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FÁILTE

Celts & Cobbers

Our Spring 2025 edition of Celtic Life International takes you to the land “Down Under” where Celtic traditions and culture are alive and thriving.

Approximately 20 percent of Australians acknowledge their Celtic ancestry. In 1992, that connection was formally recognized with the raising of the Australian Standing Stones in Glen Innes, New South Wales. The stones were erected to officially acknowledge the significant contributions made by the Celtic nations of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Man, Bretagne, Galicia, and Asturias to Australian culture. Sourced from local granite, the stone formation was inspired by the Ring of Brodgar in Scotland's Orkney Islands and the Callanish Stones on the Isle of Lewis.

Located on the traditional territory of the Ngorabul (Ngarabul) people, the stones are precisely positioned to track the annual journey of the earth around the sun which, as we know, was vital to the

daily life of the ancient Celts. It is interesting to note that the Aboriginal people of Australia also used standing stones to landmark sacred places, to form ceremony circles, and to symbolize their “creator beings” from the “Dreamtime.” In fact, the Wurdi Youang stone arrangement in Victoria on the country's stunning southeast coast is considered by some researchers to be one of the oldest known astronomical observatories in the world - predating both Stonehenge and the Pyramids of Giza. Wurdi Youang is of great significance as it shows that the Aboriginals were tracking the position of the sun while taking astronomical measurements of the stars and moon - proof of how scientifically advanced their society was at the time.

“Both the First Peoples of Australia and the Celts had a spiritual connection to their environment and the insight to understand complex concepts.”

Although separated by time and miles, each culture independently developed sophisticated ways of explaining themselves and the world. These parallels highlight the universal human instinct to seek meaning and understanding of the influences that shape our existence.

Whether our ancestors hail from the Highlands of Scotland, the emerald hills of Ireland, or the rugged coastlines of Wales and Cornwall, the Celtic impression on Australia today is indisputable and there is no time like the present to embrace your inner Celt - attend a festival, learn a few Gaelic phrases, or simply raise a glass in honour of the Ancient Celts and the Aboriginal Australians as we acknowledge their wisdom and appreciate that we are a continuum of their legacy.

Siobhán L. Covington,
Publisher



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CelticLifeStyle

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first WORD
with James Acken

Three Streams in Modern Celtic Tradition

It has been said that there are three streams that flow into modern Irish music: that of the Music Hall, that of the modern folk tradition, and that of the medieval tradition.

The medieval tradition gives us Sean Nós, the ‘Old Custom’ with its structured prosody and emphasis on the voice as opposed to instrumentation, and the equally structured system of reels, slip-jigs, airs and the rest of the instrumental music familiar from ‘trad sessions’ around the world.

The folk tradition gives us the songs of resistance and rebellion like ‘The Wearing of the Green,’ ‘Follow Me Up to Carlow,’ and ‘Come Out Ye Black and Tans,’ alongside reflective songs like ‘There Were Roses,’ ‘Green Fields of America,’ and ‘Sleive Galleon Braes.’

To the tradition of the Music Hall we may ascribe songs that, while fun to sing and listen to, are complicated by stereotypes and narrative tropes that are directly informed by colonialism: ‘The Irish Rover’ with its “Sluggie O’Toole who was drunk as a rule” and ‘Finnegan’s Wake’ with its image of the titular character being resurrected by a shower of whiskey in the middle of a funeral brawl both exemplify this tradition.

That all three of these streams are informed by - and respond to - the colonization of the Celtic peoples is so obvious as to be unworthy of comment were it not for the light they shed on the broader experience of the Celtic diaspora. The Scottish, Manx, Welsh, Cornish, and Breton musical traditions show a similar pattern with cartoonish caricatures standing beside authentic reflections of present experience and continuities with the pre-colonial past. For the Scots, place ‘Angus and the Kilt’ beside ‘Jamie Raeburn’s Farewell’ and ‘An Fhìdeag Airgead,’ a Jacobite song popularized by the series *Outlander*.

“Taken separately, each stream is cohesive to itself.”

The Music Hall is comedic, whimsical and presents a grotesque view of what we often think of as an ethical character but is really the holdover (or maybe a hangover from) late 18th and 19th century racism. This image presumes that the Celts are violent, drunken, and a little simple in the fine tradition of barbarism. By contrast, the modern folk tradition presents an image of the anguished outcast who must make do by any means. This is a figure who is almost indistinguishable from the 19th and 20th century laborers of the Atlantic Fringe, whether English or Celtic, which is why we find so many English songs that feel Celtic. Among these may be counted ‘Hard Times (Come Again No More),’ originally by Stephen Foster but now almost exclusively played by Celtic musicians,



“From Sandwood Down to Kyle” by Dave Goulder from Derbyshire, and “Pound a Week Rise” which was originally about Durham mineworkers in the 1960s but is most often heard at Celtic Festivals.

Now, after so much time, the reality is that these three streams are inseparably blended by both Romantic idealism and plain, old-fashioned, if well-meaning ignorance. Most people are not even aware of the medieval-ish roots from which spring Lasairfhiona’s Amhrán an Phúca and Mac-Talla’s Griogal Chridhe, but Disney’s composition ‘Noble Maiden Fair (A Mhaighdean Bhan Uasal)’ for the movie *Brave* (2012) deliberately banks on them even as it revels in two-dimensional caricatures of genuine medieval tradition.

All of this is central to the consideration of the Celts in Australia. Like North America, Australia was a penal colony after the formation of the United States in the late eighteenth century denied Great Britain those territories for convicts. Songs like ‘Back Home in Derry,’ ‘The Wild Colonial Boy,’ and ‘The Black Velvet Band’ recall this, and just as commonalities between the plight of the Celtic emigrant and the early industrial laborer allow songs to cross the boundary between those identities, songs like ‘Van Diemen’s Land’ show up in Celtic Contexts despite their English origins. Cultural memories always run deep and strong, so it is no surprise that many of these aspects and reflexes show up in modern Australia, an equal participant in the Colonial moment that defines so much of the modern world.

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

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De Tha Dol



1 Gaelic Drama

The BBC recently aired its first prestige Gaelic television series. The series, titled *An t-Eilean* (The Island) includes both Scottish Gaelic and English dialogue, and takes place on Scotland's Western Isles. It follows protagonist Kat Crichton (played by Sorcha Groundsell), a police officer who returns to her former home - The Isle of Harris - to investigate a murder. At a mere four episodes, the crime drama is a short one, but it may yet pave the way for more mainstream shows in Gaelic. *An t-Eilean* is available on BBC iPlayer.

2 A Tale of Two Dylans

American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan has a connection to Wales that has nothing to do with ancestry. Since Dylan's birth name, Robert Allen Zimmerman, doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, it's no surprise the musician took on a stage name. What may surprise some, however, is that he was inspired to take the name "Dylan" from Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. Some of Dylan's lyrics may also have been inspired by Thomas' poems. In 2023, there was even a book published about the connections between the two men, titled *Bob Dylan and Dylan Thomas: The Two Dylans*.

3 Manx Language Database

An online database for the Manx language is set to expand. Recently, Culture Vannin awarded a £3,000 grant to the Manx Language Research Group. This grant money will be put towards the transcription and translation of Manx language audio recordings so they can then be put online. Up until the grant was awarded, this online repository was entirely supported by volunteers. According to the BBC, "the new time-stamped transcriptions would allow website users to search for a word or phrase in either Manx or English and instantly hear a native speaker using it in context."

4 Cornwall on Screen

A recent psychological thriller series juxtaposes its disturbing storyline against the beautiful backdrop of Cornwall. *Playing Nice*, which is based on a book by the same title, tells the story of two couples whose children were switched at birth. This life-altering error is discovered when the children are already toddlers. Since its airing on ITV, critics have been quick to note the stunning scenery present. *Playing Nice* was filmed in several parts of Cornwall, including Mawgan Porth, Park Head, Watergate Bay, Porthcothan, St Ives, Mevagissey, Penzance and Bodmin.

5 Matrilocal Celts

In many cultures throughout history, women have been expected to leave their home in favour of their husband's upon marriage. It was intriguing to researchers, then, when they came upon evidence suggesting that an ancient Celtic tribe observed an opposing tradition. Scientists came to this conclusion by studying DNA from the remains of those who lived in Iron Age Britain from around 100 BCE to 100 CE, which revealed that these Celts lived in a matrilocal society. The full study has been published in a British science journal called *Nature*.



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June 20 & 21, 2025



Friday, June 20, 2025

4:00 PM – 11:00 PM

Happy Hour and an Irish/Scottish
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\$20 Admission / Cash Bar

(Friday tickets include
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Saturday, June 21, 2025

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Highland Games begin 9:30 AM.
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HOLLAND CELTIC FESTIVAL

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June 20 & 21, 2025

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Celts in Culture



• **Bev Armstrong**

If you spend much time online, you might recognize one of Bev Armstrong's pieces. The London-based silversmith is the brains behind Stoned to Death: a small indie jewellery brand. Recently, their "pint claddagh" ring gained traction on the internet. As the name implies, this design is a play on the classic Irish claddagh motif. Rather than depicting two hands clasped around a heart and crown, the hands on this ring embrace a pint of beer. The description on the Stoned to Death website (cheekily) reads, "The perfect claddagh ring for pint lovers (wear it facing upward). Hate pints? Don't worry, show your disdain to the world by wearing it downward! Like a traditional claddagh it can communicate your feelings about pints/ drunkenness to the world." Of course, the pint claddagh isn't Armstrong's only product. Many of their handmade pieces are inspired by Irish culture, queer culture, or both. They also offer commissions for custom designs. Whether it's a pendant stamped with a personal slogan or a ring featuring the colours of a Pride flag, Stoned to Death serves it up. From gemstone selection to polishing the final piece, every step of creation is done by Armstrong, who is self-taught in the craft. "Most designs start off as loose gemstones and chunks of recycled solid sterling silver which are hammered, torched, set on fire, bent, cut, shaped and polished into the jewels that you can wear for your lifetime."



• **Fiona Finlayson**

Combining a love for pets and art, Fiona Finlayson creates beautiful needle-felted animals. A graduate of the Edinburgh College of Art, Finlayson ended up pursuing a career in a different field. However, she kept creating art as a hobby. She learned needle felt several years ago and hasn't looked back since. These soft "sculptures" are created using wool and special needles to shape the different figures. Alongside her full-time job, Finlayson now takes commissions for her artwork. She specializes in pet portraits, often capturing the likeness of a client's deceased pet. "There's been some where I'm able to put some of the dog's or cat's fur into the portrait as well, so they know there's something there that's actually from the pet," Finlayson told The Scotsman. "I just really want to capture the character of the pet, that is what is important to me when I'm making it." A piece can take anywhere from four to 15 hours to complete, depending on the specifics. Finlayson typically takes on eight commissions per month. Many of her clients are based in the United Kingdom, but she's also sent work elsewhere in Europe, as well Canada, the United States and even Australia. While cats and dogs make up a large number of her pieces, Finlayson will happily recreate almost any animal, from rabbits to horses.



• **Scot AnSgeulaiche**

Oral storytelling may seem like a lost art. Folks like Scot AnSgeulaiche, however, are keeping it alive. Among other things, AnSgeulaiche is a traditional Highland storyteller (or, as it's more succinctly put in Gaelic, a Seanachaidh). "Storytellers were (up until the last 300 years) members of the elite class in many cultures, including Celtic," AnSgeulaiche notes on his website. Hailing from the Glasgow area, AnSgeulaiche has both Scottish and Irish ancestors. For years, he embraced a love of folk music but eventually put it on pause to explore more modern sounds for a modern industry. Later, he fell back in love with Scottish culture - especially its folk songs and ballads. AnSgeulaiche has now been a storyteller for more than 20 years, sharing tales at weddings or on guided tours. "I don't attend many dedicated storytelling events or festivals," AnSgeulaiche writes. "My work is more 'applied' storytelling as part of some other activity, such as community oral history gathering, traditional wedding tales at the wedding ceilidh and so on." AnSgeulaiche is adept at several other ancient arts as well; he makes besoms (traditional brooms), works on thatched roof houses, and performs hand-fasting ceremonies at weddings. In a recent interview with the BBC, AnSgeulaiche spoke about his work as a thatcher. "You could decide that they're not at all historically culturally valuable and we could just put them down to slates and tin or you could say that's part of our culture and we do think it's valuable. I happen to think it is."

Northern Nevada



Celtic Ceilidh

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Australian Celtic Festival

May 1 - 4, 2025
Glen Innes, NSW

www.australiancelticfestival.com



Atribute to the region's rich cultural roots, the Australian Celtic Festival showcases the timeless traditions and explores the cultural treasures of Breton, Cornwall, Ireland, Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales. This year, guests will enjoy an exciting program of live music and dance performances across three stages, thrilling Highland Games and Strongman competitions, re-enactment villages, and an array of pipe bands. New for 2025, the Celtic Cauldron will host a dynamic line-up of instrumental, and language workshops as well as demonstrations, presentations, impromptu music gatherings, food talks, the Poets' Breakfast including Haggis ceremony, and more. In addition, the Highlands precinct will serve-up selections of gin, mead, and whiskey, alongside fares and wares from vendors. Young imaginations will come to life at the Celtic Kids Marquee with interactive activities inspired by Arthurian legends and Celtic mythology.

KVMR Celtic Festival

May 2 - 4, 2025
Grass Valley, CA

www.kvmrcelticfestival.org



Established in 1996, the KVMR Celtic Festival is held annually at the Nevada County Fairgrounds in Grass Valley, California. Originally the primary fundraiser to benefit KVMR Community Radio, the festival evolved over the years to become a regional celebration of Celtic music, culture, and heritage. This year, festivities begin with a Friday night Cèilidh, followed by a weekend of activities, including live musical performances from the likes of Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy, Téada, and other world-renowned musical artists. In addition, attendees are invited to immerse themselves in living history encampments where various guilds and clans, including the California Cornish Cousins and the House of Gordon, offer interactive experiences to transport participants back in time. The festival also features a youth arts program, Celtic dance performances, traditional Scottish Highland Games, a marketplace with over 100 craft and food vendors, and overnight camping.

Northern Nevada Celtic Ceilidh

May 17, 2025
Reno, NV

www.irishnevada.org



This spring, the Sons & Daughters of Erin (SADOE) will host the 3rd Annual Northern Nevada Celtic Ceilidh in downtown Reno's renowned Brewery District. The day-long gathering offers up an array of activities for visitors, including performances from the Sierra Highlanders Pipe Band, Scottish Dancers, local Celtic entertainers, renaissance actors, and more. Musical headliners include Peter Daldry from San Francisco, Golden Bough from Modesto, California, and Reno's own Reeling Banshees. Clan tents and vendors will be on site as well. The festival continues the legacy and traditions of the region's original Celtic Celebration, which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A non-profit Irish Heritage organization, SADOE presents and sponsors Celtic entertainment, celebrates Irish history and culture, donates to local charities, and participates in community events. The event is free and open to all.

Smoky Mountain Scottish Festival & Highland Games

May 17 & 18, 2025
Townsend, TN

www.smokymountaingames.org



Scotland in the Smokies is calling you to celebrate the 43rd anniversary of the Smoky Mountain Scottish Festival & Highland Games - Tennessee's oldest festival of Scottish, Irish and Celtic culture - in the stunning foothills of Townsend, just outside the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. From May 17 to 18, guests will enjoy the best in folk, roots, rock, and pop music, along with a barrage of Highland bagpipes and drums. Also on tap are feats of strength by caber-tossing athletes, authentic Highland dancing, kilt-clad clans, whisky tastings, sheep herding demonstrations, along with a strong selection of fares and wares from the Scottish, Irish, and British homelands. The wee ones will be entertained with their very own Highland games, including a caber toss, a kilted dash, stone and axe throwing, and more. Kids aged 15 years and younger enjoy free admission, making for an engaging weekend for the entire family.

Garrett County Celtic Festival & Highland Games

June 7, 2025
Friendsville, MD
www.gccelticfestival.com



This June, the Garrett County Celtic Festival and Highland Games in Friendsville MD celebrates the Appalachia region's rich Celtic roots with a full day of entertainment, engagement, and education. This year's featured performers include local favorites Aurora Celtic, Clann Redmond, the Seán Heely Trio, area Irish dancers, and the West Virginia Highland Dancers. Highland Games events - organized by Mid-Atlantic Scottish Athletics - will take place on the village green, with a noontime pause for a parade, showcasing local host band Garrett Highlands Pipes & Drums. Also on tap are interactive workshops, demonstrations, storytelling, a vendor village with Celtic-themed wares and fares, and much more. The wee ones will enjoy exploring Rainbow's End, with imaginative play, crafts, and a miniature version of the Highland Games. All activities and free parking are included in admission.

Georgia Mountain Scottish Festival & Highland Games

June 7 & 8, 2025
Hiawassee, GA
www.gamtnscottishfestival.org



After two decades of awe-inspiring artisans, fantastic foods, and amazing athleticism, The Blairsville Scottish Festival & Highlands Games has outgrown its roots at beloved Meeks Park and has found a new home. The popular annual event has moved its Highland fling to the nearby Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds - located in the Highlands of Hiawassee, two hours north of Atlanta - rechristening as the Georgia Mountain Scottish Festival & Highland Games for their twentieth anniversary. Guests will now have the opportunity to enjoy even more live music, Highland dancers, Pipe & Drum Bands, athletics, artisan wares and fares, genealogy resources, workshops, and children's activities. A guaranteed great gathering for the whole family!

Moncton Highland Games & Scottish Festival

June 10 - 14, 2025
Moncton, NB
www.monctonhighlandgames.com



The 19th Annual Greater Moncton Highland Games & Scottish Festival takes place this June along the banks of the mighty Petitcodiac River in Moncton, New Brunswick. This year's June 14 gathering will feature the CSAF women's Masters and Open championships, Highland dancing, piping and drumming competitions, clan tents, vendors, horse & wagon rides, agricultural displays, traditional Ceilidh Tent entertainment, and a headline performance from Juno-nominated Mi'kmaq fiddler and singer Morgan Toney. Whether you wish to trace your ancestry, cheer on the competitors, or simply combine culture with classic Scottish-themed entertainment and activities, the yearly festival offers something for everyone amidst the stunning scenery of the Petitcodiac's powerful tidal bore - the perfect backdrop to the spirit of Scottish culture.

39th Annual Scottish Festival & Highland Games

June 13 & 14, 2025
Wheaton, IL
www.chicagoscots.org/festival



This June, celebrate Scotland's rich heritage with the Chicago Scots at their 39th Annual Scottish Festival & Highland Games at the DuPage County Fairgrounds in Wheaton, Illinois. This beloved occasion offers a dynamic mix of traditional events, cultural showcases, and family-friendly entertainment. Enjoy thrilling competitions, including the Caber Toss, Highland Dancing, and one of North America's largest bagpiping championships. Dive into genealogy and history information booths and experience special attractions such as the Dogs of Scotland, a classic British car show, whisky tastings, and lively Celtic rock performances. A program of fun-filled activities awaits the wee ones, too, while adults can relax in the beer garden and explore the festival marketplace, featuring Scottish treats, handcrafted goods, kilts, and all things tartan. Best of all, the annual gathering supports a great cause - proceeds benefit Caledonia Senior Living & Memory Care, the principal charity of the Chicago Scots and Illinois' oldest nonprofit charitable organization.

Holland Waterfront Celtic Festival & Highland Games

June 20 & 21, 2025

Holland, MI

www.hollandcelticfestival.org



Join the fun this June as the 4th annual Holland Waterfront Celtic Festival & Highland Games in Michigan celebrates the region's rich Irish, Scottish, and Welsh roots. Guests will enjoy the ever-popular Highland Games competitions, live Celtic music performances across two stages, and spectacular Scottish and Irish dance displays. Explore the Scottish Clan Village and browse an array of wares and fares from Celtic vendors, including traditional favorites like Fish & Chips, Shepherd's Pie, and Scotch Eggs. The festivities kick-off Friday with a "Ceilidh"/Happy Hour (21+) - with Saturday open to all ages and featuring live musical performances from the likes of Mudmen, Barley Saints, Stone Clover, and more. A flurry of family-friendly activities also awaits, with free admission for children aged 15 and under. The festival is hosted by the Holland Celtic Society, a nonprofit charitable organization celebrating all things Celtic.

Embro Highland Games

July 1, 2025

Embro, ON

www.embrohighlandgames.ca



This year marks the 86th Embro Highland Games, a celebration of the region's rich Celtic roots which hail back to 1820 when the area was originally settled by those forced from their lands in Sutherland, Scotland. That heritage will again be celebrated on Canada Day in 2025 with several special events, including competitive Highland dancing, massed pipe bands, piping & drumming competitions, heavy events, Scottish animals on display, agility dogs, Scottish dogs on parade, children's Scottish-themed crafts and activities, and the always-popular Tug-of-War contest. Guests will enjoy live Celtic music all day at the Muckle Tent. Adults are welcome to stroll and enjoy a wee libation on the fully licensed grounds, and the vendor's area is always worth a visit with its fine array of Scottish wares and fabulous food trucks.

Kincardine Scottish Festival & Highland Games

July 4 - 6, 2025

Kincardine, ON

www.kincardinescottishfestival.ca



Every summer, the town of Kincardine comes alive with the sights and sounds of Scotland during its three-day Scottish Festival & Highland Games. This vibrant celebration brings together music, tradition, and family fun, making it a must-attend event for locals and visitors alike. Saturday is the festival's highlight, featuring a spectacular parade down the main street, led by pipe bands in full regalia. The energy continues with thrilling Highland Games, where athletes compete in traditional heavy events. Families can enjoy a variety of activities, while festivalgoers take in Celtic music, headlining concerts, and delicious Scottish fare. Sunday is dedicated to family-friendly fun in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. With an array of games, crafts, and live entertainment, there's something for all ages to enjoy. Music fills the air as visitors explore the festival grounds, making memories with loved ones while experiencing a taste of Scottish heritage. Whether you come for the thrill of competition, the stirring sound of bagpipes, or the warmth of community spirit, the Kincardine Scottish Festival & Highland Games promises a weekend steeped in tradition and excitement.

Sherwood Park Highland Gathering

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Sherwood Park, AB

www.sphg.ca



A vibrant summer celebration of Scottish heritage, the Sherwood Park Highland Gathering brings the spirit of the Highlands to Alberta for two unforgettable days of traditional pipes, drums, live music, high-energy dancing, and a thrilling lineup of Heavy Games, including the iconic caber toss, shot put, and other strength-based competitions. With over 400 competitors and enthusiastic crowds filling the grounds each year, the event blends competition, culture, and community. Visitors can explore a bustling marketplace featuring artisan jewelry, handcrafted Celtic wares, and unique festival souvenirs while enjoying a tempting selection of festival fare from local food trucks. The festival's renowned Beer Garden offers a lively atmosphere, with the Tilted Kilts delivering rousing performances throughout the weekend. Weekend highlights include the charming 'Go to the Dogs Canine Caper,' a delightful parade of kilted canines, as well as sheep and duck herding demonstrations. A must-visit summer experience for all ages, families will love the kid-friendly entertainment and activities.

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Sabhal Mòr Ostaig

Connecting to Culture Through Language Learning

Dr. Sileas NicLeòid's journey into Gaelic medium education is a testament to the power of language and its cultural connection.

The course leader for An Cùrsa Inntrigidh at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Scotland's National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture on the Isle of Skye, NicLeòid was originally trained as a secondary school teacher in Germany. While there, she developed a passion for languages, exploring English, German, and French linguistics and literature. However, a trip to Scotland changed everything.

"That was the first time I became aware of the Gaelic languages, and I found them quite fascinating," she recalls via email. "So, I decided to learn more and see where it might take me."

In 2014, that curiosity led her to enroll in the very program that she now leads, igniting an interest that eventually brought her to the Isle of Skye to immerse herself fully in the country's language and culture.

"I became deeply engaged, which led me to move to Skye and study it properly. I also worked in a Gaelic medium childcare facility, where I saw firsthand how children learn the language, even those from families with no Gaelic background."

As a result, NicLeòid's PhD research soon delved into the sociolinguistic aspects of language - in particular, examining how students' attitudes toward language evolve. Her findings emphasized the crucial role cultural identity plays in language retention.

“For minority languages like Gaelic, fostering a strong, positive attitude in young speakers is crucial to ensuring that the language continues...”

"I studied children in their final years of primary school and early years of secondary school because this transition often leads to changes in language attitudes."

She found that while younger children



generally enjoy learning Gaelic, older students sometimes question its relevance.

"At that stage, cultural connection becomes essential. If students feel connected to Gaelic culture - not just as history but as something alive and relevant - it strengthens their attitude toward the language. They become more likely to continue speaking it, improving their skills and passing it on to future generations." NicLeòid believes that intergenerational learning is one of the best ways to enhance Gaelic education. "Bringing in older Gaelic speakers to share stories, history, and experiences is invaluable. Language isn't just about words; it's about idioms, registers, and cultural context. These things are often best learned outside of the classroom in real-life interactions."

One of the most remarkable aspects of Gaelic medium education, she notes, is its inclusivity.

"You don't need to have a Gaelic background to participate. My own children are in Gaelic medium education, and I speak German to them at home."

This openness allows Gaelic schools to foster both a deep cultural connection and an appreciation for linguistic diversity. "Such an approach creates a well-rounded perspective, helping children appreciate other cultures while strengthening their own sense of belonging within Gaelic heritage."

As the leader of An Cùrsa Inntrigidh for Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Dr. NicLeòid has developed a curriculum that prioritizes immersion from day one.

"Students start speaking Gaelic in their first week, even with a limited vocabulary. We structure it as a script at the beginning, gradually allowing for more freedom as learners become confident."

The program also avoids using English as much as possible. "If students don't know how to say something in Gaelic, they wait until they do. This method mimics how a first language is learned - forcing learners to function with what they have. It works beautifully, though it does require a shift in mindset."

Despite the challenges of distance learning, the course has flourished. "It was originally delivered over the phone!" recalls NicLeòid. "Moving to Zoom has been a significant improvement, allowing us to see students and foster a stronger sense of community."

With easy and proven access, the growth of Gaelic medium education is promising, with increasing numbers of young people pursuing careers in Gaelic teaching.

"Gaelic is now seen as more than just a second language - it is a full cultural package. Gaelic education creates deep connections between students, teachers, or researchers, and it isn't just about acquiring another language; it's about becoming part of a living, breathing community. I hope this understanding continues to develop, encouraging lifelong learning beyond formal education."

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Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland

One Scottish organization brings the past to present

Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS) challenges the perception that traditional music, dance, and storytelling belong only to history. Officially constituted in 2012, TRACS was born out of a government report commissioned by the Minister for Culture. The report put forth the idea of an organization that could bring together different aspects of traditional arts and, as CEO Steve Byrne puts it, “give a collective voice” to those arts.

“TRACS is essentially about raising up traditional arts as a central part of life and communities in Scotland,” he shares.

The Scottish Storytelling Forum, the Traditional Music Forum and the Traditional Dance Forum of Scotland together make up TRACS. The goal is for each sector to get equal representation, although Byrne admits it can be a challenge. Music tends to get more engagement than storytelling and dance, “but that doesn’t mean that the importance of the others are any less. I suppose we exist to try to readdress that balance, in a sense.”

So, why is trad music often at the forefront? It’s a tough answer to pinpoint. Byrne, however, has his theories. The bagpipes and fiddles, for example, are still very present in the modern lives of Scottish people. These traditional instruments are regularly seen and heard at events or ceremonies. The folk music boom of the 1950s may have also played a role. Ceilidhs are still widespread as well, but Byrne notes that they are usually confined to certain times of year, such as Robbie Burns Night. When it comes to day-to-day life,

these aspects of the culture are often overlooked.

Byrne explains that none of these art forms could exist without the others. “You don’t get traditional dance without traditional musicians and traditional music forms don’t exist without dancers. Traditional ballad-singing is greatly aligned with traditional storytelling.”

The dwindling of such traditions can be traced back to both major legislative change and seemingly small cultural shifts. The 1872 Education Act, for instance, stated that education in Scotland must be conducted in English. This “had a huge impact on Gaelic-speaking communities, which we are still trying to repair to this day,” says Byrne. Then there are the more mundane changes, such as the removal of CD players from cars, which has altered how people consume music.

There have also been beneficial shifts, however - including what Byrne refers to as “the rise of summer festival culture” on the north and west coasts of the country. “That’s definitely vibrant.” In addition, some schools are offering dance as part of their physical education programs.

“We do still have to grapple with areas of the tradition that we feel need a bit more support,” says Byrne. When it comes to the next generation, there are not many young singers in Scots language song, nor are there many young storytellers. “We are looking at a range of apprenticeship programs as well as young storyteller development work.”

The Scottish International Storytelling

Festival aims to engage people in this oft-neglected art form. The event has taken place annually for more than 35 years, evolving as part of the Scottish Storytelling Forum and the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

Spearheaded by Byrne’s predecessor, Donald Smith, the festival brings together bearers of the storytelling tradition. “There was a recognition that it needed a bit of an intervention,” says Byrne. “That has blossomed into the centre, the festival and the forum, which all offer avenues for people to learn.”

The storytellers aren’t exclusively Scottish - professionals come from various cultures and parts of the world - but the festival keeps the Scottish storytelling tradition at its heart. Going forward, Byrne hopes that the gathering will offer even more collaboration and learning opportunities about safeguarding the tradition.

“We have a role to play in helping people to develop their sense of place and identity in relation to these traditional arts...”

“I often liken it to people looking up and elsewhere for culture when in fact there are wonderful traditions on their doorstep.”

Having recently been approved for multi-year funding from Creative Scotland, Byrne says TRACS will be making the most of the years ahead “to ensure that traditional arts do become more a visible part of everyday life in Scotland and in our communities.”

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The Edinburgh Tartan Parade

Tania Pramschufer has been organizing events for two decades, but her latest endeavor - the Edinburgh Tartan Parade - is perhaps her most ambitious and meaningful yet. With a deep love for Scotland's cultural heritage and a passion for creating events that bring people together, Pramschufer is spearheading an initiative that will weave the past, present, and future of tartan into a vibrant and inclusive celebration.

Born into a family with a rich and diverse heritage, Pramschufer has always had a deep appreciation for Scotland's history and traditions. "My mother's family names, Coutts and Petrie, trace back to the Forres area of Scotland, while my father's German and Swedish lineage adds another layer to my story," she shares with Celtic Life International via email. Now residing in Portobello, Edinburgh's beloved beach suburb, she benefits from being close to the lively Scottish capital, with its thriving community of independent businesses and stimulating activities.

Harnessing her extensive experience, Pramschufer's journey with tartan parades began in 2017 when she developed a small procession to launch the World Fair Trade Tartan.

"It was just 500 people, but the moment was electric. We marched from the Royal Mile to the Ross Band Stand in Princes Street Gardens, and I knew then that this had to grow." Inspired by the annual NYC Tartan Day Parade, she brought World Fair Trade Tartan to The Big Apple in April of 2018. "It was overwhelming, absolutely incredible. The pride, the spectacle, the sheer cinematic joy of it all - I wanted to create something just as special in Edinburgh."

That dream has now become a reality. Following the success of her participation in the NYC Tartan Day Parade - where she returned in 2023 with 30 young drummers from Leith-based charity Pulse of the Place - Pramschufer and a team of five like-minded individuals founded Tartan Parade Scotland.

"Teamwork makes the dream work," she says enthusiastically. "We began working on the project last spring, and the inaugural event is set to take place this coming May 10. The timing is perfect, as Edinburgh is celebrating its 900th anniversary in 2025."

Registrations are quickly filling up. "We capped participation at 1,600 for this first year, and we reached that limit three months ahead of schedule! The interest has been phenomenal - from Edinburgh, across Scotland, and even from as far as New York and Washington. We even have Vikings joining us from Shetland, Bay City Roller fans, and the Chinese Entrepreneur Society, who will bring tartan-adorned lions and dragons!"

The Edinburgh Tartan Parade is designed as a tribute to Scottish pride, inclusivity, and positive energy.

“We are all about celebrating tartan - the fabric of Scotland that weaves connection, identity, and friendships around the world...”

The parade will kick off on the Royal Mile in front of City Chambers, a site steeped in history dating back to the 1300s. Participants will march through Cockburn Street, cross Waverley Bridge, and through East Princes Street Gardens before concluding at the Mound Precinct near the National Galleries.

Following the parade, attendees will be treated to a free Ceilidh at the Ross Band Stand, with Edinburgh Castle providing a breathtaking backdrop. "We've got two world-renowned, award-winning bands - Whisky Kiss and Gleadhraich - to keep the energy high," notes Pramschufer. "And for those who want to keep the party going, the Usher Hall after-party will feature Rura and the Red Hot Chilli Pipers for a night of incredible music."

Organizing such a large-scale gathering is a formidable task. "Funding a first-year event is always a challenge, but we are delighted to have Belhaven Brewery, Hand Up Events, and LocalMotive Markets as our sponsors."

A welcome hurdle, however, is the sheer volume of interest the event has generated. "We will definitely be looking to expand next year - there is clearly a huge demand!"

The rewards, she shares, far outweigh the challenges. "Watching this idea blossom, seeing people come together in a shared love for tartan and Scotland - that is the greatest gift. It's about community, joy, and making something meaningful that will last."

"This is a Scotland-wide event, but it's deeply rooted in the local Edinburgh community. Pipe bands, dance groups, organizations, and individuals are all taking part."

With the parade now firmly placed on Edinburgh's cultural calendar, Pramschufer's vision of a grand tartan procession has come full circle. "We have planted the seed of an idea and are watching something beautiful grow."

WWW.EDINBURGH.ORG/900/EVENT/EDINBURGH-TARTAN-PARADE

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 large trees 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.



Fairfield
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Women with Ambition

Jane McCooley wants to challenge the stigma around ambitious women

“What is so wrong with a woman exhibiting fierce ambition?” asks Jane McCooley, Founder and CEO of Women With Ambition (WWA), via an email exchange with Celtic Life International.

Born in small-town Ireland, McCooley moved to New York more than a decade ago and currently resides in Weehawken, New Jersey. In 2022, she hosted the inaugural meeting of WWA in her dining room. Originally, McCooley had plans for a six-month peer mentorship program. She had no idea how things would expand from there.

Today, the group “is a professional network of Irish and Irish American women working in New York and the Tri-State area,” she explains. “We provide a platform for women of all industries to form a meaningful network and focus on intentional self-development - all while supporting and celebrating each other as we strive for individual career goals and ambitions.”

WWA still runs its mentorship program, along with several other initiatives. “Since that time around my dining room table, we have evolved to hosting many events all over New York City, including at the Bank of Ireland NYC Hub, who we are very proud to be strong partners with. We have had hundreds of women come join us for our various activities.”

Networking events, a workshop series, and a Female Founder and Entrepreneur Expo are just a few of the initiatives that have been brought to fruition since the organization’s founding. On an individual level, the non-profit aims to help women improve their communication skills, enhance their personal brand, and develop confidence.

“We aim to confidently express our determination to reach our goals and become strong leaders, while empowering and inspiring each other.”

Before founding WWA, McCooley admits that she personally did not have a strong network. She also noticed that many women, including herself, shied away from showcasing their drive and talent, recalling how she “was even dismissive” of her own feelings. That has since changed. Women with Ambition recently celebrated its three-year anniversary, having come a long way from that initial meeting of just 18 women.

“I feel extremely passionate about showcasing talented and accomplished women of all industries and the important contributions they have made to their sectors or communities, but also because the value of having a network of like-minded people to support, celebrate, and propel women forward in their individual endeavors cannot be understated.

“There have been many rewards from developing WWA and seeing it expand, including the ability to showcase the amazing achievements of so many women, educate our members on subjects or industries of interest, and connect women who would never have otherwise met each other. My most precious feedback is when a WWA member tells me they are now very good friends with, or found a job through, someone they met at a WWA event. I find that very special, and it reminds me of the power and importance of our mission.”



Fortunately, McCooley has found women who are just as passionate as she. WWA is run exclusively by volunteers. As Founder and CEO, McCooley establishes the vision for initiatives and events, while the volunteer team helps bring the vision to life. Of course, it’s not easy. “We do not always have the financial support we need, and I know there are many opportunities we could exploit if we had more funding. I have many ideas up my sleeve, so I am sure we will find a way in the coming months and years.”

Women from any and all industries are welcome to participate in WWA events and initiatives. “We also have an official membership, where some discounts are available for female-founded businesses that we frequently partner with, and a portion of the proceeds go to charity.”

In the future, McCooley hopes Women with Ambition will expand into other areas of the United States. She would also love to host an event in her home country of Ireland. There is already plenty on the agenda for the year ahead, however.

“We will continue to grow our Golf Society, since this remains very important for business and ensuring that women are included in conversations where networking happens, and relationships are fostered. Towards the end of the year, we will host our third Female Founder Expo, where nearly 40 female-founded businesses will sell their products and services, elevate their brand awareness, and network with each other.”

WWW.WOMENWITHAMBITIONNY.COM @WOMENWITHAMBITION_NY



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The Celtic Creatives

One Irish woman shares her experience, strength, and hope...

In the coastal town of Skerries, nestled along Ireland's eastern shores about a 40-minute drive due-northeast of Dublin, Jen Murphy is weaving together the threads of ancient wisdom and modern longing.

Founder of The Celtic Creatives, Murphy has dedicated her life to helping women reconnect with lost parts of themselves through Irish feminine mysticism. Her journey, shaped in childhood and defined by folklore, was later refined through both a personal and professional journey that spanned anthropology, human rights, and deep personal transformation.

"I grew up in a lively working-class suburb of north Dublin," she recalls. "My grandmother, Frances O'Sullivan, filled my ears with Irish folklore - stories passed down through generations."

Those first forays with folklore left a lasting impression, setting Murphy on a path to study Medieval Irish and Celtic Studies before plying her trade for 14 years as an anthropologist in human rights education.

Life, however, had other plans.

"In 2019, while pregnant with my second son, I had a cervical cancer scare. It changed everything; I left my career as I knew it and dove deep into the feminine - training in somatic modalities, Jungian psychology, and dreamwork. From that, The Celtic Creatives was born."

Murphy's work is not merely the surface study of esoteric ideologies, however - it is the hands-on, everyday practice of those principles that enables the process of authentic self-discovery.

"For women to discover lost parts of themselves through Irish feminine mysticism, they must reconnect with what I call the three bodies: the Earth Body, ancestral connection to nature; the Creative Body, following our *dán*, an Old Irish term for one's calling; and the Moon Body, the unconscious self waiting to be integrated."

She brings this philosophy to life through offerings that blend creativity with spirituality, including one-on-one mentor-

ing, a vibrant Substack community, self-guided courses, and in-person retreats in Ireland. Her most popular course, The Celtic Woman's Voyage, guides participants through the Celtic Calendar alongside Irish goddesses.

"Everything I do is infused with co-creation with my ancestors and the Celtic Otherworld. Modern interpretations of Celtic mythology often miss two vital aspects: the feminine and the body. But our ancestors understood their importance."

Her work with others evolved as her own journey took shape and progressed.

"When I started, I was focused on feminine embodiment coaching. Now, it's about the art of belonging - coming home to our authentic nature. Research shows that people who feel they belong are nearly three times more likely to have a greater sense of well-being. This includes belonging to our lineage."

Her path hasn't always been easy. "Running a business while raising two young sons, I have had to surrender to the current of life, aligning my creative work with the wisdom of the Celtic Calendar. It makes everything flow easier."

Despite the challenges, she reaps the very rewards that she seeks to bring to her clients.

“Living my *dán*, my creative calling - is a gift. And seeing what a connection to Celtic spirituality does for others is extraordinary...”

Though her work is deeply rooted in Irish tradition, Murphy's clients come from across the globe, with many of Irish heritage seeking to reconnect with their roots in meaningful ways.

"They're often overwhelmed by modern life and patriarchal structures and carry a deep longing to re-enchant their lives, sensing that their ancestors knew something vital. But they might be unsure how to access it."

Connecting with others initially through her website, social media, podcast appear-



ances, and events, the real transformations happen in person, with many clients expressing, "I feel like I've finally come home."

Although Murphy may feel right at home guiding others through the process of personal transformation, she is also excited to continue her own journey.

"I want to open a mythic arts center in Skerries - a space where people can gather, collaborate, and co-create with the Celtic Otherworld."

In the meantime, she is busy launching Celtic Soul Garden, a course for creatives seeking to align their projects with the Celtic Calendar, as well as planning for a retreat that she will host in the sacred Boyne Valley this autumn. She is also writing a book proposal and undertaking a three-year research program in dreamwork and ancestral stories.

In a world that often leaves many of us feeling disconnected and uncertain, Murphy sees an increasing hunger for spiritual depth. "The global polycrisis is waking people up. They're realizing there has to be another way. And there is."

She points to an old distinction in Irish culture as a clue to the solution: "sous" and "imbas."

"Sous is book knowledge, formal study. Imbas is poetic wisdom - insight gained from nature, ancestors, and the soul. Today, we have plenty of sous, but not enough imbas."

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Clodagh

Inspired by the females in her family, Portia A. Buckley explores women through film

“My Great Aunt Columba worked with Alexander Fleming on the invention of Penicillin,” Portia A. Buckley shares via email. “Both my grandmother and great-grandmother studied at Trinity Dublin, which was rare for women in those days.”

Although she is based in London, Buckley’s heritage is distinctly Irish; her paternal grandparents are from Eire and her parents currently reside on the Emerald Isle as well. Growing up, Buckley herself spent many a summer visiting the rural regions of the country - the Waterford area in particular.

It’s no surprise, then, that her latest short film, *Clodagh*, was set and shot in Ireland.

“The wealth of talent when it comes to actors is amazing. I love the Irish turns of phrase. Many times, I have heard a turn of phrase and know I will put it into a script. It is always beautiful, philosophical and inspiring, but can come from anyone. Everyone is a poet in their own way here. Visually, it is hugely inspiring; you can’t miss when you shoot in Ireland – is a wonderful place to film.”

Over a mere 16 minutes, *Clodagh* tells the tale of Mrs. Kelly (Bríd Ní Neachtain): a priest’s housekeeper and Irish dance instructor living in a small Irish village. When Mrs. Kelly meets the eponymous character (Katelyn Rose Downey), she is taken aback by the teenager’s talent for dance.

“It’s about a lot of things, but it was only in hindsight we realized we had written a film about a child coming into someone’s life and turning it upside down,” says Buckley, who co-wrote the film with Michael Lindley, her partner in creativity as well as life.

“The combination of the two of us and our shared taste is what makes our work unique. It’s no better or worse than anyone else’s, it’s just different. Michael’s brain works very differently from mine. His is more literary, mine is more aesthetic, but when we filter his through mine, I believe we get the



best of both.”

The couple made *Clodagh* together not long after welcoming their son into the world, which is emotionally reflected in the story.

“It is a film about the joy of allowing a wonderful and unpredictable and unruly child into your well-ordered life...”

Having a child has indeed impacted her life as a screenwriter.

Buckley notes that, with a baby in the picture, it became more difficult to even go to the cinema and simply watch a film. “Not only was there no spare time but the cost of going to the cinema had doubled, tripled even. Getting a sitter or parent to watch him, paying the tube or the parking.” This meant moviegoing was a luxury and, more to the point, it made Buckley realize just how important it is to make a film worth seeing.

“Although one should always strive to make important work that has a strong message, you should always be entertaining! It

seems obvious, but after a long stretch at film school, one can forget this.”

If the public and critical response is any indication, *Clodagh* has succeeded in both entertainment and emotional impact.

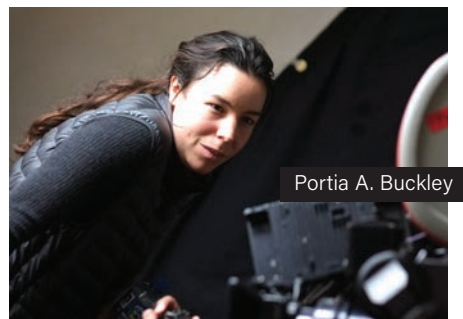
“The goal of the film was to get back to work after having a child, to shoot something low key with small stakes so that I could really explore the characters and continue to develop my own style. Of course, that lack of expectation has led to things I never thought possible.”

Clodagh has reached audiences in London, Los Angeles and even Japan. It has earned a slew of awards from various 2024 festivals, including the Cork Film Festival and the Cleveland Film Festival. The film was also longlisted for the British Independent Film Awards and was shortlisted for the Academy Awards. The Tribeca Film Festival, Buckley says, was a career highlight. Seeing her work onscreen in *The Big Apple*, where she’d studied film, proved to be a full circle moment.

“Seeing it play in front of an audience after a grueling shoot and edit is fun, too. You’re sick of the sight of it after all that work in the edit, but then you sit with an audience who are seeing it for the first time and they laugh and gasp and applaud and you go, ‘oh yes, this was meant to be enjoyable and funny and beautiful.’”

This year, Buckley hopes to develop *Clodagh* into a feature-length movie.

“As soon as I step back on set, I know that I am where I need to be.”



Portia A. Buckley

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Amy Scott

Pageantry with Purpose

Amy Scott never imagined that she would become Miss Scotland. After first applying to the competition in 2020, it was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I never thought I'd win," admits the 24-year-old via email. "I just tried my best and focused on enjoying the process. The girls competing alongside me were amazing and dedicated to their causes and charities. When my name got called, it was a total surprise but a very welcome one."

Scott, who hails from Strathaven, a picturesque village nestled between Ayrshire and Stirlingshire, has strong Celtic roots. "My family is mostly Scottish with some Irish connections on my mum's side a few generations back. I was raised in a small, quiet village with beautiful Scottish countryside views, and it was very easy to see both sides of my family."

Not long after the competition was cancelled due to lockdown, Scott relocated to Dubai.

"I moved back home last year and was lucky to get the opportunity to apply again. I'm grateful that everything worked out the way it did because I'm in a much better position now to accept the challenge and appreciate the platform."

Since taking the title, she has embraced her role wholeheartedly. "At home, it allows me to operate on an increased platform to engage the public in the charitable causes I care about."

Her primary focus is on raising awareness and funds for multiple sclerosis, a cause close to her heart. "My cousin was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at the same age I am now. It is a lifelong battle for her, and so it is a lifelong dedication for me."

Scott's reign has taken her beyond Scotland's borders, offering her unexpected yet enriching experiences. "When I was visiting Vietnam earlier in March, I had the opportunity to meet Miss Vietnam. I was also quite surprised to be recognized as Miss Scotland



by fans of Miss World. It was surreal."

Next on her itinerary is New York in April, where she will showcase Scottish style at the Dressed to Kilt fashion extravaganza as part of Tartan Week. In May, she will compete for the Miss World title in India. "This platform and the audience that it will be broadcast to is unrivaled in terms of bringing attention to such important social causes, and I'm grateful that I get to experience it."

Despite the obvious perks, being Miss Scotland involves plenty of perseverance.

“It may look very glamorous, and it is, but it is also a lot of hard work...”

"There are so many moving parts to getting organized for Miss World and juggling that with my charity work and my personal life has been intense. Yet, it's unbelievably worth it for all the opportunities it provides."

Among those opportunities is an unparalleled life experience. "The people I have met and the places I have been, and will get to visit, are simply amazing. There is nothing

else like it in Scotland, and it is such a privilege to be a part of."

The title and role have changed Scott on a personal level. "You become a role model. I asked myself who I wanted to be and also who I'd want my niece or other young girls to look up to. The values I held before winning my title are more amplified, and I live by them more intentionally. Spread kindness, be considerate, and try your best to help others because you never know what anyone else is facing."

Scott remains committed to her causes for the remainder of 2025. "For now, until May, I'm going to be solely focused on preparing for Miss World. Upon my return, I will hopefully be assisting with some more fundraising events for the charities I work with. That is the reason why I wanted to enter Miss Scotland and it serves as my main priority this year and for years to come."

"I am more disciplined, determined, and focused than I ever have been. This experience has taught me that you miss every shot that you don't take."

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Candlelit Tales

Siblings Sorchá and Aron Hegarty believe in the power of storytelling

“Storytelling connects us to our shared past and reminds us that whatever experience we are going through, no matter how profoundly frightening or isolating it might feel, it has been felt before,” says Sorchá, who - along with her brother, Aron - started Candlelit Tales in November 2014.

Although they are currently based in Dublin, Aron and Sorchá were raised in County Cork.

“It’s a place with a strong regional identity,” says Sorchá. “People from Cork sometimes refer to it as ‘the People’s Republic of Cork’ or say that Cork City is the ‘real capital’ of Ireland.”

Growing up, Sorchá did her fair share of reading - both to herself and to Aron, who is six years her junior. She even introduced him to the Ulster Cycle: a series of ancient Irish legends.

Although the pair pursued separate careers (as an actor and a writer, respectively), they both found themselves in the Emerald Isle’s “official” capital by 2014. Their shared interests in storytelling and mythology remained. Sorchá dove deep into mythology at the Bard Summer School, while Aron told audiences those same stories while working part-time as a tour guide.

“We realized that we were doing the same thing for different audiences, and that neither of us were completely happy with how nor where we were telling stories,” recalls Sorchá. “We started to talk about what we would like to do: to find a way to bring storytelling into a more accessible place, and reclaiming storytelling as a normal part of the culture. This would also allow us to tap into our own creativity and play with performance.”



Within weeks, the pair took their skills to a pub in the Dublin city centre. At first, this was merely an experiment: they wanted to test the waters and see if people were interested in the stories they had to share. The answer turned out to be a resounding yes. “Aron invited musicians to collaborate with us, and it grew in popularity each week, until there were queues out the door and around the corner. There was nothing like it elsewhere and we were hooked from then on.”

Since then, the siblings have sought to inspire others through Candlelit Tales, sharing stories with people of all ages while musicians play an original score live in the background.

“We have found that there are more stories in scattered fragments, and the material we draw from is deeper than either of us realized,” shares Sorchá.

“The joy and validation we’ve gotten from other people who have taken delight in the same stories that delight us keeps us inspired...”

In addition to performances, Candlelit Tales also runs workshops and online courses. Since 2019, Sorchá and Aron have co-hosted a podcast as well, which helped them continue to connect with their audience during the COVID-19 lockdown. It took the siblings some time to get used to talking in an empty room instead of a venue, but the pod-

cast is still going strong, with more than 250 episodes to date.

However, nothing can beat the feeling of a live performance and the effect it has on people. “The atmosphere is amazing: when you make people laugh at the start, the giddy energy in the room dissipates, the music starts, and we know we have them in the palm of our hand. The moments of silence are amazing, as you can hear a pin drop, and people are on the edge of their seat listening,” Sorchá explains. “People are clearly hungry for these stories, and we’re delighted to keep telling them. Recently, a woman who works as a psychotherapist told us how helpful our storytelling course has been to her in her work. So, the rewards are endless and often unexpected.”

Aron and Sorchá agree that storytelling has gone through a resurgence in Ireland - and it wasn’t until they started Candlelit Tales that they realized just how many people are working to keep the local folklore alive in their own communities. Stories of survival, pain and love are as relevant as they have ever been, and it seems people are happy to share in them. The pair have no plans to stop stoking the fire - and they’re even scheduled to launch a book in August.

“A good story is one you will want to hear again and again,” says Sorchá. “An even better one is one you want to retell yourself, from many different angles, over and over.”

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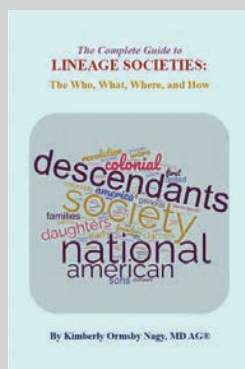
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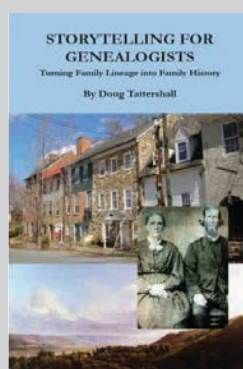
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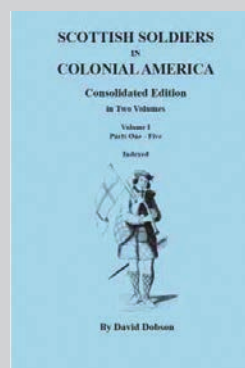
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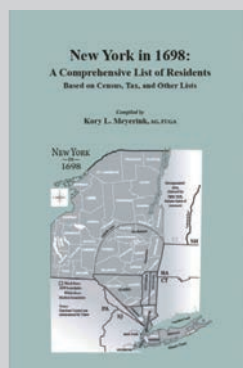
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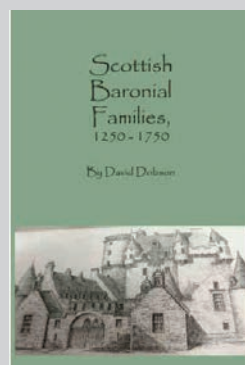
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Ben Gazur

Picture this: a sixth-century Welshman places a leek on his helmet before going into battle. No, this isn't an act of physical comedy - for those who participated in the custom, it was quite serious indeed. This is just one of the anecdotes readers will find in *A Feast of Folklore: The Bizarre Stories Behind British Food* by Ben Gazur.

Gazur has been interested in folklore since he was a child. An enthusiastic reader of British magazine *Fortean Times*, the esoteric stories found in its pages fascinated him. He didn't realize how many people felt the same, however, until he discovered the #FolkloreThursday trend on X.

Inspired by those connections, his released his new book in late 2024.

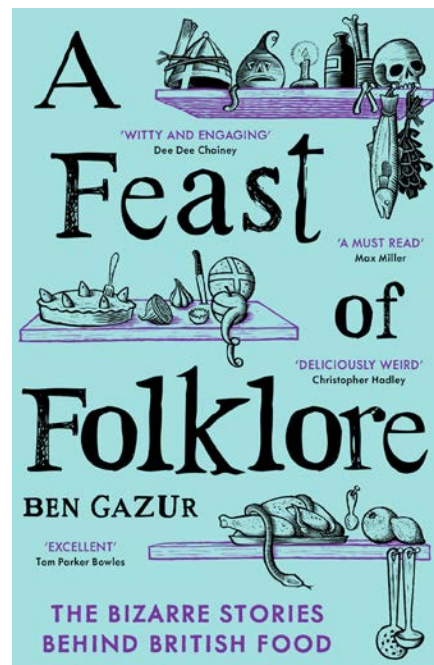
"I love food, and I love folklore - so it seemed quite natural to bring the two together," Gazur explains via email. "I liked the idea of focusing on the folklore of food because it is so personal. We all need to eat, and that has always been the case. When people in the past needed a cure, or a way to keep evil away, sometimes the only things they had to use were the things in their cupboards. The things that people used food for turned out to be very weird, such as curing warts by rubbing them with bacon, and the more I looked the weirder things became."

To research the book, Gazur had to dig into "old and obscure" sources. Fortunately, he found no shortage of those. Even for time periods for which historical records are lacking, the remnants of folklore tell us what those people believed in and, to some degree, how they lived.

"For instance, a lot of food folklore exists about curing children of whooping cough. That's not a disease that particularly fills us with dread anymore. However, based on the sheer number of cures and rituals invented to help it, we know how terrifying it must have been in those times."

A large part of his creative process involved narrowing down what he could reasonably include between two covers.

"Sitting in the library surrounded by these books was one of the best times of my life. Instead of searching out enough information to write my book I found myself with too many notebooks filled with too many facts I wanted to share." The sheer volume of folklore regarding bread, he notes, could take up an entire tome in itself, as bread has been a household staple for so many years. For ex-



ample, some believed there were supernatural creatures that needed to be fed by throwing a crust of bread over the left shoulder. "There is a whole field of folklore dedicated to rituals to make sure your bread bakes properly, too."

A Feast of Folklore is Gazur's third book. It is typical for him to go down rabbit holes in his research, he says, but that was especially the case here. "With this book, I seemed to always be turning up interesting historical oddities that I wanted to track down to their source."

“Folklore is a shifting thing that you can never really tame...”

Fortunately for Gazur, plenty of readers are equally enthralled by the bizarre beast that is British legend. "I have been so happy that other people have seemed to enjoy the history of food folklore as much I have. I thought it would be a very niche book!"

As for the popularity of folklore in general, the scribe has some theories on the widespread appeal; these ancient tales and traditions manage to feel universal and personal all at once, and every family has its own traditions - including Gazur's. "My Nan thought Lucozade and eggy bread could cure any illness."

At the same time, some beliefs seem to transcend generations and geography. "How many people toss salt over their shoulder when they spill it?"

What's more, folklore is its own kind of magic. These little rituals, mundane or silly as they may be to some, can add some sparkle and hope to a difficult time. "You might not be able to control what's going on in the world outside, but by performing a little folklore rite, you feel like you can ward off some of the bad stuff."

Gazur is currently working on his next book, but - due to his own personal superstitions - he's mum on the details. "You don't want to upset the publishing gods!"



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Owen Staton

Weaving Welsh legends one story at a time



Owen Staton's talent for telling tales took root in the historic village of Cwmavon near Port Talbot, in the heart of South Wales - an environment steeped in narrative.

"I was very lucky to have been born and bred in this old mining village nestled in the mountains," he shares with Celtic Life International via email, recounting his journey within the magical world of myth. "It was, and remains, an area full of story and soul."

Attending Welsh School in nearby Pontrhydyfen, Staton first learned stories of local legends, setting the stage for his life's work. "While at school I heard tales about Richard Burton and Anthony Hopkins, so it really was a great place to spend my early years."

Now, at 52, he resides in the Vale of Neath, a place imbued with its own more ancient myths. "It is said that Gwyn Ap Nudd flies through the valley in a chariot pulled by the Cŵn Annwn, but I have yet to see them."

Staton's fascination with storytelling began serendipitously. "I was booked to play a Roman Soldier at Swansea Museum and would talk about life in Roman Britain."

To fill the time, he began narrating stories that resonated with audiences, an exercise that led him to craft his own tales and delve into ancient Welsh ghost stories. Initially, storytelling became a welcome respite that balanced his role as a police officer.

Over time, the allure of Welsh myths and legends drove Staton to bring his passion

for storytelling to a broader audience. "Some people are just not yet aware of the wonders that they have right on their own doorstep."

He admits that his role as a storyteller can sometimes be misunderstood.

"People are unaware of what I do when booking." Questions like, "What are you reading from?" or "What costume are you going to wear?" are common. Once audiences experience one of his performances, however, their perceptions shift. "They tend to be quite surprised once they realize how immersive it can be."

Witnessing the impact that his stories have on audiences is a large part of why Staton keeps telling them.

"I have had people moved to tears by some of the old tales. It stirs something deep in their souls..."

The opportunity to engage with audiences holds a special significance - in particular, he recalls a stand-out show at the Edinburgh Fringe. "Great crowds from all over the world came to see the show, and the chance to bring these stories home to the places where they actually happened is always special."

In 2021, Staton launched his "Time Between Times" podcast, further expanding his reach and making it easier for listeners to both enjoy his storytelling in the comfort of their own homes and benefit from the meditative

elements incorporated into the storytelling to promote well-being.

"The podcast has garnered a diverse listenership, with fans from Brazil, Germany, Australia, and beyond. It is an incredible demographic, and I am amazed and humbled by its success."

He notes that storytelling among younger people is stronger than ever these days - something he attributes to an increased interest in traditional narratives. "I believe that we are in an age of discovery where people are drawn to stories and the old ways in which they were told."

Fortunately, South Wales has no shortage of inspiration for Staton to draw upon. "The mountains and the sea, the valleys and the rivers - everywhere you look, there is wonder and magic."

In a world increasingly dominated by digital interactions and overload, the dedication to preserving and sharing oral traditions serves as a poignant reminder of the passion for storytelling and the power of the past to compel audiences worldwide.

To that end, Staton notes that he has no plans to cease storytelling any time soon and continues to expand his offerings. "The podcast seems to be going from strength to strength and I am planning a number of shows this year. I will continue bringing these old tales to new audiences for as long as I can."



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Callum Robinson



The wisdom of wood and words

Callum Robinson's journey as a craftsman and writer is deeply rooted in both the landscapes of Scotland and his own family tradition.

"My parents moved up to Scotland in the early 1970s, when my grandfather worked on the hothouses at the Royal Botanical Garden," he shares via email with Celtic Life International. "I was born in Edinburgh and grew up in the rolling countryside of East Lothian."

His childhood home, a former 18th-century farm building, was rebuilt by his father and remains a touchstone of his upbringing. "My parents still live in that house, and my father, Master Woodcarver David Robinson, still works there in his home workshop, where I learned the trade."

Today, Robinson resides in a wooden house of his own making with his wife Marisa and their "terrible little border collie," nestled among sheep fields outside Linlithgow, a town renowned as the birthplace of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Given his father's influence, Robinson's path to woodworking was almost inevitable. "As a child, I felt drawn to his workshop, so in some ways, I have done it for as long as I can remember."

Despite the early start, Robinson only officially began working professionally in the field at the age of 19. "I was tending bar in a quiet little hotel, drifting my days away. My father needed support on a large bespoke project, and I needed a change of direction. Before too long, I had fallen in love with the craft, and I've been doing it ever since."

Like the wood he works with, Robinson's experience as a craftsman matured over the years. "As I have grown, my skills have developed. What appealed to me throughout

was the independence and the freedom of the creative life."

He admits that, despite the fulfillment, woodworking is not without its struggles.

"Honestly, it is a tough way to make a living; materials are getting more expensive, hardwood species are struggling, and the shipping of items has become very challenging. And, while all of those costs have gone up, household incomes continue to go down."

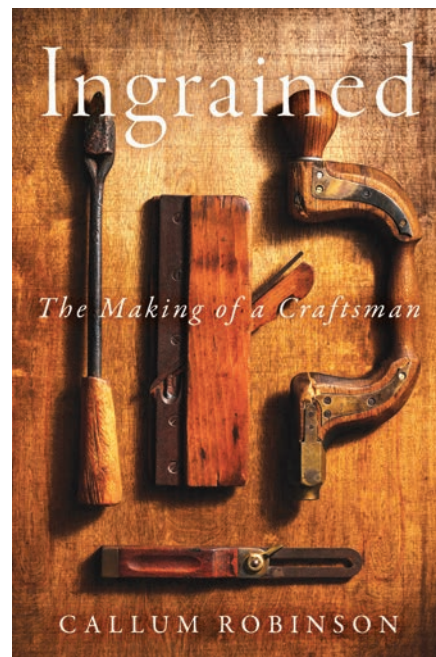
Add to that the pressures of the digital world. "It is difficult to maintain a meaningful social media presence - which is essential these days - without that becoming very time-consuming."

Robinson asserts, however, that the rewards of the vocation continue to outweigh those difficulties. "Engaging with the natural world through expressive manual labor speaks to something ancient in all of us. It's something that can forever change your relationship with the objects around you. It is honest, useful, stimulating, and sustainable work."

His many achievements have contributed to his gratitude. "Exhibiting at the Royal Academy of the Arts in London was a real highlight. I am also proud to have created a store interior for Aesop - who creates such legendary interiors."

His proudest moment, however, is more personal. "More than anything, seeing how far my father has come as a woodcarver - the recognition his work now gets around the world - that's my standout highlight."

Given his dedication, it was a natural next step for Robinson to write his debut book, *Ingrained*, as an intimate exploration of his craft.



“Two years, three thousand cups of coffee, more endless nights, delights, heartaches and breakthroughs than I can ever remember.”

The book offers readers a deeply immersive experience of the woodworking life. "I wanted to provide a visceral sense of what it felt like to work with their hands in the modern age. To describe, as evocatively as I could, the sights and smells and feelings that working with wood can provide."

The response has been overwhelming. "I have been totally blown away. This simple family story about a young man trying to find his place in the world, in the workshop, and amid the wonder of wood and trees, is being read all over the world - reviewed in places like *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Financial Times*. People are even reaching out to me personally - it is more than I ever could have imagined."

In addition to the absorbing narrative, those considering a career in woodworking or carpentry can find guidance in the tome, which will soon be followed by a sequel.

"I'm working on my next book right now. There's a lot more to explore in the wonderful world of wood, and I've scarcely scratched the surface!"



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Linguicity

One Irish American man links language, learning, leisure, and legacy

In an era where language learning has become more important than ever, Linguicity is breaking new ground by combining the fun of classic word games with the richness of multilingual expression.

Created by Carder Starr, the app allows players to seamlessly switch between languages, reinforcing vocabulary and deepening their appreciation for linguistic diversity while learning more about their own lineage.

For Starr, the inspiration for Linguicity came unexpectedly in 2013 while playing Words With Friends.

"I noticed that I had the perfect letter tiles to spell 'palabra' - the Spanish word for 'word,'" he recalls via email from his home in Rhode Island. "It struck me - why should word games be limited to just one language? What if players could switch between multiple languages in the same game?"

With deep Irish roots tracing back to County Tipperary and County Roscommon, Starr's passion for language is personal. His late wife, Eileen Molloy, was 100 percent Irish, and his visits to Ireland - first on his honeymoon in 1983, and again in 2011 - deepened his connection to his heritage. That bond evolved and was eventually reflected in Linguicity's expansion to also include Irish and Scots Gaelic.

Incorporating phonetically diverse languages within a word game presented a unique set of challenges. "One of the biggest hurdles was creating a seamless gaming experience where only the selected 'Language of Play' (LoP) is actively used." The solution came through a partnership with an experienced programmer who ensured that the app met the technical demands required by Apple and Google Play.

Starr notes that, beyond technical hurdles, the challenge of marketing the new app loomed large. "Reaching the right audience - whether language learners, educators, or heritage speakers - requires strategic outreach, partnerships, and visibility."

Another issue was expanding Linguicity's language offerings. With each new language, careful integration of vocabulary, linguistic rules, and cultural context was required. "Ensuring authenticity, while keeping the game accessible for both fluent speakers and learners, is key."

Despite those difficulties, Linguicity is now available worldwide in eight languages, including Irish and Scots Gaelic. "It has evolved into exactly what I envisioned - a game that not only entertains but also teaches, connects, and preserves language."

Including Irish and Scots Gaelic was a no-brainer for Starr who takes pride in his ancestry.

"When I first created Linguicity, I focused on major Romance languages, but Irish and Scots Gaelic were always high on my list."

The decision to add these languages solidified last summer when a family from Dublin knocked on his Rhode Island door looking for local maple syrup.

"We started talking about Linguicity, and when I mentioned adding Irish, they were thrilled. That moment confirmed that now was the right time."

While his knowledge of Irish and Scots Gaelic is still developing, Starr has committed to learning them. "I recently started taking Irish classes online, and I plan to begin Scots Gaelic classes soon before my first trip to Scotland."



The greatest reward, he shares, has been seeing people engage with their heritage through language.

“Language is more than communication - it’s a bridge to history, identity, and culture...”

Ultimately, Linguicity allows players to reconnect with their ancestral tongues while having fun. Users can interact with a language they are learning, or reconnect with a lost one, reinforcing Starr's mission to make language learning engaging, meaningful, and accessible.

"Even as cultures blend, many people continue to cherish their own heritage while respecting others. Fostering an openness to multilingualism and cultural exchange strengthens global understanding and mutual respect."

Starr has no plans to stop there, offering more than mere competitive gameplay by developing an "immersive solo journey mode" where players progress through AI-driven challenges while earning points for using multiple languages. "Users will be able to unlock cultural and linguistic insights, from Irish proverbs to the origins of Scots Gaelic phrases. It's about discovery, not just competition."

"Now that Linguicity is available worldwide, the next step is getting it into the hands of more players. I hope to inspire curiosity, connection, and a love for language that lasts a lifetime."

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Jim Murphy recalls the moment that everything changed.

“It was just another average, quiet Sunday, and then all of a sudden - out of nowhere - my phone started blowing up,” shares Jim Murphy, author and mental skills coach from his home in Ohio. “Text messages, voice mails, notes from people via social media...I had absolutely no idea what was happening.”

What was happening was something quite significant; during an NFL playoff match-up between the Philadelphia Eagles and the Green Bay Packers this past January, Eagles star receiver A.J. Brown was spotted on the sidelines during the game...reading a book. That book was Murphy’s 2020 motivational guide to performing under pressure, Inner Excellence.

A minor-league baseball player who bounced around the Chicago Cubs organization for several years, Murphy - who is proud of his rich Irish heritage - admits that he was a bit out-of-sorts when his on-field career came to a close in 1991.

“I had to do some serious soul-searching,” he shares. “I knew that I loved the mental element of baseball - and of all sports really - and I got excited by the thought of collecting these ideas and putting them down in a little manual that I could pass along to younger players.

“Sharing my experience, strength and hope was incredibly fulfilling, and I felt like I was being called to serve. But the question remained, how best to serve?”

In 2010, \$90k in debt and with only \$100 in his wallet, Murphy packed up a few prized possessions and moved to the Sonora Desert in Arizona. There, he would spend - on average - between 50 to 60 hours each week over the next five years researching and writing Inner Excellence.

“I read everything on the subject that I could get my hands on,” he recalls, “and I interviewed anyone and everyone in the field that I could; athletes, coaches, trainers, managers, motivational speakers, members of 12-step support groups, spiritual leaders, and more. I wanted to draw upon a wide spectrum of wisdom in an effort to discover the common denominators of peak performance.”

Once completed, Murphy released the book to the world and then...

“Crickets,” he laughs. “The book didn’t exactly break any records on the bestseller lists. It may have risen as high as 8,000 or 9,000 on Amazon, but it wasn’t like it was flying off the shelf.”

At one point, Inner Excellence was ranked as low as 523,497 on the online retailer. And while he did manage to pick up a few coaching clients from the world of sports, including several MLB players and PGA golfers - and side-hustled with various speaking engagements - success was slow.

Fittingly, perhaps, it took an Eagle to help the work soar to new heights.

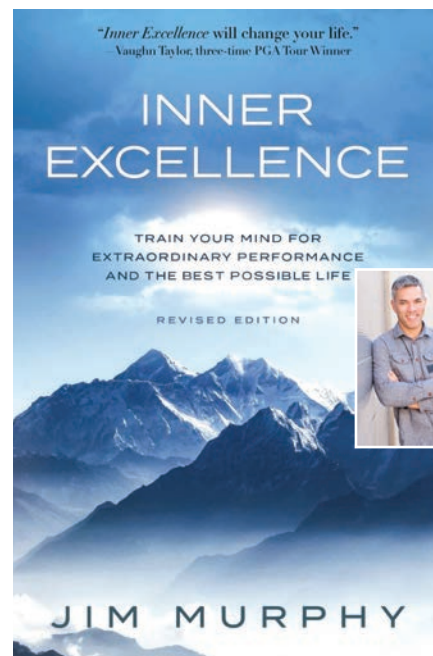
“The day after A. J. (Brown) was filmed reading Inner Excellence on the bench, the book shot to number one on Amazon and elsewhere. I went from selling 5 books a day to selling 10,000 books a day. People were all over social media - commenting, recommending, reviewing, influencing...to be honest, it may have been a lucky break, but I feel vindicated for all of the time and effort I had put into it.”

In addition to the first five years that he took to put the tome together, Murphy spent even more time revising his ideas and updating newer editions.

“In all, Inner Excellence represents about 11 years’ worth of researching and writing about performance coaching. What is really interesting, when I think about it, is that I wrote the book to help others become the best version of themselves and to achieve a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. In the end, though, the process likely helped me in those regards more than anyone else.”

That process led Murphy to an even deeper awakening.

“I am a practicing Christian, so I have always had a strong belief in God, and that faith has helped me through some very difficult times both during my baseball career and since retiring from the game. Over the years I began to understand how the spiritual life - a life of love, devotion, commitment, surrender - is critical for success not only in sports, but in any worthwhile endeavour.



“The principles at play in Inner Excellence are stars with which we can steer our ship through the seas of life...”

He expands upon those ideas in his latest chart-topper, The Best Possible Life.

“The new book raises some important fundamental human questions that we should all be asking ourselves regularly; How do I want to feel? How do I want to live? What do I want most? Who am I meant to become? Many people have told me that, after they do a little digging, they are often surprised by what they unearth.

While self-reflection is essential to staying sane in today’s often-chaotic world, Murphy admits that introspection isn’t always easy.

“There are a million things each day that distract us, and it’s not like critical thinking is encouraged or even taught in schools anymore - many people, especially younger people, feel powerless about what is going on around them these days and are discouraged about making a difference.

“That said, I wrote both Inner Excellence and The Best Possible Life to remind people that while they may not feel that they can change the world, they can certainly change the world inside of them.”

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Katie Jane Lubiens

Katie Jane Lubiens might be the busiest woman in the music business. Along with fronting her own project - The Katie Jane Band - she is also the founder, director, and star of the Celtic Light Orchestra, the concert mistress of the ECCO Orchestra, a fiddle teacher, and an ambassador of Celtic music and dance in her community and beyond. Recently we spoke with her from her home in Portland, Oregon.



What are your family roots?

I come from a mix of backgrounds, like most Americans. But after performing at so many Scottish Highland Games over the past couple of years I have been learning more about my ancestry. I am mostly Scottish, descended from the Keith Clan. My Grandma Katie Keith, whom I was named after, carries the last name and we can trace our Scottish heritage back through her. That's one thing I really love about performing at these Scottish Highland Games. At their core, they are all about family. When I was in Scotland a couple of years ago, I visited the Dunnottar Castle where the Keith Clan hails from. It was so exciting to step inside the history of my ancestors and imagine what life must have been like for them at that time.

When and why did you start playing the fiddle?

I started with the violin when I was in second grade, shortly after my parents took me to see Riverdance. A seed was planted that night. When my mom asked if I wanted to learn an instrument, the violin called me. I started by taking private lessons, before joining an orchestra in Middle School. I studied classical violin while attending the University of Nevada in Reno. Even though I loved it, I always longed for something different than classical repertoires, but I just hadn't been introduced to it yet. After I graduated college, one of my girlfriends invited me to a local Irish session and I instantly fell in love with the community atmosphere, the joy and energy of the music, and the fact that you could drink beer while playing! I was hooked! So, each Tuesday I attended that little Irish session in Reno, and it truly changed my life.

Are they the same reasons you do it today?

When I moved to Portland, I decided to pursue music as a full-time career. Today I have the pleasure of traveling the world to perform and teach music for a living. As a performer, I make it my mission to spread the joy of Celtic



music to audiences of all ages. My shows are full of vibrant energy and audiences always remark on how much fun I am having on stage. I perform a mix of Scottish, Irish, French-Canadian, and original music. The Katie Jane Band performs for all kinds of events - everything from big sold-out theater productions, national Celtic festivals, and Scottish Highland Games to small intimate performances at weddings, school assemblies, private parties, ceilidhs, and even retirement homes. In addition, I founded the dazzling Celtic Light Orchestra, the world's only light-up orchestra. The CLO performs on our patent invention - Glow Bowz - LED, light-up violin bows that respond to players' movements and dance with the music. Each CLO production is unique and features original arrangements of traditional and original Celtic music, along with folk dancing, stunning projections, dazzling LED lights, and more. I put on 3-4 concerts with the CLO each year. At home, I have a full studio of private students of all ages, and each time I have a new student I get to retell the story of my musical journey. I call my fiddle "My Friend-Maker" - and it really is. It has taken me on so many adventures all over the world to the most unexpected places to make friends and play music. Nothing could be more rewarding than sharing music with others. It's in my soul, it makes me feel alive, and I can't imagine doing anything else.

What are the challenges involved with the vocation?

No doubt there are challenges to being a full-time professional musician. Being self-employed means that any day you're not working you don't get paid. There's no paid time off, or sick days, no 401k matching, or health insurance benefits. Also, I book all my own gigs, and it's been a big learning process for me. There doesn't seem to be a consensus as to what musicians get paid so it's hard to know what to ask for. If you ever start to calculate your per hour rate - between travel, loading in, sound-checking, performing, and loading out - the math isn't pretty. But it's so hard to quantify since I absolutely love what I do. Another challenge is being a woman in a very male-dominated industry. I sometimes get paid less than other musical acts that are led by men. Also, festivals rarely feature any female musicians. As a leader in my community, I make it a priority to be a strong woman role model by uplifting women and promoting equality in the music world. It is my hope that I can inspire girls of all ages to be confident leaders in their communities with love for each other as our guide.

What are the rewards?

As performers, it is said we live for applause. It's hard to explain, but as we work so hard to create arrangements, rehearse for big shows, write new music, and coordinate logistics for turning a mere idea into reality - seeing the joy that our music and our shows bring people is the biggest reward. In a world that can seem heavy at times, I just want to bring light to others, make people feel something, and help us remember that there's goodness in us being together in this moment as we experience something immeasurably positive and special - live music.

How have you evolved as a player over time?

After that first experience at the Irish session in Reno I was changed forever as I dove into the world of Irish music.



This led me on a journey to discover many great Irish fiddlers, including Martin Hayes, Tommy Peoples, Frankie Gavin, and my idol, Liz Carroll. From here I discovered other niches of fiddle music, and I fell in love with the brightness of French-Canadian fiddling, the strength of Scottish fiddling, and the sweetness of Welsh fiddle music. I began making these Venn diagrams in my head of the similarities and differences between styles, which led me to create a new program with my students called "Fiddle Tunes from Around the World." Each quarter we learn about a different regional fiddling style. In fact, my next big Celtic Light Orchestra production will follow this idea as "Celtic Light Orchestra presents The World Fiddle Festival." Additionally, as a performer, I have always been known as a fiddler, but over the past few years, I've incorporated more singing into my shows. I have developed my voice, and a sound that is uniquely my own.

What have been some career highlights?

I got to be a part of the house band for the Scottish play "The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart" by David Greig. This was a hilarious play about Scottish ballads, folklore, and love. It was a dinner theater, and the actors would run around and sometimes act from atop the tables! We got to play live music for the production, which included playing lots of silly sound effects on my violin in addition to actual music. What was particularly special about this experience for me was that it was such a wild and outlandish play full of creativity and absurdity, and it expanded my mind creatively in a way that made me think I might be capable of doing something like this myself. It is what inspired me to start the Celtic Light Orchestra. It is an incredible thing when you allow yourself to give in to your creativity, and accept any idea as a possibility, no matter how wild it may seem.

Is your creative process more "inspirational" or "perspirational"?

I draw inspiration from so many places; recordings, fellow musicians, attending sessions, music books, live performances, etc. But as far as taking inspiration and turning it into a full-fledged live performance, it sure takes

a lot of perspiration to arrive at the final product. Especially when it comes to recording an album or creating a Celtic Light Orchestra production. One thing I marvel at, though, is the magic of having an idea that's in your head that no one else can see. Then with hard work, determination, lots of coordinating, creating, and planning, what was once just an idea then becomes something that many people can be a part of - sometimes touching them in unexpected and lasting ways, inspiring them, and passing on that inspiration in a ripple effect. That process, no matter how much perspiration it takes, is the definition of magic.

What makes a good song?

An earworm!

What makes a good live show?

Taking listeners on a journey to feel something real and alive, to feel excitement, to reflect on what's important, to feel sentimental as we remember our past, before bringing us back to the present to celebrate being together. All that and a pint of beer!

What advice might you have for young people looking to start playing the fiddle?

Have fun! Playing music is about having fun and expressing yourself. Get involved in orchestra. Play music with your family. Don't be afraid to mess up and make terrible sounds. Give in to the music and find what makes you feel inspired!

What's on your musical agenda for the rest of 2025?

This year is going to be the best year yet, and I am more motivated than ever to take my music to the next level. We've kicked off this year with a brand-new album, *Wild One*, and we've had multiple sold out concerts. I'm thrilled to be teaming up with an incredible Irish dancer for some of our bigger concerts this year. I'm planning a brand-new album, some really exciting new Celtic Light Orchestra productions, and a couple of big U.S. tours with the Katie Jane Band. It's like the feeling of electricity in the air just before a big thunderstorm.

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An Comunn Gàidhealach Ameireaganach

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ACGA promotes and advances Scottish Gaelic language and culture in North America. We host the Grandfather Mountain Gaelic Song and Language Week (July 6th-11th, 2025), the US National Mòd, and online events. We share learner resources and publish *An Naidheachd Againne*, a bilingual Gàidhlig-English newsletter.



Membership in ACGA is open to anyone with an interest in studying, learning, or preserving the Scottish Gaelic language, music, and culture. Join today at:
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American Scottish Gaelic Association

*Guarding Gaelic & Preserving the Past.
Story by Lillian Holt*

SPOTLIGHT

The Scottish Gaelic language is more than just a means of communication; it is a bridge to the past, a key to cultural identity, and an essential element of Scotland's heritage. Yet, like the other Celtic languages, it faces challenges with its preservation and promotion.

The American Scottish Gaelic Association (ASGA) plays a crucial role in the ongoing effort to revitalize interest in Scottish Gaelic.

"I first learned Gaelic for family reasons," shares Jeff Justice, President of ASGA, over the phone from his home in Texas. "It is not my entire background, but if you want to understand where your people come from, one of the best ways is to learn the language. This opens up opportunities to engage with the literature, history, and culture of the people."

According to Justice, learning Gaelic is more than just acquiring a new language. It is about fostering a deeper connection to history. "Having lived in Scotland and having spent a lot of time in Ireland, I can certainly appreciate the nuances of the landscape.

"Scottish Gaelic has at least 15 different words to describe an elevated landmass. The English words 'mountain' and 'hill' simply don't capture the full range of meanings. Some words, like 'cairn,' have made their way into English, but Gaelic offers a deeper understanding of the terrain and, by extension, the people."

Beyond mere vocabulary, language is a vessel for storytelling in a culture renowned for it: Gaelic songs, poetry, and literature carry centuries of history and emotion that translations often fail to capture. "When you read a Gaelic poem in its original form, the depth of feeling is different," notes Justice. "There is a rhythm and meaning that gets lost in translation. That is why language preservation isn't just about keeping a language alive - it's about keeping a culture alive."

This history of preservation of Celtic culture is also tied to other cultures.

"There are strong connections between different groups. For instance, there's an Indigenous American memorial in Cork, com-



Indigenous American memorial in Cork

memorating the generosity of the Choctaw people who aided the Irish during the Great Famine. In turn, the Irish returned the favor during the COVID-19 pandemic by supporting Native American communities. There are significant parallels between the cultures."

Protecting culture and language is also strongly linked to the concept of Pan-Celticism, or cross-Celtic solidarity, which ASGA embraces. With Scotland, Ireland, and Wales each working to preserve their native languages, the exchange of ideas and best practices across these groups is invaluable.

"We can learn from each other," notes Justice. "The Welsh language movement has made incredible strides in revitalization. There are things we can take from their success to help Scottish Gaelic."

Despite the historical efforts to suppress Scottish Gaelic, the language is experiencing a modern revival. A new generation of learners, many of whom rediscovered their heritage during COVID-19, are enrolling in linguistics courses.

"If there was any silver lining to the pandemic, it's that the lockdowns prompted

people to go back to school, learn new skills, or, in some cases, rediscover Gaelic because they had more time. That trend hasn't slowed down; in fact, more people are enrolling in courses than ever before. There is a renewed sense of pride and identity in these languages and cultures, and that's something we're committed to fostering."

Technology has also played a role in making Gaelic more accessible. "There are now apps, YouTube channels, and online courses that make learning Gaelic easier than ever before."

“Social media has created spaces where Gaelic speakers can connect globally. That’s something we didn’t have in the past.”

Although ASGA does not offer courses directly, it has positioned itself as a key supporter of Gaelic language education, providing guidance and information on courses offered across North America and online that can be accessed anywhere. "Some people ask why we don't create our own language



Jeff Justice

programs, but our mission is to strengthen existing ones rather than duplicate efforts. We do, however, contribute to events such as the Grandfather Mountain Games in North Carolina, which feature Gaelic language workshops.”

Along with providing information, ASGA organizes special events to celebrate the language and culture. “A couple of years ago, we hosted an online event celebrating the Celtic calendar, featuring a panel of speakers from the three Gaelic-speaking nations. It was fascinating to explore the similarities and differences in how these traditions are observed.”

Looking ahead, Justice and the ASGA are preparing for an event in May that will focus on bringing together different Gaelic and Celtic organizations across North America.

“We originally conceived it as a conference, but we realized that rather than uniting under one umbrella, we wish to maintain a diversity of organizations which strengthens our efforts. We shifted the focus to ‘Confluency’ - a coming together, like rivers merging.”

ASGA actively supports and collaborates with various organizations at home and abroad. “We have strong connections with the Toronto and Baltimore groups. One of our vice presidents is a senior leader with the New York Caledonian Society. I’m also a member of the World Celtic Society in Scotland, and I’ve been working on strengthening ties there.”

Advocacy is also a major focus, particularly regarding the Scottish Language Bill currently being debated in Scotland. The Bill

gives the Gaelic and Scots languages official status in Scotland and seeks to make adjustments to Gaelic and Scots education.

“We’ve been trying to get recognition from groups like Comunn na Gàidhlig, as they are currently focused on advocating for the Scottish Language Bill, which we fully support from this side of the Atlantic.”

While the ASGA recognizes the progress made in preserving Scottish Gaelic, Justice insists that more must be done. “All six Celtic languages are vulnerable, if not endangered. It’s critical that we work together.”

He also points out that preservation efforts must be collaborative, as well as innovative.

“Language preservation groups must connect across linguistic and cultural boundaries. If one language fails, it impacts all of us...”

“The Irish language has been heavily politicized, and many of us were alarmed that Scottish Gaelic had no presence in Scotland’s independence campaign 11 years ago. That said, if it had been included, it might have led to a Gaelic-versus-English debate, which could have had long-term negative consequences for the language.

“We need to do a better job of presenting ourselves to the public and showcasing the richness of these cultures. People often hesitate to engage with a language they aren’t familiar with, but the first step is simply being willing to try. By making Gaelic more accessible and fostering pride in its use, we can ensure that it continues to thrive.

“Make no mistake, however,” he adds. “Gaelic is still here. And as long as people are willing to learn, speak, and share it, it will never truly disappear.”

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Rascals Cafe

*One Scottish woman strives
to make a difference.*

Story by Tom Langlands.

I have always considered a cafe to be a haven in any city. There is something otherworldly about escaping the hustle and bustle of busy streets and losing oneself with a coffee, a slice of cake, and a good book. From the comfort of a calm and warm interior, the view beyond the window assumes a different perspective.

Rascals Cafe in The Fair City of Perth offers both a safe haven and a rather unique way of engaging with the outside world - and not just for its customers. The brainchild of Dodie Piddock, this particular coffee shop offers a familial approach to the care and understanding of individuals who have found themselves in trouble with the law, have spent time in prison, or those with neurodivergent issues that make it hard for them to engage with mainstream society and end up in a downward spiral of diminishing self-esteem. In fact, Rascals Cafe epitomizes the concept of the cafe as a haven - even their advertising slogan reads, "Life happens, coffee helps."

As I walked to the front door on a damp morning, window graphics showing two black, silhouette dogs' heads - one on each of the main windows - noted that the establishment was canine-friendly. Stepping inside, the interior - with its natural wood floor, wooden tables and chairs and green-painted dado woodwork - was clearly created by someone synergized with the natural world. On the walls hung animal portraits, including a Highland cow, more dogs, and two giraffes. Piddock met me with a warm, welcoming smile while the aroma of coffee hung in the air.

When researching places and events established by individuals who demonstrably choose to help others, I am struck by how often it is something in that person's own past that has led them down this path. Piddock is no exception. She began by explaining that it was late in life when she was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Before the diagnosis she had found difficulty fitting in with mainstream society's expectations which, in turn, had created a sense of loneliness and isolation. The youngest of four daughters, she recalled how her hard-working mother spent any



Dodie Piddock

available time undertaking charitable work - for which she was awarded an MBE and the Queen's Silver Jubilee medal for her efforts as the West Midland County Borough organizer of the Women's Rural Voluntary Service (WRVS). At 17 years of age, Piddock trained as a horse-riding teacher with her first paid job in Vienna.

Looking back, she considers her younger self to have been apolitical and naïve, but during her time in Austria she met many individuals with disparate political views. Laughing, she recounts,

“A lot changed inside me then and I returned to the U.K. as a 23-year-old, disillusioned, political activist.”

She joined Greenpeace, followed Captain Paul Watson when he started Sea Shepherd and his anti-whaling activism campaign and later, the Captain Paul Watson Foundation. Choosing to educate others about animal welfare and effective husbandry, she taught small animal care to young farmers at an agricultural college in Hereford. To this day, Piddock remains an ardent animal ac-

tivist and it underpins the strictly vegan approach to everything on the menu in Rascals Cafe.

Twenty years ago, Piddock moved to Edinburgh as a young mum with two children. There she worked as a personal assistant to a tetraplegic hedge fund manager, her empathetic approach partly borne from watching her Dutch mother become disabled in later life. That was followed by a spell with Brag Enterprises - a social enterprise charity founded in Fife to help relieve poverty in areas affected by the collapse of mining and other heavy industries. From there, she moved to Apex Scotland - a charity working alongside the criminal justice system and aimed at helping those in trouble with the law or in danger of becoming so. For two years she worked with four senior schools in Dundee, all of which were experiencing high student exclusion rates for behavioral problems. Piddock notes that the old adage applies; it is more often a case of individuals with problems rather than problem individuals. Some of those excluded were children who are neurodivergent.



Seeing opportunities where others see intractable difficulties, she notes, “Neurodivergent children have brains, they just use them differently. We need to rethink how we give them opportunities rather than cast them aside. The charity sector should not exist. It only does so because of the failure of the public and private sectors.”

In 2019, Piddock established Starting Step as a company with charitable status. The idea was to create a restaurant and training center adjacent to Perth Prison.

With a firm belief that it is both morally reprehensible and unsustainable to exploit animals to feed the world’s growing population, the center was intended to provide inmates with a better understanding of horticultural practices and promote a more sustainable way of feeding people. It would also offer them job opportunities and support both during and after completion of their sentences. Sadly, Covid struck at the wrong moment and the project was shelved.

Undaunted, Piddock and her partner Ron Tasker set up Rascals Cafe in 2022. Tasker has over 50 years of experience in the hospitality industry and together they believe there are great opportunities for employment within this sector, especially given the growing demand for vegan products. Piddock explains that the current system for assisting offenders and those with neurodiver-

gent issues isn’t suitable for purpose, “Most funding for assisting these individuals comes with a timescale attached.

“Each person is different, and it is impossible to ascertain for how long they may need support. To give them an opportunity with a fixed end date creates pressure and doesn’t help anyone. When time and money runs out, they are simply abandoned...”

For that reason, Rascals Cafe acts more like a family support group, helping individuals to turn their lives around or to find ways of coping with their difficulties. Students (Piddock dislikes terms such as “clients” or “service users”) work on a rolling rotation of three on duty at any one time, fulfilling a variety of roles within the cafe, safe in the knowledge that this is an open-ended opportunity for training and support. The cafe is already proving popular with locals and visitors alike, partly because of the products provided and the holistic approach to food production, but also on account of the way it helps people in need.

While Rascals Cafe is the product of a lifetime of connected events underpinned by a strong core belief that everyone should be given the best possible chance in life, Piddock

says that it is nonetheless just the beginning, “The Starting Step charity is now ready to develop the training kitchen garden. It is a known fact that horticulture brings a multitude of benefits including better physical and mental health and the ability to work with a diverse group of people of all ages, including inter-generational work. Horticulture brings joy to people by growing plants, boosts wellbeing, and supports the environment, economy, and food security. This is badly needed to help close the green skills gap.”

With the U.K. horticulture industry generating £5billion annually and providing employment for over 674,200 people, the dream would be to establish a dedicated horticulture college, founded on the principles of reducing human impact on animals, developing more sustainable food sources that are environmentally beneficial, and providing training and job opportunities for individuals struggling to find their place in society.

Piddock was very close to her late father and remembers once asking him, “What is the point of the human race?” His reply was simple but profound, “I don’t know collectively of any point; however, I know that an individual has the power to make the world a better place from having been in it.”

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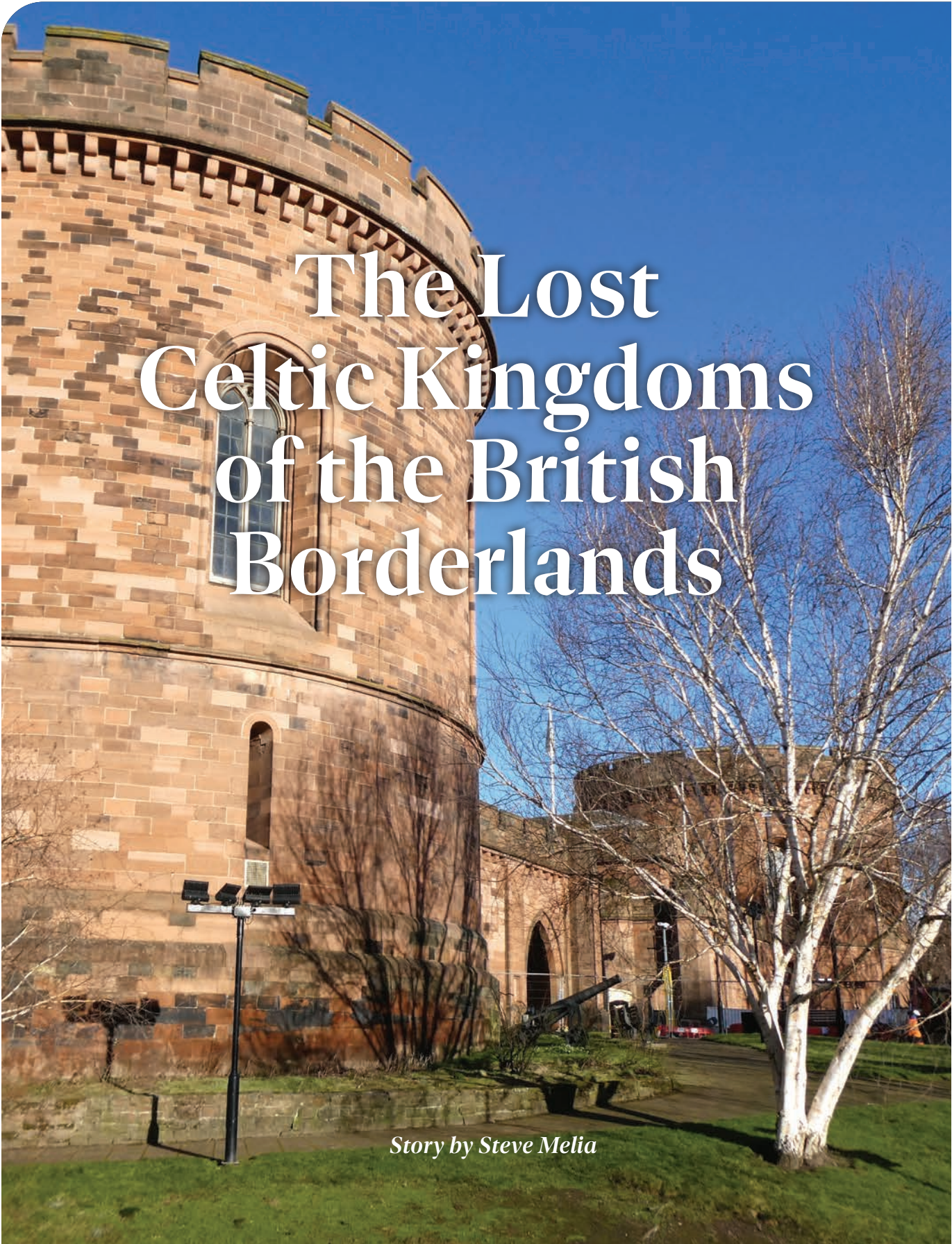


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The Lost Celtic Kingdoms of the British Borderlands

Story by Steve Melia

For 900 years, the Solway Firth has separated Celtic Scotland from English Cumbria - an ancient ethnic divide, you might imagine, but the truth is more interesting than that.

The Scots, who gave the country its name, were late arrivals from Ireland. For centuries after the Roman withdrawal, both sides of the Solway were ruled by native Celtic kingdoms, speaking Cumbric, a language similar to Welsh. Taliesin, the legendary Welsh bard lived in one of them, the elusive kingdom of Rheged.

Beyond Taliesin's epic poems, we know very little about Rheged. However, in 2017, archaeologists Ronan Toolis and Christopher Bowles published a book claiming to have found both its royal stronghold and its fate on a remote hilltop on the Scottish side of Solway Firth. Thus, Trusty's Hill was my first destination on a journey to discover three lost Celtic Kingdoms.

Dumfries, the regional centre where I was staying, is home to 33,000 people. It feels slightly run-down, with second-hand stores in the centre and fast-food outlets lining the main roads. It was the birthplace of Peter Pan and the resting place of Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns. Its few surviving older buildings are mainly made from local red sandstone, dark and solid.

A huge intercontinental-style bus serves the route, down narrow country lanes, towards Gatehouse of Fleet, the village near Trusty's Hill. The contrast is stunning; the small, terraced cottages lining the main street are like many in Dumfries, but these are beautifully maintained, and smart restaurants have replaced the fast-food joints. Britain is unique in this respect: to move to the rural countryside is a dream for many, but only a reality for the well-to-do.

Climbing a narrow track towards Trusty's Hill, my way was blocked by a fallen tree. Scottish access law is different from the rest of Britain; you can walk almost anywhere here, in theory, but that doesn't stop landowners erecting barriers of barbed wire. The detour took me over fences, though bogs and brambles, until I stumbled upon the path to the top of the hill.

An iron grill, protecting the carved stones I had seen in the book, indicated that I had found the site. Two rocks stand on either side of the entrance to the ruined fort. Beside



Penrith Castle

one of them is a basin carved into the rock, and it is here that Toolis and Bowles believe that the kings of Rheged were anointed. While the grill is now overgrown with moss, one can still make out the strange outline of a double disc and a sea monster amongst the doodles and graffiti of later generations.

Two things struck me while standing in the sunshine and looking across the hills towards the Solway Firth; compared to earlier Celtic hillforts, this site is very small. If this really was the royal stronghold, it was difficult to imagine a court meeting inside it.

“And, in addition, I will say one thing for the ancient Celts - they chose some beautiful places to build.”

During my descent, I spotted a herd of stoutly built horned cattle. They looked up, saw me, and charged. I didn't hang around, running around a hillock, out of their sight, towards the nearest wall, which was covered in barbed wire. Lacerated hands or trampling hooves - what a choice! I waited for a while, and they didn't reappear. Slowly, I edged back into their sight. They looked up, decided I wasn't worth the effort, and went back to chomping their straw.

I eventually found another track, leading down to the road, and another bus, towards Kirkcudbright, where the Stewartry Museum holds the finds from Trusty's Hill. Although there are only fragments on public display, the curator let me handle them through rubber gloves. Lumps of “vitrified stone” - melted through intense heat - reveal the fate of Trusty's Hill in the seventh century. Accord-

ing to Toolis and Bowles, additional wood was brought in to create “a spectacular advertisement of power and the total destruction of the defeated regime.” They believed that the destroyers were Anglo-Saxons from Northumbria.

But was this really the royal seat of Rheged? Others are not so sure.

Tim Clarkson is a historian who has written several books on this period. “The frustrating thing about Rheged is that we don't know where it was or indeed what it was. Although Trusty's Hill was clearly a stronghold for a sixth-century king, neither his name nor the name of his kingdom is known. ‘Rheged’ is certainly possible, but I don't think we can change ‘possible’ to ‘likely’ now.”

Whatever the status of Trusty's Hill, the Northumbrians certainly did extend their control during the seventh century. That was not the end of the story, however.

A visit to Dumfries Museum, on another hilltop overlooking the town, helps to explain what happened next. Part of its collection is dedicated to the Vikings, who attacked the Northumbrian coast in 793AD, gradually making their way around the Scottish coast.

There are weapons and carpenters' tools; they came to raid, but also to settle. Shifting relations between Vikings, Celts, and Anglo-Saxons would shape the history of this area for the next three centuries.

One room is full of carved stones, from Roman times to the Middle Ages. I recognized one of them as a small “hogback stone” as, a few years ago, I had visited the best-known and best-preserved hogbacks in Scotland, in Govan Old church, near Glasgow. These

arched and decorated stones are often associated with Viking settlement, though none have been found in Scandinavia. After a Viking attack on Dumbarton Rock, the native Celts retreated inland, creating a new capital at Govan, and a new kingdom: Strathclyde. The Govan stones were carved there, although by whom we don't know.

As Viking attacks weakened Northumbria, Celtic Strathclyde was able to expand. How far south their kingdom stretched remains uncertain, but my next destination offered a clue.

Penrith, on the edge of the English Lake District, is a small town, half the size of Dumfries.

“Penrith hosts an array of historic sites, including two medieval castles, a fortified manor house, a Roman fort, and three neolithic henges.”

Outside the railway station stand the sandstone ruins of Penrith castle, built in the later medieval period. As the jewel in Penrith's historic crown, it has been beautifully landscaped, with a dedicated park by its side.

The older buildings along its high street are also built of red sandstone, giving it a similar feel to Dumfries, although the hills are closer to the town here. The next site I had come to visit was tucked behind the high street, in the graveyard of St. Andrews church. The Giant's Grave is an arrangement of two tall crosses, with their arms broken off, and four hogback stones, dating from the tenth century. Beneath them is reputed to lie Owain Caesarius, legendary King of Cumbria. Nineteenth century drawings show intricate carvings of spirals and circles on these stones, although time and rain have since eroded them.

What was the relationship between the Celtic kingdoms of Strathclyde and Cumbria? The few written sources are confusing and contradictory. Most historians believe Strathclyde changed its name to Cumbria as it expanded southwards, into what is now England. Some think they were two separate kingdoms, while others note that Northumbrian rule survived here for longer.

Clarkson believes all three scenarios are possible but feels that “the conventional view” - that Strathclyde expanded - “offers a more plausible interpretation.” Either way, Cumbria (or “Cumberland,” as part of it be-

came known) was named after “native Britons whose language and identity survived throughout the Northumbrian period and beyond.”

Here, near the village of Eamont Bridge, Athelstan - the Saxon King of England - convened a peace conference in 927AD with the kings he had allegedly defeated. Amongst them was one Owain, whose kingdom is uncertain. Who does Clarkson believe Owain was?

“Our oldest source is a version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle written in the eleventh century. It named one of the attendees as 'Owain, king of the people of Gwent,' in South Wales. Later, in the twelfth century, the English writer William of Malmesbury described Owain as 'king of the Cumbrians.' I tend to favour William's identification of Owain, seeing the Eamont meeting as primarily for northern rulers rather than their Welsh counterparts. If Strathclyde had expanded into Cumbria, then Owain was its King.”

A medieval stone bridge now spans the River Eamont, which may have marked the boundary between Celtic Cumbria and Athelstan's England. It is too narrow to carry all the traffic, which must wait for a signal at either end. Most historians believe the treaty was sealed somewhere around here, at that spot or one of the other historic sites nearby. I decided to explore two of them: a neolithic henge called Arthur's Round Table and another called Maybury Henge. A single stone stands there today, high above the village, with Penrith in the distance.

My final destination, Carlisle, is where the separate Celtic identity of Cumbria came to a violent end. On the English side of the border, Carlisle is the only city for miles around.

The city centre is currently under heavy construction, moving traffic away from the citadel, which acts as a gateway to the centre. On the opposite side of the centre, Carlisle Castle stands high above the River Eden and the parkland, which lines its floodplain.

“Carlisle is Britain's most besieged castle, resisting or surrendering to 10 sieges between the Norman Conquest and the Jacobite Risings.”

When William of Normandy conquered England in 1066, Cumbria lay beyond his



control. Whether the Lords of Carlisle owed any allegiance to the King of Scotland is another disputed question. Clarkson believes the Northumbrians were back in control, but we know the Cumbric language was still being spoken here. It took until 1092 for William's son, William Rufus, to conquer Cumbria and create the lasting border between England and Scotland. He built the first castle on this site shortly afterwards.

A volunteer guide, David Troughton, welcomed me to its inner keep. Unlike the other sites I had visited, Carlisle Castle has survived intact. It has been extended, repaired, and rebuilt many times. The first castle was thrown up in haste, using earthworks and timber. The inner keep was built to replace it 30 years later, by Henry I.

If you visit Carlisle, take one of the guided tours of the castle - while the rooms are empty, the guides know the stories that each one conceals. In the dungeons beneath the keep, some of the stones have been hollowed out, and licked, by Jacobite prisoners, desperately seeking any drops of moisture. In one of the rooms above, the same rock has been carved into curious images, of people, beasts and heraldic symbols, by a medieval guard who may have dreamed of becoming a stonemason. They reminded me of where my journey began - Trusty's Hill.

Cumbria's Celtic past has now faded from popular memory. Today, most Cumbrians would consider themselves to be English. All that survives of the Cumbric language are place names and a few numbers. Only poems and legends, passed down to us by the bards of medieval Wales, preserve the memory of the Old North, where Celtic warrior kings once fought to defend their precious independence.

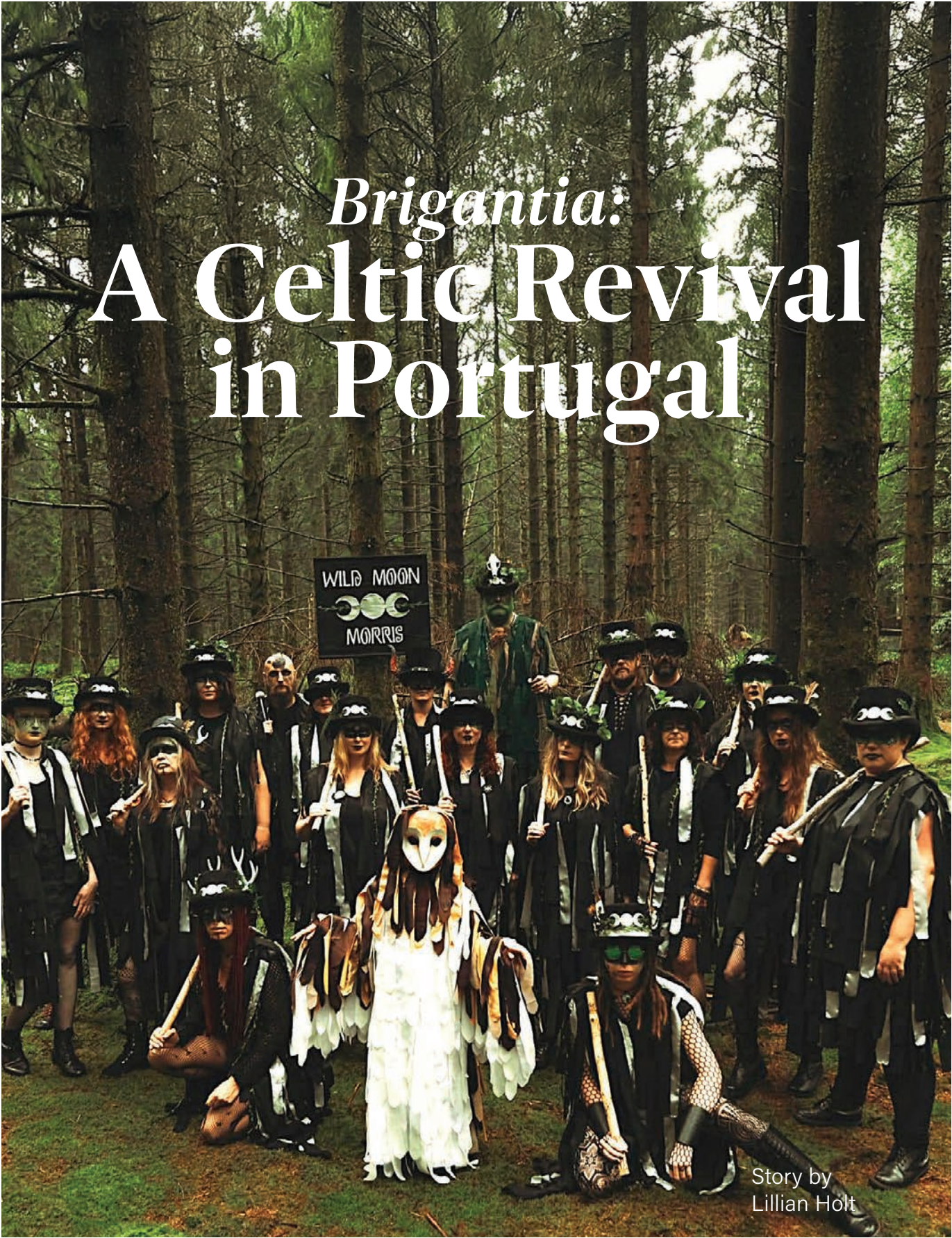


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Brigantia: A Celtic Revival in Portugal

CULTURE

Story by
Lillian Holt



Thelma Rocha

Nestled in the historic landscape of Morado, Portugal, a unique cultural endeavor is taking root.

Brigantia, a modern-day Celtic village, launched this past February 1.

Fittingly, the project coincides with the start of the ancient festival of Imbolc, reflecting its core theme - that of renewal, community, and the continuity of traditions. Thelma Rocha, the visionary behind this ambitious undertaking, is an actress and cultural historian with deep ties to both Portugal and the United Kingdom. Together with her colleague Ewan Cameron, they are building more than just a theatrical site - they are resurrecting a way of life.

Rocha's inspiration for Brigantia stemmed from her twenty-year career as an actress in the U.K., where she discovered striking cultural similarities between northern Portugal and the Celtic traditions of Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and northern England.

"Storytelling is at the heart of Celtic culture," she shares. "In the northern mountains of Portugal, our grandparents would gather by the fire, making chorizos, sharing wine, and passing down stories - just as I saw in the U.K. I began to look more deeply into those similarities."

Her research led her to explore the historical links between the Brigantia tribe, an ancient Celtic people whose presence stretched from Portugal to northern England. The name Brigantia itself has deep cultural and spiritual sig-

nificance, drawing from both the Celtic goddess and the revered Saint Brigid, whose influence is still felt in the Braganza district of Portugal. Rocha highlights the importance of honoring this legacy, as Brigantia aims to connect people to not only history but the deeper spiritual and communal aspects of Celtic life.

"I eventually realized that St Brigid was a saint adored and worshipped in the district of Braganza (in Portugal), and if you travel to this little district, you will find that many of the saints here are women."

“Brigantia is not merely a historical reenactment, however - it is envisioned as a living community where people can immerse themselves in the Celtic way of life...”

Visitors and residents alike will participate in storytelling, traditional music, communal feasts, and customs that have endured over centuries.

"We want people to experience Celtic culture in real-time. We want people from different Celtic communities to share food, stories, and music just as they did in ancient times. Ultimately, there is more that unites us than divides us."

Cameron concurs: "The experience we are creating is not about seeing sites or observing only, but interacting, by various means, one of which Thelma terms as 'landscape theatre'."

Beyond the rich cultural aspects, the settlement of Brigantia also aims to reconstruct

traditional Celtic architecture. As such, Rocha has enlisted the expertise of architects, historians, and anthropologists to ensure historical accuracy.

"We have very dedicated builders and architects who are precisely reconstructing Celtic ruins here in Portugal, helping us lay the foundation. We are using historical maps and excavation reports to recreate the structures exactly as they were."

The village's design includes natural pools for blessings and purification rituals, with the sacred number three playing a key role in the layout, reflecting the Celtic Triskele and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The initiative seeks to create an immersive environment where participants can take part in authentic experiences, from making traditional crafts to engaging in ancient forms of music and dance.

"The end goal is an actual living settlement where people can come and visit and stay for an extended period of time," continues Cameron. "We are still in the process of expanding the village to accommodate that."

Despite its noble vision, Brigantia has faced numerous challenges, including logistical hurdles and bureaucratic red tape. Brexit has complicated international collaboration, making it more difficult for artisans and scholars from the U.K. to contribute. Funding remains an ongoing challenge, as Rocha and her team actively seek support from cultural organizations and European grants.

"Although, at times, it has been difficult to get the people needed into Portugal, it's won-





derful how we can somehow come together and overcome barriers. When I met Ewan - who is with the Wild Moon Morris dancers - we were able to get the dancers for the launch where they teamed up with traditional dancers from Portugal.”

One of the biggest obstacles has been resistance from the Church. Some factions see the project as reviving pagan traditions and have even issued death threats. Rocha remains undeterred.

“Celtic culture has survived invasions, persecution, and erasure. It lives on in our traditions, our emotions, and our connections. Brigantia is proof that these stories are still alive...”

Despite the opposition, local support for the project is growing. Some of the older women in Rocha’s own grandmother’s village have welcomed the initiative, even serving up meals and sharing their own family traditions. Many of them recall older customs and ways of life that closely resemble Celtic practices, reinforcing the project’s authenticity and its place in Portugal’s cultural fabric.

“We have managed to overcome obstacles

by building trust, sharing cups of tea, and sitting with people to explain our vision. That’s how cultural change happens - through human connection.”

Beyond the village itself, Rocha and Cameron have a grander vision: establishing a Celtic tourism route linking Portugal, Spain, France, and the U.K. They are actively seeking funding from the European Union to develop this initiative, hoping to attract cultural travelers and history enthusiasts to walk the path of the Celts. The project also seeks to collaborate with historians and anthropologists to map out key sites and deepen the understanding of Celtic migration and settlements.

Cameron, who hails from Scotland, sees Brigantia as part of a wider movement reviving lost traditions.

“There’s a renaissance happening,” he says. “Folklore and ancestral traditions are being reclaimed. Brigantia will be a place where that revival comes to life.”

Brigantia will also host major Celtic events throughout the year, including gatherings for reenactments, festivals, and workshops on traditional crafts, music, and storytelling. Volunteers from Scotland, Wales, and Ireland have already signed up to help construct the village, demonstrating the cross-border appeal of the

project.

The long-term vision includes building a network of similar settlements across Europe that will function as hubs for Celtic heritage, allowing people to experience history in an interactive and meaningful way.

In addition, Rocha envisions the settlement as evocative of the matriarchy so prevalent in the recurring Celtic motif of the divine feminine. “We are looking to contribute to a renaissance of what has been forgotten, specifically, women’s role within the folkloric and cultural community, and how we can learn from that in today’s society.”

With its recent official launch, Brigantia has taken its first steps into actualization, with visitors from around the world attending to witness and participate in the rebirth of a Celtic village. Rocha and Cameron encourage those interested in supporting the ongoing project to visit the website for updates, volunteer opportunities, and upcoming events. They emphasize that anyone can take part, whether as a visitor, a storyteller, a musician, or a builder contributing to the settlement’s expansion and growth.

“We are inviting spring, renewal, and community,” Rocha says with a smile. “This is just the beginning.”

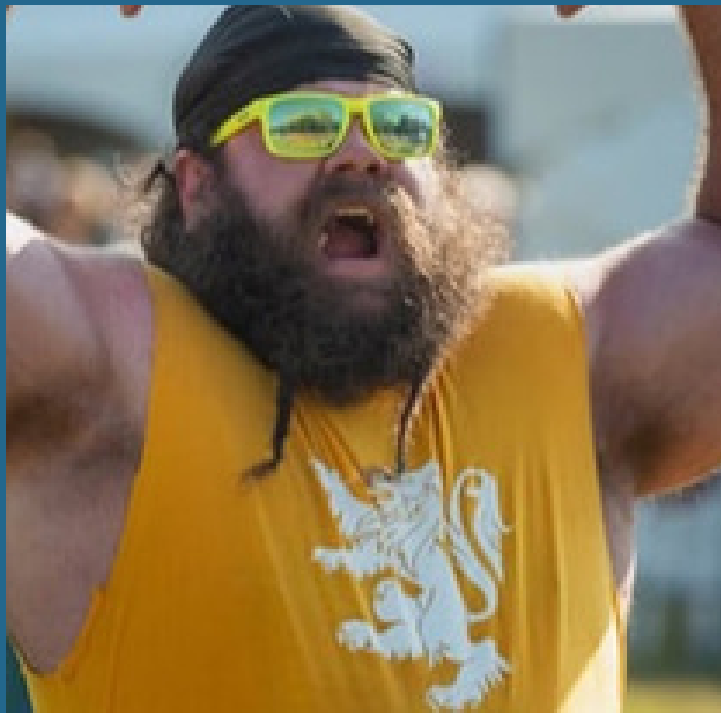


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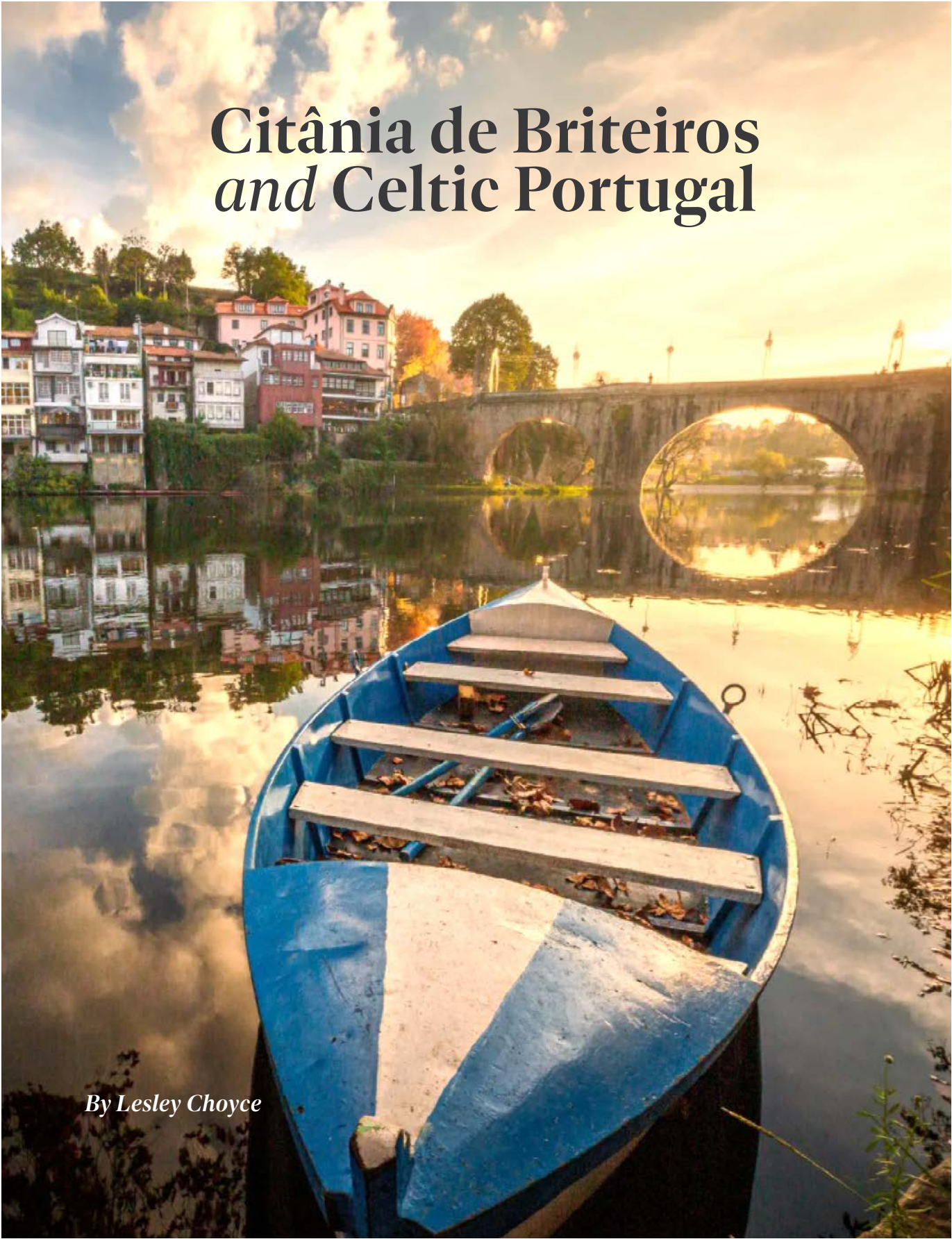
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Citânia de Briteiros *and Celtic Portugal*

By Lesley Choyce

Recently, my wife Linda and I grew weary yet again of what turned out to be a particularly harsh winter season even for our rugged selves accustomed to the raw, bitter North Atlantic winds coming in off the coast of Nova Scotia. Unlike most of our fellow Canadian snowbirds, however, we seldom escape to tropical destinations for fear of being too hot. Instead, we seek out moderate temperatures in lesser-known and less-touristy European destinations.

That is how we ended up bivouacked on a back street in the town of Amarante in northern Portugal, where we encountered not a single other North American tourist, but instead we were surrounded by some gorgeous rivers, forests, and mountains worthy of hiking and adventure. It also put us within striking distance of what Lonely Planet calls, "One of the most evocative archeological sites in Portugal, Citania de Briteiros" - the ruins of a Celtic settlement dating back to the Iron Age.

Portugal had been kind to us on many occasions, and it is an easy country to feel at home in, even if you don't speak Portuguese. Our only bad experience ever was in Sintra where an overly aggressive tuk-tuk driver railroaded us into an unpleasant and expensive ride to the Pena Palace, an over-crowded, over-priced tourist hotspot well worth avoiding. In fact, perhaps it was the over-popularity of places like Sintra that had guided us this time north and away to Amarante where few people spoke English but treated us like locals anyway - which is always the way we like things to be if we can be so lucky.

We flew to Lisbon by way of London, an easy connection if you don't mind shelling out big money for a night at the Heathrow Hilton Garden. From Lisbon, we drove a few hours north on the excellent Portuguese toll highways. To get to Amarante, we turned inland past Paredes and Penafiel until we crossed Rio Tamega and eventually motored our way uphill from the river to a rented cottage with a magnificent view over the river valley.

Walking around the outdoor market in town the following day, we couldn't help but

notice how many vendors were selling penis shaped pastry. We should not have been surprised. Had I bothered to read up on my Fodor's, I would have known that "the deeply religious town is a surprisingly racy experience - bashful visitors may blush at the sight of super-sized cakes that are unquestionably phallic in form." These bolos (cakes) are said to be in honor of a local 13th century saint, Sao Goncalo, who was famous as a marriage matchmaker although the direct connection between the pastry and the saint remains somewhat vague. It did, however, remind me of an article I had read by Andrew Weir titled "Pride, Potency and Sin," wherein he noted that, "Celtic society, like all patriarchal societies had the penis symbol at its core." He goes on to point out that, "The British Isles must once have been littered with phallic stones, pillars and carvings." And Ireland, he points out, probably still has the most of them that are still standing.

So, even though we were not in Ireland or another brazenly obvious phallic fanatical territory, here was a hint that we were in Celtic country.

“Researchers have remarked that there were undoubtedly large Celtic settlements in many places around the Tamega River Valley.

Even the name of the river itself is most likely derived from the name of the Tamagani people, an ancient Celtic tribe of northern Portugal and Spain. Many other towns in the region also have names derived from Celtic origins. Although our goal was to ultimately make our way to the most famous Celtic settlement in the region, we decided to get away from the highways and larger towns by renting e-bikes and riding an extensive portion of the Tamega Ecotrail, an abandoned railway line that took us out of Amarante for 25 kilometres to Celorico de Basto. We biked through several small, idyllic rural villages and past backyard gardens but also through blackened forests where out-of-control wildfires had devastated the area only a few months prior. Such fires, we were told, were becoming more and more prevalent during that time of year in the region, another reminder that nowhere on the planet is immune from the ongoing crisis brought on by global warming.





The weather had been perfect for the round-trip 50 kilometres we covered that day, and aside from being a bit saddle sore and having had my first nasty encounter with stinging nettle (I thought it was wild mint), we both agreed it was the bike ride of the century for us.

For our pilgrimage to Citania de Brit-eiros, however, we were not so lucky. Despite the ominous weather forecast, we left out comfortable cottage and headed towards the historical city of Gumaraes on our way to the ruins. Guimarães is sometimes called the birthplace of Portugal as it was the first capital of the country in the 12th century.

Located there is the “Celtic Castle,” referencing the Celtic people who once populated the region. Despite the label, it was built in the 10th century by Countess Mumadona Dias as a defense against Norman and Moorish invasions and not really of Celtic origin at all.

As the day progressed, we sadly realized the Portuguese weather predictions were accurate. The rain poured down and the windshield wipers could not quite keep up with the onslaught, but we soldiered on, nonetheless. In the tiny village of Briteiros, the cars lined the streets with barely enough width for us to squeeze through. It was Sunday morn-

ing, after all, in this most loyally Catholic country, and everyone was at church despite the deluge. Beyond the town, the road snaked up into the hills. The rain seemed to increase even more the higher we went. I was ready to pack it in and save it for another day, but my intrepid spouse (sometimes a bit more headstrong than her husband appreciated) insisted we journey on to our destination.

I was taking the narrow switchback turns at a consistent 10 kmph and wiping my sleeve on the windshield to keep open a porthole of visibility. And then, suddenly, our Google map lady’s voice announced, “You have arrived at your destination.” I pulled the car off onto the bumpy side of the road and saw nothing but forest and rain. I made a loser’s plea again that we should just call off the hopeless quest, but instead, Linda jumped out into the deluge and looked around. Sure enough, she spotted a tiny sign and a narrow path on the other side of the road indicating that the site was further uphill. “Let’s just sit here and wait out the rain,” she said.

So, we did.

Or at least we gave it nearly a half hour for an abatement. No luck. The rain relented only briefly and then returned with a vengeance.

“My grandmother Minnie would have said, “It’s raining cats and dogs,” although I never understood the context of that colloquial phrasing.

At that point, the windows of the car were completely fogged up and it was as if we were sitting in a cloud. It was kind of like that scene with Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet inside the car in the hold of the Titanic - only without the sex.

Well, you can only wait out the northern Portuguese rain so long before you grow restless and a little bored. Thus, it was decided by the more ambitious of us two to simply take our chances and go explore Citania de Brit-eiros, come hell or high water.

So, that we did. We trekked up the hill to see what there was to see.

Oddly, another car had stopped, and a small contingent of environmentally ill-prepared folks who looked like they just came from church raced up ahead of us. I assumed we were headed to an unattended site like many we’d visited in the west of Ireland, but it turned out that there was a stylish official entrance building of glass and brick. As we approached it, those who preceded us were turning around and breaking into a jog back



down the hill. This did not bode well.

Inside, however, it was warm and dry, and a young woman looked at us with an unwelcoming frown. Being my father's son, the first words out of my mouth to her were, "Do we have to pay to get in?" Clearly, she understood my English because her frown deepened and said, "Yes." Probably the people before us had asked the same thing (only in Portuguese) and decided it wasn't worth the money. But when I asked how much, I learned it was a mere three Euros each.

I paid the money, received an honest smile, and was ready for us to venture back into ancient times when she said, "Wait. Stop. Take these." And she handed us two large and sturdy umbrellas.

The rest, as they say, was pure magic.

Ken Feisel writing in *Archeology Magazine* (of which I hope one day to have a gift subscription) has this to say about the site: "Covering roughly 50 acres on a high outcrop with sweeping views of the Ave River Valley, a hillfort site in northwest Portugal known as Citânia de Briteiros was home to more than

1,000 people between around 200 B.C. and A.D. 300. Archaeologists have been excavating the site, some eight miles north of the medieval city of Guimarães, since the 1870s."

So, there we were, setting out into a spider web maze of trails in the pouring rain atop Sao Romao Mountain, walking pathways that had been trodden by people of the Castro culture many centuries ago. I was still worrying about wet feet, but Linda was entranced and without having to beat me over the head with her umbrella, her wonderment was infectious.

We had the place to ourselves. The mist was rising from the ground. And suddenly, we were surrounded by the immaculately restored walls of round rock homes that had once housed families who lived and thrived here on this mountaintop. At first, I thought there might be a few dozen of these wonderful, curved dwellings, but there were many more. This had been a very large village of not just homes but family compounds, community halls, and an acropolis surrounded by an impressive rampart. Someone had obviously

done an amazing job of resurrecting Citânia from the distant past and preserving it for Celtic seekers like us. So, as the mystique of the abandoned community drew us into this most wondrous lost world, I couldn't help but feel most appreciative of the restoration work.

And that someone had a name, as it turned out. Accord to Lonely Planet, "When archaeologist Dr. Martins Sarmiento excavated the site in 1875, he discovered the foundations and ruins of more than 150 rectangular, circular and elliptical stone huts, linked by paved paths and a water-distribution system, all cocooned by multiple protective walls."

Yes, 150 stone huts. In their day they would have had thatched roofs that sheltered the families living in those dark but perhaps cozy one-room dwellings. As we ventured to the acropolis itself at the top on the ancient stone pathways, it became more apparent how well organized this community was. If it had been a clear day, we would have had a magnificent view of the Ave River Valley, but that didn't much matter. I was trying to



keep us on the designated path that had been sketched out to us when we entered the site, but it seemed to take way too much cerebral energy, so we gave up on that and allowed ourselves to wander freely. It was, to use an overused term, otherworldly.

“There were just the two of us - pilgrims of sorts, escaping from the current political and social woes of the 21st century - now wandering aimlessly, soggy and joyful, giving ourselves over to what remained of a lost civilization.

I realize that sounds a tad melodramatic, but this is coming from a guy who gets easily bored by well-manicured, highly rated famous historical sites.

As far as things go, I guess you could call this place a hidden gem, an evocative location that sets the imagination wandering back into the past. Certainly, the remnants of these stone structures are impressive in their intricate architectural stonework but also, according to Ken Feisel, “The Castro people crafted elaborate gold and silver torcs, fashioned pendants featuring spiral and rosette motifs, and carved stone statues and engraved walls that decorated ritual bathing complexes.”

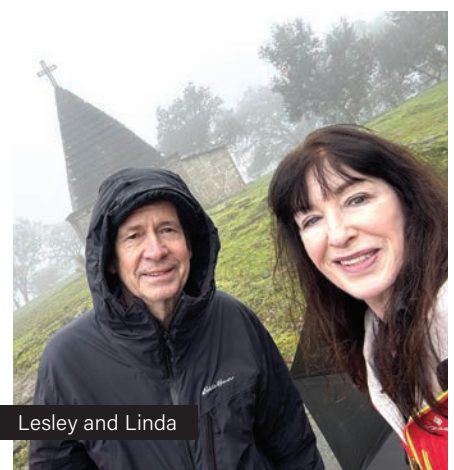
The park authorities tout the site as,

“One of the most expressive proto-historical fortified towns in the Iberian Peninsulas” as well as “one of the most paradigmatic sites” in the history of the country. Expressive, yes, and as a paradigm, then Citânia de Briteiros is rightfully an “ideal standard.”

At the height of the Celtic community’s heyday it may have had as many as 1500 residents. And then something changed, and the community must have gone into decline. Later, the pesky invading Romans arrived and occupied the site in the first century AD, and it is believed that the village was ultimately abandoned in the second century.

On our way back to modern civilization, we ambled downhill to the remains of a thermal bath and its symbol-laden monolith. Then we returned our umbrellas at the visitor centre and retreated to the shelter of our car.

As we cautiously drove back down Sao Ramao Mountain, the rain finally slowed down, and by the time we were walking around the square at noon in Guimares, the sun was out. We had most certainly returned to our own century as the crowds filled the square. When we sat down for lunch and explained to the server that our dripping coats were the result of spending the morning hiking around Citânia de Briteiros, he claimed he had not heard of such a place, and quite possibly we were pulling his leg. This made us feel all that more satisfied that we had experienced such mystical magic moments all to ourselves at such an important portal into the past that is probably most often overlooked.



Lesley and Linda

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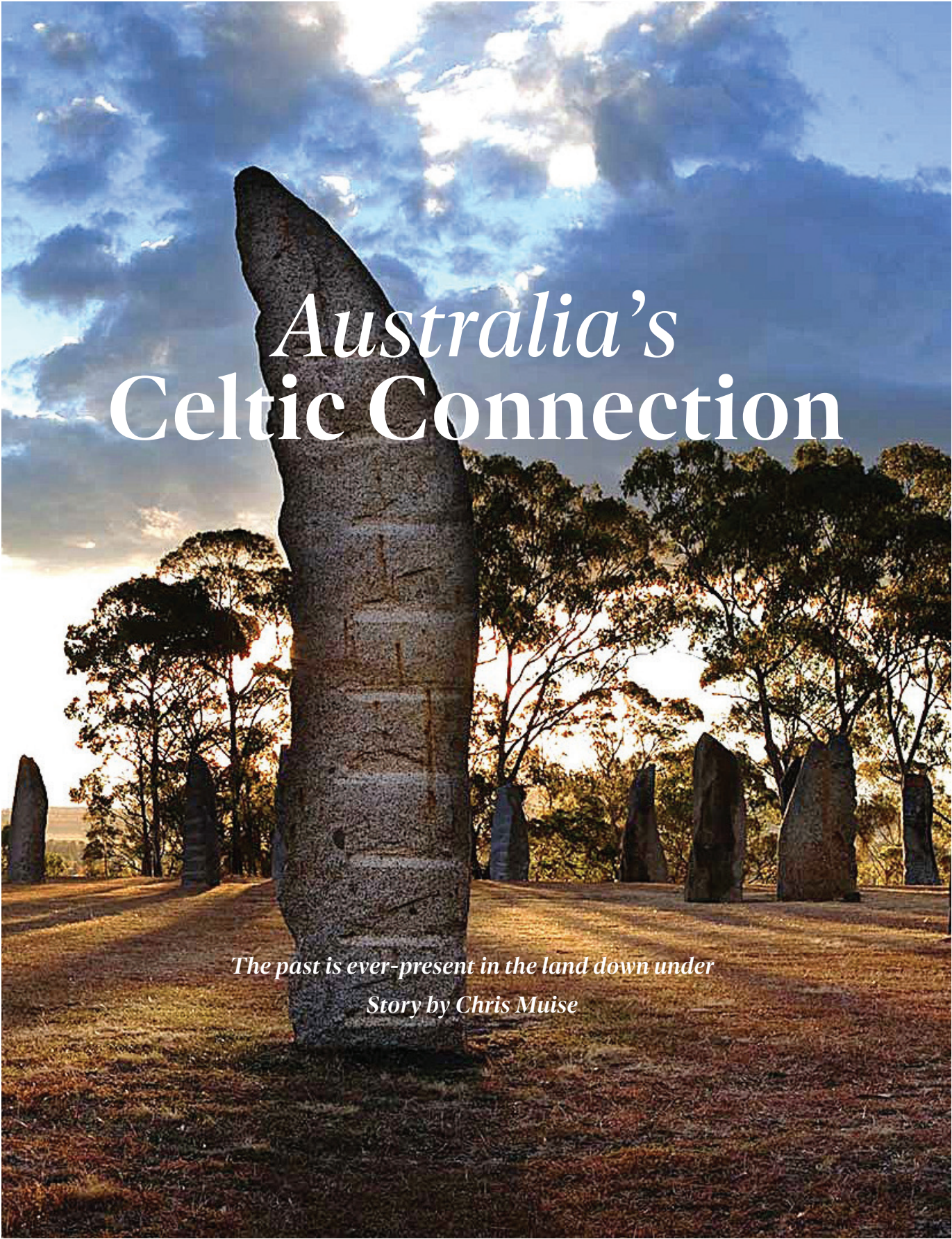
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Australia's Celtic Connection

The past is ever-present in the land down under
Story by Chris Muise

COVER STORY

If you ever happen to find yourself in the quaint seaside community of Glen Innes, New South Wales, there is an outdoor installation you simply must see for yourself - the Australian Standing Stones.

"The Standing Stones are an array of local granite that stand approximately 3.5 meters above the ground," shares Judi Thomas, chair of the Standing Stones management board via Zoom. There are 38 stones in the main array, 24 stones in a circular shape that represent the hours of the day, with four cardinal points, accurately surveyed in terms of true north and south."

The Standing Stones are more than just a stunning public art installation, however - they are a symbol of Australia's Celtic connections.

"Then there are three central internal stones," Toms continues, "and the very central stone is known as the Australia Stone, which is sort of like a connecting stone. We describe it as connecting Australian Celts to the site, because it is actually classified by our

National Trust as Australia's national monument to Celtic heritage in Australia's development. That central Stone also picks up on that connection with Celts around the world to Australia.

"We also see it as a connecting link between ancient Celts and modern Celts. There are stones on either side of that central stone; one of them is known as the Brittonic stone, and the other is known as the Gaelic stone, and they reflect the language sources of the ancient Celts."

The origin of the Standing Stones goes back to 1988, when Scotland sought to gift a rock cairn to acknowledge the bicentennial of European settlement down under. Many communities campaigned to home the rock, and while that cairn wound up in Sydney, it gave the Celtic Council of Australia an idea how to bring pockets of Celtic communities across the continent together at Glen Innes.

"It got the Celtic Council of Australia thinking that there wasn't actually any specific acknowledgement of Celts in general in



Pamela O'Neill

Australia - not specific Celtic lines like Scottish or Irish, but just the generic diaspora," continues Toms. "So, they then went back to those communities that put in their nomination to see if anyone would be interested in homing another initiative and we were certainly interested."

"There were Cornish with tin mining in the area here, and also Irish with various convict labour throughout here as well and some spattering of Welsh. All of that information was collated and sent off to the Celtic Council of Australia. Glen Innes was then awarded the honour of creating this monument."

"Australia isn't the first country people associate with the Celtic diaspora, but Celtic peoples have been part of its history since the first ships of the British Empire landed at Port Jackson to establish a penal colony."

"The first boatload of convicts arrived in 1788, and amongst those convicts were people of Celtic background," explains Pamela O'Neill, president of the Celtic Council of Australia. "It can be quite hard to sort the immigration records to Australia, because very often, the place of origin is elided a little bit. So, a lot of Scots and Welsh, for instance, show up as English in the records."

"That said, there is certainly a recognizable Irish element amongst the convict population. Some of the early governors were Scots. We had a Cornishman - Bligh, the famous one from the mutiny on the Bounty, a Cornish vessel. Then there was the Irish fam-



ine and the Scottish clearances, and then in the 1850s, gold was discovered in Australia, and many people from Celtic countries came for the mining. So, we have quite a lot of Celtic influence very early in the colony.”

Australian author Victoria Knox can trace her Celtic lineage back to a case of grand theft bovine.

“My Irish connection goes back to about the mid-19th century,” Knox recounts in a call with Celtic Life International. “Margaret O’Sullivan, who was born in Cork, was convicted of stealing a cow. Now, this is really interesting, because you don’t steal a cow and hope to hide it - so what was the purpose in stealing one? Well, if you remember, that was a terrible time in Ireland as millions died with the potato famine. I believe that Margaret stole a cow because it would give her family something to milk before the cow was found and returned to its rightful owner. But she also knew that she would be arrested, and I think she chose a life on the other side of the world, rather than to die of starvation.

“It would have been the only way to have emigrated for these people as they were poor.” Knox opines. “But the women in our family tree are the most extraordinary people, and Margaret was tough; she was sentenced in Waterford at the court for ten years. She was only about 17 or 18 years old when she got on that ship, which took about six months to arrive in Tasmania, the most southern state in Australia.”

Things worked out as well as they could for Margaret, as Knox tells it; she found a skill in embroidery, which kept her out of prison (which is still standing today in Hobart) for much of her sentence and then married another penal colony colonist before relocating to northern Tasmania, near Launceston, where she remained until her death in 1904.

“What a plucky woman, and what a thing to do. She never saw home again. Never saw her siblings or her parents. It was quite extraordinary, these people that came and pioneered the other side of the world.”

Knox has a knack for getting histrionic with history - it’s her bread and butter these days. After careers in both nursing and opera singing, she decided to make a go at becoming an author. Her first book, *In Spite of All Terror*, was published in 2016, and featured the recurring character Clement Wisdom inserted into real-life historical skullduggery.

“The whole Clement Wisdom series came about from a question on a television program,” Knox reveals. “The question was, ‘who or what were the scallywags?’ Well, they were Churchill’s scallywags. It was, of course, a euphemistic term for a group called the auxiliary units, which were a clandestine group of guerrilla fighters that were set up in the summer of 1940 as a direct response of the fall of France. It was in finding out about the auxiliary units that sparked the first book. By the time I got to the end of that book, the main character, Clement Wisdom, had really developed legs.”

Since his first adventure, Clement Wisdom has travelled to the north of Scotland, Cambridgeshire, and - most recently - Sydney, Australia.

“The fourth book is called *West Wind Clear*. I did a huge amount of research for that one as it’s largely about code breaking. I do my own research, and I love finding little historical details that I can hang a story on. I use real characters in the book, from Commander

Rupert Long, to Commander Eric Nave especially, who was an Australian code breaker.”

The decision to bring Rev. Wisdom to the southern hemisphere was partially borne from necessity - like the rest of the world, Knox was housebound during the pandemic and couldn’t travel afar for research. So, she stuck close to home.

“I had to write about places I knew, so my upcoming book, *Codenamed Sorrow*, is set in Sydney, and it builds up to the Japanese invasion of Sydney Harbour in May of 1942.”

It is material like this - the actual history of Celts in Australia - that O’Neill wants to see gain traction amongst down under descendants.

“People come to Celtic from a lot of directions,” O’Neill explains, “and a lot of them have these kind of fantastical ideas about what Celtic is, and half of it is tosh. For me, I aim to gently introduce people to the facts, which are much more exciting and interesting and wonderful than the fantasies that people build up. You can’t just say ‘that’s not the way



Victoria Knox



it was' - rather, just introduce that material to people in a gentle way and help them to explore it for themselves.

“One of the things that is a threat to Celtic culture is it being replaced by this kind of fantasy that was never there.”

Alongside her role as the president of the Celtic Council of Australia, O'Neill is also a teacher and school administrator. She is the principal of Australian School of Celtic Learning, which she herself founded in 2017. She is also the Sir Warwick Fairfax Lecturer in Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney, where she does her best to share the history, the culture, and the language of the real Celtic peoples of Australia.

“My interest in Celtic things is basically an academic one,” shares O'Neill, who currently tutors a number of students in Gaelic, some of whom commute to class via Zoom, including one as far afield as the Isle of Skye. “I finished my Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Old English and developed a really strong interest in Celtic stuff, particularly early medieval Celtic.

“One of the things that's interested me in my study of Scottish Gaelic-speaking migrants is the vast difference in their experience. On the whole, the culture here doesn't survive in the same kind of strong pockets like it seems to do elsewhere. One of the factors that is at play here is that when they come to Australia, they get dispersed over

massive geographical areas, so any survival of the culture is hard won. It is a campaign of little bits.”

But those little bits, when connected meaningfully, can have a larger effect. That's why something like the Standing Stones are so important to Celtic identity in Australia - they act like a magnet.

Rhonda Bombell runs the Australian Celtic Festival, which brings Celts from across the country to Glen Innes every year. While no one is excluded, the festival cycles through Celtic nations to highlight in rotation.

“Every three years, we do a cycle of Brittany, Cornwall, and Wales,” Bombell ex-





plains. “Then we do the Year of Scotland, then the Year of Ireland and the Isle of Man.”

Bombell notes that the Australian Celtic Festival brings their sleepy town to life, with people from all across this vast nation coming together with one goal; to better understand and appreciate their Celtic heritage.

“When you come to Glen Innes as a visitor, or even if you're just passing through, you can see the town really embraces the festival - everyone really looks forward to it each year. For me, the best thing about the event is that I get to learn more about Celtic culture.”

“It is growing, and we are finding that people are becoming more interested in their ancestry,” adds Toms, who works closely with Bombell. “A growing interest in DNA ancestry has really made it much easier for people to look at their own identity. And we also see many people at the festival looking for information on their ancestry. In fact, we

have a section within the event that is specifically set aside for the Scottish and Irish clans, and the other Celtic societies as well.”

Even O'Neill - who points out that the ancient Celts never actually built standing stone monuments like the Australian Standing Stones - can't deny the power they have to bring the Celtic Australian Diaspora together.

“I have a troubled relationship with our stone circle because, of course, stone circles are Neolithic, and our first understanding of people that we can identify as Celtic is in the Bronze Age. So, the stone circles were already there. I've reconciled myself to it from the perspective that Celts certainly lived amongst stone circles, because they are in the areas that became Celtic.

“But it has kind of grown on me, and there's no doubt it is a beautiful site. I had the Croft Celtic Cultural Centre and Cafe in

WWW.CELTICCOUNCIL.ORG.AU

a building on site at the stones, and people came because they wanted to get in touch with their Celtic ancestry, or heritage, and they would come in and have really long conversations. It was fantastic, because in amongst making them coffee or cooking them scones, I would be able to talk to them about the origins of their clan, or the language, if they had an interest in that direction. It's another example of how it doesn't matter why they come; if they come, they will ask questions about it.

“There's that fabulous saying, which is possibly from a slightly dubious context in origin,” grins O'Neill. “It doesn't matter where you work up your appetite as long as you eat at home.”

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Australian Celtic Women

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Camille Layt



Miranda Starr



Jeannine Phelan



Gabrielle Jack

Our regular readers will no doubt be familiar with Irish supergroup Celtic Woman. Founded in 2004, the all-female quartet - and several of the artists who have been members over their 20+ year history - has graced the pages of Celtic Life International many times.

There is also no doubting the band's impact on the Celtic Diaspora, including "down under," where a seven-member musical homage - Australian Celtic Women - are passing that influence along.

"We came together through our shared Celtic roots, and a deep passion for Celtic music passed down through our families," shares the group's award-winning singer and Bodhran player Miranda Starr in an email exchange. "Although each of us was born in Australia or New Zealand, our heritage is richly woven with connections to Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Every member of our band has grandparents or great-grandparents from these Celtic nations, which has inspired and influenced each of our musical journeys."

"The band's genesis was during the 2021 Australian Celtic Festival, when I thought to myself 'life is short, and I fancy a Celtic jam.'

Watching my husband's band play, I said, why not? But the songs my husband's band plays were too manly and pub-centric for my taste - we weren't ready to swap five-star venues for sticky floors."

Taking a cue from their Irish counterparts, Starr decided to form an all-woman Celtic group - ultimately naming it in honour of the original - and began planning and putting a crew together during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

"The whole band is passionate about music. We've all won awards in our various disciplines. I have performed overseas in residencies at numerous five-star venues and resorts in corporate bands. Our fiddler, Melinda Coles, plays 13 instruments and won a scholarship at the age of seven to study with Dr. (Shinichi) Suzuki in Japan. Two of our lead vocalists - Kathryn King and Gabrielle Jack - are both award-winning, classically trained singers who have dazzled audiences worldwide with their breathtaking performances. Pianist Jeannine Phelan also trained classically at the Conservatorium, while Camille Layt, our bagpiper, has played internationally as a pipe sergeant and soloist, and has even writ-

ten books on the instrument.

Last, but not least, our drummer Melanie Smith has travelled extensively across 35 countries, playing primarily in rock and metal bands, and is now savouring the energy, passion, and fun of Celtic music.

"Every member in the band has performed professionally for years in their own fields, and we all love music - it must be in the genes!"

"We also wanted to champion older women in music, so everyone in the band is over the age of 35, seasoned, and diva-free. Rehearsals kick off with a drink and a giggle - with our Celtic roots, everybody just loves to tap along with music and have fun."

Australian Celtic Women often collaborates with other Celtic performers from across the outback. As they started booking bigger venues, the band began working with the Scottish/Irish troupe The Shamrock Dancers, as well as local and area pipe and drum bands looking to share the stage.

"For us, it's all about having a great time, producing a quality show, and also ensuring



Kathryn King



Melinda Coles



Melanie Smith

everyone in the band is allowed to express themselves and show off a little,” says Starr.

“We rehearse a lot to ensure the quality of our songs is top notch. But we also have fun on stage and off, and it shows. “In addition, because we come from diverse musical backgrounds, we all have a lot to share, and we come up with different ideas about our songs and our shows. We can go from haunting cello, tinkling ivories, and soaring vocals to a rock anthem, or we might just dance around the stage to a jig while encouraging the crowd to join in. We even throw in an opera song or two, to keep the audience guessing.”

Ultimately, Australian Celtic Women is all about bringing the Celtic vibe.

“It’s not uncommon to see the crowd laughing one minute and tearing up the next,” notes Starr, “While it’s more of a concert vibe, we love when people get up and dance. At festivals, we take it up a notch by diving into the crowd to dance and sing with everyone - it’s like a Celtic celebration on overdrive!”

The secret, Starr shares, is in the music; each song needs to connect with some part of the listener’s heart – something that, luckily, Celtic music is well-known for.

“Whether it is sad, emotive, or just plain fun, a good song is a song that makes you feel, and we want to make the audience feel something. Every song has the opportunity to take you back to a time when you smiled, cried, or remembered something important to you - an ability to take you out of the day-to-day drudgery and simply enjoy life in the moment.”

Australian Celtic Women is only a few years into its tenure, and Starr admits that juggling the responsibilities of home life and day jobs while trying to grow the band can be a challenge. But the challenge is worth it in exchange for what the gig gives back to them.

“Performing in an all-woman Celtic band offers a multitude of rewarding experiences that extend beyond the music itself.

“It is a unique platform for celebrating and preserving the rich cultural heritage of Celtic traditions that run deep here in Australia, while also promoting female empowerment and collaboration...”

“The camaraderie and shared passion among band members foster a supportive and inspiring environment, encouraging creativity and innovation in musical expression. In addition to all this, it’s about being able to work with amazing people that we genuinely care about and enjoy spending time with.”

She and her bandmates don’t plan on resting on their laurels - or riding the name recognition of their northern hemisphere predecessors - they have hit the ground running in 2025.

“We have just finished recording our first CD and are currently writing originals for our next one. We have been asked to record a Christmas album, but that might have to wait until next year. We have a number of ticketed shows at cultural centres, town halls, and entertainment venues coming up this year, and we’re also hoping to continue our momentum and travel to France to the legendary Festival Interceltique de Lorient in 2026 or 2027. So, yes, we are busy, but we are loving every minute of it.”

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Andrew Donaldson

At 33, Scotland's Andrew Donaldson is considered one of the world's greatest marathon swimmers. Among his many accomplishments, he holds the world record for having the fastest time to complete the Oceans Seven marathon. In 2022, he set a new record for swimming across the English Channel, completing the 33-kilometer crossing in 8 hours. Following that, he became the first Scottish male to swim the North Channel crossing between Ireland and Scotland. In 2023, he was voted "Man of the Year" and "Performance of the Year" in the World Open Water Swimming Association awards. In 2024, he broke the world record for the Manhattan Island Swim (swimming around NYC), completing the course in just 5 hours and 41 minutes. He currently holds the world record for the fastest swim across the Cook Strait, the waters between New Zealand's North and South Islands. Recently we spoke with him from his home in Western Australia.





CL: What are your family roots?

AD: I grew up in a very active family on the west coast of Scotland. We were always outdoors doing things; my parents took my sister and me on hikes, and we played badminton, golf, rode our bikes all over the place. I think my folks just needed some sort of outlet to get us out of the house and tire us out, essentially.

CL: How, when, and why did you initially get into swimming?

AD: My older cousin was the first in our family to take up swimming - specifically club swimming. My sister followed him into the pool, and I ended up getting pulled along to all these swimming competitions on weekends. It was inevitable, I suppose, that I would follow in their footsteps.

CL: And you took to it right away?

AD: So much can be done for the body and the mind and the spirit just by getting outside and exercising, being in nature - it's one of the reasons why I love swimming and why I eventually came across to open water swimming and outdoor swimming because of that connection to nature. And again, that comes back to my childhood growing up in Scotland. I love being outdoors, and that love was passed down from generation to generation. Both my father and my grandfather loved to travel and took an interest in the world and that spread to both me and my sister. Swimming was, and remains, the vehicle that takes me around the world. I moved here to Australia because of swimming.

CL: The weather is better than back home, I'm sure.

AD: I didn't want to say it, but yes, living here certainly has its advantages. My mother is Indonesian, so the warmth is in my blood, which is what you want as a cold-water swimmer. The thing about being Scottish is, there are certain intangible benefits of having grown up there, and dealing with the

weather is one of them. Scots, by nature, are tough stock - gritty, resilient, with a backbone carved out by centuries of struggle. We aren't afraid to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

CL: Hard work has a bit of a bad reputation these days.

AD: Agreed. My experience has been that hard work will take you there, and then smart work will take you further. Those are life lessons that I was fortunate to learn from both my father and my grandfather - two proud, hardworking Scots who always encouraged us to be the best version of ourselves and help others.

CL: So, self-mastery and service?

AD: Yes, that is an excellent way of putting it. I mean, and I suppose like a lot of people, every once in a while, I scratch my head and ask myself "Why am I doing this?" and "Why am I pushing myself so hard here?" And that allows to me reflect and to remind myself that it is not enough to merely challenge myself - that's only half the job. The other half is about challenging and inspiring others. As I have learned, when you help the people around you, you help yourself in the process.

CL: Is leaving some sort of lasting legacy something you consider?

AD: Yes, only recently, but more and more. I was in Hawaii last year and there they talk about thinking ahead and making decisions based on looking 7 generations into the future - that's a really long time. We ought to be thinking more than just about ourselves and how we can set up future generations for success. And if I can move the needle just a tiny bit through what I do then I will feel good knowing that I have contributed in some way.

CL: Do you feel any sense of obligation to give back,



given your status and celebrity?

AD: Celebrity! I like that! I don't feel like a celebrity, nor do I really look like one, but I will take it! No, not really in the sense that I don't feel any added pressure to be anyone other than who I am.

CL: Do you connect with the Scottish Diaspora when you travel?

AD: You know, I should really leverage - if that is the right word - the Scottish network much more than I do, and I should probably start sooner rather than later. When I began open water swimming here in Australia, I didn't meet very many people in the Scottish ex-pat community, and certainly not many in the sporting world. There are lots of Scots here - I mean, look at the number of Highland Games and festivals that take place in this part of the world each year - it's just that they are not so much in my immediate sphere. When it comes to sports, Scots are, admittedly, a little behind, and I hope that I can help to play my part to change that going forward by inspiring more young people at home and away to get more involved with sport.

CL: Speaking of going forward, what are your plans for 2025, and for the years ahead?

AD: I have a lot of both personal and professional goals that I am hoping to accomplish. I am aware that my role in swimming will likely change over time - I have no plans to

stop challenging myself at this point, but I see myself perhaps becoming an ambassador for the sport down the road. One thing that really excites me is the idea of putting together some sort of ultramarathon swimmers team from around the world, all of us pooling our resources and swimming under one banner to raise funds and awareness for various global causes and charitable organizations. I am very much a part of this community, and I can tell you that these are incredible people with incredible stories to share and huge love in their hearts. And this would be another way that I could continue my mission to promote both mental health and ocean health.

CL: And you are involved with this year's Dressed to Kilt fashion show in NYC!

AD: Yes! Although to be honest, I am not quite sure how I got roped into that, and I'm not quite sure how I feel about it yet! I've never done anything like that before, and - I admit - I am a bit nervous, maybe even downright frightened - which is kind of silly when you think about it; walking a runway in a kilt in front of hundreds of people - with all of those cameras - should be a walk in the park compared to the challenges that come with marathon swimming!

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Sean O'Riordan

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I was born in Co. Limerick. My family come from the town of Kilmallock, on the border between Cork and Limerick, but I was raised near the small village of Ardpark at the foot of the Ballyhoura mountains. It was a fantastic place to grow up and it gave me my love of the outdoors.

I currently live and work in Australia, however I will be moving home to Ireland in the coming months.

I always enjoyed taking pictures and I love hiking and the outdoors, so naturally I gravitated towards landscape photography. As a youngster, I often spent time fishing during the summers

and when I would see a nice sunset or something that caught my eye, I wished I had a camera.

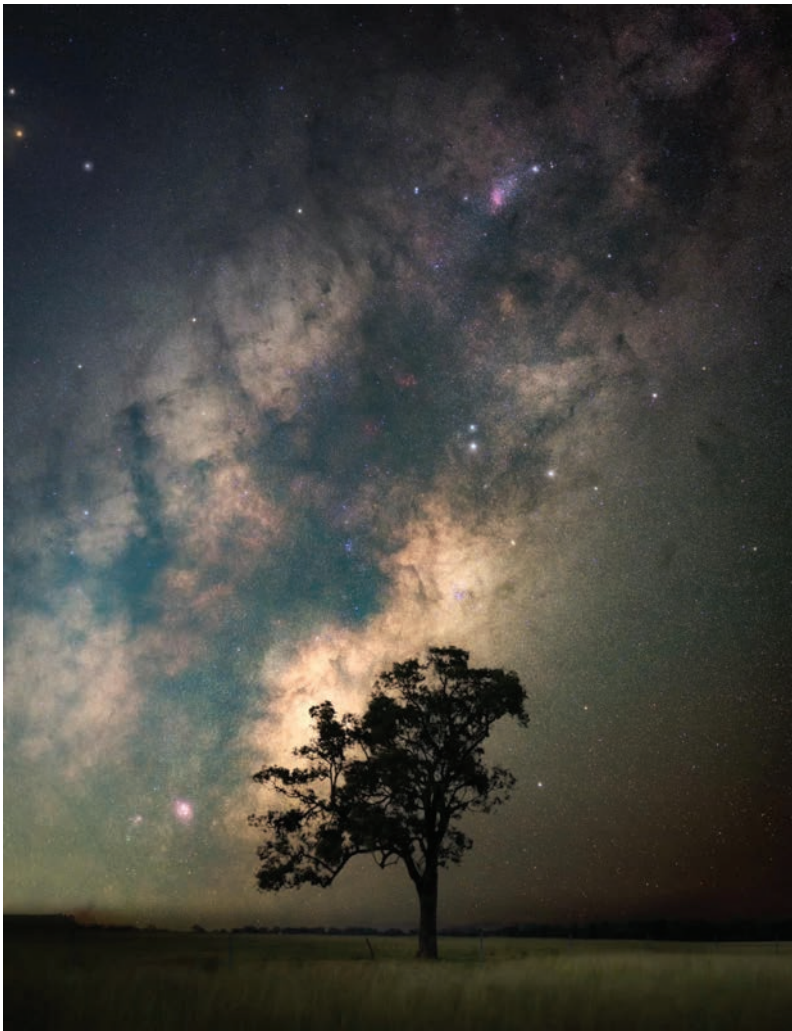
In the early stages of my photography journey, I was willing to do anything to get a good image. Often stupidly this meant going out when it was not safe or pushing through an all-night drive when I was sleep deprived. Not smart - but it led to me getting shots I knew nobody else was getting. I became known for the lengths I would go to get an image. I still like to capture my adventures and the fleeting moments that I know may never happen again.

A big highlight for me has been

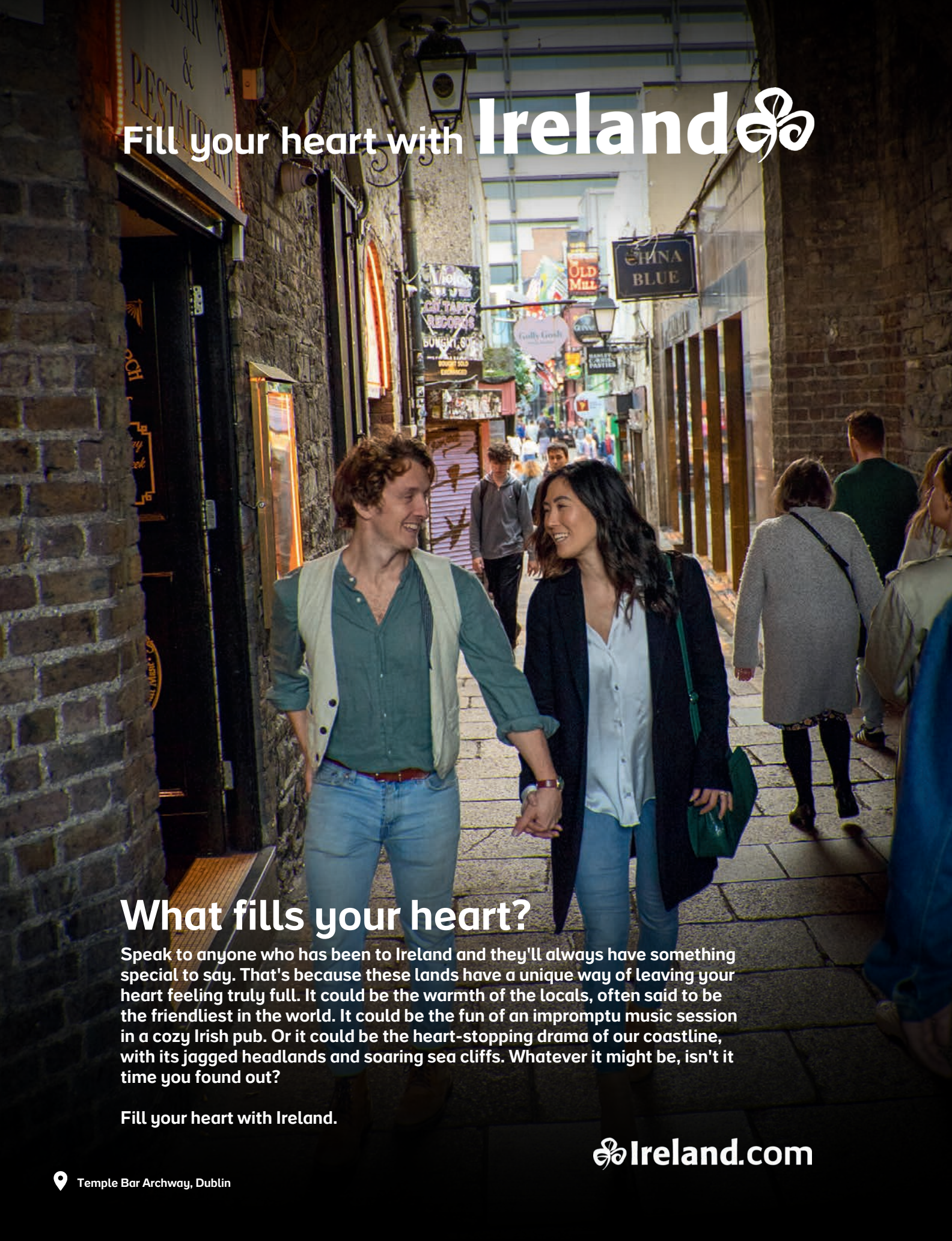
capturing some very unique landscapes in Ireland and elsewhere that I know may never be captured. I like to be good at what I do and put in the hard work to stand out.

I am all about the adverse weather. If I am struggling for motivation, but I know a storm is coming, I get inspired to get back out there with the camera - it is chance to be different and do something that no-one else is doing.

A good photo is something that stops people scrolling for longer than 5 seconds. It should captivate attention and make the viewer think. A good photo has a wow factor.







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Kris Ramsay

@kr_celtic_artist

Although I am Australian by birth, my ancestry is entirely European, and I have always felt a profound connection to my Scottish heritage. My great-grandfather, David Normand, was born in Scotland, and grew up in Perthshire. Following his service in the Black Watch, he emigrated to Australia. The Normand family name has long been associated with the MacLeod Clan of Harris.

There is considerable artistic talent on both sides of my family. Recognizing my childhood interest in drawing, my family encouraged me to continue. Visual arts played a significant role in my education - fine arts, woodwork, and metalwork. It was a means of expression and communication, as well as an invaluable escape during the challenges of adolescence and self-discovery. After high school, my family, aware of my fondness for my Scottish heritage, gifted me a Celtic-style ring, igniting my interest in exploring the Celtic art style.

It wasn't until 2014, when I completed my artwork S'Leatsa mo chridhe gu bràth (My Heart Belongs to You Forever) - a Celtic-styled acrylic painting on canvas depicting a couple embracing, with the man holding her heart in his hand - that I was profoundly impressed by my own work and the personal growth it represented. I resolved to create a collection of Celtic Art and - given that Celtic Art is not commonly recognized in Australia - I aimed to elevate awareness of this traditional and cultural form.

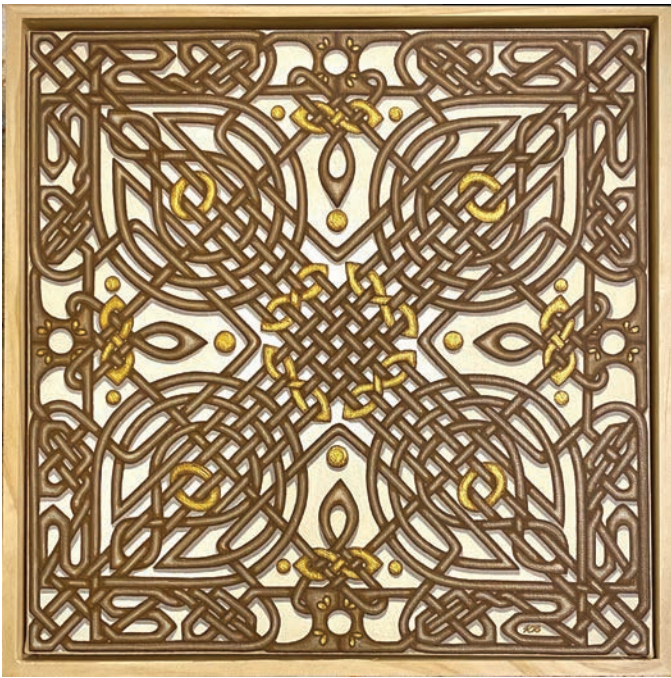
When I first started creating Celtic art, my knowledge was limited to a few simple knot designs. Utilizing the gifted ring, I began to develop these designs independently. Initially, I relied on freehand drawing to create original designs. In 1998, I was presented with 'The Celtic Art Source Book' by Courtney Davis, which remains a valuable reference. The artwork provided new inspiration for my explorations in Celtic art. Elements, evident from my years studying courses such as design fundamentals and Interior decora-

tion, have influenced and aided in the cultivation of my own unique style. I've moved from geometric experimentation, to curves and flow, reflective of my studies in art deco and art nouveau. No longer do my works consist of only knotwork but now include all aspects reflective of Celtic art.

In my practice, I apply sincerity, originality, and integrity. With consideration of both historical and future contexts, I offer a modern and contemporary response to older traditions and cultural beliefs, making Celtic art relevant to the present while respecting its artistic tradition. By exploring resources accessible to the Celts, I recreate the organic platform and add depth to encourage viewers to examine the dimensional illusions that characterize my work. The goal is for each piece to provide a cultural experience that is accessible to everyone.

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“ I want to tell you a story, a story that has no written words, and I will use a language that is universal and diverse. I'll lure you in and take you down a path with many twists and turns. It is possible that in this story, you may lose yourself in the illusion of my world.”

Artist Kris Ramsay





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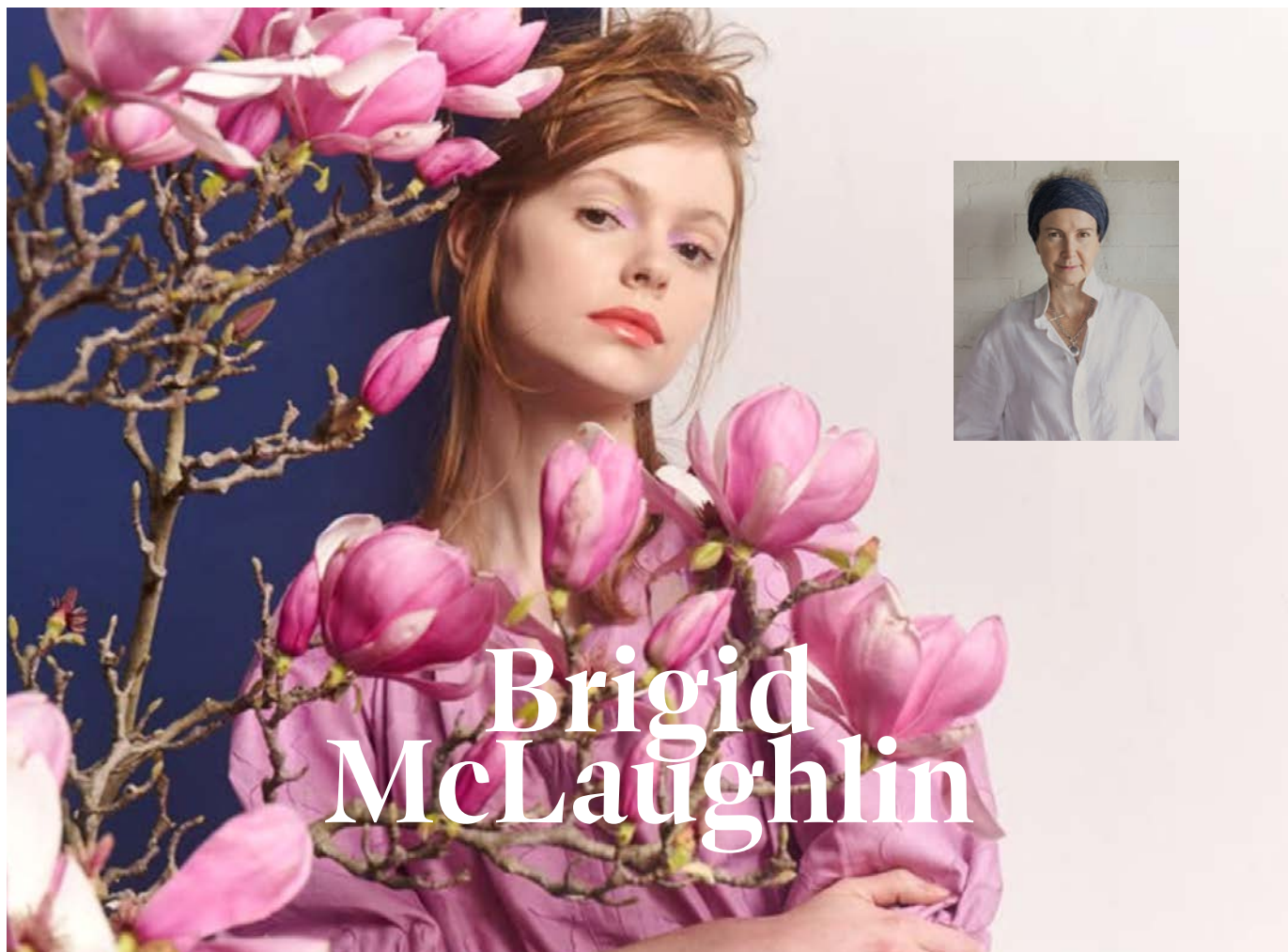
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Brigid McLaughlin

I grew up in central New South Wales, Australia, on a Merino Sheep Stud located between the small towns of Nyngan and Warren. I had an idyllic childhood surrounded by animals, nature, and adventure. My family are dedicated, third-generation merino wool producers. The McLaughlin family hail from Bushmills in Northern Ireland, and our relatives, the Holtermans, still live in the original family farmhouse a short distance from the town.

Today I reside in the Sydney suburb of Haberfield, known for its Federation architecture and large sprawling gardens. To me it feels more like a country town than a suburb, with a very tight community and a slower pace than many of the neighbouring areas.

I have always been interested in fashion and have wanted to be a designer since I discovered it was a job. I have constantly created, in many different forms, however fashion design was always constant. From

an early age I made things, cardboard submarines from old boxes, stylish accessories for pet cats and lambs, wooden animals from timber off-cuts, I drew, painted, then I made my own clothes. I was very fortunate to have a father and mother who loved the arts and fostered creativity. As a creative no other industry combines all my great loves - design in all its forms, textiles, art, photography, music, dance.

My creative process is both inspirational and perspirational. I am a collector, so my work often starts with a ramble through my collections of vintage or artisanal textiles.

My key strength is in my quality natural fabric selections, the exclusive textile designs, and my command of colour. My signature style and philosophy remain constant. As a niche design house, we create handcrafted designer clothing in natural fibres, where timeless design meets sustainable, nature-positive artistry.

Our store/design studio is a welcoming space where customers can see our collections coming together; the hustle and bustle of fabrics being cut, samples being sewn, patterns being made. We pride ourselves in working as a traditional design house where we make all patterns and samples in-house, while also embracing new technologies such as digital pattern making.

The reasons why I'm still involved in the industry today remain the same, and my compulsion to create is just as strong as ever. What I love most is that I'm in the business of making people happy. Dressing well is empowering. The joy the perfect outfit brings to my customers and myself is always a thrill. As a dedicated team, we all fuel each other's passion, and it is this combined creativity and resourcefulness from which the beauty evolves.







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Australian Celtic Cuisine



Galician Australian Empanada

Instructions



Ingredients

Pastry

4 cups (600 g) plain flour, plus extra for dusting
good pinch fine sea salt
1 tsp baking powder
½ cup olive oil, plus extra for greasing
1 egg, beaten, plus 1 extra egg to glaze
1 cup (250 ml) milk

Filling

2 tbsp olive oil
1 large onion, finely diced
1 red capsicum, halved, deseeded and cut into thin strips
500 g roma tomatoes, chopped
⅓ cup fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped
1 tsp fine sea salt
½ tsp coarsely ground black pepper
200 g drained, tinned tuna in oil
Resting time 2 hours

To make the pastry, place the flour, salt and baking powder in a bowl, mix, then make a well in the centre. Add the oil and beaten egg and gradually incorporate the flour into the liquid. Start adding the milk, a little at a time, until the mixture forms a slightly sticky and elastic dough (but not wet). You may not need all the milk depending on the size of the egg you are using or add slightly more if too dry. Bring the dough together with your hands. Place on a plate, sprinkle with a little flour, cover with plastic wrap, and chill in the fridge for 30–60 minutes. Meanwhile, to make the filling, heat the oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Fry the onion until soft but not coloured, stirring regularly. Add the red capsicum and chopped tomato and cook for 3 minutes, or until just starting to soften. Take the pan off the heat, add parsley, salt and pepper, and mix everything together. Leave until cool (20–30 minutes). Drain the oil from the tuna, break into smaller chunks and add to the tomato mixture. Preheat the oven to 200°C/Gas 6 and lightly oil a flat baking sheet. Weigh the pastry, remove 120 g for decoration and divide the remaining weight by 5. Roll two-fifths of the pastry into a ball and put it to one side. Form the rest into a slightly larger ball. Roll out the larger ball of pastry until it forms a circle about the size of a large plate (35 cm) and place on the lightly oiled baking sheet. Spoon the cooled filling into the centre of the pastry and spread it out towards the edge, leaving a 4 cm border all the way around. Brush the border lightly with beaten egg. Roll out the remaining pastry slightly smaller than the base of the pie (about 32 cm) and gently place it over the filling, leaving a 4 cm edge all the way around. Bring the base up to meet the smaller pastry disc and fold it over, pressing and rolling into a rope shape to make a sealed pastry edge. Alternatively, press edges together with a fork, supporting the pastry underneath with your fingers, then roll the edge over. Roll out the 100 g pastry into a long, thin shape, then cut thin strips to decorate the top of the empanada. Brush the top with beaten egg, cut a small hole in the centre and line with a small length of pastry and place remaining pastry strips to decorate. Make a couple of small slits in the top to allow the steam to escape. Bake in the centre of the oven for 35–40 minutes until the pastry is golden brown and the filling is hot. Serve warm or cold.

Scottish Australian Haggis Chiko Rolls

The best of Scotland and Australia.



Ingredients

1 tbsp rice bran oil, or other neutral oil
1 onion, finely chopped
1 celery stalk, finely chopped
1 carrot, finely chopped
1 cup cabbage, finely sliced
1 cup green beans, thinly chopped
1/3 cup water
1 tsp corn flour (cornstarch)
1 cup cooked pearl barley
1/2 batch vegetarian haggis
1 tsp stock powder
12-14 spring rolls wrappers
egg yolk or milk for sealing wrappers
extra oil for frying
soy sauce for dipping

Instructions

Take the spring rolls wrappers out of the fridge to defrost. Heat oil in a large frypan over medium heat. Add onion, celery, carrot, cabbage and green beans (I added them as I chopped them). Fry for about 12 minutes from when the onion goes in - the vegies should be quite soft. Meanwhile dissolve corn flour in water. Add barley, haggis, stock powder and corn flour mixture. Cook for another few minutes until mixture thickens. At the point mixture can be kept in the fridge until you are ready to use (I kept mine overnight). To roll up the mixture into spring roll wrappers, place 3 tbsp of filling along the middle third of each sheet, fold in the sides and then roll up (as in photos above). Dab a little egg yolk or milk on the end of the wrappers before finishing rolling up to seal the edge. Heat about an inch of oil in a small saucepan over medium heat. Check mixture is hot enough by putting a crumb in - if it sizzles it is ready. Place a few rolls in at a time and turn regularly with tongs until deep golden brown. Drain on kitchen towel. Serve warm with some soy sauce for dipping.

Irish Australian Damper Bread

Not unlike Irish soda bread, Damper bread was a staple of the early Australian settlers' diet. Traditionally, the dough was cooked directly on the coals of an open fire.



Ingredients

4 cups self-rising flour
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon butter, softened
1 cup milk
1/2 cup water

Instructions

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F (220 degrees C). Grease a baking sheet. Stir flour and salt together in a large bowl. Rub in butter until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Make a well in the center; pour in milk and water, then stir until dough comes together. Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface and form into an 8-inch-diameter round loaf. Place loaf onto the prepared pan; cut a cross in the top using a sharp knife. Bake in the preheated oven for 25 minutes; lower the temperature to 350F (175 C) and continue to bake for an additional 5 to 10 minutes. The loaf should be golden brown, and the bottom should sound hollow when tapped.

Welsh Australian Ice Slices



Ingredients

500g ready-made puff pastry (you could use short-crust if you prefer)
7 tbsp Bird's Custard Powder
6 tbsp caster sugar
1 litre (about 2 pints) milk
200g icing sugar
5 tsp cold water
Flour for rolling out the pastry

Instructions

Preheat the oven to 200°C/400°F and line a baking sheet with greaseproof baking paper. Roll out the pastry into a rectangle about 20cm x 40cm/8in x 16in and then cut it into two, so you are left with two squares. Place the pastry onto the lined baking sheet, prick all over with a fork, and cover with another layer of greaseproof paper. Then put another baking sheet on top to weigh it down. If you have enough baking sheets, you can cook both at the same time, if not, cook them one after the other. Bake in the oven for about 20 minutes until crisp all over. Allow to cool on a wire rack. While the pastry is baking, make the custard by heating the milk in a saucepan until simmering and then tipping it onto the custard powder and sugar that's been mixed with a little milk in a large bowl or jug. As you tip the milk in and mix, the custard should become thick and glossy. Allow to cool, stirring regularly to stop a skin forming. When everything has cooled, you can start to assemble. Start with one layer of the pastry and top with the custard (it should be really quite solid by this point but still spreadable), top with the other pastry layer. In a jug or bowl, mix the icing sugar and water to form a smooth paste. Tip it over the top of the pastry and spread to the edges. Place the whole thing in the fridge for 15-30 minutes to really solidify. Remove from the fridge and using a sharp knife, cut the confection into eight rectangles.

Bretagne Australian Strawberry Crepes



Ingredients

150 g (1 cup) plain flour
1 large egg, lightly beaten
375 ml (1½ cups) milk, approximately
2 tsp butter
60 g (¼ cup) apricot jam or your favourite flavour
80 ml (⅓ cup) double cream
250 g strawberries, hulled and sliced
icing sugar, for dusting
Standing time 10 minutes

Instructions

Sift the flour into a bowl and make a well in the centre. Add the egg and a little milk into the well, then gradually whisk in the flour, slowly adding more milk until you obtain a smooth, thin batter. Strain the mixture through a fine sieve into a jug and stand for at least 10 minutes before cooking the crêpes. Melt the butter in a 20 cm crêpe pan, then whisk the hot, melted butter into the crepe mixture. Pour enough mixture into the hot pan to thinly cover the base. Cook for 1 minute or until the edges start to brown. Turn and cook the other side for 30 seconds, then transfer to a plate and repeat with the remaining batter, stacking the cooked crêpe as you go. To assemble, spread each crêpe with a little jam and cream and top with 4-5 slices of strawberry. Fold the crêpes and dust with icing sugar just before serving.

Cornish Australian Pasty



Ingredients

50g butter
1 large brown onion, peeled and finely diced
3 cloves garlic, minced
500g beef mince
1 tsp Vegemite
2 large potatoes, peeled and cut into 1cm cubes
2 carrots, peeled and cut into 1cm cubes
1 cup diced pumpkin (peeled and cut into 1cm cubes)
5 sprigs thyme
½ cup chicken stock
1 tsp Worcestershire sauce
salt and black pepper, to season
2 tbsp finely shredded parsley
6 sheets frozen puff pastry
1 egg, beaten
tomato sauce, to serve

Instructions

Heat the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat and fry the onion and garlic until softened. Add the mince and Vegemite and fry until the mince is well browned. Add the potatoes, carrot and pumpkin and fry for about 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the thyme, chicken stock and Worcestershire sauce and season very well with salt and pepper. Cover with a lid and cook for a further 5-10 minutes until the vegetables are softened, stirring occasionally. Stir through the parsley and allow to cool to room temperature. Adjust for seasoning. Remove the puff pastry from the freezer and allow to thaw. Using a dinner plate as a guide, cut each pastry sheet into a large circle. Place about a cup of filling into the centre of each pastry circle and fold into a half-moon shape. Crimp along the side of the pastry to seal in the filling without any air pockets. Repeat for the remaining filling. Heat your oven to 200°C. Place the pasties on a lined baking sheet and brush with beaten egg. Bake for 25 minutes or until well browned. Serve with tomato sauce.

Manx Australian Meat Pies



Ingredients

1 tbsp olive oil
1 large brown onion, finely chopped
500g extra lean beef mince
1 tbsp corn flour
¾ cup beef stock
¾ cup tomato sauce
2 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
1 tbsp barbecue sauce
1 tsp Vegemite
2 sheets frozen short crust pastry, thawed
2 sheets frozen puff pastry, thawed
1 egg, beaten

Instructions

Heat oil in a saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onion. Cook for 3 minutes or until soft. Add mince. Cook for 8-10 minutes, stirring with a wooden spoon, or until browned. Mix corn flour and 1 tablespoon of stock to form a paste. Add the remaining stock, Tomato sauce, Worcestershire sauce and Vegemite to mince. Bring to the boil. Reduce heat to medium-low. Simmer for 8 minutes or until thick. Cool. Preheat oven to 220°C. Place a baking tray into oven. Grease 4 x 8cm base measurement pie pans. Cut 4 x 15cm circles from short crust pastry. Use to line bases and sides of pans. Fill with mince. Brush rims with water. Cut 4 x 15cm circles from puff pastry. Place over meat. Press to seal. Trim. Brush with egg. Season. Place pies onto hot tray. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes or until golden.

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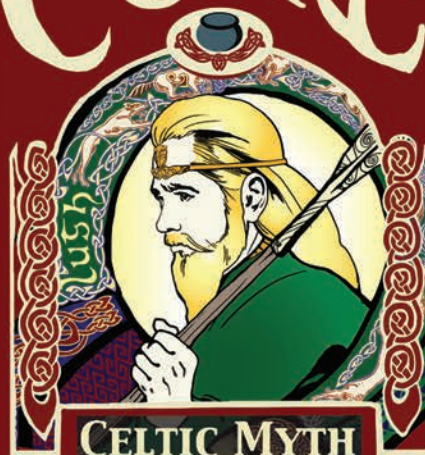
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Lake School of Celtic Song & Dance



If you are a parent, you might struggle trying to find the right extracurricular activities to enrol your kids in, especially if you want them to connect with their cultural identity.

Imagine the additional challenge of finding such a program when outlets for your cultural expression are hard to find in your area. And, if your area is 7.7 million square kilometres across, you can start to put yourself in Felix Meagher's shoes.

"My wife and I, Christine, have four children," Meagher tells Celtic Life International via Zoom. "And at the time, this was about a quarter of a century ago, my sister-in-law had five. We wanted our kids to be exposed to Irish music. I came to it later in life because my father was very reluctant about his Irish background, as a lot of people in Melbourne were for a long time."

The dream was to send all nine youngsters to the Willie Clancy School in Ireland to learn traditional Irish song and dance for a summer, but - as they were living in on the exact opposite side of the world in Victoria, Australia - the sheer cost involved quickly put a kibosh on that idea.

"Back then, I was living in Croydon, Port Fairy - a suburb of Melbourne - and I was very involved in a local event called the Port Fairy Folk Festival, which has been going for nearly 50 years," Meagher continues. "One of my best friends in life, who founded that

gathering, said, 'Well, why don't you have it here?'

"With nine kids and us, we thought, well - we've got an audience, and we've got a quorum. So, we did."

That was the start of the Lake School of Celtic Song & Dance, which welcomes families from across Australia and the world to a campsite in Koroit, three hours from Melbourne, for a week each summer in January (remember, it's Australia). There, students study trad instruments, including fiddle, harp, bodhrán, flute, uilleann pipes, guitars, and more.

Meagher has run the camp since the start but recently stepped back from its operational responsibilities.

The new president, Jim McAlinden, has been a regular at the Lake School for over a dozen years. He notes that enrolment has grown exponentially from the original 25 students that attended the first year of the camp in 1999.

"I think we had about 300, 310 students this year. As well as the tutors, their partners and there might have been a number of tutors' children who didn't actually register but logged into classes anyway. So, you are talking around maybe 350 to 360 people in all that come into this small village town."

"With the families, I reckon it's more like 500," Meagher chimes in.

Cora Browne, assistant chairperson at

Lake School, came to Australia from Waterford, Ireland, when she was 15. She had lost track of her Irish culture in spending her adolescence immersed in Australian culture but attending the Lake School as an adult with children of her own has helped her to rediscover it.

“Coming to Lake School and hanging out with people who really appreciate culture has given me a place to stand...”

What started as a small affair is showing no signs of slowing down.

"I would like it to grow and become bigger," says McAlinden. "The actual town of Koroit is actually waking up to their own Irish culture and background, as there are many families here whose roots come from the early 1900s and 1800s. But we're not just looking backward, we are looking forward. The school is not just a little thing in the background - it has a massive impact."

Meagher concurs. "In terms of its influence, it really punches above its weight. It took a while to build, but the fact that people come indicates that they have decided to dedicate some of their life to this. And once you get a bunch of dedicated people, you can change the world."



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Ally

One American piper marches to the beat of a different drummer



THE PIPER

The sound of bagpipes typically conjures up visions of somber ceremonies. But for Ally, a 29-year-old piper from New England, bagpipes are anything but typical. Incorporating a blend of progressive rock, heavy metal, pop, and folk influences, she is redefining what it means to be a modern piper while still paying homage to her heritage.

"I am American," she shares, clearing up a common misconception. "My mother's side is Irish, and my dad - who legally adopted me when I was 12 - has Scottish heritage"

It was her father's Scottish lineage that first sparked Ally's passion for the pipes. "When my dad adopted me, I got a new last name and a ton of Scottish heritage to learn about."

From family tartans to crests and all points in between, she dove headfirst into her newfound roots. "The educational videos I watched about Scotland had bagpipes in the background, and I just loved the sound."

Her fascination eventually became a reality after attending a parade with her mother. Seeing bagpipes for the first time, she begged for lessons. "About a year later, I got a practice chanter for Christmas and started taking lessons in the spring with a local youth bagpipe band."

What began as a foray into traditional competition, evolved into the unconventional. "I would call my style 'progressive.' It's clear that I have traditional roots, but much of my style sounds more like what you might expect to hear from a lead guitar."

That fusion of genres challenges any preconceived notions about the instrument.

"The bagpipes are extremely misunderstood. I have been accused of 'faking it' often. Even people who know how bagpipes work

have been skeptical at times as I play in uncommon settings and sounds."

Her innovation with the instrument did present logistical challenges.

"The bagpipes have a limited range and aren't traditionally in a key that plays easily with other instruments," she notes. As such, she partnered with G1 Reeds to design a chanter in the keys of B and B minor, providing greater musical flexibility. "My prototype was modified further to play strictly in B minor," she adds, reinforcing her devotion to being distinct.

This departure from a customary sound became a staple of her live performances also.

"When I was starting out, I didn't know where to begin with sound equipment. Bagpipes aren't as developed in the musical world as guitars or violins. It's still a very DIY operation, but I am excited to see where it ends up."

So far, that vision has paid off.

"I have had the opportunity to play for incredible audiences," she shares. From a NASCAR race to football halftime shows and live performances for WWE wrestlers Bret Hart and Drew McIntyre, she has brought bagpipes to unlikely audiences.

"I often get comments from fans saying, 'I never thought I'd be a fan of the bagpipes.' That's one of the greatest compliments I could ever receive..."

Not surprisingly, Ally is optimistic about the future of piping.

"I have seen many young folks emboldened to take up the pipes. However, many children, especially girls, fall out of it in their

teenage years. Pursuing music education with bagpipes is difficult because music educators often lack knowledge about the instrument."

As such, Ally wishes to change the stereotypes surrounding the instrument. "Bagpipes are pigeonholed into being a funeral and parade instrument. I had to create options for myself. I hope more pipers can function like other musicians, doing session work, gigs, or starting their own bands."

Her plans for 2025 are as ambitious as her music, with an upcoming album of original music and a tour that will span venues across the Northeast and Midwest this spring, followed by the Celtic festival circuit in the summer. Two songs from the album - released under the name "Piper Ally" - are already available on streaming platforms.

"I plan to continue pushing the boundaries of the pipes this year and seeing where that takes me and the instrument."

Despite her young age, she shares advice for potential young pipers.

"Stay true to yourselves. If it's your dream, push for it and make it possible. And for parents or teachers, don't belittle the impact of discouraging a passionate young musician. Support their dreams."

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Hannah Beer



Strings, Strength, and Spirit

The story behind Hannah Beer's fiddle playing is as vibrant as the tunes she plays and the persistence that she personifies. From her reluctant beginnings with the violin to embracing the fiddle with a fiery passion, Beers' journey is a testament to perseverance and the transformative power of music.

"My roots are mostly Scottish," she shares via email from her home in Invercargill, New Zealand, which she describes "as a great place to live if you can tolerate the cold!"

And while her early environment may have been chilly, her warmth is as apparent as her enduring dedication to her craft.

Interestingly, Beer's introduction to music wasn't exactly love at first sight. "I started learning classical violin when I was 11 years old because my mum put me into lessons. I hated it and wanted to quit because I really wanted to learn the cello, but my mum said it was too expensive."

Her resistance shifted a year later when she stumbled upon Mairead Nesbitt, a fiddler whose performances with Irish supergroup Celtic Woman are world-renowned. "She danced around the stage while she played, and I was just so inspired!" Studying Mairead's videos sparked a newfound motivation and Beer began practicing diligently, even donning dresses and running barefoot across her lawn. "My poor family must have got so sick hearing the same tune over and over again!"

In her third year of classical violin studies, Beer met Marian Burns, transitioned to fiddling and began exploring a range of styles.

"I discovered the world of Canadian fiddling and took online lessons from world-class players. I also started teaching my own

students and doing heaps of performances."

Although her perseverance paid off, it also led to health concerns. "The hardest thing for me has been dealing with burnout," she reveals. After a traumatic event at age 15, Beer threw herself into music as a coping mechanism. "Unfortunately, this caused me to burn out repeatedly, and I learned that simply ignoring your problems doesn't make them go away."

Her struggles culminated in hospitalization, forcing her to pause and focus on recovery.

"I learned the hard way that a work-life balance is very important and that no one is invincible," she reflects. Perfectionism has also been a persistent challenge. "I would beat myself up over every little mistake, feeling I needed to be the perfect performer and teacher."

Sharing her talents with others helped the young fiddler to triumph over her troubles.

“Teaching others how to play the fiddle properly and seeing them progress is extremely rewarding...”

Other career highlights include competing in the New Zealand Gold Guitar Awards, performing with Marian Burns and attending fiddle camps like ScotStringNZ. She has embraced each opportunity for personal growth

with a continuous commitment to her craft. "Recording my single, playing in beautiful locations like Cathedral Cove, and teaching my fiddle ensemble are moments I will always cherish."

Collaborating with other musicians has also been fulfilling. "I loved performing as a duo with Sacha McLeish - we call ourselves The String Faeries."

As a player defined by passion and persistence, Beer encourages young musicians not to give up, especially in the early stages. "The first year will likely be really hard, but with practice, it gets easier. Make sure you listen to fiddle music - it helps a lot. And for adults thinking about learning the fiddle, remember that it is never too late to start."

Her experience bears this out. "I started with terrible technique, playing both out of tune and out of time - practice hasn't made me perfect, but I have made a lot of progress."

For 2025, Beer's focus remains on balancing the basics. "This year, I don't have too much on the musical agenda as I am mostly focusing on my health." However, she does have plans to enter a busking competition, create a short fiddle course, and continue to share her music with her social media fans and followers.

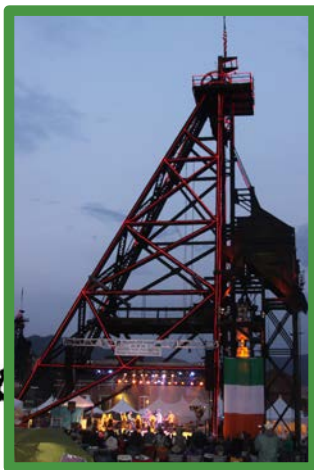
"I have a long way to go with my fiddle playing, but I have also come a long way. I hope my music inspires others to learn and find joy,"

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Gabor Turi

Fun and friendship on the dance floor

Scottish Country Dancing may be a quint-essentially Scottish tradition, but it has found a passionate advocate in Gabor Turi, a Budapest native who has dedicated much of his life to introducing and cultivating the cultural activity in Hungary.

"I do not have any Scottish roots or family relations," shares the 50-something via email with Celtic Life International." Born and raised in Budapest, his first encounter with Scottish dance came in 1982 at a college Christmas party. "My English teacher had recently visited Scotland and taught us two ceilidh dances," he recalls.

The Scottish dance scene in Hungary during the 1980s was sparse, relying on sporadic exposure from travelers and enthusiasts. "In 1988, a band called MÉZ, playing mostly Irish pub music, became a point of attraction," Turi explains. During concert breaks, attendees would attempt Irish jigs and reels. By 1990, these gatherings had evolved into weekly events, providing Turi with a foundation to explore and eventually teach Scottish dancing.

The turning point came in 1992 when he and his fellow dance teachers acquired a publication and cassette from the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, which inspired a core part of the club's repertoire, and introduced them to the intricacies of 'strathspey' - a uniquely Scottish form of dance.

The inception of authentic Scottish techniques sparked a pivotal debate within the Hungarian Scottish Country Dance community, however; some wanted to continue blending Hungarian and Scottish folk styles, while others, including Turi, sought to embrace the "proper Scottish way." The group eventually split, and Turi became the leader



of those interested in learning traditional techniques.

"I spent many weekends, and even weeks, in various European countries to learn and practice," he notes. His dedication paid off when he became the first Hungarian to attend the prestigious RSCDS Summer School in St. Andrews, Scotland. "Eventually we became an official association, affiliated with the RSCDS, and started to organize European trips for Hungarian dancers, to gain experience and make new friendships."

The official club in Hungary now boasts 80 members and a robust training program.

For Turi, Scottish Country Dancing is more than mere movement - it is a celebration of music, culture, and community.

“Scottish dance is successful because of its communal nature...”

"The set dances, the excellent music, the changing partners, and the intricate formations require teamwork, creating a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers."

The cultural exchange facilitated by SCD has been transformative for many participants.

"At first, you just join the dances. Then you realize how incredible traditional Scottish music is. Eventually, you start visiting Scotland, wanting to see the places mentioned in the dance titles." Turi now spends his holidays in Scotland, developing deeper ties to the culture.

SCD has also become a family tradi-

tion for him. "I met my wife through Scottish Country Dancing," he shares. Their daughter, now in her early 20s, is following in their footsteps and has begun training to become an RSCDS-certified teacher. Together, the family participates in demonstration teams and international events, showcasing the activity's appeal across generations.

Despite concerns about youth engagement, Turi is optimistic about SCD's prospects in Hungary, highlighting the success of "dance houses" and formal Scottish Balls, which provide opportunities for young people to socialize. "These events are like an alternative to online dating," he jokes, adding that they have played a role in maintaining the vibrancy of the SCD community which he remains dedicated to maintaining. He is presently organizing Hungary's 14th International SCD weekend - a biennial event that attracts dancers from across Europe - which is scheduled for this coming October.

Turi's contributions have not gone unnoticed. He was awarded the Scroll of Honour by the RSCDS for his pioneering efforts and is a dedicated teacher inspiring others to achieve their own certification while consistently emphasizing the transformative power of Scottish Country Dancing.

"Dancing Scottish is the perfect way to get closer to Scottish culture. It starts with the dances and music but grows into lifelong friendships. We are committed to fostering connections and celebrating this beautiful tradition."



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with Gary Maclean

Hot Cross Buns

The history of the hot cross bun is lengthy and complex. People have been making variations of these for thousands of years; the ancient Egyptians used small round breads topped with crosses to celebrate the gods. The cross divided the bread into four equal sections representing the four seasons. Closer-to-home, hot cross buns have been synonymous with Easter celebrations for over 800 years. They are very popular in Scotland, and tend to contain a little more spice than others found in the U.K. This recipe makes 16 buns.

Ingredients

500g (1lb 2oz) bread flour
300ml (11oz) milk, plus 2 tbsp more
50g (2oz) butter, unsalted
85g (3oz) caster sugar
1x 7g sachet fast-action yeast
1 egg
150g (5oz) sultanas
100g (3½oz) mixed peel
1 orange zest
1tsp ground cinnamon
1tsp mixed spice
1tsp salt

For the cross

100g (3½oz) plain flour, plus extra for dusting

For the glaze

100g (3½oz) apricot jam

Instructions

Bring the milk to a boil, remove it from the heat and add the butter. Leave to cool until it reaches baby bottle temperature (37°C). Put the bread flour, salt, cinnamon, mixed spice, caster sugar and the sachet of yeast into a bowl. Make a well in the centre. Pour in the warm milk and butter mixture and then add 1 beaten egg. Mix well and then bring everything together with your hands until you have a rough sticky dough. Tip on to a lightly floured surface and knead the dough until it is smooth and elastic and bounces back when you stick a finger into it. Put the dough in a lightly floured bowl, cover it with cling film, and leave to rest until it has doubled in size and a finger pressed into it leaves a dent. Once it has doubled in size, tip in the sultanas, mixed peel, and the zest of orange. Knead into the dough, making sure everything is well mixed. Leave until it doubles in size, again covered with cling film. Once doubled in size, divide the dough into 16 even pieces. Roll each piece into a smooth ball on a lightly floured work surface and arrange them in the baking tray lined with parchment. Leaving enough space for the dough to expand. Carefully cover but not too tightly with some oiled cling film and set aside to prove. Preheat the oven to 200°C. Mix the plain flour with 5 tbsp water to make the paste for the cross add the water 1 tbsp at a time, so add just enough for a thick paste. Spoon into a disposable piping bag and cut a small tip of the end. Pipe a line along each row of buns, then repeat in the other direction to create crosses. Bake for 20 minutes until golden brown. Meanwhile, place the apricot jam into a small saucepan and heat the jam to create the glaze. As soon as the buns come out of the oven, brush the hot glaze over the top of the buns and leave them to cool on a wire rack.

Slàinte Mhath! - Gary

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DRAM

with Andrew Ferguson

The Water of Life Cycle

My career in whisky, which started in 2003, has coincided with one of the biggest surges in growth the Scotch whisky industry has ever seen. Beginning in the first years of the new millennium, the sector grew seemingly exponentially for more than two decades until things started getting wobbly in 2023. It may still be too early to know whether we are in the midst of a post-boom bust or merely a market correction. One thing is certain, however; we are not where anyone thought we'd be just three or four years ago, and - in retrospect - we should have seen this coming!

Scotch whisky has a proud history that reaches back centuries. The first record of distilling in Scotland was Friar John Cor's famous "eight bols of malt...wherewith to make aqua vitae" in 1494. This was not the water of life's inception, but merely the first recorded reference to it in Scotland. For the next three centuries, whisky-making in the country was largely local, small-scale, and illicit.

The oldest commercial distilleries in Scotland date from the 1760s and 1770s, and a few from that time, such as Glentworth (1763), Bowmore (1779), and Strathisla (1786), are still operating today. It wasn't until 1824, the year after the passage of the Small Stills Act, that the first boom in whisky production truly took off. In the decade that followed more than 250 distilling licenses were issued, and by 1836 there were 230 legal distilleries operating. A quarter of these would close by 1843, and only 25 from the era are still around today.

The Victorian whisky boom took place at the tail end of the 1800s. It was fueled by the global expansion of Blended Scotch whisky and saw at least 50 distilleries open their doors between 1865 and 1901. The vast

majority of them opened in the last decade of the era. Blended Scotch surged into the void left by phylloxera's devastation of European grape vines, which had caused a massive drop in wine production. Spotting what looked like an opportunity for a quick profit, banks and investors pumped money into the Scotch whisky industry which funded expansions and new distilleries. This speculation caused the volume of malt whisky stock maturing in warehouses to surge to a nearly 7-fold increase in the 1890s, until the bubble burst in 1901.

The hangover from two World Wars and the Great Depression delayed the industry's recovery until the mid-1950s when the next big boom began. Over the next twenty years, exports surged 500 percent, 28 new distilleries were opened, and most of the existing distilleries were modernized and expanded. The Tomatin Distillery alone added 21 new stills between 1956 and 1974 to the two it had made do with since opening in 1897. It went into liquidation in 1985 but was saved the following year when it was acquired by a Japanese firm. In the early 1980s, with the global economy reeling, 4 times more whisky was sitting in bond than two decades earlier. Twenty-three distilleries locked their gates, twenty of them forever.

“The 21st century whisky boom, the fourth in the Scotch industry's commercial history, has run out of steam in recent years...”

And there are some interesting historical parallels with the three earlier growth cycles, not least the fact they have all lasted roughly 20 years. Beginning in the late 2000s the industry began cranking up production con-

siderably. Many distilleries began producing 24/7, adding capacity and cutting production times. In the early 2000s, the two largest single malt brands, Glenfiddich and Glenlivet, had the ability to produce 10M and 6M litres a year. Today they are both able to produce a staggering 21M litres. And over the same period, 52 new malt whisky distilleries have opened in Scotland alone, with still more to come, and many hundreds more around the world.

As with the Victorian boom, the 21st century boom was fuelled by easy credit and no shortage of speculation. Like the post WWII boom, which left Scotland with a Whisky Loch in the 1980s, the industry has grossly overproduced for the last two and a half decades. Are we facing another bust, or will things be different this time? What does the future hold for Scotch whisky?

Although the demand for Scotch whisky has slowed globally in the last couple of years, the industry had broader and deeper



roots today than it has at any time in its history. I believe the interest in single malt whisky, which has grown organically for more than two decades, will ensure the industry has a bright future. But, in my opinion, prices have risen too high, there are too many distilleries, and too much production. In the next few years, we can expect most distilleries to slow down, and sadly, many others to close. Retail whisky prices will also need to come down to counter this economic slump.

While filling yet another proverbial loch of whisky over the last twenty years, the captains of this iconic industry have forgotten two of the immutable principles which govern our Universe: what goes up must come down, and nearly all booms are followed by a bust.

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Sage's CIRCLE
with Candice Marie Sage, PhD

Beltane - May Day as an Act of Resistance

Celebrated May 1, Beltane (pronounced BELL-tayn) is the Gaelic May Day Festival, the second of the four greater pagan fire Sabats of the Wheel of the Year and the apex point between the spring equinox and the summer solstice. Beltane is “high spring” when the increased warmth of the sun leads to the blooming of flowers and the earth’s readying for the planting of crops. It is a time for connecting with life-affirming energies. A prominent deity is Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, who has the power to create new life and birthed the Tree of Life.

Beltane has many symbols. In Celtic mythology, the “Green Man” is a tree-like figure who acts as the guardian of all living things. The Maypole, a tall structure with ribbons tied from its height, symbolizes fertility. The divine masculine energy of the sun as provider and protector is anchored within the divine feminine energy, the land itself. The ribbons are symbols of energy, gifts to encourage connection to the spirit world. Festival colours are white for the pure light of the feminine, green for the lushness of new growth, and red for fiery energy and passion. Crowns for women were created from the Hawthorn flower, associated with wisdom, and interwoven with Lily of the Valley (joy and the return of spring), primrose, (youth and growth), roses (love, beauty and the divine feminine), and elder to ward away negative energy.

Beltane is a festival of life, and - in ancient times - a giant bonfire lit the night while people gathered to feast and celebrate nature’s beauty and rhythm, dancing barefoot on the warm earth. In Celtic lore, the “Aos Si” or faeries, oversee the blooming of flowers, and are invited to come and dance with the revelers and bestow blessings as they dangle from the ribbons of the Maypole. Beltane was about “connecting” with the passion of spring. Dancing and reveling led to new love and lovers. The pagan tradition of ‘hand-fasting’ - the union of a couple for a year and a day - was a precursor to marriage the following spring (and why



May and June are still such popular times for weddings).

Interestingly, it was maidens who proposed hand-fasting to their partners, and if they weren’t satisfied with the union, they could dissolve it the following Beltane.

With the coming of Christianity, the raw earthiness of Beltane became frowned upon, and

went underground during the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. Beltane was reinvented in private celebrations, while its essence was disguised through the play of children around the Maypoles of May Day celebrations. Its survival was through the resistance of people who kept the old ways alive in secret.

“Today, May Day still reflects resistance, as organized Labour and environmental groups promote social and environmental justice on that date.

Another important deity of Beltane is Áine (Any or Anu), the Irish Faery Queen and goddess of wealth and sovereignty. She was the goddess wife of the King of the ancient Irish Province of Munster in the South. She embodies the fertility of the land with the sun’s vitalizing power. Áine embodies the Celtic values of integrity, authenticity, creativity and reverence for Mother Nature. She reminds us that sovereignty means more than one’s personal power and happiness, that we live in a web of life, tied to our natural environment, and to each other. We need community to survive. This spring, it seems difficult to ignore how the world we know is being challenged by a variety of social, economic and environmental shocks. Hyper-capitalism and its mass consumption is leading to increased economic and social injustice. Meanwhile climate change is creating further insecurity. Being sovereign at the individual level is not a virtue when injustice prevails around one. Beltane can be a way of bringing together our communities to celebrate the beauty and renewal of spring, and that together, connected to nature and each other, we will survive, perhaps even thrive in difficult times. Make Beltane a celebration or resistance against the forces that would see us divided and conquered. It’s time to light the fires.



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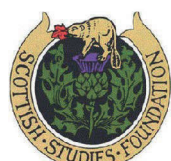
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