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Molly Wade, Tiller's Folly
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first WORD

with Stephen Patrick Clare,
Executive Editor

Choyce Words

I once asked Canadian novelist Farley Mowat if he had any advice to share with younger writers.

“Well, there’s no secret to it,” he reflected over a breakfast of vodka and orange juice. “Just sit your arse down in the chair every day and go to work...”

A longtime resident of both Newfoundland-Labrador, and - in his later years - Nova Scotia, Mowat was well acquainted with the work ethic of Atlantic Canadians, a people whose resourcefulness was largely inherited from the region’s many Irish and Scottish settlers.

Also passed down through the generations was the Celtic custom of storytelling, evidenced by the litany of literary awards and accolades given to gifted East Coast wordsmiths in recent decades, including the likes of Wayne Johnston, Donna Morrissey, David Adams Richards, Lisa Moore, Michael Crummey, Ami McKay, and others.

As the literary critic for several years at the Halifax Daily News in Nova Scotia (until it permanently closed its doors in 2008), I had the good fortune to meet and know many of the region’s finest writers. Those relationships evolved and flourished as I moved on to contribute literary articles and reviews to the province’s broadsheet “paper-of-record” The Chronicle-Herald, as well as The Globe and Mail, Quill and Quire, Atlantic Books Today, and dozens of other publications. In 2009, I co-authored Atlantic Canada’s 100 Greatest Books after polling more than 715 readers on their favourite reads from Canada’s Maritime provinces. In addition, from 2009-2012, I hosted a weekly, cross-country radio program called The Book Club, showcasing local, regional, national, and international authors, poets, and more. In my time with Celtic Life International, I have spoken with hundreds of creative writers and journalists, often - and for purely selfish reasons - seeking to steal and study the secrets of their craft.

I first met Lesley Choyce in 2006, after reading his wonderful narrative *The Republic of Nothing* (1994), a book that had been recommended to me by Neil Peart, drummer and lyricist for Canadian rockers Rush.

When the percussionist passed away in 2020, Lesley penned a beautiful tribute to his friend, recalling the roots of their relationship;

“It started out with a fan letter of sorts from Neil to me concerning my novel, *The Republic of Nothing*. God knows how he came across it, but he wrote me a cleanly typed two-pager telling me that it connected with him and that he thought I should know. I think he introduced himself as someone who played in a rock trio or rock combo or something like that, and that he was primarily a guy who banged on things with sticks.”

After championing *The Republic of Nothing* for an online book club initiative in 2007, I joined Lesley onstage for a spoken word/musical performance in Halifax, cementing our friendship. Later, I would contribute a short story to his anthology *Nova Scotia; Visions of the Future*, and - in 2017 - he began writing for Celtic Life International.

In this issue, we celebrate the life, work, and word of a man who has penned over 100 books. No other writer in the Canadian cultural canon has ever been as prolific and profound - ironic, as he was born and bred in New Jersey. That said, after almost 50 years living on Nova Scotia’s eastern shore, and given his good and humble nature, you’d swear that he is - at heart - Canadian.

I once asked him to share the secret of his literary success.

“Well, there’s no secret to it,” he told me, echoing Farley Mowat. “I just sit my arse down in the chair every day and go to work...”

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The Hermit of Gully Lake

A little more than 20 years ago, search and rescue members found the remains of Willard Kitchener Macdonald, affectionately known as the Hermit of Gully Lake.

Story by Donald Cameron

This discovery ended the final chapter of a remarkable story of a unique man who became a legend while alive and, especially so, since his death. This legendary status is ironic, considering he was happiest and most relaxed, living alone in the woods near Gully Lake, Nova Scotia, away from civilization.

I was fortunate to get to know Kitchener in his later years, thanks to an introduction by two of his old friends - Lloyd Bogle and Earle Tanner - who took me to meet him at his former shanty of a home in the province's Colchester County. These men had gained Kitchener's respect and friendship.

For more than three decades, Lloyd had been visiting Kitchener on foot or by snowmobile. He brought him many things over the years - food, clothes, other supplies, doctors, lawyers, social services personnel, CBC interview crews, advice and a friendly, familiar face to talk to.

Likewise, other people had befriended Kitchener over the years and dropped in periodically to visit or bring supplies. In his later years, he decided to be called Kitchener instead of the previously used Willard because there was another Willard Macdonald in the area.

Although he was born in Somerville, Massachusetts, in 1916, Kitchener lived in the Earltown area in the 1930s. Soon after meeting a special lady, he was scheduled to take a troop train to fight in the Second World War.

Shortly after boarding the train in Earltown, he changed his mind about the army, jumped off of it, and started his 60 years in hiding. He hid out in the wilderness during

the war years, afraid for his life because of the severe nature at that time regarding military deserters.

By the time the war was over, Kitchener had settled into a solitary, self-sufficient life in the wilds of Gully Lake. His homes over the years have been very basic, dirty little shacks. His love of the woods, animals, nature, and living alone allowed him to be totally satisfied with where and how he lived.

He wasn't comfortable among crowds, and yet, once you got to know him, you could have easy conversations with him about wide-ranging topics. He loved to read. His shanty was full of books - Readers Digest was his favourite.

“In the earlier years, he lived off the land by hunting, fishing, and trapping.”

He was a familiar sight, either walking or bicycling through the woods or along the road to Earltown, where he would periodically get his supplies from the Earltown General Store.

Although he was eligible for a pension, he did not need it. At one point, after many cheques hadn't been cashed, his pension was frozen. Friends and the Social Services Department made it possible for him to purchase the supplies he wanted when he wanted.

In the early 1990s, as Kitchener was approaching his 70s, Social Services built him a new, relatively modern two-story cabin. Unfortunately, despite trying it for one night - during which it rained hard on the metal roof - Kitchener decided that he didn't like it be-

cause it was, as he stated, "too close to all that noise and confusion."

He was referring partly to the sound of the metal roof and that the house had been built next to the forest access road, less than one kilometre from the main dirt road linking Earltown and Kempton.

This proximity meant that he could hear the traffic sounds, which to him was sound pollution - understandable when you consider that the man had lived for nearly 50 years in relative silence, disturbed only by the sounds of nature.

He grudgingly lived in the newer structure that had been built for him, complete with a propane stove, which he refused to use, and a water hand pump. There have been many different visitors to Kitchener over the years. His old shanty was located immediately beside one of the many snowmobile trails through the Gully Lake Crown block of land, which became the Gully Lake Protected Area. In fact, there is a beautifully maintained hiking trail named and signed in his honour in the Protected Area trail system.

Kitchener was interviewed by national, provincial, and local media many times. Many curious visitors and regular visitors would come to see him.

After suffering some health issues, Kitchener was missing from his home in the winter of 2003. His body was found the following summer. All things come to an end. Such is the case for the unusual life and times of Kitchener Willard Macdonald. It is safe to say that his legend will live on for many years.

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Rionna Morgan

"If you have the words, there's always a chance that you'll find the way." - *Seamus Heaney*

On the subject of storytelling, few voices resonate with such richness of heritage as that of Rionna Morgan. An accomplished writer, publisher, and community builder, the scribe weaves her Emerald Isle roots into every element of her life and work.

"I am Irish," she muses via email with Celtic Life International. "That single sentence brings into being such pride, such love for a people and a place. I was raised in a home that celebrated the ancient festivals - Samhain, Yule, Midsummer - ensuring that the traditions from the generations before were passed on to the children of the future."

Steeped in the storytelling tradition of her ancestors, Morgan wove those cultural threads into the tapestry of both her own family life and her writing.

"We fill our home with music and dance, love and laughter. We read stories of great heroes, build fairy houses, and believe in magic."

Her love of the written word began early. "I have always been a writer, a storyteller. From the moment I could form words, I was telling stories. And when I could write, I sure did - poetry, short stories, letters to the universe."

Her big realization was that "reading was like reaching through time, space, adventure, mystery, and all the other beautiful things a story brings to connect with another person."

Her focus on storytelling as a bridge to bring people together deepened over the years. As the owner of Whitney Morgan Media, and as the Community & Publishing Lead at PageDAO, Morgan's work is now

centered on creating spaces for writers and readers to come together. "Our mission at Whitney Morgan Media is to remove barriers to publication so more writers and readers can form those powerful bonds."

She remains aware, however, of the challenges in an ever-evolving literary landscape.

"Balancing the creativity of writing with the business aspects of publishing - whether through traditional means or new technologies - isn't easy."

She sees these issues as opportunities for innovation rather than inhibition.

"Being a part of multiple organizations means wearing many hats, which can sometimes feel like a delicate balancing act. With these challenges come possibilities, and I am committed to embracing them as part of my evolution as both a writer and a leader."

The rewards of those connections, she notes, are worth all the effort.

"The true gift of being a writer lies in the people; it is the writers, the readers, the creatives, and the visionaries who inspire me daily,"

Those associations, she shares, are at the core of her journey.

"Whether it is that little girl at a Barnes & Noble book signing jumping and clapping when I told her I had written a book just for her, or the FBI agent who shared expertise for one of my tales - these moments are everything."

Among many career highlights, Morgan fondly recalls the publication of her first novel.

"Opening that big box of books and holding the physical copy in my hands was monumental..."

As well, Whitney Morgan Media's exclusive merchandise collection on Story, and innovative projects such as The 7 Love Stories literary digital collection - a collaboration that blends storytelling with bespoke artwork, sound, and emerging technology - reflect her commitment to accessibility and inclusivity. "I was inspired by my late mother, who was blind at the end of her life. I wanted to create something that she too could enjoy."

These days, there seems to be no limit to Morgan's creativity. Her current focus is on her Celtic Wheel of the Year series - a project she describes as "beautiful and a treasure to my heart." She is also working on a time-travel fiction book, several fantasy short stories, and a romantic suspense novel.

Her advice to aspiring writers reflects the same persistence she applied early on in her own career - despite receiving 154 rejection letters. "Write. Write. And write some more. Read. Learn. Study. Find your voice, find your passion, and connect with others who can uplift and celebrate along with you."

"The truth of your words comes from inside you. Remind yourself that somewhere out in the world, there are readers who need your story, need your truth. Write for them."

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Tiller's Folly

Canadian folk trio Tiller's Folly has been weaving stories and melodies for nearly three decades. With their latest EP, *Way Out West*, the British Columbia-based band continues to capture the essence of their roots while exploring new horizons.

"I am a sixth-generation Canadian of Irish descent," shares frontman and songwriter Bruce Coughlin via email from his home in Maple Ridge, BC. "Deep down in my heart, I have always believed that music would be my destiny. As a young child, I would walk around simply singing."

By grade school, he had picked up the ukulele and upright bass - both self-taught - later learning the guitar before leaving home to go out on the road and ply his trade as a musician.

Fast forward 50 years, and Coughlin remains just as committed to his craft.

"I've never really considered any other pursuit..."

Reflecting on the challenges of the vocation, he notes, "Paying the bills consistently, year in and year out, has been the greatest challenge."

Despite the economic issues, he wouldn't trade it for anything. "Music has proven to be an adventure in and of itself. Engaging musically with others has also been very rewarding. I have been blessed to have played with many of the greatest acoustic Folk, Celtic & Americana/Bluegrass musicians on both sides of the Atlantic, however, Celtic Music is still at my very roots."

In 1997, Coughlin formed Tiller's Folly as a six-piece group - with eight Irish dancers - to honour his Celtic heritage. Given the global popularity of Irish dance spectacular *Riverdance*, the timing was right.

The band's first album, *The View from Here*, blended traditional Irish music with original compositions, including a number of historically inspired ballads. The band's evolution took a significant turn in 1999 when Nolan Murray, known as "the Fiddling Fury," joined the lineup.



"Nolan brought a unique palette to the band," notes Coughlin. "His background in Americana music blended well with my Celtic and folk influences, creating a distinctive sound."

By 2000, Tiller's Folly had fully embraced Americana, touring extensively throughout the United States and Canada. Those tours were marked by many unforgettable moments, including a 2008 Canada Day performance before a crowd of over 250,000 on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

However, Coughlin muses that his most enduring achievement is *Stirring Up Ghosts*, an initiative to preserve Pacific Canadian history through music. "Inspired by Celtic balladry, it's my effort to keep a measure of our history and culture alive in story and song."

He describes the recording of their latest EP as a collaborative and ultimately, familiar process. "Everyone involved just did what they do best, and the results speak for themselves. Each song tells its own story, and each is compelling in a different way."

Although the inspiration that nourished the songwriting for nearly half a century may have come easily, Coughlin admits that the logistics of production were more arduous. Nonetheless, the band has consistently sought to balance hard work and the creative process into what he believes makes a good song - connection.

"I like music that engages its audience and relates to them on a personal level. A good song evokes images, memories, and emotions. It is timeless, relatable, and authentic."

Similarly, a great live show hinges on engagement. "It's all about creating a sense of oneness or community within the collective."

As for advice he might have for younger musicians looking to carve out a career in the music industry, Coughlin is clear.

"Music is the toughest way to make an easy living - it's not for the faint of heart."

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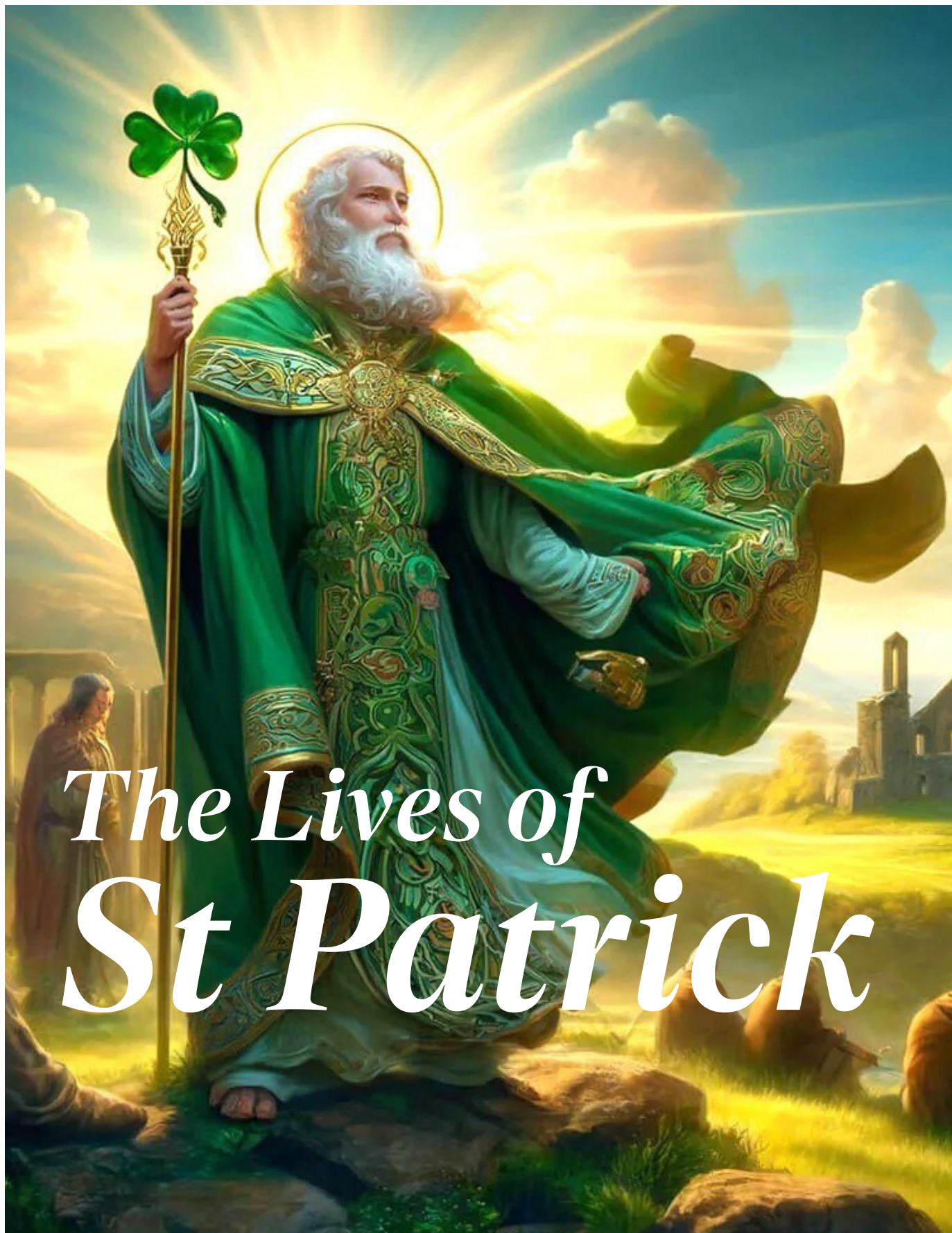


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The Lives of St Patrick

St Patrick's Day ~ Top Ten

Each March 17, millions of Celts and non-Celts around the world honour the life and legacy of St. Patrick. But who was he, and why do we celebrate him?

The Irish can't claim credit for the invention of the Saint Patrick's Day Parade.

The world's first recorded Saint Patrick's Day Parade took place in Boston on March 18, 1737, followed by the New York Parade, which first took place in 1762. Ireland took over a century to jump on the parade float with the rest of the world and only had their first St. Patrick's Day Parade in Dublin in 1931.

We will all be wearing green this St. Patrick's Day, but shouldn't it be blue??

The original colour associated with St. Patrick was blue. Still, because the Saint preached about the Holy Trinity through the symbol of the shamrock and the Irish 'little folk' were also associated with green, it became the most common shade in connection with him. Parade committee organizers worldwide wouldn't take too kindly to us changing the colour now, so maybe we'll leave it at green.

100 lbs. of green dye was poured into the Chicago River in honor of St. Patrick's Day.

In 1961, the business manager of Chicago's Journeymen Plumbers Local Union, Stephen Bailey, received permission to turn the Chicago River green for St. Patrick's Day. Due to uncertainties about how much dye it would take to turn the river green, a massive 100 lbs of vegetable dye was used compared to the 25 lbs used today. The Chicago River stayed green for a full week.

Saint Patrick banished the Snakes from Ireland

... and not a snake in sight. Patrick is said to have banished the snakes from Ireland but in fact, Ireland never had any snakes as the weather was too miserable for the cold-blooded reptiles. The banished snakes were thought to be symbolic of the pagan druid priests with whom Patrick might have had a few issues to iron out.

The resting place of Saint Patrick

Though never fully proven, Down Cathedral in the town of Downpatrick, Ireland, is thought to contain St. Patrick's remains and, according to legend, he lies beside Saints Columcille and Brigit. Apparently, he's missing a few things like a jaw and a tooth, but these can be seen in Dublin Museum.

George Washington ordered that "St. Patrick" be the response to the password "Boston" on Evacuation Day

On Evacuation Day - March 17, 1776 - the General Orders issued by Washington were that those wishing to pass through Continental lines should give the password "Boston," to which the reply should be "St. Patrick".

Saint Patrick's Relics

A few of the Saint's relics can still be viewed in Ireland today: St. Patrick's Bell and shrines of the Saint's jaw and tooth can be viewed at the Dublin National Museum while Patrick's four gospels are held at the Royal Irish Academy. Saint Patrick's Crozier, with which he banished the imaginary snakes, was venerated for centuries in Dublin's Christ Church only to be publicly burned in 1538 under the orders of the archbishop, George Browne.



Drink, drink, and yet more drink!

The global corporate relations director of Guinness says 5.5 million pints of Guinness are sold on any given day, but this figure rises to an astounding 13 million on St. Patrick's Day. IBISWorld also reports that Saint Patrick's Day 2024 brought in \$410 million in beer sales. So, who's up for making March 18 into International Hangover Day?

The Royal Dublin Dog Show was the place to be on St. Patrick's Day.

Due to strict laws on the curtailment of sales of alcohol on Holy Days in Ireland, from 1927 to 1961, the only place a thirsty Irish person could legally get a drink on Paddy's Day was at The Royal Dublin Dog Show. One person was reported to complain that it was a grand occasion "except for all the dogs." At the time, the church and state were worried that the Irish would drink too much on the day.

And after all that he's not even Irish!

Saint Patrick is rumoured to have been born in Roman Britain at the end of the 4th century AD and taken to Ireland by slavers as a teenager. The exact place of his birth is debatable as some say Scotland and some say Wales but, either way, he's Irish now.

St Patrick's Origin Story



Born in England arguably in the late 4th century A.D., St. Patrick was captured by pirates as a child and brought to Ireland. During his enslavement, he was called to Christianity and escaped his captors after six years. He returned to Ireland as a missionary and, in his teachings, combined Irish pagan beliefs with Christian sacraments, devising the Celtic Cross.

His father, Calphurnius, was a deacon from a Roman family of high social standing. His mother, Conchessa, was a close relative of the great patron St. Martin of Tours. St. Patrick's grandfather, Pontius, was also a member of the clergy. Surprisingly, St. Patrick himself was not raised with a strong emphasis on religion. Education was not particularly stressed during his childhood either. Later in life, this would become a source of embarrassment, and - in the early 440s - he would write in his Confessio, "I blush and fear exceedingly to reveal my lack of education."

When St. Patrick was 16 years old, he was captured by Irish pirates. They brought him to Ireland where he was sold into slavery in Dalriada. There, his job was to tend sheep. His master, Milchu, was a high priest of Druidism, a Pagan sect that ruled religious influence over Ireland at the time.

St. Patrick came to view his enslavement as God's test of his faith. During his six years of captivity, he became deeply devoted to Christianity through constant prayer. In a vision, he saw the children of Pagan Ireland reaching out their hands to him. With this, he grew increasingly determined to free the Irish from Druidism by converting them to Christianity.

Circa 408, the idea of escaping enslavement came to St. Patrick in a dream. In the dream, a voice promised him he would find his way home to England. Eager to see the dream materialize, St. Patrick convinced some sailors to let him board their ship. After three days of sailing, he and the crew abandoned the ship in France and wandered, lost, for 28 days - covering 200 miles of territory in the process.

Now a free man, St. Patrick went to Auxerre, France where he studied and entered the priesthood under the guidance of the missionary St. Germain. As time passed, St. Patrick never lost sight of his vision: he was determined to convert Ireland to Christianity. By 431, Pope St. Celestine I, consecrated St. Patrick Bishop of the Irish and sent him to Ireland to spread "The Good News," or Christian Gospel, to the Pagans there.

Upon his arrival in Ireland, St. Patrick was initially met with hostile resistance, but he quickly managed to spread Christian teachings far and wide. Through preaching, writing, and performing countless baptisms, he convinced Pagan Druids that they were worshiping idols under a belief system that kept them enslaved. By accepting Christianity, he told them, they would be elevated to "the people of the Lord and the sons of God."

Throughout his missionary work, St. Patrick continued to promote the conversion of Ireland to Christianity by electing Church officials, creating councils, founding monasteries and organizing Ireland into dioceses.

St. Patrick died circa 461 in Saul, Ireland. He is said to have been buried in Ulster, County Down, Ireland.

Though he was never formally canonized by a pope, St. Patrick is on the List of Saints and was declared a Saint in Heaven by many Catholic churches. He was also venerated in the Orthodox Catholic Church.

The Episcopal Church annually honours St. Patrick with the celebration of St. Patrick's Day on March 17, which falls during the Christian season of Lent. For more than 1,000 years, the Irish have observed St. Patrick's Day as a religious holiday. Traditionally, on St. Patrick's Day, Irish families would attend church in the morning and celebrate later - including eating a traditional meal of cabbage and Irish bacon.



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Molly Kathryn Wade

@mollykathryn_london



What are your own roots?

I am originally from Peel, Isle of Man.

Where do you currently reside?

I currently live in London where I work full-time for Vivienne Westwood and on my own practice in my spare time. I have split my time between here and the Isle of Man for the last 8 years.

When and why did you first become interested in fashion?

I can't remember a specific moment where I realized I was interested in fashion, but I have always felt compelled to pursue this route. I have always been drawn to materials and different textures, and I think it is fascinating how fabric can be manipulated in so many ways. So many narratives can be told through fabrics; almost like a woven tapestry that records stories and history of culture, and the wearer. Creating wearable pieces out of this and seeing them come alive by the people that wear them was just a natural progression for me, as the pieces will inhabit totally unique personas by the people that wear them.

Are they the same reasons that you continue to be involved today?

Absolutely. Whenever I face creative blocks or doubt my work, I reconnect with the instinctive drive that led me to this path. It reminds me that I what I do is worthy to put out in the world for others to enjoy. Over time, I've come to see fashion not just as an art form but as a communication tool - a medium to share my values with the world. Fashion transcends any language barrier and is an effective tool of communication; wearing someone's designs signals alignment with their values and aesthetic. This keeps me inspired to continue creating work that resonates with people.

How has your work evolved over the years?

My work has grown increasingly sustainability-focused as I've

become more aware of the realities of production and the impact of supply and demand. This has reshaped how I approach my business model and my relationships with suppliers and customers. I now prioritise creating pieces that stand the test of time—garments that maintain their value and relevance long after the fleeting buzz of a fashion moment. I also do not consider trends and hype, or what is considered 'fashionable.' Instead, I focus on building narratives that foster a sense of timelessness, grounded in craftsmanship and material authenticity.

What are the challenges of the vocation?

The financial challenges of starting a product-based business are immense, especially with limited funding. Designing, developing, and producing collections is incredibly time-consuming, and balancing this with a full-time job often feels overwhelming. Financial backing opens doors and opportunities that many lack access to, which leads to those from higher-class backgrounds dominating the industry and systematically excluding talented individuals from working-class backgrounds. For this reason, I had to move my practice outside of the city, and encourage making creative opportunities more accessible to diverse demographics. Expanding the reach of these fields would bring fresh perspectives and invaluable contributions to the industry.

What are the rewards?

Receiving compliments on your work and seeing real people connect with your work gives me a high like no other. I love putting creations out in the world that resonate with people. It can reach corners of the world and communicate with people in a way I would never be able to do otherwise. This year, I've also had aspiring fashion students approach me for advice, which is surreal. Being in a position to guide others is deeply rewarding, as I understand how difficult it is to find your footing in this





industry. Sharing my experiences and helping others to follow their path feels like a way of giving back. What have been some career highlights? Representing the Isle of Man at the Festival Interceltique de Lorient was an incredible experience, as was participating in London Fashion Week and receiving recognition in natural design competitions.

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

At its core, it's inspirational. I'm driven by ideas, storytelling, and the materials themselves. I seek escapism in everything - I've always been a bit of a dreamer!

What makes your work unique?

I try to approach my work with a deep commitment to understanding the origins of materials and their journey through the supply chain. In my latest collection, I delved into the production of leather, uncovering gaps in our knowledge about its origins, and wanted to try and change that. The collection was a response to developing a bespoke production system that included working with local abattoirs and independent tanneries; which helped me build really strong relationships with the materials as I was so involved in the production of them. I think it is probably a very intense approach to sourcing materials, but it infuses my work with authenticity and evokes strong emotional reactions from those who experience it. It all draws back to constructing narratives in a way that feeds the idea of escapism through fashion. This helps me channel storytelling and escapism, realised through meticulous craftsmanship and sustainable practices.

Who are your clients, and how do you reach them?

Networking and word-of-mouth have been my most effective tools for connecting with clients. Staying immersed in the creative community and saying "yes" to opportunities often leads to new contacts and expands my reach.

What makes a good piece/item of clothing?

A truly great garment is timeless—it transcends fleeting trends and remains relevant over decades. A garment that can be reinvented countless times, or adapted to so many different styles with a classic suit or coat - this is the clothing that can grow in value as it ages, storing the history of all its wearers.

What are your thoughts on the current state of fashion?

The industry's current model is increasingly unsustainable, particularly for emerging designers. The bi-annual fashion calendar and endless seasonal cycles are financially unviable. However, I believe these challenges are paving the way for more imaginative business models and innovative ways of showcasing and selling work. So yeah, although it's tough, I anticipate exciting potential for change and creativity in the years ahead!

How can it be improved?

We always need to be supporting emerging designers and new creatives! Opportunities for nurturing creativity are shrinking, especially with cuts to arts education; it is contributing to an increasingly volatile landscape. Encouraging funding and mentorship for young designers would help build a more inclusive and innovative fashion landscape.

What's next on your creative agenda?

I'm planning to develop a capsule collection that continues to tell stories through clothing. I also want to deepen my collaborations in both the fashion industry and the Celtic arts scene to solidify my identity as a Celtic designer. There's so much untapped potential in celebrating cultural heritage within fashion, and I hope to create work that resonates as both a celebration of tradition and a challenge to the unattainable wealth-driven narratives often associated with the industry.



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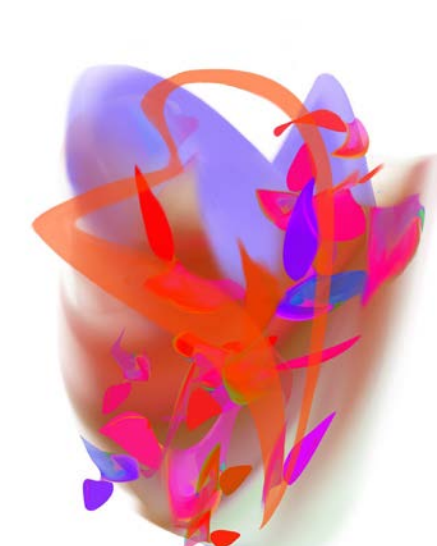
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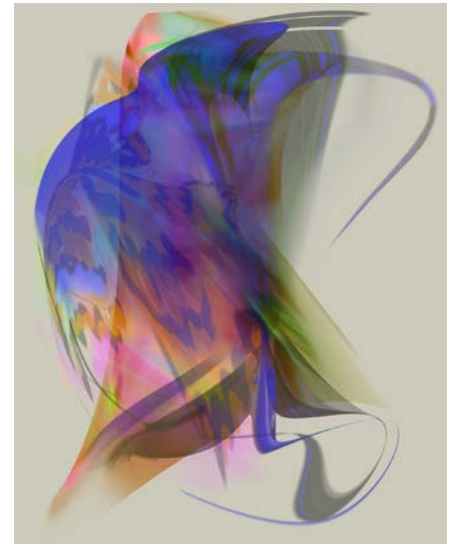
I was born in Montreal, and now live in Toronto. My father was born near Galway, Ireland, and came to Canada in his 30s for work. When I was a child, we travelled back every few years to visit his family who lived throughout the country, and as far north as Carrick-on-Shannon. That tradition continued once I had my children and we returned every summer to visit my father, who had returned to live in Ireland.

I have had a fascination with the visual arts as long as I can remember. I loved drawing and painting as a child in school. We went away to a farm most weekends during the summer, and I had a lot of free time on my hands. I became very close to nature, and would observe and engage with the fields, the garden, the flowers, the insects...and I loved to draw and colour with any kind of Crayola product. I wasn't in any lessons for art - I just enjoyed the playful expression of the beauty that I found outdoors.

It all starts with nature - all the things in my life dissolve and the noise of everything dissipates. A new perspective is found. It is a form of meditation - a place where I feel connected with the universe and a part of something greater than myself.

There is no plan - I simply go out into nature, immerse all my senses and flow, and





simply let things happen and draw.

Reading often shows up in my work - W.B. Yeats and J. O'Donohue are always at hand - as does music; a few years ago, I attended a Loreena McKennitt concert and it had an effect on my post-creative sessions. Her stage was full of purples, so lovely. Soon after, I noticed my art had touches of these colours in them; her music and stage show had become a part of me.

I have coined the term 'synthesis art' to represent my approach to combining analogue plein air drawings into digital layering and then after printing on canvas I paint them, or on paper I will create, paint and add text onto the materials. I play with form and colour - pure play of composition, colour, light, movement, layering opacity - this often arises from the subconscious, where the magic happens. For me, combining those two methodologies highlight how we acquire knowledge about ourselves; understanding our history through new technologies gives us a deeper understanding of who we are as humans.

A good work of art is one that makes you feel something, that elicits a reaction whether you love it, or you hate it - it affects you in some deeper way.





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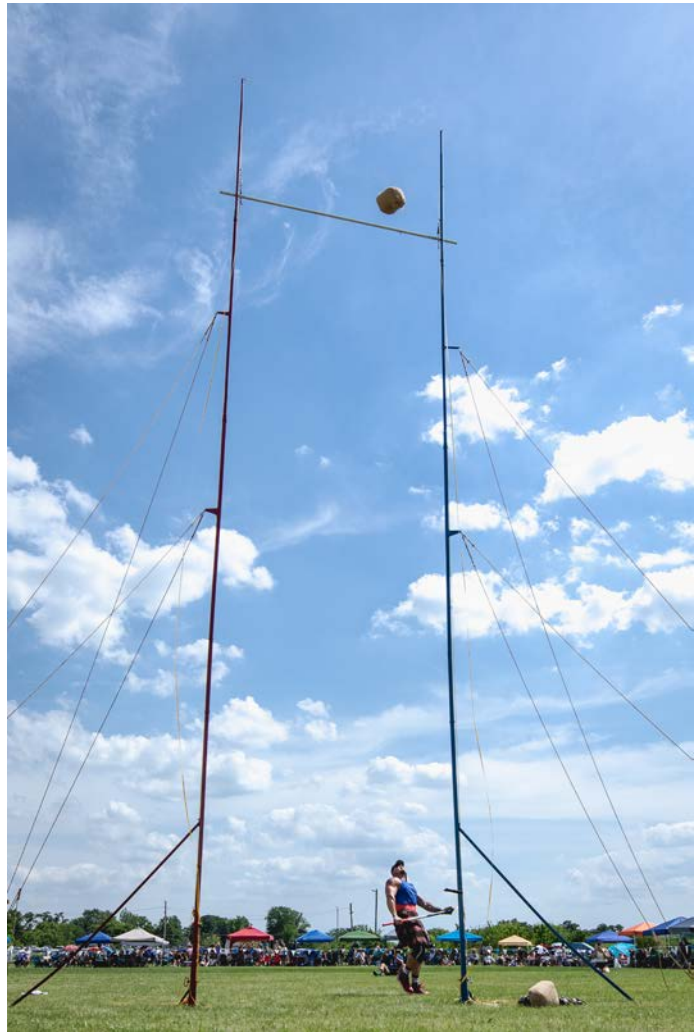
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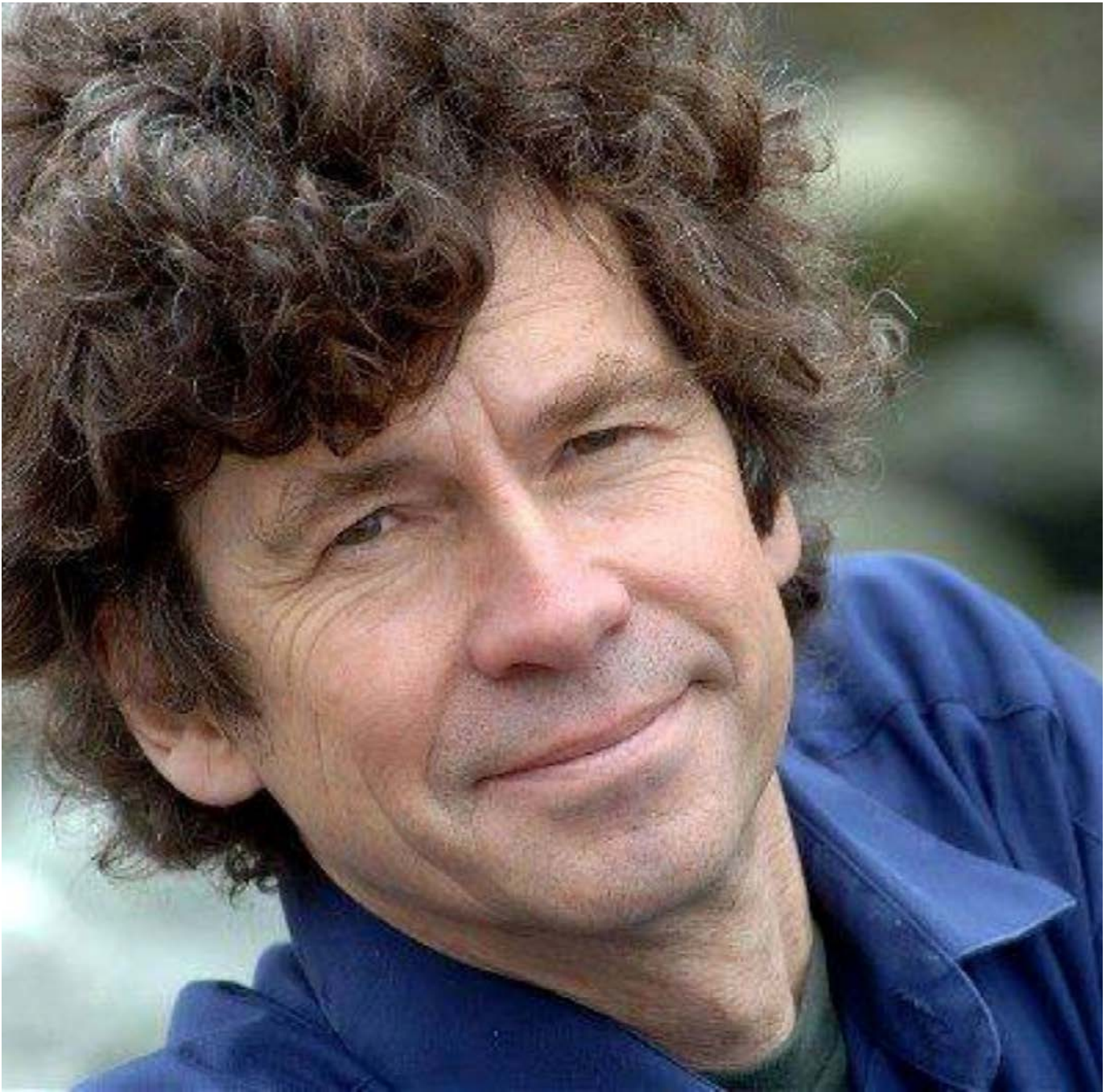
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Celtic by Choyce

Author, poet, publisher, professor, surfer, and - for the last 8 years - Celtic Life International contributor, Lesley Choyce is a man for all seasons and reasons. Recently we spoke with the scribe about his past, present and future, and his passion for his profession.

What are your own family roots?

The Choyces came to the New World from Leicestershire, U.K. - my best guess is from around the tiny village of Sibson, where Dick Turpin once hid out in a pub owned by the local church. They settled in New Jersey and Pennsylvania from whence I eventually, generations later, escaped over the border to Canada when American insanity revealed itself fully to me. On my mother's side, the Willis immigrants supposedly came from somewhere in England with Lord Baltimore who first attempted settlement in Newfoundland until he realized the winters were notably harsh. So, instead, his settlers ending up in Maryland, and my forefathers and mothers on that side of the family settled on Maryland's Eastern Shore. And, of course, I now live on another Eastern Shore, in Nova Scotia.

When and why did you want to become a writer?

I thought this through in great detail in high school. The goal was to avoid work. Hey, just sit down and put some words on paper and you don't have to get a real job. Fiction was the goal. Just make some stuff up and you'd get paid a lot of money. That was the dream. Then I wanted to do it all: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, kids' books, movie scripts. All that was accomplished except the promised cash prize never materialized so I had to get real jobs to sustain the habit.

Are they the same reasons you continue to write today?

Today I write for the sheer joy of it, the challenge of keeping up with the times and the lofty, albeit perhaps foolhardy notion that I continue to have something of significant value to share with readers while still attempting to entertain.

What inspires you today?

Inspiration takes many forms: nature, ideas, loved ones, language itself. Inspiration itself in its myriad forms still sends me spiralling up into the misty sky. Inspiration also sometimes grabs me by the ankles and yanks me down to the surface of the planet. Travelling far and wide to discover how fascinating and odd humans are



or sitting on my arse and asking the clouds to deliver wonderful ideas, inspiration is all around. The Atlantic Ocean, a stone's throw away from my doorstep is still my great mentor and stimulus - always changing, always there, always charged with energy. Just staring out across it or sitting on my surfboard waiting for the next wave supercharges my creativity.

Who are your core literary influences?

Walt Whitman, Farley Mowat, William Wordsworth, Pat Conroy, Jules Terti, Bill Bryson, Jonathan Swift, Tony Hawks, Seamus Heaney, Alan Ginsberg, John Fowles, Alistair MacLeod, Billy Collins, Bob Dylan, Sun Tzu, and Trevor Noah.

Do you have a favourite writer?

Pat Conroy - American Southern fiction author

Do you have a favourite book?

The Prince of Tides, by Pat Conroy.

What are the challenges of the vocation?

Endless rejection. Changing publishing trends. Censorship in its many forms. Trying to continually learn and improve my craft.

What are the rewards?

The rewards of writing are embodied in the act of writing itself. Discovering what I have to say about the world

and trying to get it down with words and getting it right - or close enough so that it connects with readers. Sometimes I get actual responses from people, but like most writers I know, we write a rough draft, fix it up, send it out there and never really get much feedback so we need to have faith in the value of writing itself.

What makes a good book?

A good book is one that in some way is original and the writer is reaching somewhere beyond the norm. Style is more important than content. Character is more important than plot. At its core, a really good novel expresses something about human



nature that we know deep down but can't quite understand or articulate until some amazing author puts it into a story. And, telling a good story probably supersedes all the rest and it results from the sum of all the parts, not just the parts themselves.

What makes a good story?

Riveting characters who are put in impossible situations where they must make impossible choices but have no... choice. That will make for a fine tale.

What is it about Atlantic Canadian writers that makes them, and their stories, so unique?

Well, I was called to live here by the Great Muse of the Atlantic. It was a siren call and a dangerous one where I might have foundered on the rocks. But, like others before me, born here or called from a great distance, we listened to the rhythm and melody of the vast oceanic song and found a way to slide into a comfortable symbiotic relationship with the danger and the beauty. While we can never quite explain this properly, we might just keep trying to borrow from that beauty, wonder, fragility and danger, tap into it and see if we can spin a tale or two worthy of its spirit.

From your perspective, are young people still reading?

People of all ages are starving for something more than just megatons of information. Young people are still trying to make sense of the world as I am. They just have more distractions. Wisdom is hiding more than ever behind a cloak of infinite details that consume our daily lives. Books, ebooks, blogs, movies - all have the same potential to allow us to dig deeper than the mundane and shallow diversions. Politically, right now at least, so little makes any real sense that the survival of the species may depend on creators in every medium to shred the seductive, destructive distracting veneer of contemporary social and political culture so that we can all continue to be reminded of the good stuff that might just keep humanity moving forward rather than backwards.



What advice might you have for a younger person looking to have a career as a writer?

Start young. Keep your eye on the ball. Write often. Read massive amounts of everything worthy of your time. Write what you know. Write also about things you feel incapable of writing - push those limits. If you are feeling it, try to really speak for your generation. Find your audience, even if it is a small one. Write some more. Read some more. Fail. Fall. Get back up. Then find one small fragment of success. Build on it. Ignore bad advice - there is lots of it out there about writing, success and everything else - and keep on keepin' on.

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

This past year, Linda and I have been chasing Atlantic islands with volcanoes - mostly dead ones, I admit. The pursuit has taken us to Iceland (with the real fire-breathing

monsters), Madeira, Tenerife and Sao Miguel (Azores). I hope to continue finding new places to hike and explore, both nearby and far off with a special fondness for those dead volcanoes. Japan is on the shortlist. I look forward to the publication of my latest novel, *In the Kingdom of Cheese, There Are No Heroes*, and completing a novel that has been in the works for four years titled *Mistaken Serenity*. I am still searching for a publisher for a travel memoir titled *Two Sides of the Atlantic*. I continue to teach Creative Writing at Dalhousie University where I have taught for over forty years. I also look forward to waking up beside my beautiful wife each morning and both of us continuing our commitment to be happy. So much uncertainty and insanity out there that each of us has to weave a protective blanket of our own sanity, compassion and happiness out of whatever raw material is at hand.

@lesleychoyce

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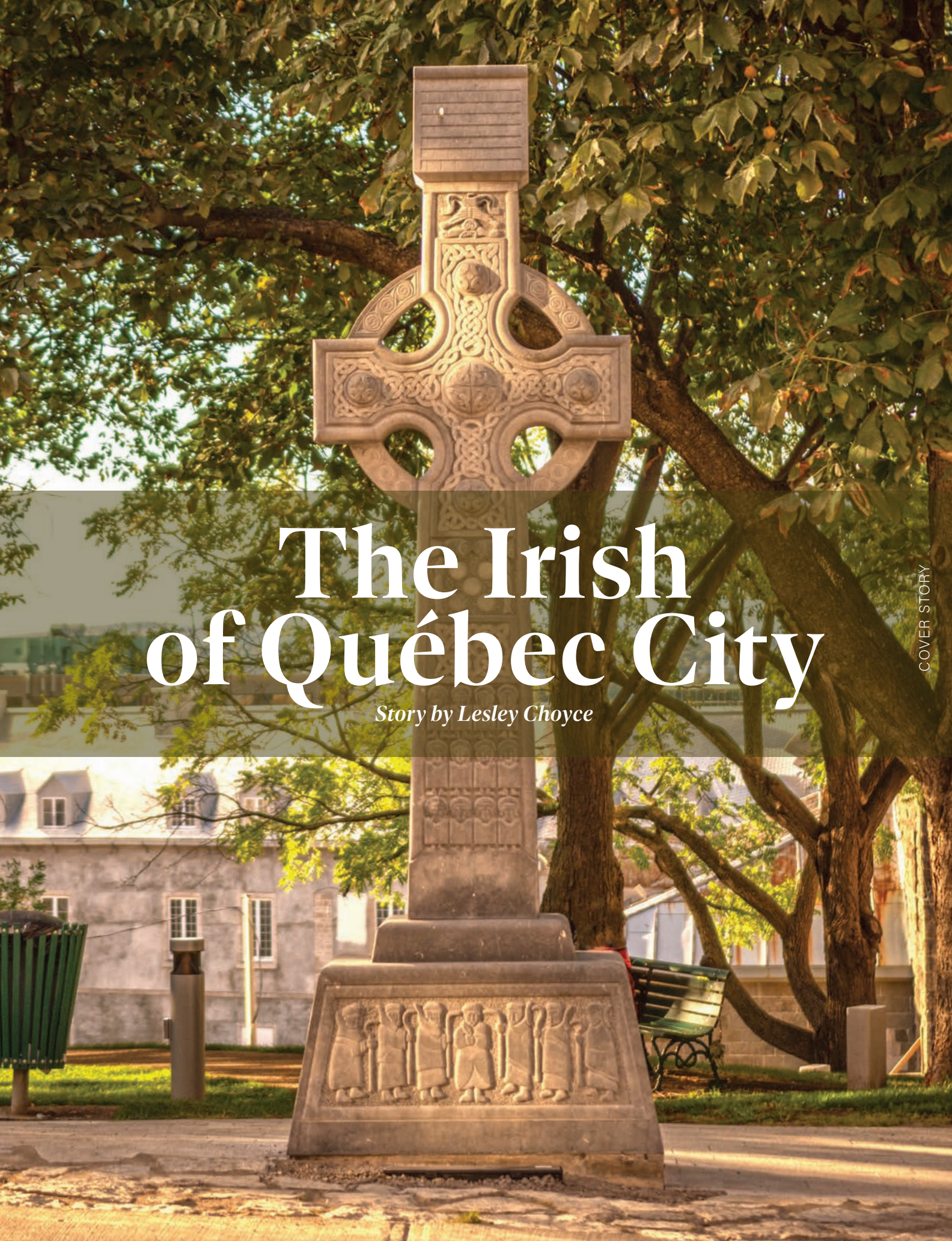
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The Irish of Québec City

Story by Lesley Choyce

While most travellers probably head to Québec City and Old Québec for the unique Frenchness of the place, I found myself on a recent visit getting more interested in the area's surprising Irishness. My wife Linda and I were camped out in a stylish and comfortable loft on Rue Sainte-Anne right across from City Hall and above a noisy late-night bistro that pumped out floor-thumping rap music. It was almost winter, although tolerably warm for a town that soon would host public tobogganing, ice skating, and room rentals in makeshift ice hotels.

On a previous visit, we had hiked around the Plains of Abraham on skull-numbing cold days, with me pondering that title of Alistair MacLeod's brilliant novel, *No Great Mischief*. According to the author, the phrase referred to a statement by British General James Wolfe who, during the Battle of Québec in 1759, had this to say about his Scottish Highland soldiers: "No great mischief should they fall." Wolfe was dismissively referring to the fact that these warriors were expendable, as soldiers so often are, but because of their origins, they were more expendable than most.

I had seen enough war paraphernalia and tales of military history in Québec on that foray so, this time round, I was looking for new perspectives on this distinctive Francophone city. That led Linda and I back to a wonderful little cave-like pub in Lower Town called Pub L'Oncle Antoine where we had sat and supped on a previous visit. To us, it had seemed both genuine and local, warm and welcoming and (to my mind) the pinnacle of French-Canadian culture. Perhaps it had changed hands since last we darkened Antoine's door, but this time round it was nearly empty, the music was soulless and bad, the beer was tolerable, but they were out of French onion soup. Sometimes it doesn't work to return to favoured haunts as travellers. We all know that.

So, here was a good reminder that we should be looking for something new and undiscovered to us about Québec City. Still saddened by the dearth of French onion soup, we set off wandering the streets looking for signs and surprises. Over the next few days, we meandered in ever-widening concentric circles outward from our third story encampment and, along the way stumbled upon a prominent historical marker on Rue



McMahon titled "Irish Roots in Old Québec: The Irish Settle and Flourish."

The truth be told, both Linda and I had been pining for another trip to Ireland ever since the Covid pandemic had curbed our more-or-less regular visits to the Emerald Isle. So, I was now determined to discover whatever I might about the Irish of Québec City. I remembered that I had read somewhere that nearly half a million residents of the province of Québec declared some portion of Irish ancestry. And most certainly, wherever the Irish immigrated to, there were dramatic, fascinating but often tragic stories. I was especially curious about the "flourish" aspect of the story. Clearly, I had some research to do. So, I was now fully engaged and gleaned from this helpful sidewalk marker the following: "History notes that the first Irish in Québec City were soldiers in the French army and, later, soldiers and officers of the British garrison. By 1815, the newcomers were mostly Protestant businesspeople and craftsmen. Around 1830, Irish immigrants were mainly Catholic and of more modest means. Massive emigration from Ireland, which was plagued by famine and disease, was a phenomenon of the 1840s. By 1871, some 12,500 Québec City citizens were of Irish origin."

For me, this was all uncharted territory, and then further exploration took us to a rather prominent Celtic cross in Artillery Park. To me, it now seemed clear that I was fated

to find out a bit more about the history of the Irish of this city before leaving town. According to Parks Canada, "The cross, sculpted by Aileen Brannigan from blue limestone in the Feelystone quarries, incorporates elements sacred and profane; mythological and scriptural; historical and legendary."

“Just like the Irish to combine the profound and the profane in a handsome stone monument.

I decided to dip into the past by discovering who McMahon was and why the street was named for him. I soon learned that Patrick McMahon was a prominent Catholic priest in the 1800s who promoted and supported Irish emigration to Quebec. He was also of considerable service to that Irish community, especially during the multiple disasters of the 1840s. I didn't have to dig much deeper to realize that this story of Irish immigration was fraught with suffering and tragedy. McMahon also was responsible for overseeing the construction of St. Patrick's Church named not for him but for the familiar patron saint of Ireland.

Any self-respecting historian might have headed straight off to that very sanctuary to have a look, but as we ambled on, we came across St. Patrick's Irish Pub on Rue Saint-Jean and stopped for drink and nourishment. It was a noisy, festive establishment

and there was Guinness to be had, but I must admit it didn't feel terribly authentic. This came as no particular surprise. I'd walked into quite a number of "Irish pubs" in various parts of the world and most seemed to be designed to satisfy what most non-Irish think an Irish pub should look like. (My favourite pubs in rural Ireland tend to have fake wood luan paneling on the walls, scuffed linoleum floors with a sleeping dog or two, surly bar-keeps, and a couple of locals discussing football scores.) Here, however, there was a path to the loo marked with shamrock stickers on the floor and a downstairs music venue with a solitary afternoon folk singer hammering out a serviceable version of "The Rocky Road to Dublin." So clearly, some version of Irish culture flourished within these walls even if that pint of Guinness now cost \$12 which would have caused many a dead Irish immigrant to roll over in their grave.

Back in our loft overlooking City Hall, I got a bit more serious about my research and soon discovered that the interrelationship of the Irish and the French in continental Europe was considerable, including quite a number of Irish chiefs and soldiers living in exile in France way back in the 16th century.

Consulting the Ville de Quebec website and leaping ahead a few centuries, I read that, "Half of the immigrants who landed in Québec in the first two decades of the 19th century were of Irish origin. Most were Protestants who belonged to the wealthier classes of society." The rosy story changes considerably after that, as farm workers and their families left Ireland in the thousands hoping to establish a better life. Those who made it to Quebec City settled in Lower Town and men found jobs loading and unloading freight from ships on the docks of the St. Lawrence.

On yet another chilly morning, Linda and I revisited Lower Town, stopping to take a signature selfie along with a throng of tourists at the top of Breakneck Steps and then elbowing our way through the crowds of shoppers along Rue du Petit Champlain. Apparently the 20th and 21st centuries had squeezed most of the Irish influence out of this historic but glamorized urban zone, but the preserved stone architecture remains impressive. From there we ventured further onward to the river and the ports, crossing several roadways with heavy traffic, hoping to get some glimpse of where those Irish long-

shoremen slaved away for shipping magnates in cruel conditions bad enough to prompt them to form one of Canada's first labour unions. Alas, all we found were bigger highways, more traffic, and a generic industrial dockside landscape that could have been in any city in North America.

Later that day, I read more about the 1840s, when Irish immigrants sailed across the Atlantic and up the St. Lawrence escaping the terrible potato famine of their home country. Conditions in many of these vessels were appalling with diseases spreading rapidly aboard ship.

“Over 17,000 of those refugees heading to Quebec City in 1847 alone died in transit or upon arrival.

For good reason, those vessels were often referred to as "coffin ships." I thought it would be proper to visit the grave site of so many of those who died trying to make it to Canada, but I soon realized that would require a trip to Grosse Isle, 46 kilometres downstream from Quebec City and only accessible by boat or plane. The island is today a national historical site and has its own proper Celtic Cross monument built by the Ancient Order of Hibernians commemorating the losses of the Irish who died from typhus in 1847-1848.

According to The Canadian Encyclopedia, "In 1832, the deserted island was turned into a quarantine station for immigrants, to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, in particular cholera...Despite these efforts, a cholera epidemic spread to Quebec City and Montreal in 1832 and 1834 causing thousands of deaths."

Things got much worse starting in the spring of 1847 when those escaping the Great Potato Famine began arriving with typhus, often referred to as "ship fever." A total of 441 ships were headed for Quebec City and hundreds upon hundreds died during the voyages, many of whom were dumped overboard during the crossing. Dr. George Douglas was the medical authority of the quarantine station there, charged with dealing with those who survived, but well over 5,000 died and were buried at Grosse Ile.

To add to such misery, there were as many as six epidemics of cholera in Quebec

City itself between 1832 and 1854 where many more Irish immigrants died. According to Ville de Quebec, "The Irish first joined with French Canadians in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to help Irish immigrants struggling with illness and poverty. Then they created an institution of their own to help orphans, the destitute, and the elderly... The progressive integration of Québec City's Irish community into the French-Canadian majority was eased by the religion they shared: 90 per cent were Catholic at the start of the 20th century."

Before we left the city, I paid my respects once more to the Celtic cross on Rue McMahon, somewhat enlightened about the history of the Irish here, sobered by the sadness of such pain, suffering, and loss. I realized that many cities along the Atlantic seaboard had similar tragic histories of immigration. Later that night, in a comfortable hotel room near the airport in Montreal, my thoughts were haunted mostly by what conditions must have been like on those "coffin ships."

Not quite ready to move on to happier prospects, I went looking for answers only to find excerpts from Robert Whyte's book, The 1847 Famine Ship Diary: The Journey of a Coffin Ship. Observing the conditions of passengers on board, he noted that many "were to be left enveloped in reeking pestilence, the sick without medicine, medical skill, nourishment, or so much as a drop of pure water." There were happier days ahead for those who survived in the "flourishing" Irish-Quebec communities, but the human price paid for a new life in Canada in the nineteenth century was extremely high. As an immigrant to Canada myself, I feel blessed that the only impediment in my path was a problematic and obstinate bureaucracy that eventually relented and let me into this fine country.



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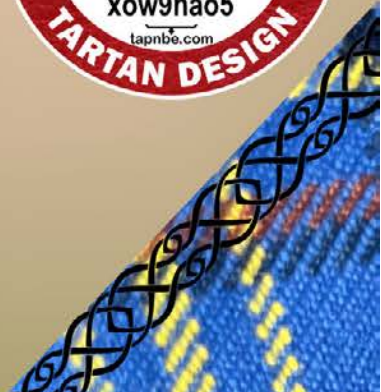
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Story by Lesley Choyce



COVER STORY



Well, I think the first hints of my love affair with Nova Scotia began somewhere back in seventh grade in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. As unlikely as it sounds, one of my teachers asked us to pick a Canadian province and give an “oral report” to the class even though we all hated the very idea of an oral report. It meant standing in front of the class, nervous as hell, and me with sweaty palms, reading out our research from 3 x 5-inch note cards.

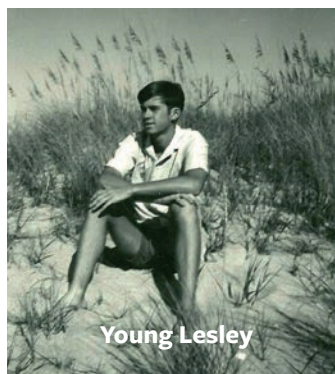
Foolishly, perhaps, I chose to do my report on Saskatchewan because the name sounded funny, and I was attracted to the yellow colour of that large oblong province on the classroom wall map. Now, I don’t mean to belittle Saskatchewan, and I am sure it is a wonderful place to live, but my research led me to believe that it was a fairly boring place, known mostly for growing wheat. Nonetheless, I dutifully presented my findings to a captive but bored audience and took my seat only to be upstaged by my classmate Lance presenting a truly

impassioned speech about - you guessed it - Nova Scotia.

While I never really liked Lance himself - a blowhard teacher’s pet who raised his hands often with great enthusiasm to answer math problems on the blackboard - he blew me away with the information he delivered. For here was a Canadian province with a gloriously rugged rocky coastline, lacerated with a seemingly infinite number of coves and inlets, where some residents still spoke a foreign and nearly forgotten language (Gaelic) and that was once its own nation (well, colony, really). Fishermen sat on old wharves smoking hand-carved pipes retelling yarns of yesteryear to each other. Off the shores of this magical place, those same fishermen or their sons could catch lobsters the size of Volkswagen bugs. And, of course, the province was once the home of what Lance called “bloodthirsty pirates.”

*In short, this Maritime province
was the land of my dreams.*

I went home and devoured all there was to find in our family WorldBook Encyclopedia which made contemporary Nova Scotia sound like it was a half-century behind the rest of North America with its quaint fishing villages, pet oxen, church suppers, and unpaved roads. I assumed that most towns looked just like Peggy’s Cove and that all the children there dressed like little street urchins from a Charles Dickens novel. At this tender junior-high age, I had convinced myself that I had been born into the wrong century and lived in the wrong part of the world. So, I guess you could say that I cultivated my yearning for this sacred place from afar as so many love affairs begin.





Lawrencetown Beach

During high school, however, I decided that Nova Scotia was unattainable, at least for now and, besides, I had grown to rather like my own home turf and my contemporary corner of the twentieth century due to my growing interest in South Jersey girls, cars, and everything related to the surfing craze that had swept the American nation. And, oddly enough, all these three things were attainable right where I lived. I won't say categorically that surfing was number one on that hit parade list, but it was pretty far up there.

Then, one humid summer night in a Presbyterian church auditorium on Long Beach Island at the Jersey Shore, I attended the viewing of a 16 millimetre surf movie and in the final six minutes of the film, the narrator said something like, "And far to the north on the East Coast of North America is a place virtually untouched by the surfing world where frigid crystal blue North Atlantic waves wrap around pristine headlands for some of the best point breaks to be found anywhere." And, sure enough, there were images of two surfers in black wetsuits surfing head-high waves peeling perfectly right to left as if from a goofy-footers dream come true.

I don't know why I didn't drop everything - girlfriends, plans for university, Vietnam war protests, summer job, and financial ambition - and drive my '57 Chevy north to the promised land. But I didn't. I dutifully went to my first year of university in North Carolina and then back to New Jersey even as those images of immaculate northern surf continued to burn in my memory vault.

And then, near the end of the summer of 1971, my surf buddy and bass player from my teenage rock band, the Wipeouts, Jack, reminded me we had some free time before fall classes started. So, we did it - we drove north through New England in his Volkswagen Kombi, crossed the border into my first foreign country and headed "down east" to

the shores of my beloved province.

Our first stop was Crystal Crescent Beach, not far from downtown Halifax. Today this beach is known for its crystal clear water, but also because part of it is a nude beach which I urge you to steer clear of if you are taking your kids there for an outing to the sea.

Sadly, for Jack and I, there were no waves this fine day of our arrival, but we did come across a pair of those young Dickensian boys who were dressed like little old men and spoke in a funny accent. They were scouring the headland for something called pigeon berries, which turned out to be small hard black berries that tasted bitter and sour and were notably perhaps only truly fit for the pigeons to eat.

*Nonetheless, we hiked the shorelines
and admired the granite outcroppings, the ragged
spruce trees shaped by winter gales, and we were
mesmerized by the swaying coppery-coloured seaweed
dancing in the unpolluted ocean.*

All that coastal beauty soon created a tremendous thirst which sent us two wandering pilgrims to downtown Halifax where we ambled into a nondescript tavern where thin bald men in flannel shirts and wearing white aprons walked among the patrons hefting extra-large trays of overflowing beer glasses at shoulder height. We seated ourselves at an empty table and surveyed our surroundings. In the dim light, amidst the smell of stale beer and stale urine, we noted that the floor was actually covered with sawdust, the tables were as sticky as kindergarten mucilage, and that there were no women in



sight. I would later learn that, for the most part, at that time in Nova Scotia, most bars were just for men. Some would have a separate section where women could imbibe, or most were happier to just associate with other women at such establishments as The LBR or Ladies' Beverage Room.

When asked by the server what we'd like, I assumed he wanted to know what kind of beer. That one, I said, pointing to a particularly seductive glass on his tray. "Ten Penny, then," he said. "How many?" "Two each," Jack piped up, not wanting us to look like wimps in front of the rowdy though cheerful room full of rough and ready Nova Scotian men.

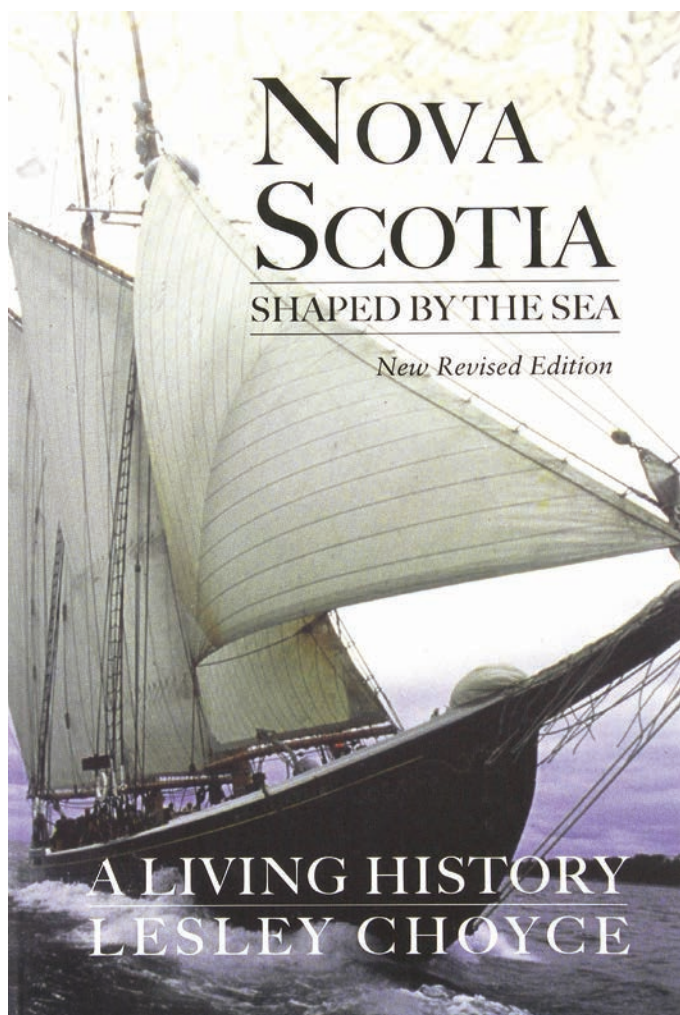
The beer tasted funny to us, having been accustomed to the American varieties of Pabst Blue Ribbon, Ballantine, and Iron City. It was also higher in alcohol leading us to believe that Nova Scotians, possibly even all Canadians, were more robust and harder than our fellow countrymen. Ten Penny suited us just fine, as it turned out. And so did Schooner beer, Alpine ale, and a strange thick black liquid known as stout.

Not long after our nocturnal Haligonian adventures, we were back on our search for waves and, at long last, we did our first paddle out on the west side of the Lawrencetown Headland, about 20 minutes

east of Halifax by car. The water was colder than we were used to and clear with more swaying kelp that - to a sandy beach break surfer from New Jersey - seemed like a crowd of exotic dancers.

I suppose I should be reporting things here about the culture, the people, or the politics of the province although it was our interest in surf, girls, and beer that dominated our attention. Somewhere while driving down Highway Seven on the seemingly forgotten, remote Eastern Shore, we saw a sign for a store that called itself New Scotland. It had not occurred to me, odd as that may sound, that this had anything to do with the name of the mystical land we were exploring. (And both the WorldBook and Lance had failed to report this important bit of knowledge.) Jack, being a better student of dead languages than myself, said, "Of course, you didn't know that? Get it? Nova means new. Scotia means Scotland. It is Latin."

And so began my personal and professional interest in the culture and history of my beloved province that eventually led to my writing a complete history of the place called Nova Scotia: Shaped by the Sea which Penguin Books would publish and distribute around the world. Given my poor grades in high school history, the fact I took no history courses at all in university, and that I was a lowly immigrant from New Jersey, such a scenario seems unlikely. But suffice to say that



one's passion for a parcel of coastal geography can do that to a writer. Or at least it fired me up to eventually learn everything I could about Nova Scotia.

So, there we were, two rambling surf lads driving down gravel roads to empty beaches and even emptier surfable waves with me dreaming about someday living here.

It felt like home to me, and I grew to believe, or at least fantasize, that I had almost certainly lived here before in another life.

If that is true, I am sure I was a sailor of some sort and that I had once stood on the deck of a heaving ship looking shoreward singing, "Farewell to Nova Scotia, the sea-bound coast. Let your mountains dark and dreary be."

I tried explaining this to Jack and he just shook his head and said I should focus more on finding the next point break and maybe lay off the Ten Penny Old Stock Ale.

Ignoring the latter bit of advice, we found ourselves at a very rural tavern somewhere along the wilds of the Eastern Shore where watering holes were very few and far between. I realized that we were doing a poor job of getting to know the locals or learning anything much about the people and the lifestyle, so I struck up a conversation with an old fella in a John Deere ball cap. My father had always told me not

to strike up conversations with strangers about politics, but I often did. I started the conversation, however, asking the man some silly generic question like "What's it like living here?"

He, of course, looked at me like I had just arrived from Mars or one of the more distant outer planets and answered succinctly with as little effort as possible, "It's quiet." From there I moved on to asking him about his job, only to learn he was unemployed and that it was due to "the government." He was referring to both the federal and provincial governments and that all politicians, he claimed, were corrupt.

Jack offered up the universally accepted notion that it was the same where we came from.

"Which is where?" Mr. Deere asked.

I explained that we were from New Jersey, and he couldn't understand why we had wanted to come to Nova Scotia. When we told him we came here to surf he stated flatly, "But there's no surfing in Nova Scotia," a statement I would hear for many years after I'd been surfing here.

I moved the conversation back to politics and asked about local elections and how one got elected. He explained that whoever promised to pave the most roads got elected, but I thought he was joking. "Well, in some places here about, they still get elected the old way."

"Which is?" I asked.

"Well, buddy comes around to your house or stands outside the community hall on election day and hands out a mickey of rum to the men or a box of chocolates to the women. Whoever has the best goods tends to win."

"Isn't that illegal?" Jack asked.

"Not that I know of," he answered as he took his last slug of foamy brew and announced that it was great chatting with us foreigners but that he had to get home to "the wife."

Somewhere along the way on our continuing journey, we encountered excellent fiddle music, which also enhanced my emotional ties to Nova Scotia. Before long, I could tell the difference between a lament and a strathspey.

For unknown reasons, Jack and I had come to the conclusion that since there were so few people on the Eastern Shore, and those few we encountered were so friendly, that there must logically be no crime here at all. Thus, we left the van unlocked and with windows open as we paddled out at a delightfully remote place called Clam Bay Beach where the seaweed was so thick it slowed the waves as they approached and made surfing there seem like we were cruising across walls of the most wonderful mush.

Why I had left my wallet sitting right on the dash absorbing summer sunlight, I can't recall, but when we returned to the van, dripping heavenly saltwater from every square inch of us, someone had stolen money from my wallet.

Not all my money, mind you.

I am sure I had a total of \$50 in my wallet and whoever was the thief took exactly half. Yep. Just half and left the rest. And, as strange as that may sound, it made me love Nova Scotia that much more.

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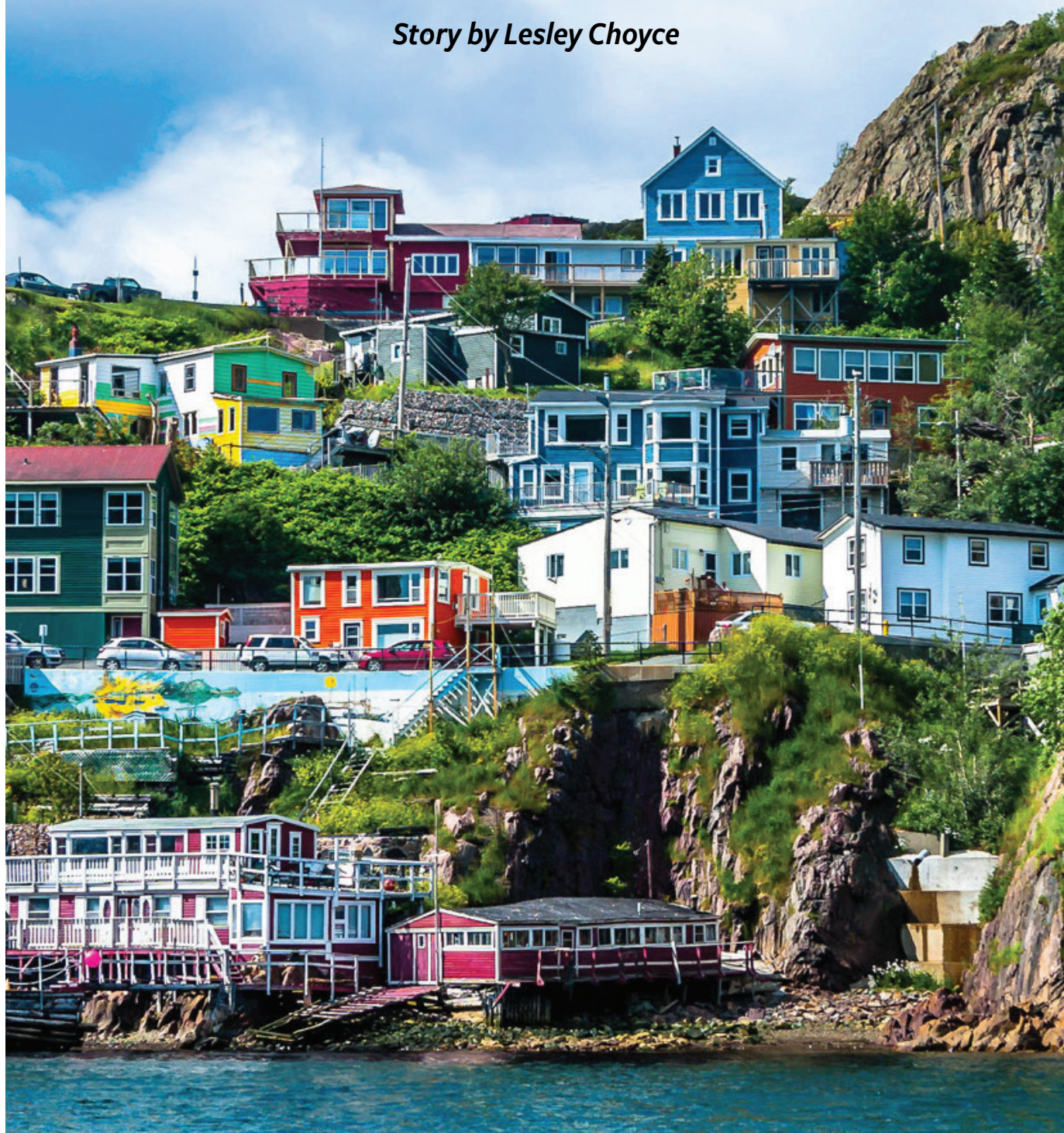
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Walking the Rock

Story by Lesley Choyce



COVER STORY



St John's "Jellybean" row houses

Yes, we have been travelling, my wife Linda and I, in the very midst of the pandemic. In fact, on this fine day in Nova Scotia, you would find us sitting in the somewhat subdued lounge at the Halifax airport waiting for our flight to St. John's, Newfoundland. I have returned to reading Sun Tzu's Art of War, thinking I need some coaching as we travel during these strange and worrisome times.

"In the midst of chaos, there is opportunity," writes the Chinese sage, who - according to scholars - may or may not have been a real person. There are so many translations of this book that each version I pick up seems almost completely unlike the one before and I discover something different. Nonetheless, these challenging words provide a modicum of positivity for the trip ahead.

The opportunity was an offering of



Lesley

extremely cheap flights coupled with the opening of the "Atlantic Bubble." At the time, there were so relatively few cases of COVID-19 in Atlantic Canada that we were free to travel within the region. This made us feel most privileged in a world held hostage by disease. We had our masks on and hoped for the best, despite the fact we would be sucking in shared oxygen inside a propeller-driven De Havilland Dash 8.

Newfoundland had been calling to us for a long time, but costly airfare and European attractions always sent us flapping our wings over the Rock on a transatlantic flight instead. But now our flight was called and soon we were in line with a young, smiling (Was she smiling? Hard to tell from behind her mask...) airline employee pointing a device not unlike a gun at our forehead to take our temperature. And then it was smooth sailing on a clear and cloudless day east across the Nova Scotia mainland, briefly over Cape Breton, and then out across the Cabot Strait to peer down at the remote and other-worldly coastline of the nearly uninhabited southern lands of Newfoundland.

Now you might think that I am lying when I say this, but we arrived during a heat wave on the Avalon Peninsula. Yes, such things happen here although they are rare. I had forgotten to bring a rain jacket or even a sweater as if some deep primitive part of my cerebellum had told me not to worry about weather, calamity, or ill will from locals fearful of outsiders bringing a deadly disease onto their island home.

"If the mind is willing, the flesh can go on and on without many things," so says Sun Tzu.

I am probably being overly dramatic. But then Linda and I were on an unusual romantic getaway from our self-isolated lives. This was a quest for hiking challenges, wilderness experience, Newfoundland craft beer, and Irish music. All, I believe, are worthy of high-minded notions.

As if we had just landed on another planet, the car rental guy seemed genuinely glad to see us. I had foolishly reserved a big-cab Ford 150 pick-up truck because it was affordable, but I changed my mind at the counter and was given the keys to a nearly new Mazda that awaited our arrival and, like us, was hungry for adventure.



We had an apartment rented downtown on Duckworth Street near the nightlife entertainment action - well, for us, it was primarily early evening action. For the mornings I had scheduled an itinerary of remote hikes. Our temporary accommodation was located above the Trinity Pub, one of the many Irish pubs in the city. St. John's is also known as Sin City,



which baffled me at first, given the shiny happy people walking around the streets, until someone gave me directions and I noted that it sounded like “Sin Jawns.” I noticed a clothing store on Water Street offering Sincity Streetwear, purportedly “high end, unique streetwear imported from...” - well, somewhere other than nearby I suppose. And after some cursory internet research, I discovered that the owner had been arrested in 2019 for trafficking cocaine although he fought the charges saying that he had been unfairly targeted and unlawfully searched. Clearly, St. John’s was that kind of town, filled with curious history, unusual streetwear and colourful citizens regularly carving a place in the modern world with their own set of rules. So, there were at least a few colourful characters hereabouts putting the sin in the city. But then, somewhere in a provincial tourist brochure, I had also read that it was also known as the “city of legends.” And, so, it was that as well.

Once we unpacked our suitcases - me realizing I had pretty much forgotten to pack even the most common and essential items for travel - we headed down to the Trinity for a quiet beer on a sunlit deck. Sun, heat, Quidi Vidi Calm Tom Ale, and the company of my most amiable travelling companion, combined for a good omen for our Newfoundland excursion despite the uncommon heat which seemed to have inspired many locals to dress as if they were on a Caribbean holiday.

We must have ambled down George Street after that. If you can believe TripAdvisor, they exclaim, “23 bars in a one block strip! If you like bar hopping, Irish bars and dancing then check out George St.” Perhaps we were there too early in the day as the legendary street with supposedly the most bars in the world seemed a tad tired

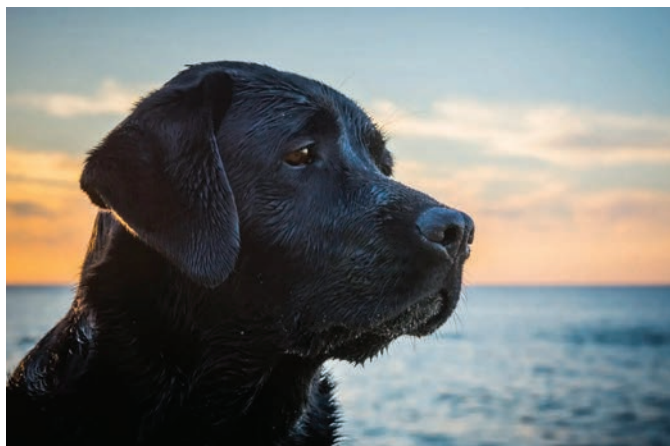
and worn, but one can understand that such places probably should only be explored at the height of midnight madness. However, by that time we would be sound asleep, prepping for rugged rural thrills instead of urban insanity.

As Sun Tzu would caution, “Even the finest sword plunged into salt water will eventually rust.”

Before you think that we were being overly reckless with our mid-Covid adventure, let me say, most establishments in St. John’s were enforcing the masks and sanitizer squirts and keeping patrons reasonably apart. It certainly did not deter us from venturing beyond seedy, litter-strewn George Street and down onto Water Street which had blessedly been blocked off from traffic and turned into a pedestrian mall - at least for the foreseeable warm days. It was late afternoon by now and crowded, as if half the population of Newfoundland had funnelled itself onto this main drag of the city. I catalogued moms and dads with toddlers, respectable-looking older couples, not-so-respectable-looking older couples, skateboarders (always a good sign in my book), pot smokers, urban chic young people, classic old farts in flat caps, kids on bikes with training wheels and probably the most interesting and polite panhandlers that I had come across in a long time. And because of the warm weather, if tattoo-observation was your special thing, there was much to admire or sneer at.

Linda likes to look up reviews so that is why we ended up at Adelaide’s Oyster Bar for fish tacos. I think I ate one oyster, and





it was pretty good. During our Maritime Mexican dish, I kept thinking about gastronomic geography and how a famous flatbread food would find its way so far north and east from its origin that a lad from Nova Scotia would be sampling it here, stuffed with locally caught cod or haddock from the cold Atlantic.

We were determined to find some “authentic” music before the sun went down as we withdrew to our second-story rental. We had been alerted that Sunday night in St. John’s is party night (as are the other six nights of the week, apparently) and fortunately for us, the parties and the music started early.

“Concentrate your energy and hoard your strength,” as Sun Tzu says, is reasonably good advice for the seasoned or unseasoned traveller.

But the night was young, and we found a roost at Broderick’s Pub a little further down Water Street. It felt Irish enough for sure without having too many shamrock decals on the windows. There we were introduced to Quidi Vidi’s Dayboil Session IPA, a somewhat low alcohol, local, tasty beverage that ruled the town and live music from a couple of performers who had driven in from Stephenville (766 km!) to offer us some most excellent tunes. The fiddle and guitar were just what we needed. There was a young waiter who had the kind of nervous energy that suggested that he had downed a few too many Red Bulls but he kept my glass filled and told us he was trying to get to Norway to work in the offshore oil fields once the COVID-19 thing was over.

By the time we headed home, it was well after 8pm and, as we ambled along

Water Street, we wondered why we had not come to Newfoundland, our neighbouring province for God’s sake, much sooner.

As if St. John’s would not prove quite Irish enough for our tastes, we were tempted to venture out onto what the provincial tourist folks call the Irish Loop, heading south from St. John’s for a further exploration of the Avalon Peninsula. According to Westjet Magazine, the loop is named for its 400 years of Irish history. Wisdom taught me to avoid driving too far, so we would only go as far south as Bay Bulls. First, however - lest the weather suddenly change and we were doomed to more traditional days of fog and cold - we drove to Cape Spear early in the morning. It was another warm, clear day and we intended to make the most of it. Cape Spear, however, was not where I thought it was and we made a few wrong turns - it seemed that every road we took out of the city wanted us to go to the blighted inland zone of shopping malls and industrial parks. But, eventually, the car itself decided to take control and we let the GPS put us on the road towards Black Head and ultimately Cape Spear - “Canada’s easternmost point of land.”

Like many, I have a fondness for things extreme.

I have a passion for all the world’s land ends that I could plant my feet on: Land’s End itself, of course, in Cornwall, U.K. - a bit touristy in a Disney sort of way, but it took only moments to walk your way out of the shopping plaza and out onto the windy welcoming cliffs. The same as with Pointe du Raz in Brittany - a wild and untamed chunk of rock.

Now here we were on the opposite side of the sea, on our own side, and we could brag to anyone we cared to tell that we were further east than any of the millions of North Americans who were satisfied with their mediocre geographical locations on this fine

morning. But was the cape merely extremely east or was there more to it? As it turned out, there was more - much more. Sure, it is an historic site run by Parks Canada, but it was almost entirely deserted with buildings locked tight. Still, the trails were open. Linda is a runner and was itching to run. I would hike and do my best to keep up. We headed south towards Maddox Cove. The trail was well marked, the vistas were stunning, and we were transported to another level of existence. I could argue that you can only arrive at such a heightened mental state by going to remote coastal locations and putting your feet down firmly on rocky (or boggy) ground and getting your bipedal fix from the salty air, the dazzling sea and communing with the wind-whipped shrubs, herbs and trees that are your proper cousins.

The bogs smelled of peat, the sky sang of blue and, aside from a few locals picking bakeapples (also known as cloudbberries) from the bogs, we had the place to ourselves.

Twenty minutes (if we hadn’t gotten lost, that is) from the throngs of Water Street and here we were at our own private end-of-the-earth during probably the most benign weather this part of the world had seen in this or the last century. Linda would wave to me from a hilltop a kilometre away and I would wave back in our morning long-distance relationship. We ventured about four kilometres out and then back and both took a wrong shortcut through a soggy hillside that muddied our shoes but failed to diminish our euphoria. I could go on about how grand a place this is, but I would bore you, so suffice to say, we would be back. And if you ever get the chance, go there and see for yourself when the world returns to normal.

Back on the road, we wound our way to Petty Harbour. I had once interviewed Alan Doyle of the Celtic rock band Great Big Sea about his book, *Where I Belong*,

and I wanted to see the bridge he wrote about that separated the two sides of town. It seemed that the Catholics lived on one side and the Protestants on the other when he was growing up there in the 1960s. We parked on a look-out above the famous denominational dividing line and gazed at the houses perched on the steep hills above the sea.

The name of the town was short for Petite Havre as, apparently, the French named it first. But even before the French found this little nook of the north, Basque fishermen had established temporary quarters ashore here dating back to 1500. Did I fail to mention that European settlements here are really old? The Portuguese were here fairly early as well, and then the English. A fair number of Irish convicts were shipped here to settle also, as travel costs were considerably less to Newfoundland than to Australia in the eighteenth century. Authorities did a head count in 1794 and determined there were 133 Protestants and 122 Catholics living in Petty Harbour, separated by the river of course, and long before Alan Doyle grew up there in the 1960s.

We didn't hang around long enough for me to give a proper opinion of the place before linking back to the Irish Loop and heading further south while listening to CBC Radio give us a fine lecture about the origin of Newfoundland terms. My favourite phrase of the morning was the query, "Who knit ya?" which is a common way of asking who your parents might be, although I found the imagery a tad troublesome. I give second place to "Put the side back in 'er" which simply means close the friggin' window.

Then it was on to Bay Bulls, which also had its origins in the sixteenth century when it was settled by fishermen from the island of Jersey in the English Channel.

This whole coast is said to attract tourists who come to see whales, puffins, and icebergs.

As we drove the coastal back streets looking for the local stretch of the 300-kilometre long East Coast trail, we saw no whales, puffins, or icebergs, but nor were there any tourists about so it was a reasonable trade-off. As we put on our hiking and running shoes, we did hear the amplified voice of the captain of a whale watching boat heading to sea with a scant group of customers, so presumably the whales hovered offshore in deeper waters waiting each day to show off for the visitors.

The hike was a good one, blessed

by legions of dragonflies the size of toy helicopters. We headed east toward South Head and soon discovered that the trail, unlike the one at Cape Spear, takes you through dense green forest hugging the side of the hill. There were still no whales or puffins to be seen, but I loved the feel of spongy peat beneath my feet, the burble of tiny rivulets coming down the hillside, the friendly fir and spruce trees sheltering us from the sun, and the scent of the fecund wet earth with its low-lying vegetation. I think we did three kilometres out and three back, with plenty of uphill and downhill, but no complaints from these trekkers.



Now, if anyone was ever to study the two of us on our wilderness outings, they would undoubtedly find it strange. As noted, Linda runs and I hike - at a good clip usually, but it is still walking. So, she runs ahead on whatever terrain it is and turns around after a half km., runs back to reassure me that she hasn't been accosted by a moose or fallen into one of the many slippery ravines. Then she turns and runs on while her husband winds his way onward, smiling at the accommodating trees, sky, boulders or whatever the coastal path has to offer. It seems to work for us and saves money on expensive gym fees, Prozac, and marriage counsellors.

When I say yet again that the heat was almost oppressive, you will roll your eyes, but it was indeed overly warm and, by the time we doubled back to the Mazda, we were both sweating as if we had trekked through

a tropical rainforest. At the trailhead, a large obstinate Newfoundland dog greeted us. He was one of those old, large dogs that stands directly in your path and barks at you in an unfriendly manner while drooling large droplets of saliva onto the gravel. A man stood nearby watching saying simply, "He's not my dog," and I was thinking that this Newfoundland dog is probably not nearly as lovable as the one Lord Byron had for a pet back in the good old Romantic poetry days. I talked to the dog the way a parent talks to a young child who has just picked up a carving knife, but the dog just stood his ground barking and drooling until I realized that was his *modus operandi*. So, I gave him a pet and he drooled copiously onto my hands. Then all we really needed to do was walk on past. Could the dog be what is locally referred to as a "bull" I wondered, and is that why the town is called thus?

We retreated to downtown Bay Bulls and poked around. I later discovered it may have been known as Bay Boule by the Jerseyites who founded it. At least that is what Bishop Howley claimed, and - in Newfoundland - you really don't want to argue with a bishop. We drove around looking for something we thought looked authentic but ended up back on Highway 10 heading to another cleverly named village called Witless Bay. Sadly, we bypassed Running the Goat Press, a "micro press that published books of exceptional quality" according to their website. If you are down that way, please be sure to drop in and report what they have to offer. The name intrigued me, as many names do, so I soon learned that "running the goat" is a kind of group dance traditional to the town of Harbour Deep. I was immediately inclined to convince Linda we should swing by there to see if any impromptu parties were on, so we too could run the goat with the locals but quickly discovered Harbour Deep was on the Great Northern Peninsula, 718.1 kilometres away - a 10 hour and 18-minute drive.

Have I pointed out yet, that the island of Newfoundland is very large? Well, the province is officially called Newfoundland and Labrador and it is altogether 405,720 km² - which is only slightly larger than all the Maritime Provinces together or slightly smaller than California. Suffice it to say, our little foray into a nicked corner of the Avalon Peninsula was like a mere walk to the corner store to buy a beef jerky in a land as large as this.

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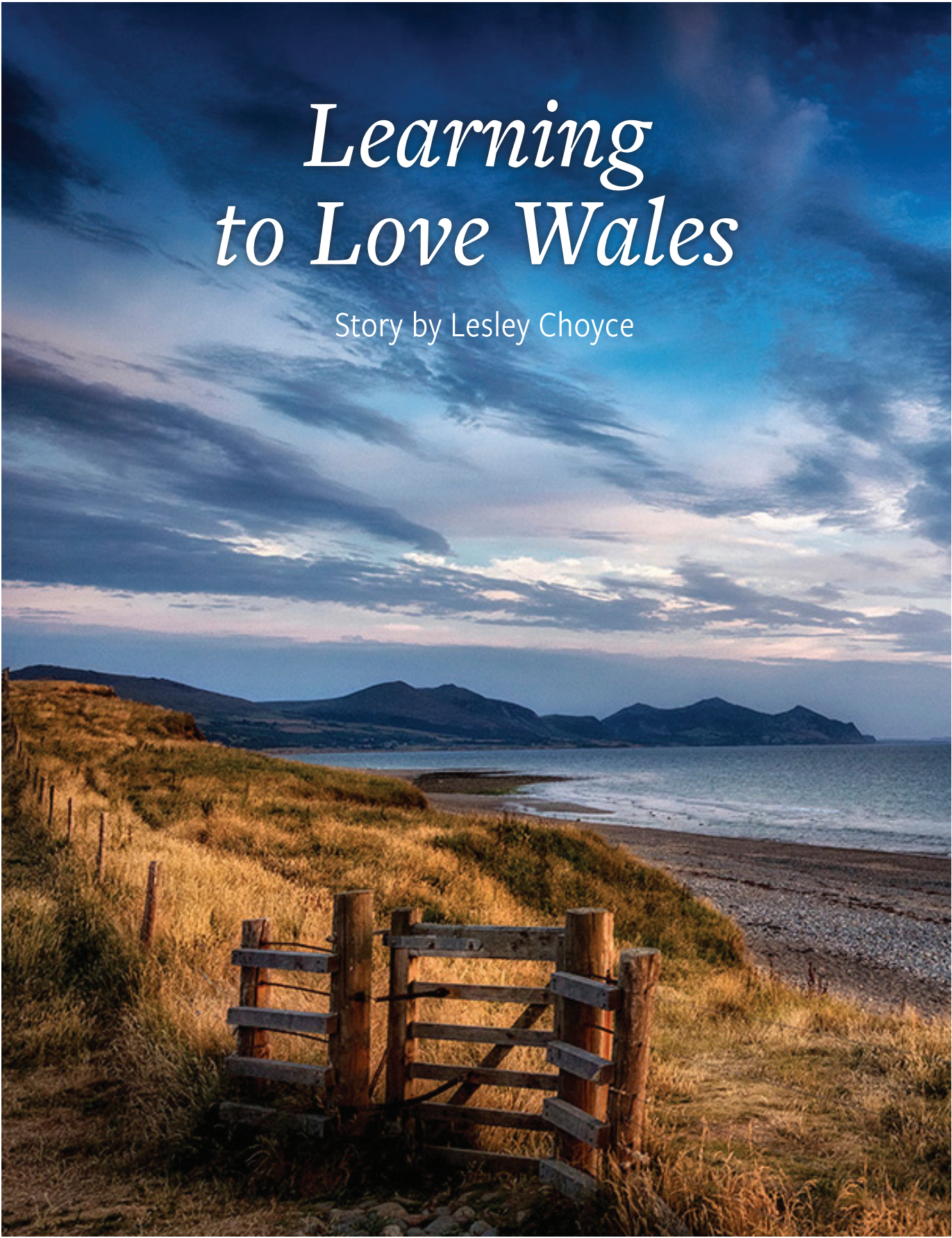
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Learning to Love Wales

Story by Lesley Choyce

COVER STORY



One of the reasons I thought that my wife Linda and I, along with our trusty Westie Keltie, should travel to Wales was for me to overcome a deep-seated grudge, an outright prejudice some might say, that I had against the Welsh.

However, before you judge me harshly, let me explain a few more details; as a young man (well, as someone in their late thirties) I was travelling about Wales, somewhere near Merthyr Tydfil or Pontypridd, when I stopped in one late afternoon for a pint of bitter at a pub in a small town. I was alone and looking every bit the outsider. I received dark looks from working men who had obviously just finished an honest day's manual labour, I would guess, and in walks this foreigner (me) without a care in the world.

I sat at the bar and absorbed the scowls of working men with a certain amount of grace I thought, and ordered my pint. I handed the barkeep a twenty-pounder and he promptly handed back several of those weighty little pound coins. The price of a beverage to me that day seemed a bit steep here in whatever the town was. So, I reminded the man behind the bar that I had handed him a twenty, not a fiver or a ten. He grunted and I think so did a few of the other regulars not trying to mind their own business that afternoon. The man grudgingly opened the till again and slapped some appropriate bills with those funny pictures of the queen before me.

As I drank my bitter, feeling a bit bitter myself, I decided then and there that this was possibly the most unfriendly pub I had ever had the displeasure to drink in. Perhaps it was the most unfriendly pub in all the U.K., perhaps the Western World.

After that, even though I knew Wales to have some exquisite surfing beaches, dramatic mountains and lively culture, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had received that unwelcoming day.

But now, as a man in his sixties, it was time to bury the hatchet and forget about old grudges.

Fittingly, perhaps, the skies were clear, and it was a fine day as we drove on to Llangollen through a green valley that was untarnished by slate or coal strip mining as far as the eye could see.

Between Llangollen and Glyndyfrdwy, however, not far from Horseshoe Falls, we hit more traffic on the highway. In fact, we came to a complete halt. After a twenty-minute wait, we were allowed to move forward and discovered that in the opposing lane of traffic was a monstrous-sized truck towing a mammoth blade of a wind generator that was at least four car lengths long. The truck was dead stopped. We'd seen wind generators generously distributed throughout the

U.K. and, to me, they were always symbolic of how far this nation and much of Europe had come since the energy crises of the 1970s and 1980s. Such change, though, comes at a price...and today, I supposed those late for an appointment due to the construction of environmentally-friendly energy sources would be cursing those goody-two-shoe environmentalists who were mucking up Welsh traffic flow with their damn wind machine parts.

Soon, however, we were past the truck and on our way, but for those coming from the other direction, the drivers were stuck in a traffic snarl that was at least five miles long. Maybe it is one of those disreputable North American traits but passing those other poor sods who were going to be stuck for a really long time and not knowing even why they were stopped, I felt a small bubble of happiness burgeoning in me. I daresay I am not proud of the feeling, but part of my brain produced the simple adolescent equation: they were stuck in traffic and I was not. How lucky is that?

A quick glance at our map assured me that there was probably not another easy way through this valley and, besides, there was no place to turn around on the narrow road. Those Welsh drivers were good and screwed if they were hoping to get home on time for their Welsh rarebit lunch. This seemingly insignificant event strangely lifted my spirits enough so that I had stopped worrying about my daughter Pamela and the soon-to-be twins.

Along the way, we passed a place called Ewe-phoria Agri-theatre and Sheep Dog Centre, although it didn't look to be open. According to Britevents, the place "details the life and work of the shepherd on a traditional Welsh farm. The Agri-Theatre has unusual living displays of sheep with accompanying lectures on their history and breed, while outside sheepdog handlers put their dogs through their paces." The BBC once declared Ewe-phoria one of the top U.K. Easter destinations, coming in at number thirty-eight just ahead of the Star Wars Museum.

I made a mental note to possibly stop there on our way back to England if we happened to be in the mood for unusual displays of sheep, but for now we kept going and, instead, stopped for a much needed break in Pentrefoelas. Dayoutwiththekids.co.uk claims there are 155 "things to do" with kids in this town but there isn't really. How-



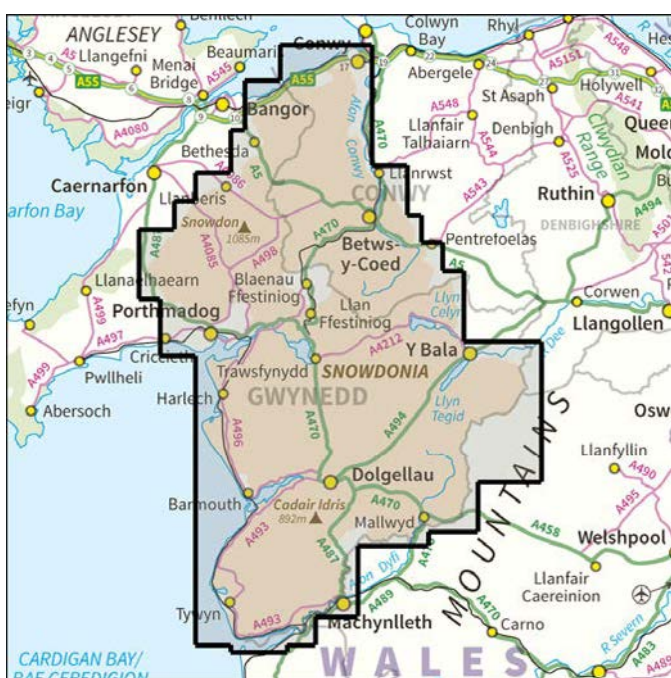
ever, there is a little grassy park by a chattering brook with a cool arched stone bridge. There are wood carvings here and plaques with stories about the "Fair Folk" of Welsh legend.

Apparently, long ago, these mystical creatures appeared and disappeared on a regular basis and occasionally became intimately involved with the locals.

One story, recounted by author zteve t evans (zteve must really hate capital letters), tells of a young shepherd from Pentrefoelas who was staring at a peat stack one misty morning only to discover a beautiful girl standing there. It looked like she needed help and he went to aid her, eventually falling in love with this lovely person from another dimension. According to zteve, "Although the girl was not from Earth they married and had children and lived a happy life. Sadly, their happiness was shattered by a freak accident that broke a promise the shepherd had made to his wife's father. This meant she had to return to the Otherworld where she came from and they were parted for-ever."

Such a sad ending to an inter-dimensional love story. I suppose local parents tell the tale to their children as a kind of warning not to fall in love with someone from the Otherworld. I know I wouldn't want my kids to fall for someone like that and I guess you would have to say that becoming beguiled by one of the Fair Folk is not one of the 155 things to do in this neighbourhood.

Although we only stayed a short while in this small village, both Keltly and I felt the presence of something we could not quite name and left for the last leg of our journey refreshed and rejuvenated. I found myself thankful, as well, to all those who keep track of old legends like this, especially zteve t evans who has this to say about himself: "I have a deep affinity with the natural world, animals, plants, trees, birds, and all other of God's creatures and a healthy respect for spiders, scorpions, snakes and anything that stings, or bites." Clearly, he and I are kindred spirits.





Conwy Castle

We easily found our temporary home, Rock Cottage, close to the centre of Betws-y-Coed. It was right behind a discount outdoor sports outlet called The Cotswold Outdoor Rock Bottom Store. “Rock Bottom,” I assumed, referred to prices but to my eye, the running shoes, backpacks, BPA-free water bottles and hiking shorts all looked damned expensive. The town actually had several of these outdoor enthusiast franchises, leading me to realize that many travellers come to Betws-y-Coed to hike, climb mountains, run up and down the mountain trails and bike through the valleys, all with stylish and expensive gear. In fact, the town reminded me a lot of Grasmere back in the Lake District where such stores had been plentiful as well. In principle, ever since I was a Boy Scout hiking through the wilds of the New Jersey Pines with my friends in the Flaming Arrow Patrol, I believed that the really good outdoorsy stuff need not be anything special. An old pair of shoes that you’d never wear to church, some old jeans that probably had rips and paint stains, a signature faded flannel shirt with button-down pockets, an army surplus canteen with cold water, a used rucksack that had once belonged to a private in the military - and Bob’s Your Uncle, as we like to say in Canada. But I could see that the world of outdoor activity had been infiltrated by commercialism like everything else on the planet. Fellow hikers here in the heart of Snowdonia National Park probably judged you by the brand name shown on your sunglasses, your self-wicking t-shirt

or appropriately low-rider designer white socks. I remained confident, however, that the creatures of the wild you encountered in the Gwydyr Forest didn’t care a whisker about your clothes or gear so long as you left them in peace as you tromped through the valleys and along the streams.

But, by the way, did I also say that I liked Betws-y-Coed? Well, I did. The name means something like “prayer house in the woods,” and it has had its share of famous visitors over the years, including Percy Shelley, Mathew Arnold, Charles Darwin, Alexander Graham Bell and the Queen of Siam. Darwin, who was born in Shrewsbury, near the Welsh border, liked to hike through the hills near Betws to find fossils. Shelley was no doubt

trying to get away from the rat race of competing poets. I don’t know what drew Bell or the Queen of Siam, but the mountains of Snowdonia had a heyday of tourism that started in the eighteenth century and continues on to this day. The great news is that as soon as you walk two blocks southwest of all the hubbub of the expensive footwear stores and the organic pizza parlours you are in the woods that are still as pure and pristine as the days when Wordsworth came here to wear out the soles of his latest hiking boots and mutter his latest sonnet for sister Dorothy before it drifted off into the wispy clouds of the blue Snowdonia skies.

After we’d unloaded our car, Linda wanted to shop. So Kelty and I agreed she



Pont-y-Pair Bridge



Lesley Choyce

should go her own way and have fun while we hiked about town. It was a hot day by Canadian standards, so we headed for the Afon Lugwy River that runs through town to connect with the Conwy River. A quick stop at the tourist bureau allowed me to pick up some brochures of nearby places we would not be going to, including Zipworld, The Conwy Railroad Museum, Go Below Underground Adventures and the Betws-y-Coed Golf Club. However, they did have a large bowl of water on the floor for Kelty, as did many stores, restaurants and pubs in town. In my mind, such a preponderance of this symbolic gesture made Betws-y-Coed regis-



Linda & Kelty

ter much higher on my travel regard than if it had twenty, four-star Michelin restaurants.

I did pick up a brochure for one place already on my to-do list – Surf Snowdonia, one of the world’s first inland surf parks. Tomorrow would be the day I surfed my first artificial inland wave and I was both excited and nervous at the prospect.

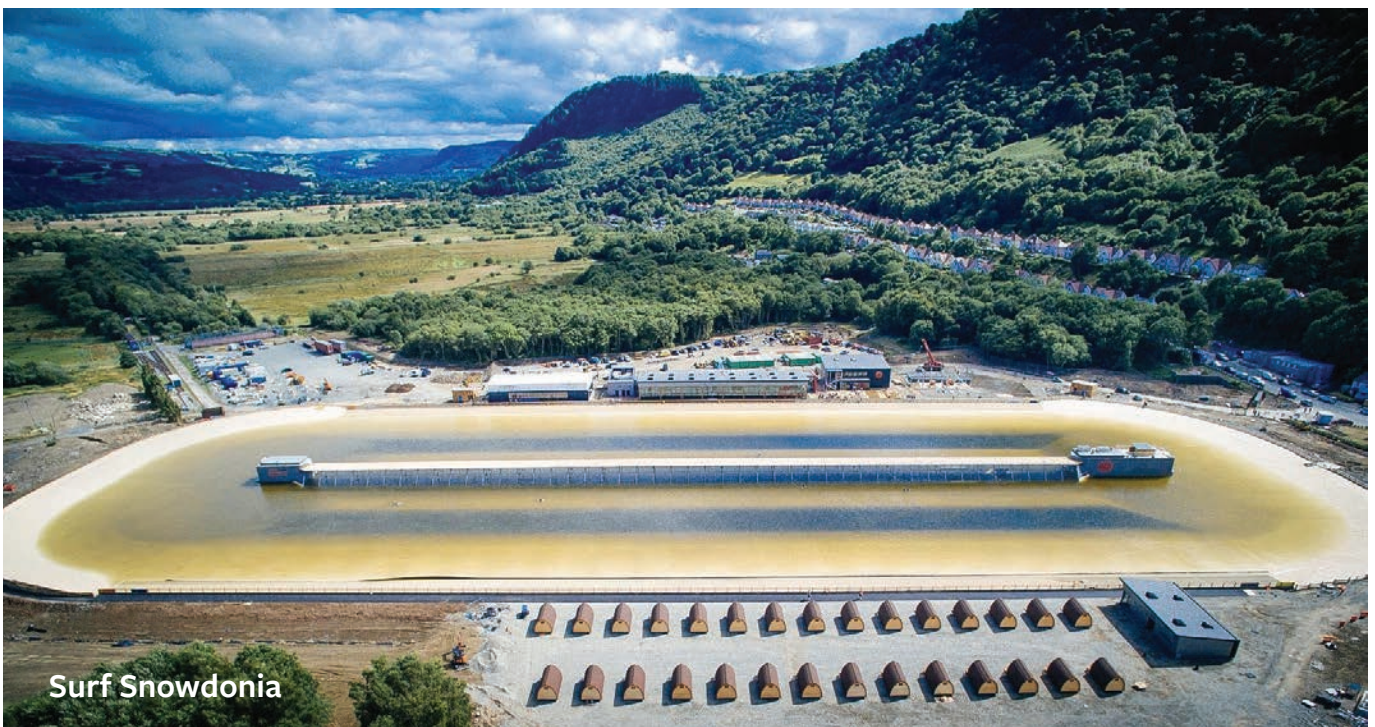
As Kelty slurped down half the contents of the water in the steel dish near my feet, I read an item on the wall that said: “Fun Fact: Betws-y-Coed is the most misspelled word in the U.K.” Who would have guessed?

Kelty and I walked back and forth over the Pont-y-Pair Bridge, which was built back

in the 1500s and still seemed in good shape today as cars and ice-cream-licking tourists passed over its stone arches. It appears in a number of famous paintings, including one by Thomas Girtton who captured it in water-colours back in 1798 well before the bed and breakfasts and the hiking supply shops took over the town.

We found a trail leading west along the river into a forest with a high canopy of deciduous trees and I slipped off my shoes to dangle my feet in the cold water as Kelty followed my lead and put paws to water. Back on the trail, we ended up in a field of sheep that weren’t the slightest bit shy around a small, yappy white dog. Kelty’s tail stood straight up, as did his ears, as we danced around the minefield of blackish sheep dung. Soon it was time to catch up with Linda back in front of St. Mary’s Church.

My initial survey of the town revealed it to be busy but friendly, quaint yet commercial, dog-friendly and human-friendly as well. And so, I was forced to re-evaluate the national character of the Welsh and admit that my encounter with the scoundrel barman might have been an anomaly. Clearly not all Welshmen were nasty cheats. Here was a village with water bowls for dogs, polite young smiling shopkeepers, pubs offering discounts on craft beer during mid-afternoon happy hours and balding men with serious sunburns sporting t-shirts with phrases like, “I’m a Railway Nut.” I was beginning to like Wales very much.



Surf Snowdonia

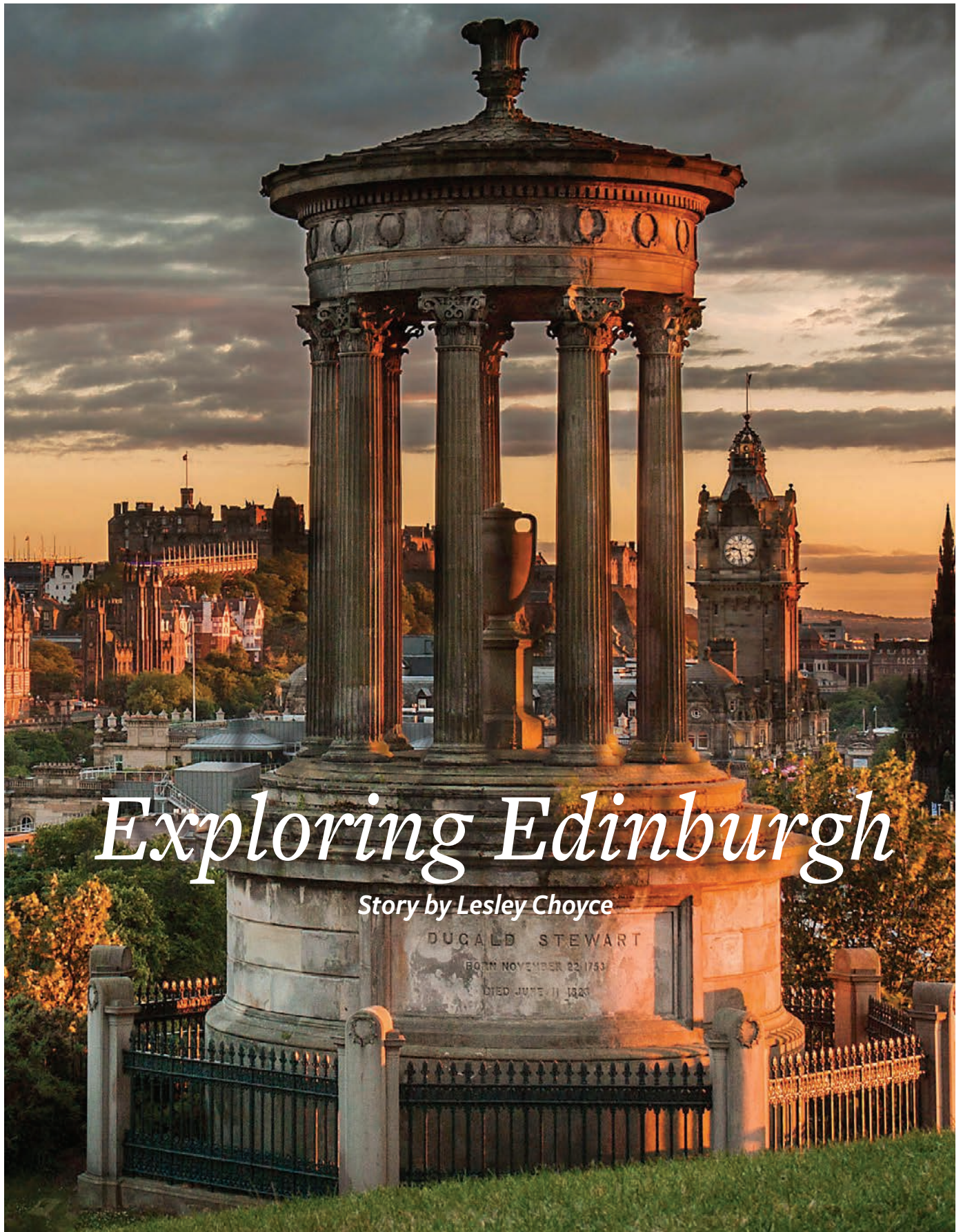


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Exploring Edinburgh

Story by Lesley Choyce

DUGALD STEWART

BORN NOVEMBER 22 1753

DIED JUNE 11 1828



There's not much to say about the urban sprawl heading into Edinburgh from the south. It looked like a lot of tough neighbourhoods where it would be easy to get into a scuffle in a pub if you spoke highly of a football team from England. But once we had made our way towards Old Town and got rid of our vehicle in a car park near Waverley Station, the city began to weave a spell over my wife Linda and me.

We paid a most handsome sum of money to stay at the Fraser Suites just a block from St. Giles Cathedral. It was a tad uphill from the car park (well, everything in Old Town seems to be quite up or down) and if rolling luggage over ancient cobblestones is exotic in your world, then this is the place for you. And I am indeed one of those travellers - excited by the notion that famous and notorious men and women from centuries past had helped to polish these stones with the soles of their shoes just like me.

I had a small agenda of things to seek out in Edinburgh: pubs with dogs, of course, literary connections, exploration of as many dark nooks and crannies as possible, and conversations with locals about whatever was foremost on their minds.

Those conversations, as it turned out, were harder to come by than I thought. It seemed that everyone we met on the street was from somewhere else. The street in question was High Street, and the section we traversed most was the famous "Royal Mile." I would later learn that thirteen million tourists visit Edinburgh each year, so that explains the great diversity of folks cavorting about in the city.

On a Saturday morning, we hiked further uphill to Edinburgh Castle and were not surprised to find it mobbed with visitors.

The castle was built on an extinct volcano, but it hasn't erupted for 350 million years, so most of us there that day felt reasonably safe.

By the entrance to the castle grounds was a plaque that read, "NEAR THIS SPOT IN 1625 Sir William Alexander of Menstrie, Earl of Stirling, received sasine, or lawful possession of the royal province of Nova Scotia by the ancient and symbolic ceremony of delivery of earth and stone from Castlehill by a representative of the King. Here also (1625-1637) the Scottish Baronets of Nova Scotia received sasine of their distant baronies." In essence, below our feet was a small patch of Nova Scotian land declared so that men granted free land in Nova Scotia didn't actually have to go to the trouble of traveling there to make their claim. So there we were, over 4000 kilometres from my home province, yet still standing (or at least looking at) Nova Scotia soil. William Alexander, as it turned out, was a busy man and never did visit Nova Scotia. Inside the castle you will find more tourists than I was comfortable with but if you want to see the Stone of Destiny (the rock, not the movie) you'll have to pay your money and take the tour.

The statue that made the biggest impression on me along the Royal



Mile was that of Adam Smith. I had never seen a statue of an economist before and, thanks to the fact I'd been reading Arthur Herman's *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, I learned that Smith "thought of himself primarily as a moral philosopher" and believed, unlike the church of his day, that man was primarily good rather than bad.

I hadn't made up my mind whether Adam Smith himself was a good guy or a bad guy. He'd said things like, "All money is a matter of belief." And "Man is an animal that makes bargains: no other animal does this – no dog exchanges bones with another." But Smith also said, "The real tragedy of the poor is the poverty of their aspirations."

Alas, whatever we contemporaries felt about the man, seagulls on this fine spring day had been sitting on Mr. Smith's metallic head and his face had been whitewashed by their plenteous droppings, reminding me vividly of the same fate of Winston Churchill's statue in Halifax where the old public library once stood. So goes the fate of philosophers and politicians. Later, in Glasgow, pondering the famous traffic cone covering the head of Lord Wellington, I would reflect on what a hard life it is for statues in the U.K. where people and creatures can do them a disservice at any time of day.

Not far from Mr. Smith, I noticed a formation of stones in the ground in the shape of a heart. This turned out to be a mosaic called the Heart of the Midlothian, where there once stood a prison built in the fifteenth century. Many executions had taken place here over the years at this very spot. There is a tradition of people spitting on the stones, perhaps initiated by the lucky ones (many of them simply men who did not pay their debts) released from jail over the centuries. Most folks I saw that day were too polite to spit and, in truth, many walked right over the spot without noticing it.

Right alongside the Heart of the Midlothian was yet another statue – that of Walter Francis Montagu Douglas Scott, the 5th Duke of Buccleuch. Among his other accomplishments, he is given credit for importing Labrador Retrievers from Newfoundland to Europe for the first time in the 1830s. In my mind, his other political achievements fell to the wayside and it brightened my day to see yet another Canadian connection, especially one involving dogs.

Linda thought we should have lunch at the Elephant House where it was reported that J.K. Rowling once did some writing or research for the early Harry Potter novels.

The sign outside says "The birthplace of Harry Potter" – but that may be stretching it a bit. Who knows?

Inside, it was a noisy, happy little restaurant on the King George IV Bridge. The "bridge" itself confused me somewhat in that it didn't seem to be over any body of water, but looking down from the bridge, was a whole other level of the city with narrow streets and ground level stores. I couldn't quite figure out how this could be since we, too, were on ground level. It was like peering into another world below us and it was indeed as Harry Potteresque as a thing could be.

I still had a small grudge against Ms. Rowling because trashy newspapers in England and Scotland had claimed she had the cutest West Highland White Terrier in the U.K. I thought my own Westie much cuter and soon he too would be in the U.K. and we would try to right this wrong. Nonetheless, there we were for lunch in her former haunt with memorabilia from herself and great gobs of Harry Potter graffiti aplenty on the walls of the loos. I ordered haggis, neeps and tatties ("Our Scottish national dish") for lunch in honour of the occasion and found it most filling.

Back on the Royal Mile, we wandered down as many narrow alleyways (or closes, as they are called) as we could. Among the many are, Advocate's Close, Anchor Close, Old Post Office Close, and the curiously-named Fleshmarket Close – which refers to what was once a butcher's market rather than a place for street sex. Mystery writer Ian Rankin borrowed the name for the title of one of his novels where a number of dark and brutal events occur.

Down one alleyway, we came upon The Writers Museum which is blessedly free and open to the public. The building dates back to 1622 and displays artifacts and images of Robbie Burns, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson. Behind a glass case, Stevenson's high



top shoes looked like he had just taken them off yesterday and I was rather impressed to see a photograph of the author of *Treasure Island* imbibing kava with some shirtless citizens of Samoa. I'd read *Treasure Island* as a lad and it had not occurred to me that perhaps drugs were involved in the creative process.

There was much ado in the museum about Burns' poetry and it prompted me to recite what I could remember of "A Man's a Man for a' That" until my wife grew embarrassed enough to elbow me in the ribs to MAKE ME desist. A few steps further along, staring at a bust of Walter Scott, I couldn't for the life of me remember reading a single thing by such a famous Scottish writer and wondered why his fame lingered while his writing fell out of favour.

Stumbling upon Devil's Close, we ambled into a pub called The Devil's Advocate to quench our thirst and moved on to dinner at an establishment called the Filling Station on High Street where I ordered a curry dish, having done my duty earlier in the day to partake of the Elephant House haggis.

Pubs and restaurants there are aplenty in and around the Royal Mile.

Halfway through my curry, it occurred to me that here in Scotland I was eating Indian food, in England I opted for Italian food, in the U.S. Mexican food, and in Canada, I preferred Thai.

The following morning, Wetherspoon's near the train station provided nourishment for the day in the form of a tasty but lumpy egg, a couple of rashers of bacon, a delightfully bulbous sausage and the inevitable black pudding (it's the blood that makes it black, yes?). I

couldn't help but notice that a large percentage of men were drinking large mugs of beer with their breakfast and, asking a waiter why that might be, he explained that Monday was a bank holiday.

As you can tell, I probably have not done the city full justice, having skipped or merely glanced at some of the more famous sites, both ancient and modern, of Edinburgh. The bagpipers were in tune on most corners, and I confess I was shocked at the cost of an authentic kilt. During the day, buskers juggled large knives while atop rolling planks, hen parties sang a Helen Reddy song in unison, and a number of young inebriated semi-clad men covered a reasonable rendition of "Wonderwall" by Oasis, then ran off, leaving one of their own behind who turned his back on the throng of curious onlookers and urinated on the wall of St. Giles Cathedral, whose crown-shaped steeple dates back to the fifteenth century.

Heading back along King George IV Bridge, we stopped by Greyfriars Kirk which has "stood in the same spot since 1620 - the first new kirk to be built in Post-Reformation Scotland." Here we came upon a shrine erected to a dog known as Greyfriars Bobby that much reminded me of the statue of the loyal dog Hachiko I had once stumbled upon in Tokyo.

Bobby was a Skye terrier (closely related to Westies, I might add) who "guarded" his owner's grave every day for fourteen years after the man's death back in the nineteenth century. In a nearby bookstore, I noted that there were at least twelve children's books written about Bobby and at least two animated movies. Clearly, loyalty in dogs is admired by Scots and authors in many parts of the world.

So far we had failed to find any dogs in pubs, but as luck would have it, the closest pub to Greyfriars Kirk had two large dogs, a black one and a white one, lounging on the floor, dutifully waiting for their masters who were drinking McEwan's ale. The establishment was called Sandy Bell's Pub and it purported to be famous for its folk music. A fiddler and a guitar player were tucked in a corner improvising something closer to jazz than folk, but it was a comfortable and pleasant place to ponder the story of Bobby, and to see how dogs behaved in the presence of Scotsmen drinking beer.

On a shelf over the bar was a bust of a man and a note on the wall indicated it was the "head of Hamish Henderson." I wondered what a replica of this man's head was doing in a pub and later learned Hamish was a poet, songwriter, collector of folk songs and lore, as well as a soldier and a communist - quite the list of accomplishments. I couldn't help but take a moment of reverie to wish that someday a pub owner would think enough of me to place a replica of my head over the bar to keep a watchful eye over generations of patrons. Alas, it was a foolish and ill-conceived idea if ever there was one.

I also noted a sign over the bar that read, "No Football Colours Allowed," and I asked a gent sipping scotch what that was all about. "Fights," he said. "Ya can't have two different colour shirts in one pub or you have trouble."

Two colours presumably indicated fans of two different teams.

Combine that with enthusiasm and alcohol and presumably you have fisticuffs.

Then he pointed out the window across the street to yet another pub, an Irish one called McSweeney's. "You want to see some ruckus, you should go over there." And sure enough, outside McSweeney's stood two sturdy bouncers waiting for football trouble to come their way.

But I found it not in our best interest to do further investigation into football team loyalty and hostility.

I liked the way drinkers casually walked over and around the lounging canines whose weary eyes indicated they'd be much happier sleeping under the front porch. So, in the name of research, I asked the young tattooed barmaid with a nose piercing the following question: "How does having dogs in the pub change the nature of the place?" As you might guess, it came out sounding rather formal and stilted.

The young lady gave me a funny look but an honest answer, "Well," she said, "the dogs are much nicer than the drunks." Truth be told, I saw no drunks at Sandy's, but then it was the middle of the day. After that, it was a final hike back to High Street where a new piper provided the official soundtrack for the advancing fog rolling slowly but inexorably up the cobblestone street from the North Sea below.



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Kelty and Me

Story by Lesley Choyce



It is a frosty spring morning as I sit in my warm kitchen at Lawrencetown Beach in Nova Scotia. My wife Linda is working, so I am home alone - well, not quite alone; my dog is sitting on a chair beside me. Yes, he is sitting there, watching me write this, looking a bit like one of those dogs in that silly but ubiquitous 1894 painting titled *Dogs Playing Poker*, by Cassius Marcellus Coolidge. Unlike any of the dogs in the artwork, however, Kelty is a two-year-old West Highland White Terrier - a Westie.

He is a most lovable pet most days, but on occasion becomes a little West Highland Terrorist when the spirit moves him.

For as far back as I can remember, there has always been a dog in my life. Sadly, we outlive our dogs, and I have outlived nearly a dozen. But it is not a morning to be mourning - nor to be pondering mortality. It is a day to plan for the future.

I have a sabbatical coming up and have decided that some sort of grand adventure is in order. My fondness for the U.K. - and the Celtic world in general - got me thinking about a land-based circumnavigation of Great Britain. Linda and I would drive around, paying homage to dead poets and novelists, find small villages with funny names, and drink local brews at England's smallest pubs and other sudsy establishments with names like the Cock Inn and the Broken Whistle. We'd meet fabulously quirky and eccentric Brits, Scots and Welshmen, and I would write a book about it.

But we wouldn't leave the mutt behind this time. Instead, we'd drive around England, Scotland and Wales with a dog. It was a most exciting idea.

Two authors were partly responsible for inspiring this peripatetic quest. One was Bill Bryson, who had written two wonderfully funny and insightful books about his travels in England. The second was Tony Hawks, who had written a most hilarious book titled *Around Ireland with a Fridge*.

Prepping myself for the upcoming odyssey, I first wrote to Bill Bryson, believing he was living in New Hampshire, and requested an interview. He promptly wrote back with the following: "Thanks for your inquiry. I am afraid I haven't lived in New Hampshire for 15 years, which kind of suggests that you haven't been following my work terribly closely for quite some time. I am afraid I am not able to give interviews at present." I guess it was his semi-polite way of saying "go-fly-a-kite."



Nursing a bruised writer's ego, I am still working up the courage to write to Mr. Hawks, bracing myself for yet another scathing brush-off, but hoping that a man who has hitch-hiked the perimeter of the Emerald Isle will see my own humble quest as modestly noble and offer up some advice.

In my mind the whole adventure was shaping up nicely: fly with my wife Linda and dog Kelty to Glasgow, rent a car, go first to Poltalloch, the legendary origin of the modern Westie, then over to Edinburgh to sit in the back at The Elephant House café where J.K. Rowling reputedly wrote her first Harry Potter novel. We might possibly take a quick nip over to 6a Nicolson Street, where she did more writing - now the location of Jimmy Chungs Buffet King restaurant. Then it would be down to Sibson in Leicester-

shire, home of my ancestor, William Percival Choyce, before moving on to Wales to Surf Snowdonia, the world's first inland surfing destination - all with Kelty along for the adventure.

At Christmas, someone had even given me a book titled Good Guide to Dog Friendly Pubs, Hotels and B&Bs. In it, Fiona Stapley notes that "8.5 million households in Britain own a dog," and that she takes her Labrador to many friendly pubs where they offer her black pet "biscuits and other treats such as pig's ears and a sausage or two." I was convinced immediately that, without a doubt, Kelty's first tasting of pig's ears would be a highlight in his young life.

But alas, the kind folks at the airline informed me that you can't fly into the U.K. with a dog in the cabin - they could only go

in baggage. And there was simply no way we were about to let that happen. The Brits, for all their love of dogs, had thrown a mighty wrench into the works, the bureaucratic bastards!

We almost gave up on the idea. I went looking for advice on how to get a dog into the U.K. and discovered that we could travel over on the Queen Mary from New York and take the pooch. The only problem, however, was that it would cost many thousands of American dollars - more bad news.

A little more digging, however, revealed that we could fly to Paris with Kelty and smuggle him into the U.K. in our rental auto strapped down on a rail car through the Chunnel. It smacked of a slightly tamer version of something from Mission Impossible and I immediately knew it was the right thing



to do. So we booked tickets to Charles De-Gaulle instead of Glasgow and paid an extra \$50 to keep our dog with us in a carrier at our feet. "Around England with a Dog" would have to begin on French soil, and we would make our landing in England not far from Hastings where the French army under William of Normandy successfully invaded England in 1066.

Some might wonder why go to all this trouble just to take the family mutt to a foreign country.

Well, dogs are damned important to some of us - man's best friend and all that. Let's face it: dogs are loyal and lick your face. They are exuberant and fun-loving. I'd always had mixed-breed dogs but, with the arrival of Linda in my life, came a pure-breed Westie. Kelty's predecessor, Murdo, was a purebred Westie that required expensive grooming and who slept on the bed. Murdo died of cancer a few years back and we mourned his loss for a full year before Linda convinced me we needed a new dog - a puppy - and a Westie of course. The only problem was there was not a single Westie puppy to be found for sale in the Maritimes. We had to drive to Ontario and escort our new puppy home to Nova Scotia, where we three are living happily ever after.

Hoping to avoid a tedious internet search on the subject of Westies for this article, I made a library reservation for what I thought was the definitive tome on the dog breed - West Highland White Terriers by Sara Green. When I arrived at the library,

however, I discovered it was a children's book. It had such great photos of lively tongue-protruding, tail-wagging Westies that I checked it out anyway, and found a wealth of information. I also concluded that I had made a big mistake as a young lad when I gave up on those colorful slim volumes about volcanoes, spiders, Uruguay, and how things work, in favour of dull, wordy and picture-less books for more mature readers.

I devoured the book cover to cover and was reminded that Westies are "small, friendly dogs with shiny white coats." Well, not my dog after a trip to the beach where he has rolled in sand, mud, and washed-up unidentifiable sea creatures that had been decomposing for at least a week. But underneath, yes, white it is.

I didn't know about the double-coat made up of a "short and soft" undercoat and a coarser outer coat of wiry hair, but here was a two-coated dog. I also discovered that our noble beast was descended from Cairn Terriers, who have a darker coat. Apparently, back in nineteenth century Scotland, some Cairns had white puppies that were considered weak and poor hunters. That was undoubtedly a lie but, back then as today, people believed what they wanted to believe, true or not.

The book tidied up the story about Edward Donald Malcolm of Poltalloch who, in the 1800s, started breeding the white dogs because "it would be easier for hunters to recognize their white dogs in the fields or woods." Well, I already knew that Colonel Malcolm himself had shot one (if not more) of his own darker Cairn Terriers while hunting foxes, so the breeding was an attempt of

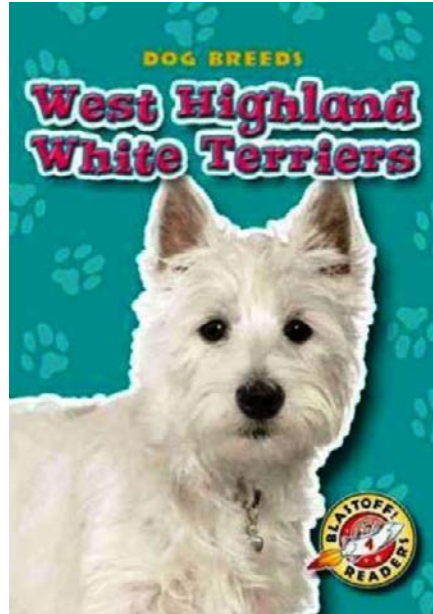
sorts to offset his own incompetence as a huntsman. Nonetheless, he gave us the modern Westie. He called them Poltalloch Terriers because that was the name of the town where he lived.

And indeed, Poltalloch is first on my list of places to visit in the U.K. - a most appropriate pilgrimage to the sacred soil where Kelty's ancestors roamed the fields, chased rabbits, and sniffed each other's butts.

Westies are darn good at digging. Apparently, their claws grow faster than other dogs for just this purpose. They like to dig deep and follow tunnels made by animals living underground. In fact, the name "terrier" comes from a Latin word meaning earth. This was labelled a "fun fact" in the child's book, allowing me to remember that, yes, once upon a time facts really were fun, as opposed to today when "facts" are no longer fun and, so often, are not even facts at all.

Kelty, like his ancestors, is a great digger and if we had rats, I'm sure he would heartily enjoy catching them and biting into their necks, then swinging them left and right like his Poltalloch cousins have done for over two hundred years. Westies also have extra-strong tails, so if they are stuck down deep in a rat hole, you can pull them out by their tail and it won't hurt them, although it would surely be a significant dis-comfort. I have seen Kelty "unhinge" his back legs as well, sprawled out flat on the





floor in a pool of sunlight. These are very versatile and agile dogs, indeed.

Early Westies had several different names, and this annoyed dog breeders so much that the Scottish Kennel Club gathered in 1904 and, after what I envision as a highly charged debate involving scathing Scottish insults and many glasses of Scotch, came up with the official name of the breed: West Highland White Terrier. And that was that.

Today, I am told by Ms. Green, "Most Westies just dig for fun." But some are trained to work with deaf people; when they hear crying or doorbells or smoke alarms, they use their nose or paw to inform their deaf companions - how ingenious is that?

Modern dogs, even Kelty, are related to those howling wolves I occasionally hear on moonlit nights here on the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia. But they came into their own about 100,000 years ago. About 30,000 years ago in Europe, humans started to domesticate dogs - or at least dogs started hanging around the campfire hoping someone would toss them a bone. Domestication led to breeding for certain desired traits. Hunting and guarding were big ticket items, and West Highland Terriers certainly have that going for them.

White dogs probably first appeared in Spain, although I could not find an explanation as to why the Spaniards wanted a white dog more than anyone else. Sometime in the 1500s, James VI of Scotland gave a white terrier (but not the modern version, and probably not pure white) as a gift to Henry IV. There are no reports as to how well the dog fared while Henry spent considerable time

during his kingship fending off assassination attempts and rebellions.

Just so you won't be as confused as I was, James VI (the dog giver) became James I of England after the death of Elizabeth I. Certainly he brought some terriers south with him as Scottish comfort against the many conspirators who gave him trouble as well, including one Walter Raleigh. And it was this James I who granted a charter to Sir William Alexander in 1621, giving him rights to a large parcel of land in the New World that would one day be Nova Scotia, the present home of Linda, Kelty and me.

Unlike King Charles II, he did not name a dog after himself, but in Volume 12 of *Classical Review* (1898), there is an article about a most convoluted discourse that took place in Cambridge back in 1614-1615 involving "King James I on the Reasoning Faculty in Dogs."

One way or the other, it is clear that dogs helped influence, if not shape much of the history of Scotland, Britain, and other nations.

Dogs have inspired poetry and paintings as well, of course. One fine example is the 1839 painting by Sir Edwin Landseer - *Dignity and Impudence* - of a bloodhound, representing dignity, and a small white terrier, well, representing the alternate quality.

I have discovered there is much ink spilled on the subject of Westie breeding, definitions of a pure breed, and the world of show dogs - none of which is my cup of tea. Nor would I want to get into an argument in a dog-friendly pub about which lineage or breed is nobler than the others. There seems to be a considerable number of various of-

ficial competitions as well that involve Westies, including agility competitions, "conformation shows" (sounds nasty to me), a dog sport called coursing ability, earthdog trials, freestyle (more like it) and, God help us, something called "obedience and rally."

I am certainly not an advocate that everyone should go out and buy a Westie; it turns out that between vet bills, endless grooming, and making travel arrangements for the small white creature, you could probably raise a child for less.

Famous Westies abound, and I was surprised to learn that Mohammed Ali Jinnah, considered the founder of Pakistan, had a Westie. A Westie also appears on the label of Black and White whisky, as well as on Cesar dog food throughout the world. You should never tell an owner that all Westies look alike - even though, for the most part, they all do look alike.

I grew just a tad jealous when I learned that J.K. Rowling's West Highland White Terrier, Bronte, won a cutest dog competition. The headline in the *Scottish Sun* read, "THE MAGIC MUTT: JK Rowling's adorable West Highland Terrier Bronte earns top marks in cute pooches competition WeRateDogs." I mean, isn't literary fame and unspeakable wealth enough?

I am hereby giving Ms. Rowling fair warning that we are headed her way and, although I may not be as famous a writer as the author of the Harry Potter books, I have a dog that I think is both smarter and cuter than any in the U.K. And there will be photos taken to prove it - lots and lots of photos.



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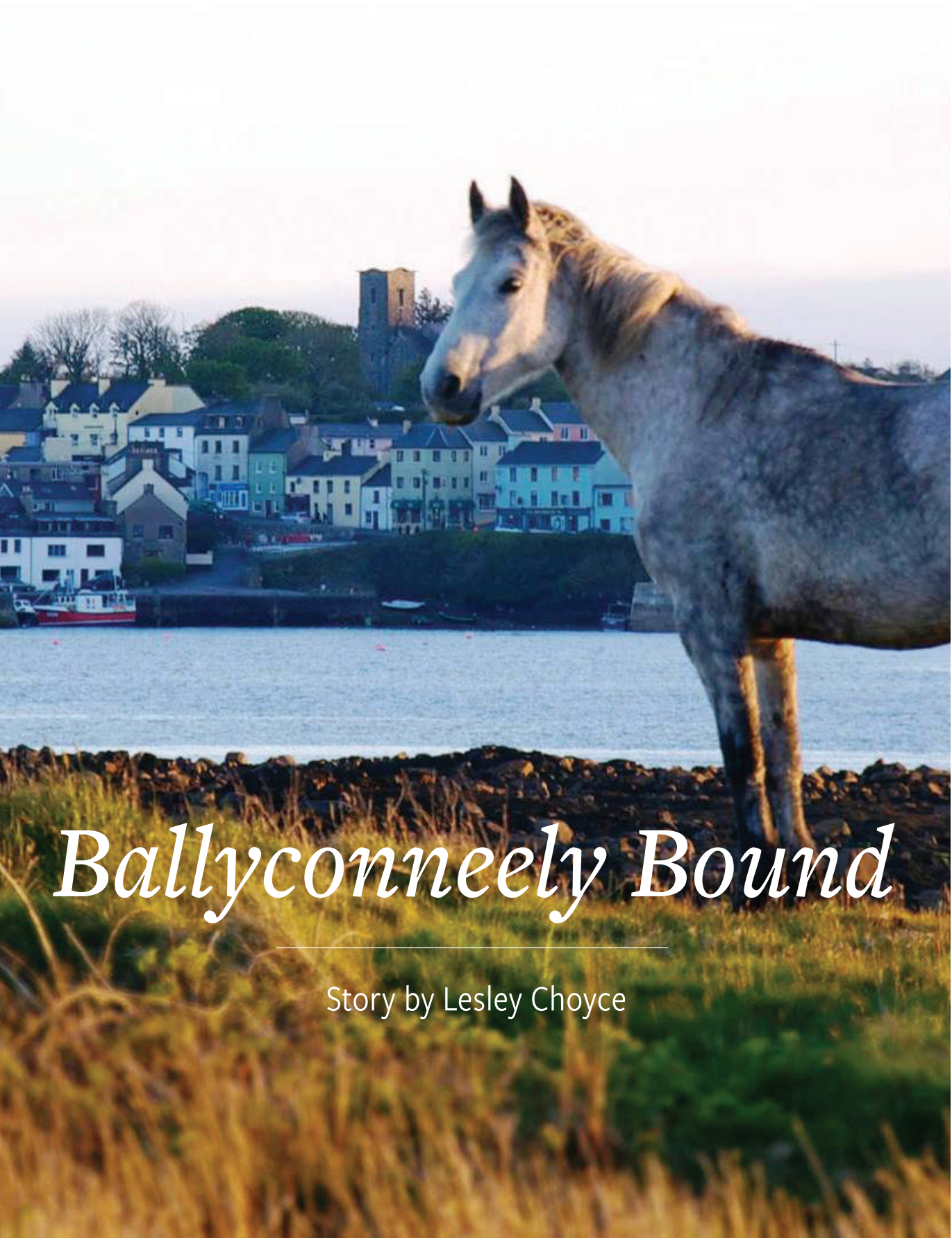
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Ballyconneely Bound

Story by Lesley Choyce



Cliffs of Moher

I don't know what it is, but every few years I get itching to return to Ireland and find a narrow back road in some remote part of the country to drive around on. My wife Linda and I have done some fair damage to our rental cars over the years as a result. Not the drive-it-like-you-stole-it kind - just a lot of scratched paint and the odd ding in rear-view mirrors. We have taken to carrying around a tube of scratch-removal paste that we use to buff out the scratches before we return our vehicles. That seems to do the job.

Not long ago, we flew into Shannon and rented a car that already had a dented mirror and, even before we hit the road, I reminded myself to fold both side mirrors in while going through small villages where the locals park their cars half on the street and half on the narrow sidewalk.

Ireland was as green as I remembered it - even for a dry July - as we drove north towards our destination, a stone house near the shores of Bunowen Bay. We passed through Lahinch, a popular surfing town on the Atlantic. Ireland has become a surf-crazy country in the last decade and attracted surfers from around the world to ride monster waves on offshore ledges in places like Mullaghmore and Easky. The waves in Lahinch were a tad tamer as we travelled through. The town was a bit too popular for my tastes, with a narrow crowded beach packed with pale bodies working on some serious sunburn. I did recall, however, sitting in a pub there one rainy



Lesley

day in February on a previous visit, looking directly out on lads surfing some difficult, but powerful winter waves. So, if and when I return to Lahinch, it will be off-season.

The Cliffs of Moher were the next stop, mostly because it was on the way, and they were indeed as spectacular as ever. We joined the throngs of tourists from around the world as they stepped out of their buses and cars to make their way to the famed 100 to 200 metre-high cliffs and stare down at the ocean. An international swarm of teenagers were trying their best to see who could get closest to the edge and I wondered how many people over the years have actually died here. But there's no denying it is a breath-taking place. In the parking lot, I purchased an obligatory penny whistle and a shillelagh like a good foreign spendthrift before heading off to Doolin

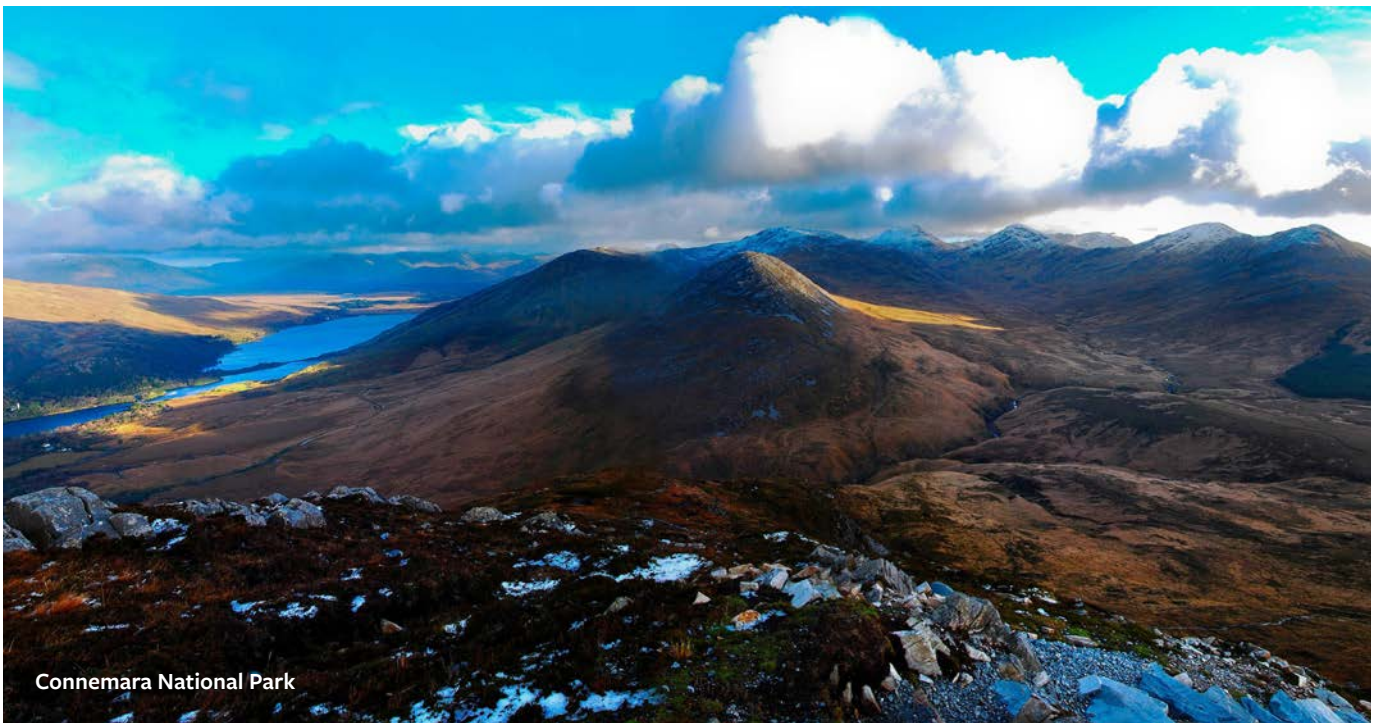


Linda and Buddy

for the first pint of the trip at Gus O'Connor's Pub. The Guinness tasted equally as good as the one I'd had here many years before with my old friend Mike. We'd argued that day about James Joyce versus Jack Kerouac like a pair of perfect intellectual idiots while a full Sunday afternoon jam session was taking place with ever-changing fiddle players and new musicians arriving by bus each half hour.

Linda and I spent our first night in a country hotel in Lisdoonvarna, famous for the month-long matchmaking festival that occurs each September when as many as 40,000 lonely hearts arrive to seek a spouse. For most, it must seem an efficient and tidy way to avoid decisions, dating, dinners, and the complex modern rituals of romance.

In the morning, we were back on the coastal road of the Burren, past Slieve Elva



and Black Head. I was particularly taken by the rugged, otherworldly frozen-lava-like limestone formations near Murroogh, and the megalithic tomb at Poul nabrone.

We saved Galway for another day and stayed on the N59 to Clifden, then onto the joyfully twisty and narrow road - more like a paved sidewalk really - leading to our cottage beyond Ballyconneely. The map suggested that much of the peninsula was something called the Roundstone Blanket Bog - not an image that might attract many travelers, but the rocky, pockmarked coastline with its little pure white sand pocket beaches was a dream come true for coastal lovers like us.

Across the road from our stone cottage was a fenced-in field with a beautiful white horse - a Connemara pony, of course, that most certainly had been a unicorn in a previous incarnation.

Linda fell in love with the horse immediately and fed him carrots whenever the opportunity presented itself.

When we asked about beaches with good waves, folks were strangely tight-lipped. This was a tad puzzling, since most Irish people to whom I asked a question would inevitably tell me much more than I ever wanted to know. But, finally, one hiker we met took pity on us as we poked around sandy coastal trails and told us about a place where the local surfers found favourable waves. It required driving several kilometres through a very large sheep pasture. There were no real roads - just some wheel tracks in the grass and sand, and the sheep were mostly willing to step aside, and if not, you could just drive around them. The beach will go unnamed, but it was exactly what we were looking for - clear blue water, rocky outcroppings on either side, hard packed sand and wallowing North Atlantic waves perfectly suited for our inflatable boogie boards and our thirst for salty wet adventure.

On the weekend it was actually quite crowded with local folks, so it wasn't really that much of a secret, but the mood among camping families was as mellow as a clan gathering of hippy farmers that I once recall attending.



Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten-Brown

Clifden is the big town near Ballyconneely. The visitors' website boasts, "Clifden today is a vibrant and cosmopolitan town on the very edge of Europe." Well, it was a cheerful place with busy people and a few too many shops selling geegaws from China. But the Alcock and Brown Hotel caught my attention, and the two names rang a bell. So I went searching to find out more about those two surnames.

According to National Geographic, "In 1919 Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten-Brown became the first pilots to fly nonstop across the Atlantic. They were pioneers and heroes, ushering in the next chapter in the progress of aviation."

As it happened, the dynamic duo took off from Newfoundland, flew across the ocean, and landed in one of those large Irish bogs just shy of Clifden, thinking it a level and welcoming patch of earth. Though a bit of a crash landing, both men were fine. Alcock told the London Daily Mail that on the trip they had encountered several unforeseen events and that, "The cockpit was very cozy indeed, but when we peered over the side, sleet and ice chewed bits out of our faces."

Later, wandering the streets of Clifden, I kept wondering why I knew so much about Charles Lindbergh's later flight across the At-



lantic and so little about these two aviation pioneers.

There is a spectacular drive from Clifden to Knockavally called, appropriately, Sky Road, with some exceptional views of Clifden Bay. We drove on yet another finger of land out towards the Atlantic until we came to Cleggan (Gaelic for skull) where, in 1927, 25 local fishermen were lost at sea in a sudden gale, devastating the town, but later immortalized in poems, songs and stories. The day was slipping away so we didn't take the ferry to Inishbofin (Island of the White Cow) with its small population of 180, a place that was inhabited more than 5000 years ago.

On yet another day, we headed south, skirting Roundstone Blanket Bog, and did barefoot hikes of Dogs Bay and Gorteen beaches, ending up in Roundstone, a lovely, slightly touristy town. We had lunch in a little internet café but, upon walking back to our car, encountered an intoxicated band of young men and women in their early twenties along the road. They were goofy, yet polite to us, and I couldn't quite figure out why the young, somewhat-drunk gentlemen were wearing socks and no shoes. However, the girls were laughing at their antics and they wished us well as we passed.

We found some good mountain hiking in Connemara National Park, not far from Letterfrack, which is Gaelic for Speckled Hill.

Letterfrack was founded by a Quaker couple in the nineteenth century, who moved here and set up a farm to provide food to residents during the Great Famine. After that, Protestant missionaries moved in to convert Catholics to Protestantism, but had little success and gave up after 25 years.

Letterfrack also has a connection to my home province of Nova Scotia, in that it was here that Marconi set up a receiver station for wireless messages coming from Cape Breton, far across the Atlantic.

Farther inland along Killary Harbour, called by some "Ireland's fjord," is Leenane, home of the Aasleagh Waterfalls on the River Erriff, not far from where it meets the harbour. Nearby, we discovered the Connemara Seaweed Baths, where you can pay a fee to sit in a tub filled with seaweed and saltwater. The clever folks who run the establishment say that their seaweed "is hand cut daily and fresh with essential nutrients and minerals...as well as relaxing tired and aching muscles, saltwater seaweed baths provide a natural cure for

skin ailments from psoriasis to eczema and also help relieve the associated pain of arthritis and rheumatism."

It made me think of the tons of fresh seaweed that washes ashore back home in Nova Scotia going to waste as it rots on the beach instead of being utilized for its curative powers. I made a note to myself to gather up a carload of it after the next storm, empty it into my bathtub, and lie in it for a good hour or two while listening to New Age music.

Then it was back to boogie boarding at the hidden beach, and a drive to the westernmost tip of our peninsula - Slyne Head. As the road grew yet more narrow and grassy, we were shocked to suddenly come upon a most opulent and worldly Connemara Golf Club.

One of the most curious things about both Ireland and Scotland is that just when you think you are completely off the beaten path and at a most end-of-the-earth locale, you discover a putting green, a mansion-like clubhouse, and men wearing funny hats and baggy pants hitting a little white ball across a perfectly manicured lawn.

There was nothing to do but go into the clubhouse restaurant, which welcomed non-members, for some fish and chips and glass of Kilkenny before another afternoon boogie board session at yet another secluded and unnamed beach.



Watching sunsets, while feeding carrots to the Connemara pony across the road became the norm for us. Linda had nicknamed him Buddy and he had already grown to like his daily treat by greeting us kindly with a nuzzle on the neck.

Ireland had once again worked its magic on us with barren stone hills, beautiful beaches and, here in Ballyconneely, on a soft summer evening, it seemed impossible to realize that nearly 170 years ago, the entire region was beset by calamity.

On the website connemarahistory.com, the author notes, "In 1845 a fungal disease called 'blight' (phythophthora infestans) began to affect the potato crop and led to its failure several years in succession. The British government was slow to react, and this led to mass starvation and disease. Relief schemes were introduced, but these were too late to have any great impact on the situation. Grain continued to be exported, and in one incident grain was left to rot in Clifden port while the population starved."

A final day of hiking took us to the Twelve Bens and we found a gravel road heading up into the mountains. Once suitably far from any towns or tourists, we left the car and hiked up through beckoning grass and rock-strewn fields filled with free-ranging sheep gossiping about our presence.

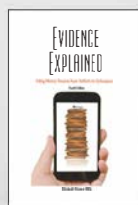
It was clear that this Connemara that we had grown to know was a hard land in many ways - certainly not an easy place to grow potatoes among the many stones. And its history was beset by tragedies aplenty. But here on the slopes of one of the Bens - we never figured out exactly which one - we were able yet again to leave our own century behind. It was a sunny, oddly windless afternoon filled with small vibrant flowers, growing low to the ground but brilliant in colour, tucked between the many stones.

Perhaps here was another of those "thin places" we had encountered in Sligo and Donegal, a sacred location where the line between the physical world and the spiritual world is diminished to nearly nothing. A place where the magic of the natural surroundings steals your cares away and reminds you that your five senses can provide you with much entertainment and satisfaction, but just beyond your mortal vision is something even much grander.





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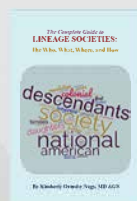
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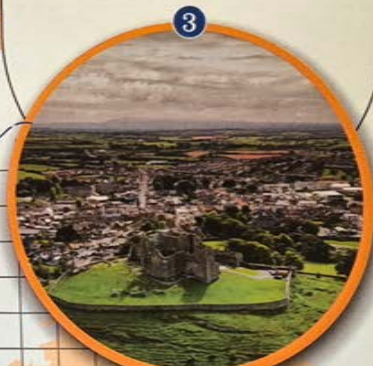
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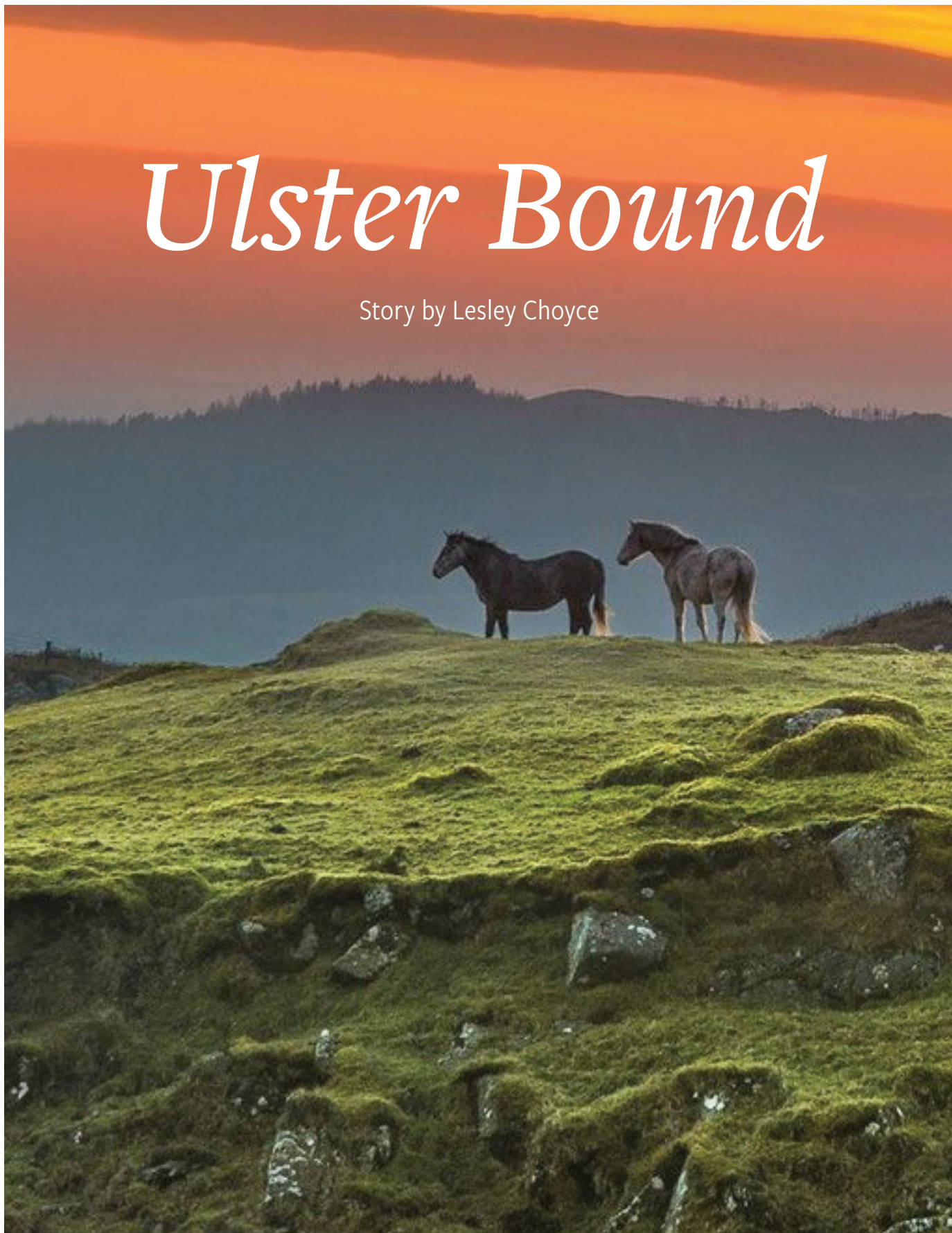
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Ulster Bound

Story by Lesley Choyce



COVER STORY

My first visit to Northern Ireland was back in the 1980s. It was a foolish North American's notion of an all-too-quick circuitous tour of the island: get off the ferry from Wales in Dun Laoghaire, drive south and west to the Ring of Kerry, then north to Galway and Sligo and into Ulster to Enniskillen and Londonderry, and then off the island at Larne onto Scotland.

I was stopped and questioned by English soldiers with machine guns while crossing from the south into the north. They looked to be pimply teenagers with guns and they smiled a lot and commented on my "funny" accent. But there was nothing fun or funny about what Northern Ireland was going through in those days.

I remember green, green hills alongside inhospitable-looking towns, with barbed-wire fences around the police stations, phone companies and public buildings. There was such a stark contrast be-

The dark skies of the past were mostly gone. What I saw was a sunny, friendly part of the world, well worth the trip.

I noticed not long ago that a fellow traveller had asked TripAdvisor if it was still a (political) problem to wear green, yellow or orange while visiting there. The consensus reply was decidedly no, with one writer suggesting, "Might be a risk of being laughed at in public if your outfit contains all 3, maybe."

My wife, Linda, and I were less concerned with our wardrobe, and more keen on hiking the green hills and mossy forest gullies, finding some rental wetsuits (black, of course) for boogie boarding on the north coast, and toasting to our lucky lives in a friendly pub or two



tween the idyllic countryside and the impoverished sections of Londonderry that I wondered how such a thing could be possible...until I remembered what I knew of the long strife-ridden history of this unlucky place.

However, when I returned to Northern Ireland in 2011, it was a completely transformed place. Remnants of the Troubles still existed here and there, including a billboard promoting reuniting the North with Ireland, and random political graffiti on the brick walls in towns. But most of what we saw was very different from the old days.

along the way. And I am pleased to report that, on the drive north from Dublin, I kept looking for some sign to tell us when we were entering the North. But I never saw it.

I keep a keen eye out for such things, and usually have a habit of saying something foolish and obvious like, "So, we're now in Northern Ireland." But I never got my chance. Either I missed it or it wasn't there – and neither was the British military guarding the invisible border. We were well past Newry, and on our way to Banbridge, before I realized we had left the Republic of Ireland.

We had rented a small cottage in the village of Breen, not far from Ballycastle, and had some serious exploring to do. A 514 metre-high mountain named Knocklayd, with its head planted firmly in the clouds, presented itself across the road beyond a pasture of sheep that looked like they had been mud wrestling. I found the sheep and the mountain most welcoming as we settled into our cottage, lighting the first peat fire of the stay.

The sweet pungent smell of the burning turf added just the right ambience to our arrival.

Our goal was to explore as much of the northern coast here as possible, so the next day we set out on the B15 towards Ballintoy. Along the way was the famous Carrick-a-rede rope bridge. Some time in the

ing sea, she decided to let him be her guardian angel on the bouncy trip back as well. Later, it occurred to us that her encounter with such a kind and helpful young immigrant from a once-ravaged land was a good omen for the future of the (then) hopeful European Union.

After a hike on the big beach at White Park Bay in Ballintoy, we continued west, inevitably finding ourselves pulling into the parking lot at the world-famous Bushmills Distillery. The tour busses had apparently discovered the place before us and - with some of my typical trepidation about such places - we ambled into the gift shop and cafeteria to split some fish and chips and Guinness Pie. I found myself thinking, how clever of the Irish to come up with a way to have a pint while eating and not even have to sip from a glass. If you want to try this at home, campers, note the advice from the website, epicurious.com, which states, "Irish stouts produce a thick head when poured,



eighteenth century, locals built the original version of this bridge over the deep chasm that separates Carrick Island from the mainland. The modern-day walkway is still narrow and scary for anyone afraid of heights, as it sways and wobbles from the wind and the tromping of others on the narrow wood planking.

Linda found it daunting and decided to hang back while I bounded across to the island. When she saw me waving from the other side, however, she allowed one of the on-site guides, a young Polish man named Adam, to "talk" her across. After we walked around the craggy rocks and peered down from the heights at the jagged cliffs and surg-

so chill the can or bottle well before measuring to reduce the foam."

I was anxious to get back to nature and away from the hungry (and thirsty) hordes of the cafeteria, so I didn't allow us to dawdle in the gift shop with its seemingly infinite supply of whiskey bottles and trinkets. And not being a real whiskey aficionado, I couldn't help but wonder, what really could be the difference between a 15 Euro bottle of regular Irish whiskey and an 80 Euro bottle that looked exactly the same? But that's just me.

Well fortified by the beer pie, we made our way to Portrush, a prime Northern Ireland surfing destination. Sure enough there were

waves and surfers and we planned to return to get wet and banged around by the waves before the week was out.

I recall that we ended a number of our travel days in Armoy, not far from our den in Breen, at a little pub named McClafferty's Bar. We liked it very much because there was a very friendly, but high-strung, little dog there that would greet us nervously as we entered and kept us company in our booth as we deconstructed our day. McClafferty's is much like many local pubs, we observed. Nothing special or fancy about it: old 1960s-style luan-wood panelling on the walls, and a scuffed linoleum floor with a bar that looked like you might find in your uncle's basement. It made me ponder the irony that so many "authentic" North American Irish pubs look nothing like this at all. Instead, they are all so classic looking in the way that we in Canada or the USA think an Irish pub should look like. Nonetheless, McClafferty's allowed dogs, the Guinness was on tap, and it didn't have the air of snootiness I had detected in the more famous and touristy pubs of Ballycastle. So it was our pub for the week.

The town of Armoy began as a monastery founded by none other than Saint Patrick in the fifth century.

Based on my limited knowledge of Irish history, and various travels around Ireland to locations where St. Pat started one thing or another, I'd say that he was a very busy man in his relatively short tenure on the Emerald Isle.

And thanks to a garrulous patron in McClafferty's, who mistakenly thought we were Americans, it turns out that St. Patrick's Day - an annual event that at least once got me into some trouble - commemorates the day Patrick died, since no one knows on what day he was born.

A rainy day meant a road trip to Derry and a walk around the top of the city walls built between 1613 and 1618. Obviously the city has spread well beyond those seventeenth century walls, but it seems that here was the "last remaining walled city in Ireland." And the rainy walk was pretty grand I admit, and well worth the journey to what was once called Londonderry. It was a great way to view the architecture from a height and ponder the gloomy past of this place. As we left through

one of the old city gates, we found ourselves wandering out and into a vast modern indoor shopping mall, where all the stores sold much-too-familiar brand names. It looked so much like the shopping malls of New Jersey that I started looking for an exit within minutes.

A guidebook had exhorted that we have lunch at a place called Badgers. Stuthediver on TripAdvisor reports thus: "Just been to Derry with 30 other blokes and basically camped in the Badgers," intimating that he much liked the place and recommended it. We didn't choose to camp there, but did have a lunch of leek and potato soup, smoked haddock and blackened salmon.

We got lost trying to find our way out of the city and had a chance to see some of the seedier parts of town, with the graffiti reminding us that there were still some pretty hard grudges hanging around town and that some fragments of the dark days were still alive in Derry. Stopping to ask for directions, we came across a monument that turned out to be The Bloody Sunday Memorial, which Lonely Planet describes as, "a simple granite obelisk that commemorates the 14 civilians who were shot dead by the British Army on Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972." The lyrics from the U2 song suddenly rushed into my head. "How long must we sing this song?" I silently sang as we got back in the car and headed out of town.

The next day, we booted it back to Whiterocks Beach outside Portrush to rent boogie boards and damp wetsuits from a guy named Declan in a van who said we should give him our car keys while we hit the waves.

The wetsuits were a bit leaky, the boards a bit battered, and the water was damn cold, but we had a fine time bouncing around on the waves clearing the cobwebs from our heads.

Our car was still there when we returned, and Declan claimed he had taken it out for a spin to get coffee while we were gone, but I think he was just having us on.

The Giant's Causeway was on our route home so we joined the throngs for a walk out onto the really cool basalt columns, unlike any geological formation I'd ever seen. The Causeway was the result of





volcanic activity some fifty million years ago and, today is a world heritage site.

Legend is often more interesting than science, so if you prefer, the origin of the causeway was this; Finn MacCool was an Irish giant who was challenged to a fight by a Scottish giant named Benandonner. (Presumably this is what giants did in the old days for fun.) Finn took up the challenge and built the rocky road to Scotland so the two could have a good bout. What we have left today is a remnant of the bridge.

It was certainly crowded, but everyone, young and old, seemed cheerful as they wandered about tripping over chunks of jutting basalt. Children from many different nations could be seen climbing out onto the most challenging ledges, as their parents screamed at them in various languages, urging them not to fall into the beckoning blue-green sea below.

We chased around a number of backroads looking for a place called The Dark Hedges, a beautiful and spooky formation of beech trees that forms a canopy over Bregagh Road.

Apparently, this is one of the most photographed locations in Northern Ireland, and sometime after our visit it was featured in *Game of Thrones*. We missed the proper turn-off several times, as there were no signs anywhere guiding us -both indications that this was a worthy destination. We were not disappointed when we finally found it and enjoyed wandering beneath the giant trees, first planted by James Stuart in the eighteenth century to impress visitors wending their way to his estate. There are reports of a grey lady ghost wandering around the neighbourhood but she did not present herself on the sunny afternoon when we made our visit.

We often base our travels abroad around sea and sky, involving both coastal and mountain hikes.

We failed to find our way to the top of Knocklayd, as there seemed to be no public path, and our final attempt only led us to an abandoned quarry with a big “No Trespassing” sign, the only one I saw on our trip. So instead, we drove east along a charming backroad from Ballyvoy to

Cushendun. It was more of a paved footpath really, lending itself to some most creative driving when passing an oncoming car. It took us through some of the finest countryside in the Celtic world, leading us to Torr Head with its spectacular views from the headland there looking off toward Scotland’s Mull of Kintyre.

South of Cushendun is Glenariff Forest Park, with some wonderful hiking trails and luxurious fern undergrowth - a true ‘Irish Spring’ type place. Upon returning to our roost in Breen, we realized we had ranged far and wide but failed to spend much time in our immediate neighbourhood. Why is it that when we travel, sometimes, we miss some of the best things that are nearly under our noses in favour of trekking off to distant sites?

Certainly, there were more sheep than people in Breen, which is not a bad thing in my book, but we had met no neighbours to point us toward any local highlights. So we drove slowly around the immediate countryside looking for clues as to what we should explore. I finally spotted the sign for Breen Oakwood Nature Reserve, which proved to be an amazing find.

Here was a classic Irish gully, filled with ferns and mosses and pure clean water oozing out of rocks. As discovernorthernireland.com observes, “In spring and summer the boggy pools and damp gullies are a heaven for newts and dragonflies, and bluebells and wood anemones are among the woodland flowers.” And it was, to our great luck, spring.

If you do, in fact, have a hankering to be with newts, dragonflies and bluebells, Breen is where you want to be. More than that, hiking through that gully made me feel the presence of something profound that probably can’t be encountered in the Bushmills Distillery, a Ballycastle pub, or at the famous Badgers in Derry. Here was a quiet green sanctuary of peace and tranquility, with a soundtrack of soft breezes in the oak and birch trees. Water trickles from miniature waterfalls, and tiny birds flit from rowan to hazel to hawthorn. And, when a dragonfly the size of a model airplane chooses to hover in front of your face to inspect you and dips a nod of approval, you realize that you have discovered one of the many small, unsung sacred places within Ulster’s stunning six counties.

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Sage's CIRCLE
with Candice Marie Sage, PhD

The Legend of Ostara

SAGE'S CIRCLE

In my previous column (Carl Jung's Celtic Connections), I discussed St. Brigid's Day (February 1) and the ways in which we celebrate the revered saint. This coincides with Candlemas (February 2) - a Christian celebration of light that falls forty days after the birth of Jesus. It also corresponds with Imbolc, one of the four greater pagan Fire celebrations (called Sabbats) that takes place February 1 to 3, celebrating the tri-goddess Brigid: Healer, Poet, and Keeper of the fires of the Smithy and Hearth. Spring is in the air (even though our groundhogs predicted there would be another six weeks of winter this year), the days are getting longer, and hope is swelling for warmer days and sweeter times.

In this edition of Sage's Circle, we look at a lesser-known goddess associated with the Vernal Equinox - Ēostre - who presides over the Sabbat of Ostara. Herein lie the pagan roots of the Christian celebration of Easter, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, which takes place the first Sunday after the first spring full moon.

Ēostre is reflected in Old English, Old Saxon, and Old High German. She was a West Germanic Spring goddess, associated with the dawn, new beginnings, and nature's rebirth after winter (resurrection). Her pagan feast is called Ostara, and her name became Ostara as Anglo-Saxon dialects and cultures evolved. She is symbolized by rabbits and hares (for their fertility), as well as eggs (new be-

ginings). The hare is an archetypal symbol across Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam, associated with rebirth, fertility, lunar cycles, and the magic of birth. It is a nocturnal animal, except during the spring mating season. The hare is a messenger between the goddess and the human world, moving through the moonlight until spring when it is seen in plain sight under the warm sun - traveling across the Veil (the collective unconscious) between our ancestors and our lands.

“*The Spring Equinox, with its equal hours of night and day, symbolizes the balance of masculine and feminine energies.*”

Here we see the archetypes of the divine masculine in the Sun, the provider and protector to the divine feminine, the land itself.

The legend of Ēostre/Ostara is connected to spring, as she travels across the lands to melt the winter snows. In one tale, she comes across a shivering bird near death and transforms it into a hare, giving it the power to lay eggs (embodied within the hare) so that the bird may produce offspring. Some versions recount that the hare lays colourful eggs in gratitude to the goddess. It is said that Ēostre/Ostara can turn into a hare, and the medical term oestrogen (the fertility hormone) comes

from her name. Today, rabbits and hares remain her symbol along with eggs decorated in her colours of green, yellow and purple.

The hope of spring is programmed into our DNA. The pagan celebration of Ostara connects us to the Celtic values of creativity, authenticity and reverence for Mother Nature. It is a powerful time of anticipation. Through reflection and imagination, we have an opportunity to re-birth ourselves and to examine new paths of possibility as the days get longer and we are inspired by the feverish bloom and majesty of the natural world awakening. The goddess Ēostre/Ostara embodies possibilities for renewal and growth.

For many, life is very challenging, and we may be anxious about forces beyond our control that threaten our well-being. This year at the Vernal Equinox (March 20), you are invited to take some time to reflect on the power of goddess Ēostre/Ostara, and the promise that spring will come in all its glory. Get outside and slow your pace to see, hear, touch, smell and feel this power of renewal. May it inspire you to dream, to create, and know that you are a part of this magnificent becoming, you are connected to the world around you and your ancestors who came before you.

Happy Ostara!

est. 1992



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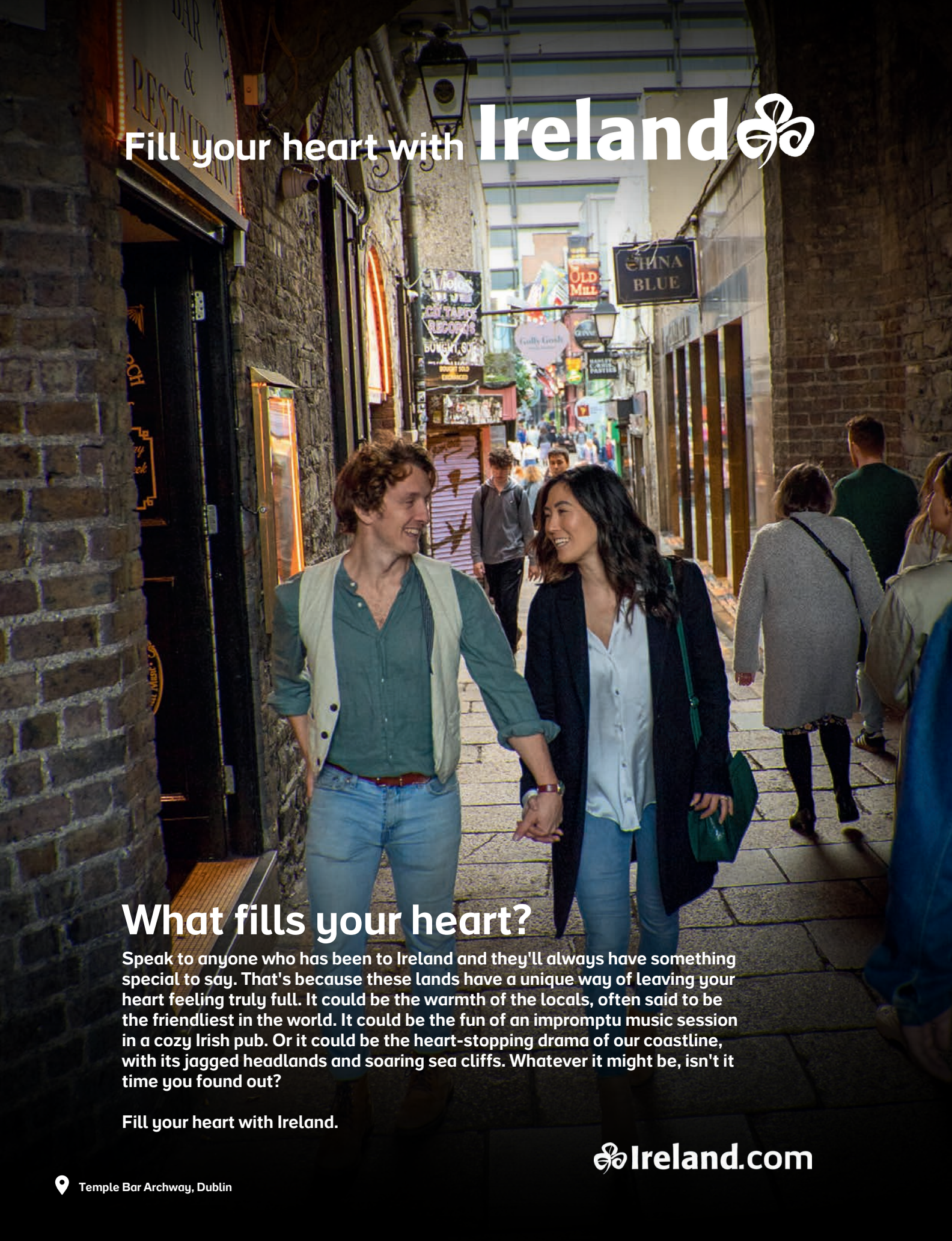
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