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Fáilte!

Humble Beginnings

In the autumn of 1978 I received a call from John R. Macquarie of Pugwash, Nova Scotia, asking me to meet him with the intent of organizing a branch of Clan MacQuarrie in Atlantic Canada. John R., as he was known, was a very charming and convincing gentleman. It would be hard to say "no"to him. Thus, I accepted his invitation, unaware that it would open the door to many new opportunities for me in the Celtic community, in particular, as publisher of Celtic Life International.

John R. wanted to ensure that Clan MacQuarrie would be ready for the first-ever International Gathering of the Clans to be held outside Scotland the following year. That same summer of 1979 saw the inaugural Nova Scotia International Tattoo, held as a tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, who opened both events in Halifax.

With a background in publishing, I was asked to print an information circular in the form of a tabloid magazine about the activities of the Clans of Nova Scotia and the upcoming International Gathering. I called the publication The Clansman. This was the origin of what would become Celtic Life International Magazine.

In the early days, the mandate of The Clansman was to promote Scottish culture and, in particular, the activities of the Scottish Clans. However, the global Celtic bloodline runs much deeper and wider and the magazine evolved to reflect the more all-inclusive audience of the Seven Celtic Nations. With advances in technology we were soon able to reach a much larger audience.

Today, Celtic Life International represents a global community for a living, breathing Celtic culture. Among our many Celtic initiatives are working with organizations like the World Peace Tartan Foundation, the Festival Interceltique de L'Orient, New York Tartan Week and the Pipes of Christmas. We also promote Celtic cuisine through our annual cookbook, Cabrini's Celtic Kitchen, featuring recipes from the Seven Celtic Nations and beyond. Regular features in our publication on travel, Celtic and Gaelic Studies, language, the arts, sports and more reflect the diverse nature and interests of our audience.

The future looks bright. Currently, we reach over 1 million people bimonthly via our social media, website, print and digital publications.

However, to be successful, Celtic Life International must also be significant. Our mandate to promote and preserve Celtic culture means that we will continue to connect the Celtic dots, bringing people together from around the world. And people are what our Celtic community is all about.

We welcome you to the Best of Celtic Life International, containing a cross-section of stories from past issues that capture and convey the hopes, dreams, thoughts, feelings, opinions, perspectives and experiences of contemporary Celts everywhere.

Enjoy and May God Bless
Angus M. Macquarrie, Publisher

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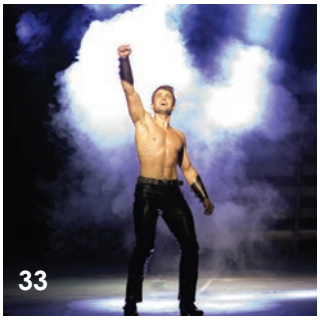

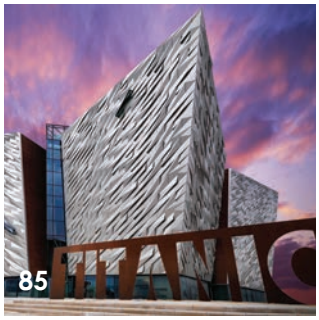

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first word

Celtic Roots? Somebody Who Looks Like Me…

A few months ago I went out to dinner with some old friends and new acquaintances. We were a motley crowd – American, British, Irish, all in the Celtic business – and somehow we were half way through dinner before the Irish woman sitting across from me heard my last name: Nagle. She looked at me, bewildered, "I would never have believed that somebody who looks like you could have such an Irish name."

An Irish name. Although few Americans realize it, Sarah Nagle is a very Irish name. The Irish, of course, have an edge. My family name, Nagle, is literally as Irish as the hills. (The Nagle Mountains flank the Blackwater Valley.) Someone who looks like me. She had a point though. My name may be as Irish as the hills, but I don't look very Irish.

"This is America. Things can get a little complicated in 100 years." We both laughed it off. But there was a truth there, in the question and in the answer, that we – as individuals, as a family, as "Irish" people, as Irish-Americans and as a Celtic collective whole – have never, until recently been particularly good at acknowledging: Things do get complicated. And I see that messy, complicated 21st century Celtic reality reflected in my family tree and my family business.

I am the great-granddaughter of an Irish emigrant who married a thoroughly Americanized woman of primarily Scottish descent. I am the granddaughter of a man of mixed Celtic heritage who married a woman with no Celtic heritage. Products all of us, ethnically or culturally, of the emigrant cauldron of America from the early 20th century.

Today there is nothing particularly startling about the hybrid nature of Celtic culture. Fusion, indy and alt bands headline the festivals. The knife-edge identity politics of the 1920s – hyphenation was a dirty word in America in the '20s and '30s – are now barely remembered. And yet...on the business side of things there is often little acknowledgement of the hybrid nature of much modern Celtic culture, or the complex origins of so much ancient and traditional Celtic art.

Celtic art has gone mainstream in the past 20 years. Celtic jewelry in particular has become a staple of many non-Celtic businesses. (A man might only buy one kilt in his life, but chances are he'll buy several kilt pins as well as belt buckles, plaid brooches and cuff links.)

I've been fortunate enough to see the Celtic market in general expand over the past decade and become more diverse. I've also been fortunate enough to see my own family's business expand and become more diverse. Today we are making more than 200 stock designs that we were not making 10 years ago. We've expanded our plaid brooch line – we now have a colour catalogue with more than 120 different plaid brooch designs – we've also expanded our kilt pin line. We've recently started making belt buckles again. A few years ago we started working in bronze – a copper-tin alloy beloved by the pre-Roman and Roman era Celtic tribes – as well as pewter, silver and gold. We've expanded our wholesale business and today about 30 small Celtic retailers in the U.S. and Canada carry Nagle Forge & Foundry pieces.

But sometimes I think the sheer diversity of the Celtic artistic tradition can be as bewildering as the idea that someone who looks like me could have such an Irish name. Celtic design has always been about more than claddaghs and thistles. But for a long time if a design didn't have a shamrock, thistle or cross – something immediately identifiable as "Celtic" – it wasn't salable. In recent years I think the pendulum has swung the other way and a lot of people are actively seeking out "different" Celtic designs. Today I think we finally have the opportunity of fully embracing the broad range of Celtic art forms that have developed over the past 2,000 years.

By Sarah Nagle
www.nagleforge.com

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piseogs

Celtic culture has some odd traditions. Here, Lora O'Brien looks at piseogs, charms and superstitions.

A group of friends are sitting around a table when one of them scratches his nose.

"Ah, me nose is itchy," he says, scratching away. Then, he exchanges a few light punches with his friends and all is well again.

If you know much about Irish superstitions, you'll understand that traditionally an itchy nose signifies an impending fight, and that a mock fight should be carried out to ensure that the bad luck is done with. Superstitions like these are picked up by many of us in the school yard or around the family dinner table and carried on into adult life.

How many others can you remember, now you're thinking about it? Itchy palms - a sign of money to come. Itchy knuckles - another fight. Itching on the temples and you'll have cause to weep, while if your eyebrows need a scratch, you'll be drinking whiskey. Perhaps those last two are connected.

But it's not all about the itching. A gap between the front teeth is a sign of a beautiful singing voice. There's a vein that connects the third finger of the left hand directly to your heart, making it the best place to wear your wedding ring. What about "One for sorrow, two for joy…", and counting magpies to see what fates they foretell?

A black spot on the tongue is a sign of telling lies; many suspicious parents have told a child to "stick out your tongue 'til I see if you're lying". If your ears are 'burning', someone is talking about you. If it's the right ear that feels inexplicably warm, you are being praised, but if it's the left ear, the talk is bitter and full of malice.

In Ireland, the word for superstition is piseog, pishog or pisreog, depending on dialect and source, but the word implies much more than simple sayings and quaint beliefs. A charm, a spell, a superstitious practice – anything connected with magic – is deemed a piseog in the old stories.

Those who carried out the practices were known as piseogaí. These people could provide beneficial charms and cures and they could counter any malicious piseogs that were placed upon a family or an individual, or they could be the ones who placed the evil.

A classic piseog was connected to May Day morning, the turning of the year at Bealtaine from winter into summer; a time for changes. A malevolent person could go out on this particular morning and mix rotten produce into your farm to try and turn your luck. This could be rotten meat in the haystacks, or rotten eggs in through the soil… either way the imagery is clear, and unless the foulness was found your luck would turn. The sensible farmer would have already taken precautions against this type of shenanigans, and deployed one of the many available counter charms to turn aside ill intent.

May Day was also a time for beneficial changes – washing one's face in the sun-kissed dew on this morning would ensure fresh beauty throughout the year. Who needs expensive lotions when dew drops are free?

These folk beliefs, or superstitions, may seem silly to us now, thinking about them in the light of modern science and technological advancement, but they are reflective of our psychological needs, of how we as humans have thought, felt, and interacted with the world around us, and with each other.

Though we can glean the logic behind the origins of some piseogs, it is not rationality that has ensured their survival, it is repetition. When something is done again and again, down through the generations, it becomes not a superstition but a tradition, and these are held on to. They are links to the past, connection through the generations and common ground from which each new family builds their own rituals.

Maybe the old piseogs avert the bad luck, and bring about the good luck or maybe they don't. But before you decide either way, it might be wise to bear in mind the old Irish saying – Ná dean nós agus ná bris nós - Don't make a custom and don't break a custom.

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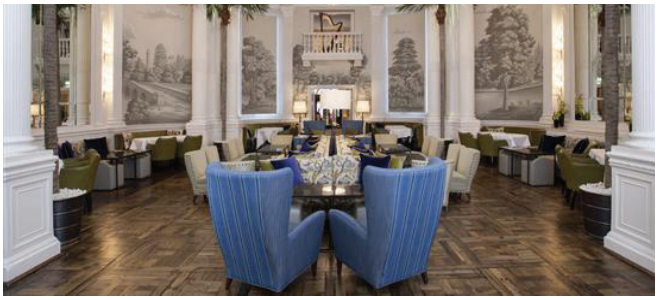

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the triskele

The triskele, or triple spiral, is an ancient symbol with many meanings. It commonly consists of three identical interlocked spirals or three identical protrusions stemming from a shared centre. A design with three-fold rotational symmetry may also be called a triskele.

Steeped in time, the triskele is a Celtic and pre-Celtic symbol found at ancient sites and on artifacts in Ireland, Europe and America.

Famously, the triple spiral is found at the 5,000-year-old Newgrange Passage Tomb in Ireland's Boyne Valley. Pagans have often used the triskele to represent the sun, triadic gods, and the three realms of land, sea and sky. It can also represent the cycles of life and the Triple Goddess (maiden, mother and wise woman). Celtic Christians have used the symbol to represent the Christian Trinity.

The triskele is closely associated with the triskelion, a symbol which looks like three running legs. The triskelion is found on the flags of Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, and on that of the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea.

Some speculate that the Vikings copied the symbol from the Greeks while adventuring in the Mediterranean, as the symbol is found on Greek coins.

The Manx or Isle of Man flag shows a triskelion composed of three legs armoured in chain mail, running clockwise and joined at a triangle.

On the Sicilian flag, three naked human legs are joined by the face of Medusa, festooned by three wheat ears. The legs are said to represent the island's three promontories, while the wheat stands for fertility, and Medusa, for the island's protection.

The origins of the Manx flag are unclear. A legend has it that one day the Celtic Sea God and island's ruler, Mannanan, turned himself into a three-legged wheel so that he could roll down the mountain and vanquish Norse invaders.

In the 10th century, silver pennies featuring the triple knot were issued in the English city of York by the Norse-Irish kings Sithric, Ragnald and Anlaf Cuaran.

Alexander III of Scotland may have adopted the symbol in 1265 when he took the Isle of Man from the Norsemen. Alexander's wife was the sister of the king of Sicily and the symbol was already in use there.

Residents of the island occasionally debate which way the legs should run. On the island's flag they run clockwise. They can run counter-clockwise but should never be kneeling. The Latin Motto associated with the symbol means 'Whichever way you throw me, I stand.'

by Carol Moreira

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seaSPIRITS

The Celtic nations have always had an intimate bond with the sea, writes Simon Reed.

The pounding ocean waves and high winds carve the landscapes into distinctive forms and shape the minds and cultures of the Celtic peoples. This is undoubtedly true of Cornwall, which pokes like a long finger into the treacherous waters of the North Atlantic. The sea here provides food and wealth, but also tragedy and death. The immense power of this environment has led to the creation of a huge corpus of Cornish sea folklore, in particular stories of sea spirits that embody the qualities of the ocean.

Mermaids, or morvoren as they are known in the Cornish language, often feature famous mermaid legends and include the stories Lutey and the Mermaid and the Mermaid of Zennor.

In the small village of Zennor, situated in the far west of Cornwall, there is a church dedicated to Saint Senara, a Breton saint who is said to have floated to Cornwall inside a chest after being cruelly punished by her husband. Within the church, an enigmatic carving of a mermaid is incorporated into one of the benches. Made of dense, ancient wood, this striking carving is said to celebrate the story of a young man called Matty Trewhella who lived hundreds of years ago and was a renowned church singer. One day, a beautiful and mysterious lady appeared at the door of the church, apparently enchanted by Matty's singing. The stranger began attending church services, listening intently to Matty's performances. Then they both disappeared and it was believed they had fallen in love and eloped.

Years later, fishermen in the nearby cove of Pendour, were accosted by a mermaid who angrily requested they remove their anchor, which was blocking the door to her home. The fishermen recognized the mermaid as being the lovely lady from the church and wondered whether Matty had been lulled to his doom or followed his heart to a new life.

The story of Lutey and the Mermaid occurred some 30 miles from Zennor on the Lizard Peninsula, the most southerly point in mainland Britain. It is said that Lutey, a local fisherman, was walking on the beach when he found a stranded mermaid. Taking pity on her, he carried her to the sea's edge and to freedom. As a reward, the mermaid gave Lutey the power to heal which was then passed down through his family. This power came with a heavy price however; Lutey drowned nine years after helping the mermaid, and it was believed that every nine years one of his relatives would face the same destiny.

For me, the most fascinating Cornish sea spirit is not a mermaid but a powerful and destructive manifestation of the storm - the Bucca. High above the village of Newlyn in West Cornwall there is a green rock formation covered in curious patterns and shapes called the Tolcarne. This was one of the abodes of the Bucca, thought to be a storm demon or a remnant of a Celtic storm god. Here, and on the foreshores of local beaches, the town's fishermen used to leave an offering of three fish to appease this elemental force. It was thought that failure to do so would result in death.

Over time, Bucca was transformed into the Devil himself. It's said he was chased from Cornwall by the choir of St. Pol De Leon Church, leaving his footprints embedded in the green rock above the village.

Sometimes in Cornwall, when the waves are pounding, it is easy to understand why people living near the volatile and mysterious sea came to believe in volatile and mysterious entities.

Simon Reed is the author of The Cornish Traditional Year, which examines the unique pattern of seasonal customs in the Duchy, and Wassailing - The British Blessing Custom. He was Mayor of the Cornish town of Penzance between 2003 and 2005 and is responsible for many of the recently revived traditions found in that community. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

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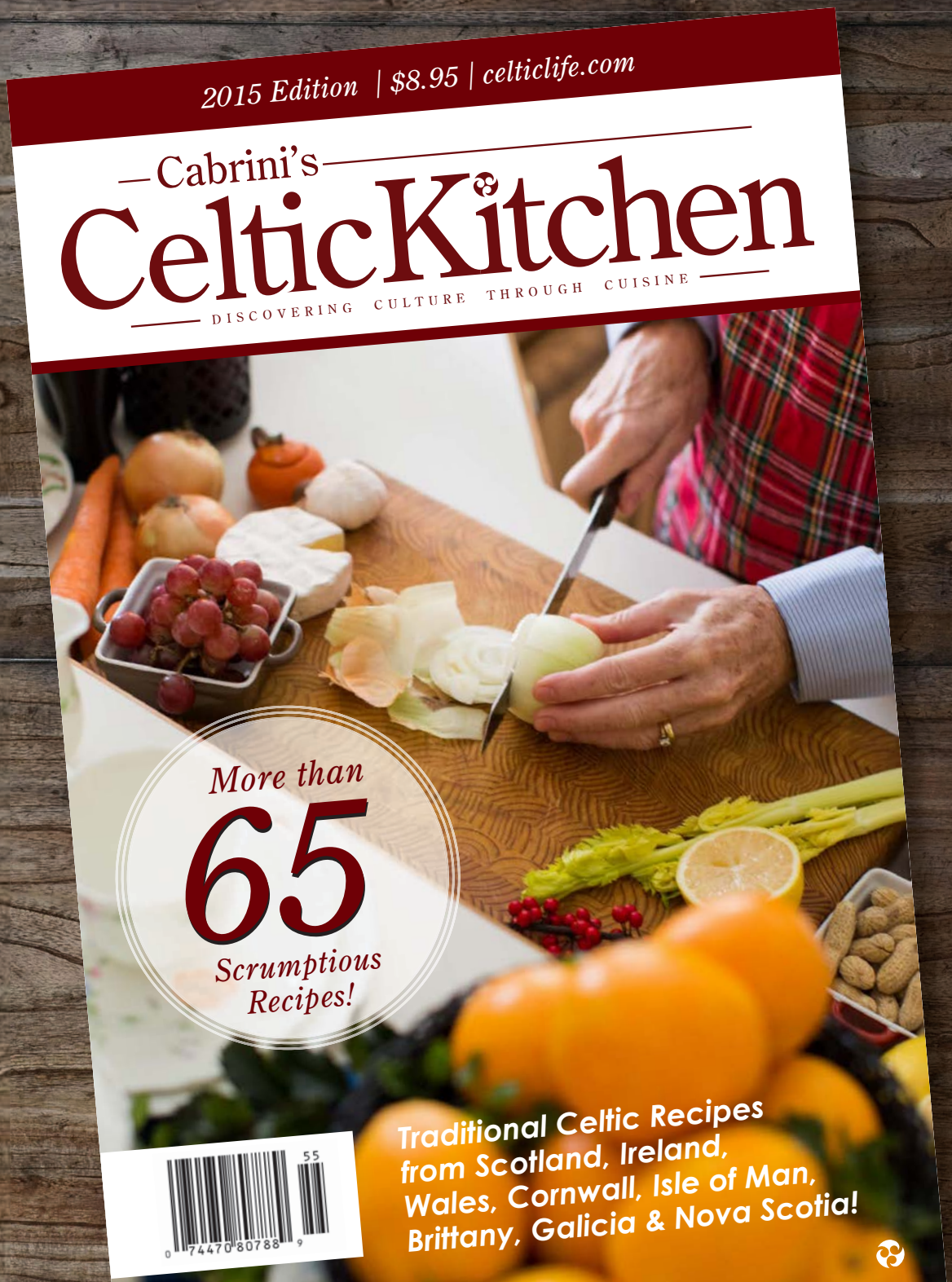

The *Mullaghbawn* Occupation

The International Women's Movement was born more than a half-century ago and contrary to popular belief, it didn't begin with Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, or a legion of bra-burning feminists. They're wrongly credited with leading the women's lib charge.

If history demands vindication and truth be told, the international women's movement started one inauspicious Sunday in a chapel in Mullaghbawn, South Armagh, Ireland. I know this because I witnessed the event that triggered the earth-shattering universal sexual revolution.

In fact, my wife and Jemmy Toal, a local blacksmith, are responsible for igniting the firestorm that transformed Mullaghbawn, Armagh, and, in time, the whole Western World.

What happened that historic Sunday with my wife and the legendary blacksmith is soon told.

It was a half-century ago, in 1964, that my wife, three boys, and I moved into a dank house owned by a distant relative on the river in the Village of Forkhill. "Joe Gorman's house," as the dampish manse came to be known, was a mere mile from the family farm, where my grandfather was born.

I was told that I was related to half the countryside. We were "known" in Forkhill, but Mullaghbawn was another story — it was a mystery to us.

Nestled up the Markethill Road along Slieve Gullion's side, the hamlet (one could hardly call it a village) had only a few shops and a chapel. But, because Forkhill had no chapel of its own and Joe Gorman's house was "on the wrong side of the river," we were informed by distraught kin that Mullaghbawn was indeed our parish and that our absence at mass might be taken as a slight.

So, on the first Sunday in Joe Gorman's, we dutifully dressed and journeyed a mile up . . . and two centuries back . . . to Mullaghbawn and the Church that Time Forgot.

As we made our way into the only vacant pew on the right side of the cramped chapel, my wife smiled across at familiar women's faces in the congregation — all of whom registered degrees of shock and disbelief. Two women signaled frantically to her, but she took it as a vigorous gesture of recognition. She couldn't decipher the code.

"Is it okay if we sit here?" she asked in innocence as the other occupants of the pew grinned, nodded in unison, and shifted to make room. We genuflected and filed in. With that, the sacristy bell was rung, and priest and servers made their way to the altar.

Our pew-mates, now fidgeting and elbowing one another in anticipation of what was to come, could hardly contain themselves. And it soon came in the gaunt figure of the ancient blacksmith Jemmy Toal brandishing a blackthorn and thumping his way menacingly up the aisle.

Tension was building — priest and servers froze in place to witness the calamity in the making — as the weathered blacksmith peered into the bench with his one good eye, caught a glimpse of the strange woman occupying his place, and rotated the stick threateningly above his head, like a druid hurling a curse and shouting for all to hear, "Is it women on the job?"

The penny dropped, and my wife, suddenly realizing she was not only the lone woman on the male side of Mullaghbawn chapel, but also that she'd committed an unpardonable sin that cried out to heaven for vengeance — she'd taken the pew that the grizzled blacksmith had no doubt occupied from birth.

What began as silent warnings from the women's side of the chapel had, at the smith's entry, turned to near hysteria. There was, among the women in the congregation, a mass epiphany that would lead to a common cause. There was shared outrage at the insensitivity of husbands, sons, and brothers, and there was resolve to buck tradition and a system that had assuredly outlived its time.

The following Sunday, in defiance of Jemmy Toal and his ilk, the women of the parish, raised the battlecry "women on the job," and began a revolution of their own. They "occupied" the entire male side of Mullaghbawn chapel and sat back to watch Jemmy Toal and other hapless menfolk wander aimlessly in search of new roosts.

Life would never be the same — not in Mullaghbawn, not in Ireland, not anywhere else. The international women's movement broke ground that Sunday, and it would not go away.

And, I'm thinking, if he were alive and able, Jemmy Toal, the blacksmith who inspired the feminist revolution wouldn't have voted for a Mary Robinson or Mary McAleese or any other female. . . Jemmy never liked women on the job.

By Donal O'Cathasaigh

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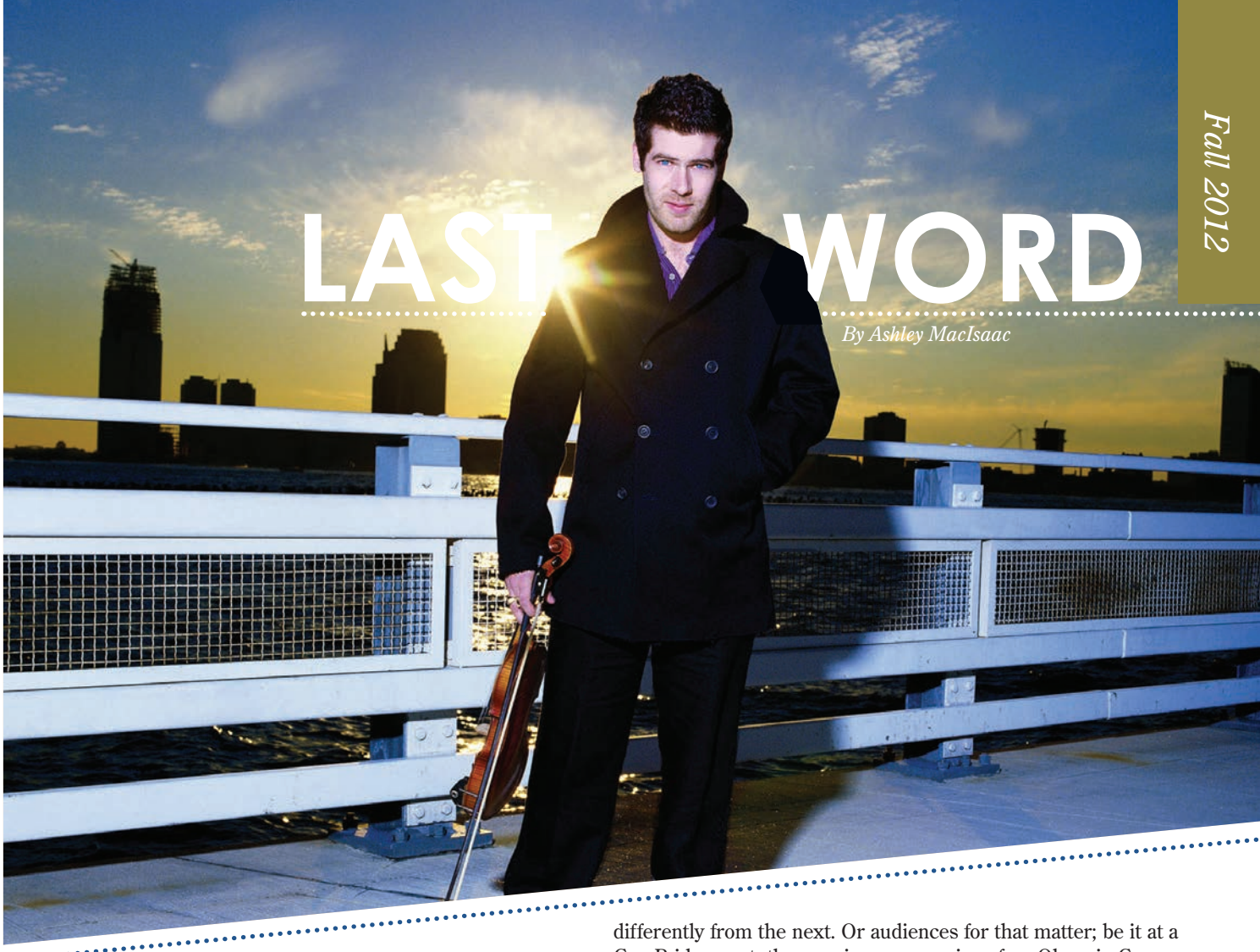
LAST WORD

By Ashley MacIsaac



When I first thought that I might be gay, I was already a fiddler, a step-dancer, and a bearer of a great tradition.

I asked myself, how in God's name could I possibly go with this whole gay thing? I was surrounded by family, friends and fans who believed that fiddlers were 'real men', masculine and bold.

Who was I to screw with this stereotype? And, how was I to reconcile a long-held perspective with my true identity?

I have always believed in myself as a musician – that has never been in question, and it isn't today. So, back then, I just went ahead and did my own thing, bringing my music to the world, confident that my abilities as a player would overshadow the whole question and controversy surrounding my sexual identity. If I was unique and good, even great, then people would like me, gay or not. And that is what happened.

Sure, early on in my career many people were angry and turned off by how open I chose to be about my personal life. Other fiddlers, and even their parents, sent me nasty letters with warnings of my descent into Hell and threats of eternal damnation, etc.

But now I understand that they were probably just jealous of my talent and success. Some of those players – some of them the very same anti-gay individuals who chastised me - enjoy opportunities today because of the doors that I opened.

Me? I love people and I refuse to treat one individual any differently from the next. Or audiences for that matter; be it at a Gay Pride event, the opening ceremonies of an Olympic Games or even a square dance in a small village.

In truth, real music fans couldn't care less about my personal life. They don't want to hear about my visit to some really awesome dance club in New York's Gay Village. They want to hear my music.

And music is what I do. I still make traditional albums, and of course I still push the limits of Cape Breton fiddling in my pop recordings and in my performances. It is my job to balance and present a modern agenda with a traditional upbringing.

The irony of it all is that while the music of the Celts has been around a long time, being gay has been around even longer.

I cannot overstate how important both have been to my life. Hopefully other young musicians feel as free to express themselves in both areas as I have, no matter their ethnic, cultural, financial, musical or sexual standing. I know that, for me, a fiddle player from the wilds of Cape Breton, each element has enriched my life and contributed to my passion and profession.

In retrospect, I realize that my attitude perhaps didn't come so much from a desire to present my music to the world, but more a wish to discover what the world had to offer someone like me. Gay. The fiddle has allowed me to see the world, and I love it – haters included.

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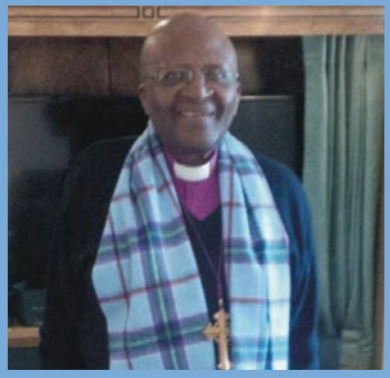

Bishop Desmond Tutu

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UP FRONT

He may not be Celtic, but Arun Gandhi is honoured to wear the tartan

Arun Gandhi remembers the first time he wore a kilt.

"It was at the From Scotland with Love fashion show in Manhattan in 2012," recalls the spiritual leader by phone from his home in upstate New York. "My good friend Victor Spence from Edinburgh was there promoting his World Peace Tartan initiative, and he put me in a kilt and put me up on the catwalk like some sort of celebrity."

It was also the last time that the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi wore the traditional Scottish wrap.

"Victor wouldn't let me keep it," laughs the 81-year-old. "I believe it was the only one he had at the time, so he couldn't let it go. He did give me the scarf, however, and I wear that with great pride."

Gandhi is one of numerous notable recipients of the World Peace Tartan scarf, a list that includes eight Nobel Peace Laureates, the Dalai Lama, the Archbishop of Canterbury, astronaut Chris Hadfield, champion bagpiper Craig Weir, human rights lawyer Yola Minatchy, renowned concert pianist Grace Mo, and Bishop Desmond Tutu.

"Actually, I will be visiting with Bishop Tutu in South Africa next week," says Gandhi. "We have become great friends, with common interests, and there is always much to discuss; politics, economics, the eradication of poverty and disease.

"And, of course, world peace," he adds. "That is always on the agenda."

Given Gandhi's pedigree, his passion is understandable. Not only is he the descendant of one of the world's greatest peacemakers - with whom he lived for some time - both of his parents were involved in the global nonviolence movement as well.

Growing up in apartheid-era South Africa, his experiences with discrimination inspired him to carry on the family tradition. Over the last six decades, the socio-political activist has lobbied tirelessly for global harmony via endless speaking engagements, meetings with world leaders, the authoring of several books, and the creation of both the Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence and the Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute.

"Change will happen from the ground up…"

Along the way, he has witnessed many injustices, most of which, he explains, are the product of greed.

"The world's current economic systems are fundamentally flawed - the axis upon which they spin favours the few at the expense of the many. Sadly, most governments - once the property of the public realm - now have their policies dictated to them by private corporate interests."

The problem of paradigm, proposes Gandhi, runs deeper than politics.

"Our thinking on these matters is awry. Most of us have an infinite growth mentality about our lives, meaning that we act as if our water, trees, natural resources, energy sources, and food supplies are limitless. However, as we are learning, they are not. And even though we know better, we continue to consume what we want, when we want it.

"We now live in a very materialistic world, where the measure of success is based upon what you possess, instead of who you are. Spiritual development, our highest calling as human beings, has taken a backseat to rampant commercialism."

As such, he acknowledges that things are likely to get worse before they get better.

"I am afraid that, as a species, we may need to hit bottom - and even drag there for a while - before we learn our lessons. Often, spiritual awakenings are preceded by rude awakenings."

Despite the dire prediction, Gandhi believes there is always hope.

"Change will happen from the ground up, it always has - grassroots organizations and movements that make sense and gain momentum. The internet is a very valuable tool in that regard, both for education - exchanging information and sharing best practices - and for organizing and mobilizing people."

The power of the individual to make a difference, he points out, cannot be overstated.

"Look at the work my grandfather did - he changed the course of history. He was one man with a vision. There are countless other examples of courageous men and women around the world with unique vision who are choosing to be a part of the solution.

"Victor Spence is a man like that. I am very proud to wear my World Peace Tartan scarf, and so pleased that he let me keep it."

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Controversial Irish comedian TOMMY TIERNAN is a stand-up guy

To hear Tommy Tiernan tell it, you'd think he was a wee bit daft.

"I really have no idea," the hyper-chatty Irish comedian said in his thick Donegal drawl when asked to explain his success. "But I must be doing something right, because the crowds keep coming back, or maybe it's because I keep doing something wrong and they are determined to see me do it right."

Speaking by phone from The Brooks Hotel in downtown Dublin, the forty-three-year-old humourist struggled to explain his immense popularity in both the Irish capital city where he just completed his 200th sold-out show at the 1,000-seat Vicar Street performing arts center, and elsewhere across the country.

"It's not very often that I'm speechless," he chuckled, adding, "I'm just happy that people seem to love what I do, and I'm extremely grateful to be making a living doing what I love."

Perhaps it is his sheer verbosity, or maybe it's his spastic delivery, or even his 'I-know-I'm going-just-a-little-too-far-with-this-joke-but-I'm-going-to-do-it-anyway' cavalier attitude - whatever it is, Tiernan is tickling more funny bones than ever, both at home and abroad.

"Comedy has this great universal appeal," he mused. "I can tell the same joke, or do the same kind of routine, just about anywhere in the world and someone, somewhere, is going to relate to it."

All this means that Tiernan's show is inevitably influenced by his surroundings.

"If I'm on the road in Canada, then the show will take on a Canadian flavor over time, or if I'm in London then I might bring up stuff that is relevant to the U.K. The core of the joke is the same, however, and so is the response."

That response has sometimes been mixed over the years, and Tiernan has often been called-out for crossing the line into taboo territory. Still, his contentious wit keeps packing the rafters - especially with young people - and tickets to his upcoming tour-dates in Canada are selling briskly.

"Just like here at home, the crowds in Canada and America don't come out to see me just because I'm Irish," he explained. "Sure, there will always be the nostalgia factor for North Americans – you know, the older ex-pats who will go to anything with the word Ireland stamped on it – but that's the exception rather than the rule for me and what I do."

He added that the only real difference between Irish and North American audiences is that "the Irish are shorter."

While his appeal is broader than his heritage, Tiernan acknowledges that the apple never falls too far from the tree.

"Look - I'm Irish, there is no way of escaping it, those are my roots and they are on display every time I take the stage. I don't shy away from the fact that I come from where I do, but at the same time I don't consider myself some sort of spokesperson or poster-child for my country. I am a stand-up comedian - I try to make people laugh. And it just so happens that the Irish are generally pretty good at that."

To that end, Irish comedy, he believes, is in a solid place these days.

"I like that we are a little different about things here. We are a bit quirky - almost like we are afraid of success. And because of that we have managed to maintain a sense of authenticity about it all; our comedy isn't this generic, made-for-TV schlock that you might get elsewhere. We are who we are and it is what it is and that's the way we like it and we make no excuses."

Tiernan's own creative-comedic process contrasts with the exuberance of his performance.

"I am not so sure I would call it a process; it's more of a perception which isn't always easy to call up. I tend to wait around for it like a lost poet waiting for the last bus. The ideas and words come to me when I am alone, usually when I am out walking on my own, in silence."

The silence, he acknowledges, brings some balance to his busy life.

"Yeah," he laughed,

"it's not very often that I'm speechless."

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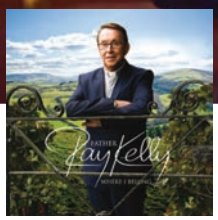
Father Ray Kelly



With a deeply-rooted faith, and a little help from his friends on high, Father Ray Kelly has his Hallelujah moment

He might be Ireland's most unlikely rock star. And while he may not sport sexy sunglasses like U2's Bono, nor scowl like Boomtown Rats frontman Bob Geldof, nor even croon Take Me to Church like Dublin hipster Hozier, Father Ray Kelly can carry a tune with the best of them.

"A singing Irish priest," smirks the affable 60-something clergyman over the phone from his parish in Westmeath. "Who would imagine, right?"

By now, most know the story of the pastor's impromptu performance of Leonard Cohen's haunting Hallelujah at a Meath wedding last year. His stirring rendition brought the bride, groom and their guests to tears, and – within days – had tens of millions of YouTube users reaching for their tissues.

"I've been singing at weddings for many years," shares Kelly. "Music is a vital part of church ceremonies so, to be honest, I wasn't quite sure what all the fuss was about."

The video's popularity propelled the tenor to instant stardom, and soon his schedule was full with interviews, television appearances, concert performances, and record company interest.

"It all happened very quickly," he recounts. "One day I am preparing my service for Sunday Mass, and the next day I am in front of a camera on RTE One's The Late Late Show. It was surreal."

Less than a year later, the good Father has released his major-label debut recording *Where I Belong*.

"I wanted a good mix of spiritual and secular songs," he explains. "And songs that were best suited for my voice. It was important to me that each of the tracks could stand on their own two feet - both emotionally and in terms of sound and style - while at the same time work well alongside the others."

Along with Hallelujah, Kelly covers R.E.M.'s Everybody Hurts, Eric Clapton's Tears in Heaven, as well as traditional tunes from the Emerald Isle, Galway Bay and Danny Boy. Another wedding waltz – Together Forever – is included on the CD, as are a smattering of spiritual standards.

"Pieces like Amazing Grace and How Great Thou Art are classics of the church," he notes. "I've been listening to choirs sing those songs for years. They always help to lift the spirit.

> *"My faith is a deeply personal thing..."*

Spirituality is a hot topic for Kelly, since having 'found his religion' more than three decades ago.

"At one time I worked in the public service sector in Dublin," he recalls. "Across the street from my office was a church that I would often visit in the mornings before work or over the lunch hour. I always felt this tremendous sense of serenity while there - an inner peace would wash over me and take all of my troubles away. There was no bright light, no thunderous voice from above, nor 'on-the-mountaintop' moment – just the feeling that this was where I belonged."

After ordination, Kelly returned to his home county of Meath to serve his constituency.

"It's not an easy gig," he confesses. "The church has had its fair share of struggles both here in Ireland and abroad in recent years. The times have changed, and we haven't always been the best early-adapters. As well, all sorts of other options are now available for people who are looking for deeper meaning and purpose in their lives.

"That said, amidst all the troubles and strife in the world today, our doors remain open to those seeking solace and support. We are still a very strong community of faith, bound by our love for God and one another."

Kelly still believes in the power of attraction over promotion.

"My faith is a deeply personal thing, and often difficult to describe to people. I'd like to think that priests like me inspire our fellow men and women with the way in which we live our lives in service to others. Most of us go about our business quietly and steadfastly."

As such, and despite his newfound celebrity, Kelly says his life hasn't changed that much since going viral.

"Oh, I have a few more shows and weddings than usual lined up I suppose, and a Facebook page I have to monitor, but I still have my weekly Sunday service to write and prepare, and parishioners to answer to. In that way, I'm more blessed than Bono."

www.facebook.com/FatherRayKelly

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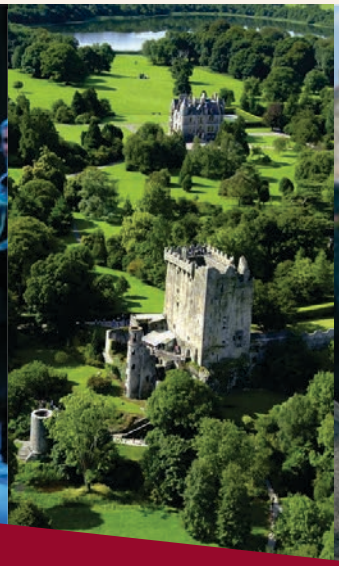

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Diana Gabaldon

After reading one of Diana Gabaldon's thrilling historical fiction novels, you may be surprised to learn that the author of the acclaimed Outlander series is American with Mexican and English roots, not Scottish.

Gabaldon's Outlander books are loved for the way she captures the history and culture of the Scottish Highlands with her exciting descriptions of action-packed battles and heady romance. The American also excels at recreating the region's language.

Gabaldon told Celtic Life International that she first worked on the Highland's dialect by listening to tapes and CDs by Scottish folk singers. "You can pick up quite a lot of the dialect from the song lyrics themselves, but even more from the live performances, where you hear the band members chatting with each other and with the audience in between numbers," she said from her home in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Gaelic proved more of a challenge. Gabaldon incorporated small amounts to represent the language spoken in the Highlands during the 18th century and, early on in the series, she was pleased to receive a letter from Iain Taylor, a native Gaelic speaker from the Isle of Harris.

Taylor said he could tell Gabaldon was relying solely on a dictionary for Gaelic terms and he offered to help her, to which Gabaldon replied, "That would be wonderful Mr. Taylor. Where have you been all my life?" Since then, Taylor along with Catherine MacGregor and Catherine-Ann MacPhee, have helped Gabaldon with Gaelic translations.

Gabaldon is now a New York Times bestselling author and her Outlander series and its offshoot, the Lord John Grey series, are published in 29 countries and 26 languages. It all began in the early 1990s with what Gabaldon calls her "practice novel" – a work she started after watching an episode of the BBC science fiction series Doctor Who, set during the year 1745, and which featured a "fetching" young Scotsman. Gabaldon immediately went to the library at Arizona State University, where she was a professor-researcher specializing in scientific computation and quantitative ecology, and typed the words, Scotland, Highlands, 18th century, into the card catalogue.

After intense research and self-discipline (she wrote while working full-time and raising three children under the age of six) she found the courage to share her practice novel with a CompuServe Literary Forum. Outlander, known as Cross Stitch in the UK, was released in 1991.

The book's success soon meant Gabaldon needed to write additional books, and she told her husband the time had come to visit Scotland.

"It was wonderful – it was actually exactly the way I'd been imagining it," she said, adding that visiting Scotland allowed her to absorb many realistic details. For instance, at Loch Ness, the writer was amazed to see white swans swimming around the headland. "I would have never imagined in a million years there were swans on Loch Ness," she said.

Gabaldon has returned to Scotland more than a dozen times since. Nowadays, a handful of Scottish companies run Outlander-themed tours, and Celtic fusion band Uncle Hamish and the Hooligans has composed a song based on the series.

Lovers of her work are currently anticipating an Outlander television series. The STARZ network has acquired the rights and has hired Ron Moore, author of Battlestar Galactica, to write the pilot.

"Ron came out with his assistant and they spent two days with me talking over the books and telling me their ideas on how they might do an adaptation, which I liked very much," said Gabaldon, adding that once the script is finished, STARZ will decide on how to proceed.

Currently, Gabaldon is working on Written in My Own Heart's Blood, the eighth book in the Outlander series, as well as the second volume of The Outlandish Companion.

She prizes the positive response she's received from Scottish readers, and is now an honorary member of Clans Fraser, MacKenzie and Anderson. She was thrilled when she visited an Edinburgh bookshop and saw her novels in the Scottish Fiction section.

"I found the manager and said, 'I'm really pleased that you put my books there.' And he said, 'Well we thought Gabaldon was such an odd name it might quite well be Scottish!'"

By Michelle Brunet

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the Outlander

Scottish actor Graham McTavish is never far from the warmth of home

Graham McTavish is shivering as he hails a cab in downtown Philadelphia.

"Aye, it is bitterly cold," says the 53 year-old thespian over the phone. "This is the only unpleasant part of the job. Actually, being outside in winter is probably the only unpleasant part of life."

McTavish is in the City of Brotherly Love to film Creed - the latest in Sylvester Stallone's ageless Rocky Balboa saga, which is scheduled for release this fall.

"Except for Sly, I might be the only actor who has appeared in both the Rocky and Rambo movies," he laughs. "Sly is a consummate professional on set, and he's had an incredible ride with Rocky."

It has also been an interesting professional journey for McTavish. From school-days productions to his current role, the native Glaswegian has seen all sides of the performing arts; theatre, television, cinema, voice-over work for animated films and video games, and more.

"Everything except radio," he notes. "I just sort of picked up acting as a youngster and ran with it. I have been quite fortunate that way; the work came to me, and I simply put in the hours."

McTavish says his "ah-ha" moment arrived when he was cast as Dwalin in The Hobbit film series.

"It struck me quite suddenly that I had really arrived as an actor, and that I was reaching a pinnacle in my profession. Given the popularity of both the books and the films, the challenge became where I could possibly take my career from there."

And then, along came Outlander.

"Well, it's a perfect fit for me, don't you think?" he grins, referring to his portrayal of Dougal MacKenzie on the award-winning, Diana Gabaldon-inspired TV series.

"Dougal is a complex character," he continues. "He is a man of contradictions, and very self-conflicted at times. Still, he is someone with a very firm set of principles, and deep down, he has a heart of gold."

The Outlander experience has been as rewarding personally as it has been professionally.

"I really miss my cast-mates," he shares. "We are very much a family on set, and it has been good fun getting to know and work with everyone. I still speak with Sam, Stephen, Gary, Grant and Duncan all the time, and I can't wait to work with them again."

Filming in Scotland also afforded McTavish the opportunity to trace his own roots.

"In my down time I explored the National Records to get a better understanding of my ancestor's history and heritage. Though I am the only actor in the lineage, it turns out there is a lot of interesting fruit in the family tree. It was quite revealing, and made me even prouder to have been born and raised in Scotland."

A staunch supporter of Scottish independence, McTavish was encouraged with the results of last year's referendum.

"Despite the loss, there were several positive signs; voter turn-out was huge, as was the number of young people engaged in the political process. Although the older voters opted for the status quo, the younger voters were decidedly in favour of independence. That bodes well for the country's future."

His pride will be on display again this April 11, when McTavish leads the annual New York City Tartan Day Parade.

"It's a great honour and thrill to be involved as Grand Marshal," he says. "And it will be exciting to be surrounded by my fellow countrymen and women. I meet expats all the time – the accent gives us away – and I feel that connection, that bond, each time. And, being Scots, there is always something for us to talk about – or, perhaps more accurately - something for us to argue about."

That Scottish presence is also strong in New Zealand, where McTavish and his wife and children settled in 2011.

"I am amazed at the number of expats I have met there. There are probably more McTavishes in New Zealand than back home in Scotland! And it's such a lovely part of the world, and a perfect place to raise the kids.

"And," he sighs, stepping out of his cab and into his hotel, "it's certainly a wee bit warmer there this time of the year."

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Hiking the Cape Breton Highlands

Three years ago, folk singer Taylor Mitchell was attacked by coyotes while hiking alone in the Cape Breton Highlands National Park on Canada's east coast. Tragically, she did not survive.

Mitchell was horribly unlucky; attacks like this are extremely rare - it was the first such incident in Nova Scotia - and Mitchell's death should not deter visitors from experiencing the beauty of the area.

"We haven't had any incidents lately," says Mariève Therriault, the national park's visitor experience product development officer. "There are lots of steps being taken to ensure these things don't happen again". Therriault, an avid hiker, has yet to see a coyote in the eight years she has been working in the park.

The national park covers 948 square kilometers of the Cape Breton Highlands, a mountainous plateau of rugged, coastal cliffs and lush vegetation stretched across the northern section of Cape Breton Island. Perhaps the scenery - which is reminiscent of Scotland - explains why thousands of Scottish Gaels have settled the area throughout the centuries.

Considered one of the planet's most picturesque drives, the 298-km Cabot Trail encircles the majority of the Highlands. Tens of thousands drive the circuit each year to experience its sheer beauty. And when the evenings begin to cool in late September or early October, and the leaves turn sizzling reds and golden yellows, the Cabot Trail becomes a true visual feast.

The fall foliage views are even more stunning when you set out on foot into the surrounding wilderness.

"We've been trying to encourage people to take advantage of our trails to discover all the treasures that it's hiding," says Therriault.

The national park boasts 26 different hiking trails suitable for a range of skill levels; from the 15-minute, wheelchair accessible Bog trail to the challenging three-hour Franey climb.

"Franey is one of my favourites." Therriault exclaims. "You have a view of Cape Smokey, the Middle Head Peninsula that goes out into the Atlantic Ocean, and the Clyburn Valley. It feels like you're standing on the edge of the world."

There are also dozens of hiking routes outside the national park, accessible via the Cabot Trail. For example, the North River Falls Trail, a 25-minute drive from the Gaelic College in St. Ann's, showcases the largest waterfalls in all the Maritimes.

Native Cape Bretoner and avid outdoorsman, Jason McNeil, describes the 19-km hike as a huge challenge, but well-worth the sweat.

"Once you make it through the old forest, the hike becomes increasingly more difficult as you wind your way through more mountains, scale riverside cliffs and nervously cross old hand-made bridges," he relates.

"The mighty 32-metre North River Falls is a truly breathtaking sight…I always feel an unexplainable serenity when I am in these woods. Time it with the leaves changing during the fall for an extra mind-numbing experience."

Nearby, in the village of Indian Brook is Cabot Shores, a wilderness retreat owned by Dr. Paul Weinberg and his wife Barbara.

"We teach people where the good trails are off the Cabot Trail, and sometimes we will actually guide them on those trails," says Dr. Paul.

There are several public trails nearby that glimmer and shine during autumn, including the Indian Brook trails that Dr. Paul and members of the local Mi'kmaq community created.

The Weinbergs are passionate about the therapeutic benefits of outdoor recreation, and they have guided hikers from six to 91 years old and hosted retreats for groups like Young Adult Cancer Canada.

Tom C. Wilson, chairman of the annual Hike the Highlands Festival, sees another benefit of hiking in the region – the camaraderie.

"The festival is a physical activity but it's also a social activity," shares Wilson. "Every year when we have our first hike of the festival, you'd just be amazed at all the hugs."

This year's gathering runs from September 14 to 23, and offers participants a choice of 26 guided hikes around the Highlands.

Another festival soon approaching is the popular Celtic Colours International Festival, from October 5 to 13. Many of the venues, showcasing music and art from local and international Scottish, Irish, Acadian and Mi'kmaq traditions, are located around the Cabot Trail. You would be hard pressed not to find a route close to each of the host towns, so attendees can easily enjoy the colours alongside the Celtic cultures. Additionally, Parks Canada will be guiding festival hikes the mornings of October 9 and 11.

For your walking holiday in the Cape Breton Highlands, make sure to bring comfortable hiking shoes, a walking stick or pole, water, light snacks, sun block, mosquito repellent and a wide brim hat, says Roland Coombes of Cape Breton Island Hoppers Volkssport Club.

"If you pack it in, pack it out," he adds, noting that even biodegradables, like apple cores, should be carried out since they could potentially attract wildlife to frequented trails.

The safest way to avoid dangerous encounters with wildlife, Wilson says, is to hike in groups. If you decide to go hiking alone for a soul-searching experience, be aware of Parks Canada's guidelines on dealing with moose, black bears and coyotes. (Guidelines are available on their website, in brochures and on signs throughout the park). Should you come face-to-face with a bold coyote, stand your ground and never run, recommends Therriault.

In all likelihood, however, your hiking experience within the pristine environs surrounding the Cabot Trail will be fun and fulfilling, especially this time of year.

"Sometimes it feels like you've just plunged in paint, it's so surreal, the colours are so vivid," shares Therriault. "We are so spoiled with all the hiking trails. I've been here for eight years and I'm still in awe of the place."

maps & photos courtesy of parks canada

Recommended Autumn Hikes

Celtic Life International

Lone Shieling /0.6 km / northern side of the national park

The Lone Shieling, surrounded by rare, old-growth forest, is set within the Grand Anse Valley, renowned for its striking autumn colours. Children of all ages will be delighted when they come across the traditional Scottish crofter's hut.

Mariève Therriault

Franey / 7.4 km / eastside of the national park

The Franey trail is a challenging climb up to an elevation of 430metres. At the top, enjoy a stunning, 360˚ view of the Clyburn Valley, Cape Smokey and the Atlantic Ocean.

Roland Coombes

Salmon Pools / 12.2 km / westside of the national park

Follow a relatively level path alongside the Chéticamp River which is bordered by 400-metre tall canyon walls. The autumn leaves are particularly vibrant along this trail.

Cara Palmer (Inverness County's Physical Activity Strategy Coordinator)

Fishing Cove / 12 km or 5.7 km
/north-west corner of the national park

Descend steadily down the mountain to a pristine cove where whales are often sighted. Set up camp for the night on one of the wilderness platforms before the climb back up.

Tom C. Wilson

Pollett's Cove / 18 km / north of Pleasant Bay

This day-long hike takes you through stunning coastal landscapes and is balanced between climbs and flat terrain on the way into the cove. Michael Haynes, author of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Hiking Trails, has said this is his favourite.

Cabot Shores

Indian Brook Trails / Village of Indian Brook

Trails on either side of the Indian Brook were constructed by the owners of Cabot Shores and the local Mi'kmaq community. The public trails start at Cabot Shores' property and guide hikers through the colourful autumn woods where they will see three spectacular waterfalls.

Visitors

Skyline /7.5 or 9.7 km /west side of national park

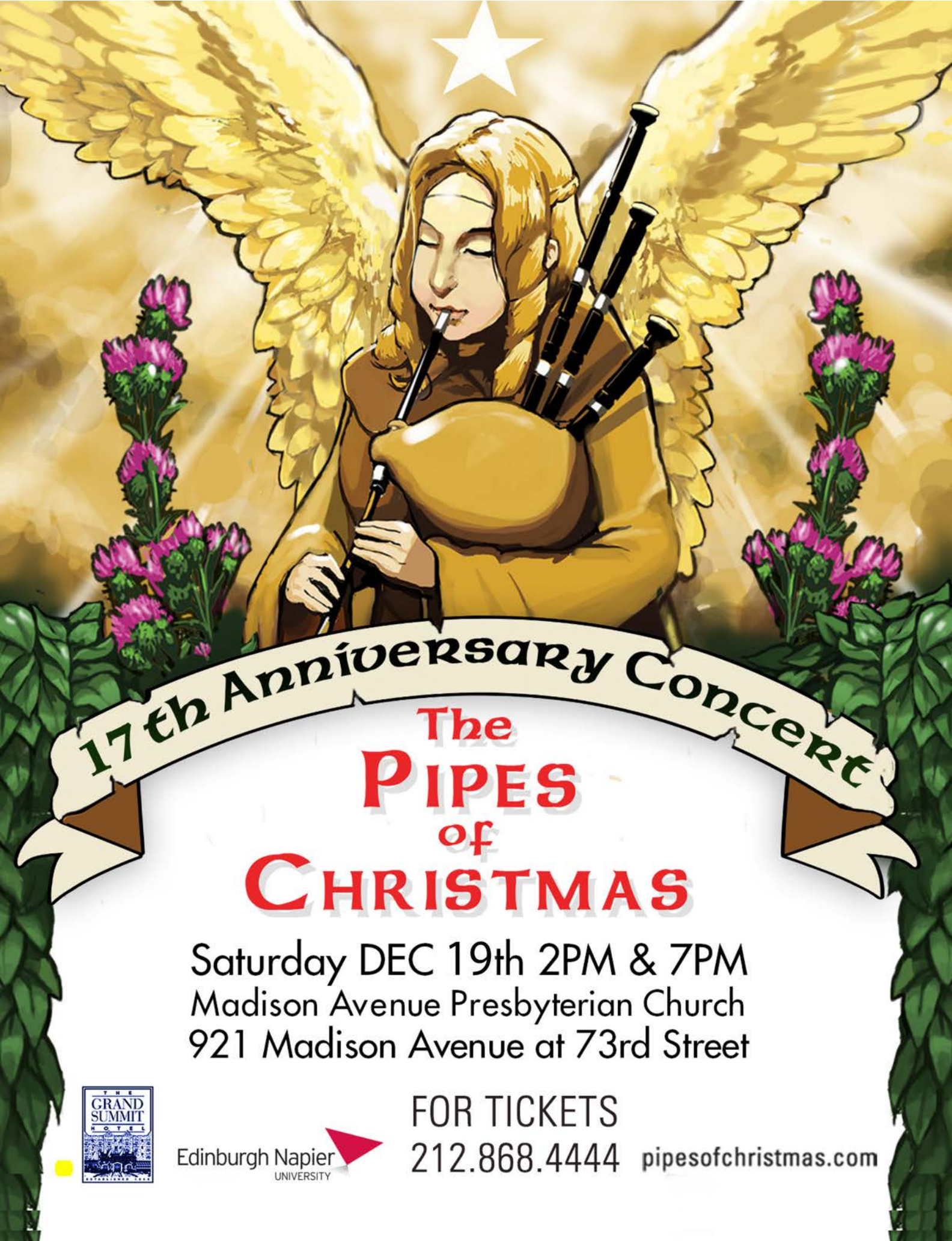
The Skyline is the national park's most popular trail and is hiked by approximately 26,000 visitors per year. Hikers can park their car near the top of the mountain and walk an almost level trail to a wondrous view of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Jason McNeil

North River Falls Trail / 19 km / outside St.Ann's

This challenging backcountry trail takes you to the Maritimes' largest waterfalls. The forested terrain is gorgeous during the fall and is known for a diversity of wildlife sightings.

By Michelle Brunet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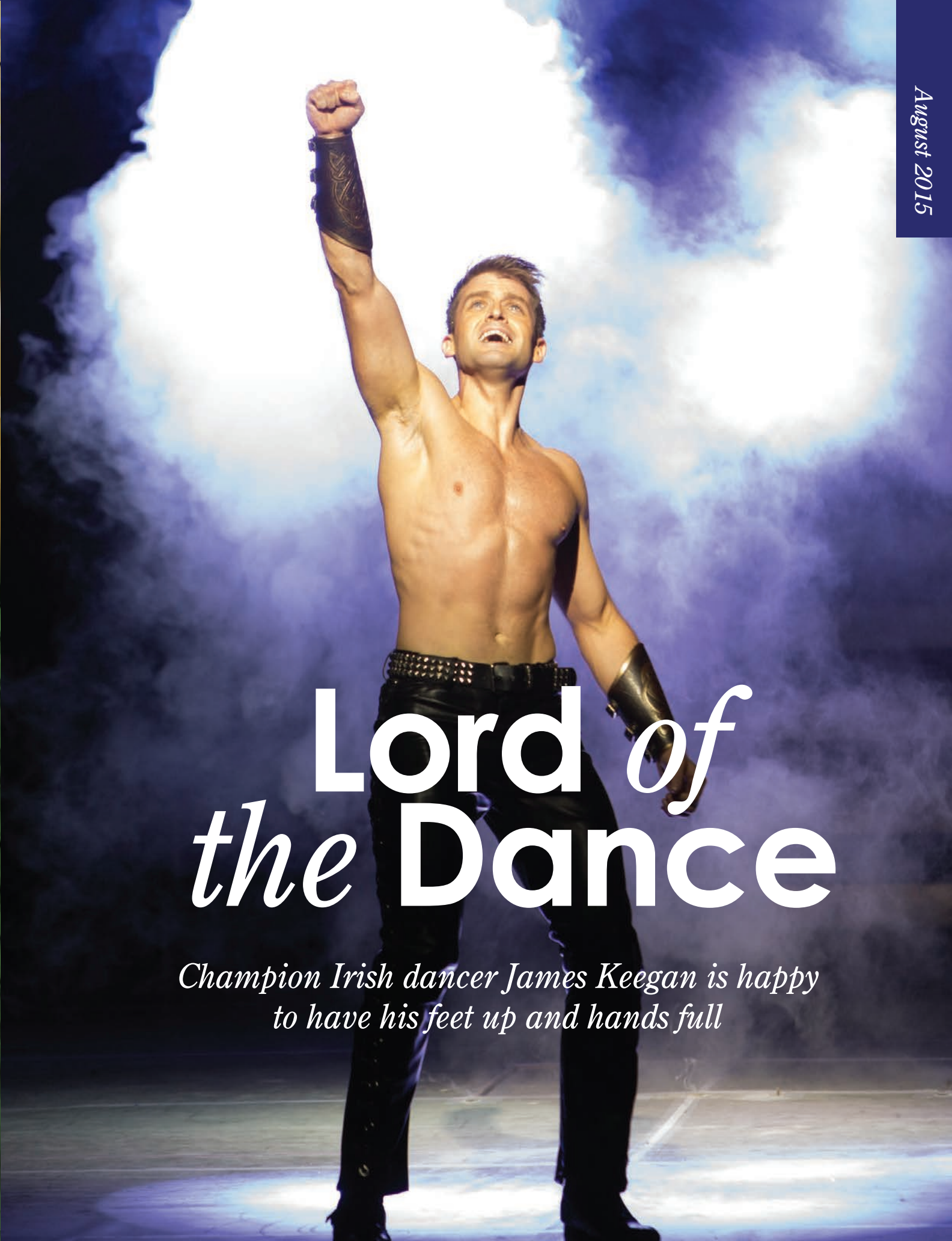


Lord *of the* Dance

Champion Irish dancer James Keegan is happy to have his feet up and hands full

James Keegan is happy to have the day off.

"I am doing all the little things that I don't normally have the time to do," shares the 28-year-old Irish dancer by phone from London; "Errands mostly - making a few calls, shopping, cleaning - that sort of thing. Today I am the lord of the laundry."

The Manchester native sighs, then chuckles at the reference to his decade-long run with world-renowned stage spectacle Lord of the Dance.

"Actually, what would really make me even happier right now is a nice full pint," he confides with a grin. "Maybe I'll slip out for a couple of hours, find a pub where I can put my feet up, and put down a Guinness."

Keegan's Celtic roots are showing; with both his mother and father hailing from the Emerald Isle – County Leitrim and County Roscommon specifically – a thirst for the "black stuff" is completely understandable – even expected.

"Manchester, like Liverpool, Blackpool and Blackburn, has a huge Irish population," he explains. "Generations of people from all across Ireland crossed the water for work, and those communities are still very present. Really, I might as well have grown up in Dublin."

Amidst that milieu, it was natural that Keegan would take up Irish dancing.

"I was only four years old when I began attending the Lally School of Irish Dance, so I'm not sure I had much choice in the matter at the time," he laughs. "All I knew was that I liked it right away, and that it made me happy. It still does."

Unlike so many youngsters now involved with the sport, at no time did his parents pressure him to pursue the pastime, let alone succeed at all costs.

James Keegan

"They were supportive from the very start," he shares. "They would drive me to and from classes and competitions, and give me the time and space at home to practice in private. My family always encouraged me to follow my dreams. They still do."

Keegan's swift rise through the ranks is a testament to his own dedication and discipline. The drive and determination paid off quickly, and he consistently placed top-three at local and regional feiseanna in his first two years of competing. At the age of seven, he won his first title at the American National Championships. Over the next few years, his trophy case would fill up fast, winning a total of four American National, eight British National, nine Great Britain, three All-Ireland, one European and two World Championship titles. In 2000, he won every major title that could be achieved competitively in Irish dancing.

Interestingly, Keegan's other great passion – soccer – nearly blew the whistle on his dancing career.

"I remember one week winning the World Championships and flying home and three days later I had a trial with Manchester United," he told the Irish Post last year. "It was a mad one because as much as I loved the dancing, I loved the football and it was looking like I was going to have

to make a decision. The fact that it was there within my grasp, I had to give this a go, but I ended up breaking my leg. That put me out of action for about a year, so the football kind of fell away because of that."

As it turns out, one sport's loss was another's gain, and it wasn't long after recovering from his injury that Keegan was scooped up by Michael Flatley of Riverdance fame for a new production called Lord of the Dance.

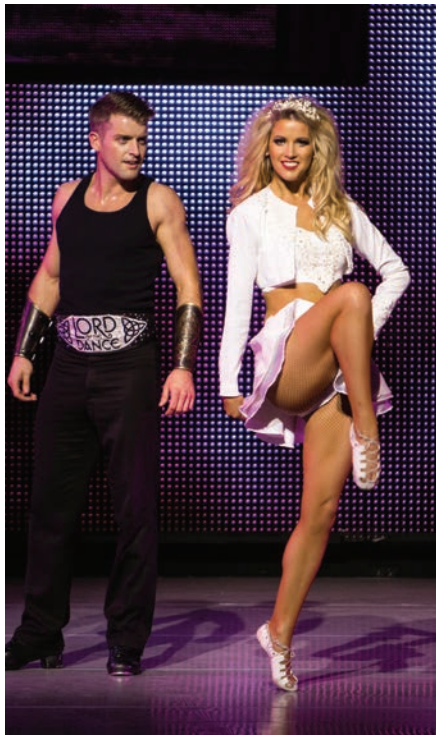
Less than a year into performances, Keegan was asked to take on the lead role, making his debut as Lord in South Africa. Since then, he has graced stages in the USA, Mexico, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Russia, Asia, and all over Europe, performing for the likes of Prince Charles and the royal families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. One of his proudest moments came in 2010, when he showcased in his hometown.

"I had always dreamed of dancing in Manchester arena," he recalls, "and when it finally happened I was very nervous, especially with all my family and friends there."

Keegan credits his boss for keeping him cool that night.

"Michael has been an incredible influence on me. Not only is he the consummate professional, but his passion and intensity for dance – and for learning dance - is infectious. He can be tough at times, yes, but he is always fair. He has brought out the best in me as a dancer and as a person, and working with him has continuously brought my game to higher levels. It still does."

Flatley's influence can now be felt in Manchester, where, in 2011, Keegan and his sister Louise – herself an accomplished dancer – opened the Keegan Academy of Irish Dance.



"I suppose it is one way that we can give back to our community," he says. "Both of us were quite fortunate to have had the chance to be involved with dancing as youngsters – it kept us physically active and out of trouble – and we wanted to afford young people back home the same opportunities. At that age, taking dance lessons is as much about making friends and being a part of something bigger than yourself as it is about the sport. I know it was for both Louise and I. It still is."

Working with youth will likely be a part of his future, once his professional dancing days are behind him.

"It is extremely rewarding," he says. "Even now, with this production, I really enjoy being able to share my experience with some of the newer cast members. Passing on the tradition of Irish dancing, being a link in that chain, is something that I can see myself doing for the rest of my life. That is, unless Manchester United comes calling again. To be honest, though, I haven't really thought that far ahead. Right now, I am happy with where I'm at, and I've got my hands full these days.

"And I'll be even happier once I get my hands on a full pint."

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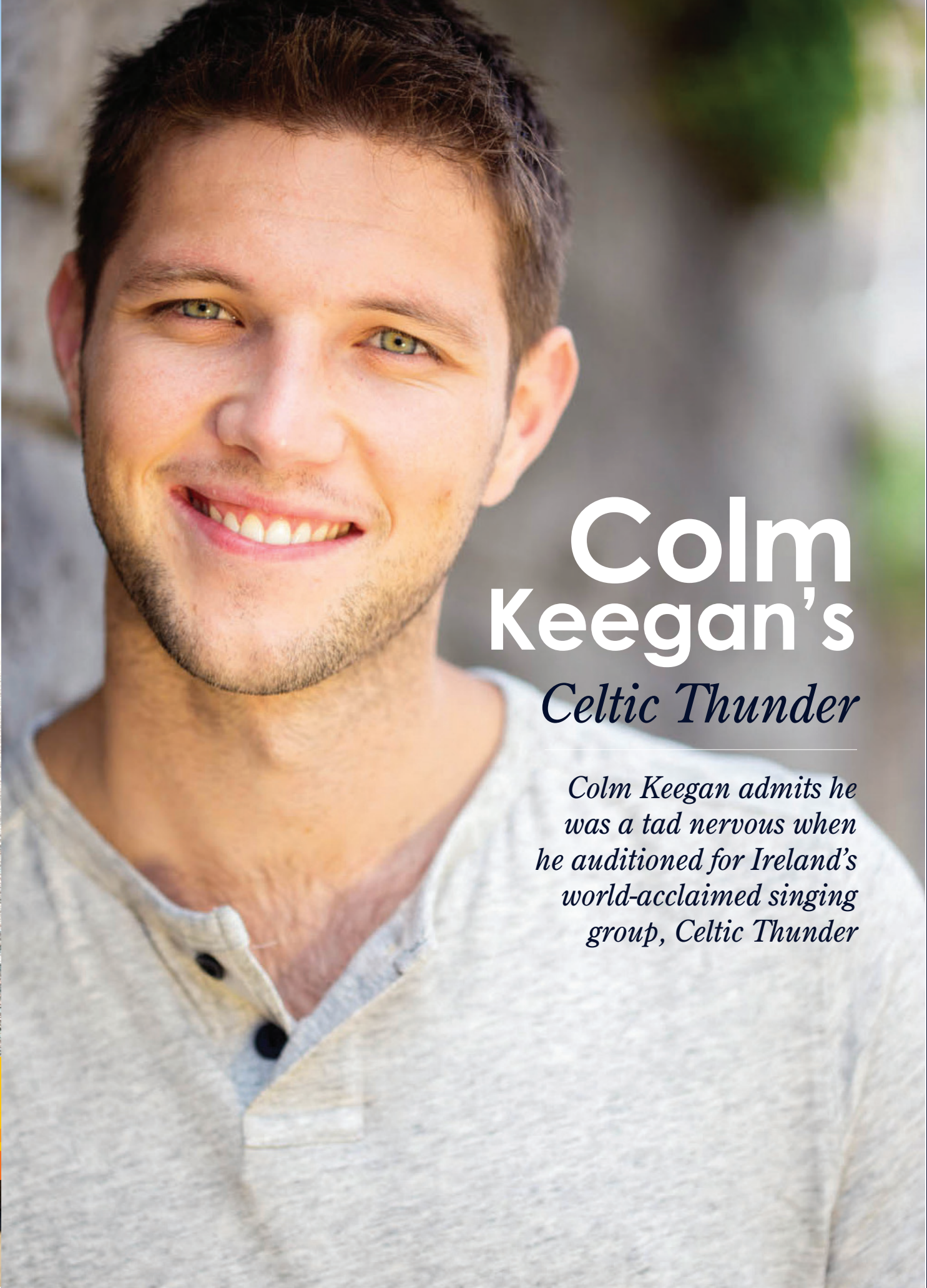


Colm Keegan's *Celtic Thunder*

Colm Keegan admits he was a tad nervous when he auditioned for Ireland's world-acclaimed singing group, Celtic Thunder

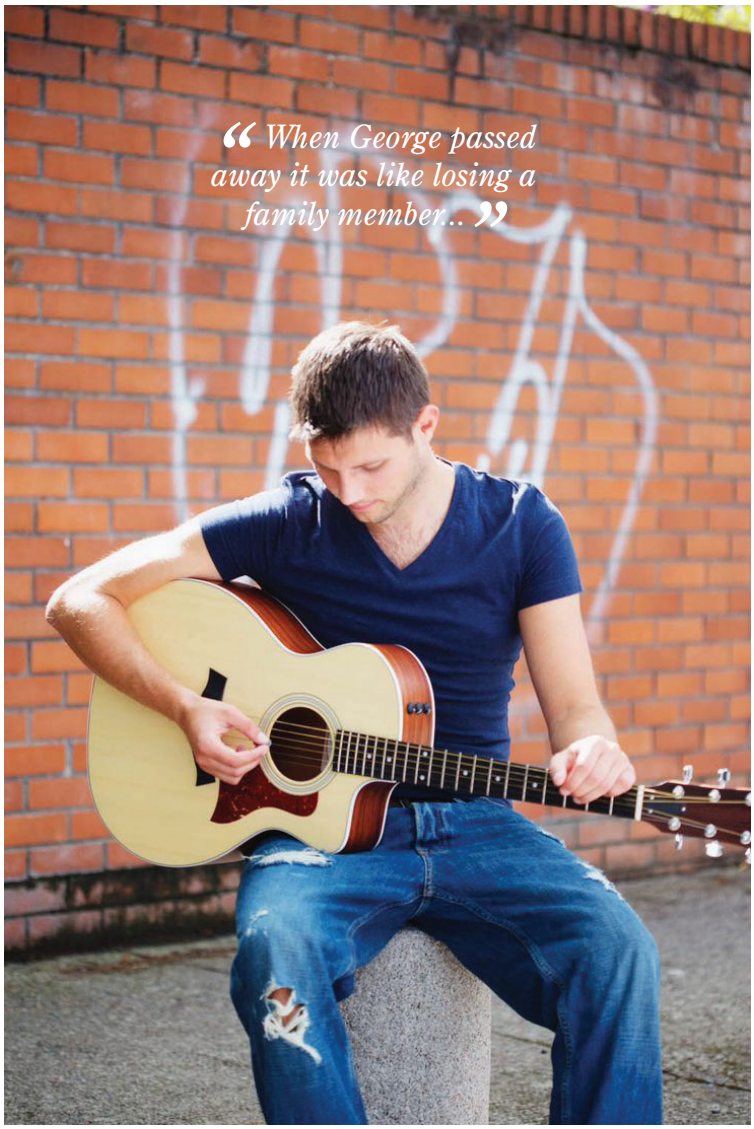
"Scary I think is an understatement. It was absolutely petrifying!" shares Keegan. "For the guys who were there from the start, the original members, you know, Ryan and Keith and Neil, they had no idea how big the show was going to become. I suppose that was the nerve-wracking thing for me when I was auditioning, I did know how big the show was and the fan base was and seeing how it was number one on the Billboard charts. There was this kind of weight of a lot of things on my shoulders going into the doors of the audition."

If you are a loyal Celtic Thunder fan, then you know that Keegan proved successful during that "petrifying" audition. He joined the musical group and stage production back in 2012, and describes the last few years as a whirlwind, admitting that he's enjoyed every second.

Twenty-five-year-old Keegan was born and raised in Dublin in a family of five boys. He remembers music being a part of his life early on.

"All of us were kind of thrown into the local cathedral choirs since we were pretty much able to speak," he shares. "So singing had been second nature to us, just like everyone else in the country. I think everyone in Ireland has some sort of musical background."

Keegan sang solos and won music awards from a young age, and his choral experiences brought him to such remarkable venues as Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia in Barcelona, Brno Cathedral in Prague, St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York and St. Peter's Basilica for the Pope in Rome.



Those choral experiences were quite different than those, more recently, as part of the choir that performed with Celtic Woman, and now Celtic Thunder.

"I was used to standing in a robe with a folder in my hand looking at a conductor," Keegan laughs. "All of a sudden there was no folder and no conductor, and in front of me was an audience, and I didn't know where to look or what to do with my hands. It didn't really come second nature at the start, but you kind of jump in the deep end, and luckily it has worked out well."

Before touring the globe with either of Sharon Browne's Celtic music groups—both of which have topped the Billboard world music charts—Keegan completed an honours degree at University College Dublin.

"When I was in university I studied music and the Irish language, and at the time I would have had to have spoken Irish almost as my main language." he says. "So to do an Irish music show afterwards for me was kind of an amalgamation of a few different Irish cultures that I love, so it's been brilliant. And that was one of the things that I asked on my first show [with Celtic Thunder]: to be able to sing a song in Irish."

Keegan's first solo with Celtic Thunder was a song in Irish Gaelic and English called Buachaill On Eirne, previously performed by Damian McGinty, which invites listeners to "Come by the hills to the land where life is a song…."

Highlights for Keegan have been many since becoming one of Celtic Thunder's principal singers; and the making of the group's Mythology DVD might just outperform all the rest of his fond memories to date.

"We were standing on the stage back in Dublin at The Helix theatre and it was an invite-only audience, so it was all family and friends of the cast," he describes. "When you're standing there and you see your mom and dad, and grandparents and your friends and your rugby mates and everyone in the audience, I remember thinking I hope the camera doesn't see my legs shaking on stage. To be honest I think that was probably the most nerve-wracking show I've ever done, and with that, it probably had to be the most sense of relief at the end of it."

With a Celtic Thunder cruise, a symphony tour across the United States and a Mythology tour across Australia, 2014 was a very busy time for Keegan and his fellow Irish songsters.

In August, Keegan also embarked on his very first solo tour accompanied by Laura Durrant, the Celtic Thunder band's cellist.

"It was a real treat for me to perform with someone of her musical calibre every night," notes Keegan.

On the road throughout the eastern United States, Keegan and Durrant played Irish pubs and other performance venues, and also wrote some of their own songs; a relatively new project

for Keegan that he plans on pursuing further.

With the amount of time the Celtic Thunder lads have spent touring together, as well as recording and rehearsing, Keegan says they've all become a very tight and special group.

"You know they're the people you wake up with, and you fight over the fact that someone took the last Corn Flakes. All the kind of 'important' topics to complain about, we fight about them all; and we laugh about everything and we cry about everything," admits Keegan. "The second we get back from a tour and we're not waking up in the same bus, we're all ringing each other wondering what we're wearing and having for breakfast that day."

The Irish singers have together experienced many highs, as well as lows, including the passing of their fellow Celtic Thunder mate, George Donaldson, in March of last year.

"When George passed away it was like losing a family member," shares Keegan. "For the 'Very Best Of' tour, it's going to be very difficult to have that gap on stage. He was a huge, loveable character. We'll miss him and it's going to be very difficult; but it's kind of nice that we're all feeling it, and without speaking about it all the time, we know George is being thought about all the time by everyone."

When Celtic Life International chatted with Keegan, he, and Keith Harkin, Ryan Kelly, Emmett O'Hanlon, Neil Byrne and guest artist McGinty were gearing up for their February to April, North American, Very Best of Celtic Thunder Tour.

Over the phone, Keegan's enthusiasm indicated his good spirits while he stood in the corridors of the very secondary school he had attended, Gonzaga College. He was helping out with the school's production of Bugsy Malone.

"I like to keep busy," explains the Dubliner, who was just as busy before joining Celtic Thunder. Some of his pursuits included starring in and helping direct other musical theatre productions, volunteering with Habitat for Humanity in Ghana and Zambia, completing triathlons, playing hurling, rugby and Gaelic football, and teaching singing at a youth performing arts school, among other endeavours.

Today what Keegan seems most passionate about is sharing some of what he loves about his homeland. "I've always been a huge lover of travelling and different cultures," he says. "To be able to travel as part of my job and sing Irish songs that I've known and loved since the time I was in a cradle and heard my parents and grandparents sing, you almost have to pinch yourself."

Keegan adds, "One of my favourite aspects of the show is standing on stage and singing songs, maybe even in the Irish language, and seeing some American or Canadian or Australian audiences singing along with us."

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Story by Michelle Brunet

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Irish chef Catherine Fulvio blends the best of Gaelic and garlic into world-class, award-winning cuisine. Celtic Life International correspondent Lisa Jackson dishes up the details.

Catherine*Fulvio*

The first time I meet Catherine Fulvio, she is wielding an oversized golden trophy.

"I just got back from New York City this morning," she says. "I was competing in the St. Patrick's Day Beef and Guinness Stew cook-off on national TV. Guess who won?"

Despite traversing an ocean, and wrestling jetlag, Fulvio seems unfazed by an interview with a journalist, or the impending feeding frenzy of sixty hungry tourists about to land at her doorstep. But such is the day in the life of a Celtic celebrity chef, teacher, and food writer, who describes herself as having "Irish blood and an Italian heart."

Best known for hosting three TV shows – *Catherine's Family Kitchen, Catherine's Italian Kitchen, and Catherine's Roman Holiday*, she has also appeared on NBC's *Today Show* and BBC's *Saturday Kitchen,* and is now a household name both at home and abroad.

Before she was a superstar, however, Fulvio started out on the family farm in Wicklow, Ireland.

"I grew up cooking with my mother," she reminisces. "She was a fantastic cook, always entering cooking competitions. We were dragged all over Ireland. She took it very seriously."

As a child, Fulvio often played the role of sous-chef, assisting in these cook-offs across the country. Back at home, she watched her mother in the kitchen, operating one of Wicklow's first farm-based bed and breakfasts.

"She made home-cooked breakfasts, straight from the garden. Growing up here, we had our own milking parlour. We always used fresh milk and cream."

These early experiences cultivated Fulvio's appreciation for food sources, along with a strong connection to the land. Over the years, she inherited her mother's love of cookery and "field to fork" food philosophy.

"She had her own garden – as I do – and used whatever she could from the farm. That's something that I still do to this day. It's very important to me."

Today, Fulvio lives on the 280-acre family farm, where she runs the award-winning Ballyknocken Guesthouse and Cookery School. The name stems from Gaelic – Baile an Cnocan – meaning "the town land of the little hill."

"I'm third-generation here," she says proudly.

The guesthouse is old, but the cooking school is new. Arriving at Ballyknocken, it feels like entering a country estate, superbly decorated with rustic relics and dark wood floors, and with spicy aromas wafting in the hallway. I'm ushered into the parlour where a tray of leek and cheddar scones, tea, and a crackling fire await. Fulvio tells its creation story while spooning homemade carrot and cumin soup into our bowls.

"Guests began asking, how do you make this?" she says. "So I started showing them on the dining room table. I kept looking over at the empty milking parlour, thinking, this is such a waste of an empty space."

Fulvio renovated the room into a cooking studio, and within two years, opened the culinary school. Now, people flock from Ireland and abroad to the locale to learn the art of Irish cookery. Some register for a one-day workshop, whilst others stay at the guesthouse and enrol for week-long classes.

"We also book groups, and get quite a few from Newfoundland," says Fulvio. "A lot of choirs – I've been serenaded so often to Danny Boy!"

Most students gravitate to the culinary school craving inspiration, and to "fire up" their mundane daily menus. Others are keen to rub elbows with a celebrity chef - Ballyknocken certainly attracted extra attention after Fulvio appeared on national television.

"I got the opportunity to cook on the morning show here," she recounts. "It took off, and then I was on there almost once a week for a year."

Impressed, the broadcaster launched a TV series starring Fulvio, and it wasn't long before the BBC and NBC began calling as well. Since then, she has written five cookbooks – with a sixth in the works – and has won several awards.

Meanwhile, back at the farm, the esteemed chef makes gastronomy fun and easy, encouraging novices to get their hands dirty without fear. For Fulvio, the most valuable lesson is learning how to cook properly.

"I want to teach people to make 'every day exceptional' in the kitchen," she explains. "And that's not by doing extraordinary things. It's about learning the key skills in cooking."

Like what? According to Fulvio, it's about returning to the basics that many people have forgotten.

"Kneaded scones end up stones," she notes. "It's also about layering flavour – caramelizing your meat, cooking your onions until soft and sweet. Simple rules like that."

By way of example, she warns against blending all the Beef and Guinness Stew ingredients at once. Instead, build up the flavours, first by frying the onions until tender, followed by beef tossed in flour, salt, and pepper. All the caramelized juices mingle in the pan, releasing a natural sweetness into the dish that "can't be bought." Then, layer with more flavours, such as Guinness.

> *"It doesn't necessarily take more time, but it takes patience. I'm always saying, just let the cooking happen."*

Every culinary class has a theme, ranging from Irish baking to "Guinness is Good For You" to the most popular course dubbed "7,7,1."

"Seven nights, seven dinners, one plan," smiles Fulvio. "It's always booked out, because it does exactly what it says. It's one that Irish people can use frequently."

Walking around Ballyknocken's backyard, fences surround leafy greens sprouting from the soil, alongside little labels speared into the ground. Fulvio points out the various plants and herbs – golden marjoram, pineapple mint, kale – and talks about each as if they're old friends. I hear sheep bleating somewhere in the green hills, cloaked by the misty morning air.

"We have fantastic ingredients in Ireland," she says. "We've got so many forests and fresh Atlantic air. And our animals graze outside year-round. That's why our cream and milk are so yellow. Our animals are naturally grass-fed – it's why our beef and lamb have such a great flavour."

Part of the classroom experience involves picking herbs, vegetables and fruits from the surrounding gardens and orchards to use fresh ingredients in the recipes. When ingredients can't be foraged, Fulvio buys from the local butcher and neighbouring farmers.

"If you can't grow it, or if you can't produce it yourself, buy locally," she encourages. "You're supporting local farmers and there are no air miles on your food. But you're also getting the best – it's fresh and the flavour is better!

"In Ireland, we've had our fair share of problems with emigration," she continues. "We need to keep as much money in our

community as we can, keep the young people working. That won't happen unless we buy food locally."

In Fulvio's kitchen, Irish cuisine is so much more than meat and potatoes; she offers up ideas on how to create easy, tasty recipes that have Irish roots, but international flavours.

"We cook everything here, from Italian to Irish to Asian. I'm known for the Italian-Irish fusion. When you think of Italian food, it's all about eating locally and seasonally – that's the concept behind eating good Irish food as well. It works very well."

Although she acknowledges that the Irish diaspora has posed challenges for communities, in some ways, Ireland's food culture has benefitted. Years ago, Chinese food was a take-away container to be wolfed down after the pub; today, upscale Szechuan, Indian, and Thai restaurants pop up across Dublin, some serving exceptional Irish fusions.

"The Irish are very good at bringing ideas back home and mixing it with something traditional," she says. "I suppose because of our culture of being an island and always looking out. We're not afraid to travel and try new things."

Of course, some things in Ireland's food culture will never change.

"On the flight back from New York this morning, there was an Irish school tour behind me," says Fulvio, with a toothy grin. "When the plane landed, one of the young boys shouted, 'I can't wait to get home and have a big plate of spuds!' I guess the potatoes just weren't the same over there."

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Donnell *Leahy* & Natalie *MacMaster*

June 2015

As Celtic Life International editor Charles Mandel explains, husband and wife Donnell Leahy and Natalie MacMaster are making beautiful music together

Donnell Leahy knows who wears the pants in the family.

"I'll put you over to Her Majesty," chuckles the Cape Breton fiddler on the phone from Davis, Florida.

No, the Queen of England isn't wintering in Florida; rather, it's a very down-home, low-key Natalie MacMaster who picks up the line on the other end.

"Donnell just called you Her Majesty," I note. "Do I refer to you that way as well?"

"Absolutely," comes the drop-dead reply in a distinctly Cape Breton accent. "No, no," she then laughs, with a touch of mischief.

Yet, you could make the argument that MacMaster is indeed royalty: Queen of the Celtic fiddler players, who began recording at age 16 with her debut album - Four on the Floor - and who now has three decades of experience, 11 recordings, and thousands of shows behind her.

She even has the family pedigree of royalty: her Uncle Buddy, who passed away at the age of 89 last summer, is considered the King of the Cape Breton fiddlers, while cousin Ashley is a firebrand Prince who married traditional island fiddling with rock music and took it to New York City's Carnegie Hall.

MacMaster and her husband – himself a renowned fiddler, and frontman for the very successful band of siblings Leahy – are currently on a 60-city tour. Though they are not actually playing at being Canadian snowbirds down south, Donnell jokes that they are trying to delay their departure from the Sunshine State as long as possible.

"We understand you folks are fighting the fight out there," he comments, referring to the record amount of snowfall that's blanketed Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton, this winter. Clearly, he and MacMaster are thankful to have missed the ice and cold as they tour in support of their new recording, One.

> *"Writing music with one another has been great..."*

The title One is nothing if not apropos. It's the first time MacMaster and Leahy have recorded together, something the latter said they had planned on doing since getting married 12 years ago. For one reason or another the occasion kept getting put off. He attributes the delay to different schedules and, jokingly, "the fact that there's a baby born every day now in the family," a reference to the couple's six children.

Although the pair has frequently performed together, it didn't always add up to a harmonious sound - the fiddlers' styles are different, according to Leahy, and sometimes they cancel out one another's nuances.

What they did learn was that when they arranged tunes together, they ended up at something more equitable. "Writing music with one another has been great," Leahy notes, "because naturally, from the beginning of the song, you're not stepping on each other's toes.

"Of course, we have played together a lot; on tour, at house parties, and elsewhere. And, after 12 years of living together, I think we have figured it out."

MacMaster elaborates on the recording sessions for One. "There wasn't a lot of struggle, and things came together pretty easily. There were a number of tunes that

we had been playing live for a while, and of course all the little kinks just sort themselves out after playing them on stage for years."

Leahy agrees, dismissing any idea of marital stress while in the studio. "Not recording, no. Wall-papering, yes, but not recording," he jokes.

> *"After 12 years of living together, I think we have figured it out..."*

In fact, the fiddler notes that the studio sessions marked the first time in years the couple was able to leave their children for a week-and-a-half and concentrate on making music. "We were able to really focus and create, so there was no stress at all. We had also learned, earlier on in our relationship, that we have similar taste in music, and we sort of hear it in the same way. We like what the other one likes. That made a big difference."

More than marking the first time the couple has recorded an album together, One boasts another first: veteran music producer Bob Ezrin was at the controls, shaping the final sounds. The Canadian music producer is famed for having worked with the likes of Lou Reed, Alice Cooper, Kiss, Pink Floyd, Peter Gabriel and Phish, among many others.

Ezrin will also produce a Christmas album that MacMaster will start recording in June.

"Bob brings an immediate reaction, and it's the right reaction [to the music]," she asserts. "He's efficient and confident and he knows how to make things happen. He is wonderful to work with and I trust his musical sensibility."

Ezrin isn't the only big name on board these days; producer Justin Cortelyou also worked on the new CD. Cortelyou's credits include Taylor Swift, Ke$ha and Alan Jackson.

Clearly, MacMaster and Leahy had fun making the recording. For the very first time, she sings on a song, the vocal lament titled Cagaran Gaolach. On Fiddler's Despair, she takes a page from her cousin Ashley, with a couple of up-tempo distorted guitars driving the song's momentum. And two players share one piano on Pastiche for Anne. Just to round things out, the tune Joyous Waltz features a drum set made out of a cardboard box and paint cans.

MacMaster says One is definitely a rockin' record, but points out that most of the same basic elements can be found in her past works. "It's both a continuation and an evolution of sorts, really...maybe just a higher quality version."

According to Leahy, the couple didn't plan to create an album that specifically sounded contemporary or traditional. In fact, they really didn't have any particular genre in mind. Instead, the pair brought their individual musical tastes and interests, and let the music dictate what came about, organically. "It is diverse, and I think that reflects our playing styles," he says. "We didn't take the approach that, oh, we need another fast tune or there's not enough slow stuff on there. We just picked the material, and it was all quite honest and natural."

It goes without saying that MacMaster also chose to pay tribute to her uncle Buddy on the recording with a couple of different songs. Of one tune, she says, "That was the easiest, simplest, most fluid track we did. We just gathered a bunch of people to sit there and play tunes for Buddy. We didn't even know what we were playing.

"We put it together in the studio and we got it in one take. It came together so quickly that we said, 'Well, we've only been playing for five minutes. Some guys drove two hours to be here, we might as well put something else down.' So we threw some more tunes together and – boom! – first take."

She notes that they didn't intend to keep both tracks originally, each of which featured six fiddlers, but ended up including one as a bonus song on the record. "I'm sure the spirit of Buddy was there with us," she recalls of the Cape Breton sessions.

Now, deep in the southern United States, Cape Breton seems a long way away. However, as they often do, the couple have practically brought their home with them on the road. All six kids are along for the tour, which began in Akron, Ohio and will continue through to California. "We've traveled a lot separately in the past," Leahy notes, "but to be on tour with the whole brood, we have home with us, so it's wonderful. We're not missing the kids or worried about them. It's all good."

On the road, the kids are homeschooled, as they always have been, and the family eats at restaurants, although MacMaster does the cooking when they're home. It is quite a challenge to balance touring, composing music, lessons, family life and more, and MacMaster concedes it's a handful. "People say, It's pandemonium, but that's just our reality. But that just our reality and I'm used to it, and this is our life and we just do it and don't think about it."

To be sure, she wouldn't have it any other way. Her husband and children are the best and biggest part of her life these days, and the only things more important to her than her music. She notes her recordings normally come about two years apart, but this one took three. "My life is different right now because my music is not my baby. My children are my baby, so it just takes longer."

MacMaster acknowledges that she's not as efficient as she once was, and doesn't pump things out as easily or quickly as she once did. "It takes more effort, for sure, just by nature of being a mother of six and running a home. I don't have 24 hours in a day to dedicate toward music anymore; I have 24 hours in a day to do laundry, help with lessons, juggle meals, all that stuff. I mean, there is only so much a person can do in one day. Still, somehow we always manage to find time each day to make some beautiful music together."

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Nicola Benedetti

Scottish violin virtuoso Nicola Benedetti is more than just another pretty face…

"I really must get something to eat."

Scottish violinist Nicola Benedetti is on the phone from New York City, where she is busy making the media rounds in support of her latest recording, Homecoming – A Scottish Fantasy. The lovely, twenty-something "Scotalian" has just flown in from Pittsburgh, where she appeared with the city's renowned symphony just the night before. And though she is happy to have her feet on the ground, she hasn't stopped long enough to enjoy a proper meal.

"It is one of the many perils of performing on the road," she says, "irregular meals and diet. As much as I try to keep my eating routine, I never get used to touring that way. And there is nothing I enjoy more than sitting down to a solid meal. You might never guess, as I am fairly petite, but actually, truth be told, I adore good food."

As for travelling itself, Benedetti has mixed feelings.

"It is the getting to and from the airports, the checking in, the going through security, the jet lag, etc – that's the part most of us grow weary of," she explains. "Once I arrive I am fine, and I cherish the opportunity to get out and explore a city like New York or Paris or London. I love the energy of these places, and the chance to experience and absorb new cultures."

The challenge, she acknowledges, is finding the time to go sightseeing.

"Usually it is a bit of a whirlwind wherever I go; there are always meetings with the media or the people from the record company, and there are likely a number of social events and appearances planned for me also. And then there are the rehearsals and concerts themselves, which take up most of my days. And somehow, through all that, I still have to find the time to practice, eat, call my family and boyfriend, and try to have some semblance of a normal life."

Not that Benedetti is one to complain.

"Good Lord, no," she laughs. "I am certainly the last one you would call a diva – my mother and father simply would not stand for it. I know my roots, I know where I am from, and I am grateful every day to enjoy the good fortune that I do. I make sure to count my blessings each night before bed."

Born in West Kilbride, North Ayrshire to an Italian father and a Scottish mother, Benedetti is the epitome of a child prodigy; she began playing the violin at the age of four, and by eight was leading the National

Children's Orchestra of Great Britain. At ten she was admitted to the prestigious Yehudi Menuhin School for young musicians. By the age of 14, she had performed with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Scottish Opera, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the City of London Sinfonia, as well as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Two years later she was named the BBC Young Musician of the Year, and soon after signed a lucrative recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon/Universal Music Group.

In 2005, Benedetti released her first full-length solo recording – Karol Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No. 1. Since then, she has proven prolific, producing eight more CDs in just nine years, including Homecoming – A Scottish Fantasy.

"It was a recording that I had been thinking of making for a long time," she shares, "and it is one that I felt I had to make. The timing seemed right for me, and I knew where I wanted to go with it, so it was just a matter of bringing all of the pieces together and making it happen."

Including works by the likes of Max Bruch, Phil Cunningham, James Scott Skinner and others, Homecoming is an homage to her homeland.

"Growing up in Scotland, and being passionate about music from such a young age, it was almost impossible not to be influenced by our traditional culture," she notes. "It was everywhere, and it was a part of the daily soundtrack of my life. And even though I studied classical music exclusively, I have no doubt that those influences have seeped into my style and sound."

Benedetti believes that her perspective on Scotland has changed as she has matured.

"There was a time, as a young girl, when I had very little appreciation or understanding of where I came from or the importance of having a sense of history and heritage. Scotland just always seemed to be there, and it was something that I took for granted would always be there. Of course, I missed my family when I went off to study in England – it is tough for any ten year-old to be away from their mother and father – but being away from my country at that time never aroused any sense of patriotism. It wasn't until I was older and travelling more often that I started to appreciate being Scottish."

She says that, despite being far from her family so frequently, she is still very much a product of her parents.

"I may look more Italian than Scottish, but I behave more like my mother," she chuckles. "I am typically Scottish in many ways; practical perhaps, and maybe even conservative or reserved by nature. Listen to me – I can't believe I am even admitting that!"

Being "Scotalian" isn't as rare a mix as one might think, she muses.

"There are a lot of us. Many Italians came to Scotland during and after World War II, setting up small shops and businesses all over the country. You would be hard-pressed not to find at least one Italian restaurant or ice cream parlour in each little town or village. The national palate has become a little, shall we say, stronger in recent years. Food is a very big deal with Italians, and we take it very seriously.

"Speaking of which, I should get going here. I have a wee bit of time before my next interview, and I really must get something to eat."

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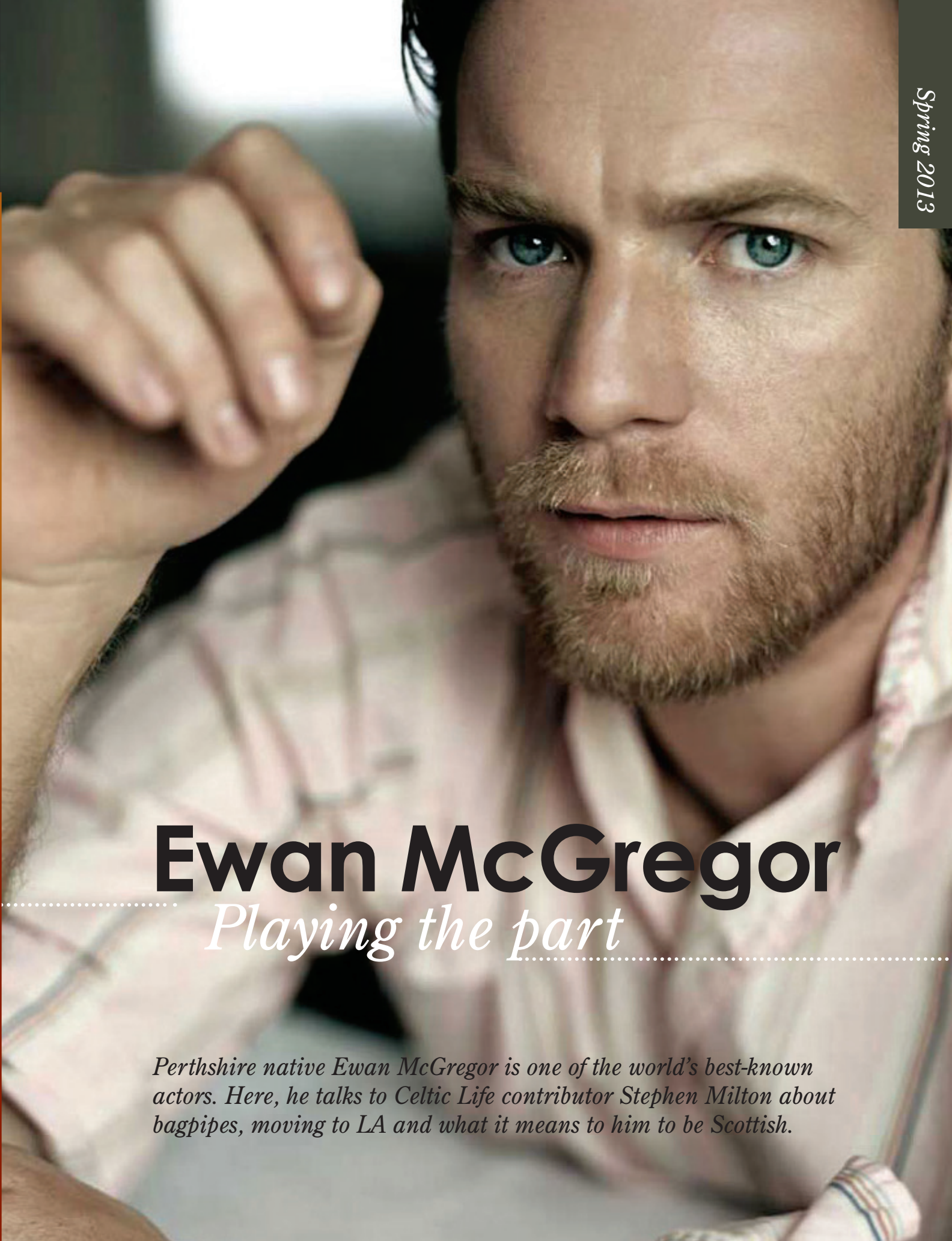


Ewan McGregor

Playing the part

Perthshire native Ewan McGregor is one of the world's best-known actors. Here, he talks to Celtic Life contributor Stephen Milton about bagpipes, moving to LA and what it means to him to be Scottish.

Ewan McGregor has become something of a national treasure, yes. But for a man whose career has taken him across the galaxy, he has remained remarkably true to his Celtic roots.

In his breakthrough role as Mark Renton in Danny Boyle's Trainspotting however, he delivered a rather colourful ode to what it means to be Scottish. His words went something like, "It's shite being Scottish." Words he stands by?

"It actually pained me to say that when we were filming Trainspotting," he said. "I in no way stand by those words. I'm incredibly proud of my roots and will always be so. Anyway, I was also shooting heroin in that movie, and I've done many other questionable deeds as an actor. None of them however, reflect my actual life."

Raised in Crieff, Perthshire, the son of two teachers, James McGregor and Carole Lawson, McGregor always wanted to act. His parents allowed him to leave school at 16 to join the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. Within a year, he was starring in the Dennis Potter television series Lipstick on Your Collar. Within two years, Shallow Grave arrived, and shortly afterwards came Trainspotting.

Fame was accompanied by all its disadvantages though. McGregor joked as he told the story of when he was strip searched by U.S. customs.

"It was just after Trainspotting had come out and the customs guy took me quietly aside into a booth. There was no doubt that he'd seen me in a movie about heroin and therefore assumed I'd be carrying heroin on me. I sort of took it as a compliment. Obviously I'd been quite convincing."

Returning to Scotland after Trainspotting hit theatres was an interesting experience for the actor. "I was in Glasgow a few months later, having been in America shooting a movie, and people were calling out in the street, 'Renton, RENTON'. Everyone wanted to take me for a pint. I found I was doing a lot of very fast walking, head down, because it was very difficult to wander about. But I guess it was lovely that a movie like that, which was so important to Scotland, had made such an impression and I was part of that. I guess it was weird and strange in equal measure."

Does he accept the tag of being some sort of modern cultural ambassador for the country, following in the footsteps of Robbie Burns, Sean Connery and Arthur Conan Doyle?

"God, I hope not," he said with a laugh. "I think there are many greater exemplars of a population than me. I suppose you could say I was a passionate devotee of the country, and I'm fiercely defensive of our great nation. I won't allow anyone to talk it down, unless it's done in jest.

"Most criticism is based in ignorance anyway. Is there really anywhere more diverse than Scotland on this planet – the cities, the music, the arts, the tradition, the wide open spaces? It is a magnificent country that continues to punch well above where it should.

"It's funny, but it's a very Scottish thing to love the place more the less you're there. It's easy to love Scotland from afar. And yes, I do yearn for it. I yearn to take a motorcycle ride and lose myself in the Highlands. It's the one thing I don't often do. These days, I seem to talk about that stuff with ex-pats rather than actually do it. I guess it's the idea of knowing I will one day do it again that really stops me from pining for it."

In a 20-year acting career, McGregor has made nearly 50 films – an exhausting average of two movies a year. Some of the highlights include Moulin Rouge, Black Hawk Down, The Island and the Star Wars prequel trilogy, where he played a young Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Four years ago, he and his French wife of 17 years, Eve Mavrakis, moved to Los Angeles with their four children, Clara, 16, Esther, 10, Jamiyan, 10, and two-year-old, Anouk. It was a strange move for someone so staunchly proud of his roots, particularly someone who swore, some 11 years previously, that he'd never move to Hollywood.

"I didn't have any desire to live in Los Angeles then," he explained. "I moved to London when I was 18 and I just thought that this is where I live. But our friends here in LA said, 'You should see this house,' so Eve and I saw it and just fell for it."

They bought their new home in 2005, rented it out, and stayed there now and again. "And then every time we came to stay, we liked being here more and more and then we just decided – on a whim, I suppose – to try living here. And we like it very much. The truth is I have to go away to work, and Eve finds it easier to be here with the kids when I'm away."

Does Ewan have any desire to move back to Scotland down the line? "I think it would be a nice idea in the future, but right now, our kids like the LA lifestyle and it suits us, but who knows? We change our minds all the time, the fickle bunch we are!"

With a demanding schedule to cope with, McGregor, 41, took a well-earned four-month break after shooting Oscar-nominated South Asian tsunami drama The Impossible, which the father found emotionally draining.

Recreating the experiences of the Belon family, who miraculously survived when the disaster hit the Thai beach resort of Khao Lak on Boxing Day 2004, McGregor admits it's his encounters with survivors since the movie's release in January which he finds most affecting.

"There's a woman I met in London who is a friend of a friend of mine who sat with me for three hours. She told me her whole story which was very similar to my character's in the film, really. And she lost her husband, sadly, and they have three children.

"During the tsunami, her husband was separated from her

and her two kids, much the same as I am separated from Naomi (Watts) in this film. So there were some kind of parallels between her story and the character I was playing in this, except that her story ended in a terrible way, which was incredibly difficult for me to hear. It stays with you."

After wrapping domestic saga August: Osage County with Julia Roberts and Meryl Streep, McGregor will move on to Our Kind of Traitor, a bare-knuckle thriller opposite Ralph Fiennes, before shooting starts on a movie in Australia with new director Julius Avery.

"He is a brilliant young director who wrote and directed a film called Jerrycan, which is fantastic, and won the short film festival in Cannes and an array of other awards. I am making a film with him called Son of a Gun. He wrote it and is going to direct it too. It's his first feature, and it's going to shoot in parts of Australia for nine weeks later this year. I like to help foster new talent if I can; it's important to me."

We'll next catch the Scot in Jack the Giant Killer, a Hollywood revisiting of fabled fairytale Jack and the Beanstalk. With a rumoured budget of £250million, it's his largest scale movie since the Star Wars prequels. It's a clear turnaround from his initial reservations on big budget movies.

"I still don't like big, meaningless blockbusters. I don't think I have been in any particularly. The Star Wars films are the most blockbuster type of thing I have been in, but they are also unique in the sense that they are Star Wars.

"And The Island was another big blockbuster film, but it was a Michael Bay film. And again it had something in its heart. It was a story about something, and the idea of cloning. I still like it.

"Jack and the Giant Killer, I didn't do it because it was a blockbuster; I did it because I thought it was a good script. But I also have lived and learned. I am 41 now, and I have changed my attitude about some things since I was 22."

Like what?

"I think I'm a lot more relaxed. We Scots are renowned for a fiery passion that sometimes emerges before our brains are engaged. I love that, but I think these days I can be calm in what I'm doing. Scotland makes hard people, and I was probably too thirsty to climb the tree at times when I was younger."

With so much accomplished already, what's next for the Perthshire native?

"I'd just like to carry on. If it's a dream about my career, it would be carrying on doing different kinds of films. I'd like to direct something. At one point, I could have pursued a book that I really liked and thought I wanted to direct it, but then I got the fear and didn't do it. And funnily enough I got sent it sometime later to act in. And I've got lots of silly, crazy dreams, involving old vehicles and long distances."

There are rumours that McGregor, who was recently nominated for Best Actor at the Golden Globes for his performance in Salmon Fishing in the Yemen, was fulfilling a lifelong dream by learning the bagpipes.

"Where'd you hear that," he laughed heartedly. "Well, again, it's the Scottish roots. I played in the McGregor Family Band as a boy and I've always been keen to learn so I thought, why not now?

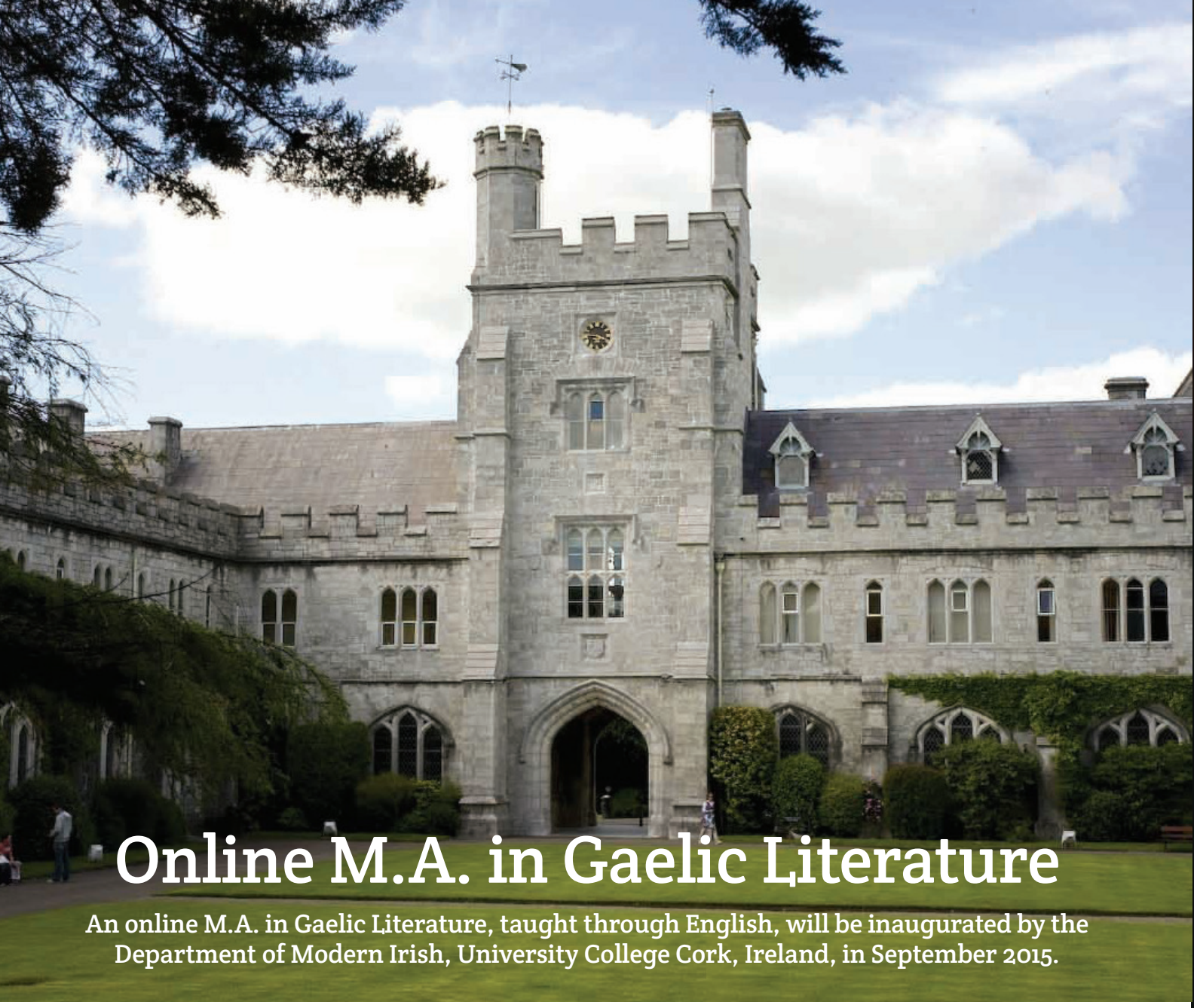
"I'm hoping I can whip them out for dinner parties and get-togethers down the line... really get the party going. I want it to be my fun party piece."

Is he having lessons?

"I've had a few and I think I'm coming along nicely, although my family isn't quite so sure. I think they might stash them away from me. The pipes will mysteriously disappear!"

So we're back to talking about McGregor as an ambassador for Scotland…

"I think Scottish culture is pretty unique, and most people the world over understand and respect that. We don't need the fanfare or the extravagant marketing campaigns. We're a nation that has always stood out from the crowd and that makes us really special in the eyes of the world, of that much I'm certain."



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From Shakespeare on the stage to James Bond on screen, Judi Dench has spent more than 50 years wowing audiences. And despite now approaching her ninth decade, the actress shows little sign of slowing down.

Dame Judi Dench

Her latest film, Philomena, a screenplay co-written by Steve Coogan (who also stars) is a true story set in Ireland. In it, the lead character undertakes a pilgrimage to discover the fate of the baby she was forced to give up for adoption five decades earlier, as an unmarried teenager working in one of the Irish Republic's penitential Magdalene laundries. The film packs an emotional punch, and features a typically Dench performance of effortless poise.

Born in December 1934 in York to an Irish mother (who met her father when he was studying medicine at Trinity College, Dublin), Dench was able to sympathise with Philomena's narrative arc. But before the film, how aware was she of the prevalence of such scenarios that were often played out in the Catholic Church?

"Well, because of the Magdalene Sisters – the film from 2002 – I was very aware, like we all were. There was a focus suddenly on it and everybody was aware it was happening. But as far as this story is concerned, in a way I think that's not so much what the film is about.

"For me, it's about a woman who comes to terms with that,

who can live with it, years and years on, and actually never tell anybody about her son for 40 years… not even her daughter. She then has to go through the search and then, on the other side of it, come out as a much stronger person who actually can turn around and say, 'I forgive you for what happened.' I don't think there are many people whose story could have gone that way."

Research for the film included more than re-watching a decade-old film, with Dench going to meet the real-life protagonist Philomena in order to fully appreciate the plot. "I met her before we started shooting and we had lunch. She's very funny and very Irish, just like my mother was. Not that she was like my mother in any way, but I have many Irish friends who I saw similarities in. Irish people are just so happy and optimistic, I have found, no matter what they go through. That's perhaps a generalisation, but anyway…"

Unlike her late actor husband Michael Williams, Catholicism never swayed Dench. She remained true to the Quakerism that attracted her so many years ago. "I am a Quaker. My husband, who died, was a Catholic, and I am a Quaker. And somebody said to us before we were married, 'You must convert.' But that's been the structure in me and is something that I can't do without - that was a personal decision for me for a long, long time ago and it's always been very important."

Talking to Dench, her positivity and good natured humour is as noticeable as it is welcoming - not that Dench has ever had any notions of diva behaviour or grand old Dame eccentricities. The only moment when conversation is anything less than joyful is when it turns to her late husband, who left a gaping hole in Dench's life upon his death in 2001. "Nothing compares. What you lack when you've been living with someone is the physical contact; someone who will put their arm around you, or just hold you instinctively when you need it."

What was her coping mechanism? "Friends. My friends were and are everything, and they were staunchly supportive and there for me. And, I admit, I was also offered a lot of good jobs, and I threw myself into work."

This much is certainly true: for a woman of 78, her workload over the past decade has been unrelenting, both on stage and screen. Her most noticeable role is as M in six James Bond films, from Tomorrow Never Dies to Skyfall, in which she was dramatically killed off. Those 007 productions represented quite a shift from what previously she'd been renowned for: UK comedies, terrestrial dramas and stage work.

What was it about the role that appealed? "There were three reasons. The first is that they asked me. Secondly, it was the first time that M was a female.

And thirdly (and most importantly) Michael said to me 'I find it irresistible that I shall be living with a Bond girl'.

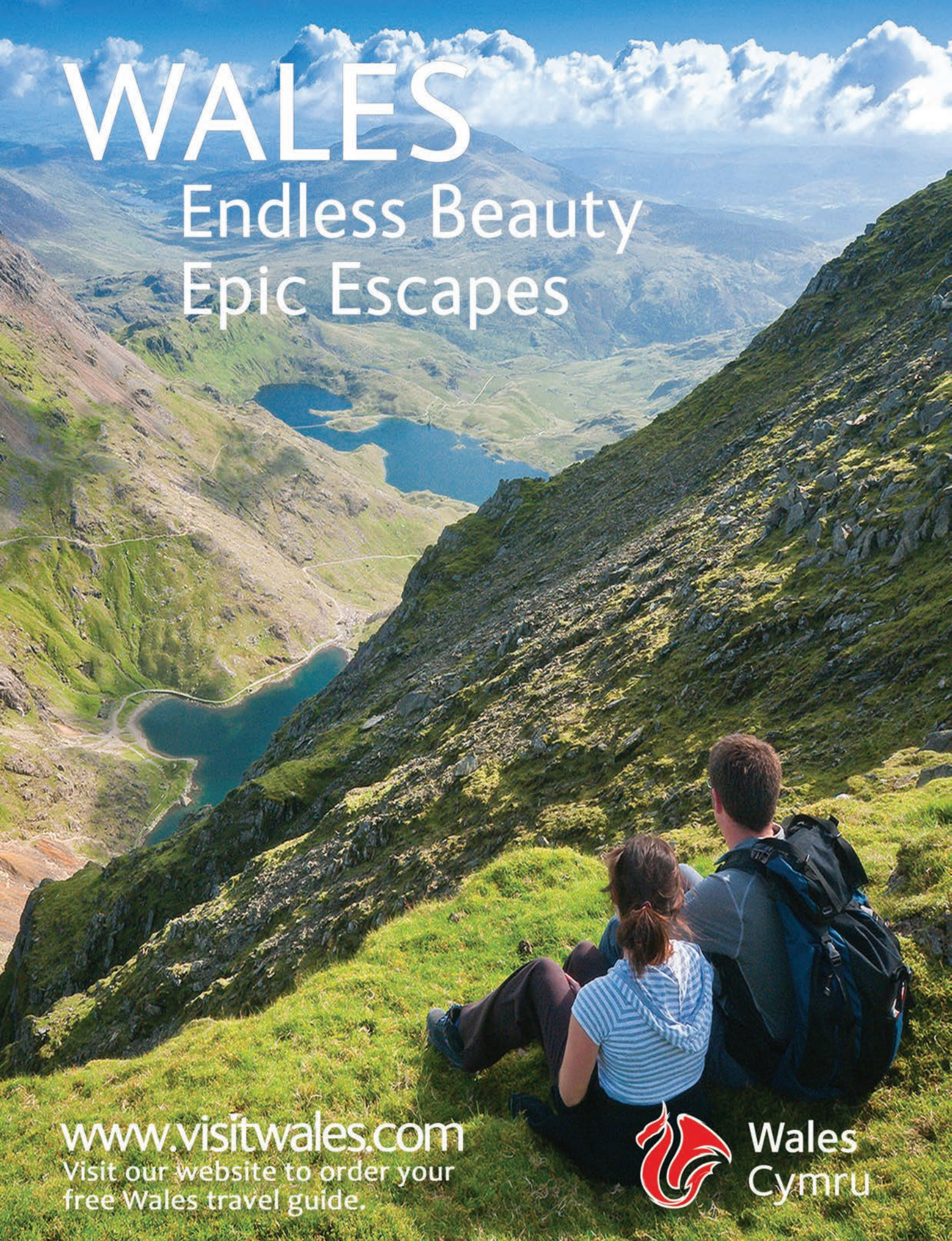
Subsequently, the Bond films introduced Dench to a whole new generation of cinema goers, and in the process she became something of a veteran pin-up among some young enough to be her grandson. It is a status she playfully embraces. "I have fans who are young men of my grandson's age, up to about middle to late teens, and that's wonderful. Imagine being a pin-up, at 73, to the teenage boy crowd? And you know what is even better – the fact that those lads might find out that I am also a stage actress, and that they then might be tempted to see what the theatre is all about. I admit it - Bond, for me, is a 'fishing trip' for live audiences."

This line is only half a quip: Dench's true work remains in the theatre, where she made her name. From her debut performance at the Liverpool Royal Court with the Old Vic Theatre in 1957 as Ophelia in Hamlet, Dench established herself as one of theatre's most significant actresses with the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. And, despite the late-career film flourish, the stage remains her calling.

"My only passion is the theatre - that's what I really, really love. You get the chance to have another go the next night and do it again – it may end up being worse, but definitely different, and always to a different audience. The audience informs you of absolutely everything. An American student said to me, 'Does an audience make any difference?' And I said, 'If an audience doesn't make any difference, I am staying at home. I am putting my feet up the chimney.'"

The burning desire that made her a success drives her still - "I cannot bear apathy, the 'I couldn't care less… whatever' attitude in anything. I like people who are wildly optimistic; that's the way I approach life and living. I am an unbounded optimist, even at nearly 80 years of age."

But after such a distinguished, eclectic and successful career, when she looks at herself in 2014, has Dench achieved everything she wanted to when she started out in 1957? "No. And I don't expect to. There are a few things next year," she laughs. "The other day someone said, 'What kind of play do you want to do?' And I said, 'I want to be in a play where I am an Afghan woman who learns to walk the tightrope and in the last act turns into a dragon.' I've not done that yet, so on we go…"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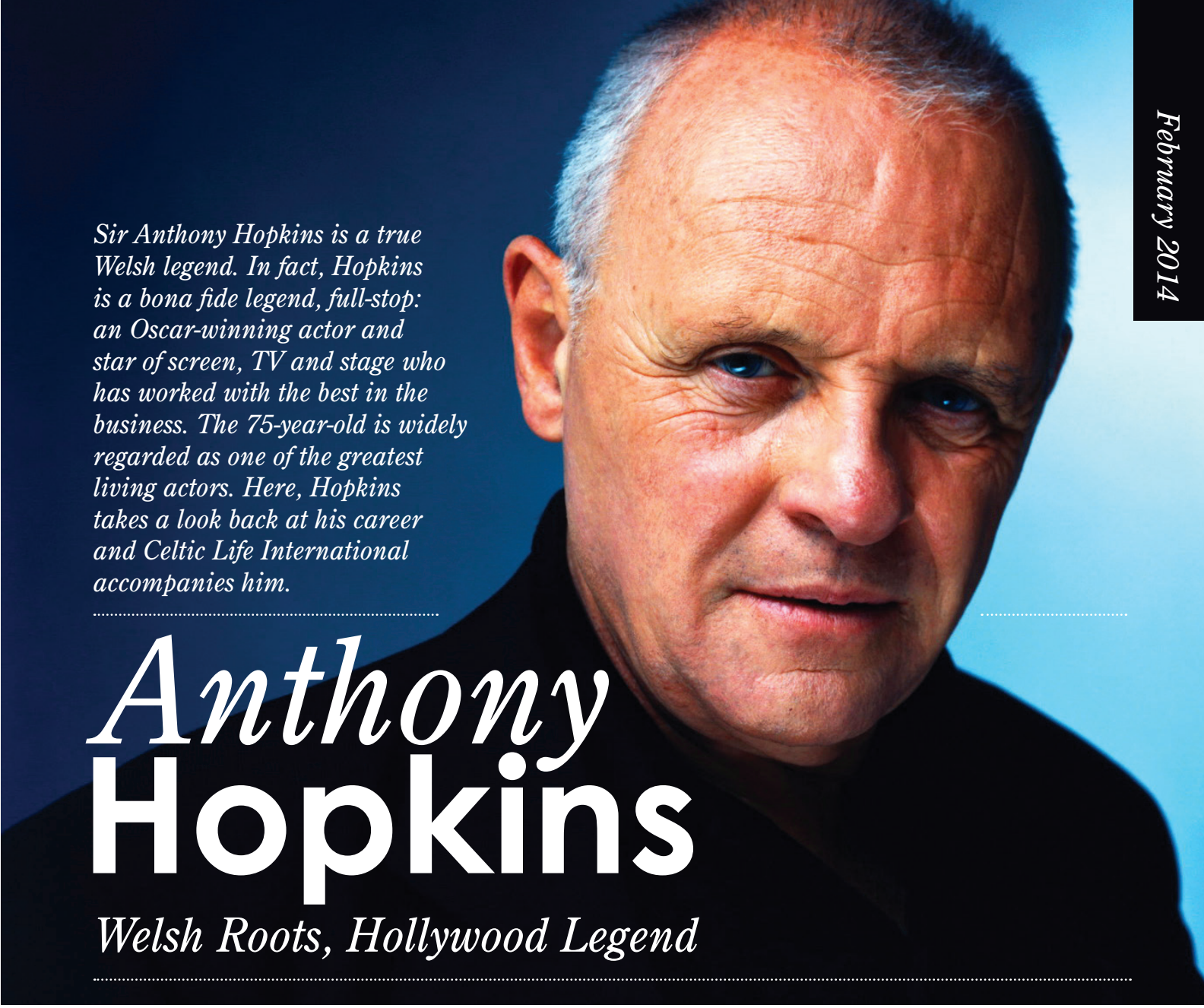


Sir Anthony Hopkins is a true Welsh legend. In fact, Hopkins is a bona fide legend, full-stop: an Oscar-winning actor and star of screen, TV and stage who has worked with the best in the business. The 75-year-old is widely regarded as one of the greatest living actors. Here, Hopkins takes a look back at his career and Celtic Life International accompanies him.

Anthony Hopkins

Welsh Roots, Hollywood Legend

It's been some journey for Anthony Hopkins – from troubled Glamorgan child to troubled doctor Hannibal Lecter, the latter proving one of the highlights of an esteemed career that has seen the Welshman become one of Britain's best loved actors. He's someone capable of memorable and powerful performances that have won him Oscars, Emmys and BAFTAs galore.

Not that Hopkins seems in the least bit impressed with his achievements. His manner is of a man, perhaps in keeping with his heritage, who doesn't see himself as anything special; nor does he pay much attention to sentimentality and nostalgia. As he notes, "You're only as good as your last job."

Yet he is more than happy to recall his early life in Port Talbot. He admits to difficult formative years: born in 1937, Hopkins was the son of a baker and experienced a typically Welsh upbringing during the war era, one of hardship that was made downcast by his alienation in the classroom.

"I was not a good child at school," he frowns. "I was seen as a child who had problems, but of course in those days nobody knew or cared if it was something like dyslexia. I would sit in class and not know what was going on, or really understand anything the teacher was saying. I was never at the top of the class, in fact I was always at the bottom, and because of that I was viewed to be trouble. And with that, the teachers made sure I suffered with it."

But despite his academic struggles, the detrimental treatment he endured had a profound effect on the young Hopkins, who decided to turn his feelings of neglect into the drive to make something of his life.

"Going into acting was never on the agenda," he says. "It wasn't a dream as such, but what school gave me was the idea that I wanted to prove people wrong. It made me angry, and I wanted to show them. I set out to be rich and famous, because I wanted to show them they were wrong.

"One day in 1947, I went to the local YMCA and they had an acting class on for amateurs. I am not entirely sure why I was there, or what I was trying to achieve because I didn't even think about acting as

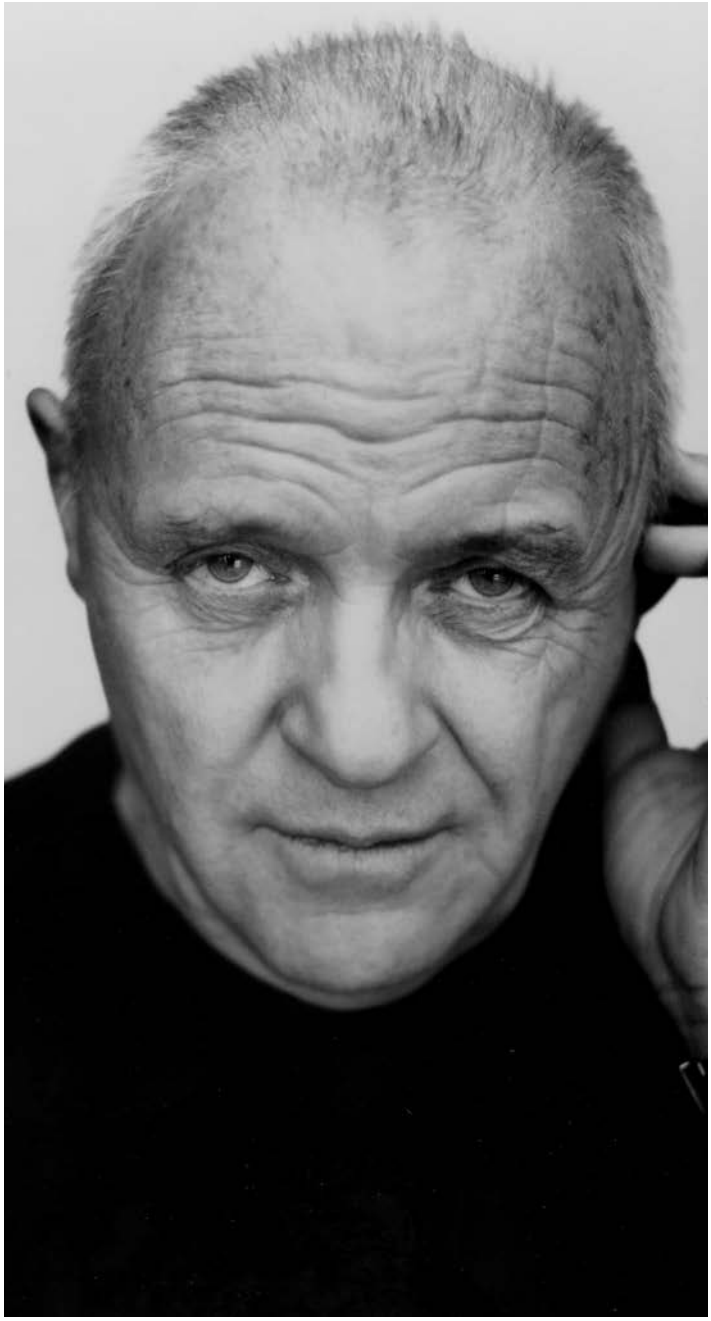
a career. I just assumed I would be a baker like my dad. But I found myself there, and I found myself going back. I think I saw it as a way to get back at all the people, the kids included, who had made school a bit of a misery for me!"

Hopkins may have been out for revenge, but it was success that awaited him. His first professional appearance came on a stage production of Have a Cigarette in Swansea, before he was scouted for The National Theatre, London.

His move to the big screen followed in 1967, and he has never looked back, starring in dozens of films – probably the most famous of which, Silence of the Lambs, will forever remain his outstanding signature. Not one for looking back, does he nonetheless have a career highlight?

"Not particularly," he smiles. "I find that at my age now everything I've done blurs into one. Of course, the Oscar was very nice and you are honoured to receive it, but now all it does is sit on the sideboard near my television and rots away. I don't think you can take things like that too seriously. We are all going to die eventually. I thought about that when I went to JFK's grave a while back. All he achieved didn't matter to him when he is lying there. That has stayed with me."

For someone who seems a touch embarrassed about his ever-growing collection of awards, how did he feel about accepting the Knighthood? "I'm not sure why they gave me a Knighthood, in all honesty," he says. "I don't call myself 'sir.' I only really use the title in America, where they insist upon it. I have tried to get them to stop, but they get offended if I don't use it!"



If this makes Hopkins sound cranky and ungrateful, he certainly isn't, and he carries something of the Celtic grounded outlook about him. That is true of his actions as well: he may have moved to America many years ago, and currently lives in Malibu with his third wife, Stella; but his affection for his homeland is undiminished. Whenever he is back in the UK, he visits Wales at any given opportunity.

"Whenever I go back to England to film, my wife will try to get back. Recently I went down to west Wales to St David's, because it's the cathedral capital of Wales. It's where St David is buried. It's beautiful; it's another world – a tiny village with this great cathedral that goes back 1,000 years.

"I will always try to go to Wales. I have a couple of friends there, friends of my mother's really. So I go to see them and we head out for dinner. I only go back if there's work, but I enjoy it, I enjoy it very much. It's different and I like the weather. I love the weather here, but it's different!"

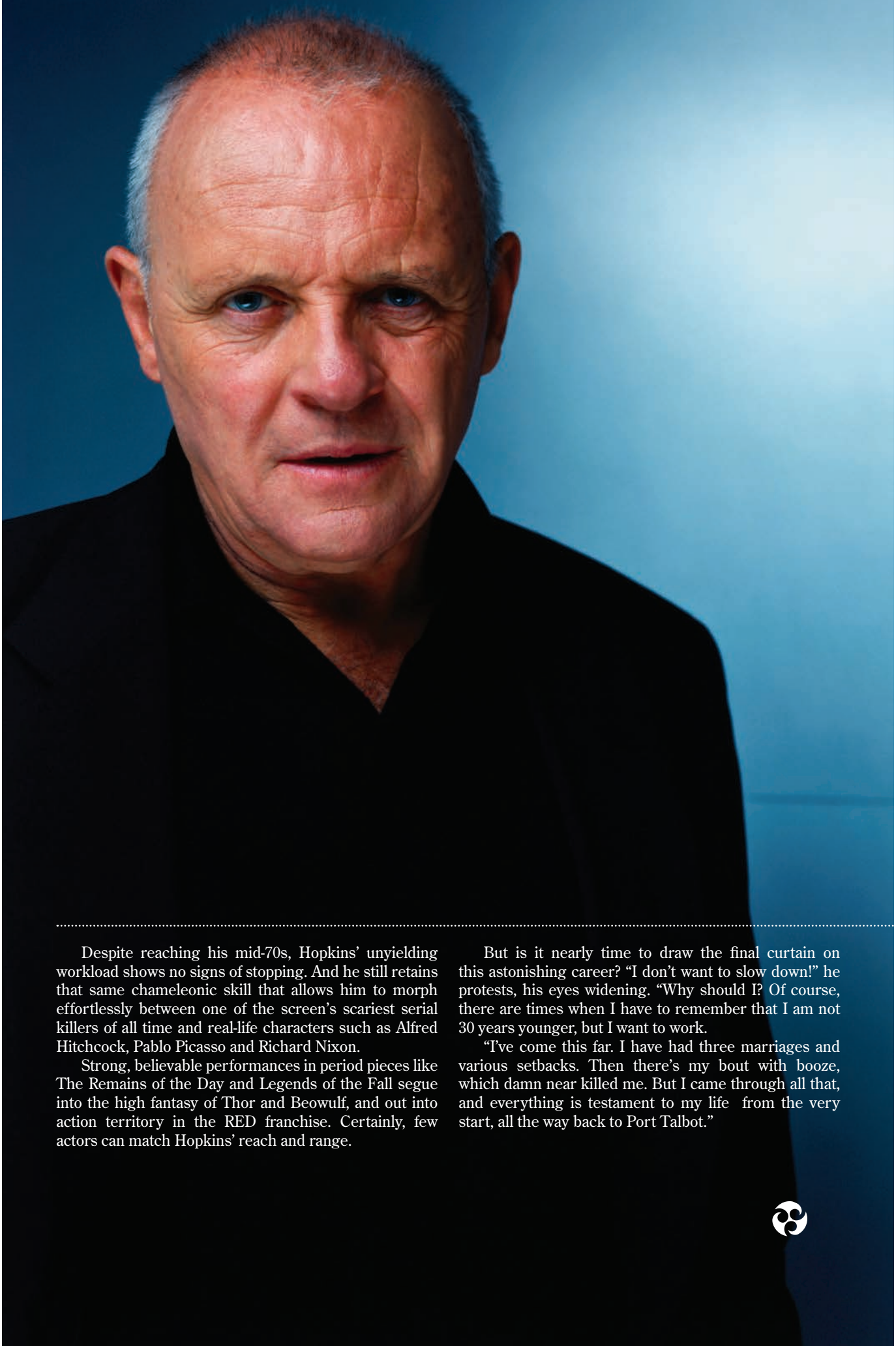
Hopkins says he enjoys a "nice life" in Malibu, and that he is more conscious of the need to look after himself as he reaches an advanced age. His battle with alcohol has been well documented, but nowadays a healthy body and mind are paramount.

"I am very, very well," he grins. "I have to watch certain things that I eat. And I see people around me here in America, who are younger than me and who are grossly overweight. Through the years I had battles with weight, because I eat too much or I eat too fast and so I work out every day – cardiovascular stuff and weights and all that sort of thing. I go to bed early too.

"Everything changes as you get older. I sleep in the afternoons, but I really take care of myself and I read a lot. It keeps the brain active. And I play the piano, which is a good activity for the brain. I learn poetry and I learn text, and that really keeps one alive."

Hopkins' continued work helps to keep him young too, and this year he can be seen in two films, RED2 and Thor: The Dark World, in the latter reprising his role as Odin in the film based on the Marvel comics. What was it that moved him towards this film?

"Well, because they offered it to me!" he smiles. "Ken Branagh called me one day and said, 'Could we meet, and would you like to play Odin?' That doesn't take courage because you think, 'Well why not?' You can't get too fussy about things. They say all these little things – look before you leap, be careful – but sometimes it's good not to be careful, to just leap off the ledge and do something. You never know how it's going to turn out. So you have to ask the question."



Despite reaching his mid-70s, Hopkins' unyielding workload shows no signs of stopping. And he still retains that same chameleonic skill that allows him to morph effortlessly between one of the screen's scariest serial killers of all time and real-life characters such as Alfred Hitchcock, Pablo Picasso and Richard Nixon.

Strong, believable performances in period pieces like The Remains of the Day and Legends of the Fall segue into the high fantasy of Thor and Beowulf, and out into action territory in the RED franchise. Certainly, few actors can match Hopkins' reach and range.

But is it nearly time to draw the final curtain on this astonishing career? "I don't want to slow down!" he protests, his eyes widening. "Why should I? Of course, there are times when I have to remember that I am not 30 years younger, but I want to work.

"I've come this far. I have had three marriages and various setbacks. Then there's my bout with booze, which damn near killed me. But I came through all that, and everything is testament to my life from the very start, all the way back to Port Talbot."

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Gerard Butler

One of Hollywood's most likeable players, Gerard Butler has built a career on being a nice guy. The Paisley-bred actor talked to Stephen Milton about his work and his Scottish identity.

Admittedly, he's not the best actor out there, and he freely acknowledges his limits. More often than not, his reputation as a ladies' man - after romances with the likes of Jennifer Aniston, Jessica Biel and Cameron Diaz - has eclipsed his performances, but there's so much more to this power-packed performer...not that Butler himself would admit that.

"Sometimes I think I'm going to be found out," he laughed in his charming West Scots brogue. "Sometimes I think people will discover that really I haven't a clue what I'm doing, that I'm just a mouthy Scot who got lucky."

By Tinseltown standards, Butler was a latecomer to the game. He shot to fame in 2006 when he was in his mid-thirties thanks to his hulking turn as King Leonidas in mythological comic book smash 300. He's since cultivated an action man image with Guy Ritchie's RocknRolla and a decent turn in last year's flawed biopic, Machine Gun Preacher.

Despite being relatively mature when he found fame, Butler is not immune to the pressures and temptations of the film industry.

"I can see easily how the younger ones in the game go off the rails," he said. "The money's been thrown at you, the fans too. You're constantly being praised and it's hard to stay grounded. And it doesn't matter what age you are when you start or when success hits. I was that bit older than some of the young fry setting off now but it doesn't make any difference; it's adulation and you have to block it out to an extent. There are a lot of privileges and opportunities taken for granted in this game, until you sit back and realize, it's a good life."

Of course, actors are not always adored – Butler's recent baffling attempt at gross-out humour as a foul-mouthed leprechaun in Movie 43 didn't exactly strike a chord with audiences, while the role of a former football pro in Playing For Keeps was a commercial disaster, although it did offer Butler the chance to play for his beloved Celtic, if only in an alternate reality.

So now he's flexing his impossible muscles once again as a Secret Service agent protecting the White House from North Korean terrorists in Antoine Fuqua's Olympus Has Fallen, alongside a respected cast that includes Angela Bassett, Aaron Eckhart and Morgan Freeman.

"Antoine Fuqua, the man who gave us Training Day - he's a genius," Butler mused. "Coupled with a cast of that calibre... I mean Freeman, Angela Basset, Aaron Eckhart…it's like, let me just pretend I'm meant to be sharing a scene with you; that I'm at the same standard...that we're not on completely different plains."

After training in weapons artillery and hand-to-hand combat for his gruelling shoot in Louisiana, the 43-year-old admits the action in his movies is starting to take its toll.

"I think I can do everything," he explained. "I'm a typical Scot in that way – nothing's impossible. I can run and hurtle back and land on the ground. And that's fine if you do it once, but after 20 takes, you're cut to shreds. At one point my arm went black and blue all the way round because I was doing this same kung-fu move over and over. I'm no spring chicken anymore."

He flashed that twinkly grin. "And you'd think I'd have learned my lesson after Hawaii."

While on the set of surf movie Chasing Mavericks off the coast of Oahu nearly two years ago, Butler was caught out by a series of freak waves. "It's like you're in an avalanche and you don't know if you're ever coming up. You can't breathe and there's nothing you can do about it.

"It was so scary and frightening as I just couldn't get up to the surface. So for future movies, I'm starting to see the logic in hiring a stunt guy. But it's hard because you want to be on that chopper, you want to be surfing that wave or you want to be in that fight. You want to be doing the sh*t that boys do."

A Scottish childhood

Born in Glasgow, Butler was immediately relocated to Montreal in Canada for the first two years of his life, before returning to home shores with his mother when he was two-and-a-half years old. It's a transition he praises her for.

"My mum decided to leave my dad, and Montreal, because that wasn't going well. She brought us back to Scotland. That was a big decision and I have nothing but respect for her for making it.

"She didn't have an easy time," he shared. "My mother is ultimately like my hero. When she came back to Scotland she had three kids – and absolutely nothing else. She ended up taking night classes and became a lecturer in business studies. She then went on to become a senior lecturer at college, which is a big thing, and brought up us three kids on her own.

"It's superhuman stuff. I don't know if I could ever do it, but I loved my childhood. I was raised next to Paisley and, coming from a huge Irish Catholic extended family, there was so much love surrounding us. There was also a passion for being Scottish, and you didn't have to leave Scotland to feel it."

Butler added: "For me, Scotland is home. Scotland is my roots and, you know, you always get that feeling when you arrive back, each and every time."

Building a career

Butler didn't first set out to be an actor – after graduating with a law degree from Glasgow University, he was taken on as a trainee by an Edinburgh law firm, but his party-loving lifestyle led to dismissal a week before full qualification as a lawyer.

So he headed south to London to pursue a career on the screen, eventually landing a string of minor roles in Tomorrow Never Dies and Mrs Brown.

"When I first moved to London, it took a good two or three years of slave labour, doubt, and pure what am I doing here attitude," he recalled. "I was working waiter jobs in Soho, as a telemarketer, you name it. I did it while trying to pursue this impossible dream.

"But then I landed a job behind the scenes at the Mermaid Theatre in Blackfriars and that's where a shift happened, where I suddenly found myself in an environment where I could potentially meet people who could help me."

Introduced to director Steven Berkoff, who cast him in a stage adaptation of Coriolanus, this eventually led to a theatre reworking of Trainspotting, offering the young actor a platform.

"Those years in London, they gave me a foundation. As much as I love the international lifestyle my career has afforded me, and a base in LA at that, coming back to London – just like going back to Paisley – reminds me of what I went through to get where I am today."

The future – Scotland's and his own

As he is a proud Scot, one wonders where Butler stands on the Scottish Independence referendum, which will be held next year. Oddly, or maybe, practically, he's somewhere in the middle.

"I'm not 100 per cent sold on the idea. I used to have intense feelings for an independent Scotland but now I'm more about coming together, rather than a separation. I think some separate taxation and more of a connection with local government is smart, and should be worked on, but I don't think an independent Scotland is necessarily a good idea."

Butler is currently in what appears to be his longest-standing relationship to date with Romanian model Madalina Ghenea, whom he met on the set of a commercial in Dubai. Butler gives the impression he may be finally ready to put down roots.

"Priorities change as you get older," he said. "I guess part of me would love to have toddlers running around, to enter that new stage in my life. But sure, that's pretty normal for anyone really."

And career-wise, he seems to be embarking on a new direction too, with plans to start shooting on harrowing Holocaust drama Dynamo, which charts the Ukrainian uprising against the Nazis as well as Thunder Run, an Iraqi war epic co-starring Matthew McConaughey and Sam Worthington, in similar vein to The Hurt Locker.

And what of the rumours of an appearance in the sequel to 300? "I think that rumour is done. Unless they've used CGI (computer-generated imagery) and not told me about it, I don't think I'm in it," he joked. "They offered it to me and I really liked the script but I didn't understand what I was there for; all I was doing was giving a political speech - it was only a minor sideline. It just felt better that I wasn't a part of it."

It's fair to say Butler straddles the line between action and rom-com pretty successfully. In the past 12 months alone, he's gone from Machine Gun Preacher to Playing for Keeps and now Olympus Has Fallen. Is this an intentional mix?

"I wish I was that calculating," he chuckled. "Honestly, I just take what I can get. I guess I like to mix it up... isn't that what acting's all about? Hopefully there's no fear that I'll ever be typecast.

"And of course, it'd be great to think a big award might be around the corner. I mean it would be lovely, wouldn't it? So many say they aren't bothered but it's a lovely recognition for your work. I think every actor has a moment where they think, that'd be nice. But we'll see down the line, who knows?

"My goals are just to keep working, be happy, be healthy. No-one can really ask for more than that, can they?"

Jetsetting around the world may be all well and fine for now, but in the future, Butler foresees a move back to his homeland.

"I think ultimately that's what I'm working towards. LA and Dubai, and Australia - all these places are phenomenal and wonderful for the short-term, but I think I really want to move back to my roots and settle in Scotland – back to Paisley. Yeah, I could see that happening very easily. And whenever I return home it restores a bit of the bullishness that I carry around with me. That can become a bit too softened in LA, so I like to recharge in that way!"

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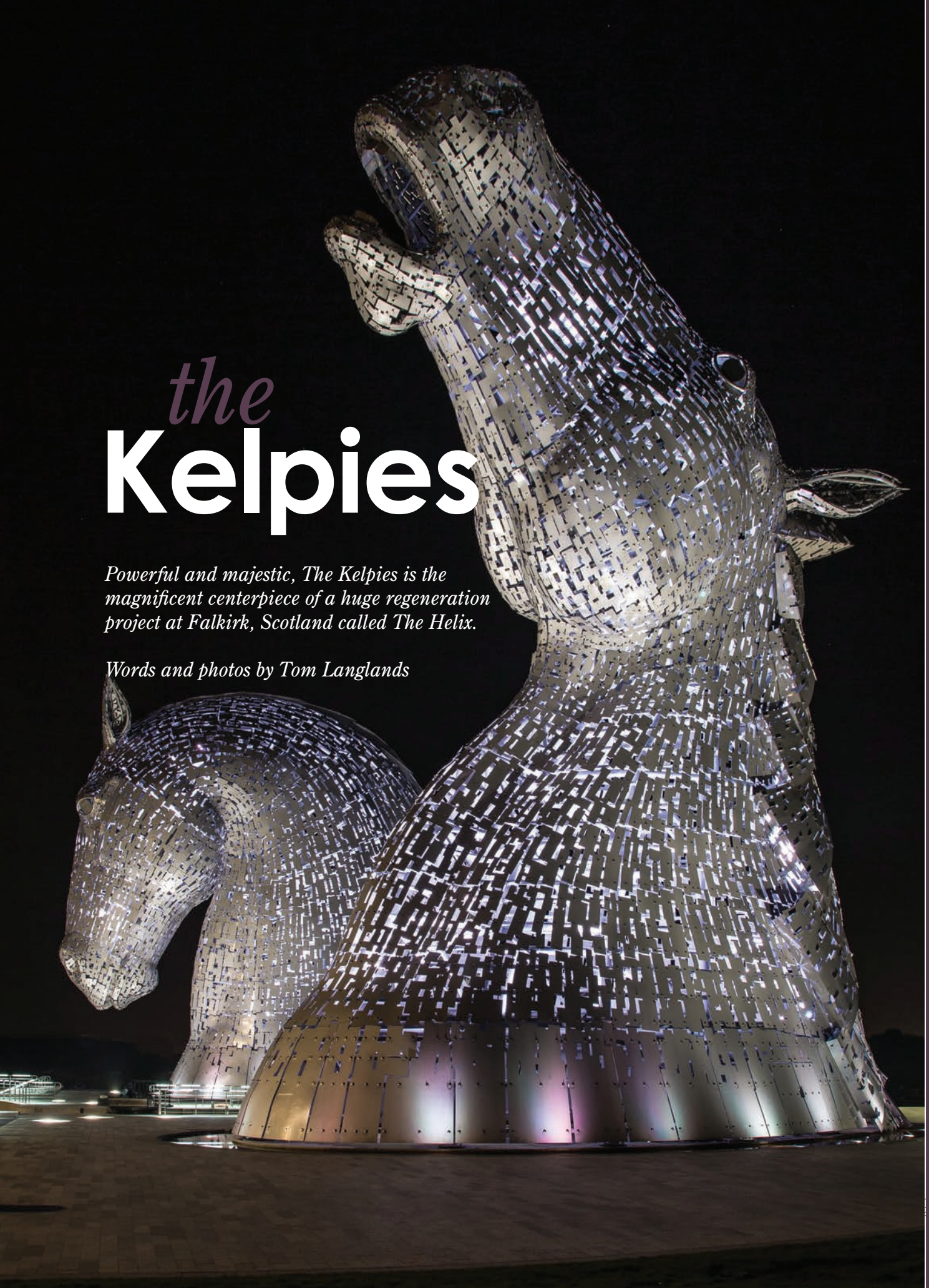

the Kelpies

Powerful and majestic, The Kelpies is the magnificent centerpiece of a huge regeneration project at Falkirk, Scotland called The Helix.

Words and photos by Tom Langlands

The Kelpies' name comes from the water-dwelling horse-spirits of ancient Scottish folklore. These massive, shimmering beasts – towering sculptures that artist Andy Scott created – are mirrored in the waters of the Forth and Clyde Canal, and serve as cultural icons, reflecting an oft-forgotten aspect of Scotland's industrial past.

Glasgow-born Scott's creation opened in the spring of this year. The two 100-foot (roughly 30-metre tall) steel horse heads each weigh 300 tonnes and are clad in stainless steel plates. They stand as equine guardians on either side of the newly opened section of the Forth and Clyde Canal. They are the largest of their kind in the world and are already attracting international attention.

Bold and inspirational, they embody the spirit and aspirations of the Helix while remaining firmly anchored in the history of the land from which they spring.

Walking around the Kelpies, they seem alive. Looking up at their expressive faces against the blue sky, they appear to move. They are huge, yet approachable, engaging and captivating, just as those powerful draught horses of yesteryear must have been. I can sense their ancestors straining at big heavy ropes as they ploughed their way along the old Canal towpaths, their skin glistening in the sunlight as it reflects the ripples from the water surface. At night, looking into the black depths of the Canal, the colours change from gold through silver, to blue and red. Enchanting and hypnotic, I can't help but wonder if a true pair of water-dwelling Kelpies is bewitching me.

The Kelpies is the largest piece of public art in Scotland and the largest equine sculpture in the world. It serves as a focal point within the wider Helix Park. Given its visibility from the nearby motorway and the low-lying nature of the surrounding land it also acts as a magnet for attracting visitors to the area.

Scott has produced public art in Scotland for many years. His designs are "influenced by the location, the social history, the geography and in many instances the aspirations of the local people." In the case of The Kelpies, "The client had a vague concept of a massive civil engineering structure which was to act as a boat lift mechanism and they had a title. My brief was to re-interpret that start from my angle as a sculptor."

As discussions progressed it was decided to separate the boat lifting element of the project from the artwork. The concept of the two horses' heads, in strikingly different poses, first came to Scott when he was sketching at his future wife's kitchen table in Amsterdam. It came from several considerations, "The vast open site of the Helix Park, the sight lines, the relationship to the distant Ochil Hills, the potential for illumination, the proximity to the M9 motorway and, of course, their function as an entrance gateway to the Forth and Clyde Canal. There was also my own attraction to the equine theme, and the idea of an artwork with two components, but not a symmetrical pair. The different poses create a dramatic tension and give rise to narrative interpretations."

"We have created a brand new green space in Helix Park that has replaced a disused wasteland..."

Once the basic concept was set, Scott advanced the design, resolving many of the sculptural issues in the second set of maquettes that were eventually scaled to full size. The foundations for each of the Kelpie heads is made of 1200 tonnes of steel-reinforced concrete. Each Kelpie's main frame is constructed of tubular steel that in turn supports a secondary structure of steel brackets. These facilitate the fixing of the final 990 individually shaped stainless steel cladding pieces. This awe-inspiring work of art is in itself a significant work of engineering. The frames were delivered to site in sections and the entire installation was erected in 90 days at the Forth and Clyde Canal.

The Forth and Clyde Canal was conceived in the mid 18th

century and completed in 1790. It provided a valuable inland east-west waterway link between the lowland industrial communities of the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Clyde, avoiding the previous route around the treacherous seas of the north of Scotland. The main way to transport materials the 35 miles (56 km) between these communities was via barges pulled by powerful draught horses such as Clydesdales, Shires and Percherons. This was the heyday of the industrial revolution and it was against this backdrop of industry and trade that the harbour town of Grangemouth came into existence at the Forth end of the Canal. Falkirk, just a few miles inland, prospered owing to its prime location at the junction of the Forth and Clyde Canal and the Union Canal that linked it with Edinburgh.

Throughout the 19th century a gradual increase in the size of sailing vessels rendered them unsuitable for the shallow, narrow waters of inland canals. The advent of rail travel also took vital trade away from the waterways, as did the invention of motor vehicles and the construction of reliable road networks. The Forth and Clyde Canal slipped into disuse during the 1930s, officially closing in the 1960s.

Today, there is a renewed interest in leisure craft, sailing and houseboats. It partly comes from a desire to rediscover our lost landscapes and history and also from a renewed interest in nature, wildlife and sustainable living. In 2001 the Forth and Clyde Canal reopened as part of the Millennium Link, an £80-million project to re-engineer and revive both the Forth and Clyde Canal and the related Union Canal. The project is part of a wider initiative meant to regenerate communities and create economic, leisure and health benefits.

Following the Millennium Link project, and associated with it, came The Helix. It is one of Scotland's most innovative parkland projects. With a grant of £25-million from the Big Lottery Fund and additional funding from other project sponsors, The Helix has a £43-million budget to create a cutting edge multi-purpose space linking 16 communities via 16.7 miles (27km) of pathways. Opened in 2013 The Helix boasts a 650-foot (roughly 200 metres) diameter lagoon, play areas, educational resources, community woodlands with associated nature and wildlife resources, cycle tracks, open space for hosting large events, a new extension to the Forth and Clyde Canal and the newly completed Kelpies.

Grant Mackenzie, Helix Team Leader for Falkirk Community Trust and responsible for managing The Helix and The Kelpies, says "We have created a brand new green space in Helix Park that has replaced a disused wasteland. One of our objectives is to help provide opportunities for the local population to be healthier. Our visitors are already walking, cycling and roller skating around their new park."

"...One of our objectives is to help provide opportunities for the local population to be healthier. Our visitors are already walking, cycling and roller skating around their new park."

With a new Kelpies visitor centre due to open in summer 2015, Mackenzie is already seeing the benefit of Scott's Kelpies. "Since The Kelpies opened in spring 2014 there have been significant numbers of visitors to the site and we have already beaten our budgeted figure of 500,000 and we are only in September. Visitors have really taken The Kelpies to their hearts and are awed by the sculptor's design and vision for them. We have created a completely unique work of art that our visitors just can't wait to see up close."

Thanks to Andy Scott www.scottsculptures.co.uk and Grant Mackenzie, Falkirk Community Trust www.falkirkcommunitytrust.org

For additional information about The Helix and The Kelpies see www.thehelix.co.uk

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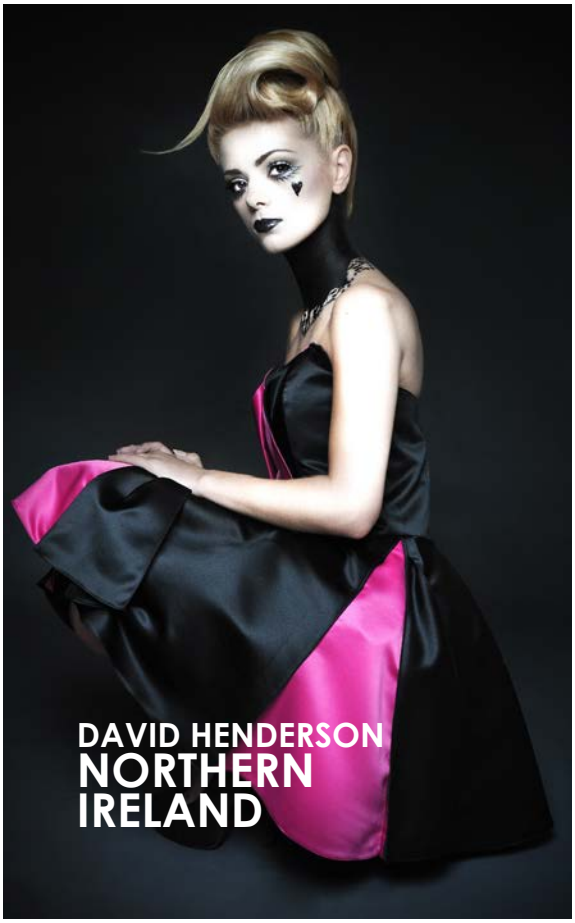

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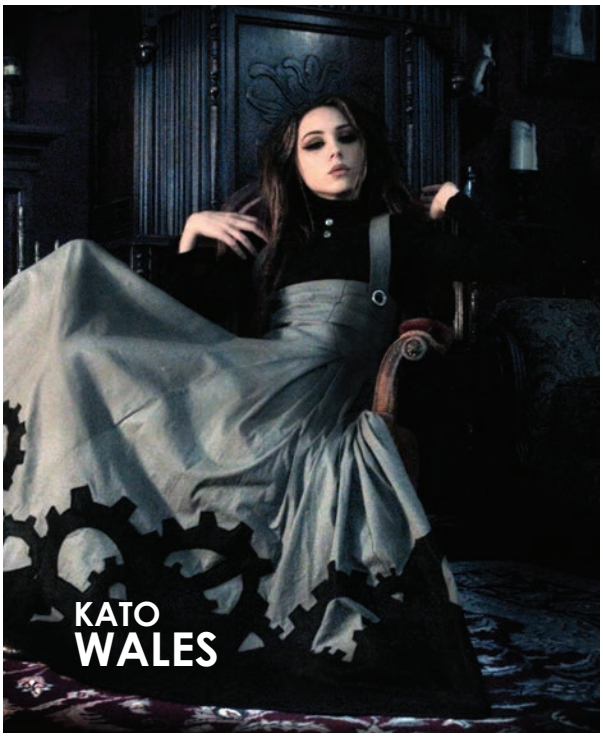

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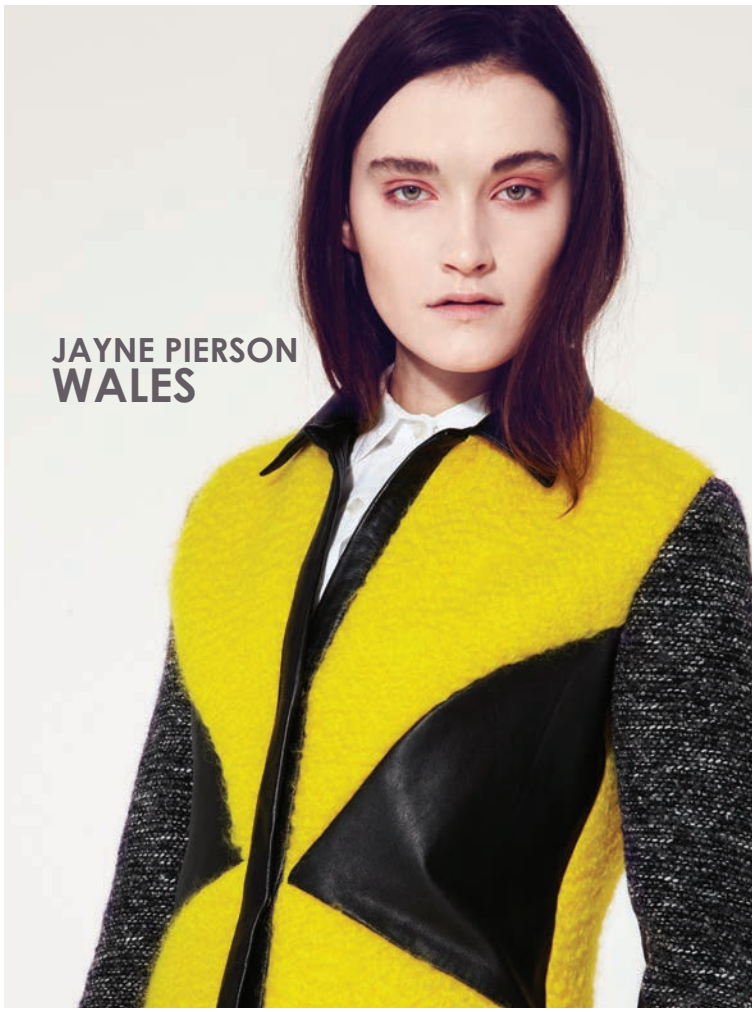

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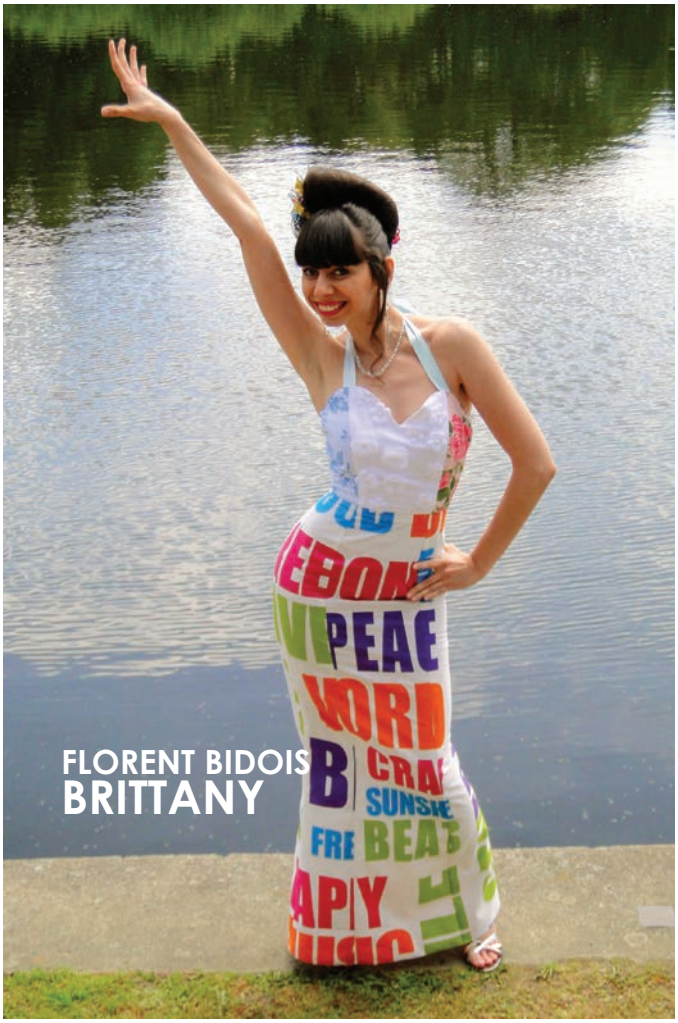

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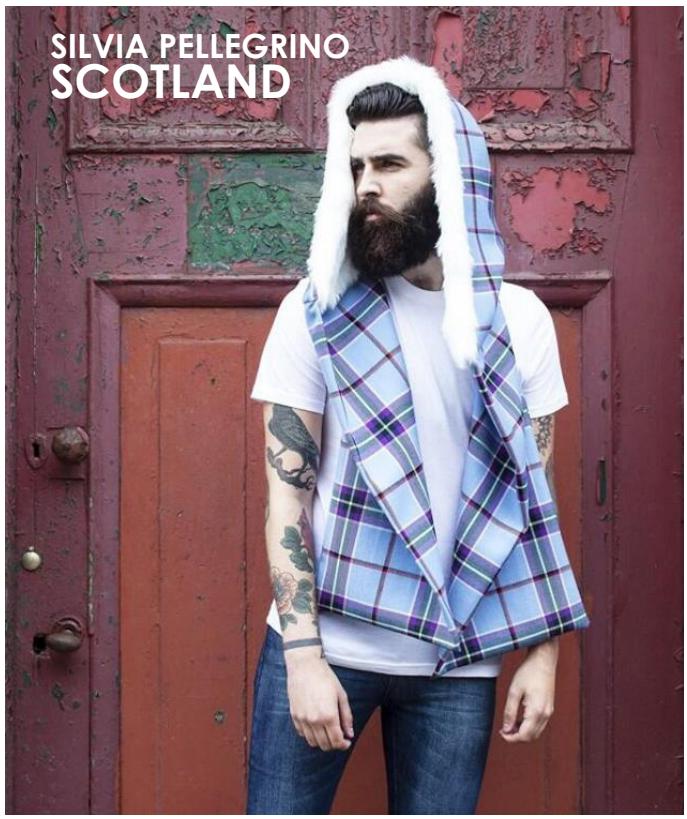

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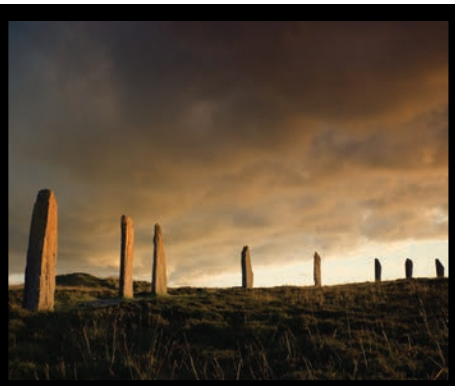

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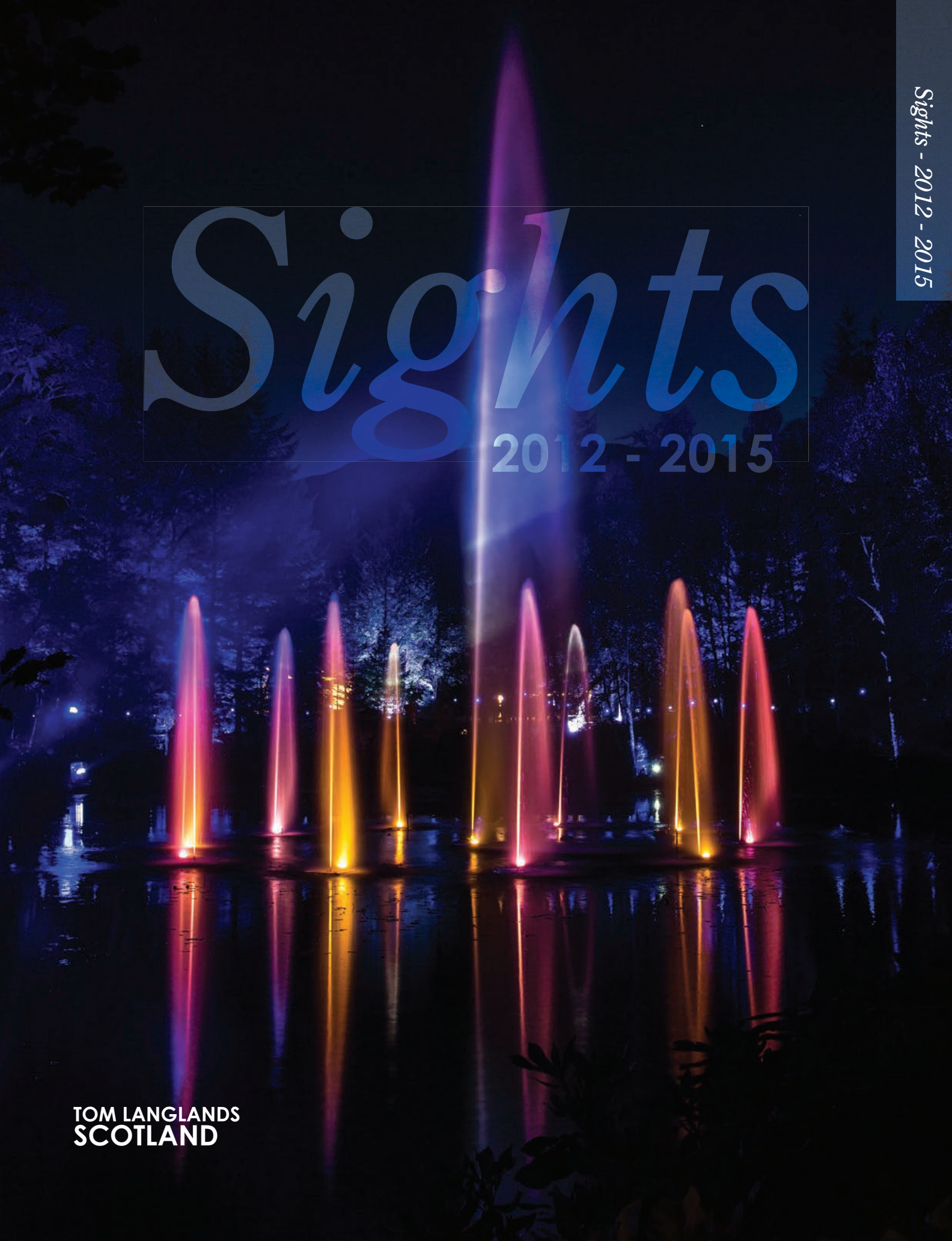


Sights

2012 - 2015

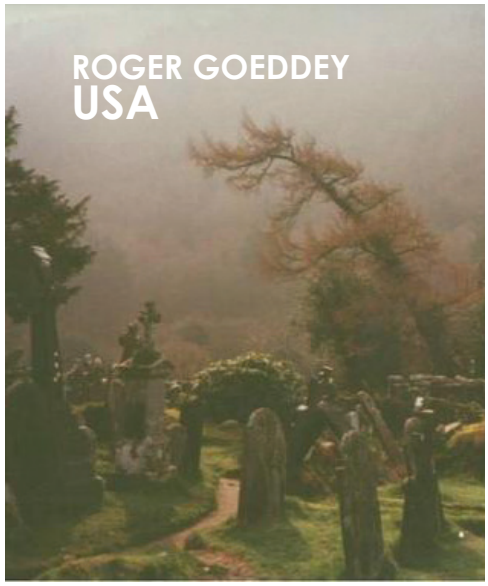
TOM LANGLANDS
SCOTLAND

Sights - 2012 - 2015

BRENT MCCOMBS
CANADA

TOM LANGLANDS
SCOTLAND

GRAHAM MACINDOE
SCOTLAND


ROGER GOEDDEY
USA

BRENT MCCOMBS
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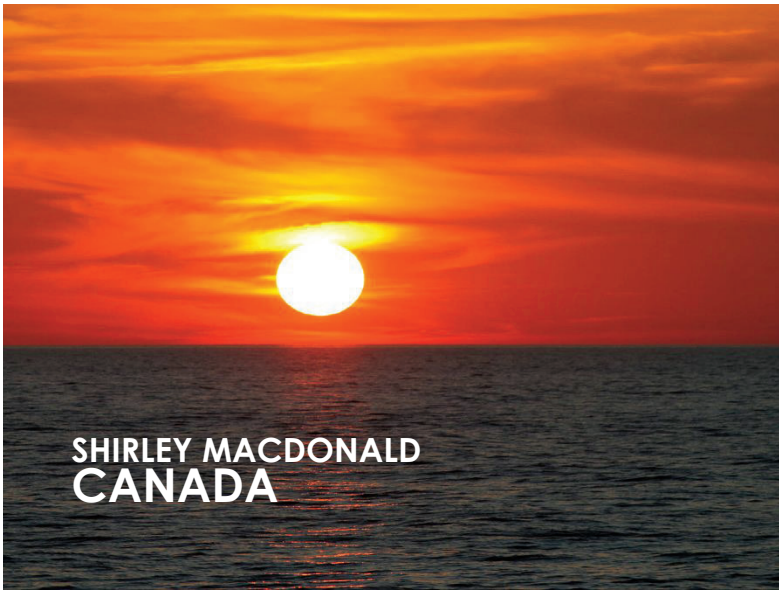

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CANADA

KELLY MACARTHUR
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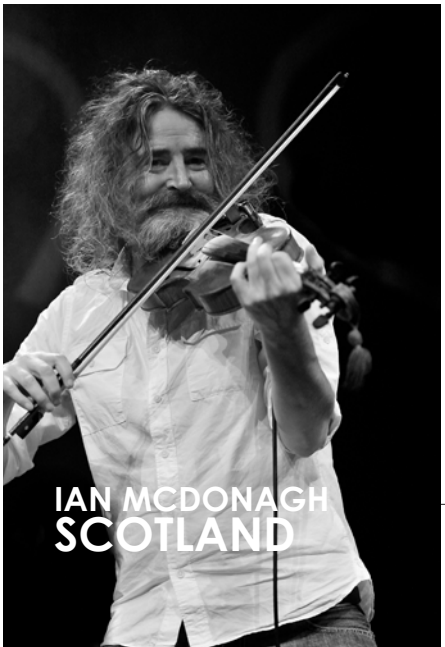

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ANDREW MCNEILL
WALES

RYAN MACDONALD
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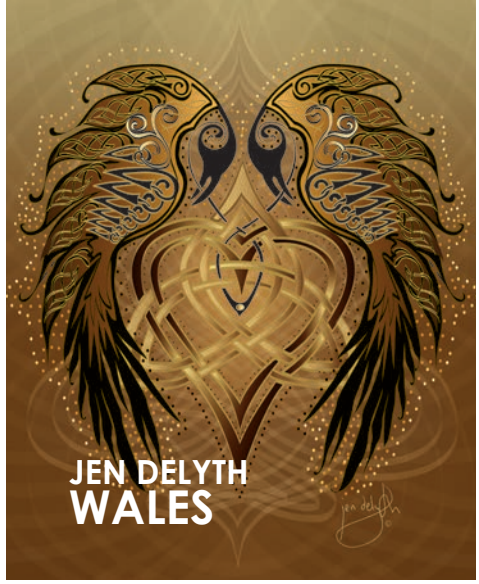
JEN DELYTH
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STEPHEN RANKIN
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SHEILA MACLEAN
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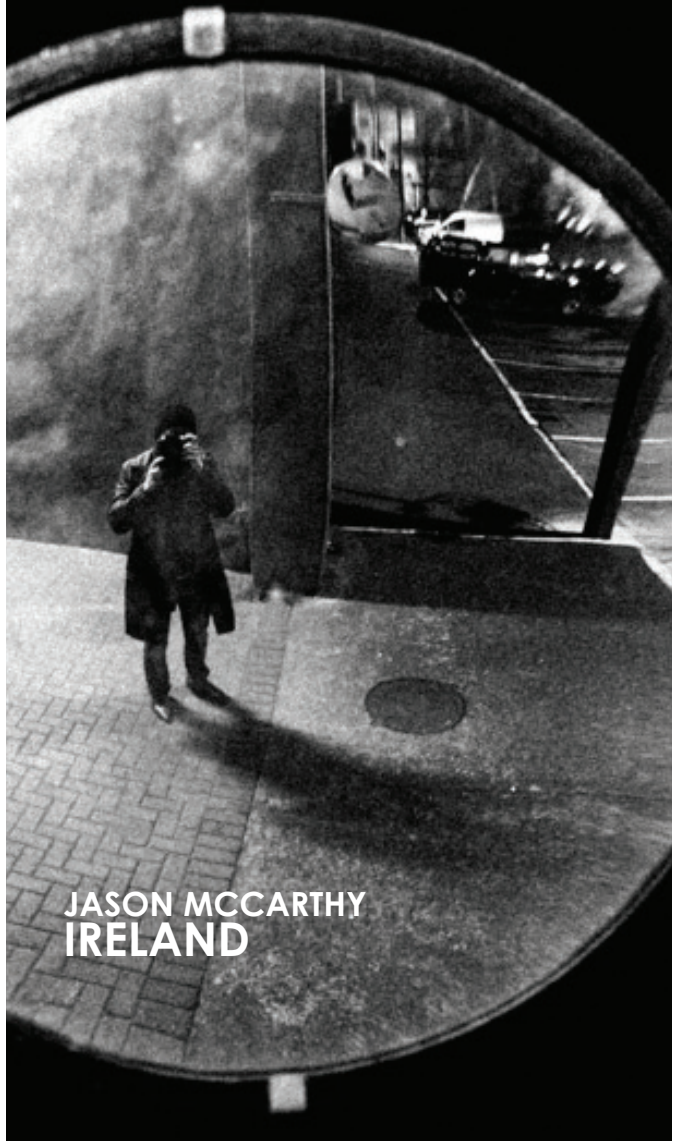
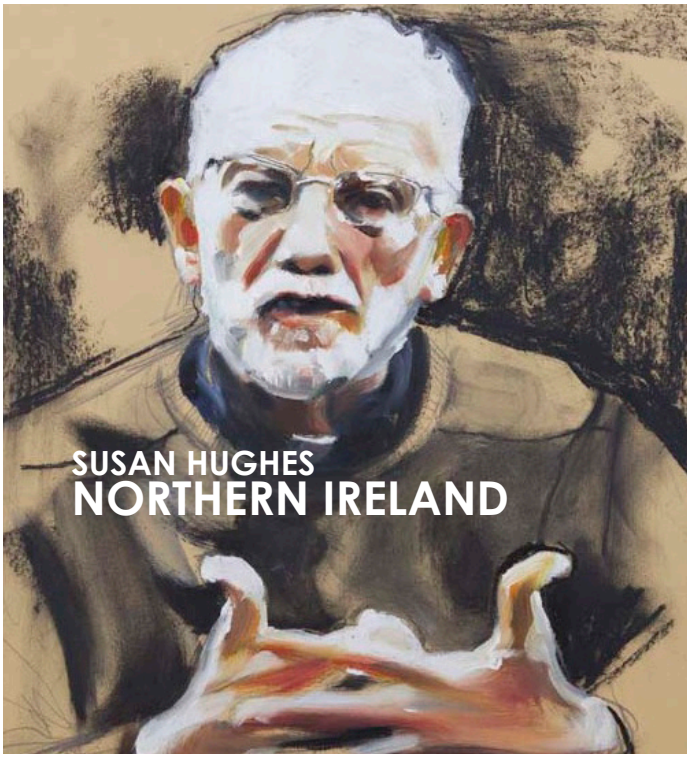
TOM LANGLANDS
SCOTLAND

PAUL KILLEEN
NORTHERN IRELAND



JASON MCCARTHY
IRELAND



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Jump into Ireland

Revisiting Northern Ireland

Twenty-five years since last setting his soles upon Ulster soil, Celtic Life International managing editor Stephen Patrick Clare returns to find a changed cultural, economic and political landscape.

BELFAST

July, 1989
After a short and scenic train ride up from Dublin – which included being strip-searched at the border (no extra cost) - I am in Belfast. The gentle mist and soft rain is a bizarre backdrop to the Troubles; soldiers and armoured vehicles roam the streets, military helicopters drone overhead, and sirens wail as local residents pass through a maze of gated checkpoints across the city core. The mood is tense, taxing, and everyone seems on edge.

March, 2014
The 25 minute drive from Belfast International Airport into Northern Ireland's capital city is a revelation; it has been 25 years since my last visit here and – except for the gentle mist and soft rain – it is a changed country.

My first journal entry from that trip north (above) seems surreal now; gone are the guns, the soldiers, the armoured vehicles. There are no roadside checkpoints, nor blockades, nor buzz of black helicopters.

Instead, the road into town is a sea of shiny, silver SUVs, BMWs, and Mercedes. Yellow construction cranes abound, with new residential and commercial sales booming. Older homes and buildings are surrounded by red scaffolding, undergoing extensive and expensive renovations.

Pulling into Belfast, the rain is heavier, and I lurch to get my luggage into the luxurious Malmaison, one of the city's many new high-end hotels.

Soon after, umbrella in hand, I am exploring the city, astonished by what I discover; stylish boutiques and nouveau cuisine aside refurbished pubs and churches; the boisterous Cathedral Quarter, brimming with fashionable nightclubs, just steps from the ancient Albert Memorial Clock; an array of foreign accents and financial institutions; smart phones and tablets lighting up the night.

Most impressive, perhaps, is the revamped waterfront. Once the industrial heart of global shipbuilding, and the lifeblood of the local economy, the dockyards are now home to Belfast's booming tourism, high-tech and film industries. The magnificent, towering Titanic Museum invites visitors to peruse the past in a very present place.

As the city savours the make-over, its residents are enjoying a faith lift; the mood is light, spirited, and everyone seems energized.

The next morning, my driver picks me up. Billy Scott has lived in Belfast all of his life, and testifies to the transformation.

"I'm waiting for the other shoe to fall," he jokes, displaying dry Irish wit. "Seriously, though, peace has brought prosperity to almost everyone here."

As if on cue, we wind our way through a myriad of well-manicured middle-class suburbs, replete with new schools, community centers and sporting facilities.

"The standard of living has gone up significantly in a very short time," shares Scott. "Unfortunately, so have the housing prices.

"It's been mostly Catholic money," he continues, quick to add that he has never taken sides. "In truth, they were the ones who stood to benefit the most from the Good Friday Accord, only because they had nowhere to go but up."

And while the majority of Belfast's neighbourhoods are now mixed and non-sectarian, shadows of the city's past still lurk.

TRIVIA: Perhaps interestingly, Northern Ireland is a place without official designation. Some call it a country, while others might use the terms province or region.

POPULATION: A recent census shows that 1,837,938 people currently reside in Northern Ireland, an increase of 7 per cent from 2001. Over half are under the age of 35.

DEMOGRAPHY: In terms of ethnicity, Ulster is almost entirely Caucasian (98 per cent), with a small, but growing mix of non-Caucasian groups scattered across the country. 42% identify as Protestant, 41% as Catholic.

ECONOMY: Traditionally, Ulster has had an industrial economy, most notably in shipbuilding, rope manufacturing and textiles. These economic pillars have been replaced by tourism, IT, bio-tech and financial services.

Scott steers us up past the Sandy Row, around the Crumlin Road, towards Shankill, a longstanding Protestant holdout.

"There are always a few idiots about in places like this," he notes, "hardliners who won't let the past go."

The contrast is striking; drab and decaying homes are coloured-over with massive murals and Union Jacks.

"There's no money here anymore," he continues. "This neigbourhood was built on the backs of shipbuilders and mill workers. For generations, there was no need for an education, because you were guaranteed a job if your dad and granddad had one. But that work is gone now."

Just a few blocks over, in the Catholic Falls Road district, the story is similar; pro-democracy propaganda is pasted over old, broken down buildings, and barbed wire sits atop crumbling walls.

An open-top excursion bus drives by, filled with curious onlookers snapping shots.

"Political tourism," explains Scott. "Tens of thousands of visitors now come through these communities each year. Some have roots here, others have a historical interest. Whatever the reason, it's been good for business."

Rebranding the Troubles has been part of the country's efforts to reconcile its recent past.

There are still small sectarian flare-ups, however, including a skirmish the previous evening between a handful of Loyalists and Nationalists in front of City Hall as part of ongoing "flag protests." Interestingly, though law enforcement officials were on hand, the scuffle was self-policed.

"Blame it on the booze - the bars had just let out," laughs Scott. "But it just goes to show you that people here will step in to stop that kind of nonsense now. They aren't willing to let anything muck with their good luck."

GOING NORTH

July, 1989

Hitchhiking north to the coast, I catch a lift with George McGuinness, who delivers bread each day to villages between Belfast and Derry. I ask him, given the Troubles, why he continues to live here. He does not reply. He doesn't need to. Over the coming hours, my eyes take in the breathtaking beauty of his homeland.

March, 2014

I lucked out with Ken McElroy. An author, playwright, poet, philosopher, humourist and sporting aficionado, my driver and guide for the next few days was recently awarded an

MBE for his contributions to tourism. The experience is sure to be engaging, entertaining and educational.

Ken's warmth, wit and wisdom are welcome as we weave our way through the tender Glens of Antrim. He points to this and that, regaling me with tidbits of history. The grassy knolls are peppered with small farms and streams. It is an outdoorsman's dream, he tells me, ideal for fly fishing.

Later, we hug the ocean on the Causeway Coastal Route, named one of the world's top five road trips. It's easy to see why; the seaside settings are picturesque, with a stirring view of Rathlin Island, just six miles north. Look a little farther, and the southernmost tip of Scotland's Kintyre Peninsula comes into focus.

The rugged Ballintoy Harbour is our first stop, one of several location sites for HBO's hit series Game of Thrones. The parking lot is teeming with tour buses, so I sniff the salty air and take a few quick photos before we move on.

Not surprisingly, just a couple of miles west, the Giant's Causeway is equally busy. We escape the visitor center, strolling a few hundred yards down the bluff towards the awe-inspiring seascape of hexagonal basalt columns.

As the surf pounds the shore, Ken tells me about the "Wreckers," locals of years past who would use luring lights to deliberately steer passing ships into the rocks before looting them. The waters off Northern Ireland, he says, are among the world's largest ocean graveyards.

An hour later, my trusted guide again brings history to life at Dunluce Castle, a now-ruined 13th century stone structure overlooking the sea. Fact is as engaging as fiction here, with stories of ghosts, Earls, Kings, Queens, Spanish sailors and two now-infamous battles between the McQuillans and the MacDonalds offering valuable insight into the region's fascinating past.

In the town of Bushmills, home of the world famous Whiskey distillery, local residents watch travelers come and go. The four-star, 400 year-old Bushmills Inn is bustling, mostly with golfers itching to improve their handicap at the nearby 36-hole Royal Portrush Golf Club, ranked one of the top courses on the planet.

Ken theorizes on the region's exploding popularity. "For a long time, the only news that came out of Northern Ireland was bad news, and many people have told me they were simply too afraid to come here because of the conflict."

Later, over excellent fish 'n' chips and Guinness in Portballintrae, I ask him why, given the Troubles, he continued to live here. He does not reply. He doesn't need to.

DERRY

July, 1989

Rough day in a rough part of the region. First, I am given the boots when I try to cross the street during an Orange Day Parade. Later, I am mugged by thugs in the Bogside, who walk off with my wallet and camera. Are these the trials of traveling, or merely the tribulations of not using my head? I have no one to blame but myself for the bruised body and wounded pride.

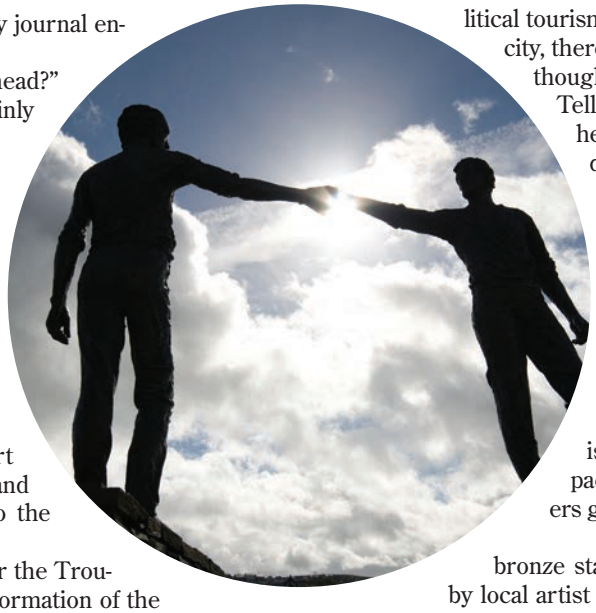
March, 2014

Ken laughs when I read him my journal entry from a quarter-century ago.

"Ah, so you didn't use your head?" he smirks. "Well, they certainly did."

Ha.

While my scars have since faded, my memories have not, and as we pull into the historic city of Derry – officially Londonderry – the recollections come rushing back.



Perhaps more than Belfast, Derry has come to terms with its long and difficult past, even embracing it as a vital part of its identity. History is alive and well here, carefully woven into the fabric of everyday life.

The city was a flashpoint for the Troubles, starting in 1968 with the formation of the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association, which sought - peacefully - to improve the quality of life for area Catholics. Instead, what followed were thirty years of senseless sectarian violence and bloodshed.

There was fighting in the streets long before that, however, and Ken details the 1609 Plantation of Ulster, the Irish Rebellion of 1641, the 1649 Scottish Presbyterian blockade, and the Siege of 1689.

A quick visit to the multi-media Tower Museum affirms the accounts, as does a tour of the Guildhall, home of Derry's city council and Mayor. Opened in 1890, the spectacular structure has since survived fire (1908) and two bombings (1972).

It is on the streets, however, where the past most permeates the present; the old cobblestone roads, stone mason buildings, and grand Cathedrals are all in use, as are the stoic Walls of Derry.

Built between 1614 and 1619, the historic monument is almost perfectly preserved today, providing a panoramic perspective of city. From there, I look out over the Bogside, the once impoverished community of my mother's ancestors (Dunphys from Kerry, many of whom who came north during the famine and married local Dohertys).

Like parts of Belfast, "the Bog" has kept its murals and monuments intact, looking to prosper from political tourism. And, also like Ulster's capital city, there are still a few hardliners here, though they are now the minority. Tellingly, the old Sinn Fein/IRA headquarters at the heart of the quarter is now an upscale Inn with a bustling bar and restaurant.

Also visible from my vantage point is the newly constructed Peace Bridge, which connects the mostly Catholic city core with the Protestant Waterside community across the River Foyle. It is a powerful image - the link is packed with pedestrians and bikers going to and fro.

Another poignant symbol, the bronze statue Hands Across The Divide by local artist Maurice Harron, stands by the bridge.

"Peace has done wonders for this place," notes Ken. "It might seem as familiar as always, but you wouldn't recognize it now if you tried."

My wise guide speaks truthfully, the difference being most notable with residents, who walk with calm and confidence.

"We've become an international municipality," says Mayor Martin Reilly. "Over seventy different languages can now be heard here on any given day, and we have one of the U.K.'s most thriving arts scenes."

Named an International City of Culture in 2013, Derry is picking up where it left off last year; the list of festivals, concerts, exhibits and events scheduled for 2014 is impressive.

"There is a youthful enthusiasm here today that I have never felt before," continues Reilly. "It is as if we have awoken from the deepest slumber – a nightmare really. And it is the young people – the artists, the entrepreneurs, the dreamers and doers – who are driving the growth."

The numbers support the Mayor's claim; over 71 per cent of the local population is under the age of 50, with more than a third below the age of 25.

"A lot of them are simply too young to have a full recall or understanding of the Troubles," he adds. "Gratefully, they don't have to live our history to learn it. And not only are they embracing our past, they are building upon it in their own manner. The scars will fade with each generation, but the memories will not."

GOVERNMENT: The Northern Ireland Assembly has the power to legislate in a wide range of areas that are not explicitly reserved to the U.K. Parliament, and to appoint the Northern Ireland Executive, which sits at Stormont in Belfast. The assembly is one of two mutually interdependent institutions, the other being the North/South Ministerial Council with the Republic of Ireland.

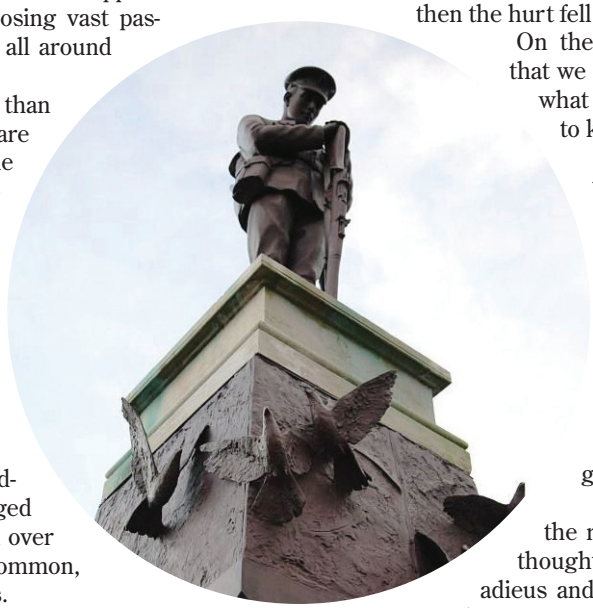
BORDERLANDS

July, 1989

An amazing day spent traveling through the towns of Strabane, Omagh, Enniskillen, Portadown, Armagh and Newry. The Ulster countryside is like no other, and there is as much raw physical beauty in the six counties of Northern Ireland as in the twenty-six south of the border. Hard to believe this is 'bandit country' – like a thorn on a rose.

March, 2014

From Derry, we head south. The sun appears and dissolves the morning mist, exposing vast pastures of farmland, rivers, and, all around us, rolling hills.



The Donegal border is less than a mile to the west. Twice we are forced to cross over into the Republic, as police and traffic block the main highway. Going over the border is a non-issue now; there are no patrols, checkpoints, or even a single sign post indicating that we have entered another country.

"Maybe there's been an incident," muses Ken each time.

His hesitancy is understandable. While things have changed drastically in Northern Ireland over the last 15 years, caution is common, especially among older citizens.

En route to Enniskillen, he lists off the region's history of horrors - bombings, shootings, knifings and kneecappings - pointing out particular locations as we pass. It is almost impossible to fathom that a land of such splendor could have known such terror.

I recall author Leon Uris once calling this land 'A Terrible Beauty,' and perhaps nowhere is this adage more apt than in County Fermanagh, home to the lovely Lough Erne and its 154 islands. With waterways that wind more than 100 miles, including a sizable stretch west to the Atlantic Ocean, the region is ripe with visitors year-round. Summer is especially busy, as boaters bring a boom to the local economy.

Enniskillen was also the scene of a savage IRA attack. On November 8, 1987, 11 people were killed and another 63 injured when a massive bomb detonated during the town's Remembrance Day ceremonies. The ensuing outrage from all sides was so severe that many see the incident as a turning point in the Troubles.

A simple memorial stands in honour of those who fell.

"I don't know anyone that wasn't touched by the tragedy," says Anne, who wished to remain anonymous for this story. "We were there that day. My husband and I helped carry bodies out of the rubble."

It time, the community came together to heal.

"I was putting the laundry out to dry one morning – this was about five years after the bombing - and I started talking to my neighbor through the fence. Even though we were from different backgrounds, we quickly realized how much we shared in common."

Within weeks the pair had set up a support group for survivors.

"It was important - no, it was essential and necessary - for us to share our thoughts and feelings about what had happened. Wounds fester in the dark, but they evaporate when exposed to the light."

While she has not forgotten the terrible event, Anne says that she has forgiven those behind it.

"I'm not one to carry that weight around with me," she shares softly. "After the anger fell away, the hurt set in. And then the hurt fell away."

On the ride back to Belfast, knowing that we are soon to part ways, I ask Ken what it will take for Northern Ireland to keep the peace and prosperity.

"Time and talk," he says thoughtfully, echoing Anne's sentiments.

"It's a matter of trust," he continues. "Trust in ourselves, trust in one another, and trust in the process. Trust takes time.

"As for the talking, well that's not a problem; after all, we're known to have the gift of the gab."

Ironically, we sit in silence the rest of the way, each to our own thoughts. Back in Belfast, we bid our adieus and promise to keep in touch. And we have.

The next morning, on the ride to the airport, I pull out my journal from 1989 and read the final entry from my previous visit here.

This most beautiful country of land and hills, lakes, sea, and sky, these most beautiful people, warm and wise, rugged, resourceful and resilient; you are in my thoughts and prayers, my head and heart, now and always. The past, present and future are yours. Choose wisely. And if, perhaps, you never change, please know that you have changed me forever. And if, perhaps, you evolve and finally find peace, please know that we have done so together. I, and the world, will be watching.

~Stephen Patrick Clare

CLIMATE; The country's maritime location means that the weather is unpredictable at best on most days, though seasonal changes are quite moderate. The average daily temperature in January is 5 degrees Celsius, while in July it is 17.

Can a sequence of brutal murders re-write the shorthand of history?

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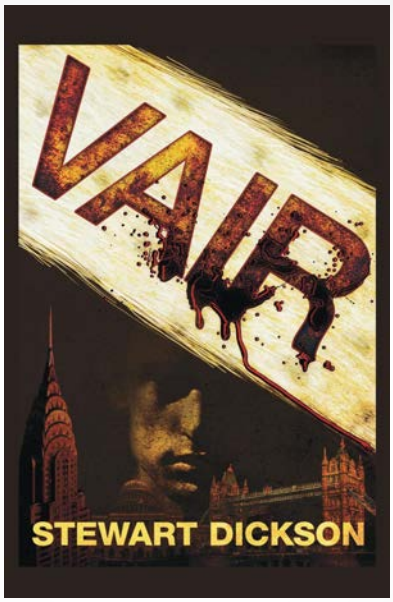
Is the killer a madman or, as the Vatican secretly believes, a human vehicle possessed by the spirit of one of history's most terrible tyrants?



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Keysnews.com, Key West, Florida

Leith-born journalist Stewart Dickson covered major international news stories in his native Scotland, London's Fleet Street, and as U.S. bureau chief of a British tabloid. He lives in New York City with his wife, Gunna.

VAIR (ISBN: 978-1-60264-875-3) is available in softcover from Virtualbookworm.com, Amazon.co.uk, Amazon.com and numerous other online sites. The book can also be purchased in eBook format.

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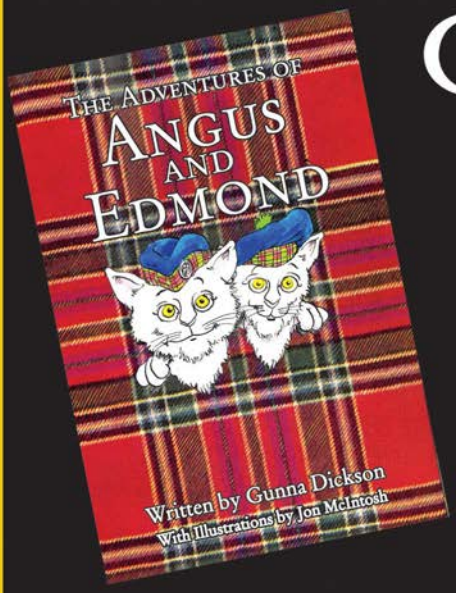
CELTIC CATS



This lively book of cat tales follows brothers Angus and Edmond on a journey to trace their roots~from a shelter in New York City to the Highlands of Scotland.

Their adventures take them to Paris, London, Edinburgh and St. Andrews. While soaking up local history, the lads hit the tourist shops, visit castles and ghoulish sites, and play a round of golf at The Royal and Ancient. Along the way they meet the Loch Ness Monster and the ghost of Hamish McHamish.

A feast of fun for animal lovers and children of all ages.

Author Gunna Dickson is a New York based writer, editor and translator. Illustrator and fine artist Jon McIntosh lives and works in Key West.

"The Adventures of Angus and Edmond" (ISBN 978-1-62137-759-7) is published by *Virtualbookworm.com*. It is available in hardcover and softcover at *Amazon.com*, *Amazon.co.uk* and numerous other online sites.

Wonderful Wales

With its rich history and heritage, and its warm, welcoming, witty and wise inhabitants – Wales celebrates its Celtic roots with a quiet pride…

Story by Stephen Patrick Clare

Cardiff

The weather in Cardiff is iffy at the best of times. During the fall and winter months the sun shines at least part of most days, however, rain jackets and umbrellas are always close at hand. And though mainly mild, damp and grey from October to March, there is still a spring in the step of most residents here.

Like her sister cities Belfast, Dublin, and Edinburgh, the Welsh capital has enjoyed an economic and cultural renaissance in recent years, becoming an international hub for students and workers alike. Today, it is not uncommon to meet both transplants and transients from all parts of Europe, North and South America, Asia, Africa, and Australia.

The influx of immigrants and investment has brought a face-lift of sorts to Cardiff, as newer structures like the Millennium Centre and the Sherman Cymru now take their place alongside the traditional architecture of City Hall and the National Museum. The city's centerpiece remains Cardiff Castle, a magnificent monument to the country's majestic heritage, which stands En guard, watching over all with the dignity of a stately dragon.

Nearby, the massive Millennium Stadium dominates the waterfront. Built in the late 1990s, the 74,500-seat venue hosts a number of events annually: concerts, conferences, and a myriad of major sporting events, including motor racing, equestrian shows, boxing, and association football. Most notably, however, it is the home and heart of the country's greatest passion: rugby.

On the global sporting scene, Welsh loyalty to their "home-game" might only be rivaled in Manchester (United), Barcelona (FC), Montreal (Canadiens), and New York (Yankees),

"I haven't missed many matches over the last 30 years," boasts Martin Perry of nearby Newport. "I've been to most League games, Union games and almost all of the Autumn International and World Cup games that we have hosted."

A mechanical engineer by trade, the 53 year-old is one of thousands who make the trek from Wales to England, Ireland, Scotland, France or Italy each February and March for the 6 Nations Championships.

"That's my winter holiday," he laughs. "Actually, the missus doesn't mind me taking off for a few weeks – that's her winter holiday"

Joking aside, Perry – like most Welsh rugby fans – knows and respects the game.

"The Irish deserved to win this year (2014)," he concedes. "They were the best team and it was good to see O'Driscoll (Brian, longtime Irish team captain) get another before he retired."

Perry's good nature, and his profound reverence for the opposition, speaks volumes about the Welsh character.

"Oh, we're not a nasty lot at all. We carry ourselves quite well both at home games and abroad," he smiles slyly, adding, "unlike our friends to the east."

Dr. Michael Davies agrees.

"We cheer for two teams in rugby here," smirks the forty-something owner and operator of Dragon Tours: "Wales - and anyone who is playing England."

He chuckles to himself, before adding "Rugby is a thug's sport played by gentlemen here in Wales, while football (soccer to some) is a gentleman's game played by thugs in England."

Davies' roots are showing. Born and raised in a small mining community in South Wales, he – like most Welsh – is quietly passionate about many things; his family, automobiles, skiing, good food, fine wine, travel, and, of course, the country's national sport.

And, with a PhD in Welsh Medieval Studies, Davies knows history. More poignantly, perhaps, he knows people.

"Don't get me wrong," he backtracks. "The English are lovely – they are our neighbours after all – it is only that, like a baby brother, we have lived in their rather tall shadow for a very long time.

"Still," he continues, "the Welsh have never been the sort to shout about themselves. We don't blow our own horns very often, if at all. In fact, we are more inclined to be a bit self-deprecating."

It is not false modesty, he notes.

"No, and I would not call us conservative or cautious either. Perhaps humble might be the right word. We have a humility about us that might be mistaken at times for reserve."

He is reminded that the real meaning of humility is about being right-sized, and about having a proper perception of oneself.

"Yes, that's it: humility. In spite of everything that has happened here – all of the history, the invasions, the rebellions, the mines closing, always losing to New Zealand in rugby – or maybe because of all these things, the Welsh have a firm understanding of who we are as a people – sort of a sure sense of self without the swagger."

That quiet confidence is the hallmark of everyone here; people are self-assured, cultured, educated, authentic, and polite.

That civility, he explains, makes Wales an ideal destination for those seeking an unruffled getaway.

"I think that when people travel – anywhere in the world – they are looking for some sense of safety and security first and foremost. They long to feel that they can trust and connect with their hosts on a deeper level. Wales is – and I don't want to sound like I'm blowing our own horn here or anything – one of the best places on the planet for that. It's like coming home to a warm and welcoming Celtic blanket."

The Celtic Blanket

While Cardiff savours its newfound global status, it doesn't take travelers long to uncover the country's roots. Only minutes out of the city sits the plush landscape of Caerphilly, where a 13th century Norman castle towers over acres of farmland.

Originally a Roman-era fort, Caerphilly Castle is one of 640 such structures across the country. In many cases, the Normans and other invaders built atop or aside the original edifices, often recycling the stones.

Evidence of this is found in nearby Caerleon, a quaint village with 1,000 year-old walls, where two small museums house even older artifacts from the Roman occupation (47 AD to 383 AD). The Sirules, an ancient tribe of Celtic warriors from the area, once fought the dreaded empire here.

Celtic culture abounds within an hour's drive of Cardiff; the towns of Cwmbran, Pontypool, Abertillery, Ebbw Vale, Abergavenny, Crickhowell, Merthyr Tydfil and Pontypridd are abundant with Celtic connections.

In spite of the influx of foreign influence – both past and present - Wales has retained its distinct Celtic identity.

"Truth be told, we might be the most Celtic of all the Celtic nations," explains Davies, citing a recent study showing that the Welsh have more Celtic DNA per capita than Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall, Isle of Man or Galicia.

"Interestingly, it is Brittany that has the most in common with Wales," he continues, noting migratory patterns between the two countries, and similarities in language.

"What we know as Welsh today is rooted in the Brythonic Celtic languages. It evolved and took on a life of its own shortly after the Romans departed - and that really signaled the birth of Wales as a nation."

Unlike both Irish and Scottish Gaelic, however, the Welsh language has never been threatened by extinction.

"Very simply put, it never went away," notes Davies. "Although residents in the bigger urban areas like Cardiff and Swansea predominantly speak English, the rural population is still quite bilingual.

"In fact, up until only a couple of generations ago, for most people living in small villages through the central, western and northern parts of the country, Welsh was their first language, and often their only language."

Modern preservation efforts began in the 1960s – the country is now officially and legally bilingual - and today over 20 per cent of the nation's three million residents speak Welsh fluently.

"It is a lyrical language," says Davies, whose own 5-year-old son studies the dialect. "It is the language of musicians, writers and poets."

Swansea

Wales' second-largest municipality, the southern seaside town of Swansea, was the childhood home of the country's most vital and vibrant voice, Dylan Thomas.

The talented and troubled Welsh poet is a larger-than-life legend here, more myth than man. Both his verse and visage hover over all in Swansea, especially in 2014, as the area celebrated the centennial of his birth; at the downtown Dylan Thomas Centre, a permanent collection of his poetry, plays and short stories are accented with audio recordings and video clips; nearby, in the middle-class suburb of Uplands, the scribe's childhood home stands as a shrine to literary lovers; across the street sits the small park that ignited his imagination and inspired so many of his fantastic tales; signposts detailing where he walked, played, and went to school dot the cityscape; banners with his name hang from lampposts and his photograph stares out from Victorian-era windows.

Many of the local shops carry an array of Thomas-related items, including books, movies, T-shirts and tea towels.

Close to Swansea is the resort town of Mumbles, a pristine locale that the author adored and wrote of often. It is also where he flirted with the idea of acting, and where he first found his life-long thirst for alcohol.

Down the road a few miles is Laugharne, Carmarthenshire, where Thomas and his wife Caitlin rented a home by the water after returning from living in London. Quaint and cozy, with a 12th century castle nestled along the shoreline, Laugharne was the setting for one of the playwright's most famous works, Under Milk Wood. It is also where he was laid to rest at the all too-tender age of 39, having expired while on tour in New York City in 1953 after an evening of heavy drinking.

The details of that final night, like those of his complex personal and professional life, are blurred at best. What is fact and what is fiction is no matter, however. What is important is what Dylan Thomas left behind.

While the artist dabbled in an array of mediums – including screenplays, film, radio, vinyl recordings, the visual arts, and even wartime propaganda – it is his poetry and prose that have best stood the test of time.

Poems such as Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night, And Death Shall Have No Dominion, Fern Hill and Love In The Asylum were labours of love for the master-craftsman, who poured over words with equal measures of attention and affection.

The stories – from energetic early works like After The Fair and The Enemies, to the more refined Where Tawe Flows and A Fine Beginning – only enhanced his reputation, alongside his creative counterweight Ernest Hemingway, as the finest wordsmith of his generation.

Many know him for his yuletide classic, A Child's Christmas in Wales, which is much-read and loved during the holiday season.

His work has moved millions of readers all over the world, much as his love for his country once touched him. Wales' passion for her prolific prodigal son, though posthumous, is more evident today than ever before. Dylan Thomas spoke for all, but he mostly spoke – and continues to speak - for the Welsh. He was the country's first modern celebrity, and is one of its most renowned and recognizable figures. His words - lyrical and fantastic - helped to define and refine the nation's identity, soul and spirit.

Spirit

Like many nations, the history of spirituality in Wales is quite complex.

Druids and Celts ruled the religious roost here until the Roman conquest in the 1st century AD. Rome's conversion to the monotheism of Christianity under Constantine the Great was slow in reaching the empire's westernmost outpost, and it wasn't until after they had departed permanently in 383 AD that "the way, the truth and the light" found firm footing in the country.

In the centuries since, foreign kings, armies, cultures, bishops, merchants, preachers, and more have come and gone, but the seeds of that early Christian faith, sprinkled and sown mostly along Wales' western coastline, bloomed like wildflowers.

The Chapel of St. Non is nestled along the newly-named Celtic Sea (formerly the Irish Sea) in Pembrokeshire, in the southwest corner of Wales. It is the birthplace of the country's patron St. David. It is also a homage to his mother Non, or Nonna, who lived there in the 5th century. The small ruins are considered the

oldest Christian site in Wales, and are accompanied by a shrine, a Celtic Cross, and a holy well. Many devout Christians from around the world still make the pilgrimage to St. Non each year, throwing coins into the well waters in exchange for blessings.

St. David, who died in 589 AD, founded a monastery nearby. There, alongside his original house of worship, a massive Cathedral in his name was constructed in 1181, and still welcomes worshippers today.

A well-preserved 11th century Celtic Cross stands over the tiny town of Carew a short distance away. Early Christians thought to include the circle – a Celtic symbol for the sun, moon and wholeness - as a way of slowly integrating Celts into their religious fold.

Further up the country's western coastline sits the Parish of St. Brynach. Originally a 6th century Christian "ecclesiastical centre," the building was renovated and expanded by the Normans six hundred years later. A number of the church's original artifacts have survived, however, including the 10th century Nevern Celtic Cross, as well as a once free-standing 6th century Celtic Cross, which has since been cemented into the walls of the edifice.

Interestingly, the "kneelers" – small cushions which are used in the pews during prayer – are still hand-woven by parishioners today, highlighting a host of knotted designs, paying homage to the area's Celtic past.

Outside in the courtyard, Yew trees – once used as symbols of immortality by Celts – give shelter to aging tombstones and walkways. One tree - "The Bleeding Yew" – has been dubbed as such as it leaks red sap - the colour of blood - at various times through the year. Many still believe it to be a sacred space with healing properties.

And while the nearby Neolithic burial ground of the Pentre Ifan Dolmen predates Christianity in the area by 3,000 years,

local priests – perhaps sensing some sort of spiritual hot spot - regularly sought divine inspiration from the hilly locale, as well as from other, similar surrounding sites.

A few miles north and inland, at the confluence of the rivers Teifi and Afon Dulas, the town of Lampeter is awash in a sea of aging churches, monasteries and religious study centres. Once the stronghold of faith in western Wales, the area has secularized into an educational hub over the last century.

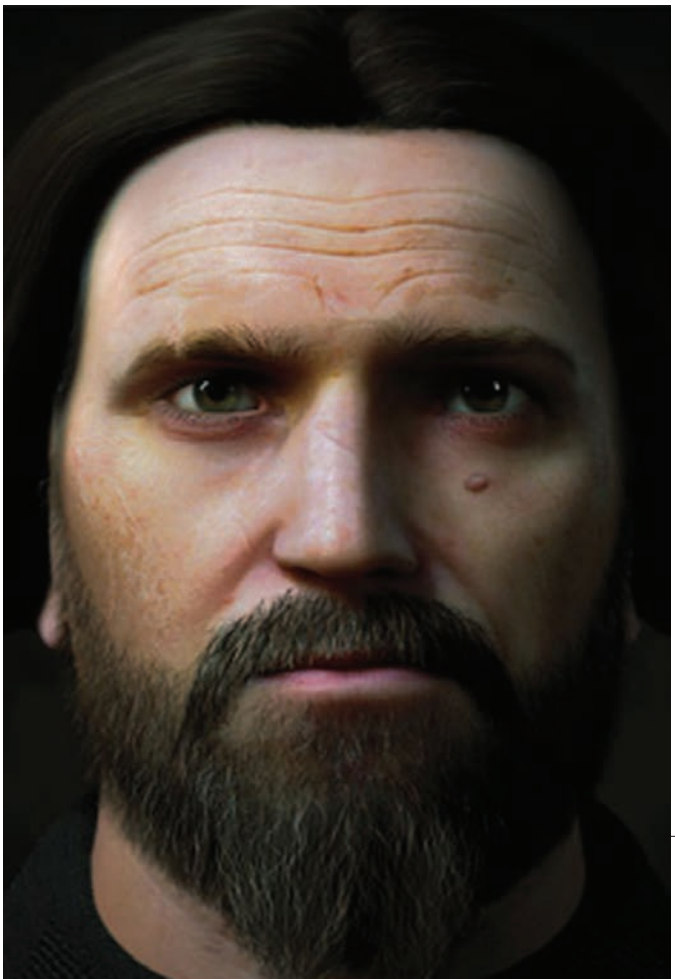
Similarly, all of Wales has undergone a transformation of spirit in recent years. While churches continue to sit squarely at the core of most towns and villages here, attendance is down significantly with each passing generation. And though a third of the population still identifies themselves as Anglican (Church of Wales), and another third continue to call themselves Catholic, a growing number now consider themselves to be "non-conformist," with many of those saying they have "no religion."

Perhaps fittingly, the fastest growing spiritual movements in Wales today are New Age, Neo-Druidism and Neo-Celtic. In search of greater "wholistic" experience, more and more Welsh are returning to their ancestral roots – spiritual seeds that were planted long before Christianity.

The Present is the Past

Scotland has William Wallace. The Irish have St. Patrick. The Welsh have Owain Glyndŵr - pronounced Owen Glen Dure.

Outside of Wales, and aside from online, you'd be hard-pressed to find any information about the father of Welsh nationalism; there have been no box-office block-buster movies made of his life, no bestselling biographies, no annual main-street parades or celebrations in major cities around the world. His story, however, is as important to the conservation of Celtic culture as those of Wallace or St. Patrick.



Born in the mid-1300s into an affluent Anglo-Welsh family, Glyndŵr studied law and later joined the English military. Resigning from service in his forties, he returned to Wales and retired to his family estates. A land dispute with his neighbor - an Englishman - led Glyndŵr to petition the courts in London. When the case was dismissed outright, he took the slight as a slap to the face of all Welshmen.

By 1400, Glyndŵr had gathered supporters and rose up against the tyrannical King Henry IV. Over the next two years, the raggle-taggle band of rebels scored several strategic victories against their oppressors, eventually winning control of the northern and central regions of Wales. The following year, his efforts inspired Welshmen from across the country to revolt, and in 1404 Glyndŵr called his first Parliament at Powys in western Wales, declaring an independent Welsh state, sharing his vision for the country, and proclaiming himself the first Prince of Wales.

A tactical alliance with France followed, and soon the English were being attacked from all sides. After the French turned their attention back to domestic issues, King Henry IV changed tactics by cutting off the insurgent food and arms supply lines. The ploy worked; the rebel forces were depleted and demoralized, with only a few final skirmishes taking place over the next half-decade, including one, sadly, that resulted in the loss of Glyndŵr's wife and two daughters.

By 1412, the country's "Last War of Independence" had come to a close, and Glyndŵr retreated to the Welsh countryside, rarely to be seen or heard from again.

Acknowledgement and recognition of his contributions and sacrifices finally came in the late 19th century, courtesy of the newly-formed "Young Wales Movement." He has since been celebrated by local, regional and national politicians, religious leaders, scholars, military figures and the like, and recently place second in a poll of 100 Welsh Heroes.

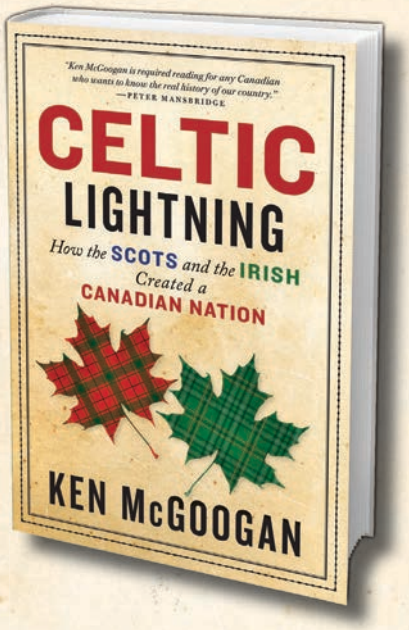
Despite his smaller standing on the world's stage, the evidence of Glyndŵr's influence upon Celtic culture is everywhere in Wales: in Ceredigion, home to both the National Library of Wales and Aberystwyth University – each guardians of the Welsh language; in Machynlleth, where the Welsh flag flies high from every home and business; in Abermaw, where youngsters sport their national team jersey on the rugby pitch; in Portmerion, where a local architect designed a major tourist attraction that draws tens-of-thousands from around the world each year; in Caernarfon, where an enemy's medieval castle remains an ever-present reminder of past struggles; in Llanelli, where the National Eisteddfod brought Welsh of all ages together for nine days of homegrown culture in 2014; in Colwyn Bay, where a local bakery has been serving up hot, homemade Welsh Cakes for over two centuries; in Holyhead, where a ferry connects Celtic cousins across the Irish Sea; in Tregaron, where a young mother and father encourage their 5-year-old son to say dwi Cymraeg.

It is the impact upon the everyday lives of everyday people here in Wales – from cosmopolitan Cardiff and lyrical Swansea, to the gentle hills and quaint villages across the west and north of this most wonderful part of the world - that is Glyndŵr's greatest legacy: a quiet pride that permeates all.

"We are very fortunate to live where we do," shares Michael Davies. "My family and I enjoy a very good life here in Wales, and we count our blessings every day for this great gift."

In the nineteenth century, two charged traditions came together and gave rise to a Canadian nation. That is when Celtic lightning struck.

OVER 9 MILLION CANADIANS CLAIM SCOTTISH OR IRISH HERITAGE



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Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way

The rugged majesty of Ireland's 2500-kilometer Wild Atlantic Way might only be surpassed by its warm and welcoming people. If the journey is the destination, then it is best enjoyed in the company of the witty and wise. In that regard, the Irish are wonderful hosts, particularly on the west coast, where residents take Céad Míle Fáilte to heart. Celtic Life International's Managing Editor Stephen Patrick Clare takes us home…

A Sort of Homecoming

And you know it's time to go
Through the sleet and driving snow
Across the fields of mourning to a light that's in the distance…

The power and passion of U2's A Sort of Homecoming washes over me as my bus weaves and winds its way through downtown Dublin. The anthemic opening track of the Irish supergroup's landmark 1984 album The Unforgettable Fire is a stirring soundtrack for my return to the Emerald Isle, a year to the day since touching down in Belfast (see our May/June 2014 edition).

And you hunger for the time
Time to heal, 'desire' time
And your earth moves beneath your own dream landscape…

Escaping the bitter Canadian winter, my skin isn't quite sure what to do here. I have no complaints, however; given the choice, I will take an overcast 10°C to the cold and snow anytime. And though the skies may be grey atop the Irish capital city on this day, the mood of its people is forty shades of great.

On borderland we run
I'll be there, I'll be there tonight
A high-road, a high-road out from here…

Leaving Dublin, we roll west. The bus is packed with young people. Bottles of Guinness and whiskey make their way up and down the aisles, back and forth from seat to seat. Everyone is in high spirits and very respectful of one another.

The city walls are all come down
The dust a smoke screen all around
See faces ploughed like fields that once
Gave no resistance…

One older couple is returning home to Galway, after visiting with family in Dublin. They are warm, witty, wise and wonderful. Brendan, 83, has lived on the country's west coast all of his life. Raised on a small farm, and the eldest of 11 brothers and sisters, he married Marie at 27 (she was 22) and together they raised four boys and one girl. Brendan never attended school, teaching himself to read and write by the time he was 30 as a promise to his bride and future children.

And we live by the side of the road
On the side of a hill as the valleys explode
Dislocated, suffocated
The land grows weary of its own…

When Brendan's parent's passed on in the late 1970s, the couple inherited the family farm, tilling it through good times and bad. The days were long, and sometimes the profits were small, but the couple and their children always made due. They had the land, and they had each other, and that, Brendan tells me, made him a rich man. Six years ago, they passed the property over to their oldest son and his family.

O com-away, o com-away, o-com, o com-away, I say
O com-away, o com-away, o-com, o com-away, I say…

As Marie slips off to sleep, Brendan regales me with memories of family picnics, county fairs, bicycle trips, currach boat rides across Galway Bay, and of working the farm aside his younger siblings. He loves to travel, though has only ventured off the island twice; once, thirty years ago, to visit an ailing brother in Vermont, and again, more recently to see another brother near Ottawa. Each invited him and Marie to relocate, but he will not leave the land he loves. His roots, he says, run deep.

The wind will crack in winter time
This bomb-blast lightning waltz.
No spoken words, just a scream…

Of the 11 siblings, only 4 are still alive; Brendan, his two brothers in North America, and one sister who lives an hour away in Roscommon. He buried two brothers by the time he was 15; one died of cholera, the other by drowning. Two sisters passed away of cancer – both in their 50s - and another died during childbirth. In the last 5 years he has buried both a brother and a sister – each lost to time, he sighs.

Tonight we'll build a bridge
across the sea and land
See the sky, the burning rain
She will die and live again tonight…

Brendan tells me it takes a special kind of man to live on the country's west coast; rugged, resilient, resolute. He speaks of the region's famine years, poverty, the struggle for independence, and the endless adversities of weather. He shares of the rewards of hard work and deep faith. He leans close to tell me that without family, however, a man is nothing. I answer that I have family roots along the west coast. He smiles and replies, "Ah, you're one of us…"

And your heart beats so slow
Through the rain and fallen snow
Across the fields of mourning to a light that's in the distance
Oh, don't sorrow, no don't weep
For tonight at last I am coming home.
I am coming home…

Wide Open Spaces

The land of beauty and of mystery, this ancient land I love
A land of history and tragedy, this is the land I love
Land of beauty and tranquility, of our music and our songs
A land of mystery and tragedy, this is the land I love
~ The Wolfe Tones

As I await my driver outside of the Park House Hotel in Galway, I speak with several young French, Spanish and Italian cyclists who have come to western Ireland to train for this summer's Tour de France.

Interestingly, though our timelines differ – they are gone a week, while myself just the day - their intended route is identical to mine; down to the the Burren, over to the Cliffs of Moher, up along the coastline through Doolin, Lisdoonvarna, Ballyvaghan and Kinvara, before returning to Galway.

The conditions here are ideal, they tell me; fresh air, hilly climbs, long scenic stretches of road, and an assortment of weather.

My guide, Joe Donoghue, arrives. I ask him about our itinerary for the day. "Fresh air, hilly climbs, long scenic stretches of road, and an assortment of weather," he smiles.

Minutes out of the city, grey gives way to green as rich and lush countryside fills the gaps between the quaint communities of Oranmore, Clarinbridge and Kilcolgan. Herds of tour buses rumble along tiny two-lane roads, stopping only to allow travelers time to take in the gorgeous landscapes and gentlemen's farms.

"Tourism is our number one industry in Ireland," shares Donaghue, whose own firm picked up the country's Coach Tour Company of the Year Award in 2014. "All this traffic is great for these communities."

Indeed, centuries-old villages are popular stops, with many pubs open early for visitors looking to prop-up the day with a fresh pint. The townspeople simply smile when asked to pose for photos, sometimes answering questions about local family names and lore.

And western Ireland has more than its fair share of lore and legend; the land and the people here are one, forever enmeshed in myth and mystique.

An hour south of Galway, over the border into County Clare, sits the Burren. Taken from the Irish 'Bioreann,' meaning rocky place, the 100 square-miles of weathered landscape has inspired poets, painters, photographers, and artists of all disciplines for hundreds of years.

"It isn't good for much else," laughs Donaghue, adding that the rugged terrain is void of usable topsoil. "A man can own 300 acres of land here, and the only thing of any value will be his house."

Sure enough, aside from the grazing of some livestock, there is little or no activity on any of the homesteads we pass. However, the area is ripe for outdoor enthusiasts, with a number of good walking trails open almost year round, as well as excellent hiking opportunities across the rollicking hills. A nearby Geo Park is also a great option for those looking for greater detail on the area's unique ecosystems. Thankfully, due to its status as a National Park, the region's raw physical beauty will remain unspoiled for generations.

West of the Burren, by the beaches of Lahinch, an array of adventure awaits; surfing, swimming, sailing, sea kayaking, deep sea fishing, and dolphin watching are just a few of the wonderful outdoor activities available to both locals and visitors.

"The water can be a wee bit cold," admits Donoghue, "but that doesn't seem to stop anyone from jumping in."

Sure enough, the craggy coastline is packed with beach goers and ocean lovers looking to bathe themselves in sun, sand and surf. "It's quite refreshing, actually," he adds, pointing out a multitude of colourful cottages and summer homes close by. "The hard part is getting into the water, taking that first step. Once you're in, you're in, and you'll be fine."

Nearby in Liscannor, a small fishing vessel comes in from a morning run. A boatload of American sportsmen returns with a well-measured haul of shark, pollack, ling, ray, and mackerel. Cameras come out, and pictures, along with bragging rights, are posted to Facebook for the folks back home.

Ireland's most popular outdoor attraction – the Cliffs of Moher - is a mosaic of culture. With over 1 million visitors annually, accents are abundant; Irish, American, Canadian, and Australian of course, but also German, Japanese, Brazilian, Senegalese, Israeli and more.

"It's sort of a United Nations without the politics," cracks Donaghue, always quick with the wit, "or a Mecca without the religion."

My guide is only half-kidding; today, with unusually warm weather and clear skies, busloads of young and old climb one of two sets of stairs to the summit. Atop the bluff, against a breathtaking backdrop of sheer rock, spindrift and swirling gulls, couples, friends and families pose for selfies.

The immensity of the 8 kilometer panorama is almost indescribable. The salt air is cool with a gentle mist, the deep blue and green of the sea seems to go on forever, with the visage of the three Aran Islands – Inisheer, Inishmaan and Inishmore – just visible to the naked eye upon the horizon. The main attraction, of course, is the cliffs themselves; majestic, grand and glorious. A few meters up, just past the stately O'Brien's Castle, hundreds of hikers hug the precipice along the Burren Way, a coastal walking trail that offers up awe-inspiring views from different directions. And all the while, there is the eternal crashing of waves against the shore, both sensational and soothing at once.

The mandatory exhibit center and gift shops do brisk business, with visitors lining up to take a piece of the experience home with them. Donaghue and I are content with coffee, however, climbing back into the car for our coastal drive back to Galway amidst fresh air, hilly climbs, long scenic stretches of road, and an assortment of weather.

Spirit of the West

Man seems - Spirit is
Man dreams - Spirit lives
Man is tethered - Spirit is free
What spirit is man can be
~ The Waterboys

While Galway may be the creative capital of Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way, the country's west coast is a cornucopia of Celtic-inspired arts.

A walking tour of Galway should be mandatory for any visitor. From above, the small maze of streets hasn't strayed much from its original medieval - era design. Down on the ground, however,

the city of 75,000 has become a treasure trove of art studios, craft shops, theatres, music halls, jewelry stores, restaurants, museums, and cinemas.

Boasting more than 25 festivals annually, and drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world to its shores, the area is the heart, soul and economic engine of the Emerald Isle's thriving west coast.

That inspiration, it appears, is infectious, as smaller communities up and down the coastline continue to expand their cultural offerings, evolving into more than a mere cottage industry.

Fifteen minutes northwest of Galway bay, the Farmlane Art Gallery in Moycullen features the work of local artist Mary Holan. Working mostly in oils, Holan draws inspiration from the Irish sea and sky, transforming physical landscapes into timeless abstract expressions. Her small gallery is one of dozens that colour communities across the west.

The language arts are well represented here also, with schools – public and private – devoted to the promotion and preservation of spoken and written Gaelic. While much of western Ireland counts the ancient idiom as its mother tongue, there has been a strong push in recent years to make it real and relevant to younger people; classes are now mandatory for students throughout the region, and libraries, bookshops and reading festivals have received extra government funding over the last decade to keep the language from languishing.

Southwest, near Spiddal, Charlie and Dearbhail Troy are doing their part to keep Celtic customs alive with their refurbished 17th century Connemara-hill village called Cnoc Suain. The multi-building facility hosts a number of creative day experiences and immersive residential programs that focus on area history and culture. The couple is fluent in Gaelic, proactive with political issues, and work tirelessly to support and safeguard the region's economy, ecology, and arts.

An hour up the coast in Roundstone, the country's master Bodrhán maker Malachy Kearns plies his trade for folk musicians, young and old, near and far. Set within the walls of an ancient Franciscan monastery, Kearns' workshop is a shrine to the distinct Celtic drum; old photos and newspaper clippings line the walls, videos and music pound out rhythms day and night, and wood and skins are draped across desks and drawing boards. A visit to his shop is more than a stop for the curious - it is a trip through time, and a lesson in local legend and lore.

Celtic lore is at the core of O' Dalaigh's Jewelry in Clifden. The family-owned and operated business designs and manufactures an array of rings, necklaces bracelets, bangles, brooches, pendants, earrings and more, all of which speak to the region's past and present. Like traditional music, the art of metal-smiths has been infused in everyday life here for centuries, and now en-

joys world-renown for its craftsmanship and quality.

And, of course, everywhere there is music; fiddles, guitars, bodhrans, tin whistles, and the ever-present resonance of the Irish voice. Traditional tunes abound in western Ireland, and melodies spill out from pubs, clubs, hotels and homes across the region, day and night, rain or shine.

Interestingly, where creative communities in other parts of the world - Europe and North America in particular - might foster a competitive atmosphere amongst artists, musicians, painters, poets, photographers, dancers, sculptors, chefs and others across the Wild Atlantic Way are cooperative and supportive of each other's endeavours.

That collective resourcefulness and resolve in the arts is more than a habitual necessity, however; it is a testament to the area's true enduring legacy - the heart and soul of its Celtic people.

Time Stands Still

While I'm sitting here
The waves of the sea are lapping
Against the wild shores of Connemara
The sky breaks, dazzling light pierces through
Down to the water
Giving forth a thousand reflections of silver
~ Fiddler's Green, traditional

The past permeates the present across Ireland; the country's people and places are woven together in history, and millions of travelers explore Eire's heritage and natural beauty each year.

Interestingly, though the northwest counties of Mayo, Sligo and Donegal are rich with rugged landscapes and coastlines, they don't enjoy the same number of annual visitors as other parts of the Wild Atlantic Way.

"The south gets most of the attention," admits my tour guide John Carew, a Sligo native. "You can actually draw a line from Dublin to Galway, and everything under that line seems to do very well, all year round."

Carew explains the discrepancy. "Behind Dublin and Belfast, Cork is the largest city in the country, with many shops and activities, and there is the Titanic connection as well. In Clare, you have the Cliffs of Moher, and the Burren, and in the southwest there is the Ring of Kerry - all of these are known around the world.

"The thing is," he continues, "Mayo, Sligo and Donegal have just as much to offer in terms of scenery and sheer experience as anywhere on the island. In fact, there are parts of those counties that are even more beautiful than the south; undiscovered spots where time stands still."

Sure enough, leaving Clifden and winding our way north through Connemara, we are welcomed by gentle rolling hills, pristine ponds, and babbling brooks. We stop the car every few hundred meters to take photographs.

A rainbow arcs over the region's most famous structure, Kylemore Abbey. The extravagance and opulence of the 1920s-era palace is matched only by its spectacular surroundings of dense forest and a clear lake. The heather is rich and full, and the birds carry melodies through the woodlands.

Minutes later, we pass through petite, picturesque fishing villages along the Connemara loop. The inlet's surf is still, shading light blue and green. The tide is receding, leaving boats of all shapes and sizes stranded on the strand.

There is little traffic along route N59 – almost too good to be true.

"It does get a bit busier in the summer months," says Carew. "There are more tour buses, campers, RVs, cars and motorcycles. We get visitors from America, Canada and Australia, but in recent years we have seen many more Germans and Dutch. A lot of people prefer this part of Ireland because it is quieter."

That sense of serenity is evident en route; fields of green sit silently, with homes and cottages few and far between. The only signs of life are stray sheep, and white wisps of peat smoke billowing from house chimneys. The scent is unmistakable, harking back to bygone eras.

"Not much changes up this way," shares Carew. "The land is as it has been for centuries. Even some of the older stone structures that lay derelict have been sitting there for generations."

In nearby Maam, it was recently announced that the thatch-roofed cottage used in the 1951 cinematic classic The Quiet Man - starring Maureen O'Hara and John Wayne - will be refurbished. Also close is Gaynor's Bar, setting for the pub scenes in the Richard Harris film The Field. Both movies do well to capture and convey the area's rural roots, says Carew.

Past the quaint villages of Westport and Newport is Mulranny, a seaside town on the shores of the Clew Bay. From here I rent a touring bicycle, peddling 13 kilometers to Achill Sound. The tailored trail is flat and well-marked, and the experience is exhilarating; with mountains and ocean on both sides, and a big sky overhead, I am embraced by the crisp salt air.

At trail's end I re-connect with Carew, and we cross over to Achill Island and the Atlantic Drive - 25 miles of timeless terrain. To the right, abandoned famine-era ruins and aged Celtic crosses pepper fields of bog. Left, along the shoreline, the sea plays hide and seek as we ascend the cliffs. The rocky bluff offers up breathtaking views of the area. We are at one of the most westerly points of the island, at the edge of Europe, on the ledge of the Wild Atlantic Way.

"Not many people make it this far out," muses Carew, almost breathless. "They really don't know what they're missing. Mind you, maybe the people here prefer it this way. After all, they might have the best kept secret in Ireland."

Land of our Fathers

The land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for, because it's the only thing that lasts…

~ Gerald O'Hara

It is said in Ireland that a man is nothing without land, and that true wealth is measured not in money, but in acres.

And while pockets of the Emerald Isle enjoy the fruits of rich and fertile terrain, much of the country is covered with bog, or turf topsoil. In particular, the western coastline, from Galway to Mayo, is matted in marsh.

Wikipedia defines bog as "a mire that accumulates peat, a deposit of dead plant material - often mosses, and in a majority of cases, sphagnum moss. It is one of the four main types of wetlands. Other names for bogs include mire, quagmire and muskeg. Bogs occur where the water at the ground surface is acidic and low in nutrients. In some cases, the water is derived entirely from precipitation. In general, the low fertility and cool climate results in relatively slow plant growth, but decay is even slower owing to the saturated soil. Hence peat accumulates. Large areas of landscape can be covered many meters deep in peat."

Ever the survivalists, the Irish were early adapters of bog; bricks were cut and dried, and used like logs in the fire to heat homes and stables - a process still used today.

Across the country's western counties, farmers now employ huge diggers to tear up swaths of soil, later dicing them into smaller bits for transport. It is not unusual to see massive mounds of peat protected from the elements under plastic tarps.

The smell of burning peat is familiar to Irish around the world, bringing back memories of cool autumn nights around the family hearth. Again, the practice is still in use today, and as my guide and I leave the western outport of Achill Island and weave our way north along the country's stunning shoreline, small puffs of peat smoke can be seen coming from almost every homestead chimney. The sweet scent blends beautifully with the sea salt air and fine mist – some call it the Emerald perfume.

At the very upper tip of County Mayo, near the tiny town of Ballycastle, are the Ceide Fields, home to the most extensive Stone Age monument in the world. The 5,500 year-old archeological site - which consists of field systems, dwelling areas and megalithic tombs – was discovered by local schoolteacher Patrick Caulfield in the 1930s. Four decades later, his son Seamus began unearthing the artifacts, long buried under blankets of bog. The bog is so dense here that sonar devices used to determine the site's depth are ineffective.

A few miles northeast in County Sligo, the bog gives way to greener, more arable land. Trees and brush grow wild across the hills, and farmers work the fields for more than just peat and hay. Vegetable stands and flower shops spring up along the roadsides, and meat markets showcase an abundance of local beef.

Interestingly, trees had virtually disappeared from Ireland until 1980, when public reforestation projects took root. Beginning with the Norman conquest in the 1100s, and through the ensuing centuries of British rule, native forests of alder, ash, birch, rowan, pine, willows and others were chopped down and exported. The mythical tree of Celtic lore, the oak, suffered a similar fate.

Deforestation took a terrible toll on the country's soil, particularly along the west coast, rendering it virtually infertile for hundreds of years. The appearance of woodlands in recent times is more than aesthetic ambition, however, it is an attempt to rebuild an ecosystem, restore the soil, and reclaim the land.

The Scribe of Sligo

The trees are in their autumn beauty
The woodland paths are dry
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky
~ William Butler Yeats

This year, Sligo will commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of its most famous bard – William Butler Yeats - with a series of literary and musical festivals, theatre performances, exhibits, seminars, lectures, workshops, walking tours, and more.

Though born in Dublin, Yeats spent his childhood summers in Sligo, along the Emerald Isle's craggy northwest coastline. There, he explored the region's rolling hills, running rivers, stirring seaside, and lush landscape. Rich in flora, fauna, and wildlife, the area is both idyllic and inspirational.

Home to the Yeats Society, and a popular summer school dedicated to studying his life and work, Sligo hopes to host another 50,000 literary lovers over the coming months. Some are sure to visit his ancestral summer home, while others will stop by his small, simple grave at nearby Drumhill, where he is buried alongside his wife George Hyde-Lees.

Interestingly, though Yeats married Hyde-Lees when he was 52, she was not the love of his life.

In 1889, at the age of 24, Yeats met Maud Gonne, a young heiress and Nationalist. Instantly infatuated with her intelligence and beauty, he proposed marriage on three occasions. When Gonne wed another man, Yeats sought solace with pen and paper.

And who could play it well enough
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?
He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart and lost

Over the next decade in Dublin, riding the wave of republican sentiment, he turned his attention to reforming the Irish Literary Society, and co-founding Ireland's National Theatre (later renamed the Abbey Theatre). Yeats also tried his hand at playwriting, producing a series of dramatic, well-received works.

While Protestant by birth, the scribe identified with the country's emerging Nationalist movement – likely brought about by his love for Gonne - even joining the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a militant forerunner of the terrorist IRA.

Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born

Though twice named a Senator following Irish independence in 1922, the rhymester lost interest in the cause, preferring his full time duties as a wordsmith. The following year he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, cementing his place forever in the annals of Irish lore.

With his health failing over the next decade and a half, Yeats refocused his efforts on poetry, revising his style, and working with his peers to usher in the discipline's modernist era until his death in 1939.

Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart

And while he lived and worked in Dublin and London, and travelled extensively to the European continent in attendance of his duties, Yeats often returned to Sligo in search of familiar comforts. There, he would retrace the steps of his childhood, revisiting innocence, and reigniting his interest in the occult and Celtic legends.

Perhaps fittingly, he composed his own epitaph just before his passing, the last three lines of which are etched for eternity on his gravestone.

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:
Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!

Food for Thought

We're gathered round the table
We're real friends through and through
We're gathered round the table
To eat Ma's Irish stew
~ Traditional

"It won't get any fresher than that."
Skipper Brian serves up a plate of pan-fried mackerel, which, only 15 minutes prior, was swimming deep below the surface of Donegal Bay. We are aboard his fishing vessel, 3 kilometers from shore. As the waves rise and fall, I wedge two fillets into a locally baked baguette.

"Here," he continues with a thick Killybegs drawl, "try a little sauce on that." Sure enough, the fish is delicious. "That's how we've been doing it here for years; me, my father before me, and his father before him."

While Eire's fishing industry has softened in recent years, with moratoriums in effect on several stocks, mackerel have been steady game for generations.

"We make do with what we've been given," says Skipper Brian. "That's just the way it is, the way it's always been here."

That Irish resolve and resourcefulness is also evident at the Burren Smokehouse, four hours south in Lisdoonvarna.

"We smoke the salmon right here on site," says Birgitta Curtin, who along with her wise-cracking husband Peter own and operate both the facility and the Roadside Tavern next door.

The couple set up shop in 1989, inspired by their surroundings.

"Ireland has never really been industrialized,' she explains. "Because of that, the water and soil here are still relatively pure."

As members of EcoTourism Ireland, Good Food Ireland, and other local and national community organizations, the Curtins understand the importance of preserving the island's natural habitat. "A clean environment makes for better tasting and more nutritious options right across the entire food spectrum," notes Curtin.

Jessica Murphy agrees.

"We only source the freshest local produce," shares the co-owner of the Kai Café in Galway. "And the west coast of Ireland is abundant with fresh produce."

With an array of unique meat, fish, cheese and vegetable dishes on the menu, Murphy and her husband David are pioneers of the Emerald Isle's Slow Food movement.

Skipper Brian

"It's kind of a philosophic throwback to older times, when the planning, preparation and eating of a meal was an all-day event to be shared by family, friends and acquaintances. It's a healthier process, and you can really taste the difference."

Ireland's Slow Food movement has gained serious momentum in recent years, with local chapters putting on more events each season to promote the region's burgeoning food sector. All up and down the country's west coast, eateries of all shapes and sizes are now combining contemporary cuisine with classic cookery, creating a unique culinary culture.

In Donegal, Chef Philipp holds court at the luxurious Lough Eske Castle Hotel.

"The entire food industry has changed here over the last twenty years," he says. "A large part of that is because customers are now much more aware and picky about what they will put into their bodies.

"As a result we have had to re-examine what and how we prepare and serve food. It is no longer merely about feeding people, it is about creating an experience."

That experience includes education, engagement, entertainment and more.

"Food tours have become extremely popular," says Andrew Pelham-Burn of award-winning Carrowholly Cheese near Westport in County Mayo. "Whether it is a walking tour through Galway, a bus excursion, or a personalized car hire, people want to be involved at all levels of the process.

"And the Wild Atlantic Way is quite ideal for that," he adds. "There are lots of opportunities for some really great food adventures here. Some of them can be quite rugged too."

Back in Donegal Bay, Skipper Brian is pan-frying up a second round of mackerel.

"I prefer them done well," he shares out loud, a spatula in one hand, and a cold beer in the other. "That's how we've been doing it here for years; me, my father before me, and his father before him."

You have to be here out on the water, he says, to get the full flavor, the real meal.

"And let me tell you, laddie, it won't get any fresher than that."

The Parting Glass

Oh, if I had money enough to spend and
leisure time to sit awhile
There is a fair maid in this town that sorely
has my heart beguiled
Her rosey cheeks and ruby lips, she alone
has my heart in thrall
So fill me to the parting glass, goodnight
and joy be with you all
~ The Parting Glass, traditional

Back in Dublin, I share a pint with Ellen Redmond of Fàilte Ireland, the country's National Tourism Development Authority. We are discussing my week-long sojourn along the Wild Atlantic Way.

I tell her of my time at the Burren and the Cliffs of Moher in Clare; of exploring the galleries and museums of Galway; of driving through the quiet landscapes of Connemara and Mayo; of visiting Yeats' gravesite in Sligo; of shopping at Magees in Donegal Town; of all that I have seen and heard and touched and tasted and felt over the past seven days.

The Wild Atlantic Way, she shares, is greater than the sum of those parts. It is the spirit in between those spaces – the rugged, resilient spirit of a people – that make the experience.

"You see," says Redmond, "yes, the Irish people have had to be resolute, but we are gentle and generous by nature.

"We are also curious," she continues. "And because of that, we are genuinely interested in getting to know the people who visit with us here. So we will take the time to talk, share a spot of tea and a scone, or perhaps raise a pint, and make the connection. Most of us here have relations abroad, so we are like long-lost cousins to a lot of visitors. As Yeats once wrote, 'There are no strangers here, only friends you haven't met yet.'

"Having that sense of familiarity - of family, really - makes all the difference in the world along the journey…"

~ Stephen Patrick Clare

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Bretagne

The French-Celtic Connection

The past is present in western France and, as Celtic Life International correspondent Eimear O'Callaghan explains, that bodes well for the future

Singer, songwriter and teacher, Louis-Jacques Suignard, is in a hurry. The 52-year-old Breton and his band Youhadenn are booked on the overnight sailing from Roscoff on France's north coast to Ireland. He's packing his bags with all he needs for four days of performing in Cork: a toothbrush, underwear, gifts from Brittany and, if he can find them, he laughs, some matching socks. He's also taking his Irish bodhrán.

Youhadenn's immersion in Celtic culture means that Irish ballads sit as easily in their repertoire as the traditional Breton songs — including gwerzioù and sonioù, laments and ballads — for which they are renowned.

In jeans and an open-necked shirt, with his sleeves rolled up, Louis-Jacques stamps the floor and wipes sweat from his brow as he sings - traditional kan ha diskan, tales of love, adventure and the sea.

All his grandparents were native Breton speakers, but his parents belonged to a generation who were discouraged from speaking it.

"In the forties and fifties, schoolchildren in Brittany were brainwashed into thinking that their parents' language was a tragic, shameful flaw that would jeopardize their lives and chances of social success. They had to reject it and learn French instead — 'the language of a bright future' — and be saved from archaism."

The impact of that policy has been far-reaching. After the Second World War, the region hosted 1 million native speakers. Seventy years later, 200,000 remain in a population of 4 million. Most are over 60 and are concentrated in western Brittany.

Louis-Jacques' mother, Annick, spoke Breton with her parents but refused to speak it to her son. She tried to dissuade him from studying it at UBO, the University of Western Brittany. Finally, after attending one of his concerts, her attitude changed.

"I was singing my own songs in our common Breton language," Louis-Jacques explains.

"She realized the audience was understanding and sharing. Breton was no longer a thing of the past for her. It was something to be proud of.

"She agreed to do for my children what she refused to do for me - speak Breton. We're lucky."

Garvan, the musician's 17-year-old son, regularly joins him on stage to jointly celebrate their culture. Circumstances differ, but the outcome is the same: traditional Breton music is the catalyst for a new appreciation of a rich cultural heritage.

A glance at the website for Tamm-Kreiz — set up 13 years ago to promote traditional music events — lists a thousand festoù-noz, or night festivals, taking place throughout the year.

Linking arms and grouping themselves into circles, hundreds of dancers of all ages shuffle about gently in readiness for an age-old routine. Two unaccompanied singers break into kan ha diskan, 'singing and re-singing'; alternately, a pair playing a binioù and bombard provide an instrumental version of the same 'call and response' performance.

Casually dressed in baggy shirts, jumpers and jeans, long floating skirts, or short skirts and boots, the motley troupes tap, side-step and gently hop in hypnotic, revolving circles to rhythms passed down through generations.

Whether the dancers are moving to an a cappella ballad or gavotte, or to the acoustic shrill of the Breton bagpipe and bombard, the melodies set feet tapping. Unfamiliar music begins to feel familiar, connecting with something deep-rooted, elemental and Celtic.

Today the thriving Breton music tradition is among the healthiest in Europe. Every August, a love of traditional music and 'Celtic rock' brings enthusiasts from across the world to the spectacular Festival Interceltique de Lorient. In November, at the Yaouank festival in Rennes, 6,000 young people dance at huge fest-noz events to rock, jazz and techno arrangements of old and modern sounds.

More than 10,000 people play binioù, bombard and drums in bagadoù, looking and sounding similar to Scottish pipe bands; another 13,000 belong to 'Celtic circles' and celebrate Breton dance.

In 2012, UNESCO conferred international recognition on the Fest-Noz by listing it in the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Citing the festivals as "communal gatherings passed from generation to generation" the UN agency highlighted their readiness to reinvent "according to changing times."

Things have changed little in 150 years around the sunny stone cottage in Perros-Guirec, the home of 63-year-old Breton activist Gireg Konan. Evergreen jasmine nightshade, laden with clusters of blue and white blossoms, climbs across its granite facade and around the blue wooden shutters and window frames.

The retired teacher recounts with pride how the house belonged to a sailor whose wife raised their children and tended to a cow, pig, chicken and rabbits while he stayed at sea. It was built in 1865 "in the traditional way" - on a framework of oak sawn from trees around their small farm, and stones from the quarry one hundred yards away.

> *"Being a proud Breton means being ready to live your life, culture and language in Brittany. Being a proud Breton is being proud of what you are, where you come from, and being ready to assume what goes with it."*

Gireg comes from a long line of native speakers and shares a name with the Welsh monk who founded Perros-Guirec 1,500 years ago. When he was born, his parents were forbidden under an 1803 French law from giving him a Breton name.

With characteristically Breton determination, his father argued that 'Gireg' was the patron saint of Perros-Guirec, and the authorities eventually relented. The original law has been relaxed but Gireg is still obliged to use his name in French, Guirec Connan, for official purposes.

The government's ongoing refusal to officially recognize minority languages militates against Breton's survival as a spoken tongue. It is the only living Celtic language without official status, and is classified by UNESCO as "endangered."

While growing numbers of children and adults are learning it, Gireg worries that the will to speak Breton may become merely aspirational.

"It isn't correct to describe the state of our language as 'healthy'," he reflects. "Rather, its social base is changing from typically rural to urban, and it's becoming, like Irish, a 'hoped for' or 'wished for' language where everyone can or could speak it, but doesn't."

One hundred thousand people understand Breton but do not use it. Supporters, like Gireg, believe its future depends on it being taught at school.

"No more progress is possible under the current system. Our schools need more money and attention but we're blocked by the State. We've little more than one hour's television per week."

He lists a host of organizations, including the Ofis Publik ar Brezhoneg — the Breton Language Office — and the regional assembly that are promoting Breton's use in everyday life; the proliferation of bilingual road signs suggests progress.

He predicts, however, a growing Breton clamour for political independence or greater autonomy, at least, "if France doesn't become a federal state, respecting every citizen.

"The assembly uses one per cent of our taxes and helps as much as it can but it's never enough. We need another level of decision-making.

Youhadenn

"The question now is how to go from a passive form of language and culture to an active one."

Paradoxically, while the number of Breton speakers is dwindling through age, the number of children learning bilingually is up a third in 10 years. Sixteen thousand are now studying Breton at the self-funded, 'immersion' method Diwan schools or in private Catholic and public schools.

On an unseasonably wet Thursday, 6,000 people donned waterproof jackets or plastic capes for the Tro Menez Are, the annual fund-raiser for the Diwan school in Kommanna. For one day only, landowners open their gates and make previously inaccessible countryside available to ramblers for an eight euro fee. Appropriately, this year's theme was 'water'.

Undeterred by the downpours, supporters of all ages — some wheeling pushchairs, others leading dogs — assembled in Sizun from 7:30 a.m. onwards. They registered for one of seven walks, ranging from five to forty kilometers.

Armed with maps, refreshments and hiking sticks, they set off to climb the hills of Monts d'Arrée, explore woodlands and country lanes, follow fast-flowing rivers and gaze in wonder at ancient bridges, fountains and calvaires — medieval crucifixion sculptures found in churchyards across western Brittany.

Kommanna is a town of 1,000 residents, where half the children are educated bilingually. Among those busily entertaining youngsters and helping at stalls was grandmother, music teacher and renowned traditional singer, Brigitte Kloareg.

The spirited, red-haired 60-year-old enthusiastically promotes Brittany's oral heritage. She remains angry at being denied a chance to learn Breton as a child. Though her great-grandmother was monolingual, and her paternal grandparents spoke Breton to each other, they didn't pass it on to her father.

As a teenager, Brigitte tried unsuccessfully to learn it from recordings. Remarkably, a few years later, she mastered Breton's sister language, Welsh, during just four weeks in Wales; she later learned Breton through that medium. Even now, she can't speak Breton as fluently as Welsh, although she is equally at ease singing in either.

"I couldn't find the key to Breton when I was growing up. The present didn't make any sense.

"Wales opened a door and put the pieces of the puzzle in place for me. Wales made sense of what I was and gave my life a meaning.

"Song is a safer place for me. Even so, when I was 35 and living in Wales, I tried to connect speaking and singing with a young Breton singer who was staying with us. Emotion would choke me. I'd be in tears, in pain, feeling barbaric."

Fifteen years ago, the accomplished linguist moved back to Brittany after two decades in Wales. Cultural diversity, whether in Breton, Welsh or the Gallo of eastern Brittany, is precious to her. Acknowledging that Diwan schools struggle to fund themselves, she is horrified to think that Breton could disappear.

"It's hard to be optimistic when you're fighting against a major, well-established culture that offers no state support. But it gives me a good feeling that my grandchildren and 16,000 others are learning Breton. I hoped, though, that double that number would be learning.

> *"To understand a country, you need to decipher its past. If you don't make sense of your past, you cannot understand your present. You cannot have a future."*

At his home in Saint Yvi, Dr. Gary German from the UBO is finalizing details of a summer school to unlock some of the region's past. Uniquely, it offers language students an opportunity to learn within a Breton cultural setting.

The Centre for Breton and Celtic Research wants to introduce Brittany's Celtic linguistic and cultural heritage to a wider audience. Dr. German points out that although the Breton-speaking population is shrinking, Brittany has more native speakers than Scotland and Ireland combined.

"Despite this, Breton is 'the poor man' of Celtic Studies. Brittany is virtually unknown in scholarly circles."

He is greatly encouraged by the number of students from America and England, and other Celtic regions, that have enrolled for the summer school. Its emphasis is on the spoken word, with local native speakers participating to give valuable experience of the "living language."

The academic, who was born in Brittany to an American father, and a mother who prefers not to speak Breton, recounts coming across three elderly men as they chatted in the ancient language.

"When they saw me approaching, they switched to French. Old people are ashamed to be discovered knowing or speaking Breton. It's no longer a community language. The language of farmers

and fishermen is now hidden."

He recalls fondly how his great-grandfather, who learned French in the First World War, translated obituaries into Breton for his monolingual wife. "She wore a traditional white lace headdress — the coiffe of Fouesnant — and the most beautiful one in Brittany, in my opinion."

His maternal grandmother eventually taught him Breton. "'Learn another language like Spanish or Italian to help you get ahead in the world', she'd say.

"As time went on, and I persisted, she came to enjoy our new bond as she unveiled the secrets of the Cornouaillais dialect and the culture that only a knowledge of Breton can reveal."

That persistence is characteristic of many language proponents, and in keeping with the Bretons' historical reputation for being tough and resilient.

The spirit that motivated the first Diwan parents to establish separate schools mirrors the thinking behind Produit en Bretagne, established in 1993 to boost the economy and create employment while simultaneously promoting Breton culture. Changes in farming and fishing, Brittany's biggest industries, claimed many jobs and decimated the small rural communities which sustained the Breton language.

"If we want our economy to develop," explains manager, Malo Bouëssel du Bourg, "we have to do it ourselves. It has to be a collective approach, bringing together culture and the economy, mobilizing everybody in Brittany."

Produit en Bretagne's outward-looking strategy fits naturally with the approach of the region as a whole. Although peripheral in mainland Europe, it is well positioned to benefit from technological advances. Car manufacturing is now its third biggest industry. Its ICT sector employs 42,000 people, almost a third in research and development.

Browsing through shops or visiting town centers, in family stores and supermarkets, the impact of Produit en Bretagne is clear. More than 350 businesses, services and institutions are affiliated to it, employing 100,000 people.

Buildings and transport display its distinctive logo — a white lighthouse against a blue map of Brittany — as do 4,000 products, many labeled bilingually. More than 60 stores in Brittany and ten in Paris boast a 'Brittany corner,' boldly declaring its origins in the black and white stripes of the Breton flag.

Malo takes pride in this modern, "open to the world," business-like image. As a writer, he relishes Breton's heightened profile in music and literature; 100 books are now being published in Breton every year.

"Twenty years ago, there were only two Breton theatrical companies," he notes. "Today there are 10 times that amount producing and presenting in our language, bringing it into popular culture.

Malo Bouëssel du Bourg

> *“Like biodiversity, cultural diversity is best for the world. We must build relations with other cultures and be open to the world if our culture is to stay alive.”*

The father of five worked in the wine trade on France’s Mediterranean coast before joining Produit en Bretagne. He grew up in eastern Brittany, well away from the Breton heartland, and only became fluent at 40.

“I love Breton. I create in this language. It’s part of a rich culture from far and deep in the past. I love French too, but Breton feels different and I want to participate.”

Language has long been regarded as a key pillar of regional identity. Early in the twentieth century, the Irish revolutionary and poet, Pádraig Pearse, wrote, “Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam” — *a country without a language is a country without a soul.*

Celtic Brittany certainly has a soul.

Language, music, education, trade and art all contribute to it. Despite obstacles in its path, it transcends nationality and crosses borders and oceans to reach out to Celts everywhere.

While most Bretons remain indifferent to activists’ objectives, successive polls show that 90 per cent are proud of their ancestry and regional distinctiveness.

Brigitte Kloareg celebrates that cultural heritage, and eases “the heartache of alienation”, by creating “a spiritual country”.

“When I stand in my sister countries — Wales, Ireland or the middle of Orkney — it’s easy to see my world all around me. Think of Italy or Hungary, and their references to a fantastic Celtic past. My country is the Celtic world.”

Eimear O’Callaghan is a freelance journalist and author. Her fascination with France began as a teenager, as recorded in her memoir “Belfast Days: A 1972 Teenage Diary.” She lives in Portstewart on the north coast of Ireland.

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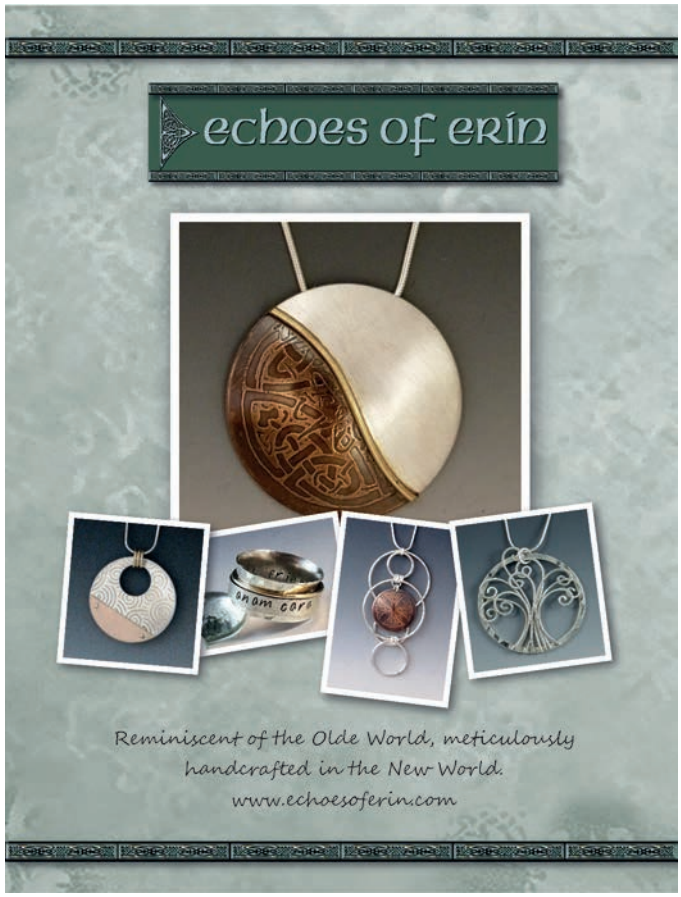

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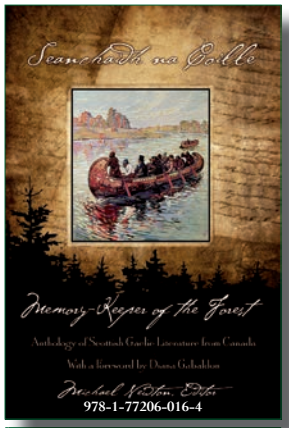

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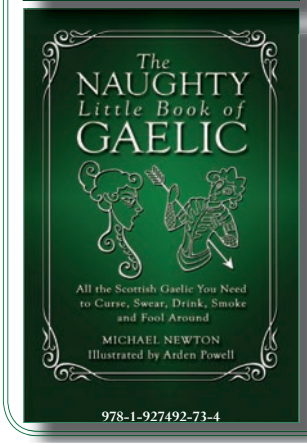

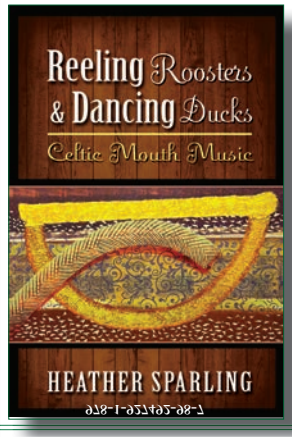

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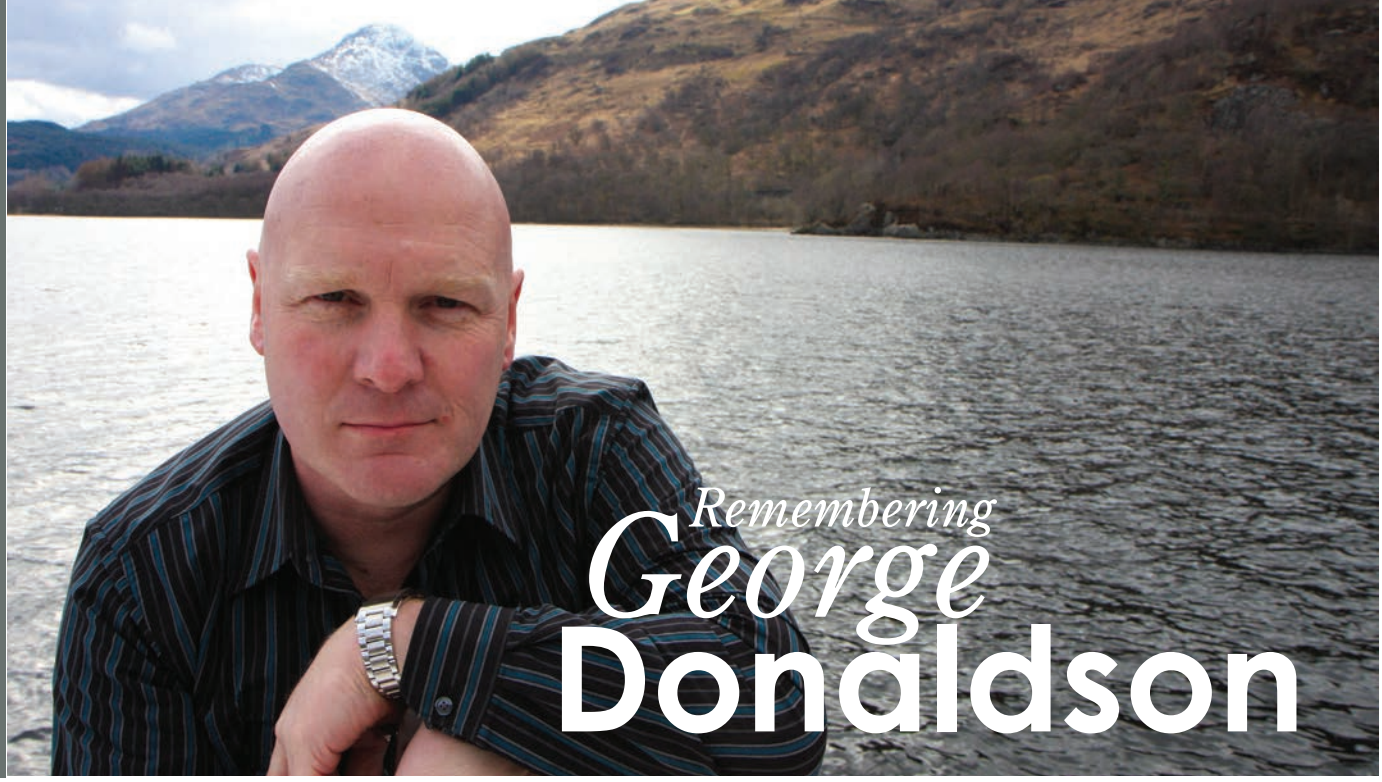

Remembering George Donaldson

One of the best-selling books in history, about an Andalusian shepherd who travels to Egypt in search of his fortune, led a Scottish bus builder to boldly chuck in his career in favour of auditioning for a part in an Irish singing group. It sounds like a multicultural joke but The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho – a book which has sold 65 million copies in 56 different languages – inspired George Donaldson to audition for the popular group and stage show Celtic Thunder.

"That is my favourite book and one of the things in that book is you're never too old to do anything," Donaldson told Australia's Newcastle Herald in an interview in 2013. "If I hadn't read that book I don't know whether I would have just accepted my lot and just thought, 'Don't take a risk in life.'" But that risk led Donaldson to a rich life full of music, fame and joy.

The father figure and singer died suddenly on March 12 from a massive heart attack at the age of 46. He leaves his wife, Carolyn, and their 13-year-old daughter, Sarah. His sudden death shocked everyone, not least his fellow performers who mourn their colleague and friend.

Celtic Thunder

Donaldson was the steadfast one in Celtic Thunder, cast as the "mature, dependable man" in the Irish singing group and stage show. It was an inspired bit of casting on the part of the show's producer, Sharon Browne. Donaldson loved the physicality of his bus-building work, but music was even more special to him. He was the only married family man in the group and he missed his wife when the group toured. "I learned that George Donaldson was the embodiment of such a man; a kind, loving, gentle giant, George was affectionate as he was professional," Browne recalled.

Born and raised in Scotland, Donaldson was a self-taught musician. He mastered guitar and flute, and was working on how to play the fiddle. His love of Celtic music came from his Glasgow childhood where his father, Bernard, had a love and appreciation of all kinds of music, which he passed along to his son. One of Donaldson's greatest thrills came when he performed for his father – and 65,000 other fans – at the Glasgow Celtics' opening match of the 2000 season at Celtic Park in Glasgow.

Music always attracted Donaldson. As influences he cited folk singers Harry Chapin and Jim Croce, and the Scottish band The Proclaimers. "The first time I saw a guy playing in a bar, I was in Spain on holiday," he recalled on the Celtic Thunder website. "I said as a kid, 'That's what I want to do.' There was always a guitar at home when I was growing up and I remember getting an instruction out of the library because I didn't have enough money to buy it, and I taught myself to play with that."

Donaldson joined Celtic Thunder in 2007 after auditioning for Browne. He appeared in all nine Celtic Thunder television specials on PBS and on all the band's CDs and DVDs released to date. Alongside the other soloists in the group, he performed at St. Patrick's Day parades in New York, Boston and Chicago, and at the White House for President Obama. In 2011 he released a solo album, The White Rose, and the next year The World in My Mind.

"From the first day I met him at the audition for Celtic Thunder in 2007, we became thick as thieves," recollected fellow singer Ryan Kelly. "I know he's looking down now on the two most important people in his life – Carolyn and Sarah – and on the rest of us holding them up for him, with his guitar strapped around his neck and a pint in his hand, with that big smile of his."

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