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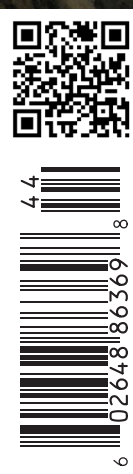
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Siobhán L. Covington, Publisher
Stephen Patrick Clare, Executive Editor
Rebecca Dingwell, Managing Editor
Chris Muise, Managing Editor
Caitlyn Elizabeth Mearns, Managing Editor

Celtic Life International Office:
Toll-Free: 888-215-6850
Email: info@celticlife.com
Website: www.celticlife.com

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Contributors:
James Acken
Lesley Choyce
Andrew Ferguson
Lillian Holt
Tom Langlands
Gary Maclean
Steve Melia
Candice Marie Sage

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FÁILTE

Lifelong Learning

Last year, it seemed like we couldn't escape all the talk surrounding Artificial Intelligence - chat about Chatbot and other new AI platforms was everywhere, colouring our conversations, worrying us while simultaneously hinting at all the amazing possibilities.

The dialogue has since been dialed back, and it appears that we are approaching the subject with greater caution and a newfound consideration for the practicalities, legalities, and ethical responsibilities of these life-altering technologies.

So, perhaps this is the perfect time to step back - ever so slightly - and remember that we still have access to another type of learning, the human brain. It wasn't without reason, after all, that the brilliant (albeit whimsical) 17th century philosopher, Rene Descartes noted, "I think therefore I am..." Our sheer existence, literally, depends on us "joggin' our noggins."

Our understanding of the brain has shifted significantly in the past 60 years. Originally thought to be a static organ

that degenerated as we aged, science now shows that the brain can grow and adapt - a trait known as neuroplasticity. It turns out that the brain really enjoys a good challenge, thriving on the stimulation that comes from learning a new language, creating art, making music, and travelling. Opening ourselves up to new experiences and skills has the ability to create fresh neural connections.

The good news is that brain health can be altered at any age by living an active lifestyle in an enriched environment. Lifelong learning is a cornerstone to fighting cognitive decline and offers the opportunity for social interaction and intellectual enhancement as well. The best part is that we live in a time where anyone, anywhere around the world can access free or affordable learning materials and study programs.

Our Fall issue approaches learning from two sources. First, our cover story on Celtic Witchcraft. Interestingly, in Celtic folklore, the word 'witch' translates to "wise" - meaning an accumulation

of knowledge and traditions that have been "held in trust" for future generations. Much of that learning, of course, came from our Celtic ancestors studying of, and interacting with, the natural world. Secondly, our deep-dive into literature speaks to the incredible storytelling culture that continues to capture and convey those customs across the Celtic nations today.

Body and soul. Nature and art. I have always loved the idea that all we need in life is a garden and a library.

Lifelong learning keeps us curious and intellectually robust. And while we may still turn to AI to handle some of our more mundane tasks now and then, it is humans - with our imagination, our capacity for creative problem solving, and our ability to grow and adapt - that will ultimately be responsible for solving the global challenges that we are currently facing.

Spraoi a bheith agat!

Siobhán L. Covington,
Publisher



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first WORD
with James Acken

Wisecraft *and* Witchcraft

The witch has a strange, twofold existence in our post-modern European-descendant cultures. On the one hand you have the alluring, sympathetic mistress of nature and mystery popular on social media and agents of “the Wise Craft” - the now-famous translation of the original phrase “witchcraft.” On the other, there is the seemingly older, more Chthonic hag of hooknose and evil-eye who will magically drain your milk-cows and wither your crops if you look sideways at her. Both possess the trappings of the witchy trade: broomstick, cauldron, broad hat, and cat, all in deepest mid-night black. Like so many symbols in this bizarre, post-colonial world in which we find ourselves, the witch draws from a great many traditions, but its tap root extends almost certainly down into the depths of long-standing Celtic tradition.

No consideration of the Celtic witch can avoid approaching that most powerful and pervasive figure of the Cailleach. Considered by many to be a full-blown goddess, she appears in Scotland, associated with Ben Cruachan, where she is now reputed to live and preside over the turning of the year in the deepest winter. A figure of natural magic, she could turn the unwary traveller into stone - however, her place there evinces an earlier association with kingship.

Locals still recount how the dead kings of the ancient Gaelic past would be carried in procession from Ben Cruachan to Oban before being ferried to Mull and then Iona for burial. Cruachan itself derives its name from Rathcroghan - originally Rath Crúachán - as the medieval Lord of the Isles and almost all the great Gaelic families of the Highlands traced their ancestry back to Conn Cétchathach, the warrior who gave his name to Connacht. There in Rathcroghan lived Queen Medb, the Other-

worldly instigator of the famous Táin Bó Cuailgne whose name literally means “intoxication” as from liquor. Here again is a dangerous “Woman of the Sidh,” the translation of “banshee,” dwelling in a mountain associated with royalty as she outlived a succession of husband-kings (as told in Ferchuitred Medba, “the Man-Company of Medb”), a quality shared with the most famous Cailleach in Ireland: the Old Woman of Beare.

In an eighth-century poem attributed to this enigmatic and often terrifying witch - who was famous for dealing with thieves in the most horrible way and being powerful enough to literally drag islands up out of the sea - the Cailleach Bhérre laments her descent in to old age after having been literally rejuvenated by her “marriage” with a succession of kings, just as Niall Noígíallach, the ancestor of anyone with the O’Neill surname, experienced with a woman who called herself Flaithius, a word which denotes lordship in the abstract. In keeping with tradition, she offers a drink from a well she guards and ultimately presides over the king’s death with another, poisonous potion when their reign is at an end.

If Sovereignty Goddesses do not seem “witchy” enough, we only must turn to the story of Sweeney’s Frenzy, the Buile Shuibhne, to see the Cailleach a Mhuillen, the Old Hag of the Mill, conduct shape-shifting and midnight flights of terror against our poor demented hero (who gets chased at one point by a pack of bouncing severed heads). Mills turn and grind, a symbolic function with pan-European significance as is seen in the image of Baba Yaga flying in her mortar and pestle, another grinding implement, and in this turning and grinding can be seen the cyclic nature of these symbols associated with the Cailleach.

“No symbol is more central to the Cailleach’s nature than her veil, what in the Gaelic language is called a Caille.

Thus, the one who wears this “hood, veil or cowl” is the Cailleach, and with this the image of the witch is completed. These various Cailleacha dwell out in nature with the cats and wild animals. They control magical drafts of potions that can heal or kill, and they are shapeshifters who first appear as hideous yet powerful old women. Most importantly, they were a large, dark head-covering.

Perhaps the greatest example of all this can be seen in Tim Burton’s 1999 film *Sleepy Hollow*. There we can see both versions of the Celtic witch: the beautiful, rejuvenating “innocent child of nature” in Ichabod’s mother and the old, veiled necromancer living in the haunted Western Wood. We may be surprised to find a modern movie so rife with Celtic symbolism - a sacred tree atop a burial mound out of which rides a warrior collecting heads - until we remember that the original story was written by a Scottish expatriate. In fact, the real antagonist is a Cailleach who has been spurned by the head of the community and so must preside over his death.

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



1 Shetland Serenade

Who says animals can't enjoy a good tune? While driving across Shetland Island recently, a local woman was surprised by the sight of a herd of Shetland ponies gathered around a bagpiper. The sight was so unusual (and adorable) that she had to stop her car and take a video. The piper, Jacques Ioset of Switzerland, told the woman that the ponies gradually gathered around him soon after he started playing. The video has since made the rounds on the internet.

2 Choctaw Nation Memorial

Ireland's National Famine Museum recently unveiled a memorial dedicated to Choctaw Nation, a Native American tribe. The Choctaw helped the Irish during a time of extreme peril: the Great Famine. When Ireland made an international call for aid, Choctaw Nation responded with a donation of \$170 (the equivalent of more than \$13,000 today). This act of generosity has never been forgotten. The memorial, a life-sized bronze sculpture titled "The Gift," was created by Brendan O'Neill. The piece is a replica of the sculpture he gave to Choctaw Cultural Centre in September 2023.

3 Welsh Postcard

A postcard arrived at the Swansea Building Society more than a century too late. Dated with the year 1903 and addressed to a "Miss Lydia Davies," the postcard ended up at the financial institution in August, 121 years later. The front of the card shows a reproduction of Edwin Henry Landseer's painting The Challenge, depicting a stag in a winter scene. It's unclear how exactly it ended up in the mail again. In an interview with CBC, Society communications manager Henry Darby theorized someone came upon it in an estate sale and popped it back in the post.

4 Manx Seagulls

Picture this: you're enjoying a nice takeout meal in the great outdoors when a seagull swoops in to grab it. For patrons of Hawkins BBQ - a food truck on the Isle of Man - such incidents are common. Seagulls victimize customers as many as three times a week. As a result, the business has launched a scheme they call "seagull insurance": a customer has the option to pay an extra £1, thus guaranteeing a replacement meal if a gull makes off with their food. That money then goes to the Manx Wildlife Trust.

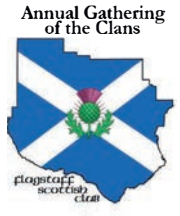
5 Beachcombing in Cornwall

A 13-year-old collector came upon a rare piece of Lego on a beach in Cornwall. The Lego octopus is believed to be from a sea spill in 1997, when a wave hit a cargo ship and knocked 62 containers of Lego into the sea off of Land's End in western Cornwall. The teenage beachcomber has collected almost 800 pieces from the spill, but the octopus is an unusual find. About 4,200 octopuses were onboard the ship, compared to 97,500 scuba tanks and 92,400 swords. Next on his list? One of the 33,941 Lego dragons.



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Celts in the Community



• *Nuala MacDonald*

During a trip to Newfoundland and Labrador, Scottish teen Nuala MacDonald was inspired to make her village more autism friendly. MacDonald, who is autistic herself, travelled to Channel-Port aux Basques with her mother in 2018. That same year, the region had been dubbed “the most autism-friendly town in Canada” by Today’s Parent magazine—thanks in part to the efforts of a local support group called Autism Involves Me. During her visit, MacDonald made note of the accommodations available. Restaurants, for example, provided pictures of food on their menus. This can help autistic people who might otherwise struggle to articulate what they want to order. Sensory items like weighted blankets, noise cancelling headphones, and colouring books were available in spaces such as churches and schools. “It gave me an idea I could do something like that in my own community that would make a huge difference for people,” MacDonald recently told BBC. She took the idea home to Wester Ross, and in 2023, she helped launch a group called Supporting and Empowering Autistic Strengths. More recently, MacDonald collaborated with West Coast Delicatessen, an Ullapool-based business. Through working with MacDonald, deli owner Stephanie Martin implemented a few changes. For instance, the radio is to be turned off during certain times of day to allow for quiet periods in the shop. A 30-minute documentary about MacDonald’s experience and activism, titled *Saoghal Nuala/Nuala’s World*, premiered on BBC in August.



• *Expedition Limitless*

Expedition Limitless is a group of adventurers who take on physical feats of resilience to raise money for charity. Based on the Isle of Man, the group was founded by Phil Quirk. This year, a dozen people decided to take on the Canadian wilderness by kayaking 715 kilometres of the Yukon River. Challenge participants surpassed their £100,000 fundraising goal before they even set forth on their journey. But set forth, they did: in June, the participants spent 12 days along the Yukon River, camping on its banks during the night. Manx Mencap was the Expedition Limitless 2024 charity of choice. The organization is dedicated to the support and wellbeing of people with learning disabilities. “We wanted to work with a charity that doesn’t get the exposure it deserves,” Phil Quirk told media site Gef the Mongoose. “Yes, part of the expedition is about raising money for that charity, part of it is about demonstrating resilience, but part of it this year is about raising the exposure of Manx Mencap and the work that they do within our community. A lot of that goes unnoticed unless you’re directly affected by it so a big thing for us this year is shouting quite loudly about Manx Mencap.” When all was said and done, Expedition Limitless had raised more than £109,000. That tops its fundraiser from last year, which saw £65,329 go to Isle Listen after a 110-kilometre snowshoe journey above the Arctic Circle.



• *Glencoe Mountain Rescue*

The prospect of fun and adventure drives tourists to the Scottish Highlands every year. However, the mountains and hills can be as dangerous as they are beautiful. That’s where Glencoe Mountain Rescue come in. Since 1961, volunteers have dedicated their time to the frontline emergency service group. Operating in the Glencoe region of the Highlands, the team is currently made up of 30 people. Although they’re not paid for their work, team members are experienced and dedicated, as Glencoe Mountain Rescue operates 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. Participating in a rescue mission might mean leaving a shift at their day job or missing an important family event. “You can’t get anything more rewarding than finding someone that’s in a lot of pain or whatever and fixing that for them,” volunteer Ewen Laurie told BBC. “It can be the worst day of their life ever and you can just make that right.” According to its website, the rescue team responds to between 80 and 100 incidents per year, including cave rescues and just about “anything that the other services have difficulty reaching.” In addition to Glencoe, volunteers cover the Mamores, Glen Etive, Blackmount, Ballachulish and Ardnamurchan. They also assist other rescue groups with major incidents, such as searches for missing people. Near the end of August, the Glencoe Mountain Rescue Team saved a pair of stranded climbers from the Aonach Eagach mountain ridge.



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Thistle & Stitch

One California couple rises from the ashes

Most businesses begin with profit-making in mind, and there is certainly no finding fault with earning a living and receiving fair compensation for a job well done. Work that evolves from a pastime performed for its own sake, however, offers more than a mere manner of making a living - it is a business as a blessing in disguise.

Jamie Kalanquin and her husband, owners of Northern California-based Thistle & Stitch, know this firsthand - the couple not only managed to turn a craft into a career but also transformed a destructive event into a constructive endeavour.

"The business began with some plaid flannel fabric that I fell in love with at the fabric store - I made one scarf," recalls Jamie. "I started with a tiny Etsy shop, and I was so excited when I sold 3 scarves in one week! In 2016 I purchased my first embroidery machine and changed my little hobby business name to Thistle & Stitch."

Inspired by the history of the Scottish tartan, combined with the flannel coveted by outdoor enthusiasts, the Outlander-inspired family business specializes in creating handmade gifts and custom embroidery born from a love of plaid and rustic adventures.

Remarkably, the backbone of the business began with a disaster that nearly decimated their area.

"The business has grown exponentially since the 2018 Campfire that leveled our town," she shares. "We lost our home in the fire, and I thought my little sewing hobby was gone. We turned away friends, family, and strangers who wanted to offer us donations because we felt we didn't need them."

"Then my old college roommate sent me a gift card for a fabric store, and it was almost like I gave myself permission to keep sewing. We started telling people that if they wanted to support us, they could buy a scarf."



I purchased as much fabric as I could and ended up making and selling around 1000 scarves between the fire in November and Christmas that year."

Before the fire destroyed their home - and damaged the entire town - the couple were both employed in the outdoor industry and involved with canopy tours and zip lines, selling items at local craft fairs only during holidays. Following the tragedy, Jaime's little "sideline" would soon prove to bring the success that saved them.

"The year after the fire, we attended our first Scottish Highland Games as vendors. I knew I had found my niche and had the feeling that I had found my people. I have been designing Celtic-themed items ever since. In the last 5 years, it has evolved to include a variety of custom-designed and handmade "Scottish/Celtic lifestyle" items, including close to 150 different scarf patterns, sweat-shirts, tee-shirts, hats, stickers, cups, mugs, candles, Christmas ornaments, and even custom tartan kilted nutcrackers!"

Along with those accessories, customization is at the core of the business with most articles designed in-house, according to clients' specifications. As product lists and demand increased, so did the responsibilities.

“I didn't like working 9-5 so I quit and started working for myself - now I work 24/7!”

Over time, she has been fortunate to delegate roles and responsibilities.

"It used to be just me doing everything, but as we've grown I have been able to hire a small and amazing team that helps with stock production, order fulfillment, event coordination, and social media. I still do most of the designing and am always coming up with new products."

"It is a family business, and we get to raise our children and show them what hard work and dedication looks like," continues Jamie. "While it is a lot of work, we get to travel and bring the kids with us. We enjoy the flexibility it provides, as we get to decide what we do and don't do."

Not content with serving their existing clientele, the California couple is always looking for new ways and means to reach potential customers.

"There is always room for growth, and that is what all vendors are trying to do - more advertising, more exposure, and more awareness will help customers find us online after an event."

As such, Jamie says that Thistle and Stitch will keep doing what they do best - design customized Scottish and Celtic giftware and apparel while continuing to grow their connections in the Celtic community.

"It was never my intention for this little scarf hobby of mine to grow into something so large, but I am more than grateful for all of the rewards it brings."

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The Scottish Gathering and Highland Games in Salado is both the oldest Scottish festival in Texas and the largest gathering of Scottish Clans in the state. Showcasing all things Scottish, the 3-day event includes bagpipe, drum and pipe bands, Highland dance, heavy athletics competitions, and the popular Clan Village. Weekend activities also include performances by Celtic musicians, Bonniest Knees and Shortbread contests, and a multi-vendor Celtic marketplace. Things kick-off Friday afternoon with a seminar on Scottish musical history in the museum. A special Calling of the Clans torchlight ceremony takes place that evening at nearby Salado Creek. Festival grounds open Saturday morning with opening ceremonies held at noon that include a Bands and Clans Parade through the streets of Salado and a massed bands presentation on the grounds. Sunday activities begin with a Kirkin' o' the Tartan, followed by pipe band and dancing performances, live Celtic music, and a dog costume contest. The annual event has been sponsored by the Salado Museum since 1961, with all proceeds benefitting the nonprofit organization.

Sherwood Forest Faire

December 13 & 14

McDade, Texas

www.sherwoodforestfaire.com/celtic-music-festival



Boasting live music, Scottish Highland Games, artisans, archery, mead, and more, the Sherwood Forest Faire will host a Yuletide Festival of epic proportions this December. Friday night, guests are welcome to sample spirits to the sounds of live musicians. Saturday, the lively lower half of the Sherwood Forest Fairegrounds will showcase on-site Celtic concerts from the likes of Plantec, Blaggards, Cleghorn, and more, at The Greenwoode Theatre, The Argosy Stage, The Three Stags Pub, The Lionheart Tavern, and Villager's Square. Later, visitors will enjoy thrilling Highland Games events, Clan booths, a vendor's area complete with Celtic-themed wares and fares, and the always-popular archery displays and competitions. With an array of activities for the wee ones, the Sherwood Celtic Yuletide Festival is a family friendly event that welcomes Celts of all backgrounds.

St Augustine Celtic Festival

March 8 & 9, 2025

St. Augustine, Florida

www.celticstaugustine.com



Each year, the St. Augustine Celtic Music & Heritage Festival celebrates America's oldest Celtic city, founded in 1565 by Celts from northern Spain. The city boasts America's first Irish priest, Father Ricardo Artur, who - in 1601 - led the world's first St. Patrick procession, shooting off cannons and marching in the streets. Fittingly, over 400 years later, the 2025 festival kicks off with the rousing St. Patrick parade in the downtown's historic core. After the parade, the gathering moves to the city's events field, with two full days of live musical performances from several national and international Celtic bands and other entertainment. Guests will also enjoy the St. Augustine Highland Games - featuring both professional and amateur athletes - a whiskey tasting, workshops, lectures, artisan wares and fares, and much more...all in America's oldest Celtic city!

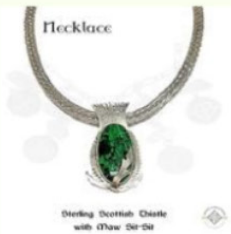
SCOTI CREATIONS



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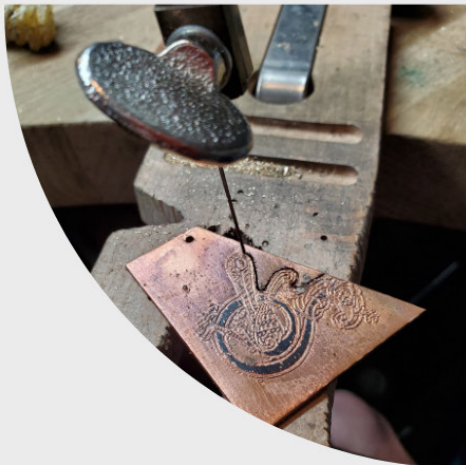
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Cycles of Renewal:

The Celtic Calendar and the Sobriety Journey

The Celtic calendar offers more than a historical lens into ancient ways of being - it invites us into a rhythm that echoes the cycles of life, death, and renewal. In many ways, it mirrors the ebb and flow of the recovery journey. These ancient markers of time provide not only a sense of continuity, but also a connection to the earth, to each other, and to ourselves. This rhythm is something that modern-day recovery programs often lack, with their emphasis on rigidity, rules, and the power of sheer will to stay sober. But what if recovery could be more than that? What if we could reclaim our personal sovereignty, deepen our intuition, and place ourselves at the center of our healing?

The Celtic calendar's turning points - Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine, Lughnasa - are moments of transition that can act as powerful metaphors for the stages of recovery. They reflect not only seasonal changes but also the shifts we undergo as we heal. Samhain, for instance, represents the beginning of winter, a time of going inward, of honoring the shadowy parts of ourselves that we might otherwise ignore. This mirrors the first steps of sobriety, where we face the darkness of our addiction, look at our brokenness, and begin the work of reclaiming our lives. But the focus is not on fighting this darkness - it's about learning to sit with it, to recognize it as part of the whole, and to soften into it. There is power in gentleness.

Recovery, like the seasons, requires an honoring of cycles. It is not linear; we don't simply move from one phase to the next, leaving the past behind. We revisit, we relearn, and we re-engage. Imbolc, with its promise of light returning, calls us to plant new seeds, to set intentions. This isn't about striving for perfection, but about honoring what is emerging within us - our own intu-



ition, our own wisdom. It is a reminder that our growth is cyclical, that there are times of dormancy and times of blossoming.

One of the greatest myths about recovery is that it requires strict adherence to external rules, or an iron will. But willpower alone isn't enough to sustain long-term healing. What's needed instead is a reclamation of sovereignty - a radical act of self-trust, where we turn inward to reclaim our own power and capacity for healing. We step away from systems that tell us we're powerless over our addiction and instead embrace the idea that recovery is about learning to be in relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the earth in ways that nourish us.

“At the heart of the Celtic calendar is connection - to the land, to the community, to the cycles of birth, life, and death.”

This echoes the need for collective care in recovery. Time and experience in recovery open us up to the realization that we don't heal in isolation. Just as the seasons change in relationship to one another, so too do we grow in relationship with others. Our healing is deeply intertwined with those around us - our community, our loved ones, and even those who walked this path long before we did.

What sets this approach apart is that it places the individual - rather than external authorities or programs - at the center of their own healing. It asks us to trust our bodies, our minds, and our spirits to guide us. The

practices tied to the Celtic calendar, whether rituals of release at Samhain or celebrations of abundance at Lughnasa, offer us embodied ways to mark our recovery. We don't simply intellectualize our healing - we live it, breathe it, and engage with it through movement, nature, and ritual.

This reclamation of intuition is a vital counterbalance to the wellness industry's tendency to offer prescriptive, one-size-fits-all solutions to recovery. The Celtic calendar invites us to tune into our own rhythms, our own needs. Instead of constantly striving to “get better” or “fix” ourselves, we learn to listen to the wisdom that already lives within us. We come to trust that our bodies know what they need, that healing isn't something we force, but something we allow.

The modern approach to recovery often centers around the narrative of scarcity - the idea that sobriety is a constant battle, a deprivation, a loss. The Celtic calendar, in contrast, offers a model of abundance. It teaches us to honor what we have, to trust that life, like the seasons, will provide. Recovery, in this framework, isn't about deprivation but about making space for fullness, for joy, for connection. It is about learning to live in alignment with the natural world and with ourselves.

By embracing the rhythms of the Celtic calendar, we move away from the idea that sobriety is something we “achieve” through willpower or control. Instead, we learn that healing is about softening, about surrendering to the cycles of our own lives and allowing ourselves to be held by the earth, by our communities, and by the practices that remind us of our own sovereignty.

The journey of recovery is a sacred one. It is not about simply surviving but about reclaiming our whole selves - our bodies, our minds, our spirits. The Celtic calendar offers us a way to honor this journey, to mark its milestones, and to trust that we are always, in every season, moving toward wholeness.

**Story by Anne Marie Cribbin
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Samara O’Gorman

Actress, writer, singer, best-selling poet, and proud Irish Canadian Samara O’Gorman is passionate about her family’s roots.

“My father’s family came from County Clare before the Famine years,” shares the 25-year-old from her home in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, a quaint and quiet community on the western edge of Montreal, Canada.

“My mother’s side hails from County Monaghan. They came to Canada and were farmers near Mirabel Airport (north of Montreal). That said, I identify with my Canadian roots just as much as my Irish heritage - my roots are who I am.”

O’Gorman’s connection with Irish culture is something she sensed immediately upon her first visit to the Emerald Isle - a pilgrimage to Galway where “the wind whispered welcome home to me...”

It was a sense of belonging that had first come alive in her own home as a youngster, with her mother’s Irish melodies hovering around the house. Admittedly, her passion for all things Eire waned in the years immediately following high school when she “lost touch with my identity” and often got caught up “in modern trends and aesthetics.” However, she soon rekindled her childhood love of Irish lore, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Irish Studies from Montreal’s Concordia University, where she took classes in Irish literature, history, music, and the native language.

“I developed a much better understanding of the stories and their lessons. Language is the foundation of storytelling, and by getting in touch with my ancestral language - and thus my ancestors - I was able to find myself again.”

Some of those studies took place during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Adapting to online learning, O’Gorman undertook a year-long Irish language course and was rewarded for her efforts when the Government of Ireland gave her an Irish Language Scholarship, inviting her to study in Eire. She was the first of her family line since the 1800s to pilgrimage back to Irish soil while speaking the Irish language.

Inspired by the old language - “the

elaborate words that carry so much imagery and metaphor” - she has since made several trips back ‘home,’ studying the master poets, including Seamus Heaney, Oscar Wilde, and WB Yeats - voices that were vital in better understanding the island’s issues of identity, especially as they pertained to forced immigration caused by the Great Famine (1845-1852) and the Troubles (Northern Ireland, 1968-1998).

Today, as an active member of Montreal’s Irish community, she continues to carry that torch of identity to others in the region. Recently, she became the city’s first-ever ‘Trinity Queen’ - so named for her roles in all three of the area’s Irish parades; Hudson (2019), Chateauguay (2024), and North America’s largest St. Patrick’s Day festivities (Montreal, 2023).

As with so many within the Irish diaspora, she carved a new home and niche for herself over time through her music, literature, art, and more - all with the aim of preserving and promoting Irish culture.

“All our Irish communities have warm hearts, and I want to play my part in passing along those traditions and customs...”

Her first poetry collection - “What If the Sun Died” - focused on femininity, grief and healing. It served “as a coping mechanism during a turbulent time in my life,” she notes, adding that “the poems were stream of consciousness.”

That cultural reach now extends to music as well; she is starting a band in which she will sing and play the bodhrán, perhaps inspired after appearing at an event honouring Sinead O’Connor - another voice that was passionate about preserving and promoting the language.

O’Gorman has also been a featured speaker at schools in-and-around the Montreal area, covering topics such as compassionate leadership and self-love with elementary school children. She often shares her poetry with the pupils.

“Children absorb kindness like sponges, and there is no judgement at that age. I ad-



vocate that children pursue what they love, don’t lose that magic. Also, they need to know that they can always go back to their passions later in life, as it is a part of who they are.”

She believes that young people today are still quite interested in their Irish roots.

“One hundred percent,” she says. “The element of social interaction is essential, whether in-person or online through social media.”

Currently, she is working on a book of folk stories about her hometown of Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue. And, in a similar literary vein, she underscores that if people have an interest in reconnecting with their Irish roots, the old poets are a wide-open window into times gone by.

“They were inspired by the landscapes around them and conveyed Ireland through her many stages of history.”

And while she now takes a more spiritual approach to studies in Irish folklore and mythology, O’Gorman describes walking Irish soil as ‘magical’ and says that there is simply no substitute for experiencing the rich tapestry of the island’s culture than being there.

“The Irish have such a way and a curiosity about the world beyond the Veil - like the lore of fairies - something that we can easily lose touch with. Each time I am there, I return to a childlike sense of wonder, of no longer seeing the world in black and white, but with a newfound curiosity. I am happier, and life is far more fun this way.”

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Liz MacRae

As an actress, Montreal-based Liz MacRae has a long list of impressive professional achievements, including an ACTRA Award. She is also a published author.

Perhaps one of her most significant sources of pride, however, lies in the long-standing history of her family's last name.

"As the newly elected Vice-President of the Clan MacRae Society of Canada for Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces, I am looking forward to finding more MacRaes, McRaes, and MacCraes. There are so many variations of the spelling - it's amazing! We are known as, or called, 'The Scattered Children of Kintail'."

Derived from the Gaelic Mhic Raith or Mac Rath, the surname MacRae translates to 'Son of Grace'. According to various sources, the surname likely migrated from Ireland to Scotland around the 14th century.

Given her own experience, MacRae recommends that folks who develop an interest in their family ancestry undertake their own personal journey.

"Although we are all so busy in our day-to-day lives, we can do quality research into our roots and where our families have come from in Scotland. My hope, in whichever ways are possible, is to find new members to add to our current membership of the Society."

With an aim to promote the history of Clan MacRae, the Society has held annual general meetings across Canada to better enable members to connect at Clan gatherings and elsewhere. Modern-day MacRaes are encouraged to share personal stories with each other and to submit items of interest to the Society's website.

"The AGM in Calgary was wonderful and gave me the golden opportunity to meet 3 of the 4 founders of the Clan MacRae Society of Canada. I feel deeply connected with these wonderful people, and I look forward to knowing them forever."

“There are so many people with exciting and impressive stories to tell...”

From Scotland, MacRae's ancestors settled on a farm in Ontario in the 17th century.

"My great-great grandfather John McRae, at the age of 20, emigrated from Glenelg, Scotland - not too far from Kyle of Lochalsh in the Highlands - to Glengarry County in Ontario. Our name was originally spelled McRae before my grandfather changed it to MacRae. My late father grew up on the farm in Ontario with his brothers and sister, first in Apple Hill and later in Williamstown.

"My dad often spoke about our Scottish heritage, probably hoping that interest in our family history would rub off on me. But I really didn't become deeply interested in it until a few years ago," she admits. "He told me about the beautiful Eilean Donan Castle in Dornie, Scotland. There was a huge, laminated poster of the castle in his office in the basement and I have dreamed of going there since I was a child. I can now say that my wish has come to be; I visited Eilean Donan Castle in April of this year - it is a truly magical place, steeped in so much history."

Online research into the family name proved fruitful as well.

"The Eilean Donan Castle website (eileandonancastle.com) was very helpful, de-

tailoring how the castle came to be and how it lay in ruins for close to 200 years until it was purchased by Lieutenant Colonel John MacRae-Gilstrap in 1911. The restoration began soon after. John's wife - Isabella Mary Gilstrap - was a talented, strong, helpful and very charitable woman, and her family's financial contribution to the rebuilding of the castle was immeasurable.

Uncovering stories of one's genealogical forebears has increased significantly in recent years, with Scotland being one of the most popular destinations for those researching their descendants - especially as over 40 million people have Scottish ancestry worldwide.

Researching one's roots and connecting with others within an ancestral community is not the only mandate of the Clan MacRae Society - it also provides a very personal experience that may transform an ordinary holiday into an extraordinary pilgrimage - one that offers insight into both cultural background and, perhaps more poignantly, the deepest parts of our beings.

"I really encourage people to visit the places in Scotland where their families have come from. I remember the train ride from Inverness to Dornie. I thought I would take a nap as it was an early morning train. I didn't sleep a wink and instead took photo after photo of the stunningly beautiful countryside and I kept thinking, 'Wow...this where my ancestors came from...' It felt as if they were with me in spirit, riding along on the train with me, nestled in my heart."

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Tanya O

One Irish woman plies her trade with passion and persistence



Irish singer-songwriter Tanya O' can't remember a time when music wasn't a part of her life.

"There was always music in my house, as my dad had a career in the industry," O' shares via email with Celtic Life International. "My earliest memories of playing music are all of me making up my own songs on a tiny keyboard and recording them into a toy recording device. The songs were of course terrible, but that didn't matter - I was obsessed, and it instantly became my passion."

In time, music grew beyond a simple pastime and into an outlet for her inner thoughts and feelings.

"Writing music for me is quite therapeutic. It is a place where I can be completely honest with myself and my emotions. I feel lucky that I have this safe space where I can process all the ups and downs in life by writing about them - and it is a lot more affordable than therapy!"

O' has been performing and recording professionally for the past decade, having spent several years in Toronto until recently, when she returned to live in her hometown of Tralee, Co. Kerry. One of her biggest hits is the 2023 single "Run To You," which she co-wrote with former Walking On Cars frontman Pa Sheehy.

When asked about career highlights, however, her answer is somewhat surprising.

"I have been very lucky the last few years, supporting some amazing acts and working with writers and producers that I

would have only dreamed of working with a few years ago.

"The place that I am in now, however, and the songs that I am putting out, are my biggest highlights to date..."

While music has always come naturally to O', offering her work up to the scrutiny of others - a necessity for professional musicians - has not.

"There have been a lot of highs, but of course, with highs come lows, and I have had plenty of those, too. I've faced a lot of rejection through auditions since I was young. I would be lying if I said it didn't get to me at times; you are basically being told that you're not good enough. I never had a thick skin, though I tried to be as stoic as I could about it all. It chipped away at my confidence. Luckily, over time I realized that I am not going to be everyone's cup of tea, and that's okay. Once I accepted that, I became a lot more comfortable in my own skin. That's what led me to continue doing what I love, and finding what music felt authentic to me."

On the flip side, words of gratitude from fans make it all worthwhile.

"When I receive messages, or chat to people after a show, and they tell me how much a song I wrote means to them and how they have connected to it...well, there is simply no feeling in the world like that. Knowing that one of my songs has helped someone

through a tough time, or connected to them in any way is special and beyond rewarding."

Ultimately, however, the only voice that matters most when making music is your own.

"I started out writing as a way of expressing myself, then spent years working with different musicians and record labels. You can get caught up in this world, of trying to write the perfect hit song that everyone will like, and I think that's where I lost myself a bit. So, I took a step back and focused on developing my craft again as a songwriter and musician. I've come full circle, where now I am just writing honest music that I love. It seems to be working out much better."

The music industry is not for the thin-skinned, O' warns. But she has some advice for fledgling songsters to prepare them to receive harsh feedback at times, so they can carry on.

"If it's something that you are passionate about, go for it. It is a tough industry, and it's brutal at times, so I think it's important to learn how not to take things too personally. It will be a lot easier if you work hard and develop your craft and musicianship as best you can - that will lead to confidence in what you do.

"And don't forget to enjoy it, keep your magic, and always trust your gut."

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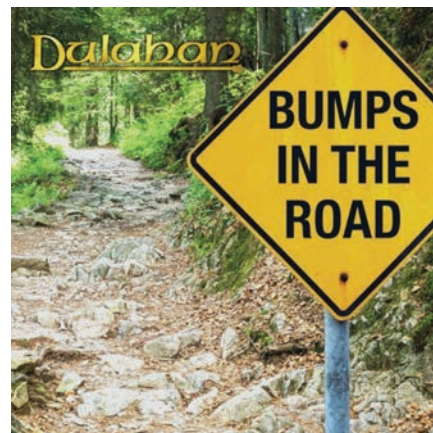


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Dulahan



Kyle Aughe, founding member of the American trad-fusion band Dulahan, has never been satisfied just covering the classics - although they did inspire his first forays into music.

"Like many youngsters in the 1960s, I was enamoured with the Beatles," the singer and multi-instrumentalist shares via email. "As a child, I could belt out all those early Beatles' favourites. In the early years, like most budding folksingers, I focused on learning to play and sing songs that were recorded by my favourite acts. That quickly became my lifelong passion, and it is a big part of what still drives me today."

Over time, however, belting those Beatles bangers would not scratch the itch alone, and Aughe began workshopping his own tunes.

"I have written over 800 songs in a variety of genres, including the 120+ Dulahan original pieces across the band's 11 albums. Songwriting demands discipline, practice, and objectivity. Most folks assume that a good song just magically pops into a songwriter's head, and many writers can cite instances where, indeed, a song did simply come to them in its entirety.

"But the craft of songwriting, in most cases, is much like the creative process in other art forms; one takes the initial idea and works with it through revisions, re-writes,

and fine tuning to mold it into the final version. I work at it every day. Seldom does a day pass where I don't spend an hour or two writing."

The band's latest album, *Bumps In The Road*, features the fruits of Aughe's creative labours, though he is quick to note that the results are very much a group effort.

"The core members are me, Leo Butler on the highland pipes, flutes, Irish whistles, harmonica, and vocals, and Mark Sandlin on Irish bouzouki, mandolin, guitar, banjo, and vocals. We have been working together for 18 years. Four years ago, my son Dylan - a talented percussionist and lead guitarist in his own right - joined the band full time. And piper Kevin Palm often sits in with us.

“Like our sound, our creative process is a fusion. As the primary songwriter, I bring new songs to the band. Then, we work together to shape it into a Dulahan song...”

"Halifax is my favourite cut on 'Bumps in the Road,'" continues Aughe. "I love to write songs about obscure historical incidents that many people are unaware of; the Halifax Explosion of 1917 fits that mold perfectly. It is one of the most powerful songs that we have ever done, with the harmony interplay between Leo's highland pipes, Dylan's guitar

lines, and soaring emotional lead guitar near the end. I felt the devastating nature of the Halifax story deserved a powerhouse framing, and I believe we captured that."

"Story songs are my favourite to write, so I challenge myself to tell a tale that shares a sometimes-complex story in the simplest way."

"One of my most cherished compliments that we have received as a band was from a listener who spoke of our song *Aberfan*, which tells the story of the 1966 Welsh coal mining tragedy. She said, 'Your song captured the powerful emotion of that event in 6 minutes more vividly than the two-hour documentary I recently watched on TV.' Humbling praise indeed, and the kind of thing that keeps us motivated to do what we do, nearly 25 years into this journey."

Aughe's parting words are those of advice for the Celtic bands out there that stick to covering the same sure-fire hits; dare to explore the other sounds of the genre, as well as your own.

"I would love to see those acts grow their repertoire beyond these classics, great though they are. I realize not all bands write their own material, but there is still a plethora of wonderful Celtic songs to explore. If these bands incorporated some of these other great, less-frequently-played tunes into their sets, it would not only grow the reach of Celtic music, but also the reach of these bands to their fans, as well."

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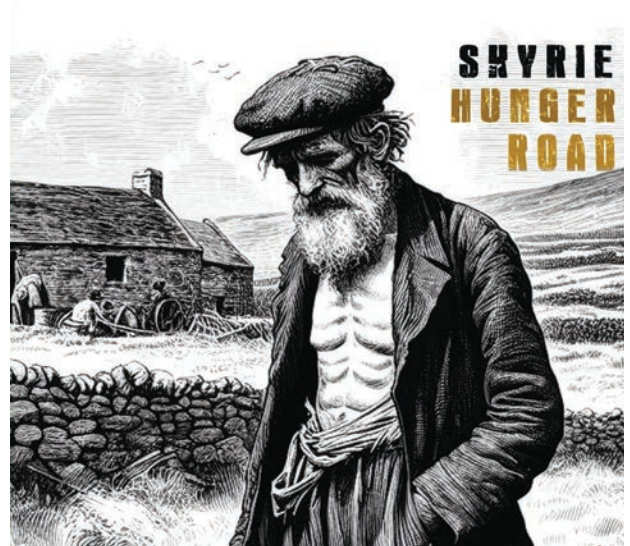


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Skyrie

Scottish trad trio Skyrie looks to new horizons



As musicians, the trio of Lesley Thompson Smith, James “Jimmy” Anderson, and Christopher Martin Smith have been busy since they were just wee bairns.

“I started playing the violin at the age of six,” Lesley tells Celtic Life International in a joint text chat alongside her bandmates. “There was always music in the house; my mum sang, and my dad enjoyed listening to classical music. I have had a love of listening to music since I can remember, and I started lessons as soon as I could.”

“Music runs deep throughout my family,” Jimmy chimes in. “My mother was an amateur singer and performer, and many in my father’s family were involved in Scottish music. I have been performing on stage since I was nine or 10 years old. The guitar became my real love.”

“I was the youngest of a musical family,” adds Chris. “My mother and father both sang, as did my older sisters. I have been on stage from the age of five, mostly performing traditional Scottish songs.”

After a few years playing solo or with side gigs, the three eventually found their way to one another and started Skyrie.

“Lesley formed the band, and I was invited to join in 2015,” notes Chris. “We have gone through a few iterations, with the final addition of Jimmy on guitar in 2020.”

“I was kind of late to the performing party compared to Chris and Jimmy,” admits Lesley. “I worked as a software engineer in

my early twenties, then started a family, and it has only been really over the last five years that I have been free to spread my musical wings.”

The trad trio recently unlocked another achievement; located in Fife, Scotland, they had always performed close to home - until this year, when they toured across the pond for the first time in support of their latest recording, *Hunger Road*.

“With *Hunger Road*, we transitioned from being an entirely instrumental ensemble playing traditional melodies to performing original songs, often with three-part harmonies,” says Chris.

“Releasing original music, and then touring America, has been immensely challenging and, conversely, incredibly rewarding,” adds Lesley.

“Lesley and I collaborated for the first time in songwriting,” continues Chris. “I provided the lyrics, and Lesley wrote the music for one track called ‘Exiled.’ And then someone had to sing it, so she started taking singing lessons.”

The harmonic transition appears to have paid off.

“The response to our live performances has been very positive,” Chris confirms. “With regards to a general response to the release, it is still early days. It is our hope

that the stories behind ‘Hunger Road’ - and the song ‘Exiled’ in particular - will appeal to the Scottish and Irish Diaspora around the world.”

After a crucible-like US tour put them to the test, the members of Skyrie have emerged from the other side stronger as a band, having broadened their horizons and grown their sense of sonic self.

“When a group of musicians are really firing off each other, they communicate subliminally, and the music can twist and turn, heading off in different directions like magic,” Jimmy beams. “I liken it to a shoal of fish who appear to simultaneously change direction with no obvious leader.”

“It gives me tremendous joy to create new music,” shares Lesley, “and I also get a big kick out of being able to share a connection and an emotional journey with fellow musicians and an audience.”

“Our plan is to tour two or three times a year in the US,” Chris caps off. “We are also keen to explore the potential to perform ‘Exiled’ in Canada to the descendants of the Highland Clearances and tell the story of why they are there. We are looking forward to a return to the creative process here at home and honing our performances at the local folk clubs and festivals, and abroad.”

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The Irish trad group Réalta recently took quite the creative leap.

The Belfast-based quintet just released a new EP, called *The Leap*. Recently, the band's guitarist and vocalist Dierdre Galway chatted with Celtic Life International to explain the project.

"Conor Lamb and I work with a charity called Live Music Now, which organizes live music in the community, mostly for people who find it hard to access regular concerts," Galway shares via email. "LMN commissioned us to compose a piece in honour of Limavady, Co. Derry – an area where we have spent time in recent years performing in schools, care homes, and community gatherings in a beautiful arts venue called the Keady Clachan.

"We decided to write about the sense of community that was evident in the area as we encountered so many people who, often in their spare time, created opportunities for others to engage with the arts, culture, and with their neighbours. We also wanted to explore the story of how Limavady got its name – a legend that is still very prominent in names and imagery around the town."

Apparently, that story all comes down to a dog. Yes, a dog.

"The track *March on the River Roe* leads into *The Running Dog*, which describes the most dramatic part of the legendary story of how Limavady got its name: *Léim an Mhadaidh*, or *The Dog's Leap*," says Galway, explaining that a quick-footed messenger dog once saved the community from being razed

to the ground. "The tension builds as the Normans march towards Ó Catháin's castle, then the anatomy of a leaping dog is explored as it leaps over the Roe Valley before racing to gather reinforcements and free the besieged castle."

This exploration isn't just through the notes of the tune or the lyrics of the song – everyone involved (and their dog) knew this story needed a little help from the visual medium to do the tale justice.

"The track is a 15-minute suite of music, poetry and visual art," notes Galway. "We developed the track alongside Garvagh poet Anne McMaster, who we met while attending a Burns Night celebration as part of our research for the commission. We quickly realized a whole suite of music and poetry would be required to convey all we wanted to express in this piece.

"Once the track was complete, we approached Sligo artist Peter Crann, who we'd recently worked with on *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, to create an accompanying animated video. He beautifully illustrated the story of the suite on a 12m long scroll of paper which he then filmed as it was unwound within a Crankie box. This animation perfectly complements and elevates the audio track and can be viewed on Réalta's YouTube Channel."

The project proved a change of pace for the ensemble.

"This track is our first commission, and our first time combining music, poetry, and visual art to tell a story.

“It has been such an enjoyable project to work on from start to finish, and we are grateful to have had such a talented creative team around us.

"We are delighted with the result, and it felt very special to premier the work in the Roe Valley Arts Centre, in the company of the people who inspired the piece. We've had a positive response so far, from the standing ovation at the live premier in Limavady to reviews and airplay, including extracts appearing on Radio Ulster's Folk Club and the entire suite being played on RTÉ Radio 1's Folk on One and Scotland's Celtic Music Radio."

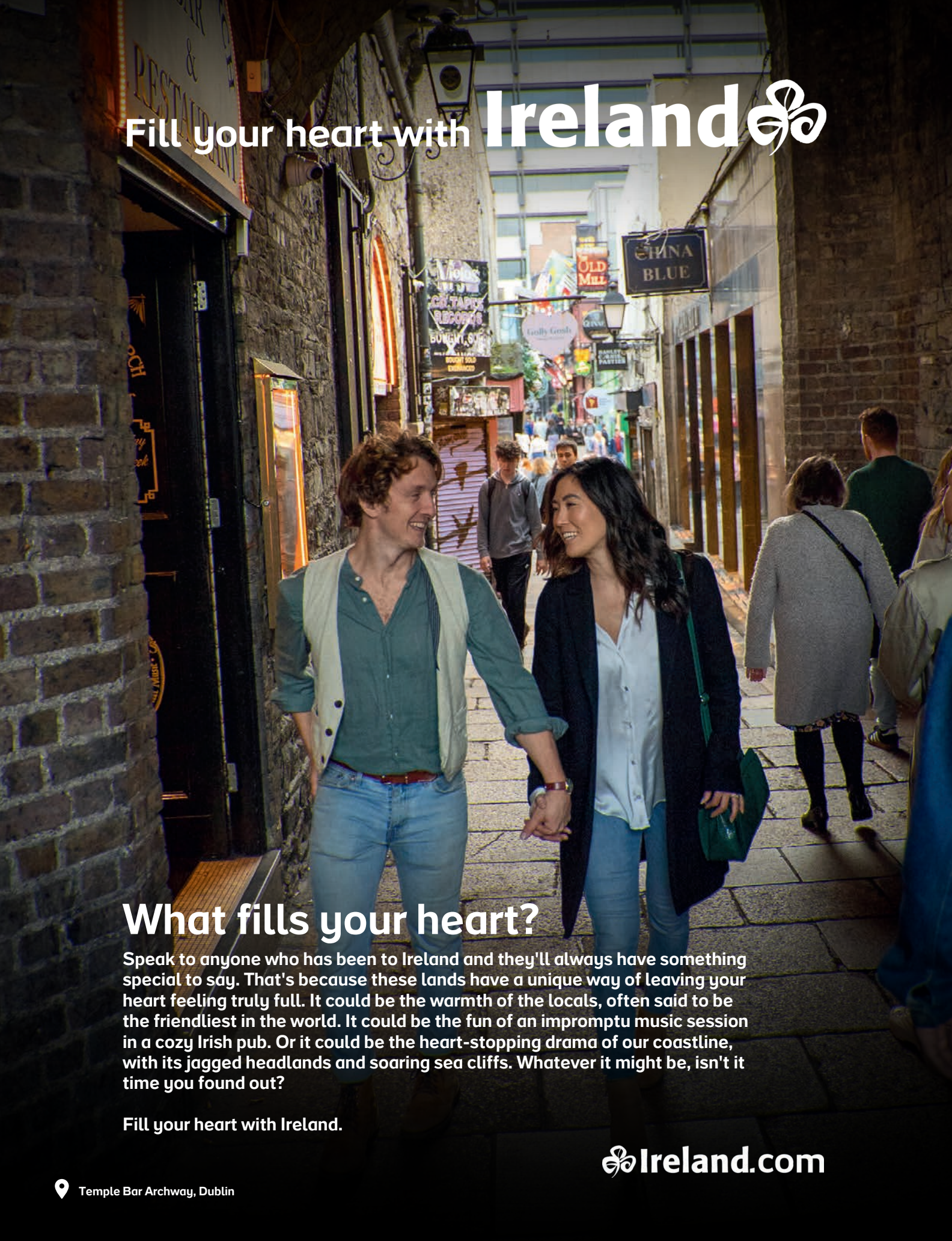
With this project complete, Galway says Réalta is already gearing up to leap into next year, with a three-week Germany tour slated for March 2025.

"A good live show should give you something more than just the music that a band has recorded. We aim to provide the full experience; a varied set list that flows well, interspersed with stories from the artists and interaction with the audience, which all helps create a warm and intimate atmosphere in which to experience the music.

"No two shows are ever the same, and a great show will hold the audience in a moment where the outside world isn't thought about for the duration, and a sense of shared experience is felt with the others in the room."

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The Belfast International Arts Festival

A hotbed of culture, Belfast has become Northern Ireland's creative capital over the last quarter century, attracting artists of all backgrounds and disciplines. Recently, Celtic Life International spoke with Richard Wakely, CEO and Artistic Director of the Belfast International Arts Festival, about the city's cultural evolution, and what audiences can expect at this year's annual gathering, which runs from October 16 to November 26.

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THE CELTIC QUESTIONNAIRE





Richard Wakely

What are your own roots?

I grew up in Marino in North Dublin, but we moved north when I was a youngster. My father took work here as, in the 1950s, there really wasn't a whole lot of work in Dublin. So, he took what many people thought was an extraordinary decision to move north at a time when there were tensions, which then of course reached a real boiling point in the 60s. In my twenties, I moved to London. I met my wife there and we had our first boy, Connor. We didn't want the children to be raised in London so we moved back to Dublin about 27 years ago and shortly after that I was offered the chance to become the Abbey Theatre's Managing Director. Today, we still live in Dublin, but I get to work in another great city, Belfast. My father's side of the family is Catholic but there's a bit of Church of Ireland in there somewhere and my mother's side of the family is Jewish. My wife is Indian Sikh, so I say to our children that they embody the new Ireland with all these great cultural lines and faiths running through their bodies.

How and when did you get involved with Belfast International Arts Festival?

I joined in April of 2013, which gave

me very little time because there was nothing really programmed for that year's festival, or very little - it was a case of just getting on the phone with people and, somehow, we managed to pull together a very good festival that year. I am stepping down from the festival at the end of 2025 and by then I will have done 13 editions.

What are your roles and responsibilities there?

I am officially known as the Artistic Director and Chief Executive Officer, which means I have two strands of work: one is the artistic side - looking after the program and making sure that it hangs together in a logical way. And then there is the chief executive side of things, which is really the running of the business, including helping to raise the money and making sure that there's a coherent strategic vision for the organization going forward.

What are the challenges involved?

Running a contemporary arts festival is always a bit of a challenge because of the spectrum of contemporary arts. Work is so vast and increasing all the time and trying to keep up with artistic and aesthetic trends is always a challenge but a very good challenge. I also think that in Northern Ireland, we

have very particular challenges, some arising out of our very difficult history and the conflict here. But certainly, there are also economic challenges in Northern Ireland and that impacts not only on us, but also on the wider arts sector. Public finances are tight, and the current cost-of-living crisis has created a difficult environment.

What are the rewards?

Personally, I love sitting in an auditorium or a theatre or a gallery and experiencing the dynamic between the work and the audience - that is the great moment for me. There is a real reward in seeing a wider audience acknowledge great artistry and in recognizing that it is wonderful - particularly as many of us curators have our own unique passions. We might hold a torch for a particular artist, and we want to fly the flag for particular artists or ensembles. When they get that wider recognition, it is very pleasing indeed.

What is the festival's history and core mandate?

The festival was founded by Michael Emerson in 1962. Michael was at Queen's University at the time and felt that the university needed to have a cultural program, and that the city needed a festival. The festival grew up under Queens and was only for the university community at first. Over time, they did things elsewhere in the city, but it was largely within South Belfast, where Queens is located. The festival has evolved over the years and when I took over in 2013, it became apparent that the next stage was to reinvent its relationship with the city. The city was changing rapidly, and the peace process was resetting relationships between different communities and how we live together. The festival seized that opportunity: it became an independent entity and relocated to the centre of the city, where we could better engage with all communities. We put together a new set of guiding values that reflected

Les Amazones
d'Afrique



the importance of contemporary arts practice, global connectivity, access and participation, and cultural diversity. These values became our road map and it's a work in progress - the festival is still evolving.

What can audiences expect at this year's festival?

Audiences can expect five weeks of extraordinary artistry from home and abroad across theatre, dance, classical and contemporary music, film, literature, and visual arts. There is a very strong slate of work from Northern Ireland, including some really exciting theatre. 'The Vanishing Elephant' by Cahoots is a great piece for family audiences - it opened in New York last October and was selected by the New York Times as a critics' pick. The Lyric Theatre is hosting two terrific productions, their own production 'The Tragedy of Richard III' and Tinderbox's 'Yerma', a sort of reimagining of Lorca. And there's a wonderful new play by Dominic Montague called 'Aurora' that's produced by Prime Cut. On the international side, audiences will enjoy work from across the globe. It's hard to pick out my favourites, however there is a Palestinian double bill of movement-based work - 'Losing It' and 'In Between' - which will be very special. We are also very pleased to bring Les Amazones d'Afrique to Belfast for the first time. They make utterly joyous dance music that fuses African beats and rhythms with contemporary sounds. And we could talk for hours about the late great Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney, and we have another great local poet at this year's Festival, Michael Longley, the last of that generation. We're celebrating his 85th birthday and his latest collection. But who's coming through is just as exciting. We've got wonderful talent like our artist-in-residence Helen Hall, Eileen McClory, another great dancer, and the composer and theatre-maker Conor Mitchell.

Why is the festival an important event for the community?

It's one of the few opportunities that people in Northern Ireland have to experience arts from across the globe, without having to go to Edinburgh or Dublin, or London. I'm a great believer that they have every right to see this work on their doorstep. The festival has continued unabated from 1963 right through to the present - and even through that terrible period of The Troubles. When you talk to festivalgoers from the late 1960s and the 1970s, it was for them a candle in the very dark night of conflict. It was something that residents really looked forward to every Autumn and I hope they still do. I think it also reminds us that we are part of a global community, we are not just this little plot of land in Northeast Europe.

How do you expect the event to evolve in the coming years?

Because I am stepping down at the end of next year, it really is up to the next director and where they decide to take it but there will be certain things that will become more central. Interdisciplinary practice is going to become even more important to the artistic community and the festival will need to reflect that. The festival's role in developing artistic practice locally and promoting connections between internationally based artists and locally based artists will become ever more

important. The final thing that might evolve is that there will be greater opportunities for active participation in the festival and artistic activity for communities across the city.

What are your thoughts on the current state of the arts in Belfast, and Ireland?

Ireland has always had a vibrant arts scene, and - in the Republic - artists influenced the nature of the emerging state over 100 years ago. So, artists in the Republic of Ireland are central to civic society. In Northern Ireland and the UK, I don't think they are valued in the same way, but they are no less important. They are no less questioning of society than their southern counterparts and the work in this year's Festival from local artists demonstrates that. There's an awful lot to celebrate but it is a tale of two parts of the island because that confidence that the artistic community has in the South is also reflected by a much greater level of investment through the public purse than in the north. Per head per capita spend on arts in Northern Ireland is only a fraction of what it is in the South. So, the economics play into this in a big way. Regardless, we definitely punch above our weight.

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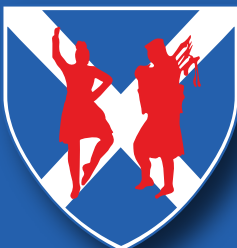
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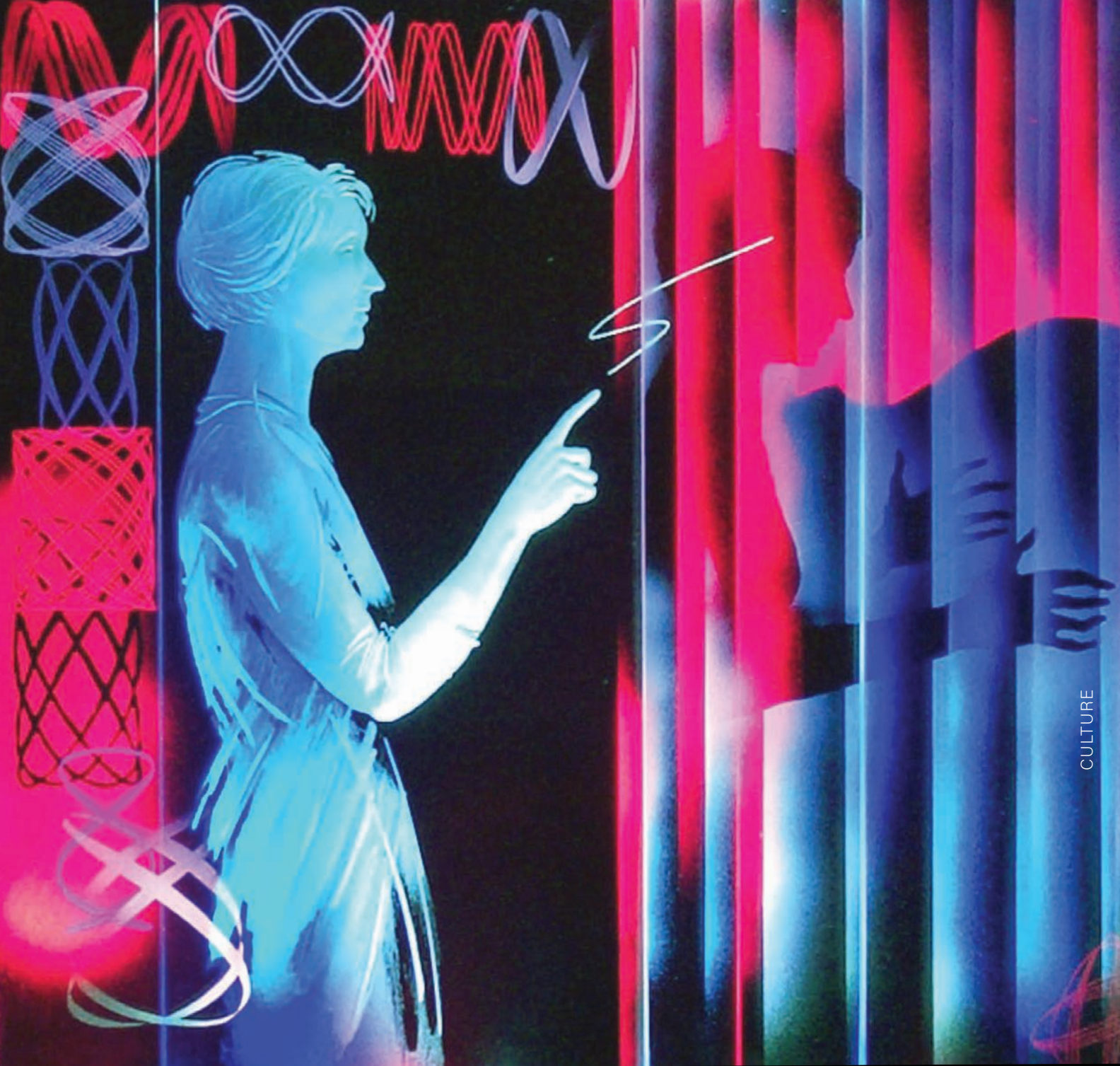
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CULTURE

Alison Kinnaird

As Celtic Life International correspondent
Tom Langlands tells us, Scotland's foremost
creative isn't slowing down anytime soon



Over 50 years ago, Alison Kinnaird applied for a student placement at Edinburgh College of Art. She had always enjoyed drawing and painting and during her school years, she was regarded as creative and talented. Sadly, her aspirations of becoming an artist seemed dashed when the college's letter of rejection dropped through her letterbox. However - in the words of the proverb "Good things come to those who wait" - today Kinnaird is regarded as one of the world's leading glass engravers, although that definition oversimplifies her art.

Through the decades, Kinnaird has been commissioned to create windows in churches and cathedrals across the U.K., gifts for members of the British royal family - including the late Queen Mother and King Charles (when he was Prince of Wales), and for his Imperial Highness, Crown Prince of Japan. Other works include glass panels for members of the aristocracy, interface panels for Murano Hotel, Tacoma, and a host of glass "award trophies" for presentation by prestigious commissioning bodies including banks and universities. These works range in size, scale and complexity from something you might display on a desk or in a cabinet to the fifteen-foot-tall window in 14th century Dornoch Cathedral. Recent works are even larger. Kinnaird's artworks feature in public and private collections in Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, New York, Prague, and Munich - including such establishments as Victoria and Albert

Museum, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and Corning Museum of Glass. She has exhibited extensively across Europe and the USA.

No trip to the Edinburgh Art Festival would be complete without a visit to Kinnaird's new Art Glass Studio on Ferry Road. The large windows showcase some of her creations to passers-by, but the real magic is inside when the light from outside permeates the art.

Glass is a wonderful medium for capturing and reflecting light yet, at the same time, acting as a membrane through which light flows like a liquid, redefining itself in the marks of the artist. For Kinnaird, the skill is to harness the light, hold it, shape it and above all, say something with it.

“It's taking the ancient skill of glass engraving, knowing how to use it to communicate, imbuing it with meaning, and elevating it from craft to art.”

The objects in her studio are a testament to her philosophy; moreover, they are a testament to the influences that have shaped her life.

Along with her passion for the visual arts, Kinnaird has been making music since she was seven years old. At first it was cello, competing in competitions in Edinburgh by the age of 12, and later being advised to go



Alison Kinnaird

to London to train professionally. Instead, she remained in Edinburgh and took up the harp under the tutelage of renowned Scottish harpist Jean Campbell. She attended Edinburgh University where she was awarded an MA in Celtic Studies and Archaeology. The course embraced the Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland, as well as aspects of Celtic culture including poetry, all of which sat comfortably with her musical ability and a developing interest in traditional Scottish music. The harp is now her instrument of choice, and she is an avid researcher of forgotten Scottish harp music.

She is quick to highlight the distinction between folk and traditional music, "Folk music is usually seen as belonging to the lower classes, while in Scotland and Ireland, traditional music was embraced by the whole of society, from the big houses to the

crofts of clansmen. The harp, however, was always a professional's instrument and many of these households had their own harpists to provide entertainment. In the aftermath of the failed Jacobean rising of 1745, many of the big houses disappeared with the landowners displaced and scattered. Traditional music was first forgotten and subsequently lost, and the harp - once an instrument of choice - all but disappeared."

By the 1960s, there were only about six harpists playing in public in Scotland. Keen to reverse that trend, Kinnaird is now recognized as one of the leading exponents of traditional Scottish harp music. She has written several books on the topic and co-authored *The Tree of Strings* - a history of the Scottish harp. She was the winner of the Clarsach Trophy at the National Mod and the Harp Competition in the Pan Celtic Festival in Killarney.

Another undoubted influence on her life and work was her late husband, Robin Morton. They met at a music gig in Shetland in the early 1970s and married in 1974. Morton was a leading figure in the Scottish, folk music scene being a founding member of the Northern Ireland ensemble Boys of the Lough, and later producer and manager for the Glasgow-based Battlefield Band. Kinnaird and Morton settled in Temple Village south of Edinburgh. There, they bought an old church and converted it into their family home with art and recording studios. It holds many happy memories for Kinnaird,

"It was a special place, full of music, the buzz of the engraving wheel, and a gathering place for family, friends and like-minded, creative people."

It was a visit to her father's family in Forres near Inverness that kickstarted Kinnaird's foray into the world of glass engraving. One rainy day she called into the studio of a fine copper-wheel engraver. Fascinated by his work and the process, she showed him some of her own sketches. He offered her the opportunity to come and work with him over the summer holidays and instantly she was hooked.

“To be able to use techniques that have existed for over two thousand years and to adapt and reinterpret those techniques in uniquely expressive ways is what excites me.”



At its most basic level, glass engraving can be considered decorative beauty. In the hands of Kinnaird it is elevated to art, conveying powerful, thought-provoking messages and ideas. Looking around her studio gallery I am witness to half a century of artistic skill and conceptual development. In the window, backlit by morning sunlight, stands a series of glass panels depicting trees and leaves of indigenous species. They sparkle not as literal copies of plant forms but as interpretations of the Ogham or Celtic Tree Alphabet, with each letter represented by a different tree. On a side wall - illuminated by an elegant frame with embedded perimeter LED edge lighting - is a powerful piece depicting an army of hollow soldiers; faceless, non-existent and empty. Within one stands a child - a poignant reminder of who these men once were or perhaps those they now kill, for the reality of war not only destroys the enemy but reshapes the mind of the warrior whom we task with effecting acts of dehumanizing brutality. Surrounding the figures are engraved the names of dozens of conflicts from Glencoe to Gaza. On another wall flies a glass kite with a long tail carrying white feathers. The body of the kite flutters in the breeze but carries a figure clouded with all the explosiveness of war and a series of outstretched palms reminiscent of the prehistoric handprints from the walls of Cueva de las Manos, Argentina. There is

something primal and disturbing about this work that was born out of the poem *If I Must Die* by Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer - it is soft and brutal, angelic and warlike, peaceful and destructive.

Of all the wonderful glass art that Kinnaird has produced it is perhaps her self-portrait in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, England that says the most about this remarkable woman. Created in 2006, this 18" x 18" x 4" panel of optical glass shows her standing to the left making her mark on the glass with an extended finger, while to the right, rippling through a curtain of sound she is seen in silhouette playing the Scottish harp. Illuminated by coloured LED lights, interlacing "lissajous" patterns - reminiscent of intertwined Celtic curves - dance around the edges. They are the visual embodiment of soundwaves sampled from her music. Like all of Kinnaird's art it begs the viewer to look beyond the obvious.

In 1997 Kinnaird was awarded an MBE for services to art and music.

Story by Tom Langlands

All photographs supplied by Alison Kinnaird

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Is Galicia the Original Celtic Homeland?

*Celtic Life International correspondent
Steve Melia pedals through the past*





Graffiti in Lugo

Where did the Celts of Ireland and the west of Britain originally come from? Irish mythology has a specific answer - from Galicia in Spain.

In the *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann*, the Irish Book of Invasions, the sixth and final group of invaders, the Gaelic-speaking Milesians, came from Brigantia (A Coruña today) on the northwestern tip of Spain. Several regions in northwest Spain have claimed Celtic identity in recent times, often fuelled by nationalist politics. Those claims have been controversial. In the 1980s, Galicia and Asturias were admitted to the Celtic League, then expelled for linguistic reasons, as the last traces of their Celtic languages disappeared in the early Middle Ages.

So, are there any grounds to consider Galicia a Celtic region? Intrigued by this story, I recently set out on a 1500-kilometer bicycle trek to find out.

It was three days' ride from my home in Bristol to the port of Plymouth and 24 hours by ferry to Santander, Spain. Clouds were

drifting over the mountains as I arrived, but the port and beaches were bathed in sunshine.

The cool and temperate climate of Northern Spain is totally unlike the rest of the country. In the Spring, the rainfall is similar to Cape Breton - more than double that

of Dublin or Edinburgh - and the weather forecast was showing rain for most of the next fortnight, making the countryside lush and green. As I left Santander on the coastal cycle route, I noticed how the landscape looked more like northwest Europe than the Mediterranean. The cloud-topped mountains



Lugo Roman Walls

could be in Wales or Scotland, and the rocky gorse-strewn coastline could be in Cornwall or Bretagne.

Connections between those regions predate recorded history. In 2012, archaeologist Barry Cunliffe and linguist John Koch published *Celtic from the West*, challenging the traditional view that the Celts originated in Central Europe. Instead, they argued that Celtic languages evolved as a *Lingua Franca* between the peoples of the Atlantic coast, from Spain and Portugal to Ireland and the west of Britain. There was prehistoric trade between these peoples, and some studies have found genetic similarities, although the evidence is not straightforward.

The sun returned for a day as I turned inland towards the Picos de Europa mountain range and national park. There are no roads through most of the park. The N-621 skirts its eastern fringe, following the river Deva upstream, between wooded slopes topped by limestone peaks. I recognized the name: Deva was a Celtic goddess of water, who also gave the Romans their name for Chester - ironically where I once lived - on the border between England and Wales.

The next section proved to be a challenge: a 1300-metre climb to the San Glorio pass. Fortunately, the road is quiet and well-graded, climbing gradually over 21 kilometres towards the peak still smattered with snow. Near the top, I stopped at a viewpoint with a group of motorcyclists. One of them looked at me sweating and shivering, shook his head and said, "fool!"

A freezing headwind blew hail into my face as I started to descend. The trees disappeared as the road snaked downwards through bare rocks and a short tunnel. I was struck by the fragility of the mountain roads; some of them had succumbed to landslips and contractors were rebuilding several stretches. Before the invention of dynamite in the 19th Century, these mountains isolated the northwest regions from the rest of Spain.

“In prehistoric times, travel, trade, and migration was easier by sea than by land.

The northwest of Spain was the last part to resist the Roman invaders. Following their



Bretoña Church Tower

conquest they named it Gallaecia, after one of the many peoples who lived there. The modern region of Galicia is only part of that ancient province. It took me five more days to reach its border, riding through mountain passes, gentler pastures, and the ancient cities of León and Astorga. Two days later I arrived at the first of the sites I wanted to visit: the castro of Lansbrica at San Cibrao de Las.

Castros are fortified Iron Age settlements, usually on hilltops. There are dozens of them all over northwest Spain and northern Portugal. They form an important part of Galician identity and are even mentioned in the Galician national anthem. Lansbrica was one of the later ones, from the 2nd Century BC, when the Romans were threatening to conquer the area, although there is no evidence of fighting there.

I climbed for several kilometres in driving rain to reach the grey angular museum at the entrance to the site. I was drying off under its canopy when I was greeted by a tall young man, Diego Fernández, who is an expert in castro culture and works for the museum, offering free guided tours in English.

I start with the thorniest question: who decided that the castro builders were Celts, and why? It goes back to the 19th Century, he explained, to the early days of Galician archaeology, when nationalist movements were trying to differentiate Galicia from the

rest of Spain.

So, were they just making it up? No, there was evidence linking Galicia to the Celtic regions, but it would be wrong to think of them as a people with a shared identity. The settlements were independent, often at war with each other. Fernández showed me two granite carvings with symbols reminiscent of Celtic art. Art and religion were two hallmarks for identifying these people as Celts. For example, the city of Lugo is named



Maeloc in Bretoña



Diego Fernández
@ San Cibrao de Las
Museum

after Lugh, the Celtic god of storm. However, as they left no writing, our written evidence, including names, has come to us through the Romans, who had their own agenda. The Roman writer Strabo called three of the coastal peoples Celtic, a word he associated with barbarians.

The display boards were all in Spanish and Galician. Modern Galician is a Latin language, close to Portuguese, with a few words of Celtic origin. So, what do we know about the original Gallaecian language? Not much, it seems, beyond those names of gods, places and peoples, which suggest at least a Celtic influence.

Diego showed me a model of the site; the excavated parts, just 15 percent so far, were coloured grey. The rest, in white, is yet to be uncovered. The rain paused as I left the museum and walked towards the castro. Walls, three to five feet high, trace three defensive rings surrounding rectangular homes, with circular kitchens and grain stores.

“As I walked around its outer walls, I was struck by the huge scale of the site - home to 3000 people at its height - and also by the power of nature, which has reclaimed everything around it.

The following day I arrived at Santiago de Compostella, which is best known as a destination for the pilgrims who converge on its magnificent cathedral. I joined the line filing past the remains of St James, noting the warning not to kiss the statue - divine protection didn't extend to COVID-19, apparently. Some come here to pray for miracles, and while I was there a miracle did occur - the sun came out and the rain stopped for several days.

A Coruña, the largest city in Galicia, was off my route, so I took a train there. It feels very different from Santiago - more of a normal city but surrounded by the sea, with several peninsulas. On top of one stands the structure I had come to see: the oldest working lighthouse in the world - the Torre de

Hercules was built by the Romans, though what you see today is mainly from the 18th Century. According to the Irish Book of Invasions, the Celtic god Breogan founded the city, originally called Brigantia, and built the tower, from where his descendants set sail to conquer Ireland. A statue of Breogan stands at the foot of the hill, where a musician was playing bagpipes, an instrument as familiar here as in Scotland or Ireland.

The capital of Roman Gallaecia was Lugo, which took me a day and a half to cycle from Santiago. The original Roman walls still surround the core of the city, making it a UNESCO world heritage site. Roman remains and themes are everywhere, but tourism is less intrusive here than in Santiago.

In the 15th Century convent - which houses the Provincial Museum - I met with archaeologist Enrique Alcorta. The first object he showed me was a game-changer for my inquiry; the Stele of Crecente was commissioned by a high-status man for his wife, who died at the age of 25. The family, depicted in happier times, are described, in Latin,

as ‘Supertamaric Celts’ - one of the peoples mentioned by Strabo. Alas, here were indigenous people, after the Roman conquest, calling themselves Celts.

The Romanization of Gallaecia varied from place to place, Enrique explained. Lugo was the centre of their power and influence. There were a few outposts, such as Castro de Viladonga where I was heading next, but elsewhere life carried on as before. He showed me some Celtic-style objects from after the Roman conquest, including bronze fibulae, like many I have seen across Iron Age Europe. But the highlight of the visit predated their arrival. The Torque of Burela is 1.8kg of pure gold, a masterpiece of its type. “Not very comfortable” said Enrique, adding that Celtic chiefs and warriors commonly wore torques but that this one was likely ceremonial.

After sampling the bars that night, I saw the Roman walls illuminated and decided to walk back along their ramparts. The god of storms responded, lighting up the sky and the buildings, ancient and modern, in my own private sound and light show.

The storm passed and the temperature soared as I rode towards Castro de Viladonga. It is smaller than Lansbrica, but more widely excavated. People have occupied the site since the Bronze Age, but what we see today was built after the Roman conquest, which is intriguing. I have seen Roman remains all over Europe and this is nothing like them, with one exception; rectangular buildings appear like a well-defended Iron Age hillfort from one of the Celtic regions.

Climbing onto its inner wall you can see the land for miles around. It is more intensively farmed here than around Lansbrica, but nature still makes its presence felt. A pine marten crossed my path on the way, and I could hear the gentle hooting of a hoopoe in the distance.

Inside the small museum, the main exhibit features a fusion of Gallaico-Roman culture; the word ‘Celt’ is never mentioned. Some of the objects display a Roman influence but most of them look indigenous, including a Roman-era gold and silver torque.

I had one more place to visit before riding back to Santander; the small unremarkable village of Bretoña, which adds a curious footnote to the story of Celtic Galicia. As



the Romans withdrew from Britain, and the Saxon kingdoms pushed the Celtic Romano-Britons westward, many took to the seas. Some of them sailed to Galicia where they established an outpost of the Celtic church. Their leader, Bishop Maeloc, is recorded at a council of bishops in 567 AD. In addition, a few brief references confirm the presence of Bretones in this area, until medieval times.

A statue of Maeloc stands on a dry fountain in Bretoña’s main square. On one side he is a bishop, on the other side a warrior. A pair of storks were nesting on the tower of the village church, which was rebuilt in the 16th Century. Excavations have revealed the

foundations of an early medieval church beneath it, but all that remains above ground is a small plaque on the wall inside.

All the experts I spoke to were wary of the word ‘Celtic’, associating it with nationalist politics or pseudo-history. The modern definition of a Celtic nation is one where a Celtic language is spoken. On that basis, there is no case for including Galicia, but many Galicians clearly do feel a connection to the Celtic world, and I had read and seen enough to conclude that those connections are genuine.





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HERITAGE

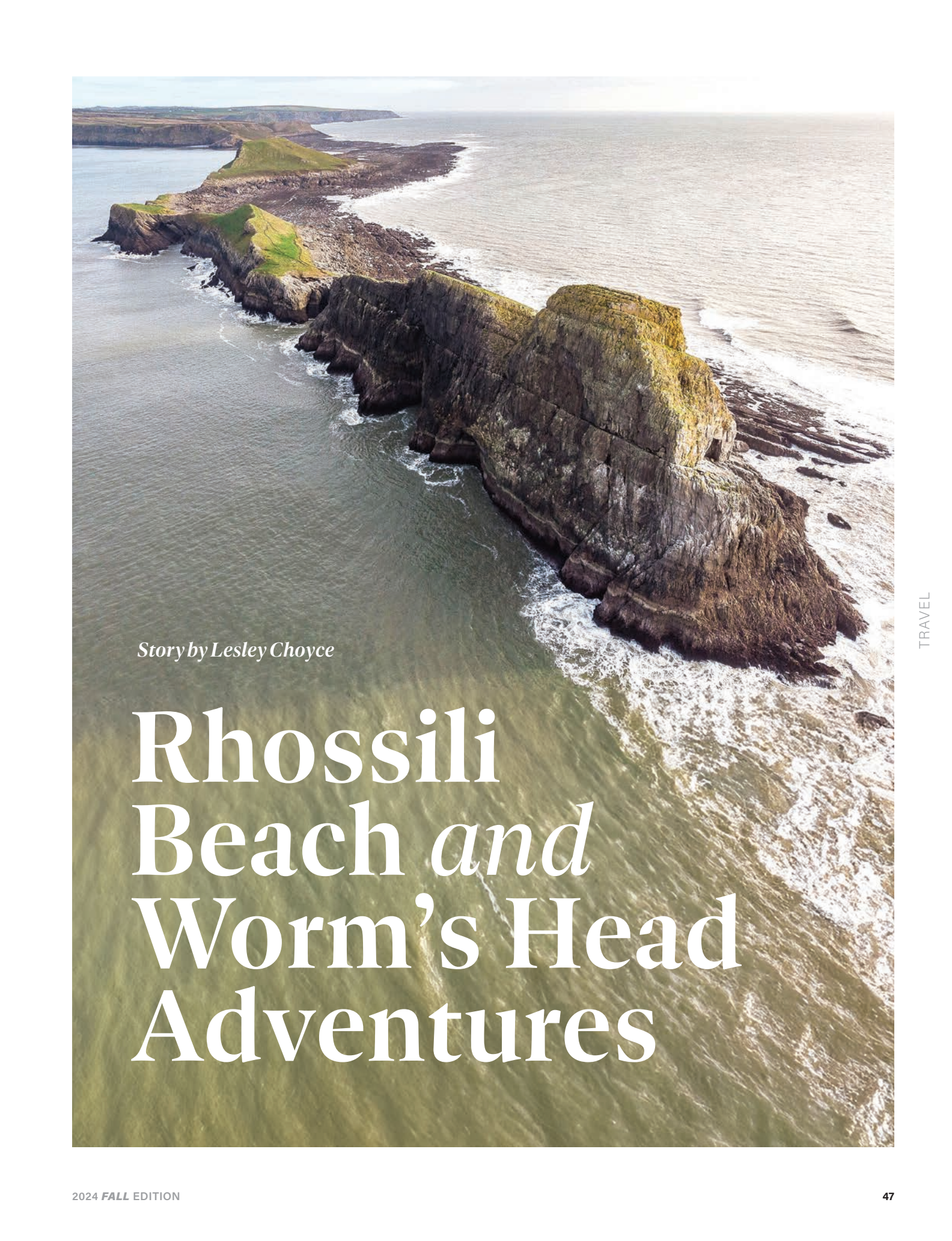
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An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. The image shows a series of dark, rocky cliffs and headlands jutting out into a greyish-blue sea. Patches of green grass are visible on the tops of some of the headlands. White foam from the waves is seen crashing against the base of the cliffs. The sky is a pale, overcast blue.

Story by Lesley Choyce

Rhossili Beach *and* Worm's Head Adventures

TRAVEL



Our desire to set foot on as many beaches and coastal paths of the world as possible led us to the Gower Peninsula of Wales late last year. Welsh beaches in winter are probably not at the top of the list for most sun-seekers, but the images planted in our heads of Rhossili, Oxwich Bay, and Rhossili Beach were enough to send us across the Atlantic from Nova Scotia once more.

Travel literature on Gower suggests that much of the coastline is “jaw dropping” - a most downright proper way to describe it. As a life-long surfer and coast-of-any-kind lover, I am continually amazed at how beaches, bays, and rugged stretches of shores across the U.K. can be so diverse and enticing. As Rhossili Beach appeared to be one of the grand daddies of them all, we drove there soon after our arrival.

My wife Linda was itching for a run and Rhossili is a solid three-mile stretch of sand, so we headed west across the length of the peninsula through Kittle and Penmaen, before deking up some narrow, twisty back roads through Reynoldston, Fairhill, Burry Green, and onward until the road ended in the appropriately named Hillend and we

knew we were there.

We could see the unmistakable cliffs of famous Worm’s Head to the south but would save that for another day when the tide was low and the wind was lesser. We abandoned the car and tromped down the massive dunes. Down on the beach at Rhossili it was wonderfully windy and wild, and Linda convinced me it would only make her morning run “more exhilarating.” I hiked while she ran head-on into a freshening Atlantic gale. I could see the rain clouds out to sea bearing down on us as if, on cue, they had taken note of our arrival and were soon to come ashore to greet us. When the rain arrived, the wind torqued up a notch or two, long enough to drench both of us and make me fantasize about a possible afternoon tucked into a warm Welsh pub by a fireplace as I drank a Gower Gold beer fresh from the tap.

The best thing about running or hiking directly into the wind is that, when you turn around, the wind is to your back. We were both ruddy faced by then, reminding me why so many hikers in the U.K. had those seemingly perpetually flushed faces. The rain soon gave up, realizing we would not be discouraged or disappointed in any way. How could

we? This long stretch of sand was just too impressive.

I realize that I am slipping into superlatives about this place, but I’m not alone. No am I quite as creative as some others; voters on TripAdvisor picked it as “Britain’s best beach,” while The Independent labelled it “The supermodel of British beaches,” and The Times touted it as “The UK’s Number 1 dog-friendly beach.”

A Doctor Who episode was once shot on the beach here and, in the summer of 2011, nearly 400 folks stripped naked and jumped in the ocean setting a new world record for the number of people skinny dipping at one time.

“Clearly, many factors add up to Rhossili being a beach of legend.

Today, of course, there was not a single skinny dipper to be found within miles of here. However - and despite the daunting wind and rain - dog owners and their beasts were plentifully out and about. The canines were mostly long-limbed and loping on the hard-packed sand near the waterline. Occasionally they would throw themselves into

St. Cenydd Church - LLangennith



the waves for no apparent reason. It was mid-tide, so we didn't have the advantage of an even-wider expanse of sand to be found when the tide was out. But we had a remarkable morning of getting to know this grand place without the throngs that might be sun-worshipping here - slathered in sunscreen - in July and August.

On our drive away, we admired nearby Llangennith with its tidy village green and a historic church named for St. Cenydd. If we are to believe legends (and I often prefer to do just that, no matter how outrageous), the saintly Cenydd built himself a hermitage here - presumably, a quiet place to be alone for prolonged periods of time - a long, long time ago. Obscure references suggest that this was during the time of King Arthur. As a disabled child, Cenydd was placed in a cradle made of willow branches and launched into the River Loughor west of Llangennith. He must have drifted down the river and out into Carmarthen Bay before heading south all the

way to Worm's Head. Angels, seagulls, and something referred to as a "breast-shaped bell" helped him to survive. I know this does sound far-fetched. I can accept seagulls being helpful, and even angels, but am, admittedly, having a hard time with that unusually helpful bell.

Whatever the case, Cenydd grew up in this neck of the woods, became a good Christian hermit, and had one unlikely person to care for him - a servant/thief who liked to steal from other robbers. A travelling saint by the name of David came along in 545 AD and cured Cenydd of his infirmities. However, this did not go over well and Cenydd prayed to have his condition restored.

I'm not sure what Christian Welsh children would make of this story, or if there is some moral to be learned, but the folks of the Gower have clearly held the man in high regard for generations. In downtown Llangennith, the townsfolk and others from nearby caravan parks still celebrate a feast in Ce-

nydd's honour on July 5 each year involving the sharing of a dish known as "Whitepot" - dried fruit, sugar, flour and milk.

I'm not sure how this one-of-a-kind holy man met his demise, but his early edifice was wrecked by the Vikings in 986 AD. The church now standing there was built in the twelfth century. As elsewhere in the UK, it seems that those snarly Vikings really did a bang-up job of destroying significant buildings anywhere along the shores where they landed. They likely faced some serious opposition however, as the locals here have long had a reputation for being a tough bunch. Around the peninsula, they were known as "Llangenny Oxen" who were handy at salvaging whatever they could from shipwrecks, often duking it out with neighboring citizens who wanted to muscle in the wreckage racket.

Having run out of daylight, Linda and I retreated to our rental home, named Under Milkwood, in Mumbles where there was a very noisy alley cat that kept us up much of



the night. We were hoping for a less windy, less precipitous day to head back to our most desired destination, Worm's Head, but we gave up on that after studying the weather predictions and drove the peninsular length again, this time coming to the road's end just past Rhossili at the National Trust car park.

“In case you are wondering, the name of the headland comes from Old English: *wyrm* - meaning sea serpent.

Thus, that snaking body of land when fully above sea level appears like a serpent with a head at its furthest point seaward.

Up to that point of standing in the parking lot, I had not properly recognized the difference between a 'Near Gale' (32-38 mph), a 'Gale' (39-46 mph) and a 'Severe Gale' (47- 54 mph). But, since this was proving to be such a windy Welsh adventure, I had spent part of my near sleepless night study-

ing up on the Beaufort Wind Scale. I thought it might come in handy as I tried to report about weather conditions. Standing in the car park, watching other unwary tourists leaning at 45-degree angles into the stiff breeze, I was now fairly certain we were up against at least a Severe Gale. Clearly, it was not the best time to venture out onto the narrow steep Worm's Head headland.

The other issue was that there was no way we could safely hike out at low tide. During this week, both daily low tides would not even occur during daylight hours. Worm's Head is only accessible for a couple of hours either side of low tide and we'd been warned that attempting it any other time "could be fatal." None other than Dylan Thomas got stranded out there once and referred to it as "the very promontory of depression." In 2020, the local lifeboat lads had to rescue a group of university students who had timed their hike poorly. Suffice it to say, you needed your wits about you concerning tides, and in

our case, winds as well, to make the pilgrimage.

Nonetheless, we decided to lean into the increasing sea wind to get as close as we could. After indulging in the luxury of the heated National Trust washroom facility (they do get a gold star for that), we soldiered-on past the old Coast Guard station and several helpful warning signs about cliffs, tides, proper footwear, littering, and wild animals.

Well, the animals weren't completely wild. They were horses. Gower horses to be exact, but often referred to as ponies. According to Jessica's Nature Blog, "They are magnificent beasts, much heavier and hairier than the ponies you normally see." (I wasn't sure "hairier" was an actual word, but I now know it is.) The ponies didn't seem to mind the spitting rain that greeted us here or the abundance of moving air, nor did they mind us tramping across their dinner table. We knew better than to try to pet the beautiful

Gower Horses



beasts or disturb them in any way - apparently, more than a few visitors had done just that in recent year, and startled them enough that a few fell to their demise over the cliff.

The grass beneath their feet was brilliant green, and small hearty flowers still bloomed here in the cold. The sea below was wild and dramatic as it went about violently crashing on the cliffs. Rhossili Beach began below and stretched out its full three miles to the north. But here on the headland, we hiked as far as we could. The trail ended for us as it dropped down a pebbly path leading to the rugged rough stone causeway that was now completely underwater and swept over by the treacherous chaos of those angry, disorganized waves. The view was still marvelously otherworldly, and I closed my eyes and envisioned a soft summer day when one might casually wait for low tide and amble across the exposed sea floor and then up onto the

narrow headland before rambling onward to the tip a mile or so out into the water. But that would be for another trip, another day.

As historypoints.org points out, at the end of the last Ice Age, "Worm's Head was then a hill on a wide plain where animals such as woolly mammoth, wolf, hyena, and rhinoceros roamed. Human remains from circa 8,800 years ago have been recovered from a cave on Worm's Head."

There are caves out there carved from the Carboniferous limestone and at least one blowhole where those ambitious waves shoot compressed air and seawater up into the atmosphere like a Las Vegas fountain for a hikers' entertainment. As I write this, I remain jealous of both the summer hikers and the ancient humans who have spent some ecstatic inspiring moments at this stunning sacred spot.



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Style

Designers across the Celtic nations are shifting to sustainable style.

Story by Lillian Holt

Across the Celtic nations, fashion designers, creatives, retailers, and others in the style sector are shifting towards greater environmental and economic sustainability.

“Most small companies are trying to make changes to create more sustainable products and business solutions to help our planet,” says Belfast native Linzi Rooney, owner of Born and Bred, a gift and accessories company based in Northern Ireland. “With an ever-changing environment, you are forced to adapt your business - you have to listen to what the customer wants.”

Such a stance is a sign of the times. Firmly established within today’s business and social lexicon, “sustainability” has become the buzzword for many companies, large or small, whether out of true concern for the environment or merely seeking to placate the shifting consciousness of customers.

The term itself can be traced back to the early 1970s when it was mostly associated with pollution control. By 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission officially defined sustainability within an environmental, social, and economic framework as, “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

In the latter part of the 20th century, worldwide summits (starting with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972), and official protocols such as the Kyoto Accord, signed in 1997, were evidence of an increase in awareness of the impact of consumerism on people and the planet itself.

Over time, many larger corporations - in response to changing social mindsets and newly developed regulations - began to address sustainability within their policies, across many industries that included building and development, energy, technology, and eventually, the full spectrum of consumer goods.

Inevitably, the glaring ecology concerns within the fashion world would also come under scrutiny.

Sustainability has since evolved significantly within the fashion industry with many Celtic designers now considering how the planet and profits can be sustained equally.

Historically, the hippie counterculture that spurned the pervasive post-industrial consumerism of the 1960s was the first sign of changing habits on the horizon. Among them, most



Linzi Rooney

notably, was an increasing interest in previously used items found in thrift shops - originally perceived as an option reserved solely for those down on their financial luck - that gradually evolved into respect for recycling, as opposed to the stigma of second-hand.

Encouraged by the social and eco-consciousness of Millennials and Gen Z in particular, the self-defeating myths surrounding cast-off clothing were ultimately debunked, transforming vintage shops into treasure troves. One-of-a-kind gently used fashion finds began to function as the defiant answer to unattainable style standards reserved for the wealthy, and apparently, wasteful, one per cent.

“Sustainability continues to permeate the fashion evolution/revolution with its latest alteration - the slow fashion movement.”

Slow fashion goes beyond the mere favoring of recycled garments - instead demanding that designers and manufacturers amend their processes and resources to produce high-quality, long-lasting, timeless designs instead

of trendy seasonal pieces dumped into a landfill after a few months.

In 2007, an article by Kate Fletcher published in *The Ecologist* compared the emerging ethical fashion trend to the ‘slow food’ movement that encourages awareness and responsibility with its production and preparation, citing that similar, much-needed alternatives be applied to an increasingly disposable ‘fast fashion’ industry.

The collective obsession with acquiring cheaper and easily accessible ready-made clothes and accessories - often hastily manufactured on the sweat of struggling workers in disreputable conditions - placed a significant strain on ever-dwindling natural resources. Much like the industrial pollution concerns of earlier decades, the exploitation of people and the planet from the overuse of water, energy, toxic chemicals, and enormous textile waste, could no longer be sustained.

“The fashion industry contributes enormous amounts of carbon dioxide to our atmosphere and fast fashion items just aren’t designed to last,” explains Katy Collister, founder of Mama & Joey, an Isle of Man-based



Clare Campbell

company that offers sustainable maternity and breastfeeding-friendly clothing.

"I like to stock timeless styles that don't follow current trends, won't go out of fashion, and won't be thrown away in a few months."

Collister is among many within a growing trend of Celtic innovators moving towards slow fashion, with larger corporations having little choice but to follow suit as social and environmental issues eclipse economic concerns.

Eco-conscious brands like UK-based Stella McCartney, Pangaia, and Cornwall's Finisterre, have, by example alone, inadvertently pressured other manufacturers and retailers to step up sustainability practices and protocols that, if nothing else, have become the latest selling point with savvy and selective consumers.

It is not surprising, that with its long and ancient heritage as a people who revered nature and the land, slow fashion has caught on quickly with many Celtic companies.

Scotland, the heartland of wool production - recognized as one of the most sustainable sources of clothing on the planet - has been at the forefront of eco-friendly fashion using the

finest of natural materials to create long-lasting quality garments for hundreds of years. In addition, its heritage tweed has long been acknowledged as an iconic fashion material and one of the most environmentally friendly designs available.

Clare Campbell, founder of Prickly Thistle - a clothing company based in Scotland - employs a zero-waste policy using local natural fabrics to create made-to-measure clothing that is also made to last for years.

Yet, with timeless designs and long-lasting wear as a cornerstone of the slow fashion movement, how can any business, willing to uphold sustainability, sustain profits?

"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."

While admirable, such sentiments are not necessarily the bottom line for all business owners.

Anthony Burns, chief operating officer for Glasgow-based ACS Clothing, established in

1997, offers a more practical perspective.

"People and other organizations often assume that to be sustainable is going to cost money and reduce profits," he notes. "However, we have saved a lot of money by changing our processes."

“At the end of the day, the less you consume, the lower the cost...”

Such a commitment sets an example to other businesses with many companies now seeking to harmonize profits with shifting social norms.

"As sustainability became more widely spoken about over the last few years, we realized that ACS was in a position to enable large brands and retailers to introduce a circular fashion offering into their business model," adds Burns.

Evidence that a viable blueprint for circular fashion is currently being studied and structured by academics and entrepreneurs alike.

Nancy Bocken, Professor in Sustainable Business and Circular Economy at Maastricht University, Netherlands, identifies tangible profit drivers from her 2023 study of several slow fashion companies.

The results reveal a successful formula that encourages slower consumption that does not appear to slow down profits. Costs are recouped through more efficient production, and manufacturing is limited to a smaller, highly skilled team focused on creating a high quality and versatile finished product. Ultimately the refined process results in exceedingly high customer loyalty based on shared values in keeping with evolving social standards.

In addition, Bocken's study also cites that the UK fashion industry is "exceptionally well-positioned" to adopt slow fashion practices, and as the third largest market, a growth of 7.5 percent is projected over the next 5 years.

With consumers demanding more ethical fashion options, advancements in technology that enable everything from the reduction of environmental footprints to fabric innovations, combined with a shifting style narrative that is more mindful of consumption, the popularity of slow fashion is destined to be more than just a trend but an emerging standard that is sustainable.

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Jayne Pierson

World-renowned Welsh designer Jayne Pierson (Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Rhianna) recently launched her latest collection, 'Annwn' at London Fashion Week 2024. Based in 'woodlands dark and days bewitched', the work explores the rich heritage of Welsh mythology and the power of ritual and collective storytelling. For centuries, Wales has been seen as a land of magic, superstitions, and the supernatural. The 'Annwn' collection examines the history and persecution of over 200,000 women as witches across Europe in the Middle Ages. These wise women were healers, midwives, enchanters, soothsayers, and herbalists. With 'Annwn', those ancient wisdoms rise from the earth once again. Deeply rooted in Celtic history, 'Annwn' is a journey to an otherworld - the abode of Rhiannon, the goddess of rebirth, the moon, and fertility.

I was born in Swansea, Wales. After travelling around the US as a child, my family settled in Dallas, Texas. Following high school, I returned to Wales before relocating to London. I now live in west Wales.

My mum trained in fashion design at Llanelli Art School in Wales in the 1960s, and later worked for both Neiman Marcus and Saks. Interestingly, she also worked as a stylist for Lorimar Productions' iconic TV shows Dallas and Dynasty, which were both filmed just 10 minutes from my house in Texas.

My first career was in music; I was in a band (Gouge) in the 1990s. As we had very little money, I was always making

clothes for us to wear, buying from charity shops and re-creating different looks. Following my time in the band, other artists began asking me to design and make clothes and accessories for them and it all snowballed from there.

I returned to university and, after graduating, interned and worked as Design Assistant for both Alexander MacQueen and Vivienne Westwood - both geniuses in totally different ways and both amazing mentors.

When I started my brand, sustainability was at the very core of my ethos and values. Sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical practices remain at the forefront of our concerns.

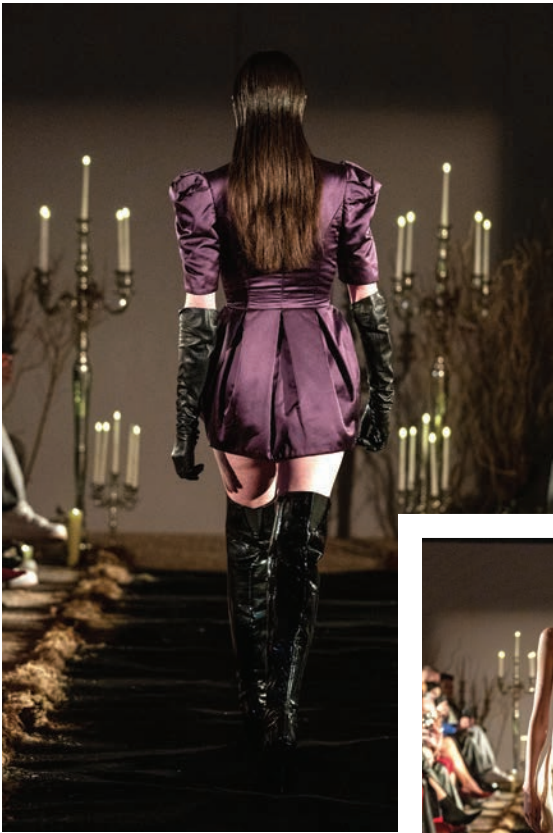
People tend to view the fashion industry as very glamorous, but the reality is that it is incredibly hard work. That said, the rewards of working with inspirational musicians, actresses, models, and wonderful creatives, including stylists, makeup artists, photographers, and others, makes it all worthwhile.

I have trained over 100 interns over the years, and it is my intention to start a Celtic Fashion Council to support emerging designers from the Celtic nations.

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SIGHTS

I grew up in north Dublin in a semi-detached home on Cedarwood Road, the second eldest of 10 children - 7 boys and 3 girls.

I now reside on the south side of Dublin with my partner Gabriella, with the Wicklow and Dublin Mountains to one side and the Irish Sea to the other.

As a young child - from the age of being able to hold a pencil - I was fascinated by the idea of being able to put a mark on a flat sheet of paper that would resemble a 3-dimensional object in the real world. I have always been fascinated by applying various media to flat surfaces: back in the day, it would have been any sheet of card or cardboard that I could find around - I never had a great supply of stuff when I was young, but I would spend endless hours drawing. As I got older, I began with watercolours and other media. I've always been fascinated by painting and drawing. I was never going to be anything else but a visual artist, as I was never particularly good

at anything else. I have said this before; artists are born, they're not made, and that is certainly the case in my situation.

I think the subject tends to choose me; a lot comes from early memories, and visual impressions from childhood and growing up - memories of shapes or surfaces of things that in some way affected me visually. And that became my vocabulary - common everyday objects of utility that I have worked with for decades: bowls, jugs spoons, vases, cups, and vessels of various kinds. Within that vocabulary, I am an instinctive painter - when I come across something by accident, and I know it is right, I go where the work takes me.

A great piece of art just bypasses the intellect - if it stuns you in some way, gets you straight in your chest, it's a 'wow' moment.

There are many rewards; completing a successful painting or drawing, seeing my work hung in a gallery and experienced by an audience...of course, when people love the work and want to own it allows me to pay the

bills and continue the cycle.

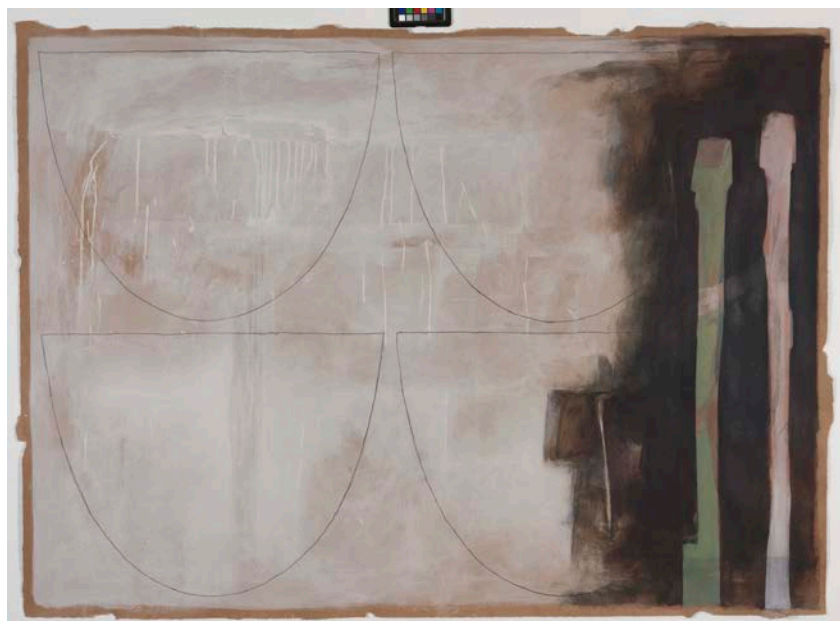
Before I started showing abroad, I enjoyed great encouragement from Irish people who supported me and collected my work. This allowed me to also take my work to an international audience, and the Irish abroad have been very supportive as well.

When things are moving well, my creative process feels inspirational. There are difficult times, also, and that is when it feels more like hard work. I never give up on a painting though - it is like having a difficult child; they might put you through the wars, but of course, you never give up on them.

Going forward, everything starts with my next piece of work - I am always aiming for it to be the best thing that I have done. More concretely, I am putting together a body of work - paintings, drawings, sculptures - for my next solo exhibition.

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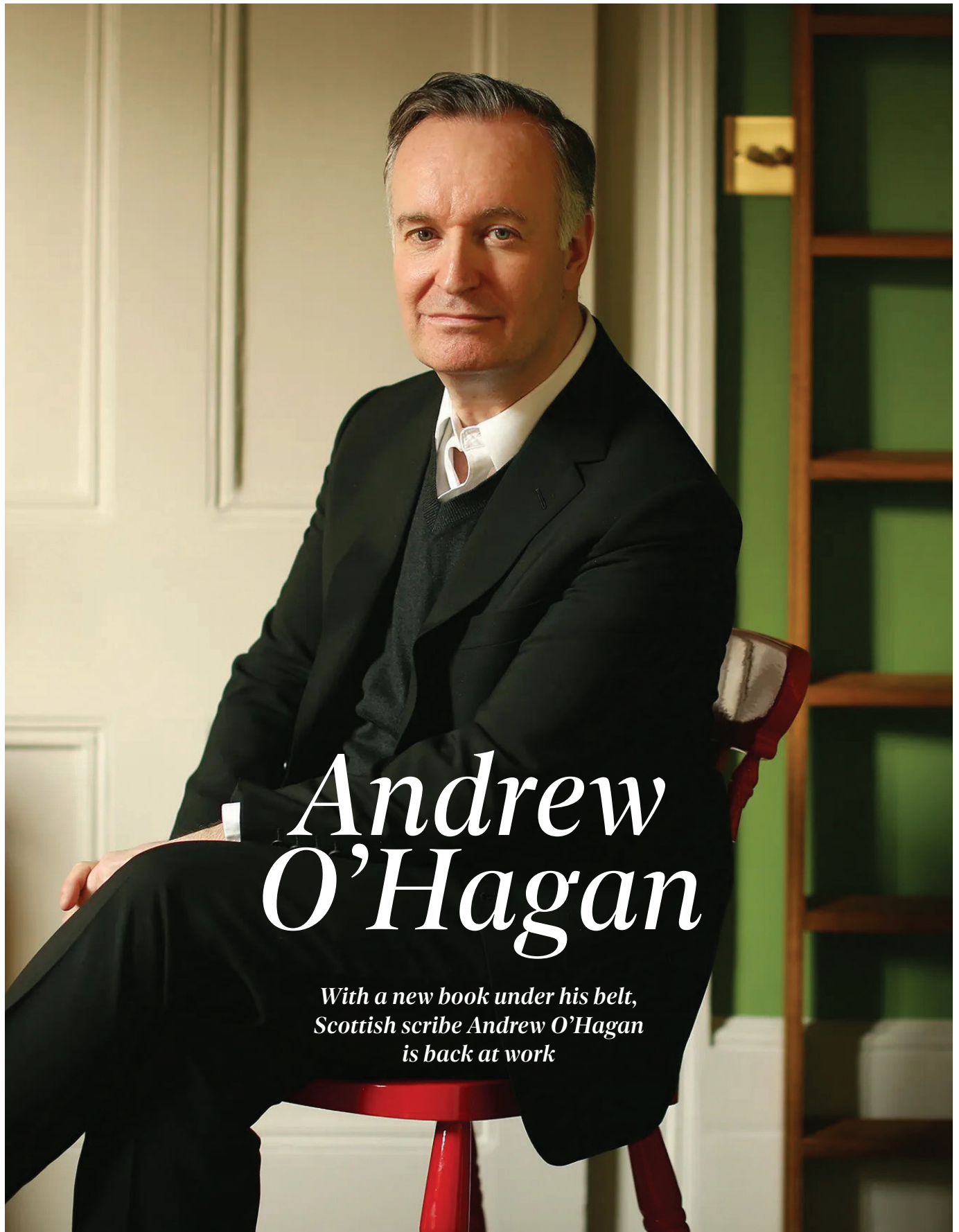


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Andrew O'Hagan

*With a new book under his belt,
Scottish scribe Andrew O'Hagan
is back at work*

It has been an eventful few months for Andrew O'Hagan.

Along with the release of his latest full-length work of fiction, *Caledonian Road*, the bestselling Scottish scribe revisited his writing roots this past July while covering the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee.

"Well, it was depressing, enthralling, and completely insane, as far as I could tell," he shares with Celtic Life International via Zoom. "I was there for the full period of the convention. I interviewed delegates and politicians from all over America and wrote a 7,000-word article for the *London Review of Books*."

Shrugging off his status as a foreign correspondent, O'Hagan is clear on the importance of the coming US election, both at home and abroad.

"America really is on the brink of something truly disastrous, with irresponsibility and hatred being foremost in the Trump campaign - attitudes that are also embodied by JD Vance. The venom coming from that campaign towards Kamala Harris is pronounced and reckless."

Harris, he notes, might be the better alternative.

"She is perfectly shaped to galvanize the anti-Trump groundswell, which is waiting to be tapped. Already there are signs that - even if people don't have a huge grasp of policy differences or political detail - what they know is that this felon is being confronted by a litigator, and the easy model arithmetic of the whole situation is becoming apparent to people; that four years of that man in a second term could mean danger internationally, disaster economically, and especially when it comes to women's bodies or the rights of migrants seeking a new life or protection in America. It could be the worst four years in post-war American history."

By turns, he notes, it could also be part of a trend back towards a more balanced global political agenda.

"Hatred and destruction and fascist tendencies are about to face real combat - almost superhero levels of combat - across the world, as the more agreeable, tolerant,



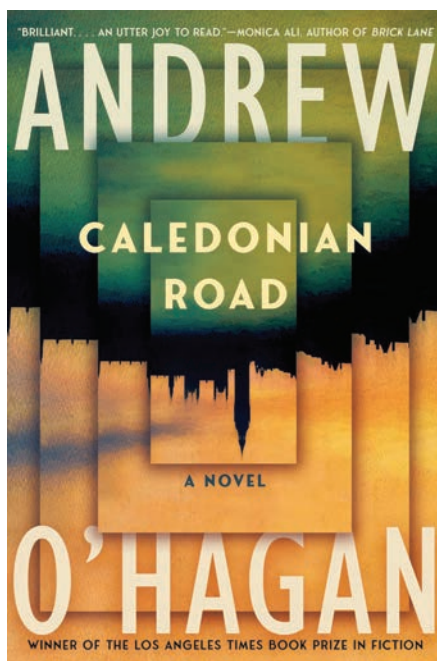
civic-minded, free-loving human beings are going to fight back. That's what we see in the Harris campaign. I think it's what we see here in the U.K., and we're seeing it elsewhere in Europe. We saw a quickly organized association of political forces in France opposing the right-wing populist candidate. There is a power of resistance that has been ever too dormant, and it will rise up in the face of the straightforward dismantling of government norms, institutions, decencies, human rights, medical rights women have over their own bodies, etc. The question will be, do we have

clear thinking, strong leadership, and the will to overcome? That's always the question."

The answer, he believes, must arise from within.

"People have a decency thermostat inside them, and when the heat gets too high, it simply clicks. We have an almost-automatic response to unfairness. And I know that goes against the dark picture of the kind of Hobbsian view of human nature, that the life of man is nasty, brutish, and short. I don't happen to agree with that. Over the 56 years I've been on Earth, what I've witnessed is great extremities of savagery and lack of fellow feeling. However, it has always met with equal and opposite resistance. It will be astonishing if Donald Trump, with an agenda such as he's promoting today, is able to win a second term in the White House with all the warnings that have been expressed with the man, a convicted felon, with his views on the international scene so unstable and so extreme, it would be a sign of something going deeply wrong in the body politic. I'm not sure that even America can go there, but it has never been closer."

Politics, he notes, often shows up in his work, even unconsciously.



“The great ideal with a novel is the story, the idea that the drama really unfolds inside the lives of the characters...”



“Sometimes that means inside their home life, or inside the intellectual or emotional life of the characters, the psychological dimensions. How they change across their lives is political - absorbing and responding to political change around them. I feel that Caledonian Road, if read in 50 years time, will offer not just a portrait of the developing lives of these characters and their secret associations and dramas within families and institutions, but also it will show you what it was like to live in that society. Society has been shaped, especially over the last 15 to 20 years, by maligned political forces and abuse of the rule of law – all to protect the interests of the rich over working people - tax breaks, ‘golden visas’ for corrupt oligarchs. I mean, London has become a modern day Casablanca, where rich, corrupt people can park their money very easily. This all happened during the last couple of decades - while services were being cut, while austerity was being imposed on ordinary everyday people, while libraries were being closed, while world health services were becoming diminished. That’s the story of the background to the book. That’s the black backing in the mirror, which allows

us to see the characters’ faces.”

O’Hagan says that the process of piecing the new narrative together was both challenging and rewarding at once.

“All these decades later I am still surprised that there is as much graft now - research, detailed engagement with sources and material, and preparation - as there was when I was 24 and writing my first book. I have been in this game 30 years now - it doesn’t get any easier, but it gets more glorious in the sense that you have readers across the world who’re waiting for a book. Each production is not something that just lives an isolated life in your head - it is for them.”

So far, response from both readers and critics has been overwhelming.

“It has been incredible - a career highlight for sure. When you have worked for a long time on a 700-page book like this - and it feels like it was almost too private for words - there are moments along the way where you wonder if you are the only one who finds it engaging and involving. However, it appears to be my biggest selling book ever - it went to number one in the U.K. and has been in the top 10 for weeks.”

It is, he admits, reassuring.

“***It has given me this huge sense that there are still readers out there who want to enter the inner drama of the times that we are living through...***”

“It is heartening to see that there are readers who still believe in strong characters, in journeying through a book with a family, with a community, with a pride, with a whole society from top to bottom, and who enjoy a Victorian-style novel in 2024. That comes as an enormous pleasure - and, of course, a relief!”

Not one to rest on his literary laurels, O’Hagan is right back to writing.

“Something has happened that has never happened before, which is that I am writing two books at the same time - and they are informing each other in a way that is utterly crucial. One of them is a novel set in 1979, and the other is a first volume of memoirs about my childhood. The reason that I am writing them together is because they are in conversation with each other. I hope to publish them close together. One is unashamedly a novel with fictional characters, looking at the shadow of the Irish Troubles falling over the West Coast of Scotland in the 1970s, and the traffic across the Irish Sea, of people’s attitudes and guns – that was all a big part of my childhood. Therefore, work straight from this novel, I suddenly saw that opening up right next to me at the desk, next to me on a separate typewriter, with a memoir - after 50 years of growing up in the house that I grew up in.

“When you are swimming as a writer, you are only really swimming when you stop looking back at the shore, when you stop looking for safety. These two books are brand new material, brand new territory for me, and I am enjoying getting sucked in.”

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Kevin Barry

Kevin Barry is the author of the novels *Night Boat to Tangier*, *Beatlebone*, and *City of Bohane*, as well as three story collections including *That Old Country Music*. His stories and essays have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Granta* and elsewhere. Recently we spoke with the Irish scribe from his home in County Sligo on Eire's west coast about his latest work, *The Heart in Winter*.

Why did you want to be a writer in the first place?

I do think it's genuinely vocational. It is a calling - kind of an insistence in an annoying way. I think a lot of people have the impulse to write poems or otherwise as teenagers, and a lot of people managed to get past that.

They grow up.

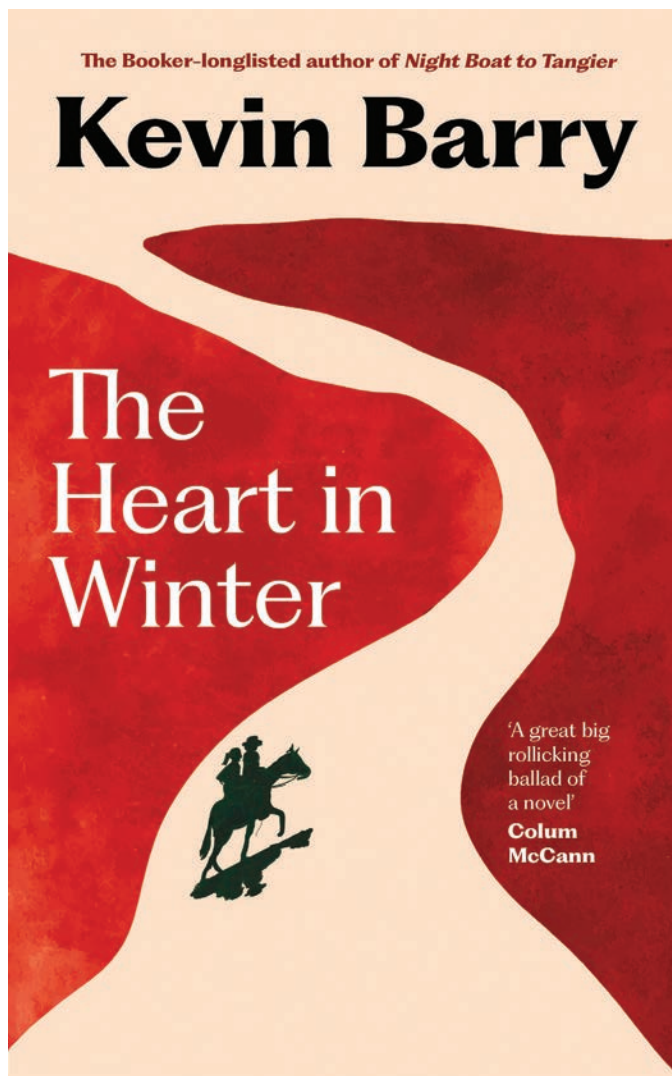
But some of us don't. Some of us persist. It was a classic kind of situation as a kid in school, I was always told I had a fluent writing style in my little essays and whatnot. I kind of I knew I sounded like myself on the page from a very young age, and I knew my personality transmitted onto the page in some way. When you have that, it helps...as writers tend to be not very good for anything else. I was always inclined, however I didn't get fully serious about it, I guess, until even now. I was working as a journalist and I didn't get fully serious about writing fiction until I was well into my 20s. I had the impulse, but not discipline. The discipline took a while.

Journalism is a great field for discipline.

A journalistic background for fiction writers used to be very common, and now it's quite rare, because fiction writers do MFAs and whatnot. I have never been near a writing workshop in my life, except when I was giving one. One thing journalism does as a background, however, is that it takes a lot of the preciousness out of writing. You can always do it regardless of where or what time of day it is, or what kind of condition you are in, or what is going on in your life. You can always get words down on the page. It fosters something good and pragmatic in somebody who wants to write books, because most of the time when you are writing fiction, it is not going very well - in fact, most of the time it is going badly. You just have to have that really stubborn streak that makes you hang in there when you'd rather be doing anything else.

It really is a type of madness.

For anyone who writes, you are all different - you are many different types of a writer at the same time. It is very interesting to approach your practice as a writer in a kind of investigative way and try different things all the time. You mentioned *Night Boat to Tangier*. That was my nighttime book, the book I wrote in the middle of the night because I was going through a period of insomnia, and I just wasn't sleeping very well. I thought, if I am not sleeping - screw it, I'll just get up and go on the night shift. I will sleep in the morning. And it kind of worked a while. But it gave the book a kind of velvety, nocturnal feeling, I thought. That story would have been very different if I had told it in the morning time. Writers can sometimes get into a kind of a fixed routine or habit, and this worked for my last story. So, I brought about this story in the same way. But it's a really good idea to mix up your practice. What I really like about sometimes collaborating with artists and other fields like visual artists or musicians or whatever is I think they're more inclined to investigate their own way of doing things, to investigate their practice more than writers are. It's a good idea to try and keep switching it up and trying different things. Your own stories and themes will always be the same ones that keep coming out, but it can be good to try and approach them in different ways.



There's a certain architecture to what you're doing.

Yes - with the novels. And, over time, you become more adept at the basic engineering. Often, you find writers' fourth, fifth, and sixth novels to be where they are really hitting their stride. There's a lot of basic building engineering - scaffolding kind of work - they have to learn about novels; how much you can take away, so you become more adept. I think it's very important to be suspicious of your skills as well. If you suddenly feel like you have real facility and you can do this easily, it should never feel easy. It's like David Bowie said: a great thing with any new artistic project, you should always feel like you've gone into the sea and you're just out of your depth. You're just a foot or two out of your depth, and ground isn't far away, but you can't quite feel it. There should be a little element of danger, an element of, "I don't know what the hell I am doing here." Because if there isn't, you're not going to surprise yourself in any way. And surprise is a great energy giver. What's important for me with any story, novel, or whatever it is, is to have a sense of where it is. The setting; a strong sense of the geography, and to have a vague sense of a destination, where it's going. But I don't want anything in the middle. I don't know anything.



What is your creative process like?

The fundamental thing, the number one thing, is showing up. It's being there. So, I am always in the vicinity of my desk, which is out in an old building up at the back of the house, for eight or nine hours a day. I am not in there writing all that time, but I'm there. I'm available, if it strikes. I'm always in there for an hour or two, often first thing in the morning - you're still getting some of the stuff from your dreams...still in that kind of half-world, in between sleeping and waking, and you are open to positive suggestions. So I tried to get to the desk as quick as possible in the morning. You're never afraid to embarrass yourself first thing - you're not too careful. When you are fully awake and alert, the guards are up again - you are kind of watching yourself and trying to make stuff on the page at some level sound impressive and cool. But first thing in the morning, those filters aren't there. You just go to it straight away - grab your coffee or cup of tea and get to the page or the laptop screen and just go see what comes out. You can tidy it and fix it later.

So, being creative on different levels of consciousness?

Writing fiction is an esoteric business because most of it isn't

really going on in the front of the brain, the conscious part. Most of what's going on is in the unconscious. It comes from the same place as dreaming. You're operating with the same part of the brain. It's effortless when we're dreaming, those scenes present themselves, the dialogue presents itself, and it's unimprovable. But to do that in your waking hours is kind of the goal - to go to that subconscious place. Your story is sorting itself and preparing itself all the time once you're committed to it. And that commitment is very important. I remember when I finally and fully committed to writing - it was August 13th, 1999. I was on a cliff in County Cork. I was walking out, and I had been writing bits and pieces of fiction, but I kind of stopped in my stride and said, are you serious? Are you really going to do this? Is it going to be the most important thing in your life? Are you going to give all your effort to it? And I said, hell yeah, I am.

What was the process like for *A Heart in Winter*?

It came from that same part of the County Cork coast in the late 1990s, that same summer. I was kind of shopping around for something to write a novel about, and came across these old, abandoned copper mines in West Cork. I read up about them and discovered that all the miners had gone to Butte, Montana. Subsequently, I thought, I've got to go to Butte, Montana. This is a great setup for a novel. But I went there and wrote 120,000 words, and it just wasn't there. I didn't have the characters yet. I forgot all about it, but all the while it was sitting somewhere back in my own conscious. Then, in late 2021, I was walking through the woods one day and I had a kind of a picture in my mind of a young couple riding double on a horse, and I thought, there they are. Those are the characters for that novel from a quarter of a century ago. They are just runaway lovers - it's a really simple story. I had it, but sometimes it's just a waiting game and you have to wait long enough. Any writer will tell you that there are always abandoned stories and abandoned projects, but they are never fully abandoned. They're always there, somewhere in the back of your mind, just waiting for that little spark that's going to set the hay shed on fire, that's going to let it suddenly take off. And I probably have lots more things waiting back there that that might come out yet - or may not. The terrifying and wonderful thing about literary inspiration is that you never know when it's going to hit, and it could hit at any minute. And the terrifying thing is, it might never happen again. You never know if this story you're writing is the last good one you get. So, you just have to have faith in it, and in your process, and the skills you've picked up, and try and make your own little world by being true to it - being true to the idea of making up these crazy stories, saying this is of value, putting it out to the world, and see if people will get something out of that.

Is that why you still write?

The great thing about writing fiction is that it gives you the chance to live life twice. All that youthful endeavour wasn't wasted. And all those fuzzy, kind of naughty years where you didn't know your arse from your elbow, none of it is wasted. It's all there. That's your material.

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Marian Keyes' Favourite Mistake

Story by Stephen Patrick Clare



Marian Keyes isn't one for numbers.

"Is it 16?" she asks with a giggle. "I've written 16 books? Really? Now I really feel old."

Joking aside, the 61-year-old Irish scribe is going stronger than ever these days.

"I've had a good run at writing over the past while," she shares via Zoom from her home on the Emerald Isle. "I was really happy with the new book, so I am enjoying time away from it, doing and seeing things in a new and different way."

At 61, the award-winning Irish author has reason to feel good; adding to an array of past accolades, awards and accomplishments, her latest narrative - *My Favourite Mistake* - has made multiple bestseller lists since being published a few months back.

The story spans familiar territory for Keyes, as she brings us back into the world of the Walsh sisters - in this case, Anna, a PR executive in New York who is transitioning back to a quieter life in Ireland amidst a plenitude of personal and professional changes.

"I addressed several issues that impact women who are over 40. Many of my readers are of that demographic and are passing through a point in their lives where they are questioning who they are, where they are from, and where they are going - like Anna. I mean, you get to a certain age and the priorities are different, especially now when so many of us are searching for greater meaning in our daily lives."

She notes that her own self-described "spiritual journey" of the last 30 years continues to inform her writing.

"It is largely unconscious, I believe, and it has been mostly in the last ten years. I've picked up these little life lessons that I managed to work into my books; that people don't exist as absolutes; that there is bad in the best of us and good in the worst of us. My characters now reside in more of a moral and spiritual grey area, perhaps as things are no longer as black and white as they once were. They are far more nuanced.

"My earlier work was centered in large part around love stories," she continues "And my approach to men, or my male characters, was that they were either rats or saviours. Of course, being older and supposedly wiser, and



having been married for some time, I realized that is a shallow and immature perspective."

Like her Emerald Island peers, Keyes comes by her tale-telling honestly.

“I’m Irish. I am a storyteller - it’s what we do. I am proud to be a storyteller, and I feel that I have become better at it over time.”

Make no mistake, however - her writing is absolutely rooted in the country's grand oral tradition.

"There are many reasons why the Irish are so good at spinning a yarn. For centuries here, the political and cultural landscape was stripped away from us; we weren't allowed to speak our language and it was illegal to own land, or to have a profession, or to practice our religion. All we had left were words and music. And English is spoken and written differently in Ireland because we have a different linguistic foundation. We have the same words that are used in Anglo-English, but Hibernian-English is constructed very dif-

ferently - sentences sound back to front, and they can sometimes sound illogical. But our words make sense to us, so that is why they are so valuable, and why we are well-known for our colourful use of them."

Her own creative process can be quite colourful.

"It is mostly a couple of sparks of inspiration, and then the rest of it is work. And it takes a huge amount of work to create a single character and build a world around them. I usually start with one person and then try out different things and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. When it doesn't it is painful, but I keep at it and hang on. To be honest, a lot of the time I don't really know what I am doing until I know - an awful lot of it is done with uncertainty. But I trust that if I just keep plugging away at it and continue to put in the hours that it will all turn out ok."

Her reasons for writing today are not far removed from why she first put pen to paper.

"It came from my wounds," she shares. "It was my way of understanding and dealing with reality. Even now I find the world of my



writing is a nice place to escape to. There are times, especially with this book, when I was filled with happiness and gratitude just from the act of writing itself.”

As such, the process proved to be therapeutic.

“Like anyone, I am a work in progress and still dealing with my inner stuff,” she says. “It is mostly shame, guilt, and fear. I have just learned to turn the volume on those things way down. And when they come now, I am much more aware of them and I know how

to better mind myself - how to not act out in them, I mean. I now have the tools to deal with them and with my feelings.”

In that way, Keyes - like her characters - is relatable.

“Most people out there walking around are carrying something quite substantial - a weight or heaviness. And let’s be honest here - if a person isn’t carrying some sort of emotional or mental baggage around with them by the time they hit 40 or 50 years of age, then they simply haven’t been living.”

WWW.MARIANKEYES.COM

‘Warm-hearted, witty and fearless’
Daily Mail

Marian Keyes

My Favourite Mistake



As such, she hopes that her writing will continue to resonate with readers for years to come.

“I have always wanted my books to be like Trojan Horses - yes, they may seem a bit fluffy or whatnot at times, especially the romance stuff, but there are always hidden layers at play - deeper meanings and messages that will, hopefully, have a positive impact on someone’s life. I mean, ultimately, that is the role of the writer and the artist in society; to reflect their times and to help people better understand and deal with their reality.”

Interestingly, Keyes’ reality might look a little different going forward.

“In a strange set of circumstances, I am doing something entirely different - I am giving myself a year off to go back to school to study interior design. Anytime that I have taken other breaks from books, I have done something new like painting or upcycling. Interior design is quite interesting, but it is not what I expected at all. It is very technical, with lots of technical drawing. But I am beyond delighted to be learning to see space, light, colour, texture and perspective in a new and different way.”

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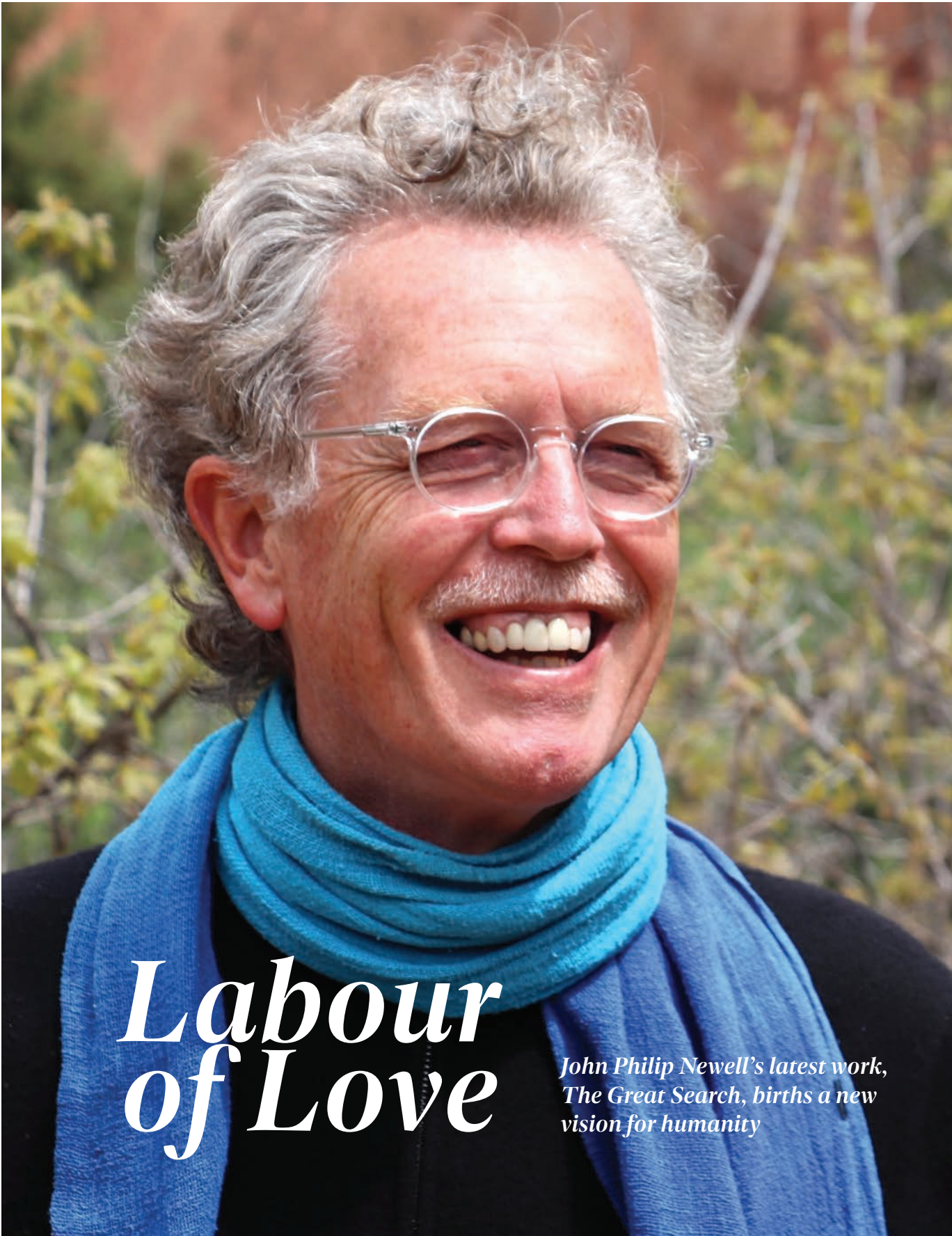
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Labour of Love

*John Philip Newell's latest work,
The Great Search, births a new
vision for humanity*

Spiritual leader and bestselling author John Philip Newell is all smiles.

"Well, for one thing, I woke up this morning, opened my eyes, and took a breath," he chuckles via a Zoom call with Celtic Life International. "So, there is that to be grateful for."

"Gratitude is essential," he continues. "An appreciation for who we are and the world around us can be infectious. Attitude is vital also, especially today when everything seems so dark and despaired."

A 'wandering teacher' with 'the heart of a Celtic bard and the mind of a Celtic scholar', Newell believes that much of that despondency comes from the decline of formalized religion over the last two centuries.

"In a place like Scotland - and Scotland is not that unlike most other Western countries, we are in a state of seismic collapse of religion as we have traditionally known it - certainly, beyond what I imagined the speed of the decline would be. And while religion is in this enormous and rapid collapse, I continue to believe that the real essence of our religious inheritance can find new form - a resurrection, if you will. And I don't mean resuscitation - like making Christianity great again or trying to hang onto what was - but rather a new vision for Christianity."

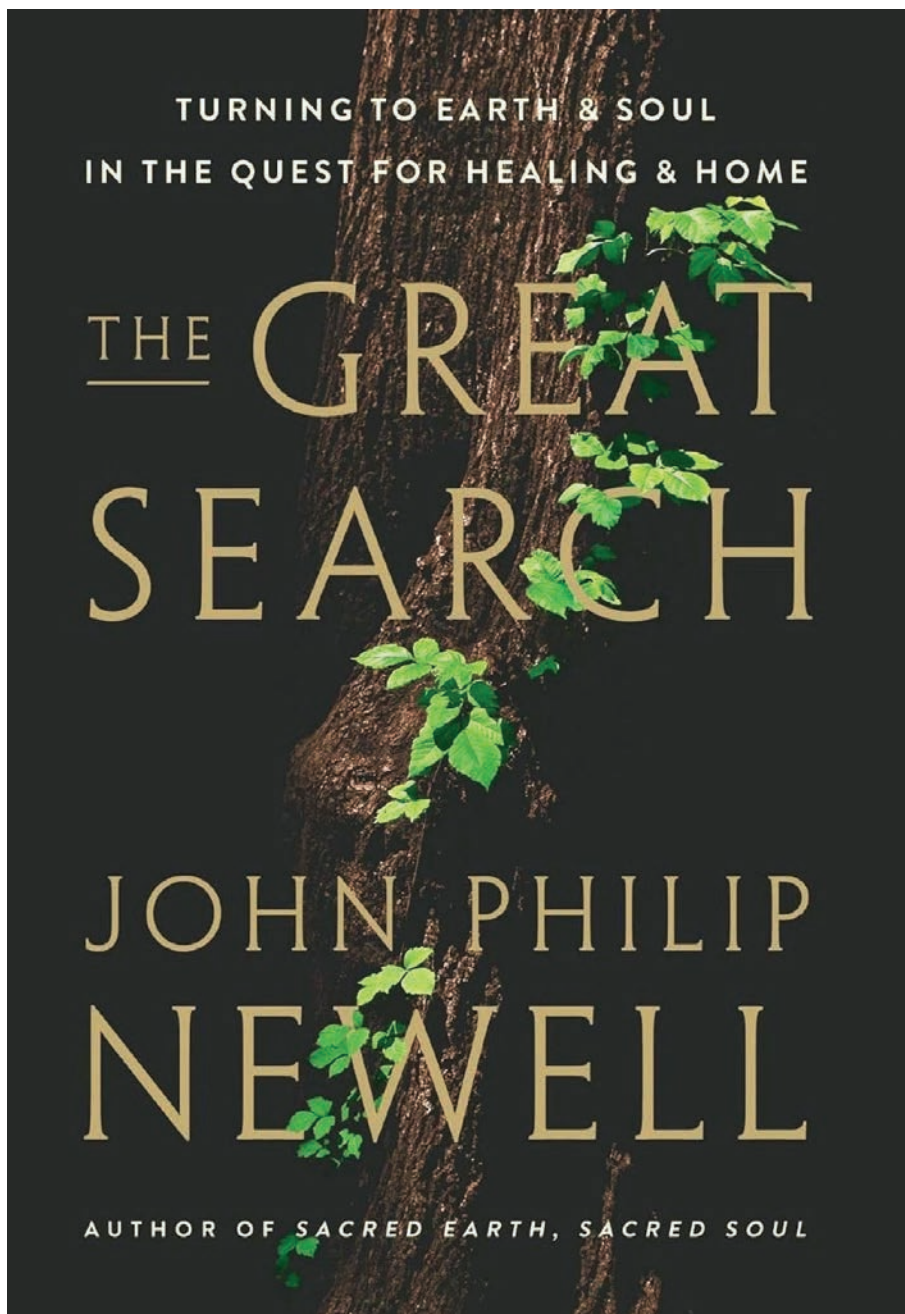
He believes that when something dies it is human nature to look out for the next thing.

"One of the metaphors that (psychoanalyst) Carl Jung uses to describe religion is that it is like trying to take a photograph of a flowing river. We see the still image and say, "That's God" - instead seeing that the flow is going to change course in ways that we don't know anything about."

“So, as a species, are we prepared to dive into the flow and know the divine deep within us? Do we know that we can't systematize it?”

"I continue to believe that there can be a resurrection of the essential vision of any great religion. In the case of Christianity, that essential vision, or the heart of the vision, is about love - about loving one another. It's about loving our true essence and it's about loving every life form."

Despite the many signs of spiritual awak-



ening, Newell notes that there are still rude awakenings to overcome.

"Within our cultures, religions, and political systems, fundamentalism always rears its ugly head, especially during times of great transition and change. We saw it in the 19th century, in the wake of evolutionary thought and higher literary criticism. And, in response, fundamentalism within Christianity, and Biblical literalism, came to the fore like it had never done before. So, while our political, cultural, and religious systems may get all the headlines

these days, I believe that it is because it is a reaction to something deeper within us that is trying to be born. We are waking up in every great discipline of thought. We are waking up to the reality that our well-being is absolutely tied to Earth - that our well-being is interrelated, and that one part cannot be well if the whole is neglected. Interestingly, (modern philosopher) Thomas Berry spoke of this moment as being one of grace, meaning that we are seeing the interrelatedness of all things like we've never done before."



“That said,” he continues, “we are still very much in-between who we were and who we are meant to be. The good thing about confusion is that it means there is something that we are about to learn.”

The new book, he says, was born from his desire to connect with others.

“My experience with individuals, groups, and pilgrims across the Western world is that this is a time of tremendous searching. And because many of us are sensing in our souls that something new - something so challenging to how we have lived, how we have compartmentalized one another as nations, religions, and peoples - something much deeper than that is trying to come forth. Thus, many of us are in exile from our religious inheritance because, for the most part, our religious traditions are not nurturing that sense of earth connection or interrelatedness.”

Newell notes that, as a species, we are “recovering” a deeper “knowing” of our truest nature.

“So many of us have been reared in a society, in a religion, that has had a hierarchy of truth in which we’ve been given the impression that we are essentially ignorant, and we need to be told what to do, or we need to be

told that certain propositional statements about the divine are true, and I think many of us are knowing a profound liberation from that system of hierarchical truth.

“On the other hand, precisely because the old hierarchy is collapsing, a hierarchy of truth, there’s a shadow side that says, ‘I know what is true. You don’t have to tell me.’ We see that coming to the fore politically in a country like America at the moment. Anything that one doesn’t like, one can say, ‘That’s fake news.’

“In this time of transition, we are in a very vulnerable place. To reidentify the authority of the soul is a liberating thing, but also challenging...”

“We need one another in that quest for a new sense of inner authority. And it is not just a matter of subjectively going for whatever is convenient to one’s own success or well-being. A deep inner authority of soul interwoven with the sense of interrelatedness is going to be the way forward.”

So how do we nurture ourselves, and thus one another?

“The world of authority is crumbling. The thing is, they have often appealed to reason, and to scientific knowing - both of which are ways of knowing; to access our capacity for reason and to scientifically know. However, that is to neglect the whole realm of the intuitive and the imaginative. Artists, musicians, and dancers are much more in tune with an intuitive, imaginative source of knowing. We have often treated the realm of the imagination almost as if it is fantasy, as if the imagination takes us away from reality. But I believe the imagination is a faculty that can take us more deeply into reality. Think of a great scientist like Einstein. His theory of relativity, it came from the imagination, and then it has only been, in a sense, scientifically proven to be a theory that we should stand by. But here is sort of a leap forward in a sense, into seeing the interrelatedness and relativity of all things, and it was essentially an intuitive and imaginative leap. I think similarly, we’re being invited to imagine a new way of being and living - a way that, hopefully, will put a smile on everyone’s face.”

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New Voices



FEATURE STORY

Twenty dynamic and exciting Irish fiction authors feature in a new initiative from the An Post Irish Book Awards called New Voices 20 Best New Irish Writers.

Focused on showcasing a new generation of Irish writers who are reshaping the literary landscape with their fresh perspectives and captivating storytelling, the list was curated through nominations from publishers, booksellers, and librarians nationwide. This new wave of Irish writers is

infusing the literary landscape with vibrant voices that blend tradition with modernity. Their sharp, insightful prose has garnered much acclaim, resonating with both Irish and global audiences. This new literary talent is not only preserving Ireland's rich storytelling heritage, but also pushing its boundaries, making contemporary Irish literature even more dynamic and globally relevant than ever before.

The nominated authors could be working in any genre of fiction, must

have had no more than two books published over the past decade, and be Irish by birth, citizenship or long-term residence. A panel of literary experts then selected the 20 authors, highlighting some of the most exciting new talents in contemporary literature.

The list, of which there is no overall winner, will also be promoted nationwide in bookshops and libraries during September to celebrate the 20 authors ahead of the An Post Irish Book Awards 2024 campaign.

The 20 authors feature



Aingeala Flannery

Aingeala Flannery is a writer and broadcaster. Her critically acclaimed debut novel *The Amusements* was published by Penguin Sandycove in 2022. She is also the current writer-in-residence at Dublin City University.

Alan Murrin

Alan Murrin is an Irish fiction writer based in Berlin. In 2021 he was the winner of the Bournemouth Writing Prize for his short story *The Wake*, which was later shortlisted for Short Story of the Year at the Irish Book Awards. He is a graduate of the prose fiction masters at the University of East Anglia and writes for the *Irish Times*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *Spectator*.

Cathy Sweeney

Cathy Sweeney is a writer living in Ireland. Her short fiction has been published in the *Stinging Fly*, the *Dublin Review*, *Egress*, *Winter Papers*, *Banshee* and the *Tangerine*, and has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Her debut short story collection, *Modern Times*, was published in 2020.

Catriona Lally

Catriona Lally is the recipient of the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature (2018) and a Lannan Fellowship for Fiction (2019). In October 2021, she was announced as the inaugural Rooney Writer Fellow at Trinity Long Room Hub. Her first novel, *Eggshells*, was

shortlisted for Newcomer of the Year at the Irish Book Awards in 2015. *Wunderland*, her second novel, was published by New Island Books in 2021.

Claire Coughlan

Claire Coughlan worked as a journalist in Ireland for many years. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from UCD and lives in Co Kildare with her husband and daughter. *Where They Lie* is her debut novel.

Colin Walsh

Colin Walsh's short stories have won several awards including the RTE Francis MacManus Short Story Prize and the Hennessy Literary Award. In 2019 he was named Hennessy New Irish Writer of the Year. *Kala* is his first novel and was a number one bestseller. He is from Galway and lives in Belgium.



Disha Bose

Disha Bose was born and raised in India, and has lived in Calcutta, London, and Dublin. She worked in the tech industry before joining the Masters in creative writing program at University College Dublin. She now lives in Cork, Ireland. *Dirty Laundry* is her debut novel.

Ferdia Lennon

Ferdia Lennon was born in Dublin to an Irish mother and Libyan father. He holds a BA in History and Classics from University College

Dublin and an MA in Prose Fiction from the University of East Anglia. In 2019 and 2021, he received a Literature Bursary Award from the Arts Council of Ireland. After spending many years in Paris, he now lives in Norwich with his wife and son.

Fiona Scarlett

Fiona Scarlett is from Dublin but now lives in Co. Kildare with her husband and two children. She holds an MLitt in creative writing from the University of Glasgow as well as a masters in early childhood education. She works full time as a primary school teacher and *Boys Don't Cry* is her debut novel.

Louise Kennedy

Louise Kennedy grew up a few miles from Belfast. She is the author of the Women's Prize Longlisted novel, *Trespases*, and the acclaimed short story collection, *The End of the World is a Cul de Sac*, and is the only woman to have been shortlisted twice for the Sunday Times Audible Short Story Award (2019 and 2020). Before starting her writing career, she spent nearly thirty years working as a chef. She now lives in Sligo.

Louise Nealon

Louise Nealon studied English literature at Trinity College Dublin, and then completed a masters in creative writing at Queen's University Belfast in 2016. She lives on her family farm in County Kildare. *Snowflake* is her first novel and was the biggest-selling debut in Ireland, winning Newcomer of the Year at the 2021 An Post Irish Book Awards.

Megan Nolan

Megan Nolan was born in Waterford, Ireland and is currently based in New York. For her debut novel, *Acts of Desperation*, Nolan was the recipient of a Betty Trask Award, shortlisted for the Sunday Times Young Writer of

ed in this collection are:

the Year Award and longlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize. *Ordinary Human Failings* was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction.



Michael Magee

Michael Magee is the fiction editor of the *Tangerine* and a graduate of the creative writing PhD program at Queen's University, Belfast. *Close to Home* is his first novel and won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature 2023.

Michelle Gallen

Michelle Gallen grew up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, a few miles from the border. She studied English Literature at Trinity College Dublin and Publishing at Stirling University. Her debut novel, *Big Girl, Small Town* was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award. Her critically acclaimed second novel, *Factory Girls*, won the Comedy Women in Print award and was shortlisted for the RSL Encore Award. Both books are being adapted for TV.

Naoise Dolan

Naoise Dolan is an Irish writer born in Dublin. Her debut novel *Exciting Times* was a Sunday Times bestseller, widely translated, and optioned for TV. She won the 2021 Hawthornden Prize and has been shortlisted and longlisted for several other prizes. She now lives in Berlin.

Niamh Campbell

Niamh Campbell's debut novel *This Happy* was nominated for the An Post Irish Book Awards, the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year Award, the John McGahern Book Prize and the Kate O'Brien Award. In 2020 she also won the Sunday Times Audible Short Story Award for *Love Many*. In 2021, Campbell won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. She lives and works in Dublin.



Nicole Flattery

Nicole Flattery is the author of the story collection *Show Them a Good Time*. She is the winner of the An Post Irish Book Award, the Kate O'Brien Prize, the London Magazine Prize for Debut Fiction, and the White Review Short Story Prize. A graduate of the master's program in creative writing at Trinity College, she lives in Dublin, Ireland.

Noel O'Regan

Noel O'Regan is from Tralee, Co. Kerry. A recipient of an Arts Council Next Generation Artist Award, his debut novel, *Though the Bodies Fall* (Granta Books, 2023), was shortlisted for the James Tait Black Prize for Fiction, the John McGahern Book Prize and Newcomer of the Year at the An Post Irish Book Awards.

Sheila Armstrong

Sheila Armstrong is a writer and editor from the north-west of Ireland. *How to Gut a*

Fish, her first collection of short stories, was shortlisted for the Kate O'Brien Award and longlisted for the Edge Hill Prize. *Falling Animals*, her debut novel, was chosen for BBC2's *Between The Covers* Book Club and shortlisted for the RSL Ondaatje Prize.

Una Mannion

Una Mannion is based in County Sligo Ireland. Her debut novel *A Crooked Tree* made the Irish bestsellers list, was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards and the Dalkey Emerging Writer Award and won the Kate O'Brien Prize. Her second novel *Tell Me What I Am* was shortlisted for the Encore Awards and was the winner of the prestigious Gold Dagger at the CWA Dagger Awards. In September 2024, Una joins the Oscar Wilde Centre and English Department at Trinity College Dublin teaching creative writing.

Now in its 19th year, the An Post Irish Book Awards celebrate and promote Irish writing to the widest range of readers possible. The initiative brings together a vast community passionate about books – readers, authors, booksellers, publishers and librarians – to recognise the very best of new and established Irish writing talent and 2024 will be no different.

Categories in the An Post Irish Book Awards include Novel of the Year, Children's (Junior and Senior), Cookery, Crime Fiction, Popular Fiction, Non-fiction, Sports, Short Story, Poetry, Teen and Young Adult and Irish Language.

The shortlist for this year's An Post Irish Book Awards will be announced in late October, with the awards ceremony taking place on November 27. A television program will be broadcast on RTÉ One television in December, culminating in one of the 2024 winning titles being announced as the "An Post Irish Book of the Year 2024."

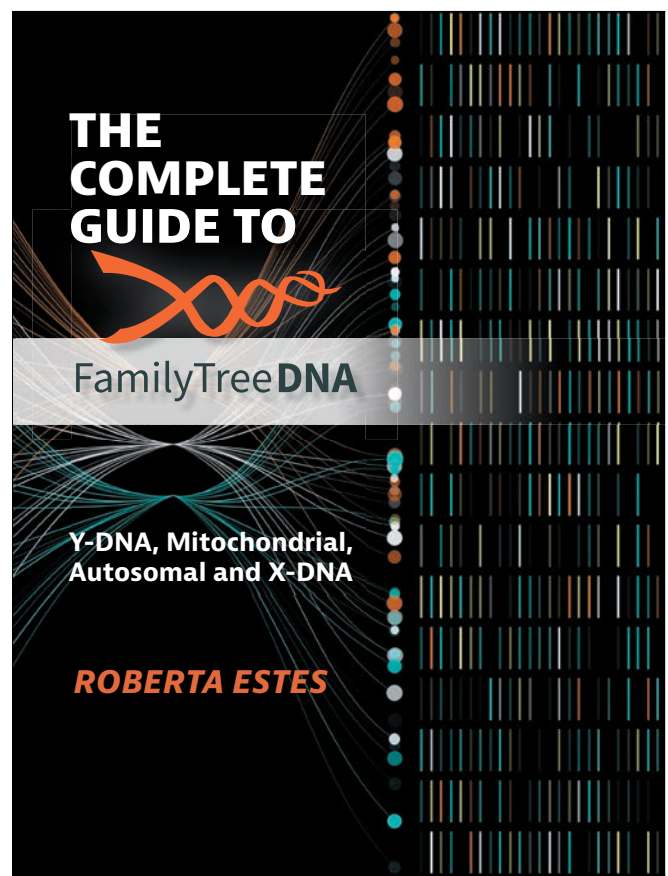
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Molly Aitken

Growing up in Ireland, writer Molly Aitken didn't hear much tell of witches

“We are fonder of stories about fairies and banshees,” she explains via email to Celtic Life International. “Perhaps it is part of our opinion of ourselves as a country of saints - allying ourselves to people who were accused of worshipping the devil wouldn't fit our good self-image.”

One day at school, however, Aitken heard the name Alice Kyteler. “A teacher mentioned her as the type of woman we girls ought never to become.”

Kyteler was the first person on record in Ireland to be accused and condemned for witchcraft. In 1324, she fled, escaping persecution but leaving her servant to be burned at the stake. Among other things, Kyteler was believed to have sacrificed animals and consorted with demons. She was even said to have murdered all four of her husbands.

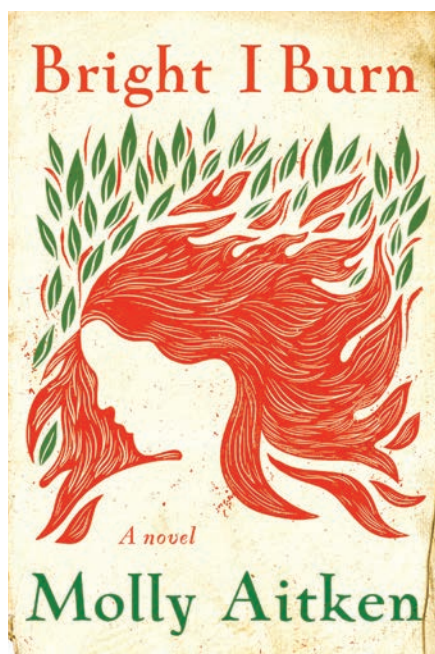
“I was quite frightened of this portrayal of her,” admits Aitken. “It was only as an adult I began to see her in a different light and thought there might be more to her story.”

This led to the creation of Aitken's second novel, *Bright I Burn*. Aitken simply “couldn't resist” writing about such a unique historical figure.

“Alice Kyteler was unlike any Irish woman I had ever heard of - wildly, ruthlessly ambitious, and so influential and powerful that she could sway and influence the Irish legal system, and so independently wealthy that she made people jealous. I had never heard of an Irish woman like this, much less one living 700 years ago.” These character traits fascinated and disturbed Aitken in equal measure, and she was determined to tell the tale.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of historical records about Alice Kyteler, and Aitken learned a great deal through research.

“There were wonderful details I found about her business. For example, she was a



moneylender and lent the equivalent of millions today to the King of England to help fund his war with Scotland. I was also extremely lucky to have access to an incredible archive in Kilkenny where Alice lived.”

In fact, Kyteler's Inn - the one the accused witch ran all those centuries ago - still stands in Kilkenny today. It is now a pub, featuring a black cat on its logo. Aitken even wrote some of the novel there.

Despite all her research, however, *Bright I Burn* is generally a work of fiction.

“What I didn't know was how Alice, or any of the other people felt. I didn't know her motivations for some of the terrible things that she did. This was where my novelist's license came in. I had to use my imagination, and at times chose the more fun or dramatic option, because why not?”

Although Aitken's first novel, *The Island Child*, was published in 2021, writing *Bright I Burn* was a different process.

“I wrote this novel in the first year of my son's life. I often only could snatch an hour to write. This made my chapters quite short, but I feel it improved the novel. It made the writing feverish and vital.” Additionally, Aitken sensed something of a spiritual connection to Kyteler.

“I felt like she was speaking to me. It was a strange experience, unlike any I've had before when writing, and likely I'll never experience it again...”



Touring the book for promotional purposes, Aitken learned that many people had never heard of Alice Kyteler - even in Ireland itself. Nonetheless, audience connected with the story on a deep emotional level.

Aitken hopes the story, and stories like Kyteler's, will continue to spread.

“Women's history has always been reduced, silenced or ignored. However, witch trials are well documented. We have a wealth of knowledge about these, for the most part, horrendously violent and sexist cases. Now, there is a general interest in resuscitating the pasts of women, for finding those names we have forgotten, and hopefully re-examining their trials to show that most of these women did nothing wrong. Generally, they were scapegoats, and unlike Alice Kyteler they were often poor without influential friends to help them. I really hope people re-examine their country's history. So many histories have been silenced or told through a misogynistic, racist and colonialist lens.”

Bright I Burn was recently published in North America. Aitken is currently working on a novel inspired by Roman mythology, about the mother of Romulus and Remus.

@MollyAitken1

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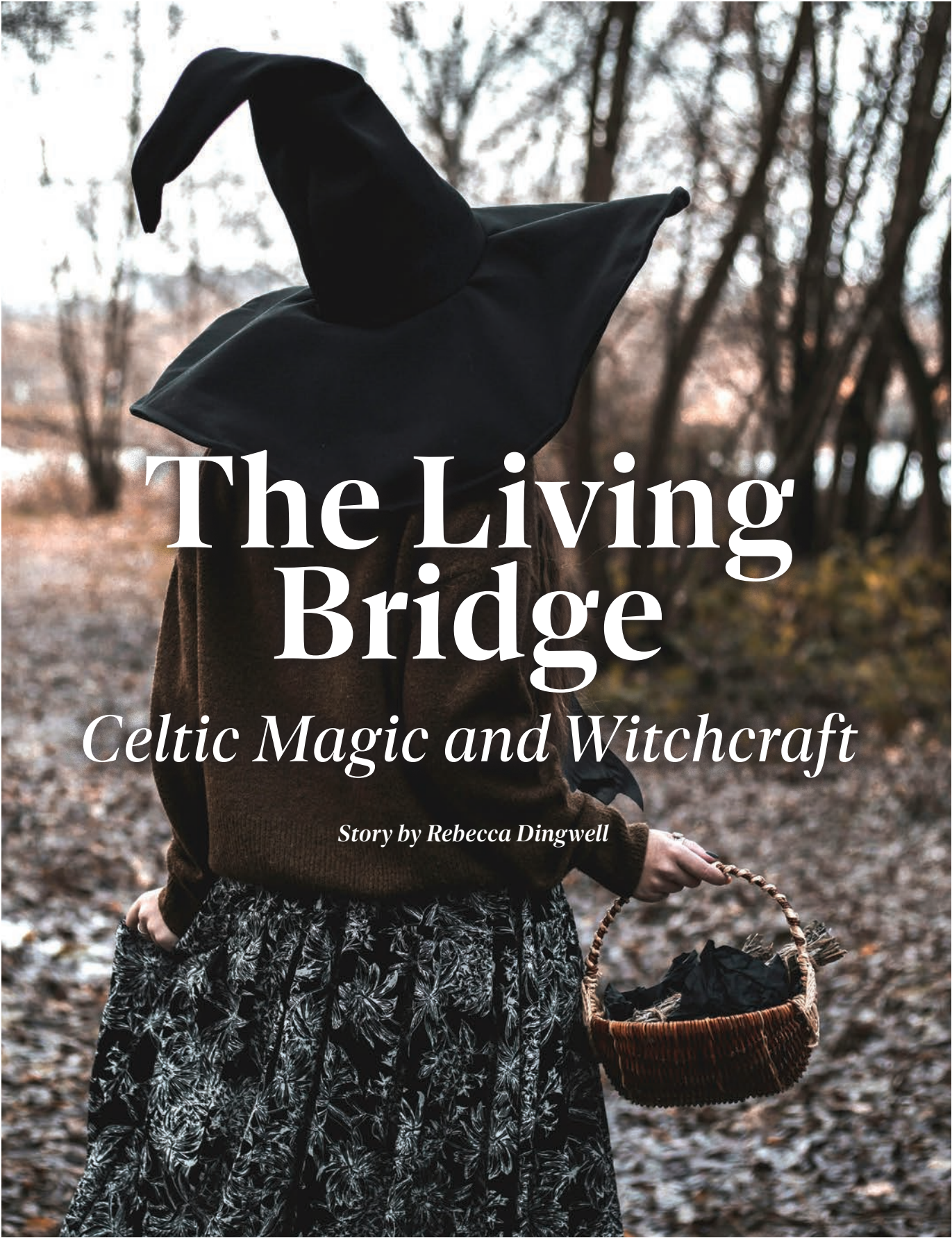
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A person wearing a black witch hat and a brown sweater is walking away from the camera in a forest. They are holding a wicker basket in their right hand. The forest floor is covered in fallen leaves, and the trees in the background are bare.

The Living Bridge

Celtic Magic and Witchcraft

Story by Rebecca Dingwell

COVER STORY



Mhara Starling

Whether you believe in magic or not, there is no denying the Celtic nations have an air of mystique about them. Perhaps it's because they are steeped in folklore, or because their rich history is apparent to visitors and locals alike. Maybe it's the beauty of the natural world therein. Galicia, for instance, is sometimes referred to as Terra Meiga (or Witches' Land). Scotland looks like the setting to a good fantasy novel. Cornwall is home to the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic.

For some, this magic is more than a metaphor or a relic of the past: it is part of their everyday lives. Welsh witch Mhara Starling is one such person. Her witchcraft practice is intrinsically linked to her mother tongue, her homeland and its folklore. Over the last couple of years, she has noticed an increased interest in modern witchcraft. Christianity is no longer the religious majority in Wales, but that doesn't mean the nation has lost its spirituality altogether. Other beliefs, such as paganism, are on the rise.

"People are still looking to be enchant-

ed, to have some sort of spiritual practice, but they're just not looking to the church anymore," says Starling. "They're looking to what's in their own backyard, to the landscape around us and the stories woven into that landscape."

Centuries ago, however, magic wasn't a matter of belief. Rather, it was more of a trade or a tool. Life being as difficult as it was, one might even argue magic was a necessity.

"The fact that people now are finding this sense of kinship with identifying as a magical practitioner - it seems like it's harkening back to something quite old," notes Starling.

The History of Magic

Magical practitioners existed throughout Europe in the medieval and early modern periods. During this time, the term "witch" was generally reserved for those who used their magic for harmful purposes, while people who engaged in simple folk magic went by other names. From cunning men (and

women) to alchemists, magic users were often trusted members of their community.

"When we look at magic as a practice prior to, say, maybe the 19th century going into the 20th century - it was not a spiritual practice that people embraced to enlighten themselves or elevate themselves on a spiritual level," says Starling.

“Magic was often just a means to an end.”

People sought spells and charms for any number of problems, from lost items to physical pain or serious illnesses. Researcher Tabitha Stanmore, who became interested in this sort of "practical magic" while working on her PhD, says attitudes towards the cunning folk varied. Some outright condemned them, while others viewed them with admiration. The majority fell somewhere between these two extremes.

"People believed that they lived in a magical universe, but they took a pragmatic view of the supernatural," Stanmore explains via email. "They feared and prosecuted magic when they thought it was doing harm, but otherwise accepted and embraced it as a useful tool."

Although practical magic was frowned upon by the Church, Stanmore says it was seen as a superstition rather than a form of heresy. "'Moral' crimes like not attending church, blasphemy, and adultery were of much more concern than folk magic," she adds.

Things changed during the social upheaval of the 16th and 17th centuries, particularly in relation to the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation.

"The Catholic Church and new Protestant sects accused each other of superstition, heresy and deals with the Devil, which shone a new spotlight on magical practice," says Stanmore. "People believed in the threat of harmful magic long before the 16th century, but it gained a new edge as the Church and secular governments grappled with the uncertainty of what was divine and what was demonic."

Here's where the ancient, stereotypical image of the witch comes in: an individual given dark powers by demonic forces. She may use her powers to hurt you, your children or your livestock. This might sound foolish



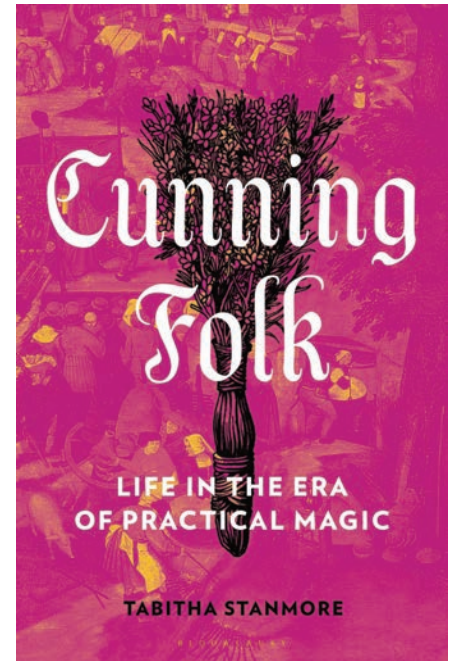
Morgan Daimler

to us in 2024, but in early modern Europe, this threat felt very real. The European witch hunts peaked from 1560 to 1630, surging across the continent and taking thousands of lives. Interestingly, cunning folk made up only a tiny number of persecuted witches. Biddy Early, an Irish wisewoman, was one of the unlucky few. Stanmore notes that rhetoric from theologians at the time did spark debate about whether cunning folk were to be trusted, “but it didn’t stop people using magic when they were in a tight spot.”

In his book *The Witch*, British scholar Ronald Hutton points out the relative lack of witch trials on Celtic soil. (Hutton here refers to regions dominated by Celtic languages such as Welsh and Gaelic. He does not characterize “Celtic” as a descriptor for a single

ethnic group.)

While early modern Scotland’s witch trials were “amongst the worst in Europe,” they were focused in regions “of greater English influence.” Core Gaelic regions such as the central and western Highlands account for only a handful of recorded cases, barely contributing to the country’s total of 3,837 witchcraft accusations. The Isle of Man saw a mere four cases, two of which resulted in death. “This is the more noteworthy in that across Northern Europe, islands were exactly the kind of small, self-contained communities in which witchcraft accusations flourished,” writes Hutton. Overall, “Wales, Man and Gaelic Ireland and Scotland represented a set of societies that traditionally lacked a serious fear of witchcraft.”



There are a few purported reasons for this, including a strong belief in “the fairies” throughout these areas. Misfortune was far more likely to be attributed to these non-human creatures over a neighbourhood witch.

The 1700s spelled the end of the European witch trials as we know them, though it wasn’t necessarily the result of a rise in skepticism. Service magic such as fortune telling endured, as did folk beliefs. In England, people still hanged horseshoes on doors to protect themselves against witchcraft, for instance. As documented by Gustav Henningsen in his book *The Witches’ Advocate*, witchcraft beliefs survived in Galicia as recently as the late 1960s. Echoes of ancient fears later reverberated in the Western “satanic panic” of the 1980s.

Furthermore, the contemporary concept of “white magic” versus “black magic” could be a hint at a lingering, medieval mindset: the dichotomy between the helpful service magician and the demonic witch.

The Modern Witch

Today, “witch” is no longer an exclusively negative word. People like Mhara Starling and Morgan Daimler have reclaimed the label to reflect their lifestyle or spiritual path.

Daimler, an American with Irish roots, was brought up by a Catholic father and a Protestant mother.

“Their agreement when they got married was that they would not raise their children in any particular religion,” explains Daimler. “I grew up in the Irish-American Diaspora being exposed to various beliefs about fairies and things of that nature, but without any religious structure.”

By age 12, Daimler was reading about witchcraft and connecting with the subject matter.

“The concepts behind it made sense to me,” she says. “I got into the Irish aspect of paganism very close to that same time.” That set her on the path she’s walked for the last three decades. While she’s researched many forms of paganism, she still feels most connected to the Irish mythology, folklore and deities.

Daimler has studied the Irish language as well, though she admits she’s more experienced in old and middle Irish than modern Irish. This has helped add a new layer of understanding to certain texts, reading them as they were originally written. “There are things that do get lost in translation,” she says. The word *púca*, for example, is often translated to “fairy” or “goblin,” which doesn’t quite carry the same meaning. The original term is at once more specific and more nuanced.

In both the United States and Ireland, she notes that identifying as a witch continues to carry a stigma.

“We’re still dealing with stereotypes and assumptions that people make based on how that word is used in the communities they’re coming from.”

When she comes up against such stereotypes, Daimler does her best to explain that witchcraft is simply a different spiritual expression.

“Catholics might go into a church and light a candle and say a prayer for someone, whereas a witch would go into their living room and light a candle on their altar and say a very similar prayer, honestly,” she says. “When we focus more on our commonalities and not on the differences, then we make more progress.”

Indeed, more people openly call themselves witches than they did 30 years ago. Daimler sees a few reasons for this, not the



least of which is wider access to witchcraft-related books, blogs and more. “It’s much easier, I think, for people to run across the concept of it as a real religion or spirituality.”

Additionally, it’s a way for people to rebel when they feel powerless.

“The witch is still, in many cases, that transgressive force,” says Starling. In Wales, though, she sees more curiosity than animosity towards witchcraft.

“Nowadays, if I post anything about the workshops or talks or events I’m hosting in the local area, I’ll sometimes get the odd comment where people are like, ‘You shouldn’t be doing this stuff. It’s evil,’” she says, “but for the most part, people have a genuine interest in it.”

Starling believes people are hungry for what she calls “the re-enchantment of the world.”

She also feels a greater number of people are seeking community connections, as well as a connection with nature. “In the modern sense we can look at the witch as this bridge between the world that we have now and the more enchanted, living landscape that we could have in the future.”

The “Celtic” Path

Search for “Celtic witchcraft” online (or, if you are lucky, at your local library) and you’ll find no shortage of sources. The problem? Some of those sources will lead you down the wrong road. Often, when books use “Celtic” as a blanket term, “that’s taking a bunch of individual cultures and kind of smashing them together in a way that they were not, historically,” says Daimler. Fortunately, “there’s a lot of good resources out



the Awen

there now that are more specific than what we were stuck with in the 1990s.”

Even so, newbies ought to be on the lookout for misinformation. Lora O’Brien, co-founder of The Irish Pagan School, has seen that misinformation firsthand. As a teenager, she struggled to find the right resources. She researched Wicca, for one thing, but admits that “the ceremonial side of things never really clicked with me.”

O’Brien had to forge her own path while wading through inaccurate texts and cultural appropriation. In the end, she relied mainly on academic sources to uncover the facts.

“It was actually really, really difficult,” she recalls. In 2017, she started the Irish Pagan School with the goal of making it easier for others. Most of the school’s students are North American, and O’Brien says she’s had to help people unlearn much of what was taught to them.

“Disinformation is not just damaging to the culture, obviously, but damaging to the people who are trying to look for something authentic as well.”

She also cautions people against limiting themselves to sources about Irish witch-

craft and paganism specifically. Irish history and politics are just as crucial when it comes to embracing Irish spirituality. Perhaps most importantly? “You need to listen to Irish voices,” says O’Brien. Else, you might fall into the trap of “cultural Celtic-washing.”

“To see Celtic as singular or homogeneous is to potentially erase a great deal of lifestyles and traditions.”

That’s not to say the concept doesn’t have its place, however.

Starling sees the issues of using “Celtic” through a historical lens, and at the same time, she believes it can still be useful in a modern context. She notes that many people from her Welsh village would be happy to identify as Celtic. However, she also emphasizes that the Celtic identity has precious little to do with DNA and bloodlines. “To us [in Wales], being Celtic has more to do with your cultural expression.

“It’s the food that you eat, the music you listen to, the language you speak.”

For Starling, the Welsh language is es-

pecially important. “The reason this language sprung up was as a language of poetry, as a way to express poetry and to utilise certain poetic expressions within ceremonial circumstances,” says Starling. “What poetry was, essentially - at its heart - was a form of ceremonial, magical language. The people who used this language were court bards.”

Although court bards are a thing of the past, the importance of Welsh poetry remains. The centuries-old concept “the Awen,” a form of divine inspiration, still resonates throughout the nation. It is no surprise, then, that storytelling and song are part of modern Welsh witchcraft.

“That, to me, is the core expression of my magic: this theatrical, bardic nature which draws upon that wellspring of Awen.”

Does that sound compelling to you? If it does - and you are willing to learn more - you might very well resonate with Welsh witchcraft, whether you have a blood connection to Wales or not. “It’s very possible to not only be born Celtic, but become Celtic as well, because it’s all about immersion in a culture,” says Starling.

When it comes to Irish-influenced spirituality and witchcraft, Daimler feels similarly.

“Particularly in the Diaspora, there are a lot of people who get very focused on the idea of physical ancestry,” she says. However, someone’s heritage is hardly relevant if that person has no knowledge of the living culture. In other words, a great-grandfather from Kilkenny shouldn’t be a prerequisite. Effort and a genuine connection are more important.

“I think it would really benefit all of us if we chose to see it as something that’s interactive and not something that just gets handed down.”

Resources:

Cunning Folk: Life in the Era of Practical Magic by Tabitha Stanmore

Getting Started in Irish Paganism (free online course) by the Irish Pagan School

The Pagan Portals series by Morgan Daimler

Welsh Witchcraft: A Guide to the Spirits, Lore, and Magic of Wales by Mhara Starling

The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present by Ronald Hutton



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Stand in Your Sovereignty: *A Homecoming to Tara*

By Candice Marie Sage

COVER STORY

As a Canadian woman in my mid-fifties, I am in the process of reinventing myself, as the traditional roles of Mother, Wife, Homemaker fall away in this “second spring” of life. I liken it to being a caterpillar who has travelled and grown from the earth but must enter the chrysalis stage, reduced to primordial ooze and DNA, waiting to be reconfigured for flight. It is a time of reflection on what has been, what is, and what could be.

In Celtic pagan cultures, the Triquetra, or Celtic Trinity Knot, symbolizes the Triple Goddess and time as counted by Moon cycles - the life phases of Maiden (childhood/waxing moon), Mother (fertility/full moon), and Crone (wisdom/waning moon). Reconnecting with my pagan Celtic roots has helped me to better navigate this new phase of my life - making meaning of who I am, where I have

been, and what the future holds.

Reconnecting with my European ancestry (German and Irish) is a journey that started in 2022. In June of 2024, I embarked on my first pilgrimage to Ireland – something I had been planning since I was 17 years old.

My time in Eire began at a seaside resort in County Dublin, followed by a Goddess Retreat in County Meade - culminating with the Summer Solstice. I then enjoyed some horseback riding in County Mayo.

Since my childhood, I have been fascinated by fantasy literature and what lies beyond the Veil. Tara’s mythical creatures - Fairies, Leprechauns, Pookas, and Banshees - still capture my imagination. The trip was as magical as I could have hoped.

My first stop after landing in Dublin was Port Mearnóg (Portmarnock, County Dublin) where I delighted in a dawn-lit swim at



Candice and Big Charlie

Muir Éireann (the Irish Sea). Irish skies seem to be perpetually in motion, the sea breezes animating the clouds, changing the light, and the mood as they do.

“**The land was lush with summer, and the waves welcomed and whispered to me, “We have been waiting for you.”**”

I had the privilege of being chosen as one of eight women of Irish ancestry to participate in a unique retreat - the Call of the Sovereignty Goddess with Irish cultural leader Aoife Lowden and Irish American Circle Facilitator Tara Brading. We focused on the history of goddesses within Irish mythology in the five counties (including the Kingdom of Mide - Meade). Lowden also introduced us to the plant medicines of the Irish woods, including Mugwort - the grandmother wort that reconnects us to our essence through Druidic remembrance of female knowledge and bloodline. Lowden spoke in Irish as well as English, and we explored the beauty of the language as we experienced the woods and the sacred historic sites of the River Boyne Valley.

We travelled the Hill of Tara and the Womb of the Gods (and Goddesses). This revered burial place, according to the tradition of Ancient Ireland, was the fifth province and royal centre of Mide, which means ‘middle kingdom’. It was the home of Dagda, Chief of the Tuata Dé Danaan, one of the most important gods in Irish mythology who controlled life and death as well as the sea-



Newgrange

sons and time. It was the inauguration site and seat of the High Kings of Ireland. Ancient lore speaks to how the king of each of the five counties also wedded the goddess of those lands, a significant symbol of how the health of the people was tied to respecting and living symbiotically with the lands, waters and skies. The goddess of Mide is Eiru (Mide, Middle - goddess of kinship, Womb of the Gods). The other goddesses and their respective counties include:

- Adeen / Brigid
(Leinster, East – goddess of prosperity)
- Anya / Aine
(Munster, South - goddess of music)
- Maeve / Medh
(Connacht, West - goddess of knowledge)
- Morrigan / Macha
(Ulster, North - goddess of battle)

The River Boyne feeds the sacred ancient wells of Mide. Boann is the goddess of the river. We visited the Well of the White Cow, which is also tied to the astronomy of the region as a star formation that shines above the river. Orion, Taurus and Sirius the Dog meet in this Milky Way of the White Cow and the site serves as a Star Temple and observatory. Goddess Boann is a mother archetype who is also the protector of the well of knowledge, which is fed by the river.

Being there during the Summer Solstice (June 21, 2024) is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that I will never forget. We visited Newgrange, a 5,200-year-old neolithic tomb, often referred to as the Womb of the Gods. The structure was built to honour the summer and winter solstices. Inside the dark of that ancient and sacred place, we witnessed the morning sun illuminate the passage leading to the central chamber, and the wonder that countless generations before us had felt paying homage to the new season to come. It is said to be the place of the conception and birthing of Angus, the god of divine love, on the day that the Sun stood still to allow for his coming.

After experiencing the rich culture and beauty of County Mide, I sought out more experiences with nature. I had wanted to

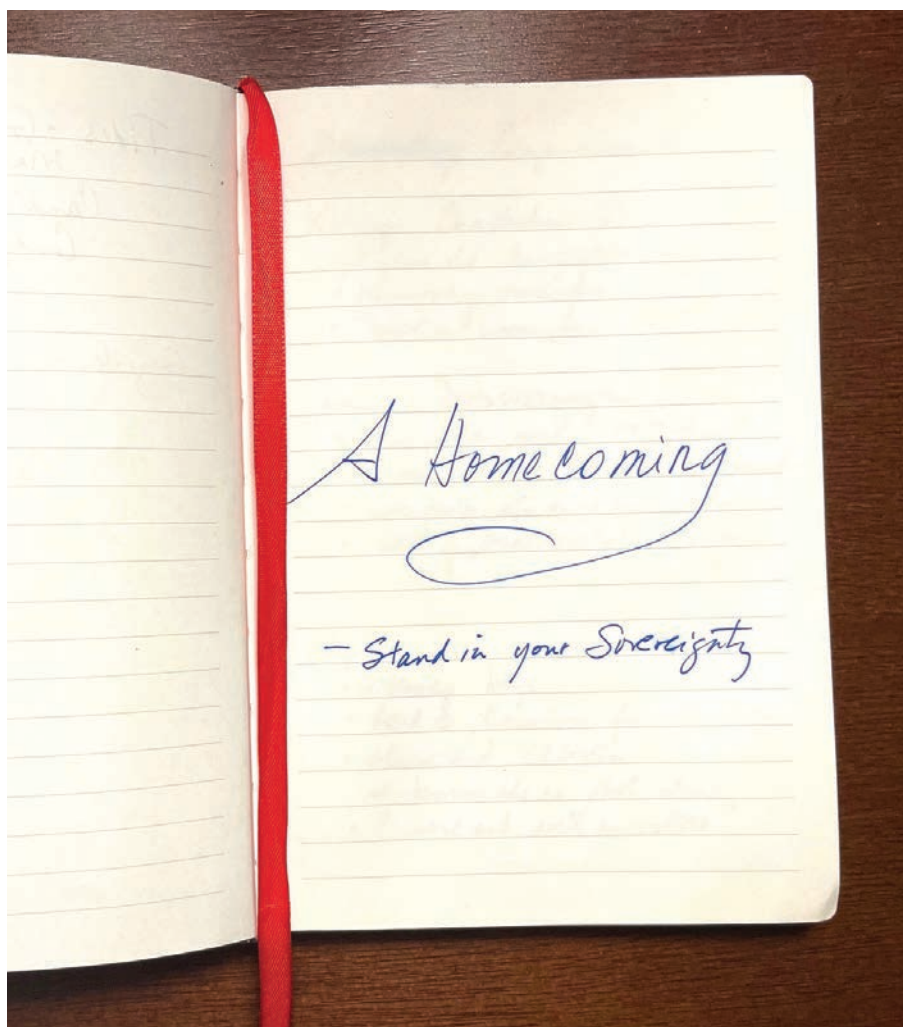
reconnect with “horse medicine” for some time - the joy of riding and creating beautiful bonds. My quest took me west across the country to the Horse Back West Equestrian Centre in Killadoon, County Mayo on the Atlantic coast.

“The scenery is spectacular, with rolling green hills dotted with the white teeth of rock outcroppings as well as sheep.

The clouds billowed in blue skies above the surf of the ocean. Upon these Atlantic golden sands, I felt the spirit of Epona, the Celtic goddess of horses and a protector of the land, as my faithful companion “Big Charlie” and I galloped along the Atlantic shore. It was a terrific way to conclude my first trip to Ireland.

A key exercise undertaken by the women of retreat was to reflect on and discover our Dán - our life’s purpose and the gift we bring to the world. It is tied to our identity and sovereignty. Mine was the ‘disrupter’ - a person who reveals the truth. It shall be born out in my writing, and I hope to continue exploring the lessons of this adventure in Eire.

My pilgrimage to Tara was a homecoming to self-identity through my roots. The lore of the goddesses reconnected me to my sovereignty as a woman, as a person whose purpose is to keep exploring the old traditions in order to pave the way for others, my children, for the descendants of Ireland. As I took the train across the country back to Dublin, I left with a whispered promise to return and explore more of the country’s magnificent scenery, its rich historical cultures, and to reconnect with the power of Tara’s land and sea.





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Irish Banshees

Banshees are among the oldest Fairy folk of Ireland, as strongly connected with the country as shamrocks and potatoes.

Also known as Bean-Sidhe, they were appointed to forewarn members of Irish families of impending death. Their presence alone brings no harm or evil, but to hear a Banshee in the act of keening is to have witnessed the announcement of the death of a loved one. The Banshee's wail pierces the night, and its notes rise and fall like waves over the countryside.

It is said that Banshees never appear to the one who is to die but to their loved ones. In times gone by, she was seen washing human heads, limbs, or bloody clothing until the water was dyed with blood. Over the centuries this image changed. The Banshee now paces the land, wringing her hands and crying. Sometimes she is known as the Lady of Death or the Woman of Peace, for despite her wails, she is graced with serenity.

A Banshee won't cry for just anyone. According to legend, each Banshee mourns for members of one family. Some say only the five oldest Irish families have their own Banshees: the O'Neills, O'Briens, O'Gradys, O'Connors, and Kavanaghs.

The Banshee is a solitary Fairy creature who loves the mortal family she is connected to with a fierce, unearthly care and will pace the hills in sorrow when she knows a death is looming.

She will follow her family's members right across the world - her keening can be heard wherever true Irish are settled, because - just like them - she never forgets her blood ties. Unseen, she will attend their funerals, and her wails mingle with those of the mourners.

Famous tales of Banshee sightings are plentiful. One dating back to 1014 AD tells of a Banshee attached to the kingly house of O'Brien who haunted the rock of Craglea above Killaloe. Legend has it that Aibhill the Banshee appeared to the aged King Brian Boru before the Battle of Clontarf, fought in the same year.



A recounting from the 18th century concerns a group of children who, on an evening walk, saw a little old woman sitting on a rock beside the road. She began to wail and clap her hands, and the children ran away in fear, only to later discover that the old man who lived in the house behind the rock had died at that very moment.

In the mid-19th century, a little girl standing at the window in her house in Cor, saw a figure on the bridge ahead. She heard the Banshee's wails, and the figure disappeared. However, the next morning her grandfather fell as he was walking and hit his head, never to wake up. The same little girl was an old lady by 1900 and one day when she was very ill her daughter heard wailing round and under her bed. The mother didn't seem to hear, but sure enough it portended her death.

A party on a yacht on an Italian lake told its owner they witnessed a woman with a shock of red hair and a hellish look in her eyes. The owner, Count Nelsini, formally known as O'Neill, became anxious that the Banshee was announcing the death of his wife or daughter, but within two hours he was seized with an angina attack and died.

“Descriptions of the Banshee vary but she appears in one of three guises: young woman, stately matron or raddled old hag.

A Banshee as a beautiful young girl appears with red-gold hair and a green kirtle and scarlet mantle - traditional dress of Ireland.

As matron, she is said to be tall and striking, contrasting sharply with the dark of night. Pale and thin, her eyes are red from centuries of crying, her silver-grey hair streaming all the way to the ground as her cobweb-like grey-white cloak clings to her body.

In the hag guise she usually wears grey, hooded cloaks or the grave robe of the unshriven dead. She may appear as a washerwoman or be shrouded in a dark, mist-like cloak.

The Banshee can also appear in other forms, such as a stoat, crow or weasel - animals associated in Ireland with witchcraft.

One of the most notorious tales of a Banshee comes from the memoirs of Lady Fanshawe. Along with her husband, in 1642 she visited a friend in an ancient baronial castle surrounded by a moat. At midnight she was woken suddenly by a ghastly, supernatural scream. Leaping upright in bed, she saw a young, handsome woman hovering outside the window in the moonlight. The woman was pale with disheveled, loose red hair and wearing a dress in the style of the ancient Irish. The apparition stayed for some time and then disappeared with two loud shrieks.

When morning came, Lady Fanshawe, not without some trepidation, told her host what she had seen. Her friend looked at her gravely and explained that she had seen the family Banshee, the ghost of a woman of inferior rank who married one of his ancestors, but he drowned her in the moat to atone for the shame he had brought on his family. She had come that night, as she always did, to announce a death in the family - one of his relations passed away in her sleep.

Always appearing as a woman, there is no shortage of legends of Banshee sightings. Stretching back for more than a millennium, the Banshee continues ringing a death knell for the witness's loved ones.

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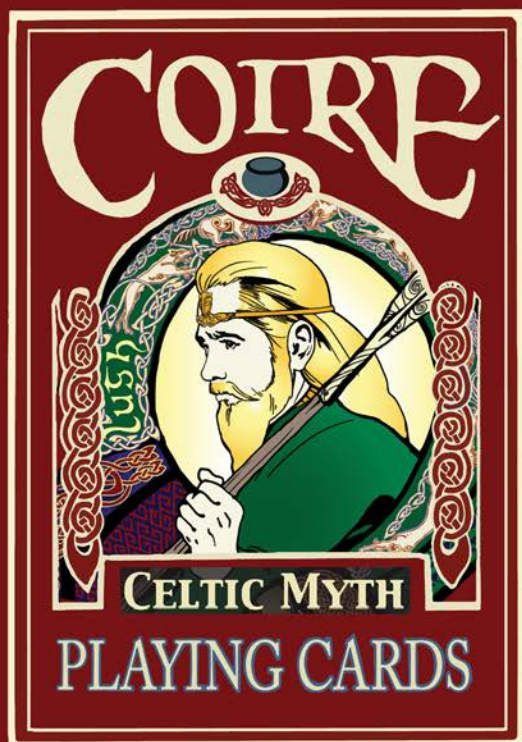
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Celtic Pumpkin Pie

This year, give your Halloween a Celtic twist with a spooky and scrumptious Eerie Eire Pumpkin Pie!

Preparation - Pumpkin Puree

Cut a medium-sized pumpkin into wedges and discard all the seeds. Cook the pumpkin in the microwave on high power for 12 minutes. Scrape off all the cooked flesh and purée it quickly in a blender until smooth. (If you are using canned pumpkin purée you'll need to spoon it onto a clean tea-towel and squeeze away as much liquid as possible.) You'll need 400g/14oz prepared pumpkin purée for the pie.

Ingredients - Pie pastry and base

2 cups plain flour (250g)
1/2 cup butter (100g)
1/2 cup light brown sugar (75g)
1 medium egg
A little cold water
3.5oz crushed gingernut biscuits (100g)

Instructions

Rub the butter into the flour until its like bread-crumbs. Add the sugar and mix in. Break in the egg and quickly pull the pastry together adding a little cold water if needed. Roll it out and line a floured 10" Pie Dish (about 1.5 " deep). Trim off any extra pastry. Crumb the ginger nut biscuits in a blender or by placing them in a sandwich bag and rolling them with a rolling pin until fine. Sprinkle the biscuit-crumbs over the pastry base, pat it down and refrigerate until needed. Crush the gingernut biscuits and gently press them onto the sweet pastry.

Ingredients - Irish whiskey pumpkin pie filling

3 medium eggs
1 cup light brown sugar (160g)
1 2/3 cups (1x 410g can) evaporated milk
1 tspn ground cinnamon
1/2 tspn ground ginger
A pinch of ground cloves
1/2 tspn salt
1 2/3 cup pumpkin purée (400g)
2 tbspn Irish whiskey (35ml)

Instructions

Break the eggs into a large bowl and whisk them well. Add the brown sugar and mix in for 30 seconds until they're thick and creamy. Add the can of evaporated milk and mix well for about 30 seconds. Add the pumpkin purée along with the flavorings and mix everything together until smooth. Lastly, add the whiskey and stir it into the filling. Carefully pour the mix into your pie dish and tap the side of the dish a few times to help raise the air bubbles to the top. Bake in the center of a pre-heated oven at 320°F / 160°C for 40 minutes.

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Scottish Halloween

The origins of Halloween can be traced back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (summer's end). The Celtic year was determined by the growing seasons and Samhain marked both the end of summer and the harvest and the beginning of the dark cold winter. The festival symbolized the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

It was believed by the Celts that on the night of October 31, ghosts of the dead would walk again amongst them, and large bonfires were lit in each village in order to ward off any evil spirits. All house fires were put out and new fires lit from these great bonfires.

Whilst bonfires to scare away the undead are still lit in some areas of Scotland, more usually "neep lanterns" (turnip lanterns) are made by scooping out a turnip and cutting through the skin to create eyes, nose and mouth. A candle is then placed inside to make the lantern. These lanterns are also supposed to ward off evil spirits. Nowadays, pumpkins are as common as turnips for lanterns.

Many of the traditions that Robert Burns mentions in his poem 'Halloween' persist in Scotland to this day. From the second verse:

*Some merry, friendly, country-folks
Together did convene,
To burn their nits, an' pou their stocks,
An' haud their Hallowe'en
Fu' blythe that night...*

As noted in the lines above, a common Halloween tradition was for an engaged couple to each put a nut on the fire. If the nuts burned quietly then the marriage would be happy, however, if the nuts spat and hissed then the marriage would be stormy. Similarly, if a girl put two nuts on the fire, one for her lover and one for herself, and the nuts spat and hissed, then this was a bad omen for their future together.

The plants mentioned in Burns' poem above were the stalks of the kale plant or 'castocks'. The stalks were pulled out of the ground after dark with one's eyes shut. The idea was that the length and straightness of the stalk would indicate a future partner's height and figure. Any soil on the stalk would indicate wealth.

“Until recently, ‘trick or treat’ was unknown in Scotland. Instead, children dressed up and pretended to be evil spirits and went ‘guising’ or ‘galoshin’

The custom traces back to a time when it was thought that by disguising children in this way, they would blend in with the spirits that were abroad that night. Children arriving at a house so 'disguised' would receive an offering to ward off evil. Today it is expected that the children, as well as dressing up, also perform a party trick - a song or a dance, or recite a poem, for example - before they are offered a treat which could be fruit, nuts, money or sweets.

The Witchcraft Act of 1735 contained a clause preventing the consumption of pork and pastry comestibles on Halloween. The act was however repealed in the 1950s, so it is now legal to also offer pork pies or sausage rolls to children as treats.

"Dookin' for apples" is a Halloween party game which involves taking an apple floating in a basin of water without using your hands, either by spearing it with a fork held in your teeth or by biting it. This is another Halloween tradition with its roots in pagan times. The origin of bobbing for apples stems back to the ancient Celts who held apples as sacred.

In fact, many modern-day Halloween traditions - pumpkin lanterns, bobbing for apples and trick-or-treating - have their origins in the ancient Celtic traditions.



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Allan Price

One man brings the pipes to the Far East

Growing up in Scotland, Allan Price liked bagpipe music as much as the next bloke. However, he didn't have much passion for the instrument at first - in fact, he almost didn't pick them up at all.

"As someone growing up in Aberdeen, I enjoyed piping and heard it often," he shares with Celtic Life International via email. "I attended my final years of high school in Edinburgh, but during an Easter holiday, I was back in Aberdeen browsing a music instrument store with friends. I noticed some bagpipe practice chanter on sale, and something in my mind said, 'give it a try.'"

Fate stepped in as one of his teachers in Edinburgh took Price under his wing, instructing him on the basics. Price soon graduated to a proper chanter just before it was time to graduate himself. With high school over and his young adult life on the horizon, he forgot about his pipes. His time with the instrument might have ended then and there. Then he moved to China.

"I moved to Shanghai in early 2015 after meeting my wife in Edinburgh - I'm closing in on my first decade here," says Price, who recently celebrated his 39th birthday alongside his better half and twin daughters. "Twenty years after touching them last, my fire for piping would be re-ignited on the other side of the world.

"During COVID-19, it was a challenging time to be a foreigner in China, especially in 2022. The sudden and severe lockdown that lasted for several months had a very negative impact on many people's lives.

"Just prior to this surprise city-wide lockdown, I had been talking with my uncle in Scotland, and somehow the topic of piping had come up. He suggested that I should ship my pipes over, and before I had time to deliver a doubtful rebuttal, he had already ar-



ranged all the shipping information and packaging for the case.

"My pipes arrived - damaged in transit, but not fatally - a week before all of Shanghai was closed off to the world."

Reunited after so long in a country where bagpipes are unheard of, Price was inspired to share their unique sound with a new generation.

“There is no cultural basis of piping here in Shanghai. Most people here unaware of its existence, in any form...”

"Even so, there are still many young people playing a variety of instruments through school learning and private tuition, so I am volunteering my time to teach and act as Pipe Sergeant for the NACIS youth pipe band, which is part of the Nord Anglia Chinese International School in Shanghai."

The band is made up of a mix of 14 boys and girls between the ages of eight and 15 years - 10 pipers and four drummers.

"We have gone from absolutely nothing to performing multiple successful concerts in under a year. By springtime, the band was already preparing for their first gigs, which is a very demanding schedule for any learner piper.

"The band has also been converting

some traditional Chinese songs onto the pipes," adds Price. "In our pre-summer concerts, we had successful performances of 'Jasmine Flower 茉莉花' and 'Heroes' Song 好汉歌,' with more innovations coming up when we return to practice after the summer break. By incorporating elements of Chinese music for the local audiences that have never heard piping before, it helps to break down the barrier of a 'foreign instrument.'"

Raising the profile of pipe music in mainland China will be an uphill struggle that would make Sisyphus blush. But by the sounds of it, Price is up to the challenge.

"There isn't much of a piping culture in Mainland China - yet. We can't rely on tradition, or competing against the rival bands, or reaching the opportunity for professional status, because those things don't exist in China. Thus, the goal is to ensure that the students love being part of the band and love playing the music, for the sake of enjoying the experience.

"As a result, we've seen amazing responses in their attitude toward learning and adapting to such a fast and steep learning curve. I'm hoping that this continues into next season as we look for new band members. I'd love to see more representation of good quality bagpipe music here, and well-trained bands that can leave audiences with a positive impression of the music."



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Rebecca Ashworth

"In dreams, begin responsibilities..."
- WB Yeats

“So many working mothers end up abandoning their passions. I am thankful for the chance to hold on to that little piece of me from before.”

Fiddler and vocalist for Toronto-based Celtic band Old Man Flanagan's Ghost, Rebecca “Bexy” Ashworth has a full plate as a mother, wife, administrator, musician, and mentor. As all-consuming as that may appear, however, expanding her horizons hasn't meant stretching herself too thin.

“At 19 I moved to Toronto to attend York University,” she shares via email. “I stayed in Toronto for another 10 years after completing a BA in Fine Arts, then moved back to London, Ontario in the spring of 2018 with my husband and our then 6-month-old twins in tow.”

The Celtic fiddler has made her passion a priority from the start. Raised in her old/new hometown of London - and with roots in Quebec, the Maritimes, England, and Scotland - she was first inspired by a virtuoso violinist at the tender age of 3.

“One of my favourite shows when little was Sesame Street,” she recounts. “I saw the great Itzhak Perlman perform on one episode, and I was immediately obsessed. I begged my parents for lessons, and they enrolled me in Suzuki violin classes when I was about 4 and a half years old.

“Playing violin became my thing. It was my shield, my passion, my solace, my heart - and as I suffered from crippling shyness in my childhood, it became my voice. I began my professional fiddling career around the age of 9 as a member of a local fiddle group, The Suzuki Underground Fiddlers. The Suzuki Method teaches students to play by ear, just like how traditional fiddle has been taught for generations. This allowed me to easily pick up on diverse musical styles, and I continue to be inspired by many different fiddlers from across Canada to this day.”

Beginning with the CFPL TV Junior Talent Competition as a youngster, and followed by numerous performances throughout southwestern Ontario, Ashworth then settled into a teaching career in Toronto. When she was invited to join Old Man Flanagan's Ghost as an emergency substitute, she jumped at the opportunity to revisit her fiddling roots.

Drawing upon her early training and performances, she earned a permanent place with Old Man Flanagan's Ghost.



As the mother of young twins, however, and having returned to her hometown for financial reasons, she was faced with honoring her calling versus potentially failing her family. Somehow, she made it all work.

“I had been teaching Suzuki violin in the Greater Toronto Area for over 10 years. Leaving my students was heartbreaking, but the prospect of not playing with the band was too much. I embarked on a new and more conventional administrative career, giving us the security we needed as a family, and allowing me to pursue music on the side. I am extraordinarily grateful for my husband - he is often left solo with the kids while mommy is off ‘being a rock star.’

More than a mere rock star, Ashworth is the consummate Celtic fiddler, all the while remaining committed to her family, her craft, and the instrument itself.

“I play the same fiddle I got when I was around 12 or 13, a Klotz family violin from Germany, built around the end of the 1700s.”

“**The Celtic music scene here in Toronto is a close-knit community with many talented artists - some of whom are featured as guest on our new album, Simple Little Boat.**”

“Collaborating with the likes of Spencer Murray, Alana Jennish, Emily Yarascevitch, Kyle Sullivan, Gary Grant, and Michael O’Grady, has been inspiring - their unique sounds really lent a special quality to the recording.”

With Old Man Flanagan's Ghost's upcoming album release scheduled for November 30th at the Rivoli in Toronto, Ashworth and her musical peers - Stephen Lamb (guitar, vocals), Matti Palonen (double bass, tin whistle, vocals), and Scott Allen (percussion, vocals) - show no sign of slowing down anytime soon.

“There are a lot of sweat and tears that go into creating an album,” she admits. “I rise to new levels when surrounded by talented musicians, and I can dig deeper and explore new levels of playing.”

Ashworth's ability to mine the magic of her music may serve as inspiration for others juggling parental duties and personal dreams.

“That little spark that keeps me inspired to create and perform actually helps me to be more present with my family and gives me the energy to be a better version of myself, as a wife, mother, and artist.”

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Keely O'Grady

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Alongside her long list of achievements, Keely O'Grady's affinity for Irish Dance has not only shaped her career but has also deeply affected her connection to her Irish heritage and, ultimately, her outlook on life.

With 6 National New Zealand Championships to her credit, a 3rd placement at the Australian International Oireachtas, participation at the Dublin World Irish Dance Championships, and a performance with the 2020 Celtica tour, there is no shortage of highlights to Keely's career - one that began as a youngster.

"My Dad played me a VHS tape of Riverdance that quickly became my favourite," recalls the 21-year-old via email. "I then put on my own performances and forced my family to watch. I have vivid memories of jumping around to 'Some Say the Devil is Dead' by The Wolfe Tones. I asked my mum to put me into classes, and I have been dancing for about 16 years now."

If nearly two decades of accolades weren't enough, winning one of the most coveted titles celebrating Irish women was yet another unexpected honour. Selected as The Rose of Tralee 2024, she dazzled judges and international audiences alike at this year's festival in Co Kerry, Ireland.

"I have been feeling on top of the world, and very honoured and humbled that the judges saw something in me. 31 strong, talented, smart girls stood beside me, and I hope to do them proud and represent each one of them as The Rose this year."

Encouraged by her father to represent her country, she entered the competition

through her local Christchurch Irish Society - becoming only the third New Zealander to win the title since its revival in 1960.

"I thought I would push myself to try something different. I didn't fully understand what I was getting myself into, but every stage of The Rose of Tralee has been an overwhelmingly positive and empowering experience."

Pushing herself has been a hallmark of Keely's career from the start - a characteristic that was not forged without challenges. While most of her peers were busy with typically youthful pursuits, Keely was committed to her calling above all else.

"Dance was my focus throughout my school years. I gave up a lot of extracurricular and social activities to pursue my passion, but it was usually a no-brainer decision. I was at dance class five times a week at my peak and still practiced each day at home."

Notwithstanding, the endurance required to maintain such a schedule is matched only by her enthusiasm, making the journey itself as rewarding as any destination.

“Irish dancing has always been my happy place and I haven't grown bored of it at any time...”

"I could go on and on about all the amazing things that Irish dance has allowed me to do. Growing up dancing in New Zealand, the Irish dance community is my home and holds a special place in my heart."

Like thread woven through the tapes that became her career, creating strong

connections became the sturdy fabric upon which her success was designed.

"I have formed some of the closest relationships with people in the Irish dance community, many of whom I consider family - it is a very close-knit, supportive environment."

With bonds based on community and common interests, it was inevitable that a fierce cultural pride and the desire to protect it would follow. Keely has not only consistently honoured her Irish heritage - she also seeks to inspire the same in others.

"It has been amazing to have grown up connected to my Irish culture through dance. Cultural preservation efforts in Ireland are important - the encouragement of Irish language, sport, and art, is something that countries like New Zealand should aspire towards. The next step is to promote these to a wider Irish audience. Increased support for International Irish societies through guidance by those living in Ireland would be something to consider."

Given her mandate to promote and preserve her heritage, it is fitting that she was awarded the title of The Rose of Tralee 2024.

Perhaps her greatest reward, however, has been the impact that her career has had on her character.

"I have learned so much from being a part of Irish Dance - it has taught me life skills of sportsmanship, teamwork, dedication, leadership, and perseverance. It has truly shaped the person that I am today."

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King Scallop *with* Brown Crab



For the Scallops

Ingredients

4 king scallops
25g (1oz) butter, unsalted
½ lemon

Instructions

Make sure the scallop is clean and dry - pan and sear on one side until golden brown. Remove the pan from the heat and flip over the scallop. Add the butter and a little squeeze of lemon juice. Remove from the pan and serve with the barley top with some pea shoots.

There is something special about bringing the flavours of Scotland to the table, and to the world. This dish does just that. Combining the sweetness of king scallops with the richness of brown crab, this recipe celebrates the best of Scottish seafood. Barley, a staple grain in Scotland, adds heartiness and texture, while the vibrant spinach offers a touch of earthiness and colour. This is an ideal dish for entertaining friends and family, as most of the preparation can be done in advance. It's relatively quick to pull together yet feels luxurious enough for any special occasion. I have prepared this dish for private dinners and events across the globe, and it always goes enjoyed. Serves 4.

Ingredients

200g (7oz) pearl barley, soaked overnight in water
150g (5oz) crabmeat, white and brown
1 shallot, finely diced
Small bunch of spinach, shredded
1 carrot, cut into small dice
3 cloves garlic, finely minced
Small bunch of chopped parsley
50g butter
400ml (14froz) shellfish stock
85g (3oz) cheddar cheese, grated
150ml (4froz) white wine
Small bunch of pea shoots to finish
Salt/Pepper

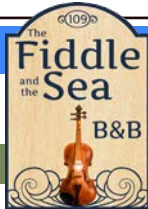
Instructions

Heat a saucepan, add ½ of the butter, then add the chopped shallot, diced carrot, and garlic and sweat for 3-4 minutes without colour. Add the soaked barley and cook for 2 to 3 minutes. Pour in the wine and reduce until it has totally evaporated. Once the wine has been absorbed, add the stock a ladle at a time, making sure the previous ladle of stock has fully been absorbed. Continue this method until all the stock has been absorbed and the barley is cooked. Check seasoning; add crabmeat, spinach, and parsley.

Slàinte Mhath! - Gary

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DRAM
with Andrew Ferguson



Spectacular Signatory

If you were to ask me to name my 5 top independent bottlers of Scotch whisky at any point in the last decade, Signatory Vintage would have made that list every single time.

An independent bottling, or IB, is a whisky bottled by someone other than the distillery. When a distillery bottles its own whisky, we call that an Official Bottling, or OB. There are hundreds of independent bottlers of Scotch whisky today, but 36 years after its founding, Signatory remains one of the best.

Signatory Vintage was founded in 1988 by Andrew and Brian Symington. The former had previously managed the iconic 5-star Prestonfield House Hotel in Edinburgh, where he developed a taste for single cask, single malt Scotch whisky. They named their firm Signatory because the original vision was to have a celebrity signature on each bottling.

Attracting celebrity signatures proved impractical, and the first bottling, a sherried 1968 Glenlivet, sold out before a signatory could be found... but the brand name stuck.

1988 was good time to be buying casks of Scotch whisky, as the industry - which boomed in the 1960s and 1970s - went bust by the early-to-mid 1980s. The cask trade was a buyer's market, and the Symington's firm quickly established itself as a respected independent bottler. By 1992, Signatory

was doing a brisk enough business to justify moving to a larger facility with its own bottling hall, and in 1997 Andrew bought his brother out of the business.

“Most independent bottlers, especially in the decade, have operated hand to mouth, often bottling whatever they can get a hold of.”

The best independent bottlers, like Signatory, purchase stocks with an eye to the future, often buying large parcels rather than single casks. Some of these casks might be ready to bottle sooner than others, some might be sold or traded with other firms, but the rest would be laid down to continue maturing. This strategy, with the right supervision, means that companies can bottle that parcel of casks over a decade or more, ideally releasing each cask when the whisky is at its best. Signatory has held on to some its casks for more than three decades, a feat only a handful of other independent bottlers can claim.

In 2002 Signatory purchased the picturesque Edradour Distillery in the hills above the Highland tourist town of Pitlochry. The distillery was Scotland's smallest at the time, with a middling reputation for quality. However, in the 22 years that Andrew Sym-

ington has been running the distillery, he has completely turned it around, and today the whisky enjoys a well earned and loyal following. The distillery also gave Symington the land on which to build warehousing to store the stocks for both the distillery and his growing IB business.

The two things I love most about Signatory whiskies are the consistency of their bottlings and the price. The strategy of buying parcels of stock and bottling the casks at their best has always given me a lot of confidence as a retailer when it came to purchasing. I knew the new bottlings of Benrinnes 1996, Bunnahabhain 1989, or Clynelish 1995 were going to be good, because the sister casks, from the same parcel had been excellent. And in an environment where whisky pricing has been growing at unsustainable rates in recent years, Signatory continues to offer excellent value.

Signatory whiskies can be found at the best whisky retailers around the world. Their Cask Strength Collection whiskies never disappoint, and there are some special (and pricey) Rare Reserve bottlings of ancient malts released to mark their 35th anniversary. For every day, value conscious drinkers, Signatory released a new 100 (British) Proof (57.1%) range in the last year, which marries exceptional quality and affordable prices.

There are still no celebrity signatures on the label however...

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Bronze Shoes

by Samara O’Gorman

Long – shall we walk
to the Black Rock.
A path cast from flight
brought my forebear,
far away from the blight.

To live well here,
that is our revenge on our old soil
I carry Ireland’s liberty,
on foot, she carried my future
her skin beginning to boil.

I do not bear the strength
to wear her bronze shoes –
but I will polish them,
and not complain of any blues.

Let us play a game of pick-up sticks
until I find the perfect match
to illuminate their passage,
to our home, which they – did hatch.

The souls below us,
leaned over our cradles
praying that their story
will always be told at our tables.

The Irish were not seeking slots –
they gambled on the art to survive,
with their knees in knots.

Seacrafts sculpted into coffins –
their sails disfigured,
docked alongside a destined bridge
they would soon configure.

You curse at the sky –
the betrayal of that crop
was not what left their plates dry.
It was their cattle and grain
stripped from their motherland
and seized in vain.

Let this root in your mind –
you do not bear the bronze shoe,
you do not bear the blight,
it should not bring you burden
for us to reunite.

Our march begins at noon –
Let us not neglect it,
it is merely one moon.
For them, they lost count
in the pit of the ship –
so let us mount!

I am a pilgrim where
offerings are shared:
on these damp grounds –
my holy place, I have found.
Long – shall I walk, to the Black Rock.

‘Bronze Shoes’ was a poem I was asked to write and perform at the Annual Walk To The Stone, an Irish event held each year to commemorate the tragedy of the Great Famine. The poem speaks of being grateful for the life we have here and recounts the strength of my forebears before me. The arduous journey of Irish emigrants to Canada, lasting between six to twelve weeks, or even longer, was marred by inadequate space, sustenance, hygiene, and clean water aboard many ships, despite legislation aimed at safeguarding passengers. I believe that the unwavering fortitude and perseverance exhibited by my ancestors amid their murky depths and circumstances have been inherited by the poet I am today, one committed to preserving their legacy.
~ Samara O’Gorman, 2024



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

Irish Studies Program

www.fairfield.edu/irishstudies

FAIRFIELD, CT

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

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

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



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