “by purging it of its contaminated [Celtic] race” before fortifying it with towers and surrounding it “with a wall of squared stone.”

The sandstone walls which surround the gardens today were rebuilt by the Normans on Athelstan’s foundations. Athelstan’s tower stands in a forgotten corner, surrounded by rubbish, and sprayed on one side with graffiti. I was struck with mixed feelings. What a terrible desecration of such an important monument, but perhaps that fate is partly deserved.

I remember the roads near the port of Plymouth used to be lined with prostitutes but there was no sign of them when I arrived. They have moved online according to the local paper, whilst smart new apartment blocks are gentrifying the derelict sites that used to surround the bay. I joined a long line of other cyclists in the queue to board the ferry. It was an overnight crossing, arriving at 8am in Roscoff.

Most of the vehicle drivers turned left towards the main road network, leaving the quiet road into Roscoff to the cyclists and foot passengers. Most ferry ports are good places to get away from, but Roscoff is an exception. It is called a town but is smaller than some English villages. Its centre is lined with granite buildings dating back to the 16th century, including a church with an elaborate tower, ostentatiously oversized for such a small town. It was built during the “Breton Renaissance” of the 1700s, a time of peace



La Fuite du Roi Gradlon

and prosperity, when the Breton elites set aside their struggle for independence and began to integrate with the rest of France. Over the next few days, I would marvel at many others and learn how churches have been central to Breton history.

The fields in that area mainly grow green vegetables, and the smell of fresh cabbage often reminds me of the road from Roscoff to Saint-Pol-de-Léon. The traffic was busy to start with, but that soon changed. France has a similar population to Britain spread over more than twice the surface area, with a similar density of minor roads. That makes most of them, and the villages they pass through, very quiet.

My first stop was in Landivisiau, which has a strange monument that I much wanted to see. Behind the town’s church is a lavoir, a line of three shallow basins used for washing clothes. Above the source of the water is a stone panel, carved with primitive Christian images. Its origin is uncertain, but it is believed to have come from the desecrated tomb of Francois de Tournamine, who died in 1529 and became known locally as Saint-Bidouzin. The waters are believed to have magical powers – for example, if a lady’s corset pin floated in the water, it would prove her virtue.

“ **There are several hundred local saints in Brittany, pre-dating the official procedures for canonization by the Vatican. Magical stories, influenced by earlier pagan beliefs, surround them.** ”

Many are linked to those early migrations, and also linked to the next place I was heading towards.

To reach the Abbey of Landévennec you have to cross the River Aulne onto the Crozon peninsula. A new bridge had been built since I last came this way. Google Maps was still showing a cycle route over the old bridge - which was demolished in 2014.

The abbey was reportedly founded in the fifth century by Saint Guenolé, who was born in Wales and migrated with his family to Brittany, where he was educated by a monk and inspired to set up a monastery. We know this from an account of his life, written by the Abbot of Landévennec in the ninth century, now held in New York’s Public Library. The same document also describes his prowess as a surgeon; when a goose plucked out the eye of his younger sister, he cut the bird open, put the half-digested eye back in the socket and miraculously restored her sight. The monks and abbots of Landévennec wrote many such hagiographies - biographies of saints, who mostly came from Britain or Ireland. For some of them, the hagiographies are the only evidence of their existence.

The village of Landévennec lies at the tip of a small peninsula, surrounded by water. I arrived early and went for a coffee at the Awen Breton Cultural Centre. After my recent tour of Welsh-speaking Wales, I was struck by one big difference here: in the village shops and cafes, even in the cultural centre, everyone spoke French; the only Breton I heard was in the songs playing over the sound system.

The old abbey abuts the modern village, close to the shoreline. A small museum over-

looks the ruins, where I met Bernard Hulin, its director since 2011. He is one of those specialists I have been privileged to meet in museums around Europe: keen to share his knowledge, his passion, and hours of his time.

The abbey, he explained, was built, damaged, and rebuilt seven times before the revolutionary government sold it to a businessman looking for stone. Today it belongs to the new abbey, which was built on the hill behind, when the monks returned in the 1950s. The site and most of the items in the museum were excavated between 1978 and 2002. The earliest foundations date back to the fifth century, which corroborates one element of Saint Guenolé's story.

Of the Breton migrations, he says:

"This is one of the least documented periods of our history. None of the texts of the time talks about mass migration and there's no archaeological evidence for it, although there are some clear differences between East and West Brittany at that time. In the West, the houses were circular or oval and the few scraps of pottery we find are similar to British styles. There probably wasn't a mass migration, although something clearly happened. That is the result of a long campaign which ran until the early 20th century and has, unfortunately, borne fruit. The French state always wanted a single national language, and they used the education system to eradicate other languages."

“As in Wales, children heard talking the local language would have a board hung around their necks to humiliate them. Only here, it seems, the campaign was more successful.”

Walking around the museum Bernard pointed out that some of the information boards were out of date. One of them talks about a mass migration.

"Why don't you change them?"

He grimaced.

"We have long-standing plans to refurbish the whole museum, but we lack the funds. We are always looking for donors."

The next case contained a replica of a hagiography written by the monks of Landévennec.

"The originals have been dispersed all

round the world. I have a dream - to bring them all back."

One case displays a medieval skeleton, buried within the walls of the abbey, a powerful benefactor, possibly a prince, Bernard believes.

"We have over 200 skeletons in storage and a long-term aim to analyse their DNA and their tooth enamel, if and when we find the funds."

From a high point in one corner of the site, you can look down over the ruins towards the sea. Of all the different periods of its occupation, Bernard explained, they have chosen to showcase two: the ninth and the sixteenth centuries, both times of peace after conflict, when the abbey was rebuilt. The earliest foundations lie reburied at lower levels.

The most intact structure is a chapel dedicated to Brittany's mythical first king, Gradlon. Like King Arthur, he might be based on a real person, or he might exist only in the realm of legends. Either way, I would see and hear a lot more about him before I left Brittany.

In the most famous Breton legend, he was living in the city of Ys, on an island in the Bay of Douarnenez. Ys is Brittany's Atlantis. Influenced by Gradlon's daughter, Dahut, it had become a city of vice. Amongst her many lovers, one was Satan in disguise. On one evening of wild debauchery, she gave him the keys to the city. He opened its gates to the ocean, submerging Ys for all time. Gradlon escaped on horseback. What happened next differs in different versions of the legend, but that moment has inspired artists ever since. I passed a sculpture of it in Argol, nearby, and Bernard told me to look out for another example in Quimper.

The next day I rode to Guilvinec on the south coast. Thanks to a vast tidal range, the beaches around Brittany are wide, long, sandy, and unbelievably quiet in September - totally different from the Mediterranean coast. The water is not as warm, of course, but at 19 degrees it was warm enough to swim in.

Bernard gave me some research articles about the Breton migrations, and I found more online. They disagree on many points, but everyone seems to agree that there was a migration of some sort. The genes of people living in west Brittany differ from those in the east. They have more in common with Wales

and Southwest England. There are stronger genetic links with Ireland, but they seem to go further back in time, to the Bronze Age or Neolithic. Perhaps that is when the Celtic languages first arrived. Ben Guy argues that the later migrants were mainly peasants from areas where the Anglo-Saxons were advancing, particularly Dorset and Somerset. They brought the language that would become Breton. That discovery changed my plans for my next article and my route home, through Somerset.

It was a fairly short ride from Guilvinec to Quimper, a small city and capital of the Department. There were two more things I wanted to see there before moving on. In its medieval centre stands the magnificent gothic cathedral of Saint Corentin, dominating the views as you approach along the river. Between its two slender spires stands a statue of a man on horseback: King Gradlon. Amongst its many stained-glass windows, one features Saint Guenolé, the founder of Landévennec.

Across the square, in the Musée des Beaux Arts, hangs a nineteenth century painting: *La Fuite du Roi Gradlon*. I had seen it online but there was something intensely moving about seeing it in real life. You can feel the terror of the two horses trying to flee the advancing waves. Beside the king is a monk, Saint Guenolé, turned towards him with his hand raised to the sky. The voice of God is speaking through him, telling Gradlon to throw his daughter off the horse and into the sea.

I had set out to write two articles: this one about the historical migrations and the next one about Brittany's legends, but I discovered that the two were inextricably linked.

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Powys

Recently, my wife Linda and I decided to undertake an adventure around parts of England and Wales that we had not fully explored before. One leg of the journey involved a fairly full day of driving from Chester - in the heart of Cheshire, England - to the outskirts of Swansea, Wales. We vowed to stay off the M highways so that we could see as much of the countryside along the way as we could.

Why we were in Chester is a bit of a mystery to me. I think we were drawn to the ancient fortress wall that still surrounds the old town. The Romans had constructed the wall when they arrived here in the land of the Celtic Cornovii, who had been quietly farming, raising families, and extracting salt from briny springs around the countryside. We stayed in an old boathouse in town named appropriately enough "The Boathouse" and inside the pub, posted on the wall, was a note that the original name for the Roman fort was Deva Victrix (which I thought would be a great name for an all-female heavy metal band). It was there, among fellow amber beer

drinkers, that I was astonished to learn that Chester was once considered the Roman capital of Britain in its day. I later learned that this is an idea propagated by a BBC TV program, only partially true and a dubious concept snubbed by most Londoners.

At any rate, that Roman fortress was built, apparently, as it was close to the Welsh border and the Roman military minds must have been seriously worried about Welsh warriors trying to take over the lush territory the Romans had stolen.

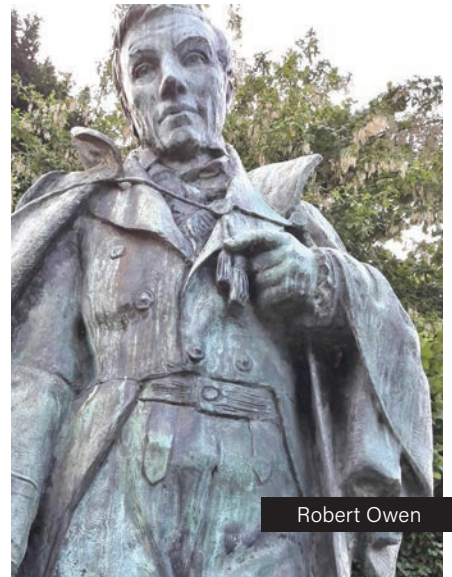
For us, however, Chester was a good enough starting point for our journey into the hills and vales of Wales. I must say that, up to that visit to Chester in the mild but eternal drizzle, I knew next to nothing about this charming small city on the banks of the Dee River. Now I know about the Cornovii, the Romans, and the fact that Daniel Craig of James Bond fame grew up there. I knew there was a Cheshire cat in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, but it came as a mild surprise that there is a popular British TV show called *The Real Housewives of Cheshire*. But, as

I said, Chester wasn't so much as a destination as it was a base camp for us two Canadian road warriors to make our run for the Welsh border and into the hilly heartland of that country.

I believe I made a wrong turn trying to find my way out of Chester onto the A483 and ended up - oddly enough - on an avenue called Roman Road on our way to Eccleston, which had not been on our itinerary. Not finding much of particular interest along the route, I made a right-hand turn, arguing with the right hemisphere of my brain to keep the car on the left side of the road. As it turned out, this led to another small side trip to a spot on my old 2008 Collins Superscale Britain map book called "Cuckoo's Nest," which was very tiny and uneventful, but reminded me of both the nursery rhyme and the epic tale of mental institutions gone awry by Ken Kesey, one of my all-time favourite 1960s authors. Just south of the "Nest," we flew over the Welsh border and, if there was a sign, I missed it. Certainly, no Welsh warriors were defending it and there was a complete ab-



Powys Castle



Robert Owen

sence of fanfare regarding our arrival.

Back on the main road we picked up some speed and motored on to Wrexham. According to wrexham.ac.uk, “Our city is home to one of Europe’s biggest industrial estates. It covers a whopping 550 hectares filled with 340 businesses that have created over 10,000 jobs. Here, you will find manufacturing giants like JCB and Kellogg’s, along with leading players in the automotive, engineering, aerospace, and pharmaceutical sectors.” And this would explain why we chose to keep on motoring down the road for more pleasant prospects.

But, before I get angry letters from Ryan Reynolds aficionados and football fans, I also learned this: “Reynolds bought Wrexham [AFC] with fellow comedy actor Rob McElhenney in November 2020. They funded the club’s return to the English Football League for the first time since its relegation in 2007/08,” according to *The Standard*.

I had originally thought we might try to thread our way south right along the serpentine Welsh border, but if you look at it closely on a map, you see that it is a twisty tangle of a thing that seems to dart hither and yon and wanders east and west somewhere back around Robin Hood’s barn.

But I did try to keep the border just to our left as we progressed southward towards the distant Swansea Bay. However, by the time we hit Owestry (pronounced aa-sweh-tree), we discovered that we were back in England again and ready for a short break. The name means “tree of a man named Os-

wald” and there is a great - but probably fabricated - story about a king named Oswald who was dismembered in a fight. A raven picked up his arm and carried it to an ash tree and after that the tree was able to perform miracles. There is an Iron Age hill fort there which, I have learned from experience, is a great place to hike to if one likes windy barren heights (and I do). At a different, more pleasant time of year, they have balloon and film festivals. I am always pleased when I discover a town that commemorates a writer, especially a poet, so I give Owestry full marks for having its own Wetherspoon franchise restaurant named The Wilfred Owen. Why name a greasy spoon after a WWI poet, you might wonder? Well, according to the proprietors, “Wilfred Owen, probably the greatest poet of World War I, was born in Western Lane, Oswestry, in 1893...Owen was killed in action in November 1918, one week before the end of the war. His works concentrate on the sadness and futility of war.” I told Linda that I remembered reading his anti-war poem, “Dulce et Decorum Est” in university where he describes a fellow soldier dying from mustard gas thus:

“*In all my dreams before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*”

His poetic point was that actual participation in a war is never a pretty site or a noble calling.

Back on the highway headed south, we

crossed over one more time into Wales as we approached Llanymnech, then dipped briefly back into England before the road took us back yet again into Wales. Later I would learn that the Welsh/English border actually runs down the main street of the town.) This got me wondering how such a seemingly higgledy-piggledy division of two nationalities came into being.

Well, it turns out that, “In the Middle Ages the Welsh border had the greatest concentration of castles in Europe. Hundreds of castles were built from 1066 and throughout the 12th century.” (*The Historic England Blog*)

Which doesn’t exactly answer the question but does suggest the exact location of the border was of great importance (to whomever was living in those castles). And then I discovered this tidbit: “The physical border between the two countries is marked by rivers, mountains, and man-made structures, and has evolved over time due to various historical, political, and geographical factors.” This information was provided by Quora and is wonderfully logical, ambiguous, and probably as insightful as needed unless I was willing to dig much deeper. I also need to confess that - looking at this tidbit on the internet - it came to my attention that the answer to my query came not from a person but from a bot. In other words, a machine, not a person.

Of course, such detailed research as this takes place well after the actual drive itself and it suggests to me that soon, my alter ego bot or AI persona will most likely take



The Boathouse

over altogether in the writing of marginally insightful travel prose like this. It's all a bit scary, isn't it?

But, after Llanymnech, we were most certainly back in Wales and the road would now allow us to stay put in the Welsh hills and vales all the way to Swansea. Linda was taking notes for me as we drove and, as luck would have it, her pen ran out of ink. (These are the trials and tribulations of old-school technology that bots don't encounter.) Of course, there was not a single back-up pen in our rental car. Realizing this deficiency, I decided to pull into one of those petrol stations just off a roundabout - you know the kind, the ones that make it incredibly difficult to actually find the entrance. I had to go back to the roundabout at least twice, ending up in the improper lane each time much to the chagrin of local drivers more familiar with the national rules of the road. But once safely inside the convenience store, we found a box of cheap pens and ended up in a line up at the cash with (presumably) local Welsh patrons buying coffee, Gregg's sausage rolls, Wales Lottery (Loteri Cymru) tickets, and snacks with

names like Bara Brith Fruit Loaf, Parson's Laverbread (made with seaweed!), Penderyn Whisky Chocolate Bars, along with the usual hodge podge of junk food.

Next up was the tiny village of Four Crosses - which, we learned, was home to some prize-winning ice cream - and then Arddlin, before barrelling down to the much bigger community of Welshpool on the Severn River. Close scrutiny of our old Collins map book informed me that our highway

would be threading along this scenic river, heading south towards the coast. Somewhere nearby there was a canal system - the Montgomery - which reminded me to remind Linda that someday we should take one of those canal journeys in an old slow canal barge to see what that would be like.

The name of Welshpool is English, of course, to distinguish it from another Poole in England, but the Welsh knew it as Y Trallwng, which means "the marsh or sinking land."



“Over the years I have been more than shocked to discover how many towns and cities beyond England have been renamed to better suit the ear of conquering English scoundrels.

There is a fine castle near here - Powys - and some nice views east to Long Mountain. However, according to the local chamber of commerce, one of the most attractive features of the town is that it has many transportation links, so it is easy to get to. It is a



fairly large town with a population of close to 7,000 souls.

But small towns capture my fancy more than bigger ones so the next community we visited was Berriew, which had won the Best Kept Village in Wales a fair number of times before said competition was discontinued which, I assume, could be a story in itself. I have discovered that such tidy town challenges often created heated hostilities between competitors, leading to threats and even violence in some parts of the U.S. and the U.K. But I did like the look of the timber-framed buildings of Berriew and the oh-so-inviting pubs, and it was located along the Montgomery Canal, so perhaps somewhere in the future, it would be worthy of further exploration.

Now I realize that, by this time, you (the reader) are thinking that here is a man (me, the writer) who knows next to nothing about these towns he is driving through and now he is writing a story about his very brief time there. Well, that is true and clearly these are the random observations of a rambling man motoring through rural Wales and not an expert. But that is just the point. Most of us are just that - humans in motion from one place headed to another, not necessarily a noble thing-in-itself, but that's what we do. So if I can't stop and smell the roses, I can at least look around in my brief hiatus, observe, form an opinion, and then offer up some words to let armchair readers know this: here is a small but significant hamlet, village, burg, town or

city where life goes on, where citizens are both happy and sad, wise and foolish, with deep history worth a look (if one has time) and inevitably some small or large claim to fame such as a prize winning ice cream or a football team owned by Hollywood celebrities.

All this ran through my head and probably led to a rambling discourse to my wife as we drove on, and she may or may not have taken any note of it in her notebook with her brand-new plastic pen. Road trips are ripe for long narratives about many things, are they not? And I knew we had many miles to go through the misty forested countryside, so I probably spoke too much and too often, after which it was proper to apologize.

With that, we found ourselves in the sadly generic sounding town of Newtown where the British had once again done their damage by changing the name from Y Drenewydd (which actually does mean new town). There is a statue in a park off Shortbridge Street here of a man named Robert Owen. I admit, the name did not ring a bell at first, but I soon learned more and developed a fondness for both the man and the town where he lived. For Newtown was a factory town in the days of yore and it was here that Owen was born. He was an 18th century utopian socialist who believed whole communities could be invented where everyone would be equal, happy, and prosperous. He was a reformer of many things and claimed even to be opposed to “personal responsibility.”

He established labour unions and generally got around trying to make life better for workers and everyone else in whatever utopian community he was trying to establish. He also tried this in America - in a place called New Harmony, Indiana - although things didn't work out so well. He believed his idealistic experiment would create a "superior social, intellectual and physical environment," but it also attracted a fair number of layabouts, good-for-nothings, and crackpots. But Owen had some very forward-thinking ideas for his time and some darn good intentions. And if you ever find yourself in Newtown, do get a look at that statue and, as you can see from the look on his face, you can tell he had a sharp mind, a strong will, a bit of whimsy, and a glimmer of pure optimism that somehow there must be a way to reform human nature and bring out the best in ourselves for the welfare of all concerned.





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Connecting Celtic Culture

For many, Celtic culture remains a puzzle of past and present.

Chris Muise puts the pieces together



The contributions of the Celts to the contemporary cultural canon is without question. Within language, music, dance, literature, cinema, and theater, to artisan kilt-makers, delicate jewelry design, delicious delicacies, and more - the world is a far more colourful and flavourful place for the presents of their creative presence.

Still, it begs the question; exactly what makes a culture “Celtic?”

More specifically, between all the accoutrements of Celtic culture, is there any one thing they all share that makes them authentically “Celtic?” Or is it all just branding? The answer might seem obvious - “culture that comes from Celtic people, of course!” - but the reality is far more complex.

“The term Celtic, itself a very useful concept, is also a very loaded and difficult one,” says Dr. Heather Sparling, professor of ethnomusicology at Cape Breton University. “Celtic, to me, is a very helpful umbrella; a term that incorporates several different groups of people. But there are a couple of different definitions here.”

The earliest “Celts” included the Gauls, the Britons, the Picts, the Gaels, and other Indo-European peoples going as far back as 1,200 B.C. - though the nature of many of their customs and conventions have been obscured by the fog of time, a mist made even thicker until about 800 A.D, when they started to put their history into written word.

There is some empirical evidence of their ways, however.

“One of the earliest signs of Celtic heritage is the Hallstatt culture,” shares Gregory Darwin, a senior lecturer at the University



of Uppsala in Sweden, with a PhD in Celtic languages and literatures. “You might have heard about the Hallstatt salt mines, where thousands of graves were found. But one of the things that is really striking about their burials is that they are quite rich and elaborate - like the big, four-wheeled wagons with thick iron rims, ornate carvings, and reliefs.

“So, metalworking seems to have been important, especially when it came to things like commemorating the dead by presenting something about how this person saw themselves or were seen by the community in life. This was quite expensive and would have taken great time and care in a medium like iron or gold or silver.”

These wrought-iron rims suggest the hand of the Celts at work as they were known to be some of the earliest blacksmiths. Oddly, people would pray for God's protection from

these forgers, as metalworkers' trade secrets might have seemed to be some sort of elemental magic (St. Patrick's Breastplate is a particularly famous example). The evidence



Heather Sparling



Gregory Darwin

appears even in our words for the metals themselves.

“The etymology of the word ‘iron’ - is a borrowing from Celtic,” says Darwin. “When Germanic speakers occupied central and Western Europe, they were probably encountering people manipulating iron for the first time. When they borrowed a word for this new technology, they likely borrowed it from the people that they learned it from, who would have been speaking Celtic languages. It is tempting to see some kind of connection there, although the evidence we have for that is very limited, and there is a thousand years sometimes between some of these sources.”

“Celtic languages helped to thread song and dance across history, even if those original melodies and steps might appear unrecognizable today.”

“We have very few records of those things going back very far,” continues Sparling. “We don’t have a lot of ancient records, and even when we look to more recent references, we have some challenges. Until the advent of video - a late 20th century invention - we had to rely on textual references, which are notoriously difficult because people use the same word in different ways, or they refer to the same thing using different words. So, we don’t really know what that looks like.”

One fascinating example Sparling provides is from the 1980s, when a music school in Keolis in South Uist turned to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia for help in rediscovering the lost art of Scottish step dancing.

“They looked to people here to show the ways of music and dance that had originally come from Scotland. Interestingly, the step dancing that people do here today was not recognized in Scotland as something Scottish. People said, ‘That’s not Scottish. We don’t have that here. We’ve never had that here. That’s got to be Irish. That’s an old form of Irish step dancing.’ People in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia said, ‘No, it’s not. This has been passed down through our families, and it came from the people who were originally immigrants from Scotland.’ There has been much research that proves this to be the case.”

As Sparling explains, song, dance, and



language are intricately connected, and when you lose one, the other two can fall by the wayside. Traditional Gaelic music was often written in step with the language itself, the tunes matching the cadence of the words in the lyrics. But, as in a lot of places where folks used to speak their own Celtic languages, everyday use of Scots Gaelic fell out of fashion in Scotland, and so too did the style of dance that had survived and evolved in the New World.

“This style of step dancing was linked to the music in a way that, when the step dancing in that style disappeared in Scotland, the music disappeared also. Conversely, the styles of dancing that continued to be practiced in Scotland, or that evolved there,

meant that the music that accompanied that dancing evolved as well.”

This is just one of the many side-effects of colonialism and globalization diluting the living Celtic languages - something that University of Toronto associate professor Brent Miles says is something that Celtic people have fought to preserve over the centuries.

“Retention of the language is very politicized, because it is associated with a way of life, and a way of life that was repressed - in some cases very clearly,” says Miles, who teaches Celtic Studies at Saint Michael’s College, a liberal arts campus within the UofT.

“For example, in Wales, there is what’s called the language movement, which started in the 1960s when speakers of the language started calling for the equality of Welsh in Wales alongside English. From the mainstream point of view, Welsh would have had a secondary status in Wales. So civil rights in Wales ended up being a language movement.

“Wales has tied language to their identity very closely, and they don’t show signs of being inclined to give up just because it’s getting difficult,” he continues, adding that the Welsh can now watch TV and even pay their taxes in their native tongue. “If anything, there have been all kinds of advances.”

Similarly, he shares, across the Irish Sea, poetry and literature were essential elements to the Emerald Isle’s identity.

“There was a nationalist push in Ireland



accompanied by a cultural revival, sometimes called the Irish revival. It was associated with poets like William Butler Yeats and playwrights like Lady Gregory, who were working in English. Alongside them, journalists helped to revive the language as well.

“In terms of identity, language and culture are absolutely central.”

Miles didn't grow up speaking any Celtic languages himself but taught himself Welsh and modern Irish as an adult out of interest in the culture. He explains that the poetry of the Celtic languages is the best way to study ancient ways, especially via the voices of native speakers alive today.

“In the Celtic countries, you can almost hear the 17th century speaking to you, because the poet tradition remains very respected and cultivated and vibrant. In Ireland, there is the tradition of Sean-nós singing. It's not at all like Scottish music – it is completely different, but it is deeply historical, and still practiced by people who are quite serious about it. Likewise, the singing style is completely alien to the rest of Western Europe, but it works with the Irish language – you can hear 2,000 years of history in it.”

Most of what we know as Celtic culture is fairly modern on a historical scale. In fact, language is one of the few aspects of Celtic



culture that goes as far back as the early Gauls.

“A more modern understanding of Celtic is one where there are six Celtic languages in the Indo-European language tree,” Sparling explains. “We talk about Celtic culture as coming from a place that speaks, did speak, or was associated with one of these Celtic languages. That's typically how I use the term Celtic.”

“That understanding of the Celtic languages only became evident in the 18th century, when Edward Llwyd became the first linguist to recognize that there were similarities amongst the Celtic languages. Several scholars now believe that the way we

talk about Celtic today is not about culture that stretches back 2,000 years, but cultures whose identities became clearer in the 18th century and onward.”

Even what we now call ‘trad’ is a relatively recent invention.

“Most Celtic music that we listen to today is also not that old,” says Sparling. “The majority of the tunes that we are talking about are from the 16th and 17th centuries, with much of it originating in Continental Europe. For example, in the Baroque period, Johann Sebastian Bach was writing dance suites based on the same kinds of melodies. He even has jigs in his dance suites. They are exactly what we think of today as Celtic tunes.”



So, does this mean that, aside from the languages, everything we thought was Celtic was just window dressing? Just fads of the day? And that, if you don't speak the language, you're not really part of Celtic culture?

Darwin thinks the truth is more nuanced than that - that it does no good to throw out the Celtic baby with the cultural bathwater, so-to-speak.

"The course I taught, Celtic History and Culture, started and ended with a simple question; what does it mean when we say someone is Celtic? What does it mean when we talk about the Celts? One of the best ways to define this is with language, because linguistics is a much more precise science. You

can easily say that a certain language is Celtic or not, as it has a certain lineage and you can identify certain features.

"The problem with that, of course, is, humans don't really experience culture in these very rigid ways," he continues. "And there is more to culture than just the language. So, when people talk about their own identity, for example, it's not purely the language, especially in Diaspora communities where there has been a language shift due to immigration, colonialism, etc. I don't think anyone would say that you're not indigenous if you don't speak an indigenous language.

"There is some cultural continuity that survives, even in the case of people who

don't necessarily speak the language as their first language, something which makes people want to learn the language again. If there was simply no connection there, why would you be attracted to learning Gaelic again? So, it is useful, but it's not complete."

"My personal feeling is that the place where the languages should be strong is in their home countries," says Miles. "It wasn't like convincing people in Edinburgh to start speaking Scottish - it was convincing people in Skye to continue speaking Scottish. There's still work ahead. Anglicization is part of globalization. To an outsider it looks like a behemoth. You are hoping that people in Skye continue to speak Scots Gaelic when it's hard enough to find someone in Sweden who still speaks Swedish. This is the reality of the world that we are living in right now."

"It is very hard for people to outside of these places to be able to contribute to the living culture," Sparling says.

“Language is a big part of it, but the more important pieces are the principles, philosophies, beliefs, and values of Gaelic culture...”

"That is one way that people can help to contribute to the preservation of Gaelic culture - understanding and appreciating both the beautiful, expressive forms like music and dance, and the intangibles that sit underneath.

"We see that in places like Nova Scotia that are world-renown for their hospitality. Hospitality was, and remains, a fundamental principle of Gaelic culture, and that is true whether people speak Gaelic or not. Those are the not-so-obvious types of things that give greater depth to the Celtic cultural experience.

Whether you are expressing your Celtic pride by learning an ancient language, or simply enjoying some bagpipe music, don't worry about whether or not it is Celtic enough - it is what's Celtic right now, which connects to what Celtic once was, and what it will become for future generations.

"These are things that have been in our communities long enough that they are hugely, culturally significant for anyone who is currently alive," concludes Darwin. "That is certainly not something to be dismissed."

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Citizen McKennitt

It has been five years since we last spoke with Loreena McKennitt. In a career spanning more than four decades, the Canadian musical legend's Celtic blend of pop, folk, and world music has sold over 14 million albums. She has twice been nominated for a Grammy Award and has won two Juno Awards, as well as a Billboard International Achievement Award. In 2023, McKennitt was inducted into the Canadian Songwriter's Hall of Fame. Recently she chatted with Celtic Life International Executive Editor Stephen Patrick Clare about her new recording, touring, and her growing concern for the state of humanity.





It has been a while since you have been on the road - are you finding it any different?

No, overall, it has been pretty similar to past tours. I am very grateful that ticket sales have been strong. It is always a bit of an Olympics - I regard touring as an athletic event first, and an artistic one second. It is so physically demanding, and you really must look after yourself when you are moving around almost every day, sometimes sleeping on buses, and so on. We are slightly less worried about contracting COVID, but all the same we still have all our protocols of testing and vaccinations and filters. Aside from that, touring is pretty much what it was - there are many pleasurable and gratifying aspects, and then there are things that you just have to dig into and get done.

How do you keep yourself busy during the downtime?

I still pick up newspapers wherever I can - train stations or airports. Sometimes I will listen to podcasts or read books. I feel that it is part of my duty of care as a citizen to keep myself educated, or at least informed. We all have that duty of care as

citizens. And newspapers and books and podcasts are great and portable travel companions.

Travel has changed so much in the past five years.

We move around in our little bubble, but I haven't done a lot of traveling since the pandemic. Certainly, we have noticed that people's dispositions have changed - there is a lot more insecurity and worry. Things have changed drastically since the Internet, especially with regard to social media and smartphones - people are now spending more time with their technology than with other people, and even the language we use today has been co-opted by Facebook, Instagram, and the like.

For better or for worse, tech has had a huge impact on our lives.

I personally think that it is a catastrophe for young people and for families in general. I would argue that tech companies deliberately target the education system, pushing their devices into the hands of our children. Of course, parents don't want their kids to be left out or left behind, so they get roped into paying for this

stuff and, in that way, they are victims as well. There is research available now, including a damning report from the U.S. Surgeon General's Office, indicating just how devastating this trend is in terms of mental health. I believe that a large part of our current mental health crisis is related to the misuse or overuse of technology. It is a very serious problem as we rely on the generation that comes after us to be familiar with the real world, analyzing and responding to it in a mature and responsible way. In the meanwhile, and I am quoting author Neil Postman here, we are all slowly amusing ourselves to death.

Are you arguing against progress?

Do you know Ronald Wright's book *A Short History of Progress*? He argues that we have a propensity to get ourselves into what he calls 'progress drops,' and that moral progress became untethered from technical progress around the time of the Industrial Revolution and unlimited fossil fuels. And we now see where that has brought us. So, I pray every day that there will be some sort of massive correction. Governments all over the world are trying hard to bring in new rules and regulations; the ongoing anti-Tik-Tok legislation in the U.S., the passing of online harm bills in Canada, Australia, and the European Union. However, the disconcerting thing is the wealth and power of certain individuals, like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg - these people have become like sovereign individuals, and that is very worrisome.

It is difficult to know what to think and believe anymore.

If society can't reach a consensus of what is true and what is not - be it climate change, the war in Ukraine, whatever - then there are going to be major issues. For years, we have taken for granted that a large part of our existence has relied upon a critical

mass of people looking at the same bit of information and coming to the same conclusions. It is frightening to witness media being weaponized against us, and to watch the Internet enable surveillance capitalism.

So, what is the solution?

I'm not sure that there is one, catch-all solution for the way we absorb media now - especially for younger people. It might take little changes, like these Gabb phones for kids that allow them to call and text only - no surfing. And I believe that - as a species - we could do with a little more modesty and humility so that we might better understand and respect the power of technology and AI. If we guide it well, it could be an extraordinary thing for humanity. However, if we leave it unfettered...

Tech has had a huge impact on the arts sector as well.

The music industry was the first to feel the brunt of it with Napster. Musicians get paid \$0.25 per song on CD and vinyl, and we receive \$0.10 per 1000 plays on Spotify. The digitalization and sharing of music alone broke one whole half of the industry. Now what remains is primarily a touring industry, with less money spread out in the sector's ecosystem. Greater automation means great inequity, and the music industry is just the first of many industries that will be mostly, if not fully, automatized.

Speaking of music, your new recording - *The Road Back Home* - is a bit of a lightweight counterpoint to some of the heavy stuff that we have just been discussing.

Ha, yes, it absolutely is. It is a simple and easy and fun recording done with good friends. Actually, this was sort of an accidental album - I had

no intention of doing anything new. We were supposed to tour Europe last summer and, for various reasons, we had to delay it until 2024. So, suddenly, I had time off, and I thought, 'well, there are these folk festivals in Southern Ontario that have asked me to perform for a number of years, but I have never been available' - here's my chance, why not? And so, I knocked on the door of a local Celtic band called The Bookends, and we put together a little 60-minute live set for these festival shows. We decided just to record the songs to see what would happen and we ended up with ten great takes.

It is a return to roots of sorts for you.

Yes, I call it a field recording. In retrospect, it was so very much like going back in time to 'touch the stone.' I grew up in Manitoba, and in Winnipeg in the late 1970s I had the chance to discover albums by all these great trad bands from Ireland, Scotland, England, and other parts of the Celtic world - artists like Steeleye Span, The Watsons, Bothy Band, Planxty, Alan Stivell, and many others. That music informed my entire career, and you can certainly hear those influences with this new recording. And the process was fun! Really fun!

The rest of the year looks like it will be fun for you also.

It is going to be busy for sure. Once we finish up this leg of touring Europe, we will take some time off to do the laundry and get reacquainted with our home lives and families and friends. Then we come back to Europe in June for the 30th anniversary tour for my album *The Mask and Mirror*. And I always have a bunch of things on the go that have nothing to do with writing, recording, or performing music; I am the owner and director of a family centre in my hometown of Stratford, Ontario, and I am also wrapping up a 17-year stint



as Honorary Colonel of the Royal Canadian Air Force in 2024. I've got my garden to put in - I am always happy to get my hands dirty - and by the end of the touring cycle, I am ready to resume my role as a regular citizen.

loreenamckennitt.com
[@loreena](https://twitter.com/loreena)

Loreena McKennitt Discography

Studio albums

1985: *Elemental*
1987: *To Drive the Cold Winter Away*
1989: *Parallel Dreams*
1991: *The Visit*
1994: *The Mask and Mirror*
1997: *The Book of Secrets*
2006: *An Ancient Muse*
2008: *A Midwinter Night's Dream*
2010: *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*
2018: *Lost Souls*

Live albums

1995: *Live In San Francisco*
1999: *Live in Paris and Toronto*
2007: *Nights from the Alhambra*
2009: *From Istanbul to Athens*
2009: *A Mediterranean Odyssey*
2012: *Troubadours on The Rhine*
2019: *Live at The Royal Albert Hall*
2022: *Under A Winter's Moon*



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SOUNDS

The Jesus and Mary Chain

Formed in East Kildare, Scotland in 1983, alt-rockers The Jesus and Mary Chain have been writing, recording, and performing together for more than 40 years. Recently we caught up with vocalist and co-founder Jim Reid to discuss the band's latest recording *Glasgow Eyes*, their upcoming tour, and the state of modern music.

WWW.THEMARYCHAIN.COM

Why did you first get into music?

From a very young age, music clicked with both my brother William and me. I'm not sure why, because our parents were not the least bit interested in music, so where it came from, I don't know. William got a record player for his 12th birthday, but we had no records, so we had to borrow some Beatles and Bob Dylan albums from a cousin. The Beatles just blew us away. It was like, wow - this is what music can be. And so that was the first dipping of our toes in sonic waters. That is when we realized that music wasn't just something that existed in the background of our lives - it could be right there in the front of us. It would take a few more years to get into Dylan, because as kids his music was a wee bit over our heads.

Are they the same reasons that you continue to make music?

I always say this - and people don't believe me - but we continue to make music because we still think that we are the best band in the world. When we started it was because we would turn on the radio and all this crap was spewing out of it, and we were cocky enough to believe that we could fix the radio - and we are still cocky enough to believe it.

Radio, and music in general, was going through a bit of an identity crisis at that time in the U.K.

Yes, by the 1970s the glam rock stuff had taken over - T. Rex, the Sweet, David Bowie, and the like. But things really only clicked for us with punk rock. Until then, music was made by strange, exotic creatures that were nothing like us. And then suddenly, the Ramones, the Stranglers, the Sex Pistols, Stiff Little Fingers, the Clash - these guys are like us; they talk like us, they kind of look like us, and the music is simple and primal. It was a revelation to discover that we didn't have to take ten years of music lessons to play an instrument or look and act like some sort of pompous rock star. With punk, anything was possible,



and it kind of felt like anyone - even a couple of layabout brothers from East Kilbride - could really make something of themselves.

And you have carried that same message since then.

I mean, I don't want to get too big headed about it, but I have read many interviews with younger bands who namecheck us. We made Psychocandy in 1985 with the idea that kids would be listening to it 30-40 years later, and with the hope that it could possibly inspire some young guy or gal to pick up a guitar or the drums or a microphone. And, since then, that is the way we have approached all our work. The thought that someone might get creative with sound or a paintbrush or a pen and paper because of our music is the ultimate compliment and has made doing it all the more worthwhile.

What are your thoughts on the state of music today?

I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, advances in technology mean that it has never been easier for someone to make their own music and get it out there. On the other hand, everyone is putting out music now - something like 65,000 new songs are released online every day. That doesn't necessarily make one a musician, however. It might make them an expert at laptops and recording software, but being a creative musical artist is something else entirely. I got two daughters and one of them is

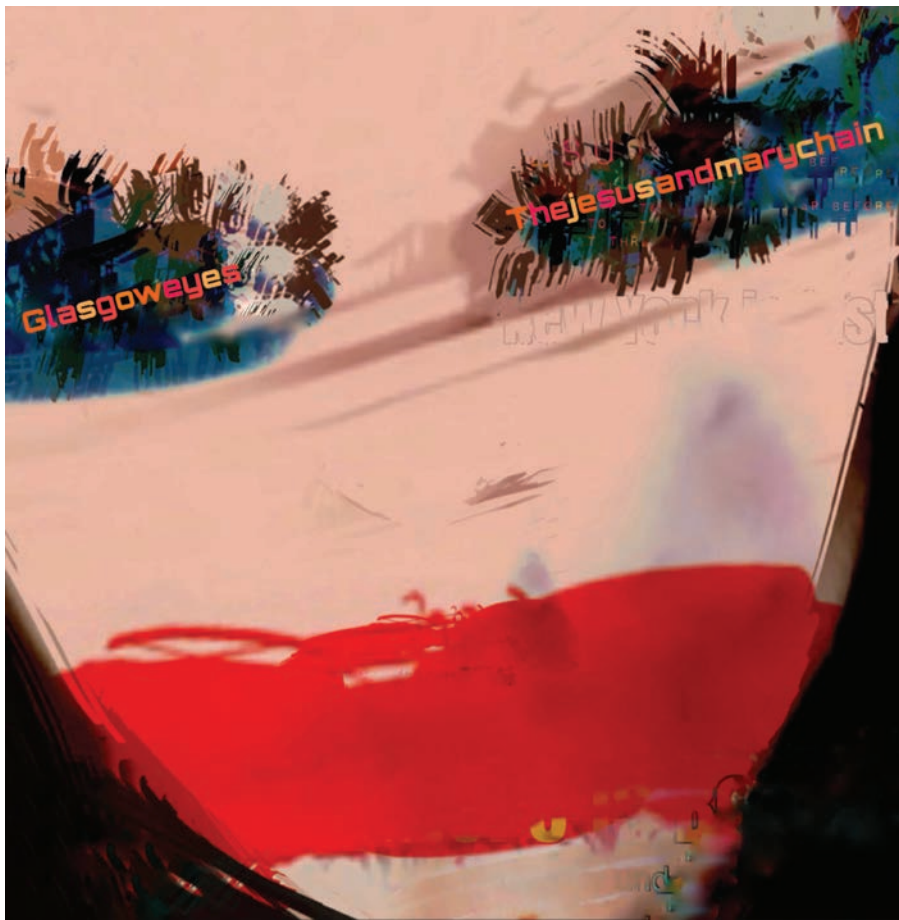
20 years old and she is really into drum and bass music. I never listen to that stuff, but I am forced to because I always driving her around in the car. Although music like that doesn't appeal to me at my current age, I can understand why she loves it and I think that if I was her age now, I would be into it - there is an attitude there that reminds me of punk, that anyone can do it.

Streaming has changed everything for musical artists.

Again, there are pros and cons to this. Yes, there is the opportunity to be heard and seen by millions of people, however the market has never been more crowded. And even if you do get lots of spins on Spotify or YouTube or whatever, the pay is still a pittance for weeks or months or even years of work that you have put your heart and soul into. So, selling full albums today is difficult, and bands and solo artists must rely on merch sales and live shows to make any money. All that said, it isn't impossible to have a career as a musical artist, however it is significantly harder than it used to be.

Tell me about your creative process.

It is the same as it has always been, really. Technology has made the process a bit easier, but we still hit the studio with a bunch of tunes and then figure out how to record them. We don't like to plan that part of it in advance - I really believe that the recording process should be as organic as possible.



The Jesus and Mary Chain Discography

Psychocandy (1985)
 Darklands (1987)
 Automatic (1989)
 Honey's Dead (1992)
 Stoned & Dethroned (1994)
 Munki (1998)
 Damage and Joy (2017)
 Glasgow Eyes (2024)

Was that the case with the new album?

With Glasgow Eyes, which was actually recorded in Glasgow, we did talk about making it a bit more electronic, which might be a nod to some of the great artists that inspired us - bands like Suicide and Kraftwerk. So, William and I had some fun sifting through all sorts of sounds from both old and new synthesizers. Aside from that, the process was really no different from past recordings.

What has the response been like so far, and does that matter to you or Will?

I'd like to say that the opinion of others doesn't matter much to either of us, but that simply isn't true. I should, however, differentiate here between critical and popular acclaim; what fans and everyday listeners think is very important to both of us, and so far, we have been thrilled with the feedback. Critics have been kind as well, although neither of us have ever paid a whole lot of attention to that stuff.

What's it like to be in a band with your brother? And how did you keep from killing each other all these years?

Well, we almost did in the 1990s, and it took years to heal properly. But time and wisdom have allowed us to learn from the mistakes of our past and move on. We still fight like brothers, don't get me wrong, but now we know where the line is and slow down and step back.

You will be on the road for the next few months in support of Glasgow Eyes.

Yes, we will be across Europe for most of the spring, with dates being added regularly. North America could be on the agenda also, and elsewhere.

Is touring still enjoyable?

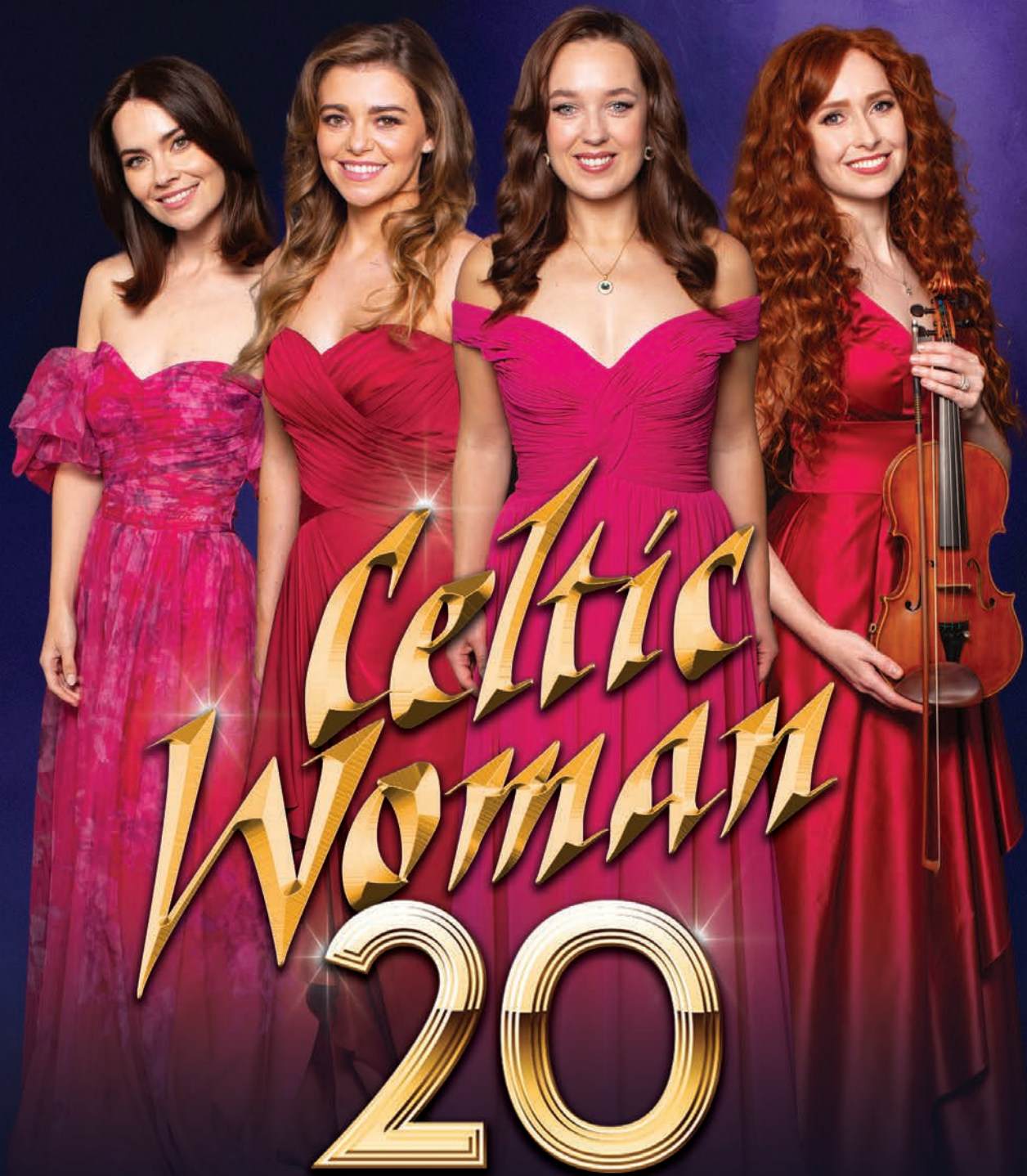
Was it ever enjoyable? Yes, there is enough good stuff there to keep us going back out on the road. Admittedly, the travel itself has grown a bit

wearisome - airports, taxis, hotels, etc. - but performing itself is always a joy. It always amazes me that 22 hours of each day is entirely devoted to those 2 hours on stage each night. And both Will and I love meeting people before and after gigs. That is very rewarding, and it gives us a chance to say 'thank-you' to those who have supported us for the last four decades.

These days, you see a lot of older bands touring classic, full-length albums from their back catalogue. Do you have anything planned for next year's 40th anniversary of Psychocandy?

At this point I sincerely doubt it. That was certainly a seminal album at the time, and it still resonates with audiences today. I'm sure the demand for shows would be there, but to me, the idea of profiting from people's nostalgia doesn't sit well with either of us. And, from a creative perspective, we've almost no interest in looking back as we still have work to do going forward. That said, anything is possible.

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Celtic Tenors

The Celtic Tenors return to form

“Im just so grateful to be back at work,” shares Irish vocalist Matthew Gilsenan from his hotel room in Alexandria, Virginia, where he and his musical cohorts James Nelson and Darryl Simpson will be taking the stage that night.

“For a while there, and like a lot of people, it felt like we were floating...and with little idea where we were going to wash ashore. For full-time musicians, the COVID-19 pandemic was a catastrophe as we simply weren’t able to do what we do and love.”

With five full-length recordings to their name, along with a live DVD (The Homecoming), the trio have traditionally made their bread and butter either in the studio or on the stage.

“We all come from musical backgrounds,” says Gilsenan. “Music was a big part of each of our home lives growing up, and James, and Darryl and I have all had formal training and experience in a number of genres.”

While the troupe’s members enjoy similar sonic roots, they also revel in the diversity of their geography.

“I am originally from Co. Meath. James is from Sligo but currently resides in Wicklow, and Darryl is from Omagh. So, we are from all over the island, and you can hear it in our accents.”

While appreciative to be back at work, Gilsenan admits that the music industry is in a very different place than it was when he first started singing.

“It is tougher to make a living at it today for sure, but there are many more opportunities available for young people to get creative than there was when I was that age. My son writes and records his own music. It is amazing to see him plugging away at it so passion-

ately, then post his work to Spotify and promote it via social media. He is quite creative, and that is one of the best things about all this technology we now have at our fingertips - anyone can make music with a few instruments and a laptop computer.”

That approach, he explains, was different for The Celtic Tenors.

“We started off as a singing group and that is what we still do best to this day...”

“Yes, we all write our own music, and we have performed original material both as an ensemble and on our own. However, it is humbling - and sometimes hard - to sing our own songs when they are stacked up against all the other great material that we do.”

For now, Gilsenan is just happy to be back on the road, plying his trade.

“Ah, it has been really lovely. We all thought that the pandemic would spell the end of our careers, and the music industry in general. It was a deeply depressing time for creatives, and for everybody really. We kept the faith, however, and our patience paid off; this has been our first full-length tour in several years and audiences have been coming out in droves. It has been wonderful to see people supporting the arts.”

And - he notes - those audiences aren’t just Irish ex-pats.

“Irish music isn’t exclusive to the Irish, in the same way that Italian opera isn’t exclusive to listeners in Rome or Florence or

Venice - good music is good music, regardless of where it comes from. So, yes, we do see and meet a lot of non-Irish people before and after our shows. They might be fans of the genre, or vocal ensembles in general, or perhaps they simply have some abiding passion for Irish or Celtic culture. Whatever the reason, the important thing is that they are there, in attendance, enjoying what we do.”

The band’s concerts are quickly becoming all-ages events.

“More and more, we are starting to see entire families at our shows - parents, children, and even the wee grandchildren. For some, this is their way of passing along Irish cultural traditions to younger generations.”

As such, he muses, music is truly a universal language.

“It is the sound of our emotions - while our stories and circumstances may be different, and we may come from different backgrounds and parts of the world, one thing that all people share in common are feelings. Music stirs the soul and opens the heart - two qualities that the world is in dire need of these days.”

Given the current state of the world, and the collective hangover from the two-year lockdown, Gilsenan will never take his vocation for granted again.

“I know it sounds a little cliché, but sometimes you don’t truly understand the value of something until you almost lose it. I think we just assumed that we would always be writing, rehearsing, recording, and performing. Today, the three of us have found a new and greater appreciation for both what we do and for the lives that we live.”

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Clare Cunningham

One Irish singer-songwriter makes music because she must...

When it comes to music, Clare Cunningham has long-lived by a simple edict; write to sing, don't sing to work.

"It started when I was really young," says Cunningham, who originally hails from Co. Louth, Ireland, but now resides in Nashville, Tennessee. "Music has been in my bones since the womb! I started playing classical piano at the age of six and made it all the way to grade eight."

A penchant for writing poetry eventually paved the way to songwriting.

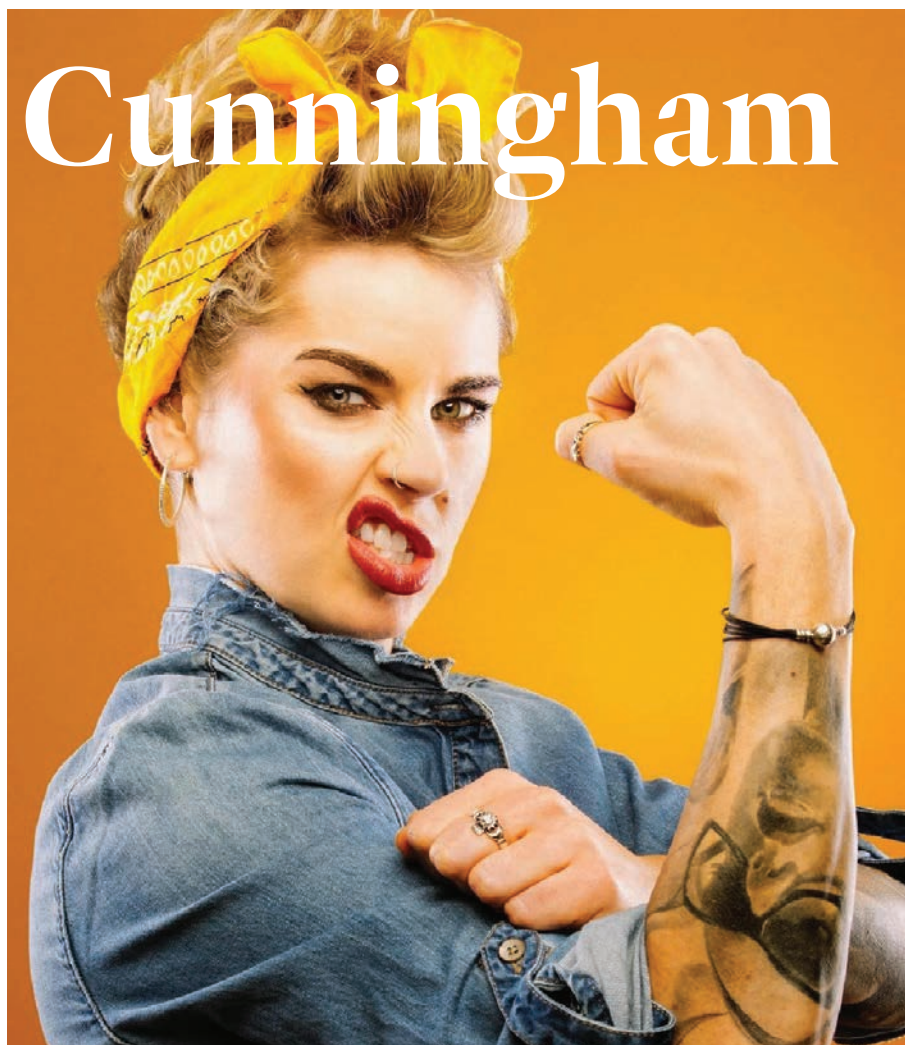
"It felt like therapy to me - a way of putting my thoughts and feelings onto paper and bringing them to life. I taught myself to play the guitar at the age of 16, and I was then able to take those songs to the stage. Professionally, I was earning money from performing by the time I was 18."

Her career has since skyrocketed.

"The biggest highlight of my career to date was debuting at the Grand Ole Opry in March of 2023. That night, I got to perform with Steve Earle, and I met my childhood hero Garth Brooks, who also performed. I have been very blessed to receive many accolades for my artistry through the years. And though I didn't get into it for accolades and awards, I will admit that has been lovely to be honoured and noticed."

Being recognized by her musical peers pales in comparison to connecting with her audience, however - both on and off the stage.

"The rewards far outweigh the challenges. I have the opportunity to bring joy, hope, and inspiration to those around me. I can connect with people through my music. I have even helped people who were contemplating suicide find the strength to continue for another day on earth. That means everything to me.



“I am living my calling, and performing is a feeling I will never be able to explain. It is electrifying...”

Cunningham notes that there was a time where it felt more like an obligation than a calling.

"When I first moved to Nashville and started to do more co-writing, it was strictly for the 'sake of writing' and I treated it like a job. There will always be artists who will sell their souls by solely making music for money. I believe that if artists put the art before their bank balance, we would achieve more authenticity in the arts. Music is, of course, a business - especially to those who only write songs for other artists - but the real power is in what the artist decides to put out into the world, and that is much easier for an independent creative like myself.

"Personally, I never intentionally sit down simply to write anymore. However, when the spirit moves me to do so it is a wonderful experience."

Today, Cunningham is doing what she loves, and loving what she does - a path that she encourages young artists to stick to.

"Nothing beats watching somebody who loves doing what they do. When someone is passionate about what they do, it is contagious and intoxicating. You must love what you do - music is a gift that should be enjoyed for both the creator and the listener. And always stay true to who you are, and don't let a label or the industry chew you up, define you, or mould you into something you cannot stand behind or believe in. Make music because you want to, not because you have to."

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The Harp Twins

One dynamic musical duo doubles the fun



When heavy metal rockers Metallica and Iron Maiden penned their potent classics, they likely never imagined that their melodies would eventually morph into lyrical versions played elegantly on a grand harp by identical twins from Northern Illinois.

Yet the Harp Twins have done just that - and much more.

Camille and Kennerly Kitt have not only produced impressive musical covers from a range of genres that include folk, rock, and heavy metal - they continually captivate audiences across the globe with their stunning arrangements of Celtic traditional music and their original compositions.

"We now focus far more of our time and energy on writing original music than cover songs, as this is where our true passion lies," notes Kennerly. "But covering the likes of Iron Maiden and Metallica is so much fun, and we will probably always be arranging new versions of their tunes."

Although the duo's 2020 album *Iceborn* may pay tribute to their Scandinavian heritage, their featured appearance on the PBS Special *Celtic Heart*, and a fair portion of their set list, reveals a distinctly Celtic affinity - perhaps intuitively derived from their recently discovered ancestry.

"Our roots are mostly Scandinavian (Norwegian) - however, our aunt has been

doing some family research, and we have discovered new lines back to Scotland," claims Camille.

As the only non-Irish participants in the Celtic PBS special, the pair cite this performance as a career highlight.

"It was an honor to work among some of the Irish greats, including former members of Celtic Woman," shares Camille. "There is so much amazing Celtic music out there right now - from traditional music reborn to modern Celtic music influenced by other musical styles.

“We also now officially have a Celtic harp named after us! Blevins Harps created the ‘Harp Twins Serafym’ with Celtic artwork designed by our mom, Diane Carlson.”

Such industry recognition is well-deserved, given their devotion to mastering the instrument since childhood, which, curiously enough, was the only instrument available to them at the time.

"Our mom put us in piano lessons when we were kids," recounts Kennerly. "However, we didn't have a piano at home. We were introduced to the harp by a friend whose mom played the instrument, and she let us try. We were both instantly enamored. We had to earn the money ourselves for our first used lever harp."

This fateful first introduction would prove to be as mystical as it was momentous.

"The harp is certainly not a mainstream instrument by any stretch," says Camille. "However, to us it is the most magical. The strings create overtones that vibrate through your body in this amazing and therapeutic way. It is incredibly diverse, and when played well, it creates pure magic."

For all their inspiration, the Harp twins' success has also demanded a fair measure of "perspiration" and plain hard work. In addition to participating in four World Harp festi-

vals and headlining countless concerts, fairs, conventions, and comic-cons across the globe, the duo has been on a full European tour of 20 cities in 11 countries since early 2024, and has North America in their sights for the coming months.

"Being professional touring musicians is often exhausting," admits Kennerly. "We spend countless hours honing our craft, writing music, editing music videos, sending e-mails, etc. - the list of things that need to be done is always endless, and yet we are blessed to have the opportunity to do what we love, and we love meeting the people who listen to our music."

And there are certainly a lot of people to meet. With a fan base of 2.5 million strong across social media platforms and 155 million views and counting on their YouTube channel, the Harp Twins show no signs of slowing down in 2024.

"Between extensive touring, we are always working on writing and recording new music, filming new videos, and creating more fun for our Patreon community," explains Camille. "Our latest original album, *Twin Destinies*, is a multi-media collaboration with New York Times bestselling author Debbie Viguié. The response has been almost overwhelming. This year, we are continuing work on the 2nd installment of the *Twin Destinies* series - slated for a late spring release. We are also working on an original album of Nordic-inspired music with the Wolfgang Twins."

Their diligence notwithstanding, the Harp Twins place the primary focus on "leaving the mark of our souls on listeners" and remain dedicated to love more than labor.

"There is nothing more special than someone telling us that our music helped them through a hard time or brought joy to their day," says Camille. "In life, there is no greater reward than being able to bring light to others."

@camillekennerly

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Alan Doyle

Canada's beloved troubadour takes his home on the road

As if Alan Doyle doesn't have enough on his plate with a new album and ongoing preparations for a North American tour, the world-renowned Canadian singer-songwriter is penning another narrative about his home province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

"This little book that I am currently writing is very much trying to answer some big questions; Why are we all so drawn to this place, you know? Why are we all thrilled to have the chance to live here? I don't know, I mean, personally, I think it is the people - we are different, and I don't mind saying it. I don't know if we are any better or worse than anybody else, but there is a sense of community here that shows up in very practical, hands-on ways. Only this morning, I was carrying a truckload of wood into my mother's house, and two people stopped and helped me. I love where it is in the world too, and that we are from kind of a weird place."

Despite that oddness, or perhaps because of it, "The Rock" (as Canadians call it) has produced its fair share of talent over the years,

"Well, for one thing, we have been disproportionately running the CBC (Canadian Broadcast Corporation) since 1975. Rex Murphy, Rick Mercer, Mary Walsh, Alan Hawco, 22 Minutes, Mark Critch - someone from this province has been on one of the top three television shows in the country for the past 50 or 60 years."

The region is a literary heavyweight as well, birthing a bevy of bestselling books from the likes of Wayne Johnston, Michael Crummey, Donna Morrissey, Lisa Moore, and many others.

"One thing we do very well here is tell stories. Perhaps that is our Celtic heritage, but we have taken that traditional storytelling culture and made it our own, be it in our music, our books, our theatre, whatever...and the rest of Canada has embraced it."

That has certainly been the case for both his former band Great Big Sea and with his solo career.

"Audiences in Saskatoon will clap their hands to Lukey's Boat as fast as anyone, anywhere in Canada. Music from this part of the world is now an important piece of our national identity."

Canada's sense of self, he notes, is a relatively new occurrence.

"One of the things about having the United States as a neighbor is that Canada gets a little overlooked sometimes. On the whole, we are quieter by nature, even perhaps too modest or humble. Less patriotic than our American cousins anyway. I mean, for a long time if someone

asked you to describe what it means to be Canadian, you'd be stumped."

That started to change, he says, in the 1990s.

"I remember being in a taxi in Toronto about 30 years ago and we were stuck in traffic and the radio station played four Canadian songs in a row; Celine Dion, Our Lady Peace, Susan Aglukark, and Great Big Sea. And I'm thinking to myself 'there are four completely unique artists, each with a distinct sound, from four different regions of the country - and yet there is something that ties it all together, like the country itself.

"And it occurred to me then that, as a country, we have a voice...a strong voice. And our music, perhaps more than anything else, gave us a definitive cultural identity as a people. It still does."

Doyle's latest musical effort, *Welcome Home*, was a return to roots of sorts.

"This record was a band record," he explains. "And it was great to stand in a room, wedged between Kendall Carson (violin) and Cory Tetford (guitar) and just celebrate the fact that we could all get back together and do music. It's a cliché, but it is true nonetheless; you don't know what you've got 'til you almost lose it or it's gone altogether."

He is equally as grateful to return to the road.

"I am really, really looking forward to reconnecting with audiences. From what I have seen, people are coming out to concerts in a big way, and numbers are up from pre-pandemic times. Thank God, as most of us in the music industry had no idea what to expect. That said, it seems like every band and their dog is out there on tour these days and the competition is stronger than it ever was for live music. I am just grateful that people still dig what I am doing."

And what Doyle is doing is filling his time with artistic pursuits.

"Composing songs, performing, writing a book, a musical, doing a score for a TV show, etc. I always have a half-dozen things I am working on, so the laptop is constantly fired-up. And then there is my family and my home life - and there is always something to do around the house. Like I don't have enough on my plate."

@alanthomasdoyle

WWW.ALANDOYLE.CA

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 black top 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.



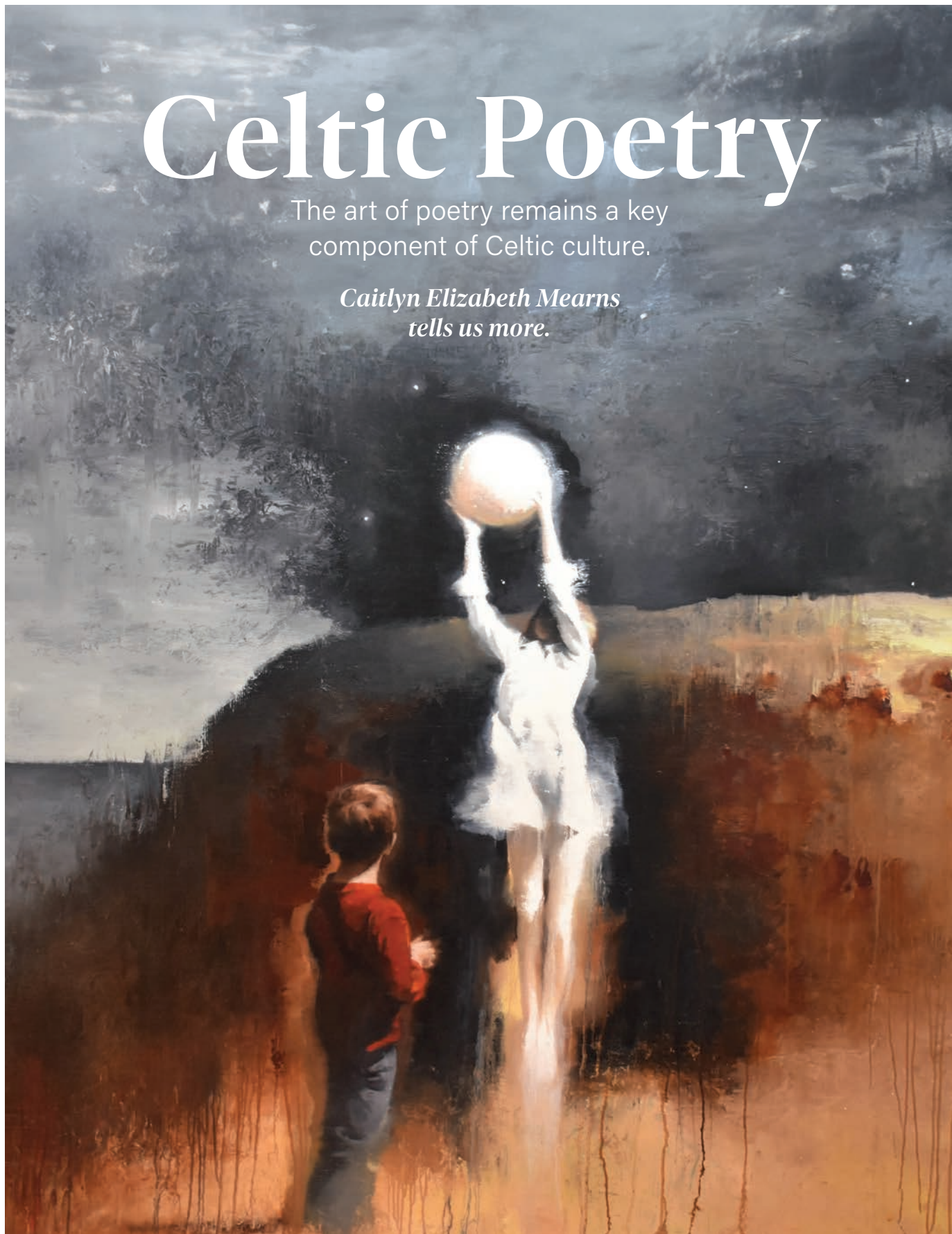
Fairfield
UNIVERSITY

College of Arts
& Sciences

Celtic Poetry

The art of poetry remains a key
component of Celtic culture.

*Caitlyn Elizabeth Mearns
tells us more.*



*This is what language is:
a habitual grief. A turn of speech
for the everyday and ordinary abrasion
of losses such as this:
which hurts
just enough to be a scar
And heals just enough to be a nation.”*
– *Lost Land Poem*, Eavan Boland, 1999

The Celts are no strangers to verse. Their history is rich with romantics who left some of the world’s most beautiful prose in their wake. There are the obvious ones - Oscar Wilde, Robert Burns, Dylan Thomas - and then there are the likes of Eavan Boland, John Montague, and Katharine Tynan, whose works are equally important to the Celtic poetic canon.

Poetry serves different purposes for different people. For some, it is way to reflect on the external world, for others it is a pathway to worlds within.

For Liz Kelly, the Director of Poetry Ireland - the country’s leading resource for poets and readers - poetry is interwoven with the Irish identity.

“We are natural storytellers,” she tells Celtic Life International via Zoom from Dublin. “Poetry really lends itself to the storytelling form, drawing upon the innate lyricism and musicality of the Irish language - something that is quite niche to us.”

Northern Irish poet and arts facilitator Colin Dardis shares that, for him, poetry is about communication.

“In most national cultures - in as much as a culture can be defined by national boundaries - poetry is a revered element,” he explains. “Ireland usually ranks high in surveys and polls of friendly nations around the world; we are generally a verbose lot that appreciates communication. Poetry is a pure and direct distillation of our need to communicate.”

Dardis, who works for Poetry NI+ - a multimedia media, multi-platform resource for poets - notes that the “The Troubles” have also played a significant role in the evolution of the art form.



Zoe Brigley

“Look at any nation that has had a long history of conflict; it is the poets and writers that give us insight from these situations alongside the historians.”

Of course, the modern-day love for Celtic poetry doesn’t end at the Irish borders. One needs to look no further than the Welsh National Anthem to understand the country’s deep connection to poetry.

“Gwlad beirdd a chantorion,” quotes Zoe Brigley, the editor of Poetry Wales magazine. “Our National Anthem notes that Wales is a country of poets and singers - a land that values art and culture.”

For Liz Niven, a Scottish poet and poetry facilitator based in Glasgow, poetry is about people and the stories of their lives.

“It is cited at births, deaths, marriages, and by people in love or people in despair - all the moments in life where words can fail you, but you know you need them. Poetry is



Colin Dardis

still important as it addresses human experience though rhythm and language. Attaching words to emotions is the greatest gift that poets can give to society. Without words, humans struggle to comprehend our existence.”

The tradition of bringing pen to paper is still very much alive across the Celtic nations -but as the world changes, so does its art. The landscape of poetry in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales has evolved over time. And while the heart of poetry remains largely the same, the sleeves upon which it sits have not.

For one thing, there is a greater sense of diversity within the art.

“We are multicultural here in Ireland,” says Kelly, who adds there are simply too many remarkable emerging poets to name only a few. “And that variety brings greater depth to the Irish experience.”

Brigley shares a similar sentiment on poets in Wales.

“I am pleased to see traditionally mar-



Hanan Issa

ginalized poets having a voice,” she says, noting the increase in queer, disabled, and racially diverse poets. “Everyone is welcome!”

She namechecks Hanan Issa, Wales’ National Poet, who is part Iraqi.

“It is also worth noting that the Welsh language, Cymraeg, is alive and thriving today and our poets are using it,” she adds.

The inclusion of first languages is another example of the form’s diversity.

Niven, whose work is a blend of English and Scottish, muses that she might be the exception rather than the rule.

“There are only a small number of publishers who will publish full collections of poetry written in Scottish,” she says, citing Luath Press, an Edinburgh-based poetry house. “Due to the concern over limited readership if the work is not in English, it leaves it difficult to publish a body of work in Scottish. Thankfully, that is about to change thanks to support from Creative Scotland’s Scottish language publishing grants and New Scots



Liz Kelly

Writing awards from Scottish Book Trust.”

According to Kelly, her native tongue is present in poetry also.

“The Irish language is what distinguishes us from the rest of the world, and that is why it is so important for us to promote it...”

“To support it, we run Irish language residencies as part of our regional school programs - it is tremendously important.”

Those residencies appear to be working; the Irish language is now taught in both primary and post-primary schools, and the Irish language is finding greater popularity in Eire’s larger cities.

Spoken word has also become very popular on the Emerald Isle.

“It has really captured the public imagination,” continues Kelly. “It is interesting for us as so many of our Celtic literary and storytelling traditions are oral. Spoken word

poets are very much a part of carrying those forward.”

Dardis, who co-founded Purley Poetry, a one-off slam event for the Belfast Book Festival, believes that social media has grown interest in non-traditional styles of poetry like slam.

“It used to be that to be seen as a poet, you had to be published, and how you were seen depended on how reputable that publisher was,” he says. “But social media has removed a lot of those narrow boundaries and gatekeepers. Now, a hard-working and Internet-savvy person can find their own audience online, without the need for a publisher. And how people digest poetry is changing too - it’s not just in books, it’s in videos, Spotify tracks, Tweets, etc.”

As such, forms like spoken word attract a younger audience, bringing poetry further into the mainstream.

To that end, the future of poetry across the Celtic nations looks bright.

“We have some really spectacularly talented, younger and emerging voices here in Ireland,” shares Kelly. “Poetry is a growing art form and, going forward, there is a lot to be excited about.”

Dardis admits that things are slightly more challenging north of the Irish border.

“In Northern Ireland, arts funding has been decimated over the last few years. That means in tougher economic times, more and more people are competing from that same, ever-decreasing pot of funding money. However, we are starting to see more names come to the fore from this part of the world, and it is great to see people realizing that poetry is not just within the exclusive realm of the universities or the cities - it is everywhere in our daily lives.”

Niven advises those looking to pursue their poetic passion to focus on the process, not the result.

“Say what you strongly wish to say. What is the ‘music’ of your voice, what’s the best rhythm, what’s the form that best works? Have you crafted your work as much as possible? And read, read, read, both poets from the past as well as poets from now. The contemporary poets will speak in the voices of today.”



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Alexandra Kiley

What happens when an American travel consultant meets a charming Scottish local?



Alexandra Kiley

So begins Alexandra Kiley's debut novel, *Kilt Trip*.

Based in Colorado, Kiley became a writer not long after becoming a mom.

"When my youngest turned one, I felt that phase of motherhood of wanting to reclaim a previous self or at least have something of my own that didn't revolve around nap schedules and diaper changes," she shares with Celtic Life International via email.

A trip to Chicago with her own mother ignited a creative spark. The pair saw the stage musical *Hamilton* and Kiley left the theatre feeling moved. "I don't have the same ambitions to shape a nation or change the world or create an iconic musical, but I was absolutely inspired. I went home and decided 'I'm going to write a book.'"

And write, she did. Since that initial draft, Kiley has learned "that writing 80,000 words does not a novel make." The new scribe further explored writing as a craft, through classes and critique groups with her peers. Finding a community is what has helped her most as a blossoming novelist.

"Writing can be such a solitary experience and having people who understand the challenges is crucial. The writing community has been so supportive with many outstanding creators."

Her stories are now structured in a more meticulous manner, making use of spread-



sheets to ensure the plot is moving along. Along with story structure, Kiley explains that character and narrative are major factors in composing a good tale.

"Voice has a big role in the enjoyment of reading for me. I love stories where characters use words in a slightly unique way, or something is described in comparison to something that I would not have expected."

Kiley's work and dedication has paid off - *Kilt Trip* was published on March 5. It tells the tale of Addie Macrae, a lonely travel consultant still grappling with the death of her mother a decade after the fact. At the behest of her boss, she travels to Scotland to help the struggling, family-owned tour company Heart of the Highlands. Soon after her arrival, Addie finds herself smitten with Logan Sutherland - only to find out that he is, in fact, the company owner's son. As the pair disagree about how to save Heart of the Highlands, their attraction to one another endures. Suffice to say that things get complicated. But that is only the beginning.

Although Kiley has mainly Irish and German heritage, Scotland is close to her heart. *Kilt Trip* was inspired by her year

abroad at the University of Edinburgh.

"I got to do a lot of traveling while I was there. One of the trips was an overnight bus tour and we stopped at several places that I would never have been able to get to on my own or even known about. I hadn't considered writing a book back then, but the seeds were certainly planted."

“Many of the places that she visited during that time are reflected in the novel.”

Last summer, Kiley returned to Scotland and received proofs for the book's cover just before her trip.

"At the last minute, they had changed the castle on the cover from Edinburgh castle - which is more of a fortress - to Eilean Donan, which is a fairy tale castle, and happens to be the clan seat of the Macrae clan which is my main character's last name. I already had plans to visit, but it was so special to hold my book in front of the castle that is in the story and on the cover."

So far, the response to *Kilt Trip* has been incredibly positive.

Kiley says that hearing from readers who have connected with the story is a reward all its own.

"People have been so supportive and generous with sharing their own stories. I love it when I get messages from people telling me how much they loved Addie or think that Logan is a great book boyfriend. The absolute best, however, has been when people say they were moved by Addie's journey through her grief or share stories of their moms or their own travels in Scotland."

Fortunately for those whose hearts flutter for Scottish adventure, Kiley is currently working on *Scot and Bothered*, a book about Logan's brother, Jack.

"It is a dual-timeline, second-chance romance, full of adventure and pining..."

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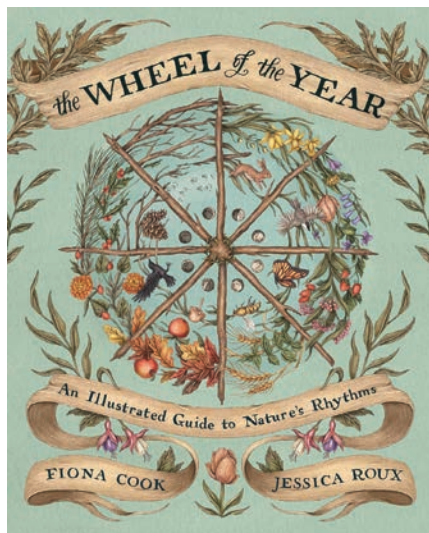


SCENE

To everything there is a season.
Celtic Life International Managing Editor
Rebecca Dingwell tells us more.

Fiona Cook has long practiced an “Earth-based spiritual faith.” In fact, it is one of the things that connected Cook and her partner when they first met. After the couple had their first child, they wanted to explore traditions that best reflected their beliefs and values.

“Most people just kind of assumed we’d be celebrating Christmas, even though neither of us are Christian,” recalls Cook from her home in Chicago. “My partner asked, ‘Why are we celebrating this, why teach it to our kids?’ We both had some baggage surrounding it, and we wanted to move away from the commercialization and materialism that that holiday has largely become entangled with.”



Rather than celebrate Christmas, the family chose to observe the Winter Solstice.

“Celebrating the solstice naturally led to a deeper exploration of the other holidays on the wheel (of the year), and these practices resonated with us. We found ways to observe them all within our new little family.”

The wheel of the year is a calendar of sorts, based on the earth’s seasonal cycles. While the wheel itself is a modern invention, the individual celebrations are believed to have roots in ancient Celtic culture, as well as Norse, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon customs. The wheel is divided into spokes which represent each of the eight sabbats: four quarter festivals and four cross-quarter festivals. The quarter festivals are the Winter Solstice, the Spring Equinox, the Summer Solstice and



the Autumn Equinox. The cross-quarter festivals (or fire festivals) are Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnasadh.

In October of 2023, Cook released a book in collaboration with illustrator Jessica Roux. *The Wheel of the Year: An Illustrated Guide to Nature's Rhythms* walks readers through each sabbat, with suggestions for family-friendly activities to go with each.

“Around the time I first had kids, I couldn’t find many good books for kids and families about the wheel of the year, so I decided to write my own,” says Cook. That has since changed, she notes, pointing to books like those published by Moon Dust Press. “I want it to revive a sense of connection to the Earth in people. We can have a reciprocal, care-based relationship with the world around us, we can give and receive from it in

a very nourishing, sustainable way. I want these seeds to be planted, tended, and shared through generations.”

As Cook worked on the book, she was careful to avoid pushing hard-and-fast rules about how to celebrate. Rather, she sought to create a gentle guide and spark ongoing conversation. Of course, many cultures observe celebrations based on solar events or seasonal changes, and the precise origins of the individual sabbats are often unclear.

“The traditions of the wheel are both older, in that all cultures at some point observed and celebrated the passage of time in alignment with the earth’s seasonal changes, and newer, in that many of the specific practices were lost and/or destroyed through time and colonialism so in many cases we have to cobble together and invent our own practices,” says Cook.



Heather L. Porter

“By investigating what really matters to us, and passing that on to our children, we can move towards repair of our own spirituality, as well as of our dear planet Earth and her other inhabitants.”

Writer Heather L. Porter also notes that the historical context of the sabbats is “up to consistent and chronic interpretation.” Most ancient Celtic traditions, for instance, weren’t recorded on paper. Written work on the subject was documented by Christian monks. “We can only really theorize, and I think that’s actually kind of the magic of the Celtic path.”

Porter considers herself an apprentice of Celtic mysticism. Growing up in Austra-

lia, she felt deeply connected to nature from a young age. As an adult, she eventually sought spirituality related to her bloodline: her Irish and Scottish ancestry. “That was the key that unlocked the door and then the doors flew open,” she says. That was 15 years ago. From there, Porter dove into research and self-exploration. She’s always felt in tune with the seasons, and she soon embraced the wheel of the year. She especially resonated with the cross-quarter festivals.

“Everything started to make sense to me. The season is sort of guiding me towards my own work and I am in service of the season.”

Colonialism, witch trials, and a lack of written records all possibly contributed to the decline of ancient practices. These days, however, they are going through something

of a revival. Whether they identify as modern pagans or are simply seeking that connection to Earth and nature, people like Porter and Cook are incorporating traditions from the wheel into their lives.

“I think what I experienced personally as a new mom is not unique,” says Cook. “There’s been some mass disillusionment with mainstream religion, as extremism rises and some of the dark secrets and violence of religious institutions have been shared more openly.”

Cook believes climate change has also been a factor. As a parent, it’s important for her to teach her children hope and resilience as it relates to their home planet. “To some, this might mean going back deeper, connecting with traditions that had a more direct, reciprocal relationship with the earth.”

Porter, too, sees an uptick in planetary awareness and self-awareness. This has inevitably led people to look to the beliefs of their pre-colonial ancestors. “I think perhaps the shadow of colonialism has reached so far now that it’s starting to crumble,” she says.

“Now, I think, the zeitgeist and the global community might say, ‘Oh, we really do need to pay attention to where we live.’”

John Wrightman, member of the Earth Spirit Society of Nova Scotia (ESSNS), has noticed an increased interest in sabbats and paganism in general. “Pagan means connected to the Earth,” he says, “and there’s definitely a trend in that way as our environment is more and more threatened.” The Society - which was founded in 2006 -hosts rituals for each sabbat, both in-person and online. Some of the more popular celebrations, such as Samhain and Yule, attract upwards of 200 participants.

“We don’t tell people what to believe or what to think, and a lot of religions do,” says Wrightman. This is a common thread when it comes to Earth-centred spirituality. There are no religious leaders, per se, and Porter believes that’s by design. “The Celtic pool of legend is vast—and a living myth. There is no dogma, there is no pope, there is no high teacher of this.”

The best teacher, perhaps, is Mother Nature herself.



Samhain (Samhuinn, Sauin)

Northern hemisphere: Oct. 31-Nov. 1

Southern hemisphere: April 30-May 1

Believed by some to be the Celtic New Year, Samhain is a festival that marks the end of the harvest season. As with other celebrations that take place this time of year—such as Halloween and Mexico's Día de los Muertos—Samhain is said to be a period when the veil between the world of the living and the realm of the dead is thin. As such, this is a good time to honour ancestors and loved ones who have passed on. One may also look at death metaphorically. For example, is there a habit or practice from the last year that no longer serves you? What do you want to leave behind as you look to the year ahead?

Winter Solstice (Yule)

Northern hemisphere: Dec. 21-23

Southern hemisphere: June 21-23

The Winter Solstice is the shortest day and the longest night of the year. In Celtic mythology, this solstice marked a battle between the Oak King (who symbolized light) and the Holly King (who symbolized darkness). The Oak King's triumph over the Holly King represented the return of the sun. From the Winter Solstice, the days become increasingly longer until the Summer Solstice. Many of the traditions and the décor we now identify with Christmas were originally part of the Winter Solstice: holly, mistletoe, feasts and gift-giving were all involved in the celebration. These days, people continue to observe the Winter Solstice alongside or instead of other winter holidays. Stonehenge, for instance, is a popular destination during this event. In addition, the Winter Solstice Lantern Festival takes place annually in Vancouver, B.C.



Imbolc (Imbolg, Lá Fheile Bríde)

Northern hemisphere: Feb. 1-2

Southern hemisphere: Aug. 1-2

Although winter is still upon us, the proverbial seeds of spring have been planted come Imbolc. This celebration pays tribute to Brigid, a figure revered as a goddess in pre-Christian Ireland. Some sources say Brigid was the goddess of spring and, in fact, Feb. 1 was once considered the first day of spring on the Emerald Isle. Christians today know her not as a deity, but as Brigid of Kildare: the patroness saint of Ireland. In both interpretations of Brigid, she is associated with fire and light. People light candles and craft Brigid's crosses in her honour. In the Christian faith, Feb. 1 is observed as St. Brigid's Day. This year was said to mark 1,500 years since St. Brigid's death and, to honour her, the town of Kildare hosted two weeks of celebrations and events. In Halifax, N.S., Imbolc often takes place around Interfaith Harmony Week, making it one of the more popular events hosted by the Earth Spirit Society of Nova Scotia.

Spring Equinox (Ostara)

Northern hemisphere: March 19-21

Southern hemisphere: September 21-24

During both equinoxes, day and night are approximately the same length due to the position of the sun. A great deal of mystery surrounds Ostara, which takes its name from a goddess of the same title (though she is sometimes referred to as Eostre). The story of Ostara says the goddess used her powers to transform a bird into a hare, and the hare laid coloured eggs thereafter. As with Imbolc, pagan and Christian traditions overlap during this time of year, and—just like Brigid—there is little consensus over Ostara as a figure. Some believe she is part of ancient lore, while others say she is a modern invention.

by neo-pagans. Folklorist Stephen D. Winick falls somewhere in between these beliefs, as he wrote in 2016, “While the story of Ostara turning a bird into a hare is not ancient, it’s also not new.” In an article for the Library of Congress blog, he pointed out references to Ostara from as early as 1835. That said, it’s entirely possible to observe the Spring Equinox without incorporating Ostara herself. If your family is Christian, for example, it may be appropriate to associate the Equinox with Easter. Otherwise, simple acts such as “spring cleaning” or nature walks might serve as celebration.

Beltane (Bealtaine, May Day)

Northern hemisphere: April 30-May 1

Southern hemisphere: Oct. 31-Nov. 1

Beltane sits directly across from Samhain on the wheel of the year. As Samhain focuses on death, Beltane is focused on life and fertility while the growth of spring surrounds us. Once, it was considered the first day of summer for Iron Age Celts. Bonfires were a major part of ancient Beltane rituals and were believed to protect livestock from disease. While times have changed, fire remains an important element in modern Beltane celebrations. Since 1988, a Beltane Fire Festival has taken place every year on Calton Hill in Edinburgh, Scotland. Dancers, musicians, and a costumed procession abound while thousands gather to take in the magic.

Summer Solstice (Litha, Midsummer)

Northern hemisphere: June 20-22

Southern hemisphere: Dec. 20-22

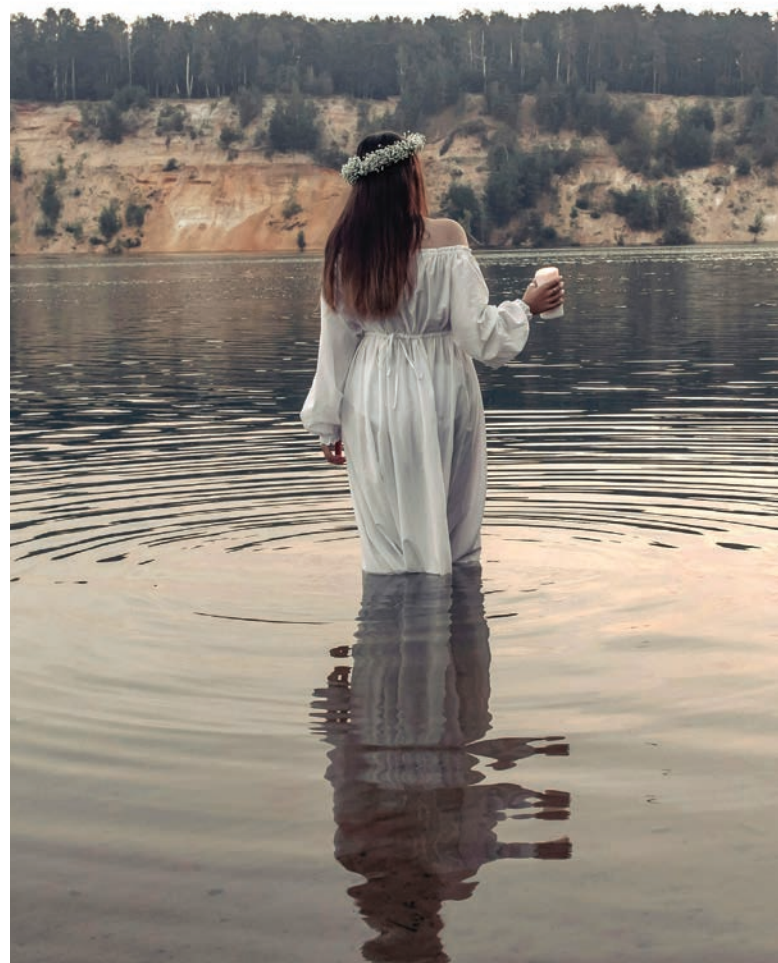
The Summer Solstice—or Litha—is the longest day of the year, after which darkness begins to creep in once again. Darkness need not have negative connotations, however: Summer Solstice reminds us to soak up the sunshine while we can and prepare for the seasons ahead. You may want to set your alarm to wake at dawn so you can watch the sunrise and enjoy the day to the fullest. There are many ways to celebrate the sun, such as making meals or baked goods with seasonal ingredients. If you have less time on your hands, tea made with seasonal herbs (like lavender or chamomile) is also a lovely treat to share.

Lughnasadh (Lúnasa, Lammas)

Northern hemisphere: Aug. 1-2

Southern hemisphere: Feb. 1-2

Named for the Celtic figure Lugh, Lughnasadh is a time to celebrate the fruits of the harvest. Although Lugh is sometimes referred to as a god, he may simply have been a king. Either way, Lugh is associated with the sun, as well as crafts such as blacksmithing. Legend says Lugh created the Áenach Tailteann (Tailteann Games) to honour his foster mother, Taitliu. The Áenach Tailteann were not unlike the Ancient Greek Olympic Games and, for a short period from 1924-32, a modern revival of the Tailteann Games took place every four years. The start of World War II brought this tradition to an end. However, an



annual cycling race called Rás Tailteann has taken place in Ireland since the '50s. For an event that's more spiritual than sport, the Hill of Uisneach hosts a Lughnasadh celebration in Co. Westmeath. Those who celebrate Lughnasadh today may also participate in sport or craft on a much smaller scale, whether that's baking bread or organizing a day of outdoor games for your kids.

Autumn Equinox (Mabon)

Northern hemisphere: Sept. 21-24

Southern hemisphere: March 19-21

Along with Samhain and Lughnasadh, the Autumn Equinox is a harvest festival in which food can play a large part. It may even serve as an alternative celebration to Thanksgiving, making it the perfect opportunity for a family feast. Apple picking, pumpkin harvesting or observing the colours of autumn leaves are also great ways to honour this time of year. Reportedly, Wiccan author Aiden A. Kelly began to refer to the Equinox as “Mabon” around the 1970s, inspired by a Welsh mythological figure called Mabon ap Modron. There are mixed opinions about this modern renaming and whether it is appropriate or fitting. Arguably, though, the spirit of the season is more important than its name. The equinoxes call attention to balance and harmony: after all, spring cannot exist without autumn.



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Master Kilt Tailoring

One Scottish woman seeks to preserve the
Celtic craft of kilt making.

Chris Muise tells us more...

There may be no symbol of Scotland more recognizable than the kilt. Worn proudly for centuries, the simplicity of a measured sheet of tartan worn around the waist belies its significance to millions around the world.

While the kilt is in no danger of falling out of fashion anytime soon, the art of kilt making faces an uncertain future.

Not if master kilt tailor Marion Foster has anything to say about it, however.

“I have loved working with textiles since I was a child,” shares Foster via email from her home in Perth, Scotland. “I made my first kilt at the age of 16, for the very good reason that, as a Cub Scout leader, I needed one.”

“Kilt making guidance proved to be in short supply, and I was left wondering how my kilt could be made to fit like a glove. Years later, I attended a training school founded by a former Master Kilt Tailor of the Gordon Highlanders, who predicted that the art of tailoring the kilt was headed for extinction, mostly as the military began contracting-out their kilt uniform to a mass manufacturer. I grasped the opportunity with both hands.”

The construction of a kilt, explains Foster, is far more complicated than it might appear.

“The master tailors of the Highland Regiments applied their tailoring knowledge and skills to create kilts fit for purpose - that is, for combat and ceremony. They used their practical knowledge to create the kilt to fit on a body, be functional, and look attractive. Their value was appreciated when, in 1876, a Tailors Department was formed at Fort George, Inverness to meet the requirements of the garrison.

“This was because a Colonel of the Aberdeenshire Highlanders complained to the Army Supply Department in London that the kilts ‘are not made up with that spring, or contraction at the waist, quite as necessary to prevent them falling off when the men double, as it is for trousers, or rather much more necessary in a Kilt.’ He concluded his letter by stating that ‘the Kilts, Gaiters, Trews, and Feather Bonnets of a Highland Regiment can never be properly made up in London, but only at the Depots and Headquarters of the Kilted Corps by their tailors.’”

Today, regimental uniform kilts are mass produced quickly and cost-effectively, although at the compromise of hand-crafted attention to detail and personal care. As such, traditional skills honed for centuries are in danger of being lost to time and cheaper factory textiles.

“There is a wonderful piece of work published recently, called ‘Safeguarding Traditional Crafts in Europe’ that reflects what we are about and how we are safeguarding the craft of kilt tailoring,” says Foster. “The writings attribute the decline of traditional craft to the widespread accessibility of low cost, mass-manufactured products, relegating them to a niche market. This shift has rendered heritage crafts vulnerable.

“The endangered status of kilt tailoring as a craft raises concerns about cultural preservation.”

For that reason, among others, Foster sought to share her learned skills; her kilt tailoring knowledge, along with her previous career experience as a radiologist, put her





in a prime position to help others study the subtle intricacies of the kilt and its relation to the human body.

“My legacy is to capture all that I know and make the training more accessible and affordable. The craft must grow and it needs to be safeguarded and continue beyond what I know and share. This is why I established The College of Master Kilt Tailors.”

Kilt tailoring is not a simple matter of taking down measurements and whipping up a ready-made garment.

“Bespoke tailoring of the kilt requires three visits; a measuring and planning, a mid-fitting, and a final fitting session, plus seven to eight days of stitching with the final steam and pressing. It is a combination of the head, heart, and hands - truly a work of art. Commercial kilts, considering their market and the need to prioritize, are often ‘made to measure,’ or manufactured. There is less heart in the process, as it is viewed more as a commercial product than a symbolic clothing of Scotland’s cultural heritage.”

Several economic realities have led to the diminishing number of true master kilt tailors; lack of paths to formal accreditation, pressure from global markets to be competitive, very few government incentives, and a shortage of small business financing to name but a handful - all factors that Foster took into consideration when designing her programs.

“There are separate courses for the different styles of kilts, as well as for kilt restoration. This latter skill is very much in demand, and vital to ensure that heirloom kilts are revitalized and saved for future generations.

“Courses are available for all students, whether they wish to learn the heritage craft for their own enjoyment, or whether they want to establish their own kilt tailoring business. Either way, they have the option to study for the accreditation which, upon completion, allows them to become a Member of the College of Master Kilt Tailors and use the protected collective mark MCMKT after their name. This is a protected collective mark, and signifies that the kilt tailor has been

trained, and continues to work, to the highest possible standards with revalidation after a set period so that the recognition has not been plagiarized nor diminished.”

Foster has also assembled a team of “safeguards” - former students that she hopes will go out into the world and set up their own kilt tailor training operations.

“It is my belief that existing students who have their ‘heads and hearts’ in the ethos of the College are best placed to take the College forward into the future. I have endeavoured to do this myself, and I believe that I have established a program and a team that will help to save this heritage craft from extinction.”

The College of Master Kilt Tailors accepts students from around the world, including online apprenticeships.

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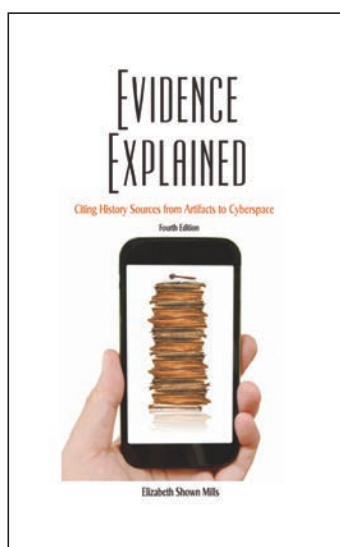
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Tom King

As William Shakespeare once wrote, "Some people are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."



“I have been blessed with gifted hands where making comes naturally...”

“I use my engineering background and artistic expression to focus on the ancient craft of blacksmithing, shaping hot iron into jewellery, spears, shields, and swords in the style of my ancestors. How good were the warriors of ancient Ireland? Only as good as the smiths who supported them. I consider myself a living historical figure and one of these people.”

Not only does King manage to replicate the milieu of metalworkers of the past, but he also serves up hearty fare from times gone by.

“My early Bard Menu serves up ‘The Mound of Sausages’ - based on the Mound of Hostages located at Tara. And I offer another fine dish - ‘Niall and the Nine Sausages’, which is based on the story of great King Niall.”

Visitors certainly seem to be eating it all up. King’s An Gobha Iron Works Experience was shortlisted for several tourism awards in his first year, and he was the winner of Overall Best Product of Showcase Ireland 2023 for his Iron St Brigid’s Cross.

Given the expertise he amassed during his career as an engineer, along with his passion for the Celtic arts, King seems to have tapped into the collective yearning of many to both acquire knowledge of the past and to fully immerse themselves in its customs and practices.

“A wide range of visitors and guests have reached out and made contact - from the Boyne Valley, the Ancient East, from schools, retirement groups, sister and men’s sheds, pilgrimages, and cub/brownie groups. So far, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive - in fact, some guests reach the point of tears. To experience heartwarming feedback has been incredibly rewarding. There is so much to look forward to.”

@an_ghoba

When adversity was thrust upon Tom King during the COVID-19 pandemic, he saw it as an opportunity to develop his own measure of greatness; after 18 years of working as a design engineer, he was laid off.

In the persevering spirit and intrinsic luck of his ancestors, however, King managed to transform a twist of bad fate into a turn of good fortune.

“I received a phone call from HR informing me to stay at home until further notice while they navigated lockdown,” notes the native of Bohermeen, Co. Meath, Ireland. “I realized that I now had an opportunity to focus on my Celtic art.”

That desire was met with significant demand. Using social media platforms to get the word out, King attracted interest with more than just his blacksmithing skills by applying a unique and creative twist that allows participants to experience the historical charm of an ancient forge firsthand.

“The demand just exploded,” he explains. “It was very apparent that the need and want were there, so I made that leap of ancestral faith and turned professional. The response has been overwhelming, both with the blacksmithing and with the total experi-

ence offered at the forge. While the Office of Public Works and others talk about the past, I bring those stories to life. The forge is set up like a stage with the grand banqueting hall - similar to the great banqueting table and King Lugh’s Thrones.”

Distinguishing himself as the character of “An Gobha” - the Gaelic term for blacksmith - King has the roots that give him the right to such a claim; his own heritage hails from the sacred corridor known as Slighe Assail - one of the five ancient roads spread across Ireland - allowing him to provide visitors with historical knowledge while honoring the sacred legacy of his craft.

“I am from the village of Bohermeen, which is the Irish word for Smooth Road. It is also known for being the resting place of one of the great ancient kings of Tara. Slighe Assail was also favoured and used by Queen Maeve and her Tuatha who travelled from Sligo to Tara for ceremonies at the various Celtic festivals throughout the year.”

King does not merely offer staged reenactments, however. Visitors to his forge are invited to participate and witness his significant skill as a smith.

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Kimberley Arnold

For one Canadian woman, creativity is its own reward

Artist and writer Kimberley Arnold always knew that Scotland was in her blood.

“While my parents told us that we were mostly English with a bit of German on my mother’s side, I always wanted to be Scottish,” she tells Celtic Life International via email from her home in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

“I didn’t really know why I wanted to be Scottish until a few years ago; I took an ancestry DNA test and discovered that I was 50 percent Scottish, with the remaining being Germanic and English. I knew then what I had already known - I was a 100 percent Celtic.”

Arnold’s curiosity for Scottish and Celtic culture remained a constant throughout her life. In college, her roommate - a Celtic musician - introduced her to Celtic music and ceilidhs.

“Around the same time, my sister moved to London, England which led me to travel throughout Ireland, Scotland, and England over the next 30 years. From that first trip in my early 20s, my passion for all things Celtic was ignited and I began creating Celtic-themed art.”

Her first piece was a large watercolour.

“I don’t know where it came from, but I didn’t need lessons or to practice. It just came out of me.”

Arnold studied the meanings of Celtic symbols, Celtic art, and Ogham - the secret language of the Druids - all of which enriched her understanding of Celtic culture, adding greater meaning to her work.

Her creative edge has evolved over the years.

“I continue to do Celtic art for the love of the designs and what they represent, but, as I evolved, my quest for spiritual understanding led me to Buddhism and modern Western spiritual teachers. However, something was still missing.”



It was after working with some of Canada’s Indigenous communities that Arnold discovered that missing piece: “It led me to think, ‘What is my Indigenous tradition?’ The answer at that time was obvious - the Celts.”

Arnold’s focus on (pre-Christian) Celtic spirituality began to take center stage.

“My work has gone from doing nice designs and representational art - Celtic crosses, knot work, birds, serpents, stags and hounds, and the like - to imparting Celtic spiritual messages and related pieces of wisdom that I have been privileged to receive.

“The evolution has also included understanding Ogham and I have translated these pieces of wisdom from English,” she continues. “From a material perspective, my art has gone from just using pen and ink to also including 24 karat gold leaf for additional dimension and colour.”

Arnold describes her work as “a modern interpretation of traditional Celtic art used on metal work, stone, and in books...”

She cites sacred texts such as The Book of Kells and Lindisfarne Gospels as some of her biggest inspirations.

In addition to working as an artist, Ar-

nold is also a published author. Her first book, *Authentic Love*, was published in 2023. She notes that all her creative work brings her both challenges and gifts.

“Expressing what is in me in a unique way is my reward. Finding what I love to do is my reward. Having a very effective creative and spiritual outlet is my reward. Although the responses from people are also a wonderful bonus. If I can impact people in a positive way - if even for a moment - what could be better?”

Arnold is concerned about the current lack of popular interest in Celtic arts - surprising, given the number of people alive today who claim Celtic ancestry.

“So many people are interested in Indigenous spirituality and arts in many different countries,” she says, noting specifically Indigenous communities in North America, Australia, and Mexico. “And yet not many people see the Celts as being the Indigenous people of much of Europe.”

The best way to change this, she believes, is through education.

“Knowledge is the great improver.”

Arnold is currently focused on her next big project, her sophomore literary effort *Radical Wisdom 1* - a collection of musings on Celtic spiritual and human wisdom. The book is set for release later this year.

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Amanda Lynn Mayhew

Professional hunter goes from
'dressed to kill' to 'Dressed to Kilt'

“On my father's side, I can trace my roots back to the early 1800s, although I cannot pinpoint exactly when my ancestors immigrated from the U.K. to Canada,” Mayhew shares with Celtic Life International via email.

“They were miners and forestry workers in Northern Ontario. On my mother's side, my ancestors came from Latvia in Northern Europe. They immigrated to Canada after the birth of my eldest uncle in the early 1950s, fleeing political unrest and seeking better opportunities.

“I am proud of my diverse cultural heritage, and the resilience and determination of my ancestors to build a better future for themselves and their families.”

These days, Mayhew lives on a farm in Southern Ontario, close to where she enjoys spending most of her time - the great outdoors.

“The fresh air, wide-open spaces, and the sense of community that often comes with rural living are all valuable aspects of farm life. Living on a farm also provides a unique opportunity to connect with the land, appreciate the cycle of nature, and understand the value of hard work and dedication that goes into farming.”

An avid hunter since her own childhood

when she would track game with her father, Mayhew was offered the opportunity to share the lessons in self-reliance, outdoorsmanship, and sustainable living that she learned with her father to a wider audience.

“I was persuaded to be a part of a project showcasing hunters across Canada. In fact, I was told all I had to do was ‘Just Hunt’ – although I had almost no prior experience with produced television. I thought that being a part of a project that showcases hunters across Canada could be a great opportunity to share my passion for hunting, showcase my skills and experiences, and connect with like-minded individuals who share a love for the outdoors and wildlife.

“It was also a chance to highlight the important role that hunting plays in conservation efforts and responsible outdoor recreation” she continues. “Hunting and fishing, when properly managed and regulated, can be environmentally sustainable practices that contribute to conservation and biodiversity protection. They can help manage wildlife populations that may become overabundant and threaten the balance of ecosystems.

“Hunters and anglers have a vested interest in preserving natural habitats and in maintaining healthy ecosystems to sustain wildlife populations...”

“By selectively harvesting animals such as deer or fish in a sustainable manner, they can prevent overpopulation and mitigate negative impacts on habitat and other species.”

Mayhew's proud pop wasn't the only parent to contribute to her interests and skills, and she is about to put some of those other skills to the test as she makes her debut as a model in the upcoming Dressed to Kilt fashion spectacular in Toronto.

“My mom was very much into fashion. I love clothes, both designing and wearing them. I even have my own clothing collection that I have designed myself for hunting functionality. I am in no way on the scale of the designers showcased in Dressed to Kilt, but I have always been a very creative person.

“I have never done a fashion show before,” she admits. “Dressed to Kilt is probably the event I am most looking forward to this year - and most intimidated by! It's funny - I can walk towards predators without a stitch of fear, but put me on stage to walk in front of hundreds of people staring at me? Now that is scary!”

The rest of 2024 will be equally busy, though perhaps less daunting.

“I have been invited to speak at an awards ceremony to talk about my winning of the Courageous Award of 2021, and then I will be planning my travels across Canada and the United States.”

@amandalynnmayhew

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Trinity Irish Dance

Chicago-based troupe
connects Celts

It has been a busy 12 months for Trinity Irish Dance Company. Following lengthy tours of Japan and North America, the troupe rounded out their roadwork with a recent appearance on *The Tonight Show*, before performing to a sold-out St. Patrick's Day crowd at The New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

Founded in 1990 by Artistic Director Mark Howard, the troupe's mandate has evolved over time; today, it seeks to elevate Irish dance through performance; engage in gender equity, celebrating male and female equally through costuming, choreography, and casting; and empower audiences and artists alike through dance experiences and meaningful collaborations.

No stranger to show business, Howard was a regular guest on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson and has also appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, *CBS This Morning*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, *The Today Show*, *Live with Regis*, *Good Morning America*, and many more. From PBS and Network specials to extensive film efforts for Disney, Dream Works, Touchstone, and Universal, he has worked with the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Ron Howard, and Sam Mendez, and was the personal dance coach for actors Tom Hanks and Daniel Craig. His work has brought numerous grants and awards, including choreographer's fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, an Emmy award, and accolades from New York to Tokyo. He has twice been named one of *Irish America Magazine's* Top 100 Americans and in 2023 was inducted into the Irish American Hall of Fame.



In 1990, after the first decade of his career as an Irish Dance teacher, Howard - whose Irish-born father emigrated to the United States in 1962 with a young family in tow - made a seismic shift to devoting his life to elevating Irish Dance as a choreographer.

"The performing arts stage provided me with a passion and an outlet that I didn't see coming," he explains via email. "It was like somebody flipped a light switch. The concern was no longer whether you were going to get paid for it or whether you were going to go on and be successful. It was, as they say, no longer about the destination but the journey. I was alive to what I was doing, and I still am."

"Mark's job requires an intuitive feel for emotions which has made him a brilliant connector," notes Chelsea Hoy, who joined Trinity in 2014 and is now the troupe's Associate Artistic Director. "Through his passion and his craft, he builds goodwill and community wherever he goes. He cares about people and likes to inspire them. When you are in his presence you come to understand how much he is rooting for you as well as everyone else.

"As an artist who has worked with him for what is now a decade, I am continuously astonished by his versatility as well as his ability to transform the mundane and find power and beauty in literally everything that he creates," she continues.

"In an industry where mimicry is king, I have never seen him create something even remotely familiar. He seems to have infinite range."

Hoy adds that the reward is knowing that the Trinity Irish Dance Company continues to carve out a space for Irish dance to breathe and evolve.

"Our artists know that they are carrying the torch for a globally beloved cultural form, to ensure it is celebrated as a serious art."

Given the current state of the world, Howard believes that the show's healing properties are needed now more than ever.

"I see our dancers and musicians as movement and sound doctors - always searching for something real, something human. They are powerful connectors that surround audiences with a field of positive energy, emphasizing the critical importance of savoring the joyful moments. Dance and music are commodities that we consume with our imaginations. As humans, we often personify art to help us understand our own humanity. The dances and songs are alive because we are, and I believe the inverse is also true."

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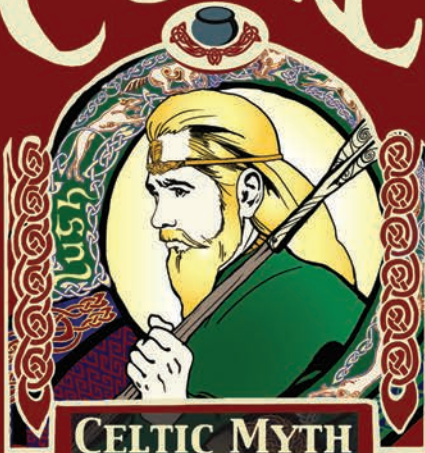
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Elphi Désidérata

I am Breton - Morbihannaise. I grew up between Ploermel and Malestroit in central Bretagne. I still live in Morbihan, in St Anne d'Auray, at the gateway to Vannes and Auray.

I have always loved sewing, drawing, theater, and manual work - a vocation more than a profession. I started sewing at the age of 4, making clothes for my dolls, using adhesive tape and staples. Then, from the 6th grade onwards, I made all my own clothes. Later, I took fashion design courses, obtaining my BEP and a professional fashion baccalaureate.

At first, I made small creations like jewelry, fashion accessories, children's clothing. Over the past 11 years, I began - little by little - to create dresses and costumes for events, fashion shows, photo shoots, salons, and so forth. I am an advanced sewing trainer for the Chamber of Trades and Crafts of Bretagne, training professional seamstresses, and also a sewing facilitator at the Maison des Animations et des Loisirs in Auray. I do costume design on the side - for three years, I have had the honor of working for the Venice Carnival, creating several pieces each season.

As a costume designer, I love embodying a character and the chance to learn about an era, a context, and new techniques. My job goes well beyond sewing and into the realm of telling stories - persevering through the process of testing, failing, and starting again.

The challenge in fashion today is to become more ecologically sustainable. I am already involved in this process, using organic fabric, collecting costume scraps to create small pieces like bow ties, brooches, etc., and my prototype fabrics are crafted from recycled cotton.

The greatest reward is the satisfaction of a job well done and the happiness in the eyes of our customers. It is simply magical.

It is, above all, a true passion. Passion animates me, makes me feel alive. I don't see myself doing anything else. It is such a rich profession, in both its process and in its techniques - I am always learning. That said, you must be just a little bit crazy to work in the fashion industry.



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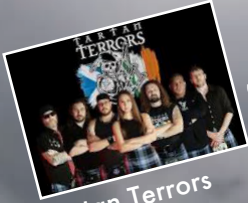
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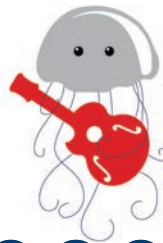
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COVER STORY - SIGHTS

My roots are in St Ives, Cornwall. One side of my family were born and bred here. It is where I grew up, and where I still reside today.

I was good at art as a child - I would draw my family, my pets, my surroundings, and I used my imagination a lot. The positive responses I received encouraged me to keep going. My art teacher seemed to enjoy my work and gave me exercises to draw from life and paint with my emotions. It was an excellent way to express myself fully, especially as a child, when words were hard to find.

Art is a universal language, and being able to communicate through visual creations is incredible. It is important for me to express myself through creativity, as the process is therapeutic. Constant practice and life experiences have enriched my work, pushed my boundaries, and have moved me more to-

wards semi-abstractation.

When inspiration strikes, I paint, even if it is late in the evening. I can feel physically tired after covering large canvases, sometimes destroying what I have spent time painting to take it in another, more exciting direction.

A good painting is one that creates a connection, a genuine feeling that resonates with the viewer, maybe leaving them pondering, or enticing them to take time to digest and interpret.

I am surrounded by beauty, so it is never difficult to choose my subject. I am constantly looking at shapes, movement, and colour, finding something that really catches my eye when exploring the Cornish coast - it has that deep family history and connection. The Cornish coast is rugged and dangerous, yet breathtakingly beautiful. It is the perfect

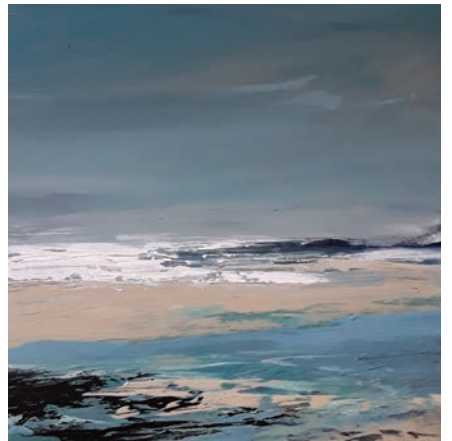
place to channel every emotion.

There is an abundance of visual arts and culture in St Ives, Cornwall. St Ives is famous for its renowned art colony dating back to the 1880s. We have Tate St Ives, the Barbara Hepworth Museum, the Bernard Leach Pottery and Museum, the St Ives School of Painting, galleries, societies, workshops, and more. Something for everyone.

I am working towards a couple of exhibitions at the moment; one in July at the historical St Ives Arts Club and another at ING, Moorgate, London in November.

The rewards of the vocation are many; experiencing inner peace when creating, turning negative emotion into something dynamic and beautiful, keeping me balanced with a sense of purpose.







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I was born on the Isle of Man and have lived here my entire life. My father's side of the family are Manx, whereas my mother's side of the family are Scottish. I currently live near the village of Andreas in the north.

My photographic journey began in 2006 with my first camera, a Fuji Finepix E900, specifically purchased for a trip to South Africa. I was utterly clueless about photography and any place beyond the shores of my home island. That trip ignited a passion for both photography and travel, which has sculpted my life ever since.

When I started, I was driven by a desire to document and record my travel experiences. Now my motivations are anchored in spending time outdoors and connecting with nature.

Silly as it sounds, the hardest challenge is walking out the front door, often into uncomfortable and unpleasant weather con-

ditions. Quite simply, the more I walk out through my front door with my photography bag the greater quantity and quality of photos I capture.

Most of my images are pre-planned and visualized before they are captured, which means that a lot of hard work goes into the preparation to make them happen. It is rare that I will go anywhere without at least a rough idea of what I am trying to achieve beforehand. I believe that the drive to find new vantage points on well-known locations, exploit unconventional environmental conditions, and discover brand new landscapes instills some element of uniqueness into my portfolio.

These days we are bombarded with imagery 24-7 - to the point that it is easy to become totally desensitized to incredible landscape imagery. Photos that stop me in my tracks, elicit some sort of emotion, and get me pondering questions about the subject

are the signs of a good photograph.

My photography in recent years has become focused on the landscapes of the Isle of Man. I have grown to appreciate that returning to locations multiple times across the seasons, in different weather and lighting conditions, cultivates a deeper connection to these places, which translates into better photos. So, I have very much become a strong advocate for local photography. With growing environmental crises escalating on multiple fronts, I also believe that local shooting is the most ethical and sustainable approach to landscape photography.

What I find most inspiring about the Isle of Man is that within a relatively small area it offers a plethora of distinctive and different landscapes that haven't been well photographed. The feeling of pioneering new ground is incredibly rewarding.







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A full-page photograph of a cyclist riding away on a paved road that curves through a lush, green coastal landscape. In the background, there are islands and a body of water under a heavy, purple-tinged sky. The title 'Pan Celtic Race' is overlaid in the upper center.

Pan Celtic Race

*Life is like riding a bicycle; to keep your balance
you must keep moving. - Albert Einstein*



According to the Oxford Dictionary, the Magnum Opus is “a large and important work, especially one that is thought to be the best work ever produced” - a fitting description for the highlight route of the 5th edition of the Pan Celtic Race Series 2024.

As a new circuit added this year, the Magnum Opus represents the culmination of the extensive experience and knowledge brought to the series by Pan Celtic founder Matt Ryan. It is also an expression of gratitude to past participants who have helped make the series such a success.

“The Magnum Opus is a 2,400-mile ultra race which we are gifting for free to the riders who have supported us in the past,” shares Ryan with Celtic Life International via email.

It is a timely tribute to a 5-year cycling tour de force.

What began in 2018 as an idea to combine cycling with Celtic culture has evolved into a cyclist’s dream journey that takes riders across six Celtic nations; Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and Bretagne.

This is more than just a bike ride, however; the self-supported, high-endurance event is as much of a testament to beauty and culture as it is a test of body and mind. Mapped out with different routes each year, cyclists travel through spectacular landscapes on a journey of the spirit, as well as one of physical fortitude.

“Our primary goal is to have a framework

that allows you to get from start to finish safely and have fun while doing it,” explains Ryan.

“It took a bit of planning before it was announced to the public,” he continues. “It was a simple image of a rider looking out over the mist-shrouded feature of a spectacular climb in Scotland called Bealach na Ba.”

He had no idea that the image - along with a simple Instagram post labelled “Coming Soon” - would spark so much interest.

Ryan seemed destined for such adventures from the start. His love for racing and experience with organizing cycling events - as well as a penchant for sleeping in bushes, under caravans, football stands, and just about anywhere that provides shelter from a “ride-out” - was borne out of an adventurous childhood amid the castles, rivers, and mountains of North Wales.

“My childhood was spent outside, riding my bikes, each one a hand-me-down, each a beloved friend. Jumping a plank of wood resting on one, then two, and ultimately 3 bricks high. Learning no-hands then wheelies. Getting scrap parts from abandoned machines and getting my faithful friend back on the road.”

Since its inception, Ryan’s wife, Rebecca, and friend Toby Willis have made up the administrative team for The Pan Celtic Series, with help from supporters who provide photography and videography expertise on social media.

In true Clan fashion, however, Ryan is the Chief of the Pan Celtic Race.

“My responsibilities cover nearly all aspects of delivering a multi-national, ultra-endurance bike race that covers around 1,400 miles.”

In addition to route planning, Ryan and his tiny troupe personally contact every local government agency, town hall, and traffic manager, to ensure the most streamlined experience for participants.

“It is all very hands-on and often run from our kitchen table. What started off as a passionate, part-time challenge to create something different, new, and unique, has grown into an all-consuming project that squeezes-in alongside my full-time job and personal life.”

A firefighter in the Victorian-era seaside town of Llandudno, Ryan admits that balancing work and family life with his love of adventure can sometimes be challenging. Entrants may face similar obstacles as riding through the six nations can take 3 to 4 weeks. As a result, some route tweaking for this year’s race was required to prevent - as the event’s website notes - “participants and Clan members from being divorced or losing their jobs.”

Ryan’s idyllic childhood in North Wales and the influence of his adventure-loving father leave little wonder as to his wanderlust.

“My father was a free spirit and would be absent from our home for extended periods. Exploration and escapades became bread and butter staples of outdoor play and I think these experiences have burned a lasting legacy on my thirst for fun and adventures. It is fair to say that the Pan Celtic Race pretty much dominates the majority of my free time, but it comes with many great rewards, the best of which are the people you meet and the places it has taken me.”

And there is no shortage of people and places to meet and discover. In addition to the





newly added Magnum Opus route, another 2024 highlight - the Ultra - is composed of a “full route” at just under 2,300 kilometres, and a “short route” slightly below 1,900 km. Both begin on July 6 in Douglas, Isle of Man, coming to completion there on 16 July.

Routes change every year and are thoroughly risk-assessed by Ryan himself. Support for participants includes live spot tracking, a mechanic, multiple checkpoints to rest and recharge, and a complete manual with detailed info on the many sights along the way.

He reveals that planning the Pan Celtic routes requires a lot of work.

“It starts with a lot of reading. Identifying places of cultural and historic interest. In Celtic terms, these are often standing stones, burial chambers, tombs, etc. I plot these on a map and then start looking for areas of outstanding beauty, a couple of tasty climbs, and off-beat stuff. You put these down on a map and then you look to see how you link them up. The route must, in its own way, tell the story we want it to. I’ve been on rides or routes designed by others that aim for the biggest, steepest climbs, or the longest of descents but in a contextual sense, they fail to combine to make a journey that makes sense.”

After five years of dedication to the Pan Celtic, the addition of the Magnum Opus for this year is the natural evolution of Ryan’s hard-won experience.

“We will have riders starting from all corners of the Celtic nations, all racing to be the

fastest to the Isle of Man. Riders will have to complete a 100-mile Time Trial before crossing back to the mainland and heading North. Here they will travel through the Lake District and into Scotland, before finishing back where we started for five years in Inverness. When we finish in Inverness, Scotland, we will have delivered on our promise to visit all six modern-day Celtic Nations in five years.”

Although the Magnum Opus is reserved for previous participants only, new riders can expect a warm welcome from the Clan who understand the true spirit of the cyclist that Ryan views as an antidote to the trappings of contemporary life.

“At heart, we are still kids, racing around the block on our bikes but the difference now is that the block is many hundreds of miles long...”

“We bind ourselves up in mortgages, careers, and commitments that leave little time for us to do what we truly want to do. The Pan Celtic is the antithesis of modern living. It takes you away from all the constraints of your normal life. You need only focus on the essentials, food, water, shelter, and security. If you figure these out, you can ride the 1,000+ miles needed to finish. It’s this laying bare of your soul, this exposure and exploration of your spirit, which is the true gift of the race.”

Often perceived as an elitist sport in some parts of the world and within society, Ryan has

made the Pan Celtic Race more inclusive than many other standard cycling competitions.

“There are no barriers or restrictions to anyone taking part. Yes, you must want to do it and have the will to succeed but other than that, all other hurdles are surmountable. Inclusivity for us goes beyond gender, ethnicity, and race. It also includes physical impairments, financial constraints, sexual orientation, and so on.”

The event has steadily grown each year, although Ryan is adamant that the series remains “authentic” and true to its original vision.

“We limit the number of riders to around 300 and we do this to make sure we don’t dilute the experience that riders have. In the last three years, we have sold out of entries in under two hours, with a waiting list that hits more than that number again. It’s a huge compliment to us and we do not take a single entry for granted. I make it my job to get to know the name and face of every rider each year.”

As a rider himself, Ryan creates an experience that he would expect at the events he chooses for himself with “real people” running things and “no corporate shills.” As dedicated as he is to the success of the Pan Celtic race, he remains true to his core vision and values.

“The evolution of the Pan Celtic Race has been organic and home-grown. We have been approached by various businesses and corporations who have wanted to ‘take it to the next level’ or help us grow the event and maximize profits and efficiencies but that isn’t who we are or why we do it.”

According to Ryan - and evidently many others, given its ever-increasing popularity - riding the race is its own ultimate reward.

“Meeting people, seeing new places, and making new friends becomes more important than just having your head down and racing flat out.”

And for some, the race offers something even more meaningful.

“It would be clichéd to say it will change your life, but the honest fact is that for some, it really does. It gives them an experience unlike anything else they have done before. It brings like-minded souls together, connects people, and acts as the catalyst for life-long friendships and opportunities. It is stuff like this that is the enduring legacy of our event.”

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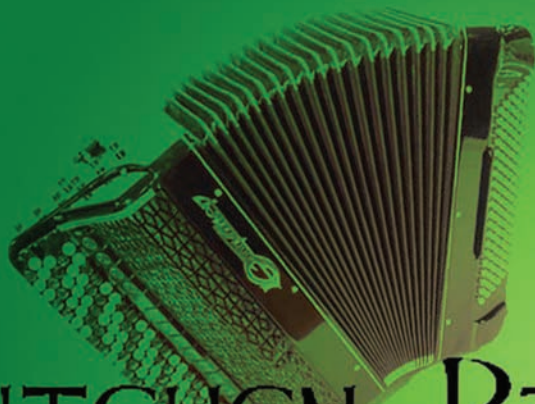
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Keith MacCallum

One Canadian piper loves to put on a show.

Keith MacCallum's first foray into the bagpipes was when he was 12 years old. At the time, his father was learning a bit of the Gaelic language, and the musical side of the culture piqued MacCallum's interest. MacCallum's ancestors hail from Argyll - a historic county in the southwest Scottish Highlands - but his kin have been in Canada for several generations.

"My family has always held some Scottish traditions - like kilts at weddings," he explains via email from his home in Saint John, New Brunswick. "But as far as we know, there haven't been any bagpipers."

Like all beginners, MacCallum began his bagpipe journey playing the chanter.

"I so convinced my parents that I was going to stick with it that they bought me my first set of pipes at the age of 14."

Seventeen years later, MacCallum is still plying his musical trade.

"I discovered that bagpipes were awesome - I love the sound, the music, the camaraderie of the band, and performing for people."

He explains that the pipes are a distinct instrument, with both its pros and cons.

"I am not an expert in musical theory, but my understanding is that the grace note movements are quite unique, as is having a range of only nine notes. Once you have figured out the music, then handling the bagpipe becomes the challenge. To sound good, you need to keep all four reeds vibrating consistently, which means maintaining a constant air pressure in the bag. Once you've got all of that sorted out, you then must learn how to play in a band setting. This means making sure that your pipes sound the same as everyone else's and that you are hitting all of the notes at the exact same time as the dozen other pipers you are playing with."

MacCallum has played in his share of bands over the years, including his role as



Pipe Sergeant for the New Westminster Pipe Band in Vancouver. Last year, he joined the Fredericton Society of Saint Andrew Pipe Band.

"I recently had the chance to perform a small set of hornpipes as part of a performance we did at Picaroons Brewery in Fredericton. I looked up halfway through and realized that I was playing with five of the best pipers that I have ever known. It might seem modest compared to doing well in big competitions, but it meant even more to me."

Piping has taken MacCallum all over the world - from a desert in Nevada to the mountains of New Zealand - and it has taught him to adapt to a variety of musical styles.

"I have played in bands that have been incredibly traditional in their sound and I've played in bands that have done covers of modern pop songs. When I play solo, I like to play whatever will get the audience en-

gaged. I am much more likely to stick with a traditional sound for a crowd of pipers and focus on impressing with the accuracy and difficulty of what I play. If it is for a random crowd at a bar, I like to play whatever is fast or recognizable." Avicii, The Lion Sleeps Tonight, and the Star Wars soundtrack are all in his repertoire.

Whether playing alone or as part of a group, both experiences have their own rewards.

“People always have a strong reaction to a bagpipe performance - and it is almost always positive.”

"The feeling of putting on a good show for an enthusiastic audience is hard to beat. Having your band's name called as the winners of a competition after a long year of practice just might beat it, though."

For most of his career, MacCallum has played a low-maintenance set of Dunbar pipes. However, he recently bought a set of MacCallum pipes from one of his bandmates.

"They sound incredible. And there's a bit of pride in playing a set made by your own Clan, even if it is a distant branch."

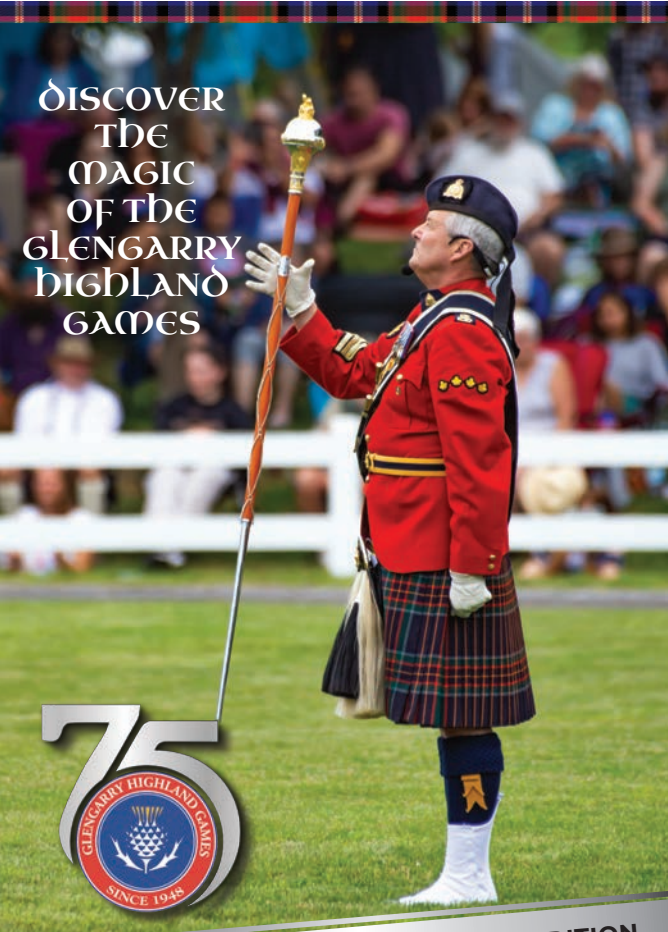
While acknowledging that piping is "a fairly niche passion," MacCallum isn't worried about its future - he has seen people pick up, or rediscover, the pipes at a variety of ages, whether as children, middle-aged adults, or retirees.

The Fredericton Academy of Piping and Drumming, he adds, does a great job of drawing in new musicians.

"They bring a constant stream of new pipers and drummers of all ages to the band. What they really excel at is having teachers of all levels as well."

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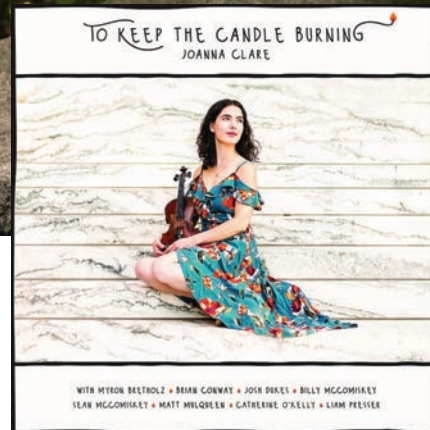
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Joanna Clare

One Irish American woman carries the torch of Celtic tradition



Continuous immigration from Ireland to New York over the last two centuries brought a distinct Irish sound and spirit across the Atlantic, ultimately creating a rich musical legacy amid the merry gatherings in homes and modest dance halls across the northeast American state.

From a modern musical perspective, connecting Central New York to the Irish fiddle may not be the most clear-cut association that comes to mind. Yet, the long-held Irish musical tradition has a lengthy history in the Empire State.

Fast forward to the 21st century, where native New Yorker Joanna Clare does more than her part in keeping Irish fiddle music alive from her studio and present home base in Philadelphia, PA.

"I moved from Baltimore, Maryland - where I attended university - to Philadelphia two years ago. However, I grew up in upstate New York and started taking Suzuki Violin lessons at a young age. Soon after, I worked on Irish fiddle tunes intermittently, until I was eleven years old when I started learning to play in the New York Sligo style with Brian Conway."

Having studied with the great fiddle master for nine years, Clare was continually encouraged by her diligent mother, who had her performing in talent shows in Ithaca, New York, at the age of two. And while the average American youngster may have been struggling to recite standard nursery rhymes, Clare's musical appetite was whet with Irish and American fiddle tunes that she happily absorbed and performed by the time she was in grade school.

"I was initially inspired to start playing Irish music by the wonderful players and

groups I grew up listening to - Mick Moloney, Eugene O'Donnell, and Seamus Egan on 3 Way Street, Eileen Ivers, and Cherish the Ladies, to name a few.

“I continue to play the fiddle today because, after 21 years, I don’t know a life without it.”

Barely in the third decade of her life, Clare has won numerous awards both in Ireland and at home in the USA, and - following countless appearances in competitions and festivals around the world - she launched her own violin and fiddle studio for students of all ages.

"In May 2022, I qualified to compete at the 2022 All-Irelands in the senior fiddle, senior fiddle slow airs, and newly composed tunes competitions. In August 2021, I was awarded runner-up for the FleadhFest senior fiddle slow airs championship in Sligo. That said, I consider the awards a very small piece of the weight and importance that Irish music has in my life."

Despite her modesty, Clare is also a consummate composer. At 13, she wrote her first Irish tune, "The Mouse Catcher," and has penned 40 others since.

"Great new Irish tunes have a traditional sound without following what the tunesmith's ear, "says" to do. Sometimes, after a long day, I just pick up the fiddle and record whatever string of notes comes to mind. I have experimented with incorporating elements of other Irish styles to develop a distinct sound. Many, but not all, great tunes sound traditional, and I am intentional about honoring the tradition."

Her debut album, *To Keep the Candle*

Burning, reflects that intention and is the natural evolution of her commitment to capturing an unmistakable, yet unique Irish tone.

"The album is dedicated to the Irish musicians who most inspired me. I chose at least one tune that was meaningful to me from each of these players/groups and arranged the tunes into sets. The singer on the album, Catherine O'Kelly, was a student of Dierdre Connolly, who sang *Erin Gra Mo Chroi* on a *Cherish the Ladies* album. I needed to make sure there was a balance of types of tunes, reels, jigs, etc. I gathered musicians who either fit into the story somehow or who I could imagine hearing on certain tracks. Then came recording, mixing, and mastering, and the rest is history!"

Clare's highly developed "tunesmith's ear," along with her well-honed technique, is not the main force that motivates her, however. Honoring an Irish musical tradition and meeting the people she plays for and with - is at the core of her commitment to her craft.

"I love busking and watching little kids point, laugh, and dance to the music, and I love teaching. What will continue to highlight my life is fostering human connections made through a common love for Irish music. It brings me a lot of joy and allows me to connect with all kinds of people. I hope to inspire others to play fiddle as I was inspired at a young age."

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Natalie Quick

One Toronto Highland dance teacher keeps what she has by giving it away

According to folklore, the kings of ancient times attended the Highland Games to select the most strapping and sturdy men for battle. While such an occurrence may not be surprising, uncovering the most favoured competitors of nobles might raise an eyebrow or two. Apparently, the most popular event for picking the best men in arms was not the Stone Put, nor the Hammer Throw, but Highland Dancing.

Aware of the intense physical and mental discipline required for such competitions, Clan chiefs carefully observed male Highland dancers and hand-picked those who demonstrated the most agility and strength.

Although today 95 per cent of dancers are female, the fact that the flowing movements of Highland Dance originate from pantomimes playing out the heroic deeds of ancient Scottish warriors - still evident in the traditional Sword dance today - makes perfect sense to Canadian Highland dance champion Natalie Quick.

"Highland dancing is an incredibly physically challenging art form requiring dancers to perform gracefully while mastering the technique," she shares with Celtic Life International from Toronto, Ontario. "It involves lots of jumping and significant amounts of stamina. In particular, the sword dance is unique and adds a level of precision that necessitates a lot of practice. It is a challenging dance form that requires tremendous creativity and focus."

Quick should know; as a winner of numerous Highland dance competitions, she

now teaches and adjudicates contests all over the world.

"I have been very fortunate to win the Canadian championships six times, the World championships three times, and the North American championship. I also had the opportunity to perform solo at the Edinburgh Tattoo."

Raised in nearby Hamilton by parents originally from Nova Scotia, Quick's Scottish roots go back to the Highland Clearances that forced her ancestors to settle in Canada in 1801.

"I started Highland Dancing at the age of three and competed at five years old following in the footsteps of my older sister Sabrina and my mother who also danced in Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

“Participating in Highland dancing has allowed me to stay connected with my Scottish heritage.”

Aside from the bagpipes and perhaps haggis, nothing captures the spirit of Scottish culture quite like Highland dancing - something that Quick is exceedingly proud of.

"Dancers get to choose their own tartan and perform to the Scottish bagpipes, which is a wonderful way to celebrate our heritage. One also connects with many other Highland dancers from the Scottish community."

Today, Quick finds fulfillment in helping her students adjust their forms for competitions.

"I started teaching as an associate teach-

er at the age of 16 and have continued to grow this passion over the years. I enjoy working with students in the studio and helping them train competitively. I now adjudicate as a member of the international judging panel of the Royal Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing. I am also a fellow of the British Association of Teachers of Dance, and a professional member of Scotdance Ontario."

Considering that Scottish mercenaries performed the sword dance as part of a plot to assassinate King John III as far back as 1573 leaves little doubt as to its longevity. Despite periods of waning popularity, the art form continues to thrive, particularly in Scotland, Canada, the USA, and Australia.

"Like any dance form or sport, the number of participants has decreased since the Covid-19 pandemic," shares Quick. "Our professional organizations are striving to promote Highland dancing across Canada and internationally. It is exciting to see the numbers increasing again each year. Many students get involved because of their Scottish ancestry and, often, their parents may have danced. However, sometimes students have simply seen it at an event and fallen in love with it."

The rewards for both her and her students, she notes, are beyond compare.

"Dance has provided me with incredible opportunities to travel across North America and abroad. There are so many rewards, but mostly the sheer satisfaction that comes with achieving an incredibly physical and artistic dance form."

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the CELTIC CHEF

with Gary Maclean

Simnel Cake



Ingredients

For the cake

170g (6oz) butter, softened,
plus extra for greasing
170g (6oz) light-brown sugar
3 eggs
170g (6oz) self-raising flour
50g (2oz) ground almonds
100g (3½oz) sultanas
100g (3½oz) glacé cherries, quartered
100g (3½oz) dried apricots, chopped
100g (3½oz) hazelnuts, chopped
2 tsp mixed spice
50ml (2fl oz) milk

For the topping

500g (1lb 2oz) golden marzipan
4 tbsp apricot jam
1 egg, beaten

Simnel cake is a rich fruit cake, with a layer of marzipan in the middle and on top. It is perfect for Easter celebrations. Dating back to medieval times, it was once associated with Mothering Sunday. It has eleven balls of marzipan on top, one each for the eleven disciples who didn't betray Jesus. Simnel cake is like Black-bun, which is usually served at Hogmanay, but it has a brighter and more spring-like finish. This recipe combines the perfect balance of spices, dried fruits and nuts, creating a moist and fruity cake - a wonderful centrepiece for the Easter Sunday table.

Instructions

Weigh and measure all the ingredients. Grease a 20cm (8 inch) round, deep-sided, loose-bottomed tin, and line the base with parchment paper.

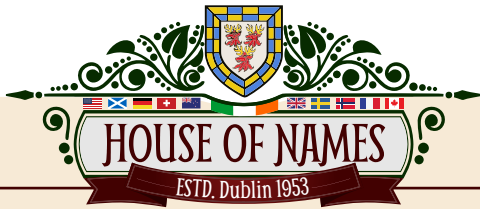
Cream the butter and the sugar together. Once it is light and fluffy, add the beaten eggs a little at a time.

Combine the flour and the ground almonds and mix in a large bowl and mix well. In a separate bowl, combine the sultanas, cherries, apricots, hazelnuts, and mixed spice.

Add the flour and the ground almonds mix into the eggs and sugar. Next, add in the fruit and hazelnut mixture with the rest of the ingredients and fold everything together. Lastly, add the milk and mix well. Spoon half of the mix (550g -1lb 3oz) into the prepared tin and make sure to level the surface. Roll out one-third of the marzipan to the size of the base of the tin and place it onto the cake mixture. Preheat the oven to 140°C (275°C). Scoop the remaining batter on top of the marzipan and again level the surface. Bake the cake for 1 hour 15 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. Test if it is cooked by inserting a metal skewer into the cake and if it comes out clean it is cooked. (Test every 15 minutes after the first hour.) Once cooked, allow the cake to cool for 10 minutes before removing it from the tin. Once the cake is cool, heat the apricot jam in a pan and brush it on top of the cake. Roll out half of the remaining marzipan and place it on top of the cake, using your thumb to crimp around the edges. Form 11 small balls with the marzipan that is left and place them around the edge of the cake, fixing them to the marzipan with a little beaten egg. Brush the marzipan with the egg and glaze it under a hot broiler, turning the cake to ensure even browning. You can also use a blow torch if you have one. Allow to cool before cutting.

Slàinte Mhath! - Gary

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Celebrating Compass Box



John Glaser

Over the last couple of decades, the Compass Box Whisky Co. has grown from a small start-up to an influential player in the global whisky industry. An leader in innovation, transparency, and marketing from the get-go, the company compelled many of the biggest drinks companies in the world to up their own game. And at the heart of all this was Compass Box's founder John Glaser.

John recently stunned the whisky community when he announced that he would be stepping away from Compass Box after 23 years.

It was in the mid-2000s, early in my own career, when I first took note of Compass Box. Single Malt Scotch was on the rise, soon to become ascendant. More distilleries were offering their whiskies as single malts, and independent bottlings were exploding exponentially. The blended whisky brands like Johnny Walker and Chivas Regal still accounted for more than 90 percent of all Scotch sales, but the category had become tired and stale.

A native of Minnesota, John studied winemaking and literature before taking a marketing job with Johnnie Walker, the world's largest whisky brand. While working with the firm, he saw an opportunity for boutique-blended Scotch whiskies - a vision that his bosses did not share. So, in 2000, John set off on his own, founding The Compass Box Whisky Co. He left a comfort-

able job because he thought Blended Scotch Whisky could be something more.

“Compass Box burst onto the scene like a breath of fresh air. Its blends were playful, consistently good, and excellent value.”

The company's stable of products included Blends, Blended Malts, and Blended Grains. Education went hand-in-hand with marketing, as many of the whisky styles Compass Box was producing were almost unknown. Blended Malts, a marriage of whiskies from two or more single malt distilleries, were known at the time as Vatted or Pure Malt Scotch whisky. Compass Box made the category renowned with releases like The Peat Monster, Oak Cross, and Spice Tree. At the time of its release Hedonism was the only commonly available Blended Grain whisky.

Over the years the brand was at the cutting edge of industry innovation, pushing the boundaries of production. Its earliest release of Spice Tree, which involved inserting flat staves inside a cask to increase oak contact, were deemed illegal by the Scotch Whisky Association, although later copied by a Bourbon producer in the USA for the Maker's Mark 46.

Compass Box frequently earned the ire of the stodgy old establishment. More than

once they poked it in the eye with a sharp stick - à la David VS. Goliath.

And then there is the branding - revolutionary. At a time when the entire industry was stuck in the 20th century, and very traditional, the labels on Compass Box whiskies were bright and evocative, and they told a story. While creative and "fun packaging" is more common now, with many of the big firms finally on board, there was no one else doing it at the time.

I have long looked up to John, as both an entrepreneur and as one of the most influential people in the modern Scotch Whisky industry. I have also enjoyed a great working relationship with him over the years. Compass Box has twice collaborated with Kensington Wine Market on bespoke Blends, a privilege afforded to but a handful of other retailers around the world. Our KWM 25th and 30th Anniversary Blends are without question two of the biggest highlights of my career.

I don't think it is unfair to say that John, almost single-handedly, made Blended Scotch whisky sexy again!

The Compass Box Whisky Co. isn't going anywhere, and I don't think we'll see too many changes with the brand, as "it is being left in good hands." John assembled a good team, including James Saxon, who has been the lead blender on many recent releases. It is still the end of an era, however, for as long as I have worked with the brand, John Glaser was The Compass Box Whisky Co.

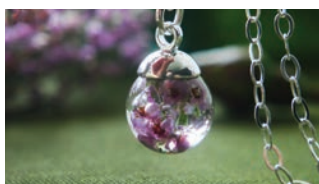
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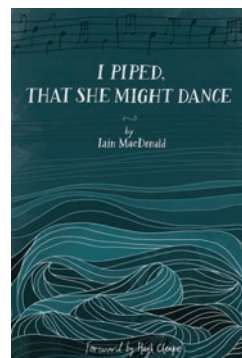


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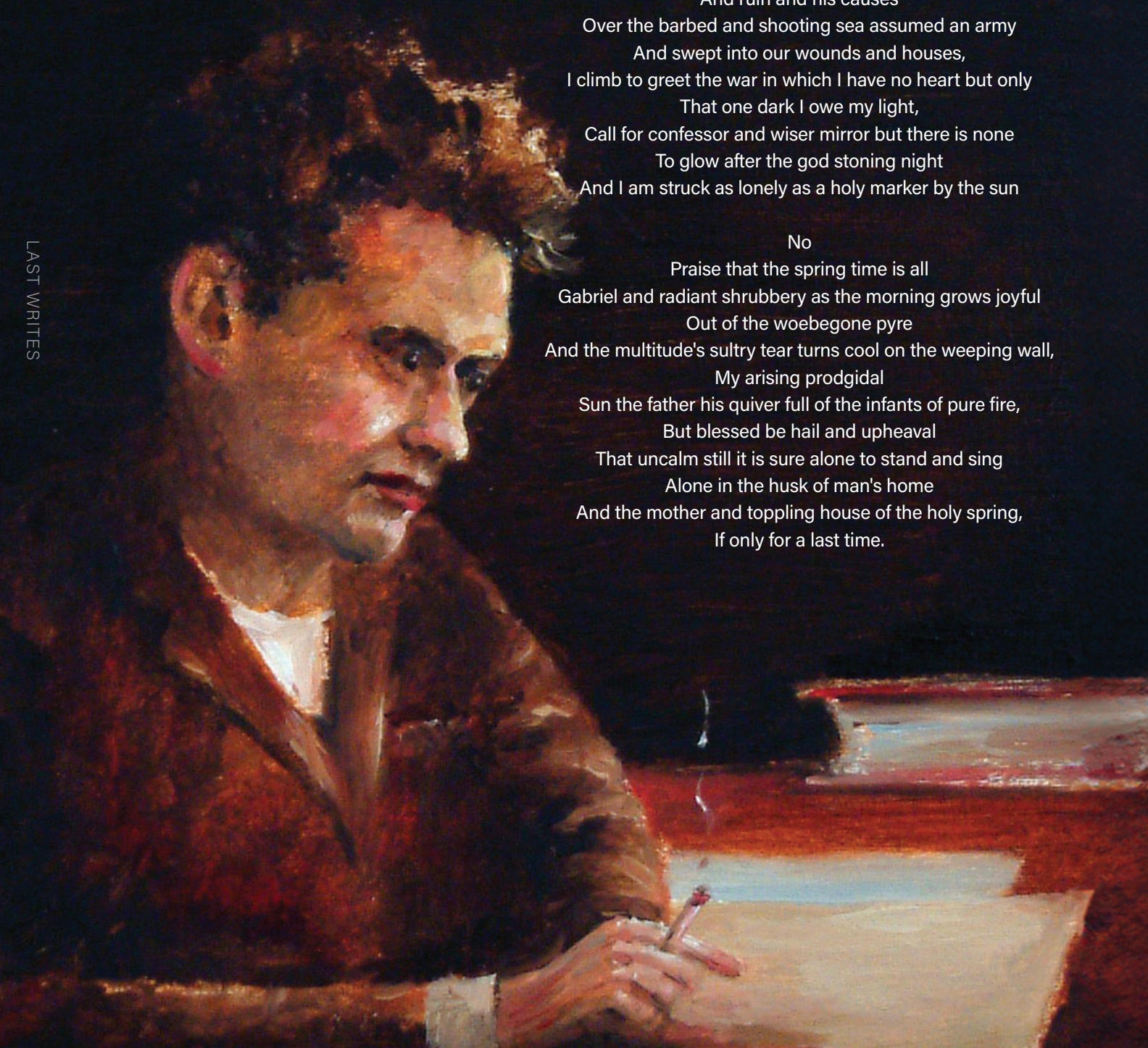
By Dylan Thomas

O

Out of a bed of love
When that immortal hospital made one more move to soothe
The cureless counted body,
And ruin and his causes
Over the barbed and shooting sea assumed an army
And swept into our wounds and houses,
I climb to greet the war in which I have no heart but only
That one dark I owe my light,
Call for confessor and wiser mirror but there is none
To glow after the god stoning night
And I am struck as lonely as a holy marker by the sun

No

Praise that the spring time is all
Gabriel and radiant shrubbery as the morning grows joyful
Out of the woebegone pyre
And the multitude's sultry tear turns cool on the weeping wall,
My arising prodgidal
Sun the father his quiver full of the infants of pure fire,
But blessed be hail and upheaval
That uncalm still it is sure alone to stand and sing
Alone in the husk of man's home
And the mother and toppling house of the holy spring,
If only for a last time.



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