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# CelticLife

— I N T E R N A T I O N A L —

## *The Best of Celtic Life International 2022*

### **INSIDE!**

*Riverdance, Marian Keyes  
Game of Thrones, Jann Arden  
Belfast, Camino de Santiago*



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### *One small organization in Cornwall is making a big difference*



It is estimated that one in four individuals will struggle with some sort of mental health issue each year. That startling statistic is the driving force behind Cornwall Mind, a mental health charity that has been supporting Cornish communities for over 26 years.

“We work with people to support them in achieving their goals and by getting them more engaged in their local communities,” explains Jo Boulton, Cornwall Mind’s project co-ordinator.

With 19 full and part-time employees and 30 volunteers, the organization currently offers three different modalities of therapy: Active Minds, which promotes mental health through physical activities like gardening and exercise; Creative Minds, which focuses on stress-relief via writing, music, and art; and Community Minds, where participants are encouraged to interact and relate to one another through virtual cafes and talks.

“We offer online services for those that cannot access our face-to-face groups,” notes Boulton. “We are now exploring other ways of providing online support as well, as we want more people to have more available options to them.”

In addition, Boulton’s team supports those in recovery and those experiencing home

insecurity or homelessness. They also host a non-judgemental helpline for people who identify as trans and nonbinary.

More recently, the organization has created specific online support options for those coping with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We endeavour to prevent those who are vulnerable from developing mental health issues by providing advice and assistance. We campaign to improve services, raise awareness, and promote understanding of mental health. We will not give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets support and respect. We offer a range of recovery-focused wellbeing groups such as gardening projects, walking groups, and radio show workshops. We also provide a range of projects for people experiencing mental health difficulties, homelessness, and fuel poverty.”

Boulton previously worked for the NHS in a mental health day resource centre, before making the switch to Cornwall Mind after she was drawn to its core values, mission, and style of work.

***“I wanted to work in a mental health organization where clients are at the heart of everything.”***

“Cornwall Mind is a workplace that lives its values, and the wellbeing of our staff is a high priority for us. We are a dedicated team.”

The association’s client base is broad, catering to anyone over the age of 18 who currently resides in Cornwall and who is struggling with matters pertaining to mental health.

“We work individually with people on a case-by-case basis, as everyone is different and has unique struggles.”

Boulton admits that, while rewarding, the job doesn’t come without its fair share of challenges.

“As with any small, local charity, funding is always an issue. Although we are affiliated to Mind (the national U.K. charity), Cornwall Mind is an independently registered and funded goodwill organization dependent on fundraising and donations to continue our vital work in the community. We have seen an increase in people needing support during the current COVID-19 pandemic - it really has impacted the mental wellbeing of people, and we are currently facing a mental health emergency. On top of that, Cornwall has a variety of matters that impact the mental health of the local community, such as rural issues involving the farming community, poor public transport, an increasing aging population, reduced employment opportunities and wages, high self-harm and suicide rates, and lack of general mental health and wellbeing support.”

The solution, she notes, includes engaging more members of the community to become more involved with fundraising and donations - both options that are now accessible via the organization’s website.

“With this, we could increase our services in more areas of Cornwall.”

2022 will be busy for Boulton and her peers, with much change and growth expected over the coming months.

“Our plan is to further improve our services and expand across the regions. We want everyone to know we exist so that people have a place to turn. No one should face a mental health problem alone.”

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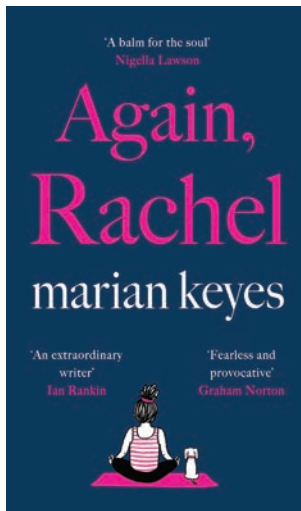
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## Our Editor-in-Chief Stephen Patrick Clare picks the best of the best for 2022



Literature

### Again, Rachel By Marian Keyes

The eagerly anticipated, long-awaited follow-up to Rachel's Holiday (1998) doesn't disappoint. After a stint in rehab, Rachel Walsh settles into a middle-class life - marriage, children, career, hobbies, etc. When a long-lost love reappears, she begins to question her choices and, as the past permeates her present, is at a loss for what to think, feel, and do. Bestselling Irish scribe Marian Keyes is in fine form here, describing an avalanche of retrospection that invokes regret, remorse, and what-could-have-been. Although trying at times with detail, the robust narrative arc breathes in the spaces that exist in-between the novel's characters - the sign of an experienced author that knows what to leave out. While targeted to women, readers of all sorts will enjoy Rachel's mid-life ride. ~ SPC

Music

### The McDades *The Empress*



Alberta-based trio The McDades have received so many awards and accolades since their inception in 2000 that they must be a wee embarrassed at this point (how typically Canadian, eh?) The Washington Post even called them "the Dizzy Gillespie of the tin whistle." Though perhaps a bit extreme, the reviewer wasn't that far off. On their new album, *The Empress*, The McDades again incorporate such an amazing array of instruments and styles that the music is simply beyond proper description. Woven through the tapestry of the engaging 11-song mosaic, however, is a Celtic thread of traditional melody that firmly cements their legacy as contemporary carriers of classic customs. Vocalist (and violinist) Shannon Johnson just might be one of the finest singers in the genre today. ~ SPC



Cinema

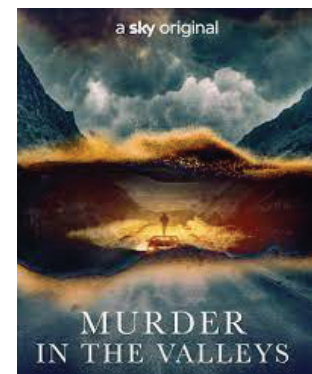
### Belfast Kenneth Branagh

One of the finest films to appear in the cinematic canon in recent years, Kenneth Branagh's brilliant and beautiful autobiographical motion picture is a prolific portrait of both a people and a place. Set in 1969 amidst the turmoil of The Troubles, the film follows the trials of a young Protestant family from East Belfast as they navigate turbulent political, economic, and social waters. And while it is impossible to create a period piece about peace in that place at that time, the Northern Irish director does well to details the daily joys of a father and mother and their two sons. Shot in black and white for impact, the true colours of familial warmth, wit, and wisdom leap off the screen into viewers' hearts.

Streaming

### *Murder in the Valleys*

The dark and haunting beauty of the Welsh landscape is the ideal backdrop for this true crime documentary that recounts the brutal 1999 murders of three generations of one family in the village of Clydach. The killings, which shocked the U.K. and made international headlines, resulted in the conviction of a local contractor. 20 years later, area police reopened the case based upon new evidence, dividing the local community. Kudos to the creative team for piecing together a masterful melange of narrative, stunning cinematography, and a stirring soundtrack. Exploring all the angles, the four-part series noir is well-paced, and, in the end, viewers are left to come to their own conclusions. A deeply disturbing examination of pure evil and the pitfalls of the justice system.





# A Celtic Travel Trilogy

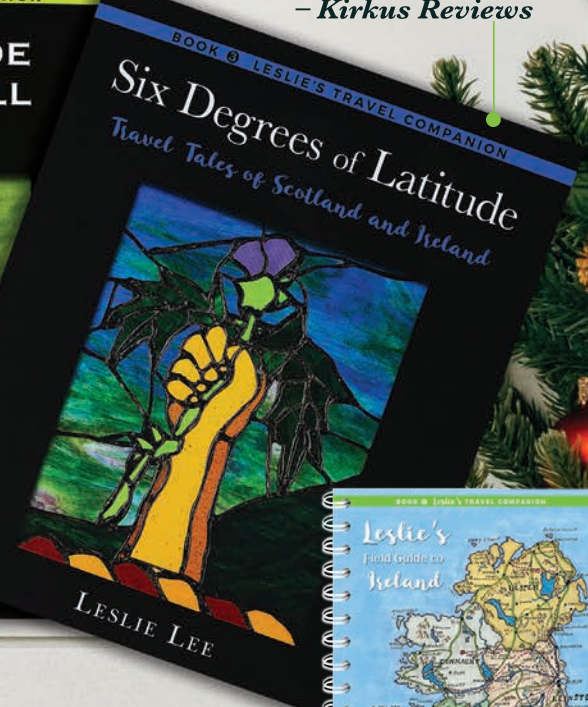
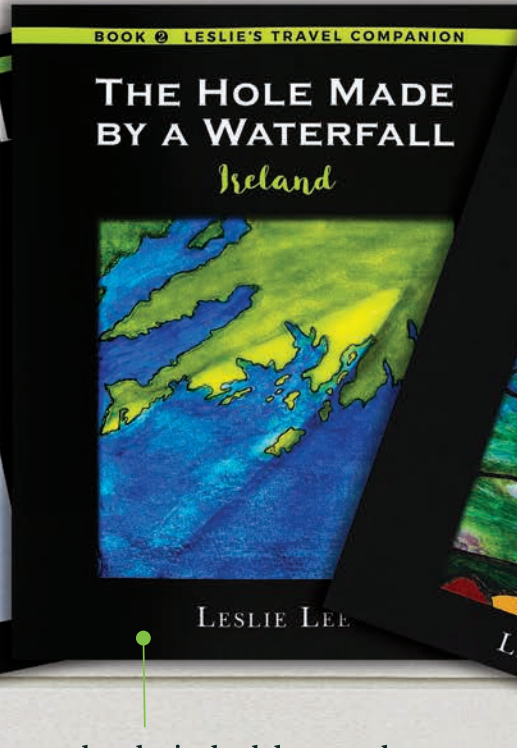
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— Foreword Clarion Review

"More than merely a travelogue, this is a meditation on belonging and on Scottish ancestry."

— Kirkus Reviews



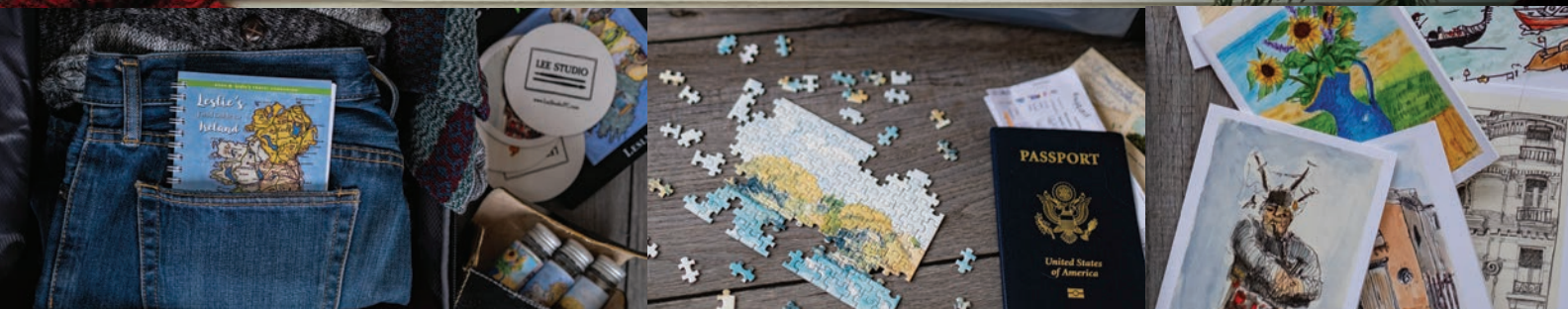
"Abundant sketches are used to depict both large and small details of the trips, from maps of visited locations to crumbling castles, pub musicians, and regional dishes. These illustrations are whimsical complements to Lee's enchanting descriptions of dramatic landscapes, simple and extravagant meals, and spontaneous interactions with local people."

— Foreword Clarion Review



"The author provides a lucid summary of the country's history and traditions..."

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# Prickly Thistle

*One woman taps into her Highland heritage to create sustainable clothing*

**P**rickly Thistle founder Clare Campbell is a Scottish Highland woman on a mission.

"The paradox of the future is that it is actually the past," she tells Celtic Life International. "We did all of this before. We don't need to be super inventive, really. We just need to think about natural materials and buying less, buying ethically."

Campbell has a background in accounting and says that her switch to the world of Scottish textiles was a matter of both "the head and the heart." After grieving her brother and her father, she realized "how fragile and how short life can be." In her mid-30s, she decided that it was time for a change.

"I've got this one shot, and I've got a longer ride than my brother, who we lost when he was 19. I have the opportunity to have a bigger impact that he didn't have. I wanted to make that count."

Growing up in the Scottish Highlands, Campbell had a basic understanding of tartan and what it was. However, it wasn't until around 2015 that she "went down the rabbit hole" and started seriously looking into the industry.

*"I started to relate to the whole legacy, identity and spirit of courage and passion. There were just all these amazingly powerful emotions attached to this cloth."*

After exploring the industrial landscape, Campbell realized that the traditional tartan

industry had become rather small. She wanted to "add to the traditional tartan story" while keeping integrity at the forefront of her work. As such, she sought to keep her business close to home and create things in an environmentally friendly way. She also had no desire to compete with any of the existing mills. "That is why we don't do clan tartans, per se, because that is the bread and butter of many of these mills. We were just trying to do the right thing in the medium that we have fallen in love with."

In the beginning, Campbell worked with other mills to create commissioned designs for clients. In 2017, she launched a crowdfunding campaign in hopes of starting her own mill. "I thought, 'it's Scotland, it's textiles. It's our thing. Come on, we need to do something with it.'"

The first crowdfunding venture failed, but Campbell didn't give up: she set up a new crowdfunding goal in 2018 and divided it into smaller chunks. For example, she looked into renting a property rather than trying to build something new off the bat. Outlander star Sam Heughan even boosted the initiative on his Twitter account.

"I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea what I was getting myself in for," Campbell laughs. "But I believed."

That belief soon paid off and, today, her company employs 14 staff members. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, all small businesses struggled, and Prickly Thistle was no exception. However, it was during this time that the company also found its niche. "We wanted to really champion and

really work on that relationship that women have with clothing."

Through zero waste design, natural fabrics (wool doesn't need to be machine washed), and made-to-measure sizing, Prickly Thistle creates clothing with the goal of lasting longer. Its mandate also encourages people to buy new clothing no more than four times a year. But how does a business survive while supporting an overall goal of less consumption?

"It is challenging," admits Campbell. "At the end of the day, what will be a testament to businesses like ours is that we never compromise on our values. I hope that clearly lays out to people that when you buy from a company like us, you do make a difference."

Today, Prickly Thistle's tartan clothing includes tops, dresses, jumpsuits, "kick ass kilts" and more. Many of the items can be worn multiple ways. Campbell compares it to going to a restaurant with a condensed menu - it is likely that the small selection will be of good quality.

"We really believe in the simpleness of our collection. One of our missions is we just sell less to more people. That is how we become a sustainable business. You buy just a couple of pieces from Prickly Thistle, and quite often, that will be enough. But you are going to be so inspired that you will tell all of your pals."

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# Triskele Hearth

## *Past spiritual practices enrich the present*

Celtic culture has been embedded in Reverend Erika Rivertree's family life - and her personal identity - for as long as she can remember.

Although her family has been in the United States for several generations, Rivertree's ancestors hailed from "the Celtic heartlands of Northwestern Europe," including Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. She also has roots in England, Germany, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden.

"My last ancestor to immigrate was a maternal great-great grandmother, Mary Davidson from Invergowrie, Scotland," says Rivertree.

Rivertree was born in Richmond, Virginia, where she spent her childhood surrounded by evidence of her family's Celtic legacy. "I grew up listening to Scottish bagpipes, eating Scottish foods, and going to Scottish festivals with my dad, who celebrated our Clan Lamont heritage. My mom's family are proudly Irish and a little Welsh, which has always been a prominent part of our family history. My introduction to Irish folk music and folklore was through my mom. My love of Celtic cultures and history has continued to inspire me throughout my life, and I have studied as much as I can about it along the way."

Today, Rivertree is a Celtic Priestess living in Louisville, Kentucky. She started the Triskele Hearth fellowship in 2018, "to provide spiritual support, community, and life guidance for sacred living in the Celtic tradition."

"I offer classes, seasonal celebrancy, all stages of life rites, and I make supportive ritual crafts such as candles, organic body care, teas and tisanes."

While it can be challenging to get the word out about her work, Rivertree uses social media and regularly posts on a blog for The Highland Bard website. The blog covers everything from mythology to recipes. She also includes guides to her own spiritual practices, such as a candlelight contemplation in honor of Imbolg (or Imbolc) - a Celtic festival marking the midpoint between the

Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox.

"Take some time to include contemplation (by candlelight if you can) on what the spirit of this ancient holytide means for us in modern times, especially for those of us living in modern, industrialized cities," Rivertree writes. "How do you relate to the concepts of preparation, purification, and piety, in both a practical and spiritual or mythic sense? How do you sense these flowing, or being blocked, in your life?"

Incorporating Celtic spiritual practices into one's daily life, Rivertree explains, can be as simple as a daily devotional and prayer or contemplative practice. She recommends learning a Celtic language and then incorporating that into a regular devotional. She is currently practicing Gaelic herself. While she notes that Celtic culture is widely celebrated in America, she wishes there were more language programs available.

*"The warm character of  
Celtic spiritual practices has  
a rhythm to it that flows with  
the change of seasons..."*

"Often it is simple offerings and prayers. They are personal and devotional in a way that is intimately connected to the local landscape. Celtic spirituality awakens you into a direct experience of sacred living through an attunement with the local landscape wherever you happen to live. It is rooted in relationships and co-creativity; this synergy of mutual interdependence and inclusivity is one reason why it is especially relevant and important today."

In Celtic spirituality, such as Druidry or Paganism, respect for nature is key. Perhaps this is why there is such an emphasis in connecting with spirituality here on Earth, rather than trying to reach some other realm.

"There is a knowing that our everyday, waking life is not the only dimension. The influences of that way of being or perceiving are keenly felt in our extant mythology and



folklore traditions. It is the idea that there is no separation from the sacred or divine. Everyday life is imbued with sacred qualities, interconnected patterns, and other ways of being that are around us all the time. I have heard this called 'silver branch perception.'"

Those who open themselves up to these practices will experience "an awakening of the heart to authenticity, an inspired passion for life and creativity, a deeper connection to others and sense of belonging, and an awareness of how interconnected all life is that encourages living with reverent presence and integrity."

And, for those looking to grow their own spiritual lives, Rivertree has a few words of advice: "Always keep a sense of humor, don't take for granted either time or good health, nurture your curiosity for life, heed your intuition, and have the courage to be yourself and forge your own path in life."

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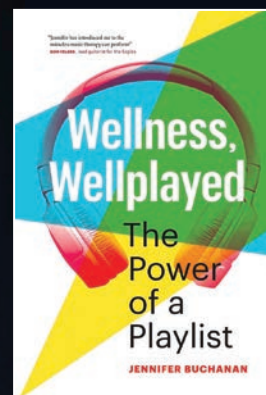
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# Jennifer Buchanan

*One Canadian woman shares the healing power of music*



Jennifer Buchanan - who has roots in Scotland, Wales, and England - says that it was a family health crisis that first inspired her life's calling.

"I witnessed the power of music as a young teen when my Grandad had his second stroke leaving him unable to speak or walk," she shares via email from her home in Calgary, Alberta. "It was my Granny who asked me to bring my guitar to the hospital center and sing his favorite song (White Cliffs of Dover). As I sang, I watched the face of the grumpy old man I thought I knew shed the tears of a man who wanted a more meaningful connection."

That experience inspired Buchanan to register in a music therapy degree program. She later founded JB Music Therapy, which has been instrumental in the implementation of hundreds of music therapy initiatives across Canada for 30 years.

"I have always been curious about how music resonates strongly with people - and equally as curious as to why different music evokes emotional responses. Was it a certain chord progression or tempo that draws people in? Why are we attracted to songs written in a certain style? What role do lyrics play in these preferences? And the bigger question; how can we leverage the science and clinical evidence to replicate music's benefits? My work as a music therapist has granted me many of these answers, but has also deepened my curiosity, leading me to continue to seek research to inform my clinical practice and grow our team so we can increase our impact."

Her organization - which employs a diverse team of 18 Certified Music Therapists (MTAs) - currently works in a myriad of medical settings, including intensive care, burn, neurorehabilitation, mental health, and forensic units.

"We also do end-of-life care - including hospice and palliative care - and, in addition, we are involved with group homes for adults with disabilities, long-term care, and dementia care facilities, as well as preschools and high schools.

*"Working in the community feels like we are a part of something much bigger."*

Buchanan - who is also the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Music Therapists - has extended her teachings through a series of books. Her 2015 tome, Tune In, explored the idea of using music intentionally to reduce stress and boost mood. Her latest effort, Wellness, Wellplayed, is about one specific technique, broken down into different exercises.

"I wanted to give more attention to one of my favourite concepts - designing purposeful playlists. Each exercise in the book is designed to provide readers with a process and a product that will benefit their emotional health and wellbeing. Playlists can be a bridge to something deeper within ourselves, and a way to address our human need to feel, create, and connect. Wellness, Wellplayed also blends education with fun - something I feel that we all need right now. In addition to the experiential exercises, readers will also have many opportunities to reflect on the past and feel inspired for their future. The book delves into the history of the mixtape, as well as how music is processed in the brain. There are also inspirational stories on how others are connecting to their music that I hope encourages the reader to do the same."

She notes that there has never been a more important time for people to discover

the healing power of music.

"In Canada, according to the non-profit research institute ICES, one in five children and youth experience a mental illness at any given time. The Canadian Mental Health Association also shares that in any given year, 1 in 5 people in Canada will personally experience a mental health problem or illness. By age 40, about 50 per cent of the population will have, or have had, a mental illness, affecting people of all ages, education, income levels, and cultures; however, systemic inequalities such as racism, poverty, homelessness, discrimination, colonial and gender-based violence, among others, can worsen if mental health supports are difficult to access. I believe that after the pandemic has finally subsided, we will see the full effects of the mental health crisis on our hands. Having access to mental health professionals - including music therapists - as well as greater access to leisure facilities and creative spaces where people can gather will be part of the solution.

"Music brings meaning into moments, but on a more complex level, it impacts brain function and human behaviour. It also reduces stress, relieves pain, and improves symptoms of isolation and depression. It boosts our mood, enhances our memory, and motivates us as well."

Buchanan hopes to expand her reach over the coming years.

"I would love to continue to engage in lively discussion around the benefits of music, music therapy and our emotional health and wellbeing. I can already feel this is happening here in Canada and I look forward to more opportunities in other countries as well."

[www.jenniferbuchanan.ca](http://www.jenniferbuchanan.ca)



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# Celtic Illusion Reimagined

*A long-standing spectacle brings new flavours into the mix*



Celtic Illusion - a fusion show featuring Irish dance and magic illusion - was created by Anthony Street (formerly of Lord of the Dance) and premiered in 2011. Street combined his love of magic and dance - both of which he has been passionate about since a young age. The spectacle has since found success throughout Australia, Street's home country, as well as in New Zealand. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the show's 2020 tour plans, but it recently hit the road again.

Having already touched down in Canada and the United States earlier this year, Celtic Illusion Reimagined is spending the rest of the summer touring its Australian home.

Georgia May, lead dancer for one of the show's two troupes, has been a part of Celtic Illusion since 2013. "Initially, I did not fully appreciate what the role would entail," she admits. "Once I started rehearsals, I quickly realized that I had quite the challenge ahead of me. Even though it was daunting, I was excited to tackle it and give it everything I had."

"No two days are the same in this role," she continues. "Things are constantly moving, changing, and improving. It makes the entire show and experience so exciting - not only for me, but for audiences as well."

May herself began dancing at the age of three, starting with jazz, ballet, and tap. "I think my mum thought I was going to be a ballerina with the Australian Ballet."

However, she soon fell in love with Irish dance. "When I was 9 years old, I saw a local Irish Dance school performing for St. Patrick's Day and I begged my mum to take me to lessons."



Since then, she has trained in Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne, London, and Birmingham. She also has a Bachelor of Dance Performance under her belt, which includes acting, singing and musical theatre, "but Irish dance has taken my dance career to the next level."

As for her role with Celtic Illusion, there has never been a dull moment - both the illusion and dance elements bring their own sets of challenges. "I don't stop from the moment I arrive at the venue to the final curtain call. One minute I am performing a complex illusion that has multiple elements to line up, and the next, it is an emotional lyrical-style duet with high-flying lifts and intricate choreography. When performing illusions, you need to be hyper-focused on so many things at once. It is not just as simple as vanishing into thin air! It is physically and mentally challenging."

While travelling from venue to venue, the challenges only intensify. Different places have different lighting, tech, and space. The performance itself also must continue to evolve and improve. As with any job in show business, it is important to keep things fresh and surprising.

*"You have to be different, you have to go bigger, be crazier, and take risks to be successful..."*

"Especially with magic, you need to surprise the audience by performing the classic tricks in a new and unexpected format. The dancing has to be world class, too. The show is made up of two very unique art forms, and one must complement the other."

Along with being a performer, May also has directorial and tour management duties, such as props management, liaising with venues, and marketing. "Your finger has to be on the pulse at all times to make the magic happen day after day."

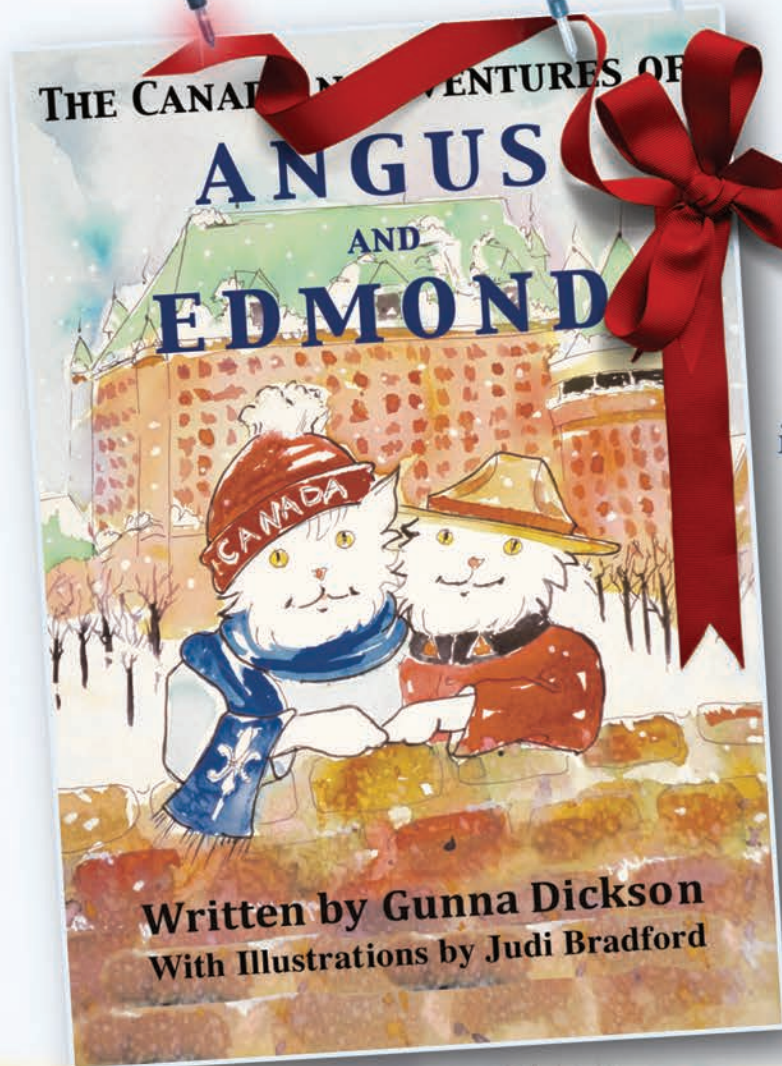
However, the hard work is all worth it. "After the hardship of the pandemic, it feels great to get back out on stage to entertain and transport our audiences for a few hours. Chatting with them after the show leaves you with such a sense of happiness."

"Another highlight is when all of the planning and hard work leading up to a tour all comes together. Planning begins 8-12 months out from a tour, and - given the scale of the show - it is a huge effort to pull it all together. My 'to do' list seems to grow every day in the lead up, but with hyper-focus, hard work and determination to be the best, seeing it come together and be successful is always satisfying."

[celticillusion.com](http://celticillusion.com)



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Ooh, Canada!

Angora-mix brothers Angus and Edmond find purrfection in the wintry warmth of Montreal festivities and the pre-Carnival glow of Quebec City.

*Author Gunna Dickson is a New York-based writer and editor. Illustrator, fine artist and milliner Judi Bradford lives and works in Florida.*

"The Canadian Adventures of Angus and Edmond" is available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and other online sites.





# We Banjo 3



*The road reopens for a talented Irish quartet*

**W**e Banjo 3 has been making its mark in the Irish and Americana music scenes for more than a decade. Now, after a challenging two years of pandemic life, the group is releasing its latest album. “Open the Road” officially launches on July 15 while We Banjo 3 tours the United States.

Despite the band’s name, We Banjo 3 is made up of four members - two sets of brothers, in fact. Enda Scahill (tenor banjo, vocals), Martin Howley (tenor banjo, mandolin, vocals) and David Howley (lead vocals and guitar) first began playing small gigs together as a “passion project.” When Fergal Scahill joined the band to play the Milwaukee Irish Festival, the musicians didn’t bother changing their moniker. Fergal has remained with the Galway-based group, adding vocals, fiddle, mandolin and more. Today, the quartet has three Billboard #1 albums under its belt.

Like many musicians, the band’s members worked hard to keep in touch with their audience during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“There was so much uncertainty and genuine fear in the world, and so many stories of loss, suffering and tragedy,” Enda tells Celtic Life International. “During the first year, we made huge efforts to remain in contact with our fans and community by livestreaming for four hours every week. This was both a rewarding and highly exhausting endeavor as it placed us way outside our normal musical comfort zones and deep into unfamiliar territories of streaming tech.”

Ultimately, however, Enda says they had the support they needed to keep them afloat. “As time rolled on, we realized how privileged and grateful we are for where we live and how well Ireland looked after its musi-

cians and artists during the pandemic. We were intensely lucky that our fans also supported us the entire time.”

We Banjo 3 originally had plans for a January 2022 tour, but another surge of COVID-19 trampled those hopes. But all was not lost, as the musicians decided to take the time to record a new album in Maryland. “When we were working remotely, we began to share ideas and a common theme emerged and thus the album began to come to life,” explains Martin. “We decided to instead convene at Waterford Studios, home of our engineer Frank Marchand. We bundled ourselves away and began to shape and craft this new recording.”

“Open the Road” came out of intense isolation in the dead of winter. After just two days in the studio, the musicians agreed they had something special. Lead vocalist David was the spearhead of the creative vision. “The biggest challenge with this album was being apart for so long,” he notes. “We were used to road life and always being together that the separation due to COVID-19 was really hard for us all. Trying to plan an album on Zoom is harder than you think.

*“We had to lean into other parts of our creative process which brought out something new and unique for this album.”*

Martin describes the process as “cathartic, visceral and elevating.” He adds: “We are deeply excited to share this music.”

Now that they are touring again, We Banjo 3 has already been able to share some of the new songs with its audience. “So far,



people are loving them,” says Fergal. “We can already see fans singing along and knowing more of the lyrics than we do. It’s really nice to have fans come up to us saying how excited they are to hear the recording, because they love the live versions so much.”

Of the new work, Fergal is partial to the “Open the Road” title track. “It was written as a fast Irish reel, but when we got into studio and played it over and over, it took on a life of its own and started to move and change the more we played it. The resulting track is a journey, starting out slow and moody and builds to a frenzy before dying away to a peaceful end.”

Speaking of journeys, We Banjo 3 will be making its way across the U.S. for album release dates and festival shows for the remainder of the summer. The band members are thrilled to have that live audience connection once again.

“The shared experience and energy transfer that happens during a live show cannot be replaced or replicated,” says Enda.

[www.webanjo3.com](http://www.webanjo3.com)



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# Gemma Briggs

*Gemma Briggs passes  
on her passion for the pipes*

One morning in 2010, an 11-year-old girl of Scottish descent arrived at school to learn that free piping lessons were being offered after classes. She signed up and quickly became “hooked.”

The school was Dunedin Middle School in Florida, and the girl was Gemma Briggs.

Briggs, now 23, hasn’t stopped piping since then. She fondly recalls her first few months learning the instrument as part of her 6th grade pipe band, under the tutelage of her teacher Sandy Keith.

“I would never have had access to the instrument otherwise,” she tells Celtic Life International by email, adding - with a chuckle - that she has been a piper since she was  $\frac{3}{4}$  the size of the  $\frac{3}{4}$  pipes. “There were times that I was more enthusiastic than others, but I have always deeply identified with the pipes and being a piper. And, if piping wasn’t so difficult at times, I don’t think it would have nearly the same charm.”

Today - donning her Ancient Payne tartan and plying away at a set of Peter Henderson drones - Briggs runs her own bagpipe business out of Tampa Bay, offering traditional pipe music for a variety of services.

She admits that carving a career out of a hobby hasn’t been without its issues.

“The biggest challenge for me has been putting myself out there. Every piper has run into that jerk at a gig that wants to tell you how much they hate the sound, or how you are not in tune, or some other rude comment. Anything unique is going to have lovers and

haters, and I have found this especially true - some people think you are the best thing since sliced bread and some will chase you off a street corner for busking.”

She adds that the COVID-19 pandemic hasn’t helped.

Despite the difficulties, however, her career has had no shortage of highlights. When she was only 14 years of age, she performed at the University of Florida with renowned Galician piper Carlos Núñez. She has also performed at a variety of festivals and events across the USA. Most recently, she participated in a tribute concert, which raised \$14K for Ukrainian war relief. She notes that the freedom of working for herself and the satisfaction of building her own business is what keeps her going.

*“I never thought that it  
was possible to make it as a  
musician, and the more that I  
lean into the dream, the more  
opportunities appear.”*

“There is no rush like performing - and I find that it is a lot easier to slip into spontaneous opportunities as a soloist.”

Briggs believes there is a keen interest in piping among young people, but notes that more can be done to raise the instrument’s profile.

“Scottish culture has become very popular in the media, and while there is an

increased interest, I am not sure that this has translated into new piping programs for youth. I hope that this can be improved by a greater cultural appreciation of the bagpipes in North America, which was heavily settled by Scots and Irish. I see this appreciation growing, and hope that it continues into private groups and municipalities investing in the Scottish arts.

“Young professional pipers have a lot to do with getting youth involved,” she continues. “It breaks the stereotype of the instrument being something ‘old’ and the traditional being ‘boring.’ The Red Hot Chilli Pipers are a perfect example of this. I admire their work in making the bagpipes relevant to a younger audience that might not have been previously exposed.”

The rest of 2022 will be busy for Briggs.

“My plans are to grow my in-person performances, my online presence, and focus on competition to move up to Grade 1. Becoming an open piper has been a dream of mine since I started playing. I also want to improve my recording so that I can create original music incorporating the bagpipes and the other instruments I play - keyboards, guitar, electric bass, and vocals. I want to grow my YouTube Channel, Facebook, and Instagram so that I can reach more people and challenge their ideas of what bagpipe music is and what bagpipe players look like. I will also continue to take lessons and teach beginning players: I believe that there is always someone to learn from and someone to teach.”

[www.gbbagpiping.com](http://www.gbbagpiping.com)

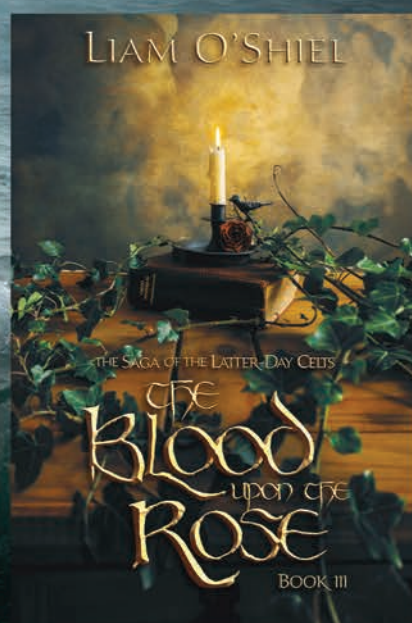
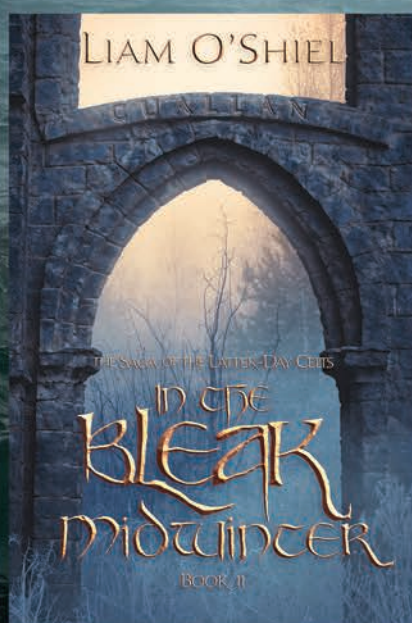
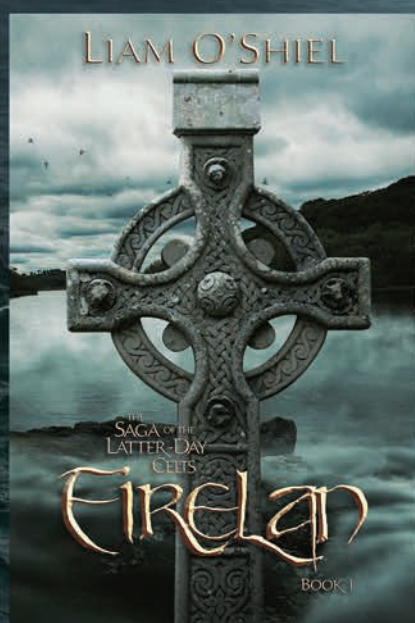


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# Colin Barrett

*A new short story collection celebrates Ireland*



**B**orn in Canada and raised in rural County Mayo in the west of Ireland, writer Colin Barrett has always had a passion for storytelling.

“From an early age I was interested in narrative and making up stories,” he tells Celtic Life International via email. “I drew little comics when I was a child. As a teenager, I turned to prose.”

Now 40, Barrett continues to write for many of the same reasons.

“I was first and foremost a reader, I loved and love stories. I wrote as a kid, and I am very lucky that I still get to write as an adult.”

Barrett’s professional career began notably: in 2014, his debut short story collection *Young Skins* would win the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, the Guardian First Book Award, and the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature.

One of the pieces in that collection, *Calm with Horses*, was adapted into a major motion picture by the same name, premiering at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival.

In 2015, he was named a National Book Foundation “5 Under 35.” His work has also appeared in many publications, including *The New Yorker*, *A Public Space*, *Granta* and *The Stinging Fly*.

He attributes his growth as a writer to both his life experiences and the types of books that he chooses to read.

“Your tastes change over time, even if

only subtly, and the kind of writing you want to do changes with that.”

Recently, Barrett released another short story collection, *Homesickness*. Described by the *New York Times* as “exact and poetic,” the eight stories explore unique characters through homespun warmth, wisdom and wit.

Among the anthology’s protagonists are a sword-wielding fugitive who appears at a local pub on a quiet night; a ghost that struggles to conceal itself at a funeral party; a policewoman battling with her own choices and existence following a shooting; and an aspiring writer whose life is turned upside down after his father receives a cancer diagnosis.

The scribe notes that *Homesickness* - as with most of his work - was inspired by the West of Ireland.

*“Place is intrinsic to how I write, and it informs all the stories in Homesickness.”*

“These kinds of collections kind of creep up on you,” he continues. “I write maybe two or three stories a year, and so after a few years, I have a collection. At a certain point, whatever its overall quality, you know that a story is ‘done.’ While you can finick endlessly with adjectives, you realize there is nothing more of significance you can do with it in terms of structure, character, or plot, that

it has reached its final form. It is what it is.

“Each story brings its own challenges - having a premise or set of characters and working out what to do with them in the confines of a given short story. It is often just a process of trial and error, trying different narrative paths, and seeing what works best.”

Since its release, *Homesickness* has enjoyed strong critical and popular acclaim. Irish writer Sally Rooney described it as “mesmerizingly powerful” and “full of strangeness,” and Irish novelist Colm Tóibín boasted that the collection was “crafted with skill and flair.”

Barrett is thrilled with the positive response.

“My assumption with both this book, and my first collection, was that nobody would be interested in stories about ordinary people on the margins of a provincial town on the edge of Ireland.”

He admits that it is hard to define what makes a “good book,” noting that, for him, it changes everyday.

“As far as my own books, I am trying to find language that has a charge and intensity and vividness to it. I look for that in the books I read, too. To try and keep things simple. It doesn’t matter how intricate a story is, you owe it to the reader to deliver the story as concisely and pleasurably as possible.”

Barrett is currently finishing up the final edits on his debut novel.



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# Clay Risen

## One man explores the history of bourbon

American author Clay Risen has been writing since he was a youngster.

"I started a newspaper at my elementary school," shares the scribe via email. "Well, that's a stretch - it lasted a single issue."

Risen's love for the newsroom evolved over time, and today - in addition to being an author - he plies his trade as both a reporter and an editor for The New York Times.

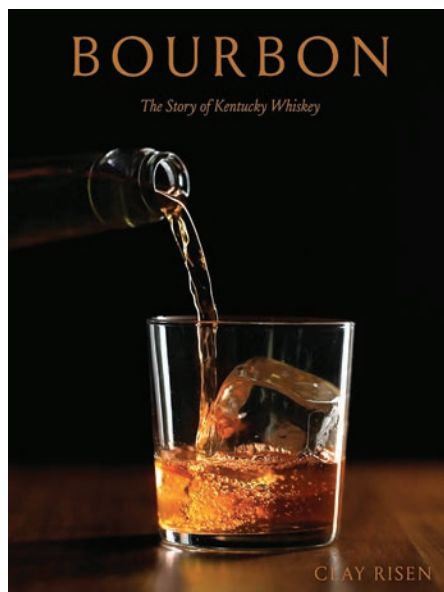
"As to why I started [writing], I suppose because it has always come easy to me, and it feels good doing it. Some people say they like having written something more than the actual process of writing it, but I am the opposite - I relish the writing and couldn't care less about the results once they are out the door. Plus, I don't think that I'd be very good at anything else."

His catalogue of works includes the Gilder-Lehrman award finalist *The Crowded Hour*: Teddy Roosevelt, the Rough Riders and the Dawn of the American Century (2019), and the critically acclaimed *American Whiskey, Bourbon & Rye: A Guide to the Nation's Favorite Spirit* (2013), among others.

His latest effort, *Bourbon: The Story of Kentucky Whiskey*, hit bookstore shelves this past December.

"About four years ago my publisher came to me with an idea. They had put out a book called *Champagne*, about both the drink and its region in France, and they wanted to do something similar for Kentucky. It is a wonderful book - the author, Peter Liem, dives deeply into what makes Champagne, Champagne - the people, the history, the terroir. I couldn't do exactly the same, because Kentucky whiskey doesn't have quite as extensive a history, nor is it as tied to the land as Champagne is. Instead, I focused on the people, the culture, and the communities around bourbon to explain what makes it special."

Risen was perfectly paired for this project: his dad's family has been in Kentucky since the late 18th century.



"Where they came from is a mystery," he admits. "Risen sounds German, so maybe they were like the ancestors of James Beam, who came to the state from Germany via Pennsylvania around the same time. My mom's side is mostly Scottish, though again, they arrived long ago and from nebulous shores. The irony is that I still have family in Kentucky, and my closest Scottish relatives live in Oban, near the Oban distillery, and yet I am the only one with any connection to whiskey."

Encased in an elegant drawer-styled boxed set, the new, 288-page tome includes an illustrated history and guide, archival photographs, rare bottle labels and more.

And though COVID-19 travel restrictions had an impact on the project, Risen found the process to be rewarding and educational.

*"I knew how much work and knowledge goes into making bourbon, but I don't think I fully appreciated it until I wrote this book."*

"Above all, it is about barrel management. Good distillation is important, but at the big distilleries, at least, what matters is how it is aged. And the best managers use their warehouses as giant tools, knowing the intricate details of each and how those qualities affect barrel aging - how one corner heats up faster in the spring, or how another retains humidity better than the rest.



"Much of this is received knowledge, oral tradition almost," he continues. "And while it goes back generations, many people are only now starting to talk about it publicly. Not because it was a secret, but because for a long time there was a sense that the public didn't care - and because, this being Kentucky, people don't like to trumpet their own expertise."

The book has enjoyed an excellent response since its release.

"It was a bit of a star-crossed roll out. The publication was delayed because the books were late in getting from the printer in China to the United States, and then the actual publication date fell at the height of the omicron wave. On the upside, this isn't a book meant to sell a bunch of copies quickly and then disappear. It will be around for a long time, and I am hoping people will be just as excited to read it five years from now as they are today."

Going forward, Risen notes that he has "always got a few pots on the stove."

"I have a series of whiskey books built around reviews, and I am wrapping up the third, about American rye. I also write books about American history, set mostly in the postwar decades, and my current project is about the anti-communist Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s."

[www.clayrisen.com](http://www.clayrisen.com)



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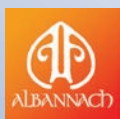
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photo:  
a chicks eye view





A close-up portrait of Janiva Magness, a woman with dark hair and bangs, resting her head on her hand. She is wearing a dark, patterned top and a beaded necklace. The background is dark and out of focus.

# *Janiva Magness*

*American blues singer Janiva Magness lives to tell.  
Story by Stephen Patrick Clare.*





**J**aniva Magness comes by the title Queen of the Blues honestly. Born and raised in Detroit, the 64-year-old songstress left home as a teenager after losing both of her parents to suicide. After a few rough years, she found her calling in life after seeing Otis Rush in concert. Since then, she has recorded 15 albums, toured the world, won a multitude of awards, and lived to tell.

### **You have Celtic connections do you not?**

Yes, my paternal grandfather was full-blooded Scottish. My mother is half-Irish, although that side of the family history is a bit of a brick wall as she was an only child and there is simply no one left to ask. On my father's side, my aunt made a life's work of exploring the Magness family genealogy. She left a massive three-ring binder, which I have now, that traces our lineage back to a gentleman named Mackness. There is all sorts of stuff in that binder - a family crest, old photos, a few handwritten letters.

### **Do you have any interest in those roots?**

Oh yes. I mean, I have read the binder from cover to cover, and I have added a little bit here and there and shared it with my family. I lovingly say that there have been a lot of preachers, drunks, and beauty operators in our family tree. I have been to Scotland on

tour, and I felt an immediate connection there, like I was walking on home turf. I felt very riveted - almost magnetized - in Edinburgh. I kept seeing people that looked like me.

### **Do you think those roots informed who you are and what you do?**

I have no doubt that my Scottish DNA had an impact on my ability to survive. The Scots are tough, headstrong, resourceful people, and those qualities must have trickled their way down through our family gene pool to me.

### **Is that Celtic influence anywhere in your music?**

Absolutely. When the Scots and Irish came to North America, they brought their music with them. So many of them settled in the South and that influence is there in country music, jazz, and the blues. While it may not

seem immediately apparent, you can hear Celtic roots in the melodies. Certainly, the Irish sense of melancholy informed the blues, both musically and lyrically. And there is the storytelling element also - no one spins a yarn quite like the Celts, and that is a central component in all music, and particularly in the blues.

### **The Irish, in particular, seem to have a real affinity for the blues.**

Of course. Given what they have been through over the centuries the appeal is more than understandable. Much of Ireland's traditional music - the jigs and reels - arose from places of hardship, either to reflect those difficulties or to overcome them. In that sense, it really is no different from what we have heard from the great American blues artists. Sometimes I feel like people don't truly understand what blues is about - it is, first and foremost, healing music. And, for me, it captures the power and resiliency of the human spirit.



## Is that why you got into it?

Yes, though at the time I didn't recognize it - I was caught up in the power and immediacy of the music, the blues scene itself, and all the pitfalls that came with it - you know what I am talking about here. But I was a kid, really, when I first got into it. In retrospect - and today it is much easier to connect the dots of the past than when I was actually going through it - it was a form of self-therapy. I was able to give voice to something that needed to be expressed, that refused to stay silent. I was giving intangible things some sense of tangibility. In some ways, the blues - and music in general - saved my life.

## Are those the same reasons that you continue to sing today?

Yes and no. Look, if you get to my age and you aren't carrying any baggage from your past then you haven't been living. For sure, I still have some deep wounds and scars that need to heal, and that is an ongoing process. Over time, those have lessened, but some of them are still there. On the other hand, writing and recording and performing bring me great joy and help me to celebrate life. I love to travel and see new places, experience different cultures, try new foods, and meet new people. I am still filled with wanderlust and wonder.

## Your 2019 book, *Weeds Like Us*, was a way of sorting that stuff out as well?

Yes, it was. It was quite a process, and the writing took a long time. You could even say it took a lifetime. But it was important for me to cut through the myths I had been telling myself about myself and get to what was, and is, real. They say that truth is better than fiction, and that was certainly my experience with the book. I also wrote it in hopes that it might help someone out there who might be struggling. I mean, what's the point of surviving all that heartache if you don't share the story? I am just so grateful that I lived long enough to tell it.

## Will there be a sequel?

You never know! Maybe ask me again in another 50 years.

## The COVID-19 pandemic has given us all a little extra time.

Yes, for better or for worse. Mostly, however, it has put me out of work. The music industry has been hit hard, and between not being able to tour and the availability of music online, artists have very little opportunities to generate revenue these days. I have done a few things here and there that have helped, but everything has come to an almost complete standstill. And I'm sorry, but streaming concerts just don't do it for me, either as a performer or as a member of the audience. The experience is flat. I need to be there, in the flesh, to truly enjoy a musical experience.

## What have you been doing over the past 18 months?

I have mostly been writing and prepping music for a new recording. We go into the studio shortly and I hope to have the album ready for release in the spring, followed by - say your prayers - tour dates. A few years ago, I began writing and recording original music. Prior to that I had dabbled in my own music and lyrics, but mainly I had been interpreting other people's music. Which, when you stop to think about it, is really another form of creativity. I love the challenge of taking someone else's song and making it my own; finding my place in the music, wrapping my head and heart around the lyrics, and breathing new life into it. This new record will likely feature both my own songs and a few covers.

## I imagine the new songs will reflect your own personal growth.

Again, yes and no. At the end of the day, the blues are the blues; the rhythm, the groove, the growl - it hasn't really changed that much over the last century, nor should it. You can still dance to it, you can still sweat to it, you can still sing along with it, and you can still connect with it on some sort of deeper, primal level. And that is still part of the appeal of it for me - the sheer soul and spirit and swagger of the music. On an entirely other level, however, it reflects - perhaps both consciously and unconsciously - who and where I am in my life.



## And where is that?

Oh, I am in a really good place with myself these days. I am healthy and happy - young enough to fully understand and enjoy what I do, and old enough to know better! For most of us, there is a certain wisdom that comes with age - usually life lessons that are the result of decades of bad decisions! But I wouldn't change any of it. If I had the chance now to speak with my younger self, I would tell her to go for it in exactly the same way. And I would remind her to believe in herself, and trust that everything will work out in the end and that, one day - with a little luck - she would live to tell.

[www.janivamagness.com](http://www.janivamagness.com)

## Janiva Magness Discography

1991	More Than Live
1997	It Takes One to Know One
1999	My Bad Luck Soul
2001	Blues Ain't Pretty
2003	Use What You Got
2004	Bury Him at the Crossroads
2006	Do I Move You?
2008	What Love Will Do
2010	The Devil is an Angel Too
2012	Stronger for It
2014	Original
2016	Love Wins Again
2017	Blue Again
2018	Love Is An Army
2019	Change In The Weather





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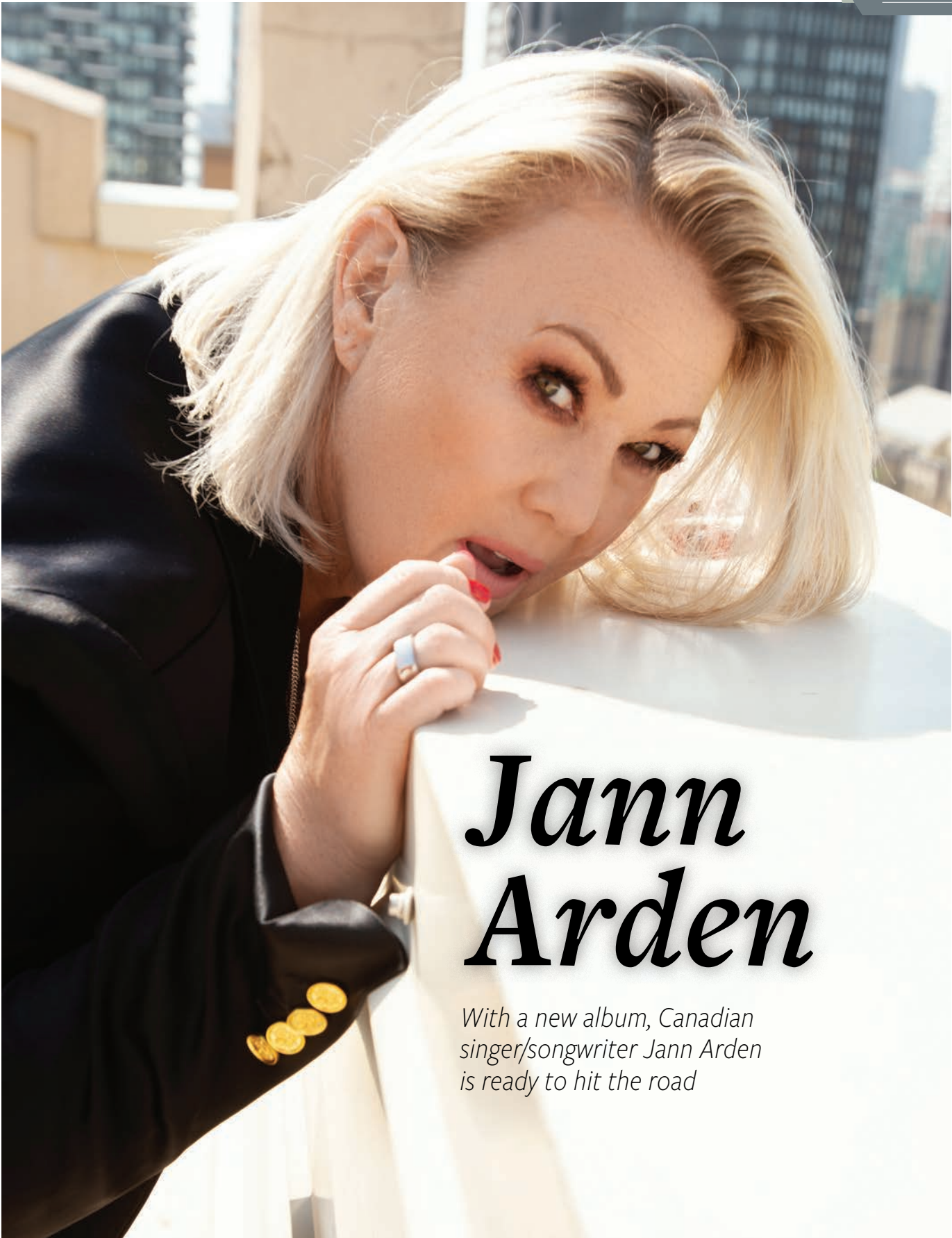
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# Jann Arden

*With a new album, Canadian singer/songwriter Jann Arden is ready to hit the road*



**D**espite the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, Jann Arden has never been busier. With a hit television series, a popular podcast, bestselling books, and an array of philanthropic interests, the much acclaimed, multi award-winning singer/songwriter has just released her 13th full-length recording, *Descendant*. Recently Celtic Life International Editor-in-Chief Stephen Patrick Clare spoke with Arden about her past, present, and future.



### How have you been coping with the current state of the world?

You know what? It's been great for me actually. Now that I have been home for an extended period, I realize how lucky I am to have such a great home and how much I enjoy just being around the house. I was so busy for so long - writing, recording, touring, television, promotional junkets and all the other activities that support my work as an artist - that it has been nice just to sit still and take things slow for awhile and to enjoy the fruits of my labours. When you are so busy being busy, you often don't realize how important it is to take the time to breathe and pause to reflect on where you are in your life. For me, it was long overdue, and it has been refreshing and rejuvenating. That said, I am getting a bit claustrophobic at this point, and I need a good reason to get out of my house!

### You will be turning 60 soon.

Don't remind me. Actually, after some challenging and worrisome years, I am in a really good place these days and quite happy with who I am. I feel like I have arrived, or landed, at a new phase of my life - a safe spot - and that I am quite comfortable in my

own skin. I still feel younger than I am - in my head I will always be 30 - although some days my body tells me otherwise. But one of the perks of getting older, I suppose, is having a greater acceptance for everything. A lot of the stuff that used to get under my skin just doesn't rattle me anymore, and I simply can't be bothered with things that don't matter. My perspective has evolved, but I am always amazed that I still awake each day with that sense of childlike wonder and awe. I never lost that.

### What is important to you now?

Many of the same things that matter to most people I guess - health, family, friends, feeling like I am making a difference in the world. And, for me, of course, staying creative is essential - maybe more than ever.

### You really put yourself out there.

Do I? I never really saw it that way, but perhaps you are right. Between the album, the book, the TV show, guest appearances, the podcast, and everything else, I suppose that people are probably quite sick of me by now. The bad news for them is that I don't have any plans to go away anytime soon.

### How much of all that is Jann the person versus Jann the performer?

They are one and the same and, really, what you see is what you get. I am pretty open about my life and with my thoughts and feelings. That said, any artist will tell you that as much as you bring yourself to the studio or the concert stage or the page or the canvas, there is always a part of you that you keep to yourself, that you don't give away. That is vital in a business that can sometimes suck the soul right out of you. It's a bit of a balancing act.

### How do you keep that balance?

Oh, I have great people around me that keep me in check. They are my eyes and my ears... my family, my friends, and a few folks in the entertainment business that I know and trust. Every once in a while, especially when I get one of my big, outrageous ideas, one of them will tap me on the shoulder and ask me "What the hell are you doing?" And they are usually right. Not always, but often enough that I pay attention. And then I just have to laugh at myself.



## **Humour has long been a hallmark of your work.**

Well, without it I would be dead in the water. Life can sometimes be so...heavy. I mean, look at what the world has been going through in the last two years and think of how much more terrible things would have been without those little moments of laughter and joy here and there each day. Thankfully I was born with a big funny bone, and I can keep myself, and hopefully others, in the right kind of stitches.

## **With so much on the go, does your music ever get lost in the mix?**

No. Never. That is, first and foremost, who I am and what I do. It always has been and always will be. I do enjoy being involved with the other things as they bring out different - and sometimes surprising - sides of me, but nothing comes close to writing, recording, and performing music. It is still the most satisfying and rewarding thing that I do, and I don't believe that will ever change.

## **What went into the new recording?**

Descendant was a joy to make. Looking back over the process, it was easy. And at this point in my life easy is good. I like easy. Those songs almost came together by themselves - a few of them had been floating around in one form or another, or in my head, for some time, while others just showed up at the door when I began writing. I have always been rather fortunate that way - sure, there have been times in the past when I have struggled with the process, wrestling with music and lyrics, but that wasn't the case this time. It all flowed quite easily. And, like I said, at my age easy is good.

## **How have you evolved as an artist over the years?**

That's a good question, and if you had asked me that two years ago, I am not sure that I would have been able to answer it, or at least have answered it accurately. One of the benefits of this pandemic - and you always have to look for that silver lining, right? - has been the opportunity to turn inward and reflect. What a luxury that is, especially at a time when there are so many ways and means to be distracted. And one of the things that I have had the chance to reflect upon

is how I have grown as both a person and as an artist. And I have realized a few things about myself that, perhaps under "normal" circumstances, I might not have considered. First, I have learned to get out of the way and allow the songs to appear. All I have to do is suit up and show up and do what I do each day. Secondly was the realization that the message is always more important than the messenger. So, that allows me to take the work seriously without taking myself too seriously. And, lastly - as I mentioned earlier - my perspective on life has changed; I realize that the big picture is made up of the tiny details of my daily life - the simple joy of watching a hawk fly, a short stroll by a still lake, or the beauty found in a bouquet of flowers, or the pleasure of a few smiles and laughs with a family member or friend over a cup of tea.

## **Simplicity.**

Exactly. And what was so amazing about this album was that all the people involved - the musicians, Darcy Phillips, who wrote two songs with me and did some arranging, my producers Bob Rock and Russell Broom - we were all on the same page that way. You know, despite all the arguments about how technology is ruining our lives and taking us away from the things that really matter, there is something to be said for how it has improved our lives. For a musician, sketching and writing and recording and mixing songs has never been easier. We no longer have to be in the same space to work together. Sometimes, in the past, being at close creative quarters has been challenging, especially when you are working with deadlines. There was a lot of pressure to produce. That wasn't the case with Descendant.

## **Do you have a favourite track on the new album?**

All of them. I mean that - I love each and every piece. I'm not sure that the question is fair, though, as it is like asking a mother to pick out a favourite child - each are near and dear to her heart and the love for each is pure and true. That said, there are some songs from my previous recordings that I prefer over others, and even a few that I can't listen to anymore. But I don't feel that will be the case with the songs on Descendant.

## **What makes a good song?**

Another good question. For me, there has to be a connection of some sort there. It



could be an emotional connection, or even a spiritual connection, but there must be some sense of familiarity with the music or the melody or the lyric - something that speaks to me or perhaps resonates with some deeper part of me.

## **Soul.**

You can call it that for sure. Soul music really isn't about colour or race or a particular genre of music, however - it can be found in any work of art that is honest and real and comes from a place of truth and love and beauty. There is a wealth of great music being produced these days, and it will be interesting to see how it evolves over the coming years.

## **Speaking of the future, what do have planned for the remainder of 2022?**

Well, as much as I have enjoyed the downtime, I must get back to work - my bills aren't going to pay themselves. So, we hit the road in May for a month of shows across Canada, and then there will likely be other dates through the summer and into the fall. I have really missed being on the road, and I can't tell you how much I am looking forward to playing concerts again and sharing these new songs with people. If anything, it gives me a good reason to get out of my house!

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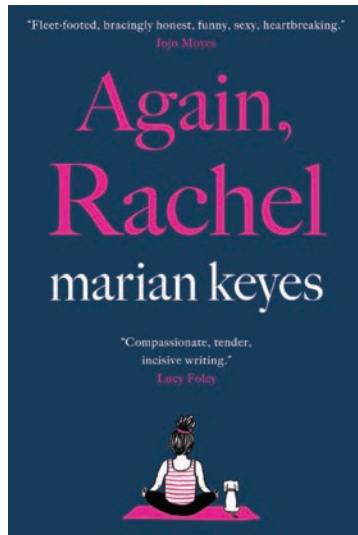
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# *Marian Keyes*





Over the course of her prolific career as a novelist, Marian Keyes has never written a direct sequel to any of her previous works. However, during the COVID-19 lockdowns - and unable to visit her own family - the Irish scribe reconnected with one of her earliest characters, and found some comfort writing about, once again, Rachel Walsh. Recently Keyes chatted with Celtic Life International's Chris Muise about her latest effort *Again, Rachel*.

### **Tell us about your Celtic heritage. Where do you reside, currently?**

I was born in Limerick, which is a city in the west of Ireland. When I was 22, I moved to London, and then I moved back to Ireland about 25 years ago. I live in a suburb of Dublin now, called Dunleary. It's on the sea, which always makes people go dreamy-eyed, but it's nothing like as delicious as it sounds. It used to be a ferry port, and the ferries don't come anymore. But it's busy, a really nice mix of people. I live very near where I was brought up; my mother, who is still alive, is within walking distance from me and two of my brothers. I really like it. I didn't think I would. When I left Ireland at 22, I wanted to never come back. I wanted bright lights and glamour. But I outgrew it; I really love living here now.

### **At what point did you want to become an author?**

It was never part of my plan. I studied law in university, and as soon as I qualified, I delighted my parents by leaving Ireland,

going to London, and getting a job as a waitress. I just didn't want to have a regular life, but I had no real idea of what I wanted to do. And, unbeknownst to myself, I was a drinking alcoholic. I didn't know I was, because I was a woman in my 20s, I had a job, and a flatmate - all the things that ordinary, middle-class people had. But just shortly after my 30th birthday, things began to get far worse very quickly. There was one afternoon, when I should have been at work and I was at home with yet another hangover, and I had read a short story in a magazine that had won a prize. Something in it kind of appealed to me. Made me feel that I could attempt something similar. There and then, I wrote my first short story. It was the first thing in my life I felt I'd ever been proud of. Over the next four months, I wrote several more. I ended up going to rehab in January of 1994, and when I came out, I remembered the writing I had been doing - how it made me feel, and the joy it gave me. That is how it all started. And then I got a publishing deal very, very quickly, which is unusual. I was lucky, because if I had been rejected early, I'm not sure if I'd ever had the confidence to try again.

### **It sounds like there's some cross-over between *Rachel's Holiday* and your own life experiences.**

That was the third book I wrote. It was so interesting to find that if I - a young woman who was educated, had a job, and all the infrastructure of a middle-class life - am that person, and an alcoholic, it means that addiction is not something on the margins of life. People with all kinds of addictions are walking around and trying to manage their lives, wondering why it's all so difficult. I wanted to write about addiction as something that's very mainstream. And about the denial that goes with the condition, because I was in massive denial when I arrived at rehab. I honestly thought that I drank the way that I drank - which was a lot - but that it would be temporary, and that when things improved in my life, I wouldn't need to drink so much. That's kind of Rachel's attitude, as well. It wasn't something to worry about. It's about moving from denial to realization. The rehab in the book, the Cloisters - which appears in *Again, Rachel* - was sort of a tough love place. It was inspired by The Rutland Centre, which is where I went. In other ways, Rachel





isn't me. Our drug of choice was different. I lived in London, she lived in New York. Our educational backgrounds and places in our families had been different. But the mindset of an addict was almost identical.

### **Again, Rachel is your first sequel.**

It is my first sequel, and I always said I would never write one, because it always made me feel a little bit uncomfortable. It felt like I was short-changing the reader. For me, it just felt a little bit cheeky. But I think enough time had passed that I felt it would be an entirely new story. A storyline came that I thought would work for Rachel and Luke. I decided I'd give it a go and started writing it as the first lockdown kicked off here two years ago. But I made a deal with myself; if the book felt half-baked or not quite good enough, I'd abandon it. And here we are now, with *Again*, Rachel on bookshelves. It became my friend really quickly. I believed what I was writing about, which was a massive relief. I couldn't see my own family during that time, but I could write about the Walsh family, who have featured in several of my other books. They were nearly as good as the real thing. I was so grateful to have the book to write.

**What do you think will resonate with the current generation of young, modern readers? And do you think there's been a cultural shift that makes now a good time to talk about addiction and coping again?**

Yeah, maybe. In *Again*, Rachel, she's now working as an addiction counsellor in the Cloisters. One of the things I really liked

about writing *Again*, Rachel was writing about the group therapy sessions she has. There's still an urge in us all to regard addiction as a moral failing, rather than an illness or a response to trauma. I still think we have some work to do. We still try to "other" addicts because we're afraid of it happening to us. But the attitude towards addiction has widened. Now, people understand that you can be addicted to sex, to food, to spending money, or to gambling. But it's hard for people's first response to be compassion. "Why don't they just stop?" As if anybody would live that way if they had any say in the matter. So, there've been some changes, but we're not there. Yet.

### **How is that reflected in the book?**

Well...I'd be giving a spoiler if I told you. Something does come up for Rachel, and it's very handy that she's working with addicts all day long, because in those circumstances, it becomes impossible to hide her own truth from herself. I know that's a cagey answer.

### **Will you revisit Rachel again down the road?**

Maybe not Rachel. But you see, in that family, there are five sisters, and I have written about all five of them. And it's so odd; after resisting the whole idea of writing a sequel for 25 years, I'm now very drawn to doing another one, with one of the sisters. It's incredibly nice, being back in that world. I think the pandemic has changed so much for so many people. Now, I'm craving comfort, the familiar. One of the sisters is named Helen, and I'd really like to write her story now. And I'd be writing it as much for myself as for the reader.

### **Does *Again*, Rachel tackle mental health and addiction from a uniquely Irish perspective? Or is it more universal?**

That's...a big question! My response is that Irish people cope - with pain, trauma, or loss - with humour. It's our go-to, and in many ways, it's very useful. It makes it possible to talk about something that would be unmentionable if you spoke about it as it really was. The Walsh sisters communicate with each other by insulting each other, in a humorous way. That's very much how me and my siblings communicate. Another thing Irish people will do, we find it very hard to say "I" was assaulted. They'll say, "you're finding it hard to sleep." We talk about ourselves in the second person, almost third-personing it. It's connective; it's a shared thing when that kind of language is spoken. But I think most countries have terrible difficulty articulating their pain.

### **Where does our cultural attitude towards trauma need to go, moving forward? And are we on that path today?**

I believe a big effort is being made, especially with our younger people. To let them know that it's okay to not be okay. But a lot needs to happen across the board, and it involves countless individuals taking risks - speaking out and articulating their stories. For "unlikely" traumas to be discussed; for men, let's say, to talk about their experiences with anorexia. Every time someone in the media mocks a person for speaking out, they should be absolutely across-the-board called out for it. We should not stand for it. Younger and younger in schools, kids need to be given language to speak about uncomfortable feelings. It's on us all, to be honest when we'd prefer maybe not to be. We've all got to be braver.

*mariankeyes.com*



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# *Riverdance Turns 25*

*Ireland's celebrated cultural spectacular returns  
from hiatus with a new cast and show.*

*Story by Stephen Patrick Clare*





*“I am really excited for the opportunity. It feels like I have been working my entire life for this moment.”*

A quick glance at her resume confirms her ambition; born and bred in Aghyaran, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland, Dolan first danced for the Carson Kennedy Academy in Belfast as a child, later winning several major titles - including the 2010 World Irish Dance Championships (Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne). After attending the Riverdance Summer School in 2016 she became the show's youngest lead dancer in history the following year at the age of 19. Among other notable highlights is her 2018 performance for Pope Francis at Croke Park in Dublin in front of more than 80,000 spectators. Her journey to the top of the Irish dance world was captured in the 2020 BBC documentary “Born to Riverdance.”

“It has been quite a wild ride,” laughs Dolan, who has developed a significant following on her social media outlets, includ-

It is almost impossible to measure the impact that Riverdance has had over the last 25 years. To properly detail the iconic Irish dance and musical production's origins and history would take hours, even days or weeks. Simply put, it is almost beyond words.

Alas, let us turn to Wikipedia for a succinct summation.

*Riverdance is a theatrical show consisting mainly of traditional Irish music and dance. With a score composed by Bill Whelan, it originated as an interval performance act during the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest, featuring Irish dancing champions Jean Butler, Michael Flatley and the vocal ensemble Anúna. Shortly afterwards, husband and wife production team John McColgan and Moya Doherty expanded it into a stage show, which opened in Dublin on 9 February 1995. Since then, the show has visited over 450 venues worldwide and been seen by over 25 million people, making it one of the most successful dance productions in the world.*

“Yes, that about sums it up,” smiles the show's Executive Producer and Director Pádraic Moyles via Zoom.

Moyles is joined on the call by the production's principal dancer Amy-Mae Dolan.

“The show has brought so much joy to so many people around the world,” she shares. “And it still does, maybe even now more than ever.”

Originally scheduled for 2019/2020, the famed Irish spectacle - like everything else on planet Earth - went on hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

“It was completely unexpected, of course,” notes Moyles, who has been with the company - first as a dancer and, more recently, in his current role - since 1997. “We have never seen anything like it and there was a lot of waiting on when and where and how we were going to get back out on the road. In my position as one of the core leaders of the show it was vital to remain upbeat

and optimistic.”

As per the adage, the real job of a leader is to create other leaders.

“Yes, that's it exactly. And Amy-Mae is an ideal candidate to carry on that legacy, as she will be leading the dance team when the tour resumes in January in the USA.”

Almost amazingly, despite her young age, Dolan feels no pressure.







ing her YouTube channel, where she posts behind-the-scenes clips from the Riverdance tour alongside her own Pilates instructional videos.

"All my years of training and hard work have paid off in ways that I never could have imagined," she continues. "It is a dream come true. And I have made so many great friends along the way. We are much more than friends at this point, however - we are a family."

Moyles echoes the sentiment.

"We are very much a family, for sure. When we talk about the people of Riverdance, we aren't just speaking about the present cast and crew - think of all the past members that have been involved with the production over the last 25 years; the dancers, the musicians, management, the directors, the stagehands...a huge amount of people have come and gone in that time. A few who met while working on the show got married and had children, and now some of those young ones are with us. It has become a generational experience."

That is true of audiences as well.

"Folks who might have seen the show years ago are now bringing their kids and their grandkids to the performances," continues Moyles. "For some it has become a part of their own family tradition."

Dolan says that creating memories for others is beyond rewarding.

"I look out into the audience during the show and see people smiling together or laughing together or tapping their toes and it makes me feel all warm inside. Those are the times that you live for as a performer - knowing that, even if it is only for a few moments here and there, you have made a positive difference in someone's life."

While Riverdance is renowned for its brilliant choreography, moving musical overtures, and elaborate stage sets and lighting, it is the human element that audiences connect with most.

"The show is, ultimately, one of storytelling," notes Moyles. "It is very Irish in that regard. We are natural storytellers, given our history of myths and legends."

*"Beyond the flash and glitz it is a story of people - their ideas, their emotions, their experiences... these are things that resonate on a deeper level."*

As such, he says that focus is key for performers.

"It may sound a little strange, but if a dancer is thinking about what they are going to have for lunch or where they are going to go out after the show while they are on stage, the audiences pick up on that."

"Oh, absolutely," agrees Dolan. "There are a million things that go through your mind while you are up there. The real trick is just to let them pass and continue to concentrate on each moment. While the steps and routines are committed to memory, you really have to stay on your toes and remain mentally focused at all times."

The chance to connect with audiences in-person often comes post-performance.

"I love meeting people after the shows," continues Dolan. "The feedback is fantastic, especially when you meet a young dancer that has just been completely blown away by the performance. Seeing that you have perhaps inspired a little girl or boy to take up Irish dance, or perhaps encouraged someone to keep dancing or even motivate them to explore Irish culture a little more, is a big part of why we do what we do."

Not surprisingly, many of those meet-and-greets are with Irish ex-pats.

"There are a few of them about," laughs Moyles. "Actually, I am always pleasantly surprised to meet people that have absolutely no connection to Ireland at all - no roots, no heritage, no family relations. It is interesting, though; often they are the ones who connect with the show the most."

Moyles sometimes takes a seat in the venue to gauge what audiences are experiencing.

"I love watching people's reactions to what is taking place on stage. It is quite something to see them smile or nod their head or lean over and share a thought with the person next to them. On occasion,



during intermission, I will even head to the men's room just so that I can hear more of what people are thinking and feeling about the show."

So far, reviews have been beyond positive, with critics calling the new production "stunning," "spectacular," "hypnotic," "thrilling," "breathtaking," and "unforgettable."

"The U.K. tour was brilliant," says Moyles. "We began anew in late summer and went right through to December. It felt so good to be back out there after all the delays and issues brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. And the audiences just went wild. I think they were just so happy to get out of the house and return to some semblance of normalcy."

*"It is amazing to think that something that started a quarter of a century ago could continue to evolve and touch people around the world."*

With tour dates scheduled across North America, Europe, and Asia over the coming 12 months, the show shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon.

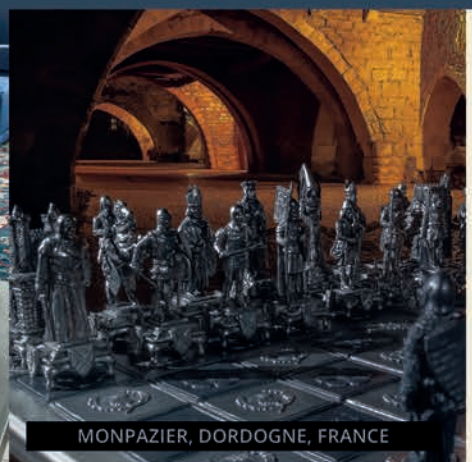
"Oh, I wouldn't be surprised if it went for another 25 years at this point," muses Moyles with a grin. "The demand is certainly there, and so long as we have the will and the creative energy and the talent, we will continue to perform for people everywhere we can. The possibilities to grow the show, and to further inspire audiences, are limitless - almost beyond words."

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# Game of Thrones Studio Tour

*A new visitor experience in Northern Ireland  
keeps the “Song of Ice and Fire” alive.*

*Story by Chris Muise*





Whether or not you are a fan of Game of Thrones, there is simply no denying that the blockbuster HBO series was - and remains - a juggernaut of the zeitgeist. Even the places where the series was shot over the show's 8-year run have continued to thrive as mega-fan pilgrimage hot spots.

"Because of the overwhelming success of the series, fans have been flocking to the filming locations for years," shares Brad Kelly, general manager of the recently opened Game of Thrones Studio Tour in Banbridge, Northern Ireland, just a few miles southwest of Belfast.

Kelly, who has been in the business of visitor attractions for the past decade, previously plied his trade at the live-platform Dr. Who Exhibition in Cardiff, Wales.

"You can't replace the magic of visitors coming from all over the world to that specific place, because they just want to be immersed in the world they are immersed in when they are watching the show on their

screens," he shares. "When Game of Thrones Legacy Attractions were announced a few years ago, and manifested themselves into this, it was an ideal situation for me to get involved with."

Game of Thrones was filmed in a number of locales, both across Northern Ireland and around the world, but one of its key production meccas was a reclaimed linen facility just outside of Belfast.

"Linen Mill Studios was an old bleaching building. That industry went offshore about 12 years ago, just before HBO started to look around for studio facilities. Obviously, with such a vast production, you would need more than one production facility. This space was adapted into filming studios."

With Game of Thrones over, the building - as well as a treasure trove of sets, props, and costumes to rival even the Lannister's fortune - lay unused. Rather than mothball it all, however, they were repurposed into a tourist destination for fans of the series.

"A couple of them are pretty much in the

same footprint as they were when production was rolling," says Kelly, himself an admitted fan of the franchise, pointing out that the Winterfell section remains unmoved from where it originally filmed several key moments throughout the series. "When you walk into that room of four walls, it's not missing a fourth wall that the camera comes in from."

Other key locations from the series that visitors can now experience first-hand include King's Landing, the land of the north beyond The Wall, and of course, the Iron Throne itself.

*"That is the hero moment  
- when you sit on that throne  
and momentarily get to rule  
the Seven Kingdoms."*

The experience isn't just for GOT die-hards, however - Kelly says it appeals just as much to visitors who have never seen the series, as they can enjoy a behind-the-scenes peek into how a grand and cinematic television show like Game of Thrones gets made.

"You will see, stage-by-stage, the story behind the production; how the costumes were designed, how motion capture was used to create different scenes, a display of weaponry and props and the story of the weapons master and what goes into that design process.

"I love that our staff members and tour guides have been extras on the show," continues Kelly. "Because the cast was so vast, and obviously the filming was here, the local population was very much involved. Many of our staff have their own unique stories and anecdotes from behind the scenes that add a personal touch. You've got a perfect storm of fans with the appetite to consume more and experience that live platform, and the right people to deliver it."







While the show was certainly adult-themed, the tour is more than appropriate for kids of all ages - something that Kelly himself can vouch for.

"I brought my seven-year-old godson to some pre-launch events. He has never seen the show, but he was blown away and has not stopped talking about it since."

And while the COVID-19 pandemic did delay the opening of the facility somewhat, Kelly says that the difficulties of getting the doors open were counterbalanced by the advantageous timing of opening right as lockdowns ended.

"That is a challenge and an opportunity in itself - to be at the vanguard of tourism returning and growing. It is a great time to launch because you've got that appetite for people to go out and do stuff. There are a lot of bookings from 2019, pre-pandemic, being transferred over. As tourism comes back, we are a new product on the landscape."

He figures that the facility will still be around by the next time winter comes to Westeros. For one, it adds a whole new dimension to the potential tourist markets in the region.

***"Game of Thrones has - literally - become part of the landscape..."***

"To create that live platform for people to get another hit of the show is kind of a down-stream product of our film industry. And what's fantastic about using a region like Belfast - rather than somewhere like London - is that is totally fresh and unique. And it creates another identity. This region

has lots of ancient history, and it has a fantastic, thriving tourism industry through that. But this creates another completely different identity."

And the fandom itself fuels interest in the experience, Kelly muses, looking at franchises like Harry Potter and the Marvel Cinematic Universe as examples. So even if the story of Game of Thrones is over, the story of its fans is not.

"Game of Thrones had such an impact. It is still on television, in terms of repeats and everything. So, you are going to have that constant flow of new audiences finding it.

"With what we have on display here, one of the challenges when it was being designed was not what to include, but what to exclude. This is a massive facility, but it was an even bigger production. So as this grows,

we can add additional sets, and extend the experience, as that appetite grows. It just becomes a tourism mainstay."

That said, a dearth of new stories probably won't be anything to worry about in the immediate future.

"You've got a new production, a spin-off happening, so development of the story expands and builds continually," says Kelly. "We don't know where that is going to go yet - that might be a continued story arc that may go on for many years.

"The narrative never really goes away - it will exist in some form or another. And this studio tour will contribute to the continuation of that story."

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# *The Japanese Garden at Cowden*

*Our award-winning  
photojournalist  
Tom Langlands  
explores the Far East*





Isabella “Ella” Robertson Christie was a remarkable Scotswoman whose visionary legacy lives on in a Japanese Garden she named Sha Raku En - “the place of pleasure and delight.” Sitting on a wooden bench and looking across the still water of a lochan towards the thatch-roofed Garden Pavilion, and with the faint smell of cherry blossom drifting in the air, I can vouch for the accuracy of the name - Sha Raku En. It is a place of exquisite beauty also.

Christie was born in 1861 in Midlothian. When she was four years of age the family moved to Cowden Castle near Dollar in Clackmannanshire where the climate and soil suited her father, who was an enthusiastic arborist. Being wealthy landowners, the family enjoyed the privilege of foreign travel. By the time of her father’s death in 1902 she had travelled extensively across Europe as well as visiting Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. There then followed a series of ever more adventurous journeys that would have required a considerable degree of fortitude for a single woman at that time. She is known to have visited the ancient city of Samarkand lying on the Great Silk Road linking China and the Mediterranean, becoming the first Western woman to visit the Khanate of Khiva. Her travels took her through India, Ceylon, Kashmir, Tibet, Malaya, and Borneo. She met the Dalai Lama, attended a banquet hosted by the Maharaja of Kashmir, and had dinner with Commander in Chief, India, Lord Kitchener. Between 1907 and 1908 she visited China, Korea, Hong Kong, Russia, and Japan. While in Japan she developed an interest in Japanese gardens. In Kyoto she met sisters Ella and Florence du Cane. Together

they spent time visiting Japanese gardens. Ella du Cane produced acclaimed watercolour paintings and Florence was a writer. In 1908 they published jointly *The Flowers and Gardens of Japan*. That same year Christie returned to Scotland and started work on the creation of a Japanese Garden in the grounds of Cowden Castle.

Christie appointed Taki Handa - a female Japanese Garden designer and horticulturalist - to design the garden. She was affiliated with the Royal School of Garden Design in Nagoya, Japan, but in 1908 was studying in England. Handa’s design wraps the garden around a lochan created by damming a small burn running through the estate. Resting at the foot of the gentle slope of the Ochil Hills there is a similarity to geographical aspects of Japan with the slopes of Mount Fuji being

noted as a particular inspiration.

For 17 years following the garden’s completion, Professor Suzuki, the Hereditary Head of the Soami School of Imperial Garden Design at Nagoya visited regularly. Overseeing a team of Japanese gardeners, he ensured trees and shrubs were trimmed and pruned in accordance with the ethos and requirements of an authentic Japanese Garden. Working on Handa’s creation, he acknowledged it as being the best Japanese Garden in the Western World!

*Prior to this, no woman had ever been officially credited with the design of an authentic Japanese Garden.*







Suzuki wasn't the only Japanese responsible for the maintenance of the garden. Shinzaburo Matsuo lost his entire family in an earthquake and came to Scotland to embrace a new life as a gardener at Cowden. Arriving in 1925 and remaining until his death in 1937 he became a well-known figure in the local community. Fascinated by the man who had lost everything before coming to work in the Japanese Garden at Cowden and making Scotland his home, I went in search of his final resting place. I found it in a small peaceful corner of Muckhart Churchyard only a few miles from the garden he tended for 12 years.

Ella Christie passed away in 1949. Her adventurous, globetrotting spirit resulted in her being in the first group of women to be elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1913. She was elected also Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of Scotland, becoming Vice-President of the latter in 1934. With her death, the garden passed to her great nephew, Robert "Bobby" Christie Stewart. Cowden Castle was demolished in 1952 and, other than being opened a handful of times a year, the Japanese Garden closed to the public in 1955. Sadly, in a single night of mayhem in 1963, it suffered irreparable damage. Four teenagers entered the grounds, set fire to the buildings, destroyed the bridges, and threw the shrines and lanterns into the water. It had taken decades of painstaking work to bring to maturity and it was wrecked in a few hours of wanton destruction.

By the 1980s the garden had fallen into disrepair with vegetation out of control and the pond choked with weeds. Despite its



condition, it still attracted the interest of those in the West who knew of its existence, as well as Japanese visitors who understood its significance. During the 1990s the garden passed to Sara Stewart - the youngest daughter of Bobby Stewart and the great-great niece of Ella Christie. With Sara working in London, Bobby spent much of his retirement endeavouring to maintain control of a garden that was succumbing to nature. He used a carhorse to remove trees that were endangering rare shrubs and erected temporary bridges to access the overgrown island. The lochan was drained in 2012 to remove overgrown weeds and to locate fragments of the lanterns and shrines that had been vandalized in 1963. The scale of the task was daunting. As it happened, Professor Masao Fukuhara of Osaka University was in Scotland in 2013. He was responsible for the restoration of the Japanese Gardens at Kew, London and Tatton Park, Cheshire. In 2001 he received the gold medal at the Chelsea Flower Show and his winning garden is now in the National Botanic Garden of Wales. Aware of the importance of the garden at Cowden he requested to visit it. After several hours of soulful contemplation on site he agreed to lead a full restoration project. Commissioned by Sara, he returned in the spring of 2014 with a team of volunteers, associates, and students. Within two weeks they restored the islands on the west side of the garden, but it became apparent that a significant investment would be needed in order to continue. Sara established the charity, The Japanese Garden at Cowden Castle

SCIO, with its purpose being the restoration and maintenance of this historic site. Since its formation, the charity has benefited from donations by various foundations and public funds with the National Heritage Lottery being the principal funder of the new Garden Pavilion. Although only partially restored, the garden opened again to the public in 2017. Visitor projections had been set at 10,000 per annum, and notwithstanding the impact of Covid lockdowns, the garden was able to remain open for 11 months between 2018 and March 2020 and attracted 30,000 visitors. In 2021 it welcomed over 40,000 visitors.

The restoration project is still ongoing. There are plans to build a Japanese Pavilion, housing a restaurant, lecture room, shop, and event space. Existing visitor facilities are adequate but don't complement the beauty of the place and need to be replaced. Raising funds for such ambitious plans remains the biggest challenge, but speaking with Sara it is evident that she remains passionate about the project, "I am an artist's agent by trade and I never imagined I would put myself through the cold fear of driving a project such as this from concept to fruition. The garden offers so much enjoyment to so many and I owe it to Ella Christie and all of our visitors to ensure that a day at the Japanese Garden at Cowden continues to be as wonderful and restorative as it was in her day."

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*“For me, fashion represents much more than my profession - it is my lifestyle; how I conceive the world and how I decide to live in it...”*

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*My roots are Spanish, specifically from Galicia. I currently live in the city of A Coruña, in the northwest of Spain. After 20 years living abroad, I returned 7 years ago. This city offers me tranquility and daily contact with nature.*

*I have been interested in fashion since I was a child. As a teenager, I travelled to many design fairs across Europe with my mother, who is an interior designer. Those experiences fired up a passion in me, and a sense of belonging - a place that spoke a language with which I identified and felt comfortable.*

*My work evolves daily. I always say that a collection is the evolution of the previous one. There is no drastic break between collections, but they grow with me, they accompany me in my development as a person, and that is reflected in my evolution as a designer. I do not conceive a separation between my work and my essence as a person and a woman.*

*The challenges of the vocation are related to the goals you set for yourself - they speak to your ambitions and level of demand. The higher the goal, the greater the challenges you may encounter, and therein lies great learning. The greatest reward is the enjoyment of creating, experimenting, and communicating.*

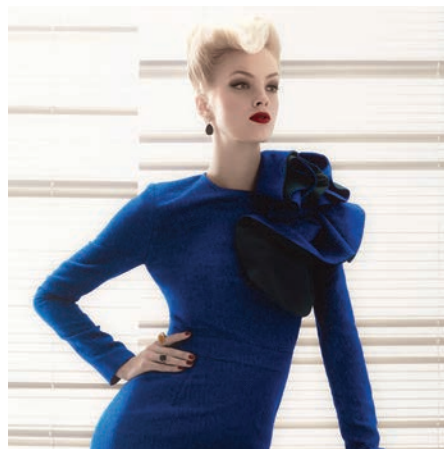




Everything can be an inspiration - the important thing is to have an open mind and vision to be receptive to everything that we experience in our daily lives. Most of my inspiration comes from my own personal and cultural interests. However, there is another important part of the process; my subconscious, my inner personal work, and everything that arises from a more spiritual element. Then comes the perspiration, the actual work itself.

Change is constant in fashion, and even more so today, where two apparently opposite currents coexist; one is the return to a more artisan, manual, and high-quality modality of work - which preserves essential trades in this sector that were almost forgotten - and the other is the emergence of the virtual fashion model, which is conceptual and intended for the virtual world only. I believe that both could nurture each other.

Currently I am focused on the illustration of my fashion creations, where I am better able to connect with my creative essence, express myself in a more visual way, and discover a part of myself that I have not explored. Experimenting and exploring new artistic paths inspires me both personally and professionally.





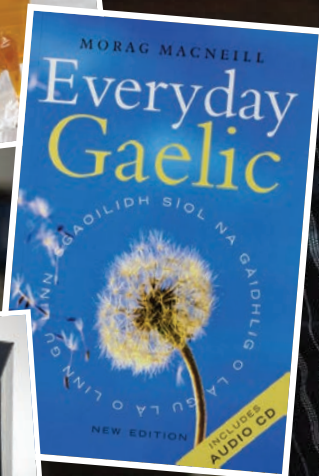
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# *The Celtic Camino de Santiago*

*Galicia's riveting route reminds travelers  
that the journey is the destination.*

*Story by Chris Muise.*





**I**t has been said that spiritual awakenings are often preceded by rude awakenings.

That was certainly the case for Dubliner John Brierley. Seemingly set for life, Brierley had built a prosperous chartered surveyors' business by the age of 39, enjoying the well-earned fruits of his labours.

"I was the perfect self-made man," he tells Celtic Life International via Zoom, before solemnly adding, "and suddenly, my life was totally empty and meant nothing to me."

On the verge of burnout, Brierley took a year off for a "business sabbatical" - spending time in nature and refreshing his mind and body.

"So many people spend their whole lives maybe doing something that they were never meant to do. As it turned out, I was becoming

one of those people."

The time off proved to be well spent.

"That was probably the most productive year of my life. It was then that I found myself on the Camino de Santiago."

The Camino de Santiago - literally "Santiago's road" in Spanish - is a series of pilgrimage routes leading to Galicia, the Celtic corner of Spain, and one of the seven Celtic nations.

In fact, Brierley's sojourn was such a life-changing experience that he gave up his old career to dedicate himself fully to sharing the good word.

Interestingly, sharing the good word is practically the origin story of the Camino; it all started when one of Jesus' disciples, James the Great, endeavoured to spread the

gospel to the westernmost part of the known world.

"There may not be a lot of historical fact, but there is a lot of legend," explains Brierley, who has since written 12 guidebooks for the various Camino routes. He also speaks around the world on the topic. "James had already agreed to go to the Iberian Peninsula."

The disciple's destination was a region called Finisterre, which is as far west as one can go in Europe. Back then, the western end of Europe was considered the end of the known world.

"That became the most important spiritual place on Earth, because when you reached Finisterre, when the sun sank in the west, it sank to Tir Na Nog, or the land of





eternal youth. You could not get closer to the world of spirits, to God, to whatever the pagan worshipers of the time knew it as.”

Sadly, James wasn’t successful in his mission to convert the Iberian masses and was quickly beheaded upon his return to Jerusalem.

“His body, then, was brought back to the place where he had sought to bring the message,” says Brierley, adding that even in death, James did not have much luck in Finisterre. “As a Christian, he wasn’t allowed to be buried there - he had to be laid to rest three days away. He ended up in a place called Libroador, which was a Roman town well-known for its burial site, which is Compostela.”

This site eventually came to be known as Santiago de Compostela, the capital of Galicia, and the end point of every Camino route. The path became a popular pilgrimage for Christians to take some few hundred years later.

“In the 11th century, the Crusades against the Muslims in the Holy Land meant that you couldn’t go there anymore,” shares Brierley. “What happened, then, was this massive swing to, ‘well, you can go to one of his apostles, who is buried in Santiago. That is pretty easy to get to’ - and that created a huge reorientation of the pilgrim traffic.”

Fast forward to about 25 years ago, when Brierley made his first pilgrimage. While, by his own admission, he isn’t particularly religious, he did encounter his fair share of Christians - and believers from all faiths - upon his journey.

“Indeed, when I walked up from Sevilla in the south of Spain one year, I only met one other pilgrim - a wonderful Japanese Shinto follower,” Brierley recalls, adding that, as the presence of organized religion became less prominent in people’s daily lives in the modern era, the Camino began attracting people from all walks of life - even atheists - to have a genuine spiritual experience.

***“The Camino is very eclectic. It is every religion and none on this route, which is part of its power.”***

“And when we take the extra time out - particularly, for walking an overtly spiritual pilgrimage route - something magical happens.”

Annemiek Nefkens can attest to that magic. Like Brierley, Nefkens was enjoying the life she had built for herself. Until, that is, she wasn’t.



“I was working as a communications adviser, and I was really focused on my career at that time,” Nefkens recalls over Zoom from her home in The Netherlands. “I had set goals for myself; in five years, I wanted to be a senior communications adviser, and five years after that, I wanted to be a manager of the communications department.”

“I achieved all of these things. I spent a lot of hours on working, working, working. Not only physically, but also in my head. I had everything I wanted. I married a man who was also working a lot. Life was good.”

However, she soon began having physiological warning signs - tension headaches, nervousness, and more - all of which she chose to ignore. Then, the ball dropped.

“In just a month or two I lost all the things that I thought made me who I was; the work, the marriage, the money - all the security I thought I had was suddenly gone.”

Like Brierley, Nefkens sought answers along the Camino, starting her trek near Paris, taking one of the most popular routes, the Camino Frances.

“In the beginning, it was really hard: I was all alone there in France, I really didn’t speak the language, and I cried a lot.”

However, as per the popular phrase shared among the route’s faithful pilgrims, “the Camino provides.” In Nefkens’ case, it offered a sympathetic ear.

“I started to know others like me,” she explains. “I recall meeting a German woman, and by coincidence she shared a story that was very similar to mine. There was a real connection there.”

Nefkens communed with her fellow travelers, sharing albergues (Spanish hostels),

and coming to consider them as extended family.

“I often roomed with 10 or 20 other pilgrims. We would sleep, get up early, share breakfast, and then simply start walking. That is the life of a pilgrim. I was never alone, on any single day on the Camino from Paris to Compostela.”

As her 2,000km journey continued, she found renewed purpose in supporting travelers who were new to the trails.

***“Helping other pilgrims gave me a renewed purpose.”***

Arriving at the steps of the Cathedral of Santiago three months later, Nefkens knew that she had been changed forever. Soon after her tour, she accepted a job at a travel agency specializing in Camino excursions, and eventually cofounded her own travel agency, WAW.travel, with her fiancé, Roberto Santos, who had been born and raised along the Camino.

“I lived in Santiago de Compostela for a year,” adds Santos, jumping into the Zoom chat with Nefkens. He gives a nod to the city’s Celtic culture, pointing out a charming pub in particular. “Casa das Crechas is really close to the Cathedral of Santiago, and that is where all the people who have Celtic roots meet. There, they play music, sing songs, and read poems. It is a bit surprising, but their dedication to preserving Celtic traditions is inspiring.”

Nefkens’ aim with WAW is to help other women through the Camino and show them that they can balance a life of career and



family with self-care and self-reflection.

"That is my personal mission, because I am an example of this. I can give you 20 other examples of this among my close circle of friends. I talk with a lot of women, and many of them are suffering from something. I learned the hard way that, in the end, you need to take care of yourself before you can take care of others."

She has been back many times since making her first pilgrimage, across several different routes, both for professional and personal reasons.

"This year, I will be walking again, to Santiago de Compostela. They say it is like a virus - except that this is a positive one!"

"There is something very real called the Call of the Camino," Brierley chimes in, adding that even those who don't complete the whole 2,000km trek on the first try always seem compelled to finish it on another occasion. "Once the Camino calls you...I don't know anybody who didn't start it who didn't either finish it, or come back to finish it. It is that powerful."

As noted by both Brierley and Neffkens, there is no one way to take the Camino. There are 12 major recognized routes, denoted by stone way-markers that point to Santiago de Compostela, and some are larger than others. Some are even shorter by design, to make it easier for people (many who may not have the privilege of taking three months away from everyday life) to complete their journeys and earn their Compostela certificates.

One such pilgrim is Maureen Summers, a Halifax, Nova Scotia woman who first walked the Camino with a friend from Vancouver. They couldn't make the whole journey in their limited vacation time, so they endeavoured to try again when the pair happened to be in Scotland, where Maureen was visiting her husband's family.

"It was fabulous, just an amazing experience," she shares, explaining that she and her friend took a day in Dublin to walk some of the Camino Ingles.

*"We decided that we couldn't  
not go back and finish."*

The Camino Ingles is also known as the Celtic Camino, as it would have been the start of any Irishman's trip to the mainland, arriving in the aforementioned Finisterre, to trade, or to follow the Camino themselves. Brierley is currently writing a new guidebook on the Camino that he hopes will promote it and other smaller routes that don't see the same numbers as the Frances and other, more well-trodden paths to Santiago.

"Partly what I am trying to do is move the heavy traffic off the Camino Frances - a quarter of a million people trudging along the route. There are lots of ways into Santiago. It helps to spread the economic and cultural benefit to remote parts of Spain, which could well do with what they call the 'pilgrim dollar.'"

Lesser-known routes were the least of the worries of anyone relying on the "pilgrim dollar" the last few years, though. Just like everything else, the Camino was effectively shut down at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and is only now starting to open again to international travellers.

Summers is currently the co-coordinator of the Halifax chapter of the Canadian Company of Pilgrims, a national organization that connects Camino enthusiasts to one another, and helps provide information sessions and local community walks, among other things.

"Many countries have some type of association that supports people in their interest about the Camino, and in preparation for doing a Camino," she explains. "And these provide a community when one comes back from a Camino as well. Some of the chapters run weekly



walking groups, while others have annual or biannual group meetings, featuring different guest speakers and doling-out information on what you need to take."

Of course, with a worldwide viral disaster making international travel almost impossible, the Canadian Company of Pilgrims - and their 19 chapters - are essentially in a holding pattern for until things get back to some semblance of normalcy. However, that doesn't mean the group was sitting on their collective hands; as mentioned before, Summers and the other members of the organization know that "the Camino provides," but this time, the pilgrims are providing for the Camino.

"The Camino is sleeping," she acknowledges, a bit mournfully. "However, we are doing what we can to keep it alive by helping those who are desperately trying to keep their business going in some of these very small places."

Thus, a fundraiser was born.

"The intent of Keep the Camino Alive is to enable Canadians and our members to donate through the Canadian Company of Pilgrims," explains Summers. "There has already been over \$35,000 raised, and donations sent to many albergues. That money is being used to get plexiglass installed, and new beds that conform with Covid-19 restrictions. The fundraiser will continue until the end of 2022, as we don't want to see that infrastructure destroyed."

It is important that this Camino infrastructure is in top order, because soon, there could be even more pilgrims making use of it.

"There is very much a feeling of hope in terms of the Camino coming alive again," says Summers. "They are expecting, throughout the year, about 500,000 people will walk Caminos."

"All the hostels, all the different associations, everybody is in fever pitch," adds Brierley. "There is this massive, pent-up demand, people are aching to get onto the Camino. I think we are going to see a surge of interest for two reasons. One is the pent-up demand. But two - and probably more importantly - the pandemic has forced people to reflect on their lives. They have lost jobs, or lost loved ones, and are on a bit of a wake-up call. They are beginning to ask those deep, existential questions, like what is this life all about?"

"Those of us who have walked the Camino, in order for the experience to be of any relevance to the world we live in, we have to bring the Camino home with us," says Brierley. "Part of the efficacy of the Camino is bringing back what we have experienced and learned and sharing it with others who might need some sort of spiritual awakening."





## Highlights

The Camino de Santiago is a vast adventure full of natural beauty and medieval architecture spanning two stunning mountain ranges in north-central Spain. This pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and the purported tomb of the apostle Saint James the Greater in northwestern Spain began in the 9th century. Commonly known as a Christian road for more than a thousand years, the Camino was, in fact, built over Celtic and Roman roads that were twice as old. The modern visitor can journey in more comfort than in medieval times but savor the same natural and cultural highlights.

### Pyrenees

Among the most breathtaking views along the Camino is the pinnacle at the beginning, a few miles after pilgrims depart from the French town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to cross the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain. The highest point, just before reaching the Spanish town of Roncesvalles, is at the Col de Lepoeder, one mile (1,450 meters) above sea level. An ancient native beech forest anchors one's feet below, and at eye level is the infinite layered mountain vista of the Pyrenees.

### Burguete

Burguete is a magical mountain setting, especially when Roncesvalles is overflowing with pilgrims. Set between enchanted forests, this is where Hemingway stayed to go trout fishing in the Pyrenees, eternally captured in *The Sun Also Rises*. A hike from here to the village of Espinal, 2.2 miles (3.6 km) to the west offers a taste of the medieval pilgrimage route and takes trekkers through beautiful wildflower-covered rolling hills into a native pine and oak forest.

### Pamploma

Famous for the running of the bulls and Hemingway, the real appeal of Pamplona is not when the city swells with the bull-running masses to celebrate their city's patron saint, San Fermín, but during the everyday of this pedestrian-friendly city. Local life is centered on the colorful main square, the Plaza del Castillo, and the surrounding cobbled streets. Here cafés cater to the best of those small plates known as pintxos in Basque and pinchos in Spanish. Take a seat, order, and savor the slow lane.

### Eunate

No one knows who built this little 12th-century octagonal church, which is one of the highlights of the Camino. Its arched cloister surrounds the chapel like the rings of Saturn and its beauty is further accentuated by the solitary hill on which it stands, surrounded by rolling green meadows dotted with grazing sheep and swaying wildflowers. The church's engravings show enigmatic characters that speak of mixed esoteric traditions and the diversity of the medieval masons who built it.

### Estella Irache

The first pilgrim's guide, the 12th-century *Codex Calixtinus*, hailed Estella as one of the Camino's most beautiful towns serving some of the best food and wine. It retains its medieval

beauty, set on the banks of the Ega River, and its cafés serve excellent garden-to-table cuisine and local wine. Two miles (3 km) away, through vineyards and oak and pine forest, Bodegas Irache winery maintains the medieval tradition at Irache's 10th-century monastery by keeping the pilgrim's fountain flowing with both water and wine.

### Torres del Rio Dome

Like Eunate, Torres del Rio's 12th-century Holy Sepulcher church is octagonal and beautifully harmonious. Inspired by the architecture from Islamic Spain and borrowing the cross ribbing of Cordoba's mosque dome in the south, it is worth the one euro the chapel caretaker asks from visitors. Enjoy the space's acoustics and look up to take in the overall architectural magnificence. Note the carved capitals and their menagerie of fantastical creatures.

### Najera Vineyards

Across the entire Camino, pilgrims pass through diverse and excellent wine country, but this 6.5-mile (10.4 km) stretch in Rioja wine country is especially pleasing for the walker, not just the wine lover. The landscape is of red earth, green vines, and dark blue undulating hills against clear skies. Both the medieval hamlet of Ventosa and town of Nájera have local cafés where visitors can order a glass of wine from the very land they just traversed.

### Oak Forest

Oak trees were sacred from prehistory into the Middle Ages and many churches and chapels across Iberia are surrounded by oak, but few are set in such a vast lyrical oak forest as the one in San Juan de Ortega's valley. The church of the celebrated and sainted 12th-century engineer, San Juan de Ortega, possesses a harmony that is a physical delight to experience. Nearby Atapuerca, Europe's oldest site for human remains (around 1.2 million years old) makes this the Camino's most ancient terrain.

### Burgos

Burgos is justifiably famous for its immense 13th-century Gothic cathedral, one of the largest in Spain, and its beautifully preserved, walled medieval town where El Cid was a native son. Across the Arlanzón river is the new world-class human evolution museum showcasing Europe's earliest human remains. But for the ultimate experience of Burgos, head to the colorful main square, the Plaza Mayor, to join the locals in the evening ritual of enjoying tapas and a glass of wine with friends.

### Fromista Church

Considered one of the earliest and purest forms of French Romanesque architecture in Spain, with its animated, folkloric sculptures capturing the medieval world of the 11th century, Frómista's church of San Martín embodies the Romanesque's ideals of harmonious physical and acoustic proportions. The church is set in the central square of a welcoming and small Castilian town with good food and wine, which adds to the magic of coming here.

### Sahagún

Sahagún was a prosperous and diverse place in the Middle Ages, and its buildings reflect the influence of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Europeans from many origins living side by side. The town retains its traditional Saturday market when the central square fills with riotous colors from foods, crafts, and household goods. All around are four churches worth visiting—San Tirso, San Lorenzo, La Peregrina, and Virgen del Puente—all built in the signature red brickwork style carried north by Muslim craftsmen.

### Leon

A Roman garrison town in the 1st century, León has a 13th-century Gothic cathedral that steals the limelight. Built over old Roman baths, this cathedral is considered one of Spain's most French Gothic churches and possesses an unusual lightness and lyricism. But the treat is in stepping inside to stunning stained glass windows of saturated colors, especially the electric cobalt blue. This is so pronounced that the building appears as if it is made entirely of light and color, not stone. The old town surrounding the cathedral is a food and wine lovers' delight with medieval pedestrian paths leading to numerous taverns serving the best of hearty Leonese cuisine.

### O Cebreiro

The third highest point on the entire Camino, O Cebreiro treats pilgrims to one of the route's most beautiful vistas and layered sunsets. It is the gateway to Galicia, the final region of the Camino; from here, pilgrims have 92 miles (148 km) left, passing through mountains, valleys, and rolling hills to the final goal at Santiago de Compostela. The village's sweet round granite homes with thatched roofs preserve its medieval appearance and its earlier Celtic roots. The intimate 9th-century church is the site of a famous miracle.

### Biduedo to Samos

A few kilometers after O Cebreiro, this 9-mile (14.5-km) section of the trail from Biduedo to Samos descends into misty green valleys, gently rolling hills, and chestnut and pine forests with occasional hamlets untouched by time. It is one of the Camino's most enchanting stretches. The Benedictine monastery at Samos, founded in the 6th century but rebuilt in the 16th century, appears in its bucolic setting with the final descent into the village.

### Santiago de Compostela

Medieval Santiago de Compostela's gray stone buildings turn mossy green when it rains, while its cathedral—the pilgrim's ultimate goal—holds the radiant center. All around, stone-arcaded cobbled streets, with a lone musician playing a medieval tune, transport visitors to another time, while the farm-to-table food scene and the daily market, Mercado de Abastos, brings you right back to the present. The cathedral's beauty is not its ornate façade, but just inside, at its original 12th-century engraved gateway that leads in to an airy and harmonious space where Saint James reigns. Excavations under the cathedral confirm the presence of ancient tombs from Celtic and Roman times.

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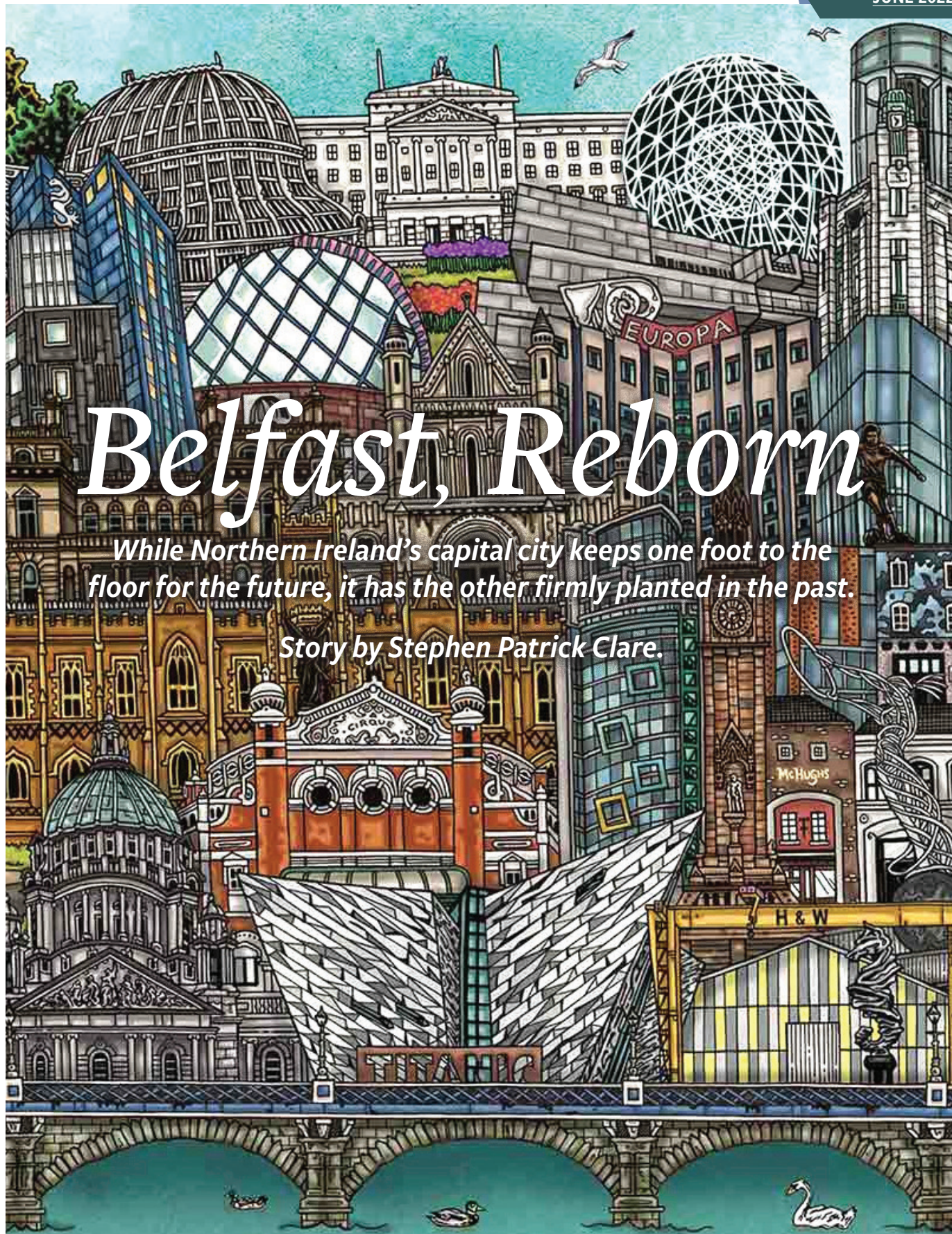
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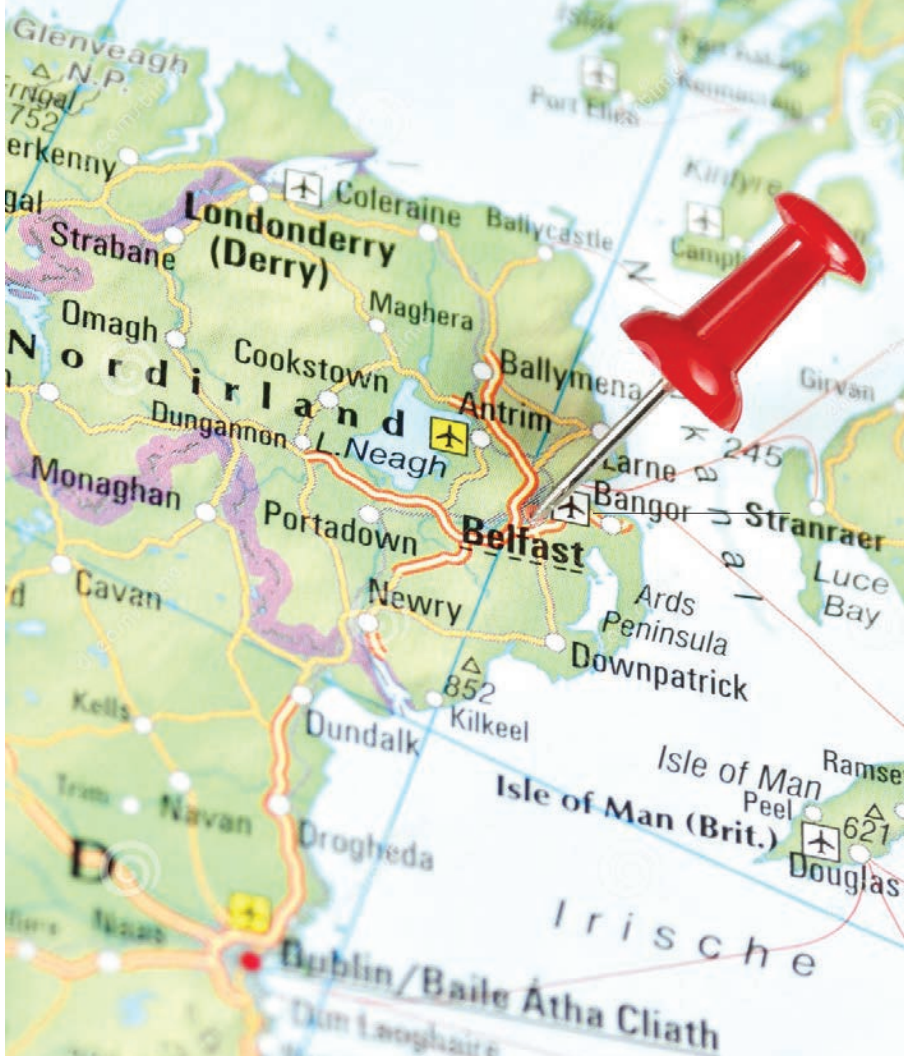


# Belfast, Reborn

*While Northern Ireland's capital city keeps one foot to the floor for the future, it has the other firmly planted in the past.*

*Story by Stephen Patrick Clare.*





The final scene of Kenneth Branagh's 2021 cinematic masterpiece *Belfast* might be one of the most moving and memorable moments in modern movie making; after Granny (Judi Dench) says goodbye to her son (Jaime Dornan), his wife (Caitriona Balfe), and their children (Jude Hill, Lewis McAskie) as they board a bus bound for a new life across the water, she walks home, stopping to take one last, lingering look. As the film fades to black, words appear on the screen;

*For the ones who stayed.  
For the ones who left.  
And for all the ones who were lost.*

Perhaps an epitaph for the past, or a eulogy for troubled times, Branagh's black and white coming-of-age tale - which is set in the late 1960s - is both an homage to his hometown and one last, lingering look over his shoulder.

And though the film has garnered great popular and critical acclaim since its release last November (including an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay), the director - who grew up in the city's Tigers Bay area as the son of

working-class Protestant parents - has insisted in interviews that, while Belfast was a movie that he had to make, it was time for him to move on.

The implications to residents of his hometown were obvious - it is time to move on.

However, as much as Belfast - and all Northern Ireland - keeps one foot to the floor for the future, it has the other firmly planted in the past. As such, and instead of ignoring its history - or weeding it out altogether - the city continues to bloom atop its rich and robust roots, reimagining and reinventing both its scenery and its storylines.

## Restored

Nowhere is this replanting more evident than in Belfast's famed Linen Quarter, where old-world charm meets new-world charisma.

Situated just south of City Hall, only a few blocks from both railyards and shipyards, the heritage district was the hub of the world's garment industry from the late-1700s to the mid-1900s. After WWII, rising costs, the advent of synthetic materials, and

foreign competition signalled a period of decline. In recent years, however, the area has undergone an overhaul as new industries and investments have moved in and refit the aging brick-and-mortar buildings, giving them - and the city - both a much-needed facelift and a lift in faith.

As a result - and aided by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that ended decades of sectarian division - the once-wilting borough has blossomed into a major global business destination over the last twenty-plus years, boosting Belfast's economy. The growth of the city's commercial sector has seen much-needed funds funneled into housing, hotels, restaurants, pubs, shops, entertainment, events, and more.



“Everything used to just close right up around here during the summer months,” says Bronagh Smith, manager of the casual/chic Meat Locker restaurant on Howard St. “In the past 20 years or so - except during the COVID-19 pandemic - the streets have been filled with people. And not just tourists, students, and workers from other countries, but many Irish from other counties as well. We’ve become the Celtic Tiger of the North.”





Ken McNeely

James St. restaurant. “And not just with regard to food, but also with our understanding and appreciation of spirits as well. Guinness and Jameson’s will always be a part of our liquid landscape, of course, however we now produce all sorts of craft spirits and creative cocktails, and the city’s wine culture has evolved significantly.”

Evidence of that refinement is on display at Coppi, one of several elegant eateries located by the city’s magnificent Metropolitan Arts Center.

“Oh, we are pretty much regulars here,” says 24-year-old Liz Keller, sitting with a table of girlfriends. “It is quite contemporary - the food is fantastic, the drinks are delicious, and the ambiance is amazing.”

Like Keller, many of the diners are young, well-dressed, and well-versed in culinary matters.

“In the past few months, we have tried dishes from all over the world right here in Belfast - Italian, French, Spanish, Greek, Polish, Turkish, Korean, Thai, Cuban, Columbian, African. It has been an education for sure.

“And the nightlife is brilliant,” she continues, looking around the room. “There is real joie de vivre here now; restaurants, pubs, clubs, music, theater, festivals...it’s very exciting!”

## Refined

Part of the attraction is the upscale culinary culture.

“We have come a long way, quite quickly,” notes Smith’s boss Chef Michael Deane, who returned home to Belfast in the mid-1990s and today owns and operates five restaurants in the city, including the Michelin-starred Epic.

*“At one time it was all just fish ‘n’ chips and chowder, but now we have an incredible variety of world-class cuisine, much of which is produced locally.”*

“And, as eaters have upped their standards and demands, we have had to up our game also. The shift in people’s palates has been quite profound.”

Ryan Stringer agrees.

“What we are doing now was unheard of just a few years ago,” shares the chef of





## Belfast ~ Basics

- Name derived from Irish “Béal Feirsde” - meaning “river-mouth”
- First known settlers 5,000 BC
- Founded as a town in 1613 by Sir Arthur Chichester
- Granted city status in 1888 by Queen Victoria
- Current population 341,877 (city), 671,559 (Metropolitan area)
- Demographic
  - Caucasian 97%
  - Catholic 49%, Protestant 43%, Other 8%
  - Female 51%, Male 49%
  - Median Age 35
  - Average Annual Income \$33,294 (USD)
- Economy; Engineering, Manufacturing, Tourism and Hospitality, Information Technology, Financial Services, Life and Health Sciences
- Unemployment Rate 2.5% (February 2022)

“We still have a way to go,” admits Michael Deane, “both with our culinary offerings and as a city in general. However, at least we are moving in the right direction.”

## Recreated

Belfast’s creative class is certainly moving forward, enjoying a cultural renaissance not seen since the early 1900s.

Along with a bevy of world-class restaurants, concert halls, live theatre venues, festivals, art galleries, and the like, the city is home to a thriving underground arts scene.

In particular, the quirky and quaint Cathedral Quarter is awash in funky cafes, used record stores, bookshops, boutiques, pop-up shops, tattoo parlours, salons, speakeasys, and more.

“I have been here for almost six years,” shares Ken McNeely, owner of Young Savage, which specializes in vintage clothing and alternative paraphernalia. “This area has grown quite significantly since I first opened. It used to be sort of our little secret part of the city, but that’s not the case at all anymore.”

“It has become a bit of a hipster hotspot,” laughs Aoife Downie, a Fine Art graduate from Ulster University.

*“When you go down there now, it’s all young people with beards and tattoos and piercings. It certainly makes the city more interesting and colourful.”*

On cue, she points to the variety of vibrant graffiti that adorns the sides of many of the neighbourhood’s buildings.

“It’s great to see the growth and to have all of these new businesses and buildings,” she smiles, adding that she intends to stay and work in Belfast “because someone has to make them beautiful.”

Like Downie, local artisan Alison McBride has chosen to make Belfast her permanent residence.

“There was a time when I seriously considered leaving and going to London,” admits the 48-year-old craft-jewelry maker from her stall at nearby St. George’s Market. “My husband and I simply couldn’t make a proper living doing what we love here. That has all changed.”

Built between 1890 and 1896, St. George’s Market remains the beating heart of the city, bustling with thousands of visitors each weekend.

“For one thing, there are more jobs here now,” continues McBride. “More jobs means more disposable income for local people. On top of that, we have seen greater amounts of tourists in recent years.”

## Revisited

Despite the difficulties brought on by COVID-19 and the ongoing uncertainty of Brexit, tourism in Belfast is expected to rebound in 2022, with millions of guests bringing travel numbers back to pre-pandemic levels. Fittingly, given the region’s strong nautical heritage, many of them will arrive on one of the 130 cruise liners due to dock in the city’s harbour.

There, it is only a short stroll to Titanic Belfast, the city’s premier museum and one of the most popular tourist attractions on the planet.

Opened in March of 2012, the iconic six-floor building - which features nine interpretive and interactive galleries - recently celebrated its 10th anniversary with a number of events, including a special photographic exhibition titled “The People Who Built Titanic Belfast” featuring 123 photographs and illustrations telling the story of the iconic building from its inception and design to the

## Belfast ~ Best Of

- Stay** ~ Grand Central Hotel
- Eat** ~ EIPIC / James St & Co. / Coppi
- Drink** ~ Crown Liquor Saloon  
Lavery / Berts Jazz Bar
- Shop** ~ St. George’s Market
- See** ~ The Cathedral Quarter
- Do** ~ Titanic Belfast Museum

structure being fitted and built.

Over the last decade, the facility has welcomed more than six million visitors from over 145 countries. Titanic Belfast is part of the area’s “Maritime Mile,” which includes an array of attractions, exhibitions, historic buildings, public art, and even a Glass of Thrones Trail - a series of six stained-glass installations which celebrate Northern Ireland as the home of Game of Thrones.

“We are huge, huge fans of the show,” notes 26-year-old Pierre Mouliot who, along with his fiancée Monique, are visiting from Paris. “This is our first time here, and we came specifically to see all the Game of Thrones sites. Before the show, I couldn’t even have told you where Belfast was on a map.”

Nicknamed “Thronies” by locals, fans of the blockbuster HBO series - which ran for 73 episodes over eight seasons from 2011-2019 - can enjoy a full-gamut of GOT experiences in Belfast, and across Northern Ireland, including touring filming locations and immersing themselves the new, multi-media Game of Thrones Studio Tour in nearby Banbridge.

“We have only been open a couple of months, but we are already seeing heavy traffic,” explains Alex McGreevy, the facility’s Public Relations and Communications Manager.

*“People are coming from all over the world. It’s great for the local economy, and Northern Ireland as a whole.”*

While Belfast and its environs have long been a cinematic hotspot, the popularity of streaming services has upped the ante; smash-hit series such as Line of Duty, The Fall, and Derry Girls were all filmed in and around the Northern Irish capital.

“After watching Game of Thrones, I became very fascinated with the culture here,” says Pierre Mouliot. “I started exploring other television shows, then movies, blogs, books, records, and lots of stuff online. And I discovered the sounds of Van Morrison.”





Van Morrison

## Revered

Along with their Game of Thrones excursions, Moiré and his bride-to-be have numerous other adventures awaiting them in Belfast, including stops at local museums, a night at the Grand Opera House, and a trip down the Van Morrison trail.

The Belfast Bard, the Mystic of the East... Morrison has been called many things since first emerging on the city's music scene in the mid-1960s - not all of them pleasant. A notorious curmudgeon and recluse, the songsmith has nonetheless spoken highly of his hometown on many occasions.

"Belfast is my home," he shares via his website. "It is where I first heard the music that influenced and inspired me, it is where I first performed, and it is somewhere I have referred back to many times in my song writing over the past 50 years."

Just as Van Morrison's music provided the bittersweet soundtrack to Branagh's Belfast, so his work has informed and inspired music lovers for more than half a century. Long time listeners and those new to his tunes will cherish the chance to walk in his footsteps - literally.

Launched in 2014, the self-guided 3.5-kilometer Van Morrison Trail begins at Elmgrove Primary School, before winding its way through the nearby Hollow, along the Beechie River, by the bard's childhood home on Hyndford Street, around the neigh-

bourhood where he held his first jobs, past Orangefield Park and High School, by the now-defunct Belfast & County Down railway station, up Cyprus Avenue, past Saint Donard's Church, before coming to a close at the former site of his favourite eatery Davy's Chipper.

Drawn from memory, Morrison has referenced these places repeatedly over the course of his prolific career, during which time he has written and recorded more than

40 studio albums. It is no wonder that he is revered by both fans and critics alike.

"When you find an artist, a writer or a musician who has been creating for decades, it feels like you've discovered a planet that you'll spend the rest of your life exploring," writes Northern Irish author Darran Anderson. "Van Morrison was never a polemic figure. He no doubt understands that explaining his music is like undertaking a live autopsy, which partly explains his caginess with interviewers. He didn't set out to defy the either/or binary of Northern Ireland. He didn't need to explain that you can be both an East Belfast musician and an Irish poet (and vice versa). He just did his own thing and thus embodied a different way of being and showed us another way forward, or rather many ways. And perhaps he tired of all this talk of the past. He's an artist who has always moved on. So, he's moving on. And so - if our luck, empathy, and spirit hold out - are we."

## Reflected

Just west of the downtown core, the Falls Road area remains the city's core Catholic enclave. I stop in at a small, non-descript café for breakfast, noting with interest that, here, the "Ulster Fry" is called an "Irish Fry."

A group of four young men come in and sit next to me. They are in their late teens, each attired in jeans, hoodies, ballcaps, bling, and expensive Nike shoes. They are upbeat and pleasant. They introduce themselves - Kevin, Timothy, Ronan, and Liam.

"You're from away?" Kevin asks me, detecting my accent.





## Belfast ~ Ones to Watch

Kate Nicholl (*councillor & Lord Mayor*)  
Andra Vladu (*activist*)  
Dean Farquhar (*youth worker*)  
John Johnston (*entrepreneur*)  
Michael Thompson (*chef*)  
Katharine Timoney (*jazz vocalist*)  
Ruedi Maguire (*designer*)  
Kelly McCaughrain (*author*)  
Dean Kane (*graffiti artist*)  
Keri Halliday (*athlete*)

"Canada," I answer

"Do you know Drake?" asks Ronan, referencing the Toronto hip-hop star.

"We're on a first name basis," I reply, with a wink.

"Does he have a second name?" he queries with a smile, and the room erupts in laughter.

We chit-chat for awhile, before Kevin tells me that he has relatives - an aunt, uncle, and cousins - in Mississauga, outside of Toronto. I inquire about them.

"They were from the Divas Flats," he recounts. "They left here years ago - they'd had enough of the Troubles. Their kids were born in Canada. I was over to visit with them before COVID. Bloody cold over there!"

I smile knowingly, before asking them about the Troubles.

"Ah, that's done with," says Timothy, adding, "before our time."

"Well, maybe not totally over, y'know?" pipes in Kevin. "There are still some idiots out there, but it's not really a part of our lives, y'know? I don't know anyone that's involved with that crap. Maybe my parents would have known a few people, but it's not really discussed, y'know?"

Outside, the colourful political murals are reminders of past struggles, as are the traditional Black Taxis that weave their way through traffic.

Nearby, at the Peace Wall - the concrete divide that separates the Nationalist Falls Road from the Loyalist Shankill Road - a group of American tourists emerge from a minivan. Black and red markers in hand, they sign their names on the wall.

Their driver, a young man from Ballymena, just northwest of the city, smiles and hands me a marker.

"First time here?" he asks.

I tell him that I have been to Belfast several times, going back to 1989.

"Ah, it's not the same city," he notes. "Even here, in this neighbourhood, it's completely changed. It may not look like it, but the attitudes are very different than before."

I ask about the murals and the Peace Wall.

"We don't really see it as propaganda anymore...it's more just like street art now. It's a huge draw though...visitors are really fascinated with this stuff. I mean, who can blame them, really? For years the only news you got out of Northern Ireland was bad news, and this area was at the center of it all."

As in the Falls Road district, "political tourism" is alive and well a few blocks over on the Shankill Road, where Union Jacks still fly, portraits of Queen Elizabeth II fill storefront windows, and historical frescoes tower over corner lots.

"That's just for show, mostly," shares Claire, a 20-year-old waitress who was born and raised in the community. "Young people, like myself, don't give a shite about that stuff to be honest. I've got a lot of friends from the Falls. We go dancing and drinking downtown each weekend. We never discuss politics. Not because it's taboo or anything... it's just that we don't really care."

Despite an upcoming election for the Northern Ireland Assembly (as of this writing, Sinn Féin were leading in the polls), young people here - as elsewhere - have other things on their mind.

"I'm in university, studying psychology," continues Claire. "Afterwards, I'd like to stay here and find a good job - you can do that now. Maybe travel a bit before settling down. I'd like to have a family, maybe two or three children. I have to find a husband first though! You know any good, single Canadian boys?"

Like Kevin, Timothy, Ronan, Liam and most others their age from Belfast, Claire has only known peaceful times. Their perspective is mostly one of indifference to, or intolerance of, matters of division.

## Revealed

While the Troubles may have brought out the worst in people from the two communities over three decades, it appears that peace has brought out the best in them.

"What you have in Belfast, and Northern Ireland, is nothing more than two sides of the same coin," says Michael Doherty, who, at the age of 61, has been driving a cab in Belfast for 40 years. "We're the same people, for Christ's sake, from the same stock!"

"You see, once we had put down the guns and started talking and listening with one another, I think we saw how foolish it all was...and that we had more in common with one another than we thought. What we are starting to see now, I believe - and I get this from talking with my own grandchildren (ages 20, 17, 15) - is that Belfast is no longer

## Belfast ~ Notable Names

James Galway (*musician*)  
Van Morrison (*musician*)  
Gary Moore (*musician*)  
Jamie Dornan (*actor*)  
Kenneth Branagh (*director*)  
Chloe Dougan (*designer*)  
C.S. Lewis (*author*)  
Lyra McKee (*journalist*)  
Mary McAleese (*politician*)  
Chaim Herzog (*politician*)  
Mairéad Corrigan (*activist*)  
Betty Williams (*activist*)  
George Best (*footballer*)  
Eddie Irvine (*F1 driver*)  
Jocelyn Bell Burnell (*scientist*)

an "English" city, nor is it an "Irish" city - it is its own place, with its own unique identity."

Interestingly, and to Doherty's point, the most recent census for Northern Ireland lists 39 per cent of the population identifying as Irish, 35 per cent identifying as English, and 26 per cent identifying as Northern Irish.

"That is the first time that has happened," notes Doherty. "The first time in our long history that so many people here have identified as Northern Irish. It speaks volumes about how we now see ourselves and how far we have come in such a short time."

***"What I believed has happened is that the younger generation has taken the best of both worlds and simply discarded the rest."***

And while those influences remain apparent across the cityscape - the English, Victorian-era architecture and Savile Row style, and the Irish warmth, wisdom, and wit - Doherty is correct in his assessment; Belfast is no longer an 'English' city, nor is it an 'Irish' city. It is, rather, an international city. And it is an inclusive city.

## Respect

"I arrived in Belfast from Nigeria four years ago," recounts 24-year-old Ada Yakuba. "I came here to study hospitality and just fell in love with the city. After graduating I took a job at a restaurant, and now I work at a hotel."

At first - and as a young, gay, black woman with a distinct sense of style that honours her African heritage - Yakuba was concerned that she might not feel at home in her new environs.

"It was the opposite, actually," she shares. "From my very first class I had other





Those same sentiments are echoed by many young people in the region today. That inclusivity, that sense of belonging, was certainly aided when Northern Ireland legalized gay marriage two years ago. That youth-driven sense of unity has since been strengthened by peaceful rallies around the city against climate change, racism, COVID-19 mandates, and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"We - and by we, I mean people my age in Belfast - aren't interested in local, petty partisan politics. Our concerns are bigger than that, though we do what we can on the ground right here at home. What's the saying? Think globally, act locally."

## Renaissance

It has been said that spiritual awakenings are most often preceded by rude awakenings, and that - to quote Churchill - those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

"Peace here was hard-won, and it has been prosperous," shares Michael Doherty from the front seat of his cab. "Trust me when I tell you we won't be giving it up anytime soon, if ever again."

As we pull over in front of The Garrick Bar on Chichester St in downtown Belfast, I request one final question.

"Go ahead," he replies.

I pause and take a deep breath before blurting out, "How in God's name do you people manage to drive on the wrong side of the street with a steering wheel on the wrong side of the car?"

"Ha!" he laughs, turning to me with a smile. "Go on, get out of here you crazy Canuck!"

I pay the fare, close the door, and bid my newfound friend adieu. The pub is buzzing with music as young people of all sorts stand outside, drinks in hand, laughing and smiling.

I look up to the sun. And then, on the side of the building, I see it.

*A nation that keeps one eye on the past is wise.  
A nation that keeps two eyes on the past is blind.*

**Stephen Patrick Clare, Spring 2022**

*(For the ones who stayed.  
For the ones who left.  
And for all the ones who were lost.)*

students coming up to me, welcoming me, inviting me out. Within a few days I had a whole new group of friends. Since then, I have become active within the LGBTQI+ community and, just recently, I joined a climate action campaign."

Like Yakuba, thousands of young people from other countries have arrived in Belfast over the last decade, enticed by a solid education system and a strong economy.

"There are lots of jobs here these days," notes Yakuba, "especially in the hospitality sector. In fact, staffing shortages have become a real issue for some businesses - we have seen it right here at the hotel. Of course, COVID-19 didn't help. But we stayed positive, and things seem to be bouncing back now."

With pandemic lockdowns fading in the rear-view mirror, Yakuba and her friends are enjoying their freedom once again.

"I love the lifestyle here. It is so much fun. On any given night we can eat at a great restaurant, go clubbing, have a few drinks at a pub, see a show...I even went to my first ice hockey game a few weeks ago! It was awesome! And there are excellent shops here -

from higher-end clothing stores to bespoke boutiques to funky, out-of-the-way second-hand spots - I love it. It's funny; my family just came for a week-long visit, and they had to stay at a hotel because I had no room to put them up - I have so many clothes!

"My father was skeptical about me staying here after I graduated," she continues, "until he met my friends. They are all so sweet and nice, and he sees that I am happy when I am with them. About half of them are from here, and the other half are from Europe, Africa, Australia, and North America."

Similarly, members of both her LGBTQI+ community and her climate action group are a mix of both locals and those from other parts of the world.

*"For whatever reason we have  
found each other and feel  
comfortable with one another  
here. Belfast is a safe place, and  
it is very multicultural, very  
inclusive. I belong here."*





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A photograph of a stone archway in a building. The archway is made of light-colored stone and has a decorative keystone with a carved face. Inside the archway is a mural. The mural features a large red apple in the center, with a white unicorn's head and neck emerging from the bottom. The background of the mural is dark blue with white stars and a white crescent moon. The archway is flanked by two columns with decorative capitals. The ground in front of the archway is paved with red bricks.

# *Belfast, Reviewed*

*Northern Ireland's capital city lends itself well to the lens.*

*Photos & text by Stephen Patrick Clare*





I had been to Belfast several times previously - as far back as 1989 and most recently in 2017. However, this was the first time that I spent more than 36 hours in the city.

Usually, I have a pretty good idea of what I am looking for on these assignments before I arrive. I took a different approach this time, instead allowing the city - and the story - to reveal itself to me a little bit each day.

I set out from the hotel each morning - armed with a pen and journal, a digital recording device, my iPhone, and my Canon SX540 camera - not knowing where I would traverse, who I would speak with, or what I would experience. Aside from a few "must-see" spots, I had room to roam, scouring every nook & cranny of the city, stopping only for afternoon tea and scones.

Over the course of six days, I spoke with about 70 people, filled-in more than 100 pages of my journal, and snapped over 1,000 images.

Each night, after supper, I would review my notes, photos, and recordings from the day's adventure. In time, ideas and emotions would emerge, and I began to sketch a basic storyline. It wasn't until I returned home, however, that the big picture came into focus.

As any journalist will tell you, the craft of storytelling is a process of experience, evocation, and expression. As such, Belfast, Reborn wrote itself - all I had to do was get out of the way.

Stephen Patrick Clare, Spring 2022









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**THE CELTIC CHEF**  
with Gary Maclean

## Pheasant

**P**heasant is an iconic and beautiful bird that was brought to the U.K. as early as the 11th century by the Normans. Pheasants were introduced in North America in the 18th century and have become well established throughout much of the Rocky Mountain states, the Midwest, the Plains states, as well as in Canada. It is also found on menus all over Scotland. I spent a number of years working for the largest feathered game producer in Scotland. They have been instrumental in obtaining these birds from estates all over Scotland and northern England.

This recipe was inspired by a dish called Chasseur, or Hunter's Chicken. It is a one-pot wonder and the pheasant cooks without drying out. If you cannot find a pheasant, then this recipe works well with most game birds and with good quality chicken.

### Ingredients

1 pheasant (oven ready)  
25 g / 1 oz unsalted butter  
200 g / 7 oz button mushrooms (trimmed and wiped)  
200 ml / 7 fl oz beef stock  
Small bunch tarragon leaves  
100 g / 3½ oz cherry tomatoes  
100 g / 3½ oz baby onions  
100 g / 3½ oz streaky bacon  
150 ml / 5 fl oz white wine  
1 x 400 g can / 14 oz chopped tomatoes  
50 g / 2 oz plain flour  
½ oz lemon juice  
25 g / 1 oz good oil  
Salt and pepper

### Instructions

Pre-heat the oven to 160°C/325°F. Cut the pheasant into 4 pieces (splitting legs into thigh and drumstick and cutting the breast in 2). Heat a sauté pan with the oil, then add butter. Once foaming, add the seasoned pheasant pieces. Sauté over a reasonably high heat, turning and allowing the pieces to become golden in colour. Add the baby onions and the bacon, allowing to colour. Remove the pheasant from the pan and place to one side, then pour off any excess fat. Place the pan back on heat, add the mushrooms and cook until you have achieved some colour. Next, dust in the flour, making sure to stir it in until there are no lumps. Then add the white wine and bring to boil. Reduce by ¾. Add the stock and reduce by ½. Next, add the tinned tomato, the cherry tomatoes (halves) and the tarragon. Pop the lid back on and place into the oven for an hour. If you don't have a pan that works for the oven you can pour the mix into a large casserole dish and cover with foil. Remove from the oven once the timer goes, then season with salt and pepper. Finish the sauce with a squeeze of lemon juice to enrich the flavour.

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## New Kids on the Block

with **Andrew Ferguson**



The Scotch whisky industry has seen something of a baby boom over the last ten years, with no fewer than 30 new distilleries opening - a dramatic growth spurt for an industry which only saw 6 new distilleries open in the 20 years prior. While most of these new entrants are still at least a year or two away from being able to legally bottle whisky (the spirit must mature at least 3 years in oak casks), a few of them have already started to hit the market. Here are some of the new kids on the block, with actual whisky hitting the street.

When the Glasgow Distillery opened in 2015 it became the first distillery to operate in the city in over 100 years. Founded by Liam Hughes and Ian McDougall, the distillery was awarded "Scottish Whisky Distillery of the Year 2020" in the Scottish Whisky Awards. The distillery primarily produces peated and unpeated double-distilled single malts, but also dedicates 1 month of production to triple-distilled spirit. The whisky has been named 1770, in honour of Glasgow's first distillery, Dundashill, which opened that year. The distillery has 3 whiskies in its core range: Original, Peated and Triple Distilled. The distillery is only offering virtual tours at present.

Is there anything more romantic than a Scottish island distillery? The founders of the Isle of Raasay Distillery, Alastair Day and Bill Dobbie, certainly agreed with that sentiment, having originally planned to open in the Borders. The distillery was built next to

the Victorian Borodale House, which serves as a hotel, and has spectacular views looking towards the Isle of Skye. The facility produces a 50/50 mix of peated and unpeated single malts, with some of the barley, including some rare strains, grown on the island. Raasay's single malt whisky has been released in small batches from spirits distilled, matured, and bottled on the island.

*Lindores Abbey Distillery was founded on the site of a ruined abbey of the same name.*

It was the site of the first recorded manufacture of whisky anywhere in the world. In 1491, King James IV of Scotland permitted "Friar John Cor of Lindores Abbey being granted 'eight bolls of malt wherewith to make aqua vitae'." Work on the distillery and visitor center, founded by Drew & Helen Mackenzie-Smith, began in 2013, but couldn't be completed until 2017 due to discoveries made during excavation of the site. The legendary late Dr. Jim Swan was a consultant for the distillery, which began producing single malt spirit in December of 2017. Since 2000, the distillery has been exclusively producing with locally grown Lindores barley. It also produces an Aqua Vitae inspired by whisky's origins at Lindores Abbey, as well as single malt bottled at 46 per cent.

Lochlea Distillery, unlike all other new

distilleries, decided to fly under the industry and consumer radars, that is until they had 3-year-old whisky in late 2021. Lochlea was founded in 2018, just south of Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, by beef farmer Neil McGeoch. The farm dates from the 1700s and was the home of a young Robert Burns during his formative years, 1777-1784. The distillery only uses estate-grown barley and produces a more full-bodied spirit than traditional Lowland distillers. It is filled into predominantly fresh bourbon and sherry casks, but also a dozen other types of casks. The distillery's inaugural release, a limited edition, was released in the Fall of 2021.

Kingsbarns Distillery was founded in 2014 by the Wemyss family, who have been operating as an independent bottler, Wemyss Malts, since 2005. Plans were first hatched to open the distillery on an 18th century farmstead near St. Andrews in 2008. The distillery began production in 2014, with the first casks being filled in 2015, primarily ex-Bourbon, but also STR (shaved, toasted and re-charred ex-wine barriques) and sherry casks. The first whisky was released in 2019, with a few other limited editions following it. The first core release, Balcomie, is a 5-year-old matured in ex-bourbon and oloroso sherry casks. The distillery is open to the public and is the only one that I am aware of with its own doocot (Scottish for dovecot).

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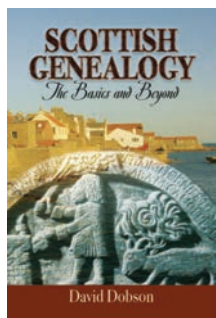
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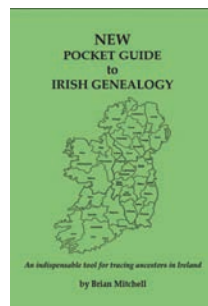
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While this publication identifies the major sources and repositories for those just getting started on their research, what makes this book stand out from all the rest is its focus on the other, less commonly used, sources that will allow researchers to advance their research. For each research topic—including statutory registers, church records, tax

records, sasines and land registers, court records, military and maritime sources, burgh and estate records, emigration records, and much more—Dr. Dobson has compiled an extensive list of the publications and archival records that most researchers have not heard of. It would take years for any other individual to compile such a far-reaching bibliography and compilation of relevant records in Scottish archives. David Dobson was born in 1940 in Carnoustie, Scotland. Most of his working life was spent at Madras College, St. Andrews. He has been an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Aberdeen, the University of Edinburgh, and at present, at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of more than 200 books, including *Scottish Emigration to Colonial America, 1607-1785*, *Scottish Trade with Colonial Charleston, 1683-1783*, and numerous historical and genealogical source books. He now lives in Dundee and is working on further source books.

xiv, 158 pp., indexed (main index & surname index), illus., paper. 2021 ISBN 9780806321134. #1459. \$25.95



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his guide to direct readers to the most current websites and resources. His original premise, however, remains the same: that the examination of seven major records will throw detailed light on most peoples' Irish ancestry. By skillfully blending Irish history, record sources, case studies, maps, charts, and his own mastery of the subject, Mitchell has put together a masterful handbook to Irish genealogical research.

122 pp., paper. 2020. ISBN 9780806359083. 25.00 USD. 20 GBP. 22 EUR.

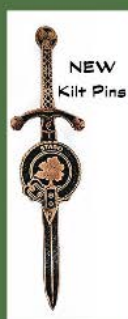
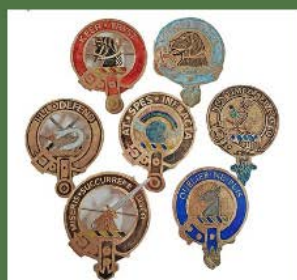


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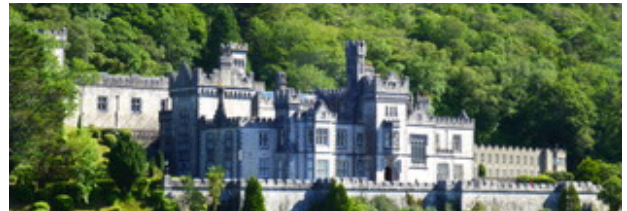
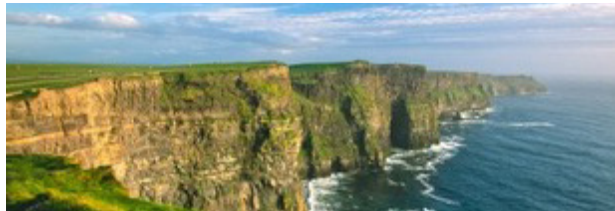
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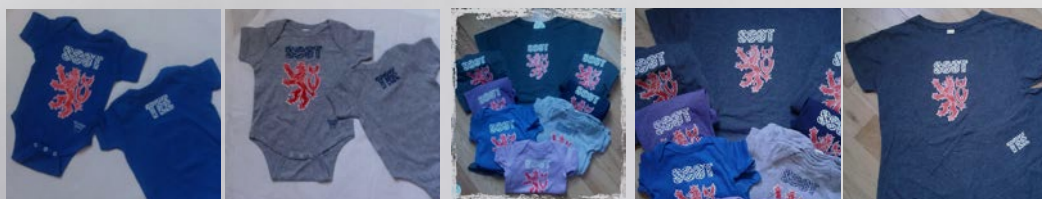
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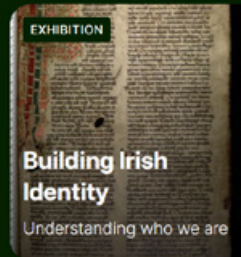
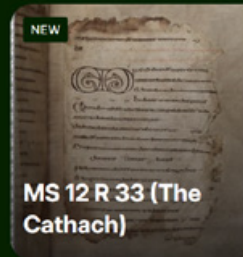
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## Queen Elizabeth II; 1926 - 2022

**I**t is almost impossible to fully reflect upon the life of a woman who lived for 96 years - and reigned as Queen of the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries for 70.

Queen Elizabeth II - the queen regnant of 32 sovereign states during most of her life (15 at the time of her death) - was a permanent fixture in the lives of millions; many books and articles are published each year about her and her family, and Netflix's award-winning drama *The Crown* is a fictionalized account of her life. In addition, her visage continues to adorn the currency of more than 15 countries. For more than seven decades, the world watched the queen, some as admirers and others as adversaries.

With her passing at Balmoral Castle in Scotland on September 8, she again became the focus of mainstream news publications. Despite the ongoing coverage, however, what remains unbeknownst to many are the ancestral and political connections that she had to the Celtic nations.

Queen Elizabeth II was a Celt, descend-

ed from the Royal House of Stuart (previously Stewart) on both sides of her family. Her parents also shared a common ancestor - Robert II, King of Scots - and, while her father's side of the family descended from James VI Scotland, her mother was a member of the Bowes-Lyon family whose ancestry traced through many generations of Scottish nobility reaching back to Sir John Lyn, Thane of Glamis. The Queen also had distant ancestry to Ireland, being a descendent of the Irish High King Brian Boru, who ruled in Ireland from 1002 to 1014

*Her well-known love for Scotland began when she was a young girl during family trips to the Balmoral Castle and continued to grow for the rest of her life.*

The admiration was mutual. Though the monarch has a complex history with Scotland, many there remember Queen Elizabeth II for her kindness. CBC reported that John Sinclair, owner of a popular butcher shop in Ballater that has a royal warrant, said, "She was a wonderful person for this area. And I think she will be sadly missed."

It was also during her reign that the 29-year-long conflict known as "The Troubles" took place in Northern Ireland. 3,600 people were killed over that period, with another 300,000 wounded. Although the conflict officially ended with the 1998 Easter Sunday Peace Accord, many believe that true "healing" began in 2012 when the Queen visited Northern Ireland and shook hands with Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, the then-commander of the Irish Republican Party. To this day, this small gesture is considered a monumental moment in Irish and British history. Although the relationship between the Queen and both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is undoubtedly complicated, both sides of the political line released statements of sympathy and praise following her death, noting "the important role she played in repairing relations between Britain and Ireland."

The Queen also enjoyed a strong connection to Wales, and she was seldom seen without her two trusty corgis, Muick and Sandy. It is said that the pair were by her side the day she died. Her relationship with Wales ran even deeper, as noted in an article released by the BBC on the day of her passing - "Queen Elizabeth II: How the monarch helped shape modern Wales" - detailed her devotion to the Welsh people through her love of their farming culture, her dry sense of humour, and her steadfast sense of duty. Wales is also the location of the Queen's biggest sadnesses during her reign - the 1966 Aberfan mining disaster when a colliery spoil tip collapsed, leaving 116 children and 28 adults dead. The Queen spoke about this tragedy, and her grief, a great deal throughout her life, leading to a close relationship between monarch and the town's residents.

While many Celts have polarized opinions about the Queen, there is no disputing her lasting and memorable relationship with the Celtic nations.



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